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Introduction

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Introduction

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During lockdown, academics' worlds became smaller, we moved around less, we baked banana bread and like so many white-collar workers around the globe, started working from home, tuning into video calls from the safety (and sometimes chaos) of kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms or even pantries. The verb "to zoom" took on a new meaning. Depending on where someone dialed into a call, we could see into their homes, thus peering into spaces previously undisclosed to colleagues and work contacts. For bookish observers, the ubiquity of bookshelves in the Zoom room soon became obvious. Of course, other household items were often on display as well, which sometimes led to reactions on the internet, as in the case of a Welsh interviewee who had a sex toy on her shelf as she spoke about job loss in the wake of the pandemic (Lewis 2021). But for scholars in all areas of book studies (book history, publishing studies, and the

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history of reading), the Zoom room became an interesting, though ethically questionable, space to conduct autoethnographic research into the books that colleagues, co-workers and other work contacts, as well as people interviewed on television, owned—and may or may not have read. Home bookshelves, for obvious reasons of access, are not a well-researched area. While there is ample research on prolific collectors and their collections, the average home bookshelf (and its performativity) has not come under scrutiny so far, with the exception perhaps of Lydia Pyne's 2016 consideration thereof in the series Bloomsbury Object Lessons, and of Ute Schneider's analysis of bookshelves within a Bourdieusian framework. As Schneider posits, the book-as-object is read as a cultural signifier across society (and many societies), and is also understood as such by people who themselves may not own many books, or books at all (Schneider 2018, 113). Jessica Pressman has recently added another layer of analysis to these questions with her concept of "bookishness," elaborated in *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age* (Pressman 2020). Of course, book historians were not the only ones to notice the books in the Zoom, and cultural journalists as well as a dedicated Twitter account were among the follow-ups considering bookcases as markers of credibility (Hess 2020, @BCredibility).

Mid-lockdown, we exchanged thoughts about this newly developed public focus on private bookshelves and their owners, and soon decided to bring two of Shafquat Towheed's colleagues from The Open University on board to convene the first-ever online international conference dedicated to the topic of "Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic." Together with our co-organizers Sally Blackburn-Daniels and Edmund G.C. King, we asked conference speakers to respond to some of the following questions in their research presentations, with particular reference to the contingencies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which at that point, was in its eighth month:

- What do our bookshelves (and books) on display say about our cultural capital, or material wealth?
- As our domestic spaces have been repurposed, where do we draw the lines between the public and private spheres? Do our bookshelves blur this distinction, or attempt to reinforce it? Can the books on our shelves cause public embarrassment or ridicule?
- Do our bookshelves on display represent individual talent or collective effort?

- How can we interpret the aesthetics and logistics of the virtual book-shelf background, including default and bespoke settings on Skype, Zoom, Teams, etc.?
- Does the physical or virtual display of books on a shelf or in a case display cultural adaptation or cultural appropriation?
- Is the physical bookshelf at its apogee (peak IKEA Billy bookshelf)—might it be eclipsed by a digital equivalent, such as the bespoke or fake digital bookish background?
- What does having a bookshelf to display in this age of the pandemic actually mean, who is invited in, and who is kept out?
- What assumptions of reading based on possession are we casually making, and what might this cultural interference in a private act constitute?

The conference featured 28 speakers and attracted over 200 attendees from more than 30 countries; we were thrilled by the broad range of ideas and contributions that emerged. We are delighted to now publish this volume, which contains more fully developed chapters based on over half of the conference papers, as well as some additional content produced expressly for this volume. Our edited volume can (and we think should) be read alongside a special issue of the journal *English Studies* (103:1; 2022), "Bookshelves, Social Media and Gaming" co-edited by Blackburn-Daniels and King, which features extended research based on other papers from the conference; these have a strong focus on social media and the digital (literary) sphere, bookshelves and gaming. These two publications showcase some of the most relevant recent research in this area; while they do not answer all the questions we initially asked, they do offer substantial, evidence-based and critically informed responses to many of them, while also raising new and unanticipated follow-up questions of their own.

Our delight at the thematic spread of the conference was tempered by the recognition that we were able to observe and think about books in online meeting spaces from a place of physical safety and socioeconomic privilege. Compared to front-line workers, confronted with and battling the pandemic in their workspaces and on their commutes, we were at a relative remove from the dangers of COVID-19. Nonetheless, the the-matic spread of papers held at the conference hinted at other forms of engagement with (and without) books in the pandemic. Obvious exam-ples included bookstores and libraries, shuttered and struggling to fulfil their economic and societal role. To hint at the economic fallout for

booksellers, for instance, in Wuhan, China, considered by many to be the original epicenter of the pandemic, news outlets estimated that 1000 bookstores were shuttered for hundreds of days (Fan 2020).

This introduction will first attempt to sketch out theoretical frameworks and considerations that find application in the volume, but also gesture at areas of theoretical inquiry that are relevant to the question of bookshelves in the pandemic moment, but were not able to be included here. These theoretical observations will be followed by a brief overview of the volume, before gesturing to future research possibilities.

Theoretical Frameworks and Contexts

Perhaps the most obvious theoretical framework when peering at bookshelves and deciphering writing on spines is that of Gérard Genette and paratexts. The books we see and comment on are only identifiable through their "thresholds of interpretation," as Genette circumscribes his term paratext (Genette 1997). Arguably, even their visibility on the screen could be understood as a type of epitext, removed from the author and publisher, but hinting at the reception of the text.

