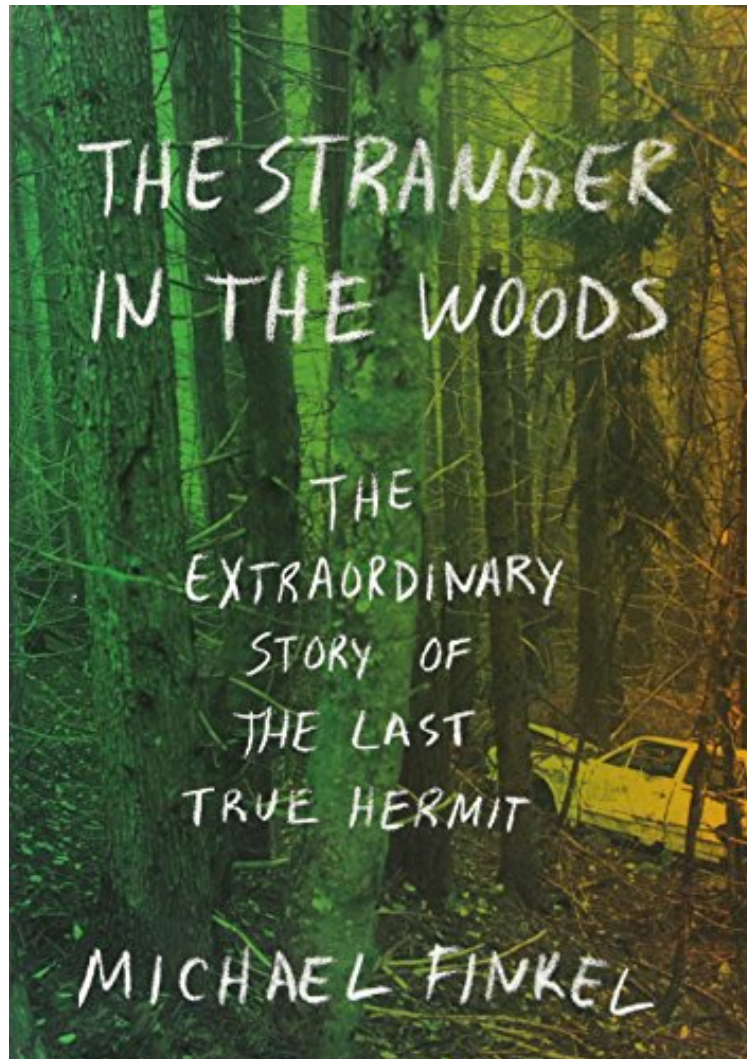


[Download] The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit

The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit

Michael Finkel

**Download PDF | ePub | DOC | audiobook | ebooks*



DOWNLOAD



READ ONLINE

#3668 in Books KNOPF 2017-03-07 2017-03-07Format: Deckle EdgeOriginal language:EnglishPDF # 1
8.50 x .80 x 5.90l, .83 #File Name: 1101875682224 pagesKNOPF | File size: 52.Mb

Michael Finkel : The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit:

145 of 154 people found the following review helpful. clearly better than anyone else hasBy carilynpMichael Finkel, author of the true story of THE STRANGER IN THE WOODS: THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF THE LAST TRUE HERMIT, you have my utmost respect. Not only is this story of Chris Knight one of the most compelling that I have read in some time, but the lengths that you went to, to research his venture into the woods of Maine, to

understand him, to get to know him, clearly better than anyone else has, and to represent him with such dignity, astounds me. Having never heard of this story, I was riveted from the get-go. What would possess a person to want to leave society and be completely isolated from their family and all society for that matter. It wasn't until the end of the book that I truly understood Knight's yearning for this lifestyle. I'm not sure that when he set out to live as a hermit, that he knew yet either. While some, especially those whose homes were burgled, might still never understand what would cause a person to want to live in such extreme conditions let alone in solitude, far removed from the regular world, after reading the book, while I will never spend a night, let alone an hour in the woods, what drew Knight makes sense to me now. As the author quotes philosopher Merton, among others, true solitary does not seek himself, but loses himself. This book teaches us so much about what it truly means to be with oneself. The deeply profound and intellectually stimulating thoughts that come from doing so, most of us will probably never know. It is not just a story about how a man one day walked into the woods and decided to leave his life behind and live off the land, and the pantries of hundreds of nearby cabins. It is so much more. So much more thought-provoking. It's not to say that after reading *THE STRANGER IN THE WOODS* that every reader will feel compelled to pick up and leave their jobs, families, and the comfort of modern society behind, but it sure does offer food for thought. Finkel points out that most of us feel like something is missing from our lives, and wondered then if Knight's journey was to seek it. But life isn't about searching endlessly to find what's missing; it's about learning to live with the missing parts.

