



THE MAN
WHO LOVED
BOOKS
TOO MUCH

The True Story of a Thief,
a Detective, and a
World of Literary Obsession

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Like a Moth to a Flame

April 28, 2005, was bright and mild, the kind of spring day in New York City that seems full of promise, and on the corner of Park Avenue and East Sixty-sixth Street a queue of optimistic people was growing. It was opening day of the New York Antiquarian Book Fair, and they were waiting to begin the treasure hunt. The annual fair is held at the Park Avenue Armory, an anachronistic, castle-like building with towers and musket ports that one historian described as large enough to allow a four-abreast formation to march in and out of the building. There were no such formations when I arrived, but a steady stream of book-hungry people marching through the doors, eager to be among the first to see and touch the objects of their desire: modern first edi-

tions, illuminated texts, Americana, law books, cookbooks, children's books, World War II histories, incunabula (Latin for "in the cradle," books from printing's infancy, roughly 1450 to 1500¹), Pulitzer Prize winners, natural histories, erotica, and countless other temptations.

Inside, security guards had taken their positions and were prepared to explain, twice to the indignant, that all but the smallest purses would have to be left behind at the coat check. Overhead lights shone bright and hot, like spotlights aimed at a stage, and as I walked into the fair, I felt like an actor without a script. Ever since I was a teenager, I've been an inveterate flea market shopper, on the prowl for beautiful and interesting objects. Some of my favorite recent finds are an old doctor's bag I use as a purse, wooden forms for ships' gears, which now hang on a wall in my house, and an old watch repairman's kit with glass vials of minuscule parts. (When I was a teen, it was costume jewelry and bootleg eight-track tapes to play in my boyfriend's van.) This book fair was altogether different. A hybrid of museum and marketplace, it was filled with millions of dollars' worth of books and enough weathered leather spines to make a decorator swoon. Collectors strode with purpose toward specific booths, and dealers adjusted the displays of their wares on shelves while eyeing one another's latest and most valuable finds, perched in sparkling glass cases. They even set some of their

goods on countertops, where anyone who pleased would be able to pick them up and leaf through them. Everyone but me seemed to know exactly what he was looking for. But what I sought was not as clear-cut as first editions or illuminated manuscripts. I love to read books and I appreciate their aesthetic charms, but I don't collect them; I had come to this fair to understand what makes others do so. I wanted a close-up view into the rare book world, a place where the customs were utterly foreign to me. With any luck—something I'm sure every person at this fair was wishing for—I also hoped to discover something about those whose craving leads them to steal the books they love.

To that end, I was here in part to meet with Ken Sanders, the Salt Lake City rare book dealer and self-styled sleuth I had spoken with on the phone. Sanders has a reputation as a man who relishes catching book thieves, and like a cop who has been on the force for years without a partner, he also savors any opportunity to share a good story. I had called him a few weeks earlier, in preparation for our meeting, and during that first conversation, he had told me about the Red Jaguar Guy, who stole valuable copies of the *Book of Mormon* from him; the Yugoslavian Scammers, whom he helped the FBI track down one weekend; and the Irish Gas Station Gang, who routinely placed fraudulent orders with dealers through the Internet and had them shipped to a gas station

in Northern Ireland. But these were preliminary stories, warm-ups for the big one: In 1999, Sanders had begun working as the volunteer security chair of the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America. In short, the job was to alert fellow dealers whenever he got wind of a theft so that they could be on the lookout for the missing books. At first, the work was sporadic. Every few months he would receive an e-mail or telephone call about a theft and immediately forward the information to his colleagues. But as time passed, the number of thefts climbed. There seemed to be no one type of book stolen, nor any pattern, except that most had been snatched through credit card fraud. No one knew if this was the work of one thief or a gang of many. Sanders heard from a dealer in the Bay Area who had lost a nineteenth-century diary. The next week, a dealer in Los Angeles reported losing a first-edition *War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells. Sanders found himself spending less and less time attending to his store and more time trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

Sanders took a deep breath, then launched into a bizarre incident that had occurred at the California International Antiquarian Book Fair in 2003, held in San Francisco. The fair was at the Concourse Exhibition Center, a lackluster, warehouse-like building situated on the edge of the city's design center, just blocks from the county jail—between

showcases for the domestic trappings of wealth and a holding pen for criminals. It was a location that would turn out to be fitting. With about 250 dealers and 10,000 attendees, the city's fair is the largest in the world. "That big ol' barn goes on forever," is how Sanders described it. On opening day, as usual, collectors and dealers were giddy with a sense of possibility. Sanders, however, warily paced his booth. He was surrounded by some of his finest offerings—*The Strategy of Peace*, inscribed by John F. Kennedy, and a first edition of the *Book of Mormon*—but his mind was not on his books. Several days before the fair, while sitting in his Salt Lake City office, surrounded by dusty piles of books and documents, he had received a phone call from a detective in San Jose, California. The detective said that the thief Sanders had spent three years trying to track down (and by then Sanders had a hunch it was one thief, not a gang) now had a name, John Gilkey, and that he was in San Francisco.

