



# **The Confidence Game: Why We Fall for It . . . Every Time**

*Maria Konnikova*

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**The Confidence Game: Why We Fall for It . . . Every Time** Maria Konnikova

**From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Mastermind*, a compelling investigation into the minds, motives, and methods of con artists—and the people who fall for their cons over and over again**

While cheats and swindlers may be a dime a dozen, true conmen—the Bernie Madoffs, the Jim Bakkers, the Lance Armstrongs—are elegant, outsized personalities, artists of persuasion and exploiters of trust. How do they do it? Why are they successful? And what keeps us falling for it, over and over again? These are the questions that journalist and psychologist Maria Konnikova tackles in her mesmerizing new book.

From multimillion-dollar Ponzi schemes to small-time frauds, Konnikova pulls together a selection of fascinating stories to demonstrate what all cons share in common, drawing on scientific, dramatic, and psychological perspectives. Insightful and gripping, the book brings readers into the world of the con, examining the relationship between artist and victim. *The Confidence Game* asks not only why we believe con artists, but also examines the very act of believing and how our sense of truth can be manipulated by those around us.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## The Confidence Game: Why We Fall for It . . . Every Time Details

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# From Reader Review *The Confidence Game: Why We Fall for It . . .* Every Time for online ebook

## Julia Milner says

I was drawn to this book because I recently came thisclose to buying into a multi-level marketing scheme and, as a result, felt compelled to learn more about why we are all susceptible to manipulation and persuasion by con artists. I thought Maria Konnikova's explanations of the psychology and methods of cons/scams were engaging and well-researched. I particularly enjoyed the detailed true stories of cons, both recent and historic, and Konnikova's ability to link her findings to general statements about human nature. While other reviewers have (fairly) criticized Konnikova's writing for being repetitive and hard to follow, I was impressed by how much she has improved since writing *Mastermind*.

### Main takeaway:

"Con artists, at their best and worst, give us meaning. We fall for them because it would make our lives better if the reality they proposed were indeed true. They give us a sense of purpose, of value, of direction... Ultimately, what a confidence artist sells is hope. Hope that you'll be happier, healthier, richer, loved, accepted, better looking, younger, smarter, a deeper, more fulfilled human being—hope that the you that will emerge on the other side will be somehow superior to the you that came in."

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## SundayAtDusk says

This book has a wealth of information about those who con and those who are conned. It's also easy to understand. But it's not organized in the reader's best interest. It's organized in a way that best suits the author, who has no problem continuously jumping around from century to century, and who can easily remember every con mentioned in the book. That's a shame, too, because Ms. Konnikova's book could have been a better help to the general public. Although when it comes right down to it, most people are not conned in their lifetime in major ways. Yes, everyone will buy lies here, there and everywhere, but not the type of lies that end up costing them substantial money or alter their lives. No, we don't fall for it every time.

(Note: I received a free copy of this book from Amazon Vine in exchange for an honest review.)

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## Peter Mcloughlin says

Gets into the psychology of the con artist and the psychological quirks and weaknesses of ordinary psychology which can make all of us prey to con schemes. We are not wired particularly well to resist the cunning tricks of the confidence artist. We are all susceptible to the grift by our natural cognitive biases. More about our weaknesses than the mechanics of the con it is a reminder that honest good and smart people can fall for the con.

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## Lance Charnes says

Whenever we read about some con job that nets a sucker or ten, the first thing across our minds is: how could they *possibly* have fallen for *that*? It's such an obvious scam! What were they thinking?

According to psychologist/author Maria Konnikova, they were thinking the same way we would. In their shoes, we'd have been saps, too.

In the 1950s, linguist David Maurer called confidence men the "aristocrats of crime." Unlike most other crimes, the con requires us to become willing participants in our own fleecing. Ridiculous? Maybe in the abstract. But as the author points out, time and time again the victims of con games go out of their way to help the grifter take them to the cleaners, then fail to notify the police or even refuse to admit they've been taken.

