

What Other Readers Say

To collect is to sympathize with art. To make one's own commonplace book is a good way to become a thinker—perhaps even a poet.

Gilbert Highet

A commonplace book is what a provident poet cannot subsist without, for this proverbial reason, that "great wits have short memories:" and whereas, on the other hand, poets, being liars by profession, ought to have good memories; to reconcile these, a book of this sort, is in the nature of a supplemental memory, or a record of what occurs remarkable in every day's reading or conversation. There you enter not only your own original thoughts, (which, a hundred to one, are few and insignificant) but such of other men as you think fit to make your own, by entering them there.

Thomas Swift

Has the practice of keeping a personal commonplace book disappeared as some commentators claim?¹ Before conducting an informal survey on this subject, I knew of only one other person who kept a written or typed record of passages they selected from the books they had read. Surely other serious readers keep a comparable record. However, it is all but impossible to know how many, let alone what form their collection takes. To try to get some evidence on this question I

¹ Robert Darnton, "Extraordinary Commonplaces," *The New York Review of Books*, December 21, 2000

placed a *Writer's Query*² in two consecutive issues of the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. I received thirteen replies—six from England and the United States and one from Canada. Eleven of these individuals completed the short survey shown in Table 2 about their commonplace book and two of them were kind enough to expand upon their comments during a series of subsequent e-mail exchanges.

All of them expressed a sincere attachment and, in some cases, a deep affection for their commonplace book and the central role it played in their reading experience. One person put it this way: "I see my Commonplace Book as a kind of treasure chest...[confessing] This is what I believe is true; *this* is what I find to be beautiful." Another said "I copy the best words I have found, the intelligence of my times, of all times...And I do so out of pleasure and gratitude, endlessly working to assimilate what has been given me, paying it the justice of concrete attention..."

On the average these readers had been maintaining their commonplace books for thirty- five years with a range of from five to sixty-five years. This variation seems largely a function of their age, with the majority, as far as I could tell, into their fifties and sixties. Several confirmed my hunch that they had not heard of the term "commonplace book" or been aware of the practice when they began their own. In a delightful confession, one academic described a visit by W. H. Auden to his campus. After introducing Auden to the audience that came to hear his lecture, he went on to say that he "took him to the airport where we drank many martinis. He started to talk about his commonplace book, and I realized that is what I was doing too. As you probably know, his is published and mine will not be. His should be published. Mine should not be."

² Writer seeks accounts of contemporary Commonplace Books—record or journal of memorable reading passages--including its purpose and role in your reading experience. Brief Commonplace Book survey sent if requested. Send questions and comments in confidence to rkatzev@gmail.com

Table 2

Commonplace Survey

This survey is designed to learn about your commonplace book, what form it takes, and the role it plays in your reading experiences. Your answers will be of value to me as I try to gauge the nature and extent of commonplacing among contemporary readers. Your response will be kept strictly confidential. Please write me if you have any questions at rkatzev@gmail.com

1. For how many years have you kept a Commonplace Book?
2. In what form do you keep it—written notebook, typed pages, computer document?
3. Approximately what size is the page and how many pages have you collected to date?
4. What are your reasons for keeping a Commonplace Book?
5. What types of materials do you draw upon in selecting passages for your Commonplace Book? Check all that apply:

Fiction (novels & short stories)	Quotations
Non-fiction (essays & memoir)	Poems
Quotations	Periodicals
Others (please specify)	Newspapers
6. How often do you review previous entries?
7. Do you annotate the selections added to your Commonplace Book? If so, can please describe your practice?
8. Have you organized or analyzed the contents of your Commonplace Book in any way? If so, please explain.
9. Do you have an electronic version of your Commonplace Book? Yes No
10. As part of my research, I will be performing a statistical analysis of a small number of Commonplace Books. Would you be willing to have yours included in this analysis with assurance of complete confidentiality? If so, would you be able to transmit it by e-mail?
11. Please add any further comments about the role of your Commonplace Book in your reading experience.

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this survey. I am very grateful for the information you have provided.

One individual reported he has been keeping his commonplace book for “as long as I can remember.” Another said she had been doing so on and off since she was a child. All but one kept their extracts in hand written notebooks or bound volumes and two reported they kept several of their quotations on index cards taped above their writing desk or tucked inside their desk blotter. One individual, keeping pace with the times, kept his initially (35 years ago) in a written notebook, then on typed pages, and since 1996 he has stored them electronically on his computer. He had also gone to the effort of retyping all his previous entries on the computer; he is the only individual who said their commonplace book was in this form.

While the majority of individuals reported they had accumulated anywhere from two hundred to three hundred pages in their commonplace book, one reported, to my astonishment, that he had “accumulated 23 volumes, 4,550 pages, which at an average of 230 words per page, comes out to 1,096,500 words.” And that is only from the *books* he has read! It takes no account of the passages he has copied from magazines, periodicals, essays, etc. that constitute almost another half of his commonplace activities. The combined total of *both* collections is actually 36 volumes, 7,170 pages and 1,685,500 words! This surely has to be some kind of a world record, probably qualifying for entry in the Guinness Book of World Records. I learned that he had transcribed 80 pages from De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and 140 pages from Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*. He also claimed he generally reads about five books each month. I can also assure you that I was not the least bit surprised when he reported that he is 13 years behind in transcribing passages in his commonplace volumes and that he is currently copying passages from the books he read in 1993. What an astonishing account!