Two scholars who have contributed significantly to our understanding of the intersections between the digital and the physical book are Simone Murray and Matt Kirschenbaum. Murray's concept of the digital literary sphere lends itself to application here, especially her understanding of the "digital paratext" (Murray 2018). Kirschenbaum's concept of the "bitstream" and its relationship to books-as-texts and books-as-objects also offers a productive perspective. As Kirschenbaum writes in his very recent book *Bitstreams*, "Books […] have emerged from the other side of the digital's disruption with their material forms intact, but also irrevocably changed" (Kirschenbaum 2021, 83). Here, Kirschenbaum also points toward ideas about a "post-digital" moment, elaborated for instance by the media theorist Florian Cramer (Cramer 2014). In the Zoom room, physical books as three-dimensional objects become flat—but given the knowledge base viewers have of the book-as-object, there is a consensus about what the codex might look, feel (and smell!) like if one were able to reach through the screen and take the book off the shelf. Jack Self's considerations of "The Big Flat Now" can also offer insights for our contexts. Self uses "flatness" as a "contemporary metaphor [to describe] how the invention of the Internet has restructured global society" (Self 2018). Through videoconferencing, for instance, we can see the same book(s) in

different bookshelves, geographically at a distance but brought together on one flat screen in a particular instant in time.

The focus on physical books-as-objects in digital Zoom rooms is arguably a post-digital manifestation, in a particularly screen-heavy period. This angle converges with research during the pandemic which showed that book buyers were inclined toward print books to give them respite from the screen after a long day in video meetings. In the UK, for instance, industry figures indicated the largest rise in volume for the printed books market since 2007 (Stuart-Turner 2021).

Pandemic Reading and the Bibliotherapy Bookshelf

In the space of a few months, the COVID-19 pandemic turned our lives upside down and many of our most natural instincts were suppressed. Pandemic social distancing rules cut us off from participatory culture, sport and social life, and this contributed to a surging mental health crisis. Never has reading matter, specifically, having books at home, been of greater importance. Non-essential workers were confined to their homes for long periods at a time, during which many turned to the printed books on their shelves and the e-books on their digital devices for reassurance, reflection or escape.

While reading during the pandemic is not the primary focus of our volume, it is worthwhile to mention that the pandemic also saw readers trying to alleviate the stress and boredom of lockdown through reading. Tastes diverged, but there was a visible trend toward classics. For instance, Penguin Random House UK sold 69% more copies of *War and Peace* from January to October 2020 than overall in 2019; for *Anna Karenina*, the sales increase was 52%, and for *Don Quixote*, the increase was 53% (Vincent 2020). The trend toward classic, doorstopper novels indicates that readers were searching for an immersive reading experience. Granted, some of these sales were certainly merely aspirational: as is often the case with sales numbers, we don't know how many readers actually worked their way through the doorstoppers. Some reading during the pandemic has been predictably immersive: readers have looked to earlier accounts of quarantine to make sense of an inherently disorientating experience. Sales of pestilence classics like Albert Camus' *La Peste* (The Plague, 1947) and Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) have been at an all-time high, with Marcel Theroux commenting that the books had "gone the way of dried pasta and toilet roll" (Theroux 2020) despite the fact that

the latter is out of copyright and free online. In April 2020, sales of *The Plague* by Albert Camus had already tripled in comparison to 2019 in France as well as in Italy (Self 2020). Both books have been virtual book club and reading group favorites since the outbreak, with Camus being promoted by the French Embassy's Albertine Club (2020), Seattle's *The Stranger* (which runs a "silent reading party" quarantine club, Frizzelle 2020), and the YouTube Vlogger "Better than Food" (over 49,000 views since April 17, 2020). Defoe's factual-fictional "novel" was picked by *The Guardian* (it was their reading group choice for May 2020 [Jordison 2020]), the Silent Book Club (Achilles 2020), and even by the futurist, Bryan Alexander (2020). What this clearly demonstrates is our inherent need (as humans *and* readers) for shared, collective experiences, mediated via text, to make sense of extreme upheaval. We look to books that have narrated or fictionalized the experience of past pandemics, to make sense of this current one. Online book clubs such as #TolstoyTogether, founded by author Yiyun Li, generated widespread interest and motivated readers to fulfill their lofty reading goals: "What may have begun as a highbrow way to munch through an expanse of time swiftly turned into something far more meaningful, and less perfunctory" (Vincent 2020). In short, reading is a worthwhile pastime, and its impact was and has been profound in the pandemic as well.

Reading a book in a time of upheaval can contribute to our mental wellbeing through positive emotional affect; many of us have habitually turned to our favorite books at times of illness, solitude, or mental upset, because reading can provide both a means to temporarily escape our current circumstances, and also a way of understanding them—and ourselves—better. While bibliotherapy, or the practice of reading books to promote mental wellbeing, was well-established before the pandemic, the intervention of a global traumatic event has propelled it into the spotlight. Since March 2020, there has been an explosion in bibliotherapy provision, both formally in the health and social care sector, and informally, through social media, self-help groups and book clubs. Bibliotherapist Bijal Shah who runs Book Therapy, offers a personalized book prescription service, with an initial seven to ten books recommended after a detailed questionnaire; the books are designed to start filling a bibliotherapy bookshelf, with a regular subscription in the form of a "personalised book prescription" tailor-made to your individual needs: this is effectively structured reading leading to structured bookshelf curation (Shah 2021). The opposite approach is taken by the "Birštono viešoji biblioteka" in Birštonas,

Latvia, which has been offering pre-curated bibliotherapy bookshelves for patrons to browse freely since 2008; in the words of the library, users are encouraged to "look at the bibliotherapy bookshelf prepared by the library, also browse through our list of bibliotherapy books made together with specialists and choose the healing book for your troublesome problem" (n.d.). With the arrival of the pandemic, the bibliotherapy bookshelf has been adopted in many different physical and virtual guises. For the newly launched Seattle bookstore Oh Hello Again, the approach has been to organize all the books on their shelves not by author, title, format or subject, but by their emotional affect (Constant 2021), an idea inspired by British bibliotherapists Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin in their book *The Novel Cure: An A to Z of Literary Remedies* (2017). What all these approaches suggest is not just the healing power of books, but also the holistic appeal of the shelves that host them: good bibliotherapeutic practice encourages the curation of a shelf of books that can address a range of different emotional problems. The recently launched Shelf Healing podcast project at University College London literalizes this metaphor, with their Twitter account (@Shelf_Healing) encouraging visitors to share images of their bibliotherapy bookshelves. The bibliotherapy bookshelf, whether in physical or virtual form, is another cultural phenomenon that has come of age during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Blurring Boundaries, Heightening Inequalities

