

Living with Books: How Books are used to Construct Identity in Domestic Spaces

Our understanding of readers and their reading practices has expanded significantly through the work of book historians, literary scholars, and others dedicated to understanding reading as a social and cultural practice, but there remains a lacuna in this work with respect to the lived experiences of individual readers. My recent research with avid readers offers a way to address this omission by using a life history approach that allows for a culturally and socially situated reader while simultaneously emphasizing the individuality of each reader's experience. Applying this methodology to understanding individual reading practices reveals the need for new areas of research, including the connection many readers have to their books as physical objects and how this manifests itself in their arrangement of these books in their homes. As the space where readers spend the most time and over which they have the most control, the home is an important site of identity construction, yet the importance of physical books and their arrangement in domestic spaces has received scant attention from scholars of reading practices. In this presentation, I intend to feature excerpts from interviews and photographic evidence from my life history work to illustrate how the organization of books and reading materials in readers' homes reflects the social processes through which people define themselves as readers, how they wish others to view them as readers, and how they in turn view other readers. By focusing on the intersections between the arrangement of readers' books and aspects of their social identities, I will illustrate the importance of the book as a physical object in understanding how people negotiate their identities as readers.