

The Electronic Future

I have this habit of turning down corners of pages that contain something I like. Sometimes I'll write in a book, but I try to avoid it. It's so messy.

Sara Nelson *So Many Books So Little Time*

When Ben Jonson was a small boy, his tutor, William Camden, persuaded him of the virtue of keeping a commonplace book: pages where an ardent reader might copy down passages that especially pleased him, preserving sentences that seemed particularly apt or wise or rightly formed, and which would, because they were written afresh in a new place, and in a context of favor, be better remembered, as if they were being set down at the same time in the memory of the mind.

William H. Gass, *A Temple of Texts*

From the earliest days of the commonplace book tradition, copying noteworthy passages by hand, usually into one or more notebooks, has been the preferred method of transcription. The introduction of the typewriter and more recently the computer has made inroads on this practice, although only one of the individuals who responded to the survey said he was now keeping his commonplace book in electronic form. Nevertheless, in recent years a considerable number of “commonplace books” and quotation lists have appeared on the Web. While these electronic analogues of their printed forerunners have probably not led to a revival of the commonplace tradition, it has surely broadened the audience for what had become a largely private activity.

At the same time it has raised anew in my mind the question of how to define a commonplace book. Is it a patchwork collection of quotations or must the quotes be organized in some fashion to qualify as a commonplace book? In the Preface to her scholarly treatment of Renaissance commonplace books, Ann Moss¹ writes:

The subject of my research, the commonplace book, in the form which was normative to it by the end of the sixteenth century, was a collection of quotations (usually Latin quotations) culled from authors held to be authoritative, or at any rate, commendable in their opinions, and regarded as exemplary in terms of linguistic usage and stylistic niceties. The feature which distinguished the commonplace book from any random collection of quotations was the fact that the selected extracts were gathered together under heads.

If the extracts must be organized around “heads” or general topics, most of the commonplace websites would have to be considered so in name only. This is also true for the majority of privately maintained commonplace books that, by and large, are neither organized topically nor annotated to any extent. At the same time I think it is important to appreciate the evolving nature of the commonplace tradition. In antiquity and the Renaissance commonplace books were viewed as a source of the knowledge and wisdom of the time. Now that we have other vastly more powerful means of organizing knowledge, it is clear that it is no longer necessary to treat them in quite such a restricted fashion.

To be sure, collecting notable thoughts remains a powerful desire for many readers. The legacy of early commonplace books provides a model. Websites that label their collection as a “Commonplace Book” maintain the tradition of this time

¹ Ann Moss. *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought*, 1996. New York: Oxford University Press.

honored practice. I tend to view a modern commonplace book, then, as a collection of quotations that an individual, during the course of their reading experience, has found notable or significant in some respect. This would exclude a large book of quotations that has been selected by a staff of people for commercial purposes, such as *Bartlett's Book of Quotations*.

Thus, it now seems to me that the act of transcribing memorable literary passages, either by hand, typing, or at a computer keyboard is the *sin qua non* of a genuine commonplace book. There are two groups of sites on the web that can be characterized this way. While the boundaries between the two are not precise, the first are labeled Commonplace Books, while the second are Quotation collections or archives. A representative selection of each group is listed in Table 3 and 4, respectively.

Several of these sites include a section in which the author gives a brief statement of its background. For example the author of *The Sheila Variations*, http://www.sheilaomalley.com/archives/cat_commonplace.html, writes:

Years ago - in high school - I started keeping a 'commonplace book' - although I had no idea at the time that there was a NAME for it. I just wanted to keep all the quotes I really liked in one place. I called it my quote book. Then much later, I realized that there's a long, long tradition of people keeping these "commonplace books" - especially "those guys" that I love so much in the 18th century. I've shared a ton of those quotes with you all here.

Table 3
Representative Commonplace Book Websites

Reading and Writing the Commonplace—A Hypertext Model
<http://www.cmu.ca/faculty/pdyck/old/cpbface.htm>

J. Jacobs's A Commonplace Book <http://3stages.org/quotes>

The Constant Reader's Commonplace Book
<http://www.constantreader.org/v2/commonplace.html>

Identity Theory Commonplace Book
<http://www.identitytheory.com/etexts/commonplace.html>

Scott McLemee's Commonplace Book
<http://www.mclemee.com/id8.html>

M. Kuchling's Commonplace Book
<http://www.amk.ca/quotations/quotations>

Verbatim Commonplace Book <http://shanta.edublogs.org>

Risa's Commonplace Book <http://epud.net/~bears/common.html>

The Advisor's Commonplace Book
<http://www.psu.edu/dus/leonard/book>

The Sheila Variations
http://www.sheilaomalley.com/archives/cat_commonplace.html

The author of the Quotations Archive, (<http://www.aphids.com/quotes/index.shtml>), writes:

I started this collection of quotations in mid-1993 when I started a job administering a unix machine in a University computer lab. I was looking for a way to motivate people to read the login message

(where we often try to communicate problems or new features to users). I decided a new quotation every weekday might make people pay attention to the messages.

