



ASK THE EXPERT

How to Save Your Books

DEBORAH HOWE | COLLECTIONS CONSERVATOR

Back in the day, Dartmouth employed “mending ladies” who worked in the library to repair damaged books with “mending tape.” Now the College has an entire department dedicated to preserving and repairing the collection, and tape is “bad, bad, bad,” says Howe. In 2015 the conservation staff of the preservation services department treated 4,216 volumes, including 51 that were wet or moldy. Here Howe shares some tips to help you preserve your own collection for posterity.

—Sue Shock

PRIORITIZE

“First you have to decide what to save. Do you have family heirlooms you can’t replace—family Bibles with writing in them or old photo albums? Buy acid-free clamshell boxes to protect special books from heat and light. Then you have your favorite books, the ones you want to keep around you. These books need a cool, dry place out of the sun. Create a dedicated space inside the house that’s good for them and get rid of or pack away the others.”

PACK PROPERLY

“Books like to be out of the light with minimal temperature and humidity fluctuations. Heat is a real enemy. Attics might be fine in the winter, but can get too hot in summer. If you have a cool, dry basement, store books there, but not if you have moisture issues. Cardboard boxes allow books to breathe but don’t protect against moisture. Plastic containers may be good in a flood, but moisture can get trapped inside and books can get moldy. Pack books tightly, flat or spine-down, and keep boxes off the floor.”

DEODORIZE

“Just because a book is musty doesn’t mean it’s moldy—mold will have visible signs. There are a couple methods to get rid of a musty smell. On a sunny day with a breeze, take the book outside, stand it up on a table and fan out the pages, like freshening your sheets. Or get non-odor kitty litter and make a chamber—put the litter in a tray, put a screen on top, then stand the book up on the screen and fan out the pages. Close up the whole thing inside a garbage bag and leave it there for however long it takes.”

USE YOUR FREEZER

“Mold is a huge problem. It can spread through the air or by touch. If a book has visible mold, I know it’s hard, but put it in a plastic bag and put it in the garbage. Most people don’t have to worry about bugs in their books—you hear about bookworms but we don’t see them in modern times. If you think you have bugs, like bed bugs, you can freeze the books to kill them. Freeze for 72 hours, take the books out and let them warm up, then put them back in the freezer for 24 hours.”