

HISTORY This Week EP 414: Anatomy of a Campus Heist EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: This episode contains descriptions of assault. Listener discretion is advised.

HISTORY This week. February 11, 2005. I'm Sally Helm.

For months, some of the guys living in the little yellow bungalow at 613 Beaumont Avenue have felt like they are characters in a movie. Everything is thrilling. Larger than life. Sometimes scary. And...reality is about to come crashing in.

Around 6 AM, a SWAT team breaks down the door of that little yellow bungalow in Kentucky. Most of the college students living inside have no idea what's going on. They emerge bleary-eyed in their boxer shorts. One of them, a young guy in flannel pajamas, thinks at first that the house is being robbed...until he realizes...oh, no. The feds are here for me.

Agents arrest Warren Lipka, Eric Borsuk, and Chas Allen the Second. At the same time, they're picking up another accomplice, a guy named Spencer Reinhard, from his dorm at nearby Transylvania University. And in the basement of the little house at 613 Beaumont Avenue, the agents find all the evidence they're going to need. Stun guns. Disguises. A how-to for opening a Swiss Bank account. And...a first edition of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Plus, four other rare manuscripts... All stolen in a heist that, until very recently, has had the authorities mystified.

Today: four friends go *Ocean's Eleven*. How did these disillusioned college students decide to steal almost a million dollars' worth of precious rare books? And how did they plan to get away with it?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Lexington, Kentucky. 2003. On campus at the University of Kentucky, students do what college students do. Go to class. Toss frisbees. Try to get into bars with their bad fake IDs.

Just down the road...more college students. Doing much the same. Though in a different setting. Transylvania University—known affectionately as Transy—is a private liberal arts school less than a mile away from the big state university. It's small, just under a thousand students. And among a handful of notable traits, one stands out: Transy has an especially impressive collection of rare books.

BJ Gooch: Well, the Audubon's are simply beautiful.

Sally Helm: BJ Gooch was the special collections librarian at Transy for nearly 30 years. She's recently retired. She says the gem of the collection at Transy was John James Audubon's four-volume series *Birds of America*.

BJ Gooch: Their size is so dramatic. I mean, it's about the size of a large coffee table, and it was Audubon's intention to make the birds look alive.

Sally Helm: When I talked to Gooch, she said the books in Transy's collection *felt* almost alive to her. She spent a lot of time alone with them. They were almost her companions.

BJ Gooch: People ask me if I miss working and I say, I don't really miss working, but I miss the collections. I miss. Taking care of those incredible collections.

Sally Helm: It was her job to protect them. That's pretty much how a book ended up under Gooch's care—if it needed special protection. Special handling. Because it was valuable, or one-of-a-kind. An illuminated manuscript from the 1400s. Those Audubon's, which were worth *millions* of dollars. But Gooch says, you don't just keep books like that locked up in a temperature-controlled vault.

BJ: As a special collection's librarian, you have to walk a fine line between preserving something and providing access to it. And I always tried to err on the side of providing access, and one thing I loved about my job was I got to help all sorts of people. It wasn't just academics. I had a garden club group visit once who wanted me to pull some old botany books and I had such fun pulling these books. A group of women arrived, they spent the whole afternoon there just ooh-ing and ah-ing over these books.

Sally Helm: She also spent a lot of time with students. She'd give them tours of the collection. Trying to spark their interest. And one day, a routine visit sets off a chain of events that will end up changing Gooch's life forever. The visitor is a Transy student.

BJ Gooch: Spencer Reinhardt, says he was part of a tour when he was a freshman that came up and supposedly, he's the one who told his buddies about, you know, these incredible books and special collections.

Eric Borsuk: One day one of my friends had the bright idea that, they wanted to rob it.

Sally Helm: This is Eric Borsuk. One of the buddies who gets recruited for the heist.

In 2004, Eric is a student not at Transy, but at the nearby University of Kentucky. He knows another student there named Warren Lipka. And Warren is high school friends with Spencer Reinhardt. That Transy student. The one who had gone on a special collections tour and realized...*wow. There is some really valuable stuff...just...sitting here in special collections.*

Warren contacts Eric in the Spring. He says, *hey, I'm planning a heist.*

He explains his plan to steal rare books from the special collection's museum at Transylvania University. Tells Eric, *you should join me. I've already laid the groundwork.*

Eric Borsuk: He had gone to Amsterdam and established contacts with black market dealers there that they said they could unload the stuff to once we had it.

