

Ex-Libris

Ross King

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Novels awash in the arcane archeology of lost medieval manuscripts have become their own sub-genre, with

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* being the keystone tome of the art of book-lore display. For bibliophiles (the ideal readers), this is good news. Wearing its research earnestly yet gracefully, *Ex-Libris* ("from the library of"—a typical bookplate pasted into the inner cover by the owner) balances the story of an aged antiquarian bookseller of 1660 London, named Isaac Inchbold, with the bloody drama of the English Civil Wars to create a brisk, deftly plotted saga of suspense.

Rich with historical detail, from the outfitting of the ships Sir Walter Raleigh commandeered to seek El Dorado in the New World, to the book-selling sects of Prague and Constantinople of the 1400s, the author, in his second novel, shows a sure hand of tweaking the genre for pace and place. Much like Inchbold's crammed shop on London Bridge, atmospheric authenticity is keen: from the foul aroma of London's sooty side streets and coffeehouses to the musty great house library left by Cromwell's desecrating troops.

If there is a reservation to be had with *Ex-Libris*, it is in its choice of style. Conspicuously missing is an ear for English prose circa 1660. Clearly King has stripped his vehicle down for speed, eschewing fustian diction in favor of a clipped mastery of technical argot. The cumulative effect is to detract from Inchbold's spry character, though he narrates most of the mystery, he can seem more a conduit for observation than a sentient soul. *Ex-Libris*, however, is as snugly packed as a ship's cabin, cabalistic manuscripts and Galileo's interdicted treatises on the moons of Jupiter are nimbly accounted for. Book lovers have their own special melancholy, for the end of a book is inevitably a death. In the space of time that Europe is crossed in the name of a hermetic text purported to be called *The Labyrinth of the World*, *Ex-Libris* is the best of all possible worlds—a teeming microcosm of life on the vellum margins of antique manuscripts. (February)

LEETA TAYLOR (January / February 2001)

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