

**NOTES FROM: *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much*, by Allison Hoover Bartlett**

**SUMMARY:** Who among us has *never* thought about robbing a bookstore? I mean *honestly*. *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much* is the nonfiction account of the “appropriation” by one John Gilkey of a multitude of rare books, and the network of rare book dealers desperate to stop him. It’s also *phenomenal*.

Gilkey (whom the author gets to know up close and personally before her investigation is through) stole hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of rare books from book fairs, stores, and libraries all over America. He’s also *completely* fine with that, does *not* feel as though he’s doing anything wrong, and has *no* plans to *stop* stealing rare books.

You can think of this book as almost like a less violent *In Cold Blood*. Like Gonzo journalism with just a tad more objectivity and distance. It’s all those things and more, and it really does read like a great novel. I ripped through the whole thing in just a few sittings, completely captivated by the real-life characters that populate the world of rare books and literary obsession.

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“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.”

“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 in 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.”

“One man’s red Porsche is one of these guys’ inscribed first-edition copies of *Portnoy’s Complaint*.”

“I learned that this fondness not only for rare books but also for endlessly acquiring them has been alive for twenty-five centuries. Around 400 B.C., Euripides was mocked for his appetite for books. A few hundred years later, Cicero noted that he was ‘saving up all my little income’ to develop his collection. 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. 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.’ 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."

"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."

"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."

"Driving home from hot, dry Tracy to cool, crisp San Francisco, I replayed my conversation with Gilkey in my head. He was not the flinty, belligerent criminal I had expected, nor had he been completely straight with me. What I felt sure of was that he was a man completely enthralled by books and how they might express his ideal self. He was a collector like other collectors - but also not like them. His polite manner had been a relief at first, but had become disconcerting. Reconciling the face of composure with his history of crime was no simple task, and it was about to become even more complicated."

Ken Sanders: "I had been putting coins in the piggy bank at Pop and Grammy's, and Grammy had matched my deposits. I spent every blessed nickel I had on books that day. Still do."

"Gilkey has a strong sense of decorum, which comes through on the phone, and a complete lack of guilt about ripping people off, which does not. When he reached the store on the phone, he asked if they had any books by H.G. Wells. They did. He gave them a credit card number and, as usual, said that someone else would stop by to pick it up, a man named Robert. Shortly thereafter, Gilkey went for the pickup. 'Great place you have here,' said 'Robert.' He talked with Ben or Lou (Gilkey wasn't sure) for ten minutes or so and took a look at a few books. The book was already packed up and ready to go, so 'Robert' signed for it and walked out with *The Invisible Man*."

"To Gilkey, having a book like *The Mayor of Casterbridge* - old and fine, a piece of literary history - in his hands, felt deeply satisfying. There was nothing like it. He held it, knowing that it was worth something, that 'everyone wanted it,' but that he was the only one who owned it. It was thrilling."

John Milton: "For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them."

Walt Whitman: "Camerado! this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man."

"Still, eighteen months seemed, as he put it, 'an awfully long time to be behind bars for liking books.'"

"Looking around, I was relieved that the cafe was patronized mostly by tourists and people who worked nearby. It was unlikely I would run into any friends and have to explain my companion. What would I say? 'This is the thief I've been telling you about'?"

"Even when thieves take valuable books, their crimes are usually treated relatively lightly in court, probably because the same traits that helped them get away with stealing books in the first place - politeness, education, solicitousness - also help them convince judges that they aren't the sort of people who would ever again do such a thing."

"Jefferson proposed a classification scheme he adapted from Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning*, in which books were organized within the broad categories of Memory, Reason, and Imagination, poetic divisions I'd like to see bookstores adopt today. It might take longer to find what you're looking for, but in browsing, who knows what you'd find."

Don Vicente: "Every man must die, sooner or later, but good books must be conserved."

"The next week, I received a collect call. 'Mrs. Bartlett?' said the only person other than telemarketers who calls me that. 'This is John Gilkey.'"

"What must it be like, I wondered, to view the world in such a way, to feel entitled to all one desired and to be able to justify to oneself any means of obtaining it? If this were truly how Gilkey perceived the world, and every conversation with him confirmed this feeling (I could not think of any reason for him to have presented these views to me as any sort of disguise; after all, they were not flattering), then perhaps he was mentally ill. He was aware that stealing books was illegal, and yet he continued to steal them, because he did not equate *illegal* with *wrong*. Was this a permanent state of mind, or could he change? He didn't seem to want to. Instead, he kept his mind on his collection, imagining how it would elevate his position in society. Gilkey would be regarded as a man of culture and erudition, just like the woman in the wealth management advertisement I had seen who was pictured leaving a rare book shop. Everywhere he looked - movies, television, books, advertisements, clothing catalogs - were images that confirmed our culture's reverence not for literature, per se, but for an accumulation of books as a sign that you belonged among gentility. Through his collection, Gilkey would occupy a revered place in an envied world. Maybe he was just a little more mad than the rest of them."

"Not long before this book went to press, Sanders, nominally retired 'bibliodick,' had

nevertheless alerted colleagues of Gilkey's most recent theft: stealing a book from a Canadian dealer. Gilkey was not arrested. The story never ends."

Warning Written by Medieval German Scribe: "This book belongs to none but me, for there's my name inside to see. To steal this book, if you should try, it's by the throat that you'll hang high. And ravens then will gather 'bout, to find your eyes and pull them out. And when you're screaming 'Oh, Oh, Oh!,' Remember, you deserved this woe."