

# A freewheeling discourse on the five-finger discount

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

**O**K, true confessions time. Have you ever thought about pocketing an item in a store and walking out without paying for it? If so, you might see a reflection of yourself in the pages of Rachel Shteir's latest book, "The Steal: A Cultural History of Shoplifting."

"She is carrying many bags. There is a bulky, dark garment bag, either navy blue or black, which looks like it is stuffed with clothing, and a red rectangular shopping bag. The woman is also carrying a tote bag and two purses, a white one and a turquoise one. Her thin face might register trouble — fear or guilt or sadness — it is difficult to tell because the surveillance video does not have good resolution."



**The Steal: A Cultural History of Shoplifting** by Rachel Shteir

Shteir is no stranger to controversial topics. In her previous two books, "Striptease" and "Gypsy," she delved deep into the history of the "girlie show" and presented a look into the lives of those who populate that socially illicit world. In "The Steal," Shteir turns her literary lens towards the modern cultural ill known as shoplifting. While as a scientific study the book is not exhaustive, the author does a very credible job resisting tabloid-style titillation, instead choosing to present shoplifting as a complex social issue full of subtlety and nuance: "I am inveterately curious about the boundaries cultures establish: the lines we draw between civilization and barbarism, madness and sanity, the appropriate and the inappropriate." The author's motivation for writing the book is not merely to present a series of show trials of celebrities with sticky fingers. Instead, her aim is to "bust myths," to "overturn common wisdom" and to examine "the complex and often contradictory things shoplifting stands for."

The most contradictory thing, according to Shteir, is the difficulty even experts have coming up with a satisfactory definition for what shoplifting is. As the book points out,

