

## The Curation of a Library and an Opinion

Lindsay Rice  
PUBL 6310: Introduction to Publishing  
M.S. in Publishing Program

These examples made it possible for a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This thinker observed that all the books, no matter how diverse they might be, are made up of the same elements: the space, the period, the comma, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also alleged a fact which travelers have confirmed: *In the vast Library there are no two identical books*. From these two incontrovertible premises he deduced that the Library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols ...When it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books, the first impression was one of extravagant happiness.

–Jorge Luis Borges<sup>1</sup>

Books are cultural and historical artifacts capable of conveying far more than what is expressed by only the text or images within. The decisions made when writing, designing, printing, binding, and marketing a book make that book a unique piece of history, even if every book is essentially a combination of the same elements. This can also be said of libraries; although every library is comprised of the same components, each is a unique artifact in its own right. Because they are carefully curated and maintained by the books' owner, a personal library in particular is an artifact that is more than a simple collection of stories. The decisions made when creating a personal library demonstrate that each library is the singular result of a creative endeavor, can offer a unique insight into a person, and, ultimately, declare which books are considered worthy enough of preservation.

The creation of a library mirrors that of the book. Just as a book's binding protects the story within, shelving protects the books it holds; just as a book's design tells a story of both the artist and the text, a library's arrangement tells a story of the owner; just as the design of a book indicates what readers might think about the book prior to purchasing it, the curation of a personal library indicates what the owner likely wants people to think of him or her. The creative decisions made when compiling a book—especially in regard to the text and the design—are not all that different than the decisions made when compiling a personal collection of books. In both, there lies a “tension between the exhaustive and the essential” that links libraries to printed

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel,” 54–55.

works.<sup>2</sup> The desire to be complete, perfect, and exhaustive often competes with the impracticality of that desire. No matter how much an author might write in their initial draft, an editor will pare it down; no matter how comprehensive any collector might like their library to be, a library that contains all books is not possible. Because a truly exhaustive personal library is not an option, decisions must be made—owners must perfect the collection they do possess, just as authors and editors perfect their books. What follows are choices in the binding and designing of the library.

Every physical representation of a text will say something different to the potential reader. Similarly, a variety of statements can be made about a person based on the decisions they made when housing their books. Books sequestered in glass-encased bookshelves in a closed-off room of a house will make a different statement than books on open bookshelves in well-used living areas. Furthermore, the arrangement of the actual books—by color, genre, author, or another uniquely personal method—will change how the personal library is potentially interpreted. This idea of the personal library's presentation as a statement dates back to at least the 1920s, when mass consumerism changed the way books were bought in America: "Simply possessing books, however, was not enough. They were to be as thoughtfully selected and coordinated as any expression of personal style in the home."<sup>3</sup> This thoughtful coordination, the careful curation of personal collections of books, is reminiscent of the thoughtful compilation of a book's design elements—both of which speak volumes to those who are paying attention.

This careful curation of the personal library offers a rich perspective of the owner that extends beyond the writing, binding, and design of the library. Books and their owners are closely linked, perhaps more so than any other object and its user, for books "inflict upon their readers a symbolism far more complex than that of a simple utensil"<sup>4</sup> and can therefore offer a unique historical insight into a single human being. The way that books are displayed imbues the

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Chartier, "Libraries Without Walls," 41.

<sup>3</sup> Megan Benton, "Too Many Books," 281.

<sup>4</sup> Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, 214.

owner with characteristics, but so does their choice of books and the way those books are treated; the books found in a personal collection not only capture the owner's personal and scholarly tastes, but also his or her opinions and reactions to what the books say.<sup>5</sup> The books in a personal library can testify to a variety of facts about a reader—their wealth, intellect, and education, and also their character and beliefs. This testimony can be manufactured, however, when owners choose books that project a persona they wish to be on display, rather than provide a glimpse of their true opinion about the books that they own.<sup>6</sup> Yet this too allows a library to speak volumes about its owner.

