

Leah Price (ed): Unpacking My Library: Writers and Their Books

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Think of this as *Playboy* for bibliophiles. Dozens of full-page, high resolution photographs will have you tilting *Unpacking My Library* on its side to better admire the stacks and shelves of thirteen authors from a variety of genres. Supporting interviews tell you when the authors bought their first books, how they arrange their books, and what books they keep on their bedside tables. Leah Price, professor of English at Harvard, has put together a captivating little collection that will leave you wanting more.

Six of the thirteen authors included in *Unpacking My Library*—Rebecca Goldstein and Steven Pinker, Lev Grossman and Sophie Gee, and Claire Messud and James Wood—are couples and were chaptered together but interviewed separately. Each couple interviewed maintains shared libraries, so for each, there is a single photo set. The remaining seven authors included are Alison Bechdel, Stephen Carter, Junot Díaz, Jonathan Lethem, Philip Pullman, Gary Shteyngart, and Edmund White. Most exciting to me was the chapter with Pullman, author of *His Dark Materials*, one of my favorite series growing up. Pullman is the only author featured in *Unpacking My Library* who wrote an essay response instead of answering each of Price’s questions in turn and it’s nice to read his words uninterrupted.

That said, Price asks great questions. Have you ever in your life given up reading? Uniformly not. How do you dispose of unwanted books? Bechdel keeps them, Díaz gives his away, Grossman and Gee put theirs out on the curb, Shteyngart uses the trash. How do you arrange your books? Jonathan Lethem “oscillate[s] between alphabetical absolutism and imperatives of genre, size, color, [and] publisher” (114).

Authors were also asked about their shelving arrangements. Pinker stores his books in stackable cubes in order to avoid “those awful things called bookends”

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(71). Grossman is looking forward to replacing the bookshelves left over from his first marriage. Pullman moved into a new house in the hope that he would finally be able to store all his books, but still they spill over into stacks on the floor. When asked about his shelves, Edmund White simply replied “They’re wood” (185).

Most interesting of Price’s questions were those that had the authors considering the future of their own books and of books in general. Bechdel, reflecting on her library of paperbacks and comic books, replied that unless she “dies very soon... [her] library will decompose before [she does]” (15). Considering a future without paper books, Claire Messud asks, “Doesn’t anybody but me ever imagine an apocalypse after which there is no electricity, no computers?” (131). Pullman does: “When the big crash comes, I shall throw away my Kindle without a moment’s regret... [but] my books will last as long as I do” (155). Steven Pinker doubts e-books will kill off the paper book, but “love[s] the way that the iPhone allows [him] to steal back snatches of wasted time and enjoy a book—standing in line to board a plane, or on a crowded subway platform” (72). A life-long daily newspaper reader, Pinker recently switched to the iPad edition.

In her introduction, Price argues that despite the numerous changes that books and readers have undergone in recent years due to digital options and social media, “[w]hat seems unlikely to change is our curiosity about what friends and strangers read—or about what others will make of our own reading” (7). There is an undeniable pleasure in examining an unfamiliar bookshelf and *Unpacking My Library* recreates this experience admirably.

At first, I was put off by the size of this book. At 5 and a half inches tall and 8 inches wide, *Unpacking My Library* is about the size of a half sheet of paper. Considering its photographic emphasis, it would have made a great coffee table book. But after spending some time with it, I have come around. *Unpacking My Library* fits comfortably in your hands and tucks into a bookshelf easily, where it can be lost, and found, and happily reread. This is a celebration of the paper and ink book and in the age of e-readers, it is refreshing and engaging. But boy, would it look good on the iPad.