Reading Group Guide

FINDERS KEEPERS

A TALE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL PLUNDER AND OBSESSION

BY CRAIG CHILDS
One thing that’s striking about this book is the lack of easy answers and the moments of excruciating, very personal moral conflict inside your own mind. Was this book painful to write? Was it cathartic?

This was the most difficult literary project I’d ever taken on. The fact that there was no single answer drove me mad, and I knew coming out with one final answer would only perpetuate the very problem I was trying to solve. I was involved with people I disagreed with deep in my gut, yet for what I wanted this book to be, I had to go to them and say, Convince me of why you are right. It would have been far easier to champion my own ethic above all others, but that would have been a cheat. We each believe we are so right that we refuse to consider how convoluted this issue actually is, and how closely tied all the players really are. I wouldn’t say it was cathartic. It was more like opening Pandora’s box. I came away with far more questions than I had when I started, which was the whole point of writing this thing to begin with.
What kind of reaction did you receive from the archaeological and collecting communities to the publication of the book? Was there a backlash? Have you changed your mind about any of the conclusions drawn during the course of the book?

I’ve heard mixed responses, of course. This book kicked a hornet’s nest, which is what I intended. Before I wrote it, I’d talked to archaeologists, private dealers, and museum technicians who took me aside and said someone needs to break the ice, that we’re locked in the same old fights and stalemates, and somebody needs to tell the bigger picture of antiquities that looks beyond one-sided reactions. So I did. Now, I hear some in the scientific community are angry or frustrated that I considered opposing points of view at all. They wished I had simply cast stones at people engaged in dubious activity. Well, if you read this book, then you know what I was trying to do: level the playing field and look each character in the eye, not holding any above the other, as they all seem wont to do. I set out to give every perspective, even if some made me uneasy. As I said, this was no comfortable task. In the end, my own ethic weathered the assault of this book. My resolve to leave artifacts as they are was only strengthened.

Do you have an update on the situation in Four Corners? Has public sentiment toward the government and the collecting community changed since the raids?

I still don’t know how to grasp those raids — such a collision of opposing forces that it remains burned on my eyes like a bright flash. I feel that in one way diggers are being energized by the anger created by these events. It seems the pot-hunting tradition — at least, the culture of it — was gradually dying out, and I worry this has given it a backlash-boost. At
the same time, law enforcement has seemed a bit tighter in the Four Corners, probably a backlash in return. Two older men were recently jailed for leading a tour group to a site where one of the men unearthed a skull to show clients before putting it back in the ground. Would I do that? No. Is it acceptable? Depends on who you ask. I know of a whole human skeleton under a ledge in Utah and have gone back a couple of times to visit. Granted, I didn’t take a tour group, and I’ve not disclosed its location, but do I deserve jail time just for going there, for laying my hand on a dead man’s skull and pondering the past? Tourists who paid to go there may have gotten nothing but a morbid chuckle out of seeing an early Puebloan skull, but they have also come to better understand that we are in the country of ancient dead, that beneath our feet exist ages of native history that are best not forgotten. I think what we are seeing are our own growing pains as a culture, a coming-of-age in an occupied landscape with its own rich past. How we ultimately choose to relate to it, what ethic we agree upon, is yet to be decided.

What’s the role of state and federal governments in stopping the looting of artifacts?

It’s almost impossible for law enforcement to take anyone down unless he or she is caught with shovel in hand, standing in a trench next to a spoil pile, and even then the prosecution can have an extremely tough case. These laws are notoriously hard to enforce. But the laws are out there, and one way or another they put a cap on these activities. Without the law, dipshit pothunters and old-time diggers would have cleared out the Southwest a long time ago. And China would be practically empty of decent artifacts, South America stripped. If there weren’t people with guns and badges putting their weight against plundering, we’d be
looking at a global free-for-all. I see antiquities enforcement as a cat-and-mouse game, and that’s what you see in the Four Corners. Law enforcement flexes enough to let people know what is truly unacceptable, but not so much that they create an artifact rebellion from the rural populace. They flex too much, like they may have done in the suicide-riddled Four Corners case, and they strengthen their foes. I do not envy the decisions they have to make. But I know that without them, and in the absence of a culturally agreed-upon ethic, much more would be lost.

An ethical question discussed in chapter 5 involves the right of ancestry for the Yupik on St. Lawrence Island to sell artifacts they dug out of their own historical sites. There’s an obvious comparison drawn with the chaos and illegality of Earl Shumway’s digging in San Juan County and the Blanding raids. How much of a difference is there between these examples?

After I wrote this book, I traveled to St. Lawrence Island and went out with a Yupik digger. He’d been excavating with a shovel at this site for twenty years, and the ancient village he was trenching had been divided into digging grounds belonging to different people. He said he’d never think of digging in someone else’s hole. There were rules. Not laws on paper, just rules shared by this subsistence-hunting community in the Bering Sea. It is the same with gathering murre eggs or fishing or shooting seals; hunting for artifacts on the island has cultural boundaries. I was struck by his quintessentially native, matter-of-fact approach to unearthing artifacts to sell. He said I could take home anything I found (the ground was littered with whalebone sled runners and seal-rib scrapers). I didn’t, but I understood the value of that permission. Was he different from Earl Shumway? By about two thousand years, yes.
What’s the current state of the antiquities market? How do you see it changing in the coming years?

