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My Own Private Library: A Peek Inside the Personal Library of a Librarian

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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

Being Catholic was something that I took for granted as a child, just as, I suppose, almost everyone takes for granted their own religious/spiritual heritage and cultural surroundings overall. My parents, both grandchildren of immigrants from, respectively, Italy and Poland/Ireland, had themselves grown up Catholic by dint of those traditions. Though we always had good public school options, going to Catholic schools through the primary and secondary levels just seemed the natural choice at the time. It wasn't until college, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, that I found myself among people from vastly different backgrounds and traditions. By the time I reached library school, I started to think more critically about my roots vis-à-vis the person I had become out in the greater world. Whether or not I thought I was actively a part of it, what did it mean to be from my own tradition? How much did I even know about it? I dove in by reading books on topics such as the Crusades, the Vatican Secret Archives, and the reigns of the popes. There was still so much that I didn't know.

It was also during this time that I took a course at the iSchool at the University of Illinois—during its final years of being called GSLIS—with Professor Emily Knox, an avid scholar of book banning and censorship. The final paper for the course didn't have to be about either of those topics, but her work and our discussions in class



inspired me to propose one obscure aspect that (to me) seemed to perfectly intersect: the Vatican's 400 years of banning books and authors through the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, the *Index of Forbidden Books*. Gobsmacked, I discovered that the *Index* and its official mechanisms were in full force from 1564 all the way until 1966, when both of my parents were almost teenagers.

I've continued to learn about this phenomenon in the years since. I've found that one of the best ways to do so, when funding permits, is to build my own "damned" library. This has led to the establishment of a special and separate section of my private collection at home. At present,

that subcollection lives below a print of the phases of the Moon on the fireplace mantel of my guest room, which has also served as a full-time office since the pandemic began.

I own a few (relatively) older banned titles themselves, including a set of six volumes of Jacques Casanova's *Memoirs*, in its first unabridged English translation, by Arthur Machen (a 1945 printing of the 1894 first edition). More recently, I bought a magnificent copy of an Italian translation of the originally Greek *Selected Works of Emperor Julian [the Apostate]* (1822). This particular title was listed on the *Index* from 1828 all the way until its abolishment in 1966. It now constitutes not only my first first- (or originally listed-) edition

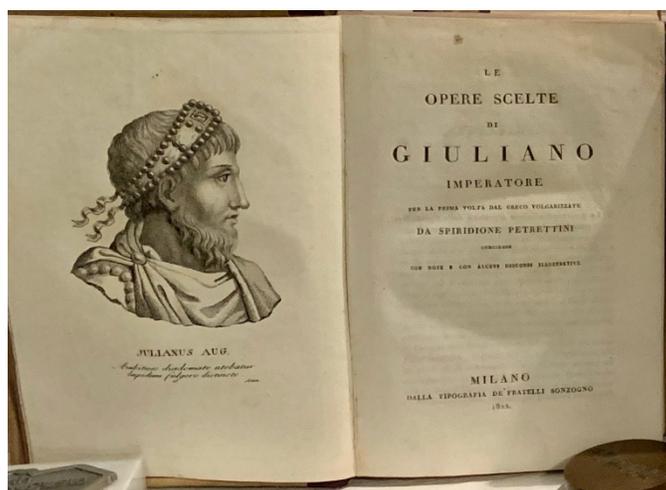
Index-banned book, but also the oldest book in my entire collection. (Julian was the nephew of Constantine the Great and emperor of Rome from 361 to 363 AD. He got his nickname by “apostatizing” from Christianity back to paganism/Hellenism, hence the ban—a mere 1,459 years after his death.)

While I slowly acquire actual banned titles in their original or otherwise published-under-ban editions, my small but growing guest room library mainly includes previous works not listed on, but rather about the *Index*. These books range from the

apologetic (Father Redmond Burke’s *What Is the Index?*, 1952), to the academic (George Haven Putnam’s *Censorship of the Church of Rome*, vols. 1–2, 1906–7), to the acerbically critical (ex-priest Joseph McCabe’s *The History and Meaning of the Catholic Index of*

Forbidden Books, 1931). I also recently purchased from a pair of specialist publishers in India two freshly reprinted volumes of Heinrich Reusch’s highly influential *Der Index der Verbotenen Bücher* (1883). It was so academically impeccable and critically well-received that it led to a massive book censorship reform at the Vatican in about 1900, and I’ll have to bone up on my German to appreciate it better.

The primary reference work in my collection is an almost 1,000-page compilation, published in 2002, of the vast majority of works listed on the *Index* during most of its official existence: J.M. De Bujanda avec l’assistance de Marcella Richter, *Index des Livres Interdits Vol. XI: Index Librorum Prohibitorum, 1600-1966*. I had to order that one all the way from its publisher in Switzerland.



More generally, I am interested in the intersections of technology and ideas, both today and throughout history. For example, when Johannes Gutenberg perfected his method of movable type letterpress printing around 1450, it blew the roof off of the established means of production held almost exclusively by the Church and its monastic scribes. When the erstwhile Augustinian monk Martin Luther burst onto the scene in 1517, setting off the Protestant Reformation, he did so through this still-new method of mass communication. On these broader themes are a

pair of books: *History of the Book* (Svend Dahl, 1968) and *Inventions of the Middle Ages* (Chiara Frugoni, 2008). Both were purchased at the used book stalls at the Decatur Book Festival last summer. And Andrew Pettegree’s *Brand Luther* (2015) is a meticulously researched account

of Martin Luther’s own brilliant capitalization on the new print medium.

I have to admit at this point that the “spookiness” of this small collection is part of its appeal. As a fan of H. P. Lovecraft, I’ve grown familiar with literary devices such as his cursed fictional tome of occult secrets, *The Necronomicon*. And while I’m not a particularly gloomy person by nature, Halloween is most definitely in my top-three favorite holidays. Can you blame me for wanting to dig deeper into what exactly made the index’s several thousands of forbidden books so nefarious?

That brings me to a few titles that I have my eye on. For one, I’d love to own more first editions of banned books—usually, but not always, the ones cited in the various iterations of the *Index* itself. But in the absence of many thousands of

dollars of disposable income, these first or otherwise early editions will most likely have to be in the form of more recent (and affordable) titles. These include Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1952); anything by mid-20th century French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (all of his books were banned); or perhaps one by Basque-Spanish philosopher and man of letters Miguel de Unamuno, an enemy of Francisco Franco whom the *caudillo* imprisoned until his death in 1936. But then again, maybe I should just go for broke: a 1776 complete first edition set of the forbidden *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon will only set me back...okay, never mind. It's \$10,617.67. I already have a cheapo used Penguin edition from 2000, so maybe I'll just buy a lottery ticket instead.

Since writing that fateful library school paper several years ago I've continued to research and

write and speak about the *Index* on various platforms. This includes a blog (<http://bibofthedamned.com>), as well as a handful of posts on the topic to the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (<https://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?author=43>). In 2018, Harvard's Houghton Library awarded me a Visiting Fellowship grant to use their rare book collections to access several rare first editions that appear on the *Index*. You can find a recap of those visits here: <http://blogs.harvard.edu/houghton/a-year-on-fellowship-at-houghton-library/>. In the summer of 2019, a long-form interview I did on the topic was released by the *AskHistorians* podcast (<https://askhistorians.com/podcast.html>). And you can find me and this project on Twitter: @bibofthedamned.

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