by researchers and collectors with an interest in the Victorian period, though as is commonly the case now, the book is extremely expensive and is unfortunately not available in a digital format.


Reviewed by Patrick Spedding

On the dustjacket of this book, Anders Rydell is described as a Swedish “journalist, editor, and author of nonfiction.” His *Bokjuvarna. Jakten på de försvunna biblioteken* (2015), is the first of his works to appear in English, but he is the author of six other titles, including *Plundrarna. Hur nazisterna stal Europas konstskatter* [*The Plunderers—How the Nazis Stole Europe’s Art Treasures*] (2013). Although Rydell is writing for a popular and non-specialist audience, and there are some journalistic features of his writing that book historians may find tiresome, *The Book Thieves* is well researched and makes available in English important German-language material that is otherwise unavailable. As Rydell explains, although a great deal has been written about the pillaging of artwork before and during World War II, very little has been written about the pillaging of books (x–xi). One of the few books on the pillaging of libraries during this period is *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation*, edited by Jonathan Rose (2001).

Most of Rydell’s chapters open with a human-interest story, often concerning the author’s travels, the librarians engaged in identifying looted books, and those with some sort of connection to the looted libraries. These transitions act as a constant reminder of the present status of the books and libraries that are the subject of *The Book Thieves*. After each transition, Rydell provides some historical background concerning the books and libraries that were plundered before giving an account of the fate of the books, as well as of the owners, librarians, and community of readers or scholars. It is these non-journalistic sections that are the highlight of the book, often dealing with complex material, concerning many individual libraries, in an engaging way. Broadly-speaking, the book is organised chronologically and geographically, foreshadowing the end of the war (Berlin), before spreading out across Germany (Weimar, Munich and Chiemsee) tracing the rise of the Nazi party, then following western military expansion into Holland (Amsterdam, The Hague), France (Paris), south to Italy (Rome), Greece (Thessaloniki), east to

Lithuania (Vilnus), and Czechoslovakia (Theresienstadt), Poland (Ratibor, Prague) before returning to Germany (Berlin) at the close of the war.

Rydell’s account of Nazi-era book collecting substantiates the claim that “book collecting was a mania” and a “status indicator in the Nazi movement” (62). Although he says relatively little about the personal book collections of leading Nazi figures, the scale of institutional collecting by Heinrich Himmler and Alfred Rosenberg is staggering, as was the fierceness with which these two men competed with each other, and the ways in which they competed. Organisations evolved and developed multiple sectional libraries. Himmler, as intelligence chief, controlled the libraries of the BPP (Bavarian Political Police), SD (the intelligence wing within the SS) and RSHA (Reich Main Security Office), all of which had multiple departments or Sections, containing millions of books (59–70). Rosenberg, who was in charge of ideology and educational research, established the ERR (the Taskforce of Reichsleiter Rosenberg). While Rosenberg lacked Himmler’s SS manpower, Herman Göring, commander-in-chief of the Luftwaffe, supported him. Rydell gives an intriguing account of some of the battles between Himmler’s RSHA and Rosenberg’s ERR to reach and claim prize libraries.

The Nazi activities in Western Europe were of an entirely different character than those in Eastern Europe (195–96). In Germany, and in the West generally, it was primarily the possessions of individuals within certain despised groups that were seized (enemies of the state, such as Jews, communists and freemasons, whose possessions were stolen before the owners were sent to their deaths), but these seized possessions were prized by Himmler and Rosenberg: carefully packed, transported back to Germany, housed and catalogued. The libraries built out of these collections were valued by the Nazis for the insight they were expected to offer into the malice and nefarious activities of the enemies of the German people. By 1936, Himmler’s SS had a library of more than half a million books taken from German masonic orders alone (32); and by 1941, Rosenberg’s Institute for research into the Jewish Question boasted “the world’s finest Jewish library,” which contained half a million volumes by 1943 (140). Because the Nazis valued them, many of the books looted from Western Europe survived the war.

In the East, by contrast, the Nazis were intent on completely erasing the culture of whole countries, not just of certain despised groups. As a consequence, while two or three million books were stolen from tens of thousands of (mostly Jewish, private) libraries in the West, the scale of this seizure is completely dwarfed by the seizure and complete destruction of libraries in the East. The ERR initially stripped 1.7 million books from 723 libraries in France, before taking the contents of a further 29,000 apartments (138), probably amounting to millions of more books in total. In Poland, however, it is estimated that 70 percent of all books “were destroyed or lost through plunder” and “over 90 percent of collections belonging to public libraries or schools were lost or destroyed” (32–33, 197). It is difficult
to comprehend the scale of this loss—the contents of 350 libraries were simply pulped, and centuries-old libraries containing hundreds of thousands of items apiece were methodically burnt where they stood. Something like fifty million books were destroyed in the Ukraine (206) and a further one hundred million books in the Soviet Union (33, 205).

