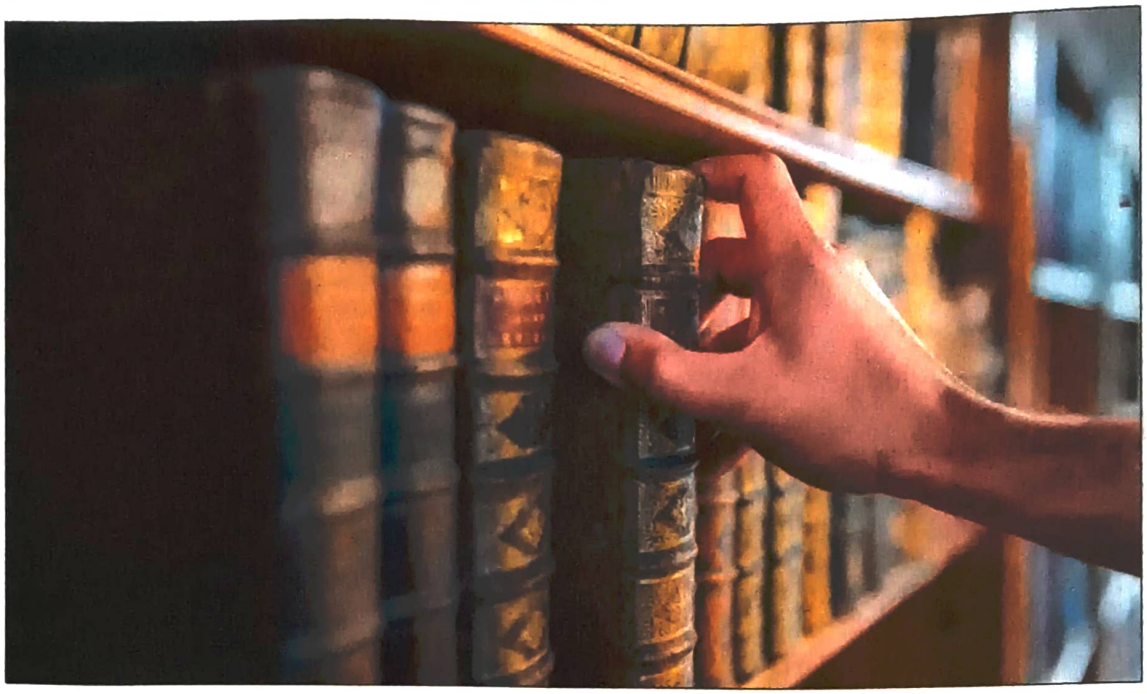
Stealing books is wrong but it isn't a crime

Books travel

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Last week, a school friend returned a book he had borrowed fifty-six years ago. It had belonged to my brother (his name was written in unsteady capitals on the free endpaper), a hardbound novel that my parents must have bought for him for eight rupees and sixty-five paise because that was the price pencilled into the corner. It was a terrible novel, part of the Hardy Boys Mystery Stories, an early example of packaged juvenile fiction where the main characters were created by a syndicate and then ghost-written by several hands under a collective pseudonym, in this case Franklin W. Dixon.

I was delighted to have it back because it had been fun reading the Hardy Boys then. Novel reading as a boy had been like chewing gum: a mechanical, undiscriminating business where I didn't much care about the taste so long as I had a wad to chew on. Also, *The Viking Symbol Mystery* was a hefty little hardcover with the title properly embossed on its spine which made it more precious than if it had been a dog-eared paperback of the same vintage. How much we fetishise books varies, but most of us have felt that spasm of possessiveness that some books induce.

I have a friend who, from the time he was a student, had to own novels to read them, an affliction that made libraries useless. Books can be aspirational. In college, I remember a suspiciously large number of undergraduates carrying the yellow Penguin paperback of Neruda's *Selected Poems* in their *jholas*. For young *desis* of my cohort, Penguin's fiction list with its matched orange spines cast a peculiar spell that the blue of its Pelican non-fiction didn't. Rows of Penguins on our shelves were our first stab at interior decor. Anthony Powell's twelve-volume *roman-fleuve* (ponderously named *A Dance to the Music of Time*) has a novel called *Books Do Furnish A Room*, and they absolutely do.

