



The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man

By David Maurer

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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*.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

"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

From Publishers Weekly

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.)

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About the Author

David W. Maurer was a professor of Linguistics at the University of Louisville until his death in 1981. His other books include *Whiz Mob* and *Kentucky Moonshine*.

Luc Sante is the author of *Low Life*, an acclaimed account of New York's underworld.; the memoir *Factory of Facts*; and *Evidence*.

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