

Art Thief Discussion Questions

by Noah Charney

Author Bio: (Wikipedia & Fantastic Fiction)

Noah Charney (born November 27, 1979) is an American art historian and novelist. He is perhaps best known as the author of *The Art Thief* and as the founder of the Association for Research into Crimes against Art.



Characters:

- **Genevieve Delacloche:** VP of the Malevich Society. Chief investigator of forgeries and Malevich authenticator.
- **Kasmir Malevich:** Painter known for Abstract art. Painted the Suprematist White on White collection.
- **Dr. Gabriel Coffin:** Scholar, police consultant, insurance investigator and art recoverer. Insurance investigator called in to look for the Caravaggio Altarpiece.
- **Inspector Jean-Jaques Bizot:** Police inspector who works with Jean Paule Lesgorges to recover stolen art. Called in to handle the painting stolen from the Malevich Society.
- **Jean-Paul Lesgorges:** Scholar who works with Inspector Bizot to recover stolen art.
- **Claudio Ariosto:** Chief detective from Carabinieri's Unit for the Protection of Cultural Heritage. Called in for the Carvaggio Altarpiece theft.
- **Professor Barrow:** College art history teacher. Carvaggio expert.
- **Daniela Vallombroso:** Professional thief. Coffin calls her "a perfect thief." In jail – set up as the fall guy in a theft; convicted as an accessory.
- **Elizabeth Van Der Mier** – Head of the National Gallery.
- **Robert Grayson** – American businessman who bought an anonymous Supermatist painting with "unusual colors." The painting is later stolen from his home.
- **Inspector Harry Wickenden:** Police officer called in to find the stolen White on White from the National Gallery. Member of Scotland Yard's Arts and Antiquities division. Give the impression of being a "bumbling detective."
- **Lord Malcom Harkness:** A trustee of the National Gallery. Paid the ransom (\$6.3 million) for the Suprematist White on White stolen from the National Gallery.

Artworks & Art Information:

- **Caravaggio Altarpiece:** Small Baroque Roman painting stolen from the Santa Giuliana in Trastevere church.
- **Suprematist White on White:** Malevich (possible forgery) painting on sale at Christie's auction. Stolen from the National Gallery. (Belonged to Lord Malcom Harkness's family.)
- **Suprematist White on White:** Painting stolen from the Malevich society. Used to belong to Delacloche's family.
- **Anonymous Supermatist painting:** Bought by Robert Grayson. Said to have "unusual colors." Stolen from Grayson's home.
- CH347: Written on the wall by the Malevich Society theft.
- Suprematist White on White was an iconoclastic painting (an action of attacking or assertively rejecting cherished beliefs and institutions or established values and practices). It was supposed to be a statement about God and false idols. It was hung in the upper left corner where the Russians would normally put a statue of the baby Jesus.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. Who is the main character in this book?
3. This story is told from a number of different characters' point of view (i.e. Delacloche, Barrow, Coffin). Did you like that story telling device? Did it help or hinder the story?
4. There are many phrases in French and other foreign languages. Did they flavor the novel or did you find them distracting?
5. Barrow states that "medieval commoners would never have seen an image" (no TV, books, etc.). How would your life have been different if the only images you had ever seen were your reflection in a pool of water and the religious icons in the local church/ synagogue/ temple?
6. "Every painting in every museum around the world is in code." (i.e. How do you know which saint is being depicted?) What do you think about that statement? Is this true of things other than just the visual arts?
7. Charney says that art crime is considered high class and socially acceptable, where the public roots for the thief. What do you think of this statement?
8. "People do not commission the theft of works they have never seen or have seen only once. It is a love affair." If you could steal one work of art, what would you steal and why? Can stealing art be another form of art criticism?
9. What do you think of the statement, "Art has no real worth. It is an arbitrary number set by interest and history?"

10. The author spends a great deal of time detailing Gabriel Coffin. Do you consider him good or bad?
11. Coffin's "job was to protect art from the wicked, the criminal. To hunt down thieves. But could there be a good thief?" How would you answer this question? Did your answer change during the course of reading this book? If so, why?
12. Why break into the National Gallery twice?
13. Why would the thieves ransom the White on White?
14. How do you view art? Are you attracted to the deeper meaning of a painting or to its physical beauty? Do your views change depending on the painting itself? When and why?
15. Which painting would you rather own, the Caravaggio or the Malevich? Were the value of each to be the same, which would you rather own? Or would you insist that they both be in a museum so that they can be shared with others?
16. Why did the thieves lead the police on such a chase? (i.e. following the bible verse clues, the street names and "returning the idols to Jerusalem," the safe 34 seven times, etc.)
17. What do you think of the practice of hiding a real painting under a fake painting? Why would they paint a fake Malevich over the real Caravaggio?
18. Why did the three men kidnap Professor Barrow? What is he paid to do the first time? What about the second time?
19. Where do you think Lord Malcom Harkness' White on White ended up?
20. Is Daniela Vallombroso's (the female thief) revenge fitting? (Remember she was sent to prison for a past theft she did not mastermind?)
21. Who is the hero and who is the villain of this story? Or does this novel have a hero or a villain? Why or why not?
22. Who wins and who loses in this book?
23. When did you realize the scheme that had been played out on the parties involved? What was the major clue or tipping point for your realization? Whom did you first suspect? Why?
24. Was the plot of this story too complex or was it just right?
25. Charney has written 6 nonfiction books about art and art crime. Will you read any of those?

References:

- Fantastic Fiction - <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/c/noah-charney/>
- Noah Charney - <http://noahcharney.smugmug.com/>
- Simon & Schuster - http://books.simonandschuster.com/The-Art-Thief/Noah-Charney/9781416550310/reading_group_guide#rgg
- Wikipedia - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noah_Charney

If you liked The Art Thief, try...

- Burglar Who Painted Like Mondrian – Lawrence Block
- Loot – Aaron Elkins
- In a Strange City – Laura Lippman
- Death and Restoration – Ian Pears
- Acqua Alta – Donna Leon

Charney's Nonfiction Titles

- Stealing the Mystic Lamb (2010)
- The Thefts of the Mona Lisa: On Stealing the World's Most Famous Painting (2011)
- The Wine Forger's Handbook (2013) (with Stuart George)
- The Fate of the Masterpiece: How the Monuments Men Rescued the Mystic Lamb from the Nazis (2014)
- The Art of Forgery (2015)
- Art Crime (2015)