A couple of days before the fair, Sanders received a mug shot of Gilkey. He had imagined what the thief looked like, but this was not it.

"I can tell you one thing," he said. "He didn't look like Moriarty to me"—referring to the fictional character whom Sherlock Holmes called the "Napoleon of crime."

The photo showed a plain-looking man in his thirties with short dark hair parted on the side, a red T-shirt under a

white buttoned shirt, and an expression that was more despondent than menacing. Sanders's friend Ken Lopez, a tall Massachusetts dealer with shoulder-length hair and an open pack of Camel cigarettes in his T-shirt pocket, was, as far as they knew, Gilkey's latest victim (he had ordered a first-edition *Grapes of Wrath*). Shortly before the fair opened, Sanders and Lopez talked about handing out Gilkey's photo to all the dealers, even making a wanted poster for the doors of the fair. But Sanders reconsidered. Gilkey's victims, many of whom were at the fair, might one day be called to identify him in a lineup, and Sanders didn't want to risk contaminating the process. All he could do was remain vigilant and wonder if Gilkey would be brazen enough to show up at the fair.

"I was thinking that he would be attracted to a good fair like a moth to a flame," he said. "And he would be there to steal books."

The San Francisco fair had been open less than an hour when Sanders locked eyes with a man he didn't recognize. This was not so unusual. Sanders often forgets names, even faces. But this encounter was different.

"I looked at that guy, and he looked right back into my eyes," said Sanders, "and I got the weirdest goddamn feeling."

It was not the mug shot he was thinking of. That had al-

ready faded from his memory. Something else had snagged his attention, a strange, sure sense that flooded him in a slice of a second. Sanders's daughter, Melissa, was helping a customer at the other end of the booth, and Sanders turned to ask her to take a look at this dark-haired, ordinary-looking man he suspected was Gilkey. But when Sanders turned around to point out the man to Melissa, he had vanished.

Sanders rushed down the aisle, past four or five other booths, bumping into a couple of collectors along the way, to his friend John Crichton's booth. Still stunned, he paused to catch his breath. "I think I just saw Gilkey," Sanders told him.

"You've got to relax, old man," Crichton said, reaching out to pat him on the shoulder. "You're getting paranoid."



SO IT WAS with all of this in mind that I wandered through the New York fair, waiting for my scheduled meeting with Sanders at his booth, and wondering, as I observed the scene around me, if any of these people were like Gilkey. What about the elderly man at a counter a few feet away looking back and forth from one blood-red leather-bound book to another almost identical one? Or the dark-suited couple whispering to each other as they ogled a book on nineteenth-

century French architecture? It was hard not to view everyone with suspicion, but I tried to keep my imagination in check as I approached my first booth.

Straight ahead was Aleph-Bet Books, where I was drawn in by an enticing array of children's books, first editions of many that I recognized from my childhood, like *Pinocchio*, although this was a first edition in Italian, which at \$80,000 cost around twenty thousand times more than my own childhood copy at home (a Golden Book). The booth was packed with hungry collectors, but I managed to get the attention of co-owner Marc Younger, who explained to me why so many fairgoers had crowded his booth. People have an emotional attachment to books they remember reading as children, he said, and very often it's the first type of book a collector seeks. Some move on to other books, but many spend a lifetime collecting their favorite childhood stories. He showed me the first trade edition of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (\$15,000).

"It's an interesting story," he said. "No one would publish it, so she [Beatrix Potter] self-published two hundred and fifty of them. They go up to a hundred thousand dollars."

Next, he pointed out a first-edition *The Cat in the Hat*, priced at \$8,500. It looked pretty much like a new *The Cat in the Hat* to me, and he confirmed that it can be difficult to identify first editions of children's books, in part because the edition is not always noted. Apparently, you have to look for

other clues. Younger explained that when first published, *The Cat in the Hat's* boards (a term for covers—I was learning the lingo) were covered in flat paper, but that later they were glazed (shiny). I was starting to feel like an insider. At the next flea market, I could be on the lookout for a first-edition *The Cat in the Hat*.

