



Zoom with a view: The courtesy-of-Covid form of communication on Zoom has led to interviewees placing themselves in front of packed bookshelves and viewers watching at an awkward angle to try to find out what books are on those shelves

Bookcase envy a new form of fashion snobbery for the intelligentsia

I HAVE acquired repetitive strain injury, namely, a crick in my neck from watching television at an uncomfortable angle. I blame it on Zoom, our newest courtesy-of-Covid form of communication, where almost every interview or group discussion is conducted remotely via a homescreen.

In order to appear serious, cultured and/or intellectually superior many participants choose to position themselves in front of their well-stocked and carefully curated bookshelves. This is counterproductive for me the viewer, since I'm sitting with my head at 90 degrees trying to decipher the titles on the spines of their books in order to ascertain their taste in literature and consequently, whether or not they're worth listening to.

Their book titles are often difficult to discern since the interviewees' Zoom lighting is frequently amateurishly wrong, their faces a funny colour and all nose. It's hugely distracting and frustrating.

'Bookcase envy' is the newest form of snobbery – a blatant exercise in one-upmanship for the intelligentsia, a style statement for the deeply shallow. No more a random storage solution for the rest of us who just love to own and read books. Fashion has laid its fell hand upon book display.

'Why not catalogue your collection by jacket colour?' they suggest. 'Why not arrange them by size to create an undulating vertical graph effect? Or architecturally, in alternating vertical and horizontal groups?' 'A low ottoman or coffee table between two sofas will draw attention to your collection of larger art, sculpture of fashion volumes (great slabs of things, rarely opened) displayed pyramid style.' There's nothing more pretentious than a set of elaborately bound 'classics', bought by the yard and never read. As someone once

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witheringly observed "Books do furnish a room".

Personally, I favour the squiggle in wherever they'll fit system. I like Professor Mary Beard's bookshelves whose display is as chaotically assembled as she is.

I dread the 'must read' recommendations of book bullies in the guise of enthusiastically evangelical acquaintances who badger you into reading books they adored. They subsequently check by asking pointed questions to prove that you have.

I belong to a book group that, pre-Covid, engaged in lively debate over each month's title. I confess to my shame that once, by

dint of listening attentively and offering my critique last, I managed to fool them into thinking I'd actually read it. They never found out. Until now.

Once I was invited onto a local library's Booker Prize panel. Our task, to read all six of the Booker shortlist titles and discuss their merits. It was not a vintage Booker year and the scrupulous preparation was rigorous. The winner was, in my opinion, a book that killed time – for those who liked it better dead. We all wish to be intellectually well thought of.

Visitors invariably cast a sly eye over your bookshelves and privately pass judgment on your reading taste. I just hope nobody discovers my entire oeuvre of Regency romances by Georgette Heyer hidden in the attic, or I'll be condemned as a complete airhead.

My books are old and valued friends, collected over years. Though the chances of my re-reading many of them are unlikely, I hate giving them away – and as for lending them to people who neglect to return them – forget it. I can't be doing with those Kindle thingamajigs. It's the smell and the feel of a book I enjoy and the fact that you can find your place with a page number. The act of turning pages is a satisfying sense of achievement and progress in itself.

A book is an excursion ticket to new cultures, history, myth, mystery and adventure, other people's lives and loves. To open the door of a book and lose oneself travelling through it with its characters is a panacea for all life's ills. Reading is one of the few unspoiled pleasures left – perfect escapist therapy in these uncertain times and the ideal antidote to sleeplessness when your biological clock's gone haywire, you're wide awake as a box of birds at three in the morning and tempted to creep to the kitchen to make toast.

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ON THIS DAY

FEBRUARY 2 1921

Execution in Cork

THE following official account was issued from Victoria Barracks, Cork: Cornelius Murphy of Rathmore, County Kerry, farmer was tried by a Military Court for an offence against Martial Law – of being in improper possession of arms and ammunition, namely a loaded revolver.

The Court found Murphy guilty and sentenced him to suffer death by being shot. The sentence was duly confirmed by the General Officer Commanding in Chief in Ireland (General Sir Nevil Macready). The sentence was duly executed at 8 a.m. on February 1st 1921.

Meanwhile, the Lord Lieutenant has agreed to further respite the sentence of death by hanging imposed on Joseph Murphy, convicted of the murder of Private Squibbs in Cork.

Editorial
JOSEPH Murphy of Cork, the man who is innocent of any connection with the crime for which he lies under a sentence of death, been respited again – for the fourth time. It would, ordinarily, be impossible to credit the authorities with the intention of hanging this man after the expression of opinion unanimously delivered by the otherwise powerless Court of King's Bench. But who will venture to prophesy the ultimate result under existing conditions?

A tragic event of real significance and importance took place in Cork yesterday. Some days ago a man named Cornelius Murphy from Rathmore, County Kerry was convicted by a courtmartial of 'having arms in his possession' within an area proclaimed under Martial Law. He was shot yesterday – the first infliction of 'capital punishment' under such circumstances – perhaps the first execution officially carried out for the crime of 'being in possession of arms' since 1798. It was a sinister happening: millions of people will think of Larnie [the UVF gun-running 1914] when they read of this man's death. (Con Murphy was the first IRA man executed for carrying arms. Within weeks multiple executions had taken place in Dublin and Cork. These were held under the draconian Restoration of Order in Ireland Act (1920). Under the Act coroners' inquests were suppressed. Already 33 inquests had indicted either the military or the police for murder. The ROIA formed the basis of the Special Powers Act in the North from 1922 until 1972.)

DI Wounded, Wife Shot Dead

ABOUT 10 p.m. on Monday night, Captain King, County Inspector RIC of Mallow (County Cork) and his wife were fired on near Mallow railway station. Mrs King was fatally wounded and Captain King wounded.

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