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Alger says

Classic journalistic history. If newspapers are the first draft of history, books like this are the first final draft.

Greene spins out an episodic retelling of the Abscam scandal that gutted the Democratic Party in 1980, and paved the way for the end of forty years of that party's virtual ownership of the federal government. Other collateral effects included the wreck of plans to reinvent Atlantic City as an East Coast Las Vegas, disruption of the informally arranged campaign finance system that emerged after Watergate, exposure of the incestuous relationship of state politics on the East Coast with Organized Crime, and the rebirth of the FBI as an agency dedicated to fighting corruption and organized crime.

The linchpin of the book is Mel Wiesman, a talented petty conman whose success with franchise bank fraud lands him in the hands of the law. To escape jail time he agrees to work up a small sting operation with the feds, and through a mix of chutzpa and fearlessness grown out of not having to worry about getting caught, the sting operation grows into a two year saga that exposes corruption at all levels of government. The barest outline of the utter insanity of this investigation was dramatized in *American Hustle*, but the details are more interesting. What Greene delivers here is the coherence and timeline missing from the movie, and a better sense of the damage wrought by the operation.

I remember a pundit at the time saying that he was appalled by Abscam, but not because it revealed that politicians were corrupt. No, he was astonished by how cheaply congressmen could be bought. That angle which is not really of interest in the movie, is made very clear in the book. Not only were these politicians greedy, but there seems to be almost no depth too low for them to stoop for a pay off. As a real strength of the book, the FBI agents and pols are given a bigger role here. The interoffice rivalries and budget restrictions that hampered the investigation are fascinating, as is the revelation that the persons developed as marks were individually approved and chosen at some higher level of government that is never made clear. That is why the repackaging of this book as "the book that inspired the movie" is misleading: the movie captures the flavor of the sting operation, but the book is the story. Best yet, it is entirely how Wiesman saw the story of his own biggest sting evolved from a shabby storefront operation to a multi-jurisdictional sprawling monster that only ended because they couldn't keep up the pretense any longer.

As strong as the book is, it has its flaws. It is very much a product of its time, and the gender politics are just repellant. There is also a lack of organic organization within the book, so there are a lot of sketchy transitions from one phase of the scam into another. Part of this choppiness comes from Greene choosing to introduce those sections through a first person narrative of the idle thoughts of Weisman. Also, because this was written as a recap of recent history, and a history of the biggest news story of the year, Greene does not waste time introducing the reader to the congressmen since anyone interested in this book in 1982 would have enough grounding to know who Senator Williams was.

Other failings of the book are outside of Greene's control. At the time he was writing the massive structural damage Abscam did to the National Democratic Party was still developing. In retrospect Abscam was the end of the era where the Democrats were the party of ideas, and stripped them of any halo effect from the Republican Party's involvement in Watergate. Equally it was the end of the New Deal political consensus that government had a positive role in improving people's lives. The reaction was increased cynicism about politics, massive defections by the middle class from the party system, and the coalescence of the current conservative movement.

A very good book for what it is.

Rachel Rose says

Interesting story. I liked the film based on it better. The first chapter overwhelms the reader with too much information. After that Greene alternates between journalistic reporting style and fictional narrative which I find irritating. He treats Weinberg as a fictional character, offering internal monologues and asides while also including transcripts of Weinberg's own version of events. Overall a good account of what happened, but the style just doesn't work.

Ben Silver says

Entirely too long. I was very disappointed with this book. Was hoping for much more.

Annie says

In *The Sting Man*, Greene provides an all-inclusive account of Abscam. In 1978, Amoroso and other FBI agents created a con to catch white-collar criminals. They enlist the help of Melvin (Mel) Weinberg, a life-long confidence man, to structure their sting. Mel had been coning people since the age of six in 1931 when he would steal gold stars from the teacher's desk to hide his failure from his mother. He soon graduated into front-end scams building himself a large fortune. With Mel's help, the FBI formulate a scam in which two agents pose as the American representatives of an imaginary Arab sheikh who wishes to invest billions and find permanent asylum in America. Greene utilizes 237 interviews with Weinberg, FBI tapes and official court transcripts to trace how this con attracted elected public officials as well as the white-collar criminals it was originally designed to capture.

