

Book Stories: 20 Years of Library Book Plate Celebrations

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Using storytelling as a framework, this study analyzes a faculty promotion book plating ritual through the lens of a twenty-year corpus of faculty-created and library-gathered data. The sources for this analysis are faculty reasons for book selection, or “book stories,” which are part of an annual book plating ritual at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign library to celebrate promotion and tenure. Findings include increased personal information sharing over time. Libraries in the midst of pandemic reinventions should consider sustaining, reviving, and innovating new forms of storytelling to extend the impact of the library as the bedrock of academic community.

“The expanding frame of Max’s world leads him from his bedroom and his wolf suit out into the world of wild things. The thrill of this journey into the unknown is what I aspire to teach my students to love.”

~ 2013 selection statement for *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak

Introduction

In the everyday world of academia, there are occasional storytelling moments, such as introductions to public lectures. When a celebrated scholar speaks, ceremonies feature multiple academic leaders giving one introduction after another, layering together a story of why this person was selected to give this address at this time. Such rituals are taken for granted in the information worlds of librarians and faculty members, experienced but not analyzed. And yet they are characteristic of academia as an information world and of the culture of scholarship. With this gap in mind, this study uses storytelling as a framework to analyze a faculty promotion book plating ritual through the lens of a twenty-year corpus of faculty-created and library-gathered data. The sources for this analysis are the traces of the ritual: faculty reasons for book selection, here termed book stories. This highly structured storytelling situation occurs as part of an annual book plating ritual at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign library to celebrate promotion and tenure.

Though reading is central to academic pursuits, little attention has been given to faculty book choices. We take for granted but may not deeply understand how books matter to scholars. Understanding what books mean to faculty sheds new light on what libraries can mean to their communities. Although each faculty member’s promotion and book choice is individual, these book-plating practices are one part of the “small world” of faculty life. In Chatman’s

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terms, “what holds a social reality together, and ultimately, establishes proper bounds for information-seeking is the recognition by others that those behaviors are the customary ones to pursue” (Chatman 1996). Jaeger and Burnett draw on Chatman’s ideas for the theory of information worlds, with emphasis on the interactions among small worlds and larger contexts, including multiple small worlds as well as the interactions between them. “Few individuals exist only in one small world; a typical person is a part of many small worlds—friends, family, co-workers, people with shared hobbies, etc” (Jaeger and Burnett 2010).

At the University of Illinois library (and elsewhere), commemorative book plates celebrate faculty who achieve tenure and promotion. Faculty are invited to select a meaningful book and write a brief statement or book story about the selection: “Please tell us, in approximately 50 words or less, why you chose the book you did, and what significance does it have to you?” Book choices (title, author, cover) and book stories are preserved collectively on the library website.* This practice has been sustained from 2000 to 2019, and the celebration has evolved to include an event celebrating scholar’s achievements. At the event, books, book plates, and book stories were on display, with room to move around, read one another’s selections, and socialize. The website preserves the traces of a consistent practice, capturing the book stories of faculty at a moment of career transformation; faculty removed in time and space remain connected by the records of this ritual.

Librarians Lisa German and Karen Schmidt jointly authored a descriptive article about leading the creation of this “unique program of honoring faculty who attain the honor of tenure and/or promotion in rank” as the “only event on campus where the promotion and/or tenure of all faculty members was recognized in a public way” (German and Schmidt 2001). Since that time, similar programs have been developed in other places, some extending the idea of faculty bookplates to virtual bookplates in the library catalog and bookplates in honor of donors (Carrico, Fleming, and Simpson 2010; Foster and Robinson 2012). Faculty promotion programs at other universities also typically solicit “a brief paragraph as to why they (faculty member) selected that particular book” (Riddle et al. 2005). These statements are “meant to provide a personal glimpse into the faculty member and to inspire students and others in their scholarly pursuits” (Fischer, Conger, and Bazirjian 2007). One librarian noted that “faculty did not always select books from their specific research or teaching focus or even their general subject area. Many chose novels or books of general interest because they had been particularly inspired by these works during their lives” (Riddle et al. 2005).

In addition to these examples, a Google search using the terms “faculty promotion bookplate” reveals that this practice has become widespread. At least twenty institutions use these terms to describe a celebration ritual around promotion, including Florida State University, University of Idaho, The Ohio State University, University of North Carolina Greensboro, and others—and there may be more that use slightly different terms. It would be interesting to explore the histories of these practices comparatively, analyzing statements from faculty across multiple institutions. However, differences in institutional culture, such as duration of the practice and participation of faculty, would make systematic comparison challenging. As an entry point into research on book stories as traces of these rituals, this study focuses on one institution’s faculty promotion bookplates, with a corpus of more than 1,500 book stories

* Book stories are publicly available on the “Faculty Bookplates” webpage, under “Featured Collections and Acquisitions,” itself under the “Collections” section of the University Library website, <https://www.library.illinois.edu/collections/special-collections/bookplates/>.

recorded over a twenty-year period. Although previous publications have described promotion book-plating practices, the present study appears to be the first to analyze book stories as content and ask what book selections mean.

Generations of faculty have written book stories and participated in this celebration and collective ritual transition at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Reading through book stories offers glimpses into the personal histories of careers, career choices, and how academic paths and passions developed, as well as family history, geography, identity, and more. These book stories show that the process of promotion is both deeply personal and collective, revealing the significance of books as everything from disciplinary influence to family bedtime reading. As faculty, I have participated in this ritual myself, as has my partner and many of our friends. I have attended multiple celebration events and written my own book story. Being embedded in the university defines my “information world” and that of many of my colleagues, an information world where books and reading matter. These book stories capture the lives, attitudes, and passions of many of my colleagues. They reflect one person’s personality, another person’s intellectual passion, yet another person’s devotion to family life, and more. While short, these glimpses into colleagues’ lives are also profound.

