

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ June 2002

A Case for Books

The Rev. Ashmun N. Brown

I thought it would be easy.

We were moving out of the rectory and into our new house in the same town. I had lots of books. They tend to accumulate and as I move along in years I find it harder to get rid of them. Some of them, I suppose, are not important, but many of them are like old friends, and I enjoy looking at them once again.

And that's the trouble.

I start to pack the books away in a box to be lugged to the new house, and a particular book will catch my eye. Just the other day, I found *An Artist in America* by Thomas Hart Benson. I couldn't resist the temptation to read just a few pages; after all, the book was written years ago, and it could hardly speak to our time or interest me in this day and age. Of course it doesn't speak to our time, and now I am grateful for that. It speaks of a time when young people had ideals about what they would do with their lives, and would leave their homeland, move to Paris, meet all kinds of interesting and talented folks, and become themselves educated and talented and, ultimately, famous. I think that Benson is still recognized as one of the great American artists. He should be.

So it took a long time to get that book into the box.

Another day, there was the Ellery Queen staring up at me. As a youngster, I loved the Ellery Queen stories: how this urbane, super-educated man-about-town could solve incredibly difficult mysteries and never lose his aplomb. There were no guns, no violence. Ellery was not a policeman. Once again, the temptation was too much and I started into the story. Then it struck me: one of the characters in the story was an African-American, and she was described as barely literate, credulous, an object of ridicule. She was, after all, afraid of dead bodies, while none of the white characters seemed to be bothered at all.

It was a revelation, that book, and the memory was an unpleasant one. There were times when seemingly neutral books like mystery stories were used to spread libels about particular groups. It may not have been intentional, but it was part of the temper of the times. I, for one, would not like to see those "good old days" return. I hope we have made progress.

I think the library I am moving has every book that Dorothy Sayers ever wrote with the exception of her translation of the *Divine Comedy*. Her Lord Peter Wimsey is an altogether amiable person to know, and a remarkable solver of mysteries. Again, I am jarred occasionally by what can only be called anti-Semitism. And Lord Peter is a devout Christian. A man of Lord Peter's perception would undoubtedly change his thoughts once the horror of the holocaust was

revealed. Unfortunately, the little gibes and jabs did their worst in contributing to the prevailing thought of the twenties and thirties.

The most astonishing book I have run across is my high school annual. Was I ever really that young? My wife suggests that I was born about 40 years old, and have gone down hill ceaselessly ever since. What sparked warm memories were the pictures of the faculty, the people who really shaped and molded me. I find that as the years go by, my high school experience plays an incredibly important role. Several graduate schools and careers later, I think the thoughts worth thinking were first implanted in me when I was a high school freshman. And of course there were the pictures of people I knew and loved, and have not seen in over fifty years. These friendships were precious gifts, and we didn't even know we had received them.

Somewhere along the line, I had purchased a set of great books bound in imitation leather, and I must admit that they looked pretty good on the shelves. I had not read a lot of them, though I do remember reading *Two Years Before the Mast* and realizing what a masterpiece it was. I once belonged to a parish whose rector decided to preach a series of sermons on *Pilgrim's Progress*. I wish he hadn't. I found the book among the leather-bound treasures, read it and was repelled. Is there a Gresham's law applicable to pious works that bad writing drives out good writing? In charity, I must conclude that *de gustibus non est disputandum* [there is no disputing about tastes]. (My high school Latin teacher, smiling in that annual would be so proud.)

The empty boxes are there, and the books remain in their bookcases despite the fact that it has been several weeks since we moved. I enjoy going upstairs to pack, but when I get there, I find it harder and harder to get down to the business at hand. A *Time-Life* book on darkroom photography seems so quaint now that we have moved into the digital age. However, the *Time-Life* series on boats still rings true, and I am proud to say that my copy of Chapman's *Piloting, Seamanship and Small Boat Handling* is still in first class condition, despite the thumbprints here and there. And the *National Geographic* series of books on exotic places all over the globe presents a major and constant temptation to browse and dream. Succumb? You bet I do. But occasionally, a book gets placed in a box, and the box is itself moved, and the books are trickling into the new house.

And I am now finding another pastime, one almost as good as the first. If I have missed an interesting book in the taking-out stage, I can find it in the bringing-in stage — with the added advantage of not having to go home eventually, since I am already there.

Moving a library is not an easy task, by any means. But what a floodgate of memories has been unleashed.



The Rev. Ashmun Brown is Priest-in-Charge of St. Agatha's Episcopal Church in DeFuniak Springs, Florida. He is retired from the Diocese of Central Florida, and served as an attorney with the Federal Aviation Agency and with NASA. He was General Counsel for the University of Central Florida, and was Vicar of St. Francis Church in Bushnell, Florida.



445 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10016