It's not everyone who has a mountain named for them . . . in their living room, but there loomed Mt. Michelle. My longsuffering family navigated the narrow paths around it, hoping to preserve their illustrious basketball careers by avoiding injury. This mountain was not composed of the usual soil, granite, ice . . . or laundry, but was composed of books!

How could one woman go so far over the edge, you ask? If you knew what an uber-proper schoolgirl I was, how I lapped up my textbooks hoping for a star atop each assignment, you would be shocked to learn that I now have 25,000 “living” books, because when I began homeschooling, I duplicated my own school experience, even to displaying the “phonics train” on the wall and accumulating a two-ton stack of workbooks. When my son completed his entire mainline curriculum in October and then asked me what to do next, I said, “You're a second-grader and, as far as I know, international law allows you to touch only work that is labeled ‘Second Grade.’ ” So, he did the entire curriculum again. In January, he began his third round. Was he ever glad when June made him a third-grader!

I sincerely believed that my son was “not allowed” to do work above the second-grade level; I simply didn’t know any better. At that point in our homeschooling adventure, I needed an “expert” to scientifically manufacture and label materials for me, which I could then quasi-confidently dispense to my sons. It was just too bad for me that they grew unimpressed with most topics as we covered them (even though begging to learn at the beginning). My children's retention of information (limited to what seemed important or real to them) was thus unimpressive, even after scoring 100% on tests. I may have yearned for more but instead declared completion of the “supposed-to stuff” as good enough. It was all I could let myself consider.

Then, I heard my friend's son, Luke, rave about a book on Geronimo. He played it, drew it, and dressed it. Drat if that didn’t mess with my mind! Little realizing how it would change our lives, I asked to borrow the book to use with my sons. Such was their joy in learning that they practically emitted light! They were now living this bit of history too; it became a part of them; it fired their masculine resolve to courage and self-sacrifice! It was my first—albeit, unintended—invention to living books.

The proof was in the pudding. There was no denying what worked best for my sons. They took off like rockets, for I started picking up book treasures at yard sales. These books were older than our public library’s offerings and so much more wholesome.

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Then Gina nonchalantly dropped what turned out to be a bombshell: “If you like those, the public library sells their discards cheaply.” So, now you know how Mt. Michelle erupted in my living room, because after connecting with area librarians, they kindly admitted me to their storage sheds and cavernous basements (and I haaaaate spiders), letting me buy what had been sitting for forty years: the ultimate treasures.

But what does one do with 5,000 books (at the time) in an 877-square-foot house? One friend accused me of hoarding; my husband wondered if the Lord
wanted me to open a library. I about fell over myself laughing at him (scorning, really): "Why would anyone drive past a public library to my house?!" Yes, our neighborhood library was disappointing, but surely that was rare. Libraries, I supposed, were archives of all that is wonderful, no matter the age!

What does one do with 5,000 books ... in an 877-square-foot house?

Just then, Gina moved (boohoo) to a large-ish city. Since I had learned much about top-notch children's literature, we visited her new library together, prepared to probe its vast collection. Oh, the architecture was soaring. The staff was plentiful! The displays were slick! But the books? They were lousy. We were stunned to find not one of the great titles about ancient Rome there—or anywhere in the entire county! We stood rooted to the floor of the library's dignified rotunda in a moment of profound realization: The great books, the worthy books, the inspiring books, the ennobling books, the memorable books, the potent books, all these "living books" were gone . . . And I had 5,000 such gems at home! Amazingly, God had provided before I had even recognized the need!

You guessed it: I crawled back to John. A library of these rare treasures was needed, desperately! But did you forget about my miniscule house, already stuffed with boxes? Still, though, the Lord opened doors endlessly, miraculously providing last-minute money for purchases since we were flat broke. If books were available, we rescued them before they could be—as one librarian informed me—recycled into toilet paper! In one fell swoop, we bought 1,500 discards from the biggest library in the state. Somehow we survived the 4-1/2-hour drive home with books—literally—up to our necks. No door or window on the car could be opened, or an avalanche would have ensued!

When my husband was sent to New England on business (it was too far of a trip to make while neck-deep in books), we pulled a trailer. We love to recall the story of our Canadian border crossing. The guard mechanically asked, "What's in the trailer?"

"Old books," my husband dutifully replied. I guess Mr. Canada hadn't heard that line, so he perked up.

"You expect me to believe that you're toting an entire trailer of books?!!"