Younger then agreed to show me something more rare. He had two letters from L. Frank Baum, author of the Wizard of Oz books, to John R. Neill, who illustrated many of them. “Usually it’s the really extraordinary things that do well,” he said, “like these.” Younger expected them to go for \$45,000 to \$60,000. So many of his books (not to mention the letters, original illustrations, and other ephemera) seemed like “really extraordinary things” that I walked away with a kind of book-fever setting in.

Across the aisle from Aleph-Bet were the largest books I’d ever seen: sumptuously illustrated volumes of natural history, as big as coffee tables and twice as thick, which the dealer, a bow-tied gentleman who spoke in hushed tones, called elephant folios. Based on size and weight, they were aptly named, and I wondered where, other than museums, such books would be useful, or even practical to lug from a shelf, for example, to a table. After admiring a darkly lush, eerie floral illustration in one of the elephant folios, “The Night-Blowing Cereus,” by Robert John Thornton (1799), I left and headed in the other direction, to a booth where I got

to see a rare first edition of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (\$13,500) and a valuable copy of *Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids*, Watson and Crick's first and second DNA article offprints, signed (\$140,000).

The New York fair guidebook indicated that Sanders was in booth D8. Making my way there, I stopped by several more booths. At Bruce McKittrick Rare Books of Philadelphia, owner McKittrick was charming anyone who stopped by with his rapid-fire musings on books. His booth attracted more people than any around it, but that may also have been due to the champagne he poured. He told me about Pietro Aretino, a sixteenth-century Italian writer whose oeuvre included erotic books. In 1524, he wrote a collection of sonnets to accompany the engravings of sixteen sexual positions by Marcantonio Raimondi (who based his images on a series of paintings by Giulio Romano, a student of Raphael's). It remains one of the most famous examples of Renaissance erotica.

"The original editions of his books are so rare and were read to death and were extremely scandalous," said McKittrick, "not just slightly pornographic. Not like eighteenth-century French soft porn. In Venice, in the 1520s, so many wanted it, the stuff just disappeared."

He said people pirated Aretino's work, and at the fair he was selling a mid-seventeenth-century fake of a pirated copy.

"A fake of a fake," he said. "Very interesting."

Before the fair, I had learned that there are probably as many definitions of “rare” as there are book dealers. Most tend toward the cheeky. Burt Auerback, a Manhattan appraiser, is quoted as having said, “It is a book that is worth more money now than when it was published.”² The late American collector Robert H. Taylor said that a rare book is “a book I want badly and can’t find.”³ On the occasions that people answer seriously, they all agree that “rare” is a highly subjective moniker.

The earliest use of the term has been traced to an English book-sale catalog in November 1692.⁴ But it wasn’t until the early eighteenth century that scholars attempted to define what makes a book rare, with bibliophile J. E. Berger making Monty Python–esque distinctions between “*rarus*” and “*rerior*” and “*rarissimumus*.”⁵ A book’s degree of rarity remains subjective, and the only qualities of “rare” that collectors and dealers seem to agree on is some combination of scarcity, importance, and condition. Taste and trends play roles as well, however. When a movie adaptation is released, whether *Pride and Prejudice* or *Nancy Drew*, first editions of the book often become temporarily hot property among collectors. While Dickens will almost certainly be a perennial choice, Dr. Seuss’s star has risen as the children who were raised on his books have become adults with the means to form their own collections.⁶

Walking by a booth with an impressive selection of dust jacket art, I heard a dealer say to a passerby, “Don’t judge a book by its content!” I had read enough about book collectors before the fair to get the joke: Many collectors don’t actually read their books. At first, I was surprised, but having given it some thought, it’s not so shocking. After all, much of the fondness avid readers, and certainly collectors, have for their books is related to the books’ physical bodies. As much as they are vessels for stories (and poetry, reference information, etc.), books are historical artifacts and repositories for memories—we like to recall who gave books to us, where we were when we read them, how old we were, and so on.

