

AS A LONGTIME WALKER, I'VE BECOME A MUDLARK

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



Several years ago, I spent a few weeks under the spell of *Mudlark*, Lara Maiken's 2019 book about her

hours combing for treasure around London's River Thames. "Mudlark" is an old and not very flattering expression for someone who scavenges for little odds and ends in the mud of a river or harbor. Mudlarks traditionally did this work from grim necessity, hoping for small things that might be sold for sustenance. It was necessarily a dirty job, something endured by folks at the margins of society, often poor children.

But mudlarking is something else for Maiken – what some might call a hobby, though she really embraces it as an obsession. She loves to gauge the ebb and flow of the Thames, London's great tidal river. As the water recedes, a rich and lively sediment of city life sometimes gets left behind. Among the leavings, as Maiken points out, are "buttons that burst off



The odd things I find on my daily walks are an abiding reminder of life's infinite plenitude and variety.

waistcoats long ago, rings that slipped from fingers, buckles that are all that's left of a shoe – the personal possessions of ordinary people, each small piece a key to another world and a direct link to long-forgotten lives."

Unlike Maiken, I don't live near a river that leaves its residue of oddities within easy grasp. But I practice an alternate form of mudlarking on my frequent walks. I live a few blocks from my office, so I often commute to work on foot. Along the way, I spot small things. Large nuts and bolts might lie by the curb, maybe shaken from the bed of a passing pickup. Sometimes, it's an old spring that looks lifted from a grandfather clock. One day, not far from the sidewalk, I discovered a heavy gold disk – not real gold, I assume, but a bright trinket nonetheless. I think it was a weight from a scale, though I'm not sure.

The uncertain provenance of these humble curios is part of their charm. In finding them, I'm reminded of the myriad mysteries that float through a day, giving even an ordinary life like mine texture and interest.

Usually, I put these bits of this and that into my pocket, and they end up on my desk or a nearby shelf. They're talismans of a sort, pointing me toward a simple reality. It's the idea that the sheer plenitude of my daily walks unfolds in their inexhaustible supply of particulars: the orphaned screwdriver, the huge rubber band, even an unclaimed 20-dollar bill.

That's what mudlarking is like on my walks to work, as I see what the tides of chance have brought to my feet.

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