

Transcription

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Episode 13: On reading, solitude, Edith Wharton, and what a library means to a woman.

<https://soundcloud.com/user-760891605/episode-13>

Sound bite: “The library means a sense of independence, a sense of being able to dictate for yourself what you want to become and what you would see yourself become in the world.”

When writer [Edith Wharton](#) died in 1937, her library of more than 5,000 volumes was divided and subsequently sold. Decades later, it was reassembled and returned to The Mount, her historic Massachusetts estate. [What a Library Means to a Woman](#) is a book by Sheila Liming that examines personal libraries as technologies of self-creation in modern America. Focusing on Wharton and her remarkable collection of books, this conversation was recorded in December 2020.

Sheila Liming: Hello, and thank you for joining us. My name is Sheila Liming. I’m an associate professor in the writing program at [Champlain College](#). I’m also the author of the book, *What a Library Means to a Woman: Edith Wharton and the Will to Collect Books*, which was recently published by the University of Minnesota Press in its spring 2020 catalog. I’m here today to talk a little bit more about the book and to touch on some topics that I haven’t been able to discuss fully yet in discussing this book with other people, other friends and colleagues. And I’m joined here by a couple of associates and friends of my own, including Donna Campbell, professor of English at Washington State University, and also two staff members from The Mount, Edith Wharton’s historic home, which is located in Lenox, Massachusetts, the site where I did much of my research for the *What a Library Means to a Woman* book. So, joining me today from The Mount is Nynke Dorhout, the librarian at The Mount, and also Anne Schuyler, house operations manager at The Mount. Two very intelligent women who also have plenty to say on the topic of Edith Wharton as well. So, I would like to first start by introducing everybody individually and having them say a little bit more about themselves so we can get a sense of who is gathered together here. I’ll turn it first to Donna.

Donna Campbell: Thank you, Sheila, for inviting us today. As you said, I'm a professor of English at [Washington State University](#), past president of the [Edith Wharton Society](#) and have written quite a bit on Wharton. My most recent book, *[Bitter Tastes: Literary Naturalism and Early Cinema in American Women's Writing](#)*, looks at Wharton through the lens of naturalism and movies. I'm also an associate series editor for *[The Complete Works of Edith Wharton](#)*, which is going to be out from Oxford University Press. And I'm currently editing my volume in the series, *[The House of Mirth](#)*. Sheila is another of our volume editors. So, thank you.

SL: Thank you. Then, I will turn it over to Nynke and Anne, who are both gathered together and speaking to us from Edith Wharton's house, from The Mount.

Nynke Dorhout: Thank you, Sheila. My name is Nynke Dorhout. I've been the librarian at The Mount, Edith Wharton's home in Lenox, Massachusetts, for the last 10 years.

Anne Schuyler: My name is Anne Schuyler, and I've been here at The Mount for about 14 years now in various capacities. Currently, I'm director of visitor services and the interpretation director as well, which means I do a lot with the tours as well as the exhibits. Both Nynke and I have spent a lot of happy hours in the library. So, we're delighted to be here today.

SL: Nynke and Anne, you guys both wear so many different hats at The Mount and do so many different things. It's quite impressive.

AS: Confusing sometimes.

SL: I'll just begin by saying that I myself spent many, many, many happy hours at The Mount both while I was in the process of writing this book and prior to it. My relationship with The Mount started in 2013, back when I was a graduate student and I received a small fellowship from the Edith Wharton Society—thank you, Donna Campbell—for doing some research on-site there at The Mount, with Edith Wharton's library materials which are collected there under the roof at The Mount. So, I started there, and from there, got to work on a digital project, a website, which is now up and running, called [edithwhartonslibrary.org](#), which provides a virtual home base for those same library materials. It allows users all

across the U.S. and all across the world to log in and basically browse through the library collection to see what Edith Wharton owned in terms of books and also what she was reading. To engage with the notes that she took in the margins of her books and the books that she really, really cherished as physical objects while she was alive. During the time when I was building that website and then, also subsequently writing the book, I spent a number of summers working at The Mount and have so many wonderful memories of both being within the site of the library itself and just around the house and the gardens and the beautiful grounds that are to be found there. And Lenox is just a very special, beautiful and wonderful place and anyone who gets the opportunity really ought to take a trip there and visit it when it's open again.

