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“I Take it You’ve Read Every Book on the Shelves?” Demonstrating Taste and Class Through Bookshelves in the Time of COVID

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ABSTRACT

The national lockdowns brought in in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 forced many people to work from home, including journalists, politicians, cultural commentators and celebrities. The familiar faces we would normally expect to see in television studios and sets, were now being beamed into our homes from their homes and we saw their kitchens, offices, and bedrooms. What at first seemed surreal and incongruous, soon became the norm. Viewers could not help but notice the most common: an individual sitting in the foreground with their background displaying shelves or stacks of books. As a result, books and bookshelves became an object du jour, representative of the owner’s prestige and cultural cachet. This article argues that far from being a ubiquitous domestic item, such notions are socially constructed and perpetuate books as symbols of classed notions of cultural prestige and intellect.

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Introduction

The title of this paper comes from an interview of the comedian Russell Kane during a video-call on the UK Sunday breakfast television show *Sunday Brunch* on 12th July 2020. During the interview, Kane sat in what appeared to be a home office with floor to ceiling bookshelves filled with books lining the walls behind him. When one of the *Sunday Brunch* presenters commented to Kane, “I love your office, I take it you’ve read every single book on the shelves?” Kane replied:

It’s weird, isn’t it? If I was on here going [Kane changes his voice to a “posh” accent] ‘Hello it’s so good to be on Sunday Brunch, on a culinary show’, [Kane reverts back to his own broad London accent] you wouldn’t question it. But because I sound like I’m going to sell you a knock-off DVD player in a market, it is good to check in.¹

Kane continued, rhetorically asking: “He’s got a working-class accent, can he read?” and answering “I can! [...] That’s my fiction section there, alphabetized [*sic*] Jane Austen

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¹Channel 4, *Sunday Brunch*.

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through to Emile Zola. There was only one way out of my estate, to read my way out, so I did". While this may have seemed like a tongue-in-cheek retort to a fairly innocuous question about Kane's reading habits and the volume of books he owned, Kane's response to the question encapsulated an undercurrent of cultural classism that upholds the idea of books, and bookshelves, as signifiers of privilege, wealth and education.

This idea of books as symbols of cultural value(s), which has a long and well-documented history, was brought to the fore in cultural discourse during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in early 2020. When private and public spaces were forced to merge when governments the world over requested that their citizens stay indoors and work from home to try and control the spread of the virus, people's homes became the backdrop to their lives as videoconferencing via online platforms such as Zoom became central to facilitating both work activities and leisure time. With this move to working and socialising from home came a new scrutiny of what could be seen in the background when people were being beamed into each other's homes. This included politicians, celebrities and broadcasters who we were used to seeing on television in bespoke studios and sets, as opposed to in their own home offices and kitchens. Discussions regarding the décor and interior design of celebrity's homes were common, with dedicated Twitter profiles and mainstream media outlets analysing the objects – and particularly books – seen behind people such as the Duchess of Cambridge Kate Middleton,² Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon (Guest, 2020) and Chief Medical Advisor to the President of United States, Anthony Fauci.³ Indeed, just one month into the UK's national lockdown in April 2020, *The Guardian* newspaper stated that "judging famous people by their bookshelves" was "our new lockdown game". The *judgment* factor of this new "game" was key and relied upon age-old notions of the cultural and symbolic value and prestige of books as objects.

Corinna Norrick-Rühl has demonstrated the longstanding notion of book ownership being connected to distinction, arguing that: "Well before the twentieth century, private libraries brought 'social prestige' to their owners (Franzmann 1987, 574)".⁴ Norrick-Rühl continues, explaining how:

[T]he increasing availability of industrially produced books starting in the early nineteenth century made a private library a more realistic goal for larger groups of people. The twentieth century, then, with its countless series of affordable books— paperback and otherwise—marked another step in the process. (Norrick-Rühl, "Two Peas in a Pod", 232)

Megan Benton has illustrated how through the 1920s into the 1930s there were a number of rebukes to this "depressing spectacle" of "the bookshelves of the typical American living room, glutted with books".⁵ Referencing a 1923 essay by the American writer and editor Thomas Masson, Benton argues that Masson's "tips on 'domestic bookaflage'", where a reader can "group a few high brow books at a strategic point, so that as the guest enters his eye will fall upon them at once", is satirising "a notion that was in fact both proffered and received in all seriousness in the 1920s" (Benton, 279). Foreshadowing

²Guest, "Our New Lockdown Game: Judging Famous People by Their Bookshelves."