Personal libraries can also offer insight into an owner by the way he or she treats the books in the library; just as the physical preservation of the books can determine how much respect the owner has for their collection, the marginalia within the pages can determine their thoughts and reactions to the text. These annotations enhance the value of the books for both the owner and for all others who have access to the collection.<sup>7</sup> Marginalia not only offers an insight into a personal library that could extend far beyond the lifetime of the collection's curator—for once the owner passes, the collection's future is unknown—but it makes the collection a truly unique historical artifact that can only be attributed to that owner. Though it is conceivable that another library with the same collection of books exists, for books and preferences are neither infinite nor unrepeatable, the treatment of the books in a personal library is wholly singular—and can therefore say a lot about the owner.

All of these decisions made throughout the curation of a personal library culminate in one larger choice: which books are worthy of preservation? The choices made when creating a library that is comprehensive (and likely as close to exhaustive as possible), protected, and artistic—along with the decisions made about which books necessitate a personal response—are ultimately

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<sup>5</sup> David Pearson, *Books as History*, 169.

<sup>6</sup> Benton, "Too Many Books," 269.

<sup>7</sup> James Holly Hanford, "The American Scholar and His Books," 35.

the choices that demonstrate which books need to be preserved and cultivated. Because an exhaustive collection is not possible, “selection is an absolute necessity”<sup>8</sup> and those selections show which books the owner deems essential. Because care must be taken when curating a personal collection, and creative decisions are made about the arrangement, display, and housing of books, the appropriate care will only be given to those books that an owner truly wants to last. Because it is time consuming to comprehensively read and annotate a great wealth of books, those books with uniquely personal marginalia are likely meant to be treasured and passed on for others to equally enjoy.

Just as the 1920s saw a shift in book consumption, the modern publishing industry is seeing a shift in book production. As the digitization of books continues to proliferate and the publishing world evolves once more, “there will be choices to be made over the preservation of our existing printed heritage”.<sup>9</sup> These choices obviously extend beyond the borders of the personal library, but that is where those choices begin. It may be true that in the future, texts will no longer be “prisoners” of their physical body but will be a potentially infinite collection of stories housed in a library without walls.<sup>10</sup> Yet this prediction ignores the fact that collectors of books and curators of personal libraries love books for more than their words. If the day comes when texts shed their physicality, finite libraries will not disappear, they will only be honed into collections of books that society deems worth preserving—a concept that has been a part of the decision-making process for owners of personal libraries for a very long time.

This is not to say that the future of the printed word rests on the choices made by book owners in regard to their personal collections. The newly anointed president of the Modern Language Association warned against that very assumption in 1959, far before the current wave of digitization was a potential issue: “Times have changed, to be sure, and no individual can

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<sup>8</sup> Chartier, “Libraries Without Walls,” 38.

<sup>9</sup> Pearson, *Books as History*, 175.

<sup>10</sup> Chartier, “Libraries Without Walls,” 48.

determine what constitutes the canon of the books most serviceable to men. The problem of selection is for that reason the more challenging.”<sup>11</sup> Book ownership and collection is an intensely personal endeavor, and just as books are historical artifacts, personal collections of books are artifacts linked to their owners. The decisions made by those owners may start the large-scale conversation about which books should be preserved, but they will not provide the ultimate answer to that question. In the end, the personal library remains as it always has—a curated, designed, loved collection that offers a unique perspective of one person and their thoughts, tastes, and what they consider to be the books worth preserving.

## Part II

Digital doesn't have to mean death. Although the decisions made during the curation of a personal library ultimately determine which books are deemed worthy of preservation, those are not the only decisions capable of altering the future of the printed word. Readers and consumers make other decisions that affect whether libraries will eventually be devoid of walls, and many of these decisions occur entirely within our own brains—especially the brains of people devoted to deep thinking. Though vastly different in many aspects, there are subcultures within our modern society that often choose deep thinking and the literary mind over the distractions of the digital era, subcultures like nerds, introverts, cultural omnivores, and literary readers. Even though technological innovations are a significant part of our modern society, people are still capable of choosing whether or not they want their life, livelihood, and library to be wholly digital. Those decisions, and those people, may yet mean the preservation of the physical book and the printed word.

