

MY WORD

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING IAN

DAVID COHEN RECALLS A BRUSH WITH BORDERS' SECURITY.



WALKING PAST A Topshop clothes store recently, I thought: *how times have changed* – sort of. Twelve years earlier this was a Borders bookshop, where I worked as a Christmas temp.

As I recall it, my primary function was to stand at one of the store's two entrances, greet customers as they walked in, hand out the Christmas catalogue and provide directions if need be – generally prepare people for the bewildering ordeal awaiting them inside.

But it wears you down after a while, standing there grinning at complete strangers whose only desire is to enter the store without being harassed. Borders might have originated in the US, where customers appreciate an enthusiastic welcome, but this was Australia: the shoppers were just as uncomfortable being greeted as I was greeting them. Many of them paid me no attention; some recoiled as I tried to hand them a catalogue.

Apart from all that, I was distracted by the presence of a man named 'Ian'. I use quotes here because 'Ian' wasn't his real name; he was the plain-clothes store detective – what Borders referred to as a covert operative – and therefore went under an alias. 'Ian' hung around the store, dressed in casual attire, turning the pages of many books, inhabiting the role of customer as only a method-acting covert operative can.

We all knew who 'Ian' was, but were instructed to ignore him and let him do his work. For all any unsuspecting

shopper knew, that guy in the tracksuit leafing through a biography of Elton John might well be 'Ian'. He played the part so convincingly you couldn't tell if he was pretending to read or actually reading. I used to wonder: did he read in his free time and, if so, did he read the same sort of books as 'Ian' would, or completely different ones?

So when I should have been greeting people, I found myself gazing about, trying to spot 'Ian'. He was very good at his job: there he'd be, over in the European History section, but then you'd look away briefly and he was gone, only to reappear moments later in Gender Studies. Sometimes I got to thinking that there were several 'Ians' in the store at any given moment – that Borders was not only replicating itself but also its security personnel.

'Ian' looked suitably non-descript (what good is a covert operative who stands out from the crowd?) but I knew that beneath the bland exterior lurked a killing machine, or at least a hurting machine, trained in various martial arts, ready to drop his Elton John biography and spring into action at the first sign of trouble.

Sadly, my temp job at Borders came to an end before I got the chance to see 'Ian' chase down and immobilise a shoplifter. Over the next few months, I thought about 'Ian' quite a bit. It occurred to me that, even if he, too, had since moved on from Borders, he may well have inhabited the role so completely that his

whole identity had changed, and 'Ian' was now haunting other bookshops, pretending to read things.

I even paid a visit to Borders the following Christmas, curious to see if 'Ian' was still there. One of my former workmates, George, informed me that he'd left, and a new covert operative ('Warren') had taken over. George even discreetly identified 'Warren', who at that moment was immersed in a lavishly illustrated history of furniture – or so it seemed. I envied 'Warren', 'Ian' and all the other covert operatives, past and present. It really was a cracker of a job.

Ten years later, I read that a Borders shop detective in San Francisco, one Daniel Spitler (no, it wasn't 'Ian'), had been arrested for his role in an iPad email hacking scheme. There was something rather apt about this confluence of events: Spitler committing internet fraud just around the time Borders was in its death throes, due in no small part to...the internet.

Borders, sadly, failed to adapt to changing times. Spitler, on the other hand, realising that his days as a Borders shop detective were numbered, had decided that if Borders wasn't going to make the most of the internet, then he damn well would. If only he'd realised that it's far easier to remain covert in a large retail store than it is in cyberspace.

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