³Beckerman and Qasim, "What's Fauci Reading? We Take Another Look at Celebrity Bookshelves."

⁴Norrick-Rühl, "Two Peas in a Pod," 232.

⁵Benton, 268.

what would happen in cultural (re)presentation of books one hundred years later during the COVID-19 pandemic, Benton argues that in the 1920s,

Books played a prominent, often featured role in the widespread preoccupation with fashioning one's domestic environment, which in turn suggested-and presumably shaped-one's very persona. (Benton, 279)

Accordingly, far from being a new phenomenon, the questioning of the social and cultural legitimacies surrounding book ownership and presentation that appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic are well established. This article will therefore explore the “domestic bookaflage” of the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of what Jilly Boyce Kay has called the “mediated aesthetics of the crisis”.⁶ It will focus on the specific context of notions of cultural hierarchy and class in the UK since, as the example discussed at the beginning of this article illustrates, far from being an innocuous discussion of book ownership (or apparent book ownership) in the twenty-first century, the discourse that emerged regarding books and bookshelves during the COVID-19 pandemic reiterated and reinforced long-standing ideas about who should (or should not) or does (or does not) own books.

Before moving into an analysis of bookshelves and book ownership during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper will provide a brief discussion of the socio-political and cultural context of the pandemic and ensuing national lockdowns in the UK. It will then provide the scholarly context of the discussion, demonstrating the existing critical discourse within book history and publishing studies which provides a framework by which to examine understandings of distinction and prestige in book ownership. Finally, this paper will illustrate how the COVID-19 bookshelf phenomenon was inherently interrelated with perceptions of class and classed identity as it appeared to support and strengthen well-established notions of the demonstration of cultural value and prestige through book ownership and display.

What's on Your Shelves?: The Private Becomes Public

On Sunday 22nd March 2020 British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that the UK, like many countries across the world, would be put into a national “lockdown”. This (initial) three-week lockdown would see the closing of schools and “non-essential” retail. Those who were able to work from home were instructed to do so while others, whose workplaces had been forced to close, would be placed on a government furlough scheme for the duration of this nation-wide cessation to everyday life. The lockdown was a response to the worsening situation of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. The first case in the UK was reported in January 2020⁷; by 24th March 2020, 424 people had died from the virus.⁸ The lockdown ensured that most of the population would be staying indoors and this involuntary retreat into homes brought with it a whole host of, in some cases unexpected, concerns, and intensified issues already embedded within “private” domestic settings. It was predicted, for example, that “extreme poverty” in the UK would double by December 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19⁹

⁶Kay, 883.

⁷Lillie et al. “Novel Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19)”.

⁸At the time of writing in May 2021, the total number of deaths from COVID-19 was reported as in excess of 120,000.

and in March 2022 *The Big Issue* reported that up to 16 million people in the UK could be “officially classed as living in poverty by 2023”, an increase of 2 million since before the pandemic.¹⁰ Many people now rely on food banks, with individuals who “identified as ‘black or black British’ [being] disproportionality [more] likely to have to use food banks” (Butler, 2020). Similarly, a fall in post-furlough employment was more likely to affect younger people (aged 18–24), with 22% of Black, Asian and minority ethnic workers losing their jobs.¹¹ UNESCO reported that school closures carried “high social and economic costs for people across communities” with the impact being “particularly severe for the most vulnerable [...] and their families”.¹² One of the key vulnerabilities for children caused by school closures highlighted by UNESCO was the increased risk of violence and exploitation, which was echoed by researchers arguing domestic violence was “another public health crisis” exacerbated by COVID-19 and the enforcement of national and local lockdowns all over the world.¹³

