

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#58 My Library and Reading Habits

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### Alastair Roberts

Today I respond to a questioner asking for a tour of my bookshelves. You don't get the tour (sorry!), but I do share a bit about my library and reading habits.

Some of the books that I mention within the video and would particularly recommend:

Alan Noble, 'Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age' -  
<https://amzn.to/2O6Lacj>

Michael J. McClymond and Gerald McDermott, 'The Theology of Jonathan Edwards' -  
<https://amzn.to/2DvRZ2J>

Michael J McClymond, 'The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism' - <https://amzn.to/2lIKDxO>

Yoram Hazony, 'The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture' - <https://amzn.to/2Og7bVO>

Yoram Hazony, 'The Virtue of Nationalism' - <https://amzn.to/2Oc4l4i>

Julian Marias, 'Metaphysical Anthropology' - <https://amzn.to/2lLmiw>

Ivan Illich, 'Tools for Conviviality' - <https://amzn.to/2lhrZ5e>

Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'Thomas Cranmer' - <https://amzn.to/2O6MgEX>

Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt, 'The Coddling of the American Mind' -  
<https://amzn.to/2OfcK7c>

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:  
<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed these videos, please tell your friends and consider supporting me on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>.

My new Soundcloud account is here: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can

also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, can you give us a tour of your bookshelves? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Um, because most of my books are currently in storage.

I have 120 to 150 boxes of books in a storeroom in Stoke-on-Trent. Other books are in wardrobes, closets, chests under my bed and in large stacks over here to my left. So it would not be easy for me to give you a tour of them.

Also this camera isn't very movable and many of you are listening to this rather than watching it. So it wouldn't be very helpful if I were just showing you things. So I'll tell you a bit about my library instead.

I have about 3,500 books I think at this point. And most of those books are ordered using the Dewey code. So every single one of them will have a little sticker on the spine with Ex Libris Alastair Roberts.

And it has a unique three letter, or the three letters of the author's name, a unique number, and then the Dewey code below. And every single one of those, for the most part is stacked or boxed according to its Dewey code. So they're easily easy to locate when I need to locate them.

They are within a fairly predictable range of boxes or shelves. The books to my left and on my side and in front of me, are all books that are live projects or something that's related to things that I'm currently doing. But then the ones to my left in front of me are books that I use for reference.

So things like Herman Boving's Reform Dogmatics, books that I'll refer to on a regular basis, but I'm not necessarily using them at this very moment for a current project. And often this place can look like a bomb has hit it because there are just books scattered everywhere. I don't have enough room to shelve my, all my books, but also I'm also, also I'm using books on such a regular basis and generally have about 30 books that I'm using on any particular day.

So it just makes a mess. If I'm busy and keeping myself occupied, I will have a surroundings that look very, that look full of books and it's very difficult to keep it all in order. Every now and again at the beginning of a week or so, I'll tidy everything up, put it all back to its positions and then start again.

The books behind me are the ones that are on the shelves are all ordered according to Dewey code. And those are ones that are broadly related to the larger work of current projects that I'm working on. The books that are just stacked on there are books that I've

tried to get out of the way, books that were to the side of me, but I needed to find room for other books.

And that's really much, pretty much my life at the moment, trying to order books in my immediate vicinity and trying to ensure that I have access to the books that I most need very quickly while being able to manage these huge and vertiginous stacks of books that are building up and often threatening to topple. Very occasionally they do. On my immediate left, I have the books that I'm currently working through in some way or doing something with in some way today.

And some of them would be yesterday as well. And so I'll go through them one by one. Book of Common Prayer for morning devotions.

Then I have Women's Lives in Biblical Times by Jenny Evelyn. That needs to be catalogued. So that's why that's there.

Same sex parenting research by Walter Shue again. That needs to be catalogued today, which is why it was there. Lost Sons by Michael Sagrove.

I bought that yesterday and that needs to be shelved. Thomas Cramner, biography. It looked really good and I wanted to get into this.

So I'm going to have a skim through sections of this today and then decide whether to spend time reading it in the next few weeks. Disruptive Witness by Alan Noble. I finished reading that last night.

Really good book. I highly recommend that. Ivana Illich's Tools for Conviviality, which I started reading recently and need to get further into.

