

# the book case

## Prohibition Revisited

By Roy Childs

*The Underground Empire: Where Crime and Governments Embrace*  
By James Mills, New York: Doubleday, 1165 pages, \$22.95



**T**he *Underground Empire* had everything going for it. James Mills has written seven previous works of fiction and nonfiction, including two sensitive novels about the drug scene—*Panic in Needle Park* and *Report to the Commissioner*—that were made into successful films. He has handled both fiction and nonfiction with equal skill. Now he has literally submerged himself in the underground world of big-time drug dealing and drug-related crimes to produce a truly “big” book that nevertheless misses badly as a comprehensive look at the illegal world of drug trafficking. To understand why, we must look at what this gigantic book manages to accomplish—and what it ignores.

Mills went in search of the ultimate drug story and found his way into CENTAC (Central Tactical Units, suborganizations within the Drug Enforcement Administration), whose commander quickly accepted him as a sympathetic reporter, giving him the chance to follow CENTAC agents firsthand in pursuit of three world-class drug dealers. For near-

ly five years, Mills joined the chase and got caught up in its drama. He found himself going “through the door” into a world he never dreamed existed.

What emerges from this effort is a gigantic gangster epic, played out across three continents with a cast of thousands. We follow the obsessive hunt for three drug kingpins. The first is Donald Steinberg, a nice Jewish boy from the South Side of Chicago. Steinberg found his way to south Florida and became head of one of the largest marijuana empires in the world until CENTAC broke him, reducing him to the status of a government informant serving a 10-year sentence in prison. The second is Alberto Sicilia-Falcon, a Cuban homosexual who transplanted himself to Central America and the southwest United States, where he became the recognized lord of cocaine traffic. The third is a Chinese mystery man, Lu Hsu-Shui, allegedly the boss of an international heroin ring that seems to encompass whole nations.

Mills talked freely with nearly everyone

involved, from the heights of CENTAC to the innards of each of the drug operations. He shows us the world of drugs from the kingpins running international syndicates to lowly dealers, from self-proclaimed assassins to government officials, foreign and domestic, on the take.

And the wealth involved! Mills shows us glamour straight out of “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous”: men and women surrounded by the riches of kings and the drama of international intrigue. The sums are simply staggering: at one point Sicilia-Falcon is said to have \$250 million in two Swiss bank accounts alone and another \$150 million in petty cash earmarked for bribes and payoffs of government officials. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are thrown around by all the major traffickers, for whom even a few million dollars aren’t enough to worry about. Tens of millions are made and squandered in a matter of days. Lavish homes and automobiles are given away like tips in a restaurant. Entire fleets of ships and private homes up and down the coast of the United States are bought and sold, used and abandoned, as the drugs make their way through the country. By the very nature of the case, no one can know how much is involved here, but Mills claims that “the inhabitants of the earth spend more money on illegal drugs than they spend on food.”

Mills gets caught up in the drama and the sheer scope of the drug trade, in the cops-and-robbers aspects. The strong suit of his book is the endless attention to detail and nuance he brings to the story. He wields a novelist’s touch to give us subtle character sketches of people on all levels of the trade. We watch this vast illegal traffic unfold step by step.

At times this gets wildly out of control. Mills is so fascinated by the people involved that he lets them talk for page after page without pause or interruption, often without asking a single critical question while they tell the story of their lives in the “underground empire.” Indeed, Mills found one self-confessed assassin, Michael Decker, so fascinating that he let him talk, on and off through this gigantic book, for more than 100 pages of direct quotations, with barely

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a quibble!

But by the end of the book Mills is driven more by rage and disgust than by the awe with which he began. He thinks that CENTAC was proving to be the most effective weapon ever used against the international traffic before it was disbanded by the Reagan administration, which tried to give the FBI central control over the entire war on drugs.

CENTAC was disbanded in part because even under Reagan, other foreign-policy objectives proved ultimately more important than the single-minded assault on drugs. The Reagan administration wasn't willing to subordinate all other international goals to the end of crushing the drug trade. Mills ends with a barely restrained bitterness, openly showing contempt toward those he sees as drug "appeasers."

He lingers on a thought that recurs again and again throughout these 1,100 pages plus: Is it all one grand worldwide conspiracy? He notes that over a period of five years he became convinced of the participation in the drug trade of high-level government officials in at least 33 countries, from France and Italy to Bulgaria and Taiwan. Is this not the makings of a worldwide organization of the top narcotics traffickers, he postulates—an organization that could not exist "without the indulgence of the United States government"? The thought haunts him continually, and he never shakes free of it.

It's no wonder *The Underground Empire* has made a splash. The hefty tome was published last year at the height of the latest drug-menace hype and was taken very seriously. NBC's "Today" show covered it in detail for five consecutive mornings, ABC promptly snatched up rights for a future mini-series, and the book was heaved aboard bestseller lists, as it went on to sell more than 100,000 copies.

Then the criticisms hit. The first was by Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz, in *The New York Review of Books*. Dershowitz questioned Mills's gullibility in accepting almost without question virtually every assertion made by CENTAC and its friends, including the self-confessed assassin Michael Decker, whose account of his own adventures smacks of nothing if not megalomania and high fantasy. And the book had some internal inconsistencies.