Sally Helm: It all sounded really weird. Eric says it kinda didn't seem real.

Eric Borsuk: Warren always had a lot of schemes and ideas and I at first just assumed this was another one of them and it'll probably never happen.

Sally Helm: But...Eric was a little bored. Life felt kind of dull. He'd been living in a bland Kentucky suburb, only to find himself shuttled off to a college campus with nice, manicured lawns. Kinda exactly where he expected to be. He was like...planning a heist would be something different.

Eric Borsuk: It sounded sort of exciting and so I just said yes.

Sally Helm: Eric is in. Along with Warren and Spencer. And soon, a fourth guy, Chas Allen the second. They're a four-man crew. Hanging out together in the bungalow near the Kentucky campus where Eric and Warren rent rooms. Smoking weed and talking kinda idly about how to make this thing happen.

Ocean's Eleven: "First task: reconnaissance."

Sally Helm: They literally watch the heist movie *Ocean's Eleven* for inspiration.

Ocean's Eleven: I want to know everything that's going on in all three casinos, the rotation of the dealers, the path of every cash cart, I want to know about everything about every guard and every watcher, anyone with a security pass...

Eric Borsuk: I think we kind of just kept pushing this fantasy of it along further and further. Never actually believing that we would actually rob a museum.

Sally Helm: Still, they're doing recon. Putting together some actual plans.

Eric Borsuk: Over the course of a year, we would have like meetings about the heist. And, you know, at first it was just kind of like a joke, but then it just getting more and more serious.

Sally Helm: Eric says, he was starting to get sucked into the fantasy. He remembers one moment in particular during the planning phase when he said something that surprised him.

Eric Borsuk: Maybe like halfway through the year, one night, I, you know, suddenly just said something to the group, you know, even if we get caught for this, I still think it'll be worth it. And I kind of stopped after I said that. And I was thinking like, what does that even mean? Like What's the purpose of this, if you're getting caught? And so that really caused me to take a step back and think about, oh, well, clearly, we're all doing this for, for something else. It's really not about the money, it's about sense of escape.

Sally Helm: When Eric and I talked, he told me that it's honestly still kind of a mystery to him how this fantasy got pushed into actual reality. The best he can explain it, they were college freshmen. With romantic ideas about living some kind of bold, non-conformist life. A heist would be a shortcut to that kind of life.

Eric Borsuk: It just kind of snowballed into what happened.

Sally Helm: So, what was the plan?

Eric Borsuk: Initially they wanted to go in at night and kind of break in and that seemed very ocean's eleven-y and cool and okay, no one gets hurt and all that. But we realized pretty quickly that the security there was just really too much.

Sally Helm: But during the day?

Eric Borsuk: During the day all you had to do is just get an appointment to get in. The problem then being that there was always a librarian, who was always in the museum during the appointments.

Sally Helm: A librarian. BJ Gooch.

BJ Gooch: Well, Warren Lipka made the appointment, and he used an alias of course.

Sally Helm: He calls himself Walter Beckman. Gooch gets an email from this Beckman, saying, *a friend told me about the amazing books you have. I'd love to come see them.*

BJ Gooch: I didn't think anything of it because I was used to getting requests that way. I was used to setting up appointments, for researchers that way the problem was that we had trouble setting up a specific day and time, and I remember being very apologetic because my schedule was unpredictable. So, I'd had to cancel on him maybe once.

Sally Helm: Ugh, and you felt apologetic. Does it make you angry in retrospect?

BJ Gooch: Yeah, it does.

Sally Helm: Eventually, the appointment is on the books.

Eric says the plan was this.

Warren and Spencer will show up for Walter Beckman's appointment with BJ Gooch. They'll disguise themselves as old men, so that no one will recognize them. They'll go up to the rare book room on the upper floor. And...they'll subdue BJ Gooch. Somehow take her down. Then they'll call in Eric Borsuk and Chas Allen to help carry the books and drive away.