While the pandemic clearly blurred boundaries between the private and the public spheres, unwittingly granting people we normally would not have invited into our own home views of our homes, our pets, our children—and our books, it also underscored inequalities in a hitherto unimagined way. A meeting in an office space is a more neutral space, in which participants are clearly in the role of co-worker, colleague, employee or work contact. Fashion items or technical devices can certainly be read as markers of prestige even in a workplace environment. However, markers such as cars, houses with or without curb appeal, and the space and furnishings in your home do not become visible in the office environment and thus do not influence the dynamics and hierarchies. Arguably, in videoconferencing from home, lifestyle, affluence and status mix into the work environment to a greater degree than ever before. If the bookshelf exudes credibility, the lack thereof must be compensated by something else. In homes where more than one occupant was working from home

during periods of lockdown, the issue of visually demonstrating professional credibility became even more acute: who would get the work desk with a backdrop of books, and who would have to work from the kitchen table, bedroom or sofa, potentially having to deploy a background filter to mask their less-than-perfect home office arrangements? In some cases, the lack of a bookcase was rectified (almost) by bookish backgrounds. As Jessica Pressman discusses in her essay on "Fake Books and Fake News," Erin Elmore, former Trump spokesperson, was called out on social media for her use of a bookcase backdrop—a visible crease in the cloth backdrop was a dead giveaway, and her deception went viral (Pressman 2021). Elmore's case is well-known but far from unusual. The fact remains that online meetings are mediated and made visible via a screen, and yet, the very word "screen" carries a dual meaning: it is both a clear surface to display visual information, and an opaque barrier to hide people or objects from unwanted external scrutiny. The screen can reveal, but it can also occlude.

We do judge people by their bookshelves, as indicated in a tongue-in-cheek way by cartoonist Grant Snider's recent book *I Will Judge You By Your Bookshelf* (2020). But the online treatment of Erin Elmore and others calls into question the ethics of this type of research and perhaps the stereotypes that are reinforced by a playful Twitter account such as @BCredibility, which highlighted Elmore in a post. Granted, Elmore also worked for Trump, and there could be other reasons for questioning her authority as a public speaker. However, these new insights into people's private sphere also increase the danger of harassment and trolling. For the first time since the start of the digital revolution, hundreds of millions of domestic spaces and their occupants were open for public scrutiny, before any culturally agreed protocols or permissions had been put in place, and before the organic development of any shared practices had evolved. "Netizens" of the 2020s were learning on the hoof, and the results were not always pleasant: judging people by their interiors in general and their displayed books in particular became a key element of Twitter trolling (and sometimes vitriolic abuse) during the pandemic.

Research conducted on social media also needs to be aware of the ethical implications. Social media users may have published their images, words and thoughts on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram or Twitter, but that does not imply consent that these posts be used as research objects. In addition, when using these platforms, researchers are feeding into the neoliberal structures and algorithmic logic of big tech

corporations, which are known to be exploitative of personal data and problematic in terms of access and consent (cf. Murray 2021). There are reasons to abstain from research conducted on social media, but the draw of this particular data deluge is unmistakable, for it is both quantitative and qualitative, standardized as well as individually self-curated. And beyond the data, researchers themselves use social media professionally, as a follow-up space for networking and debate during and after conferences and to disseminate their research; tweeting about an article, for instance, has been shown to positively correlate with citation rates (Klar et al. 2020). Thankfully, recent interventions on ethics and social media research are available to guide researchers through the social media jungle (e.g. Kozinets 2019). Leah Henrickson goes into this in more detail in her chapter (Chap. 13), before analyzing tweets with the hashtag #PandemicReading.

Similarly, ethical reservations can apply to autoethnographic research, which has mushroomed in the pandemic as archives, campuses and libraries closed. The editors of the recently founded *Journal of Autoethnography* explained that they founded an additional forum for autoethnographic research on and during the pandemic, because "[r]esearchers can use autoethnography to demonstrate how abstract, abrupt, and vast changes affect *particular* lives: specific and contextual experiences of stress and survival, grief and loss, loneliness and connection, desires for structure and normalcy" (Herrmann and Adams 2020). For instance, the chapters by Nelleke Moser (Chap. 11) and Kenna MacTavish (Chap. 3) in this volume use autoethnography as both a research methodology and as a means of qualitative analysis. As Shafquat Towheed points out (Chap. 2), in this respect, the pandemic has collapsed the distance between participants and observers. Researchers trying to understand the phenomenon of bookshelves in the pandemic as a cultural practice are themselves occupying the same space as the people they study, for they too have bookshelves of their own, and these are also often visible in the public sphere. As the pandemic wears on, it will be interesting to see how the methods and approaches adapt to what we can only assume will be the "new normal" in academia and beyond.

The Bookshelf and Socio-economic Inequality

Within days of the first national lockdown in the UK, Sky News journalist Adam Boulton declared in no uncertain terms that while interviewing, his eyes were "tempted to stray towards the background," the background which almost always consisted of bookshelves brimming with books (Boulton 2020). "I've been struck most by the books," Boulton observed, adding that all of his interview subjects have "shelves and shelves full of them and nearly all of them in 'working libraries' of ill-matched and thumbed volumes rather than interior decoration bought by the yard" (ibid.). Boulton acknowledges that book ownership (and therefore by necessity, book display) is uneven, citing the 2017 Aviva survey for World Book Day that in the UK, "10% of homes contain no books, those you see on your screen evidently belong to the 7% of us who have more than 500 volumes" (ibid.). While acknowledging the uneven distribution of books in British households, Boulton (like so many of us) is so captivated by the sheer spectacle of the accumulated intellectual capital of his interview subjects, that he fails to see this phenomenon for what it is: the pandemic has cruelly exposed books on display as a visible marker of socioeconomic privilege, constructed by neoliberalism and delivered by profit driven global conglomerates in an increasingly consolidated publishing industry. Book poverty is every bit as real as child malnutrition, and often it is just as easily ignored; as Lea Shaver's work has shown, 40% of American children cannot afford to buy books and despite rising literacy rates in the Global South, ending book hunger remains an immense challenge (Shaver 2020).