264 of 285 people found the following review helpful. Riveting Then Heartbreaking --- Please Make a Movie By ChristineMMI wanted to read this book as the Maine woods have been a part of my life and I was unfamiliar with this story until I saw this book. I realized from the start that at the core of this story was an important topic I already have been worrying about that I feel American society either is unaware of or is purposefully ignoring: the neuro-atypical person and the challenge of how they will live (not thriving but suffering) in modern America. I found the book a page turner from the start. I did sneak to the Internet as I was dying to know more and found many videos online such as press conferences with the investigating local law enforcement and video of the now-disassembled camp site. The story was written in a way that was engaging and it moved at a pace that was just right. It's a short 201 pages and the personal details were provided in just nine hours of interviewing, limited by the "hermit's" choice to tell only so much and no more, keeping some things private, and sharing his opinions that are sometimes short and blunt (not pontificating). This is the story of a man who walked into the Maine woods with a small number of items who chose to live in seclusion, robbing lakeside summer camps (vacation cabins) for food and basic supplies. With no military or survivalist training other than reading trade books such as the Foxfire series, he devised systems and carved a life that allowed him to live for 27 years in the brutal Maine woods, sometimes in 20+ below zero winter weather. He only interacted with other people twice, once saying just "hi" to a hiker and once with hand movements and body language only. Knight was content and found peace in living that life until he was caught with the help of sophisticated surveillance equipment while robbing food from a nonprofit camp for disabled children (including kids on the Autism Spectrum). While telling the story of Christopher Knight's life as a hermit, Finkel weaves in his research on the related topics of voluntary solitude versus loneliness, the brain and what scientific studies have told us about the human need for social connection, the role of hormones, and about various (supposed) disorders that our society has invented and given names to. To a layperson Knight seems to have Asperger's, but that's a diagnosis that now no longer exists, it's been renamed and grouped under the broader umbrella term Autism Spectrum Disorder. From my own reading of the book *Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnosis of Gifted Children and Adults* by James Webb et al I wonder if Knight's IQ is one that is so high that other neuro-atypical elements also are present. In the book it was said that doctors refused to make a diagnosis of Asperger's because Knight was too high functioning in daily life to qualify for the diagnosis. The heartbreaking part of this story is that the suffering that Knight endured was due to square pegs not fitting in the round holes of modern American society, his relief and contentedness was found living in isolation in nature, but this is not really allowed in America, and when possible it's only available to those who are able to financially support themselves due to an inheritance or some income stream that they are lucky to find that meshes with their talents and abilities. Also explored in the book was how other cultures around the world have places for hermit-types to go and to live supported for their basic need for food and shelter by society (not financially self-sufficient). Prior to the disassembling of the asylums in the United States, perhaps some of the residents were those who were square pegs. If you just want to hear the story of who, what, when, where, why and how, all that is here in a short easy read. I finished it off in under 48 hours reading between living my regular life. I could have finished it in one sitting if I wanted to stay up too late or clear my calendar for a morning. But this book provides more food for thought, for me at least, than just Knight's hermit years story. I hope this book is a catalyst for Americans to think about this issue, with the rising rates of Autism and mental illness, we have more people this decade than ever before who are not fitting in with the mandatory American public school system and who are not fitting in to work jobs as adults enough to support themselves independently let alone the issue of if a person is happy or content. When a person suffers now they are labeled as depressed, if they worry too much, they have anxiety. The rise in the use of psychiatric medications to try to help people who are not fitting in with American society's defined "right way to function and be" is not always successful in converting a person into being something we call cured. We don't just let people be, anyone found to be