The measures taken to control the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated inherent societal inequities and inequalities already prevalent in the UK (and the rest of the world). For example, the need for people to work and learn from home revealed just how significant the UK’s “digital divide” really was. The UK government, who have stated that the “main factors that influence the digital divide in the UK include age, region, socioeconomic status and whether a person has a disability” had to distribute “laptops, tablets and 4G routers to disadvantaged children who could not access these from other sources”.¹⁴ Similarly, in July 2020 it was reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had “highlighted the inadequate, and unequal, access to high quality green spaces”.¹⁵ Many publicly available outdoor and green spaces were closed during the pandemic which was most likely to impact those from disadvantaged communities who are more likely to be living in smaller spaces and in more built up, urban areas. Such inequalities were strikingly juxtaposed with the rhetoric from politicians, media commentators and celebrities who were encouraging people to stay-at-home from what typically appeared to be a background of relative wealth and security. As Boyce Kay illustrates:

[C]elebrity exhortations come to us from their own domestic scenes of apparent bliss and plenitude, and via playful and hyper-personalised performances of the self. [...] Under conditions of lockdown, the private home has become hyper-visible; there has been a proliferation of carefully curated images of domesticity, and performances of being-at-home posted on social media by the wide spectrum of celebrities, micro-celebrities and ordinary folk well-versed in self-branding techniques. (Boyce Kay, 884)

The COVID-19 bookshelves phenomenon was one such aspect of this domestic “hyper-visibility” and “carefully curated images of domesticity” prevalent during the pandemic. Yet, as this article will demonstrate, the symbolic and cultural value(s) of (private) book ownership were entangled with the (increasingly public) socio-economic inequities highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic.

⁹Butler, “Extreme Poverty ‘Will Double by Christmas’ in UK Because of Covid-19”.

¹⁰Westwater and Glover, “UK Poverty: The Facts, Figures and Effects”.

¹¹BBC, “Covid: Post-Furlough Unemployment ‘Hits Young and Ethnic Minorities’”.

¹²UNESCO, “Adverse Consequences of School Closures”.

¹³Taub, “A New Covid-19 Crisis: Domestic Abuse Rises Worldwide.”

¹⁴Baker et al., “COVID-19 and the Digital Divide”.

¹⁵Gray and Kellas, “Covid-19 has Highlighted The Inadequate, and Unequal, Access to High Quality Green Spaces.”

A common and oft-replicated *mise-en-scène* demonstrating a “curated image of domesticity” during the national lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic was of an individual facing the camera and sitting in the foreground, with the background displaying shelves or stacks of books, walls covered in framed pictures, and other miscellaneous art and decorative objects. Books and bookshelves in particular became somewhat of an object *du jour* because of their apparent ability to provide some insight into the taste and cultural kudos of the individual they framed. This interior decoration was almost immediately spotted and discussed by cultural commentators – including those who partook in the phenomenon. Writing in May 2020, just two months following the national lockdown, the British television presenter and journalist Adrian Chiles observed that “[w]ith so many conversations now happening online, all eyes are on our décor”.¹⁶ Chiles continued, noting how,

An awful lot is being made of what is on the bookshelves behind people who broadcast or are interviewed in their homes. Thankfully, mine are at a right angle to the computer so you cannot see any of the titles. In fact, until adjustments were made, it looked as though the shelves were completely empty, which was rather shaming. [...] I expect some interior designer has already set themselves up as a Zoom background consultant or some such, to advise us on how best to project our personal brands. Appropriate books could be delivered by the yard, by men in masks, to create just the right look. (Chiles, 2020)

Chiles’s commentary unwittingly foresaw two significant and longer-term facets of this new cultural phenomenon. Firstly, he acknowledges that there was a sense of “shame” in appearing to have an empty bookcase. The insinuation being that an apparent absence of books is a cause for embarrassment (this issue surrounding what the absence of books may signify or relate to will be examined later in this paper). The second thing Chiles raises, perhaps flippantly at the time, was the suggestion that there would soon be a service where people could outsource the curation of a bookshelf to an interior designer to create a perfect Zoom background to “project personal brands”. However, not only had such services already existed for decades, with “books being sold by the yard [...] to fill elaborate built-in bookshelves that were trendy in the 1920s” (Norrick-Rühl, “Two Peas in a Pod”, 233), this service was instigated yet again in 2020 by the Boston-based independent bookstore, Brattle Book Shop. Having been forced to close following a state-wide lockdown, the owner of Brattle Book Shop, Ken Gloss, began “offering to curate people’s shelves with hand-picked selections of books to display during video meetings” in April 2020.¹⁷ Gloss believed that “having some aesthetically-pleasing spines perfectly arranged at eye level, or even a few well-known titles neatly stacked up for show, ‘offers a lot of prestige.’” (Annear, 2020). However, far from being an entirely new idea, Gloss noted that the bookstore had “fielded requests from customers looking to decorate their shelves with carefully selected reading materials and antique-looking books, items that create a more homey atmosphere” for many years (Annear, 2020).

