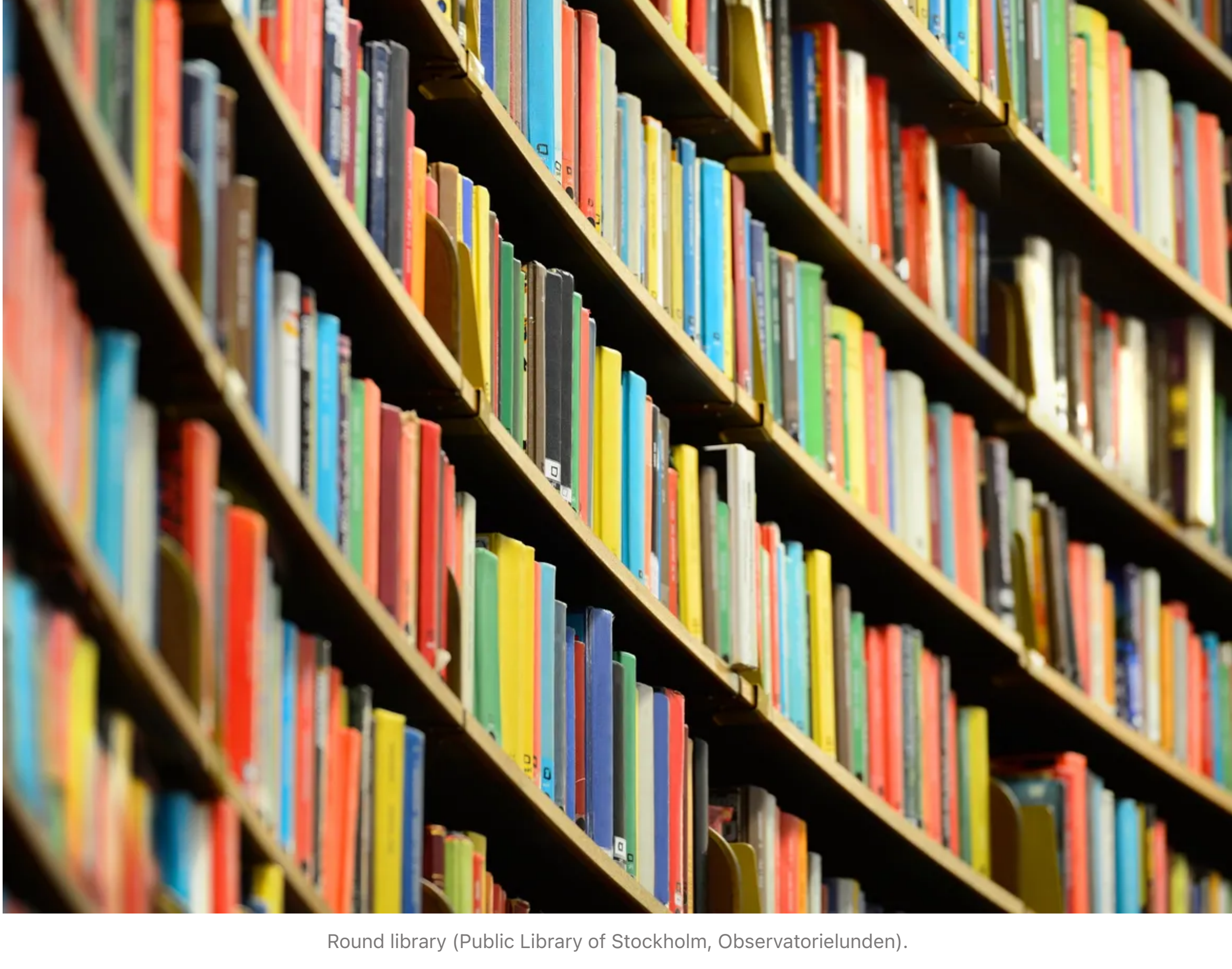


William Cash

The dark side of World Book Day

My uncle loved books too much

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What began in 1998 with Tony Blair standing in the Globe Theatre to announce a new celebration of books has morphed into something much bigger. Along with Black History Month or World History Day, tomorrow’s World Book Day is now a full member of the woke calendar. This calendar has grown – largely thanks to the UN, which spends millions inventing such initiatives – into a global non-profit industry. In March alone, we have Zero Discrimination Day, World Wildlife Day, and World Day for Glaciers.

As an author of several books, I’m all for celebrating reading, poetry and especially book buying. This World Book Day, I’m quite proud of my eight-year-old son’s choice of costume tomorrow (full cricket whites) with a sixties copy of the *MCC Cricket Coaching Book* from the library of my late uncle Jonathan Roberts, a book-loving archaeologist who used to live with us in Shropshire as a Great Uncle Bulgaria family figure.

He was our mower-in-chief, family tutor, bedtime storyteller, and tour guide until I found him dead one morning in December, aged 68, in his caretaker’s flat, crammed from floor to ceiling with thousands of books. On the floor were 20 big orange Sainsbury’s bags stuffed full of carefully wrapped packages from leading rare booksellers in the UK and abroad. None had been opened, let alone read.

