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**JUDGING A
READER BY ITS
COVER**

A commuter poses with D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960, the day it went on sale after a 32-year ban was lifted.

WHAT'S A CULTURE SNOB TO DO?

Pity the culture snob, as Kindles, iPods, and flash drives swallow up the visible markers of superior taste and intelligence. With the digitization of books, music, and movies, how will the highbrow distinguish him- or herself from the masses?

We've all had that moment. That dial tone that hums in your head after you glance across the train aisle or spot someone perched upon a park bench or peer into the window at Starbucks and, based on the cover of the book a stranger is reading, zings the hope that he or she must be a kindred spirit, a literary soulmate, because you too dig Mary Gaitskill down to the nasty bone. Or perhaps it's *Netherland* being held like a hymnal, the acclaimed novel by Joseph O'Neill that you keep meaning to read and never will, and here it is, being read with such care by someone so cute. If only you could strike up a chat, the two of you

might stroll off like French lovers thrown together by capricious fate, scampering to take cover from the christening rain. Romantic fantasy isn't the only driver of curiosity—our inner snob is always clicking away, doing little status checks. In New York City (can't speak for the other metro systems across this great land), every subway car is a rolling library, every ride an opportunity to spy on the reading tastes of fellow passengers and make snap judgments that probably wouldn't hold up in court. Single women in their 30s and 40s gripping a teenage-vampire tale or a Harry Potter—they seem to be hanging out a surrender flag. Those parading the latest Oprah selection might as well honk like geese. Then there are those who defy stereotype. A tall, straw-thin model glides into seated position

and extracts a copy of concentration-camp survivor Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* from her bag, instantly making an onlooker (me) feel rebuked for assuming she was vacuous and self-centered based on her baby-ostrich stare. In the same car is another, older woman—do men not read anymore? (*Seinfeld's* Jerry, defensively: "I read." Elaine: "*Books, Jerry*")—holding up a Kindle at an angle to catch the light. Unless you were an elf camped on her shoulder, what she was reading was hoarded from view, an anonymous block of pixels on a screen, making it impossible to identify its content and to surmise the state of her inner being, erotic proclivities, and intellectual caliber. She might be reading Alice Munro, patron saint of short-story writers, or some James

DEREK BEER/N

Patterson sack of chicken feed—how dare she disguise her download from our prying eyes! And reading an e-book on an iPhone, that's truly unsporting. It goes the other way as well. How can I impress strangers with the gem-like flame of my literary passion if it's a digital slate I'm carrying around, trying not to get it all thumbprinty?

Books not only furnish a room, to paraphrase the title of an Anthony Powell novel, but also accessorize our outfits. They help brand our identities. At the rate technology is progressing, however, we may eventually be traipsing around culturally nude in an urban rain forest, androids seamlessly integrated with our devices. As we divest ourselves of once familiar physical objects—digitize and dematerialize—we approach a *Star Trek* future in which everything can be accessed from the fourth dimension with a few clicks or terse audibles. Reading will forfeit the tactile dimension where memories insinuate themselves, reminding us of where and when D. H. Lawrence entered our lives that meaningful summer. “Darling, remember when we downloaded *Sons and Lovers* in Napa Valley?” doesn't have quite the same ring to it. The Barnes & Noble bookstore, with its coffee bar and authors' readings, could go the way of Blockbuster as an iconic institution, depriving readers of the opportunity to mingle with their own kind and paw through magazines for free. Book-jacket design may become a lost art, like album-cover design, without which late-20th-century iconography would have been pauperized. (Try imagining the rock era without the gold lamé bravura of *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong* or the modernist graveyard of the *Sgt. Pepper* cover or Andy Warhol's zippered jeans for the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers*—impossible.) Jacket design is what helped emboss books with a cool factor hitherto lacking. In an essay from his collection *There's Nothing Funny About Design*—devoted to book designer Chip Kidd—David Barringer writes, “The marketing of hardcover books has gone hard-core consumerist, tricking out books into luxury objects and personality accessories. A designer fit for the times, Chip Kidd makes books into coveted objects and conversation pieces, seducing the consumer and flattering the reader.”

