

## Review of Session 3, panel 2 – Open University/SHARP Conference: ‘Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic’

The Open University/SHARP Conference on ‘Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic’ tapped into very immediate experience for many of us. The emergence of increased reading and book buying; and the newly zoomed ubiquity of the shelfie, as facets of pandemic experience, has given new emphases to publishing scholarship. The online nature of the conference also demonstrated the strength of people’s desires to continue to pursue ideas, and to communicate and collaborate, then promotes ingenuity and also willingness to accept change. The potential that has emerged from the development of online platforms, and the pace at which that has been developed during the pandemic made possible both a stimulating international exchange of ideas and wider access to the traditional academic context of ‘the conference’.

The Session 3, panel 2, on the second day of the conference, entitled ‘You are what you read: or are you?’ featured two papers. The first, given by Dr Laura Dietz of Anglia Ruskin University: ‘Projection or Reflection? The Pandemic Bookshelf as a Mirror for Self-image and Personal Identity’, began by contextualising the discussion within recent critical judgements placed upon background shelves in the media. Bookshelves have been seen as a form of signalling in order to advertise an intellectual credibility - an assertion of credentials - which she evidenced showing the repeated identifying by the news outlets of a Robert Caro’s *The Power Broker*, a particular weighty political biography, repeatedly on the shelves of politicians and pundits, and the attendant commentary attacking supposed pretension (and its advertising success. Dietz then went on to draw attention to a more nuanced understanding of the function of our bookshelf presentations: it is, she argues, a form of self-reflection that is not simply self-promoting manipulation but, either consciously or unconsciously, an act of curation to ‘access, commemorate and honour a personal reading history and reading identity’.

Drawing upon her work on the reception of electronic forms of the book, and why the material book remains so popular, Dietz, evidenced from wider culture and her own work, an ongoing privileging of the traditional physical book format; a key element in this being the ability with the physical object to display what you are reading. In this way the act of reading incorporates an act of communication, which applies individual books as much as the shelves that are now so ubiquitous. Related to this, discussion at the end of the paper raised interesting questions about whether there will be a move for publishers to exploit the visual impact and communicative power of the spine in this age of visible shelves and whether e-readers might develop to show what is being read.

Dietz also explored the proliferation of the self-consciously crafted shelf and the use of pictures of the shelves of other people and institutions (‘borrowed finery’) as backgrounds, and demonstrated ways in which shelves are a consciously performative act (with examples of some enjoyable self-referential humour from Penguin Canada with their ‘Credibility Bookshelf’ offerings and analysis). She pointed out, however, that at another level the falsified image creates a network of telling misappropriation, viz. the widely shared image purportedly of Umberto Eco’s library on Twitter (it was actually that of an eminent historian

but one who lacked Eco's particular cultural cache) which said more about the image of the library that others wish to align with their image of Eco.

Returning to the choices we make about our shelf presentation on video networking, which are communication to others, are also about reflection. In the end she argued, whatever our choices of presentation, whether our bookshelves are reflection or contrivance; the role of our shelves is most significantly to be a tool 'to describe ourselves, to ourselves'.

In contrast, in the second paper in the panel, ' "I take it you've read every book on the shelves?" Demonstrating taste, value and class through bookshelves', Dr Stevie Marsden, of the University of Derby, saw in the pandemic's 'sudden insights into people's houses, and the subsequent demonstrations and interpretations of cultural capital' a demonstration of the ways in which books are used as statement of class and power.

Her title was taken from an incident in which comedian Russell Kane on C4's Sunday Brunch was asked this question, with regard to sizeable book collection, and where part of his response had been that were his accent not so distinctly 'working class' he would not have been asked something like that – the context was light-hearted but the point was clearly significant. Marsden pointed out that, in addition to class issues such as these emerging out of responses to people's shelves, in the pandemic there has been a 'normalising of floor to ceiling bookcases' which then makes the lack of books a notable thing – and this further highlights manifestation of socio-economic inequality.

Acknowledging that, in her own experience of a working class childhood, books were seen as a method of social mobility and are complex in their representation and signalling (as demonstrated in a clip of comedian Peter Kay recalling the fake leather VHS tape cases that were commonly available in the 1980s, located in his consciously working class comedic milieu and raising questions about the relationship between the meaning of the appearance of books), ultimately Marsden is concerned that 'fetishisation of the book upholds the status of a book as a symbol'. The very nature of the influential people who have, in backgrounds, on television and in other media, revealed their personal libraries, for Marsden, 'reiterates books as symbols of authority'. It was, I felt, useful in the discussion at the end of the paper that the panel Chair, Dr Shafquat Towheed, whilst very much agreeing that the pandemic has highlighted the problems of inequalities raised here, that also books are fundamentally powerful tools of education and that they expand the experience and potential of people who face such inequality. On following up the Russell Kane clip after the conference I was interested to note that his comment, after joking about the role of his accent in the social judgement of others, made perhaps the most important point 'there was only one out of my estate, to read myself out, so I did'.