

Letter to a Bookshelf by Andrew Pudewa

Dear Old Bookshelf of Mine,

I do not know if you remember the first time we met. After all, you may have no eyes or ears, no memory or intellect. And yet you have been a rock in my life. It was almost thirty years ago. You were installed as a permanent fixture in a house we had bought, screwed in atop a chest of drawers forming a permeated wall between kitchen and living room. My wife adorned you mostly with plants and pictures, so your load was light. Perhaps you were able to sense the joys and frustrations of family life with crying babies on one side, a whining dishwasher on the other, and wild kids squealing and racing around you. I paid little attention to you then as most of my time was taken up being daddy and husband, and my book collection was in its infancy. At the time, of course, I never imagined that you would stay with me for decades, holding my history, my secrets, my dreams. But so it was. When we left that house, we selfishly unscrewed you from your base and loaded you unceremoniously into the moving truck. We thought you unnaturally large but potentially very useful. In some small way you had become part of us.

During the next phase of life, you, great oak behemoth, traveled with us to Idaho, where you became the family bookshelf. Now properly and safely up against a wall—the longest wall in the room, no doubt — you tried to hold the favorites of the children. While *The Story of Ping* had its home on your bottom rung, it was never there, always floating about the house, demanding reading by some toddler roaming about. Your middle section was devoted to the books of the middle children, the Nancy Drew and Bodie Thoene historical fiction. Gradually you became full, as large as you were, and books had to be set horizontally on top of the properly stored vertical ones. You began to overflow. The top levels were dedicated to books that Mom and Dad collected though used less than hoped. Time in a home full of kids is short, and the books used most always focused on the youth. Thus you became disheveled at your feet, busy in your middle, and dusty in your top. But you never complained.

One trait of yours I have always appreciated is flexibility. Although it is a bit of a project to move one of your parts up or down, you were adjustable, meeting the needs of the wild variations in book size. Thus, as our library changed, you changed and acquired over time an asymmetrical look with

shelves randomly spaced, meeting the needs of the season. While some bookshelves are static always presenting the same windows of space—to heck with the books, you allowed yourself to be molded to cubbies of different size—and then when all the shelves were packed with books, your crown, previously reserved for an adornment of plants or knick-knacks, you became a hoary head piled with paper—large books, rarely touched books, forgotten books.

Finally, with our last move, your role changed. The new house was equipped with a magnificent built-in library with fresh stained rosewood and modern easily adjusted shelves. You were no longer needed in the family room. You had become replaced and displaced, moved now to my office, holding my books only. Do you miss the clamor and chaos of children poking at your contents? Do you miss the young boy mischievously climbing up your side? Do you miss *The Story of Ping*, which never really was yours except when the house was tidied up for visitors?

Now it's just you and me. You hold much that I want to know, a bit that I do know, and a tremendous amount that I will never know. A wise man once said, "A man's bookshelf does not show who he is. It shows who he wants to be." I want to read all the Latin books that sit on the right, but I probably won't. You hold a large stack of magazines I never took on a plane and therefore never read but would like to. You keep for me a few books I use to remind myself of some important truths, but mostly for practical application. Occasionally I replace some books I know I will never read with a few books I really should read, but in truth you have become more of a decoration than the magnificent servant you once were.

In all likelihood, I will die before you. You are solid and have aged well. You could last another hundred years or more. What will become of you after I leave this earth? Perhaps one of my children will adopt you and let you once more be at the center of family life. Or perhaps you will find your way into a different family or another office or a basement. You will probably not complain, for you have stoically endured whatever has come your way. Someday in the distant future you will probably become firewood or find yourself broken apart and decaying in a dump. But you will have served men well for many decades or more, and I thank you. My life has been better because of you, O bookshelf mine.

Andrew Pudewa