For me, the most important book-as-object from my childhood is *Charlotte’s Web*, the first book I mail-ordered after joining a book club. I still remember my thrill at seeing the mailman show up with it at our front door on a sunny Saturday morning. It had a crisp paper jacket, unlike the plastic-covered library books I was used to, and the way the pages parted, I could tell I was the first to open it. For several days I lived in Wilbur’s world, and the only thing as sad as Charlotte’s death, maybe even sadder, was that I had come to the end of the book. I valued that half-dream state of being lost in a book so much that I limited the number of

pages I let myself read each day in order to put off the inevitable end, my banishment from that world. I still do this. It doesn't make sense, though, because the pleasure of that world does not really end for good. You can always start over on page one—and you can remember. Whenever I have spotted my old *Charlotte's Web* (on my son's shelf, then my daughter's), I have recalled how it came to me. It's a personal record of one chapter of my life, just as other chapters have other books I associate with them. The pattern continues; my daughter returned from camp last summer with her copy of *Motherless Brooklyn* in a state approaching ruin. She told me she'd dropped it into a creek, but couldn't bear to leave it behind, even after she'd finished it. This book's body is inextricably linked to her experience of reading it. I hope that she continues to hold on to it, because as long as she does, its wavy, expanded pages will remind her of the hot day she read it with her feet in the water—and of the fourteen-year-old she was at the time. A book is much more than a delivery vehicle for its contents, and from my perspective, this fair was a concentrated celebration of that fact.



AT THE REFRESHMENT STAND toward the back of the fair, I overheard one man say he had just seen Al Pacino, and

someone else note that he had spotted one of the *Antiques Roadshow* experts. The appeal of that PBS show (your junk may be really, really valuable!) was also one of the appeals of the fair. Nothing looked like junk, but plenty of the modern first editions looked perfectly ordinary. Several times I wondered, *Do I still have that book? Do my parents? Could it be a first edition?*

As I continued to make my way through the fair, the dealers I talked to seemed more excited about the *Roadshow* man than about Pacino. Still, I took note of every dark-haired man walking by, hoping for a movie star. Pacino certainly would have blended into the crowd better than I, a woman. Most of the collectors were men,⁷ most well over forty. Many appeared to be scholars or aged hippies or lucky book lovers with inheritances burning holes in their pockets. One man's red Porsche is one of these guys' inscribed first-edition copies of *Portnoy's Complaint*. When handling any of these books, they cradled them, half open, in both hands, so as not to split the spines or cause any other trauma—no rips or folds or coffee spills. They consulted guides and maps of the fair floor, squinted through spectacles across booths, and stooped to better run their eyes down the spines of books, trying to locate a copy of a first edition of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, of which there were only five hundred printed (\$30,000), for example, or the very rare first edition of *The History of the Expedition Under the Command*

of *Captains Lewis and Clark* (\$139,000). Those with less extravagant means were probably hunting down more modest prizes, like a first edition of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (\$125) or, more affordable yet, a first edition of John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich* (\$45).⁸ They also must have been roaming the aisles hoping to be surprised, because that's any treasure hunter's dream—in this case, to stumble upon a book whose scarcity or beauty or history or provenance is even more seductive than the story printed between its covers.

At a fair like this, it's obvious that the allure of any book is in large part sensual. I watched collectors feast their eyes, their hands, their noses. An Englishman placed his coffee cup at a safe distance on the counter before taking a good whiff of a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, then fell into the rabbit hole of John Tenniel's enchanting illustrations. Watching him, I assumed he simply liked the smell of old books, but later I learned that sniffing is also a practical precaution: mildew can ravage a book, and a good whiff can tell you if there's any danger of its encroachment.⁹ As I roamed from booth to booth, book to book, I felt the sensory enticement myself—the feel of thick, rough-edged pages, the sharp beauty of type, the tightness of linen or pigskin covers, the papery smell.

In my pre-fair research, I learned that this fondness not only for rare books but also for endlessly acquiring them has been alive for twenty-five centuries.¹⁰ Around 400 B.C., Eurip-

ides was mocked for his appetite for books.⁴¹ A few hundred years later, Cicero noted that he was “saving up all my little income” to develop his collection.⁴² In the “golden age of collecting,” roughly 1870 to 1930, the world was teeming with fevered collectors. They were and are a determined breed, and their desire can swell from an innocent love of books, or bibliophilia, to an affliction far more rabid, bibliomania, a term coined by the Reverend Frognall Dibdin in 1809.⁴³ An English bibliographer and avid collector, Dibdin noted that “what renders it particularly formidable is that it rages in all seasons of the year, and at all periods of human existence.”⁴⁴ When the books, like those at the New York fair, have pasts—secret, scandalous, or sweet—the attraction is that much more robust. That they also hold history, poetry, science, and stories on their pages can seem almost secondary. The fair was abuzz with people fully in the grip of the spell they cast.

