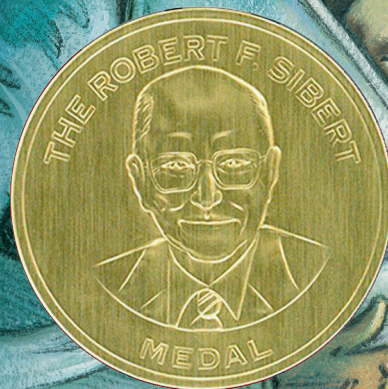


"The tale of a stunning art heist told with a contagious love of stranger-than-fiction true stories!" —STEVE SHEINKIN, Newbery Honor-winning author of BOMB

# THE MONA LISA VANISHES

A LEGENDARY PAINTER, A SHOCKING HEIST, AND THE  
BIRTH OF A GLOBAL CELEBRITY

NICHOLAS DAY  
WITH ART BY BRETT HELQUIST



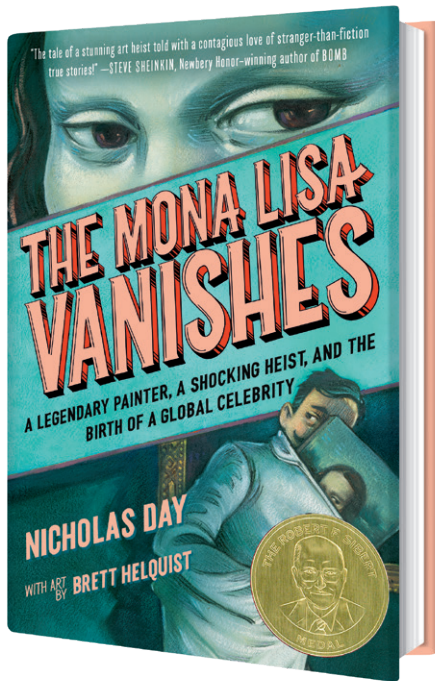
## EDUCATORS' GUIDE

[RHTeachersLibrarians.com](http://RHTeachersLibrarians.com)



# ABOUT THE BOOK

Winner of the 2024 Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal



A propulsive work of narrative nonfiction about how the *Mona Lisa* was stolen from the Louvre, how the robbery made the portrait the most famous artwork in the world—and how the painting by Leonardo da Vinci should never have existed at all.

On a hot August day in Paris, just over a century ago, a desperate guard burst into the office of the director of the Louvre and shouted, “La *Joconde*, c’est partie! The *Mona Lisa*, she’s gone!”

No one knew who was behind the heist. Was it an international gang of thieves? Was it an art-hungry American millionaire? Was it the young Spanish painter Pablo Picasso, who was about to remake the very art of painting?

Travel back to an extraordinary period of revolutionary change: turn-of-the-century Paris. Walk its backstreets. Meet the infamous thieves—and detectives—of the era. And then slip back further in time and follow Leonardo da Vinci, painter of the *Mona Lisa*, through his dazzling, wondrously weird life. Discover the secret at the heart of the *Mona Lisa*—the most famous painting in the world should never have existed at all.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Isaiah Day

**NICHOLAS DAY** is the author of *Baby Meets World*, a work of narrative nonfiction for adults about the science and history of infancy, which Mary Roach called “a perfect book.” He has written regularly for *Slate*; his work has also appeared in the *Atlantic*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, among other publications. He lives in Western Massachusetts with his family. Visit him at [bynicholasday.com](http://bynicholasday.com).

