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THE COMFORT OF THINGS

THERE ARE CERTAIN ITEMS IN YOUR HOME
THAT ARE LIKE GOOD FRIENDS: THEY ALWAYS
CHEER YOU UP. THIS MONTH, WE FEEL THE
LOVE FOR... THE BOOKSHELF

Words: CLARE GOGERTY



It's an undeniable fact that a bookshelf improves a room. The addition of a row of books, no matter how small, instantly adds warmth, colour and personality. Novelist Anthony Powell knew this when he entitled the tenth book in his 'Dance to the Music of Time' series *Books do Furnish a Room*. Any house without at least one bookshelf feels empty and unloved, and its owner risks the danger of looking like someone with a sketchy, suspicious identity. Nosing around other homes lined with a bookshelf or two, on the other hand, can reveal much, and is as irresistible as poking around a vinyl collection once was.

Assemble a row of books by favourite authors, with their familiar spines and covers, and the house starts to feel like a home. All the uncertainty and upheaval that comes from moving settles once a bookshelf is put up. Unpack a box of books and you will find old friends: some may have accompanied you through several moves – from student days when they perched on planks supported by bricks, to shared houses where they jostled beside flatmates' dubious book choices, to rental properties where they lined up on your Billy bookcase, to a home of your own where they settled into orderly ranks on proper shelving.

For a while, the arrival of the e-reader put the bookshelf at risk. Reading became a secretive business with titles and names of authors concealed behind the screen of a Kindle or iPad. But this was a temporary blip. Sales of books are buoyant* once more, and

furniture buyers at John Lewis and Heal's report a greater demand for bookcases. It seems that we can't resist the pull of a three-dimensional book: the feel of it in our hands; the satisfying business of turning a physical page (or turning down a corner to mark a place); the smell of it; its bulk; the fact you can scribble in its margins and lend it to a friend.

And, when lined up along a bookshelf, a parade of books becomes a lovely thing. The enormous popularity of Instagram's #shelfie, where 'grammers post images of their artfully arranged shelves, revealing themselves in more nuanced way than the vain selfie, and the website bookshelfporn.com, which has celebrated "beautiful bookshelves from around the world" since 2009, shows how much they are loved.

This act of displaying books is a civilising and pleasing thing to do, and when life feels as though it is tumbling out of control, it can restore a little order. A row of spines becomes an index of memories, and the older you get, the more your books become a potted autobiography, charting your shifts in interest and authors. All in all, a bookshelf is a comforting thing, which is why we love it.

"A row of spines is an index of memories: like an autobiography charting your interests"

SORTED: WHICH BOOK LOVER ARE YOU?

The bibliophile

Organises their books according to category, chronologically, or alphabetically by author's names, like a bookshop.

The aesthete Arranges their books in colour bands: all books with colour co-ordinated spines are grouped together. Not especially

handy when actually looking for a book however.

The would-be librarian

Houses books in bookcases that line walls or even entire rooms, which can then be called 'the library' or 'the study' with justification.

The curl-up-with-a-good-book loafer

Sits and reads on a wet afternoon in a designated armchair by a window next to a shelf of books.

The interior designer

Intersperses objects, plants and photographs in front of books. Shelves can then be treated as 'decorative installation' with displays changing according to whim.



* Sales of books are forecast to rise by 6% this year to £1.7 billion. E-book sales will fall by 1% to £337 million. (Mintel)



THREE TO TRY OR BUY

MAKE

With a few tools and a little application, you can craft your own bookshelf from timber cut to size. Measure carefully and bear in mind that books can weigh a ton, so the shelves need to be sturdy. A simple bracket can hold a shelf up; Ikea's Lack shelf is the one with the hidden support. Five wooden crates (hobbycraft.co.uk has ones for £8) screwed together make a quick and easy bookcase, ideal for children's books.

BUY

The default bookshelf option for a generation has been the Ikea Billy bookcase but there are alternatives. A classic and desirable shelving system is the 606 Universal System from Vitsoe, designed in the 1960s by Dieter Rams. It is modular, so can be added to or adapted as your needs change and virtually disappears when it is filled with books and objects. The String Pocket (£97.75, skandium.com, below) is a neat wire three-shelf system that is easy to assemble and can be screwed into a wall.

CUSTOMISE

Many different Ikea bookshelves have been the subject of hacks, visit ikeahackers.net for ideas. Pick up a second-hand bookcase from a carboot sale or flea market (see page 66) and revitalise it using chalk paint and wax (anniesloan.com is a good place to start) or be adventurous with decoupage.



The Pocket shelving system by String



Wide Mid-century bookshelf, £599, westelm.com.uk

HOME QUANDARIES

I have way too many books – they are taking over the house. What can I do to tame them?

Answer in brief: take a deep breath and bag some up for the charity shop.

Books are wonderful things, we all know that, and we all know they inform, transport, inspire and generally improve our lives. But books that have been read once and will never be read again (or have never been read at all) are just clutter. And clutter drags you down, not just physically but psychologically. Your new bookcase does not deserve a pile of indifferent novels and faded gardening books. It needs books that are treasured, dipped into and above all, read. And so do you.

Hold on to every book at your peril. Soon you will have teetering piles of paperbacks jammed beside the bed, crammed in cobwebby corners and rising like stalagmites from the floor. They will encroach your space, inhabiting areas that could harbour a houseplant instead or a new floor lamp. There are some books which have sentimental value and they must be kept, but there is a danger of regarding all books sentimentally and seeing their disposal as heinous.

The way to do it is to take all your books off the shelves, then put those you will read again, the useful ones, and the sentimental, into a pile. Reassemble on the shelves, then haul the rest off to the charity shop. You will then have an orderly bookcase and you will be able to find a book with ease. There might even be room on the shelves for other things – or more books...

"There is a danger of regarding all books sentimentally and seeing their disposal as heinous"

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1 Billy bookcase, £35, customised with a yellow back board, ikea.com 2 Lori concertina bookshelf, £395, cuckooland.com 3 Elmari alcove shelving, £399, by Content by Conran at furniturevillage.co.uk 4 Genuine Flake bookshelf wallpaper, £185 per drop, deborahbowness.com 5 Hadley bookcase, £599, marksandspencer.com 6 Industrial Modular Bookshelf, £799, by West Elm at johnlewis.com 7 Hand-welded metal Tickety shelves, £595, loaf.com