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# Drug Bust

*The modest success of one DEA sting suggests that with the agency's present tactics, it can't win the war on drugs*

by John Rothchild

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## **Swordfish: A True Story of Ambition, Savagery, and Betrayal**

David McClintick, *Pantheon Books*, \$25

**T**o the surprise of the publishers who paid a \$1 million advance for it, this long-awaited bombshell of a book, eight years in the making, has been a dud at the sales counter. *Indecent Exposure*, McClintick's earlier exposé of wheeler-dealers in the movie industry, caused a great fuss that put Hollywood on the momentary defensive. This time around, he exposes the bumblers in the Drug Enforcement Agency, but nobody seems to care.

Even in Miami, the national capital of smuggling where *Swordfish* is set, the book appeared on the best-seller list for only two or three weeks. The titillation of McClintick's naming names—crooked lawyers, money-laundering bankers, inept DEA officials engrossed in petty disputes, several of whom still live in the area—has not been enough to draw people into local bookstores. All of this is a shame. Ignore the unconvincing policy prescriptions at the end of this book and you've got a terrifically engrossing tale with a cast of characters Hollywood would be hard-pressed to imagine.

*Swordfish* is devoted to a single DEA sting: Operation Swordfish. (In South Florida, narcotics cases and sports franchises are both named after marine life.) What makes this a gripping story is that McClintick infiltrates the feds as well as the bad guys and gives details that you're amazed he could have discovered. Many of these come to him through tape recorders and hidden microphones that are the stock in trade of narcotics agents. When agents aren't wiretapping

their suspects, they are taping their own conversations with co-workers, informants, and their bosses at the DEA. Since nobody in this business seems to trust anybody else, people are bugging each other constantly. So when McClintick reconstructs a dialogue, it's verbatim.

Between the Colombian drug kingpins and their U.S. representatives, the informants and their aliases, the long list of government bureaucrats assigned to the case and their overlapping jurisdictions, this is a complicated adventure. Other equally complicated adventures involving international crimes, banks, and government bureaucrats—the BCCI scandal, for example—have produced books in which it's impossible to keep track of who is doing what to whom, so the reader loses interest. In *Swordfish*, this doesn't happen, because McClintick can tell a story, as opposed to simply hanging the quotes around the facts and calling the result a narrative.

*Swordfish* begins in the early eighties, when certain factions in U.S. drug enforcement have begun to realize that busting a boatload of cocaine, and then a bigger load of cocaine, and so on, is not the same thing as stopping cocaine traffic; in fact, the bigger busts are a sure sign that more and more drugs are getting through. The only effective way to stop the flow, these factions argue, is to attack the major suppliers through their banks and their laundering operations. By confiscating the profits from drugs, the theory goes, the government can put suppliers out of business.

After much bureaucratic ping-pong, the Miami DEA gets the OK from Washington to experiment

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with this new approach. It sets up a phony investment company, Dean International, which offers banking services to the cocaine trade. As it turns out, the government is no more adept at running a phony investment company than it is at running the Post Office. Nobody seems to be in charge. There are squabbles among the DEA agents, squabbles between the agents and their bosses, squabbles with Washington, and more squabbles with the FBI, which is worried that the DEA's Operation Swordfish will undermine its own similar Operation Greenback, or that the DEA will hog the limelight if both operations succeed.

Moreover, the DEA in Miami is top-heavy with gringos, and this is a Latin American town. Nobody in the agency can play the role of Latin banker, which is what Dean Investments needs before it can gain any credibility with the smuggling crowd. To ensnare anyone at all, the DEA relies on informants, mostly local dealers who are happy to throw the agency an occasional small-timer in return for being allowed to stay in business themselves.

## Snow business

Enter Robert Darias, a middle-aged Cuban exile who walks unannounced through the DEA's front door and becomes the hero of *Swordfish*. Like many of his fellow exiles, Darias fought at the Bay of Pigs. He was captured and locked in a Cuban jail, then released in President Kennedy's famous ransom deal and returned to Miami. Darias makes some profitable real estate investments, but his relaxed, tropical attitude toward certain gringo rituals—like tax-paying—gets him in trouble. Soon, he finds himself in a U.S. jail on tax evasion charges. Darias the ex-con, nearly destitute and still owing back taxes to the IRS, offers his services to the DEA as a sort of free-lance infiltrator.

Darias is the perfect banker for Dean Investments: glib, charming, and Latin. In the vacuum of competence at the local DEA, his role quickly expands until he's more or less running the entire show. This alternately thrills and horrifies his superiors, who on the one hand are delighted when Darias gets big-time traffickers to launder money through Dean, and on the other are horrified that their top-secret project is controlled by a walk-on with a felony record.

It isn't long before Darias connects with the second most appealing character in the book, Marlene Navarro, a woman with the allure of Mata Hari and the competence of a Harvard MBA. She is director of U.S. operations for a major narcotics syndicate and its flamboyant kingpin, Carlos Jader Alvarez, whom the DEA describes as the "godfather of the Colombian Mafia." This claim may be exaggerated; every time a Colombian is arrested, he turns out to be the "godfather of the Colombian Mafia," but that Jader is a big-time trafficker nobody would dispute.

Darias, posing as banker, struggles to keep his incompetent gringo handlers from screwing up his performance with Marlene Navarro. They want to come along on his visits, in part because they don't trust Darias, and in part because they've heard Navarro is a knockout. Darias manages to hold them off as he works to win Navarro's trust. She invites him into her condo, where Darias notices the porno movies in her video library and the photograph of Navarro sitting barebreasted on a horse. One of the subplots of *Swordfish* is whether Darias, a married man, will end up in Navarro's bed.

