Hoarder or Collector? Some Readings and Reflections

by Jeanne Schinto

"Why do you collect all these newspapers?" I asked Uncle Arthur.

Uncle Arthur tilted his head and looked at me curiously from slitted eyes. "I don't collect them."

"Then why do you have so many?"

"I've been busy. I haven't had time to read them."

Uncle Arthur's papers closed around us like a dark forest. Moving through them was like touring his brain. Without him for a guide, you ran the risk of tripping one of his Collyer-like booby traps patched together from frayed rope, jam jars and gum wrappers. Or simply getting lost in the dimension of junk.

— Franz Lidz, *Unstrung Heroes* (1991)

At the Edward Gorey House in Yarmouth Port on Cape Cod one day this past summer while enjoying the exhibit *Edward Gorey's Cabinet of Curiosities* (on view through December 31), I heard a fellow viewer mutter disparagingly to her friend, "Hoarder." Yes, I thought to myself as I continued along the exhibition's path through a warren of rooms in what was once Gorey's residence. I suppose that's correct. Gorey (1925-2000), the beloved author, illustrator, set designer, and artist responsible for the animated introductions to PBS's *Mystery!* series, probably was a hoarder as much as he was a collector.

On display in the exhibition, arranged with curatorial flair, were his collections of aluminum box-graters, dented metal oil cans, frog images, and scores of other quirky objects. His artist eyes made him a connoisseur of the beauty in the ordinary. He noticed that certain tools were anthropomorphic. He appreciated the charms of broken, seemingly useless things such as rusty clock springs. He saw in their imperfections what the Japanese call *wabi-sabi*.

In a frame behind glass and arranged in rows were a month's worth of his receipts from the place where he had habitually eaten breakfast. It was both a clever autobiographical vignette and a homage to the diner's owner. But the photographs that showed the interior of the house before it became a museum told the rest of the story. The lord of a whole mountain range of books, Gorey had been a saver of everything, discarder of nothing, a china hunter, a scavenger, and a keeper of cats, multiple cats, which always seem to be a part of every hoarder's domain.

I began to wonder about the differences between hoarding and collecting. Are hoarding and collecting completely disparate behaviors? Or is hoarding what happens when collecting runs amok? Do people hoard some things, collect others, as I believe Gorey did? Hoarding wasn't a trending concept until fairly recently. Is it becoming more prevalent because the world produces more and more consumer goods? Has it become the natural, though pathological, reaction to that? Or are we just more aware of hoarding because of the reality TV shows currently devoted to it? Is that why hoarder was the word that came so easily to that exhibit-viewer's lips?

I did not turn to TV shows for answers to these questions. Instead, I turned to books. The one I found most illuminating was *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, published in 2010, by Randy O. Frost, a professor of psychology at Smith College, and Gail Steketee, a professor of clinical practice at Boston University's School of Social Work.

The two professors' main observation, derived from their decades of research in the field, is that hoarding is defined not by the number of possessions a person has but by how the acquisition and management of those possessions affects their owner. It's not quantity, they argue, but quality (of life) that makes for a hoarder rather than a collector. "It hardly matters how much stuff anyone owns as long as it doesn't interfere with his or her health or happiness or that of others," Frost and Steketee maintain. Only when one's acquisitions, their upkeep, or lack thereof, cause distress, impair one's ability to perform basic functions, or endanger lives, as in becoming a fire hazard, does it cross the line into pathology.

The authors also believe that, even though hoarding is considered a mental disorder, it may stem from an extraordinary ability. Objects that many people overlook are rich with detail and significance for hoarders. They see value where others don't. So do collectors, but only up to a point. The difference comes with the organizational abilities of each. "Making decisions about whether to keep and how to organize objects requires categorization skills, confidence in one's ability to remember, and sustained attention," say Frost and Steketee, who have discovered in their encounters with and clinical treatment of hoarders of all stripes that deficits in these areas "leave them lost amid a sea of things, unable to figure out what to do next."

A bit of the Collyer brothers' interior, including what appears to be a German musical clock. Homer Collyer was trained as a pianist, and 14 pianos were part of the brothers' hoard. Incidentally, only one of the brothers, Langley, was a true hoarder; Homer, blind and disabled, had no real say in the matter and little choice but to go along with it.

