

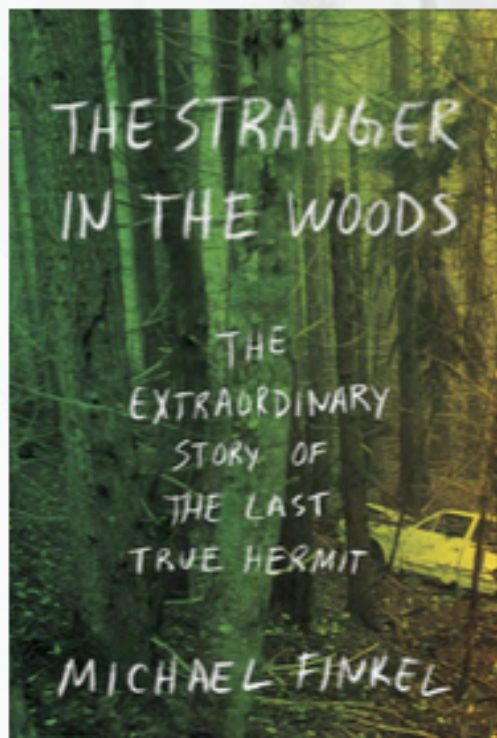
# UNMASKING THE HERMIT

by Danielle Watson

"I can't explain my actions," he said. "I had no plans when I left, I wasn't thinking of anything. I just did it." "He" is Christopher Knight, a so-called hermit who lived in the woods of Maine for 27 years with almost no human interaction. Knight is the main focus of Michael Finkel's new book *The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit*, published in March 2017.

On a seemingly normal day in 1986, 20-year-old Knight drove his 1985 Subaru Brat into the woods of Maine, left his keys on the dash, and abandoned it. Carrying only a tent and a backpack—no compass and no map—Knight trekked through the forest looking for the perfect place to get lost. And he did. Nestled between some elephant rocks in the thick Maine "Jarsey" Knight made his home. The Jarsey is "the densest, most disorienting, pathless, boulder-choked forest that is too difficult even for deer to walk through," says Finkel. He had no food and took to breaking into cabins around a nearby pond for his necessities: non-perishables, jeans, propane, a coat, and a mattress whenever his got moldy.

Knight's story may never have been told but for finally getting caught. On April 4, 2013, Sergeant Terry Hughes was awakened by his wife. Hughes' motion detector, located at the Pine Tree Camp in Rome, Maine, caught Knight in the act, alerting Hughes of his presence. For decades, someone had been breaking into the camp kitchen to steal food, coffee, and whatever they could get their hands on. According to legend, a hermit had been stealing from the camp and neighboring cabins for years, but had never been seen. Hughes set out to change that. Hughes caught Knight, with a duffel full of food, and arrested him.



Readers are taken on the journey of Knight's time in the woods, unfolded through interviews conducted by Finkel. It started with a letter from Finkel to Knight in the Kennebec County Correctional Facility, but after exchanging a few letters, Knight's responses ceased. Finkel took a chance and visited Knight at Kennebec. At first, Knight was hesitant to give any insight to his time in the woods or the reason behind it and turned Finkel away, but Finkel was persistent. Knight said, "I had good parents," and, "We're not emotionally bleeding all over each other. We're not touchy-feely. Stoicism is expected."

Finkel begins most chapters with a question about Knight's behaviors, and answers his question with facts from psychological studies, quoting famous works, and the opinions of medical professionals. He also compares Knight's behaviors with the great hermits of history: Charles Darwin, Thomas Edison, Emily Brontë, and Vincent Van Gogh. Finkel examines authors who succumbed to nature, like Thoreau, and asks Knight about their work. Finkel writes, "Knight said that publishing a book, packaging one's thoughts into

a commodity is not something that a true hermit would do." Knight never wrote a word while he was in the woods, or left a footprint. Finkel writes, "His commitment to isolation was absolute."

*The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit* is full of honesty and adventure, and is a wonderful read. Whether you're planning a trip to Maine, or want to explore the mind of the last true hermit, *The Stranger in the Woods* will have you longing for simpler times. ■