ND: Thank you, Sheila. I would just like to take a quick minute to thank Sheila for her incredible contribution to Edith Wharton's library. As Sheila just mentioned, she and I first met in 2013 when she came to The Mount as a graduate student to use the library, and since then, she has been awarded several grants to return for three summers with a very nifty, high-quality portable scanner in hand to painstakingly digitize the title page and the most important annotations in all of Wharton's 2,700 books that are currently at The Mount. I cannot mention enough how crucial this project has been to the preservation and the accessibility of Edith Wharton's library. So, thank you, thank you, thank you. Our first question we wanted to ask you, Sheila, is about the title of your book, *What a Library Means to a Woman*. Wharton, herself, described The Mount as her first real home, but I've often thought that it was her father's library where as a young girl she felt at home for the first time, where she could really be herself, accompanied and inspired by the volumes on the shelves. And this is a quote from Wharton's autobiography called [*A Backward Glance*](#) that I just wanted to share. It says: "I am squatting again on the thick Turkey rug, pulling open one after another the glass doors of the low bookcases, and dragging out book after book in a secret ecstasy of communion." That's the end of the quote. So, this is around the 1870s. She's about 10, 11 years old. And as we know from the inscriptions in her own books, family members and family friends started to endow her with a little library of her own when she was about 10 years old. And so, I wanted to ask you, Sheila, moving fast-forward to your research with Edith Wharton's library at The Mount, as well as the research for your book, what in your own experience does a library mean to a woman and what has your experience taught you that it might mean to a woman like Edith Wharton?

SL: Thank you, Nynke. That's the perfect introduction and perfect lead-up for thinking about this issue, and I'm happy to talk a bit about the meaning behind the book's title. I'll begin just by saying that I think for a figure like Edith Wharton, home was an incredibly unstable concept for a lot of her life. Part of that was of her own making. She embarked on a career as a professional writer and as a kind of worldly cosmopolitan figure that saw her moving around a lot. Edith Wharton scholars usually estimate that she crossed the Atlantic some 60 to 70 times in her life, going back and forth between Europe and the United States, even though, of course, she was born in the U.S. So, because home was such an unstable concept, I think you're absolutely right in thinking that, for her, libraries provided a kind of second home. The first of those libraries was her father's, which occasions the quote that you read to us there from her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, where she talks about having felt what she calls the "ecstasy of communion" experience within that space of her father's library, but other subsequent libraries followed, of course, for her, not least significant her own. And she started putting her library together, of course, as a young child through her independent studies with her governess, Anna Bahlmann. And then, her library grew over the course of her life. She kept adding volumes to it as she moved back and forth between different houses and between different residences. And if you spend any time in the physical space of the library now at The Mount, if you look at the books on the shelves, you can see how unstable and somewhat frantic that sense of home may have been for Edith Wharton. If you just open the books and you look at the bookplates on the inside of the cover, you see the names of at least three different houses. And, of course, because Wharton didn't design a bookplate for The Mount, you, of course, know that that's another one that enters into the picture for her, too. So, she had a number of different homes over her lifetime. And her books were the stable thing that came with her to each of those homes, at least until later in her life when she kind of split up her books between two of her libraries at her different houses in France. So, I think, for her, books and libraries were a way to create a kind of stable space within an unstable, lived experience of moving all over the world back and forth. And her travels around the world were compelled by circumstances that she chose, as I mentioned, like her career as an author, but they were also compelled by circumstances that she did not get to choose, or at least didn't have a lot of say in and that includes also her marriage to Teddy Wharton, which was not necessarily a situation where she had full control or choice. So, the books provided a kind of stable ballast to all those roving all over the world. They were a place where she could always come and always remember where she had been. Track her travels

and her peregrine nations and look back on the ground that she had covered already. I think this is why Edith Wharton scholars and people who read and studied Wharton working are so interested in libraries and reading with regards to her fiction, but even more generally than that, when I was thinking about the title for the book, *What a Library Means to a Woman*, I was also just thinking, in general, about how historically women have had to frame their own intellectual advancements in alternative terms to seek their intellectual opportunities elsewhere, to sometimes, even make them for themselves outside of maybe formal strictures or formal conventions. And I'm thinking here of the fact that Edith Wharton herself never attended school in a formal sense in her life. And what that meant is that her books were her home, but they were also her school. She had them as a kind of record of her own education and her independent studies and her independent reading. So, in that sense, they form another kind of ballast, which is educational ballast to the way that she grew and progressed as a writer, and eventually, made a career for herself as writer. So, a library means a home to Edith Wharton; it still does in the case of *The Mount*. And a library means a school. And a library also means, I think, a sense of independence, a sense of being able to dictate for yourself what you want to become, and what you would see yourself become in the world. I'm going to pass this question to Donna next because Donna is someone who has written and knows a lot about Edith Wharton. And I'm curious to hear what you have to say, Donna, on the subject of Wharton in libraries or women in libraries.

