



Edward Dolnick

The Rescue Artist
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Q: It is easy to see how you would have become so fascinated by Charles Hill. Did you admire him? Were you ever afraid of him, or for him?

A: I did come to admire Charley Hill. He's a principled man in a rough business. But what a writer wants in a subject isn't sterling character — it's depth, complexity, contradiction. You want someone you know is going to surprise you, because you're going to be spending every day together for a couple of years. Not face-to-face time, but time thinking and writing and knocking heads. I was never afraid of Charley, but it's hard not to be afraid for him at times. He likes taking chances, and his world is not a video game.

Q: What is your own relationship to great art? What kind of importance do you feel that it holds in the world? Do you ever feel that the value of these paintings is over-inflated?

A: I'm an art-lover but a long, long way from an expert. Is great art important? It's vastly important, although it's hard to talk about why that is without sounding silly. Why does music move us? How can

daubs of color smeared on a square of canvas three centuries ago lift our spirits? We know it happens, but we don't know why. We can name the mystery but we cannot solve it. Which is not to say that the art world is a lofty and spiritual place. On the contrary. The fun and lure of this whole story, for me, is the way it brings together our basest and our grandest impulses.

Q: You used a lot of humor in this story. There are moments, such as the narcotics convention happening at the very hotel where the painting is about to be recovered, that seem almost too good to be true. What was your opinion of the behavior of the police in this instance?

A: I hope readers find parts of the book funny. When the subject is great art, there's always a risk that everyone will grow terribly solemn. I loved that at any moment the Keystone Kops might come bursting through the door. Writers of fiction always have to rein themselves in, because readers will only put up with so much implausibility. Real life is much stranger. Over and over again, in checking out art heists, I ran into mishaps and coincidences that every novelist would have deleted with a sigh.

Q: In the course of researching and writing this book, did you find your opinions changing about any of the themes involved—art, high culture, crime, or the connection between these seemingly separate worlds?

A: The deeper I dug, the farther we got from Thomas Crown. I loved the contrast between the muddle of a real-life cops-and-robbers yarn and the slickness of a made-in-Hollywood heist. We've all learned that there's not much connection between great art and great character—Michelangelo was a short-tempered miser, and he smelled bad. But we tend to give high-end crooks a pass. If they steal great things, we figure, they must have some great depth themselves. Well, no, they don't.

Q: In what ways is investigative journalism the same as writing fiction?

A: The background work is quite different. Researching a book like *The Rescue Artist* involves a constant series of cross-checks—Charley's version of a story; his partner's version; the story of the man they arrested; the bits and pieces from the room service waiter and the hotel maid. Sometimes the answers contradict one another, and sometimes no answers turn up. To my mind, that's part of the bargain — readers of non-fiction lose the glossy finish of fiction but gain the tang of reality.

The similarities come at the writing stage. Readers are volunteers, not draftees. The challenge to the writer is to keep them listening. The best way to do that, as our ancestors learned around a fire eons ago, is to tell a story.