In the information worlds of faculty, promotion and tenure are meaningful moments, but rarely does an opportunity arise to analyze what they mean. This article explores book stories as traces of a collective ritual at one institution, where faculty give glimpses into what motivates them and how their academic journeys are personally meaningful through their book stories. Through this analysis, we ask: What do faculty book stories reveal about why books are selected to commemorate promotion, individually and collectively? What, if anything, has changed over twenty years, and what do these findings mean for libraries?

Literature Review

Book selection and display as a kind of self-disclosure—from undergraduate dorm room shelves to backdrops for films of experts sharing their expertise—is a longstanding trope. The idea of the “credibility bookcase” has taken on new life in an era of videoconferencing, via actual or digital bookshelf backgrounds (Hess 2020). For academics, books are meaningful in professional ways, but relatively little attention has been given to how those meanings cross over personally. In an investigation of personal meaning, Gorichanaz draws on phenomenology to analyze “information experience in three domains of personal meaning-making.” Based on these empirical studies, he argues for including “personally meaningful activities as a site for information behavior research,” not least because personal meaning is “a necessity for human beings” (Gorichanaz 2019).

Other studies have explored the intersection of personal and professional meanings of books. In the book *A Narrative Compass*, Hearne and Trites gather essays by faculty members who describe the books and stories that have served as “compasses” or guiding narratives that span and connect their lives and their work. “When scholars understand the relationship between text and context, between the subject they study and their own lives, they can draw on their internalized knowledge of storytelling to help analyze what they study” (Hearne and Trites 2009). Through exploring writing processes, embodiment, nurturing roles, and more, this collection of essays thoughtfully and systematically explores what books mean to scholars while challenging academic taboos against sharing personal narratives. The collection also

opens the door to looking for other moments when personal meanings are shared, such as in rituals around promotion and tenure.

There is room for more library and information science (LIS) narrative inquiry as we draw from varied research traditions to qualitatively understand the meanings of libraries to all stakeholders. The value of narrative inquiry for LIS has been asserted elsewhere in relation to major career transitions: “For example, we may ask to hear librarians’ lived experiences of promotion and tenure reviews.” Ford argues that “by asking for and listening to our colleagues’ lived experiences, we invite the opportunity to reflect on and reimagine these systems” (Ford 2020) a phenomenological qualitative research methodology, examines individual human experiences—stories. Mining collections of book stories is a way to leverage library assets that have already been collected and curated to stimulate such reflection and reimagining. Narrative inquiry like this may redress the persistent “imbalance in information science,” which centers predominately on the lower things (everyday life and problem solving) and overlooks “higher things” (Kari and Hartel 2007) like experiences of promotion, which appears among other career events in a recent taxonomy of major life events (Haimson et al. 2021). Achieving promotion is typically a positive experience, but there is more room for understanding what makes career transitions meaningful. The analysis of this corpus of book stories offers one window to understanding what scholars value about books.

Because of the ritual nature of this celebration, from invitation to book display, the lens of storytelling is useful for situating the analysis. Storytelling has a rich, century-long tradition in professional youth services librarianship. Conceptually, this practice has focused on the dynamic relationship between the teller, tale, and audience. The triangle of librarian-as-storyteller, public-as-audience, and the story-as-book (or any item in the collection) means that the same story may be told differently depending on the specific people and content involved, with an emphasis on the collective experience of storytelling (McDowell 2018). Research on organizational storytelling in libraries affirms a similar dynamic. In researching how “organizational stories” serve as a way of communicating “valuable tacit knowledge related to (librarians’) work to colleagues,” Colón-Aguirre asserted that “the role of the narrative seems to be related to the audience, or those with whom participants were sharing the stories” (Colón-Aguirre 2015). Storytelling has also been posited as a means of enhancing library organizational leadership, most notably in Kate Marek’s handbook on “how to use narratives to navigate change and build community” and “communicate shared goals” in everyday challenges of librarianship (Marek 2011).

Storytelling can be spontaneous, but much academic storytelling is highly ritualized, and faculty promotion book plating is meticulously ritualized storytelling. Story in the information sciences has recently been defined in two ways: structurally as narratively patterned information, and functionally as the content shared through the narrative experience of storytelling (McDowell 2021). The use of the term “book story” here draws on the second definition. The sharing of book stories is a form of collective narrative experience, both at the event—where authors browse one another’s books stories and books—and in preserving book stories on the library website. In this context, the story consists of a brief statement about book selection, and yet the corpus is vastly diverse. Some select their own books, telling the story of their own achievements. Others select books by mentors, advisors, or students, with stories of important relationships in their career trajectories. Still others select books written by relatives or read to children, offering stories of personal life.

There is increasing evidence that story as narrative experience interconnects individuals. Neural story processing involves a “mirroring process of embodied subjectivity” or experiences of “narrative emotions” predicated on story’s “ability to intertwine our experience of time” (Armstrong 2020). Specialized “mirror neurons” in the brain contribute to experiencing empathy through story (Rizzolatti 2008), and contextual empathy cues increase the potential for empathetic experience through story (Roshanaei et al. 2019). Though a complete review of neurological storytelling research is beyond the present scope, these findings indicate that the multiplicity of a collective story audience is more complex than the mere sum of individual experiences.