Eric Borsuk: I mean, my whole issue was always I don't want to be involved with any kind of curator or librarian being tied up or anything like that.

Sally Helm: Eric says, he didn't want to be there for that part. The part with the librarian.

Eric Borsuk: It was never the plan that she would get hurt. It was the plan that Warren would deal with her, and that was something that I didn't have to be a part of, be in the room or even really know what he meant by that. And so, I think that really caused me to kind of keep going along with

this idea. It was sort of like my way of justifying it to myself. I think, okay, well no one's gonna get hurt. I'm not involved in anyone getting hurt. And so—

Sally Helm: But I guess, I mean, those are slightly different, right? Like did you, when you say justify, like did you feel guilty about knowing that this was gonna happen or bad about it even though you know, the plan was that you weren't gonna be there?

Eric Borsuk: I mean, I say justifying the fact that I didn't have to be in the room. Not that it was right, is just, that's how I justify it in my mind.

Sally Helm: On December 16th, they're ready to do it. Bring the plan from fantasy to reality.

Eric Borsuk: I think everything that could have gone wrong that day did.

BJ Gooch: I had an appointment with Walter Beckman for that afternoon, I think at three or something like that.

Eric Borsuk: It was like two days before Christmas break, yet the place was packed. Everyone must have been cramming for final exams. And we were planning on it being empty that day.

BJ Gooch: I had a meeting with someone in the reading room and I remember checking my watch and saying, well, you know, I'm gonna have to stop because I have an appointment who's coming in. And right as I said that I see these two guys, I think, if I remember correctly, coming up the steps. And they were dressed very oddly.

Eric Borsuk: It was pretty obvious, very quickly, that we were not gonna pass as old men.

BJ Gooch: There were people talking about them going through the library. They thought they were someone from the drama department, you know, like it was toward the end of the semester, you know, doing something crazy.

Eric Borsuk: And so, everything immediately was like, *okay this isn't working, we need to abort this mission.*

Sally Helm: The crew retreats.

Eric Borsuk: So yeah, we took off and definitely a huge sense of relief that we had not just committed this major crime. I went home and had dinner with my family that night, and I just distinctly remember looking around the dinner table and just kind of like feeling this sense of relief. Like if I had gone through with that earlier, who knows what would've happened? I could be in jail, and just kind of thinking about what it would've done to my family.

Sally Helm: I mean, but it's interesting cause like you guys don't turn around then like you feel the relief and then you go right back the next day. Right?

Eric Borsuk: Yeah, I definitely wasn't planning on that. But yeah, that changed really quickly once I got home.

Sally Helm: After dinner, Eric heads back to the bungalow. Where he's met by Warren, Spencer, and Chas.

Eric Borsuk: The rest of the guys are all waiting for me. They've got a new plan. And I could see that everyone was in agreement, this is what they wanted to do. They thought it was a good idea.

Sally Helm: It doesn't take long before he's convinced to try again.

Eric Borsuk: I finally said, okay.

Sally Helm: Why? Was it loyalty or what was it?

Eric Borsuk: I think seeing how confident they were about it, that they wanted to go through with it. And then also, you know, having spent this past year thinking about this thing constantly, it was like this obsession that we kept just pushing along further and further.

Sally Helm: The new plan...is a lot like the old plan. Except they're gonna lose the bad disguises. Warren, still using the alias Walter Beckman, reschedules his appointment with BJ Gooch for the following morning. Just him. And this time, he shows up at special collections.

BJ Gooch: He appears at my door. I've never seen him until this day and my first thought was that he was a lot younger than I had imagined him to be because his emails made him sound like someone maybe thirties, maybe, or forties. And this guy was obviously younger than that.

Sally Helm: She also notices that he's dressed wrong for the weather. It's pretty warm outside, but he has on a heavy coat, and a toboggan—a warm hat, kinda like a beanie.

BJ Gooch: And he seemed very nervous and very tense. Some people are like that when you first meet them. So, I just thought it was my job to make him feel more comfortable. So, I had him sign our guest register. I have the books laid out in the rare book room that he had asked to see.

