



# NO MERE FOPPERY

## A DEFENSE OF RAINBOW BOOKSHELVES

*Alexandra Alvis*

**E**VERY FEW MONTHS IT FLARES UP AGAIN: Rage Against Rainbow Shelves. In the pandemic age of bookshelf-as-Zoom-backdrop, the most recent subject of this fury has been none other than National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman, who has given a number of interviews in front of her technicolor shelves, arranged ROYGBIV.

“How could such a learned individual care so little for her books?” the denizens of Twitter gasp, clutching their pearls. “The only people who organize their shelves like *that* are the people who don’t read the books on them.”

Somehow, organization of books by color implies low (or no) volume of use. But why? Is it a mental disconnect between things that are aesthetically pleasing and depth of knowledge? Is it that rainbow bookshelves are favored by women and femme-aligned people? Is it vocational awe of libraries and the artificial sacredness of the book form? Is it just people not liking things that don’t look the way they’ve been conditioned to expect? In short, yes, it’s all of the above and more . . . but let’s dig a little deeper.

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## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Organizing bookshelves by color is by no means a modern novelty (nor is shelving books spine-in, but that's a different kettle of fish<sup>1</sup>). In 1848, English publisher Joseph Cundall remarked how, "in the British Museum, books of Divinity are bound in blue, History in red, Poetry in yellow, and Biography in olive colored leather. This is an excellent plan in a large library."<sup>2</sup> Private collectors of the past were also concerned about the colors of their bookshelves: either as a navigational aid or as an effort to present an image of uniformity.

In the Hand Press Period of book history (roughly 1450-1830, or Gutenberg to the Industrial Revolution), when someone purchased a book, they usually bought a stack of printed pages. Sometimes the pages were lightly bound in a paper wrapper, often colored blue or with a marbled pattern, or in a quick and easy limp vellum case. Booksellers kept a small supply of already-bound books on hand in case a buyer was interested, but by and large, having a book bound was the responsibility of the buyer.<sup>3</sup> The buyer, in turn, could have the book bound in whatever fashion suited their tastes and budget; and if they had the money, they could commission incredibly sumptuous personalized works of book art.

Book collectors with the means to amass large personal libraries could tailor their shelves to look however they pleased. Some book collectors were so concerned with appearances that they wanted all their books to look exactly the same on the shelves. 17th- and 18th-century book collector Robert Harley, 1st Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer, was so well-known for having his books bound in red Morocco (goatskin) with a tooled border and center ornament that the style is now known as a "Harleian binding"<sup>4</sup>; 19th-century American bibliophile Charles E. Goodspeed once endeavored to rebind his extensive collection of works by John Ruskin into uniform blue Morocco.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see: Stephanie Sylverne, "When Books Were Shelved Backwards," on Medium.com (July 30, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Cundall, *On Ornamental Art* (London: Society of the Arts, 1848), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Werner, *Studying Early Printed Books* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 72.

<sup>4</sup> Cundall, 9.

<sup>5</sup> D.C. Hanson, "Sentiment and Materiality in Late Victorian Book Collecting," *Victorian*

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Other book collectors were less interested in a monochrome wall of books, and bookbinders were more than happy to oblige. Joseph William Zaehnsdorf, an extremely influential 19th-century bookbinder, lamented that “a library without color is dark, dreary, and repulsive,” advising his clients instead to choose a different color for each subject of their collection. This, he said, “Would give a pleasing variety, and a light and cheerful appearance to a library.”<sup>6</sup> In his 1835 *Bibliopectia, or, The Art of Bookbinding in All its Branches*, John Arnett observed that a large collection of books requires “the best possible effect, by presenting an appearance of different colours and leather, yet still displaying a general harmony throughout.”<sup>7</sup>

Organizational schema and library design based on color were by far not the most arcane methods employed by historical collectors. Noted 17th century English diarist and bibliophile Samuel Pepys ordered his library strictly by size, often two rows deep on each shelf, even having small blocks of wood carved to elevate volumes of different sizes that belonged to the same set.<sup>8</sup> One of the more well-known examples of truly idiosyncratic book organization was Sir Robert Cotton, the first benefactor of the British Museum. His incredible collection of manuscripts, now forming one of the most important parts of the British Library’s collection, includes the Beowulf manuscript, the Lindisfarne Gospels, and two of the four surviving 8th-century copies of Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica*. He organized his priceless collection of manuscripts by . . . convenience and proximity to marble busts of Roman emperors.

