

# New Mexico Quarterly

---

Volume 16 | Issue 2

Article 5

---

1946

## Books Disappear, Yet Book-Shelves Remain

Ruy Ribeiro Couto

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Couto, Ruy Ribeiro. "Books Disappear, Yet Book-Shelves Remain." *New Mexico Quarterly* 16, 2 (1946).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol16/iss2/5>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

# BOOKS DISAPPEAR, YET BOOK-SHELVES REMAIN

*Ruy Ribeiro Couto*

(BRAZIL)

Translated by Helene Schimansky

**N**OT LONG BEFORE THE WAR, Mr. Paul Reboux founded a league against the lending of books. In the confusion of the following years of struggle, the league was forced to disappear. It was never heard of again.

Against the wishes of their respective owners, books continue to be lent, in France and elsewhere. There are even people who read only borrowed books.

These lovers of the property of others, and of temporary things, wear the most amiable of smiles when they look over the books in their friends' libraries. "Will you lend me this?" they say. "I will return it Monday."

They do not say which Monday they have in mind; they forget to add the month and year. In that way, they never deceive us. There are so many Mondays in the long line of centuries to come!

It is difficult to refuse the loan of a book. There are, however, persons who have skillful ways of avoiding it.

"Yes, whenever you wish. Today, if you don't mind, I have to take some notes from it. Monday I will drop by your office and leave it there. Without fail."

The law of retaliation: *that* Monday will never come, either.

Some people defend themselves by tacking up a placard on the wall of the library, bearing this proverb in big, round letters: "A book lent is a book lost." The visitor is warned by that malicious insinuation.

## BOOKS DISAPPEAR, YET BOOKSHELVES REMAIN 159

Others go to the extreme of frankness: "No books lent." They are people who have already suffered many losses, and prefer the fault of impoliteness to a continuance of this pillage on the installment plan. I confess that when I entered one of those studies I had a sensation like that of someone who has been slapped by mistake. Because I hadn't come to ask for anything. I don't like to read borrowed books. I can't scribble in them as I please. And, frankly, a book which one reads without leaving a trace of the reading—a note, an exclamation point, a word of agreement or a "Not so"—does not become a part of one's soul. For the rest of us (who read with a ready pencil point and with finger-nail engravings) this is like five minutes of flirtation compared with five days of love.

There is, however, the reverse side of the medal: those people who try by brute force to lend us their books. They shame us into not refusing.

"An admirable study of the submarine flora of the Pacific Ocean! Take it along! Read it! It's wonderful!"

We manage a sickly smile. It will have to wait until another time, we say; just now we are reading about codfishing in Newfoundland . . . next we are going to read a treatise on Egyptology . . . next, *A Moreninha*, which is talked about so much by young girls . . . no thanks, not just now."

"But I insist! Take it along! Take this one too . . ."—a thick volume on the politics of Bismarck.—"You really should read them. And if you have them you will."

"Thanks, my dear fellow, but my program for this month is all planned."

"No, no—I insist. It will give me much pleasure to know that you share my own joy of reading them."

So we have to accept. And never again shall we have peace. At the very next meeting with this friend (getting off a street-car, going to a movie) comes the fatal question: "How are you enjoying the submarine flora?"

"I haven't started it yet."

"And the Bismarck? Didn't I tell you it was wonderful?"

"I haven't started that either."

The next time, a week later, the scene is repeated: "Well, what do you think of my Bismarck? Remarkable man, hum?"

We are confused. The friend who likes to lend books perceives

that we have not yet cared to give him the pleasure of reading the book, and asks: "But the other one—the one on the submarine flora—at least you have been curious enough by now to open that one?"

Further embarrassment. Yes, we opened it . . . interesting. The friend sees that it is a lie, and becomes angry. He takes leave of us coldly.

The third meeting will be marked by a distant salutation. He is hurt, evidently.

Then, our scruples of conscience overcome, we are obliged to send a note of thanks, returning the books, for which we invent a vague appreciation, without having read them. What else is there to do?

However, the friend who likes to lend books sees us on the street several days later, and comes to meet us with open arms: "So you really like it? Then listen, I have some eight or ten more at home on Bismarck. I'm going to send you all of them."

"But I don't. . . ."

"I insist! I know there are people who don't like to lend books. I am just the opposite. Don't think this will inconvenience me. I must send them to you, I *will* send them. . . ."

And he does send them. Really, the generous friend only wants his own pleasure, which consists of obliging us to admire his library. Since he has learned by experience that we are prompt in returning the volumes he has lent us, we are now under the yoke of his tyranny. We are lost.

But to return to my original thesis, the vast majority of people who own books are weak and timid. They do not know how to refuse. Books come and go, yet bookshelves remain—empty.