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Filippo Bernardini: Italian admits stealing unpublished books

By George Wright

BBC News

An Italian man has admitted stealing more than 1,000 unpublished manuscripts, many written by high-profile authors.

Filippo Bernardini impersonated figures from the publishing industry to trick people into handing over their works.

He used his inside industry knowledge, having been employed by the publishing giant Simon & Schuster in London.

Bernardini, 30, pleaded guilty in New York to wire fraud, but his motive has never been clear. Manuscripts were not found to have been leaked on the internet, nor were any ransom demands made.

The conviction of Bernardini, who was arrested by the FBI in January last year, appears to explain a mystery that has baffled the literary world for years, with Margaret Atwood, Ian McEwan and Sally Rooney among the novelists targeted.

Prosecutors said he registered more than 160 fake internet domains from 2016.

Agents, editors and Booker Prize judges all fell victim to phishing scams from slightly altered official-looking email addresses, requesting manuscripts of works by authors including Booker winner Margaret Atwood.

In [an interview with The Bookseller in 2019](#), Atwood confirmed there had been "concerted efforts to steal the manuscript" of her book, *The Testaments*, before it was released.

"There were lots of phoney emails from people trying to winkle even just three pages, even just anything," she noted.

Daniel Sandström, editor of Swedish publisher Albert Bonniers Förlag, who was among those targeted, said it was difficult to know what the motivation for the scam was.

"The literary answer to that question, I think, I mean somebody was doing it for the thrill of it and there's a psychological enigma at the bottom of this story," he told the BBC.

"A less romanticised answer would be that... this was somebody who liked to feel important and pulling strings, and that this was a trick in order to achieve that."

Although Bernardini worked at Simon & Schuster, there was no suggestion that the publishing house was at fault and it was not named in the legal papers.

"We are grateful to the FBI and Department of Justice for its defence and support of the intellectual property rights of authors throughout the world," the publisher said in a statement on Friday.

Bernardini will be sentenced in April. He faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

Filippo Bernardini: Man accused of stealing unpublished books arrested

BBC, 6 January 2022

An Italian man has been arrested in New York for impersonating figures from the publishing industry online, in order to fraudulently obtain unpublished manuscripts of novels and other books.

Filippo Bernardini was arrested by the FBI at JFK airport on Wednesday.

The 29-year-old was charged with wire fraud and aggravated identity theft.

Legal documents allege he registered more than 160 fake internet domains from 2016. He will appear before a federal court in Manhattan on Thursday.

Bernardini's arrest could explain a mystery that has baffled the literary world for years, with agents, editors and Booker prize judges falling victim to phishing scams from slightly altered official-looking email addresses, requesting manuscripts of works by authors including Booker Prize-winner Margaret Atwood.

In an interview with *The Bookseller* in 2019, Atwood confirmed there had been "concerted efforts to steal the manuscript" of her book *The Testaments*, before it was released.

"There were lots of phoney emails from people trying to winkle even just three pages, even just anything," she noted.

According to *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, author Sally Rooney and actor Ethan Hawke were also targeted in a similar manner.

The FBI claims Bernardini "impersonated, defrauded, and attempted to defraud, hundreds of individuals" to obtain unpublished and draft works. However it is not yet clear why he may have done it.

Manuscripts were not found to have been leaked on the internet, and nor were any ransom demands made, the *New York Times* noted.

'Shocked and horrified'

The Italian worked at the London-based publisher Simon & Schuster but there is no suggestion that the publishing house is at fault and they are not named in the legal papers.

In a statement provided to the BBC, a spokeswoman for the company said they had suspended Bernardini pending further information and were "shocked and horrified" by the allegations.

"The safekeeping of our authors' intellectual property is of primary importance to Simon & Schuster, and for all in the publishing industry, and we are grateful to the FBI for investigating these incidents and bringing charges against the alleged perpetrator," she added.

US attorney Damian Williams said Bernardini "allegedly impersonated publishing industry individuals in order to have authors, including a Pulitzer prize winner, send him prepublication manuscripts for his own benefit".

He added: "This real-life storyline now reads as a cautionary tale, with the plot twist of Bernardini facing federal criminal charges for his misdeeds."