atypical is trying to be fixed. If relatives take in a family member with what we call a disability or mental illness, the cost of living can be so high that it's hard to afford it. This societal problem is going to get worse in the upcoming decades. But I digress. This book is a great read that informs and it was written with respect and portrays Knight with dignity. It's not sensationalized for entertainment purposes and it's not patronizing (thank goodness). Rating 5 stars = Love It. This NEEDS TO BE MADE INTO A MOVIE so it can reach a wider audience and that income perhaps can support Knight's ability to live the kind of life he needs to feel inner peace and contentment. 68 of 72 people found the following review helpful. If you are like me a dreamer By Dustin Hunt After reading a few chapters of this book, I was hooked immediately. I couldn't put it down. As someone who is drawn both to nature and seclusion, I was fascinated by Christopher Knight's retreat from modern, Western society, into the heart of Maine's woods. Many of us dream of secluding from the busyness of modern living the fast-paced, noisy, cyclical nature in which life has become; yet many of us do not have the courage or tenacity to pursue such a dream, much less achieve this dream for the amount of time that Knight did. If you are like me a dreamer, a wanderer, a hopeless romantic for escape then this book will instantly capture you. You will be drawn into a story of a man that psychologists and therapists have no categories for. You will be drawn into a story of a man who survives the intensity of Maine's weather and the silence of isolation. I promise, whether you agree with his choices or not, you will be drawn into this man's life, enthralled by his zeal for solitude, and his utter brilliance in the entire quest. On a practical level, Michael Finkel has written this biographical account excellently. The book is written well, leaving you wanting more and more of the story when the chapters end. The chapters are short so that one can read briefly each night and still make significant headway in a few weeks. The account of Knight's life is both formatted in narrative and in some ways, topically. If you are looking for a new book that will capture your attention, make you question some of your choices, and leave you desiring more out of life please, pick up this book!

Many people dream of escaping modern life, but most will never act on it. This is the remarkable true story of a man who lived alone in the woods of Maine for 27 years, making this dream a reality not out of anger at the world, but simply because he preferred to live on his own. A New York Times bestseller In 1986, a shy and intelligent twenty-year-old named Christopher Knight left his home in Massachusetts, drove to Maine, and disappeared into the forest. He would not have a conversation with another human being until nearly three decades later, when he was arrested for stealing food. Living in a tent even through brutal winters, he had survived by his wits and courage, developing ingenious ways to store edibles and water, and to avoid freezing to death. He broke into nearby cottages for food, clothing, reading material, and other provisions, taking only what he needed but terrifying a community never able to solve the mysterious burglaries. Based on extensive interviews with Knight himself, this is a vividly detailed account of his secluded life why did he leave? what did he learn? as well as the challenges he has faced since returning to the world. It is a gripping story of survival that asks fundamental questions about solitude, community, and what makes a good life, and a deeply moving portrait of a man who was determined to live his own way, and succeeded.

"A story that takes the two primary human relationships to nature and to one another and deftly upends our assumptions about both. This was a breathtaking book to read and many weeks later I am still thinking about the implications for our society and by extension for my own life." Sebastian Junger "An absorbing exploration of solitude and man's eroding relationship with the natural world. Though the stranger in the title is Knight, one closes the book with the sense that Knight, like all seers, is the only sane person in a world gone insane that modern civilization has made us strangers to ourselves." Nathaniel Rich, *The Atlantic* "Campfire-friendly and thermos-ready, easily drained in one warm, rummy slug Raises a variety of profound questions about the role of solitude, about the value of suffering, about the diversity of human needs." Jennifer Senior, *The New York Times* "Michael Finkel has done something magical with this profound book [His] investigation runs deep, summoning the human history of our own attempts to find meaning in a noisy world." Michael Paterniti "Chris Knight is an American original... I burned through this haunting tale in one rapt sitting." John Vaillant About the Author MICHAEL FINKEL is the author of *True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa*, which was adapted into a 2015 major motion picture. He has written for *National Geographic*, *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Atlantic*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. He lives in western Montana. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter 16 Knight lived in the dirt but was cleaner than you. Way cleaner. Pine needles and mud don't make you dirty, except superficially. The muck that matters, the bad bacteria, the evil virus, is typically passed through coughs and sneezes and handshakes and kisses. The price of sociability is sometimes our health. Knight quarantined himself from the human race and thus avoided our biohazards. He stayed phenomenally healthy. Though he suffered deeply at times, he insists he never once had a medical emergency, or a serious illness, or a bad accident, or even a cold. During the summers, especially in the early years, he was strong, fit, and spry. You should have seen me in my twenties I ruled the land I walked upon, it was mine, Knight said, exposing the prideful streak that runs below his surface of contrition. Why shouldn't I claim it as my own? No one else was there. I was in control. I controlled it as much as I wanted. I was lord of the woods. Poison ivy grows throughout the area; its prevalence prevented some people from searching for his site. Knight kept a little jingle in his