I spent 7,000–10,000 man-hours creating a database of the book treasures . . .

At that, my strapping elder son leaned into the conversation with a significant sigh: "Sir, if you knew how many boxes I've hauled for my mother, you wouldn't ask. Believe me; it's books."

The guard chuckled: "You know what? I do believe you. Go on through!" Oh, did we warmly laugh, for my sons had thoroughly enjoyed our book hunt—a treasure hunt! Indeed, when we would pull up to a promising bookstore, the boys would quickly lock my car door and race ahead, trying to be the first to spot a Landmark or Signature. So fun . . .

Of course, the boys' patience was sometimes tested. One day, the elder,
with a twinkling eye, chafed: “I don't mind walking around them; I don't mind sharing the dinner table with them; I don't mind pushing them down the countertop to make a PBJ. But I draw the line at wrestling them in the freezer!” (He had discovered my anti-mustiness experiment.) However, together, with the help of friends, we used every inch of space in our home to prepare the books for lending . . . even though we had no space to operate.

Then came a second bombshell! Friends invited us to open the library in their mega-spacious home while they traveled! Within ten days, our house was up for sale and we were renters in theirs! (While there, we began building a home with a special entrance and a restroom for use by visitors to the library; it was completed the same night our landlords returned.)

The books kept rolling in, about 2,500 annually.

The library “opened” two crazy weeks later within that rental home, with folks patiently waiting for me to find needed books in boxes and stacks—while their husbands assembled bookcases. It was lots of work and lots of fun! I spent 7,000–10,000 man-hours creating a database of the book treasures, detailing their descriptions, series names, etc., so that we could easily label and search.

The books kept rolling in, about 2,500 annually. Now, fifteen years later, we rent a small commercial room (covered by membership dues and income from yard sales) that is manned by fabulous volunteers. The library got a name along the way: Children's Preservation Library.

Looking back, I never would have imagined that this “career woman” (as I thought I wanted to be) would ever homeschool, let alone found a library of out-of-print children’s literature, but both endeavors have been eminently rewarding. I can see, now, how God used my childhood interests to prepare me for the adventure, because when I was young, I cataloged my mother’s enormous National Geographic collection (a teacher, she used them for classroom bulletin boards) and built an elaborate “library desk” complete with stamps, cards, and my “pride and joy”—a slanted cardboard “return” chute. Sadly, I then forced my baby sister to request topics so that I could find them and watch her (still under duress) “return” the magazines down the chute. Thankfully, she has forgiven me and is now a member of my library!

In closing, I urge each of you to seek the Lord, because the need for such libraries is great. I’ve long wished there were one in every town! If books were still the Judeo-Christian wonders they were in the mid-1900s, if they still spoke to the “heart” of a created human rather than dispensing lifeless factoids to the electrochemical brains of “electrochemically evolved humanoids,” the publishers would still be offering worthy books and the public libraries would still be stocking them. Unfortunately, neither is usually the case. A glance through most publisher catalogs is horrifying; the rare book not about the occult, a rock star, or leftist politician is still dead, fragmented, cheap, dreary pulp that hopes to make up for the lack of narrative worthiness (story), as God used in the Bible and Jesus used in His parables, by instead offering colorful images or frequent, try-to-wake-you-up sidebars. (Please see our fuller discussion of this topic in the June 2012 issue of TOS.)

I once was asked to explain myself to public librarians at their state convention. Why on earth did I find value in what they discard, in what was “dated,” they asked! I entered the room feeling like a martyr before lions, but in the end, after sharing what is precious about the earlier living books, many eyes watered!

“This is why we became librarians,” they lamented. “We were enchanted with such books as children! How did we fail to see the changes in children's literature? Why did we not guard the precious? But now it is too late. The great books are gone, and people only want what is ‘popular.’ If only we could go back . . .”

Well, “if only” can happen, praise His name! If you'd like to explore the possibilities— I promise I won't force you, as I forced my sister—just give us a shout!

Michelle Miller

Michelle has always loved books! From teaching herself to read at a very young age to making her baby sister patronize her pretend childhood library, she today has a collection of 25,000 vintage living books: Children's Preservation Library (www.ChildrensPreservationLibrary.com). Naturally, her award-winning TruthQuest History (www.TruthQuestHistory.com) curriculum harnesses the incredible potency of these great books, along with pithy and supporting spiritual commentary.

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