The Hypertext site at <http://www.cmu.ca/faculty/pdyck/old/cpbface.htm> is perhaps the most unusual of those shown in either table. Its author views the site as an experimental electronic essay on commonplace books organized in hypertext. In a sense the site is an annotated commonplace book on the subject of commonplace books. Since the material is formatted in hypertext, it can be read in whatever order the reader chooses, rather than sequentially as in an ordinary printed document or other pages on the web. The site is largely a historical and analytical presentation of the commonplace book concept interspersed with electronic links to illustrative examples.

For example, under the heading Reading/Writing the Commonplace, there is the following Primary Material link to a passage by Erasmus titled *On what to take note of*:

Erasmus, in his De ratione studii ac legendi interpretandique autores liber, trains his reader to: take careful note in your reading of striking words; archaic or novel expressions; cleverly devised or neatly turned arguments; and any outstanding elegance of style, any adages, historical parallels, and general statements that are worth remembering. These passages should be indicated by some appropriate mark. (Quoted in Mohl, 410)

Following this passage there is a link back to the section Reading/Writing the Commonplaces. Sometimes additional links are embedded within the quoted passages that, in turn, take the reader on another path through the material. At the bottom of every page, however, there is always a link back to the original index

("layout") so that the reader can proceed in a relatively straightforward way through the material or to whatever topic he or she chooses.

Another unusual Commonplace Book website is authored by a librarian, J. Jacobs, at <http://3stages.org/quotes/>. It is distinctive in that it has an author and word index, as well as a search tool for specific topics and "random quotes." To locate the passages that Jacobs has entered into his Commonplace Book, it is first necessary to type the name of a topic, word, or author in the box on the search page. An author search for Shakespeare resulted in three selections, one for Borges yielded eleven, and a topic search for "Literature" yielded over a dozen passages, some of considerable length. For example, the search for Hemingway produced the following passages that seem most timely at the time of this writing:

No one man nor group of men incapable of fighting or exempt from fighting should in any way be given the power, no matter how gradually it is given them, to put this country or any country into war.

The first panacea for a mismanaged nation is inflation of the currency; the second is war. Both bring a temporary prosperity; both bring a permanent ruin. But both are the refuge of political and economic opportunists.

Ernest Hemingway from "Notes on the Next War" in *American Points of View*. 1936

Although the indexing feature of this site readily facilitates a secondary ordering of specific topics, none of the collector's quotations were annotated. Instead they were selected because they were found to be "particularly beautiful or insightful or funny or just plain memorable." The author also notes that they were recorded "for

myself so that I can get back to them easily since, for me, 'memorable' does not always translate into I have memorized it," another advantage to his indexing tools.

Two of the electronic commonplace books shown in Table 3 are designed as collective sites, a Wiki in Internet parlance, where anyone can contribute to the list of passages. The Literary Work Commonplace Book on one of the Wikiquote pages, http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/List_of_literary_works consists of an unedited collection of quotations drawn from a list of book titles arranged alphabetically. For example, A click on the link for *The American Scene* by Henry James displays 17 passages including their page and chapter number, while the link for Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* cites 19 passages with their chapter number. The Wikiquote section of literary works includes similar selections for hundreds of well-known books.

The Commonplace Book for Advisors, <http://www.psu.edu/dus/leonard/book> is a useful collection of quotations that educators might find instructive in guiding and supporting their students. It has been created by the voluntary submissions of unknown advisors from unknown places. Most importantly, it is organized around a set of fourteen topics including careers, decision making, overcoming adversity, success, and friendship.

With one exception, the remaining websites listed in Table 3 consist of a cumulative set of quotations and sometimes drawings and photographs from literary or artistic sources on various topics that bear no relationship with one another other than they follow one another in chronological order. The exception is *Risa's Commonplace Book* at <http://epud.net/~bears/common.html>, in so far as it clearly focuses on "ideas about perception, language, and art." The sometimes rather complex, as well as lengthy passages on this website are listed alphabetically by author's last name and, like the Hypertext Model, <http://www.cmu.ca/faculty/pdyck/old/cpblayot.htm>, is distinctive in that the author

has contributed notes or comments, sometimes rather lengthy, in response to the majority of her citations. For example, she quotes and then comments on William James as follows:

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. London: Macmillan, 1901. [BF121.J2]

Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it . . . (255).

It is amazing how much of what one reads in Kimble (1988) on psychobiology is already found in James (1901). But this passage, although implicit in Kimble, is explicit in James: context makes the image. It might not be too much to say, exceeding James: image is the information (text) that we find when we examine the field (context). That is, the text does not merely depend on the context, but is a consequence of our examination of context, which is actually all that is there. See also Peirce.

