

# Leisure Time? She's Booked Up

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

I'm afraid this predilection goes back more than 20 years and spans continents. The summer before my senior year in high school, my family traveled to Scotland. We toured the entire country by car, taking in the ruined castles and the Orkney Islands and more, but what was that to me? I had found a fantastic book in a little shop near Dunoon. I still have it: "Crown in Candlelight," a historical romance set in the British Isles. My father, for some strange reason, took offense at my reading in the back seat as we spent one interminable drizzly day driving through the moors. "Lisa," he'd bark from the front seat, "here we are in Scotland, and you're missing all the scenery!" I'd look up. Sheep. Grass. Rocks. Check. Then back to our mysterious heroine in the torch-lit recesses of her castle. Which is more interesting? Besides, to this day, whenever I happen across that book on the shelf I think of Scotland.

It was my mother who really sent my habit spiraling to new heights when she unwittingly gave me permission to indulge it. Right after college I moved to New York to begin my exciting, if impecunious, career in book publishing. Although I read all day (whenever I wasn't plunking out rejection letters on an old IBM Selectric) I never could get enough. I became a gourmand of reading material – and the Strand Bookstore was just a few subway stops from my office. My other book-addicted publishing friends and I would make regular pilgrimages to the Strand, braving extreme weather and the possibility of being groped in the stacks by some pervert. After some hours – who can tell, when time stands still? - - we'd emerge onto the street, blinking and staggering under our loads of used books and half-price review copies.

## FULL TEXT

I admit it. I have what some – namely my husband – would call a "book problem." Actually, I prefer to see it more as a charming and harmless eccentricity, albeit one that causes me to trip in the middle of the night on my way to the bathroom.

You see, half our bedroom floor is covered with neatly stacked piles of books: books on spirituality and religion, gardening and landscape design, on yoga and meditation, interior design and feng shui (of course, the stacks of books violate the first rule of feng shui: no clutter), on politics and psychology, parenting and business. And I shouldn't forget the stacks of fiction.

The books are piled on the floor because we have run out of bookshelves. We have bookshelves in almost every room of the house except the bathrooms, but not enough to support my habit. Here's an example of the troubling nature of my relationship with books. In June 2003 I married my delightful, funny, supportive husband. Besides my wedding (which stunned many relatives, considering it was, at age 41, my first marriage), what else of momentous import happened at the same time? Well, any serious book lover can tell you: the release of "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix." As a precautionary measure, I ordered my copy online from Barnes & Noble so I would have it in hand for the honeymoon.

It arrived in the mail a few days before the wedding, but – as I had a few remaining details to attend to – I determined not to read it until we got on the plane the morning after the wedding. This was very difficult, and the

book occupied my thoughts nearly as much as the impending nuptials. Fortunately for our marriage, the novel was a disappointment, so I actually did spend more time snorkeling and lounging about with my husband in the tropical paradise of St. John than curled up in a chair reading. Still, you can see the problem.

Then there is the matter of travel. Over the summer I visited a dear friend in Seattle who has an even more serious "problem" than I do, and she tempts fate every day, much like an alcoholic who works as a bartender: She is a librarian. She has so many books at home that her shelves are stacked two deep, which requires pulling books from the front row to peer at what you might be missing in the back. Anyway, on this trip we decided to go to Portland, Ore. – not to take in the undoubtedly interesting sights of the city but to visit Powell's bookstore, now in seven locations! We spent the night at a Motel 6 on the outskirts of Portland so we could spend more on books (accommodations – what a waste of good book cash). Most of my trips are like this. Like the finely trained snout of a drug-sniffing dog, I can find a good bookstore in the most out-of-the-way places – and buy with gleeful abandon.

I'm afraid this predilection goes back more than 20 years and spans continents. The summer before my senior year in high school, my family traveled to Scotland. We toured the entire country by car, taking in the ruined castles and the Orkney Islands and more, but what was that to me? I had found a fantastic book in a little shop near Dunoon. I still have it: "Crown in Candlelight," a historical romance set in the British Isles. My father, for some strange reason, took offense at my reading in the back seat as we spent one interminable drizzly day driving through the moors. "Lisa," he'd bark from the front seat, "here we are in Scotland, and you're missing all the scenery!" I'd look up. Sheep. Grass. Rocks. Check. Then back to our mysterious heroine in the torch-lit recesses of her castle. Which is more interesting? Besides, to this day, whenever I happen across that book on the shelf I think of Scotland.

I think I can safely blame my little "problem" on my parents. Some of my happiest early memories are of sitting in my father's lap as he read to me before dinner from a big red book called "The World's Best Fairy Tales." I was enchanted by stories about the Snow Queen, the Pied Piper, Beauty and the Beast, Rapunzel. My imagination danced with dazzling images of witches and ogres and princesses and brave children and faraway lands.

But it was my mother who really sent my habit spiraling to new heights when she unwittingly gave me permission to indulge it. Right after college I moved to New York to begin my exciting, if impecunious, career in book publishing. Although I read all day (whenever I wasn't plunking out rejection letters on an old IBM Selectric) I never could get enough. I became a gourmand of reading material – and the Strand Bookstore was just a few subway stops from my office. My other book-addicted publishing friends and I would make regular pilgrimages to the Strand, braving extreme weather and the possibility of being groped in the stacks by some pervert. After some hours – who can tell, when time stands still? – we'd emerge onto the street, blinking and staggering under our loads of used books and half-price review copies.

I have to admit that I felt guilty about my purchases in those days. I was making a pittance as an editorial assistant and lived in Queens with two roommates to make ends meet. Even so, I had to eat ramen for dinner on more nights than I'd care to admit, never bought new clothes and walked around most of the time with some butchered version of a chic haircut that I received at the local beauty school. So my parents would periodically send me a check to get by, and there I was, spending it on books.

But here's where my mother comes in: Feeling especially contrite after a flagrant book-buying spree, I told her over the phone how much I had spent, and waited for the shoe to drop. Here's what she said, and I quote verbatim: "Well, there are worse vices to have." Exoneration! Freedom! Exhilaration! A license to buy! Such simple and beautiful words. And I have lived by them all the days of my life. I'm sure most parents would like to know they've influenced their children to such a profound degree.

Ever since then I have felt free to love, wildly and with abandon, my cloth- and paper-covered friends who have been there for me through the darkest of times and in the brightest moments of happiness. And at this stage in my life – newly married, stepmother to two teenage girls, suburban homeowner – I love books most of all for what they can teach me. Suddenly I want to learn about gardens, birds, trees, home maintenance, interior design, cooking, crafts and so on. And I want to learn how to parent these teenagers I've inherited. And I want to know how to find God in the midst of all the craziness. And through it all – through every trial and interest and celebration – there is a book (and the author behind it) shining a light on my path. So even though I may appear to have a book problem, all the piles are a reflection of where I am at midlife: searching, questioning, open to all possibilities. A pretty good place to be.

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