DC: You've pretty much covered it. I think that there's a kind of, I don't know how to express it except defiance, about collecting one's own library if you're Edith Wharton, and your brother has books and your father has books and society libraries allow men to have books but they don't necessarily allow you to have books except for the kinds of books that women are supposed to read. So, I think that it's a kind of statement about her as a person and an intellectual in the world as well. It makes a statement, the fact that you can collect these books, and that you can collect books that were not traditionally associated with women as reading. I think that, again, having these together gives you a sense of just how committed she was to this as a process, to the process of collecting. I think as you put very well, it's not collecting as a *Perseus Gryce* would do it, or even necessarily as Lawrence Selden does it fraudulently in [The House of Mirth](#), but collecting as an act of kind of intellectual independence.

SL: Yeah, and I'm so glad you brought up that idea of defiance, Donna, because I think that's so important, too, where Wharton is concerned. She was such a defiant figure in her time, but book collecting was, and to some extent, even still remains a really male-dominated field and kind of a man's game. It's all about accruing value. And so, Edith Wharton, sometimes, even in being willing to put this collection together and in pursuing things to add to it was exhibiting a fair degree of defiance. Especially for her time period. I think I'll pass this question next to Anne and Nynke, about what a library means to a woman and to a woman like Wharton, in particular.

AS: This is Anne. You all expressed really well that first question. While you both were speaking, I was thinking just in terms of self-identification. When you're here at The Mount, a lot of these rooms have her imprint on it, but nowhere more than the library. So, you walk into that library and you breathe the air, and as some of our friends and scholars will say, it is as if she is there and you sort of breathe the air of Edith. So, I think that sense of self-identity, of declaring her independence, as you have said, and a bit of defiance, I feel kind of in her library, as well, obviously, as also just tremendous insight into her as much as we can understand about her personality and her brain from this distance. And so, that sort of leads us into the second question or the second topic, which is the relationship of The Mount with the library and The Mount as Edith Wharton's historic home and as an institution. It fulfills many different functions and just tonight, I was talking about how we're having this light-and-sound show called [NightWood](#), and we always wonder what Edith Wharton would think about that, having music and lights going off in her garden and what Teddy would think about that. We are a park, we are a museum, we are a cultural venue, we are a community center. A lot of people come here just for the grounds. They don't really have any knowledge of Wharton. And how do you think these multiple functions and roles impact or complicate or provide challenges for the Wharton library collection, which is held under its roof? And on the other hand, how might those areas/roles buttress and support the existence of the library there. Nynke, do you want to say anything on that?

ND: Sure. I'll start with that. It's always fun to talk about the challenges, of course. And as you said, The Mount does fulfill multiple roles, and housing Edith Wharton's library comes with an overwhelming responsibility. So, I would say aside from staffing and funding like so many nonprofits deal with, I would say that our biggest challenge is to preserve a collection of historic books made up

from different materials and paper, linen, cloth in an old house. We have about 1,500 books that are stored on the shelves of the actual library here at The Mount. And then, we have about 1,200 that are stored in our attic in archival boxes, and we put UV filters on all the windows in the rooms where the books are displayed. But this is an old and drafty house, and so, keeping the temperature and humidity constant to preserve the books is a real, real challenge. So, that's something that we deal with through the four different seasons. And our dream plan is actually to convert part of The Mount stable into a state-of-the-art secure and fully climatized library storage and research facility. So, that is something that we dream about, and hopefully, at some point in the future will happen. And I just wanted to mention another very interesting challenge that we face and that is the conservation of the books. Some of the books, as you know, Sheila, you've seen so close up. Some of the books that are in the worst condition are actually those that Wharton and her family and her friends cherished the most. We're often asked the question, why don't you conserve them? Why don't you bring it to a book conservator and just fix all the issues with this book. If we would decide to have a book rebound and restored to a state where it could be much easier handled and displayed, it would also mean that we would take away the integrity of the book and one of its most important messages, namely, how much it was loved. And I always find that a very, very interesting challenge.

SL: I'm glad you brought up the physical situation of preservation at The Mount, which I understand to be a great challenge. I've seen those challenges in action. And I think there's a lot to be said for, as you mentioned, Nynke, for preserving these objects, these books as objects in a state that speaks to the way that they have been used and treated over the years, especially because that legacy of use is not always Edith Wharton's specifically. A lot of the books in her library are 400 years old or more, which means that they had a whole life on this planet before they ever came into her possession. Somebody else was reading them and interacting with them and turning their pages and possibly, even marking them up or dirtying them before they even became part of Edith Wharton's library and part of the library that we know. I think those legacies of use are really telling for scholars like myself, and for people who are interested in histories of readership, there's so much to be found there and so much to be dissected and understood. So, for example, from my research and spending time with the collection, I know that so many of the books in it suffered physical degradation, not necessarily under Edith Wharton's hands, but under the hands of the people who inherited the books from her. One of those people in question being the [members of the](#)