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<sup>11</sup> Hanford, “The American Scholar and His Books,” 36.

In a modern era that is engaged in the seemingly eternal debate of old vs. new, trusted vs. innovative, analog vs. digital, there is also a dichotomous debate occurring within each of us—both consciously and subconsciously. As technologies such as the Internet become integrated into our daily routines on deeper and deeper levels, our brains are transforming, adapting to the fast-paced distractions of the Web. Neuroplasticity research shows that the adult brain is ever changing, and that it changes via the tools we use and the way we live; technologies not only have the ability to aid human activities, they are “powerful forces acting to reshape that activity and its meaning.”<sup>12</sup> Though the physical shape of the human brain is not changing, and has not changed for quite a long time, the neural circuitry that makes up the brain is easily rerouted and deepened by our activities—activities such as repetitive use of technology. The Internet delivers messages to our sensory cortices simultaneously while delivering positive reinforcements that encourage further repetition of our distracted actions. In the end, “the Net delivers precisely the kind of sensory and cognitive stimuli—repetitive, intensive, interactive, addictive—that have been shown to result in strong and rapid alterations in brain circuits and functions.”<sup>13</sup> Though neurological research on the impact of technology such as the Internet is neither complete nor comprehensive, enough research has been done to know that these technologies have the potential to have a deep and lasting impact.

Yet just because technology is changing the way we use our brains does not mean that we are absolved of decision-making. It is an observable fact that modern society’s exposure to the digital world is increasing, and studies show that the amount of time devoted to reading print publications is declining over time. But the amount of exposure to technologies such as the Internet is, in the end, up to an individual. For some, it is inescapable at work or at school, where constant connection is either a possibility or a requirement. Outside of those responsibilities, however, many decide to disconnect—to engage their brains in something other than the

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<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows*, 47.

<sup>13</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 116.

distractions of the Internet and other types of technology. Though this is possible in many forms and fashions, one way is through reading books, an escape from distraction that many have chosen, and continue to choose, as an alternative to the technologies of the day.

The brain of a reader is, therefore, quite different. Unlike the distracted brain of someone constantly engaged in technology, “the mind of the experienced book reader is a calm mind, not a buzzing one.”<sup>14</sup> Physical books allow readers to “filter out distractions, to quiet the problem-solving functions of the frontal lobes.”<sup>15</sup> Readers not only read deeply—in and of itself an active, engaging activity for readers, one in which they become a part of the book—they think deeply. Just as the Net offers stimulation and distraction, a rewarding option for some, the fact that the printed word understimulates all human senses is a rewarding opportunity for others. Deep reading and, by extension, deep thinking, offers the perfect alternative to submersion in the digital world. Even though not all feel the need for an alternative to technology like the Internet, some—people from the subcultures and personality types that help create the uniqueness that is modern society—seek out the companion that deep reading can become.

Take, for example, nerds. Though often used as a stereotype or derogatory jab among kids and adolescents, adults typically outgrow the prejudice and come to find that a nerd is, simply enough, someone who absolutely loves something. As John Green, a contemporary young adult author, has said to much applause, “nerds like us are allowed to be unironically enthusiastic about stuff...nerds are allowed to love stuff, like jump-up-and-down-in-the-chair-can’t-control-yourself love it.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, nerds are often accepting—even enthusiastic—about the investment that comes along with loving the things they love. “The notion of entry cost is one thing that separates the nerd-labeled from the nerd-labelers: Some people just can’t stand the delay and the amount of effort...It takes too long, and it’s experienced as boring or too hard or

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 123.

<sup>15</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 123.

