

Booklover or Clutter Bug?

I'm an HGTV junkie. I admit it. I find the shows oddly relaxing. And what I learned from them probably assisted me in getting a contract on my home in five days in 2007, even as the real estate market was slip-sliding away. (Though doing projects in my new home has taught me that the shows lie, lie, lie about how quickly things will get done. Otherwise they would have a 13-week show about getting the guy to come back to fix incorrectly installed dimmer switches.)

But I have a real problem with the HGTV-and-its-ilk's attitude toward books. You know what they call books? Clutter. Clutter! Is that dissing books or what?

Last year, when I was getting ready to list my old house, my real estate agent, Jane, kept telling me not to bother with the extra projects I had planned. Instead, she wanted me to do just one thing: depopulate the bookshelves that resided in every room.

"There's a reason they're called bookshelves," I pointed out with impeccable logic. "They're supposed to hold books."

"Not this many books," Jane responded. "Besides most buyers want to see space so they can imagine putting their things on the shelves."

"Ah, but this way they don't have to imagine books on the shelves, because they're already there," I said.

"Uh, most people don't put books on their bookshelves."

After she picked me up off the floor, and I begged her to tell me it wasn't so, she relented a little, though she might have just been placating me: "At least not this many books."

I did sort through my books at that point. I gave some away to benefit the public library, especially when I discovered I had multiple copies of the same book (inventory control is not my strong suit.) And I removed even more books than I gave away because I figured they'd have to go into boxes as some point anyway for the move.

Jane allowed that it was better, but if I could do some more . . . ? No way. All the blood was out of this turnip.

And not one person who went through the house in the days it was on the market made any noises about the house being cluttered.

But the whole process sensitized me to how shelves full of books were viewed by the real estate world, and thus by my shows. And it isn't pretty.

"If your bookshelves are bursting at the seams, for instance, clear them off and start over," suggests Michelle Yackel, owner of [Divine Redesigns](#) in Atlanta.

Start over? As in get rid of beloved read-them-every-year books? Is she crazy? Or just sadistic?

And then she went on to say: “It’s OK to have empty space around your books and knickknacks.”

First, if booklovers have empty space around their books, they fill it with more books. Second, they don’t have knickknacks because knickknacks get in the way of the books.

The general article goes on to give suggestions on dealing with the “clutter” of books, including: “Inexpensive baskets make great hiding places for unsightly paperbacks while adding texture and visual interest.”

Excuse me? Unsightly? Anybody else starting to wonder if these folks were rejected as book cover designers and they’re chewing on some sour grapes? Because if you want visual interest, what’s better than a Marscape or a spray of flowers or blood dripping off a dagger?

Another suggestion from the article: “You can even remove the dust covers from hardbacks and group them by color, turning a busy jumble into a decorative addition to the room.”

((Sarcasm alert! Sarcasm alert! Sarcasm alert!))

Yeah, I think we should do that in all our public libraries, too. So those shelves and shelves of books are no longer a busy jumble, but instead offer decorative additions to the reading rooms. After that, start on the bookstores. So we’ll ask to be directed to the blue section instead of non-fiction. And on a blustery winter night we’ll curl up in front of a fire looking forward to the good mauve read we just picked up at the store. Yes, yes, it’s so much better to focus on how the books look from the outside than on what they have on the inside.

((End sarcasm alert))

Don’t get me wrong. I’m no fan of real clutter, and I know there are people with true problems, from simply letting the “stuff” level of their home rise too high to serious hoarding issues. But books neatly arranged in bookshelves (or in a pinch stacked on desks or tables or floors) does not constitute clutter. No way. No how. No where.

And one final point about all these designers declaring that books are clutter: Most of them seem to espouse their methods for fighting clutter by - you guessed it - writing a book.

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