While the Brattle Book Shop may have offered this kind of interior embellishment service well before people were required to hold videocalls from home, there certainly seemed to be an increase in the desire to have a carefully curated book-based Zoom

¹⁶Chiles, “The Biggest Status Symbol of Our Zoom era? Bookshelves.”

¹⁷Annear, “Brattle Book Shop is Curating Bookshelves for Zoom Meetings and FaceTime Hangouts.”

background during the pandemic. In the US, a number of independent bookshops partnered with the literary book imprint Lookout (an imprint based in the Department of Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina Washington) to provide high-resolution images of the stores that people could use as virtual backgrounds.¹⁸ This initiative had a dual purpose. Not only did it provide booklovers an opportunity to recreate the sensation of “step[ping] inside and immediately surround [them]selves with books and fellow books lovers”, but it also promoted the websites of the stores involved, who were reliant on direct sales through their websites to provide income during lockdown.¹⁹ Publisher’s also got in on this trend, with Faber tweeting three images of their “favourite libraries from around the world”²⁰ and HarperCollins offering virtual backgrounds for children based on popular series for younger readers.²¹

Penguin Random House (PRH) Canada also provided a series of images suitable to download and use as virtual backgrounds. Suggesting that “not everyone has a stocked bookcase handy”, PRH Canada not only provided a series of images of bookshelves stacked with PRH titles, but also offered short descriptions of the kind of reader each bookshelf was most suitable for. This included the “Little-Bit-of-Everything Reader”, which tells the user’s co-workers that they are “fully dialled-in to the current cultural zeitgeist”; the “Literary Heavyweight”, for the user wanting to “impress co-workers with [their] literary prowess”; and, the “Classics Collector”, denoting a love for “Penguin Classics and female authors” and proving an “interest in [the] perennial (and pioneering) favourites signal[ling] to your co-workers that you have a taste for the finer things in life”.²² The title of this article, “Download These ‘Credibility Bookshelf’ Backgrounds for Zoom”, knowingly and playfully engaged with the debates that surrounded the boom in the exposure of personal bookshelves (whether real or virtual) during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis and judgment of what books people owned and (perhaps) read (since there is no guarantee that owning a book means it has been read), was explicit and invited. Newspaper articles provided a breakdown of “some of the most interesting bookshelves in the homes of the commentariat” in UK politics and culture, including commentary on the books noticed behind celebrities and political figures (Guest, 2020). Likewise, a number of Twitter profiles appeared which aimed to provide a record of these flash insights into the homes of strangers, providing screenshots and tongue-in-cheek analyses of people’s rooms. Two in particular, “Room Rater” (@ratemyskype-room²³) and “Bookcase Credibility” (@BCredibility²⁴), provided regular updates on the interiors of people being interviewed on television news and talk shows. Both accounts would share images, often taken as screenshots on a phone or computer, or photographs of television screens, and analyse the background interiors of the individuals on screen. Bookcase Credibility was specifically focused on the contents (or lack thereof) of the bookshelves behind people; the profile’s bio stating: “What you say is not as important as the bookcase behind you”.²⁵ Waterstones Chief Executive James

¹⁸Hass, “Now You Can Use Your Favorite Indie Bookstore as Your Zoom Background.”

¹⁹Ecotone Lookout, “Support Indie Bookstores and Students: Free Virtual Backgrounds.”

²⁰Faber Books, Twitter.

²¹Harper Collins. “Free Zoom Backgrounds for Book Lovers and How to Change Your Zoom Background”.

²²Penguin Random House Canada, “Download These ‘Credibility Bookshelf’ Backgrounds for Zoom”.

²³Room Rater, Twitter.

²⁴Bookcase Credibility, Twitter.

