

# *The Book Thief: The True Crimes of Daniel Spiegelman*

Travis McDade  
Praeger (Westport, 2006)  
2006  
\$49.95

Reviewed by Lyn Warmath

*The Book Thief* has it all—the author combines features of a mystery, thriller, whodunit, and manhunt under one cover. The narrative reads like a crime novel, but it is the nonfiction account of one thief's exploits in the lucrative field of stolen rare maps and manuscripts. Readers encounter daring exploits, thefts, and vandalism of the worst sorts, an international hunt, discovery, the criminal justice system at work, escape attempts, courtroom drama, lawyering both inept and skillful, sentencing battles, and . . . a happy(?) ending. Well, an ending anyway.

The international cast of characters includes law enforcement officers, FBI detectives, attorneys, diplomats, librarians, and rare-book experts. The author (himself an attorney, librarian, bibliophile, teacher, and rare-books scholar) knows his audience well and taps into his readers' wide ranges of interests.

For six months in the mid-1990s, Daniel Spiegelman breached security at Columbia University's Rare Books and Manuscripts Library by accomplishing the unthinkable. A forgery expert in his earlier criminal life, Spiegelman tapped into a security gap no one in the library could have foreseen. For months on end he raided the library's vaults without detection after he discovered an abandoned dumbwaiter—a book lift—that had been only partially sealed years earlier. In late-night raids Spiegelman repeatedly maneuvered through caged areas, poured himself into the unlit, child-size elevator shaft, and shinnied six floors to reach his targets—feats that still confound those involved in the investigations.

Spiegelman was fuzzy on which targets to steal. He had no background in rare books and manuscripts. He knew the materials at his fingertips were valuable, but he had no idea just how astonishingly valuable they were. So he took what was most attractive and colorful to him—not necessarily the most valuable items. This particular library theft was so devastating because Spiegelman looted a priceless collection of maps, including its “crown jewel,” a Bleau atlas. From the Bleau and other atlases, he razored out individual pages, thereby destroying forever any hope of recovery and repair to the books' former condition.

What makes this narrative different from earlier real-life library crime-and-punishment cases is the judge, who questioned the adequacy of then-applicable federal sentencing guidelines to fit the crime. Judge Lewis Kaplan's handling of Spiegelman's sentencing hearings is remarkable for the unprecedentedly heavy weight he gave to the prosecutors' arguments that Spiegelman robbed not only the library community of monetary value, but also society and researchers of important research materials that can never be re-created or replaced. The author cites case after case where earlier courts had handed out trifling punishments (probation, suspended sentences, home deten-

tion) to book thieves. The author's research revealed that “Even when a thief is caught red-handed, he is treated as less a major criminal than a person who simply had overdue library books . . . despite thefts that involve great sums of money, breaking and entering, and transporting goods across state lines.” In this case, Judge Kaplan, of the U.S. District Court for New York's Southern District, was willing to buck sentencing trends in New York and followed his own path.

Ordinarily, we might expect litigators to be among those most interested in the unfolding story of federal sentencing guidelines that played a major role in this book. In the author's telling, however, sentencing guidelines become riveting reading for nonlitigators as well, as opposing attorneys wrangled over the original intent of the guidelines and the judge weighed the options for a harsher sentence than the guidelines called for.

(Careful readers may notice lapses in the publisher's copy editing, but any distractions from the carefully researched account and engaging writing are easy to overlook.)



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