This spell is made even more potent by stories of discovery that collectors share. One of my favorites happened on a spring day in 1988.⁴⁵ That morning, a Massachusetts man who collected books about local history was rummaging through a bin in a New Hampshire antiques barn when something caught his eye. Beneath texts on fertilizers and farm machines lay a slim, worn pamphlet with tea-colored paper covers, titled *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, by an unnamed author identified simply as “a Bostonian.” He was

fairly certain he had found something exceptional, paid the \$15 price, and headed home, where *Tamerlane* would spend only one night. The next day, he contacted Sotheby's, and they confirmed his suspicion that he had just made one of the most exciting book discoveries in years. The pamphlet was a copy of Edgar Allan Poe's first text, written when he was only fourteen years old, a find that fortune-seeking collectors have imagined happening upon probably more often than they'd like to admit. The humble-looking, forty-page pamphlet was published in 1827 by Calvin F. S. Thomas, a relatively unknown Boston printer who specialized in apothecary labels, and its original price was about twelve cents. But this copy, looking good for its 161 years, most of which were probably spent languishing in one dusty attic box after another, would soon be auctioned for a staggering \$198,000. The value of *Tamerlane*, which caused no stir when it was first published and was never even reviewed, has nothing to do with its literary merit, but rather its association with a seminal author, and every time a copy has been unearthed, the price has skyrocketed. Estimates of how many copies of *Tamerlane* were printed range from fifty to five hundred, but so far only fourteen known copies have surfaced, most of which are held in public institutions. In the 1890s, a dealer in Boston spied it on another dealer's ten-cent table, and later sold it for \$1,000. In the 1950s, the unassuming text

was found by two postmen at the bottom of a trunk of books they had picked up at a yard sale. Six months later, they sold it for \$10,000. There may still be a few more on the loose, which is enough to entice any dedicated collector, and now me, toward a box of books in the back of an antiques barn or on a lawn at a yard sale or in a forgotten corner of a thrift shop, through which we will carefully dig in hopes that luck might show her face behind tea-colored paper covers.

At another booth, a dealer told me the story of a famous prank. There was a pair of books, one by Hemingway, another by Thomas Wolfe. Each had written a long inscription to the other. A knowledgeable dealer had to inform the unfortunate owner who had just paid a pretty penny for them that the inscriptions were not authentic, and that the value was not what he had hoped. Later, another dealer discovered that they were spectacular forgeries: Wolfe had written Hemingway's inscription, and Hemingway, Wolfe's.⁴⁶

As I made my way through the fair, I heard many stories of another kind—tales of theft—that whetted my appetite for meeting Sanders. Bruce McKittrick, the dealer who'd told me about the “fake of a fake” Aretino, directed me to a curly-haired man he said was “a very good guy.”

The very good guy was Alain Moirandat, a tall, slender,

articulate dealer from Switzerland. Even in a crowd of erudite, bookish people, he stood out. In the first few minutes of our conversation, he mentioned Nietzsche, Goethe, and Florentine architects. From a glass case, he retrieved a manuscript, unbound, in a shallow box. He had acquired it at auction in 2004, where it had been described simply as “a full work of Flaubert, 254 pages.” It had been priced “idiotically low,” said Moirandat. “I was desperate. Like many in this business, I’m undercapitalized, but it was so ridiculously cheap. I think people must have misread the description, maybe thought it was only twenty-five pages. I decided to put in a bid. . . . I got it at half the price.”

He opened the box and, to my surprise, invited me to leaf through the slightly yellowed pages. They were written in brown ink, which had faded somewhat, as had the drips and splatters, and many lines had been aggressively crossed out. Moirandat said it was a piece Flaubert supposedly wrote while traveling, although he doubted it.

“I’m convinced he didn’t write it on the trip. It’s too well formed.”

He read a passage aloud in French, then translated it roughly for me.

“I will abstain from every declamation and I will not allow myself more than six times per page to use the word ‘picturesque’ and only a dozen times the word ‘admirable.’

I want my sentences to smell of the leather of my traveling shoes . . .”

“It is like peeking in the workshop,” sighed Moirandat, looking over my shoulder at the manuscript.

I had to agree. Its unfinished state, with words scratched out and ink spilled, gave it an immediate, intimate quality. Moirandat left me with the manuscript for a few minutes while he helped a customer. I touched the pages and realized how much I would love to own something like it. *This is how it happens*, I thought. I could slip these sheets under my sweater and make a dash for the door. As I waited for Moirandat to return, I noticed other handsome items he had left on the counter. He was not acting carelessly. Almost every dealer I’d visited so far had done this. When Moirandat returned, I had to stop myself from suggesting he not be so trusting. I might as well suggest to a Japanese host that guests keep their shoes on. Trust was clearly part of the rare book trade’s culture, and who was I to suggest resisting it?

