

# I had to say goodbye to my old Encyclopedia Britannica set

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first person

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Illustration by Christine Wei

I just threw one of my major childhood dreams into the blue recycle bin. Or rather the balance of my dream. I'm talking about my old Encyclopedia Britannica set. And it bothers me, a lot.

Likely most baby boomers can commiserate with me. So can many Generation Xes, i.e., those of you born between 1965 and 1980. As for you millennials and younger, I am not sure you even know what a paper book is.

When I was growing up in Montreal, the No. 1 source of knowledge was the encyclopedia, the Britannica being the mother of them all. If you wanted to know a fact, such as how Napoleon did at the Battle of Waterloo, you went to the local library and opened the volume labelled something like Munich to Netherlands and in seconds you got your answer – Bonaparte blew it.

The Britannica was the first go-to if you had a school essay assignment. I once had to do a geography report about snakes. No problem. I trudged my way a couple of kilometres in -10 C, to the cozy public library where I headed for the Britannica and opened the requisite tome containing the likes of September to Spokane. In addition to enjoying this hunt for knowledge, I had basically finished my essay. I still recall that the average lifespan of a king cobra is 20 years. And that its main predator is the mongoose. And the graphic colour pictures of those cobras are still etched in my memory. Although I always relished a visit to a library, my dream then was to have my own Britannica.

Realization of this dream, of course, was financially impossible. We were talking a king's ransom. My quick math told me even if I saved half of my \$1-a-week allowance, I might be able to get my set in the year 2028.

The best I was able to achieve was one volume of a World Book series which someone had tossed into the trash. I recall it was dog-eared, water-damaged and it covered topics from Bananas to Brains. I rescued it from certain destruction. To me it was a treasure trove. You never knew when I would need instant information about Belgium. And maybe subconsciously I figured if I got this one, the rest would come. I was right.

Fast-forward to the 1980s when my finances had skyrocketed from that \$1 a week.

I wanted to give my three kids the bank of knowledge I never had in my home. I ordered a set of Britannica at a cost of more than \$2,000. At least in those days there was no GST.

When the crate was delivered, I felt like I had won the 649 lottery. I removed the 30 or so volumes and in my moments of delight I rubbed my eyes and opened a book or two. Sure enough, those pictures of those cobras were still there, well past their 20-year lifespan. All mine! Yes!

But how long can any joy last? Fast-forward to 2025. Time to downsize and declutter. With the internet, Britannica, which I note had been around since 1766, became a bit of a dinosaur.

First I offered them to my adult kids. They each reacted as if I was attempting to unload something obsolete on them, like a telephone booth. My millennial son laughed heartily as he was busy multitasking, sending someone a text.

No problem. No doubt some charitable organization would snap them up. I called around and no luck. One young-sounding gentleman said, "Oh yes, my grandfather has one of those."

My frustration soon led me to make an unimaginable decision – toss them into the blue box. If it was any consolation, at least they were being recycled. Maybe there was a reincarnation for books. Perhaps they'll come back as an iPad.

However, I had difficulty just disposing of them all at once. I wondered whether I'd experience profound regret. I decided to first throw out just Volume 1. The book's spine read something like, Aardvark to Argentina. I figured I might not miss it unless I wanted to look up the mating habits of the anteater.

With a heavy heart I placed the large leather-like covered book into the blue box. I felt like a heretic.

When the trash truck arrived, I observed the loader dumping the box into the truck. To my surprise he did not even give Aardvark to Argentina a second look. Boorish, I thought to myself. I hope one day he needs quick information on the mating habits of the anteater.

The next number of Wednesdays I similarly disposed of several volumes at a time, randomly selected for the recycle axe. Doing one at a time felt like death by many cuts.

The last one to go by chance was September to Spokane. I took one last look at those cobras and bid them goodbye. After all these guys survived the mongoose.

Times have certainly changed. Information via paper has been replaced by the internet, be it Google, AI or heaven knows what else.

In my endeavour to declutter, I just came across, guess what? My old World Book, Bananas to Brains. Really aged and war-torn. This one is a 100-per-cent keeper. It reminds me of a pleasant dream.

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