Although the storytelling in this case involves written and read book stories, there is a shared narrative experience in the celebration ritual. These book stories’ authors are present together at an event where part of the intrigue of the setting is the potential to not only read about what others have selected but to make new acquaintances as colleagues mill around each other’s books. This event and the website archive sustain potential for dynamic exchange between tellers-as-authors and audience-as-university-community. “Rich metaphorical understandings of what a storytelling process can be, may afford the kind of reframing that is necessary to enliven thoughtful, critical, inventive library services” (McDowell 2020).

In this ritual, libraries preserve stories of faculty accomplishments, celebrate faculty development, and position faculty as storytellers. Although academic leaders tell stories about faculty and university impact, faculty storytelling exists primarily in publications and classrooms. The book plating celebration is an opportunity for faculty to tell their stories as part of the institution, with the library as a larger stage for their accomplishment to be seen and celebrated. Since only brief glimmers of personal stories appear in academia, those glimmers are important to analyze. Faculty book stories reveal much about a common, collective experience of academic information worlds that cuts across usual personal and professional distinctions.

Methods

Over a twenty-year period, all faculty who are promoted to associate or full professor with tenure have been invited to participate in this ritual, but of course not all do. Participation rates are not available for all twenty years, but ten years of data indicate a response rate that ranges from just over half to about three quarters of those invited.

Year	Number of Faculty Promoted	Number of Faculty Responses	Participation Rate
2010	91	68	75%
2011	128	89	70%
2012	116	85	73%
2013	103	79	77%
2014	88	47	53%
2015	81	47	58%
2016	86	62	72%
2017	99	67	68%
2018	115	83	74%
2019	130	88	68%

Participation rates show that, from 2010 to 2019, this has been a program with uptake of about 70% among promoted faculty. Of course, the disruptions of COVID-19 impacted this ritual, so data for 2020 and beyond will be different. Understanding what such rituals mean for this library and academic community may inform how institutions reinvent book plating events. More mundane disruptions have also impacted past participation, as with one faculty member who shared disappointment to have missed the email invitation that “slipped through the cracks.”

A blend of qualitative methods was chosen to investigate what faculty book stories reveal, individually and collectively. Analysis drew on reflexive thematic analysis and topic modeling. Reflexive thematic analysis involves a six-stage process for thematizing codes and understanding what the data means (Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun 2019). This analysis takes an inductive approach to analysis, focusing on the entire data set from 2000 to 2019 (Braun and Clarke 2006) and used NVivo 12 to capture and refine the code book, themes, and subthemes.

Topic modeling complemented the findings from reflexive thematic analysis. Topic modeling is an automated way of understanding the contents of text corpuses through the process of training topic models. The output consists of lists of closely related words in the corpus, from a computational standpoint, that can reveal hidden semantic patterns. Word lists, in increments of ten, were generated from ten to fifty topics and again in increments of one from fifteen to twenty-five topics. At twenty topics (with the minor adjustment of excluding one least meaningful word from each set), the word sets both echoed and complemented the thematic analysis findings, yielding some additional insights.

Although initial plans were to analyze patterns of book titles/authors, the vast majority of the books chosen were uniquely selected, meaning that most titles appeared just one time in the list of approximately 1,500 books. A number of possibilities remain for future research, including generating a schema for analyzing subjects or contents of books themselves by drawing on other data sets. Such future work could produce better understanding of how book choices relate to the scholarly field of the celebrant, comparisons of books selected across institutions, and more. However, given the very low incidence of duplication, the books as works selected are not the focus of the present analysis. Instead, it focuses on the book stories from one consistent practice at one institution over twenty years. The findings are organized in themes developed in the analysis, with examples. These are followed by an overview of complementary insights from topic modeling.

Findings: Themes and Excerpts

The reflexive thematic analysis process yielded five themes, each with a variety of subthemes that help to elucidate the scope of the theme and clarify the content. The five themes were career stories, good books, life stories, social justice, and other. When relevant, a single statement was coded in multiple ways. For example, when a book story referenced career path (career stories), being part of an underrepresented group (life stories), and the need for social justice (social justice), then it was coded in all three themes. Table 2 provides a visual overview of the themes and subthemes.

Although each statement is a short text, the overall corpus is extensive, as was the coding process, which involved two research assistants examining just over 1,500 statements. A brief overview of the numbers of coding instances for each of the themes indicates the frequency of different kinds of meaning found in the statements.

TABLE 2
Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Career stories	Own book or contributed to book
	Influenced career direction
	Person who influenced career direction
	Excellent textbook or inspired teaching
	Student achievements
	Impact of library or university
Good books	Enjoyable or well written
	Influenced or changed worldview
	Personally influential
	Influential in the field
	Written to reach beyond the field
	Speaks to the human experience
Life stories	Childhood
	Family
	School and career stories
	Place stories
	Underrepresented life stories
Social justice	(no subthemes)
Other	Humor
	Uncategorized
	No book story

TABLE 3
Themes and Coding References

Theme	Number of Coding References
Good books	1548
Career stories	996
Life stories	639
Social justice	91
Other	78

This provides a snapshot of which kinds of meaning appeared most often in the statements. Before continuing with analysis of the findings, there must be a note of caution about making too much of such trends, because the prompts for book stories were not standardized from year to year. There was consistency in that faculty were always asked to select books, but the emails inviting participation are not all available for analysis. It is clear that later invitations included some example books and book stories from previous years, so the process evolved over time (see historical analysis, below). Earlier requests were doubtless modified to appeal to faculty and encourage them to participate. In other words, even the most numeric data in this analysis should be understood as deeply qualitative. An exemplary quotation for each theme will help to illustrate the kinds of content coded.

