

A Hermit for Our Times: *The Stranger in the Woods*

One day in the mid-1980's Christopher Knight walked into the Maine woods, and there he remained for 27 years in solitude, undetected. His existence was surmised, however, as a result of the hundreds of expert break-ins he committed in order to provide himself with the necessities and conveniences of life. When finally caught pilfering from the larder of a summer camp in the offseason, he was arrayed from head to foot in other people's clothing.

A man who passed a quarter century of northern winters in a den is not just anti-social but phobic, but despite an aversion to human beings Knight was entirely in his right mind. He knew what he was doing, did not blame the state of Maine for prosecuting him (with exemplary mercy, be it said) when his sabbatical came to an end, and did not idealize himself. This is worth mentioning only because Michael Finkel, the fallen journalist who has told his story in *The Stranger in the Woods* (2017), cannot seem to shake the belief that Knight has a place among the great anchorites.

Like Rousseau in *A Discourse on Inequality* but with less flair and invention, Finkel offers a condensed history of the human race, concluding that for almost the entirety of our existence we have led much of life alone. "This is who we truly are." Implicit in Finkel's admiration of his unlikely hero lies a notion that by breaking with society, committing himself to solitude, and returning to Nature so literally that his hide-out was all but invisible, Knight rediscovered this

great truth; found authenticity. Never mind that he fashioned for himself a pirated copy of a consumer life, running electronics off stolen batteries and drinking stolen beer. Amiens sings of the exile in the Forest of Arden “seeking the food he eats, / And pleased with what he gets.” Knight’s way of seeking food was burgling someplace that held it, as he was doing when finally captured. His flight to the woods in the first place was inspired not by a search for authenticity but an elemental dislike of human company, and the same stunted moral life allowed him to study the movements of cabin-owners as if tracking prey. On the other hand, Knight never suggested that the hardship of living in the wild excused the hundreds of felonies he committed in order to maintain himself without re-entering human society; just as he had no philosophy, he indulged in no rationalizations. Finkel doesn’t defend him either (perhaps knowing there is no case to be made), but in the contest between Knight and the law, his sympathies lie with Knight, a hermit for our times.

The literary critic Northrop Frye once remarked on “the half-baked Rousseauism in which most of us have been brought up,” and *The Stranger in the Woods* is a course in exactly that. And because Rousseau is the tutelary spirit of *The Stranger in the Woods* (the book, not the man), it bears remembering that he too made a practice of free-riding on the society he detested. He did so most notably by committing each of his and Thérèse’s newborn children—five in all—to the Foundling Hospital, thereby enabling himself to meditate in tranquility on the perfidies of others.

In the year 1750, whilst “philosophizing on the duties of man,” Rousseau delivered the third of his children to the orphanage, as he explains characteristically in the *Confessions*:

Never for a moment in his life could Jean-Jacques have been a man without feelings or compassion, an unnatural father. I may have been mistaken, but I could never be callous. If I were to state my reasons [for abandoning his children], I should say too much. . . . I do not wish to expose any young people who may read me to the risk of being misled by the same error. I will be content with a general statement that in handing my children over for the State to educate, for lack of means to bring them up myself, by destining them to become workers and peasants instead of adventurers and fortune-hunters, I thought I was acting as a citizen and a father, and looked upon myself as a member of Plato's Republic.

The abandonment of five infants in succession would seem to represent something more like a settled policy than a misstep. That policy and the fantasy supporting it permitted Rousseau to wash his hands of parental responsibility even while persuading himself that he fulfilled it in the highest degree.

Rousseau's renunciation of each of five infants in the name of virtue is the only instance of free-riding known to me more audacious than Christopher Knight's 27-year-long practice of thieving from the society he forswore. For Knight, burglary was a way of life; wielding his tools with the skill of a craftsman, he destroyed many an owner's peace of mind in the process of securing his own. This is the figure placed by the author of *The Stranger in the Woods* in the company of desert hermits and Buddhist monks.

What did Knight, a man of no ideals and few principles, think of his elevation to the status of a kind of world champion of solitude in *The Stranger in the Woods*? Probably not

much. From time to time we hear of characters who achieve independence of their own creator. Upon his return to society Knight seems to have had no interest in depleting such independence as he possessed by collaborating with Finkel in the production of his own legend. In the end he refused to have anything to do with the man and simply walked away.

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