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Bedbugs at the Penguin Building: What Will Become of All Their Books?

By [Leon Neyfakh](#)

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The Penguin building has a bedbug infestation, as Gawker reported earlier this afternoon. Management sent a memo out to staff yesterday warning them of “an insect issue in certain areas” on several floors. Staff were instructed to vacate the building by 1 p.m. today and not return until Monday while pest control goes in and takes care of business.

The obvious question to ask here is: what will become of all the books in the building? There are probably thousands of them! Are they all just going to have to get thrown away? Or microwaved!?

For answers, The Observer turned to a couple of bedbug experts: entomologist Louis Sorkin from the American Museum of Natural History and Jennifer Erdogan, the director of bedbug control services at New Jersey-based Bell Environmental Services.

Both assured us that unless the infestation at Penguin is at a very advanced stage, it is pretty unlikely that the bugs will get inside the books, because most are probably sitting in stacks or on shelves. “They don’t necessarily like books, especially,” said Mr. Sorkin. But! That doesn’t mean books will escape contamination all together. According to Ms. Erdogan, the bugs could find harborage in the bindings or simply on the books’ covers.

If that happens, she said, the easiest course of action would be fumigation, which would be fine except that, in New York, it’s illegal to fumigate a whole building.

“The books could be removed from the site and brought to New Jersey and fumigated in a

chamber—that’s called chamber fumigation,” Ms. Erdogan said. “You could also do fumigation within bags, and that is legal to do in the city. That would require placing books inside a heavy plastic bag ... and then you can place a little fumigant strip inside and seal up the bag and fumigate within the bag.”

What about using a microwave or an oven, as some people suggest?

“The books might catch on fire,” Ms. Erdogan said. “In order to kill bedbugs, it has to be about 120 or 140 degrees or higher. You could try putting them in the dryer, if you wanted to wrap them inside a towel, but that’s just not practical for a publisher. I mean, if it’s somebody who just had a few books you could do that but not on that scale.”

What exactly are the pest control people going to do when they take over 375 Hudson this weekend? We read our experts the staff memo, which asked everyone to leave their “office doors, files, and desks unlocked,” “leave in place any items that have not been recently used, rather than take them home,” and “make accessible the perimeter of your office/cubicle as much as possible.”

“They could use dogs to sniff out the bedbugs,” Mr. Sorkin said. “The good dogs and handlers are good at picking up live infestations and then those can be isolated. ... It could be that if you do a good detection, you could find that it’s not extensive throughout the whole building at all. So maybe that’s what they’re going to work on from now until Monday, and then they’ll spot-treat areas.”

“It sounds like it’ll be a detailed crack-and-crevice treatment,” said Ms. Erdogan. “Whoever’s doing the work would, I hope, come in and literally treat every crack and crevice—base moldings, cubicle dividers, all the desks and drawers. In addition, we normally advise people to take home their personal items—you know, gym bags, all those kinds of things. The less clutter, the better your success rate will be. Because the bugs like to hide on everything.”

Should journalists and book critics be worried about opening Penguin packages in the next couple of days? Not really, but maybe, according to Ms. Erdogan.

“Bedbugs aren’t invisible, so you could see a bedbug on a book,” she said. “And again, with a closed book that’s been on a shelf pressed against other books, it’s unlikely that the bugs could get inside. Is it possible? Yeah, there’s always a slim chance. I would advise whoever’s receiving them to be careful and inspect the packages.”

Calls to Penguin corporate spokeswoman Marilyn Ducksworth went unreturned this morning. We will update you on this situation as it develops.