Theme	Exemplary Book Story Excerpt
Good books	<i>"This book embodies the wonder, beauty, and strangeness that printed volumes can convey."</i>
Career stories	<i>"Most of my research has drawn heavily upon ideas that were first developed in this book."</i>
Life stories	<i>"To symbolize that it is possible to balance an academic career with family and laugh along the way!"</i>
Social justice	<i>"This book affirms, among other things, the relationship between critically-engaged history and social justice, between anti-racist teaching and the possibilities of a genuinely pluralist democracy."</i>
Other	<i>"I like unusual fruits."</i>

Each theme was based on these kinds of typical expressions, from praise for good books to moments of humor. For example, "I like unusual fruits" was the full statement for a book about unusual fruits. While accurate in a literal sense, this book story was a humorous contrast to academic language that is rarely so plain and direct.

A secondary analysis revealed the average coding occurrences over approximately five-year increments. The numeric values are percentages of occurrences, so that each column adds up to 100. Although these values are based on counting qualitative research coding, and should be read with that qualification, two trends were evident.

	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2018	Trend
Good books	38	44	41	36	steady
Career stories	33	25	24	25	downward
Life stories	22	26	30	36	upward
Social justice	4	3	3	2	steady
Other	3	2	2	1	steady

These trends were a slight downward trend in career stories, and a slight upward trend in life stories. These changes over time may reflect the impacts on academic culture of broader cultural shifts toward greater self-disclosure generally and toward a more personal way of being in workplaces. Because the culture of academia has traditionally separated the personal and the professional, some might read these trends as the encroachment of the personal into work life, while others might laud increased willingness to openly share personal life stories. No matter why caused or how understood, this change points to an opportunity for libraries to consider expanding avenues for open-ended story sharing, including life stories.

More detailed description of thematic analysis findings, below, represents typical content of subthemes and provides a sense of range. Each theme is a ***bold heading in italics*** and each subtheme is *italicized* within the body of the text.

Career Stories

This theme encompasses statements related to faculty career or career path, from selecting their own book to selecting a book that influenced them or a book that honors a colleague,

mentor, or the institution itself. Career stories define central aspects of faculty life as an information world. Some faculty chose their *own book or a book to which they contributed*, reflecting faculty information worlds defined by the production of a book in some discipline. As one person succinctly stated: “This is the first book that I wrote and published.” A humorously short statement was: “I wrote it.”

The subtheme *influenced career direction* encompasses books relevant to choice of career or the development of a career path. As one said: “This paradigm guides my own research.” Others selected books foundational to a newer area within a field: “All scholarly analysis of Latino politics that have been published since 1977 (including my own work) owe it a debt of gratitude.” This kind of book story emphasized continuity with thinkers and authors who came before.

Person who influenced career direction encompasses inspirational book authors, editors, and contributors as well as the biographical subjects of books. Sometimes the author or contributor was known personally to the faculty member. Descriptions of such collegial connection ranged widely from formal (“she was a mentor to me”) to casual (“the authors are from U of I and colleagues of mine”). Sometimes the inspirational person was the subject of the book, such as public/historical figures Mahatma Ghandi and Benjamin Franklin. From personally known mentors and colleagues to historically distant figures, these were stories of influential people and their interconnected scholarly conversations.

In the *excellent textbook or inspired teaching* subtheme, book stories often mentioned courses for which the book had been assigned reading. Graduate courses featured frequently, which is not surprising since, in faculty information worlds, the opportunity to teach graduate students tends to be less common and desired. One celebrated “university life: a lifetime of reading and a desire for both our faculty and students to teach and learn from one another.” Stories occasionally described *student achievements* including writings by or with former students. A poignant example acknowledged a book “by one of my former undergraduate students” as “a brilliant discussion of how religious truth becomes established as orthodoxy;” the faculty member shared that the student had since passed away.

Statements honoring *the impact of the library or university* praised “the extraordinary collections in the University of Illinois libraries” or the “intellectual environment” of the university. Some faculty strategically chose a book to augment the library’s collections: “I’d be honored to be the alibi for its availability in our Library’s collection.” This ritual moment is one among many moments of the ongoing relationship between the faculty member and the library and/or university. These book stories offer glimpses of the library in the lives of faculty members, and they can inform libraries as they continually revitalize services for faculty.

The statements in this theme evoke an image of faculty within career networks of interconnecting generations of thinkers. Research, writing, and teaching are confirmed as connective activities. Over time, students are inspired to become teachers and researchers who invent paths influenced by mentors who came before. Libraries would do well to consider their own roles in these networks, amplifying the library’s role in telling yet untold stories of such connections.

Good Books

Some book stories described a good book. The specific ways of being “good” elucidate a range of ways that books figure into faculty information worlds, from influencing an academic field

to bringing academic subjects to broader audiences. These book stories also speak to deeply meaningful personal experiences of reading, from the pleasurable to the life changing.

The *enjoyable or well written* encompasses books described as “beautifully written,” “beautifully crafted,” or “poetic.” One told of a book written with “perfectly rounded sentences that seemed to make each observation an aphorism.” One faculty statement said that the book’s “true star” was “the English language; although written in prose, the book reads like poetry.” The word “poetry” was used as praise for prose in a number of cases. There were also lighter indications of enjoyment, such selecting a book “because it makes me laugh” or even contrasting pleasure with career: “This book has no special academic significance to me; it’s just a pleasure to read.”

