

Why You Should Write in Your Books Now

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The sun is starting to set on the golden age of the printed book.

The digitization of books, together with the proliferation of electronic-book readers, will be a boon for readers—much as digital photography has been a boon for picture-takers. Books will finally be freed from the paper handcuffs they've been shackled with for a millennium.

But as with nearly all progress, we will lose a few things along the way. We will lose the physical evidence that a particular book has been read by a particular person.

For the most part, losing this physical evidence won't matter. The best part of reading is what is left inside us. We absorb the books we read into our beliefs and memories and feelings. The accumulated result lingers, we hope, as some kind of wisdom.

My own virtual library, existing somewhere in the cloud, is an aspect of 21st century reading I now jealously embrace and would not be without. But having been born during halftime of the 20th century (in the 1950s), I'm old enough to want to be surrounded by old fashioned books—books firm of spine and flutter of pages.

Inside my paper books are my signatures, the dates I began and finished, where I was reading, a boarding pass or train ticket, a newspaper review, a clipped obituary on the author.

Pages are marked and passages underlined. Nestled inside my dust jackets are printouts of email exchanges with friends who recommended the book, and occasionally correspondence with the author.

This old library delivers delights to me. I pull a book from its shelf and feel again the ephemera and favorite passages I would have forgotten.

Footprints in the reading sands of time

A few years ago I asked Levenger customers whether they wrote, or didn't write, in their books. We received more than 2,000 responses to what we learned was a most provocative question. Responses were about 60/40 in favor of those who write (whom I call **Footprint Leavers**) vs. those who refrain (Preservationists). Passions run high in both camps, and curiously, both groups justify their positions in the same way: their love of books.

I make no attempt to hide my own position on this topic. I am a card-carrying, foot-stomping Footprint Leaver. A few years ago I was tolerant in my view toward Preservationists, and even praised them for their contribution to the thriving used-book market, from which I have purchased hundreds of books myself. But today, with the flood tide of electronic books soon upon us, I've changed my mind.

If you have children or other loved ones who will someday inherit your books, you should write in them now. No matter how strongly you may lean on the side of the Preservationists, you need to know this: your handwriting inside your books may be their passport to preservation.

Life: affirming, in the margins

Marginalia has proved pivotally important in scholarship. Dr. Will Provine, professor of history of science at Cornell, has traced the history of evolution by reading the marginal notes of scientists in their journals and books. Owen Gingerich, professor of the history of science at Harvard, traced the surprising truth about Copernicus's impact on astronomy through the handwriting in hundreds of copies of his *De revolutionibus*.

Historians of this century will likely rue the advent of electronic books, as historians of the 20th century rued the telephone and how it sucked into black oblivion human exchanges that were previously immortalized in letters.

Archeologists can often extract more information from an ancient civilization's accidental artifacts than from its monuments. The wine stains and incidental writing in the Sarajevo *Haggadah* are part of what makes it so valuable today. **Your writing is what will make your books cherished artifacts to your descendants.** For you don't have to be Copernicus or Darwin to be important. We are all famous to our descendants. Today's young people will think electronic books are normal, because they will be, and children will be curious about the old paper books as we are curious when seeing Edison cylinders and stereoscopes.

And yet to this day, we still use another Edison invention called the light bulb. Paper books will continue to shine a bright light, but with a different focus.

Seize the day (and the paper)

So today, dear reader, when paper books are plentiful and pens abound and we still know how to write by hand, strut your stuff. Use your books as you would a journal.

And when you read a children's book to a loved one, have the child write his or her name and age, write yours (at least your name), write what you feel at that moment, what your young reader said about the book, the date and time and place. A generation or two from now, your little reading companion may cherish that printed book more than we might imagine.

It's human nature to take good things for granted and not to value something until it is gone. Seize the paper book, seize your pen, seize your own ability to write with your own hand. As they say in Spain, *Hay mas tiempo que vida*—there is more time than life.