headleaves of three, let it be and so ably memorized where each patch grew that even at night he didn't brush against it. He says he was never once afflicted. Lyme disease, a bacterial illness transmitted through tick bites that can cause partial paralysis, is endemic to central Maine, but Knight was spared that as well. He brooded about Lyme for a while, then came to a realization: I couldn't do anything about it, so I stopped thinking about it. Living in the woods, subject to the whims of nature, offers a great deal of autonomy but not much control. At first, Knight worried about everything: snowstorms might bury him, hikers could find him, the police would capture him. Gradually, methodically, he shed most of his anxiety. But not all. Being too relaxed, he felt, was also a danger. In appropriate doses, worry was useful, possibly lifesaving. I used worry to encourage thought, he said. Worry can give you an extra prod to survive and plan. And I had to plan. At the conclusion of each thieving mission, he was absolved temporarily of worry. The order in which he ate his food was governed by the pace of spoilage, ground beef to Twinkies. When he was down to little more than flour and shortening, he'd mix those together with water and make biscuits. He never stole homemade meals or unwrapped items, for fear someone might poison him, so everything he took came sealed in a carton or can. He ate every morsel, scraping the containers clean. Then he deposited the wrappers and cartons in his camp's dump, stuffed between boulders at the boundary of his site. The dump was scattered over an area of about a hundred square feet. One section was devoted to items like propane tanks and old mattresses and sleeping bags and books, another to food containers. Even in the food area, there was no odor. Knight added layers of dirt and leaves to aid with composting, which eliminated any smell, but most of the packaging was waxed cardboard or plastic, slow to disintegrate. Upon excavation, the colors on many boxes remained garish, superlatives and exclamation points and rococo typography popping from the soil while robins chirped in the branches above. The archeological record contained in his dump revealed why Knight's only significant health issue was his teeth. He brushed regularly, he stole toothpaste, but did not see a dentist and his teeth began to rot. It didn't help that his culinary preferences never progressed beyond the sugar-and-processed-food palate of a teenager. Cooking is too kind a word for what I did, he said. A staple meal was macaroni and cheese. Dozens of mac-and-cheese boxes were buried between the rocks, along with several empty spice bottles, black pepper, garlic powder, hot sauce, blackened seasoning. Often, when Knight was inside a cabin with a good spice rack, he would grab a new bottle and try it out on his macaroni and cheese. Also in his dump was a flattened thirty-ounce container from cheddar-flavored Goldfish crackers, a five-pound tub from Marshmallow Fluff, and a box that had held sixteen Drakes Devil Dogs. There were packages from graham crackers, tater tots, baked beans, shredded cheese, hot dogs, maple syrup, chocolate bars, cookie dough. Betty Crocker scalloped potatoes and Tyson chicken strips. Country Time lemonade and Mountain Dew. El Monterey spicy jalapeño and cheese chimichangas. All of this came from a single kitchen-sink-sized hole, dug out by hand. Knight had fled the modern world only to live off the fat of it. The food, Knight pointed out, wasn't exactly his choice. It was first selected by the cabin owners of North Pond, then snatched by him. He did steal a little money, an average of fifteen dollars a year, a backup system, he called it, and lived an hour's walk from the Sweet Dreams convenience store and deli, but never went there. The last time he ate at a restaurant, or even sat at a table, was at some fast-food place during his final road trip. He stole frozen lasagna, canned ravioli, and Thousand Island dressing. You can dig in the dump until you're lying on your side, arm buried to the shoulder, and more keeps emerging. Cheetos and bratwurst and pudding and pickles. Quarry a trench deep enough to fight a war from Crystal Light, Cool Whip, Chock full o'Nuts, Coke, and you still won't reach bottom. So he wasn't a gourmet. He didn't care what he ate. The discipline I practiced in order to survive did away with cravings for specific food. As long as it was food, it was good enough. He spent no more than a few minutes preparing meals, yet he often passed the fortnight between raids without leaving camp, filling much of the time with chores, camp maintenance, hygiene, and entertainment. His chief form of entertainment was reading. The last moments he was in a cabin were usually spent scanning bookshelves and nightstands. The life inside a book always felt welcoming to Knight. It pressed no demands on him, while the world of actual human interactions was so complex. Conversations between people can move like tennis games, swift and unpredictable. There are constant subtle visual and verbal cues, there's innuendo, sarcasm, body language, tone. Everyone occasionally fumbles an encounter, a victim of social clumsiness. It's part of being human. To Knight, it all felt impossible. His engagement with the written word might have been the closest he could come to genuine human encounters. The stretch of days between thieving raids allowed him to tumble into the pages, and if he felt transported he could float in bookworld, undisturbed, for as long as he pleased. The reading selection offered by the cabins was often dispiriting. With books, Knight did have specific desires and cravings. In some ways, reading material was more important to him than food, though when he was famished for words, he'd subsist on whatever the nightstands bestowed, highbrow or low. He liked Shakespeare, Julius Caesar especially, that litany of betrayal and violence. He marveled at the poetry of Emily Dickinson, sensing her kindred spirit. For the last seventeen years of her life, Dickinson rarely left her home in Massachusetts and spoke to visitors only through a partly closed door. Saying nothing, she wrote, sometimes says the most. Knight wished he'd been able to procure more poetry written by Edna St. Vincent Millay, a fellow native of Maine, born in the coastal village of Rockland in 1892. He quoted her best-known lines: My candle burns at both ends / It will not last the night and then added, I tried candles in my camp for a number of years. Not worth it to steal them. If he were forced to select a favorite book, it might be *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, by William Shirer. It's concise, Knight said, a quick twelve hundred pages, and impressive as any