Partly as a consequence of these staggering losses, the Soviet “Trophy Brigades” stripped much of what little remained in the Eastern territories and what was to become East Germany, when they occupied them at the close of the war. Warehouses full of books (looted in the West, crated up and sent east for processing), were seized by the Soviets, loaded onto trains once again and sent further east (262). Several hundred German libraries, containing tens of millions of books, were emptied entirely (263). The Soviet pillaging was comprehensive—its “scope rivaled that of the Nazis” themselves (260)—but poorly organised: collections were looted by soldiers (262) or broken up when sent east (264), and often ended up in strange places; millions of books were simply neglected, exposed to the elements and lost (264, 296). The Western Allies also “confiscated” whole libraries (institutional and private) from Germany; millions of books were sent to the US (almost a million went the Library of Congress alone; 33). While the Western Allies returned a “relatively large number” of Soviet collections (274), they received little from the Soviets in return (272). Only a small proportion of seized books investigated by the Monuments Men were ever returned to their (mostly institutional) owners (272), the rest were given to Jewish charities (276). As a result of fire, bombing and plunder, Germany “lost between a third and a half of its book collections” (33); those institutions that remained after the war rebuilt their collections amidst the chaos from the scattered remains of other looted and damaged libraries (288). The Zentral- und Landesbibliothek (ZLB), for instance, were given custody of books collected from one hundred and thirty different locations in Berlin (287). It is because of the chaotic redistribution of books collected from plundered libraries—libraries themselves partly comprised of plundered books—that it is so difficult to establish both the fate of book collections and the original ownership of books.

Rydell’s book begins and ends with accounts of German librarians who are attempting to unscramble this egg—attempting to identify books acquired either during the Nazi period or in the chaos that followed, establish the provenance of these items and, where possible, return them to people claiming to be relatives or descendants. Michael Knoche, from the Anna Amalia Library, admits that it may take “an entire generation” to investigate the books in his collection alone (58); Uwe Hartmann and Sebastian Finsterwalder from the ZLB agree, stating that the process “will go on for many, many decades” (34) and may take “generations” (286). It is hard to know what to make of those engaged in this doomed undertaking. Two librarians engaged in the (already) decade-long task...
seem not to have even considered the possibility that it may not be possible to return many, probably most, of the books they have so painstakingly identified (58). Finsterwalder suggests that the few books he has succeeded in returning are so commonplace that it costs more to post them than they are worth (295)—strategically ignoring the annual budget of two million euros that Hartmann distributes, and the millions in matched institutional funding, which is necessary to support his enterprise and those like it (31).

Rydell concludes with an account of the very brief period in the 1990s during which, in the spirit of glasnost, the Soviets offered information about, access to, and even repatriated a relatively small number of, “trophy” books (296–306). However, as demands multiplied, the return of trophy treasure became increasingly controversial; by the end of the decade, all trophy treasure was nationalised to prevent further repatriation, and the archives were once again closed off to researchers (299). The lack of access to Russian archives is unfortunate, but is likely to continue for as long as people such as Finsterwalder push, not for access, but for the restitution of the tiny fraction of books looted during World War II that were not pulped, incinerated or abandoned to the elements three quarters of a century ago.


Reviewed by Daniel Wee

For many, the comic strip or the comic book became a gateway to book collecting, independent reading and, dare I say, the first foray into understanding the value of money. Emptying a bloated piggybank on a Saturday morning in anticipation of a visit to the local milk bar or newsagents can hold special memories. Some grew into responsible and refined adults while some, just some, became lifelong enthusiasts. Once despised for perverting an entire generation of readers, the concept of the comic book has evolved from largely being considered as a derisive form into a high-brow and intellectually valid “graphic novel.” The present collection of essays outlines this intellectual shift.

Published in 2018, The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel is an ambitious attempt to capture the murky and contestable history of the graphic novel. Forming part of the Cambridge Histories—Literature series, this collection offers a series of thirty-five essays from forty authors, including the three editors, arranged chronologically. Two of the editors, Jan Baetens (University of Leuven) and Hugo Frey (University of Chichester), have collaborated before in The Graphic Novel: An Introduction (2014). In the present volume, Stephen Tabachnick