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The Big Con: The Story Of The Confidence Man



Synopsis

The classic 1940 study of con men and con games that Luc Sante in *Salon* called "a bonanza of wild but credible stories, told concisely with deadpan humor, as sly and rich in atmosphere as anything this side of Mark Twain." "Of all the grifters, the confidence man is the aristocrat," wrote David Maurer, a proposition he definitely proved in *The Big Con*, one of the most colorful, well-researched, and entertaining works of criminology ever written. A professor of linguistics who specialized in underworld argot, Maurer won the trust of hundreds of swindlers, who let him in on not simply their language but their folkways and the astonishingly complex and elaborate schemes whereby unsuspecting marks, hooked by their own greed and dishonesty, were "taken off" — i.e. cheated — of thousands upon thousands of dollars. "The Big Con is a treasure trove of American lingo (the write, the rag, the payoff, ropers, shills, the cold poke, the convincer, to put on the send) and indelible characters (Yellow Kid Weil, Barney the Patch, the Seldom Seen Kid, Limehouse Chappie, Larry the Lug). It served as the source for the Oscar-winning film *The Sting*.

Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Anchor; 1st Anchor Books ed edition (July 20, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0385495382

ISBN-13: 978-0385495387

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 52 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #69,149 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #30 in Books > Biographies &

Memoirs > True Crime > White Collar Crime #41 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > True

Crime > Hoaxes & Deceptions #533 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Criminology

Customer Reviews

"To study the lingo of the con is inevitably to study the con itself," writes Luc Sante in his foreword to this classic work of urban anthropology, originally published in 1940. "A term such as cackle-bladder or shut-out cannot be properly described without giving a full account of its use, and such an account cannot be illustrated by stick figures." Thus *The Big Con* is filled with richly detailed anecdotes populated by characters with names like Devil's Island Eddie, the Honey Grove Kid, the

Hashhouse Kid, and Limehouse Chappie ("distinguished British con man working both sides of the Atlantic and the steamship lines between, all with equal ease"). David Maurer spent years talking to con men about their profession, learning about each and every step of the three big cons (the wire, the rag, and the payoff). From putting the mark up to putting in the fix, Maurer guides readers through the fleecing--pretty soon you'll be forgetting the book's scientific value and reading for sheer entertainment. (A cackle-bladder, by the way, is a fake murder used to scare the victim off after his money's been taken. As for the shut-out, well, that you'll have to learn on your own.) --Ron Hogan

During the first three decades of the 20th century, a legion of smooth-talking, quick thinking, mostly nonviolent criminals traveled America taking people's money. They grew more skilled as the years passed, devising ruses more intricate than the last, including staging scenes with props and sets, and scripting dialogue. Yet con men shared information only through what might be called oral tradition. Enter a professor of linguistics. Maurer first published this book, long out of print, in 1940, when he could see the dynamics of this kind of crime rapidly changing and the world of the original con man fading. He embraced that world and devoured its schemes, its nuances and its language. The exemplary rip-offs (called "tear-offs" in the '30s) Maurer collected come from con men themselves, and they are retold complete with suggested dialogue of the time. Businessmen traveled on ships and trains for days and stayed in strange cities for weeks at a time waiting for the deal to close, becoming marks (the victims) scooped up by ropers (the scouts who brought victims in). As proof of their talent, con men sought out big game: the entrepreneurial veteran, the crafty wannabe and the successful risk taker. Maurer methodically documents how the three biggest ploys evolved and details the process of cleanly and cleverly removing large amounts of money from a befuddled mark step by step. That level of detail capturing this oral tradition makes his book a valuable resource for readers who want a taste of the reality that inspired such films as *The Sting*. (Aug.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I read 'The Big Con' because it reportedly provides the basis for the movie 'The Sting.' The book was originally published in 1940, and recently republished. Author Maurer, a Louisville professor, took his research seriously and is credited with having conducted numerous interviews with some of the men who conducted these cons. One of the con leaders referenced is a man named Gondorff, who got his start in 1900 New York City. Gondorff is also the name of the con taken for a ride by Newman and Redford in the movie. Gondorff took a New Britain banker for \$375,000 - about \$11 million in today's dollars. Maurer's well-written book begins with an overview that describes the best