At the high end of coveted-object acquisition is the coffee-table book, that chest of dreams, that ocean-liner view. Expensive to produce, difficult to market, a bear to cart around, the coffee-table book is an illustrated commemorative tablet dedicated to the history, appreciation, and subtle nuances of aristocratic objects of contemplation and acquisition (fashion, flowers, gardens, lavish interiors, jewelry, deceased Hollywood royalty, masterpiece paintings, baseball collectibles, ballerina toe shoes). Totems of tasteful extravagance with a ten-

dency to monumentalism, the most monolithic of them—Taschen's *GOAT* (a 75-pound tribute to the Greatest of All Time, heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali), Helmut Newton's *Sumo* (66 pounds of superbodily nudity), *Peter Beard: Art Edition* (41 pounds), *Andy Warhol: "Giant" Size* (a relatively svelte 16-pounder)—are tombstone mothers that need to be trolleyed in from the freight elevator and installed where there's no danger of their tipping over and flattening some child, pet, pint-size grandparent, or small village. Can the average coffee-table book survive *The Vanishing*? Debatable—there's something about even the most enticing specimen that evokes a weary sigh. Opening it, turning its pages, often just seems like so much work.

A newer, more demure method of showcasing one's literary favorites involves setting the book on a minimalist stage—a wall-mounted frame with a small, built-in ledge upon which rests the book that one is currently reading or that has a personal resonance. It's like placing a beloved book within a rectangular halo. You walk into the room and there it is. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* staring at you at eye level, daring you to knock its block off.

As music migrates into our iPods, CD collections require less and less room, residing in our heads rather than resounding off the walls. The protracted labor of amassing a personal music library has lost its detective zeal. Record collections used to reflect a young man's curatorial odyssey to impose order, hierarchy, and permanence on his most cherished grooves, and to one-up his fellow pack rats. (Female music fans don't seem to be anywhere near so obsessive-completist.) To have Public Image Ltd.'s *Metal Box* in its original container was to have your punk cred validated. Fabulous rarities retrieved from the discount bins earned one membership in an elite breed of forager, akin to those flea-market falcons who can swoop in and snap up the holy grail from under a pile of old Nixon buttons. Others collected opera albums, searching out European imports from specialty shops and amassing souvenirs of their divas absolutas (Maria Callas, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf), much as Broadway-musical fans made their pilgrimages down to Footlight Records to fill in the tiny gaps in their collection of original-cast albums and jazz freaks assembled a mosaic of Blue Note albums into myriad shades of midnight. In my bohemian days (the exotic reek of incense haunts me still), I owned a jukebox—a huge honker, a neon-trimmed sarcophagus—which I studiously stocked with 45s to showcase the catholicity of my pop sensibility, from the Supremes' “Up the Ladder to the Roof” to Elton John and Kiki Dee's “Don't Go Breaking My Heart,” to

Duran Duran's "Hungry Like the Wolf," to the Clash's "(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais." I was fond of that machine, despite the mockery it inspired, because it was like having a custom-built twin. "Male record collectors seek mastery over a body of music, almost always as a way of establishing a masculine identity," Krin Gabbard argues in his psychosocial study "Hipsters and Nerds." (Oh, so that's what I was doing.) "The collector makes conscious and unconscious connections to the masculine codes in the music, but he also works at acquiring a commanding knowledge that can be carefully deployed in the right surroundings."

