



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MISCELLANEOUS

## No sympathy for Barefoot Bandit

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It was good to see Colton Harris-Moore, the young man who was dubbed by the media last year as the Barefoot Bandit and applauded by thousands of fans for his brazenness and elusiveness, sentenced to seven years in a Washington state prison for his multi-national crime spree. It was important for the court to send a strong message that the 20-year-old's crimes were punishable, not admirable.

Whatever statement the penalty would make, the judge had her own to place on the record. While announcing a sentence at the lower end of the statutory range, Judge Vickie Churchill added, This case is a tragedy in many ways, but it's a triumph of the human spirit in other ways.

Although it was certainly appropriate for the judge to have considered mitigating circumstances in determining sentence length, her expressions of compassion and sympathy for the defendant's troubled childhood would only add to his appeal in the non-legal sense of the term. Many people endure childhood trauma far more severe than Harris-Moore, yet never respond by stealing airplanes and other valued property.

Also disturbing is the fact that 20th Century Fox bought the rights to a feature-length film about Harris-Moore and his crimes, enlisting Academy Award-winning screenplay writer Dustin Lance Black to craft the story. Sure, TV executives and others are quick to point out that Harris-Moore will not see a penny of the proceeds from the film. But he will certainly derive continued fame though without fortune, and that is priceless.

There is an important distinction between a true crime story and a true criminal biography. I have no qualms with movies, theatrical or televised, that focus on an investigation -- films like *Zodiac* in which the perpetrator is a secondary character and is played by some obscure actor. By contrast, films in which the criminal takes center stage and is played by someone of considerable notoriety -- as in *Monster* starring Charlize Theron -- provides that offender with undeserved celebrity.

It has only been a year and a few months since Harris-Moore grabbed headlines around the world and had a Facebook page on which tens of thousands signed on as fans. Even in that short period of time, the book, *Fly, Colton, Fly: The True Story of the Barefoot Bandit*, was published by Penguin detailing his exploits. Why is it, by the way, that the author and so many others choose to call Harris-Moore by his first name, a practice that tends to suggest familiarity and friendship?

But then, how bad can the book be? After all, author Jackson Holtz had the good sense to include some choice sound bites from me. Yes, my friends and critics who read this space, I am also motivated at least partially by a desire for attention. Of course, I don't have to commit crimes to get it.