

THE BORROWED BOOK

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The PhD student glanced up at the inscription running around the inside of the library's dome: *wisdom is the principle thing, so get wisdom, but with all of thy getting, also get understanding.*

She heard the town hall clock chiming. She decided sagely that she needed to borrow and read Roland Barthes's *S/Z* – along with everything else she had collected off the shelves. The student checked it out with the library assistant on the first floor.

Within a few weeks, she was renewing the other books online, and mysteriously *S/Z* was not listed. Next time she was in the library, she asked, casually, 'What's still on my account?' No *S/Z*.

As a result, she did not prioritise reading it.

Years went by and the student finished her PhD and became a teacher. She had students of her own, one of whom was reading *S/Z* and wanted to use Barthes's work in his dissertation. The teacher decided to confess her story: the student thought it was all very Barthes.

When he had finished his dissertation, the student bought the teacher her very own copy of *S/Z*. However, it took the teacher some time to realise that this act of generosity meant that the student thought she should give *her* copy of *S/Z* back to the library. This realisation came as something of a shock to the teacher, who had come to see the dark green copy in its thick, plastic jacket as very much her own, and the only one she would *ever* read, eventually. The new one was oddly yellow, and jacketless.

It began to dawn on the teacher that even though *S/Z* was not on her record, by not returning it when she first realised that fact, she had, in effect, stolen it.

Maybe she would have to pay a fine? An invoice even? Respond to a police notice. Appear in court. It was theft after all. She decided to return the long ago 'borrowed' copy of *S/Z* and face the consequences.

Going early in the morning, when the library was nigh empty, she struggled to find any staff at all in this newly refurbished and modernised space. After walking in circles for a while she found an obscure 'customer services' desk tucked away on the ground floor.

With some trepidation, the teacher approached and explained the situation haltingly and at length to the blank-faced man. After a pause, and reluctantly, she handed over the treasured copy of *S/Z*.

It had no tag. He tried the barcode, which did not work either. In the end, resentfully, he typed the numbers and letters underneath the barcode into the computer. It came up 'Unknown Item'. But he accepted the book, it had an old date label: it clearly belonged to the library, he acknowledged sourly.

The teacher looked again passingly at the inscription: *wisdom is the principle thing, so get wisdom, but with all of thy.* Oh piss off, she thought and left the library.