



6700 Merle Hay Road, Johnston, IA 50131 • Voice: 515-278-5233 • Fax: 515-278-4975 • info@johnstonlibrary.com

Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Feather Thief by Kirk Wallace Johnson

Summary

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.

Discussion Questions

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?