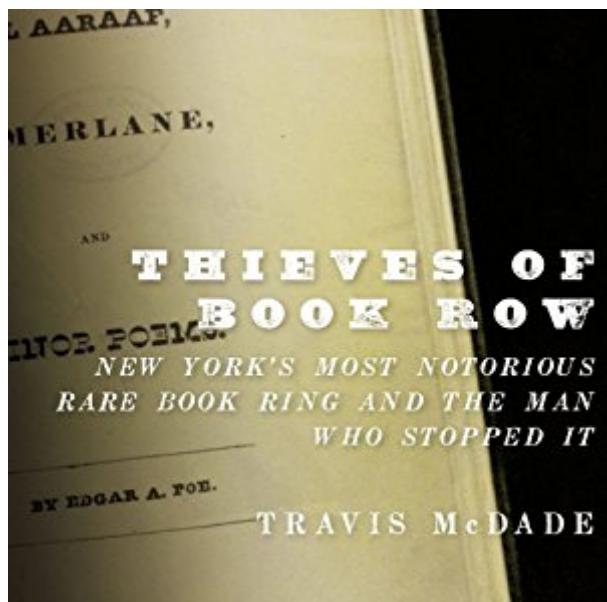


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Thieves Of Book Row: New York's Most Notorious Rare Book Ring And The Man Who Stopped It



Synopsis

No one had ever tried a caper like this before. The goods were kept in a secure room under constant scrutiny, deep inside a crowded building with guards at the exits. The team picked for the job included two old hands known only as Paul and Swede, but all depended on a fresh face, a kid from Pinetown, North Carolina. In the Depression, some fellows were willing to try anything - even a heist in the rare book room of the New York Public Library. In *Thieves of Book Row*, Travis McDade tells the gripping tale of the worst book-theft ring in American history, and the intrepid detective who brought it down. Author of *The Book Thief* and a curator of rare books, McDade transforms painstaking research into a rich portrait of Manhattan's Book Row in the 1920s and '30s, where organized crime met America's cultural treasures in dark and crowded shops along gritty Fourth Avenue. Dealers such as Harry Gold, a tough native of the Lower East Side, became experts in recognizing the value of books and recruiting a pool of thieves to steal them - many of them unemployed men who drifted up the Bowery or huddled around fires in Central Park's shantytowns. When Paul and Swede brought a new recruit into his shop, Gold trained him for the biggest score yet: a first edition of Edgar Allan Poe's *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems*. Gold's recruit cased the rare-book room for weeks, searching for a weakness. When he found one, he struck, leading to a breathtaking game of wits between Gold and NYPL special investigator G. William Bergquist. Both a fast-paced and true-life thriller, *Thieves of Book Row* provides a fascinating look at the history of crime and literary culture.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A page-turning book on an abstruse subject -- big-time library theft. From the early 1900s, thieves regularly plied their trade at various libraries, particularly in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and smaller libraries in their respective states. Public libraries, university libraries -- neither were immune. One thief alone stole thousands of volumes, including important items of Americana. First editions of Moby Dick, The Scarlett Letter, Poe's Al-Aaraaf, original author manuscripts, books of maps and exploration all went missing. However, as bad as that was, the situation became an order of magnitude worse in the 1920s, with the sale of songwriter Jerome Kern's library for the fabulous sum of 1.7 million bucks (a lot of first-edition Burns, Shelley, Swift, Dickens; manuscripts by Pope, Thomas Hardy -- including an personal note by the author to Kern -- etc.) and a rise in prices, particularly in Americana. Organized gangs of book thieves increased and became more organized. Many of them had to buy warehouses to store the loot. Sadly, often libraries didn't even know the books were missing. How most of these felons were caught and the precautions that libraries began to take -- including the creation of Rare Book Rooms, special marking techniques, even thief-resistant architecture, and the rise of anti-theft specialists and the bare-bones beginnings of investigative techniques -- takes up a lot of the book. All of it fascinates. Librarians would invent some special marking method -- stamps, embossed seals -- only to have thieves come up with special eradication methods. Or they would simply rip out the incriminating pages. One of the more unbelievable things I found was the difficulty libraries had of getting the criminal justice system to care.

The late 1920s wasn't just the era of Gatsby and speakeasies, jazz and G-men. It was also a high point in the battle between libraries to hang on to their increasingly valuable collections of books and the even more determined efforts of book thieves to relieve them of some of their crown jewels. And the bibliocriminals that are the focus of this intriguing and very readable book managed to remove some extraordinarily valuable items from collections as notable as the Library of Congress, Harvard's Widener Library and the New York Public Library (scowls on the faces of the stone lions out front being no more of a deterrent than a solitary guard, it seems). Travis McDade chose to write about this period as one in which the economics of the book trade and the values of the books were changing rapidly, in a way that gave thieves and booksellers alike a tremendous advantage to go chasing after rare Americana. He chronicles the sale of Jerome Kern's collection only months before the crash of 1929, which saw valuations hit astronomic levels -- leaving dealers stuck with costly books that they couldn't resell at anything close to what they had paid. Already, the less honorable

members of that group (many of whom had their shops on the Thieves' Row of the title, on Fourth Avenue a stone's throw from where Strand bookstore still does business today) were actively dealing in books stolen from libraries across the country: it was a cheap way to pick up titles that were increasingly in demand by collectors with money to throw around. The sudden evaporation of a lot of that wealth just made finding low- or no-cost prime books even more tempting. Besides, as McDade notes one bookseller scoffing, what good were libraries?

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