

Against the Grain

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Wryly Noted-Books About Books

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Wryly Noted — Books About Books

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The Book: An Homage author **Burkhard Spinnen**; illustrated by **Line Hoven**. (ISBN: 978-1-56792-607-1, David R. Godine, Publisher, 2018. \$19.95 Hardcover, 140 pgs.)

This short book reads both like a diary and a checklist of every aspect of a bibliophile's career. Running a mere one hundred and forty pages it still manages to contain forty-two separate essays under five headings. If you are a book collector you will find a kindred spirit here who explores such topics as "The Beautiful Book," "The Signed Book" and "The Annotated Book," among many others. **Burkhard Spinnen** is a German author and book collector who can tell the history of the book from many different angles. He has been a collector for over forty years and an author for the last twenty years and so he has seen all of the upheaval in publishing, reading, and collecting. Through it all he has remained a lover of the printed word and a champion of all types of book arts. The black and white illustrations by **Line Hoven** perfectly capture this nostalgic, but impassioned calling.

Burkhard Spinnen's work might be considered a bit idiosyncratic, based on his fixation on printed books, but any of us who collect and love books will find his subjects to be quite familiar. For example, his meditation on "New Books" explores our delight



at opening a freshly printed book, however old the text may be. We all enjoy opening a well printed new book and finding that it stays open where we leave off. The smell of new books can be a pleasure as well, but many new books simply give off an industrial strength manufactured aroma, or rather, no smell at all.

Of course his next chapter deals with old books as a counterweight to new books. He first notes that old books have probably had numerous previous readers and that they contain reflections of those readers in signatures, dedications, and other handwriting. At this point a book is no longer a consumer item. Old books have survived because someone wanted to keep them. Old books seem to preserve a secret. And they smell better.

Next **Spinnen** considers the "Damaged Book" and the "Annotated Book." He notes how we still enjoy a text even if it is found in a damaged book. Coffee stains, red wine spillage, cigarette burns, even torn pages cannot hinder our enjoyment of a hard to find text.

In the case of a *Beat* writer's publication it might even add a certain connection with the era. Annotations are generally an

annoying if not completely distracting part of reading older books. Some annotations in pencil can be ignored, but the florid ink or highlighter generally ruin a text. There are exceptions, where a particularly astute reader has added useful notes where we can sometimes learn more about the text at hand. Some textual scholars are even exploring marginal annotations as another form of literary history and many academic libraries are having their holdings scoured by diligent scholars looking for valuable marginalia.

Another chapter where the author shares an experience we can all recall is his meditation on his "Favorite Book." By favorite he distinguishes between text and book, because one might enjoy a work based solely on its content, but a favorite book might require more of an emphasis on the container. The ideal book is when text and container come together in one memorable experience. **Spinnen** recounts how he treasures some books in spite of their poor bindings or awkward illustrations based solely on the fact that this one particular edition was the first that he encountered and thus became his "favorite." Such is the influence of early reading on all of us.

In a similar vein the author emphasizes the importance of choosing the "Right Book" over the "Wrong Book." **Spinnen** gauges that the upper limit both of a personal library and the number of books one can read in a lifetime is somewhere around five thousand volumes. If you read one book a week for sixty years you will only reach three thousand books read. **Thoreau** gave sage advice when he counseled us to read only the best books first, since we don't have time to read everything. Thus we come to the "Wrong Book," one that was received as a gift or picked quickly before a trip. **Spinnen** notes that these can actually be valuable additions to our reading regimen, as they take us out of our well-trodden path of chosen experiences. His best advice for ridding oneself of a truly wrong book: give it away.

Another dichotomy that the author explores is that between the "Expensive Book" and the "Cheap Book." With the rise of the Internet he notes how once expensive books have become commonly available and even cheap. However much this development aids the poor bibliophile, it concerns him that books are thus losing their special aura and that reading itself might become too homogenized.

For the author the "Discovered Book" is the ultimate delight. He spends days on end scouring bookshops and flea markets and is never so happy as when he discovers a book he had no idea existed. He compares that to the simply utilitarian search on the Internet for specific books. In the case of the discovered book he wonders: "Had I chosen these books? Or had they chosen me?"

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life. — How did you find out I'd just arrived? — The shaking of her head, over the sweet warm drinks from a cupboard, became a sign to them both; she must have known without knowing. He was a man who did not laugh loosely but had a slow-developing strong smile when confirming something he was sure of. He was not curious about her presence in the country; the norms of exile were constant displacement and emplacement on orders not to be questioned, or by circumstances over which the one in refuge had no control, either. That fact that she did not have a refuge also gave her some credibility for him — what black man would believe a white girl would leave the luxuries of home without reasons valid for refuge?"

And thus begins the love between Hillela and Whaila that is formalized by marriage, consummated vividly and punctuated with conception. What tone will this new expression from the spontaneous mutation take? It is a question that Hillela ponders: "Our colour. She cannot see the dolour that relaxes his face, closes his

eyes and leaves only his mouth drawn tight by lines on either side. Our colour. A category that doesn't exist: she would invent it. There are Hotnots and half-castes, two-coffee-one-milk, touch-of-the-tar-brush, pure white, black is beautiful — but a creature made of love, without a label; that's a freak." And thus the mutation moves into the population creating a new dynamic. 🌿

Sidebar

I checked two **Nadine Gordimer** novels from the library, tossed a coin and started reading *A Sport of Nature*. I don't often read more than one work from Nobelists, except in the case of **Garcia-Marquez**, one of my all time favorite authors, but I felt compelled to read the second choice. *No Time Like the Present* is a story about a "mixed" couple struggling for freedom against apartheid. It will be interesting to see how **Gordimer** once again uses mixed relations to continue her theme and from what perspective.