People don't ask to borrow books as much anymore. I don't know if this is a trend or a general decline in reading or just a function of more disposable income, but I no longer have to worry about books I'm particularly attached to disappearing into other people's shelves. To lend or not to lend was a real question when I was younger. My mother, who treated books like other things we owned, advised me to keep a little register with a list of lent books and the names of their borrowers. My father, who was a librarian, saw this as a low form of book-keeping unworthy of books. Good books, he'd say philosophically, travel.

He once asked a very distinguished writer for the loan of a book and she refused on the reasonable ground that people weren't good at returning books. This disappointed him; he felt that such hoarding was beneath her. I'm still not sure who was right. Many of my shelves are barren, stripped of the books I really loved because they were readable; they travelled. I've lost count of the number of copies of *Lucky Jim* and *Tom's Midnight Garden* that I've bought to replace the ones light-fingered friends have decamped with. On the other hand, many of the readable books I have at hand are indefinite loans from my friends, so there's that.

Stealing books is wrong but it isn't a crime. My father had a story about book theft in the National Library when he was the librarian there. There was a set of books that, unusually for reference work, were paperbacks. The *bada babu* or head clerk reported that three volumes had disappeared and he thought he knew who was taking them. He was told to bring the culprit to the librarian's office if he caught him in the act. A week later, a respectable, middle-aged man was escorted to his office. He had opened out the book to reduce its bulk, tucked it into the waistband of his *dhoti*, and then arranged his vest and *kurta* over it. My father proposed that he voluntarily return that volume and the others he had 'borrowed' and no more would be said about it. This he did. There was a moral to the story. The bureaucrats my father answered to in Delhi would periodically argue that the National Library ought to be moved to the national capital. The *bhadralok* gent's bid to decamp with an encyclopedia proved them wrong. Who in Delhi, my father would ask rhetorically, loved books enough to steal them?

I once helped the historian, William Crawley, who was a fellow at the college I was affiliated to as a research student, catalogue his books. He was very old and he lived with his wife in a large house and an enormous collection of books. My job was to climb a ladder, open the books, and read out the title, author's name and so on while he scribbled the citation on to an index card. The Crawleys had been clergymen and academics for many generations so I got to handle books that were several centuries old. I remember opening out a three-hundred-year-old Bible and wondering nervously if its brittle pages would come apart in my hands. Some of the Crawleys named in the bookplates had been contemporaries of Cromwell. This was a library that had accumulated over generations and here was its current owner unsentimentally cataloguing it so that after him, his children had the information to keep the books they wanted and get rid of those they didn't.

If I had to choose, I'd get rid of most of my non-fiction without a pang, especially the scholarly books and monographs. Most historical and social scientific scholarship is read to improve your mind or your arguments, not for pleasure. There are some exceptions; I read and re-read E.P. Thompson and James Baldwin with anticipation. But mostly I'd keep the fiction, the verse, the memoirs, some cookbooks, a couple of books on cricket and cull the rest. Our shelves must say something about us. In my case, they would testify to my alienation. Nearly all the books I own are in English. This wasn't true of my father; he was literate in several Indian languages and his shelves were scattered with books in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Bengali and Sanskrit. It's remarkable how much can be lost in a generation.

There will come a time when books become digital figments, shucking off their paper bodies entirely. It has happened to music already. Tapes and records are legacy decor; we mainly listen to music off streaming services. The books that continue to be published in a world which is digital by default will be luxury collectibles, like illuminated Bibles before movable type. And that will be fine too. The fetishists will collect books while the rest of us will read in the normal way (whatever that normal is) because in the beginning was the word, not the means by which it was read.

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