The blunt fact—which academic scholarship has hitherto largely failed to register—is that a significant proportion of the world's population does not possess adequate space or enough owned books to convey any sense of personal or professional empowerment through their domestic bookshelves. Exposed by the pandemic, never has book ownership—now increasingly denominated by carefully crafted and sometimes ostentatious book displays—been a clearer measure of socioeconomic inequality than it is now; Amanda Hess' Vuittonesque turn of phrase of the "quarantine's hottest accessory" (Hess 2020) has come back to haunt us, for the poor have neither books nor shelves, any more than they have Louis Vuitton handbags or any other LVMH luxury products.

IKEA's famous Billy bookshelf has become a marker of globalization having now sold more than 110 million units since it was launched in

1979, and it is still selling at the rate of one every five seconds; in the UK alone, around 530,000 Billy bookcases are sold annually, which is cumulative theoretical shelf space for over 100 million standard format paperback books (Brzezinski 2019). Bookshelves are of course also used to store and display things other than books, as research by Jessica Pressman, Nicola Rodger and Emily Baulch (in Chap. 8 of this volume) has demonstrated (Pressman 2020; Rodger 2019; Baulch 2022). Indeed, IKEA deepened the shelves of its iconic product in 2011, specifically so it could store non-book items (ornaments, trinkets, etc.) with as much ease as books. But while IKEA readily adjusted to the changing nature of consumer culture and bookshelf display in its key markets of Europe, North America and East Asia, it has been far less successful at making bookshelves available to citizens of the Global South in general, and Africa in particular. Despite the Swedish firm's seeming global ubiquity, which the BBC's Tim Harford glibly described as the process by which "IKEA's Billy bookshelf took over the world" (Harford 2017), it is worth remembering that IKEA's bestselling product is only available for sale in two African countries, Egypt and Morocco, out of a total of 54 countries on the African continent; IKEA does not serve Africa's two biggest economies, Nigeria and South Africa. Africa has a total population of 1.38 billion people, roughly the same as China, and 67% of the African population over the age of 15 is literate; with 40% of the continent's population aged 15 or under, the African continent has more school age children than either India or China. Africa has a youthful population pyramid; the median age across the continent as a whole is 20 years. It has a massive number of children and young people in formal education who are required to read books, and an emerging middle class with increasing purchasing power, who may choose to read and own books for themselves. The fact that the world's foremost book furniture brand, IKEA, famous for its ability to deliver high-quality mass-produced home furnishing at a low cost, has effectively refused to serve nearly an entire continent, speaks volumes about how bookshelves can reinforce structural inequality, rather than challenge it. Much has been made of the rhetoric of book hunger in relation to Africa, with African publishing studies experts such as Elizabeth Le Roux contesting many of the received truisms about the perceived lack of books on the continent. This "narrative of scarcity and famine has become widespread through frequent repetition, employing emotive language and images of children, anecdotal evidence rather than broader data and the exclusion of competing narratives that could complicate the picture" (Le Roux 2020). While

the issue of an African book famine has arguably been rhetorically overinflated and is based on unreliable and incomplete data, the failure of the world's leading producer of bookshelves to adequately serve the world's second largest continent by population is incontrovertible. The history of the African bookshelf and its material and oral cognates, both in the prepandemic period and today, is yet to be written.

Just like the McDonald's BigMac index, the price of IKEA's bestselling product is now used as a comparative economic metric. Bloomberg's Billy Bookcase Index compares prices (and therefore real-world exchange rates) in 38 countries and confirms the structural inequality of access to this most iconic of bookshelves. The most expensive country in the world to buy the seemingly standardized Billy bookshelf is an African country, Egypt, where it sells for US$100, which is two and a half times as expensive as it is in the cheapest country, Slovakia, where it costs just US$40 (O'Brien and Siedenburg 2015). When purchasing power parity is factored in, the price difference is even more pronounced, with the Billy bookcase nearly 13 times more expensive in Egypt than in Slovakia. Just to put this in context, the monthly minimum wage in Egypt is currently set at US$125, while in Slovakia, it is US$665. This corporate complicit inequality is all the more jarring when Egypt has given the booklovers of the world both the ancient Library of Alexandria (the Mouseion), and the Christian monastic tradition which led indirectly to the development of both chained books and the evolution of library bookshelves in most of Europe.

The stark inequality made visible by bookshelves is not just global, between the rich north and the poor Global South, but is just as clearly evident within nation states. Research undertaken by the National Literacy Trust in the UK before the pandemic (January to March 2019) shows that book poverty is a real and persistent problem. Based on their survey sample, they estimated that some 383,000 children aged 9 to 18 in the UK— the world's fifth biggest economy at the time of the survey—did not own a single book, representing 9.3% of children from economically deprived backgrounds (National Literacy Trust 2019). People living in temporary accommodation, those on short-term tenancies, and itinerant workers and communities are less likely to buy and accrue books, for the very reasons of their materiality: books and bookshelves are heavy and not easily portable. At the same time, it is worth considering the fact that book poverty is more than just a matter of economic or material deprivation; paucity of aspiration, insufficient literacy skills and deep-rooted familial resistance to

engaging with printed books as a source of entertainment are also factors. In the UK, 96% of households have broadband internet, and 94% of the population own mobile phones, both of which are higher household penetration percentages than for printed books. It might be the case that some households without domestic bookshelves of their own have access to digital texts instead; this is something that anyone researching in this area must contend with.

