

# **Bookworm**

By: Angela Lang

To those who don't read,  
those who can't,  
and those who don't want to.

Every time, I meet a person, especially a woman, I try to imagine what kind of book she could be. Is she a pristine hardcover with a blurry picture on the cover? A one-read paperback? Would she have yellow pages when older? Would it be easy to spot her

spilled pages? The rough edges? Was she a rare manuscript? Is she out of print? Does she have fabric underneath her jacket? What type of font does she wear?

Madam Rombauer was a combination of a fine print, South American Nobel-prize-winner novel with a paper back train-ride-read mystery. She had a simple probably abstract drawing for a cover and didn't have a writer's picture or comments in the back.

Su was a basic grammar, an upgraded version of a slim textbook with drawings of foreign looking boys and girls having a conversation with letters bigger than their heads in bubbles of undecipherable text.

I was lucky enough to browse into their lives, and unlucky enough not to really take part in any of them. Like a dehydrated flower forgotten in the middle of a book read in one's youth, I got caught up or better said literally eaten up by a story that did not belong to me, nor to an unfair destiny that tends to link by signs or to a progressive causality that let me explain with words and actually believe, that one thing led to another.

I.

I'm not a compulsive liar but sometimes I minimize truth for the sake of the listener. I had said before that my connection with Madam Rombauer was a sale transaction, or a happy coincidence, but the truth is that the encounter with this woman changed the nature and the purpose of my PhD research and any other projects I had set out to accomplish. Her presence brought to my life a black magic allure that had more author's voodoo than any dream interpretation theory I can remember.

I saw her for the first time when I went to organize her bookshelf. She loved to mix up the order of the books but was afraid of people coming into her house to steal her stuff. I was highly recommended by one of her neighbors, Carlota, a soft-spoken amicable girl I dated for a couple of months. She met me in a time when I was still fascinated with manuscripts and rare books, and she felt unable to compete with the millions of pages that I still have to discover. Her uncertainties crowded my bedroom. She behaved like a collection of short stories, full with anecdotes, sketched traits and too many beginnings and endings, but we liked each other and kept a I-see-you-twice-a-year friendship that connected me to the job.

When she called me, Carlota made emphasis on the triviality of the job - to compensate for the low pay- and added some remarks about the good karma that helping an elderly woman would bring to my otherwise messed up scholarship budget and the limbo of the PhD thesis writing life. "It could give you some structure and some cash flow" she said in a motherly voice, "and it has everything you love, dusty shelves, ageing people and books." The joke didn't strike me as funny, but I could understand her bitterness as I started to sleep with a divorcee few weeks after our break up.

The workload seemed easy, I had to empty some shelves, carry some books and rearrange them accordingly to the woman's criteria. Even though I should have, I didn't care about the hourly rate or about what I imagined to be a crap collection of sentimental values and paperbacks. My secret and obvious hope was to dig out a couple of underappreciated first editions, buy them from her - at a fair price of course- and resell them on eBay. There was an argument to be made about my fascination with the

smell of leather, mold and cracking paper; somehow I enjoyed the deep marks and futile traces of time in books, and never gave up the struggle to find a parallel within the behaviors and physicality of older people in a culture of overrated youth.

I was a casual seeker of first editions, not for the value or the prestige of that sort of finding. There's a curious thing about paper mostly palpable when it ages. The process to make a single sheet involves an initial fiber that is macerated until each individual filament is a separate unit, then mixed with water and matted to form a whole again. It's impossible to guess this kind of process had taken place from tact or eyesight until the yellow marks and the folded corners remind us of its place. After browsing, purchasing, owning and reading, the weight in my hands of a book, a unit made out of hundreds of sheets (or leaves as they are called in bookmaking jargon) and a solid cover, was impossible to ignore. The ageing process lasts beyond the time spent re-reading, the perceptions brought to book, and a lifetime of moves and bookshelves. A whole made into a unit, a unit made into a whole, and in between those a microcosm of chemical reactions that devoured the most beloved characters and writers dreams, a natural progression that surpassed the everlasting bond between a book and his or her owner.

Madam Rombauer was short. She looked like a human made out of toothpicks and put together with play doh, her knees and elbows were huge, her torso and belly made a big round circle, and her head a smaller one. Before I came in, I had to removed my shoes and leave my closed bag next to them in the hallway. Standing in the doorframe, she inspected me in silence. With her palm opened, she pointed to a room in the back of the apartment, and walked close, almost next to me, but leaving me a short step ahead.

She wanted to make sure I was not going to detour or even look into the other rooms.

The shelves in the room that she called "the office" were full of half books, stacks of pages, covers and dirt. My first task was to move everything out into the middle of the room. Then she wanted to organize something she described as a "get together in the shelves." When I asked for clarification she said that she expected to mix up the writers, "to orchestrate the meeting of those that in life might had never seen each other but in paper seemed to match to perfection." Her tone changed as soon as she began to describe her project.

"This is the seed for an ideal and democratic city where authors, secondary characters and passages with character on their own will sleep, breathe and make love freely," she whispered getting closer to me. Her voice didn't belong to her light frame, it had a presence of its own as if a stronger person that had been trapped inside a small body finally had a chance to speak.

She started to hand me the books right away and I assumed we were going to clean before reorganizing. The project could take weeks and I was pleased with the extra hours without giving total attention to what she was asking for. The details were taken care of while we stacked in a random order half of the first shelf, and the only unusual request was the schedule. She wanted a "night shift," I needed to come after 8 p.m. or so, when the heat of the summer was low and the AC was not needed.

Books were piled and stuffed in every cubbyhole in the rest of the apartment. They seemed to move on their own, to have an anima, a presence that escaped from the

authors' dripping lines. Madam Rombauer didn't have much other "stuff," to be afraid of loosing it. At first glance, I caught a stool and a lithograph, a Japanese ideogram, in the kitchen and a small red couch in the books' room covered by a yellow sheet. Pictures of her youth or her family were nowhere to be found.

I asked her if perhaps we should alphabetize the books while we were moving them out of the shelf, and she refused under the argument that it could coerce her creativity. "If a rebellious mystic gets the opportunity to exchange ideas with a science fiction writer they might come up with a musical sheet that had a device to recapture lost spirits or broken souls" She pointed out with [\*Conversation with Sai Baba\*](#) in her hand and [\*Stranger in a Strange Land\*](#) in the other. "It might be good for a political scientist to get a sense of wording, sensibility, and creative use of language to be rubbed against a cursed poet." As if she were imparting a lesson to the chapters, she opened every book she picked and dropped a statement to be preserved in the middle of the pages while she carried them to the middle of the room.

The first couple of hours she made an effort to illustrate our task with vivid examples: "What would [\*Lydia Davis\*](#), the great micro fiction woman writer, tell a prolific author such as [\*Mario Vargas Llosa\*](#) (...)" I was a little disappointed to find out she had read most of her collection, "Sociological manifestos for the sake of the people - books that can't be read beyond the first chapter like [\*Capital\*](#)- really could get some love from chic lit like [\*Sex and the City\*](#) or maybe go into a threesome with a graphic novel like [\*Persepolis\*](#) (...)," and valued the books she owned, "Textbooks can teach simplicity to great Russians novels." She didn't waste movement but she was not slow.

Even though, her collection seemed very contemporary and my chances to find a

gem slimmed with every word that floated out of her mouth, I was utterly amused at her mannerism, her language and her absurd ability to establish correlations. I was pleased to realize she was willing to help and a little annoyed over the thought of her overwhelming presence.