<sup>16</sup> John Green, “Harry Potter Nerds Win at Life.”



too much like schoolwork.”<sup>17</sup> Nerds recognize that truly loving something means you have to give a little in return, whether that investment requires time, money, or sheer effort.

How does this apply to reading and the future of books? Nerds—not all nerds, granted, but certainly those with a love of books—will invest the time and attention it takes to read. In contemporary society, where everything is of immediate interest and urgency, reading a book does take time, attention, and desire. Technological innovations are constant and the Internet allows everything to be one click away. But for some, the act of reading a physical, printed book is something to uncontrollably love, and therefore is something that will be chosen time and time again over the distractions of technology. With that kind of love and investment comes the reward of deep reading and deep thought—and the decision to invest in books a little bit longer.

Another group of people who can often be found seeking the deep thought that comes from reading instead of the distraction and noise of technology are introverts. Though the definitions accepted for the “classic” introvert and extrovert are always subject to change—especially considering that every human being, and therefore every introvert and extrovert, is different—a generally accepted description of the differences between introverts and extroverts would be that an introvert requires, and desires, less stimulation and often works more deliberately and methodically.<sup>18</sup> Although we live in a society that tends to base ideals and social acceptance on the extrovert ideal, it is important to understand how introverts tick, for approximately one-third to one-half of Americans are introverts.<sup>19</sup> Take it one step further, and that means that one-third to one-half of Americans are more likely to seek out deep thought than the distraction of technology.

The messages sent to our brains when using technology such as the Internet that act as positive reinforcements, or rewards, are one of the many things sought out by extroverts. While introverts are more likely to pay attention to any and all warning signals, extroverts are “highly

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<sup>17</sup> David Anderegg, *Nerds*, 211.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Cain, *Quiet*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

reward-sensitive.”<sup>20</sup> In fact, scientists are beginning to wonder if this tendency to seek out rewards is not just an important factor of extroversion, but is actually the definition of what it means to be an extrovert. By contrast, introverts have less of a response in the reward system and therefore won’t go out of their way to seek such positive reinforcements; it’s not the distractions of the Internet they seek, but focus and concentration. Knowing how the human brain interacts with technology such as the Internet, and how introverts and extroverts react in vastly different ways to that technology, helps explain why many are attracted to the bustle of the Internet while others are not.

In the end, introverts heed warning signals because they know they require less stimulation to feel at the top of their game: “Whatever the underlying cause, there’s a host of evidence that introverts *are* more sensitive than extroverts to various kinds of stimulation...and that introverts and extroverts often need very different levels of stimulation to function at their best.”<sup>21</sup> Introverts need to decompress, and often choose to do so in the company of a friend or a book; because they do not require positive reinforcements or high levels of stimulation, tasks such as conversation or reading are not treated superficially. Rather, introverts (arguably by nature) engage in the deep thinking that is necessary to achieve the level of stimulation that they desire. That is not to say that introverts do not engage in the distractions of modern technology, that they do not choose to read on eReaders when they do need to decompress, or that they all love such low-stimulation tasks as reading. It is to say, however, that when given the choice between the stimulation of the Internet and the calm of a paperback book, one-third to one-half of America may very well choose the book.

Yet another subgroup of American society that is devoted to deep thinking and that continues to show that books are still relevant is the cultural omnivore. “Cultural omnivores” are those who do more of everything—attend live musical, theatrical, or cultural performances; visit

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Cain, *Quiet*, 158.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 123–124.

museums; watch or attend sporting events; read books—and therefore, maintain a “diverse portfolio of cultural capital.”<sup>22</sup> Cultural omnivores are also likely to engage in technology, in addition to their other engagements, which is one of the reasons they are a unique subculture.