The author divides her narrative into ten chapters, the middle eight of which focus on each step of the long con (the kind that takes days or weeks to unfold, like in *The Sting*). In each chapter, she pins the text to a particular scam that best illustrates the concepts in that chapter; for instance, in "The Tale" (about the importance of narrative in promoting a con), she follows the story of a college professor duped into smuggling drugs by a woman he thought had fallen for him. She uses academic studies, psychological analysis, the views of lawmen and con men alike, and the examples of other cons to show why a particular trick works.

In short: we as a species became what we are by evolving certain societal traits -- trust, empathy, optimism, faith, a need to feel special (ego), a yen for material or spiritual enrichment (greed), an inability to understand statistics (see "optimism") and a reluctance to believe in the worst-case scenario (see "faith"). Confidence wo/men are both uniquely able to find these traits in other people and powerfully inclined to exploit them without experiencing a lot of angst about it. They prey on belief, on faith, and on greed; that old saw "you can't cheat an honest man" has more than a little truth to it. However, it can also be said that the entrepreneur is the ideal mark, because s/he is more than most a creature of optimism, ego, faith and greed.

The object of a con is nearly always money or power. Satan was the first grifter, and Eve was the first mark; he told her a story that played on her ego, optimism, greed and faith, she went all-in, and she ended up losing her home. Advertising is a form of con job, with the tools of the ad man being the same as those of the grifter, though the former's remuneration comes a bit more indirectly. Pyramid schemes are cons, and so were Enron, the mortgage industry in 2007, religious cults, and nationalist politics at just about any time. They all play on belief and all those other traits that make us human and social creatures, then turn it against us.

Despite being an academic, Konnikova writes clearly and engagingly, with a pleasant shortage of fifty-cent words and specialist cant. The case studies she uses are varied enough to not induce *deja vu* from one chapter to the next. While Charles Ponzi (of the eponymous scheme) and Frank Abagnale (he of *Catch Me If You Can*) get name-checked, it's likely you won't have heard of most of the scams she uses as case studies, which are drawn from over a hundred years of bad behavior. Where'd the fifth star go? The author often doesn't know when to quit while she's ahead, so she's prone to repeating her arguments until you have them embedded in your brain.

*The Confidence Game* isn't meant to be a casual read; you need to really want to understand con men and what they do at the office every day. If you do want that, though, it's an excellent primer on how and why cons work. It's also a big, fat injection of empathy for the suckers, who at bottom are guilty of little more than being human. Reading this book may not stop you from getting taken, but at least you'll understand why you let it happen.

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## Dick Reynolds says

We're treated to examples of and the rationale behind real life "cons" in such chapters titled The Put-Up, The Play and The Rope. There is also a chapter at the book's end highlighting the (real) oldest profession. Hint: It's not prostitution.

The common denominator in all these cons is the incredible gullibility of the "mark" or the person who is conned. But what about the con man (it's almost always a man) who commits these white collar crimes? The true con man doesn't force us to do anything; he makes us an accomplice in our undoing.

For me, the first chapter was most illuminating. The author presents the findings of psychologist Robert Hare who has done considerable work analyzing personal characteristics of con men. These features can be grouped in three categories: psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism. Under the first, the con man exhibits no remorse for his actions, shows pathological lying, is manipulative, is promiscuous, and displays superficial charm. Under narcissism, he has an exalted sense of entitlement, self-enhancement and an overly inflated sense of self-worth. He's the center of the universe. Finally, Richard Calhoon, a marketing professor at the University of North Carolina, goes further and describes the Machiavellian as someone who employs aggressive, manipulative, exploiting, and devious moves to achieve personal and organizational objectives. It's no stretch that all the above traits can be ascribed to the man who recently settled a lawsuit for twenty-five million dollars rather than risk impeachment and removal from office.

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## Vikram says

This review is based on an excerpt from The New Yorker.

A 25 year old woman pretends to be a 14 year old victim of sex trafficking and an entire country falls for the insane ruse. This is a remarkable piece by Maria Konnikova about the psychology of the confidence game and how people fall for stories. Con artists are fascinating characters (think The Gentlemen Bastards in Scott Lynch's "Lies of Locke Lamora", Neil Gaiman's "American Gods", or Sawyer from "Lost"). The woman Konnikova points to pretended to not speak English and instead, drew a picture of her being flown by plane to Ireland followed by another picture of being surrounded by a group of men. The story turns out to be blatantly false as the woman pulled similar stunts over the years, convincing people she was a victim of some kind.

