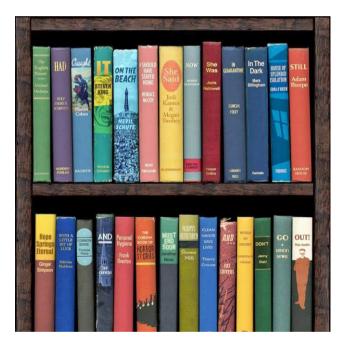**'Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic: an online conference'**

3-4 November 2020 (ONLINE)

Organised by The Open University and supported by SHARP (The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing)

Call for Papers (deadline: 1 September 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on all aspects of lives, but nowhere has this been more visible than in the conflation of public and private workspace. Despite our increasingly (almost exhaustively) online lives, the material book is now firmly back in focus, and not just as a backdrop to endless Zoom meetings – although even on that score, the wittily parodic and highly insightful Bookcase Credibility Twitter account, which has amassed over 77,000 followers in under two months, has given a new lease of life to social media '#shelfies'. In our quarantine confined, digitally mediated existence, we literally are what we read, and our cultural capital is now is on display to the whole world, in material form. As Amanda Hess has noted in The New York Times, the credibility bookcase is the 'quarantine's hottest accessory', and one for which there is no E-Book equivalent. In the semiotics of the pandemic, the well-curated bookcase has become a manifestation of our mental state, and perhaps for the first time during this barber-less interlude in human history, our books *are* more important than our hair. And yet, as John Quiggin points out, this newly respectable flaunting of cultural capital can entrench existing socio-economic inequalities; the personal library has always been an overt display of wealth as well as knowledge. This conference will ask speakers to critically examine this particular cultural phenomenon, brought to public attention by the pandemic. Possible topics to include:

- Cultural or material capital? What do our bookshelves (and books) on display say about our cultural capital, or material wealth?
- Public vs private: as our domestic spaces have been repurposed, where do we draw the lines between the public and private spheres? Do our bookshelves blur this distinction, or attempt to reinforce it? Can the books on our shelves cause public embarrassment or ridicule?
- Individual vs shared: do our bookshelves on display represent individual talent or collective effort?

- Aesthetics vs logistics (1): the aesthetics and logistics of the physical bookshelf on display – colour, shape, organisation and invisible labour (who organises? Who cleans?)
- Aesthetics vs logistics (2): the aesthetics and logistics of the virtual bookshelf background – default and bespoke settings on Skype, Zoom, Teams, etc
- Physical vs virtual books: does the physical or virtual display of books on a shelf or in a case display cultural adaptation or cultural appropriation?
- Physical vs virtual shelves: Is the physical bookshelf at its apogee (peak IKEA Billy bookshelf) or is this when the curve has been flattened - might it be eclipsed by a digital equivalent, such as the bespoke or fake digital bookish background?
- Inclusion vs exclusion: what does having a bookshelf to display in this age of the pandemic actually mean, who is invited in, and who is kept out?
- Great reads or the great unread? What assumptions of reading based on possession are we casually making, and what might this cultural interference in a private act constitute?

Proposals are invited from researchers in all relevant disciplines (book history, literary studies, publishing studies, cultural studies, anthropology, visual and material culture, librarianship, digital cultures etc) and at all stages of research careers (PhD students and early career researchers are welcome). Please send an **abstract of no more than 250 words**, a **brief biography of 50 words** and your contact details to the organisers by **1 September 2020**.

Contact:

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Dr Sally Blackburn-Daniels (facilitator), Sally.Blackburn-Daniels@open.ac.uk

Presenters who have their papers accepted will need to send a **Word document copy of their talk (no more than 2500 words)** and any accompanying **PowerPoint (no more than 10 slides please)** to the conference organisers at least 1 week before the online conference, by **26 October 2020**. The PowerPoint will be visible to attendees during the online sessions; the Word document will be securely stored (password protected) and only visible to conference organisers.

This online only conference is organised by the History of Books and Reading (HOBAR) research collaboration based in the Department of English & Creative Writing, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), The Open University and supported by SHARP (The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing).

Image caption: *Shelf Isolation* by Phil Shaw. The original print can be purchased online at the Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery, https://www.rebeccahossack.com/artists/72-phil-shaw/overview/

Schedule for organisers:

- CFP, together with requests for abstracts (no more than 250 words) and brief biography (50 words) to be sent out by **22 May 2020** for the deadline of **1 September 2020**
- Scientific committee (Blackburn-Daniels, King, Norrick-Rühl & Towheed) to evaluate proposals
- Notifications of acceptance to be sent out by **15 September 2020**
- Registration to open on **15 September 2020**
- PowerPoint presentations, Word document by speakers, and email registration for non-speaking attendees by **26 October 2020**
- Conference to take place on **3 November** and **4 November 2020** (staggered sessions)

Platform/method:

- This will be an online only conference, hosted by The Open University
- The platform used will be Microsoft Teams
- There is no charge, this will be a free event, but attendees who are not presenting papers will be asked to register by email at least 1 week before the online conference
- Papers will be **20 minutes** long in oral presentation (no longer) with up to **10 minutes** for questions and discussion after each presentation
- Questions for speakers can be sent by email in advance or posted in the chat window during the sessions on the day. Facilitators/conference organisers will ask the questions on behalf of the questioner. You will also be able to submit questions via Twitter.
- Presenters who have their papers accepted will need to send a **Word document copy of their talk (up to 2500 words)** and any accompanying **PowerPoint (no more than 10 slides please)** to the conference organisers at least 1 week before the online conference, by **26 October 2020**. The PowerPoint will be visible to attendees during the online sessions; the Word document will be securely stored (password protected) and only visible to conference organisers.
- Abstracts and biographies will be posted on the conference website.
- This is a one day conference equivalent: sessions will be planned **over 2 days**, spaced out over **morning (10.00-13.00 GMT) and afternoon/evening slots (17.00-20.00 GMT)**, so as to facilitate participation from speakers in different time zones and those with continuing caring/childcare duties. This will allow for a maximum of 20 papers to be delivered.
- The organisers will also see if there is the possibility of running an asynchronous forum during the week of the online conference.
- Registration will be done via **EventBrite**. Audience (total participants) capped at 100.