

The Voracious Reader

The best stories, I have been told, are located exactly on the second shelf of the Mystery and Suspense section (authors C through H) in the Red Bud Public Library at 112 Bloom Street. The books of Cain, James M. through Highsmith, Patricia have been lovingly edited to the last apostrophe. And while the 11,450 other titles are under excellent care, they are not under the same exacting dissemination.

Thysanura are found under the fabric, bark, and boards of much of Randolph County. And the library book bindings, curtains, wallpaper are no exception. What is an exception is Roger the *Lespisma sacchrina*. (That's "silverfish" for those of you not familiar with Dewey Decimal Classification 595.7.) Roger hatched under the cover of Agatha Christie's first novel, and has been quite the reader ever since.

Roger's brothers and sisters are secretive and are usually most active at night, hiding in cracks and crevices, content to chew on glue and endpapers. His taste is more discerning. Having grown up in the suspense classics of the 1930's, he has firm opinions on the art of fiction. Luckily for the Red Bud patrons, the most terrible things to consume are the most delicious.

Like the sweet comfort of Twinkies and cherry cola, so are the fatty and syrupy passages devoured by Roger. His belly has rounded with the consumption of so many unnecessary "ly"-ending adjectives. Honestly, some writers can't let a sentence go by without one! And, the wardrobe descriptions! In Roger's opinion, detailing a fedora down to the last feather in the band doesn't constitute character development. Considering the contemporary works shelved alongside the classics, Roger has a pretty good idea how times have changed. He's sensitive to the misogyny and racial bias in the hard-boiled stories, and tends to chew up the epithets therein. More often than not he spits them back out.

Some meals are for literary merit, some for personal preference. Roger has kindly removed the drier of the Sherlock stories. He's taken a fine tooth to the talented Ripley, in order to make Tom's sexual preference less ambiguous. Contrariwise, he's nipped a bit at Chandler when morals got too fast and loose. Not too much, you understand, just enough to keep it on Illinois public shelves.

Upon discovering that *And Then There Were None* and *Ten Little Indians* were actually the same book, Roger ate the entirety of the latter. Fortunately, he was not exposed to the other alternate, and highly offensive, title. That hefty meal made him sluggish for weeks after. It took considerable effort to lift his listless antennae and slip them under the desired page.

He did not, however, find much to munch in *The Maltese Falcon*. Roger envied Hammett a bit. He simply snacked on the page numbers and read with appreciation.

Roger was only a couple of pages into *Rebecca* when he was disturbed. Mary West, accredited librarian and the little library's sole employee, was in early. The fluorescents flickered, but Roger was no longer as fast as his sleek scurrying siblings. Mary's heels clicked through Fiction, and the list of inter-county transfers fluttered in her pale hand. As she searched the D's for du Maurier, Roger attempted to sneak past. He was not quick enough. Would this be his big sleep?

Mary giggled girlishly as Roger's three long tail-like projections tickled her palm. "Oh, you nuisance!" she said with a smile.

She gently deposited Roger outside in a patch booming over with blue violets and goldenrods. He blinked in the sunlight and his silvery body for once was still. The riot of floral colors and scents was curious and intoxicating. In his heart, he bid the second shelf a long goodbye.

Roger's abrupt retirement from his editorship was bittersweet. His legs twitched, unsure of what next to pursue. He grew warm in his recognition that he'd made an improvement in the reading life of generations to come in Red Bud. Roger shimmied under a layer of bark, unaware of thousands and thousands of libraries and bookstores past Randolph County. Millions and millions of mysteries circulating unedited all over the world.