

## THEIR SOULS LIVE ON IN THE CEMETERY OF BOOKS

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Readers who were entranced by Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, will love Carlos Ruiz Zafon's *The Shadow of the Wind*.

The book begins with the narrator Daniel being led by his father to the Cemetery of Forgotten Books. The father explains: "Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul. The first time someone visits this place, he must choose a book and adopt it, making sure that it will never disappear, that it will always stay alive."

My purpose here is not to review a book, but to explore the idea that books have souls by first reflecting on what it means to be a human soul. The ancient words that have been translated as "soul" literally mean "breath of life." Adam became a living being when the divine breath entered into a body made of dust (Gen. 2.7). The Hebrew soul is not immortal; rather, it lives only as long as it has the divine breath.

We still say that people are "good souls," which means that they lead a good life; or when we say a town has 600 souls, it means that it has 600 living beings. Indeed, the small town of Anatone, Washington lists all the animals in its population. The Hebrews also believed that animals were divinely animated, and that their destinies are the same: "They all have the same breath. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again" (Eccl. 3:19-20).

The Apostle Paul continues the Hebrew tradition with the "dust men" in the image of the Old Adam, who will be made into new beings by Christ, the New Adam (1 Cor. 15: 45-50). In the New Testament there is no natural immortality, the beginningless and endless soul of Plato or the Hindus, but only a "bestowed" immortality on a being that would otherwise return to the dust.

Authors also take the dust of ink and paper and make books living beings. As readers we have an obligation to keep them alive. Just as other souls make us who we are, we also enrich the souls of books by pouring our own lives into the reading experience. As the father in *The Shadow of the Wind* says: "Every time someone runs his eyes down its pages, [the book's] spirit grows and strengthens."

Daniel's father speaks of author and reader souls merging in a great literary web of life, but he forgets one important element: all the characters authors have created. Many authors have discovered that once their characters are formed by a breath of inspiration, they take on a life of their own. As novelist John Fowles states: "The novelist is still God, since he creates. What has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority." This is the reason Fowles decided to write several endings for his free-willing characters in his novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

The only immortality that ancient Hebrews had was living on in their descendants' memory, and that is why genealogies were so important for them. This is also the reason for the Cemetery of Forgotten Books. Here, as Daniel's father explains, "books that are lost in time live forever, waiting for the day when they will reach a new reader's hands." When Daniel finally chooses his book, he says to himself: "I felt sure that *The Shadow of the Wind* had been waiting for me there for years, probably before I was born." Later he discovers something very disturbing: someone has tried to destroy every other copy of it.

When Unitarian Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in 1553 in Calvin's Geneva, copies of his book *The Errors of the Trinity* were hunted down and burned. For centuries it was assumed that fanatics had succeeded in destroying all the copies. In their book *Out of the Flames*, Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone tell the story of their successful search for the last remaining copy of this controversial work. Everyone who loves books, and especially Unitarians around the world, are overjoyed that Servetus' courageous words have been preserved.

In ancient times scripture and other important literary works were committed to memory. Even today it is common to find illiterate Muslims who can recite the entire Koran from memory, or outcaste Hindus with no written lyrics singing thousands of stanzas of ancient epics. For over 30 centuries Indian gurus have orally transmitted scripture and commentary to their students, who in turn become masters who pass it on to their disciples.

Studies have shown that this is a much more accurate and secure way of passing on words than copying manuscripts. The Indian ragas have been passed from generation to generation without any note being committed to paper and without any note being lost in the process. Taking a cue from *Fahrenheit 451*, where people start memorizing books before the state burn them, we should all be taking courses in memorization techniques.

Ever since I started my personal library when I was a teenager, I've never thrown away a book. I have as much respect for them as I do every living being. The one exception was a book I recently got in the mail from a conservative Christian organization. Its premise was that all American Jews should return to Israel to prepare for the End of the World. The implication that they would be destroyed if they did not turn to Christ was so vicious that I, after some hesitation (it was a *book* after all), tossed it into the garbage.

Is this book and others filled with hate such as *Mein Kampf* in the Cemetery of Books? My answer is "Yes," for the same reason that the company Alexa Internet searches the web and captures all sites for their internet cemetery at [www.Archive.org](http://www.Archive.org). One simply hopes that some books are never chosen, lose their breath of life, and die.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. For many other columns visit his website at [www.NickGier.com](http://www.NickGier.com).