The majority of respondents said they review their entries occasionally, a few as often as three or four times a year. The individual who appeared to review them most often said she does so every few weeks “to look up words that chime in my

memory, to refresh my recollection of the material, or simply to browse and savor and rediscover anew their beauties and their teachings.”³ “At odd moments,” she continued, “I open the books or folders at random, or spread the pages out, close my eyes and lay the palm of my hand on the page and then lift it to look and see what is there for me at that moment.”

Most readers said they entered the passages they selected one after the other, over time, without arranging them in any systematic fashion. However, three said they organized some of their selections by themes or “heads” following the procedure of the very first commonplace authors. One person reported he kept notes from books on the psychological nature of a footpath that subsequently proved useful to an architect who was designing sidewalks for a new community. He also confessed that for years he collected the last words of dying people.

Two others said they kept some of their passages in notebooks or files explicitly devoted to a single topic. For example, one individual maintained separate notebooks on a variety of topics including “offbeat” quotations on such subjects as peace, feminism, etc. Another said she kept a notebook on Judaica, although she has only entered one quotation in it--one, however, that she has cherished. Its author is Hannah Senesh; “I feel I could not possibly live without writing, even if only for myself, in my diary...A thought that is not put on paper is as if it had never been born. I can only truly grasp a thought when I’ve expressed it in writing.”

The practice of annotating the passages was rare with the majority saying they never did. Three indicated they did so occasionally by adding short comments to a passage in their commonplace book at various periods after they had made the original entry and three others said that occasionally they make a short note on the

³ Audrey Borenstein, author of *One Journal’s Life: A Meditation on Journal-Keeping* (Impassio Press, Seattle, WA: 2002) and other works of short fiction, poetry, and criticism.

page of the book they are reading. Similarly, none of the individuals reported they have organized the passages in any fashion, although a few said they would like to one day. One person rebelled at the thought of analyzing her commonplace book. She wrote: "Organization and analysis would contravene the unique value of my commonplace books for me: it would blind me to...invisible lines of connection between ideas and things that appear to dwell in mutually exclusive realms."⁴ Yet another reader wrote in defense of the practice: "Why do I do this? Is there some thread running through it all? Is there some thread running through my life?"

More than anything I wanted to know why individuals went to the effort of copying passages from the books they read. What motivated them to engage in this practice and how did they intend to use the collection they assembled? Three themes emerged in the responses I received to this question. Foremost among almost everyone's answer was the desire to *preserve* passages that stood out from the text by virtue of their truth, cleverness, or quality of the writing. As one reader put it, her commonplace book was a way of "snagging fleeting movements and preventing them from vanishing utterly, even a way of preserving a snapshot of one's own identity."

Their rationale was uniformly based on the limitations of recall, that a reader can barely remember a fraction of what they read. Keeping a commonplace book is a method for overcoming these limits and ensuring that the memorable passages they have taken the time to record will be recoverable at some later date to be reviewed and examined anew. One reader reported: "It adds an element of permanence to my reading experience which too often seems ephemeral given the volume of reading I do and the limitations of memory." In citing this important function of commonplace books, these readers were echoing the rationale long ago voiced by Francis Bacon:

⁴ *ibid.*

There can hardly be anything more useful...than a sound help for the memory; that is a good and learned Digest of Common Places...I hold diligence and labour in the entry of commonplaces to be a matter of great use and support in studying...

A few individuals pointed out how this transforms their reading experience into a more critical, reflective process than it might otherwise be. Readers who keep a commonplace book may be more engaged with the text than those who don't. Rather than skimming lightly over the text, they often read more slowly, stopping from time to time to mark a passage, and to think about its significance for a moment or two. And by keeping a commonplace book they can repeat the same process when they review the passages they have transcribed. One individual referred to the experience as one of "self-involvement" whereby reading isn't simply living "in the moment" but rather living in the "re-examined moment."

Several individuals described their commonplace book as a reference to be used at a later date for a paper, book review, or letter they were planning to write. Some also spoke of their early ambition to become a writer and their hope that copying memorable sections from the books of authors they admired might aid them in learning the tools of the craft. Another wrote of the pleasure derived from sharing her passages with others: "They are all the more precious when I am inspired to impart them to others, to give them pleasure or solace, or to broaden their horizons of understanding when they ask this of me." And several expressed the belief that copying passages would in some mysterious way work its way into the mind so that it would heighten their appreciation of the world and expand their overall literary and personal sensibility. As one reader put it:

I've had to trust that all reading goes into the unconscious where it builds a database, so to speak, that gives me intuitive purchase on assessing and understanding the world. Or that serves as a deeply rich palette from which I draw my own creative works, or apply my critical sense.