[Clark family](#), not necessarily one of those people but a group of people. Wharton willed part of her books when she died to Colin Clark, the youngest son of Kenneth Clark, the famed art historian from England, and the Clark family stored their portion of the library at their castle in the south of England in Kent, their castle, of course, being probably even a more challenging facility than The Mount to maintain and preserve these physical objects. [The books] suffered from dampness and rot and some other issues. So, a portion of the library before it ever came home to The Mount, to Edith Wharton's library, had really suffered already. But I think that that legacy of suffering and degradation speaks to its history, where it was, who was handling it. Some of the children in the Clark family marked up the books at a young age, not understanding that they're Edith Wharton's, not understanding that a physical copy of might mean something beyond its contents. And I think that those legacies of use are really interesting as well. They are certainly on par with Wharton's own interest in who had owned her books before her. So, maybe this is a good place for me to turn things over to Donna, who's going to ask us or prompt a question for us thinking about Edith Wharton's own habits as a reader.

DC: Yes, thanks, Sheila. This is about Wharton as a writer. I don't think you can really separate Wharton as a writer from Wharton as a reader in some ways. It's important for people to understand what kind of reader she was as well as what kind of writer she was because as scholars, especially, we're always focused on what did she produce? You know, what was the context and so forth? And so, how does the library at The Mount speak to and stand for her identity as a reader?

SL: I'll just start to get the ball rolling on that question, because it's something I think about all the time right now in my in my current job as a professor in the writing program at Champlain. I teach classes in literature and I also teach classes in writing, creative writing, technical writing, publishing, that kind of thing. And one thing I'm always telling my young, would-be writers, my students is that there is no shortcut to becoming a writer. It involves practice and practice has to happen on two fronts. The first front is obviously writing, but the second front is reading. You have to read to be a writer and you have to read a lot, actually. Reading, I believe is part of how we learn, at first, how cliché we are. We start to map out the world that we live in by reading and seeing how other people have understood it and responded to it and written about it. And then, as we do that, we start to discover these places where maybe there are spaces opening up or gaps in what we're reading, and we start to see room for ourselves in what

we're reading, too. There's a place that I can fill, there's a spot where I can fit into this discussion. So, with Wharton, I think that was a big part of her impetus and her motivation behind her reading—was an effort to try to understand the world she was living in and figure out where she fit into it and where she might take up a niche for herself and fill a purpose beyond simply being a white, wealthy woman who was born into a position of privilege. Being able to actually turn some of that privilege into something productive where she could find a place to produce and give back and speak her own experiences to the world.

AS: What came to my mind as I was listening to you both is because the library is—she did not write in the library; she wrote in her bedroom—and so, the library is, she read there. I think that affects people when we're showing people around. It's like they always automatically think, well, she wrote here, right? And we say, no, well, she read here and entertained and did other things as well. And so, even for people who have very little knowledge of Wharton, one of the best treats in the world is just to let them read the spines in the library and, you might get that spark of, “Oh, I read [Anna Karenina](#) in high school,” or, something like that, something of recognition and that's one of the biggest treats of the library itself. I think it speaks to Wharton in terms of her habits as a reader, with her markings and just the intensity of her studies speaks to what type of a student that she was and what type of a scholar [she was], self-taught with the help of Anna Bahlmann, and all that. I think it gives people a real idea of her dedication and her passion. As you say, Sheila, it gives them another idea that yes, she's a privileged white woman, but she also had this intense passion and dedication and good habits, really a fierce disciplinarian of her own habits.

ND: Yeah, I just wanted to add to that and I know, Donna, that you will add a lot of wonderful scholarly information to this. So, I won't go into that direction. But just on a personal note, some of the library books that I find most endearing and enlightening are the ones that I would very disrespectfully call “writing for dummies”—the books that teach you how to become a good writer, how to become a good poet, and emphasizing again that Wharton did not have a formal education. She had a governess who was a great teacher, but she was not a writer. And so, I always feel that in the library, Wharton, actually, sort of steps off her pedestal and she becomes very human. I love those books and how heavily annotated they are. And Sheila, I'm sure you know the ones that I'm talking about, but to really see how hard she worked at becoming a good writer, sort of

making the same point that you teach to your own students. So, I'm always very moved by those books.

SL: I appreciate that Nynke, because, sometimes, we forget that there were no M.F.A. programs during Wharton's time. She couldn't just go enroll somewhere and become a writer and even if she could have, she wouldn't have. Her gender and her class and other factors would have probably prevented her from doing that. So, she had to do it on their own.

