

From Politics to Poodles: A Look into Molly Ivins' Personal Library

Submitted by Karen Sigler, Texas State University-San Marcos

If the world were given your personal library, what would it tell them about you? What if you were known for your political observations and didn't mind being blunt about holding the politicians feet to the fire—wouldn't you think this person's library would be primarily political in nature or at least lean heavily in that direction? This is what I would have thought, until I began to inventory Molly Ivins' library. Molly was a bestselling author and hell-raising political columnist, who died in 2007 from breast cancer. The New York Times described Molly as “a liberal newspaper columnist who delighted in skewering politicians and interpreting and mocking, her Texas culture”.

She never had to write fiction because state and national government provided her plenty of material for humor. She said, “Good thing we've still got politics—finest form of free entertainment ever invented”.

She once told People magazine, “There are two kinds of humor. One was the kind that makes us chuckle about our foibles and our shared humanity. The other kind holds people up to public contempt and ridicule. That's what I do”.

In Molly's library there were over 1,000 mysteries out of the 3,500 titles. Along with mysteries were a spattering of poodle training books, which appeared to be needed by the evidence of chew marks left behind on some of the books (the dogs weren't selective in what they chewed—it was anything from politics to poodles).

After Molly died in January 2007, her private book collection was generously donated by her brother, Andrew Ivins to The Wittliff Collections at Texas State University. In the spring of 2008, the Wittliff staff went to her home and boxed up her library, which amounted to 80 boxes. Pictured below is one room of Molly's home that reflects her love of books.



Molly's house (photo by Katie Salzmann)

I was assigned the project of completing the initial inventory and had assumed it would mostly focus on politics. I was completely wrong! What I found was someone who collected on a multitude of topics and kept letters from authors, publishers, and admirers of her work.

Before I proceed further, it is important for me to clarify this isn't intended to be a scholarly work about Molly, but a personal perspective on the experience of delving into a public figure's personal library. It has been a private look into the reading interests of someone who was much admired by the public for her adeptness in conveying her observations about politics with a humorous twist. It has been an interesting and often funny journey, along with some sad insights into a person who has become for me a friend I wish I'd known.

Like many others, I only knew Molly through her writings and commentary, but as the inventory began to take shape I started to "see" an additional side of Molly other than the one I was accustomed to reading and for some reason it wasn't what I expected. Discovering she had a similar passion for reading mysteries drew me into the collection. Another thing I gleaned from this intensive foraging into her library was she never seemed to throw anything away. Items laid in the books ranged from advertisements included by the publisher, bookmarks, boarding passes (often not hers), credit card receipts, business cards, a dried four leaf clover, and a page torn from a notepad with makeup tips. The latter suggested she use peach or cream eye shadow all over the eye along with a warm beige foundation (found among a travel booklet to New York City).

Molly's engaged reading style included check marks (anywhere from single ✓ to triple✓✓✓ and often times followed by an exclamation point ✓✓✓!), underlined words, and comments off to the side.

In Hilleary's office the staff is struggling to catch up with the mountain of work that piled up during the term limits fight. At about 6, Hilleary decides to swing by some of that night's receptions. Pretty much every night Congress is in session there's a dizzying round of receptions on Capitol Hill, usually given by corporate groups, lobbyists, trade associations, or the members themselves as fund-raisers for their campaign war chests. The receptions are especially popular with the younger and single members, who often grab something for dinner at the receptions. Almost from the moment they arrived in Washington, the freshmen took to the cocktail party fund-raising circuit with a vengeance. All were assigned a "mentor" through the National Republican Campaign Committee who met with them regularly to talk about how much money they were raising and what they were doing to reduce their campaign debts.

Hilleary usually attends the fund-raisers put on by other freshmen unless he has a major conflict. There's an understanding among the members that it's good form to attend each other's fund-raisers. All but nine of the 73 Republican freshmen went into debt to win their seats. By showing up at each other's receptions, the freshmen serve as a draw for the lobbyists, who pay to get in and want their ears.

For all their talk about being different, the freshmen are very much the same as the senior members of both parties when it comes to taking money from lobbyists and political action committees (PACs). PACs can contribute up to \$5,000 for the primary and \$5,000 for a candidate's general election, whereas an individual is limited to donating a total of \$2,000 directly to a candidate. In the first six months of 1995, the freshmen raised \$5 million from PACs, almost half of their total campaign fund receipts and more than any past class of freshmen. Nine of the freshmen, including John Ensign of Nevada, Daniel Frisa of New York, Frank Cremeans of Ohio, and Jon Christensen of Nebraska, raised more than \$100,000 from PACs in the first half of the year. In that same period 15 of the freshmen raised a total of more than \$200,000 in campaign funds. Topping the list was Ensign, who raised nearly \$450,000, followed by Tom Davis of Virginia, who brought in nearly \$400,000, and Christensen, who raised \$370,000. Only one Democrat was in the top tier of fund-raisers; Patrick Kennedy raised \$242,411, with 32 percent of it coming from PACs.