That the woman lied is less the focus of the piece than the narrative that those who believed her fell for. She focused on socially taboo subjects to gain attention, as Konnikova points out: "Who makes up a history of sex trafficking? What kind of person do you need to be?" But this is precisely the point. By weaving together a story that appealed to emotion, people fell for her confidence game. That we better understand situations based on stories is also interesting. It seems that we are wired to believe a narrative of falsities than a pure litany of facts, and Konnikova points to some scientific studies that say as much.

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## Don Gorman says

(1 1/2). This book is a good news, bad news proposition. The chapters are mostly set up with a case study describing the kind of con or deception that it is about. Those recounts are very interesting and seem very

contemporary, regardless of when they occurred. The rest of each chapter then goes into the psychology of why we (humans) react in the manner that we do and why we are duped. Like in many business and other non-fiction books (Tom Friedman for example), that part gets very repetitive and boring in a big hurry. A reasonably revealing and educational read.

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### **Shweta Ramdas says**

Why is the 'oldest profession in the world' the con-man? Why do perfectly educated and intelligent people fall for cons that are immediately obvious to onlookers? And how did people like Bernie Madoff lure hordes of people? Maria Konnikova dives deep into the art of the con: the steps that lead up to it, and those aspects of human psychology that con-men exploit. Our ability to trust, our circumstances in life, our belief that something exceptional *\*can\** happen to us, our over-exaggerated optimism all make us good victims. And since a lot of these are what help us navigate through life, we are all potential victims.

The book is generously peppered with anecdotes that do not fail to get your head shaking in disbelief. Yet, at some point, the book begins to drag its feet: every anecdote follows the same template, and we all know where it's going. We have also heard about many of the psychological tricks Konnikova describes in other books in the field: the nudge, the optimism, the strong tendency to prevent regret. To someone who has read her share of behavioral economics books, this one quickly becomes repetitive.

So, the big question: will my reading this book protect me? Can I now spot a conman? Probably not. If there's one thing Konnikova leaves you with, it's that our desire to believe in a narrative can make us vulnerable than we know we are, even when we choose to stay on guard.

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### **Jessica says**

Good but... repetitive, and as others have mentioned, oddly organized. Could have been shorter by a third. The research is there--interesting and impressive--but no bibliography or footnotes. An easy, even breezy, read but for the repetition, the constant circling back.

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### **Kemper says**

When I was in my mid-teens I came home from school one day to find my father reading a letter. He asked me to look at it, and it was a badly typed message full of misspellings that was my first encounter with the Nigerian prince con although I didn't know it at the time.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"It's a scam," I replied.

At that point he actually got irritated with me and started pointing out a bunch of reasons why it could be legitimate. I was beyond shocked that the man who had constantly told me things like "There's no such thing as a free lunch." and "If it's too good to be true then it probably is." would seriously be considering answering this letter. If I, an idiot teenager, could see it was a fraud then why wouldn't a pragmatic adult

recognize that? Eventually the letter got tossed in the trash without Dad sending the Nigerian prince any money.

Years later, when I was about twenty, I had a coworker approach me with a no-risk way to make some money. He laid out a deal he'd gotten into where you kicked in cash and then convinced others to contribute which moved you up a ladder where you would eventually make like 10 times your original investment.

"That's a pyramid scheme," I said. "It's illegal, and it'll blow up in someone's face eventually."

He got extremely angry, told me that I was turning down free money and went on to recruit a bunch of other people we worked with. It was part of a trend that had swept the area, and inevitably a whole lot of people I worked with lost a bunch of cash.

I've puzzled over those two incidents a lot since then because I could never understand how I could see that these things were scams while others seemed eager and willing to throw their money into them. I chalked it up to my inherent cynicism and being a fan of crime novels. After reading this I have a much better understanding of why people fall for cons, and why they refuse to admit that they even are cons. To be honest I've often patted myself on the back when reflecting about them. See, I told myself, you're much too smart to fall for that.