The connection between books and technology has always been present—there would be no mass-produced literary world without Gutenberg’s press, and the chisel, quill, pencil, and pen have been just as important in their own ways. Yet, that connection often presents itself in other, less obvious ways. Take, for example, the fact that reading surged when the middle-class could begin to afford windows, and again when the invention of the train gave people more idle time than they had previously.<sup>23</sup> Modern technology also presents a correlation with books. Though the invention of the television seemed to displace readers, the Internet is behaving differently, especially in regard to users such as cultural omnivores: it seems that some of the heaviest Internet users are also some of the heaviest readers.<sup>24</sup> Users like the cultural omnivore are not likely to choose only the distractions of technology or the solitude of deep thought, but both.

If cultural omnivores are more than likely to choose both technology and deep thought, it may be questionable as to how their decisions can affect the longevity of the printed word. The key factor is not that they do not choose only technology or deep thought, but that they choose both *at the expense of neither*. In the end, this is likely why they are the best example of the “average” person. The proportions of time spent doing things will vary from person to person, but each cultural omnivore will still make decisions about reading, about their devotion to deep thinking, and about their technology use. The fact that, like nerds and introverts, deep thinking and reading is still considered a valid option for those who are cultural omnivores means that the printed word will remain relevant for much longer.

Some recent studies have suggested that as Internet use surges, reading declines. Like television, cell phones, and radios, the Internet is yet another technology that is capable of forever

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<sup>22</sup> Wendy Griswold et al., “Reading and the Reading Class,” 137.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Griswold et al., “Reading and the Reading Class,” 137.

changing, and perhaps replacing, the technology we currently use. Yet, as in every case, suggestions such as this cannot hold true without exceptions. Just as there is research to suggest that the time spent reading is declining, there is research that indicates that with a particular group of readers—literary readers—reading is on the rise. Despite the far-reaching impact of technologies like the Internet, a new reading class seems to have been born. Like nerds, introverts, and cultural omnivores, literary readers’ devotion to deep thinking and the decisions they make in regard to the technologies they use will make an impact on the preservation of the printed word.

Literary readers, members of the new reading class, are increasingly those who have access to and the means of acquiring books. In postwar America, the fiction market was middle-class, and the desire to read as a form of entertainment was a general one. Over time, television became the chosen form of mass entertainment; reading, by necessity, became the pursuit of the educated—the academics and professionals who had the desire and the means to continue reading.<sup>25</sup> In the ten years following a National Endowment for the Arts study performed in 1992, reading among adults dropped from 60.9 to 56.6 percent and from 59.3 to 51.0 among those participants aged 18–24.<sup>26</sup> In a single decade, the number of people who could respond positively to the question of whether or not they read any books in the past year dropped. Since the completion of that study in 2002, technology has grown exponentially and reading is no longer the same means of general entertainment that it used to be.

Further studies on the prevalence of reading have been completed since the 2002 National Endowment for the Arts study. Some have claimed similar findings that reading is declining. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Americans over the age of fourteen spent 11 percent less time reading printed works in 2008 than in 2004.<sup>27</sup> In yet another study, four “typical” Americans were shadowed in the course of their day-to-day activities; none of them

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<sup>25</sup> Griswold, “Recent Moves in the Sociology of Literature,” 460.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Bauerlein, “Reading at Risk,” 103.

<sup>27</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 87.

used any printed works in those hours.<sup>28</sup> Yet other studies are reporting different phenomena: specifically, that “a reading class is emerging, restricted in size but disproportionate in influence, and that the Internet is facilitating this development.”<sup>29</sup> This reading class is, unsurprisingly, associated with education; the association is not only true of adult readers, but also of children, as one of the biggest indicators of a child’s exposure to printed works is the parent’s level of education.<sup>30</sup> People with advantages—be they children or adults—are much more likely to read. Even though reading became a means of mass entertainment in the postwar years, literature has been, more often than not, attainable by those with opportunity.