novel. He stole every book on military history he saw. He pilfered a copy of Ulysses, but it was possibly the one book he did not finish. What's the point of it? I suspect it was a bit of a joke by Joyce. He just kept his mouth shut as people read into it more than there was. Pseudo-intellectuals love to drop the name Ulysses as their favorite book. I refused to be intellectually bullied into finishing it. Knights disdain for Thoreau was bottomless; she had no deep insight into nature but Ralph Waldo Emerson was acceptable. People are to be taken in very small doses, wrote Emerson. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Knight read the Tao Te Ching and felt a deep-rooted connection to the verses. Good walking, says the Tao, leaves no tracks. Robert Frost received a thumbs-down. I'm glad his reputation is starting to fade and Knight said that when he ran out of toilet paper, he sometimes tore pages from John Grisham novels. He mentioned that he didn't like Jack Kerouac either, but this wasn't quite true. I don't like people who like Jack Kerouac, he clarified. Knight stole portable radios and earbuds and tuned in daily, voices through the waves another kind of human presence. For a while he was fascinated by talk radio. He listened to a lot of Rush Limbaugh. I didn't say I liked him. I said I listened to him. Knights own politics were conservative but not Republican. He added, perhaps unnecessarily, I'm kind of an isolationist. Later he got hooked on classical music. Brahms and Tchaikovsky, yes; Bach, no. Bach is too pristine, he said. Bliss for him was Tchaikovsky's The Queen of Spades. But his undying passion was classic rock: the Who, AC/DC, Judas Priest, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, and, above all, Lynyrd Skynyrd. Nothing in all the world received higher praise from Knight than Lynyrd Skynyrd. They will be playing Lynyrd Skynyrd songs in a thousand years, he proclaimed. On one raid he stole a Panasonic black-and-white five-inch-diagonal television. This was why he needed so many car and boat batteries to power the TV. Knight was adept at wiring batteries together, in series and parallel. He also carried off an antenna and hid it high in his tree tops. He said that everything shown on PBS was carefully crafted for liberal baby boomers with college degrees, but the best thing he watched while in the woods was a PBS program, Ken Burns's documentary The Civil War. He was able to recite parts of the show verbatim. I still remember Sullivan Ballou's letter to his wife, said Knight. It brought tears to my eyes. Ballou, a major in the Union army, wrote to Sarah on July 14, 1861, and was killed at the First Battle of Bull Run before the letter was delivered. The note spoke of unbounded love for his children, and Ballou said his heart was attached to his wives with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break. An expression of human connection that made Knight weep, even if he wasn't compelled to seek it himself. Knight was aware of world events and politics, but he seldom had any reaction. Everything seemed to be happening far away. He burned through all his batteries after September 11, 2001, and never watched television again. Car batteries were so heavy and difficult to steal anyway, he said. He repurposed the ones he had as anchor weights for guy lines, and after he stole a radio that received television audio signals, he switched to listening to TV stations on the radio; theater of the mind, he called it. Seinfeld and Everybody Loves Raymond were his television-on-the-radio favorites. I do have a sense of humor, Knight said. I just don't like jokes. Freud said there's no such thing as a joke; a joke is an expression of veiled hostility. His favorite comedians were the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, and George Carlin. The last movie he saw in a theater was the 1984 comedy Ghostbusters. He never bothered listening to sports; they bored him, every one of them. For news, there were five-minute updates at the top of the hour on WTOS, the Mountain of Pure Rock, out of Augusta. Also, he said, he sometimes listened to French news stations out of Quebec. He didn't speak French, but he understood most of it. He liked handheld video games. His rule for stealing them was that they had to appear outdated; he didn't want to take a kid's new one. He'd be stealing those in a couple years anyway. He enjoyed Pokmon, Tetris, and Dig Dug. I like games that require thought and strategy. No shoot-em-ups. No mindless repetitive motion. Electronic Sudoku was great, and crossword puzzles in magazines were welcome challenges, but he never took a deck of cards to play solitaire, and he doesn't like chess. Chess is too two-dimensional, too finite of a game. He didn't create any sort of art. I'm not that type of person nor did he spend any nights away from his camp. I have no desire to travel. I read. That's my form of travel. He never even glimpsed Maine's celebrated coastline. He claimed that he did not speak to himself aloud, not a word. Oh, you mean like typical hermit behavior, huh? No, never. Not for a moment did he consider keeping a journal. He would never allow anyone to read his private thoughts; therefore, he did not risk writing them down. I'd rather take it to my grave, he said. And anyway, when was a journal ever honest? It either tells a lot of truths to cover a single lie, he said, or a lot of lies to cover a single truth. Knights ability to hold a grudge was impressive. Though many National Geographic magazines were buried beneath his tent, he despised the publication. I didn't even like stealing them, he said. I only looked at them when I was desperate. They're really only good for burying in the dirt. That glossy paper lasts a long time. His aversion to National Geographic extends back to his youth. When Knight was in high school, he was reading a copy and came across a photo of a young Peruvian shepherd standing beside a road, crying. Behind him were several dead sheep, struck by a car as the boy had been trying to guide them. The photograph was later reprinted in a book of National Geographic's all-time greatest portraits. It incensed Knight. They published a photo of the boy's humiliation. He had failed his family, who had entrusted him with the herd. It's disgusting that everybody can see a little boy's failure. Knight, still furious about the image thirty years later, was a man acutely attuned to the ravages of shame. Had he done something shameful before he'd fled to the forest? He insisted that he had not. Knight had a strong distaste for big cities, filled with helpless intellectuals, people with multiple degrees who couldn't change a car's oil. But, he added, it wasn't as if rural areas were Valhalla. Don't glorify the country, he said, then tossed off a line from the first chapter of