DC: If I can just add to that a bit. Yeah, that idea that she again, I think Nynke is right. The whole idea that she's trying to make herself a writer, and she's trying to make herself a reader, and there's this kind of tension she has between you have to be born a reader and born a writer, but you also have to discipline yourself to be a reader and a writer in the right way. And thinking about what Nynke started this out with, that wonderful piece about her that she records in her autobiography and also in [Life and I](#) about having to make up, as a little girl, pretending to read from a book and at the same time, she's pretending to read, she's really writing. So, it's really the two things being really connected there. But at the same time, she realizes that her reading alone isn't enough, and she needs to find some discipline for it. She needs to teach herself as Nynke was just saying, she needs to teach herself to write. I was thinking about a passage that [Hermione Lee cites in her biography](#) where [Egerton Winthrop](#) tries to give her some direction about ways to read things like [\[Charles\] Darwin](#) and [\[Thomas Henry\] Huxley](#) and so forth, and the evolutionary writing that she read. It sounded exactly—this is back to Sheila's point—like what we tell our own students to do, slowly marking important parts in the margin, reread the marked parts, look up words. You could practically give it to your students now as a way to teach them to read, because you have to read before you can write. She's also very critical. In [The Vice of Reading](#), one of her essays, she really dislikes what she calls the mechanical reader. And the mechanical reader reads out of duty, and the mechanical reader doesn't really understand but feels a moral obligation to read and so forth. And she really says that a born reader is a born reader, and a mechanical reader is a mechanical reader. The born reader can get better but the mechanical reader is just always going to harm literature, essentially. Because it makes for mediocre writing. It makes for dumbing down subjects and again, this very subject she was educating herself in, and so, she has rules for herself as a writer, and she has rules for herself as a reader. And I think that that kind of, again, her passion is reading and writing. But she also realizes that it has to be

kind of a self-discipline of reading and writing. You can't just let yourself go. They're both connected. But they both require that kind of discipline.

SL: Yes, absolutely. And this is why following off of your point, Donna, in Edith Wharton's fiction, we find all these examples of good and bad readers, just as we find examples of good and bad book collectors or book owners. We are given these examples of the virtuous reader who reads to actually understand, to try to process whatever it is that they're interacting with, whether it's a work of classic fiction, or whether it's a work of nonfiction, and they're actually trying to learn about the real world that they live in from it, versus the reader that reads to simply get from cover to cover and say, "I did that." And then, put the book away on their shelf, or maybe doesn't even read, just sticks the book on their shelf without even reading it. So, we run into a number of those characters in her fiction and we pick up on her judgments about how reading is supposed to work and how you're really supposed to do it if you want to get something out of it. Well, maybe from here, this is a good point to move on to talking about the actual physical space of the library itself at The Mount, which is a very impressive space, a very special space within the house itself. It's different from the rest of the house. Anne, why don't I turn it over to you to talk a little bit more about that?

AS: Yeah, I was thinking about that because when we talk about The Mount, when we started our tours, we always talk about how spacious and light and symmetrical and balanced and harmonious The Mount is and all that is true. Then, people walk into the library and they go, "Well, this isn't light." So, it is sort of a different room and people have a slightly different reaction to it. I was trying to remember how people do react, and I would say everybody has their own peculiar reactions, but almost universally, you get a gasp. I can't tell you how many times I've heard, "This is exactly what a library should look like." Then, the other thing, of course, is that the treasure of the library is that those are her actual books. So, at The Mount, a tour guide's job for a lot of the tour is saying, "Well, no, we don't have the original furniture because she left the house in 1911 and took the furniture with her or it otherwise disappeared over the years." So, you're trying to explain why you don't have the original furnishings. And then, you have the marvelous relief of walking into the library and going, "These are her actual books," and for people, that makes their day; they have that gasp of respect and the wow factor even if they haven't a clue of what the books are and wouldn't recognize half of them; it is just that authenticity of the library. So, I think the library, in our case, it's one of the most authentic room because the

books are actually hers. And then, the other thing about the library is when people walk into it and and it has all this very rich, [] American oak carving and it's dark, much darker in comparison to all the other rooms. The curtains are quite heavy, the oriental carpet, and it does have a slightly different feeling to it. And some people think that was sort of her nod to her father's library where she had spent so much time, and other people think that well, that's just how libraries should look. I guess I'll turn that over to you, Sheila, and see what what your thoughts are. The other thing I want to ask you, Sheila, is that you for a long time were part of that library. You were on display. And I'm wondering if you remember any of your interactions with people as they came through because they had no qualms about asking you questions.