When I asked Moirandat if he had ever suffered a theft, he told me how he once traveled to Germany in pursuit of a thief who had taken a volume from his store in Basel. When Moirandat caught up with him, the thief denied he had been in Basel at the time of the theft. But Moirandat knew his books’ physical markings as intimately as a parent knows a child’s freckles and scars. In court, he told the judge, who held the book in question, to turn to page 28. “You will find

three small holes there, and if you go to the last page, you will find my predecessor's entry mark." The judge did, and the suspect, a public school teacher, was convicted.

Moirandat also told me about a man who had used the "wet string" method.

"He went one day to the library with a length of wool yarn hidden in his cheek. He placed the wet yarn inside a book, along the spine," he said. "He put the book back on the shelf and came back a few weeks later. As the yarn dried, it grew shorter, which made a clean cut."

The thief didn't have to smuggle a razor in. A length of wet yarn was all he needed to walk away with one valuable page: an original Manet print. Later, he went to Moirandat's shop and tried to sell him a book. "It was the absolute rarest Goethe first edition that there is on the cathedral in Salzburg. It's one of the really, really great texts by Goethe, seminal to the development of romanticism. It had a round library stamp, eighteen millimeters in diameter, which he had tried to erase. I could see the stamp, but couldn't tell which library it was from. I called up every Swiss library until I found where it was from." The police were notified, and the man, thief of Manet and Goethe, was caught.

I walked away thinking it's a wonder this sort of thing doesn't happen all the time.

I passed McKittrick's booth again, and he motioned for me to wait a moment while he quickly crossed the aisle to

speak with dealer Sebastiaan Hesselink of the Netherlands. When McKittrick had told me earlier about the pirated fake Aretino, I had asked him about other crimes in the trade, like theft. He hadn't had any stories for me, which is why he was now talking to Hesselink. McKittrick asked him if he would speak to me about, he whispered, *the theft*. He would, so McKittrick introduced us. I guessed that not all dealers might be willing to share a story of theft, so I felt fortunate that Hesselink had agreed to it. While his son manned their booth, Hesselink and I left the fair floor and sat on folding chairs in a dark, quiet hallway off the foyer.

In a distinctive Dutch accent, Hesselink described how several years earlier, a man had called him and asked if he would be interested in some very rare items, including a Book of Hours and letters from several American presidents. Hesselink was interested, but as soon as he saw the books, he became suspicious. He lives in the countryside outside Amsterdam, "in the middle of nowhere," yet here was a man from New York who had traveled that great distance to sell him books that could have been sold easily in the United States.

"This was already fishy," said Hesselink, who said he became more cautious than usual.

He looked at all the materials and made an offer, which the man immediately accepted. This, too, was strange, he

said. In order to stall, Hesselink told the man that because the banks had already closed, he could write a check, knowing that the man would prefer cash, and then suggested they meet the next day, when Hesselink would be able to offer it. Immediately after the man left, Hesselink contacted colleagues in the United States to see if they knew of any stolen books that resembled what he had just been offered. It took only hours to discover that all of the materials had been stolen from Columbia University. Hesselink contacted Interpol, the FBI, and local Dutch authorities, and they set up a sting for four o'clock the next day in the town's public square.

The story seemed straight out of a mystery novel, and my favorite detail was yet to come: That night, Hesselink and his son cut stacks of newspaper into rectangles the size of gilder notes and put bundles of them—the “payment”—into a plastic garbage bag. At four the next day, the man arrived in Utrecht's central square with his bag of loot. Police, in bullet-proof vests, had surrounded the area. Hesselink suggested that the man accompany him to Hesselink's car, where the payment was. After a number of Keystone Kops-style blunders by local police, they managed to arrest him. Prosecuting him would turn out to be even more problematic.¹⁷

I asked Hesselink if he was frightened while handing over the bag of “money,” since the man could have been armed and the police might not have acted fast enough, but he said

he was calm. I was impressed. This was not, after all, a seasoned detective, but a rare book dealer playing James Bond for a day. I left the hallway where we'd talked and headed back into the fair, with yet another story to add to the growing collection in my notebook. The excitement I felt hearing them, acquiring them, was akin, I guessed, to the excitement the most satisfied of collectors were feeling at the fair.