I don’t see much change in the market. The demand is always there. Dealers may become more cautious over time, provenance more cared for, but money is still being shelled out. As long as that is the case, new artifacts will be found and sold. The recent repatriations from dealers and museums to places like Peru and Italy have been impressive, and they may mark a swing in the market, but truly I think it’s the same sort of cat-and-mouse game that keeps going on through the centuries. This book, I believe, is part of that game. Someone has to be rooting for the home team while larger sentiment moves back and forth.

Both sides of the conflict in Syria last year were found to have looted and sold artifacts to finance arms purchases. Also last year, religious extremists destroyed ancient tombs and mausoleums in Timbuktu after stating that their existence was an offense against Islam (reminiscent of the preservation of the Jowo Shakymuni statue in chapter 13 — the treatment of artifacts as a political statement). Egyptians formed a human chain to try to protect the antiquities museum at Tahrir Square during the revolution of 2011, but only after it had been looted and many artifacts damaged. How do these events relate to the themes described in the book?

Same tug-of-war. Same reason I believe you have to fight to preserve history. I leave artifacts in a similar spirit to that of people chaining themselves around a museum. If New York were going down and I was in the city, I’d join arms around the American Museum of Natural History, or the Met. I believe there is always a certain population that defends the past and our connection to it, and will do so with their very lives. I do not know if I have the bravery Egyptians showed,
and I am glad such people exist. They manifest elsewhere around the world—you see these people in law enforcement; as studious, passionate curators; even as certain collectors who direct their fortunes to preserve objects.

The passage in chapter 8 from Frederick Matthew Wiseman, “viewed from the perspective of the elder who has lost legal control of her life story...this may seem exploitive to say the least,” reminded me of online identity theft. Personal information and passwords are stolen and misused or records are altered, destroying the authenticity of the victim’s identity. Is there a link here to the psychology of looting physical artifacts? If so, as more people create their own histories through their online data and identities, does that link have implications for how our cultural history will be perceived in the future?

I believe looters are consciously burning history. Looting is a form of historical genocide, in itself a process of destruction. A new history is born in its place, but an old one is decayed and lost. This is something innate to us, I think. We’ve probably been destroying identities since the beginning, burning villages, erasing altars, wiping out someone’s, anyone’s, past. The theft you’re talking about is just another manifestation of that drive, and it makes the history of now only less credible. Good luck to information diggers and historians of the future. We’re in the process of erasing our own history as it happens. At the same time, there is also the opposite and perhaps equal drive to maintain the past and protect history. I wrote this book to understand the yin and yang of protectors and destroyers, and how the two are inseparable, sometimes embodied in the very same person. I wrote this so we might look at ourselves and recognize what role we play as individuals, how much we are tearing down history and how much we are keeping it intact. This isn’t just a question about artifacts. It applies to all.
These journal entries and illustrations are from my twenties in Southeast Utah, when I really began finding artifacts in the backcountry. It is interesting for me to look back at the raw vigor of that time. With even the smallest discoveries, I started connecting dots, realizing a web of ancient history on the ground all around me.

The ethic of leaving things as they are was born out of this time. These pages are from when I was spending entire seasons exploring interconnected networks of remote canyons and buttes. The artifacts I came upon were not isolated finds but part of a much larger matrix, a story I was able to read as I moved through miles and months, registering everything I saw as pieces of common history. I suppose it might have been different had I been finding arrowheads on weekends or stumbling on potsherds while on day hikes. The objects may have seemed segregated, unrelated to each other, if I hadn’t had the time to explore their larger context. By seeing continuity among them, I understood that they were best left undisturbed, that the story being told was unbroken and I had no right to break it.

—Craig Childs
“...narrow crack, hanging over five hundred feet of open space from the lip of a bowl where water had probably collected. From the bottom or the top it could not be reached by a human. Like most places here it stood in veritable defiance of inexorable human expansion. Manifest destiny becomes lost between the endless walls like an echo.

“On the high end of one of these chambers, like the blackbrush, a tightly built granary clung to the wall. I followed cracks and snowy slopes to reach it. The roof was eight feet of unbroken smooth mortar, held in place by cottonwood beams which protruded through the ends. The cut stones were packed carefully...”
“...bird painting, or one of a coyote. They were intricate and red like the residual stain of a vision. We climbed to the ledge and balanced ourselves, and the light touched the figures. We inched along. These were the Barrier Creek paintings, the work of a culture living here perhaps as far back as 8,000 years ago.

“In the candlelight, the images came slowly, as they should. Things were faint as our eyes adjusted and I passed the candle beneath the wide eyes of a blood-red phantom. We would mumble incoherently and move to the next, feeling the ledge floor carefully with our feet.

