

STAR LIFESTYLE (20/10/2020) NLS 05

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# A library of unread books

The act of acquiring tomes without reading them may not be such a bad thing after all.

THE Japanese have a term, “tsundoku”, which refers to the act of acquiring books and letting them pile up without reading them. It’s comforting to know this affliction has a name, especially one that sounds more sophisticated than “bibliomania” or “book hoarding”.

The books I own say something about the sort of person I am or aspire to be. Those that languish unread speak to resolutions made that have, well, since been shelved. Among them are Jin Yong’s *Flying Fox Of Snowy Mountain*, which I had been meaning to read since the author’s death two years ago.

I have yet to crack open my copies of Neil Gaiman’s *The Ocean At The End Of The Lane* and Lionel Shriver’s *The Mandibles*, which I’d taken the trouble to get signed at festivals.

Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* sits glumly on my desk, reminding me of something a professor once told me, in mild reproach: “Don’t let too many years of your life go by without reading *Bleak House*.”

Tsundoku, or at least my fascination with it, was what led me to The Library of Unread Books at Excelsior Shopping Centre in Singapore two weekends ago. I found myself in good company. Books unread by their previous owners were arranged in neat, seemingly random piles on tables in a tiny basement shopfront.

“Our tagline for the library is: ‘If you have an unread book, please donate it to us and someone else will read it for you,’” says artist Heman Chong, who started the project in 2016 with archivist Renee Staal, after they were struck by how many unread books their friends had.

The itinerant library began in earnest during his residency at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art



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Singapore, where it was first displayed. It is now in its eighth iteration and has travelled to cities from Utrecht to Dubai and Manila to Milan, with more than 2,000 titles (and counting), all donated by members of the public.

You can’t take books out on loan, but you can walk in and browse the collection. Every book bears the name of its donor and some have left handwritten notes.

Writer Amanda Lee Koe, who donated Bertrand Russell’s *The Problems Of Philosophy*, quips in a pencil inscription that she is giving it up “cos I’ve got enough non-onto-

logical problems of my own”.

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What they are really curating, of course, is their image of themselves, although the project’s collective nature means it does not hold a mirror to any one person’s vanity.

A desire to seem “cool” might explain the many popular best-sellers on display – *Fifty Shades Of Grey*, *The Da Vinci Code* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*. Or the

dusty classics by dead white men, such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Laurence Sterne’s *The Life And Opinions Of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Other titles are more obscure, such as guides on palmyristry and civic organisation.

I notice a considerable lack of SingLit, with a few exceptions, such as Johann S. Lee’s LGBT novel *Peculiar Chris*.

At least one author has walked in to find his book among the unread, Chong says. German writer Ingo Niermann visited the library in Utrecht.

“Oh, I wrote this,” he said, pointing to his book *Solution 264-274: Drill Nation*.

The Library Of Unread Books raises questions about the value of unread books, recalling a well-known essay by Umberto Eco, who had a vast private library and was often asked by visitors if he had read it all.

“It could be said,” Eco mused, “that they are still people who consider a bookshelf as a mere storage place for already-read books and do not think of the library as a working tool.

“But there is more to it than that. I believe that, confronted by a vast array of books, anyone will be seized by the anguish of learning, and will inevitably lapse into asking the question that expresses his torment and his remorse.”

The anguish of learning, indeed. Some people travel to the Grand Canyon to ponder their insignificance in the world – all I have to do is visit my local library.

Surrounded by hundreds of thousands of books I know I will never read in my lifetime, I feel profoundly moved, as well as the thrill of having so much knowledge at my fingertips.

At its heart, tsundoku is a fundamentally hopeful and hopelessly optimistic enterprise. Behind each unread book lies vast possibilities.

Chong tells me that *The Library Of Unread Books* – call it a cross between conceptual art and a public programme – has nine editions, one of which has been acquired by the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). Chong is in talks with other museums – or “hosts”, as he calls them – which will also start their own libraries from scratch.

He explains: “What SAM is collecting is the instructions to run a library – how to set it up, how to collect the books ... The Library Of Unread Books is not exclusively a physical library. It is an idea ... Anyone and everyone can start their own library of unread books. That is our final goal, which is to see this idea germinate.

“If we have nine libraries (of unread books) around the world and, due to global warming, one gets flooded, we would still have eight.”

In many ways, the library is a bulwark against obsolescence. Its books might even outlive the ones which people choose to keep on their shelves. Slowly but surely, the library of unread books might just about turn into its opposite. – The Straits Times/Asia News Network