If there had been any thefts that opening day, I figured that the fair manager would have got wind of them, so I stopped by his office to find out. He assured me not only that there were no thefts that day but also that they were uncommon at fairs. I wasn't sure I should believe him. One of the things Ken Sanders had already told me is that part of the challenge in addressing the problem of rare book theft is the reluctance of many people to publicize it. It is irrelevant how cunningly the books may have been stolen; the assumption among the trade, and perhaps even more so among rare book librarians (whose books may have been donated), is that the victim wasn't vigilant enough. Book dealers, who have been known to conduct millions of dollars' worth of business through handshakes, sometimes feel that announcing losses would put them at risk of being blacklisted. "Once you're tainted by theft," McKittrick had explained to me, "you're toast." Because they are often entrusted with valu-

able, beloved books that collectors have hired them to sell, they don't want to risk being seen as vulnerable.

I had brought a slim notebook to the fair and already wished I'd brought a thicker one. Every dealer had a different story to tell. The only thing I heard more than once was, "Every rare book is a stolen book." The Nazis were rampant pillagers of collections, dealers explained, as were the Romans, who stole whole libraries from the Greeks, and Queen Christina of Sweden, who collected a vast booty during the Thirty Years' War.¹⁸ But they were referring also to thieves who act on their own behalf. Whether by the hands of conquerors or corrupt collectors, valuable books go missing, and unless a thief tries to sell a book to a reputable dealer or institution shortly after swiping it, they told me, there's a good chance that no one will be able to track it down. Eventually, perhaps a year later, a decade later, a century later, the book is sold to someone who has no knowledge of its past, no idea of its tainted provenance. It is impossible to track the history of ownership of every book. This, I assumed, is something any clever book thief has figured out.

I turned a corner and spotted Ken Sanders's booth. I was eager to see the face of the impressive storyteller. He did not blend in with the rare book fair crowd any better than I. Sanders has an ample paunch, a thinning ponytail, and a long black-and-white beard that he strokes and twists between his

thumb and fingers. His eyebrows form sharp inverted V's over his eyes, making him look curious or indignant; I would soon learn that he very often is one or the other. While he has a suffer-no-fools way about him, if you're interested in a book or a story, he has all the time in the world. He calls himself the "Book Cop." His friends call him "Bibliodick."

We sat in two chairs at the edge of his booth and talked about how things were going at the fair.

"In a fair like this," he said, "I'm a bottom-feeder. Not like those up on Park Avenue."

That's what Sanders called the aisles up near the front of the fair, which is prohibitively expensive for all but the high-end rare book dealers. Sanders, who told me he attends six to eight fairs a year, is an egalitarian and prefers the San Francisco fair, where a dealer's booth location is decided by lottery. "A lot of New Yorkers hate it," he said. "They'd rather have it be all elite. I like the mixture." I mentioned the rumor that Al Pacino was shopping for books, but he was uninterested. He said that twice, at previous fairs, he had spoken to longtime collector Steve Martin (once, while almost backing into Diane Keaton), but hadn't realized who Martin (or Keaton) was until his daughter, Melissa, exasperatedly informed him, twice.

I asked how things were going.

"We started unpacking at nine A.M. yesterday," said Sand-

ers. “Other dealers will help you unpack to see what you’ve got. So much depends on your knowledge, though.”

He told me about a book he saw one dealer sell to another for \$200 that morning, then watched the dealer resell it for \$3,500 that afternoon. One dealer had recognized value where the other had not.

We hadn’t been sitting for more than a couple of minutes when Sanders told me about the first New York fair he exhibited at.

“Ten minutes into opening night, I lost a thousand-dollar book. And my friend Rob Rulon-Miller lost a book by Roger Williams worth thirty-five thousand. The two of us marched over to the Nineteenth Precinct, which is literally out the back door of the Armory. You can imagine a New York police precinct. And the two of us in *suits* over there. I let Rob go first.”

Sanders explained that dealers are used to police scoffing at news of a stolen book, especially when it’s worth a lot of money. “People pay that for a *book*?” they ask skeptically.

“Me, being the smart one,” continued Sanders, “I let Rob break the ice and explain to the sergeant on duty that we were there to report book thefts. When Rob gives him the details, the sergeant looks up at him, disbelievingly, and says, ‘Roger *Williams*? You talking about one of the guys who founded Rhode Island?’ He actually knew who the man was. I was very

impressed. Then he says, ‘You let someone walk away with a first-edition *Roger Williams?!*’ And he looked at Rob like: ‘You’re some kinda moron, right? After that, I decided my thousand-dollar book wasn’t worth making a fuss about.’”