Because nothing screams “Lindisfarne Gospels” like the ten-year reign of Emperor Vespasian.

The idea that people may collect books as beautiful objects rather than as containers of text has outraged people for centuries. Even back in the first century AD, Seneca railed against people without a scholarly education using books “not as the tools of learning, but as decorations for the dining-room.”<sup>9</sup> But the Reverend Thomas Frognall Dibdin, one of the

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*Literature and Culture*, 43(04) (2015), 792.

<sup>6</sup> *The Art of Bookbinding* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1880), 92.

<sup>7</sup> John Arnett, *Bibliopectia, or, The Art of Bookbinding in All its Branches* (London: Richard Groombridge, 1835), 69.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Petroski, *The Book on the Bookshelf* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 127.

<sup>9</sup> Seneca, *On the Tranquillity of the Mind*.

founders of the field of bibliography, would hear none of it. His passage on the aesthetics of books from his 1817 *The Bibliographical Decameron* is worth quoting here at length:

The general appearance of one's library is by no means a matter of mere foppery, or indifference; it is a sort of cardinal point to which the tasteful collector does well to attend. You have a right to consider books, as to their outsides, with the eye of a painter; because this does not militate against the proper use of the contents. I know full well that there are some snappish critics who go about "damning with faint praise" . . . and without sneering teach the rest to sneer, against what is called fine binding and "dapper outsides" . . . . As if any scholar, or man of taste, could not relish the beauties of the volume which he opens, because that same volume happened to be coated in bright calf, or olive-tinted morocco!?<sup>10</sup>

Alberto Manguel, the modern literary polymath and former director of the National Library of Argentina, remarks, "so important is the symbol of the book that its presence or absence can, in the eyes of a viewer, lend or deprive a character of intellectual power."<sup>11</sup> You can see this concept employed in historical portraiture, where sitters would use libraries as backdrops and books as props to telegraph their intellect. In a lecture delivered on June 29, 2016 as part of his London Rare Books School bindings course, Nicholas Pickwoad described how, in 18th-century portraiture, showing the act of reading became more important than simply posing in front of shelves. In fact, sitters would pose with books in wrappers to show that they cared more for the content of the book than how it looked. Obviously, they had never heard the pronouncement that books are *too important* to be used as props.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, most of the sources I have referenced above are largely talking about "fine" or "antiquarian" or "collectable" books, not the mass-market titles available today in bookshops or on Amazon. A cursory glance at Gorman's shelves in her interviews indicates that this is more the fare that stocks her library (although I could very well be missing some modern first

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<sup>10</sup> Reverend Thomas Frognall Dibdin, *The Bibliographical Decameron*, vol. 2 (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1817), 529 (punctuation and formatting simplified for readability).

<sup>11</sup> Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Viking, 1996), 214.

<sup>12</sup> For many examples of this, see the Twitter account Room Rater (@ratemyskyperoom).

editions hiding in plain sight). But ask yourself: do aesthetics “count” more if they involve objects that we perceive as high-quality or luxury? Why can’t a mass-market paperback be pretty? Sure, it doesn’t have the visual weight of a glittering Morocco binding, but are we lesser somehow for still enjoying the cheerful colors on the wrapper of a book we plucked out of the sale bin for \$5? I would argue that the desire for “a pleasing variety” and “cheerfulness” applies just as much to bookshelves today as bookshelves of the past.

## SOCIAL CONTEXT

Even outside the historical pedigree of organizing books by color, evidence that this taxonomy is useful can be found anecdotally. Librarians and retail booksellers alike have certainly heard the refrain, “I don’t remember the title, but it was blue.” A common criticism of the rainbow bookshelf is that it prioritizes aesthetics over access, but for people with more visual memories, organization by color is a tried and true method of keeping things straight. Numerous articles<sup>13</sup> praise<sup>14</sup> color-coding your notes, and organization specialists tout the benefits of organizing everything from your closet<sup>15</sup> to your calendar<sup>16</sup> in color.