Then came the *Los Angeles Times* with a front-page story last October by staff writer David Johnson, that ran to several thousand words. The *Times* talked with 43

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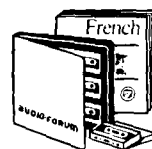
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people involved with events described in the book who claimed that at least part of what Mills wrote was untrue. High officials in the DEA and elsewhere questioned the importance of CENTAC and of its egomaniacal director, Dennis Dayle. Even Doubleday's publishing standards were called into question, but it nevertheless announced that it would "stand by the book."

The astonishing thing about the book's critics, however, is their superficiality. They call dates and references into question but completely miss the larger point: though *The Underground Empire* misses in some details, the overall picture it paints of the drug underworld is almost certainly accurate, even if the notion of a single worldwide conspiracy is absurd.

What is missing both from the book and from the criticisms of its detractors is reflection: Why is all this happening? We are given mountains of facts without any reasoning. Not once in Mills's entire tome is the word *Prohibition* mentioned. Not once is the parallel to Prohibition in the United States during the 1920s mentioned, including how Prohibition served as the opening wedge for organized crime in America.

No one stops to point out that the "empire" Mills has stumbled onto is simply a gigantic black market for products that are in great demand all over the world. This black market is a lightning rod for ferocious government opposition that is constantly compromised and defeated because of the lure of lucrative bribes and the fear of bloody threats.

Look at the situation: you have enormous demand for these drugs, and because of government prohibitionist policies, drug prices skyrocket so much that there are

billions of dollars (between \$100 and \$500 billion) to be made every year in this black market. This attracts risk-takers from every slice of society, each of whom wants a piece of the action. With such enormous amounts of money at stake, it is easy enough to predict the prevalence of both bribes and violence.

Consider a single case: trucks cross the U.S.-Mexican borders filled with tons of marijuana worth millions. Mills naively thinks it can be stopped. Tell that to border guards and customs agents who, according to his own research, are each paid \$5,000 per trip, sometimes amounting to \$15,000 in two or three days, simply for looking the other way. And those are the *lowest* bribes we read about in this enormous book.

Where is Mills's—and his critics'—sense of reality here? When a ship that contains a load of cocaine or heroin worth perhaps \$20 million is being searched, how can we possibly avoid hefty bribes? What angelic creatures are Mills and company going to find to supervise these busts? And if the bribes aren't accepted, should we be surprised at the regular use of assassins to achieve the same ends?

The paradox is that the more energy and resources governments squander in trying to stop the flow of drugs, the more lucrative drug dealing becomes. In short, you could jail every single individual involved in this black market, and a whole new market structure would spring up almost overnight—as if by an "invisible hand." It really is that simple. As in the movie *Wargames*, the only way to win is not to play the game.

Roy Childs is editorial director of *Laissez Faire Books* in New York City.

who has turned his longevity research institute into a government-protected monopoly. Baron is forced to come to terms with his own price when he is offered physical immortality in return for supporting the monopoly. It is appropriate that now—as *Bug Jack Baron* is set to become a movie and Spinrad has reached the middle age of his most famous fictional hero—his work has attained the maturity and depth that he lacked in the past.

With *Child of Fortune*, it is evident that Spinrad has found himself as a writer. It is a beautiful composition about a young woman, Wendi Shasta Leonardo, and her *wanderjahr*, the time of travel and self-discovery that most young adults of the future engage in before settling down to a career. Called "children of fortune," they are universally encouraged to vent the ardor of the transition from puberty to adulthood not on their own societies but in a pilgrim-like adventure, reminiscent of the experience of so many during the late '60s.

*Child of Fortune* is a tale of consciousness raising, of the trials and tribulations of the heroine as she journeys to a variety of planets during her *wanderjahr*. She visits the pharmaceutical center of the universe, where the use and misuse of drugs confronts her. She visits a totally free-market planet, where she runs out of money and has to fend for herself in a relatively unsympathetic culture. She gets involved with the king of the gypsies, the cult hero of the children of fortune. And the book is in part the story of her own struggle as a writer to recount her experiences.

Curiously, *Child of Fortune* parallels Tom Robbins's latest, *Jitterbug Perfume*, in many ways, especially in its harkening to the same elevation of consciousness as a reward in itself. Robbins, best known for *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, has slowly been drifting into science fiction. *Jitterbug Perfume*, if it were Robbins's first book, would be stocked in the science fiction section of bookstores. Like *Child of Fortune*, it is the story of a pilgrimage and consciousness raising. I would be very interested to know whether Spinrad read *Jitterbug Perfume* before writing *Child of Fortune*, or if both he and Robbins built on similar cultural and literary foundations.

**C**hild of Fortune struck me on three levels. First, it stands up as a book, which is to say that it does not fall into the category of much science fiction that is simply a vehicle for a concept or story. *Child of Fortune* is not just a story; it is a

## Pilgrimage to Other Worlds

By Patrick Cox

*Child of Fortune*, by Norman Spinrad  
New York: Bantam, 515 pages, \$16.95/\$4.50

**N**orman Spinrad has been around for a long time. Among science fiction writers, he has ranked among the moderately successful *enfants terribles* for several decades—one of the angry young writers worth reading, though he has never really attained the ranks of the greats. Like Harlan Ellison, he does have a loyal following, but his political tone and, until recently, his lack

of real artistic depth have necessarily limited his appeal.

But Spinrad is not the young writer who wrote the biting social protest *Bug Jack Baron* in the late '60s—his best-known book about the coming of middle age to then-contemporary liberal Berkeley radicals. The hero of the book, Jack Baron, is a talk-show host and thorn in the side of an industrialist