

Books really do furnish a room – Liz Hodgkinson



Lots of new houses tragically don't have bookshelves.
By Liz Hodgkinson

It is one of the most painful problems facing many older people contemplating downsizing to a smaller home: what to do with all your precious books.

If you're thinking of moving to a new-build house or retirement home, you'll probably find there's no space whatever for any books.

Instead, there will be a 'feature wall' of garish wallpaper. Very few new homes allow for bookshelves. Although show homes are designed for maximum appeal, with nicely-laid tables, pot plants and artwork on the walls, you will never find any books among the colour-co-ordinated décor.

Whenever I visit a show home, I always ask why there are no bookshelves. They say they make the rooms look too small and crowded.

And yet, as novelist Anthony Powell knew, *Books Do Furnish a Room*. This is the title of the tenth volume (published in 1971) in his sequence *A Dance to the Music of Time*, and the phrase has passed into the language. Rightly so – what is a home without books?

A lifetime collection – dog-eared and annotated – holds such potent memories that getting rid of it is like casting off a family member. Even my old school textbook *Latin for Today* – whose cover I altered to *Eating for Today* – has earned its place among my hoard.

The prospect of consigning beloved volumes to the charity shop is so appalling for some retirees that they decide to remain in the too-big family home and not move at all. Often the charity shop won't even take your adored books – so the rubbish dump is your only option.

Kindles and audiobooks have their uses. But for any bibliophile they will never compete with the pleasure that handling and owning a real book brings.

With this in mind, Cognatum, a non-profit retirement-home company, makes sure all its developments contain a downstairs spare room that can be turned into a dedicated book room, where there is space for a collection to expand. Book-loving downsizers will always want to add to their library – particularly because in retirement they will have more leisure to read.

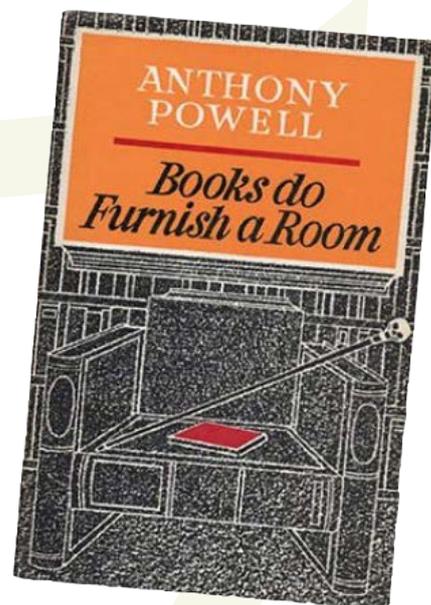
Cognatum CEO Richard Williams says, *'Don't compromise on this, as you will regret it. As people retire from a high-flying career, the textbooks and tomes they have acquired are a tangible reminder of their achievements.'*

He cites the example of a recent retiree who moved into one of their developments with 100 boxes of books, and then proceeded to line their book room with Billy shelves from IKEA. 'This proves that kitting out a book room doesn't have to be expensive,' Williams says.

When I viewed my present flat, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves were a strong reason for my buying it. Since then, my carpenter has built many more shelves and there is no space for more. So the books pile up in odd corners – but no way could I live without being surrounded by them.

As the exiled Prospero remarks to his daughter Miranda in *The Tempest*, he was gratified to be expelled, along with his books – 'the volumes I prize above my dukedom'.

The message is clear: don't leave your family home unless you can take your books with you.



The tenth volume in *A Dance to the Music of Time*

Cognatum, an independent not for profit company, has 60 retirement estates across central and southern England. All are in prime locations within vibrant market towns or villages, within walking distance of shops and restaurants. Each estate benefits from thoughtful architecture, landscaped grounds, and a dedicated estate manager.

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