# Lost library book returns to Clydebank after 13 years in Denmark



A library in Faifley, Clydebank, is currently embroiled in a real-life mystery as one of its long-lost books resurfaced—thirteen years overdue and nearly 700 miles away in Denmark. The book, "Literature or Life," written by Jorge Semprún, was originally borrowed in January 2012 but was never returned. Its unexpected return was facilitated by the Royal Library in Copenhagen, which uncovered it on the shelves of a library in Aarhus, Denmark, during a routine cleanup.

Accompanying the book was a note from the Danish library staff, expressing their bewilderment at how it had ended up there. The letter read: “We have no idea how it ended up here! We have never borrowed a book with this title, and you are not listed in our address database, so it is quite a mystery!” They speculated that perhaps a borrower had taken the book to Denmark and inadvertently returned it in the wrong location. The mystery of its journey has piqued the interest of the West Dunbartonshire Libraries staff, who have publicly invited anyone with information to step forward. They reassured the community: “Don’t worry – we don’t fine for late books!”

"Literature or Life" is not only a literary work but a profound exploration of Semprún’s experiences during his time as a member of the French Resistance and his subsequent imprisonment in Buchenwald concentration camp. Semprún, who passed away in 2011, was known for his contributions to Holocaust literature, and this particular book is considered one of his seminal works. Critics have praised it for its poignant narrative, depicting not only the terror of his captivity but also the author's lifelong struggle to articulate the trauma he endured.

Interestingly, this isn't the first time a book has travelled unexpectedly. Earlier in 2023, a book titled “Animal Ark,” borrowed from a library in Norfolk, England, was discovered over 3,000 miles away in Connecticut, USA. This incident, too, was linked to the confusion arising from identical place names across continents. In that case, a visitor carrying the book back to the UK inadvertently highlighted the strange but enriching interconnections between cultures and locales.

Such incidents raise intriguing questions about how books, as carriers of stories and histories, traverse borders and connect people. The return of "Literature or Life" not only brings closure to a long-forgotten library transaction but also reinvigorates discussions around the significance of literature and its journeys. The Faifley Library’s staff are particularly keen on uncovering the story behind the missing book and have appealed to the public for insights on how a profound work like Semprún's could have crossed so many miles over such a lengthy period.