Unabashed celebrations of bookishness as morally, emotionally, and ideologically positive have accelerated since the start of the pandemic, with the widespread online display of books on shelves and people standing or sitting in front of them feeding into a wider discourse around reading for well-being and mental health. It is certainly the case that prolonged periods of pandemic lockdown and the closure of physical bookshops in many countries led to changes to both book buying and reading habits. In the UK, where physical bookshops were classified as non-essential and in store browsing banished, sales moved online; the launch of the online independent bookstore retailer Bookshop.org in November 2020 proved particularly timely. In contrast, in France, bookstores were considered to be essential businesses and were allowed to operate, albeit with capacity controls and sanitary measures. The equivalent French innovation in books sales in this period saw the supermarket chain Intermarché launch a similar initiative, "Solidarity Alley," on its e-shopping platform. In both countries (as in many other OECD nations), book sales held up remarkably well, with hardback fiction (in particular) showing strong sales. Despite the challenges of lockdown, consumers with sufficient purchasing power found it easier than ever to top up their bookshelves and acquire the books they needed. The same could not be said for economically disadvantaged groups or communities—those with limited access to e-commerce, online access, or those who for reasons of money or habit, preferred to borrow books from public libraries rather than purchase their own.

Ironically, all of this reification of the physical book mediated digitally has happened at a time when free to the public e-book lending has increased markedly (albeit from a small base), in large measure due to the pandemic. In the UK in the first three months of the first national lockdown (April 1 to June 30, 2020), library members accessing digital resources increased by 27%, while e-book checkouts increased by 146%—all this at the time when public libraries could not host in-person access and physical book borrowing was curtailed, in no small part due to largely unsubstantiated fears around contact transmission of the virus via

contaminated surfaces (Libraries Connected 2020), echoing exactly the same fears that resulted in library closures a century earlier during the 1918–1920 H1N1 influenza pandemic. Despite the massive increase in the visibility of books on shelves mediated in the digital public sphere, for some readers, the actual bookshelf of importance during periods of lockdown was the virtual array of titles on their e-readers, apps or digital devices, a practice which is both difficult to share effectively (despite tools such as Kobo Reading Life or websites such as GoodReads) and invisible in terms of bookshelf display. The culture of virtual book display is an evolving one, and it remains to be seen how the pandemic-induced temporary changes in buying, reading and display choices might have caused a change in shared or collective social practice.

Digital e-readers internally mimic the analog organizational structure of the bookshelf, usually taking their cue from the front-facing practice of bookselling, but they cannot be used as external markers of intellectual or cultural credibility. While the absence of books or bookshelves on display are usually markers of poverty or inequality and therefore rarely seen on screen, it can sometimes be a much more deliberate, and indeed, much more sinister signifier. Of the 492 images of humans in front of their bookshelves analyzed by the now famous Twitter account Bookcase Credibility in the 18 months since it was launched in April 2020, perhaps the most striking and certainly the most disturbing is that of the Trump administration's Secretary of State for Education, Betsy DeVos, in front of a bookcase with no books on it (@BCredibility, July 9, 2020). This is the ritualistic enactment of privilege and power through the repudiation of the very knowledge production that enabled that privilege in the first place.

Of course, all of these inequalities existed prior to the pandemic, but white-collar homeworking and the explosion of bookshelf backgrounds in broadcast media have made the disparities around book ownership and display impossible to ignore. In the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, the digitally mediated bookshelf has become a socioeconomic liminal space, a repeatedly staged social ritual, one where economic privilege has been asserted, reinforced and displayed in an allegedly egalitarian virtual domain, through the systematic deployment of books as markers of authority and professionalism. Far from ushering in a democratic, open and accessible era, online meeting software, broadcast media and social media platforms have directed an unflattering light on global inequality, visualized through the presence or absence of books.

Structure of the Volume

Lydia Pyne's foreword reminds us that bookshelves remain "one of the most malleable, adaptable objects in human history—made, unmade, and remade over millennia" (Pyne 2022, x) and the introduction to this volume draws on that theme, illustrating some of the many ways in which bookshelves and the social practices that they stage and narrate have been transformed by the intervention of the COVID-19 pandemic—a process of radical evolutionary transformation which is ongoing. The 12 chapters that follow this introduction are separated into three thematically informed sections. Section 1, "private and public reading spaces," concentrates on considerations of private and public reading spaces. It opens with a chapter by Shafquat Towheed on bookshelves in the pandemic as both a physical and a temporal "liminal space" (Chap. 2), a multifunctional space poised uncomfortably between the private and public spheres. Drawing upon a range of theoretical concepts from disciplines including anthropology, the digital humanities, social sciences and critical theory, Towheed examines bookshelves in the COVID-19 pandemic as a site of liminality, a material and visual reminder of our current limbo-like existence between a pre-pandemic world that has gone forever, and a post-pandemic world that is yet to emerge. He considers the way in which online videoconferencing has granted unprecedented access (sometimes unwittingly) into people's homes and especially their bookshelves, and suggests that this offers a window of opportunity for researchers to investigate a unique moment in human culture and meaning-making. "The phenomenon of hundreds of millions of domestic bookshelves, replete with the as yet unnarrated life stories of their owners, suddenly made visible for all to see and read," Towheed argues, offers a momentary "window of visibility" offering a kind of mass observation of the lived experience of readers' lives, one which might not outlast the pandemic.