I've enjoyed this book so far. I think it's not quite what I expected, but it's good. Vindicating the Vixens.

I need to review this book. I've read it already, but it is on my to look at pile again, because I now have to review it. Our Battle for the Human Spirit by Willem van den Berg.

That's a book that I need to review. And the Theology of Jonathan Edwards, which Lord willing, I'll finish reading today. That's by Michael McClymond and Gerald McDermott.

And I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Most books, when I'm reading them now, I won't read all the way through. I'll just be skimming certain sections and reading other sections in depth.

But for the most part, I don't read them all the way through. There's just not enough to gain from them. Whereas this book is one that I'm reading all the way through.

I might give a review of it in the next few days. Over here, I've got The Virtue of

Nationalism by Yoram Hazony, which I recently received. Metaphysical Anthropology by Julian Marias.

Jonathan Haidt's *The Coddling of the American Mind*. And then, because I enjoyed the book on Jonathan Edwards so much, I invested in *The Devil's Redemption*, which I've heard really good things about by Michael McClymond. Then I've got Peter Lighthouse's *Revelation Commentaries*.

Yoram Hazony's *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, which I'm revisiting. Nehru's *The Discovery of India*. And yeah, there's several other books, but that will give you an idea of the sort of selection that I have.

And those books, the ones to the immediate side of me, will be books I'll be looking at today and reading through. Other books will be books that I'll visit at some other point in the week. And generally, I'll read three to four hours a day, mostly in the morning or in the late evening.

And I find it's a great way to wind down. And it's also a great way to keep your mind fertile. So I'm constantly reading lots of different books alongside each other.

So you have some sort of sense from this exploration of someone's theology like Jonathan Edwards. Historical autobiography. I'll be reading something on systematic theology.

I'll be reading some books on biblical theology, reading some stuff on technology and society and generally just keep these things cross pollinating. Because often I find that I get things out of books that no one else really gets out of them. That's maybe a bit because I have an eccentric mind.

Just think about things a bit in an odd way. But I often find people ask me for recommendations of books and I'm terrible at giving recommendations because the things that really help me to think about an issue or seldom will help other people. I find it's often in those books that challenge me in particular ways, unsettle me.

I disagree with strongly. They help me to come to a clearer sense of what I think on a subject. And most other people, when I recommend those books, they just do not get the same thing out of them.

But for me, it's this interaction between books that really is so important. And so I'm constantly talking with my books and thinking about how could I take certain ones of their ideas further? What would I challenge certain of their ideas with? How would I present my own position on that subject? And that's the way I tend to think. And reading a lot of books alongside each other is an important part of that.

And then I must often have things I'm just looking, dipping into for interest. So currently

looking through a big book of the history of buildings. And that's just fun.

It keeps my mind occupied with lots of different subjects. I have a great interest in architecture and it's fun to look into something slightly different, slightly off your beaten track. When you do that, often you'll find that ideas come back and the ideas that you're engaging with in those contexts can help you in strange and unexpected ways.

And the most interesting people I find to read are the people who read very widely. It's one of the reasons I've appreciated so much the work of Peter Lighthouse that and people like Peter Lighthouse are very hard to pigeonhole. They're constantly reading different things and those thoughts are coming together in strange ways.

And often when people are just reading on one particular area and that's all they read about, it shows and they have very stale ways of thinking about things, very rigid ways of thinking about things. They don't have the imagination and the breadth to be able to reframe issues, to think about the way that looking at something from a slightly oblique angle can help you to understand it in ways that others would not when they're so focused upon looking at it head on. Something I found particularly important when dealing with an issue like the theology of the sexes, because so many people are focused on that issue in a very narrow way.

But yet, if you're going to talk about an issue as broad as that, which requires a deep knowledge of history, a deep knowledge of systematic biblical theology, of acquaintance with biology, all these sorts of things, you just have to read very, very, very widely and be interested in a lot of things and then move in from that to that specific topic. But if that topic is just your focus, you will tend to miss so much because your interest is narrowed to that particular area. So I find I just have to read very widely.

I have to ensure that I'm acquainted with a wide range of current debates and then also fairly deeply rooted in the historical literature as well. And I find reading a lot of fun. There's something deeply fulfilling about working your way through a book that's challenging and revealing.

