

# Why I'm bold with bananas: my bookshelf confessions

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Books tell a story beyond their pages.

Tripping over a pile of books the other day – and tumbling into another one – I made enough noise to attract the unwelcome attention of my wife. I sat on the floor rubbing my face in a vain quest for sympathy, but nothing could deflect the lecture: “How many times do I have to tell you?” Sally said, waving her hand around what I pretentiously call my library. “You’ve got too many books. Some of them need to go!”

“That’s so cruel,” I said. “It’s like asking me to choose which one of our daughters to get rid of.” We both roared with laughter at this, because it’s probably the easiest decision we could ever make (sorry, darling, but I’m sure you suspected).

Books, however, each have something special about them; they tell a story – no, not just on their inside pages, but of people and places at the moment they came into my possession.

One treasure is a worn hardback, passed down to me by my grandfather, and so old that it bears its complete original title in italics:

*Kidnapped: Being Memoirs of the Adventures of David Balfour in the Year 1751: How he was Kidnapped and Cast away; his Sufferings in a Desert Isle; His Journey in the Wild Highlands; his acquaintance with Alan Breck Stewart and other notorious Highland Jacobites; with all that he suffered at the hands of his Uncle, Ebenezer Balfour of Shaws, falsely so-called: Written by Himself and now set forth by Robert Louis Stevenson.* (They clearly didn’t worry about spoiler alerts in the 19th century.)

There’s an early edition of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland that’s probably worth a few dollars, and my oldest book, a tattered 1696 printing of John Dryden’s “comedy” play, *The Husband his own Cuckold*, which I confess I’ve never finished, partly for fear of the pages crumbling as I turn them, and partly because the first act is so deathly unfunny.

THE  
HUSBAND  
His own  
CUCKOLD.  
A  
COMEDY.

As it is Acted at the Theater in Little  
*Lincolns-Inn-Fields,*

By His MAJESTY'S Servants.

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*Written by Mr. John Dryden, Jun.*

---

*Et Pater Aeneas, & Avunculus excitet Hector.*

*Virg.*

---

L O N D O N,

Printed for J. Tonson, at the Judge's-Head in Fleetstreet  
near the Inner Temple-Gate, 1696.

John Dryden's 1696 'comedy' *The Husband his own Cuckold*

Otherwise the collection is relatively worthless but eclectic, weighted probably 80:20 in favour of nonfiction. Lots of science (I pretend to understand quantum physics, when in truth I've no more chance of solving the most basic field equation than does my dog), heaps of history (to learn what lessons we have ignored and are about to repeat), food and wine, dictionaries and books on grammar (what I mostly ignore).

I have a disturbing shelf of crime and guides to legal medicine and forensic pathology (relics of distant reporting days that sent me regularly to the courts of London's Old Bailey), mixed with histories of witchcraft and medieval torture (the *Malleus Maleficarum*, first published in 1486, is always good for a chuckle); and my war shelves feature a few too many works on Nazi Germany.

That's why I sometimes feel pity for accused murderers and perverts, when the press details the sinister volumes discovered when the police raid their homes. Go through mine, I think, and you'd be able to convict me of anything.

Other favourites originated with my father-in-law, who had a whimsical collection that I contributed to and eventually inherited: books chosen for their titles alone.

Surely nobody could resist *Dumps, a Plain Girl; On Sledge and Horseback to Outcast Siberian Lepers; Altar Linen, its Care and Use*. But they're not just for amusement. As any lucky guest who's been round for dinner could testify, *Be Bold with Bananas* has expanded my culinary repertoire. What puzzles me is that no one's ever angling for a repeat invitation.

# BE BOLD WITH BANANAS



Who could bear to part with such a classic?

Keeping stacks of novels is harder to justify, but though I might never read them again I enjoy, for example, having all 20 of Patrick O'Brian's naval series in chronological order. Am I likely to re-read my couple of hundred science-fiction classics? Probably not, but no need to go all Fahrenheit 451 on them.

Finally, hidden away, high up, I have my shelf of shame, containing books by friends and colleagues, a silent reproach that says I'm too lazy and unimaginative to have written one myself.

Much as I love them, I'm resigned to the certainty that one day Sally will win and execute a massive clear-out of all my precious volumes.

But I hope that if I'm cunning enough, I might just be able to stall her until I'm dead.



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