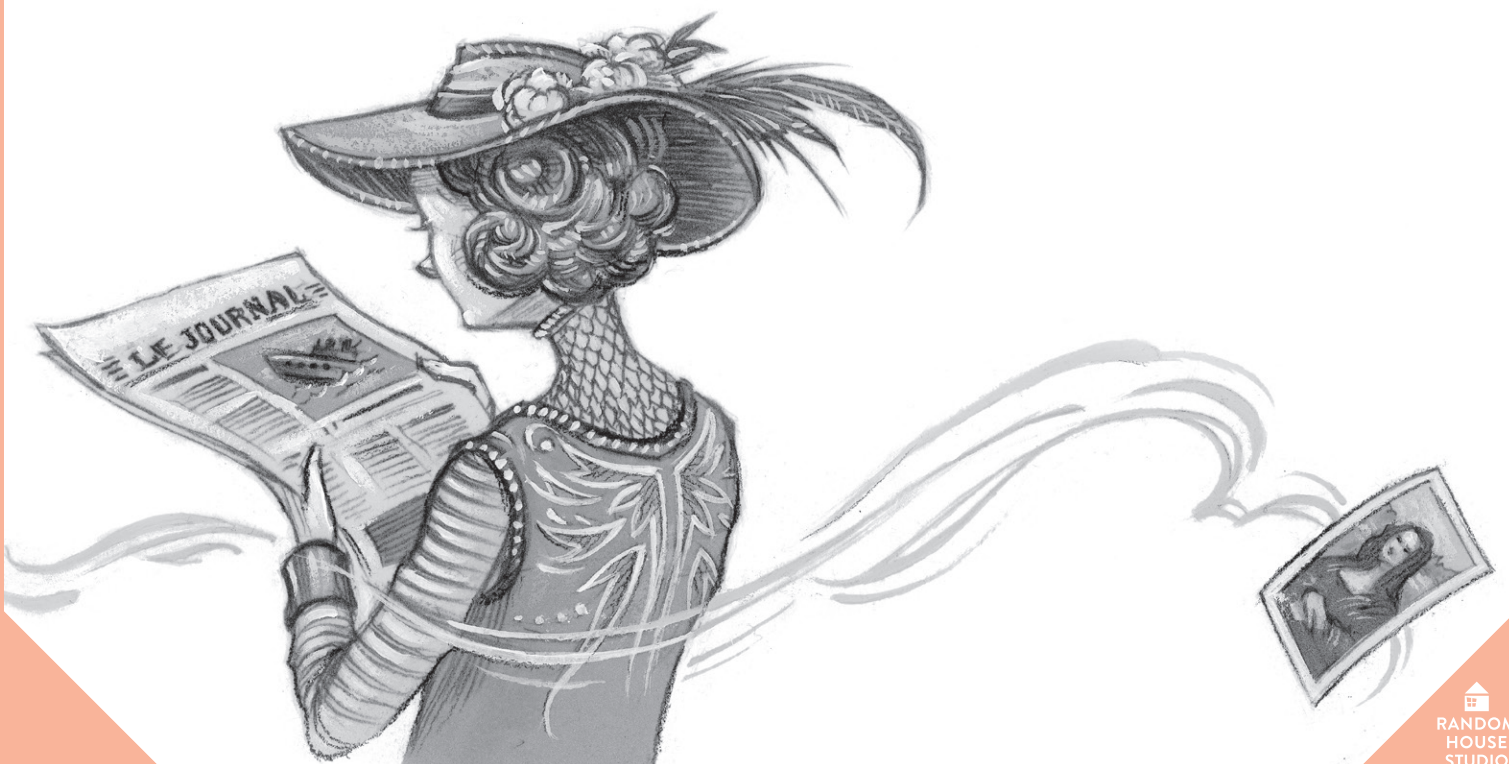


Chris Lindsey

**BRETT HELQUIST** is the illustrator of classics such as *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket, ales from the House of Bunnacula by James Howe, and books by Blue Balliett, including *The New York Times* bestseller *Chasing Vermeer*. Visit him at [bretthelquist.com](http://bretthelquist.com) • [@bhelquist](https://www.instagram.com/bhelquist)

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES:

1. What do you already know about the *Mona Lisa*? What questions do you have about the painting before you begin reading this book?
2. This book has an elaborate—and informative—subtitle: *A Legendary Painter, a Shocking Heist, and the Birth of a Global Celebrity*. What do those three topics tell you about this book? Which of the three topics intrigues you the most, and why?
3. Study the cover. What clues does the cover of this book give us about the story?
4. Read the synopsis of the book on the inside flap of the front cover. What questions does that summary raise for you before you begin reading?
5. The book you are about to read is true. Talk about nonfiction and distinguish it from fiction writing. Nonfiction books often include features you won't find in a fiction book, such as an index and source notes. Share the purpose of these elements with students so they are aware of the resources and can access them while reading the book.
6. Scan the contents. What predictions do you have about the book based on the names of the sections and the chapter headings?
7. This book received the 2024 Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award from the American Library Association as the most distinguished informational book of the year for children. Are you familiar with the award? What is an “informational book”? Research the Sibert Medal. What do you notice about the other award recipients? What does your research on the award suggest to you about this book?



