

I'll be here when you get back.

THE STORY OF THE UBIQUITOUS BOOKMARK

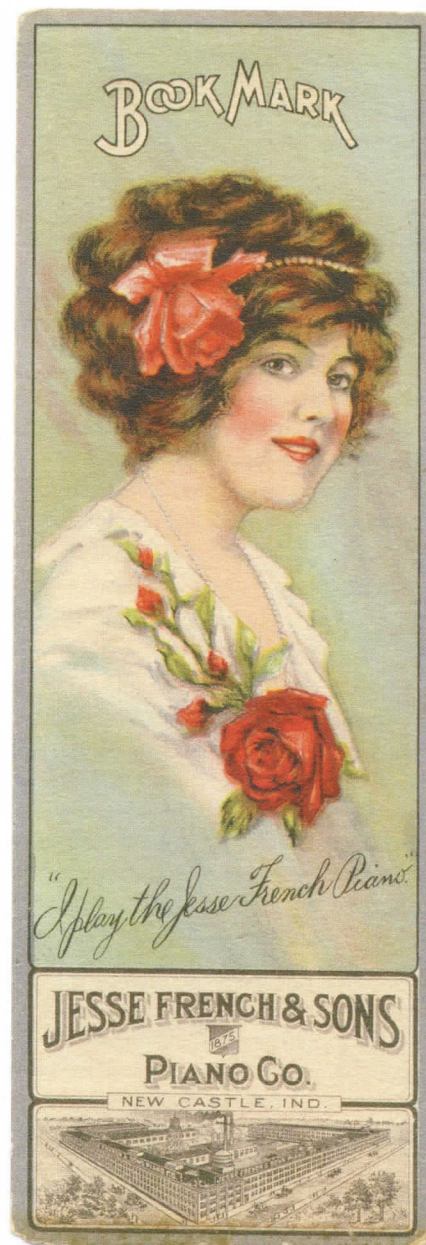


Vintage bookmarks courtesy
Mirage Bookmarks miragebookmark.ch
and The Graphics Fairy thegraphicsfairy.com.
Photo of Marylane Pannell's bookmark
collection by Kerrie More.

On the last day of elementary school, one of the teachers I admired most gave each student a gift of a bookmark signed with a personal note on the back. And there it was: my first bookmark in what would grow to be a cherished collection. Sifting through my eclectic stash of bookmarks takes me back to the corner bookstore, long since closed, where I purchased my beloved copy of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. A gift from a college roommate stands out as one of my absolute favourites, and features a lovely Winslow Homer painting. As a young English teacher, I saved a promotional bookmark from the young adult author who visited my school. There are a number from my world-travelling friend who finds me bookmarks in far-flung places like Bangladesh and Mexico, and just last summer I brought one home from my trip to Niagara Falls. Admittedly, I sometimes resort to grabbing a Sticky Note, a piece of junk mail or even a store receipt to mark my reading spot, but more often than not, I flip through my collection and choose something special as I dive into a new book.

Ivory, pewter, gold, bronze, mother-of-pearl, wood, silk, celluloid, paper—despite the extensive number of materials from which bookmarks have been made over the centuries, their sole purpose remains to safely save our place in the books we adore. Most of us have been guilty of “dog-earing” a page on occasion, and there is evidence that even readers from the Middle Ages resorted to folding pages, marking passages with a dirty fingernail or using blades of straw to save their place. Recognizing the need to protect these delicate manuscripts, medieval book lovers designed vellum place holders that clipped to the edge of the page. These bookmarks, perhaps the first to exist, were discovered on papyrus rolls in monasteries dating from the medieval period.

Somewhere around the 18th century, book makers began to bind narrow silk ribbons into the spines. More elaborate versions included silver or gold balls adorned with gems or pearls. Clip-style bookmarks came into



favour and featured a pointed piece of paper or parchment with a V-shaped slit. These bookmarks could be attached to a page identifying the exact line of text where one should resume reading. It was not until the 1850s that the traditional detached bookmark that we know and love today became more commonplace, and easier to acquire.

Victorian ladies, fond of embroidery, would spend the evening hours creating small samplers in the form of bookmarks. Even Queen Elizabeth hand-stitched elaborate needlepoint bookmarks to help protect the esteemed volumes in her library. Frequently used as gifts, they often declared adoration or commemorated special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries. Centuries later, it is hard to imagine a more thoughtful gift than a handmade bookmark.

Somewhere around 1880, markers printed on sturdy paper gained in popularity. With the Industrial Revolution came the perfection of chromolithography, which allowed commercial bookmarks to be produced in large quantities. These colourful bookmarks quickly became a preferred method of advertising and helped promote an endless array of industries such as health and safety, fashion, transportation, insurance and government agencies. Companies also used bookmarks to advertise a wide variety of products including light bulbs, perfume, sewing machines, chocolate and soap. Die-cut bookmarks, cleverly cut into the shape of a specific product, were especially appealing to customers. Political candidates famously used bookmarks during campaigns, while international tourism began marketing bookmarks as souvenirs. Not surprisingly, publishing companies and booksellers

evolved into one of the most prolific distributors of bookmarks for the purposes of advertising new book releases and publicizing current authors. Bookstores and libraries have consistently provided bookmarks for patrons throughout history. Even today, these types are perhaps the easiest to find and therefore a favourite of collectors.

Serious collectors across the globe seek out and invest in rare and unusual bookmarks

according to particular tastes. For other, such as myself, their bookmarks seem to find them through luck and circumstance. I recently purchased a novel at a used bookstore, and tucked inside its pages was a handmade bookmark coloured by a child's hand, stating, "This is Grandma's book." On occasion a book I have checked out from my local library contains the prize of a marker advertising a bookstore from across the country. These "lost and found" bits of ephemera help tell the story of a particular book. I cannot help but wonder about the loving granddaughter and the occasion for her gift. I try to imagine the journey of a bookmark from so far away. So I add them to my collection, where they will be treasured and used. Perhaps most importantly, in their entirety, the bookmarks in my collection will tell my story—the places I have been and the books I have loved. **U**



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