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OFF CAMPUS

HANDLE WITH CARE

When books become too precious to read

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There is a particular kind of horror that might flicker across a book lover's face when they watch someone fold down the corner of a page. Not disappointment. Not mild irritation. Horror—the same visceral recoil you might expect from witnessing a minor act of vandalism. Because to a certain breed of reader, that is exactly what it is.

The phenomenon has no formal clinical name, but it's widely recognised among bibliophiles: an intense, sometimes militant attachment to the physical integrity of books. These are readers who do not dog-ear pages, recoil at cracked spines, and would sooner abandon a conversation than watch someone leave a paperback face-down on a table. Their relationship with books is governed by an elaborate and largely self-imposed code of conduct, and they are not always quiet about it.

It would be a mistake to dismiss this behaviour as mere fastidiousness. For many practitioners, the preservation of a book's physical condition is inseparable from their understanding of what a book is. The object and the text are not separate things. A marked copy is, in some meaningful sense, a different artefact than a pristine one – diminished, even violated.

This view has genuine intellectual roots. Bibliographers and rare book scholars have long understood that the physical condition of a book carries meaning. Marginalia, wear patterns, and ownership marks are historical data. A first edition in fine condition commands not just higher monetary value but a different kind of cultural authority. The pristine book is a vessel that has travelled through time with its integrity intact. For the committed book preservationist, every personal copy deserves the same respect.

But the behaviour extends well beyond collectors of rare editions. It operates among ordinary readers with mass-market paperbacks, library copies, and cheap second-hand finds. Here, the logic shifts: it's no longer about financial value or historical significance but rather something more personal—an aesthetic and almost moral position.

Central to this mindset is a particular theory of what it means to own something. The pristine-book reader often believes that physical use constitutes a kind of damage and that leaving a book unmarked is an act of respect toward the text, toward the author, and toward future readers who might one day encounter it. There is something almost custodial in this

orientation: The reader does not so much own the book as steward it.

Here's where it gets uncomfortable for the preservationists: some of history's greatest readers were absolute monsters to their books.

Mark Twain annotated furiously. Sylvia Plath filled her copies with dense, passionate marginalia that scholars still study today. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a famously enthusiastic annotator. David Foster Wallace's annotated copy of Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* is considered a literary artefact in its own right—precisely because he made a mess of it.

The pristine preservationist looks at such a legacy with something between admiration and horror.

For some readers, the attachment to a book's physical integrity becomes genuinely compulsive. The anxiety triggered by a cracked spine or an accidental thumb smudge can be disproportionate—a small grief, a sense of irreversible loss. The handling of these books is almost ritualistic: specific ways of opening a volume to avoid stressing the binding, particular shelving methods to prevent warping, and the avoidance of eating or drinking anywhere near an open page.

The social dimension of this behaviour is where it tends to generate friction. Lending a book becomes fraught, sometimes impossible. Watching a friend read carelessly can produce a quiet but sustained distress. In some cases, books are not lent at all—replacements are purchased and given as gifts instead, the original tucked carefully away.

Perhaps the real answer is that neither extreme serves books well. Treating a book like a disposable object—cracking it carelessly, leaving it rain-soaked, or losing it—reflects a genuine lack of care. But so does treating it like a museum piece too fragile to actually inhabit. Books are made to be read, travel between hands, accumulate meaning, and bear some honest marks of the journey. A little tear isn't always damage: the wear on a well-loved paperback—the soft, curved spine and the faintly rippled pages—tells a story of its own.

The best readers, arguably, are the ones who love their books enough to actually use them—and trust that a good book is sturdy enough to survive the love.

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