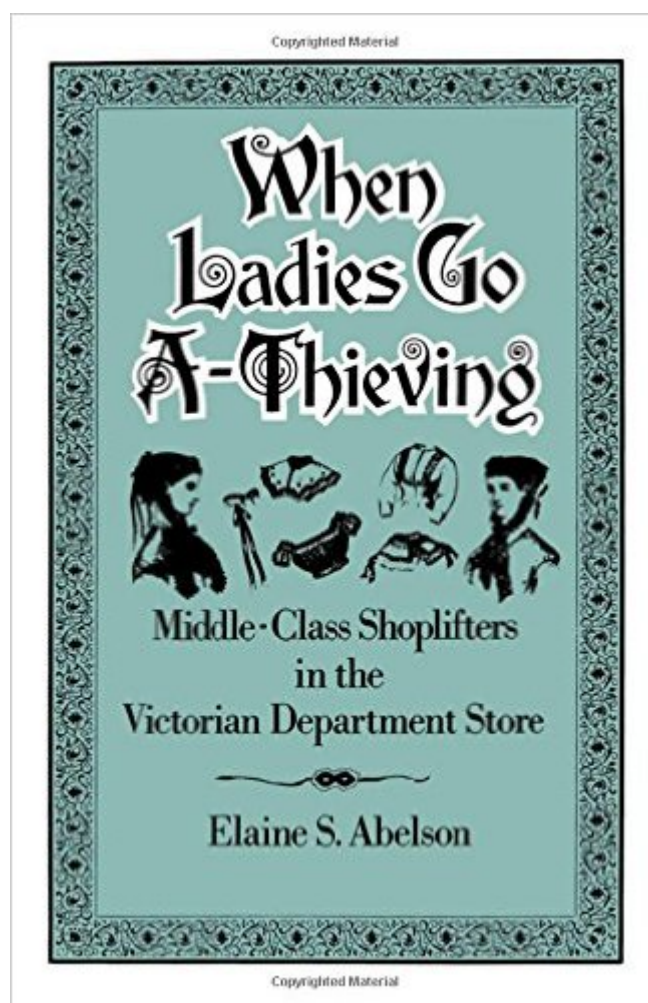


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# When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters In The Victorian Department Store



## Synopsis

This book focuses on middle-class urban women as participants in new forms of consumer culture. Within the special world of the department store, women found themselves challenged to resist the enticements of consumption. Many succumbed, buying both what they needed and what they desired, but also stealing what seemed so readily available. Pitted against these middle-class women were the management, detectives, and clerks of the department stores. Abelson argues that in the interest of concealing this darker side of consumerism, women of the middle class, but not those of the working class, were allowed to shoplift and plead incapacitating illness--kleptomania. The invention of kleptomania by psychiatrists and the adoption of this ideology of feminine weakness by retailers, newspapers, the general public, the accused women themselves, and even the courts reveals the way in which a gender analysis allowed proponents of consumer capitalism to mask its contradictions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Elaine S. Abelson's *When Ladies Go A-Thieving* is a remarkably ambitious book that seeks to examine numerous aspects of social history from roughly 1870-1914. While her primary area of investigation is the middle-class female shoplifter in the department store, her book undertakes serious examination of such varied concerns as class identity and class conflict, the rise of consumer culture, and the changing roles of women in society (and society's attempts to reconcile these new roles with existing gender stereotypes). Abelson's thesis defies quick encapsulation, as it

relies on several assumptions and takes form through multiple, equally important conclusions. As women's functions moved increasingly out of the home, and into the public sphere, one of her primary responsibilities was the acquisition of goods. That shopping was women's work (and leisure) was a widely understood stereotype. To address this demand, the department store developed as a place where a woman could see and acquire a large array of consumer goods. It also served to instill a "calculated arousal of desire" (11) and, according to Abelson, for many women the lure proved irresistible. They sought to acquire the coveted goods by any means necessary, and so they shoplifted them. Lower-class women, when caught, were dealt with as criminals. Yet many middle-class women, who could ostensibly afford the items they stole, were also caught in the act. This reflected poorly on the department store's model of mass consumption, if not mass consumption in general, and it also upset contemporary stereotypical notions of female moral superiority and incorruptibility. Thus these middle-class crimes were swept under the rug with a diagnosis of kleptomania.

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