Without getting too deep into psychology and neuroscience, it should be noted that human brains are hardwired to segment things, whether that be by shape, size, color, or some combination of the three.<sup>17</sup> “Colour helps us in memorizing certain information by increasing our attentional level,” write Mariam Adawiah Dzul kifli and Muhammad Faiz Mustafar in

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<sup>13</sup> See: Michelle Baumgartner, “5 Tips for Color-Coding Your Notes,” on Study.com (Dec. 2019).

<sup>14</sup> See: Kevin Purdy, “How Color-Coded Notes Make You A More Efficient Thinker,” on FastCompany.com (May 14, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> See: Harrisburg Kitchen & Bath, “How to Organize Your Closet by Color to Help Every Day Be Bright,” on Harrisburgkitchenandbath.com (May 18, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> See: John Rampton, “How to Color Code Your Calendar for Optimal Success,” on Calendar.com (Apr. 29, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Sun, Peng, et al., “High-Capacity Preconscious Processing in Concurrent Groupings of Colored Dots,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 115, no. 52 (2018), E12153-E12162.

*The Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences*.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, incorporating colors into the education of people with learning disabilities has proven to be successful.<sup>19</sup>

So if there is all this science on the benefits of color organization, why do so many rail against it when it comes to books? For the answer to that, we need to look no further than who's doing the organizing. Many of the organizational articles I reference above use gendered language, expecting female readers to be seeking out this information. Elena Nicolaou dives into the misogyny of rainbow bookshelf judgment in her excellent article for *O Magazine*.<sup>20</sup> She quotes Jennifer Wright, author, journalist, and Tweeter of her own color-coded bookshelves: "There's a certain anger towards young women being interested in things that are aesthetically pleasing, fun, and whimsical, and things that have been taken as a serious man's domain."<sup>21</sup> The social message seems to be that if women want to organize their clothes or their kitchens by color, that's fine, but they should stay away from things with *substance*.

Like all misogyny, it eventually wraps back around to affect men too. Lawyer Ed Condon came under fire for his bookshelves in a January 2021 television appearance: although they are at first glance innocuous, commenters on Twitter still managed to gripe about the merest hint of color coordination.

Bigots and critics are more than willing to use the presence of rainbow bookshelves to reinforce their assessments. Transphobes and TERFs seized on the bookshelves of Dr. Adrian Harrop, an advocate for trans mental health, to indicate that he is not the expert he says he is<sup>22</sup>; other overzeal-

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<sup>18</sup> Adawiah Dzulkifli and Muhammad Faiz Mustafar, "The Influence of Colour on Memory Performance: A Review," *The Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences*, 20(2) (2013), 3-9.

<sup>19</sup> See: William Doyle, "The Effectiveness of Color-Coded Cues in Remediating Reversals," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 15(4) (1982), 227-230; Paula Maccini and Joseph Calvin Gagnon, "Mathematics Instructional Practices and Assessment Accommodations by Secondary Special and General Educators," *Exceptional Children* 72(2) (2006), 217-234.

<sup>20</sup> Elena Nicolaou, "Why I'm Never Getting Rid of My Rainbow Color-Coded Bookshelves," on Oprahdaily.com (Sept. 9, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> In a Tweet from December 8, 2020, Twitter user @JammersMinde put out a call for U.K. regulating bodies to do something about Harrop's "unsupported, dangerous claims" that trans youths suffer from a higher suicide rate; user @JoolsJuevens replied in support of the

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ous Twitter denizens place color coordinated shelves on the same level as racism.<sup>23</sup>

“The association of books with their readers is unlike any other between objects and their users,” writes Manguel.<sup>24</sup> More so than almost anything else, people see books as a reflection of their reader or owner, and bookshelves as a window to the soul. And, for some reason, if that soul is colorful, there is a supposition that it lacks depth or knowledge. There is a tendency to equate a valuing of aesthetics with shallowness, as if appreciating something for its beauty automatically lowers the IQ. This is projected as much on people as it is on bookshelves: look no further than college teaching evaluations, in which, in addition to comments on their teaching ability, women and femme-presenting people are sometimes criticized for their appearance, while men and masculine-presenting people tend not to face the same visual judgements.<sup>25</sup> “What is more meaningful,” asks book artist Ulises Carión, “the book or the text it contains?”<sup>26</sup> What is more meaningful, I ask, the rainbow bookshelf or the quality of its owner?

