

Richard L. Rose
5100 Fillmore Ave. Apt. 512
Alexandria, VA 22311
703-845-5196
rlrose45@hotmail.com

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TARGET, TEPEES, AND INSPECTOR O

From dorm life through the fifth year of marriage, my bookshelves were made from planks and cinder blocks. My last bookshelf, completed forty-one years after graduation, is a “five-shelf cherry laminate” from Target. Initially, I was going to buy one of Target’s more elegant pieces, like the last four bookshelves I have assembled from kits of precut, predrilled, laminated composite boards with dowel rods and nifty screw-locks boxed up for me by some Chinese farmer who decided to make \$100 a month in the factory instead of \$100 a year at home. These shelves are sturdy and easily pass as fine furniture if one is walking quickly past them while doing something else, which is always the case in our apartment. What caught my eye about the cherry laminate were the smallness of the box and the words “no tools required.”

The bookshelf was the same size as the elegant model and a fourth of the cost. It had to be cheesy. Yet it didn’t look bad, and the box, although heavy, was easier to slide onto the passenger seat of our small car than the eight-foot-long box of the elegant model would have been. I was also intrigued by how such a large bookshelf was going to come out of the box and be held together by hardware that required no tools. Of course, the only tools I had needed on the last bookshelves were screwdrivers and an Allen wrench, but requiring no tools seemed to violate the Betty Crocker principle: *Always give the customer something to do, even if it’s only adding an egg, so that she can say she*

“made” the product.

To look at it, the hardware for the bookshelf reminded me of an airplane model kit. The plastic dowels, click screws, connectors and shelf supports come molded together on small frames from which they must be snapped free. When finished snapping, I had a small pile of flimsy white and brown plastic toy screws and dowels, not at all like the unredeemable situation I once created by foolishly unsnapping and piling all of the pieces before beginning work on a model jet plane, a plane never completed.

In the Target kit, I was pleased to see only one screw—for the anchor to the wall bolt. You often discover only late in an assembly that you’ve used the short screws when you should have used the long ones. If the short ones are unreachably secured behind a rail, you must either take it all apart or go buy more screws. Taking one of these projects apart is almost always a bad idea because, unlike wood, the composite board crumbles as screws are re-inserted. On the other hand, leaving short screws in place when one should have used long screws may result in the bookshelf folding in the middle just as one is setting a crystal fruit bowl on top for the final touch.

Happily, there were no screws, only click-screws and click screw nuts and abundant directions on how to insert them. I liked the instruction sheet. It was obviously written by someone who had suffered. So many assemblies, whether of carburetor sets, brake-shoes, bicycles, dining room tables, or ceiling lights, are explained in the same way that locals give directions around their neighborhoods: *“Go on around the way and past the Johnson place and if you be on the lookout for them, you’ll find ‘em.”*

You receive a single sheet of paper with a blurry diagram and a short list of steps that give great emphasis to the obvious and tell you nothing about the view from the back that would show how it all fits together. Only those who have suffered can appreciate the booklet that comes with the Target five-shelf cherry laminate. Forty-four pages present the assembly process in words and diagrams with multiple views and abundant warnings. The reader is repeatedly reminded to bring the boards flush before inserting the click screw nuts on piece A, before inserting the click screws into the screw nuts on piece A, before inserting the click screw nuts on piece B, and so on. I savor this redundancy

because I remember all of the leaning cabinets and dipping doors I have had to correct for want of timely attention.

Like Inspector O, the North Korean detective in Frank Church's *A Corpse in the Koryo*, I am impressed by the persistent attention of craftsmen, even though it always eludes me. Inspector O, a cabinet-maker at heart, is always rubbing a small piece of wood in his hands, to the irritation of his superiors, who tell him to drop this dirty habit and smoke cigarettes like the rest of them. Each piece of wood, he says, ultimately comes to its own shape—a different shape for persimmon than for walnut or oak. He tells how his grandfather disdained the use of sandpaper, a perverse product invented by some American in the 1830's. His grandfather always scraped and rubbed the wood until the warm pattern of the grain was revealed. Inspector O transfers the same persistent attention to the craft of detection.

Unlike Inspector O, most of us need directions to stay on task. Without being reminded on every page to bring the corners flush, I would forget. One mistake suffices to end the illusion that a pressed board bookshelf can pass for fine furniture. A missing dowel rod creates a pucker. A rail inserted upside down makes a break in the false grain. A molding attached to the base instead of the edge of the top shelf raises a question that is readily answered on closer inspection. Any of these mistakes is enough to reveal the fraud lying under the laminated surface.

The whole project went up in an hour and a half. I made a mistake, but it didn't cascade into the usual disaster. I inserted one of the shelves upside down and didn't discover it until inserting the brace to the connection between the top and bottom halves of the bookshelf. There was no place to insert the last two plastic dowels, so I substituted two screws left over from a more unfortunate project.