Therefore, though a great many lament the decline, it seems that America’s literary trend is returning to its “former social base: a self-perpetuating minority that we shall call the reading class.”<sup>31</sup> Reading may no longer be the pastime of the masses, but literary readers and the reading class is still a significant portion of the population and “the reading class will flourish even if overall reading by the general public declines.”<sup>32</sup> This class, one that is disproportionate in influence, will continue to read—not only because they enjoy it, but because they have the means to continue to seek out and purchase books. For, in the end, books aren’t disappearing simply because fewer people are reading them. When older technology is replaced with the new, the old technologies continue to be used—sometimes for a little while, sometimes for a long time, and sometimes indefinitely.<sup>33</sup> This has happened time and time before; though digital music libraries are currently the most popular option, music is still available for purchase on CDs and on vinyl, and though the newspaper is arguably being supplanted by the Internet, newspapers are still available for subscriptions and for daily purchase.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 88.

<sup>29</sup> Griswold et al., “Reading and the Reading Class,” 127.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 130.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 138.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 139.

<sup>33</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 89.

By choosing to continue reading and purchasing books, literary readers and the reading class, like nerds and introverts and cultural omnivores, will have chosen deep thinking over the immediacy of technology. As consumers in both the economic and the mental sense, they are capable of making sure the printed word is deemed relevant and worthy of preservation. Like the other groups, they are surrounded by technology—technology that may be slowly overtaking reading as the mass entertainment that it was for a short time—but the amount of time they choose to devote to those technologies is their choice. Because they have both the means and the desire to continue reading, that may just be what they choose to do.

Yet each argument is not without its limitations. As technology grows more advanced and more prevalent, and as it potentially continues to subvert older technologies as the primary form of entertainment, books may no longer travel through the traditional publishing process. If books begin to be delivered straight to readers digitally, rather than via an initial print run, how can they be preserved? If there are no more printed works to be created in the future, can the printed works of the past sufficiently allow people to dedicate themselves to deep reading and to deep thought? It is true that when new technologies are created, the old ones could remain relevant indefinitely—but will those remaining works be enough to sustain the groups and subcultures devoted to thinking deeply? The answer is that though it will be difficult, books do not have to become relegated to libraries without walls or designated as an “arcane hobby.”<sup>34</sup> As it stands now, many newly released books are released in print and digital versions, and the decision is wide open for all readers. Though the number of books that go to print, rather than to an eBook converter, may decrease over time, there will still be those readers who choose print when it is available—the initial decision will still be available, as will their determination of each book’s relevancy upon its conclusion and potential inclusion in their personal library.

The printed word is amazingly resilient and has surpassed countless other technologies that were expected to doom its existence; time and time again, people have chosen reading and

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<sup>34</sup> Griswold et al., “Reading and the Reading Class,” 138.

the quiet calm that surrounds it. Simply because brilliant technology is available does not mean that the human decision-making process is irrelevant. This concept is summed up well at the end of David Pearson's *Books as History* as he takes a look at the future of books:

Once new texts normally circulate electronically, and the printed heritage is largely accessible via digital surrogacy, the preservation of the heritage will be harder to champion. Books... will be in danger of being regarded merely as an obsolete technology of questionable long-term value. There are already plenty of people who subscribe to this perception of books and libraries. We might reflect, here, on the changes which took place after the last great breakthrough in the technology of textual communication, following the invention of printing. Countless medieval manuscripts were destroyed in the sixteenth century once the new process was established and accepted, and older books came to be seen as textually, philosophically, and physically redundant.<sup>35</sup>

The publishing industry has faced monumental technological progress before, and that progress led us exactly where we are today. Important decisions were made then about which works to preserve and, as groups such as nerds, introverts, cultural omnivores, and literary readers may attest, the decision to continue reading is still theirs to make. By making those decisions, they will not only be choosing to read, but they will be choosing a calm mind over a distracted one, they will be choosing to remain devoted to deep thought, and they will be choosing which books are worthy of preservation in the face of the current changes encompassing the publishing world. Digital doesn't have to mean death; it simply means that a decision is in order.

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<sup>35</sup> David Pearson, *Books as History*, 175, 178.

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