

[Sample]

LIBRARY MEETS BOOK FAIR

Glenn Martin

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G.P. Martin Publishing



Published 2024 by G.P. Martin Publishing

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Book layout and cover design by the author

Typeset in Sitka 11 pt

Printed by Lulu.com

Cover images and design by the author.

ISBN: 978 0 6459543 1 9 (pbk.)



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

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First Words

The author has written over twenty books, on a variety of subjects. But he also has a personal library, which has accumulated over a period of more than fifty years. It has followed him from place to place, and now it has taken root. It has been regularly augmented from bookshops, second-hand bookshops, online purchases, and occasional fortuitous sales, such as at libraries. But the book fairs of Sydney have changed the conditions of acquisition. Formerly, to buy a lot of books was a rich person's folly. Now, it can be a poor person's bounty.

However, time is not as malleable as money, and one should not buy more books than one can conceivably read. Some perspicacity is still called for. This book is about the grounds of perspicacity.

1 Introduction: About My Library

I have my own library. Is it a home library, a private library or a personal library? There could be arguments about this. Regardless, I have a library. It occupies a building separate from the house. The other half of the building is a garage. Well, it is supposed to be a garage, but it is now a workshop. I built a carport for the car so that it would not sulk.

The library part used to be the workshop for a man who made stained-glass windows. The library and the house have several samples: the double doors of the library, and double windows in the bathroom. They are exquisite and delightful.

The library is not confined to the garage. It also occupies several parts of the house – the lounge room, the hallway, the dining room and the ex-bedroom that I use for an office. My bedside cabinet has a stack of books on it, but I try to limit this. I claim to have some discipline. These books are only for current reading (defined as, probably sometime this year).

There is a loose distinction between the house-library and the garage-library (or, the “library proper”). Fiction goes in the house; non-fiction goes in the library proper. Once, I went to a book fair and they had a section labelled “Non-Fiction”. I did not find many books at that book fair. There has to be a little more discrimination than that.

In contrast, at the last Knox Grammar book fair I went to, there were printed copies of all the different categories they had, scattered around. There were fifty-eight categories, and the list was ordered alphabetically, linked to tables marked with large letters. This is reputed to be the largest book fair in Sydney.

In my library proper, there are categories, although the categories are loose and I am currently wrestling with how to improve the organisation of my books. My purpose is pragmatic. I regard my library as a working library, and I need to be able to find the right books for whatever project is in my mind at the time.

I recently read the book *Library* by Matthew Battles (discussed below), and he has both inspired me and provoked me to return to this question, which has lurked for years. Many years ago I attempted a simplified Dewey system, but to be honest, other categories which are not strictly Dewey tend to intervene. I have a shelf of school mathematics books that reflect the years I spent as a mathematics teacher. I have a short shelf which contains books that are taller than usual, so that is an odd assortment. Moreover, these sections are not in sequential order under the Dewey system. The mathematics books are on a high shelf because I don't consult them often.

The list of categories from the Knox Grammar book fair was something of a relief, because it gave permission to categories that were simply popular. Most book fairs have sections on Royalty and Military, neither of which are of interest to me. The nice thing is that it simplifies my looking; I don't have to look at them.

There are basic questions regarding libraries. I think I found Matthew Battles' book because I was ready for it. He asks the question over thousands of years: why the library? What is its purpose? And of course, the answer was different at different times of history. But to be pragmatic rather than philosophical, why do I still have mathematics books? I have not taught mathematics for many years. Why don't I simply give the books away; for example, to a book fair?

To be harsh, you could argue that the books in my library are simply photographs of me at different times of my life. The library is like a photo album. Maybe. You could argue that. But I have counter-

examples. One example involves a printed record rather than a book, but it serves my purpose.

When I first left school, I went to the University of New South Wales (UNSW) to study Civil Engineering. I thought that this was what I should do (note the word “should”). However, after two years, I realised that I didn’t have to just make it for two more years. If I passed, which I would, I would then have to be an engineer for the next forty or so years. At that point I realised that I did not want to be an engineer.

This is relevant because, after numerous changes and many years, I became an expert in building educational websites. Then I went for a job at a college where I would be building websites for an engineering degree. I could demonstrate my expertise in building educational websites easily enough, but how could I convince them that I could handle engineering material?

I went to my filing cabinet and pulled out the transcript of my UNSW studies. Although I had not completed my degree, I had successfully completed the first two years, and years ago I had gone to the trouble of obtaining a neat transcript of those studies. I made about ten copies of it and took it to the interview. When the inevitable question arose: “How will you be able to manage the engineering content?” I simply handed around the copies of the transcript. I got the job.

This is an object lesson on the value of records – and books! On another occasion, I was writing something that begged a reference to the counter-culture of the early 1970s. I had the quote in my mind, from Theodore Roszak’s wonderful book, *The Making of the Counter Culture* (1972). It had opened my mind to many new things. It had made it possible for me to make sense of society at the time from a fresh perspective.

I knew exactly where the book was on my shelves, so I could go straight to it. Then I knew that the quote I wanted was on the right-hand side of the page about halfway through the book. I found the

quote within a few minutes. This is another object lesson about the value of a library, as long as you know what is in your library, and as long as you care about what is in the books. The books need to be adding to your understanding – of something in particular, or of life overall.

This story also evokes one of my reservations about reorganising my library. I had a physical memory of where Roszak's books was. If I move it to a more "sensible" location, chances are that I won't be able to find the book anymore. Logic on one day is not necessarily the same as logic on another day. How many times do we find ourselves unable to find an object because we have moved it to somewhere where we will be able to find it more easily?

2 Library Meets Book Fairs

Why are book fairs of interest to me? My interest is not the same as that of other people. Book dealers (for example, owners of second-hand book stores) turn up in droves on the morning of the first day of book fairs. They are focused and intent. I have learned to avoid the first few hours. My perusing is slow and thoughtful, and I do not like to be elbowed.

Obviously, I am not concerned about "missing out" on some rare or unique book. I am content to see what turns up. In any case, the book dealers are looking for something that will sell fast. I am looking for books that most people would overlook. Nor am I interested in first editions or books that are pristine, unmarked. One of my joys is to find books that have a previous owner's name inscribed in them, or even better, a book owner's name plate. Or, an inscription from a gift-giver Here's one:

About the Author

Glenn Martin lives in Sydney, although he lived in the bush on the far north coast of New South Wales for two decades. He has been a teacher at high schools and tertiary institutions, a manager of community services organisations, and a commentator on management, business ethics, employment law, and training and development. He has been the editor of publications for management and training professionals and an instructional designer for online learning. He is the author of over twenty books.

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