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Book Lovers Fear Dim Future for Notes in the Margins

By DIRK JOHNSON

CHICAGO - (...)“People will always find a way to annotate electronically,” said G. Thomas Tanselle, a former vice president of the [John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation](#) and an adjunct professor of English at Columbia University. “But there is the question of how it is going to be preserved. And that is a problem now facing collections libraries.”

(...)Marginalia was more common in the 1800s. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a prolific margin writer, as were William Blake and [Charles Darwin](#). In the 20th century it mostly came to be regarded like graffiti: something polite and respectful people did not do.

Paul F. Gehl, a curator at the Newberry Library, blamed generations of librarians and teachers for “inflicting us with the idea” that writing in books makes them “spoiled or damaged.”

But marginalia never vanished. When [Nelson Mandela](#) was imprisoned in South Africa in 1977, a copy of Shakespeare was circulated among the inmates. Mandela wrote his name next to the passage from “Julius Caesar” that reads, “Cowards die many times before their deaths.”

[Studs Terkel](#), the oral historian, was known to admonish friends who would read his books but leave them free of markings. He told them that reading a book should not be a passive exercise, but rather a raucous conversation.

(...)David Spadafora, president of the Newberry, said marginalia enriched a book, as readers infer other meanings, and lends it historical context. “The digital revolution is a good thing for the physical object,” he said. As more people see historical artifacts in electronic form, “the more they’re going to want to encounter the real object.”

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