

Information Wants to Be Free...But to Do What?

I have too many books in my office. But what can I do? I love books. I live for books, each one carefully chosen, read over and over, memorized down to the punctuation.

I can tell you where I bought each book, and under what circumstances. Was it an online find, discovered in the borderless tracts of Amazon.com or Half.com? Or, better yet, a treasure trove unveiled at a local swap meet or flea market, dusty and crammed into old grocery bags? Bought for dissertation research? Pleasure reading? To complete a set? Or—my favorite—just because the combination of title, cover art, and back-cover blurb made it completely irresistible?

Whatever the reason, whatever the circumstances, I love them all. When I put up the bookshelves in my home office, I dutifully shelved my books according to subject and author, making it as easy as possible to find the volumes I need.

But I ignored the classic librarian's dictum and left no space on each shelf for the growth of my "collection," and so within six months, I already began ignoring my own system, stuffing new books wherever I could find the room.

Astronomy next to a history of the Catholic Church. Media criticism next to legal anthropology.

Soon, the shelves filled to the bursting point. I could still jam the occasional slim paperback or pamphlet between two hard covers. My copy of *The Elements of Style* fit between *A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People* and *Over 50 Years of American Comic Books*, for example—but thenceforth, I could only pull out one of them by pulling out all *three* of them. I resorted to piling newer acquisitions in stacks in front of each bookcase.

To call me a book junkie would be fair, and my wife, to her credit, staged an effective intervention. At this point, I had no more room in my office—the shelves were tighter than the airlock seals on a submarine. So, with nowhere else to turn and no other options, I went cold turkey. I stopped buying books.

But one day, I went into my office and noticed that one particular stack of books was leaning a bit more precariously than it had been. Whenever this happened, my usual practice was to take a few books from the top and spread them out among the other piles. I did this now, taking the top two books. One was Ben Schrank's *Miracle Man*. The other was *Ich bin auch ein Berliner*.

I didn't recognize the latter. I looked at the cover, a black and white photo of Bobby Kennedy. Strange. I've had Schlesinger's biography of RFK for years, and I never noticed German on the cover before...

Stranger yet, I could have sworn I'd left the biography on my bookshelf because it was too much trouble to take it out.

I turned to the section of my shelves that had originally been designated for Old English, but now had been pressed into service as a catch-all region. There, nestled in its slot, was Arthur Schlesinger's *Robert Kennedy and His Times*.

I looked at the book in my hands. It bore no resemblance to Schlesinger's, other than the cover photo. I couldn't remember buying it, but that hardly meant anything. I bought so many books on a whim.

I opened it. It was written in German.

Fascinated, I thumbed through the entire book. It was in German from cover to cover. I could not recall ever buying a German version of RFK's biography. I sought out my old German dictionary from college, eager to translate the cover precisely.

That was when I noticed that the German dictionary was, in fact, *next to* Schlesinger's book on my shelf. I had shelved it there because German and Old English were related, after all.

I truly did not remember buying the book. I topped a floor-pile with it, and backed out of my office.

I almost told my wife about my discovery. But surely she would think I was merely spinning a yarn to cover up having fallen off the book-buying wagon. I could hear her saying, "You expect me to believe that a book just *appeared* there?"

As the days went on, more and more books appeared in my office, and I realized that they weren't just spontaneously appearing—there was a logic to them. I had managed to keep all of my science titles together on one shelf, for example, and soon became the proud owner of *The Secret Life of Stars*, thanks to the mating of a book on botany and one on astronomy. My copies of *A Separate Peace* and *A Farewell to Arms* got together and bore a book that was its own thematic sequel.

I opened one heavy, leather-bound volume, only to discover that my computer manual had bred with *An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*. The result

was page after page of programming code that computed the nature of the 33rd Scottish Rite and revealed the secret encryption of the universe. It made my eyes water, so I shelved it, careful to keep it away from my copy of the Bible. I didn't want to imagine what apocalyptic tome might result.

Which brought to mind this question: Were the new books sterile? Or could they interbreed amongst themselves?

I called my thesis advisor, who lived nearby, hoping that he could somehow explain this destructive—yet constructive—deconstruction. After much pleading (and after my lengthy quoting from the collected works of ee shakespeare, which had appeared late one evening), he agreed to come see my mutating library.

He marched into my house with a phlegmatic “Harrumph!” and handed my wife his trenchcoat with the air of a man who is used to being coddled and catered to. A tenured Ivy League professor, he could quote Brockden Brown and Magnusson alike, spoke Greek, Latin, and Old Icelandic with equal facility, and had been known to berate severely undergraduates who could not recite the first eighteen lines of *The Canterbury Tales* in the original Middle English.

His complexion was florid, his nose long, bumpy, and sharp, not bulbous, but out of proportion to his drawn face. Wispy brown hair swept back from a high forehead. He was my idol.

“Let's see these so-called texts,” he sniffed.

I led him to the office. He clucked his tongue at my obvious lack of organizational skills, then asked for one of the purported book-children. I pointed to a stack on the floor, atop which rested *1984: A Space Odyssey* by Arthur Orwell. (I had read it the previous night—at the end of the book, Big Brother launches a probe into space to confront the Monolith.)

Long minutes passed as he flipped through the book. He harrumphed again and his mouth twisted into a half-frown. He put the book down and plucked up another. Pages riffled.

