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C.E.O. Libraries Reveal Keys to Success

By HARRIET RUBIN

Correction Appended

Michael Moritz, the venture capitalist who built a personal \$1.5 billion fortune discovering the likes of [Google](#), YouTube, [Yahoo](#) and PayPal, and taking them public, may seem preternaturally in tune with new media. But it is the imprint of old media — books by the thousands sprawling through his Bay Area house — that occupies his mind.

“My wife calls me the Imelda Marcos of books,” Mr. Moritz said in an interview. “As soon as a book enters our home it is guaranteed a permanent place in our lives. Because I have never been able to part with even one, they have gradually accumulated like sediment.”

Serious leaders who are serious readers build personal [libraries](#) dedicated to how to think, not how to compete. Ken Lopez, a bookseller in Hadley, Mass., says it is impossible to put together a serious library on almost any subject for less than several hundred thousand dollars.

Perhaps that is why — more than their sex lives or bank accounts — chief executives keep their libraries private. Few [Nike](#) colleagues, for example, ever saw the personal library of the founder, Phil Knight, a room behind his formal office. To enter, one had to remove one’s shoes and bow: the ceilings were low, the space intimate, the degree of reverence demanded for these volumes on Asian history, art and poetry greater than any the self-effacing Mr. Knight, who is no longer chief executive, demanded for himself.

The Knight collection remains in the Nike headquarters. “Of course the library still exists,” Mr. Knight said in an interview. “I’m always learning.”

Until recently when [Steven P. Jobs](#) of [Apple](#) sold his collection, he reportedly had an “inexhaustible interest” in the books of William Blake — the mad visionary 18th-century mystic poet and artist. Perhaps future historians will track down Mr. Jobs’s Blake library to trace the inspiration for Pixar and the grail-like appeal of the [iPhone](#).

If there is a C.E.O. canon, its rule is this: “Don’t follow your mentors, follow your mentors’ mentors,” suggests David Leach, chief executive of the [American Medical Association](#)’s accreditation division. Mr. Leach has stocked his cabin in the woods of North Carolina with the collected works of Aristotle.

Forget finding the business best-seller list in these libraries. “I try to vary my reading diet and ensure that I read more fiction than nonfiction,” Mr. Moritz said. “I rarely read business books, except for Andy Grove’s ‘Swimming Across,’ which has nothing to do with business but describes the emotional foundation of a remarkable man. I re-read from time to time T. E. Lawrence’s ‘Seven Pillars of Wisdom,’ an exquisite lyric of derring-do, the navigation of strange places and the imaginative ruses of a peculiar character. It has to be the best book ever written about leading people from atop a camel.” Students of power should take note that C.E.O.’s are starting to collect books on [climate change](#) and global warming, not [Al Gore](#)’s tomes but books from the 15th century about the weather, Egyptian droughts, even replicas of Sumerian tablets recording extraordinary changes in climate, according to John Windle, the owner of [John Windle Antiquarian Booksellers](#) in San Francisco.

Darwin’s “Origin of Species” was priced at a few thousand dollars in the 1950s. “Then DNA became the scientific rage,” said Mr. Windle. “Now copies are selling for \$250,000. But the desire to own a piece of Darwin’s mind is coming to an end. I have a customer who collects diaries of people of no importance at all. The entries say, ‘It was 63 degrees and raining this morning.’ Once the big boys amass libraries of weather patterns, everyone will want these works.”

C.E.O. libraries typically lack a Dewey Decimal or even org-chart order. “My books are organized by topic and interest but in a manner that would make a librarian weep,” Mr. Moritz said. Is there something “Da Vinci Code”-like about mixing books up in an otherwise ordered life?

Could it be possible to read Phil Knight’s books in the order in which Mr. Knight read them — like following a recipe — and gain the mojo to see a future global entertainment company in something as modest as a sneaker? The great gourmand of libraries, the writer Jorge Luis Borges, analyzed the quest for knowledge that causes people to accumulate books: “There must exist a book which is the formula and perfect compendium of all the rest.”

