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Book Review: Thieves of Book Row: New York's Most Notorious Rare Book Ring and the Man Who Stopped It by Travis McDade

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Thieves of Book Row: New York's Most Notorious Rare Book Ring and the Man Who Stopped It by Travis McDade. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013. 240 pp. ISBN 0199922667.

In *Thieves of Book Row: New York's Most Notorious Rare Book Ring and the Man Who Stopped It*, Travis McDade skillfully weaves together the seemingly endless players involved in, and circumstances surrounding, the wide-scale library book theft ring in 1920's and 1930's Manhattan. This title, however, while it might accurately reflect the major through-line of the text, does not do justice to the historical breadth exhibited by McDade's research. *Thieves of Book Row* serves to contextualize the culture of book theft in a period when libraries themselves were coming into their own as an entity in the public sphere. The fast-paced narrative adeptly negotiates parallel discussions of the history of public and academic libraries, antiquarian bookselling culture, the legal system as it pertained to the conviction of book thieves, and the rise of the "rare" book as we have come to conceptualize it today. As Professor and Curator of Rare Books at the University of Illinois College of Law, and a known expert on library and cultural materials theft, Travis McDade essentially traces the roots of his current profession in a curatorial sense. The author argues that stewards of "rare books" (individually and institutionally) arise, in part, as a reaction to organized crime, a phenomenon which directly leads to the segregation of rare books, subjected to "careful restrictions that would guard them from loss" (p. 175).

The book opens with a discussion of Edgar Allen Poe's, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems*—a book which, though released to little fanfare and mixed reviews, becomes a symbol of both the rise and fall of the book theft world in McDade's narrative. From the shelves of the Lenox Library, one of the feeder repositories for what would become the New York Public Library (NYPL) main branch located on Fifth Avenue, to the hands of thief Samuel Dupree, *Al Aaraaf's* theft triggers a widespread investigation by G. William Bergquist, Special Investigator for NYPL. McDade describes the vast network of thieves required to feed Book Row, a six-block stretch of Manhattan between Astor Place and Union Square on Fourth Avenue, littered with "little Dickensian dust [bin]" book shops that served as the focal point of the organized crime syndicate (p. 9). Ironically, stolen books were occasionally sold *back* to the same institutions from which they were lifted, feeding the crime cycle continually forward.

The narrative joins the paths of figures such as Charles Romm, Boston-based head of the pervasive Romm Gang of library thieves who stole from the likes of Columbia, Harvard and Princeton Universities, to Cincinnati-based "shadow" Stanley Wemyss, an elusive solo criminal who ransacked shelves using the pseudonyms "Hilderwald" or "Hilderbrand" (p. 163). As *Thieves of Book Row* progresses, Bergquist catches thieves one-by-one, turning them on each other and

providing a glimpse into an early twentieth century jurisprudence lacking the proper punitive measures to adequately quash the pervasive issue. Although *Thieves of Book Row* may be a story of caper-to-capture, it manages to humanize the thieves as they settle into lives as writers, librarians set on catching continuing criminals, or successful booksellers who, in true irony, sell their hoards of stock back to prominent university libraries and retire into relative quiet.

The scope of *Thieves of Book Row* is ambitious and the narrative is carefully crafted with a wealth of primary sources. Reading more like a mystery thriller than your typical scholarly text, McDade marries the best of both worlds: fast-paced readability with an authentic air of authority and academic grounding. The source material referenced by the author is broad—“[c]ourt records, deposition transcripts, institutional memos, interlibrary letters, newspaper articles, magazine profiles, bookseller memoirs, and unpublished remembrances”—and he balances storytelling and primary documents with aplomb (p. ix). McDade complicates the history of antiquarian bookselling, illustrating the extent to which the Depression-era economy, the rise of public and open libraries, and the concomitant crime syndicates fomented unethical behaviors within all facets of the industry.

McDade’s strength is in culling descriptive details from his sources, conveying not only a serialized re-telling of historical facts, but a cinematic, episodic sense of scene-making as we walk the gritty streets with the text’s characters in zoom-in and zoom-out perspectives. Furthermore, the book provides interested parties with a lengthy list of “players” and high-spots of early twentieth century book culture, all of which serve to temporally ground the narrative with familiar scenes in the history of the period. These include Carnegie, Rosenbach, Astor, and a plethora of literary figures, as well as the Kern sale (“the high-water mark of early twentieth-century antiquarian bookselling”) and the influence of telephone technology on library security and thief communication lines (p. 72). Lastly, McDade conveys the *evolution* of libraries and booksellers *in response* to theft, rather than merely focusing on thievery in-and-of itself, contextualizing the way this blitz of criminality is important to the contemporary state of these institutions—for rare book rooms, library security, and the librarian’s profession would look quite different without the influence of these mob-like consortiums.

As would be the case with any book containing such historical detail, a reader with little knowledge of book culture in this period might seem overwhelmed. This same student might, at times, find themselves lost within the timeline of history as McDade weaves a great many circumstances together in the text, requiring the narrative to go back-and-forth in time. One would do well to keep a timeline of major characters in the book, as well as to note significant dates

mentioned as the text progresses, to keep on-track with McDade's swift and agile slalom through various historical markers.

The bookselling trade and the library world have had an incongruous relationship with one another; as libraries rose in prominence, they collected in perpetuity the very commodities that kept rare book dealers in business. It is no surprise, then, that these libraries became the focal point for theft; nor is it a surprise that libraries became essential patrons of booksellers: "every generation of bookmen that complained about the "problem" [of libraries removing books from the sellers market] was very much complicit in it. Places like Harvard, Yale, NYPL, and the Library of Congress were absolutely essential to the survival of most antiquarian booksellers. Regardless of what they said in newsletters or back rooms, dealers relied on libraries for their livelihood" (p. 94). If there is one lesson to be gleaned from this book, it is the incredible talent and deep knowledge possessed by both the protagonists and antagonists of this story, however interchangeable these labels might become at times in the text—the art of the stealer and the art of the collector are one and the same, for the appreciation of a book as an object of affection saturates both urges.

Thieves of Book Row has wide ranging applicability for both students of print culture and theory, and practitioners of rare book librarianship, who can glean lessons from the historical circumstances conveyed by McDade. This book elucidates how the interconnectedness of book thievery, the rise of institutional and public libraries, and the burgeoning antiquarian book trade, all played an integral role in constructing our contemporary views of print "rarity," as well as in establishing the first specialized libraries charged with caring for these prized publications. However, even those new and uninitiated to book culture would find pleasure in reading this text, for its storytelling is strong, compelling, and rife with narrative irony and complexity.

Reviewer

Robert D. Montoya is a graduate student in the UCLA Department of Information Studies. His research interests include history of the book, print culture, and literacy, with a current emphasis on the intersection of the nineteenth-century printing and publishing industry, civil war economics, and transportation infrastructure. He works in Library Special Collections at UCLA, where he is involved in public services, communications, and the integration of primary sources into University instruction.