

Sunday Book Review

ESSAY

You Never Know What You'll Find in a Book

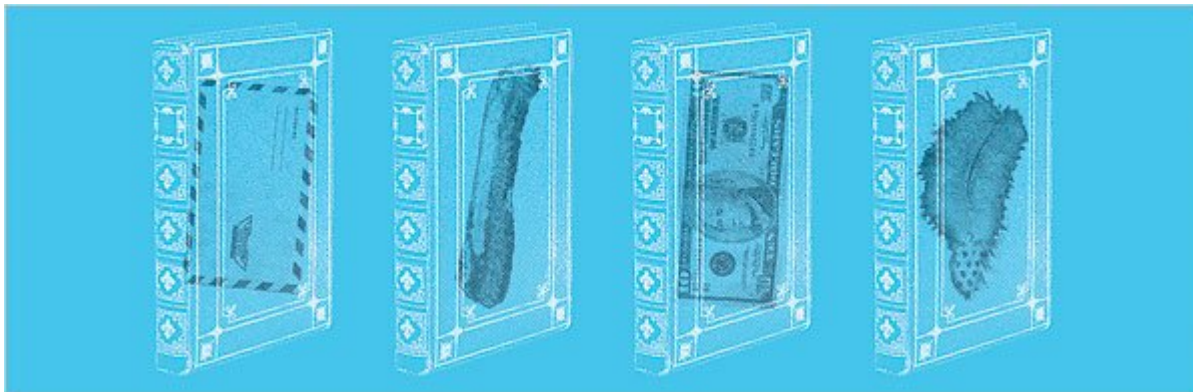


Illustration by Kim Bost

By HENRY ALFORD
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We may never fully understand what prompts people to leave unusual objects inside books. I speak of the slice of fried bacon that the novelist [Reynolds Price](#) once found nestled within the pages of a volume in the [Duke University](#) library. I speak of the letter that ran: "Do not write to me as Gail Edwards. They know me as Andrea Smith here," which the playwright Mark O'Donnell found some years ago in a used paperback. I speak of any of those bizarre objects — scissors, a used Q-tip, a bullet, a baby's tooth, drugs, pornography and 40 \$1,000 bills — that have been discovered by the employees of secondhand bookstores, according to [The Wall Street Journal](#) and [AbeBooks.com](#). Mystery surrounds these deposits like darkness.

But the motives of some depositors — the novelist David Bowman, for instance — are knowable. "I was cleaning out a drawer and thought, Let's do something with this," Bowman said of the day four years ago when he stumbled upon all of the rejection letters from agents and editors about his first novel, "Let the Dog Drive" (1993). "Some of the letters were nasty," he said in a phone interview. So Bowman scooped them up, tucked them in between the pages of a first edition of the book and sold the noxious bundle to the

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Strand, New York City's famous used-book store. "It was very liberating," Bowman said. "Revenge is a dish best served cold."

Bowman's quest for vengeance is on the far end of the book-stuffing spectrum. More commonly, the stuffers are trying to create an aide-mémoire for themselves. "I have filled books with flowers I've received, to save the flowers in dried form and to remember the happy moment of receiving them," [Anne Rice](#) said in an e-mail message. After Wayne Koestenbaum interviewed [Vanessa Redgrave](#) at a hotel bar about her role in the movie "Mrs. Dalloway," he took Redgrave's lipstick napkin and placed it in the paperback copy of the novel he'd brought with him. That Redgrave's lipstick traces might have besmirched his book seems not to have fazed him. "I might have also taken her swizzle stick," he confessed.

In "Never Do That to a Book," an essay in her collection "[Ex Libris](#)," Anne Fadiman says that these aides-mémoires are often specific to the book owner's profession. Fadiman writes about a landscape architect who "savors the very smell of the dirt embedded in his botany texts; it is the alluvium of his life's work." She also mentions a science writer whose copy of "Birds of Yosemite and the East Slope" contains an owl feather and the tip of a squirrel's tail — remnants of an animal-on-animal smackdown — and whose copy of "Mammals of the World" has been "enhanced" by the "excremental splotches" of a band-tailed pigeon that perched on the book while learning to fly. Blurry grows the line between litter box and litter books.

Sometimes things get lost in books. The novelist Diana Abu-Jaber recalled putting a favorite photograph of a friend's greyhound inside her copy of M. F. K. Fisher's "How to Cook a Wolf" — and then promptly leaving the book on a plane. ("I hope it comforts someone who's afraid of flying," she wrote in an e-mail message.) Similarly, the musician Dan Zanes once used a book to store a prized possession given him by his mother — a rare photograph of J. D. Salinger, taken by Mrs. Zanes's mentor, the German photographer Lotte Jacobi. "I'm sure it's safe, but I have no idea where it's safe," Zanes said. "Not in any book that I currently own, that's for sure."

[Sherman Alexie](#) figured out a way around botched safekeeping during his hard-drinking college days at Gonzaga and Washington State Universities in the 1980s. Fearful that he would spend all his money during a bender, he would "slide tens and twenties into random books in my apartment." Months later, having forgotten about the money, he'd find it again. "It was like winning little jackpots," he wrote in an e-mail message, adding, "I'm sober now, have been sober for many years, and I keep my money in banks."

The cadre of book-depositors is not without its stylists. The comedian Jean Villepique, who played [Tracy Morgan](#)'s therapist on "30 Rock," says she likes to slam insects between the pages of library books and then return the corpse-laden tomes. "I like to think that

someone will get to Page 62 and think, “Eww!” and then, “Who?” Villepique said in an e-mail message. She preys only on small bugs that land on the page voluntarily — mostly gnats (“like a little dust poof”) and mosquitoes, whether unfed (“neat and dry”) or bloody (“page joiners”). But Villepique warns that if any cockroach in her Los Angeles apartment “dares to creep near my copy of ‘Collapse,’ by Jared Diamond, I will kill, knowing that my behavior and the roach’s existence are both causes of the collapse of our society.”

Who knows what puzzling items lurk, or soon will, on the bookshelves of the world? Well, Meg Wolitzer gave advance warning of one. In the early ’70s, during her freshman year at Smith, she and a friend got “punch-drunk” from too much studying in the library one night. “To entertain ourselves on a break, we took out a sheet of lined paper and wrote a ‘diary entry’ for one ‘S. Plath’ (‘Saw the most delicate bell jar today in an antique store. . . .’),” Wolitzer wrote in an e-mail message. The pair gave the document a 1950s date, then placed it between the pages of a reference book, “and left it there to age and corrode and finally be discovered.”

Wolitzer added, “To my knowledge and to my relief, it has not been.”

Henry Alford is the author of “How to Live: A Search for Wisdom From Old People (While They Are Still on This Earth),” to be published next month.

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