Personal libraries have always been a biopsy of power. The empire-loving Elizabeth I surrounded herself with the Roman historians, many of whom she translated, and kept one book under lock and key in her bedroom, in a French translation she alone of her court could read: Machiavelli’s treatise on how to overthrow republics, “The Prince.” Churchill retreated to his library to heal his wounds after being voted out of power in 1945 — and after reading for six years came back to power.

Over the years, the philanthropist and junk-bond king [Michael R. Milken](#) has collected biographies, plays, novels and papers on Galileo, the renegade who was jailed in his time but redeemed by history.

It took Dee Hock, father of the credit card and founder of Visa, a thousand books to find *The One*. Mr. Hock walked away from business life in 1984 and looked back only from his library's walls. He built a dream 2,000-square-foot wing for his books in a pink stucco mansion atop a hill in Pescadero, Calif. He sat among the great philosophers and the novelists of Western life like Steinbeck and Stegner and dreamed up a word for what Visa is: "chaordic" — complex systems that blend order and chaos.

In his library, Mr. Hock found the book that contained the thoughts of all of them. Visitors can see opened on his library table for daily consulting, Omar Khayyam's "Rubáiyát," the Persian poem that warns of the dangers of greatness and the instability of fortune.

Poetry speaks to many C.E.O.'s. "I used to tell my senior staff to get me poets as managers," says Sidney Harman, founder of Harman Industries, a \$3 billion producer of sound systems for luxury cars, theaters and airports. Mr. Harman maintains a library in each of his three homes, in Washington, Los Angeles and Aspen, Colo. "Poets are our original systems thinkers," he said. "They look at our most complex environments and they reduce the complexity to something they begin to understand."

He never could find a poet who was willing to be a manager. So Mr. Harman became his own de facto poet, quoting from his volumes of Shakespeare, Tennyson, and the poetry he found in [Arthur Miller's](#) "Death of a Salesman" and Camus's "Stranger" to help him define the dignity of working life — a poetry he made real in his worker-friendly factories.

Mr. Harman reads books the way writers write books, methodically over time. For two years Mr. Harman would take down from the shelf "The City of God" by E. L. Doctorow read the novel slowly, return it to the shelves, and then take it down again for his next trip. "Almost everything I have read has been useful to me — science, poetry, politics, novels. I have a lifelong interest in epistemology and learning. My books have helped me develop a way of thinking critically in business and in golf — a fabulous metaphor for the most interesting stuff in life. My library is full of things I might go back to."

It was the empty library room and its floor-to-ceiling ladder that made Shelly Lazarus, the chairwoman and chief executive of Ogilvy & Mather, fall in love with her house in the Berkshires, which was built in 1740. "When my husband and I moved in, we said, 'We're never going to fill this room,' and just last week I realized we needed to build an addition to the library. Once I've read a book I keep it. It becomes a part of me.

“As head of a global company, everything attracts me as a reader, books about different cultures, countries, problems. I read for pleasure and to find other perspectives on how to think or solve a problem, like Jerome Groopman’s ‘How Doctors Think’; John Cornwall’s autobiography, ‘Seminary Boy’; ‘The Wife,’ a novel by Meg Wolitzer; and before that, ‘Team of Rivals.’

“David Ogilvy said advertising is a great field, anything prepares you for it,” she said. “That gives me license to read everything.”

Harriet Rubin is the author of “Dante in Love” and, most recently, “The Mona Lisa Stratagem: The Art of Women, Age and Power.”

Correction: July 24, 2007

An article in Business Day on Saturday about the private library collections of several business executives referred incorrectly to the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, whose chief executive, David Leach, commented on his collection of the works of Aristotle. The accreditation council is an independent, nonprofit organization; it is no longer a division of the American Medical Association. (The two separated in 2003.) The article also included a quotation from Shelly Lazarus, chairwoman and chief executive of Ogilvy & Mather, that misstated the title of a book in her collection. It is “How Doctors Think” by Dr. Jerome Groopman — not “How to Think Like a Doctor.”