### SUMMARY

It is very difficult to “win” in the rainbow bookshelf debate. If Gorman’s shelves were overstuffed, with papers and books stacked on top of each other, she would probably still be accused of not reading, of “not knowing where anything is.” If she had chosen a different backdrop for her interview, she would likely be accused of looking sloppy or not intellectual enough. Because, ultimately, this is not a question of bookshelves, but of who we feel we have a right to pass judgement on.

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call, noting “A rainbow bookshelf. Nice. Must be right then,” with user @WoodMoose adding: “Nobody who actually reads books organises them by colour as you’d never find the one you wanted. He is all show and no substance.”

<sup>23</sup> In a Tweet from July 9, 2020, Twitter user @RateMySkypeRoom noted that Senator Kelly Loeffler “Hates Black Lives Matter and owns a WNBA team-really. On top of that she color codes her books. This cannot stand.”

<sup>24</sup> Manguel, 214.

<sup>25</sup> See: Colleen Flaherty, “Same Course, Different Ratings,” on *Insidehighered.com* (Mar. 14, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Ulises Carión, *Second Thoughts* (Amsterdam: VOID Distributors, 1980), 13.

Rainbow bookshelves are perceived as the Manic Pixie Dream Girl<sup>27</sup> of bibliography. Like the male characters that the Manic Pixie Dream Girl exists to develop, these true bibliophiles use rainbow bookshelves as a vehicle to develop themselves, decrying them as kooky and nonsensical to try and gain some sort of intellectual higher ground. But the concern-trolling book lovers miss the point that other people's bookshelves don't exist to please or displease them: they exist because the owner of the rainbow shelves likes their books to be that way.

When library workers and book people weigh in on the rainbow shelf debate, they bring with them the moral weight of their field. Library vocational awe is a very real problem.<sup>28</sup> It is easy to see how we got to this place: in a world where space is increasingly commodified and the promise of obtaining something "for free" (i.e., checking out books) is usually a scam, librarians seem like the last bastion of decency. A misinformed Tweet regularly does the rounds about the fire suppression system of Yale's Beinecke Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts, describing how all the oxygen is sucked out of the stacks to put out the fire, whether or not there are librarians inside. Outsiders praise the willingness of librarians to die to protect our shared cultural heritage, while the librarians of the Beinecke have had to take to *USA Today* to try to disprove this harmful myth. Book people are just as human as anyone else, and no more noble.<sup>29</sup>

It doesn't matter how many library degrees you do or don't have, shaming others for their bookshelf aesthetics is bad form. Sure, some organization methods may not be your cup of tea, but that doesn't make them wrong. No book organization method grants moral or intellectual superiority. The presence of rainbow bookshelves in interior decorating pieces, on social media, or as interview backdrops does not mean that the owner of those shelves wants to break into a library and rip all the Dewey classification numbers off of the spines of the books. To borrow meme parlance, it's not that deep.

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<sup>27</sup> For more information on this term, see: "Manic Pixie Dream Girl," on [tvtropes.org](http://tvtropes.org).

<sup>28</sup> For detailed information on this phenomenon, see: Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," on [inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org](http://inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org) (Jan. 10, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Bayliss Wagner, "Fact check: Yale library's fire system protects rare books without suffocating people," *USA Today* (Feb. 12 2021).



## *No Mere Foppery*

All of the above discussion can be very simply boiled down to:

“My bookshelves, my rules.”

The tides – on Twitter, at least – seem to be gradually shifting towards acceptance of the rainbow bookshelf. On the Amanda Gorman thread, comments defending the practice outweighed those decrying it. But this may perhaps be a skewed evaluation, based on Twitter’s tendency to become an echo chamber; the circles of #LibraryTwitter that I run in are generally fairly socially conscientious and filled with practitioners more than willing to dispel vocational awe and book worship.

We as bookworkers and book lovers have the opportunity to use our status, both real and perceived, to make the world of books more welcoming. This doesn’t have to mean hopping into a hostile thread and drawing the ire of trolls commenting in bad faith, but it could mean starting a conversation on your own feed about gatekeeping. I don’t pretend to be putting out some sort of call to arms with this piece, nor do I think one is needed; it is enough to encourage some introspection about why a person’s first reaction to rainbow bookshelves may be one of shock. Do with all this information what you will, but perhaps next time someone is outraged about a bookshelf, remind them not to judge a book by its cover.

