

NEW BOOKS

By John Leonard

“Fire, water, gas, heat, dust, negligence, ignorance, malice, collectors, book sellers, book worms, insects, children, and servants”—these, according to William Blades in *Enemies of Books* (1880), are the agents most responsible for the deterioration, disappearance, and/or destruction of individual volumes and of entire libraries. He was addressing, of course, such realms of contingency and inadvertence as bad luck, lousy weather, human error, and stuff happens. So he omitted to mention soldiers, pols, priests, mullahs, reactionaries, revolutionaries, enraged mobs, grand inquisitors, holy crusaders, and ethnic cleansers. Fernando Báez, the Venezuelan writer who has previously published vivid accounts of *The History of the Ancient Library of Alexandria* and *The Cultural Destruction of Iraq*, is much more ferocious in **A UNIVERSAL HISTORY OF THE DESTRUCTION OF BOOKS** (Atlas, \$25). He is in angry mourning for the millions of books gone forever since the clay tablets of Sumer, the bamboo strips of Confucian China, the stones, skins, bronze plates, whittled bones, papyri, and codices, lacquered with memory, etched with thought, consumed by flames: from the Avesta in Persepolis, the forbidden knowledge of *The Book of Thoth*, Aristotle’s treatise on comedy, and nine volumes of poems by Sappho, to the Gnostic Gospels rotting in a desert cave, the *Natural History of the Indies* lost in the ashes of El Escorial, Richard Burton’s translation from the erotic Arabic of *The Scented Garden*, and all those Torahs and Korans burned and drowned. Báez quotes Jorge Luis Borges, the blind librarian:



After the garden was leveled, the chalices and altars profaned, the Huns rode their horses into the monastery library and destroyed the incomprehensible books and vituperated them and burned them, perhaps fearing that the letters concealed blasphemies against their god, who was an iron scimitar.

We already know about Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, just as we are likely familiar with the depredations of a Savonarola and a Goebbels too. Perhaps a bit newsier are the Qin Shi Huang who ordered the burning in 213 B.C. of all the books in China that weren’t devoted to agriculture, medicine, or prophecy; the Theophilus responsible for the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria, and his nephew Cyril who orchestrated the murder and dismemberment of the Neoplatonist Hypatia; the Sultan Mahomet whose Turkish troops took Constantinople in 1453 and paused in the butchery long enough to burn most of the library books and toss 120,000 manuscripts into the sea; the Vikings who did their best to rubbish every Latin text in pious Catholic Ireland (somehow missing the goatskin pages of *The Book of Kells*); the Christian-soldier crusaders who “annihilated upwards of three million books” in Damascus in 1108 and another hundred thousand in Tripoli in 1109. It’s all here, in thrilling, appalling detail: Ferdinand and Isabella versus the Moors, Jews, Aztecs, and a Nahuatl literature inscribed on tree bark and deerskin; Dante



suppressed, Milton burned, the Great London Fire, and the Spanish Inquisition; Pascal, Voltaire, Rousseau, and the French Revolution; the Napoleon whose troops in Spain used books as munitions paper, the Hitler who read Schopenhauer instead of Freud, the Stalin who specialized in disappearing Isaac Babels, Mao with his little Red Guardians. We are as baffled by the behavior of a Herostratus who set fire to the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus in 356 B.C., thus destroying one of the seven wonders of the world, as we are by the Serbian artillery fire that obliterated the National Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina in Sarajevo in 1992, incinerating 1.5 million books.

Báez reminds us that some surprisingly well-educated fellows, albeit egotistical, hypersensitive, and perfectionist with depressive tendencies, turn out to be “biblioclasts,” from the Egyptian pharaoh and poet Akhenaton to the Roman emperor Augustus, to Saul of Tarsus after he changed Gods, to Suleiman the Magnificent, who should have been nicer to Buda in 1526. The British, of all people, burned down our Library of Congress in the War of 1812.

And the book burners always had reasons for their “libricide”: a desire for purity, a hatred of other peoples’ sacred texts, the need to inflict historical amnesia on a defeated adversary by destroying a locus of its shared memory, the bloody blessing from an “iron scimitar.” There is even a psychoanalytic excuse. The analyst Gérard Haddad has theorized that the book is a “materialization of the symbolic Freudian father cannibalistically devoured.” Thus: “The auto-da-fé acts out in veiled but extreme form the hatred and rejection of the father.”

Well, maybe. Although I yield to no one, not even Báez, in my reverence for these odd boxes of Sacred Text and Pure Thought—think of me as part Hegel, part Tinker Bell, worshipping absolute candor (Mallarmé), counter-geography (Wallace Stevens), and the egotistical sublime (Keats)—I am also aware that most of the dead trees in the chain stores have titles like *How I Lost Weight*, *Found God*, *Sold Junk Bonds*, *Interrogated Terrorists*, and *Changed My Sexual Orientation in the Bermuda Triangle*. If we go too far in this fetishizing of the book, we end up looking as kinky as PETA. However dismaying, the fact that 15 million books were destroyed in Poland from 1939 through 1941 is not the most important thing to know about the Holocaust.