SL: Absolutely. Yeah, for a couple of months there during the summer as well, I was working to build the website, and I was digitizing the materials in the library. For part of that, I was working within the actual space of the library, which, unlike pretty much every other room at The Mount does have a little gate in front of it, and that's because the books, of course, in the library are Edith Wharton's, or were Edith Wharton's, and so, they are worth protecting as treasures or artifacts. Whereas, the rest of the house is pretty open, and you can walk around and touch things and sit on the furniture. So, I was behind the gate a little bit like a zoo animal, a little bit like an exhibit or part of the exhibit. Doing my work there with my little, portable digital scanner. And, people would come in and sometimes, they would talk to me, and sometimes, they would act like I didn't exist and like I was part of the furnishings, and that's fine too. And sometimes, I would overhear these really interesting conversations that I think stemmed from the media coverage of the library. There was a decent amount of discussion in the media such as The New York Times, etc., around the time of the purchase of the library books and before their installment in the physical spaces in the library at The Mount. There was a lot of discussion, talking about how much money the books were worth and how much The Mount had to pay to secure them, etc. And every now and then, I would hear some offhand comments from people about how much money the books were worth, how valuable they were, how much they cost everyone and what a sacrifice they were. And I was always kind of interested in those comments and what people were making of their physical surroundings in terms of value. But I will just say that on a personal level, I remember the first time I ever entered the space of Edith Wharton's library there at The Mount, in its little corner on the main floor, I remember the No. 1 thing that I was really struck by was the smell of the room. I mean, there's the darkness, there's the

furnishings, there's the things that make a difference, but there's also this very pronounced smell, and it's the smell that you imagine a library should smell like. It's the smell of old paper. It's the smell of leather bindings. It's the smell of thick carpets and dusty velvet, that kind of smell, and it feels so right. It feels so appropriate. It's so rich. It's a scent that if I could, I would capture in a bottle and wear on my person every day. It's so pleasant, and it's gathered there together in that room, whereas, the other rooms in the house are a little bit more open. They're a little bit more accessible. They're a little bit light, airy, they don't have that same kind of smell to them. And it was the smell more than anything else that really convinced me, in an authentic sense, that Edith Wharton was here once. This was a room she spent time in. Humans have been here.

DC: It's really something when you walk through it, I have to say. I went through it the first time back in the late '90s. And there were no books.

SL: Yeah, it was different then.

DC: No furniture. There was stuff heaped in the corner. It was imposing but forlorn, if that makes sense. The tour guide took us, there were no gates. We could walk right through to the veranda, whatever it's called outside. It seemed waiting for something. I'm just so grateful for what Anne and Nynke and [Stephanie Copeland](#) and everyone has done to have those books at the library and to have it set up the way that it is so that it has that wonderful library smell and that it feels like the place where Edith Wharton could be.

SL: I agree and I'm glad you mentioned that and I'm glad you got to see it beforehand to witness the transformation of that space and to see it get its just due. I love that description that it was waiting for something; that's so evocative to me.

DC: Yeah, it was back when [Shakespeare and Company](#) was there and there was a stage and things like that. It was very different. It was a very different experience of visiting then from visiting now, and it felt almost disrespectful to just traipse through the library. This room; it had dignity that was waiting to be returned.

SL: And the thing that had to restore that dignity was the books themselves. I know from when I was doing research for the book, and when I was looking into

the history of the acquisition itself, the process by which The Mount acquired the books from [George Ramsden](#), bought them and installed them there in the library at The Mount. I know that it was for a small amount of time, the idea was floated of simply lining the shelves with kind of fakes or dummies that would represent the type of books that Wharton had owned and had in her library, but wouldn't be her specific copies. And this was an idea that was talked about for a while when there was some conflicts going on regarding the sale price, when The Mount was struggling to negotiate the sale price and to hit a middle ground with the seller. And I just for, one, am so grateful that that did not come to pass—that we don't walk into a library that was once occupied by Edith Wharton, but that lacks her physical possessions, her books. It makes all the difference in the world. And of course, it's what drew me as a scholar to The Mount in the first place.

DC: That was a big topic of discussion at one of the Wharton conferences, the one in 1995, I remember. I'm absolutely glad as well that those books are where they belong.

SL: That's great.

ND: As the librarian, I just want to add—thank you for bringing this up—I, of course, understand that from a distance, people might have mixed feelings about the purchase of Edith Wharton's library, but I can tell you, and Anne will agree with me, that every single person who has ever been inside the library and viewed and held the treasure trove that the books and all the inscriptions and annotations are, everyone agrees that it was absolutely worth every penny. We often feel that the library is the soul of the house. And one thing that I always love to sort of observe when we have mostly scholars, but sometimes, people from the general public enter the library is that people often become very emotional and Donna and Sheila, you mention that you might sort of have felt that yourself. So often what I do when we have a scholar coming—these are students or professors or people who have studied Wharton for a long time, and finally, they come to The Mount, they enter into her library. And so, what I usually do is I point to the security camera, and I say, just wave and let me know when you're done. I leave them alone for a while just to breathe that air, to smell the incredible smells that you were talking about, Sheila, and to really soak up that feeling of, “I am here in Edith Wharton's library surrounded by her own books.” That's a very emotional moment for a lot of people. And it's just beautiful for Anne and me and for everybody at The Mount to watch that.