Daunt, for example, was given the bookcase credibility treatment, with a still from an appearance on Channel 4 News being assessed. According to Bookcase Credibility, Daunt, who was centre shot and framed by large, full bookshelves, was drawing on “deep experience to produce rolling credibility that is heavy on the dictators and hard-backs. Stalin, Mussolini and a glimpse of Hitler feature in an all-star monster spread”.²⁶ (It is worth noting that it was not entirely clear whether Daunt was filming from a private space or a bookshop.) In September 2020, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, already open about her love of reading and literature,²⁷ was scrutinised by Bookcase Credibility. With a screenshot of Sturgeon sitting in front of a vast bookshelf during an appearance on the morning breakfast news programme *Good Morning Britain*, Bookcase Credibility noted that:

Nicola Sturgeon gently angles the presentation to introduce a glimpse of wall. There are limits even to me, she tells us. But books creep across a table and onto a briefcase. Nicola’s credibility seeks new ground. The Rebus novels are present and correct in line with SNP policy.²⁸

While evidently flippant and impudent in tone, the comments and analyses offered by the Bookcase Credibility profile – the creator, or creators, of which remain anonymous – also provided an extension of contemporaneous media commentary which examined or ridiculed major economic and social changes, as well as governmental policy developments, and the handling of the pandemic generally, in a way that appeared to bring conversations of the very real politics of the everyday out of grandiose institutional settings and into the quasi-private-public of politicians’ homes or other seemingly private settings.

Significantly, such Twitter accounts have participated in a kind of visual sociology, an approach “grounded in the idea that valid scientific insight in society can be acquired by observing, analyzing, and theorizing its visual manifestations: behavior of people and material products of culture”.²⁹ On using visual sociology as a critical framework, Burri notes:

[A]n adequate sociology of images should not exclusively focus on how best to interpret and use an image in social sciences – thus revealing its meanings – but as well examine *how images themselves shape cultural meanings*. (emphasis in original)³⁰

While many cultural commentators³¹ were trying to decipher book titles through grainy webcam footage and screenshots (Bookcase Credibility included), and therefore participating in the first portion of Burri’s definition of visual sociology, what I found most interesting about this spectacle of book ownership was the latter part of Burri’s explanation. Namely, what was most intriguing about the “bookshelves during COVID” phenomenon was not only how abundant it was, but also how the repeated exposure

²⁵This biography was accurate at the time of writing.

²⁶Bookcase Credibility, Twitter post. December 1, 2020, 9:25pm.

²⁷Parker, “Shelf Life: Nicola Sturgeon on the Books That Changed Her.”

²⁸Bookcase Credibility, Twitter post. September, 25 2020, 7:24pm.

²⁹Pauwels, 546.

³⁰Burri, 54.

³¹Beckerman, “What Do Famous People’s Bookshelves Reveal?”; Beckerman, “The Celebrity Bookshelf Detective is Back.”; Yaffe, “There’s So Much to Unpack in These Celebrity Bookshelves.”; Hosken, “What a Celebrity Book Curator Really Thinks of A-Listers’ Bookshelves”.

to such imagery began to shape, or perhaps reaffirm, traditional understandings of the “cultural meanings” behind the ideals and depictions of book ownership. The image of a person sitting in front of a bookcase jam-packed with books was normalised. So much so that it was almost surprising, and was certainly commented upon, if someone being interviewed was *not* sitting in front of a floor to ceiling bookcase.³²

To return to the words of the owner of Brattle Book Shop, Ken Gloss, the books we saw on the shelves behind people on television, whether they be politicians, royalty or TV personalities, came to signify the individual’s “prestige”. Virtual or not, whether a person chose to sit in front of a selection of books – and *what* books they sat in front of – became a signifier not only of their “bookshelf credibility” but also their cultural, and in some cases political, legitimacy. This, of course, is by no means a new occurrence. There is an abundance of research illustrating how reading and book ownership is imbued with socio-cultural, political, didactic, and economic capital (Benton, “Too Many Book”; Norrick-Rühl, “(Furniture) Books and Book Furniture as Markers of Authority”; “Two Peas in a Pod”; Pyne, *Bookshelf*; Radway, 1997; Rose, 2010) which has led to books becoming signifiers of social stratification. As Lydia Pyne has argued:

For thousands of years, books and their shelves (or, even, scrolls and their shelves) have implied access to knowledge. With this access comes everything associated with it – power and privilege. But what’s most intriguing is the longevity and staying power that bookshelves have maintained.³³