I was greatly impressed by Risa's Commonplace Book website. Perhaps because it dealt with subjects (philosophy and psychology) that have preoccupied much of my academic work, I found myself spending a good deal of time reading the material on her website. With the addition of her comments, it also illustrated the very best of the commonplace book tradition--provocative passages combined with thoughtful annotations.

The Quotation Websites shown in Table 4 consist of a wide-ranging selection of maxims, proverbs, aphorisms, as well as short, pithy statements on a host of topics. All of them are also organized by "heads" or subjects. For example the Quote

Garden, <http://www.quotegarden.com>, lists hundreds of subject links each taking the reader to a new web page with a series of quotations on that topic. The first, Abortion, lists fifteen different quotes, while the last, Yoga, lists twenty-four, followed by an additional set of links to Hatha, Pranayama Yoga, Yoga Postures, and Kriya Yoga.

Table 4

Representative Quotation Websites
Quote Garden http://www.quotegarden.com
Quotations Archive http://www.aphids.com/quotes/index.shtml
Quotations http://www.theotherpages.org/quote.html
The Quotations Page http://www.quotationspage.com
Generation Terrorists http://www.generationterrorists.com/index_quotes.shtml
Quoteland http://www.quoteland.com/
Dr. Gabriel Robbins Quotes http://www.cs.virginia.edu/~robins/quotes.html
Quote Geek http://www.quotegeek.com
Library Quotations http://www.ifla.org/l/humour/subj.htm
Wisdom Quotes http://www.wisdomquotes.com
Lit Quotes http://www.litquotes.com

Some of the sites also focus on more specific issues or individuals. The site maintained by Dr. Gabriel Robbins, a computer science professor, <http://www.cs.virginia.edu/~robins/quotes.html>, is devoted to remarks of “famous people.” While not organized in any systematic fashion, they are uniformly short,

sometimes sly and sometimes humorous remarks that often give one pause. For instance,

"Glory is fleeting, but obscurity is forever."

- Napoleon Bonaparte

"Victory goes to the player who makes the next-to-last mistake."

- Chessmaster Savielly Grigorievitch Tartakower

"His ignorance is encyclopedic"

- Abba Eban

"Give me chastity and continence, but not yet."

- Saint Augustine

"A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on."

- Sir Winston Churchill (1874-1965)

The Literature Quotation site, <http://www.litquotes.com> is arranged by author, book title, and an unusual section labeled Lit Quotes Duo where a new pair of quotations is presented each day that "may be similar, surprising or contradictory. They can make you smile or make you think." The Duo for the day I am writing is:

"I remember a mass of things, but nothing distinctly; a quarrel, but nothing wherefore. O God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains!"

Othello Shakespeare

"I see that a man cannot give himself up to drinking without being miserable one-half his days and mad the other . . ."

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall Anne Bronte.

Finally, the author of the Wisdom Quotes, <http://www.wisdomquotes.com> introduces the site with a statement that is thoroughly consistent with the commonplace book tradition:

Welcome to the Wisdom Quotes site! I've put some of my favorite quotes here, and I try to update with new quotations often. I try to be selective in picking quotes, including only those quotes that I find challenging or inspiring or interesting -- in other words, reflecting my own tastes and philosophy.

She has also organized her site around almost 300 separate subject links ranging from Action to Writing and invites readers to subscribe to a Wisdom Quotes e-mail list, promising to send subscribers one of her selections from time to time.

At the outset of this project I assumed that collecting quotes in a commonplace book was an uncommon and fairly private activity. Early on I discovered that only a few commonplace books have been published, largely the works of reasonably well-known authors and none have been widely read. But I had no idea that so many had entered the public domain in the form of electronic websites. There are currently countless quotation sites on the web and a somewhat lesser number that refer to themselves as commonplace books.

In a few exchanges with the authors of these sites, I inquired why they had gone to the effort of posting their selections on the web, rather than keeping them in a private document. One individual responded: "Why not? Publishing things to the Web costs me nothing, so my general policy is to publish any data or documents that I spend time assembling." Another said her website was "a way for friends and visitors to share quotes that they love. I liked the idea of the exchange of authors among reading friends. In a private journal we wouldn't really be sharing them! As a librarian, my inclination is to share information and ideas."

The lure of the Internet is undeniable. It makes creating a web site, and now a blog, almost as easy as writing a letter or sending an e-mail. In addition, the software, especially for blogs, greatly facilitates the organization of the material in any conceptual or topical arrangement the author wishes. But does its public visibility also increase its readership?

In response to my question about the number of hits or visits their websites get during an average week, one author said about 50-75 hits a week, another said 150 each week, while the author of the most widely visited said his gets about 762 during an average week. On a yearly basis, this ranges from about 2,600 to 39,624, an enormous degree of variability that surely depends on the subject matter of the website, as well as its placement in Internet search engines. Regardless, it is clear that readership on the Web is far greater than what would be expected for a printed volume of the same material. Of course, these figures tell us nothing about how much is read or what a viewer derives from the experience.