In a world where digital formats often dominate, physical books still retain a charm and mystery that engages both the heart and the mind. The unexpected return of this book serves as a reminder of literature's enduring power, the journeys it can take, and the serendipitous stories that can emerge from its movement across the globe.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/whodunnit-scots-library-book-resurfaces-35321376), [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy48wznxq8eo)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/whodunnit-scots-library-book-resurfaces-35321376), [[4]](https://www.the-independent.com/news/obituaries/jorge-semprun-novelist-who-survived-buchenwald-and-was-later-a-member-of-the-antifranco-resistance-2303165.html), [[5]](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/329798/literature-or-life-by-jorge-semprun/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy48wznxq8eo)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13694379), [[6]](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13260219.2011.579888)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/whodunnit-scots-library-book-resurfaces-35321376> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy48wznxq8eo> - A book titled 'Animal Ark' was mistakenly returned to Swaffham Library in Norfolk, UK, after being taken to Norfolk, Connecticut, USA. The book was brought back by a visitor from Norfolk, England, who discovered the mix-up during a trip to the US. The incident highlights the confusion caused by identical place names across continents. The book's return was celebrated by the library staff, who were amazed that it arrived back in one piece after the long journey. The story garnered attention for its unusual nature and the serendipitous circumstances of the return.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13694379> - Jorge Semprún, the Spanish writer and resistance fighter, passed away at the age of 87 in Paris. Semprún was renowned for his screenplays in the 1960s-70s, such as 'The War is Over' directed by Alain Resnais and 'The Confession' by Costa Gavras. A Spanish Civil War exile, he joined the French communist resistance and was captured and sent to Buchenwald. He eventually returned to post-Franco Spain to become culture minister. While he supported left-wing causes all his life, he rejected Stalinism, and summed up his philosophy in his later years by saying: 'The jungle of the market is better than the totalitarian zoo.' Critics say his work was framed by his experience of the Nazi concentration camp and his first major work, 'The Long Voyage' (aka 'The Cattle Truck'), dealt with his capture by the Gestapo and his deportation.
4. <https://www.the-independent.com/news/obituaries/jorge-semprun-novelist-who-survived-buchenwald-and-was-later-a-member-of-the-antifranco-resistance-2303165.html> - Jorge Semprún, one of Spain's most influential writers of the 20th century, was born in Madrid in 1923 into a well-off middle-class home. His maternal grandfather was Antonio Maura, a political chameleon and free-thinker who was five times Spanish president, while his father, Jose María, was an ambassador for the Spanish Republic to the Netherlands: as a result Semprún spent much of his childhood abroad. When Franco's forces took Madrid in 1939, that exile – in Paris – forcibly became permanent. Semprún studied at the Sorbonne before joining the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) in France and then the French resistance movement in 1942. Caught and tortured by the Gestapo in 1943, Semprún spent two years in Buchenwald. His "job" there as a statistician partly consisted of rubbing out dead prisoners' names and reassigning their numbers to fresh arrivals. But while he was acutely aware that as a writer he had a moral obligation to pass on those sorts of macabre experiences from his concentration camp life to future generations, it took Semprún nearly 20 years to come to terms with them. "I could not do so any sooner" he once said, "because I would have committed suicide." Following the camp's liberation, Semprún returned to Paris to work as a translator for Unesco, but his political commitments remained strong and for nearly a decade from 1953 onwards he formed part of the PCE's underground resistance to Franco's regime, becoming a member of the executive committee in 1956. Like Buchenwald, his clandestine years in Madrid marked him deeply. "Years later, whenever I went to lunch with somebody, I would always wheel round just before the meeting place to check I was not being followed," he recalled in one of his last interviews, "then I would burst out laughing at myself." His memories of that period found their way into a novel, 'The Autobiography of Federico Sánchez' (1977), and so, too, did his expulsion from the PCE in 1964, following his falling-out with the long-standing leader Santiago Carrillo, and the party's Stalinist line. Semprún could not fail to notice, for example, that post-liberation Buchenwald had promptly been converted into a holding camp for East German political prisoners – something that reinforced his belief "better the capitalist jungle rather than the totalitarian zoo". Deeply disillusioned with political life, although he remained strongly committed to left-wing causes, Semprún returned to France and began writing in earnest, with his first novel, 'The Long Voyage' (aka 'The Cattle Truck') published in 1963. An account of a five-day journey by a resistance fighter towards Buchenwald, it was the first of several semi-autobiographical works centred around concentration camp life, most notably 'Quel Beau Dimanche' (1980) and 'Writing and Life' (1994) that spanned three decades of writing. Apart from his novels, Semprún's prolific output included 15 screenplays, mostly politically orientated and including two Oscar-nominated productions, 'La Guerre est Finie' (1966) and Costa-Gavras's hugely successful political thriller 'Z' (1969), as well as another film by the same director, the strongly anti-Stalinist 'The Confession' (1970). Although Semprún wrote mainly in French, and spent most of his later life in France, he remained a Spanish national – a choice which was to cost him, not without controversy, a place in the Académie Française, although he later became the first non-French member of the Académie Goncourt. Probably the most important consequence of remaining Spanish, though, came in 1988 when Semprún received a phone call at two in the morning from the future Nato Secretary-General and the then Socialist government spokesman, Javier Solana, asking him if he still held a Spanish identity card, and if so then would he like to become Spanish Minister of Culture? He accepted, but despite successfully handling the negotiations with Baron Thyssen for the opening of his museum, as well as Dali's artistic legacy, Semprún unwisely made an enemy of the formidable vice-president, Alfonso Guerra. In 1991, Semprún left his post, with his novel 'Goodbye from Federico Sánchez' (1993), an account of his time – and tribulations – there. Upon his death, tributes from politicians flooded in from both sides of the Pyrenees, with the French president Nicolas Sarkozy describing him as "someone who made a decisive contribution to the understanding of totalitarianism", while Sarkozy's Spanish counterpart Jose Luis Zapatero called him "a militant for freedom, culture and thought". Rather than any country, though, Buchenwald, was Semprún's spiritual homeland as a writer, as he obliquely hinted in April last year when he made his last trip back to the camp, for the 65th anniversary of its liberation. Standing in the camp's central Appelplatz square, he made a speech that recalled the "wonderful historical irony" that the two first American soldiers to reach Buchenwald (a later arrival that day was Barack Obama's great-uncle) were Jewish, and then described the transportation there of former Auschwitz inmates close to the end of the war, in appalling physical conditions. Last of all Semprún remembered himself as a 22-year-old, carrying an anti-tank bazooka and celebrating "with gestures of furious happiness" the Americans' arrival in a place he called "the final frontier... of dreams maintained against all the odds." And perhaps that combination of flickering, youthful hope amid so much tragedy is the most appropriate image with which to remember him.
5. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/329798/literature-or-life-by-jorge-semprun/> - Jorge Semprún was twenty years old – already an accomplished philosopher and poet – when arrested by Nazis for activities in the French Resistance. He was sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. 'Literature or Life', a bestseller in France, is a deeply personal account not only of Semprún’s time at Buchenwald, but also of the years before and after, of his painful attempts to write this book... created out of obsessions that returned him again and again like themes in a nightmarish rhapsody. His long reverie on life-as-death, now translated with the mesmerizing power of fiction. It is a profound contribution to Holocaust literature. Semprún was awarded the Jerusalem prize at the 1997 Jerusalem International Book Fair. Semprún’s first novel, 'The Long Voyage', won Europe’s prestigious Formentor Prize.
6. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13260219.2011.579888> - Jorge Semprún's obsession with memory is fed by a triple experience of exile: emigration from Spain, imprisonment in Buchenwald and expulsion from the Communist Party. While the notion of exile can be found at the core of his writing, it constitutes a complex construction that changes over time. Through the examination of three very different texts this article traces the meanings that exile acquires in Semprún's writing. Portrayed in partly negative terms in 'Autobiografía de Federico Sánchez', as the Spanish Communist Party leadership is ignorant of the true political situation within Spain due to its being outside, in 'Adiós, luz de veranos…' it comes to figure as an internalized virtue enabling the writer to pursue his vocation. In 'La escritura o la vida' the focus on the concentration camp underlines the traumatic qualities of exile and the difficulty of creating a listener who can relate to the experience of extreme alienation.