In 1999, Henry Petroski argued that, “The bookshelf, like the book, has become an integral part of civilization as we know it, its presence in a home practically defining what it means to be civilized, educated, and refined”.³⁴ At first, the discourse and imagery of bookshelves in the time of COVID propagated this notion, seemingly providing insight into “civilized” domestic spaces and hiding the everyday stress and trauma of the pandemic in public spaces and sectors which continued to provide care and support. Indeed, it was perhaps fitting that books, so imbued with authority, wealth and privilege became emblematic during a period of uncertainty: seeing books in the homes and offices of colleagues and government leaders brought comfort to the chaos of reality. But, as Norrick-Rühl notes, “The authority associated with books as well as book furniture can only be felt and perceived by those whose value system allows for it”.³⁵ In other words, there was an assumption that not only did we all agree to the implied authority of those who own a lot of books but that an abundance of books was a universal cultural experience. This aligns with Pierre Bourdieu’s assertion that “Culture is a stake which, like all social stakes, simultaneously presupposes and demands that one take part in the game and be taken in by it”.³⁶ Bourdieu continues, arguing that:

Distinction and pretension, high culture and middle-brow culture [...] only exist through each other, and it is the relation, or rather, the objective collaboration of their respective

³²There were a number of Book Credibility posts that highlighted a lack of books, or empty shelves: Bookcase Credibility, Twitter post, May, 14 2020. 5:41pm; Bookcase Credibility, Twitter post, June, 5 2020. 7:18pm; Bookcase Credibility, Twitter post, August, 9 2020. 9:52pm.

³³Pyne, 81.

³⁴Petroski, 4.

³⁵Norrick-Rühl, “(Furniture) Books and Book Furniture as Markers of Authority”, 7.

³⁶Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 247.

production apparatuses and clients which produces the value of culture and the need to possess it. (Bourdieu, 247)

However, as the rest of this article will illustrate, far from being an accepted universal truth, the perpetuation of the book as an emblem of cultural value(s) and its status as a symbol of prestige not only contributes to maintaining unhelpful ideologies about culture and class, but also invites interrogation of what the alternative to bookish abundance – a lack of (real) books – is believed to connote.

Hoping for Joyce and Getting *Dallas*: Fake Books or No Books?

As the above discussion illustrates, book ownership has been entangled in notions of self-identity and social status for centuries. Due to their authoritative position and historically exclusive nature, books and book ownership are inseparable from conversations about class and (dis)advantage. Class and socio-economic status are, of course, highly contested and personal. Understandings of what experience is or is not recognisable as “belonging” to one class or another are variable and, often, individual. As Friedman, O’Brien and McDonald have argued, many people in the UK consider themselves working class even when they hold middle-class (professional and managerial) jobs and come from middle-class backgrounds.³⁷ This is relevant to the current study since, as already discussed, books are imbued with value(s) and prestige that are typically seen as being applicable to those from middle and upper-class backgrounds and circumstances. And, if books remain as emblems of cultural power and prestige their presence, or absence, becomes part of broader understandings of socio-cultural standing.

The Bookcase Credibility Twitter account was drawn into debates regarding class and book ownership. In August 2020 Bookcase Credibility tweeted a picture of the Olympian and professional footballer Karen Bardsley, sitting centre frame in front of an empty wall bar one small shelf of books and box files in the top left-hand corner of the shot. The tweet’s caption was:

Well done Karen Bardsley for getting some temporary credibility up in the minutes before the interview. It’s not clear where she got the materials but they may be two coat hangers and part of a chest of drawers. It’ll be in pieces on the floor soon but it’s lasted enough.³⁸

This tweet was swiftly deleted following a series of negative comments regarding the perceived classicism and sexism of the tweet.³⁹ Following deletion of the tweet, Bookcase Credibility tweeted: “So far this has been called nasty, mean, sexist and classist [...] So, I’m taking this one down. It wasn’t meant to be mean”.⁴⁰ The tone of the original tweet is perhaps no more sarcastic and impudent than other tweets by the account, but what appears to have caused offense is the patronising tone (“Well Done Karen Bardsley”) and insinuation that Bardsley’s book collection and shelving is makeshift, as opposed to built-in and permanent (“temporary credibility”). The “classism” of Bookshelf Credibility’s analysis of Bardsley’s set-up is not immediately obvious but has

³⁷Friedman, O’Brien, and McDonald, “Deflecting Privilege”.