Because of its eloquence and insight and because it conveys so well the importance of the recording process itself, I would like to cite portions of one person's answer to the question why they keep a commonplace book.⁵

I like the ritual of finding quotes that mean something to me (quotes that I find beautiful, truthful, challenging, etc.). I like typing them or writing them down (the actual physical act of doing this), and I like re-reading them once I've collected them. I like the deliberate search for quotes, as well as the surprise of stumbling upon them unexpectedly as I'm reading. It's like finding buried treasure and then rescuing it and finding a safe place for it. I rescue the words from the page of many (sometimes too many) words; otherwise, they would be lost. I find these gems and then collect them for safekeeping; my quote books have become treasure trunks.

When I write down a thought or expression—when I make it my own—it becomes more alive and valuable. To read a passage I love that I do not write down is like discarding or ignoring something of value...something that could be of future importance as a companion during hard times. Words are companions, lifeboats.

⁵ Olivia Dresher, writer, publisher of Impassio Press www.impassio.com and director of the Life Writing Connection www.lifewriting.org.

When I write something down, I make it mine by entering the thought or expression more fully. And, by writing it down, I make it “permanent” rather than fleeting. To write down a line or paragraph is a way to naturally pause and drink in the words. To isolate words as a quote (to remove them from the crowd of words) is a way of honoring them. I can’t imagine reading a book without stopping to mark or quote passages at least a few times per reading. Quoting slows down my reading and connects me to the writer, whereas just reading (without pausing to quote) is the feeling of rushing and not stopping to touch the words in a more intimate way. And a quote is a world complete in itself....

Notes, fragments, quotes: these have become a way of life for me, the way I approach life and the way I express. I imagine that not having a notebook to write in would be like a musician not having an instrument to play music on. I approach words as a way of being, or one key way of being. Words, music, films, art, nature—these are the pieces of my life.

Handwriting vs. Typing

In thinking further about the various answers individuals made on the Survey, I also came to realize how critical the act of recording is to commonplacing. Reading the text is one thing. Recalling it is another. But in between these two activities is the process of transcribing. In copying the passages by pen or by typing, a reader is doing more than preserving them for future reference.

What is copying? First it is attending once again to the text. Perhaps it is also thinking about it further; it occupies your mind once again. David Michael Levin has compared transcribing to the hand copying of religious texts by medieval monks, an activity that required “the most intense meditative concentration, poise

and steadiness of hand.”⁶ Later he spoke of it as a “way of carving words (and their meaning) into flesh, into body.”

In a subsequent exchange about her survey responses, Olivia Drescher went further to suggest that transcribing the quotes by hand is superior to typing them on a typewriter which in turn is superior to typing them on a computer keyboard. She claimed: “handwritten quotes linger more in my consciousness because I actually wrote [sometimes very slowly] them with my hands into a notebook. And they feel more permanent (even if that’s an illusion), more connected to me, less fleeting.” For Levin and Drescher, writing the passages by hand is an experience that is almost “sacred,” a feature of commonplacing that brings the meaning of the words into their consciousness in a far deeper way than when they are typed. The experience becomes a very physical one for them, one that is not unlike incorporating something into your body, as one does in eating food. As Borenstein noted in quoting the Talmud: “A fitting quotation is like bread to the famished.”

Further Drescher went on to argue that while typing passages on a typewriter enables you to see them on a piece of paper, it doesn’t have the same effects as writing them by hand. And that typing them on a computer keyboard, where they appear on the screen, places the text at an even further distance from the person than either of the two other methods of transcribing.

The distinction these readers make between the several methods of transcribing the passages in their commonplace book is instructive. So too are their claims for their short and long term effects on the transcriber. Does it matter how you record the passages? The hypothesis these readers propose is testable. It would be easy to design an experiment to compare the relative effects of the different methods of transcription. Consider a recall test or some other measure of permanence. Would

⁶ David Michael Levin. *The Body’s Recollection of Being: Phenomenological Psychology and the Deconstruction of Nihilism*. 1985 London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Books Ltd.

quotes that had been handwritten be recalled with greater accuracy than those that had been typed on a typewriter or computer keyboard? That is but one of several questions that might be explored in such an experiment.

Earlier I suggested that the desire to preserve memorable reading passages must reflect a fundamental feature of the reading experience leaving open the question of what that might be. The comments of those who responded to the survey question on this topic provide an answer. We keep a commonplace book to compensate for the fragility of our memory. Readers cannot hope to remember but a fraction of what they read. Memory is elusive, unreliable, plays tricks on us, and has a very limited capacity. A commonplace book is how a reader can surmount these limitations. Preserving passages of literary excellence permits us to revisit them at any time. We can review and reconsider those passages as often as we like; we can reengage ourselves with the text and experience once again its truths. No one likes to forget moments of aesthetic beauty or insight. A camera preserves them as visual images. A commonplace book preserves them as words.