The nature of lived experience through the pandemic mediated by bookshelves, both real and virtual, is explored by Kenna MacTavish (Chap. 3), who offers a detailed microhistory of bookstore activities during lockdown in the Australian city of Melbourne, a designated UNESCO City of Literature with the second highest concentrations of bookstores in relation to its population anywhere in the world. As of November 2021, Melbourne residents had experienced six successive lockdowns amounting to 262 days in total, the longest period of social restriction anywhere in the world; during this time, residents could only travel within a 5 km

radius for essential purposes only. Framed autoethnographically, McTavish's chapter, "Crisis Book Browsing: Restructuring the Retail Shelf Life of Books," uses Instagram as a source for book studies research. She focuses on how book retailers responded to the prolonged periods of closure through canny Instagram campaigns, transforming physical features such as bargain tables into a visually appealing Instagram feed. She also examines how readers transformed their own browsing habits from physical to online spaces, a practice she terms "crisis book browsing."

The next two chapters investigate the tensions between private and public spaces as well as wider debates in an increasingly polarized digital space as negotiated via bookshelves. Ever since national lockdowns forced millions of people to work from home, the presence of potentially problematic or controversial books on people's shelves has exploded on social media, especially on Twitter. Some of the complexities of "problematic" bookshelves are analyzed by Chiara Bullen in Chap. 4. In an age typified by culture wars and political polarization weaponized via social media, and in the light of the #MeToo movement, what are the repercussions of presenting the "wrong" types of books on your shelves—purposefully or inadvertently? An example is the changing status of books by J. K. Rowling on people's bookshelves, after comments the author made on social media and in interviews in June 2020 which were widely considered to be trans-exclusionary and transphobic. In her chapter, Bullen asks whether in "today's progressive reader era and the so-called 'culture wars', ownership of such titles may encourage assumptions from other readers about one's ethical values." She demonstrates that while publishers benefit from deploying sensitivity readers, they often send mixed messages about problematic books and authors. Examining the presence of these books on people's shelves, Bullen reminds us that the pandemic has exacerbated these tensions: "the discourse surrounding problematic books, authors and publishers today gives us something else to keep in mind if presenting our bookshelves for scrutiny—digitally or otherwise."

While Bullen focuses on social media interaction, Jennifer Burek Pierce's chapter "Old Books on New Media: Reader Responses to *The Thorn Birds* and *Late Night with Seth Meyers*" (Chap. 5), reminds us of the continued relevance of linear broadcast television in increasing the visibility and cultural relevance of books and bookshelves during the COVID-19 pandemic. The explicit presentation of books on shelves on TV studio sets is the focus of Burek Pierce's chapter; she demonstrates the ways in which changes in late night TV formats during the pandemic were visualized

through the lens of bookshelves and books presented on screen. As many television hosts moved to homeworking, she shows how Seth Meyers' home studio espousal of Colleen McCullough's romance bestseller *The Thorn Birds*, a "book that was nearly fifty years old" turned it into a "feature of Meyers' show" and ended up dominating the "social media discourse surrounding it." Burek Pierce also notes how the #BlackLivesMatter movement caused a shift in the types of visible books presented on screen, suggesting direct links between politics and curation, not only of a shelf, but also of an on-screen (celebrity) personality. In this respect, the visibility of books broadcast on screen during the pandemic publicly exposes particular cultural practices or preferences that might otherwise have remained private.

Section 2 of *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic* focuses on material culture on screen, scrutinizing the extent to which the mediation of books as three-dimensional material artifacts via flat digital screens has changed as a result of the pandemic. In "Videoconferencing as a Digital Medium: Bookshelves in Backgrounds Throughout History" (Chap. 6), Paizha Stoothoff offers an art historical overview of bookshelves in backgrounds from the Renaissance to the present. As Stoothoff shows, portraiture throughout history, whether painted or photographed, has often included books as markers of status and authority. Stoothoff compares this historical practice with pandemic era videoconferencing as a digital medium, and teases out the ways in which contemporary online meeting platforms and their users draw upon the visual grammar, assumptions and aspirations of their pre-digital ancestors. Her approach suggests continuity rather than radical disjuncture: she argues that by "comparing the significance of bookshelves in backgrounds in print and digital media over time, we can uncover similarities and differences about how books have been used and judged." Again, this is a cultural practice made visible as a result of quarantine-enforced remote working.

While Stoothoff focuses on the *mise-en-scène* of books as material objects bolstering the status of their owners, Amanda Lastoria analyzes the materiality of books via the representation of the codex on screens. She identifies the role of books as "masks" on screens within a cycle of book presentation, discovery and acquisition (Chap. 7). As Lastoria shows, book design and recognizability on screen have become increasingly important. From the Amazon thumbnail to the "look inside" feature, she argues that "the materiality of printed books is remediated online," and demonstrates how it impacts our consumption of books during the

pandemic. Lastoria observes that we "discover on Twitter, acquire on Amazon and share it—that is, sell the book along with ourselves—on Zoom, where other consumers discover the book, and so on, over and over."

Two further chapters explore specific material cultural phenomena that existed before the pandemic, but whose importance and relevance have been exacerbated by it. In "Bookish objects on the Bookshelf" (Chap. 8), Emily Baulch scrutinizes the non-book but evidently bookish objects found on people's bookshelves, and demonstrates the different roles that they play. Bookish merchandise such as the popular Penguin Books paraphernalia, enters into a visual conversation with the books on the shelves. Examples of bookish objects are mugs, candles, but also so-called Funko Pops (Chap. 8). Baulch cogently observes that the "affective appeal of bookish objects reveals that we do more with books than simply read them. And we do more with bookshelves than simply stocking them with books." If the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and the burgeoning culture of working from home has revealed domestic bookshelves to the wider world, it has exposed not just printed books, but a whole world of bookish objects and bookshelf ephemera, from mugs to artwork and from toys to lucky charms.