However, thanks to this book I now realize that I've also at least twice over the years fallen for a classic when I was approached on the street by women with small children who needed some help. ("I'm so sorry to ask this, but I forgot my purse and I'm almost out of gas. Is there any way you could possibly loan me....") And even though I had some slight misgivings at the time it was only while reading this that I realized that I had for sure been taken, and that like a lot of people I hadn't learned my lesson after the first one. Oops. Well, at least my stupidity only amounts to about \$20 while some suckers have lost much more than that and then went back for more.

That's part of what makes this an interesting read. When most of us hear about people getting swindled we usually think it's just greed and stupidity on the part of the marks, and we have the smug satisfaction of knowing that we would surely never fall for such a thing. Maria Konnikova uses a variety of psychological studies to illustrate how that's exactly what the victims thought, too.

She highlights how people are essentially hard wired to trust otherwise society would just be every person with their back against a wall with a knife in hand. We also have the deep seated belief that each of us is special, we're surely owed a break, and that we're shrewd enough to make the most of it when it happens. Combine that with the human tendency to refuse to admit mistakes, and it makes all of us potential rubes.

What makes this entertaining and not just informative is the deft way that Konnikova mixes fascinating true stories of cons to highlight the behaviors she's discussing, and then she backs that up with the scientific research of the studies which often show startling tendencies.

For example, people usually decide that they're right about something and then cherry pick facts to support their beliefs. This often leads to people digging in their heels in the face of overwhelming evidence so that they won't even admit to being scammed. The book highlights one man in New York around 1900 who ran a forerunner to the Ponzi scheme and was so successful that people were still lining up outside his office to give him money even after he had been exposed in the papers and had fled with the money. In fact, even after he was arrested and convicted many remained convinced that he was legitimate, and it was the newspapers who ruined the whole thing. (Which also shows that blaming the media for bad news is a very

old trick.)

All in all this is a fascinating account of not just the psychology of what makes people susceptible to cons, it's also an excellent window into the weird ways our minds make us idiots.

Now, I've got a nice bridge in Brooklyn for sale if anyone is interested....

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## **Khadidja says**

**“We aren’t robbers, you and I. To rob a fool, you don’t need knives: Just flatter him, tell him sweet lies, And he is yours for life.”**

Before i start reviewing this book i want you to understand what doesn the word "con man" mean ! A man who **cheats** or **tricks someone by gaining their trust** and persuading them to **believe something that is not true**. It's all about manipulating someone's beliefs, Con artists are evil human beings, with malicious intentions and no conscience sounds familiar ? oh yeah Donald Fucking Trump, This book is an exploration of the psychological principles that underlie each and every game, from the most elementary to the most involved, step by step, from the moment the endeavor is conceived to the aftermath of its execution.

The confidence game—the con—is an exercise in soft skills. Trust, sympathy, persuasion. The true con artist doesn't force us to do anything; he makes us complicit in our own undoing. He doesn't steal. We give. He doesn't have to threaten us. We supply the story ourselves. We believe because we want to, not because anyone made us. And so we offer up whatever they want—money, reputation, trust, fame, legitimacy, support—and we don't realize what is happening until it is too late.

According to the author, The confidence game starts with basic human psychology. From the artist's perspective, it's a question of identifying the victim (the put-up): who is he, what does he want, and how can I play on that desire to achieve what I want? It requires the creation of empathy and rapport (the play): an emotional foundation must be laid before any scheme is proposed, any game set in motion. Only then does it move to logic and persuasion (the rope): the scheme (the tale), the evidence and the way it will work to your benefit (the convincer), the show of actual profits. And like a fly caught in a spider's web, the more we struggle, the less able to extricate ourselves we become (the breakdown). By the time things begin to look dicey, we tend to be so invested, emotionally and often physically, that we do most of the persuasion ourselves. We may even choose to up our involvement ourselves, even as things turn south (the send), so that by the time we're completely fleeced (the touch), we don't quite know what hit us. The con artist may not even need to convince us to stay quiet (the blow-off and fix); we are more likely than not to do so ourselves. We are, after all, the best deceivers of our own minds. At each step of the game, con artists draw from a seemingly endless toolbox of ways to manipulate our belief. And as we become more committed, with every step we give them more psychological material to work with.