Moving on to more recent crimes, Sanders said that based on all the theft notices he had received from fellow dealers, he estimates that from the end of 1999 to the beginning of 2003, John Gilkey stole about \$100,000 worth of books from dealers around the country. In the past decade, no other thief has been anywhere near that prolific. What was even more unusual, though, was that none of the items Gilkey stole later showed up for sale on the Internet or at any other public venue. It was this, combined with the inconsistency of Gilkey’s targeted titles (spanning a wide variety of genres and time periods) and the fact that some of the books he stole were not very valuable, that had Sanders convinced that he actually stole for love. Gilkey loved the books and wanted to own them. But Sanders couldn’t prove it.

Weeks earlier, when we had first spoken on the phone, Sanders had told me he was fairly certain that Gilkey had already served time at San Quentin State Prison and that he was now free. He shuddered at the thought, warning me that it would be difficult if not impossible to find Gilkey.

The day after that phone conversation, I looked into it.⁴⁹ As Sanders had presumed, Gilkey had indeed done time at San Quentin and had been released. What Sanders did not

know was that he was again behind bars, this time in a prison in Tracy, California. I wrote Gilkey a letter asking if he would talk to me. Knowing that he had denied his thefts in court, I didn't expect him to open up to me about them. In the letter, I told him that I was interested in writing a story about people who have gone to extraordinary lengths to get rare books. It was a euphemism I hoped would keep him from feeling defensive.

While waiting for a reply, I ordered several books about book collecting and read a stack of articles. One of them, from *The Age*, an Australian newspaper, stuck with me because it indicated that book thievery was rampant.²⁰ Why hadn't I heard about this? Why hadn't any of the friends I asked? The 2003 story was about how those in charge of the Secret Archives of the Vatican, an underground vault holding eighty-five kilometers of historical papers, illuminated manuscripts, antediluvian books, and rare correspondence, have to be on guard against thieves. This was intriguing enough, but there was one sentence in particular that caught my eye: an Interpol agent, Vivianna Padilla, revealed that according to the global police agency's statistics, book theft is more widespread than fine art theft.

Something else caught my attention. It was an online reference to the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America's profiles of five types of book thieves: the kleptomaniac who cannot keep himself from stealing; the thief

who steals for profit; the thief who steals in anger; the casual thief; and the thief who steals for his own personal use. The ABAA had defined them, I suppose, to help dealers and librarians recognize and protect against the range of motivations that might drive a thief. *Know thine enemy*. Of all these, the one that interested me most was the thief who steals for his own personal use—one who steals out of a desire for books. How different would such a person be from the typical book collector? They all seem to be passionate and driven by want. A few dealers had already confided to me that in decades of working with rare books, they had been tempted more than once to steal a book, but had found the strength to resist it. At the book fair, I saw how easy it could be to walk away with something truly unique and wondrous (Flaubert's own papers!). What makes someone cross the line from admirer to thief, and how fine is that line? I wanted to find out.

After several weeks of checking my mailbox, I found what I had been hoping for—an envelope stamped diagonally in large red letters: STATE PRISON GENERATED MAIL. Inside was a letter written in fine, small print on lined paper.

Yes, wrote Gilkey, I would be delighted to tell my story.

With the letter, he sent a page ripped from a Department of Corrections regulations handbook. He had drawn two stars next to the section titled “Media Access to Facilities” and written in the margin, *It's easy to get approved!*



SITTING OUTSIDE SANDERS'S BOOTH at the New York fair, I watched him talk to customers, some of whom he knew well, others not at all. In either case, he was an accommodating host, taking pleasure in sharing his books with people who appreciated them. Again, I had the impression that the book fair was a kind of theater, and Sanders, a seasoned player. When his booth emptied for a minute, he sat down next to me again.

"Gilkey wrote to me from prison," I decided to tell him, "and said he's willing to speak with me."

For a moment, Sanders didn't respond. I had expected him to be excited about the news, eager to hear the details (this, after all, was his big quarry), but instead he looked stern, incredulous. Before saying anything, he gave me a sideways glance.

"You should ask him where all the books he stole are hidden," he said, peevishly. "I bet he's got a storage unit somewhere out in Modesto, where he's from." He stared at the floor a moment, then added, "He's not going to tell you, of course."

It had been over two years since Gilkey had stolen books from Sanders's colleagues, but Sanders was obviously still stung by the experience. Unlike me, merely intrigued by the

idea of Gilkey's thefts, Sanders's way of life had been violated by them. He had a legitimate grievance against Gilkey. It was time for me to go, but before I left his booth, Sanders needed to give me one more warning:

"I tell you," he said, knowing I would soon meet with Gilkey, "all, and I mean all, book thieves are natural-born liars."