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Marking a Milestone

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

I wanted to treat myself when I hit the half-century point, so I bought some books. It was the best shopping spree of my life.



THE IDEA OCCURRED TO me while I was trying to come up with a unique way to mark my fiftieth birthday. Being the center of attention at a party—surprise or otherwise—would have given me hives. My husband, John, and I were planning a trip to Africa, the same way we'd celebrated his fiftieth three years earlier. He also gave me earrings (beautiful and personal), and treated me to a tandem massage (blissfully mind-blowing); but I wanted to do something special for myself.

The big five-oh didn't evoke even a hint of midlife angst. I had a great spouse and a supportive family; I loved being a freelance writer; and during our three years in St. Petersburg, Florida, we had amassed an interesting group of friends in a community that really felt like home. Also, inheriting Mom's good genes meant that most people still thought I was at least five years younger than my actual age, so that staved off the fretful mirror-gazing and pondering Big Questions like, "Who am I?" and "What am I doing with my life?"

I approached the half-century mark as a special occasion that was worthy of a personal indulgence, so I finally decided to celebrate fifty years by buying fifty books.

I've been an avid reader since I was old enough to appreciate *The Poky Little Puppy*. Like many shy and anxious kids, I found my real friends on the page instead of in the classroom. I developed a love of fantasy from Mrs. Piggle Wiggle and Mary Poppins. I learned about life in unfamiliar times and places with Laura Ingalls Wilder; Betsy, Tacy and Tib; and the *All-of-a-Kind Family* girls. I imagined myself in different careers and pastimes through the exploits of Jo March, Nancy Drew, and Cherry Ames. And from my favorite fictional role model, Meg Murry, I learned that geeky girls can be heroines. Nothing made me feel more comfortable and secure than losing myself in a new book, especially if I was revisiting an author or characters who were already familiar. That feeling has never left me.

By the time I was an adult who earned a salary that covered slightly more than groceries, rent, and utility bills, I discovered the joy of being able to buy a book *almost* any time I wanted one. Used bookstores, discount shelves, thrift shops and book sales became my shopping nirvana; and finding a marked-down version of something I'd been wanting to read was always worth a little yelp and a happy dance. I married a fellow reader, and through the years we've bought too many books to count. The prospect of acquiring *fifty* at one time—just for me—felt like a fitting celebration for a bookworm who doesn't gravitate to designer duds or pricey shoes when she wants a treat.

"I decided to buy fifty books for my fiftieth birthday!" I told John.

"That's a fun idea," he replied. "How are you going to decide what to get?"

That was a silly question from one who knew me so well. If you are picturing me strolling up and down the aisles, randomly grabbing whatever catches my eye, you would be wrong. I am a hyper-organized worrier for whom spontaneity often feels like looking over the edge of a cliff—or, in this case, a bookshelf. I didn't have it in me to launch such a monumental excursion without a plan. Starting with my existing list of books that I wanted to read, I devoured dozens of reviews and "best books of a certain genre" lists in order to add interesting and cool-sounding titles that piqued my interest. I also added replacements for two favorites I had lost—*Little Women* and *The Silver Palate Good Times Cookbook*—and meaningful books I'd read repeatedly as a young woman: Plath's *The Bell Jar,* and *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller.

The final list reflected the eclectic tastes of the reader I was at fifty. Then, as now, I was drawn to memoir, essay collections, humor, biographies, and nonfiction that deals with disabilities and mental illness. But as an equal-opportunity reader, I'm just as fulfilled by horror stories, mysteries, thrillers, literary fiction, and the books of my childhood.

When we entered Barnes & Noble on the afternoon of The Big Shop, John left me with my lengthy list, and periodically touched base to relieve me of the books I'd selected. On his first trip to the counter, he said, "My wife is buying fifty books for her fiftieth birthday. Could I leave these here while she keeps shopping?" The young clerk seemed confused or disinterested, and answered, "Uh… yeah, okay, I guess." By the time John stopped by to drop off a second stack of books, the same clerk registered what was actually happening. And she apparently appreciated my

undertaking, because she proceeded to share the news with *everyone* in line each time John added to my growing pile.

"His wife is buying fifty books for her fiftieth birthday!"

That prompted exactly the reaction you would expect from a store filled with book people who eventually figured out that the tall woman with curly hair and a blue sweater was the super shopper. No matter which aisle I was in, strangers offered smiles, birthday wishes, and countless variations on "What a great idea! Do you mind if I steal it?" I couldn't believe I was actually inspiring people to follow in my footsteps, and I loved it.

As I searched for and found every single book on my list, I took my time savoring the smell and crisp feel of new books that hadn't yet made it off the shelves. I honestly don't remember how much money I spent on this collection, which included *Running with Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs; *The Dark Tower V: Wolves of the Calla* by Stephen King; *Blue Shoe* by Anne Lamott; and *The Art of Happiness* by the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler. But I do remember the reassuring sense of literary abundance evoked by the four heavy shopping bags we carried out the door.

That feeling is why I never walk away from a bookstore or a book sale with just one book, and why my online shopping carts always include more than one. Not having enough to read makes me feel uncomfortable and ungrounded, and I can feel the stress start to mount if I only have five or six volumes waiting. I also make sure that John isn't running low on material, even though he isn't as neurotic as I am about the size of his "books to read" stack.

Call me obsessive, but if being surrounded by more stories than I can read in a week, a month, or a year makes me feel secure, then that's a label I can live with. Readers know what I'm talking about. Non-readers don't know what they're missing. And with another milestone coming up shortly, I think I'll work on a new list. ▪



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