And at the end of it, coming away with a deeper understanding. I forget so much of what I read, but it does leave an imprint. Even when you forget it, it shapes your way of thinking in response to it.

And I find that at least gives me some comfort when I think, OK, I might have forgotten a lot of what I read in this book. But I know some of the things that I gained through reading that, that's not necessarily found in my memory of the contents of the books, but how my own thought was sharpened in the process. And that stuck with me.

Now, I find having all of these books in some sort of order is very hard to do. And so there needs to be there's a certain, I don't know, a healthy entropy that occurs when

things kind of break down from their proper order and then start to come together in interesting ways. And so there's a sort of, I don't know what you call it, a bibliographic ferment.

And out of that, some interesting things can emerge. And so the books that are rubbing shoulders are strange ones often on my shelves when I've just got these random piles. But when I look at the piles, they can often spark thoughts.

And that's one of the things about having physical books as well. Physical books are very different from just having books on a Kindle or a digital device or referring to them online, because first of all, the books accuse you when you haven't read them yet. They look at you and away from the shelves and you think, I really need to get around to that.

I invested quite a bit in that book and I'm not really making the most of it. But other times it's simply the fact that it is situated within a broader body of material. So I try and develop a library that covers many bases.

So it's not just about what book do I want to read next? It's do I have a good range of books on this particular subject in my library that will challenge me to dig into these issues? And when you're locating books on a shelf, you have to walk around the shelves and you have a sense of the location of that particular thing within a wider body of material and knowledge. And the books with which it's rubbing shoulders are the books with which it's having conversations and they're part of a larger conversation. So it's an important reminder and a sense of where books belong.

And when you open up a book, again, a physical book, it's not just searching for material randomly. You very much have a sense of the place within the book. So I appreciate physical libraries for that reason.

Even though I move and I'm expecting to move around quite a bit, I find that just having physical books is very important. And even when I'm on the move, it's useful to have books that I can write in as well. I want to own my books.

I want to have some relationship with my books in a way that a book that I've worked through will have marks of me within it. When I use my bookmarks to draw lines underneath particular sentences that I've found helpful or in the margins, write lots of notes. And that is important to me, that conversation.

I also find to learn from my reading, I need to give it out in some sense. So what I'll often do is if I've read a book, I'll discuss it with a friend. I'll have a long conversation about the book or I'll write something related to the book, something that the book has sparked.

I'll write a review or I'll write a blog post that takes on this ideas and runs with it. Or I'll do something else along those lines. I need to take the ideas and to properly metabolise those in my mind.

I need to actually do something with them. And so my reading and my writing have always been closely related. When I've not been writing heavily, my reading has not really been as fruitful.

And so I'd highly recommend if you want to get more out of your reading, write about it, talk about it, do something with those ideas, try and see what you can make of them. And I find I'll forget a lot of the things, but it's that process of stimulating my own development that I'm very much developing my own mind and my own thinking. It's not so much, do I remember what's in this particular book, as have I been shaped by the experience of reading this book that I've come out of it with a sharper and a clearer mind and a deeper understanding of the subjects? And that's what I'm aiming for most of the time.

Although there are certain books that I return to on a very regular basis, I'll go back to again and again and again because there's just so much rich, there's so much riches within them. And those books are important. But for the most part, the reading I do now, much of it is just I'm skimming through stuff.

I don't need to read it through in any depth to gain anything from it. And I've come to this position over time. You don't actually need to read everything.

There are certain books you do need to read all the way through. But most of the time, it's not worth your time. And a library is a very powerful and constant reminder of the reality of opportunity cost.

That every book you read, you're paying for that book and that reading with lots of other things that you can't do now. You only have so much time in your life. And so what books you're going to invest it upon, that really matters.

You can't afford to waste that time. Likewise, if you're going to read a book, only read it as deeply as you need to. Most of the time, you will know the material in large sections of it.

So you don't need to read those sections, skim those sections at most and then read in depth where you need to read in depth. You just do not have the time to waste in that sort of completest attitude of having to read everything through from cover to cover. So read a lot, but read in a savvy way.

