

People who steal books

A friend of mine, vacationing in a sunny climate last winter, mysteriously lost her book on the beach in a moment of inattention. She could not escape the conclusion that the book had been stolen, which was not the sort of thing she had expected at this fashionable resort. Had the book been taken on impulse by another guest, perhaps? Was it a bibliokleptomaniac (such people do exist),¹ a casual thief seizing an opportunity, or a transient on the beach who needed a few dollars (or wanted to read the book himself?). Whoever the thief was, my friend felt the way a young neighbour back in Canada did when a classmate stole his latest Harry Potter book. Her book was not priceless or rare, nor was it a masterpiece, but she wanted it back.

The stealing of books, perhaps the most selfish of all forms of theft, has a history that goes back to the beginning of libraries, when books were rare and thus a greater temptation. In the Middle Ages a widely used weapon against book thieves was a curse. Of the many examples that have survived, my favourite is the following curse of uncertain origin:

For him that stealeth a book from this library, let it change into a serpent in his hand and rend him. Let him be struck by palsy and all his members blasted. Let him languish in pain, crying aloud for mercy and let there be no surcease to his agony till he sink to dissolution. Let bookworms gnaw his entrails in token of the Worm that dieth not and when at last he goeth to his Final Punishment, let the flames of Hell consume him for ever and aye.

Other curses of the time included the threat of eternal damnation or excommunication from the Church. Other tailor-made curses have been suggested² and have become popular in some libraries. Forcible exile was punishment in the Middle Ages and also, much later, in the 19th century. In Britain at that time, punishment for stealing books could include transport

to Australia, a punishment usually reserved for hardened criminals.

But history shows that some of the most shameless book thieves emerged not from the criminal fringe but from the ranks of piety and respectability. A good example is Dr. Elois Pichler, a Bavarian theologian and one of many German librarians employed in the Russian Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg. From 1869 to 1871, he committed the largest theft of books on record from a European library.³ He was caught in 1871 with about 4000 volumes. He wore a large, bulky overcoat that had been fitted with a special inside sack, in which he hid his stolen books. His collection included rare and valuable volumes as well as a large number of ordinary items bearing no relation to his research. He was found guilty and sentenced to exile in Siberia.

Other infamous thieves include Stephen Carrie Blumberg, who in 1991 was found guilty of the largest rare book theft in US history.⁴ With an altered ID card, he assumed the name of a Prof. Matthew McGue from the University of Minnesota to gain entrance to libraries. Gilbert J. Bland, “the Al Capone of cartography” stole almost one million dollars’ worth of rare maps

from libraries in the US and Canada. Bland, an antique map dealer from Florida, posed as an out-of-town historian under the alias “James Perry” before he was discovered.⁵

Defacement and mutilation of library materials is common in academic libraries and is usually perpetrated by students. Other notable thieves, some of them motivated by the money they can gain by selling their booty, include booksellers, librarians and graduate students. A fictional example is Saul Bellow’s character Augie March, who learns from a friend how to steal books to sell to students, only to find himself compulsively reading what he has pilfered, “feeding on print and pages like a famished man.”⁶ Writers have been among the most determined of book thieves, and some have even claimed to have had higher intellectual motives. The playwright Joe Orton and his companion Kenneth Halliwell were charged with malicious damage to 83 books and 1653 plates from library books in Britain and were both sent to prison. Their Islington bedsitter was found to be decorated from floor to ceiling with illustrations stolen from library art books. Beginning in 1959, Orton had been stealing books from li-



Man in crowd, reading Pierre Elliott Trudeau's *Federalism and the French Canadians*, 1968 [detail]

Duncan Cameron / National Archives of Canada / PA-206323

braries and altering the book jackets and blurbs on books he allowed to remain on the shelves. In this way, he stated, he was taking revenge on "all the rubbish that was being published."⁷ He once described these actions as "unforgivable," but this did not stop him from being, as he put it, "unrepentant."

Today, book theft from libraries is an increasing problem despite investment in expensive antitheft devices.⁸ But the theft of books, manuscripts and other printed material is only one aspect of the problem. The theft of intellectual property by plagiarism and infringement of copyright is equally serious. The absence of copyright agreements in past centuries led to open book piracy. William Alford, in *To Steal a Book is an Elegant Offense*,⁹ discusses the problem in relation to intellectual property law in Chinese



civilization, where copyright laws have traditionally been absent.

Everyone has friends with borrowing and collecting instincts, who borrow books but are tardy at returning them. Perhaps curses should be reintroduced for such individuals. The motto "Never a borrower nor a lender be" is a useful personal alternative to curses or incantations, which in today's world may not generate the same sense of fear and misery as they might have in the Middle Ages. My friend on the beach lost not only her book but the three characters who had become her close companions. When we lose such companions through a selfish act of theft we can fortunately renew our relationship by visiting them again in another copy. Hopefully, the thief found them equally congenial.

References

1. Thompson LS. *Bibliokleptomania*. Berkley: Peacock Press; 1968.
2. Almagro BR. The curse-a-book security system. *Libr Arch Secur* 1987;7:49-53.
3. Stuart M. The crime of Dr. Pichler: a scholar-biblioklept in imperial Russia and his European predecessors. *Libr Cult* 1988; 23(4): 401-22.
4. Vitale C. The Blumberg case and its implications for library security in the central university libraries, Southern Methodist University. *Libr Arch Secur* 1993;12(1):79-85.
5. Harvey M. *The island of lost maps: a true story of cartographic crime*. New York: Random House; 2000.
6. Bellow S. *The adventures of Augie March*, ch. 10. New York: Viking; 1953.
7. Lahr J, editor. *Joe Orton: the complete plays*. New York: Grove Press; 1976.
8. Griffith JW. Library thefts: a problem that won't go away. *Am Libr* 1978;9 (4):224-7.
9. Alford WP. *To steal a book is an elegant offense: intellectual property law in Chinese civilization*. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press; 1995.

E.C. Abbott

Associate professor of medicine
Dalhousie University
Halifax, NS