# READING ACTIVITIES & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As you read, can you make a connection to any other stories you've read, podcasts you've listened to, or shows you've watched? Can you make connections to the time periods of this book, the early sixteenth and twentieth centuries? What about connections with what you know about this region of the world? Do the real-life events of this story remind you of other crimes or audacious thefts? Create a mind map of these associations that you can update as you continue reading.
2. Illustrator Brett Helquist created original black-and-white sketches that appear throughout the book, as opposed to the use of photographs or other documentation you typically see in nonfiction texts. What does the artwork signal to you as you read? How does the presence of artwork support this story?
3. There are jumps in time between the early sixteenth century and early twentieth century throughout this book as the story shifts focus between Leonardo and the painting's theft. What effect does it have on you as a reader to piece together the events from multiple eras? Discuss the author's choice of verb tense, the narrative flow of *The Mona Lisa Vanishes*, and the use of dual timelines to advance the story.
4. Women are notably absent from this story. Day writes that 16th century Florence "is like a horror movie: women who don't marry just *vanish*." (p. 120) Renaissance women had little agency and, despite her image being perhaps the most recognizable in the world, "Lisa Gherardini has been erased from her own story." (p. 147) History is often told by the people in power. Spend some time thinking about women's lack of agency in this era, as well as the joys and pains they must have regularly experienced. Respond in Lisa's voice, as you imagine it, to critics who denied she was "important enough" (p. 147) to sit for Leonardo's portrait.
5. Thinking of this story as a sequence of notable moments—often even "improbable events" (p. 152)—in history, what highlights would you place in a timeline? Work as a group to create a visual map that includes an image connected to each key moment (for example, a drawing of a fingerprint, a photo of the Alps where Leonardo crossed, or a newspaper headline announcing the sinking of the *Titanic*) and a brief description, in your own words, of why that moment stood out to you while reading this text.
6. Leonardo is presented in the context of his time, where, despite disadvantages at his birth, he was a "relentlessly curious" (p. 51) outlier who defied expectations and societal conventions. "He's incredible but real—a narwhal, not a unicorn." (p. 54) What factor in your life might be considered a disadvantage to some that you can harness as a strength? Journal privately about your own narwhal potential.
7. Spend some time researching featured artistic terms, including *sfumato* (p. 47, 155) and the *Mona Lisa*'s specific pattern of craquelure (p. 214), as well as other notable works of art discussed in the story. Those might include Leonardo's *The Last Supper* (p. 100), Raphael's copies of the *Mona Lisa* (p. 192), Leonardo's horse (p. 97), Gabonese masks (p. 171), Iberian stone head statues (p. 176), and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (p. 172). Project images of these pieces on your classroom walls to create a gallery experience for students to enjoy and discuss.



