



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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***“Write in a book?
Gasp! I hate to even
fold the corners of the
pages!”***

-June 10, 2003, comment
from Unlearned Hand
website

When I was growing up, my parents somehow let us all know how to treat books. Never put them face down, never turn down the corner to mark your place and never, never write in them. I learned these lessons well, and in fact, when I went to college and everyone around me was highlighting passages in their books, I just couldn't do it.

I'm not sure what the punishment would have been - probably not as severe as some I found on the Internet, when I searched for information on defacing books. The American Library Association website has some historical documents related to libraries, including a scanned copy of the 1896 "Laws of Delaware," which was "tacked inside the left door of each traveling library bookcase." This poster describes what happens to someone who "shall willfully or maliciously cut, mark, mutilate, deface, soil, obliterate, break, destroy, or in anywise injure" library mater-

ials: "such person shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction thereof shall be fined not exceeding twenty-five dollars or imprisoned not exceeding six months, or both..."

The University of Houston website has an article, "Theft by the book," by Jennifer Peck, news reporter, which starts "The legal repercussions and disadvantages that could result from the theft and defacing of University of Houston M.D. Anderson Library books do not seem to deter students from stealing or ripping them apart." She goes on to say "...people charged with defacement of UH property face prosecution by the Harris County District Attorney's Office."

And, according to the glbtq website (www.glbtq.com), Joe Orton, the gay British playwright, was "arrested and charged with defacing books belonging to public libraries." He and Kenneth Halliwell, a fellow student, "used plates

from art books to decorate their flat and altered a number of books to make them obscene. They were sent to prison for six months in 1962."

I asked the Albany Library supervising clerk, Paula Greer, how common it is for library users to write in books. "Not very," she told me, "but it happens." The most common are crayon marks in children's book, highlighted text, comments written in the margins in adult books, and, most frequently, answers written in test books. More widespread, she added, is cutting out illustrations, tearing out whole chapters or removing pages of a reference book with a razor blade. And then, of course, there are what the "Mending Guidelines" for Alameda County call "books with any foreign substance inside."

Foreign substances have included pizza, cake and, memorably, a smashed snail.

So, what else is done to library books? Well, they can be coffee-stained, water-damaged – sometimes they are returned still dripping – and have the corners of the book chewed by animals. Auto mechanic books come back greasy and cookbooks return stained by food.

Another category for damaged items is those that have been "home repaired" ("Mending guidelines," again). This includes the taping and gluing of books and the dissection of videotapes. "Tell people," Paula said, "to just let us know what is wrong and don't try to fix it. Attach a note, put a rubber band around it if the pages are falling out – but don't fix it."

Today's book review is from Frances and the book is *Sabriel* by Garth Nix. This book, for ages 12 and up, is about "a necromancer called Sabriel who

needs to rescue her father from the dead." One word she would use to describe it is "intricate" and she recommends it because "it's a great reading for slow summers."