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Six Books That Have Sat on My Shelf Unread as Charged Objects for More Than a Decade

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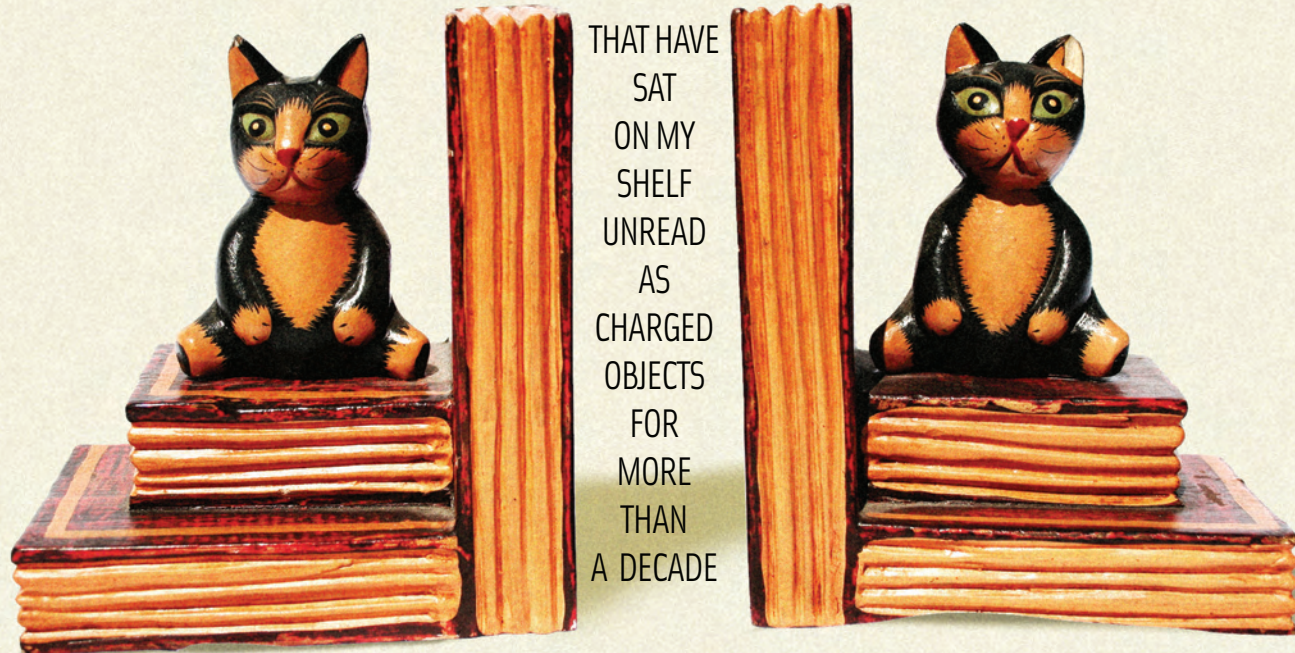
Abstract

A listing of six books that have sat on the author's shelf, unread.

Keywords

Jonathan Lethem, books, short stories

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SIX BOOKS



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1. James Joyce, FINNEGAN'S WAKE

Unlike ULYSSES, I have not even bothered to fail reading this book. But it is making me smarter and more literary every day just by being there.

2. Milan Kundera, THE JOKE

His relatively unknown first novel. I like the title so much I don't want to know if I'd dislike it as much as the more famous books of his that

I once ago did try reading. There ought to be a great novel called *The Joke*. Also, the author photo is marvelously creepy.

3. Thomas Mann, BUDDENBROOKS

I devoured a lot of "bildungsromans" in the time leading up to writing *The Fortress of Solitude*, but somehow always skirted this archetypal example. The only thing of Mann's I've ever read, I think, is a terrific novella called *The Wardrobe*, but I find

his aura generally intimidating. The copy I have is my mother's hardcover edition, with a photograph of Mann, taken by my great-grandmother in Germany, tipped into the endpapers. So I've been living with this book for forty-five years, actually. I'm sure I'll give it to my son, read or unread.

4. Max Erlich, SPIN THE GLASS WEB

This is a peculiar object, a book published in 1951 with a unique gimmick: the last chapter is sealed in a yellow tissue-paper binding that keeps you from reading it without shredding the paper, and the jacket boasts: "Your Money Back If You Can Resist Breaking The Seal." (The dust-flap explains the story this way: "Your name is Don Ewell. You have a good job, writing a top television show. You have a very comfortable Long Island home, a loving wife, and two children. You meet a young actress named Paula. And fat Henry Hinge, your expert research man, warns you, "That girl's no good. She'd ruin any man she got her hands on..." Well, I've found the book more spellbinding to contemplate than begin, so I've never learned whether I'd be able to resist, and destroy the yellow seal in frenzied pursuit of the mystery's solution, which now that I think about it, must have been an ecstatic experience for somebody or another back in 1951. I wonder if they're still honoring the promise of a refund?

5. John Cowper Powys,

A GLASTONBURY ROMANCE

First sentence: "At the striking of noon on a certain fifth of March, there occurred within a causal radius of Brandon railway station and yet beyond the deepest pools of emptiness between the uttermost stellar systems one of those infinitesimal ripples in the creative silence of the First Cause which always occurs when an exceptional stir of heightened consciousness agitates any living organism in this astronomical universe." I bet I've read that a hundred times, maybe more. Never typed it out before, though.

6. Charles Willeford, OFF THE WALL

My very favorite crime writer, down on his luck in the mid-seventies, knocked out this curiosity: a fictionalized account of the Son of Sam murders, for a fly-by-night publisher called Pegasus Rex Press. I collect Willeford's books, and this is one of the most difficult items to find in all of his many years of marginal publishing. Somehow, though, it doesn't need reading. Or maybe it does. Later.



