

I'd Throw the Book at You . . .

. . . But You've Already Lifted It From My Locker

By JOEL SAMBERG

MEMO to the guy who took my copy of "Benjamin Franklin: An American Life" from the locker room at Bally's Total Fitness in Wayne:

I don't know if I should denounce you for taking what obviously is not yours, or applaud you for wishing to possess something of such significance on both the literary and historical levels. After all, it's not a watch (which I also once left in the locker room, never to see again), or a Palm Pilot or some other high-tech gizmo. It's a book — which may have meant a lot in Franklin's day but now, sadly, means a lot less.

Or does it?

I know it was my own negligence that prompted this incident, but that doesn't prohibit me from wishing that those of us at the gym could share some sort of fraternity of trust — pull for one another to do good, stay fit, be happy. Benjamin Franklin, a great believer in individual goodness for the public good, would undoubtedly agree with me if he were here today, and a member.

That's part of my frustration: If you took the book because you're interested in the wildly engaging Benjamin Franklin (made even more engaging by Walter Isaacson's won-



Tom Bloom

derful storytelling), I would think you might then share a few Franklinian principles. But how can you, since you took the book? There was a cardboard Starbucks cup holder between Pages 242 and 243 holding my place, so while no name was handwritten inside, it was obviously in the process of being read by somebody.

Then again, if you didn't take it to read it, why did you? To give as a gift (it was in pristine condition)? To add to the aesthetics of your floor-to-ceiling library?

Regardless of your motive, what you didn't do was go to the front desk to see if anyone had inquired after it.

Is it that you turn up your nose at men who read books of that nature? Are you saying such an endeavor is entirely irrelevant? Did you in some way want to show me that I don't deserve the respect you would accord someone who left behind a copy of,

say, the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue (although I somehow think you'd keep that, too)?

Listen to the locker-room chatter. It's all about politics and war and health and women. "Benjamin Franklin: An American Life" (Simon & Schuster, \$30) is full of all that and a lot more, so there's no arguing that it's irrelevant. The only locker-room-appropriate topic it doesn't have is sports — although to Franklin, politics and women qualified as sports.

I'm sure you wouldn't have taken the time to consider that, through the inspiration derived from the book, I (perhaps like you) was merely trying to get ahead in my chosen field. Maybe you, too, are a writer — but one who feels a yen for bad behavior at this point in his life, in order to feed his artistic soul and make his eventual "E! True Hollywood Story" more compelling.

That's all. I've finished. I hope this note finds its way into your family's collective hand, for I doubt my argument will sway you personally. It is by just such a dramatic account of your actions that I hope to cast the deciding stone, as Franklin himself might have done. So here goes:

Any wife or child out there, if you see your husband or father with a copy of "Benjamin Franklin: An American Life," which up until today you knew he wouldn't have been caught dead reading, first congratulate him on his choice, and then tell him he's a thief.

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