Sally Helm: He's asked to see some of the library's most valuable books. An original copy of Charles Darwin's *on the Origin of Species*. 500-year-old horticultural volumes and illuminated manuscripts. And...John James Audubon's massive set of illustrated prints, *Birds of America*. Gooch and Warren aka Beckman are in the reading room. Oak tables, leather-covered chairs. And Gooch leads him through a set of double wooden doors to the rare book room.

BJ Gooch: And he's looking at the books and he's making the appropriate remarks about how beautiful they are, how impressive they are. And then he says, do you mind if I call a friend and he would just, you know, love seeing these. And I think he's, you know, he's on campus. So, I remember hesitating a little bit, but I said, okay, that'll be fine.

Sally Helm: Warren calls Eric.

BJ Gooch: So, he makes a phone call and just very quickly, someone else is at the door. And it's Eric Borsuk who calls himself John, he also seemed very nervous.

Eric Borsuk: I was just like, just dumbstruck.

Sally Helm: Eric says he's shocked to see Gooch answer the door. She was supposed to be subdued.

BJ Gooch: He came in, I got him to sign the guest register.

Eric Borsuk: She's trying to make small talk with me and I'm thinking to myself like, what's going on? is Warren backing out? Like, maybe he couldn't do it. So now we're just gonna like, go on a tour of the museum and then just leave or like, you know, um, or maybe I should just leave.

Sally Helm: He doesn't leave.

BJ Gooch: All three of us go back into the rare book room and I was standing between the two of them—

Sally Helm: Warren Lipka makes his move...with a stun pen.

BJ Gooch: This is when things started happening very quickly. Lipka took out a stun device, started pressing it into my right arm.

Sally Helm: The stun pen fires an electric shock into Gooch's body. *150,000 volts.*

BJ Gooch: I remember feeling really weak and falling to the floor, and again, I'm thinking, what are they doing? You know, and then it hit, I said, they're gonna rob us.

Sally Helm: There's nothing she can do to stop it.

BJ Gooch: They get me on the floor. They tie my hands with zip ties behind my back and my feet. They put the toboggan that Lipka had been wearing over my head, my eyes and nose. They try to put duct tape on my mouth, but it won't stick. And that they're frustrated by that, and they just start loading up. And, I think I must have said something to them, and Lipka tells me not to talk or it will just hurt more, or something like that. But I'm terrified. I really thought I might, I might not survive.

Sally Helm: Eric and Warren are now standing over an immobilized BJ Gooch in the rare book room. The treasures of the library are still spread out on tables around them.

Eric Borsuk: At that point we had already, the line had been crossed. In my mind I'm thinking, well, it doesn't matter now. I'm a part of this. However much I justified it to myself that I wouldn't have to be a part of this, my actions and planning this heist led to it.

Sally Helm: Hmm. Wow. So that's kinda like when the reality really hits you.

Eric Borsuk: That is definitely when the reality really hit me. And I don't say it figuratively, I literally felt my life change in that moment. I mean, it was like a train just switching tracks. And I knew that life would never be the same again after that because of that line that we had crossed. And it's one that I don't think you really come back from.

Sally Helm: Hmm. Is it a moral line?

Eric Borsuk: For me, it's a moral line.

Sally Helm: A line he crossed when he took those zip ties and used them to tie up BJ Gooch.

Warren and Eric stuff the smaller books in their backpacks. The fifty-four-pound Audubon volumes they wrap in bedsheets. But the size and weight of the books makes them very awkward to carry, even for two young men. They manage to lug them to the elevator, and ride down to the main floor.

Eric Borsuk: And of course, right when the elevator door opens up. One of the other librarians who works there sees us, and she just immediately knows something's wrong.

Sally Helm: Librarian Susan Brown starts walking toward Warren and Eric. She shouts at them to stop. They get back into the elevator. Start frantically hitting buttons.

Eric Borsuk: Elevator goes down to the basement and we're kind of panicking like, oh God, you know, we're trapped down here. Because we knew there wasn't a door down there.

Sally Helm: So, Eric and Warren head back up to the main floor.

Eric Borsuk: We just start making our way to the planned exit route, which was through a fire escape door where the van was waiting for us outside.

Sally Helm: Meanwhile, BJ Gooch is still tied up in the rare book room on the upper floor.