The lasting impact of books appeared frequently. For instance, one book was praised for having given “great joy for nearly twenty years.” Another person signaled enduring appeal: “This is my favorite and most read book of all time. I have recommended it to friends and colleagues many times.” This focus on enduring books indicated that the meaning of a book choice can reflect more than the moment of promotion and may signal influence that has lasted throughout a career or even a lifetime.

Books that *influenced or changed worldview* changed a person’s life or “changed how I see the world.” Some statements connected the change to career, noting “profound influence on my perspective on research and academia.” This kind of influence seemed to involve more than just the faculty member’s information world, extending to their experience of life generally. As one person wrote: “Few books have had as profound an influence on my life as this one.” These book stories evince the power of books.

The *personally influential* book stories were interestingly abstract, such as: “I discovered this book, and found it refreshing to my soul and mind.” As in the previous subtheme, some book stories indicated a long and repeated reading experience: “I still read it when I need to be reminded of what matters most.” Sometimes the term “personal” itself was used to elide a more specific meaning: “it has personal significance for me.” The abstraction of these book stories asserted the power and right of the faculty-member-as-storyteller to limit what they share. In such a professional setting, acknowledging the personal may imply a richer life context, but some divulged no more than that. Book stories allow the faculty member to openly share that they are keeping secrets, and that tension illuminates an important aspect of faculty information worlds. Even though there is evidence of increased emphasis on the personal in book stories over time, normatively the personal and the professional remain separate.

Influential in the field stories focused on a particular academic area, indicating that books were chosen for being a “definitive text,” “authoritative,” or “classic.” This reflects the ways that books and their contents constitute the substance of academic fields. One person wrote: “This extensive volume captures and synthesizes the most significant research that has been completed in the field.” Some described reading influential books over long spans of time: “I have owned a copy of this book for seventeen years and I regularly go back to it.”

Other selections were *written to reach beyond the field*, to make academic fields accessible or “engaging to all.” Some statements explicitly mentioned those outside of a particular field as the audience (“on linguistics for non-specialists”), while others indicated a broad variety of audiences across multiple fields (“policymakers, environmentalists, researchers, and corporate actors”). One person succinctly said: “Very accessible book. Wish I had written it!” Choosing books for broader audiences highlights an awareness of the boundaries of academia as an information world, with distinct insider and outsider audiences.

Book stories occasionally described how a book *speaks to the human experience*, indicating a broad, general importance and usually referring to “human nature” or “humanity.” They included books that were selected for conveying an “erudite and provocative set of philosophical reflections on what it is to be human,” for describing “the death and re-birth of the human spirit,” or for telling “a tragic story that exposes human nature at its worst and best.” As Kari and Hartel argue, the profound is “anything that objectively reflects humanity’s possibilities for reaching its full potential” (Kari and Hartel 2007). These book stories earnestly reflected a profound impact in referring to the human condition.

The statements that describe and define “good books” show, as information worlds theory argues, that people traverse intersections between various small worlds, or distinct “bubbles.” Book stories indicate faculty consciousness of the boundary between personal and professional, of academic insiders and outsiders, and a wide range of ways of maintaining or crossing those boundaries. As storytellers, faculty approaches range from philosophical abstraction to personal revelation and encompass allusions to the personal without further disclosure. These book stories demonstrate the power of the author as storyteller, to share or withhold the story. Librarians could launch narrative inquiries to better understand why faculty and other library users share personal and professional meanings.

Life Stories

This section delves more deeply into book stories about echoing, reflecting, amplifying, or evoking life stories. Faculty frequently mentioned the roots of their careers in *childhood*, and chose books that related to that period of their lives. Striking in these statements is vivid language used in recollection of childhood experience, from the wonder of early childhood (“From the first moment I touched a horse, at the ripe old age of four, there’s been nothing more beloved or magical in my world”) to the frisson of adolescence (“high school years—the craving and adventure of discovering ideas for the first time”). Some youthful experiences were first career steps: “I first read it at sixteen, and it made me want to devote my life to studying literature.” A few book stories contained adult reflections looking back, such as one faculty member who wrote “as a former working-class kid who is now a middle-class parent.” Though this example is an exception, childhood stories typically emphasized some continuity of identity from those earlier years to the present, demonstrating that experiences of books as guides or “compasses” can start in childhood (Hearne and Trites 2009).

Statements in honor of or acknowledging *family* revealed a range of connections, from past to present. Some statements looked to the past, such as one statement that honored a grandfather who “worked his way through Princeton,” starting “a tradition of academic inquiry in our family.” Another chose a book coauthored by her mother about “differentiated instruction in the classroom” as noteworthy because faculty ranks were closed to women until recently. There were also books chosen in honor of deceased family members and books received as gifts from family members. In a career path where women are strategically quiet about family and career balance, it was interesting to see several statements by women like this one, here quoted in full:

This book is beloved by my three beautiful boys. As all three were born during my husband’s and my time as assistant professors at Illinois, the book bonds me to my children and to my husband, while serving as a temporal reminder of uncertainty of the pre-tenure years.

These expressions of the importance of family life are interesting disclosures; the faculty member is newly protected by the guarantees of academic freedom. The typical six-year period (or possibly longer with rollbacks of the tenure clock related to a new child or children) leading up to tenure is a time of scrutiny, and family life is not a usual topic of conversation in academic contexts.

School and career stories reflected pivotal life moments or memories along the path to the successful faculty career. People chose books by influential professors, books that guided choice of major, and books that revealed “exciting new ways of thinking.” One person chose “the first book I checked out from the library stacks as a first-year graduate student.” Other “firsts” included books that were, for example, the first one read in college, or one that came out the first year of the faculty position that “has since been a beacon.” One of the few titles chosen multiple times by several faculty members across the years was Ernest Shackelton’s book *Endurance*, and these book stories emphasized the metaphorical resonance between enduring the extreme conditions of polar exploration and the difficulties of graduate school and/or the tenure track.