The Communist Manifesto about escaping the idiocy of rural life. He acknowledged, forthrightly, that a couple of cabins were enticing because of their subscriptions to Playboy. He was curious. He was only twenty years old when he disappeared, and had never been out on a date. He imagined that finding love was something like fishing. Once I was in the woods, I had no contact, so there was no baited hook for me to bite upon. I'm a big fish uncaught. One book that Knight never buried in his dump or packed away in a plastic tote he kept it with him in his tent was *Very Special People*, a collection of brief biographies of human oddities: the Elephant Man, General Tom Thumb, the Dog-Faced Boy, the Siamese twins Chang and Eng, and hundreds of sideshow performers. Knight himself often felt that he was something of a circus freak, at least on the inside. If you're born a human oddity, says the introductory chapter of *Very Special People*, every day of your life, starting in infancy, you are made aware that you are not as others are. When you get older, it continues, things are likely to get worse. You may hide from the world, advises the book, to avoid the punishment it inflicts on those who differ from the rest in mind or body. There was one novel above all others, Knight said, that sparked in him the rare and unnerving sensation that the writer was reaching through time and speaking directly to him: Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. I recognize myself in the main character, he said, referring to the angry and misanthropic narrator, who has lived apart from all others for about twenty years. The book's opening lines are: I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. Knight also expressed no shortage of self-loathing, but it was offset by a fierce pride, as well as an occasional trace of superiority. So, too, with the unnamed narrator of *Underground*. On the final page of the book, the narrator drops all humbleness and says what he feels: I have only in my life carried to an extreme what you have not dared to carry halfway, and what's more, you have taken your cowardice for good sense, and have found comfort in deceiving yourselves. So that perhaps, after all, there is more life in me than in you.