In contrast, Claire Battershill in "Writing with Spines: Bookshelf Art, Found Poetry, and the Practice of Assemblage" (Chap. 9) introduces the concept of bookshelf art in relation to found poetry and assemblage, a practice which she terms "writing with spines." In her chapter Battershill discusses the now-famous piece "Shelf Isolation" (2020) by British artist Phil Shaw, which can be seen on the cover of our volume, as a perfect example of such assemblage in practice. Battershill notes that aesthetic arrangements of books on shelves can have innate cultural value, but even more importantly, can constitute an artistic practice in itself. Interviewing Phil Shaw for this chapter, the artist reveals that the physical presence of books on shelves acts as artistic inspiration: "Who hasn't entered a room to find its walls crammed from floor to ceiling with books, and not felt a sense of joyful amazement?" Shaw as quoted in the interview with Battershill argues for the narrative, story-telling element of spines as both paratext and metanarrative: "seen together on a shelf, particularly in a private home they can tell a story quite separate from their individual content."

The final section looks at libraries, pedagogy and reading during the pandemic; all four chapters are concerned with the social, pedagogical and

societal implications of the pandemic as demonstrated via bookshelves, focusing on book access and accessibility, real world implications for pedagogy and methodologies for researching reading during the pandemic. As befits a volume that brings together research about bookshelves in the pandemic that was researched and written during the pandemic itself, the first three of these four chapters are informed by the personal experiences of their authors. Section 3 opens with Corinna Norrick-Rühl's chapter, "*Elmer the Elephant* in the Zoom Room? Reflections on Parenting, Book Accessibility and Screen Time in a Pandemic" (Chap. 10); she explores how already substantial existing inequalities of book access for families in the pre-pandemic era were exacerbated by the lockdown closure of schools, libraries and daycare centers. Norrick-Rühl comments on the near invisibility of children's books in the wider cultural discourse on bookshelves in the pandemic, noting that despite their lack of perceived authority or bookshelf credibility, children's books "were, in many households with kids, the books most often handled and read in 2020." The invisibility of children's books and reading in online platforms and academic discourse strongly indicates how research can sometimes fail to address systemic issues of inequality around books and reading, inequalities which have sharpened markedly since the start of the pandemic.

Bringing these questions closer to higher education contexts, Nelleke Moser offers an autoethnographic case study of her own pandemic teaching at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Chap. 11). The pandemic triggered a number of panel discussions and interventions on teaching material culture online, at remove from the physical objects which usually bring our disciplines such as history or book studies to life. Teaching students who suddenly found themselves unable to access the university library, and in particular, its rare books and manuscript collections, Moser embarked on a pedagogical experiment: she encouraged her students to pick a book from the ones they owned and had with them, as their exemplary text for research in the history of the book. Moser's aims were clear: she wanted to "increase epistemic equality, diversify the curriculum, and make students feel in charge of their own learning." Moser's experiment with graduate students in the Netherlands offers intriguing perspectives on how the pandemic changed pedagogical practice, while also refocusing scholarly attention on the books students actually possess, rather than on institutional collections. While Moser demonstrates the challenges faced by instructors, the next chapter, "Online Learning, Library Access and Bookcase Insecurity: A German Case Study" by Ananth, Barth, Ntoumanis

and Tolstopyat (Chap. 12) offers a student-led perspective. This chapter centers on the students themselves and other users of university libraries such as independent scholars to highlight some of the many challenges they have faced in terms of online learning during the pandemic. This contribution was the result of a roundtable discussion at our conference, and while the students involved are all based in Germany, many of their observations will resonate with students across the globe and the limitations and challenges they experienced as learners and readers in the pandemic. Ananth et al. movingly discuss the idea of "Bookcase Insecurity," caused by the conflation of public and private spaces. With universities, public libraries and cafes closed, students lost their main shared spaces for study; instead, they were often forced to learn from cramped and poorly equipped shared student housing, with few if any books to hand, and without any of the "Bookcase Credibility" so effortlessly flaunted by academics and media experts. This chapter reminds us once again of the role of the bookshelf as a contested and complex cultural space during the pandemic.

The final chapter in this section and the volume moves away from the personal to the collective experience of reading in the pandemic with Leah Henrickson's remarkably timely Twitter-based study (Chap. 13). Using the Netlytic data scraping tool, Henrickson carefully amasses and interprets 65 tweets all gathered during one week in September 2020 (another 50+ additional tweets were scraped in October 2020 and January 2021). Her analysis of tweets marked with the hashtags #PandemicReading and #PandemicBookshelves grants readers a wide and deep impression of pandemic reading habits, challenges and chances. She identifies three distinct user groups via their responses: reactive readers; resilient authors; and digitally engaged institutions. Henrickson observes that books on people's shelves have a remarkable ability to connect readers otherwise physically separated by the lockdown: "We are alone in own homes, but we are alone together—reading, tweeting, and persevering." It is an apt way to close the volume, gesturing toward the central role that social media has taken on as a replacement space for exchange and conviviality, and how that has been catalyzed through the pandemic and lockdowns. And it reminds us once again, that private bookshelves, whether on display or not, have served a number of important roles through the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beyond the Pandemic Bookshelf

While we have tried to cover a broad range of themes, readers of this volume will certainly find some topics overly represented while others are not. Additional perspectives are offered in a special issue of *English Studies* titled "Bookshelves, Social Media, and Gaming" (vol. 103 [2022]). Edmund G.C. King opens the special issue with his article titled "Unpacking the 'Red Flag' Bookshelf: Negotiating Literary Value on Twitter." He examines the idea of the "bookshelf red flag" or "warning sign"—the book or author that might give pause if seen on a potential date's bookshelf—and how this specific type of "book talk" is carried out on Twitter. Stevie Marsden's article, "'I take it you've read every book on the shelves?' Demonstrating Taste and Class Through Bookshelves in the Time of COVID" in that volume raises important questions about classism and demonstrations of taste and value through owning and displaying books. She demonstrates how the bookshelf space can sometimes reinforce inherent socioeconomic inequalities through processes of cultural exclusion; rather than being a democratizing space, bookshelf culture can serve to validate social stratification. It is followed by Laura Dietz's article, "Projection or Reflection? The Pandemic Bookshelf as a Mirror for Self-Image and Personal Identity" which specifically argues that the contingencies created by the pandemic (such as periods of lockdown, bookshop closure and social distancing) have turned private bookshelves into arenas for the self-assertion and expression of individual identity. Sally Blackburn-Daniels takes the relationship between bookshelves and their human custodians one step further in her article "'Book Birthing' and Conspicuous Literary Consumption," where she explores natal symbols and the idea of literary consumption as a generative act. To round off the special issue, Simon Rosenberg analyzes representations of physical books and bookish spaces in the video game "The Last of Us Part II." Books and bookshelves abound in the world of gaming, and Rosenberg shows how they have a particular currency in a video game set in an imaginary post-apocalyptic, post-pandemic future. As indicated, we hope that these two outputs can be read alongside one another and inform each other.