BJ Gooch: I was thinking, how will anybody know I'm up here? It's a Friday. How am I gonna get loose? My heart felt like it was gonna pound out of my chest.

Sally Helm: She manages to crawl to her office.

BJ Gooch: I'm on my hands and knees trying to dial my boss, Susan Brown, to let her know what's going on. But I'm shaking so bad I can't hardly do it.

Sally Helm: And then, who should open the door...but Susan herself.

BJ Gooch: And I just look at her and I said, *Susan, they're robbing us*. And she took off like a bat outta hell. Pardon my French.

Sally Helm: Susan Brown runs down the staircase to the main floor...where she spots Warren and Eric.

Eric Borsuk: And that's when I just hear this like blood curling scream. Like, what the hell are you guys doing? And it was the librarian who had caught up to us and she just starts barreling down the staircase at us and she was clearly intent on like, you know, taking us out and, know, tackling us.

Sally Helm: Eric freezes.

Eric Borsuk: And suddenly I feel Warren just like grabbing my shoulder. And he was like, come on, come on. Just drop the books.

Sally Helm: The Audubon's are weighing them down. So, they drop the precious volumes on the floor. They run as fast as they can from Susan Brown, and make it outside, to Chas in the getaway car.

Eric Borsuk: He sees us bursting out the doors and he's like, you know, oh shit, I can see it on his face, he starts putting it reverse.

Sally Helm: Warren and Eric fling themselves into the car.

Eric Borsuk: Meanwhile the librarian catches up to us and starts pounding on the windows and she's screaming at us.

Sally Helm: The car screeches away.

Eric Borsuk: And I remember Warren's got his head out the window and he's throwing up, you know, I can see the vomit just like streaking down the windows. I'm in the back and I'm just like, what the hell is going on? I mean, definitely one of the craziest moments in my life, for sure.

Sally Helm: The young men flee the scene of their crime. Once again, they've made a mess of things. But in the backpacks at their feet is a set of rare books worth nearly three quarters of a million dollars.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: December 2004. Police swarm Transylvania University's campus in Lexington, Kentucky. searching for the perpetrators of the so-called Transy Book Heist.

BJ Gooch: Well, I remember when the police showed up, uh, one of the first things I told them was that I had kept the email that Walter Beckman had sent me, which was normal for me. I do it just, you know, so I'll have a record of what someone has asked for.

Sally Helm: That email is the crucial lead.

BJ Gooch: They took my keyboard. You know, computer, everything I realized at that time, *oh, they think I might be a suspect*. I bet. But I went to the police, spent hours there working with a police sketch artist and just relating in detail what had happened. I drove myself home after the police station. I was a mess. So, I remember I couldn't go see my mom because I was just too shaken. And I told my husband to, please tell her I had a migraine, I couldn't come visit. So, I went to see her the next day and life resumed.

Sally Helm: When Gooch returns to work, she and Susan Brown try to put together good descriptions of the books so that other libraries and auction houses can keep an eye out. But they don't have a lot of hope.

BJ Gooch: Our first thought was that a collector had paid these guys to steal the books and we'd never see them again.

Sally Helm: Meanwhile. The thieves have the books. But there is something they need to do before they can actually sell them to their black-market contact. Oddly, they need to have the books appraised. They need someone to officially say how much the books are worth. Someone legit.

Tom Lecky: Christie's is, it's not my opinion. It's the world's opinion. I think it's fair to say one of the greatest auction houses in the world.

Sally Helm: Tom Lecky worked for Christie's Auction house in the early aughts. He was a specialist in printed books and manuscripts. In December 2004 he receives an email from a man named Walter Beckman. Asking for an appointment. It'll be a standard appraisal. That involves looking through the book to make sure it's authentic, not a fake. To make sure it's not damaged and take notes on where it's from.

Tom Lecky: That all the pages are there, that all any illustrations that should be in it are there. Another part of that process is its ownership. Does this book. Smell like something that shouldn't be in my hands. Should it be, is it supposed to be someplace else? What is its history?

Sally Helm: It can be hard to tell.

Tom Lecky: Books, especially books that have been around a long time. They've lived colorful lives, let's say. They've lived through. Wars. They've lived through famines. Floods, fires.

