

The Feather Thief

Beauty, Obsession, and the Natural History Heist of the Century
By Kirk Wallace Johnson



Synopsis:

On a cool June evening in 2009, after performing a concert at London's Royal Academy of Music, twenty-year-old American flautist Edwin Rist boarded a train for a suburban outpost of the British Museum of Natural History. Home to one of the largest ornithological collections in the world, the Tring museum was full of rare bird specimens whose gorgeous feathers were worth staggering amounts of money to the men who shared Edwin's obsession: the Victorian art of salmon fly-tying. Once inside the museum, the champion fly-tier grabbed hundreds of bird skins—some collected 150 years earlier by a contemporary of Darwin's, Alfred Russel Wallace, who'd risked everything to gather them—and escaped into the darkness.

Two years later, Kirk Wallace Johnson was waist high in a river in northern New Mexico when his fly-fishing guide told him about the heist. He was soon consumed by the strange case of the feather thief. What would possess a person to steal dead birds? Had Edwin paid the price for his crime? What became of the missing skins? In his search for answers, Johnson was catapulted into a years-long, worldwide investigation. The gripping story of a bizarre and shocking crime, and one man's relentless pursuit of justice, *The Feather Thief* is also a fascinating exploration of obsession, and man's destructive instinct to harvest the beauty of nature.

Courtesy of Penguin Random House



Reading Guide:

1. The Feather Thief shines a spotlight on the dark, illegal underbelly of a seemingly innocent hobby: fly-tying. Why do you think fly-tiers are so obsessed with rare bird feathers?

2. Many of the fly-tying community's conversations and transactions take place online, from discussion forums to eBay to Facebook. In what ways do you think the Internet enables these types of obsessions? Do you think Rist would have pulled off his heist—or even attempted it in the first place—without the resources of the Internet?

3. The story of the actual crime is recounted in just a few chapters, but the tension remains high throughout the book. How does Johnson maintain suspense and keep readers hooked? What was the most suspenseful part for you?

4. Why do you think Johnson chose to include the story of his own investigation, as well as the historical and scientific context for the feather craze, in the book? What do you think the mix of genres accomplishes that a straightforward true-crime narrative might not?

5. Rist's lawyer described the theft of the bird skins as "a very amateur burglary" (page 133), and yet Rist wasn't caught for more than a year and a half. Would you agree with the characterization of his theft as amateurish? Do you think he planned his infiltration of the museum well, or did he just get lucky?

6. Although Rist was eventually caught, he was subsequently released without ever having to spend a night behind bars, thanks in large part to a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome. Do you think his case should have been handled differently? If so, how?

7. Were you surprised to hear that Edwin Rist finally agreed to speak with Johnson, after multiple refusals? Why, in your opinion, might he have chosen to do so?



8. Johnson experiences a range of emotions when interviewing Long Nguyen, from concern to frustration to annoyance to sympathy. How did you feel about Nguyen's actions, before and after the theft? Did you sympathize with him? How would you have acted differently?

9. Johnson tells us that bird populations in twenty-six states dropped by nearly half from 1883 to 1898 as a result of a "feather fever" taking over fashion. "Before the Hermès bag or Louboutin heel," Johnson tells us, "the ultimate status indicator was a dead bird" (page 43). Can you draw any parallels with trends today, in fashion or otherwise, that are destructive to our environment?

10. Rist's theft was an extremely serious crime, in part because of the immense loss to the scientific record, and yet it's also an extremely strange one. Before reading this book, would you have ever believed that someone would break multiple laws in order to steal feathers? Does it remind you of any other crimes that seem incomprehensible to outsiders?

Courtesy of Penguin Random House Audio



Scheduled Events:

BOOK DISCUSSIONS

Monday, March 11, 10:00 - 11:30 AM (On Campus)

Monday, March 18, 1:00 - 2:30 PM (Zoom)

Learn what other ICL Readers have to say about *The Feather Thief* and share your thoughts, likes, dislikes, memorable situations-and more.

With the exception of the on-campus book discussion on March 11, all ICL Reads presentations (March - April) will be hosted on Zoom and cannot be recorded.

Join our Facebook Group - **ICL Reads!**

VIRTUAL PROGRAMS: FEATHER FEVER

April 1, 2024, 10:00 AM - 11:30 AM

ART THEFT

Guest Speaker, Jeff Mishur

Art Historian, Co-Owner of Art Excursions, Inc.

