



A Bad Month for Books

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What does Lauren Conrad have in common with Rimsha Masih? One is a reality TV star who parlayed her MTV persona into a DIY website, two how-to books, and four semi-autobiographical novels; the other is an uneducated (and by some accounts developmentally disabled) Pakistani Christian. Both young women made headlines last week for destroying books. Masih burnt a page of the Quran, probably by accident; Conrad, on camera as always, took an Exacto knife to 9 Lemony Snicket books in order to recycle their spines as decoration for a storage box. Masih's biblioclasm landed her in jail, though Pakistani authorities now claim that her arrest was designed not to enforce the country's anti-blasphemy laws but to protect her from vigilante violence.ⁱ Conrad's earned her 1,848 "dislikes" on YouTube. Her original happening concluded with a perky invitation to "submit a video response with the books you used and share with us what books you're reading now"; viewers responded instead by forwarding the video to so many other outraged book-lovers that the footage was pulled from her "Crafty Creations" website and excised from YouTube. One BuzzFeed reader commented "Holy sh-t I feel like I'm watching some sort of terrible snuff film"; another upped the ante to "I feel like I'm watching a murder".ⁱⁱ

It might seem hyperbolic to compare cutting up novels to knifing bodies. But secular bloggers inherit from the three religions of the book the sense that a volume has more in common with a person than it does with, say, a flowerpot. "If Christians burn our Koran, we will burn them," a neighbor told Reuters – and in July, a Pakistani man reported (like Rimsha Masih) to be mentally unstable was in fact set ablaze after being beaten to death in retaliation for burning a Quran.ⁱⁱⁱ When Afghans rioted in February 2012 after NATO soldiers threw Korans onto a truck bound for an incinerator at the garbage dump,^{iv} they reminded the world that Islam requires sacred texts to be laid to rest with the same reverence as dead bodies. One closely guarded "book cemetery" in the mountains of Pakistan contains 70,000 full of damaged copies of the Koran.^v Muslims have traditionally stood in the middle of a spectrum running from Jews – who protect not just sacred texts but all written paper from defilement by laying them in a special resting-place called a geniza – to Christians, who for centuries have happily torn pages from secular books for toilet paper.

Books are especially likely to be dismembered during paper shortages: this means pretty much any time before the 1850s (when the replacement of linen by woodpulp cheapened papermakers' raw materials) as well as later wars. When World War II forced Alberto Moravia and Elsa Morante to hole up in a shepherd's hut, they brought two books, the Bible and the Brothers Karamozov. After a couple of months, they faced the choice of which to consign to their makeshift outhouse.^{vi} After the war ended, the great Soviet literary theorist M.M. Bakhtin continued to use his own manuscripts to roll cigarettes.^{vii} In between, German soliders busily paved Russian streets with layers of encyclopedias^{viii} while their American counterparts turned irreplaceable volumes into munition-wadding and cartridge-boxes.^{ix}

Once a book's read-by date has passed, its pages become ripe for cutting, wrapping, and wiping. Before 1850, when a Massachusetts manufacturer invented the paper bag, groceries were wrapped in newspapers or even in pages torn from books. Paradoxically, though, pages reduced to toilet paper or fish n' chips wrap often circulate more widely than books that sit demurely on the shelf: Felix Mendelssohn found the sheet music for Bach's St Matthew Passion wrapping butcher's meat. The attorney general who prosecuted Tom Paine for sedition charged that *The Rights of Man* had been "thrust into the hands of subjects of all descriptions, even

children's sweetmeats being wrapped in it"; a few years later, the rabble-rouser William Hone traced his political awakening to a scrap of a revolutionary tract happened upon at the cheesemonger's. The first Protestant missionaries in India chose the size in which to publish bibles with an eye to preventing desecration: "In Madras," one reported in 1875, "the sale of Scriptures as waste paper is largely guarded against by printing them on pages of so small a size that they are almost useless for bazaar purposes" (Brodhead 33).

Historically, wrapping may even precede writing: in Han China, where paper as we know it was invented, its first use was to preserve food (Needham et al. 122). As late as 1911, the *Encyclopædia Britannica* continued to define paper as "the substance commonly used for writing upon, or for wrapping things in. In the age of Saran Wrap and Tupperware, though, old papers have become less valuable: you sometime have to pay to get them carted away, as I discovered when my grandmother moved into a retirement home. As more content gets digitized, the carcasses of print books will come to clog even more landfills. Does the future lie with pulping books to build a highway (as recently happened with a warehouseful of romance novels in Britain)^x? Or with printing books on toilet paper, as did the bestselling Japanese horror novelist Koji Suzuki in 2010?^{xi} That may in fact represent the highbrow option: a canner new company in Michigan began this year to sell local businesses advertising space on rolls of free toilet paper.^{xii}

Rimsha Masih may not be Lauren Conrad's closest soulmate: better candidates for that role would be the American designer Kate Spade, whose current line of purses mimics the shape of paperback reprints, or Lisa Occhipinti, whose The Repurposed Library gives step-by-step instructions for turning your old hardbacks into (MH Abrams must be rolling in his grave) a mirror and his lamp. As the soul of our reading migrates online, its earthly body begins to look like litter. Like bodies, though, books require respect no matter how much they've aged. The judgment disciplining American soldiers for Koran-burning coincided with another disciplining their comrades for urinating on an Afghani corpse. That a body has died or a book has worn out doesn't release us from the duty to respect it.