Sally Helm: And books don't always come with detailed records.

Tom Lecky: They don't carry their stories with them. There's no letter that says where it came from. There's no book plate that says who owned it. There's no ownership inscription. It just moves

through time, and it moves from place to place and it ends up where it is now. And that's only where it'll be temporarily. It's not gonna be there forever.

Sally Helm: Lecky tells Walter Beckman, sure come on in. But at the last minute, he has to ask a colleague to cover the meeting for him. And later he asks her: *how'd it go?* She says, *actually...there were a few red flags*. The two men were dressed oddly, like they were trying to make themselves seem older. And they knew almost nothing about the origins of the books. But they did make sure to ask the big question: *So, how much could we get for these?* Lecky's colleague wouldn't say.

Tom Lecky: No values or estimates or anything were shared at that point because it was preliminary.

Sally Helm: And that was that, except ...

Tom Lecky: They gave her their email address and cell phone number. We never heard back, but I said, keep that piece of paper.

Sally Helm: Warren and Spencer tell Eric and Chas about this meeting, how they didn't really get anything out of it. And Eric says, he senses that something isn't right.

Eric Borsuk: They were just acting really guarded and closed off. And eventually I got out of Spencer that he had realized after the fact that he gave someone there, his real phone number and that could actually really come back to hurt us.

Sally Helm: It certainly could.

The guys just try to live their normal lives. But they sense that the authorities are closing in.

And in fact, pretty soon after the Christie's meeting, the FBI matches Walter Beckman's emails to BJ Gooch...with Walter Beckman's emails to Christie's auction house. And they trace those emails to a computer lab on the University of Kentucky's campus. When they contact Christie's they're able to get surveillance footage of Warren and Spencer. And they get Spencer's real phone number.

The FBI puts Warren and Spencer under surveillance. Eric says Spencer's convinced they've even assigned undercover agents to his classes.

Eric Borsuk: We were all living in pretty deep states of paranoia.

Sally Helm: Eric has dropped out of college. He knows it's only a matter of time. Someday soon, the jig is going to be up.

Eric Borsuk: I used to go to bed fully dressed in a sweatsuit and my shoes tied because I was just like waiting for the day to come.

Sally Helm: The wait ends in the early morning of February 11th, 2005.

Eric Borsuk: I just remember suddenly one night waking up, just standing up straight up at a bed because I had heard this, this loud bang at the front door. And at first, I thought I was dreaming because it was exactly like what I had always envisioned it sounding like, and feeling like, and I was just like frozen that it was actually reality. Not just my imagination

Sally Helm: A SWAT team storms the house, throwing flash grenades and shouting at the people inside.

Eric Borsuk: I lived in an extension of the house, and they clearly didn't know that I was back there. And so, I was just sitting back there, in the darkness, just listening to everything that's going on in the house, everyone being arrested, and FBI agents, police officers, shouting. And I always had this escape route sort of planned out where I would make a short jump out my window and our house backed up to the university track and field complex and I would slip through this hole in the fence and you know, just be gone through that complex.

Sally Helm: Eric now faces a choice. One he has to make without Warren, Spencer, and Chas.

Eric Borsuk: I had one leg out the door and I'm thinking like, do I really want to do this? Do I really want to be on the run now? And I kind of had this moment where I just had to answer that question and decide that I just needed to face up to this and just get this whole other life started, which was going to be prison and jail.

Sally Helm: Eric pulls his leg back inside and walks out of his little annex, into the main part of the bungalow...where he's arrested on the spot.

December 2005. Eric, Warren, Spencer, and Chas sit in a Lexington courtroom. They've each pleaded guilty to six federal charges, including "theft of cultural artifacts from a public museum" and "interstate transportation of stolen property." Now it's time to receive their sentences. In the room with them is BJ Gooch, rare book librarian at Transylvania University. The woman they'd knocked to the floor with a jolt of electricity, then bound and gagged. She writes a victim's statement for the judge and testifies at the hearing.

BJ Gooch: I described the events, how it made me feel, how terrified I'd been.

Sally Helm: She also talks about how deeply she's been affected by her assault, which she feels the media has downplayed in its coverage of the robbery.