# READING ACTIVITIES & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

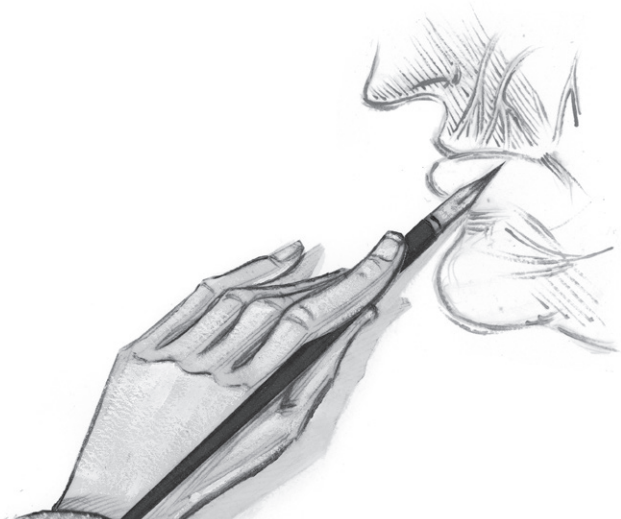
8. Which unillustrated scene of the story is so cinematic you can picture it in your mind? Create a 4+ panel comic recreating the moment in a graphic novel format.
9. Author Nicholas Day's writing style is quite distinctive – highly descriptive, humorously droll, succinct, conversational, and charismatic. How did the narrative voice make you feel as you read this book? Create a playlist inspired by the book's mood and pace.
10. How might people respond to the *Mona Lisa*'s disappearance today, using social media? Create a post, video, or meme reimagining the August 1911 theft.
11. What was happening elsewhere in the world on Monday, August 21, 1911? What was happening in your hometown on that date? Use primary resources, such as newspaper records, to research more mundane happenings on the date at various locations.
12. Antisemitism and xenophobia come up repeatedly in the book's twentieth century discussion. (p. 74, 184) These are persistent modern issues, both in France and in the U.S. How did bias impact the investigation of the *Mona Lisa*'s theft? What can we—and what should nonfiction authors—do to avoid bringing personal biases into our research and writing? What factors do you think could have influenced Mr. Day's interpretation of the historical events underlying the book?
13. Think about how the book makes you feel as you are reading, and questions you hope will be answered by its end. Create a three-column reflection chart: What do you THINK, what do you FEEL, and what do you WONDER? Use the third column as a springboard for further research if you find you're left with unresolved thoughts at the book's completion.



# POST-READING QUESTIONS

## (BEYOND THE BOOK / CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS / EXTENSION ACTIVITIES)

1. Examine the detailed source notes in *The Mona Lisa Vanishes*. Invite students to explore the resources available through the [Prints and Photographs Division](#) and [Maps Division](#) of the Library of Congress, then search specifically for images from Florence, Italy, in the 1500s or Paris, France, in the 1910s. In small groups, select four to six primary documents from the library's databases to interpret, and offer a narrative that connects the images together or connects them to this story. Encourage students to present their discoveries to the class.
2. The *Mona Lisa* has been described as “the most visited, most written about, most sung about, most parodied work of art in the world.” (John Litchfield, *The Independent*, April 2, 2005, [The moving of the Mona Lisa | The Independent](#)). Make the *Mona Lisa* your very own. Would you write a poem about it? Sing its praise in song? Create a caricature of it, artistically alter a printout, or design an homage in street art?
3. When the *Mona Lisa* was stolen, it had been hanging on the wall in the Salon Carré. (p. 8) Where does the painting now hang? Find the galleries on a map of the Louvre Museum and discuss why *La Joconde* might have been moved. Whose company does she now keep? If you want to visit her, what steps must you take to enter the museum, and more specifically to enter that particular gallery? The Louvre is enormous—“the space of nearly forty football fields” (p. 5) and the length of two Eiffel Towers. It might take you some time to reach the right spot. What will you pass along your way? Share three additional objects from the Louvre's online catalog that pique your interest.
4. The *Mona Lisa*'s theft is one of the most high-profile art heists in history, but it is hardly the only such crime. Research the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum thefts, which remain unsolved, and the disappearance (and relatively quick recovery) of another iconic painting, Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Compare and contrast what you learn about these famous crimes, creating a Venn diagram to detail the thefts' similarities and differences.
5. Turn a scene of the book into a play. You have a built-in narrator (the text). What sort of props would help you tell the story? How could you stage that scene in your classroom?
6. Watch the Louvre Kids video “[The Theft of the Mona Lisa](#).” This consolidated, animated version of events has a few notable differences from the facts as presented in *The Mona Lisa Vanishes*. Which version feels more reliable to you, and why?
7. As a group, brainstorm a list of questions you might ask if you were interviewing the thief, Vincenzo Perugia. Pair up and take turns being the interviewer and the interviewee to answer a few of your lingering questions.
8. Imagine *The Mona Lisa Vanishes* as a movie. Who would you cast as the major characters?