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In other words, straight-up hoarders do not include someone who would gather up some of his diner receipts and arrange them behind a frame as Gorey did. Instead, they would try to hang onto all their receipts in the same way that non-hoarders hang onto their birth certificate or their passport or even a receipt for something they are thinking of returning to the store. A hoarder is, in short, someone who has an overabundance of stuff and an overload of mental imagery about it paired with an inability to organize either.

Most of *Stuff* consists of case studies, told in an engaging narrative style, each one illustrating a particular point about hoarding that the professors want to make. They include the infamous Collyer brothers of Harlem, who died in their barricaded and booby-trapped brownstone in 1947. They also tell the story of some present-day twin brothers, approximately 50 years old and affluent enough to fill apartment after apartment with art, antiques, and antiquities. When one living space becomes inhabitable, they simply move on to another. The brothers, pseudonymously called Alvin and Jerry, do "collect." They buy period furniture, decorative arts, paintings, sculpture, textiles, and jewelry. I imagine that the auction houses and dealers they frequent are happy to see them coming. But the purchases and their accumulation have brought them pain as well as pleasure, especially to Jerry, who was the one who phoned Frost one day with a cry for help. "Brother and I are modern-day Collyer brothers," he told him. "What can you tell me about hoarding?"

Jerry wrote in a note to Frost: "My head has so many spinning plots and my dreams at night are turbulent and unsettling—Every day I wonder if I will ever have freedom from chaos." Alvin, for his part, complained to Frost that his mind was "too difficult to navigate. It's like a tree with too many branches. Everything is connected. Every branch leads somewhere, and there are so many branches that I get lost. They are too thick to see through." He elaborated on another occasion: "Everything is compelling, like it's attached to something else. I can't interrupt the stream of things without ruining it."

The Edward Gorey House on Strawberry Lane in Yarmouth Port, Massachusetts. When I thought about hoarder-collectors such as Gorey, I wondered if hoarding was collecting run amok. The authors of *Stuff* have a different idea: "Maybe hoarding is creativity run amok." But of course that opens up a whole other discussion, about creativity. For more information, see the website (www.edwardgoreyhouse.org). Schinto photo.

Andy Singer's cartoon makes a valid point. The hoarding of the twins Alvin and Jerry has not reached crisis level because they have the money to keep filling spaces and moving on. Singer also inadvertently touches on a basic theme of *Stuff*. What distinguishes the hoarder from the collector here isn't the type of collections each has amassed but the way each has—or hasn't—organized them. Courtesy Andy Singer. For more information, see the cartoonist's website (www.andysinger.com).

Yet there is one big difference between Jerry and Alvin. The latter takes genuine pleasure in his possessions, just as a collector does, and just as Gorey did. Alvin spoke at length to Frost about numerous individual pieces in his collections. One was a bronze elephant he'd bought at an antiques shop a decade earlier, "but the detail with which he described the store and the purchase made it sound like yesterday," says Frost. As Alvin moved along from the elephant to the next thing and the next, he was seemingly intoxicated by the associations he was making and telling the doctor about. "Possessions connected him to his past and the pasts of others. They had a meaning far beyond their physical existence."

The typical hoarder's situation reminded me strongly of magical realist Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Funes the Memorious," which recounts the tale of an unfortunate lad who, after a fall from a horse, remembers literally everything, including, for example, "the forms of the southern clouds at dawn on the 30th of April 1882," "every leaf of every tree of every wood, but also every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it," et cetera, et cetera. "My memory, sir, is like a garbage heap," Funes tells the story's narrator, who reports with amazement that without effort Funes had learned English,

The inside front cover of *Out of This World* features a photo of its author and Langley Collyer. Helen Worden Erskine's book devotes chapters to numerous other eccentrics; it is, however, dedicated to the Collyer brothers.

French, Portuguese, and Latin. "I suspect, however, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions," the narrator continues, sounding very similar to the authors of *Stuff*. "In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, almost immediate in their presence."

Stuff's authors say in their introduction: "You will undoubtedly recognize some of your own feelings about your stuff in these pages, even if you do not have a hoarding problem."