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## **Carlos says**

I wasn't wowed by this book, slow beginning.... uses pseudo science to back up some of its claims and it really doesn't offer any advice in how to avoid getting scammed .. so what was the point .... I read a 300 page book just to be told what I already know , people who want to believe are the ones who get lied to ..... really is this new? ....

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## **Nancy says**

I won this book on goodreads and started reading it when it arrived on December 3rd. On January 8th, goodreads sent me an email asking me what I thought of the book with a link to this review page. OK, goodreads, this is what I think so far (page 184 of 321):

The title irritates me. If it didn't have the "Every Time" tag at the end, it would be fine but we don't fall for every con game. Many many con attempts fail. (Check your email spam box if you want a few examples of ones you didn't fall for.) That said, there are many successful con artists that Ms. Konnikva profiles here. The book is easy to pick up, read a chapter about a con artist or some psychological study and put down. Since I started this book, several library books I requested months ago have come in so I have put this book aside to read them. I expect to eventually finish it and will give it a rating then. (Is this good enough goodreads?)

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Well, here it is February 2nd and I finished the book. It was more of the same--stories about con artists interspersed with descriptions of academic psychological studies. Most of them were kind of interesting, at least when I didn't read them all back to back.

One last comment on real life vs. psychological studies. I serve on a board that hears property tax appeals. Each year mock hearing are held as part of the training given by the state. Unlike real hearings, every one I've seen has found for the county assessors, even when the "assessor" had a very weak case. There is something about being in a class and believing a certain action is preferred by the trainer that will distort results. Many of these researchers Ms. Konnikova cites tried to hide what they were really studying from their subjects, but did they telegraph what they hoped people would do to get the results they expected?

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## **Jennifer says**

This was a fascinating book--not so much about specific types of cons, though some are mentioned in detail--focusing on the psychology of con artists and their victims. Of particular note, it looks at some of the newest psychological research to examine why people fall prey to these crimes, and why they work so well. I'm sure the subtitle is going to jar some potential readers, since we all have our pet theories as to who 'deserves' to be conned and why we ourselves won't become victims. But as Konnikova points out, researchers are discovering that different types of confidence tricks work with different groups of people. Just because you wouldn't dream of buying into a Madoff-style pyramid scheme in the hopes of too-good-to-be-true investment returns doesn't mean some other scam won't appeal to you. (The times I've been taken fortunately weren't huge financial disasters, but they were good learning experiences. Konnikova's book is a reminder that being human makes us uniquely vulnerable even as it allows us to work with others. A greater awareness of the ways some nefarious individuals will try to use our better nature against us offers at least some

protection.)

Also, I really need to write a blog post about the similarity between writing fiction and running a con-- though the writer hopes that readers come away from a story feeling anything but cheated, I realized as I was reading that the deep revulsion and frustration I feel for some books is probably a result of a sense that the author tricked me somehow, and not in a good way.

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## **Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says**

There's nothing like a good scam. I love scams in books and movies -- Ocean's Eleven, Catch Me If You Can, The Sting. I suspect I'd be a lot less charmed if I were to encounter one in real life though.

I feel simultaneously prepared for scams and resigned to being a dupe after reading Maria Konnikova's *The Confidence Game*. She describes different types of scams and cons with plenty of examples. People who have impersonated others, grifters, shell game artists, they're all here, and it's fascinating. She explains how they pull off their operations and why people fall for them.

It's great to know how the psychics and fast talking pitchmen play on our weaknesses, and even intelligent people who are nobody's fool can fall for these hucksters. Because -- psychology. They play on our trust, our vulnerability, our fears, and sometimes we're weak and they really move in. They tell us what we want to hear, promise us what we secretly want. Konnikova concludes that we actually might be better off, psychologically, to be more trusting than more suspicious overall. Not exactly the advice I was hoping for, but I can see her point.

Lots of great scam stories, and some food for thought as well. (And look for the YouTube video Konnikova describes of trickster Derren Brown paying New York merchants with blank paper while distracting them with chit chat. Priceless!)

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