This is my last bookshelf because there's no room in our apartment for shelves, or anything else, for that matter. It's not as elegant as the more expensive model, or even as impressive as the shelves I built into the paneled addition of our previous home, a small ranch-style house in a subdivision near a pasture. In that project, my mistakes were all covered by crown molding, except for the mistakes I made in the crown molding. I would also have to admit to placing cinder blocks under the bottom shelf. Years of setting up

plank and block shelves had left us many cinder blocks. Unlike true craftsmen, I like to use up the material I have, even if it violates the design. Instead of calling this tinkering-about, I call it *bricolage*, an elegant word to excuse myself for hurried work. But as inelegant and temporary as my bookshelves have been, they have sufficed.

After all, how long does a bookshelf have to last? Surely the craft required should correspond to the usage; yet bookshelves used for the lightweight purposes of displays and trophy cases are always monuments of cabinetry, not assemblies using plastic hardware. Inspector O routinely comments on the sloppiness, inefficiency and lack of craft in his world. Just getting a cup of tea is a problem for most of the book. He remembers his grandfather, the craftsman, saying that present-day North Korea was not the kind of world for which he had fought in the war and become a hero in the Revolution. Supported by an impeccably crafted idealistic structure, it was, in fact, a world of petty officials, rampant suspicion, poverty, bribery, slipshod work, shortages of basic goods and functioning equipment, dishonesty, heartache and desolation. How long should such a world have to last? Because of some long-buried system of justifications, you make up a story to explain it, a story that stands as a trophy for those who uncritically repeat it. One senses that Inspector O believes that, like the poorly painted molding along his decrepit office ceiling, his world—a world of intimidating trophies and slogans, monumental architecture, and maps showing the roads straight, regardless of how they were built—should be taken down, pulled apart, and given a good sanding.

A bookshelf is a program of study, not a trophy case. The worlds I put onto the shelf cannot stay there. It's not a flimsy shelf, but as the Earth persistently tugs on all its worlds, the boards will sag and the plastic screws pop out, even as the core will finally pop out of the Earth itself, leaving us all wondering where to go. Of pressed crumbs both were made; to crumbs they return. Should I have built it from walnut inlaid with ebony, surrounded it with a ten thousand square foot residence on a quarter acre lot, and should I have thoughtfully willed everything to our children, and should I have managed to surpass the accelerating interest rate to pay it all off, even then I may have discovered that the children didn't want it. And then, all of the worlds I had collected might as well have been marbles in a bag. Given this late-night reflection, I have concluded that what

matters is whether I have lived in those worlds, learned the parts, and seen through other eyes. A bookshelf is a program of study. When study comes to an end, the flats are taken down, the props are returned to the prop table, and the script is passed on to the next band of scoundrels.

A cheap bookshelf is easy to dismantle. I have never felt any remorse about piling the dusty, bowed shelves with their twisted, phony tenons into a dumpster. It would have been different to dismember an elegant walnut shelf, its shelves as straight and glossy as the day it was installed. And it would have been different if the bookshelf were part of a stately library, and that library part of an edifice grappling against the resistance of bedrock, underground springs, swelling marine clay, and the pressure of ten million roots, the forward arms of the host of grubs, nematodes and insect warriors that always resist such installations. To dismantle such an object is so unthinkable that you must make a monument of it and make up a story for leaving it in place, maybe like the story of the western migration.

Vine Deloria has written^{*} that from the colonial period to the western migration, pioneers were intent on recreating England, and later, New England, wherever they went. There would be towns, grids of streets, commons, and houses great and small to grapple with the land. In this way, the wilderness would be tamed and made to yield its bounty. Of course, on the view of the inhabitants of the continent, there was no wilderness, only a world requiring close attention and subtle crafts. In this world, you sometimes settled in one place, but you might as easily move on. The world supplied what was needed. Tepees were easily dismantled. To stay too long and overuse anyplace was impolite. The many confrontations and annihilations that had led to this insight over twenty thousand years of history were so distant that they were remembered chiefly through rituals, the same rituals that convinced the hurried settlers of the backwardness of the inhabitants.

In the forty first year since graduation from college, I have put up my last bookshelf, my last program of study. It's already packed with books. It embarrasses me to tell you that it stands in the bathroom, a half-wall separating it from the shower stall.

^{*}In *Lewis and Clark Through Indian Eyes*, 2007, Vintage Books, edited by Alvin M. Josephy

There are no first editions signed by the author, only unread books I have saved almost until it was too late, and other books, dog-eared but never understood. It is a monument to self-dissatisfaction. Getting at the worlds in these books will take more time than I have left. Someone will soon be dismantling it and chuckling about how easily it all came apart. But that was the point.

THE END