

Book Club Discussion Guide



The Art Thief by Michael Finkel, Page 1 (March 2024)

The Art Thief: a true story of love, crime, and a dangerous obsession

By Michael Finkel

About the author:

I am one of those fortunate people who has known what he's wanted to do all his life. In a journal I kept at age 10, I noted that I wanted to be a writer when I grew up. (My second choice was "mad scientist.") I wrote for both my high school and college newspapers, and when I graduated college, in 1990, I took a job with Skiing Magazine.

In the line of reportorial duty, I skied all over the world, including in Iran and China, and on the glaciers of Mount Kilimanjaro. I also wrote about odd sports for Sports Illustrated and traveled widely for National Geographic Adventure—crossing the Sahara desert with migrant workers; documenting the impact of animal poachers in the Central African Republic; attempting, with my sister, to climb Cho Oyu, the sixth highest mountain in the world.

While traveling in Haiti, I witnessed the desperate measures people took to escape the punishing economic circumstances there. Some built tiny boats of scrap wood and recycled nails, and attempted to sail across hundreds of miles of open water to try and start a new life in America.

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I was given an assignment by The New York Times Magazine to document one of these voyages, and along with photographer Chris Anderson and 44 Haitian migrants, we sailed off. The trip nearly ended in disaster—we were rescued at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard, luckily, just as we were about to run aground on a coral reef.

Then, working for The New York Times Magazine, I covered conflicts in Israel and Afghanistan, investigated the international black market for human organs, looked into a strange murder in Kentucky, and spent time getting to know a former Taliban soldier.

During a New York Times assignment about allegations of child slavery on the cocoa plantations of west Africa—cocoa is the chief ingredient in chocolate—I found that the young workers on the plantations were extremely shy, and when writing the article, I combined several boys' quotes together to create a composite character. Such fictionalization is against the rules of journalism, and when the story was published an aid agency questioned my reporting, and after I confessed my actions to my editors at the Times, I was fired.

Then came a twist so bizarre and unexpected that it practically defies belief, yet is completely true. On the same day that my firing from The New York Times was made public, I learned that a man named Christian Longo, who was on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list, accused of the horrific murders of his wife and three young children, had just been arrested in Mexico.

While on the run, Longo had briefly taken on a new identity, which is not a surprising action for a Most Wanted fugitive. Except that the identity he took on was mine. He told many of the people he met that his name was Michael Finkel, and that he was a writer for The New York Times.

I wrote a letter to Longo, who was being held in jail in Oregon, where the murders took place, and this initiated a bizarre and disturbing two-year correspondence, exchanging more than 1,000 pages of handwritten letters, in which Longo tried to convince me of his

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innocence. I became obsessed with discovering the truth of the crimes, and this obsession resulted in a book, *True Story*.

The book was later optioned by Brad Pitt's production company, Plan B, and adapted into a 2015 motion picture, also called *True Story*, starring James Franco, Jonah Hill, and Felicity Jones.

Later, I began working for National Geographic magazine, spending time with field scientists on a volcano in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in caves filled with ancient artifacts in Nepal, and in the malaria-ravaged regions of Zambia.

Other National Geographic assignments took me to one of the last remaining hunter-gatherer tribes in Tanzania; to an astonishingly rugged group of people living high in the mountains of Afghanistan; and to seek mushrooms in Tibet that are worth more than gold. During my career, I have reported from more than 50 different countries.

I never specialized in one topic—I just wrote stories that grabbed my interest, no matter the subject. I interviewed a man who spent 40 years running from the law. I spoke at length with three young boys who were horrifically lost at sea. I wrote about an eccentric genius who believes that a few medical breakthroughs will allow humans to defeat death. And I watched, amazed, as a man named Daniel Kish, who is completely blind, demonstrated to me that he'd taught himself how to navigate the world using echolocation, like a bat.

In the meantime, I married and had three children, in quick succession, (a girl born in 2005, a boy in 2007, another girl in 2009). My home in Montana was suddenly filled, day and night, with activity and noise.

One morning in 2013, I read about a man who had fled the world at age 20, lived alone in a tent in central Maine, and apparently spent 10,000 consecutive days completely silent. Instantly curious, I wrote a letter to this man, named Christopher Knight, and he proceeded to share with me an incredible and moving story. Knight's tale is the basis of my book, *The Stranger in the Woods*, which was published in 2017 and became a best-seller.