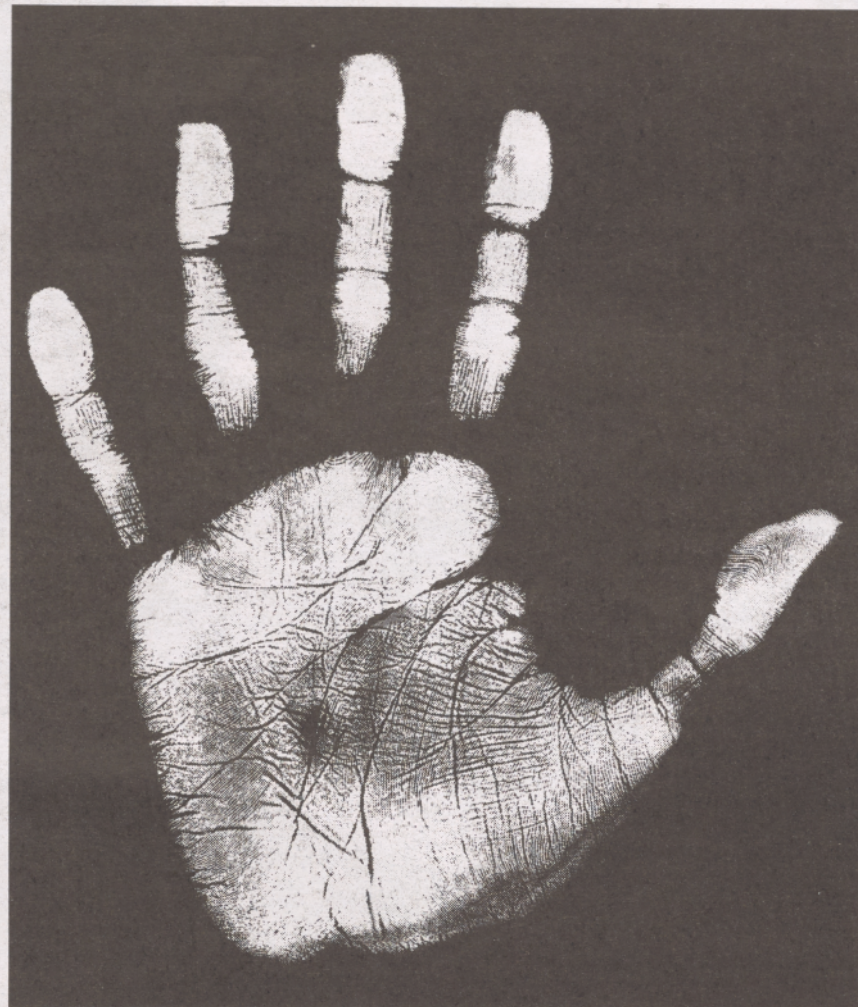


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

throughout its history, shoplifting has been classified in turn as a crime, a disease and even a means of social protest. For Shteir, this essential ambiguity is rooted in shoplifting being anathema to social discourse. "Even in our loquacious age, shoplifting produces squirming. Stores dislike talking about it. Retail security experts are reticent about their techniques ... although most secrets can be gleaned from the Internet."

The contradictions and stigma attached to shoplifting have produced a veritable labyrinth of social science remedies. "Just as experts can't agree on why people shoplift, they can't agree on how to stop it. There are behavioral schools of thought. Others put

their faith in psychoanalysis, pharmaceuticals, or voodoo. Some ... believe in shame."

While much of the book's focus is on the individuals who engage in shoplifting and the negative impacts the act has on their lives, Shteir does give examples of some of the other costs as well: "Stores measure shoplifting ... as a percentage of profits. Profit margins can be thin: Supermarkets operate on margins between 1 and 5 percent, which means the theft of one \$5 heirloom tomato from Whole Foods can require sales of up to \$500 to break even."

Regardless of how one feels about Whole Foods' pricing policies, few will argue that the net effect of shoplifting on society is

anything but negative. "Stores stockpile surveillance and antitheft devices, ensuring that going to the mall will soon resemble enduring TSA procedures at the airport." Shteir even raises the specter of mortality, noting, "Chasing shoplifters, store detectives — some of whom have no more than a few days of training — have killed them."

One of the more interesting topics in the book — and one that will no doubt grow in relevance as the gulf between rich and poor widens — is the chapter covering the "yippie" movement in the 1960s and 1970s that viewed shoplifting as a political statement. But, as the author wryly notes, though revolutionary paeans such as "Do It," "The Anarchist Cookbook" and Abbie Hoffman's "Steal This Book" presented theft as "an act of revolutionary love," such rationale for illegal activity is often tough to maintain when the Doc Marten is on the other foot. "After someone broke into his apartment, (Jerry) Rubin wrote, 'In advocating stealing as a revolutionary act, I guess I didn't make clear the difference between stealing from General Motors and stealing from me.'"

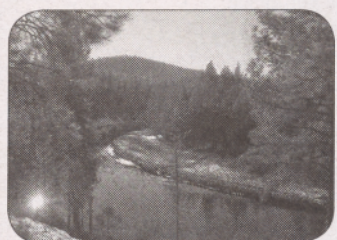
The questions raised in "The Steal" are deep and profound. For example, if a starving man steals a loaf of bread, is that the same as a bored and confused housewife who lifts a designer scarf and some eyeliner? And what about the undeniable racism embodied by the discriminatory "shopping while black" statistics that minorities know all too well?

"The Steal" is a fascinating read. Weaving statistics and history together with interviews, anecdotes and even literary references, Shteir has produced a book that makes it hard to ignore shoplifting. If you like meaty dinner conversation, this one will give you large chunks to chew on. Perhaps the best way to sum the book up is with the author's own words: "Shoplifting has been a sin, a crime, a confession of sexual repression, a howl of grief, a political yelp, a sign of depression, a badge of identity, and a back door to the American Dream. The act mirrors our collective identity, reflects our shifting moral code, demonstrates the power that consumption holds over our psyches."

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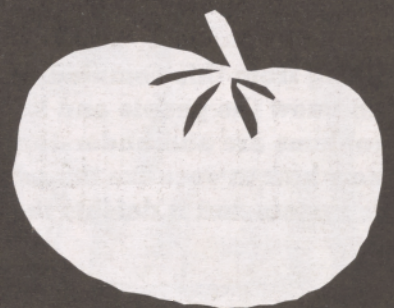
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