Some faculty shared *place stories*, remembering their home town, home country, or place of origin, the choice signifying “home and the characters that I once lived amongst.” There were book stories that recounted the place stories of family tragedies, such as a history of the “1957 hurricane Audrey that swept through a very remote area in coastal Louisiana” and “colored the lives of three generations in my family.” One described a political place tragedy:

As a native of Zimbabwe raised on a farm, which was taken away by the government without compensation, this memoir provides an account of the conditions and situation in that country that closely resemble the outcome for my family members.

Place stories also revealed ongoing displacement and the experience of not fully finding a home:

It is still the story of so many Filipinos around the world, and perhaps a good many other people as well, exiles hovering like ghosts—searching for home. Herein are all the passions and the dangerousness of these specters.

Place stories speak to continuity of emotional connection and nostalgia for location, whether sentimental for remembered home or stories of traumatic disruption so that one cannot go back. In faculty information worlds, some degree of displacement is the norm because universities typically do not hire their own graduates. Perhaps it is not surprising then that dislocation of some sort was implicit in all the place stories. Place stories reveal that some have traveled not only long distances but also across multiple information worlds to arrive at this faculty promotion ritual.

Statements coded as highlighting an *underrepresented life story* provided counternarratives to the ways that academia is racialized and gendered (normatively though not exclusively) as white male space (Cooke 2017). Some faculty used book stories to positively claim identities as people of color, for example by selecting a book that provided “a clear picture of the terms of Caribbean cultural identity” in order to “define and describe the pride I take in being a West

Indian.” Another faculty member chose a book that linked their identity to their aspirations: “It is one of the first Hopi-authored books on the Hopi people of northeastern Arizona, and it has always inspired me to write Hopi books of my own.” These counter-storytelling moments were widely varied, but all had in common assertion of identity as important to this celebration.

Life stories demonstrate that many faculty choose to share personal information through this professional book stories ritual. At the same time, not all choices about identity rest entirely with what the storyteller chooses to tell. For example, a faculty member of color may choose to reflect on being racialized or not, and yet, as Sara Ahmed points out, people of color in academia “*already* embody diversity by providing an institution of whiteness with color” (Ahmed 2013). Therefore, the choice to highlight one’s own underrepresented identity is a form of counter-storytelling that asserts the right to belong. It is not surprising, then, that the statements of faculty members who highlighted their own underrepresented identity were frequently also coded in the social justice theme.

Social Justice

Faculty framed social justice in personal and academic terms, sometimes blending the two. Academically, many books documented and named ongoing social injustices to make the case to right these wrongs. Books were selected because they provided, for example “important social criticism of and for race and democracy in America” or combined analysis with science fiction (*Parable of the Sower*, by Octavia Butler) in a way that “demands justice in the face of pessimism.” Some chose a particular life story, such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, because of being “about transformative change of an individual who struggles and strives for social justice.” Some issues were explicitly personal, for example, the choice of a book that “provided a name, a concept and a framework for understanding how working-class identity is lived out.” This faculty member also noted that the book “echoes both the voices of my education and the voices of my cultural traditions.” Others wrote about the personal importance of authors from underrepresented groups, like Gloria Anzaldúa, whose book was chosen because, as one faculty member wrote, “her prose has given me the strength and courage to embrace the tensions in my own work and life. This book reminds me that I am part of a movement of decolonization in academia and in solidarity with others.”

Other statements highlighted books that made landmark academic contributions, adding what was previously excluded as a form of social justice. One faculty member provided this rationale for book selection:

It is the first comprehensive treatment of indigenous maps and mapmaking—a topic that has been largely neglected by geographers and historians of cartography who focus almost exclusively on ‘Western’ maps.

The social justice theme encompassed analyses of causes of injustice, calls for necessary change, and visions for better futures. As in the previous section, many of these selections were counternarratives in an academic context. In this theme, commitments to social justice rendered intrinsic interconnections between information worlds more visible. As libraries strive for greater diversity in their ranks and full inclusion in all in their services, looking to faculty book stories could inspire social justice action on an institutional level.

Other

Playfulness characterized most statements that did not fit any other coding scheme. *Humor* was comparatively rare, but often relied on the brevity of the book stories format. For example, one person selected a German brewery menu: “Life is too short to drink bad beer.” Another person chose the book *Uncommon Fruits Worthy of Attention: A Gardener’s Guide*: “I like unusual fruits.” One faculty member played with form, poking fun at the formality of academic jargon: “It is a seminal discourse on the expectations, perceptions and reality of the journey of today’s young adults within the American culture; oh yeah, and it has really neat pictures!” In the context of academic language and ritual, humor arises in the contrast between serious critical language and “neat pictures.”

Among those *uncategorized* were faculty who took the opportunity to be mysterious, writing just an evocative word or two, such as “Gratitude” or “Beautiful evidence.” One left only a scavenger hunt clue: “Pages 142, 143.” A few books had *no book story*, meaning the faculty member chose a book but did not compose a statement to explain their choice, exercising the power of the storyteller to withhold stories. This theme reflected a conscious breaking of expectations as writers deliberately baffled the audience, refusing to conform to the expectations of the genre. For example, in resisting the solemnity of the occasion, one person wrote: “I also couldn’t think of anything I had read lately that touched me very deeply. Perhaps I am getting less deep in my old age.”