“I came to one of the final forms and I encircled it with the flame as if this were an incantation. The hand, stretched and enlarged from a figure, was sprouting stalks of grain, feathery and seed-laden like ricegrass. Around it were encircling animals such as a bird and a rabbit. These things revolved around this apparition as if it were a creation scene, and from an unfurled hand the world and its life emerged.

“There was a time for the Archaic people, who left this, when resources were scarce. With a decline of big game, they began making new tools, hunting smaller animals...”
“...found a comfortable spot, arranged a pile of uncut chert before him, and began pounding. Splinters flew. I turned and walked along the wall, listening to the repetitive reverberation. The overhang made it sound as if he were pounding away in an empty ballroom. The sound seemed to fit, as if it were filling an audio gap which has been empty for a few thousand years. I imagined the blows to be not too different, and until Keith complained of the unexpected difficulty, he could have been an Anasazi hunter working through his daily routine.”
“...pried off its dry husk. As I held it in both hands like a scroll of important, fragile parchment, I considered the change in the season today. The snake, twisted around to bite its own tail, losing its skin to be reborn, is a figure of cycles like the moon. It tells the entire story of the seasons, the weather, and the ceremonies we hold to mark the circles of time.

“Never mind that, the snake is the snake. It will kill, eat, unwind against warm sand under the sun and twine through the stones of an Anasazi ruin to rid itself of old skin. I slipped the ex-snake back into place.

“While we hiked back, racing the combination of dark and rain, a bat fluttered into the sky. It had gray tips on its hairs, probably a fringe-tailed myotis back from its migrational exploits in Central America. It was diving and swerving, putting a proper end to the orgiastic lives of newborn insects. First bat of the year.

“Tonight, I write from beneath the hand painting. The rain has let up and I can hear the many waterfalls of this minor tributary break free in celebration of spring.”
“No stone is harder. The sandstone of oceans and shores stands around it, unloading sand, which cradles hundreds of flakes of this stone. The flakes cluster in only certain places: beneath south-facing walls, under alcoves where hunting parties gathered. They broke the hard stone, chipping pieces apart. One heavy piece was used at first. This piece is always easy to find: about the size to fit in a fist, worn on both ends from impact. Flakes broke away and they were sorted through carefully; rolled in a palm by an expert thumb. Shapes were to become thumb scrapers, drills, spear points, arrowheads, and bird points. Some were abandoned midway through. Perhaps the stone was not uniform enough or a strike was made in the wrong direction and it was discarded. However these pieces were formed, it was not by unskilled hands. The symmetry of a found knife butt or a sharp edge is too perfect. The flakes are sheared at such a precise angle that no mark is left other than a near-surgical shell shape.
“The colors are difficult to understand, though. It is not simply a matter of pink chert or bloodred jasper. That is all I find naturally, but here at these chipping sites are black, orange, purple, infusions of gray within opal, white, chocolate brown, and dappled rust. Were they traded, or did people travel so far to find the sources of these colored hard stones? Either way, great effort was made to obtain them. Why? Do color and quality have a connection? My sense is that it was something else. This was an art. The art was not only mastered in shape, sharpness, and precision, but image.

“The sculptor chooses the proper piece of stone to work with by color, consistency, and structure. It seems no different for the makers of arrowheads. The stone scattered beneath these alcoves did not come by convenience. It was gathered, brought from great distances for the purpose of creating these pieces of art necessary for the survival of these people.”
Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Were you surprised by the extreme measures collectors and archaeologists took to obtain the artifacts they desired? What do you think drives them to such lengths?

2. What kinds of choices have you made that have affected the physical history of the world around you? Did reading this book change the way you thought or felt about those choices?

3. Was the desert guide whom the author works with in chapter 1 wrong to take the bone beads they found? Why or why not? What’s the source of Childs’s moral ambiguity about taking them?

4. The author refers to a widespread assumption that removing an artifact from the area where it was discovered is preferred. Do you agree that this assumption exists? Where does this idea come from? Does it have anything to do with protecting the item?
5. Do you agree with the author’s philosophy of leaving his finds behind for others to appreciate in their original state of discovery? Why or why not?

6. How much responsibility does Childs bear for Ugly Man stealing one of the hunting bows at the end of chapter 1?

7. In chapter 5, the author discusses the right of ancestry as it relates to a group of residents digging up historical artifacts on their native St. Lawrence Island and selling them. Is this cultural cannibalism, or a means of survival for a poor people? Both? How far should the right of ancestry extend?

8. How does the idea of information being treasure fit into the framework of the digital age? Is it right for companies that use your personal information (such as Facebook) to remove your information completely from the site after you die? Or is it right for them not to remove the information?

9. What are some of the objects and pieces of history you’ve collected over the years? Can you tell stories about them the way Forrest Fenn does in chapter 14?

10. At the end of chapter 14, the author steps back to consider his larger place in history as he holds Sitting Bull’s pipe. Do you ever experience this feeling? At what moments and in what ways do you connect to this larger sense of history?