BJ Gooch: You know, they kept saying I was okay, that I wasn't injured. I had a big bruise on my arm from the stun device, and I had some marks on my wrists where my wrists had been bound. But otherwise, physically I was okay. But boy, I was just really hurt psychologically.

Sally Helm: Remember, Gooch spent so much time in that rare book room—often alone, but for the books. It had been a comforting, largely private place.

BJ Gooch: When I was attacked up there, it was very much a personal violation of what I thought as personal space. I felt as if someone had come into my home and attacked me.

Sally Helm: Eric, Warren, Spencer, and Chas are sentenced to seven years in federal prison.

BJ Gooch tries to move on with her life. There are some good things—her mother, who'd been sick, actually makes a miraculous recovery. And Gooch returns to her job. But it's hard. She feels anxious at work. Scared. Her boss assigns some students to work with her. But Gooch is really struggling.

BJ Gooch: I remember one day this researcher came in and was using some books for the medical collection and the researcher had asked me to copy some things for him. So, I went to the back room and while I'm back there with the photocopier, I realized I was standing there planning escape routes in my head. If he had a knife and he attacked the student or me how we would get out. And I would have dreams at night about. You know, people attacking me. So it was really tough.

Sally Helm: What did you feel and think when you learned about who had done this?

BJ Gooch: I felt like these were entitled, troubled kids who wanted to be rich and famous in as easy a way as they possibly could. I mean, they didn't wanna work for what they wanted, they just wanted to take it. To be honest, I don't know if I understand where they were coming from. And I still don't have much empathy for them. I mean, I hope they've turned their lives around. They messed mine up really badly for a long time.

Sally Helm: When I talked to Eric, he expressed remorse for what he did to BJ Gooch. He said he'd wanted to offer a personal apology back then, but his lawyers had advised against it.

Sally Helm: What do you think you would say to her if you had the chance to talk to her?

Eric Borsuk: Obviously, I'm sorry. Yeah. I'm 30, almost 38 now. This happened when I was 19. Very different person now than I was back then in a lot of ways. I think I was young and naive and foolish and I would just hope that she knows that it was never, certainly never a part of my plan for her to be hurt in any way from our actions. And, just really sorry for the pain that's caused.

Sally Helm: You made this decision when you were a young man. I mean, how do you feel about that decision now? Like, do you regret it?

Eric Borsuk: It is a difficult question for sure. I definitely regret the pain that I've caused people. The librarian, my family, you know, anyone who had to suffer from this crime. At the same time, I know that I wouldn't be the person I am today if I hadn't gone through prison, if I hadn't really gone through that experience. Definitely like the most formative moment of my life was having to go through the American prison system. It really shaped who I am today, and it made me a much better person and it showed me a side of life that I had never experienced.

Sally Helm: He says, don't get him wrong. Prison was hell. Coming out of prison and trying to rejoin society was in many ways even worse. But he says, one of the cliches is true: prison gives you a lot of time to think. Eric spent some of that time writing a memoir about the robbery, called *American Animals*. He admits that he and his college buddies were driven by shallow notions about the glamor of the heist.

But he also remembers what it was like during those brief weeks before the arrest, when they had those rare books to themselves.

Eric Borsuk: The ironic part is that most all of us involved really actually appreciated art and rare manuscripts. Like it was something that we really valued. After we stole these things, we used to stay up late at night reading them and just like, knowing that we would never hold anything so beautiful and valuable ever again.

Sally Helm: Also ironic: Eric and his co-conspirators could've so easily avoided the pain they inflicted on others, and themselves. They could've held those same exact manuscripts at almost any time. They could have read them in the very same rare book room they stole from. All they needed to do was to make a normal appointment with BJ Gooch.

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests, BJ Gooch, retired special collections librarian; Eric Borsuk, whose memoir about his crime is called *American Animals: A True Crime Memoir*; and Tom Lecky, rare book and manuscript specialist. Thanks also to Beth Musgrave, reporter at the Lexington Herald-Leader. In putting together this episode, we consulted a great article in vanity fair about the crime. The writer of that article is John Falk."

This episode was produced by Corinne Wallace with help from Hazel May. Sound designed by Brian Flood, and story edited by Jim O'Grady. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julia Press and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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