



Rare-Book Heist May Leave Thieves With Little to Do but Read

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What can you do with a stolen rare book? Not much. At least that's what sellers of rare books say in light of the November theft of four rare books from the historic Adams House in Quincy, Mass.

Everyone from President Clinton to the FBI is concerned about their recovery - and where they could end up. And since there is no underground market for these stolen books, according to antiquarian experts, everyone is baffled.

Whatever the reasons for the theft, a fair number of stolen rare books are recovered because the used and rare book world is a relatively small community and a tainted book acquired by theft has no monetary value, says Kenneth Gloss, owner of Brattle Book Shop in Boston, Mass.

The Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA) has a system of fax, e-mail, and mail chains to spread the word when a valuable book is stolen. And most dealers hold a potential purchase overnight for inspection before purchasing. If the book is found to be stolen, the FBI or police set up a sting operation.

One year, seven to eight crates of books were stolen during shipping to the annual Boston antiquarian show, held every November. The loss was worth \$250,000. Eight months later, a small bookstore south of Boston recognized one of the stolen

books. The police were notified, and the remaining of the books were recovered. Many stolen books are relocated this way.

The Mendi Bible, the most important in the group that was taken recently, has no profit value now, Mr. Gloss says.

"It's gotten a huge amount of publicity," he says. "The word has gotten out, and so for any reputable dealer, library, institution, or collector, it is unsellable."

At last year's Boston International Antiquarian Book Fair, Gloss, the event's chairman, handed out FBI files that contained descriptions and pictures of the stolen books to other book dealers and collectors.

So why would anyone bother to steal antiquarian books?

A market does exist for books whose art is valuable enough to be cut out and sold as art, according to Robert Fleck, president of the ABAA.

The book most at risk from this recent theft is "Icatyologie OU Histoire Naturelle Generale," a natural history of fish, because it contains hand-painted plates that could be torn out, framed, and sold without the same scrutiny that a book would receive. He says it is feared the book could be destroyed.

The idea of a private collector contracting a theft is also not out of the question. Nicholas Blasbane, author of "A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books," (Henry Holt) suspects the Mendi Bible - given to John Quincy Adams by the Mendi people of Africa, whom he saved from slavery in 1838 - was singled out and is destined to find a home in a private collection.

Gloss suspects the motives in the Quincy theft may be broader. Since these books were the four closest to the door, he says it's more probable that it was just a theft, possibly with a malicious or vengeful intent.

"Books are meant to be used," Gloss says. "If you are going to have people using them, any time they're touched, handled, used, there is always a danger."

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