My uncle’s relationship with books reveals a darker and more troubling side to collecting. It damages finances, social relations, and becomes an illness – much like gambling addiction. For decades, he suffered from the disorder known as bibliomania. This growing condition has been fuelled by the ease of buying books on the internet.

Bibliomania – very different from being a bibliophile – is now recognised by the American Psychiatric Association. The term was first employed in Britain in 1809 by a doctor called John Ferriar at Manchester Royal Infirmary. In the same year, the Reverend Thomas Frognall Dibdin published *Bibliomania; or Book Madness*, with the ‘symptoms’ of the illness including an obsession with uncut paper editions, first and banned editions.

Jonathan’s weakness was for signed first editions, especially if he had queued up in Hatchards to get the books signed himself. He often bought multiple copies of the same book, to the suspicion of booksellers who thought he was stock-buying on behalf of authors to push up sales. Examples include Paddy Leigh Fermor’s autobiography, *An Adventure* (eight copies), all books by Antony Beevor and Iris Murdoch, *Ariel Poems* by Sylvia Plath (first edition), and poems by Ted Hughes, who had briefly taught him at Stonhurst College (several signed copies of *Birthday Letters*). Somewhere in storage is a first edition of *The Waste Land* in its original *Egoist* magazine wrapping, and a copy of *Ulysses*. His collection of 5,000 or more books almost bankrupted him, like some kind of a literary crack addict.

He also collected items associated with the comfort of his childhood and teenage years: Parker pens, signed mini-cricket bats, *Wisdens*, and sixties Dinky toy models and soldiers. The book buying, his doctor said, was probably linked to trauma, going back years: a break-up while working as an archaeologist in Kent; the deaths of his two beloved parents in 2010; the sale of the family home and business (his family owned the once-famous Roberts Brothers department store in Sheffield); the early death of his art conservationist brother; and repeated threats to kill him from an ex-soldier who lived below his flat in Sheffield.

After two failed suicide attempts in May 2021, he was admitted to a secure unit for adult mental illness at a Sheffield hospital. When the hospital called my father, Sir Bill Cash, to ask him to collect his brother, Jonathan had to be brought to the car by the police because he refused to leave.

What we didn’t realise until after his death when we looked into his finances is that his book-buying obsession was so chronic that he had filled three large storage units with unopened books and magazines, including around ten years of *The Spectator*. He must have spent £100,000 in ten years, burning through his small inheritance.

Unlike the often untidy, chaotic, and feral lifestyle of hoarders seen on US TV shows, Jonathan’s bibliomania was the opposite. He was obsessed with tidiness. When he mowed on his orange Stihl tractor-mower, he was so obsessed with immaculately cutting the fruit orchards, lawns, and churchyard that he often cut the same patch several times a day on different settings. This was not just Jonathan being an eccentric perfectionist; it was his quest for order when much of his life had been a form of spiralling mental chaos.

At his death (a heart attack in his sleep), Jonathan had amassed many thousands of books – mainly on Roman and Saxon history, archaeology, and military history (Waterloo and world war two). My uncle was an intellectually gifted historian with an encyclopaedic knowledge who could have become a leading archaeologist but never managed to get the PhD he craved. Part of his book collecting was rooted in a desire to own knowledge.

At his flat in Sheffield, the door was barricaded by huge stacks of unread books and vast piles of newspapers blocking the entrance. ‘You couldn’t walk around it,’ his nephew reported to me after visiting him. ‘You had to crawl through a tunnel system of books and boxes with a single mattress on the floor. The loo was inside a prison-like wigwam of piled books. The council rang me to say that the weight of the books was a “structural hazard” for the building and insisted they were moved into storage.’

His compulsive book-buying was, indeed, a serious addiction, but it reminded me a little of Sebastian Flyte in *Brideshead Revisited* at his end, smuggling bottles of whisky into the French religious hospital in Morocco. Both came to live simply, like a lay brother, lacking ambition other than to be of service to others. Jonathan was exceptionally kind, almost holy, and his books were his friends.

Bibliomania as a condition needs more research and attention. From witnessing a sufferer, it is clearly a form of compulsive mental disorder. When Jonathan was in various Shropshire hospitals for a range of mental and physical illnesses (never fully diagnosed), he used to infuriate the ward staff by having courier drivers wearing crash helmets deliver book packages several times a week to his bedside. We were called by the hospital, which said that his huge pile of books ‘had to be removed’.

What I saw with my uncle was that each purchase was like a fix – a form of release and escape into a safer world: knowledge, images, and words. In the end, like most additions, it ended up being socially and mentally harmful. Other than family, whom he loved, the only friends he seemed to have in the outside world were rare booksellers, most of whom sent personal Christmas cards. I am not suggesting that the book trade were enablers – to use the addiction jargon – but I fear Jonathan Roberts will be missed next week at the stands of the London Book Fair.

WRITTEN BY

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