



## The Rescue Artist

By Edward Dolnick  
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### Introduction

Edward Dolnick has done a terrific job in *The Rescue Artist* of opening up all the elements of a specific event—the theft of Edward Munch's famous painting *The Scream*—and bringing them together like a skilled choreographer, resulting in a great reading experience. This book has it all: truth, suspense, humor, in-depth analysis, great characterizations, wonderful writing, and a truly interesting look at civilization in all its layers.

When thieves climbed a ladder into the National Gallery of Oslo, Norway in 1994 and made off with *The Scream*, a national treasure and an international cultural icon, a drama was set into motion that is better than any fictional crime novel or screenplay. Dolnick explores the history of art theft, and the kind of people involved, from all sectors of society, with an ear for great dialogue as great as Hitchcock's, and an eye for detail as finely tuned as any painter.

He introduces the reader to Charles Hill, the detective who solved this crime, and a character so fascinating that he rivals any fictional detective for bravado, complexity, risk-taking and ethics. Hill is a rarity, an officer of the law who has a deep understanding of and passion for art. He cares far more about the masterpieces that he tracks than about pursuing the thieves who steal them and Dolnick makes the reader understand why. As the story develops, we are left on the edge of our seats as Dolnick explores the themes of culture, class, crime, police, crooks and the world they share. Ultimately this book is no mere "who-dunnit," but an accomplished and fascinating look into the value of art in western culture, and the ways in which it affects the daily lives of even the most ordinary citizens. It's impossible to read this book without learning a great deal about art, about crime, and about desire, all the while having a great time.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Were you shocked to find out what an easy time thieves seem to have in stealing paintings worth millions of dollars? It seems to be so easy, and yet Dolnick tells us that the thieves rarely manage to profit from these crimes. What are some of the things that motivate them to keep doing it? Did these reasons ring true to you?
2. What are some of the characteristics that the world of crime and world of law enforcement seem to share? In this book, which world seemed to be the most effective, and in what ways?
3. Art crimes of this magnitude link together the highest and lowest levels of society. Could you identify at all with thieves who seem to simply want to prove that they can penetrate the fortresses of the ultra-rich and get away with it?
4. Do you find *The Scream* to be a beautiful or powerful painting? How does such a painting come to have such a high value? What is it about this particular image that has made it so popular, acting as an instantly recognizable cultural icon?
5. Dolnick describes the police in this story often behaving as either incompetents, or as "macho" reverse culture snobs. Charles Hill describes them, on page 26, as "complete ignoramuses," and goes on to say, "You can take the high road all you want, and all they'll do is write you off as some sort of aesthete who thinks that pictures are what it's all about." How is Hill himself different from this sort of detective? And why would the police tend to view the knowledge of art as some kind of handicap?
6. What are some of the frustrations that Hill feels toward the authorities with whom he must work in order to solve this crime? Did you identify with Hill at all? Did you find any of his methods questionable?
7. Hill has a great deal of insight into his own character. He says, speaking of the hazards of his undercover work, "You start believing your own bullshit, thinking you're completely immune to having to address anything that smacks of the difference between right and wrong" (Page 92). Indeed, one of the compelling aspects of this story is that it does seem to blur those lines. In what ways does Hill himself define right and wrong?
8. "Even a villain has some humanity," Hill remarks, "and the trick is finding a way to connect with it" (Page 101). Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
9. Dolnick quotes F. Scott Fitzgerald on page 105, "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." In what ways is Hill able to do this, and with what results? In what ways do other characters in the book either fail or pass this test?
10. Dolnick describes Hill as, among other things, a failed priest. And Hill does see himself as having a mission. He says, "It's the story of Noah and the rainbow and all that, but you're a steward of not just the animals two by two but to *everything* worthwhile in life" (Page 214). Do you agree that great art carries this kind of weight in human life? Why or why not?

### About the Author

Edward Dolnick is the author of *Down the Great Unknown* and *Madness on the Couch*. A former chief science writer at the *Boston Globe*, he has written for the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and many other publications. He has two grown sons and lives with his wife near Washington, D.C.