In all of the House, fewer than 25 members refuse PAC funds. Hilleary is one of only four freshmen who does not take PAC money; fellow Tennessean Zach Wamp, Mark Sanford of South Carolina, and John Hostettler of Indiana also decline PAC money. Although Hilleary's campaign was left with \$150,000 in debt, he doesn't hold many Washington receptions because he doesn't take PAC money. "All of my friends in the freshman class have held fund-raisers up here and raised \$30,000 in a pop. And it takes them a lot less time than I'm going to spend raising \$30,000 out of the Fourth District of Tennessee," says Hilleary.

Between 5:30 and 7:00, prime reception time, you can see the members traveling in groups between the House office buildings and popular reception spots along

Example of Molly's engaged style of reading

Once the inventory revealed that she loved mysteries too, I became curious as to what she would find entertaining—would it be crime fiction or lean toward the cozies, which some might argue aren't true mysteries (except for those who read them). It definitely wasn't the cozy venue, but there was a healthy dose of British mysteries. Some of her favorite British authors were Simon Brett, Peter Dickinson, Agatha Christie and Reginald Hill. Along with the mysteries, she also had an interest in nautical sea stories and had compiled the complete set of Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey/Maturin novels.

Molly often marked passages in her books. There were numerous examples in political books, but humor and biography received considerable attention, too. One that certainly stood out was

from a biography on Napoleon in which Molly blasted Wilhelm Reich for being an idiot (seems her time spent in Paris wasn't in vain).

Some of the mistakes attributed to Letizia probably did not have the consequences ascribed to them. Wilhelm Reich speculated, from the mixture of great energy and passive tendencies, that Napoleon might have been a 'phallic-narcissistic' character, as a result of an 'overfeminized' early socialization, with the nuns at school and the overbearing Letizia at home. It is, however, unlikely that his brief attendance at the nuns' school had any significant role in his formation, and it is surely far

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Buonapartes with vendetta to Napoleon's grave and beyond. They intrigued with his enemies, manipulated Czar Alexander and were among the first to suggest St Helena as a place of exile. Only after the fall of Louis-Napoleon in 1870 and the death of the Prince Imperial in the Zulu War of 1879 did the Pozzo di Borgos relax and build the castle of LaPunta as a monument to their final victory.

Far more important than the influence of Corsica on Napoleon was the impact of his family. It is quite clear from his later career, as indeed from the tenuous record of his first nine years, that Napoleon was obsessed by rivalry with Joseph and yearned to supplant him. The later political history of Napoleon the emperor is sometimes inexplicable without taking

WHAT?

Molly's comments

Some genre headings, such as addiction and cancer, were not as comforting as others. There were only a few markings in the titles under addiction and none in cancer. It was difficult processing these books, knowing those were the same ones she might have used to deal with her own problems. I worked through this area more swiftly so I could move on to something less serious that didn't remind me of the personal difficulties she had to face.

Molly's admirers and fans referred to her in many ways, but the warmth of friendship would often shine through in inscriptions or notes. One of my favorites was from the author Bud Shrake who inscribed a copy of his novel The Borderland to Molly shortly after learning that she was battling cancer, which Shrake referred to as "the Red Queen".

BUD SHRAKE

Dec. 27-99

Dear Molly:

I have always considered you a formidable and indestructible presence.

The Red Queen has picked on the wrong sailor in this saloon. May you be blessed with a quick victory.

Enclosed is an advance reader copy of my forthcoming (April) novel about Austin in the days when developers wore their suits outside their pants.

Happy New Year, prayers + love Bud

Note from the author Bud Shrake

Valentine's Day 2009 started out in a cold secluded room with Molly's library. It was also a day I hoped to finish the initial inventory of the last of 80 boxes so I could begin the bibliography of her library. One of the last books I opened contained a letter that began, "Dear Molly, Happy Valentine's Day!". I can't explain it, but at that moment it seemed as if Molly was right there with me. The unlikelihood of finding this particular letter out of 3,500 titles and on Valentine's Day seemed remarkable and could be explained only as another intervention from Molly. I occasionally have these types of occurrences when working with other collections and have now begun to call them my "Molly Moments".

We set up an exhibit of her library at Texas State University in the summer of 2008 to give visitors a cursory glance at what Molly read. It was hugely successful, but its brevity left many still wondering, "What did Molly read"? One of the best ways to answer this question will be for the reader to meander through the genre headings and titles in the annotated bibliography of her library, which has been completed, but is not yet published.

Whatever revelations about Molly I have imagined (and believe me working with this collection has led to an active imagination), it has been an enjoyable journey into becoming acquainted with Molly Ivins from a unique perspective.