

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Kirk Wallace Johnson is a screenwriter and author. He is the creator of *Drug Spies*, a scripted series about pharmaceutical espionage, and his books include *The Feather Thief: Beauty, Obsession, and the Natural History Heist of the Century*, *To Be a Friend is Fatal: the Fight to Save the Iraqis America Left Behind*, and *The Fishermen and the Dragon: Two Dreams at War Off the Texas Coast* (forthcoming from Viking Press). He is also the founder of the List Project to Resettle Iraqi Allies.

His writing has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post Magazine*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Foreign Policy*, among others.

Prior to founding the List Project, Johnson served in Iraq with the U.S. Agency for International Development in Baghdad and then Fallujah as the Agency's first coordinator for reconstruction in the war-torn city.

He is a senior fellow at the USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership and Policy, and the recipient of fellowships from the American Academy in Berlin, Yaddo, MacDowell, and the Wurlitzer Foundation. Prior to his work in Iraq, he conducted research on political Islamism as a Fulbright Scholar in Egypt. He received his BA from the University of Chicago in 2002.

Born in West Chicago, he lives in Los Angeles with his wife, son, and daughter. - Author's website

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?
11. Was this non-fiction book fun to read, or was it a little dry? Did the author need to "spice it up" or "tone it down"? How could they have managed that?
12. Talk about specific passages that struck you as significant—or interesting, profound, amusing, illuminating, disturbing, sad...? What was memorable?
13. How did this book change your views on the subject matter it presented? Are your opinions different now than they were before reading the book?

- BooksOnTape.com

BOOK REVIEWS

Publisher's Weekly

/ Starred Review */* Johnson (*To Be a Friend Is Fatal*) makes his true-crime debut with this enthralling account of a

truly bizarre crime. In 2009, Edwin Rist, an American student at London's Royal Academy of Music, stole 299 rare and scientifically significant bird skins from the Natural History Museum at Tring, in Hertfordshire, England, plucked their feathers, and sold them for top dollar to men who shared his obsession with the Victorian art of salmon-fly tying. Johnson explores the expensive and exotic hobby of salmon-fly tying that emerged in the 19th century and uses that context to frame Rist's story, including his trial. Rist did not serve jail time after his lawyers successfully argued that Asperger's syndrome was to blame for his crime. In the book's final section, Johnson goes deep into the exotic bird and feather trade and concludes that though obsession and greed know no bounds, they certainly make for a fascinating tale. The result is a page-turner that will likely appeal to science, history, and true crime readers. (Apr.) --Staff (Reviewed 11/13/2017) (Publishers Weekly, vol 264, issue 46, p)

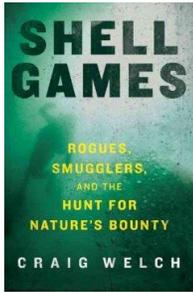
Library Journal

On June 24, 2009, a break in occurred at the British Natural History Museum at Tring. Nothing of value seemed to be missing, but several months later, the museum discovered that hundreds of rare birds, some of them collected by Darwin competitor Alfred Russell Wallace, had been stolen by fishing-lure aficionados. The author, a fly fisherman himself, stumbled on this story and found himself tumbling down a rabbit hole of obsessed Victorian fly-tiers, who need the feathers of now-endangered or extinct bird species to replicate the artistic lures created decades ago. The feathers themselves are worth a small fortune, and while the thief, American Edwin Rist, was captured, many of the birds' skins remained missing. Johnson took up the search within the secretive brotherhood of fly-tiers, tracking down new leads and interviewing wary or openly hostile members. The result is a mind-blowing account of a modern subculture and a riveting historical tour of the feather trade from the 1800s to the present. The resolution, however, is frustrating and demonstrates both the importance and difficulty of preserving our natural history. VERDICT A different kind of detective tale that will appeal to lovers of natural history and criminal caper stories. [See Prepub Alert, 10/29/17.] --Deirdre Bray Root (Reviewed 02/15/2018) (Library Journal, vol 143, issue 3, p72)

Kirkus Reviews

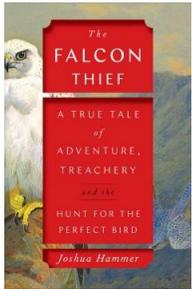
/ Starred Review */* A captivating tale of beautiful, rare, priceless, and stolen feathers. Journalist Johnson (*To Be a Friend Is Fatal: The Fight to Save the Iraqis America Left Behind*, 2013) was fly-fishing in a New Mexico stream when he first heard about the "feather thief" from his guide. The author became obsessed with the story of Edwin Rist, a young American flautist and expert tier of salmon flies, who, after performing at a June 2009 London concert, broke into the nearby British Natural History Museum at Tring to steal 299 rare bird skins, including 37 of naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace's "beloved" Birds of Paradise. Johnson dove headfirst into a five-year journey "deep into the feather underground, a world of fanatical fly-tiers and plume peddlers, cokeheads and big game hunters, ex-detectives and shady dentists." Everything the author touches in this thoroughly engaging true-crime tale turns to storytelling gold. These intriguing tales include that of Darwin rival Wallace's extreme hardships trying to gather rare birds from around the world and losing many of them in a sinking ship; the incredibly wealthy Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild's museum at Tring, which his father built for him when he was 29 to house his extensive collection of animals and birds, alive and dead; and the sad history of 19th-century women demanding the most exotic birds for their fashionable hats, which resulted in hundreds of millions of birds being killed. Throughout, Johnson's flair for telling an engrossing story is, like the beautiful birds he describes, exquisite. Furthermore, like an accomplished crime reporter, the author recounts the story of how Rist was located and arrested by a local, female detective nearly 15 months after the break-in; the trial, which features an unexpected twist; and the fate of much of his booty. A superb tale about obsession, nature, and man's "unrelenting desire to lay claim to its beauty, whatever the cost." (Kirkus Reviews, February 1, 2018)

READALIKES



***Shell Games* by Craig Welch**

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.



***The Falcon Thief* by Joshua Hammer**

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.



***The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean**

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.