

I Am Not A Careful Reader

by Roz Warren

Some people handle books so tenderly that even after they've read it cover to cover it looks untouched. They turn each page carefully, and always use bookmarks. They refrain from cracking the spine.

They never nosh as they read, so the pages aren't dotted with red sauce or spotted with chocolate. And they wouldn't dream of leaving a book lying around where their Yorkie-poo (or their toddler) might nibble the corners.

I am not like that.

When I read a book, I move right in and make myself at home. I dog-ear pages, underline, highlight, and make marginal notes. I'll use the blank pages to make shopping lists or jot down phone numbers. At the ball park, I've been known to use that space to list the opening line-ups of both teams.

By the time I'm through reading a book, you can definitely tell that I've been there.

Of course, I treat library books more carefully than I do my own books. After all, they have to last through many readers. And, as someone who works in a public library, I expect you to do the same.

I might dog-ear the pages of the books I check out, but I refrain from writing in them. (Or I'll make lightly penciled notes in the margins, which I'll erase before returning.) Unlike some of our patrons, I don't read library books in the tub. (And if I did, and they fell in, I wouldn't sneak the water-logged book into the book drop and hope nobody noticed.)

Our patrons return library books not only waterlogged, but heavily underlined, stained with last night's supper, gummed by toddlers, colored in by 3-year-olds and chewed up by dogs. (It isn't unusual

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for our books about puppy training to come back to us graced with at least a few teeth marks.)

Did you know that there are actually folks who correct -- in ink-- the spelling and grammatical errors they find in their library books? I'm one librarian who welcomes this behavior. The way I see it, these unsung heroes, by maintaining standards of literacy in an age of creeping Twitter-speak, are performing a valuable public service.

I try to return my library books in the same condition they were in when I checked them out. But when it comes to my personal library? I strip off the jacket! I crack the spine! I fold over corners. I underline. I don't hesitate to leave my mark.

I happen to think that makes a book happy. Some of my best relationships have been with books. And who, in a relationship, wants to always be handled with kid gloves? I don't want to remain untouched by a book. Why should the book want to remain untouched by me?

If I were a book, I'd welcome underlining. It's not disrespect. It's affirmation. It's a reader saying "Yes! Thanks! I agree! You rock!"

And folding over a page corner? It doesn't say "I don't care." It says "I'll be back."

My mother, from whom I got my love of reading, never saw eye to eye with me about this. Growing up, whenever she caught me folding over a page corner to mark my place, she'd say, "Use a book mark!" and hand me a slip of paper, a napkin or a file card.

It was a losing battle. To this day, I shun bookmarks. But I'd never think of discouraging you, the library patron, from using them. Not because I'm tender-hearted about page corners. But because those of us who work in public libraries are so entertained by the stuff the

reading public uses to mark their places with, then forgets to remove when the book is returned.

Airline tickets. Grocery coupons. Money! (I once found a fifty in a copy of "Get Rich Quick.") Family photos. Nudie photos. A marijuana leaf. A slice of wrapped cheese. Love letters. Once, even, a cherry-flavored condom. (Thankfully, unopened and still in the wrapper.)

Then there was the furious, heart-felt letter written by one of our patrons to her spouse, detailing every despicable thing he'd done during the course of their marriage, which fell out of a just returned copy of "Coping with Infidelity." Was it signed? You bet.

Think about her the next time you're tempted to grab a less than dignified photo of your hubby or a steamy love letter from your sweetie to mark your place in a library book.

Then play it safe and fold over the page corner.