Topic Modeling

Topic modeling complemented thematic analysis by confirming the coding scheme and suggesting a future research path. In a qualitative application of a more typically quantitative text-mining research tool, topic modeling was used to sort the full text of twenty years of statements for word frequency and proximity. The output consists of sets of closely related words in the corpus by these two measures.

Two coders assessed and sorted the topic modeling output and found that fourteen of twenty topics modeled confirmed the qualitative coding. Themes were clearly related to the word sets, and they were related in a similar proportion to the frequency of the appearance of that coding in the corpus (see tables 3 and 5 above). Table 4 shows the fourteen topics that confirmed one or more themes.

Theme(s)	Word Sets from Topic Modeling
Career stories	work, field, shape, topic, community, include, graduate, major, contribution
	author, book, teach, choose, mentor, teacher, friend, teaching, guide
	book, university, interest, Illinois, academic, inspiration, engineering, excellent, lead
Good books	write, insight, literature, offer, writer, English, reader, beautiful, volume
	book, great, good, make, give, challenge, reminder, writing, support
	book, important, early, knowledge, mind, fundamental, learn, pursue, influential
	book, student, collection, continue, publish, edition, reference, textbook, resource
	world, inspire, hope, scientific, age, open, eye, view, classic
	theory, wonderful, nature, problem, approach, information, understanding, technology, model

Theme(s)	Word Sets from Topic Modeling
Life stories	life, change, personal, remind, perspective, grow, place, capture, journey
	read, book, child, learn, love, favorite, young, enjoy, mother
	people, live, family, language, show, memory, person, struggle, parent
Career stories and Life stories	professor, write, honor, feel, career, describe, father, advisor, begin
	research, influence, area, study, develop, development, profound, undergraduate, graduate school*

*"Graduate school" was considered one term, since these two words were consistently adjacent in the corpus.

What was left out through topic modeling was any indication of the life stories subthemes *place* and *underrepresented life story* and the *Social Justice* theme. The best explanation for this is that words that signal place (geographic names), underrepresented identities (cultural, group, or ethnicity descriptors) and social justice (anti-racism, protest, democracy, etc.) are as highly diverse in wording as the topics they represent. In other words, these themes could not be captured by the topic modeling process because of the great variety of terms that signaled these meanings. Although semantic analysis might identify place names as a category, many computational methods would miss the significance of this content. This demonstrates the importance of including human coding along with computational methods in qualitative analysis to accurately analyze important information about ethnicity, gender, social constructions of race, and related concepts.

Another interesting finding was the intersection and overlap of word sets in two areas, career stories and life stories. Very similar words appeared in the topics aligned with these two themes, such as mother and parent (in life stories) and father (in career stories). It is interesting that these words, though closely related, echo societal gender biases. Other words such as "grow, journey, influence, develop" show overlap between these categories. For many people, career stories were aligned and intertwined with individuals' lives, which may speak to how privileged backgrounds facilitate pursuit of faculty careers.

The other six topics suggested language patterns related to academic discipline—construed broadly as the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. These were not captured in the qualitative coding process. Again, the output consists of sets of closely related words in the corpus, so these groupings of words are kept together. Each of the word sets appears in the column on the right, and the related disciplines that the coders identified appear on the left.

Discipline	Word Sets from Topic Modeling
Humanities	history, work, text, write, represent, music, scholarship, scholar, create
	time, find, experience, book, read, introduce, artist, powerful, career
Sciences	book, science, understand, scientist, present, modern, fascinating, introduction, material
	book, system, biology, process, focus, aspect, evolution, central, plant
Social Sciences	social, idea, human, economic, question, society, intellectual, role, practice
	study, culture, today, political, power, art, American, issue, woman

Future topic modeling analysis of this and other sets of promotion book stories could provide a window on how discipline influences book choices. However, it is a surprisingly difficult task to verify every individual faculty member's discipline. While faculty members' departmental affiliations are recorded with book stories, colleges have changed names, merged, and otherwise evolved rapidly over twenty years at just one institution. Further, some colleges and departments are multidisciplinary, from large colleges like Liberal Arts and Sciences to iSchools. Cross-institutional analysis would be even more complex. Therefore, unfortunately, it is not a simple matter to analyze book story patterns (or book choices themselves) in relation to the faculty member's discipline. Still, these findings suggest promising avenues for future research analyzing faculty member's disciplinary affiliation and book story meanings.

Discussion

In the competitive spaces of academia, celebrations are infrequent, and collective celebrations of accomplishments are extremely rare. At a time when personal and profound meaning are mostly absent from research questions in library and information science, this study shows that they are nonetheless present in information institution practices. Book stories are important for the work they do in several dimensions: as celebration, as connection to the library at/as the institution, and for the meanings they convey. This analysis shows that life stories have greater presence in book stories than in the past. Along with a decrease in career stories, this suggests that personal meaning is becoming more acknowledged in academic contexts. Book stories celebrate faculty achievements and commemorate them for the future, pushing back against the tendency for "milestones in the lives and careers of faculty" to receive "little celebratory notice" (Fischer, Conger, and Bazirjian 2007). Making achievements of all faculty more visible is particularly important in an institutional context where there are still many improvements to be made in equity, particularly in the promotion and tenure of BIPOC faculty (Gutiérrez Y Muhs et al. 2012).

Another vector of importance relates to the library and the role it plays in the life of the faculty and in the university. One academic librarian described the challenge of communicating the place of the library:

So often we ask, not at all rhetorically, "Where exactly is the library? What does it mean anymore to be in the library?" Hosting faculty recognition programs can help readjust the balance of the library between being simultaneously a real place and a cyber place, so that the physical presence, the "place of the library as the center of scholarship on campus, can be reaffirmed (Riddle et al. 2005).

