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REVIEWS

Reid Byers, *The Private Library* (New Castle: Delaware, Oak Knoll Press: 2021), 540pp. US \$85 (Hardback) ISBN 9781584563884

Review by RISA DE REGE
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A library is a perfect place for a polymath. With a background in divinity, music, computer science, as well as journalism and television, Reid Byers brings us a detailed look at a personal facet of library history which is “only incidentally about books at all” (2) in *The Private Library*. Rather, it is about the spaces that books inhabit and the physical context of how books exist in our homes. Looking at architecture, archeology, and material culture, Byers illustrates what has changed and what has not over the three or so millennia that books have been part of domestic life.

This unique perspective is refreshing for the field. Some of us have had the history of the book drilled into our heads ad nauseam, starting with cuneiform tablets and contending with Gutenberg’s impact. But here, in the physical aspects of reading and book storage spaces, is a new context where the weight of cuneiform tablets can be seen to inform the design of shelves in ancient Mesopotamia. Reading, let alone writing, requires a comfortable setup that has improved over the centuries by better access to lighting and innovations in furniture. Reading spaces moved from courtyards to cells to studies, and book

chests became reading desks. By analyzing the material clues left behind in private libraries, Byers uncovers past behaviours and puts together a comprehensive picture of readers across the ages. Central to this study is the idea of being *book-wrapt*: surrounded by books and their knowledge and enveloped in the enjoyment of cozily reading in such a place. In some libraries, he examines how the walls of books and bookshelves contribute to the physical and metaphorical security of the reader in this space. The presence of books brings on this feeling through their interaction with architecture, furniture, and setup.

Weighing in at over a pound and nearly five hundred pages plus notes, Byers's tome may be more of a reference book if it were not for his prose. He writes so charmingly that you could easily read the tome cover-to-cover and have a fun time. While the text is generously accompanied by diagrams and photographs, essential to a story that is so much about places and things, the reading experience would be improved by captions, especially for the architectural diagrams. Each chapter is further divided into manageable sections focusing on examples, themes, and locations such as the Chenies Manor, digitization, and the Italian Renaissance.

The Private Library follows the general chronology of book history, focusing on how these elements were implemented in the home. We start with cuneiform as clues to some of the oldest private libraries, then to the book boxes of classical papyrus, medieval reading furniture, enlightenment studies, and ending with the digital future of the book. The crown jewel of all of this history is the English country house.

Byers's specialization covers centuries of these plentiful, accessible, and excellent examples of how the modern private library began as an "embarrassment of riches" (187). The book ends with almost one hundred pages of appendices discussing architectural details like moulding, crowning, and, of course, secret doors, and atmospheric accessories like bookplates, globes, and marble busts.

Throughout, he emphasizes the architecture of the library and highlights considerations exemplified in historical examples. A library in the ancient world, for example, needed a sunny reading spot to accompany its book room. One particularly lavish example had a balcony for this purpose with two seating areas at opposing angles to best capture sunlight in the morning and evening. The ancients had this down better than some contemporary library architects, bringing to mind a recently renovated library I once worked at, which, while pretty, had an open stairwell that did an excellent job ferrying the raucous sounds of the ground-floor lounge all the way up to the silent reading areas. Libraries may improve over time, but we will never reach perfection.

As is par for the course in library science and book history, the book's coverage is Eurocentric. Byers does shine light on some non-European private libraries, like that of Tianyige in China, one of the world's oldest surviving examples, and Fatima al-Fihri's ninth-century library, which eventually became the University al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco. More discussion of colonialism's tragic obfuscation of library

practices in places within Africa and within Indigenous cultures of the Americas would have been insightful and appreciated.

I hope that this text inspires more multidisciplinary work in the field of book history. There are many more links to be drawn with such an all-encompassing field, and architecture and domesticity are excellent frameworks with which to focus a history of the (private) library. Byers's next project is on imaginary books, and I eagerly await its release. With an unmatched eye for detail and a jolly sense of humour, *The Private Library* takes us through thousands of years of the material culture of homes, books, and readers into private places meant for pottering and study.

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