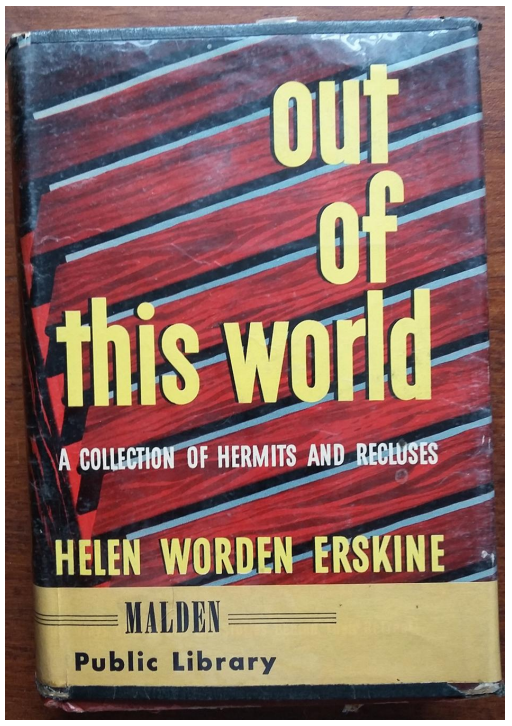
In my opinion, you certainly do not have a hoarding problem if you are a thoughtful, discerning collector who cherishes objects of historical, aesthetic, or cultural significance; who has an understanding of the hierarchy of objects within your collections; and who knows how to sort, arrange, and edit your collections if necessary or desirable. You are not a hoarder if your collections enhance your life and enrich it. Your relatives may not value your collections because they don't understand what you collect. There are ways of dealing with them. One way is to give them a copy of *Stuff* and suggest that therein they will read about people they truly would not want for relatives.

If some of those critical relatives are younger than you, you may also want to point out to them the contemporary hoarder-collectors of digital stuff among us, people not unlike Funes, who collect intangible things, people perhaps similar to themselves who accumulate vast libraries of music and thousands of e-mails and texts and photos, which they often cannot effectively organize, search, or thin out—practices facilitated by seemingly limitless storage spaces and systems in "clouds" and otherwise. These hoarder-collectors are not as obvious or open to pity or ridicule as the old-fashioned kind but are certainly all around us, hiding in plain sight, as it were.

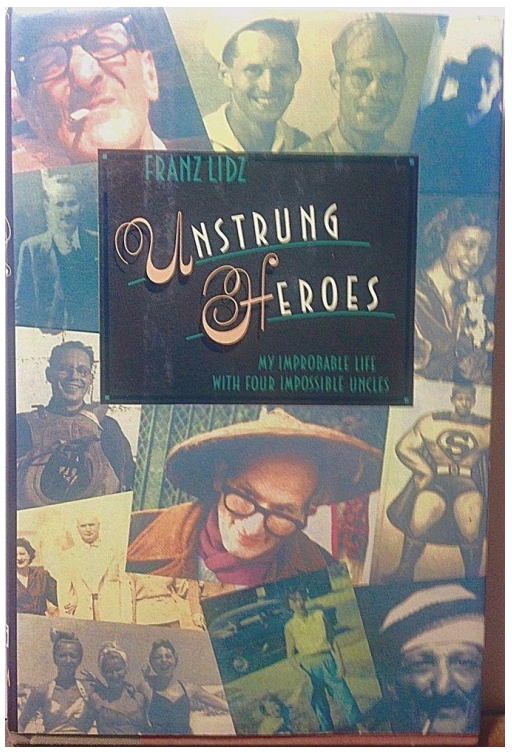
Stuff's authors make it clear that hoarding is distinct from the kind of frugality that is colloquially known as Depression mentality and attributed to deprivation after the 1929 stock market crash. When Frost and Steketee ask their hoarding research participants if they have ever experienced periods of economic deprivation in their lives, they usually say no. In fact, the professors write, "many of them grew up quite wealthy and never faced any shortage of food, money, luxuries."

