

# THE STEAL: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF SHOPLIFTING BY RACHEL SHTEIR



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## Review

“Author Rachel Shteir...[presents] a complex view of shoplifting in her richly researched, dry-witted book.”  
— THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“Tantalizing enough that you'll not to want to put the book down — especially if you're inclined to lift it.” —  
NPR

“Intelligent...[Shteir] captures her subject from every angle.” — NEW YORK TIMES

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“A serious study of shoplifting...Shteir is an expert at exploring cultural phenomena previously ignored by academia...” — CHICAGO Magazine

“Shteir’s fascination for the topic and sense of humor are infectious, and make her history of this curious, understudied crime compulsively readable.” — PUBLISHERS WEEKLY (starred)

## About the Author

Rachel Shteir is the author of the awardwinning *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* and *Gypsy: The Art of the Tease*. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Slate*, *The Guardian*, *Playboy*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Magazine*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and elsewhere. She is an associate professor and the head of the BFA program in criticism and dramaturgy at the Theatre School at DePaul University.



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# THE STEAL: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF SHOPLIFTING BY RACHEL SHTEIR PDF

A history of shoplifting, revealing the roots of our modern dilemma.

Rachel Shteir's *The Steal* is the first serious study of shoplifting, tracking the fascinating history of this ancient crime. Dismissed by academia and the mainstream media and largely misunderstood, shoplifting has become the territory of moralists, mischievous teenagers, tabloid television, and self-help gurus. But shoplifting incurs remarkable real-life costs for retailers and consumers. The "crime tax"—the amount every American family loses to shoplifting-related price inflation—is more than \$400 a year. Shoplifting cost American retailers \$11.7 billion in 2009. The theft of one \$5.00 item from Whole Foods can require sales of hundreds of dollars to break even.

*The Steal* begins when shoplifting entered the modern record as urbanization and consumerism made London into Europe's busiest mercantile capital. Crossing the channel to nineteenth-century Paris, Shteir tracks the rise of the department store and the pathologizing of shoplifting as kleptomania. In 1960s America, shoplifting becomes a symbol of resistance when the publication of Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book* popularizes shoplifting as an antiestablishment act. Some contemporary analysts see our current epidemic as a response to a culture of hyper-consumerism; others question whether its upticks can be tied to economic downturns at all. Few provide convincing theories about why it goes up or down.

Just as experts can't agree on why people shoplift, they can't agree on how to stop it. Shoplifting has been punished by death, discouraged by shame tactics, and protected against by high-tech surveillance. Shoplifters have been treated by psychoanalysis, medicated with pharmaceuticals, and enforced by law to attend rehabilitation groups. While a few individuals have abandoned their sticky-fingered habits, shoplifting shows no signs of slowing.

In *The Steal*, Shteir guides us through a remarkable tour of all things shoplifting—we visit the Woodbury Commons Outlet Mall, where boosters run rampant, watch the surveillance footage from Winona Ryder's famed shopping trip, and learn the history of anti-theft technology. A groundbreaking study, *The Steal* shows us that shoplifting in its many guises—crime, disease, protest—is best understood as a reflection of our society, ourselves.

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[www.rachelshteir.com](http://www.rachelshteir.com)

#### Most helpful customer reviews

17 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

Non-fiction at its best

By a fan in Chicago

Insightful, meticulously researched and beautifully written, *The Steal* explores shoplifting as a cultural phenomenon -- crime, disease, and protest -- that has always been with us and always will be. No one can stop shoplifting-- not the stores with their increasingly sophisticated anti-theft devices, not the police who arrest shoplifters, and not the psychologists who treat them because we shoplift for reasons that are too deeply embedded in our society to ever go away. The book benefits enormously from not only the author's tireless pursuit of every angle of her subject, but also her deep familiarity with the literature of shoplifting. Yet Mrs. Shteir wears her learning lightly. *The Steal* is as much fun to read as it is informative.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

INTERESTING INSIGHT

By Joseph H. Race

As we know, there are professional shoplifters/criminals, and others that act on impulse or needing something beyond their financial means. This is a good one to read by law enforcement folks, and especially store/mall security types. The shoplifters cause us to pay for the losses by the stores, and of course, tie up the police and courts with minor crimes. Good insight. I liked it.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Bright and sparkling

By Jay Dickson

Billing itself as the first genuine study of shoplifting, Rachel Shtier's charming cultural history *THE STEAL*

examines the ways in which stealing merchandise has been around for centuries but has exploded particularly in the United States in the last fifty years. Shtier offers a wealth of enjoyable and intelligent anecdotes that stretch from ancient Greece to the present day involving theft. Did you know, for example, that one of the landmark early court cases of shoplifting in England in the early nineteenth century was committed by Jane Austen's aunt? (The prosecution could not explain adequately why a wealthy woman would stoop to petty thievery, and so she got off, in a pattern that would be replicated for decades in the next two centuries in cases involving "thrill shoplifters"). Shtier's prose is as fizzing and as enjoyable as her sensational topic merits: this is a book that does not position itself as a heavily scholarly study of shoplifting, but rather as an enjoyable cultural history of the crime marketed to a broadly popular audience. As such, the work does not freight itself with either footnotes or heavy sociological analysis, and attempts to cover all kinds of bases, from the history of the crime (which Shtier intriguingly argues mushroomed after the appearance of Abbie Hoffman's incendiary *STEAL THIS BOOK* in 1971) to its effects on merchandise sales today, and to the extraordinary efforts taken by merchants to create anti-theft devices and shaming techniques to combat theft. I found Shtier's prose, her subject matter, and her wealth of material great fun, and her research impressive; my only problems occurred with the book's sometimes confusing organization. (More specific chapter titles to announce her topics would certainly have helped.) But this is a rich and entertaining read overall.

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