³⁸Bookcase Credibility, Twitter post. August, 14 2020. 7.30pm.

³⁹The deleted tweet was recovered via WebArchive by the author of this article.

⁴⁰Bookcase Credibility, Twitter post. August, 14 2020. 7.30pm.

perhaps been assumed or projected onto the subject due to their status as a professional footballer, a sport which is associated with working-class culture in the UK.⁴¹

Such conversations pertaining to the supposed temporariness or actual absence of books is a cultural deficiency most commonly associated with (and sometimes proven to be most relevant to) people from working class and lower socio-economic backgrounds. For example, in July 2020 the National Literacy Trust (NTL) released a report comparing the reading habits of children and young people before and during the UK's COVID-19 lockdown. While the report found that "Children's enjoyment of reading has increased during lockdown", it also highlighted that many children, and particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, did not have access to a quiet space at home to read.⁴² Relatedly, there were "children and young people who did not have their own books" (National Literacy Trust, 2020) and who had limited access to books because of the closure of schools and libraries. However, such data is not unique to the pandemic. Research conducted by the Booktrust in 2014 indicated that "respondents who never read books tend to live in areas of higher deprivation [with] more children living in poverty".⁴³

Another example of the enduring tensions that exist when book ownership is discussed in terms of working-class culture(s) was demonstrated in a Twitter debate instigated in May 2021 by a writer who tweeted:

[W]riters portraying their working class credentials as, 'no books at home' or not enjoying classical music or theatre or eating shit food etc is about the most anti- working class narrative out there. I just dont [*sic*] recognise it.⁴⁴

Many of the responses to this tweet acknowledged that, while this writer may not "recognise" these aspects of working-class life, which the writer called "stereotypes" in another tweet,⁴⁵ it was something that they, as individuals from working-class backgrounds did recognise. One responder, who self-identified as a "working class writer/lecturer" stated that "my reality is that we didn't have books at home, go to the theatre or listen to classical music".⁴⁶ Another stated that their "working class family didn't have many books – just a few Book Club Associates ones",⁴⁷ a comment which provides anecdotal support to Norrick-Rühl's research exploring the classed act of collecting books through book sales clubs.⁴⁸ According to Norrick-Rühl, book clubs marketed books "as commodities for consumption" which "deconstructed the academic aura of the book and promoted leisurely reading, while simultaneously advocating book ownership".⁴⁹ This led to a "hybrid understanding of the book"⁵⁰ and the notion of the "furniture book".⁵¹

Perhaps the most literal manifestation of a kind of "furniture book" was illustrated by Scottish author Douglas Stuart, in an interview following the release of his Booker Prize

⁴¹See, for example: Moorhouse, " 285–315; Baker, 241–51; Pope, 154–8.

⁴²Clark and Picton, 2.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Jim Monaghan, Twitter post. May, 19 2021. 10:08pm.

⁴⁵Jim Monaghan, Twitter post. May, 21 2021. 10:08am.

⁴⁶The Twitter user who posted this tweet wished to remain anonymous.

⁴⁷Michael Jarvie, Twitter post. May, 27 2021. 4.40pm.

⁴⁸Norrick-Rühl, "Two Peas in a Pod" 233.

⁴⁹Norrick-Rühl, "Two Peas in a Pod", 239.

⁵⁰Radway, 127.

⁵¹Norrick-Rühl, "Two Peas in a Pod", 239.

winning novel *Shuggie Bain*, in 2020. When Stuart was asked what he believes is the “Most interesting or unusual use of a book?” he responds:

Growing up, the only books in our house were those fake leather-y looking ones that housed VHS cassettes. The fact that my mother did that still makes me laugh. Imagine opening what you hoped was James Joyce and getting four episodes of *Dallas*.⁵²

Stuart’s comment responds directly to the deceptive quality of the object, juxtaposing the assumed high-literariness of Joyce with an American television soap drama. This is clearly a significant memory for Stuart, as he also includes these faux books in *Shuggie Bain*, a semi-autobiographical story about a young boy, Hugh “Shuggie” Bain, coming to terms with his sexuality and managing his mother’s alcoholism whilst living in council housing in Glasgow. In the novel, Shuggie’s mother, Agnes, searches her house in an attempt to find any leftover alcohol:

