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### The bizarre world of bonkers book collecting

(Filed: 15/05/2004)

#### Dealers in these tomes are laughing all the way to the bank, writes Sam Leith

"Here's one," says Brian Lake. "Criminal Life: Reminiscences of Forty-Two Years As A Police Officer. By Superintendent Bent." His face creases with mirth.

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Anyone who has ever pulled a Christmas cracker and, merry with port and clothed in an inadequate paper hat, provoked a fusillade of groans by reading out the motto, will be familiar with the genre: The Haunted House by Hugo First; Skiving Off by Marcus Absent.

Except that this is not a cracker joke. In 1891, the unfortunately named Charles Bent published, in all innocence, his memoir of a crime-fighting life. He can have had no idea of how, more than a century on, his book would be prized among antiquarian booksellers for its frontispiece rather than its contents.

According to the organisers of this year's Antiquarian Book Fair at Olympia, west London, interest among collectors in what have become known as "bizarre books" - the quirkily titled, the inane of subject and the unfortunate of author - is rising fast.

Next month, several dealers will be offering this ephemera alongside the more traditional fare of literary first editions and books about exotic travel.

Mr Lake, 57, the proprietor of Jarndyce Books, opposite the British Museum in London, is a pioneering aficionado of bizarre books.

"The idea started at a book fair in York 10 years ago," he says. "We came up with the idea of dud books. Every bookseller has a book that he's had stuck in stock for years.

"We decided to do an exhibition of all these books that were unsaleable rubbish - but it expanded, because people started to bring along books they thought were funny."

Mr Lake went on to write Bizarre Books, a miscellany of the odder titles, and when he reopened Jarndyce after renovation work three years ago, included a window

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display of the best from his personal collection. It has become, he says, a local landmark.

Although he specialises in 18th and 19th-century novels, Mr Lake says: "When I'm in a boring bookshop, my mind switches to looking for bizarre books. I was in East Anglia recently, in an absolutely hopeless bookshop. I could feel, I'm not going to buy anything for stock. And then, there was *Lost On Brown Willy*. Beautiful. £3.50 with discount. Have it!"

Many offer straightforward opportunities for a schoolboy giggle. *Drummer Dick's Discharge*. *The Romance of the Beaver*. *Flashes From The Welsh Pulpit*. *Play With Your Own Marbles*. *The Big Problem With Small Organs*. *Fine-Weather Dick*. *Scouts in Bondage*. All of these are real publications, and are to be found on or off the shelves of an antiquarian bookseller near you.

But the market for bizarre books is not limited to the double entendre. There are also those whose appeal is their arcane subject matter, a delicious proleptic irony, or, for want of a better expression, sheer bonkers-ness.

There's *Fish Who Answer The Telephone*. There's *Lady Loverley's Chatter*. There's *Progressive Afghanistan*, published in 1933. There's *The History of the Concrete Roofing-Tile*, a perfect read for a romantic weekend. There's 1934's *Correctly English in Hundred Days*. ("This book is prepared for the Chinese young man who wishes to served for the foreign firm. It divided nearly 190 pages. It contains full of ordinary speak and write language.")

Or there's *You Can Make A Stradivarius Violin* - the optimistic work of a man who confessed himself trained in neither making nor playing violins, and whose name was not Stradivarius but Joseph V Reid.

Elizabeth Strong, of McNaughton's bookshop in Edinburgh, says there is value in even the wackiest titles. "It's social history - a tremendous picture of life as it was lived." She mentions *The New-Poor Cookery Book* (1932) - which suggests menus to help down-at-heel households that have to struggle by with only two maids - and titles such as *The Stocking-Knitter's Manual* and *Be Clever With Leather*.

"You can buy really interesting things for not too much," she says. "It's worth pointing out to people that you can collect without being rich as Croesus."

Roger Treglown's shop in Macclesfield specialises in chess books, pamphlets and the period 1500-1850, but he, too, cherishes his sideline in bizarre books. "These books with odd titles are books that amuse me. Last year I had one called *Piles For Civil Engineers*.

"There's a growing interest in collecting these things: it's very cultish, and very English. It's a market that gets book collectors away from this passion for Harry Potter, and ridiculous things like that. There are ridiculous prices on those things. But these are fun - and they are usually never more than £20 to £30."

I ask Brian Lake, tentatively: "Do you ever read them?" He pauses, then laughs. "I try not to," he says. "I did read *The Fangs of Suet Pudding* once. Second World War thriller. Very weird. It's astonishing what gets published."

The Antiquarian Book Fair is held at Olympia, June 3-6.  
Tickets for the opening day are £15, and thereafter £10.  
Readers of The Telegraph can obtain complimentary tickets  
by telephoning 020 7439 3118.

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