Don't waste your time. And also read books that push you, push you out into areas that you haven't explored before, push you deeper into areas that you haven't gone to in your thinking before that actually force you to think a bit more in challenging ways and in difficult ways. Those books will shape you far more than other books, books that you can read through and they're so easy to read, but at the end of it, you gain very little out of the experience.

My books are probably my greatest indulgence. I don't spend much on luxuries or anything like that, but I spend a lot on books. I mostly get my books from new books from Amazon and I get other books from lots of books secondhand.

The bulk of my library has been bought secondhand and that in certain locations enables you to get books really cheaply. And so the core of my library was developed particularly around large book sales in Stoke-on-Trent where in the Mowcop area where they used to have a large book sale every year. And I'd come back with a couple of boxes every single year from that.

And that was the core of my library in the early stage. But since then, I've been building it up and I have to focus a lot more upon not just the general body of the books, but specific titles a lot more now. And if you're getting specific titles, generally you need to look online.

So I get a lot of my books from Amazon now, Amazon Marketplace particularly. And that is a wonderful resource. It's Amazon, so I have mixed feelings about it, but it is really helpful.

And it gives me access to material I never would have had access to when I first started reading theology. So I would recommend thinking very carefully about the way that you develop your library. Are you just developing your library as a random set of books that you've found interesting that caught your eye? Or are you developing a library that is trying to cover different bases so that you have an area of knowledge and you've got the main books that you need to have on that subject? That's what I'm trying to think about at the moment.

And then also removing certain books. In the next few months, I'm going to have to get rid of maybe a thousand books or so. And that's going to be painful, but it will be good for me.

It helps me to think carefully about what books I really need and what books are just filling up space that I can't afford. And so more generally, I would recommend thinking about your library as a wider body, something that's coherent, something that is gathering a lot of things together, something that's well ordered. Ideally, the books that you're currently reading don't need to be really well ordered, but the books that you have more generally in your library should be well ordered, should be covering different bases and they should be books that push you and challenge you.

There shouldn't be a lot of filler in there and there's a lot of filler that I need to get rid of from my library. And that's going to happen in the next few months, which again, it's going to be a wrench. But it's good for me.

It's good to develop a library that is tight and taught and doesn't have flab and really



tackles issues well, because it is your time. It's your space as well, but it's your time. So don't waste your time reading books that you don't really need to read.

There's a lot of books that are published today that just do not need to waste your time on. They're not bad books, but they're not going to repay your time as well as getting into some classics. Now, we have the emphasis upon what's currently happening, upon the immediacy of the current debate and what book has just been released.

And there are some good books that have just been released, but for the most part, they do not match up to other books that have been written that have really stood the test of time, particularly in a subject like theology. So focus on those books that have really stood the test of time and root yourself deeply in those. And then you can read some of the really good new books.

But most of the time, the drive to read lots of new books is simply because they're current, because they're new, because they're at the front of the conversation. And if you really wanted to learn about the subjects, you'd be probably better off going elsewhere. And so I recommend be ruthless about your reading and don't focus so much upon what other people are talking about.

That can be helpful sometimes if you really want a good recommendation. A number of these books I'm currently reading have been given to me on recommendations. But much of the time, it is a danger to focus your reading too much upon the public conversation, upon the social charge around certain texts.

Focus more upon those things that will give you a deep grounding. And that's often found by rooting your reading in solitude, not within the social world of social media, but within solitude. So not the book that people are currently raving about and everyone's outraged about, but the book that will get you deep into a subject, that will help you to connect with the historical tradition, that will really reward revisiting and the time that you spend upon it.

Because in five, 10 years' time, people will forget the book that they've been outraged about over the last week or the book that everyone was raving about. Those books have a very short lifespan. They burn quickly and brightly, but they're soon gone.

Rather focus upon those things that will really shape your thinking for years to come. Those things that will deeply ground you. So you're not having to just react to the latest theories that are out there, but you have a deep sense of the broader terrain of the area that you're exploring.

Anyway, I've rambled on enough. I hope that this is helpful to some people. And Lord willing, I'll be back again with some further question and answer.

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account. I'll leave the link for that below. And if you would like to ask me further questions, please do so using my Curious Cat account.

God bless and thank you very much for listening.