“Good God!” he ejaculated. “This is in Old Icelandic!”

He was holding a copy of *The Burning of Neil*, a court thriller about a murder trial at the Althing in pre-Christian Iceland.

“I left my copy of *Njalssaga* next to a Scott Turow book,” I explained.

He shivered and ran a hand through his thinning hair. He dropped the book like it was something dead, then stripped off his tweed jacket and loosened the massive Windsor knot at his throat. “This,” he declaimed, rolling up his sleeves, “will be a challenge!”

Hours later, we were no closer to a solution. None of the books should have existed. All, though, were authentic combinations, in the professor’s opinion, of the authors and topics in question.

“If only,” he moaned, “you had kept your collection in order! We would have new volumes of Shakespeare, perhaps the conclusion to *The Canterbury Tales*. But no. Instead, we have...this.” He pointed with disgust at *Paradise Found*, an epic poem about losing one’s virginity. I had shelved my copy of *Good Time Girls* with my Milton.

“But can they breed amongst themselves?” I asked. “Imagine what new forms of literature we might discover! Just think about it!” I grabbed a book and began reading: “In the fullness of time, he came to see that she loved him. That her financial dealings didn’t matter. Not one whit. He would be President, and she would be beside him.” I closed the book and looked up. “*Blood Sport* mixed with one of my wife’s romance novels! The love story of Bill and Hilary Clinton, like you’ve never read it before!”

“Bah! Populist garbage! Cultural Marxism at its worst! The end-game of post-modernism. All words are *not* equal. All texts are *not* valid.” He glowered around the room, his face flushing as though with exertion. “It should all be destroyed.”

“But—” I waved a copy of *Heathcliff's Progress*. “But you can't just ignore this! Information wants to be free!”

“To do what? It's a blight on the face of Western Civilization!” he thundered, rising to tower above me. “An abortion that did not die! It must be destroyed!”

I hustled him out of the office and into the kitchen, where I plied him with lemonade until his burgundy-suffused face mellowed to a mild roseate patch on each cheek.

“Professor, this is a real find. We can't just destroy it. These are works that never would have existed if not for—”

“They never *should* have existed!” he admonished. “A biography of Henry Adams from the point of view of a power plant! I never!”

“I shouldn't have left the Edison biography next to *The Education of Henry Adams*,” I admitted. “That was a mistake.”

“The history of the Jews as told by an alien! Literary theory as applied to the O.J. Simpson case! Henry David Thoreau's exhaustive memoir about hunting Moby-Dick! They have to be destroyed!”

I had no intention of letting that happen. I thanked him for his help and led him to the door, making certain that he had his trenchcoat. He glared at me with a wary eye. “You can't keep them, you know. They'll throw all of literature into disarray.”

“I'll let you know what I decide,” I told him, and closed the door.

I spent days in my office, combing through the new texts like a father endlessly fascinated with his newborn. I read Stephen King's sequel to *Hamlet* (needless to say, Yorick's skull plays an important part, and Hamlet himself is back for a return engagement). I devoured an anatomy text written in blank verse. So much easier to understand science when it's poetry...

My wife finally pulled me from my studies. I had become pale and drawn, and she took me to dinner. I babbled the whole time, recalling Dickensian volumes about Microsoft and Dickensonian poems describing Vietnam.

When we got home, though, we saw the front door was ajar. The doorframe, splintered. And I smelled something.

Smoke.

I charged into the house and up the stairs. In the office, the professor cackled to himself as he wrestled entire shelves of books to the floor, dumping them unceremoniously into heaps. He picked one up and set it aflame with a pocket lighter, then tossed it out the open window.

"What are you *doing*?" I screamed, and rushed at him. He sidestepped and I fetched up against the wall near the window. Down on my concrete patio, I saw a pile of burning books.

"Stop it! You're destroying them!"

"*People* write books!" he yelled, the glimmer of madness in his eye. "Books do not write themselves! Do you want to undo centuries of thought and criticism?" He set another volume on fire and hurled it at the window. I tried to catch it, but it singed my fingertips. I pulled my hands back and could only watch as J. R. R. Tolkein's *Lord of Wall Street* trilogy soared through the air like a comet and dashed into burning chunks of ash on the patio.

I snarled. I leapt at him, and we fought. But he had the strength of insanity upon him, and he shoved me against one bookcase. A precariously

balanced copy of John Barth's reinterpretation of Shakespeare's entire oeuvre—in hard cover—toppled and landed on my head. I saw black, then red, then nothing.

When I awakened later, the professor was sitting on the floor, his back against an empty bookcase. *All* of the bookcases were empty, in fact, and the plume of smoke at the window was nearly black. In the distance, I heard sirens. Downstairs, I heard my wife on the telephone, giving our address. Police? Fire? Both?

“Someday, you’ll understand,” the professor told me. He breathed heavily through his misshapen nose. “Someday, you’ll thank me.”

I came back from the emergency room with a bandage on my head and orders to rest. I stepped into my office for a moment. It was eerily quiet. And empty, of course, with only my computer and my CD player to fill what now seemed a too-large room.

Lying on the desk, I found a new CD, one unfamiliar to me. I couldn't remember buying it.

On the spine, it said: *Classic Bach! 12th and 13th Movements. Concerto for the electric guitar and synthesizer.*