Alberto Manguel
PACKING MY LIBRARY
An elegy and ten digressions
160pp. Yale University Press.
£16.99 (US $23).

Memoirs

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From time to time, a library of books has to be boxed up and put into storage. According to Alberto Manguel, “possible new orders” form in the darkness, “secret but implicit, apparent only once the old ones are taken apart”. This is the generous point of view of a man for whom books have a life of their own – for whom they talk among themselves, in ways that may surprise even
the most attentive of librarians.

“Lifelong enemies” Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, for example, in Manguel’s own library of 35,000 books, could sit “amicably on the same expectant shelf”. In the guise of *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (“read for the first time many decades ago”), Jules Verne could sit as a “stern companion” alongside Vercors and Verlaine, “ranking higher than Marguerite Yourcenar and Zola, but lower than Stendhal and Nathalie Sarraute”. Such are the arbitrary adjacencies of the alphabet. “This is anarchy under the appearance of order.” Such, too, is the hifalutin approach of *Packing My Library* to a fairly commonplace phenomenon.

There is a sense in which this short book is an exercise in exquisite self-praise. It is Manguel (now Director of the National Library of Argentina, in Buenos Aires) who brought these books together, and who attends to their conversations: they do not speak for themselves, but he speaks for them. His title responds to Walter Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library: A talk about book collecting” (a title also borrowed for a miscellany of
musings on roughly the same subject, published by Yale University Press, as Manguel’s volume is, in 2011), as well as the dismantling of Manguel’s collection, the establishment of which, in the “ancient barn” of a stone presbytery in the Loire Valley, he wrote about in *The Library at Night* (2009). In itself, packing up this formidable collection was quite the operation, being the work of friends, and friends of friends, who came to stay, to box books and catalogue the collection as a whole.

Amid these activities, however, there are the ten glorious digressions of Manguel’s subtitle, taking him from volumes to visions. The mention of a recurring dream of his, about walking endlessly around a library, via Nathaniel Hawthorne, leads to further stories of dreams and stories about dreams: Alice, contemplating the existential threat of the Red King’s waking from a dream (“you’d go out – bang! – just like a candle!”); Dante, dreaming three times over in Purgatory. Books, too, are threatened by despotic forces that would burn them or ban them, and defended by this obsessive reader and writer in the highest terms (“all literature is civic action: because it is memory”). These reflections
take the reader far from the “zany logic” of mere books on shelves, at the same time as they absolutely depend on Alberto Manguel’s lifelong absorption in this most vital of conversations.

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