Little Red Herrings — Uncommonly Odd

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

About the time you think you know where things are going, they go somewhere else. I had that experience recently with our institutional repository (IR).

About five years ago, we stumbled into **bepress's** Digital Commons. I had argued for one for about a decade, but no one really understood what I was talking about, and honestly, I probably ham-fisted the explanation. But then came one of those unfunded mandates for which administrations — local, state, and federal — are so famous. I mentioned **bepress** to a quondam administrator who had just come from another institution that had it. The off-the-cuff remark worked like magic. A light turned on and we were told to “get it.” After much toing and froing about who was going to pay for this (only this year has it been added to our budget in a permanent kind of way — let us say in heavy pencil for now), we did get it.

The next few years we labored — really labored — trying to help faculty understand that publishing in our IR in no way jeopardized their publishing chances elsewhere. On the contrary, we argued, it actually increased them. And not only for them and their work, but also their students and their students' work.

Some faculty never got on board. They were convinced that whatever showed up in our IR, with or without an embargo, put an end to any hope of publishing, and, subsequently, tenure. I explained copyright, not really being an attorney, but having stayed in my fair share of hotels, as it were. Transformative works, the fact that publishers would insist on rewrites and so on

didn't do a lot of good. The most exasperating discussions had to do with theses. While our students were encouraged to submit them to dissertation abstracts or similar entities, they were cautioned not to put them in our IR.

It took a great deal of handwringing, pleading, begging and more, but eventually most came around. We hired a delightful young librarian to whom I credit most of the good will, coaxing and cajoling. There followed about three or three-and-a-half years of IR *dolce far niente*, as it were. Everyone seemed pleased. In fact, we had more than our share of success stories. The helpful dashboard that comes with our digital commons also impressed more than one faculty member.

Once up and running, we began uploading past theses and all went well. We had one small hiccup with a graduate who asked that we erase all evidence of a thesis he had written many years before, but we embargoed it instead for about twenty months. We never knew why but guessed it had something to do with maturity of craft. Still, we argued it was a record of work that had to be preserved.

While I did not do this with every opportunity, I often sent the powers that be our headlines: surpassing various download thresholds, our recognition for various papers in various disciplines, and our papers that had “topped the charts,” so to say. Frankly, we were all feeling doggone good about ourselves.



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The “Gifted Book” is next on **Spinnen's** list. He notes how books are ideally suited for gifting and that bookshops and maybe even the book trade would cease to exist without people buying books as gifts. Books are the ideal gift, as one can tailor one's choice specifically to the recipient's interests. And if things go awry, books are the easiest of gifts to exchange.

“Signed Books” come freighted with a load of metaphysics. An author's signature gives one immediate contact with their personality. Books nowadays are industrial products and the signature of an author offers the illusion of “uniqueness.” Unfortunately, the Internet has revealed just how many copies of first editions and even signed first editions there are in the world. Prices have plummeted for all except the most rare books.

Spinnen finally explores the many ways of collecting books. He reminisces about his first visits to his town library and how certain books were forbidden to children. Of course he could hardly wait to grow up and see what had been denied him. He also extolls the private library and says that a private library can be of any size. What counts is its value to its owner.

“Collecting means giving order to something, inasmuch as one brings together those things that one feels belong together. And as long as one doesn't commit theft or murder in the process, that isn't the worst way to employ one's mind or money.”

If you are a book lover, collector, or both, this book will be an ideal checklist for comparing your book experiences with another devoted bibliophile. This is a book to keep on the nightstand and relish one little chapter after another. 🐛

And then, this spring, as you have doubtless surmised at this point, and as we surpassed 100,000 downloads, the wheels wobbled significantly, and nearly came off.

I got a very anxious email, freighted with gloom, from a faculty member about what we were doing and why. The email came to me, surely, but also to about two dozen other faculty. I gave my usual explanation, replying to all, and explaining about how the IR works, why it's important, and even added a plug for open access. Following the email, one of the other faculty emailed me back that she knew I could explain it better than she could and all would be well. Again, I felt pretty good.

Not so fast. Another email came, explaining that I had missed the point and that tables, PowerPoints, posters and so on simply should not be deposited. These represented works in progress and letting those cats out of the proverbial bag would spell doom for faculty trying to publish.

I went back over my explanations, taking more time to explain that surely that would not happen. I explained that acceptances to papers often required many rewrites, and whatever we deposited would not be the same as what appeared later. I also pointed out that many IRs had both pre- and post-prints included. Another faculty member chimed in that oh, no, that business about posters and PowerPoints and data are all things that must be held secret. *Après moi, le deluge*, and all that. That publishing might take three or more years and someone would beat them to the punch.

I didn't help matters making the case that surely researchers who might well look at anything in our IR would cite it, but if there were some who wouldn't, well, they'd likely get hoisted on their own petard. I tried talking about copyright and derivative and transformative works. I came off sounding as if I wasn't respectful of researchers everywhere, hardly my intent. More emails followed and the two faculty claimed they could not in good faith deposit anything like posters, PowerPoints, and the like.

I must admit that at this point I despaired of making any further headway. I responded finally that I respected their decision although I disagreed with it. I pointed out that our IR was entirely voluntarily but not using it not only proscribed one's influence, but also constrained open access.

This small episode has taught me that however far we have come with open access, we are still very far away from making any permanent inroads. I know this isn't the case everywhere, of course, but I also know that our faculty aren't the only ones with these concerns. We are a teaching institution, and while research is important, it is not *sine qua non*. Good teaching is.

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