As broad as the scope then is, this volume does not and cannot claim to be fully representative of the phenomenon around bookshelves in the pandemic; we would like to acknowledge some of the topics and approaches not covered in this volume, in an effort to open up the field for future researchers. Our volume brings together research conducted in (and from

researchers based in) six OECD countries: Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and the USA. All of these nations are among the most developed and privileged in the world, while the COVID-19 pandemic has of course, been a global phenomenon. Individual chapters and the volume introduction have tried to address issues of inequality *within* nation states, but it has largely been beyond the scope of this volume to address some of the huge and increasing inequalities *between* nation states. How for example, did the prolonged period of school closure impact on access to books in the Global South, given that school textbooks and exercise books are often the only books owned by children in vast swathes of the world? How might the closure of in-person bookselling in Global South countries (some with limited or no online book sale platforms), have been different from the impact felt in the West? How might the concept of "Bookcase Insecurity" (Ananth et al.) be usefully extended (or not) to tens of millions of people working from home in the Global South who have no book lined shelves to project authority or credibility? While Indian novelist Chetan Bhagat has written compelling call center novels such as *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005), the call center bookshelf (if indeed there is such a thing) has so far evaded critical scrutiny, despite the fact that the call center industry pioneered open plan working and home working long before the pandemic. And even more pertinently, how might the new generations of digital native readers, most of whom are in the Global South, have responded to acquiring and reading texts differently to their analog ancestors?

Where chapters in this volume discuss questions of access to books and accessibility, these issues are considered in relation to the settings and conditions specific to these six countries. While books are indeed recognized as cultural signifiers in a wide range of cultural settings, the practice of examining bookshelves filled with codices inherently privileges Eurocentric ideas of what constitutes the normative material for research. This Eurocentric approach was often found in the histories of book collecting and bibliophilia which preceded this volume, which skew heavily toward white male collectors and collections based in the Global North (e.g. Basbanes 1995). Only recently has the predominantly male history of book collecting been challenged by ideas and approaches of a burgeoning feminist book history, as evidenced by Kate Ozment's wonderful "Rationale for Feminist Bibliography" (Ozment 2020). The racial inequalities perpetuated by a focus on Eurocentric and middle-class ideals of the home bookshelf filled with printed (often hardcover books) also need to

be acknowledged, and rightfully challenged and re-aligned. There is also an issue of how any analysis of bookshelves might consider the needs, preferences and practices of people with disabilities, whether physical or neurological. So far, the paradigm of weighty books stacked up on vertical shelves to above standing height literally materializes the dominant culture of the able bodied; such an approach ignores books in braille or audio books, or books which have to be shelved at a lower height for reasons of accessibility to wheelchair users. Such books and devices might not be visible to camera. The history of the bookshelf for people with disabilities could well be radically different from that of the able bodied, and this needs to be acknowledged by researchers.

Beyond the broader issues of what gets selected for analysis is the need for a more fine-tuned approach and the requirement for comparative and interdisciplinary work in interpreting books on shelves. If we are to think of a simple example from typography, the direction of texts on book spines will be completely different in the UK, USA, Anglophone countries, Benelux countries and Scandinavia, where titles are written top to bottom, to the prevalent system in France and Germany, where titles on spines are written bottom to top. This situation is further complicated by languages which have a history of being written or printed vertically (like Chinese or Japanese), or from right to left (like Arabic, Hebrew, Persian or Urdu). Many readers in households in countries across the world are bilingual or multilingual, and we must not casually assume that there is one coherent or consistent way of arranging, retrieving or displaying books.

Parallel to the issue of the specificity of texts is the specificity of environments. Researchers have often assumed that domestic bookshelves and the books arranged in them are the responsibility of an individual member or several members of a single household, and that their maintenance, cleaning and upkeep are provided solely by the householder. But domestic cleaning throughout history has been women's work, and almost always unpaid or underpaid. In the UK just before the pandemic, it was estimated that one-third of all households employed paid domestic cleaners; this means that a substantial proportion of the nations' private bookshelves are indeed dusted, cleaned and organized, by paid (largely immigrant and female) domestic workers. While authors, academics, public intellectuals and celebrities have often posed in their writers' studies or placed themselves in front of artfully arranged books for their publicity shots, how many of them have ever thanked their domestic workers in their publications for keeping their bookshelves pristine and their books in order? The

visibility of bookshelves in the pandemic draws our attention to the invisibility of certain types of labor; the invisibility of domestic work was highlighted by pandemic national lockdowns, when household mixing was prohibited, and previously outsourced domestic work was temporarily suspended.

When we submitted the proposal for this volume in January 2021 during the second lockdown in the UK and Germany, it was hard to imagine what the world would look like post-COVID. At time of writing, in November 2021, we still cannot quite imagine where and how this pandemic will end. Nonetheless, we believe that this volume shines a light on a phenomenon that has accompanied us through months of restrictions and lockdowns. We hope that the volume's chapters will offer fertile ground for further research in this field, and look forward to the discussions that it generates. A global history of the bookshelf in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic is yet to be comprehensively written, but we feel with this volume, we have at least made a start.

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