cons as combining intelligence, broad general knowledge, acting ability, and improvisational skills. A 'short con' involves taking the pigeon for all the money he has on his person, while the 'big con' sends him home to get more. All con games employ the victim's greed as a lever. In all of them the mark is induced to participate in an extralegal money-making machine that requires an investment. The cruder mechanisms are simple bait-and-switch devices; in the most sophisticated the victim may never realize he's been bilked, merely registering the outcome as a failed gamble. The con game always has at least a 'roper' and the 'inside man' who bounce the victim between them. The high and elegant style of the big con described in this book has declined, perhaps disappeared, due to changing technology. Communications are now faster and more widely available. Relatively few good con men are ever brought to trial - the victim must virtually admit criminal intentions himself to prosecute, and about 90% never do. Of those con men who are tried, few are convicted. The steps in a big con are: 1) Locating a well-to-do victim. 2) Gaining the victim's confidence. 3) Steering him to meet the inside man (roping). 4) Permitting the inside man to show him how he can make a large amount of dishonest money. 5) Allowing the victim to profit. 6) Determining how much he will invest. 7) Sending him home for that amount. 8) Playing him against a 'big store' and fleecing him. 9) Getting him out of the way as quietly as possible. 10) Forestalling action by the law. An early version of the big con ('fight store') involved staged fights between a traveling millionaire and his boxer, vs. a supposed local champion, with a fake doctor also involved. An 'employee' of the millionaire supposedly out for revenge and in cahoots with the millionaire's favored boxer would solicit participation by others in a supposed rigged fight. However, the champion would land a surprise hard blow to the challenger's chest, the challenger would fall to the ground, and the 'doctor' pronounced him dead. The victim loses his bet, and all fled to avoid being entangled in a manslaughter investigation (prize fighting then was illegal, and there would be few attendees). The record take for this con is believed to have been \$50,000; this con faded when prize-fighting became legal around 1915. Another version, 'the wire,' was invented just prior to 1900. The con men convinced the victim that with the connivance of a corrupt Western Union official they could delay race results long enough to place a bet after the race ended. Two fake setups were used - in one a Western Union office was established, along with a horse race room located elsewhere with a telegraph, odds board, bookmaker, and shills winning and losing large sums of money to whet the victim's appetite. In the 'economy version,' the cons would sneak into a real Western Union office, until the company put a stop to this. 'The rag' was a variation of this that convinced victims the mob's inside man was manipulating stock prices. Lou Blonger was kingpin of an extensive ring of confidence tricksters operating for over 25 years in Denver. His gang set up rooms resembling stock

exchanges and betting parlors to convince tourists to put up large sums to secure delivery of stock profits or winning bets. He had long-term ties to politicians and law enforcement in Denver, including the mayor and police chief. In 1922, however, the district attorney (Blonger had offered election assistance) bypassed the police and used his own force, funded by secret donations from 31 wealthy locals, to bring Blonger and the ring to justice after a year of investigation - including spying on him from a building across the street, installing a Dictaphone inside his office (did not require a search warrant at that time), and allowing a crooked detective to work inside his office and feed Blonger misleading information. The Denver attorney general then made it known in the summer of 1923 that he was going on a long fishing vacation, signaling the gang that the heat was off. Texas rancher J. Frank Norfleet showed up at this very time - after having been twice scammed by other gangs (taken for \$45,000 in 1919 attempting to take advantage of 'inside information on stock trades) and hunting for the men who had swindled him. (Some had already been imprisoned.) Norfleet spent five years and \$75,000 tracking down the swindlers, but lived to age 102. Maurer reports that a roper was considered doing rather well if he brought in 2 - 4 victims/year, though one in Florida succeeded in bringing in three in one 1922 week. The one inviolable rule was to never bring in a local resident; some ropers used advertisements soliciting business opportunities or offers to buy businesses. Maurer's book provides both an overview of how the major big cons (and some of their simplifications) worked, but details of how typical conversations by the various players proceeded. The sophistication and cleverness involved is quite impressive - typically beginning with a proposal to buy eg. a business from the victim, then evolving into another 'opportunity' while the lawyers etc. are freed up to complete the deal. The 1930s brought greater involvement of the federal government, and ended perpetrators' ability to hide behind corrupt local officials.

pooled ink Reviews: 4.5 Stars
Of all the grifters, the confidence man is the aristocrat.
• THE BIG CON is a casual narrative that eases you into the world of the modern (1940s) confidence man as its pages offer you true third party insight with the occasional tale or anecdote from those who actively play the game. Educational, amusing, informative, and a remarkably quick read this book provides all that is needed for the casual enthusiast. Non-fiction is pretty hit-or-miss for me but the narrative that spun this research together drew me in immediately. It felt so conversational I became eager to hear him out and learn what was being offered. And what Maurer was offering was a base of history, a trove of secrets, and a smattering of stories straight from the horse's mouth. Read my FULL review here: [...]

This is the book that the writer of the movie, *The Sting*, based their script elements on. It is a great compendium of early 1900's con slang and the working of the big three cons of the day. This is a non-fiction book written by a professor and it reads that way at times. It gets redundant at times, but a good treatise on the art of the con, written with some affection to the grifters. While nonfiction, it is clear that Maurer lost most of his objectivity while working on this, so the book comes off a bit romanticizes and nostalgic. Good scholarship? Probably not. Good read? Absolutely!

Stories about con men and criminals are good to use as anecdotes and metaphors. *The Big Con* does this well and if that was all it did it would be worth having. What I didn't realize is that Maurer's book is the definitive academic piece on early 20th-century crime. As in, he also wrote an entire book on the linguistics of the underworld (which is interesting to think about considering how commonly we use their phrases - grift, rag, con, the fix, blowing him off) and wrote the Britannica article for "slang." You would probably be well served to explore a few of the biographies of the characters in the book, although *the 48 Laws of Power* does a good job with some of the highlights. The one thing to take away: con men exploited the desire of wealthy people to get something for nothing and their willingness to break the rules to do so. Avoid that weakness, even if we don't have to worry about roving bands of con men as much anymore.

I was a bit worried that the book would be too dated - mostly in the language. I was expecting something like Dashiell Hammett. Enjoyable, but you're constantly reminded that those days are gone. That's not the case here. The book could have been written yesterday from a language perspective, and any linguistic idiosyncrasies are specific to the language of the con man. As some people have noted, it can be repetitive, but that's because most "big" cons (those where the con men work in large teams and have established locations) are very similar in essence; only the execution and specifics are different. I found it to be very interesting, both from a technical perspective on how things were done, as well as a sociological perspective.

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