I picked up *The Sting Man* as it is the true story behind the upcoming film *American Hustle*. Before I found this novel in Barnes and Noble, I thought that *American Hustle* was a fictional movie and had never heard of Abscam before. Having finished the novel, I am amazed by the amount of corruption the FBI found.

Numerous congressmen were named as possible targets and quite a few were actually convicted for trading money for pushing bills. The power of greed is examined deeply in this story. Weinberg's philosophy of man emphasizes that all men are powered by greed. The idea of obtaining large amounts of money causes men to push aside all rational and moral judgement. Weinberg also talks about how hope helps a con man. People would rather hope that the money will eventually come rather than entertain the notion that they are being conned. I found these two insights extremely interesting and knowing them makes me hope I'll be harder to con! All in all, *The Sting Man*, while at times dry due to it's journalist author, outlines one of the few events in which the FBI fought against the government directly and was engaging, making me truly interested in the subject, and chock full of facts, making me confident in my knowledge of this historical event.

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Godzilla says

Another pick up on a whim read, but it left me disappointed. The subject could have been riveting, but it simply wasn't, the narrative style killed it for me.

The main character, Mel Weinberg, the Sting Man, could have, and should have totally absorbed me. A chancer and wide man, but with an infectious warmth and skewed moral code that draws you in.

But the book descends into a rather drab and tedious tale of political corruption, without any flair or colour.

I'm sure when this first came out it caused a sensation, but in this modern, cynical world of corruption and deceit revealed daily, it falls a little flat.

There are some interesting moments, but they are lost in a morass of straightforward factual narrative.

I wanted to enjoy this more, and I know there's a good book about this subject somewhere, but this wasn't it for me.

Roland Allnach says

I should start this review by saying that I bought this book after seeing 'American Hustle'. While the movie is a distinctly fictional work that only sources an outline of events from reality, it stirred my memory of the ABSCAM scandal. I remember the 1970's (my childhood) as a time of one scandal after another that I was too young to understand, with one figure or another brought on trial after revealing themselves on grainy audiotapes, grainy videotapes, or both. So, with a bit of nostalgia and a sense of historical curiosity, I sought out the story of ABSCAM, and found an excellent source in 'The Sting Man'.

Author Robert W. Greene did an excellent job with the structure of the book by following the persona of Mel Weinberg, the real life con master at the center of the ABSCAM investigation. Through the lens of this complex man (criminal), Greene brings the reader through the jaded, cynical world of corrupt politics and shady wheeler-dealers. It is shocking to read the ambivalence of so many politicians to their own corruption, and perhaps more so considering that such despicable antics always continue to wait only one information leak away.

That said, the book does sometimes slow down while discussing the intricate details of the investigation. The saving grace of these tangents is that it helps the reader appreciate the twisted, serpentine world of deception in which corruption lives. If such investigative detail is a particular reader's cup of tea, add a star.

Frankie says

This book is the true story behind "American Hustle." I did not finish this book. At first, I really enjoyed the antics of Mel Weinberg. But half way through the book it was too hard to keep track of everyone and became confusing.

Brooks Kohler says

I found this book at Dollar Tree. At times I became lost and flipped back to find out who-was-who. If it weren't for that, I'd give it four stars.

L says

I saw "American Hustle" and wanted to find out more about the real story of Abscam because I was far too young when Abscam hit the news to remember anything about it. I picked up "The Sting Man" and thought I'd just skim it, but I started reading and got hooked. Mel Weinberg was such a character--so unapologetically a con man, which is somehow endearing. It was a really interesting book, and I'm now at least a little less likely to fall for a con...I hope!