Among other things, this ritual of celebration is important because it centers the library in the institution as a site of pleasure, of celebration, of satisfaction and even of marvel at the many lives dedicated to knowledge accumulated. Book plates are a concrete way of inviting every promoted scholar into the library, seeing themselves in its collection. Some patterns of meaning in book stories provide fresh avenues for thinking about the library in the life of the faculty member, as a contribution to research on the library in the life of the user (Wiegand 2015). Tensions around the library's position in the university have been heightened as physical buildings have closed or diminished in occupancy due to COVID-19 and library websites became the primary or sole library presence. Revisiting, revising, and reinventing this and

other venues for celebration with the library will take on new meaning in postpandemic times. Understanding the histories of rituals like this is one important means of informing decisions about what kinds of presence libraries will sustain or re-create in academic institutions going forward.

Research on individuals' information sharing in positive contexts has found that "sharing happy information is important for building, maintaining, or strengthening relationships" (Tinto and Ruthven 2016). Faculty are stakeholders in academic libraries, but for practical reasons engaging them tends toward conversations with administrative leadership, such as department chair, or more general "spending time with faculty" (Harland, Stewart, and Bruce 2019). A national survey documenting the "current state of librarian roles in campus-wide faculty development" demonstrated that librarians are building new roles as willing partners in faculty development efforts (Fribley, Vance, and Gardner 2021). Book plating celebrations and other practices can strengthen the relationship between the faculty member and the university and the faculty member and the library. Rituals like these deserve greater visibility as a way that libraries engage stakeholders. Academic librarians could also use these insights to experiment with innovative ways of engagement. In a context of increasing trends toward personal information sharing, libraries have a role in expanding bridges between the personal and the professional to extend the impact of the library.

In information worlds theory, Jager and Burnett describe "bubbles" that touch at the edges, arguing that most people live in multiple information bubbles. In this theory, "boundaries between the soap bubbles represent points of contact between different small worlds" (Jaeger and Burnett 2010). This analysis revealed that meaning is made at precisely those places where worlds intersect, in rituals and book stories. Separation of career and family is set aside, and interconnections between life stories and academic paths become clear. Faculty members reveal where they came from, how they became academics, and who helped them along the way. These book stories represent the first ritual moment of expression after tenure, perhaps the first use of a newly protected voice, and it is telling that they have increasingly been used to share life stories. Librarians could use what is revealed here to lower barriers and remove obstacles. For example, understanding that a faculty member succeeded despite obstacles such as traumatic displacement from their homeland makes possible empathetic approaches that consider the whole person's needs as a member of an academic community. As the cornerstone of one's academic home, it is fitting that libraries should sustain and grow ritual opportunities like this one to share stories.

If the metaphor for information worlds theory is "a sink full of soap bubbles," then storytelling is the surface tension that defines and spans the spaces between bubbles. The act of storytelling—sharing and listening to stories—is one way that information worlds touch. Storytelling is a strong tension; tellers tell, audiences listen, and tellers become audiences (and vice versa). Metaphorically, the library is the sink, the immediate container through which these particular sets of (small world) bubbles touch. And, just as a burst soap bubble may leave a faint impression, brief book stories leave a trace from a moment of career celebration. However, the storytelling between the "bubbles" of information worlds is not simple. Faculty may choose to share or not share about, for instance, their children or home life, and faculty who are from racialized, underrepresented groups may choose whether to include their identities in book stories, but underrepresented faculty cannot consistently choose how they are identified by others. What a person can do is to choose what to claim and amplify

when invited to tell, whether they choose career stories, life stories, or counter-storytelling with social justice aims. These complexities point to the power (and limitations) of faculty member as storyteller. Understanding these dynamics allows librarians to consider this history in looking ahead to postpandemic reinventions or adjustments to the presence and meaning of the library in academic culture.

Storytelling offers one additional practice as concept: retelling. In career as in life, important stories are told again and again. Book stories frequently feature mentions of the length of time that a person has lived with a book as indicative of its importance. Books are part of faculty life stories, and the value of books is inherited from advisors, taught to students, passed around with colleagues, and otherwise shared. The enduring importance of books for people is both real and rhetorical in faculty information worlds. In book stories, mentioning time is a way of communicating: Pay attention. My story with this book encompasses and represents years of life experience.

Conclusion

Analyzing book stories by two methods reveals strong patterns in collective meanings (career stories, life stories, etc.). Books can catalyze life events and inspire career directions. Books are woven into family life, in reading to children, and across generations. Books serve as portals to new passions and inspire entire research careers. Twenty years of book stories also reveal that time matters, and that life stories are shared more often over time. Questions remain for future research, including analysis of book contents, how choices relate to the discipline of the celebrant, who did not participate and why, and comparisons across institutions with similar rituals.

Faculty information worlds are often experienced individually, and yet these rituals instantiate the library as a space of commonality, virtually and physically. Library practices of soliciting and collecting book stories generate a record of conversations, with continuities and tensions, reflecting generations of reading and meaning making. In a context of increasing trends toward personal information sharing, libraries could claim a larger and more deliberate role in bridging the personal and the professional. Further opportunities for collecting and sharing other book stories could be a positive step, as could any innovative practices that allow information worlds to intersect, stories to be told, and librarians to listen. Engaging the dynamic relationships between teller, audience, and story could bring the library into sharper focus for faculty, who often know more about one database than about librarians' work. Sustaining, reviving, and innovating new forms of storytelling connections could extend the impact of the library as the bedrock of the academic community.

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