I would call my uncle Dan J. Schinto a good exemplar of Depression mentality. He was lucky enough to have had a viable business throughout those dire years, but similar to everyone else, he saw deprivation all around him. When he died at age 93, he had cans and cans of de-icer in his garage, enough for the next Ice Age. He had shelf upon shelf of canned tuna, tomato paste, and other non-perishables; he could have lived for a year on what was in his pantry. He scolded me at length one morning, because while staying at his house overnight I had come home late and neglected to turn off an outside light.

I can attest, however, that he was neither hoarder nor collector. He simply could not resist a bargain, and when things were on sale, he bought them. In retirement, besides grocery shopping, another of his favorite pastimes was visiting the dump, to check out what might be up for grabs. He hated waste and could never understand the mentality of people who threw perfectly good things away. Maybe there should be a mental disorder named for them. In fact, there is! When the tendency truly gets out of hand, it is unofficially called compulsive decluttering. See "The Opposite of Hoarding" by Leslie Garrett on *The Atlantic* magazine's website (www.theatlantic.com), September 7, 2015. Collectors, it might not be a bad idea to keep a copy of this article in your arsenal of weapons against would-be critics.



E.L. Doctorow's novel *Homer & Langley* (2009) and Franz Lidz's *Ghosty Men: The Strange but True Story of the Collyer Brothers, New York's Greatest Hoarders* (2003) both tell a version of the Collyer brothers' tale, and each is indebted to an earlier book, whose jacket is pictured. It is *Out of This World: A Collection of Hermits and Recluses* (1953) by journalist Helen Worden Erskine (1896-1984). It was she who broke the Collyer brothers' story for the *New York World-Telegram* in 1938. Her interviews with Langley, the brothers' Harlem neighbors, and others who knew them, along with her own eyewitness reporting, are the original source of information about the Collyers.



Franz Lidz has written engagingly about his hoarding uncle in *Unstrung Heroes* (1991). In *Ghosty Men*, his subsequent book about the Collyers, the uncle is reprised. "If I didn't collect, I'd be in the nuthouse by now," the uncle says. "It takes away the stress. It gives me patience, which is what a person needs." Diane Keaton directed a film version of *Unstrung Heroes*, released in 1995. Lidz notes in *Ghosty Men* that Hollywood sanitized his uncle, turning him into a compulsive collector of wedding-cake ornaments. "Evidently, the reality of musty cardboard and cockroach-teeming newsprint didn't fit the set designer's *Metropolitan Home* aesthetic."

Exterior of the Collyer brothers' brownstone, March 22, 1947, the day after Langley Collyer was reported dead by a neighbor.

My uncle Dan J. Schinto (1910-2003), circa 1936, with the delivery van he used for his business, Pine Grove Farm of Greenwich, Connecticut.

Plyushkin, the fictional hoarder in Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls,* is on the right in this image from an illustrated edition of the novel. In some quarters today, hoarding is called Plyushkin syndrome, while "Collyers Mansion" is an official shorthand phrase used by the New York City Fire Department to designate a structure whose contents make it particularly perilous for firefighters.

The *Stuff* authors don't explore the idea that the consumer age has spawned the hoarder age, probably because it's not the case. There is, for example, the fictional hoarder in Nikolai Gogol's 1842 novel *Dead Souls*, a novel he meant as a critical assessment of his contemporaries. The character is a wealthy landowner named Plyushkin, a curmudgeon afflicted with "stinginess"—i.e., a miser. Gogol's omniscient narrator describes the spectacle of the interior of his house at length, agog at the conglomeration of objects: broken furniture, yellowed engravings, filthy oil paintings, all jumbled together with old food, old clothing, and trash. Plyushkin also has storerooms, barns, and granaries crammed full.

What possible need did Plyushkin have for such a mass of "artifacts?" Gogol's narrator asks rhetorically. "Never in all his life could they have been used even on two such estates as his—but to him it still seemed too little. Not satisfied with it, he walked about the streets of his village every day, looked under the little bridges and stiles, and whatever he came across—an old shoe, a woman's rag, an iron nail, a potsherd—he carried off and added to the pile…." Langley Collyer did exactly the same kind of scavenging, on the streets of New York City at night. Same as the poor, hoarders have undoubtedly always been with us. And so, too, thank God, have collectors.