Raquel says

An excellent and very thorough book that tells the story of Mel Weinberg, his life as a con artist and his involvement in the FBI sting called Abscam. The book came out in 1982, soon after the scandal broke (in early 1980). The details. Oh my goodness, there are a lot of details. Stink operations are often very complicated and involve a lot of people. So be prepared to be bombarded with many names. The events detailed in the book are often exciting, shocking and surprising. I enjoyed the story of Mel Weinberg more than that of Abscam. It took me a while to read the book because the amount of detail was a bit overwhelming. Fans of the film American Hustle who love American History and want to learn more about Abscam will appreciate this book.

Read my full review here: <http://quellebooks.blogspot.com/2014/...>

Danielle says

Really interesting to read the real account of the Abscam operation. It doesn't really give me much hope for the future of government corruption.... My biggest issues was keeping track of all of the people involved.

Walter Mack says

Better Than The Movie

The movie would have been better if it had hewed closer to the facts. Some of the actual meetings are even funnier in print than in cinema. My advice is to explore both and decide for yourself.

Lauren says

Fascinating detailing of the Abscam investigation and the FBI's "secret weapon" con man, Mel Weinberg. The true story from which the movie "American Hustle" was based. The politicians in the movie had far higher morals and ethical standards than the real life politician scoundrels. It's both mind-boggling and depressing to learn the extent of corruption and self-centered personal greed amongst our US Congressmen and Senators. A great deal of humor in the escapades that unfold in The Sting Man.

Greg says

Slow

Dave Courtney says

Mel Weinberg is a complicated man. As he attests in this behind the scenes look at Abscam, all con-men are.

Right up front, there will likely be some who will not enjoy the sort of journalism that Greene (a journalist) that the Sting Man: Inside Abscam represents. The novel is not necessarily similar in form to the narrative of the film (American Hustle), which brought this story to life on the big screen. I enjoyed both, and at points I would consider many of the 'scenes' that the book provides to be even more incredulous and humorous than the film, which leaves out a lot of details (the book begins with the infamous court case and then structures the rest around different scenes from the life of Weinberg from a child to the crowning jewel (Abscam) of his professional career as a con-man). But I will also suggest that the material itself is packed with so much information as to almost come across as dry at points. This is a small criticism, if that.

The story of Abscam (and Weinberg, the man who pulled the whole thing together) is a story of greed. While most of the focus is on the sheer expanse of the corruption in Congress itself (which is truly frightening to consider), the journey into the mind and life of Weinberg ends up as a commentary on the nature of humanity itself. Weinberg's true genius was in understanding human nature and applying it to his game of deception. His success as in learning the rules and applying them, a fact that he suggest only worked because it could be applied universally. The reason he lasted so long without getting caught, and the reason why he was so successful (successful enough for the government itself to desire (need) his skills for their own purposes (despite his criminal past), is because he understood the two things that drive people to fall for a con: The presence (and allure) of hope, and the presence of a need.

Weinberg's own professional career was set in motion when he realized he could con his own mother by stealing gold stars to demonstrate an outstanding school achievement. While this opened him up to a world of possibilities, it was exposure to the luxuries of higher class living (on the other side of the tracks) that motivated him to declare that never again would he or his family (and future family) be without money. As he states, if he could not actually become a part of the higher class, he would at least live like one. And he never looked back.

The greatest part about this story is the complicated man. He is a criminal who exposes what many would see as the greater criminals (Congress), even though the two do not stand far apart. He is a man blinded by greed and sexual desire, who gave little consideration to some of the broken relationships that he left behind.

And yet there is a moral chord or code that keeps him somewhat grounded along the way. It is this slight moral code that led to him being caught for the first time in his life. It is this code that keeps him struggling with the notion of family values and responsibilities and loyalty to his friends. It is the presence of that complicated person that sits underneath the deception (and he is clear, a con is based on mostly truth... it has to be in order to work) that helps reminds us of those parts of ourselves that we struggle with as well. Weinberg saw past the surface to see that we are at least a little bit like him and the corrupted Congress that he helped expose. And it is a humbling reminder to consider what his legacy teaches us, which is that the line between the good guys and the bad guys becomes a lot more blurry when we are looking in a mirror.