In spite of Gérard Haddad’s cannibalistic confabulations, psychoanalysis may be making a comeback. Jamal Khan, the analyst-hero of Hanif Kureishi’s wonderful new novel, **SOMETHING TO TELL YOU** (Scribner, \$26), asks most of the important questions in the very first paragraph of this satiric romp through a midlife crisis and swinging twenty-first-century London. As in every analytic confrontation, the stranger inside must open his mouth to ask “why love is difficult, sex complicated, living painful and death so close and yet placed far away.” Why, in addition, “are pleasure and punishment closely related? How do our bodies speak? Why do we make ourselves ill? Why do you want to fail? Why is pleasure hard to bear?” And damned if, three hundred pages later, Jamal hasn’t come up with some actual answers: working, reading, thinking, writing, eating, talking . . .

But not before a murder mystery in which we root for the killer against his victim, a re-reading of Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* as if it were *The Divine Comedy*, a nest of parables about fatherhood, a tart and smoky antidote to V. S. Naipaul’s aspirin taste, a send-up of London’s chattering classes as witty as Evelyn Waugh and as dour as Doris Lessing, an anthropology of East Asia meets John Bull as shrewdly observed and wickedly indulgent as Zadie Smith and Monica Ali (Kureishi, you’ll recall, wrote the screenplays for *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*), and a sociology of class, gender, race, and religion that includes tattoos, iPods, cocaine, Prozac, vibrators, Lou Reed, Jean Genet, Uncle Vanya, Sufism, incest, and a stolen hand. Jamal may remind you at first of one of Philip Roth’s middle-aged little boys refusing to be socialized, insisting he’s transgressive. But what he really wants, “once more, perhaps for the last time,” is adult love, not teen sex.

Psychoanalysis also plays a big part in Jonathan P. Eburne’s **SURREALISM AND THE ART OF CRIME** (Cornell, \$35), a dense, revisionist, and occasionally rebarbative inquiry into how one of the twentieth century’s major artistic movements faced up to—or ran away from—the problem of violence. (I stick Surrealism back in the bygone twentieth century since it seems to me to have exhausted itself in the Situationist manifestos and futilities of Paris 1968. Eburne, a professor of the humanities and comparative literature at Penn State, believes otherwise. You get the feeling he thinks he’s still surrounded by the intuitive and the uncanny, by spectacles, totems, desires, and dreams; that he suspects Jacques Lacan and Walter Benjamin are watching his every move.) If, as André Breton and Louis Aragon came to believe in different ways, crime could be thought of as a mode of cultural production (tabloid journalism, detective novels, police blotters, crime-scene photographs, legal briefs, medical and psy-

chiatric opinions), then violence itself was up for grabs aesthetically. In random violence, as in automatic writing, the unconscious spoke to us directly from its heart of darkness.

Upon this trampoline, Eburne performs some terrific lit-crit somersaults—on Dostoyevsky, on Lautréamont, on Georges Bataille, the Hungarian Comintern agent Arthur Koestler, the African-American mean-streets ex-con Chester Himes, and the dime novels of “Nick Carter.” He is less satisfactory trying to distinguish between the violence Surrealists could be counted on to approve of (revolutionary, anti-colonial) and violence they deplored (the state, the army, the courts). He might have thought more seriously about violence against women—on page, stage, and canvas—as its very own category of modern art. And he declines to face head-on any idea of the unconscious that’s less than exalted. But what if the unconscious is overrated and error-prone, as full of false consciousness and bad faith as your quotidian awareness, more of a garbage disposal than a dream catcher?

Ian Rankin’s **EXIT MUSIC** (Little, Brown, \$24.99) is crime at its most culturally productive. This is the retirement novel for Detective Inspector John Rebus, in preparation for which he has cut back on his drinking, though he still smokes too much, and goes home at night to Johnny Cash and Leonard Cohen. What will his long-time colleague Siobhan Clarke do without him, besides getting promoted? Meanwhile, who murdered the dissident Russian poet? Which is more sinister, the car park or the Parliament building? Why do the local gangsters, Edinburgh bankers, Scottish nationalists, and Russian mining tycoons show up at the same time in the same bar at the Caledonian Hotel? Art, drugs, porn, real estate, surveillance cameras, and, of course, political influence all figure in the action. For Rebus, as for the Edinburgh he carries around with him like a diseased heart, “underworld” and “overworld” are one and the same, transparently corrupt. ■