She stoated around the empty house, tipping out all the hiding places that might hold a forgotten drink: the laundry basket, behind vinyl video case covers that were made to look like encyclopaedias. On her knees, she pulled all the empty grocery bags out from underneath the kitchen sink till she knelt waist-deep in a cumulus of blue and white plastic.⁵³

Here the “vinyl video case covers that were made to look like encyclopaedias”, which have presumably been purchased in an attempt to project a sense of cultural distinction, are juxtaposed with the general barrenness of the scene. Indeed, the potential emptiness of the fake-books reiterates the paucity of the home; seemingly the only thing Agnes owns in abundance is empty shopping bags.

Stuart’s real-life recollection and fictitious depiction of VHS cassette tape boxes mimicking a bookish aesthetic and being the only books in the home of a working-class family, as well as the comments from the working-class writers on Twitter and the NTL research that reveals an absence of books in the homes of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, stand in stark contrast to the abundance of books and bookshelves propagated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the examples from Stuart and the working-class writers on Twitter were not direct references to the pandemic, they did both appear at a time when the UK was dealing with a national crisis in which, as noted earlier, pre-existing, and typically hidden, economic and socio-political inequities were brought to the fore, making class (as well as its intersections with race and ethnicity, age and gender) a key factor in how a person might experience, and in some cases survive, the national lockdown. The idealisation of the iconography of the book and book ownership during the pandemic, therefore, was part of this exposure of inequity. If the performative display of book ownership during the pandemic was to be aspired to and, as Pyne argues, represents “power and privilege”, then the alternative – a dearth of books and “bookafage” – becomes emblematic of social, cultural and economic disadvantage. This suggests that the “traditionally reliable” notion that book ownership provides “social distinction” endures.⁵⁴

⁵²*Herald Magazine*, “From Armistead Maupin to Jimmy Boyle”.

⁵³Stuart, 128.

⁵⁴Benton, 285.

“IMPRESSIVE BOOK COLLECTION”: Conclusion

There was at least one example of the COVID-19 bookshelves phenomenon being challenged and parodied during the pandemic. In July 2020, the actor Jason Isaacs appeared on the BBC early evening magazine talkshow *The One Show* to promote his latest film. Like all other television interviews at the time, Isaacs joined the shows hosts via videolink. During the interview Isaacs sat in front of a large sheet of paper pinned to the wall behind him on which he had drawn a row of books and written: “IMPRESSIVE BOOK COLLECTION”. Below this were more large pieces of paper with “MYSTERIOUS ARTISTIC OBJECTS” and “FAMILY PHOTOS” written in large letters. Isaacs’ knowing and satirical nod to the *mise-en-scène* viewers had become used to was not commented upon by the programme’s hosts, but was acknowledged on Twitter, with one tweet including a screenshot of Isaacs from the show stating “Jason Isaacs was on The One Show yesterday, and I LOVE [*sic*] his background displays”.⁵⁵ Not only was the tweet liked over twenty-thousand times and retweeted over two-thousand times, but many people commented on the post tagging the Bookshelf Credibility account suggesting that Isaacs’ background should be “reviewed” by the infamous bookcase arbiter. While the Bookshelf Credibility account did not provide a review of Isaacs’ background, one Twitter user tweeted an image of Isaacs from the show to Bookcase Credibility and commented that Isaacs was “obviously trolling” (i.e., pointedly mocking) the bookcase reviewing account.⁵⁶ Although it is unlikely Isaacs satirical heckling was directed specifically at the Bookcase Credibility account, he was clearly challenging and dismantling the cultural discourse related to book ownership and distinction that commentators perpetuated and publicised during the COVID-19 pandemic. In parodying the COVID-19 bookshelf phenomenon with overtly fake book imagery Isaacs highlighted the fallacy of the cultural importance the book as object is imbued with. His use of the word “impressive” over a haphazardly hand drawn row of books pokes fun at the absurdity of an object carrying so much (cultural) value. While this comment on the cultural authority of books and book ownership may have been offhand, when positioned alongside the broader context of social, cultural and economic inequities exposed by the pandemic, it should encourage us to reconsider and unravel the centuries old idolisation of the book *as object* as a symbol of power, privilege and prestige.

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