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The Book-Filled Crate

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The Book-Filled-Crate
Ervin Malakaj

Two very strong memories mark my second summer in Chicago. The first one is a memory of the overwhelming sense of relief I felt during the first week of summer break, after a horrendous first year at an American high school. The second memory concerns a marvelous find that proved to be the beginning of a long affair with books.

A year earlier, June of 1999, my family had emigrated from Germany and settled in the Chicago Northside, where I would be placed into a random high school, chosen not because of the quality of the teachers or the success of its students, but because of its proximity to the apartment building in which we lived. Seven years in total we lived in a small town in Germany prior to this move, six of which it took me to get acquainted with and feel *almost* comfortable in the German language; four of which it took me to feel like I have friends who would want to consider the child of Bosnian refugees a friend, something not many kids in my neighborhood and at my school there were willing to do. Just as my life in Germany ceased to be an enigma (for not until college did I fully understand the history of the circumstances that led to my family needing to flee the civil war on the Balkans), the reason for leaving Germany and moving to Chicago became another. The first year at a Chicago high school seemed a mere continuation of the randomness that I thought my life to be, albeit small-scale: I was in classes I did not select myself; I became acquainted with people I did not feel comfortable being myself around; and the teachers spoke a language I could understand quite well, but not one that I felt comfortable making use of in order to express my feelings and communicate that which I had learned from them. Everything seemed random, and I quickly became overwhelmed by the arbitrariness, the mundane of my everyday life. It was all very exhausting, so it is no wonder that the first week away from school became such a memorable sigh of relief for me.

I quickly isolated myself from those I knew from school during that first week of summer break, because those so-called friends simply reminded me of how awkward the setting was in which I met them. On my way home from a random stroll through the neighborhood (this must have been the second

week of summer), I took a shortcut through the back alley to get home. Just as I was about to enter through the back gates into the yard I noticed an old milk crate sitting next to the large garbage bins in the back of the apartment building in which we lived – it was filled with books. This was in fact the largest stash of books I’ve ever seen in one place outside of a school building. After a few glances here and there to see if someone is not perhaps just letting the crate rest in the alley before bringing it up to his or her apartment, I decided to take a peak into it. The first sight was quite discomfoting, as the books were all covered with dust, here and there a spider web, some had coffee stains on the covers, and all of them seemed very old. All were paperbacks, and seemed to have gone through more than one set of hands, more than once. “Agatha Christie,” one of them read in large red letters, and a second look confirmed that all of them indeed seemed to be by the same author. I felt as if I had heard this name somewhere before, but I could not remember. It’s title: *The Under Dog, and Other Stories Featuring Hercule Poirot*. I could not properly pronounce this second name on the cover, and I started considering what it could sound like, what it had to do with this strange Hercules-figure my English teacher talked about for an entire month last semester; I wondered who Poirot was. A curious picture was on the cover of this book as well, just below the title and the large print in which the author’s name was; it was a large ruby, in its center a painted face of a distressed man. On the edges of the ruby carefully drawn images of a revolver, a dagger, a key, a playing card (the king of clubs), and a syringe with a dangerously sparkling needle appeared. I was very fascinated by this dusty book cover and the ominous scent that came from the book when I opened it up, attempting to browse through its pages.

The opening lines of the first story were captivating as well: “Lily Margrave smoothed her gloves out on her knee with a nervous gesture, and darted a glance at the occupant of the big chair opposite her. She had heard of M. Hercule Poirot, the well-known investigator, but this was the first time she had seen him in flesh.” Lily’s fascination with Poirot seemed to mirror my own, and for the first time in my life I became drawn into the world of a book. I sat on the ground next to the crate (between the gate to the building where I lived and a garbage bin!) for the next hour, reading page after page of this marvelous Poirot mystery. The main character’s gestures, particularities, and strangeness were appealing to me to the

point of identification. I felt I was Poirot, attempting to solve this mysterious case of Sir Reuben Astwell's murder. My mother saw me sitting on the ground reading after some time; displeased to find me in my condition, she ordered me to come inside at once. Unwilling to part with Poirot and his case, I snatched the book, returning moments later to leave a note to the person who I thought had left the book-filled-crate sitting outside. The note stated that I would return the book the following morning. I ran inside, straight to my room, and as far as I can recall I read each of the stories in that book that same night. While reading I became fascinated with the book's own history as well; its worn pages fueled my imagination, for I tried to envision who had read this book, and when. Eventually I located a date: 1954. This small fact blew me away, for I could not determine limits to the possible excitement that this book lived through in its almost fifty years of life. Early the following morning I decided to return it, but instead found that no one had read my note and that the book-filled-crate was to be disposed of by the approaching garbage truck. Naturally I snatched it – indeed I saved it! – and brought it to my room. The crate contained over twenty different Christie titles, including *Murder in Mesopotamia*, *13 For Luck*, *The Man in the Brown Suit*, and *Passenger to Frankfurt*, which later became my favorite. I read them all that summer!

I remember feeling very glad to have discovered this crate, but also became sad knowing how fast I read all of the books I found inside of it. Left in want, I sought out a bookstore in our neighborhood, bringing along another favorite, *The Man in the Brown Suit*, hoping someone there would help me find more books of this sort. In the window I already saw a Christie title that I did not have: *The Secret Adversary*. This was my first trip to a bookstore, and I was delighted to find out that old, used books one was able to purchase just as well as new ones. Given that my allowance was not particularly large, I was glad to find out that the Christie book was only fifty cents! Even more astounding was the discovery that there are many, many more Christie titles available there than I thought existed. *The Secret of Chimneys*, *Death Comes as the End*, *Cards on the Table*, all of which were purchasable. Soon I became interested in titles by authors like Kendell Foster Crossen, Hugh Pentecost, and others, who were authors of detective and mystery fiction, and I would return over and over again to this store to get a new stack of used books

to read. Soon I realized that my personal library was building, and I developed a love for collecting these books. The older paperbacks interested me the most, for many of them would have had strange notes in them from ages ago, many had names written inside the cover and sometimes even on the cover of the book. A clerk at the bookstore I frequented once asked me why I was getting “this junk” and I happily replied that I did not consider it waste. In fact the engravings made these books more special for me, for now I had one more sign that would help me construct a narrative about the books’ previous owners: Pansy, Donna, Erik, were just some of the names I found, and some were written in an antiquated cursive I only remember from my grandfather, who himself wrote like that. Some of the books were from as early as 1940, and facts like this astounded me.

It has been many years since that summer now, and although I read and enjoyed works by a variety of mystery authors, Agatha Christie remained my favorite. Over the years I have collected a substantial number of her works, oftentimes the same title in various editions, published between 1940 and 1970s. Much like during that first summer when I found the book-filled-crate, these stories continue to fascinate me alongside the history of the books in which they are found. Christie’s detective fiction, her life work, reflects life’s randomness, and now I know why and how they were able to help me realize ways to deal with my family’s move to the States that mystery-filled summer over a decade ago. It was strange to me then that someone would want to get rid of these great books, and even stranger that something that I valued this much would be available for so little. Now I realize these books’ true value, namely their ability to appeal to a confused teen in want of some structure. Reading provided this for me, and especially reading and collecting these books. Christie’s books helped shape what became an intimate relationship with books and literature more generally for me, which may well be a reason why I later decided to pursue a graduate degree in literature and the reason why I am currently at Washington University.

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