AS: And I would add one more thing to that—even for people who don't know Wharton, just the ability, the library exudes so much of what her personality is, and you can just draw these pictures of she and [Henry James](#) sitting around with a glass of whatever late at night, reading [Walt Whitman](#); most people know Walt Whitman, so they go, oh wow, and you can draw these pictures and people can actually see it. It really adds a connection even for nonscholars who might not know all the books or read French or Italian, or Middle English, and all these other things that Edith Wharton as scholar that we appreciate, but the picture the library can show of life at that time, I think, is very important for the house as a whole.

DC: I just want to confirm what you all have been saying, and that is, a couple years ago, when I was doing some work at The Mount, you put me in the library, and I thought I had died and gone to heaven because it just has this feeling like no other and it was just great to be able to sit there in her space and be able to do work. We always hope that the work we do is going to be important in keeping interest in her life. It was wonderful. So, thank you for doing that.

SL: Absolutely. I agree. We read as scholars, as critics, as students, as just readers, we read to get close to people, whether it's the author that we're reading in particular, or it's just a relatable story that relates to our own experiences in our own lives, and to read about someone and to read their work and then, to find yourself physically situated in a space where you're getting close to them in a different kind of way—a physical kind of way—is just a really gratifying experience to have. And in the book, *What a Library Means to a Woman*, I devote the conclusion to talking about how the library at The Mount basically came to be—logistically, financially, in every other means possible. And some people have talked to me about that; it's like, “Wow, I'm surprised that you went into such detail on that,” but one of the reasons I thought it was such an important story to tell is not only because it's an incredible story that in many ways almost didn't come into being, but also, because I think it exposes the fragile nature of some of these archives and resources that we have as critics and scholars, too; we take for granted that they exist there for us, sometimes. Maybe Donna, you don't, because you saw what the library looked like before the books came to reside in [The Mount], but we are often just driven to assume that these things will be there for us, that somebody is taking care of them, that we will go out and discover and find them for ourselves if we need them. And it's important to remember how many people are involved in making those things happen, how

much labor goes into making those resources exist and be accessible to us. And that's why I'm so grateful for the kind of labor that Anne and Nynke provide at The Mount, providing access to these materials but also in knowing so much about them and making them navigable and accessible and real for people.

DC: I agree.

SL: This actually does bring me around to one more topic that I wanted to get to here. This is a theme that I develop in general terms throughout the book, which is the theme of loneliness. I was just talking about labor and so much of scholarly labor, of course, happens where nobody can see it. It happens in these out-of-the-way places, when we're reading, when we're alone in our offices, when we're writing by ourselves in a solitary sense. So, one of the themes that I talk about a lot in the book is loneliness, particularly, loneliness experienced in relation to collecting and the way that people amass archives or amass collections for themselves in order to assuage feelings of loneliness, but the way that those collections themselves actually end up speaking to loneliness as a kind of monument to it. So, in the book, for example, I talk about the loneliness of archival study or research and this is actually an idea that I take from [Carolyn Steedman](#) in her wonderful book about archival research which is called [Dust](#), and I love that book, because it does get at these contradictory experiences that you have as an archival researcher, where you are reading to get close to someone, to get close to an answer or a figure or a person from history. But in the process of doing that, you just immerse yourself in this solitude. And that's part of the process, you have to do it that way. So, a question that I would pose to everyone is what are your impressions of loneliness or solitude, either where Wharton is concerned—her work or her fiction or her biography, or where her library is concerned, and perhaps, libraries, in general, as well. I think I'll pose this to Donna first.

DC: I was really interested to hear you talk about loneliness because although the loneliness in the collection and the act of collecting seems to be part of that, but the book to me spoke so much more about networks and things; maybe there's solitude in it, in the collecting, but also, you did that wonderful chapter on the library's networks and the connections that books make among people, and you've got some wonderful insights about the ways that objects and people sort of connect one another in the library and in reading. You mentioned a little while ago about Henry James reading Walt Whitman and so forth that Wharton talks

about in [A Backward Glance](#), but I guess I was wondering—reading is and isn't isn't a solitary activity. It's the connection of your mind with another person's mind. And sometimes, another person's mind and voice. You had mentioned before, Sheila, about with your students, that you have to insert yourself into the reading, that they have to see room for themselves so that they can project themselves imaginatively into the reading, so that they can actually write. But is there an essential impulse of solitude, maybe, that makes those connections happen? Again, reading is an activity that you sit and you do quietly, but then, maybe it's not. So, she does have a lot to say about loneliness. I think, to look at her life, to look at the numbers of people that she talks about, and to look at her diaries and see the number of activities that she has and so forth, it does make me wonder whether some of that is to escape some kind of essential loneliness. I'm not trying to psychoanalyze her because she would have hated it first of all, you can't do that, but the intensity with which she makes books part of her inner circle, always and connects to people through books, it does make you suspect that kind of maybe there is an isolation there, there's a kind of solitude, if not loneliness, that exists there.