# POST-READING QUESTIONS

## (BEYOND THE BOOK / CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS / EXTENSION ACTIVITIES)

9. The author describes the existence of the painting as “an improbable series of improbable events.” (p. 152) What if the Gherardinis’ land hadn’t been burned? (p. 125) What if Leonardo had rejected the commission? (p. 155) What if Bertillon hadn’t been so egotistical? (p. 85) What if Henry Duveen hadn’t laughed at the offer to buy it? (p. 138) What if the French police officers had thoroughly investigated Perugia? (p. 229) Discuss the impact of individual agency versus cultural and societal influence that led to this improbable convergence of coincidences.
10. Secondary characters play pivotal roles throughout the *Mona Lisa*’s grand history. Choose one of the following men of interest (mostly real and one fictional) to research and report out additional items of interest among the class: Louis Béroud (p. 23), Louis Lépine (p. 30), Alphonse Bertillon (p. 69), Arsène Lupin (p. 76), Eugène François Vidocq (p. 78), Charles VIII of France (p. 102), Adam Worth (p. 112), Kempton Bunton (p. 134), Cesare Borgia (p. 150), Guillaume Apollinaire (p. 164), Pablo Picasso (p. 165), or Théophile Gautier (p. 199).
11. “Paris was a city of newspapers,” (p. 34) in the midst of “the golden age of newspapers.” (p. 36) However, accuracy of reporting was often sacrificed to drive up sales (p. 37, 237). Day posits, “They weren’t looking for a thief. They were looking for a story.” (p. 135) Reflect on the early example of “fake news” spread by Karl Decker (p. 236) and the impact conspiracy stories had on delaying the investigation of the *Mona Lisa*’s disappearance. (p. 238) Assumptions were made during the twentieth century investigation, and conspiracy theories won out over demonstrated evidence. What connections can you make between that 1910s response and news media in our modern world?
12. Reflect on one of the significant societal advancements that coincided with the *Mona Lisa*’s disappearance. Day writes, “impossible things were happening every day, sometimes before breakfast.” (p. 39) Examples Day offers include the advent of film (p. 38), the birth of forensic science (p. 63), the “clean, violent break” marking the start of the modern art era (p. 172), and anarchy-driven geopolitical turmoil that soon led to World War I (p. 174, 231). What do you think is the legacy of one particular advancement? Find a classmate who reflected on a different advancement and discuss your theories.





# THINKING DEEPLY ABOUT NONFICTION

1. *The Mona Lisa Vanishes* is a true story, although the crime was somewhat absurd. Was this book what you expected? What surprised you about the text? Which people or ideas from the story stood out to you the most? What did the author challenge or change about your thinking? Do you feel differently about nonfiction books, generally, having read this one?
2. This book is written in a style known as narrative (as opposed to expository) nonfiction. Narrative nonfiction typically reads like a fictional story; it is a type of nonfiction writing that's particularly effective at helping readers understand a past time and place. Research other types of nonfiction, focusing on the Five Types of Nonfiction classification work of science writer [Melissa Stewart](#).
3. How much license do you think authors should have to employ techniques of “literary craft” into their nonfiction stories? *The Mona Lisa Vanishes* uses a thrilling writing style to tell a story of almost mythical proportions. What real-life topics would you like to see written about with this kind of flair?
4. What are the next steps for you after finishing a nonfiction book? What would you like to read or learn more about, now that you've finished *The Mona Lisa Vanishes*? Where will you turn for reliable information to get you started on your research?

## PRAISE FOR *THE MONA LISA VANISHES*

★ “Readers will love the brouhaha.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “A completely engaging book.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

★ “A wildly entertaining, thoroughly contextualized look at art, history, and fame.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

Educator's Guide by Kit Ballenger. Kit Ballenger, JD/MLIS, is a Washington, D.C., area youth services librarian and literary consultant. As a book reviewer, collection curator, and the librarian in residence on SiriusXM Kids Place Live, she nurtures literacy-rich environments that sustain joy and build lifelong readers.

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