The right surroundings used to be the bachelor pad in all its swingy-dingy splendor. In the premiere editorial for *Playboy*, founding editor Hugh Hefner announced that the *Playboy* reader, unlike the *Esquire* gent, wasn't a hunting-and-fishing Hemingway he-man avid to camp out under the stars and cast the perfect fly. "We don't mind telling you in advance—we plan on spending most of our time inside," proclaimed Hefner. "We like our apartment. We enjoy mixing up cocktails and an hors d'oeuvre or two, putting a little mood music

the building code of his very being. You wouldn't put Charlie Parker in with rock 'n' roll? he asks his wife, to which she responds with innocent blasphemy, Who's Charlie Parker? "Jazz! Jazz!" Shrevie explodes as the ceiling of his universe comes crashing down. "He was the greatest jazz-saxophone player that ever lived." Today such a couple would have to find something else to quarrel about, probably finances, because iPod software can organize a music library any way one wishes with no risk of an outsider's slotting an artist onto the wrong shelf. Some bloggers even post regular shuffle lists of their iPod listening to advertise the eclecticism of their tastes. Any shuffle list that doesn't include the Ting Tings appears underdressed. (According to Emily Gordon, the editor in chief of *Print* magazine and a trusted informant, the real bragging rights in popcult superiority now belong to those who snag and collect "set lists" from hipster-accredited bands and have them framed. If they're autographed, so much the cooler.)

The video library has undergone a similar purge diet as iTunes and Netflix downloads have made the trip to the video store staffed by the scroungy cast of Kevin Smith's *Clerks* a schlep of the past. The video library, un-

like the vinyl collection, involves too recent a technology to acquire the nostalgic aura of paradise lost and regained. As with a neatly stacked CD collection, even the most adventuresome DVD collection appears paltry because a guest has to squint and/or twist his head at an acute angle to read the tiny print on the sides of the plastic cases; it has all the wonderment of checking the ingredients on soup-can labels. An ancillary victim of the film-library thin-down is the framed movie poster that used to grin from so many walls when I first came to New York. Duck into someone's apartment and you might have been met with the poster for the Radio City Music Hall spectacular for Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, Robert De Niro skulking through Times Square with his full-bodied scowl in *Taxi Driver*, or some French New Wave classic exhaling its grainy romanticism. But as more and more films are fetched from the ether, the movie poster loses its memento value, its Pop vintage. What will survive in the entertainment bunker are the definitive boxed sets jammed with extras (mini-posters, booklets, director's cuts, bonus discs) that preserve film and TV classics in Proustian density: the "Ford at Fox" collection (coralling half of director John Ford's output for the Fox studio spread across 21 discs—auteurist's heaven), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, *The Sopranos*, and "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Chosen Collection*" (40 discs suitable for any crypt). They attest to the foundational tastes of the owner without having to be viewed in their stupefying entirety.

As all this space opens up—as the tokens of our cultural snobbery or keen connoisseurship (take your pick, depending on the degree of pretentious wankery you attribute to others) recede into the hideaway shelves and flash drives—what will refill it? "After two decades of defining ourselves in terms of our possessions," Holly Brubach wrote recently in *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, "we now need to figure out who we would be without them." I suspect that once this downturn plateaus and shrinks in the rearview mirror, we'll just stock up on other possessions, which will be arrayed and arranged to show off not our personal aesthetics or expensive whims but our *ethics*—our progressive virtues. A place where we could play host to Barack and Michelle and feel assured they'd find nothing amiss. □

THE VIDEO LIBRARY HAS UNDERGONE A PURGE DIET, MAKING THE TRIP TO THE VIDEO STORE A SCHLEP OF THE PAST.

on the phonograph and inviting in a female acquaintance for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex." Yes, nothing goes with a nightcap quite like a little Nietzsche deftly massaged into the frontal lobes. According to Gabbard, the trouble arose from fetishizing one's musical tastes, marching them front and center and parading them like a set of encyclopedias. "A serious devotion to collecting may... hinder a man from acquiring the regular company of a sympathetic woman, and not just because so many record collectors end up with the unkempt look of the nerd," he cautioned. An overgrown man-child and his precious collection can become a closed-loop co-dependency that functions as a moat. Gabbard cites the scene in Barry Levinson's *Diner* in which Daniel Stern's Shrevie freaks out at his wife (Ellen Barkin, before she got scary) for misfiling a James Brown album, which for him violates

TUNES TO MAKE THEM SWOON

In a 1961 *Playboy*-magazine pictorial, Hugh Hefner shows a Playmate his great taste in music at the Playboy Mansion.