April 1, 2024, 4:00 PM - 5:30 PM

FLY TYING

Guest Speaker, Fred Hannie,

Fly Tying Specialist

April 8, 2024, 10:00 - 11:30 AM

FROM FOLLICLES TO FEATHERS--AN AMAZING AVIAN ADAPTATION

Guest Speaker, Lilli Holden

Chicago Bird Alliance

April 15, 2024, 1:00 PM - 2:30 PM

UNDERSTANDING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Guest Speaker, Erica Duijzer

Sr. Director, Hope Autism Clinic

April 22, 2024, 1:00 PM - 2:30 PM

MEET THE AUTHOR, KIRK W. JOHNSON

Guest Speaker, Kirk W. Johnson

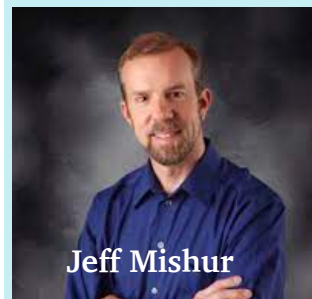
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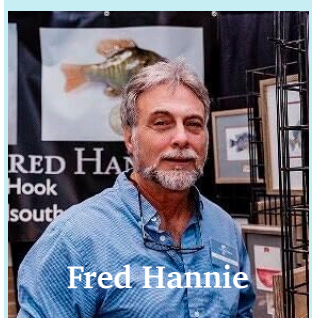
Kirk Wallace Johnson is the author of *The Feather Thief* and *To Be a Friend Is Fatal*, and the founder of the List Project to Resettle Iraqi Allies, which he started after serving with USAID in Fallujah. His writing has appeared in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, and on *This American Life*, among others. His most recent book is *The Fisherman and the Dragon*.

Courtesy of Penguin Random House

Meet Our Guest Speakers



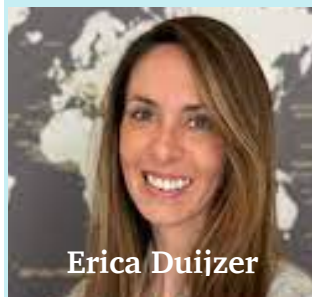
Jeff Mishur



Fred Hannie



Lilli Holden



Erica Duijzer



Kirk Johnson

For Further Reading:

Finkel, Michael, **The Art Thief: a True Story of Love, Crime, and A Dangerous Obsession**

Carrying out more than two hundred heists over nearly eight years a master thief along with his girlfriend who worked as his lookout, stole more than three hundred objects, until it all fell apart in spectacular fashion.

Frank, Matthew Gavin, **Flight of the Diamond Smugglers: A Tale of Pigeons, Obsession and Greed Along Coastal South Africa**

A stunning investigation into the role of carrier pigeons in South African diamond smuggling.

Gierach, John, **All the Time in the World**

The author tells the world why the pastime of fly-fishing makes so much sense—except when it doesn't.

Hammer, Joshua, **The Falcon Thief: A True Tale of Adventure, Treachery, and The Hunt for The Perfect Bird**

Documents the true story of Irish national Jeffrey Lendrum and his globetrotting adventures as a smuggler of rare birds, detailing the efforts of British wildlife detective Andy McWilliam to protect the world's endangered birds of prey.

Maclean, Norman, **A River Runs Through It, and Other Stories**

Two novellas and one short story, based on the author's own experiences, center on a young man's discovery of life and art in the woods of western Montana.

Meiberg, Jonathan, **A Most Remarkable Creature: The Hidden Life and Epic Journey of the World's Smartest Birds of Prey**

introduces readers to the remarkable world of the caracara, a social bird of prey, discussing how the species baffled Darwin and why it has remained confined to a small South American region.

Nuwer, Rachel, **Poached: Inside the Dark World of Wildlife Trafficking**

Explores the underground world of global wildlife trafficking, from traditional medicine black markets in China and ivory poaching in Africa to wild meat restaurants in Vietnam.

Orlean, Susan, **The Orchid Thief**

Describes the life and times of John Laroche, a plant smuggler and orchid thief, and the eccentric world of Florida's obsessed collectors of rare plants

Pittman, Craig, **Cat Tale: The Wild Weird Battle to Save The Florida Panther**

Traces the story of the unlikely rescue of the Florida panther from extinction while revealing the political factors and colorful personalities that are impacting the species today.

Smith, Jennie Erin, **Stolen World: A Tale of Reptiles, Smugglers, and Skulduggery**

Chronicle of reptile smugglers, the collectors and zoo keepers who trade with them, and the federal agents who try to catch them.

Tetro, Tony, **Con/Artist: The Life and Crimes of The World's Greatest Art Forger**

A world-renowned art forger who has been duping the art world for 45 years and served time for a widely-publicized trial, describes the secrets and corruption of that universe while giving an art history lesson.

Welch, Craig, **Shell Games: Rogues, Smugglers, and The Hunt for Nature's Bounty**

Blends crime drama and natural history to tell the story of a larger-than-life man who stole millions of dollars in marine creatures and led wildlife police on a two-year odyssey to catch him.

Williams, Paige, **The Dinosaur Artist: Obsession, Betrayal, and The Quest for Earth's Ultimate Trophy**

Analyzes the perilous world of the international fossil trade through the story of one man's devastating effort to sell a Gobi Desert dinosaur skeleton from a nation that forbids natural-history trafficking.