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At the same time I was working on *The Stranger in the Woods*, I became fascinated with the story of the amazing French art thief, Stéphane Breitwieser. This thief fascinated me for several reasons. There's the sheer quantity of his crimes—Breitwieser stole from more than 200 museums and galleries in the 1990s and early 2000s, likely more places than anyone in history. He also never resorted to violence; his thefts were all daytime affairs of refined stealth.

Mostly, though, I was intrigued by Breitwieser because he seemed to steal for the love of art, not for money. He stashed all of his stolen artwork, worth by some estimates \$2 billion, in a pair of attic rooms in his mother's house. There, he and his girlfriend, Anne-Catherine Kleinklaus, who often served as lookout during his thefts, could gaze at the art to their hearts' content.

Breitwieser, though, had never granted an interview to an American journalist, and it took me a couple of years, writing him occasional letters, before he agreed to meet me for lunch. By the time of our lunch meeting, my wife and I had moved, along with our three children, from the mountains of Montana to the South of France, a lifelong dream that had nothing to do with the art thief and everything to do with immersing ourselves in another culture and language.

Learning French, even with my terrible accent, served me well, as that is the language Breitwieser and I used to communicate. The initial lunch opened the door to dozens of hours of interviews and road trips with the art thief. In 2021, after nearly seven years in France, my family returned to the United States, back to the Rocky Mountains, this time settling in northern Utah.

My intrigue with the art thief, which spanned 11 years from my initial letter to him to his final trial in France, has reached fruition with the publication, in June 2023, of *The Art Thief*.

Source: <https://www.michaelfinkel.com/about/>

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About this book:

The Art Thief chronicles one of the most outrageous crime sprees in history: In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Stéphane Breitwieser stole from more than 200 museums and galleries across Europe, amassing a collection worth an estimated \$2 billion. He never resorted to violence – his audacious thefts all occurred during daylight hours, most with the aid of his girlfriend, Anne-Catherine Kleinklaus, who served as lookout. And unlike nearly every other art thief, Breitwieser did not steal for money. He displayed his treasures in a secret lair where he and his girlfriend could admire them. Yet even more astounding than his crimes is the spectacular events that brought everything crashing down. The Art Thief, based on a series of exclusive interviews with Breitwieser, the first he has ever granted to an American journalist, details a riveting story of love, crime, and an insatiable hunger to possess beauty at any cost..

Source: <https://www.michaelfinkel.com/books/the-art-thief/>

Discussion Questions:

(General nonfiction questions to get book club discussions off to a good start.)

1. If your book offers a cultural portrait—of life in another country or region of your own country, start with questions a, b, and c:
 - a. What observations are made in the book? Does the author examine economics and politics family traditions, the arts, religious beliefs, language or food?
 - b. Does the author criticize or admire the culture? Does he/she wish to preserve or change the way of life? Either way, what would be risked or gained?

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- c. What is different from your own culture? What do you find most surprising, intriguing or difficult to understand?
2. What is the central idea discussed in the book? What issues or ideas does the author explore? Are they personal, sociological, global, political, economic, spiritual, medical, or scientific?
 3. Do the issues affect your life? How so—directly, on a daily basis, or more generally? Now or sometime in the future?
 4. What evidence does the author use to support the book's ideas? Is the evidence convincing...definitive or...speculative? Does the author depend on personal opinion, observation, and assessment? Or is the evidence factual—based on science, statistics, historical documents, or quotations from (credible) experts?
 5. What kind of language does the author use? Is it objective and dispassionate? Or passionate and earnest? Is it biased, inflammatory, sarcastic? Does the language help or undercut the author's premise?
 6. What are the implications for the future? Are there long- or short-term consequences to the issues raised in the book? Are they positive or negative...affirming or frightening?
 7. What solutions does the author propose? Are the author's recommendations concrete, sensible, doable? Who would implement those solutions?
 8. How controversial are the issues raised in the book? Who is aligned on which sides of the issues? Where do you fall in that line-up?
 9. Talk about specific passages that struck you as significant—or interesting, profound, amusing, illuminating, disturbing, sad...? What was memorable?

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10. What have you learned after reading this book? Has it broadened your perspective about a difficult issue—personal or societal? Has it introduced you to a culture in another country...or an ethnic or regional culture in your own country?

Source: LitLovers (<http://www.litlovers.com>)