

Ultimate Library  
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# THE ULTIMATE LIBRARY



THE LIBRARY AT K NEST HOTEL, SINGAPORE ULTIMATE LIBRARY

As Kathryn Conway discovers, Albert Einstein had it right when he said “the only thing that you absolutely have to know is the location of the library”



Retreating to the pages of a good book, it is widely acknowledged, can provide the reader with a welcome escape from the stresses of the world. It is an aid to making sense of the chaos, and it seems that in today's climate, against a backdrop of economic uncertainty and political upheaval, the life-affirming power of reading has never been so vital. It is no coincidence that book sales rose by

eight per cent to £3 billion in the UK last year, reportedly the highest level since 2012 – people are looking for authenticity, the reassurance of the familiar. Indeed, in spite of the seemingly inexorable march of new technology and all the advances that have been made in the digital sphere, our emotional attachment to the tactile and smell of a weighty tome is not to be underestimated.

“Physical books are back,” agrees Philip Blackwell, a man who was perhaps predestined to be a learned bibliophile. “We’ve been through the cycle of ‘oh, it’s going digital’ and there is now a whole biophilic movement afoot, one that is driven partly by modern technology and partly by the world we live in today. We are in a time of great uncertainty, where people are questioning governments and big businesses, and when people feel worried, they often turn in on themselves and tend to look back.”

Blackwell argues that the growing appeal of farmers’ markets, of the foraging of food and the sourcing of ingredients, of the resurgence of vinyl and our current predilection for bare wooden floorboards and exposed materials in interiors, is a statement about the current state of the world. And given that we spend much of our lives poring over digital screens, communicating in a virtual bubble, is it any wonder that we crave the antithesis of this?

“The touch, the smell, the full engagement of the senses provided by a physical book is deeply satisfying. I tend to look at it in terms of, if you want to read something and you want a very rational approach, an immediate approach, you might go to your digital device. But, if you want to take a more considered approach, you would pick up a physical book,” says Blackwell. “In the same way that when you get home tonight and sit down to supper, you

might light a candle – it provides that authenticity and subtlety that is absent in harsh, overhead lighting.”

#### A LIFE IN BOOKS

Blackwell's bias is perhaps understandable given his family's connection to books. Set up in 1879 by Philip Blackwell's great-grandfather, Blackwell's in Oxford has faithfully served scholars as an academic and specialist book retailer for more than 150 years, establishing a room in its basement that has been accredited as housing the world's largest single display of books. The Blackwell family is still involved in the business, although Philip himself stood down as CEO of the bookselling arm in 2006. Put on two years' gardening leave, Blackwell decided to travel and it was while luxuriating in some of the most amazing hotels in the world that the entrepreneur hit upon his next business idea – Ultimate Library.



"Travelling is about curiosity," says Blackwell. "Everything is so alien, it's such an assault on the senses; being able to read about and see a place through the lens of fiction and other people's experiences, whether real or fictionalised, really brings your environment into sharp focus."

This was keenly felt while Blackwell was in Egypt and *Daniel Martin*, a novel by John Fowles in which the eponymous protagonist takes a cruise down the Nile, was recommended to him. For Blackwell, he found that the observations of the river provided by the prose amplified and heightened his own experience of this ancient body of water. "One of the great skills of a writer is the power of observation," Blackwell acknowledges. "Their power to observe and capture in words what they see can not only be enhancing, but it can also take a black and white world and transform it into a kaleidoscope of colour."

#### PROVIDING A SENSE OF PLACE

Fascinated by the ability of authors to provide their readers with a sense of place, Blackwell began to hunt out such literature in the libraries of hotels he was staying in and ended up sorely disappointed. With that, the seed for Ultimate Library was sown, and the company now helps hotels, resorts, private residences and retail spaces build bespoke book collections that reflect their local neighbourhood.

"Our job for a hotel or resort client wanting a library of 500 books is to find the 500 that will



educate, entertain and inspire their clients, to create a sense of place and take them on a journey," says Blackwell. "If you like detective fiction and you're in Bangkok, for example, why read Elnore Leonard, P.D. James or Lee Child, when you could read John Burdett? He will take you, with the same sense of excitement and all the same values, to the seamier side of Bangkok. Perhaps it's a side you never want to see, but, boy, the insights it will give you into the way the city works, into the way the Buddhist mindset works, will enhance your experience. It's a great stimulant."

Blackwell has worked with a number of London hotels – the Savoy, Ham Yard Hotel, K West Hotel & Spa among them – and says that the capital is evoked by any number of authors. "One thinks of Samuel Johnson, there's Dickens if you want historical, there's Martin Amis in his day, or Zadie Smith is fantastic for gritty, contemporary London life," he says. "But the book I love most is called *London Stories*. It's a brilliantly edited collection of great stories set in London and it's a beautiful little book that brings the city to life."

#### INTELLIGENT LUXURY

Of the many millions of books in print today, whittling down the selection to just a few hundred seems an incredibly difficult task. "It's actually very enjoyable," Blackwell assures. "It's a privilege for somebody to say 'find me 500 books that say something about me or my property', or just



'find me a nice shelf of books that have been intellectually selected'. For private clients, a book collection is a window into their soul and therefore, for those people who care about these things, it's a statement."

To ensure that a book collection makes the correct statement and reflects what Blackwell likes to call 'intelligent luxury', Ultimate Library ensures that a percentage of the books it provides are used or second-hand. Not only does this add an air of authenticity but, as Blackwell points out, there are great books that are no longer in print which can only be bought second-hand.

"You don't want any book collection you create to look like somebody went shopping with a credit card in the local bookshop on a sunny Thursday in April – you can tell immediately," says Blackwell. "The approach needs to be considered, which is why we use a network of specialist dealers."

However, Ultimate Library doesn't purely curate a considered, bespoke book selection. It also advises on shelving design, aesthetics and lighting to ensure the collection looks its best whatever the time of day. "You've got to light the books," says Blackwell, "but you've also got to consider the light on an individual, chosen book, so we work with a specialist lighting partner to get this right." Part of the work of Ultimate Library also lies in "explaining the rules of engagement," says Blackwell, particularly in hotels and resorts. "I've been to many places where people don't know that they have

permission to engage. So, we provide book plates in the front of every book and signage that can be anything from the very formal 'these books are here for your enjoyment. Please leave them behind for the future enjoyment of other guests', to 'choose me, read me, leave me.'"

#### GIVING BACK

One final particularly pleasing aspect of the business is that Ultimate Library also engages on a philanthropic level, working with hotels and resorts to identify schools and projects in their local community that might benefit from a donation of books. It is a scheme Blackwell is keen to extend to the private clients he works with, offering those who are cash-rich but time-poor an opportunity to give something back in a meaningful way.

"Part of the premise is that, despite technology, books are still the fundamental building blocks of education, they are part of that discovery process. So, if by donating books we can help raise the overall educational standard, that in turn creates opportunity," says Blackwell. "It is my fondest wish that, one day, somebody will walk into Blackwell's in Oxford in 20 years' time and say 'do you know, the first books I read were in my Maasai village or on my Maldivian island, and that inspired my love of literature and learning. It was the catalyst, and now I'm here, studying at Oxford.'"

A noble dream perhaps, but one that, given the growth of Ultimate Library, seems entirely achievable.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: THE MARYLEBONE ROOMS AT THE MARYLEBONE HOTEL; LIFECARE RESIDENCES AT BATTERSEA PLACE; AN APARTMENT AT ONE DENMAN PLACE; LIBRARY AT K WEST HOTEL & SPA @ ULTIMATE LIBRARY