SL: Yeah, it's kind of an Emersonian dialectic. [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), in his famous essay, [On Solitude](#), writes that you have to spend a lot of time by yourself in order to figure out how to spend better time with other people. It's kind of like training for social engagement. And I can see you touching on that a bit, Donna, and what you're saying about how reading itself is a lonely activity, but it's actually preparation for social engagement as well. You ideally want an audience member to pick up your book and to enter into the conversation with you, otherwise, you would never do it in first place. Well, maybe I'll turn the question to Anne or Nynke if either of you want to talk about loneliness in response to Wharton or the library.

ND: Thank you, Sheila. Both you and Donna have said such beautiful things already. I would love to be a student in your classes. Anne, unfortunately, had to leave to fulfill one of her many other roles. You were talking about loneliness associated with collecting, with research, with writing, but I would like to share a quote about the comfort and companionship associated with reading and with the simple, physical act of owning and holding a book. This is Edith Wharton remembering her 17th birthday and she says: "And there was one supreme day when, my mother having despairingly asked our old literary advisor, Mr. North at Scribner's, "what she could give the child for her

birthday," I woke to find beside my bed Buxton Forman's great editions of Keats and Shelley! Then the gates of the realms of gold swung wide, and from that day to this I don't believe I was ever again, in my inmost self, wholly lonely or unhappy." I just love that quote. And we have these editions in the library. And so, I, of course, often point them out to people. And it brings that whole moment so much alive, to have the books there, to have that quote, and have that really sort of intimate feeling that she describes of waking up to a stack of books next to her bed.

SL: On the subject of loneliness, I should just mention that, while I was working on this project, both the digital project and the book, I spent a lot of time, of course, by myself with the books, and there was a lonely quality to some of that, although I didn't necessarily mind it because I felt like I was engaging with material that really activated my interests and kept me fully aware and interested. But I also just want to mention that I wasn't alone the whole time because I was joined by someone else for a lot of that process, which is, of course, Julie Plain, long-standing volunteer at The Mount, somebody who I count as a dear friend who I really got to know actually really well through the process of thumbing through those books of Wharton's with Julie. Julie is a retired librarian and lent a lot of expertise to the whole project; because I would give Julie a box of books or a whole shelf of books and I'm like, okay, Julie, find out what's interesting, and what's worth commenting on and recording about this whole shelf of books, tell me what the world needs to know about this if they're not able to come visit this library? What do they need to know about these physical objects and Wharton's use of them or her interactions with them. Julie always did a great job of that but she also just really kept me company a lot of time.

ND: Absolutely, that is so true, and Julie is an absolutely invaluable volunteer, and especially with the library.

SL: I want to just thank you guys for joining me in discussing the book today. I think we've kind of made the rounds of our conversation in a very sort of organic and fun and enthralling way. So, I appreciate your participation in it. I just want to close off here by thanking you both for your involvement in the project. Nynke, obviously, you've been indispensable to it since the very beginning. You're the first person who ever steered me towards Wharton's books within the physical space of the library. But Donna, you and other Wharton scholars and people associated with the Edith Wharton Society have been indispensable as well

because that's part of the way that we feel less lonely in doing scholarship. We read the work of all the other people who are interested in the same things we're interested in and that becomes such an important system of support for thinking that there is an audience for this research. There are people who want to know these things, just like I want to know them. And that means that there is a real kind of cause for talking about them and for putting them into words in the first place. So, I just want to close by thanking you both for your contributions to the project as well.

DC: Thank you so much, Sheila. Your book is wonderful. Everyone said so, my students have read two parts of it now. They're as excited as I am about it. So, thank you for putting into words, for sharing those insights that you had in the book and for doing all the work that you've done in the library.

SL: Absolutely. I enjoyed it.

ND: Thank you so much, Sheila, and thank you for letting us join you today.

SL: Absolutely. I'll just say, I guess in parting, thank you for those of you who are listening and please feel free to join in this conversation that we're having in a larger sense by reading and interacting with us, and if you ever possibly can, by visiting The Mount itself and by checking out the books that are on the shelves and looking at who Wharton was as a writer and a reader.

For more information, visit z.umn.edu/whatalibrarymeans.