

Marlborough Public Library Adult Book Club

June 11 or 13, 2024

*The Feather Thief* by Kirk W. Johnson

Questions abridged from:

<https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/non-fiction/11306-feather-thief-johnson?start=3>

1.) Johnson reports that a fly-tier expert warned Johnson away from pursuing the story of the Tring theft. "I don't think you want to write that story... We're a tight-knit community, fly-tiers, and you do not want to piss us off." Johnson becomes frustrated by those who don't seem to grasp the seriousness of Rist's crime. Why is it such a serious crime?

2.) When the author interviews Rist, he shows little remorse for his theft. What do you think of Rist and his self-exoneration? He says at one point:

[A]ll of the scientific data that can be extracted from them has been extracted from them. You can no longer use DNA, because what you would want to do it for is to prolong and help living birds, which hasn't really worked anyway, because they're still going extinct, or will go extinct depending on what happens with the rainforests.

Is Rist correct? Or is that beside the point?

3.) Juxtaposed to Rist's lack of remorse is the museum's science director who calls the theft a "catastrophic event," of "stealing knowledge from humanity." Is it catastrophic? What do the losses mean to science?

4.) In what way does the basic conflict at the heart of this book continue today? That conflict is the belief that nature is worth preserving for posterity vs. the belief that nature is put here for the use and betterment of humankind. In what other areas do we see this debate playing out, and where do you stand in regards to it?

5.) Is *The Feather Thief* an important book or merely an entertaining book about an absurd obsession? Do we need to care about what happened to the birds of Tring? What is their value to science? Johnson says that the curators had protected the specimens for years, because they "understood that the birds held answers to questions that hadn't yet even been asked." If the questions haven't been formulated by this juncture in history, are they really that important?