Eventually, Navarro gives Darias a few briefcases full of Carlos Jader's drug money—mostly \$20 and \$100 bills—to be laundered. This involves exchanging all the bills for a Dean International cashier's check, which is sent to Colombia and turned into pesos, which in turn are deposited in Jader's accounts. Meanwhile, Darias has attracted other customers who want their bills laundered, so the cash is piling up in desk drawers and filing cabinets at the Dean headquarters, millions of dollars that nobody is bothering to inventory.

Wiretaps are installed on Navarro's telephones to augment the tapes that Darias has been making all along, and the DEA prepares to move in with indictments and arrests of Navarro and several of her associates. The drama peaks when Navarro is worried she's been betrayed, and Darias is desperate to know whether she thinks he's the rat. There's an easy way for him to find out—the DEA is still tapping Navarro's phones. He asks his bosses what Navarro has been saying, but they won't tell him because the rules of wiretapping preclude a potential witness in a case from hearing the wiretap evidence in advance. Navarro is spooked into fleeing the U.S. for South America, and Darias and his fam-

ily receive death threats and go into hiding in north Miami. Operation Swordfish begins to look like a fool's errand that has accomplished nothing.

So the end of the book is a surprise: As a result of Operation Swordfish, Navarro is captured in Venezuela and extradited to the U.S. There, she is tried and convicted and serves six years in prison until 1992, when she is granted a new trial. Carlos Jader is captured by the Colombian police and also extradited to the U.S., where he is tried, convicted, and continues to serve his prison term. Several lesser characters are jailed as well.

Instead of letting a good reporting job speak for itself, McClintick steps out of his reporter's role in the epilogue to give his opinion that drugs such as cocaine should not be legalized, that operations such as Swordfish should be continued, and that the war against drugs can be won. But wittingly or not, McClintick has proven the opposite. Even with Jader and Navarro put away, you leave *Swordfish* convinced that the DEA is no match for private enterprise, and that busting a drug lord or two is hardly going to stop the flow of cocaine out of Colombia.

In fact, what has changed during the eight years that McClintick worked on this book is that the turf wars between rival drug factions have been resolved, so now business runs smoothly, professionally, and boringly, like AT&T. "No doubt about it. The Colombian cartel operates like a major corporation," says *Miami Herald* reporter Jeff Leen, the resident expert on the subject. "The money is laundered in off-shore banks, away from federal oversight, and operations have been decentralized away from Miami, so you don't hear as much about it as you used to. But it's still a big business, and very successful."

In fact, the manufacturers and suppliers of illegal drugs, crack in particular, have been far more successful than the pharmaceutical companies at making a product that's readily available, affordable, and shrewdly promoted. The cocaine trade is a triumph of modern capitalism that ought to be studied in business schools. Perhaps that's why McClintick's book hasn't struck a chord. His approach is out of date. A book about the Colombian cartel modeled after Tom Peters's *In Pursuit of Excellence* would be more to the point. □

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# Post Impressions

*A spicy, bare-knuckled account of life at  
The Washington Post savages the  
newspaper rightly in some places, unfairly in others*

by Mark Feldstein

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## **Volunteer Slavery: My Authentic Negro Experience**

Jill Nelson, *The Noble Press*, \$21.95

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**L**ike so many other aspiring college journalists in the seventies, I was inspired to become an investigative reporter by the Watergate heroics of *The Washington Post*. Ten years later, I moved to the capital and was surprised to discover that the same newspaper which bravely felled a crooked president seemed afraid even to criticize the cocaine-riddled corruption of the city's mayor, Marion S. Barry, Jr.

What was going on? The *Post*'s coverage of the Barry administration—indeed, of black Washington generally—seemed to vacillate between the obligatory and the enfeebled. Not that I minded, really. I was one of the paper's television rivals, and its neglect only made it that much easier to break local stories. Still, the question nagged: Why had one of the best papers in the country fallen down so badly in its own backyard?

In this autobiographical essay, Jill Nelson offers the most pointed critique yet on racism at *The Washington Post*. Nelson, an African-American reporter who worked at the paper for four years, delights the reader with a memoir that's raw, acerbic and hilarious; she happily picks at the scabs of race and sex and class that most writers prefer to leave untouched. For Nelson, payback is a bitch, and she pays back—and bitches back—with a vengeance, settling some nasty scores with the establishment organ that seduced her from freelance writing in New York

and then abandoned her in the back-stabbing nation's capital.

Nelson gets her licks in good. Ben Bradlee turns out to be "a short, gray, wrinkled gnome." Bradlee utters such inspiring lines as "I want the fashions [section] to be exciting, new, to portray women who dress with style, like my wife." Publisher Don Graham is "a rich kid waiting for his mother to let go of the reins." Other *Posties* are uncharitably described as "weasel-like" and "mottled, plump, sour-lipped."

But ultimately, Nelson's book is more than just an angry middle finger extended to her former colleagues. It is also a poignant tale of being black and female in a white and male corporate world—"voluntary slavery," she calls it. "I envy the arrogance," she writes of the *Post*, "their inherent belief in the efficacy of whatever they're doing, the smugness that comes from years of simply being caucasian and, for the really fortunate, having a penis."

A soul sister who revels in the racy, Nelson describes exploits like having sex with a mortician on his embalming table ("I would have burst out laughing, but he had such a pathetic look on his face that I know if I did he'd get mad and might not be able to get it up") and the joys of male bimbos ("Whenever he did or said something stupid, I'd think about what a pure ego feed it always was to look up into his handsome face when he fucked me"). Nelson's philosophy about the opposite sex is a simple one: "One thing I love about men and pussy is that it makes them so predictable."

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Mark Feldstein is a correspondent in Washington for CNN's Special Assignment investigative unit. From 1984 to 1990, he covered the Barry administration as a reporter for WUSA, a CBS affiliate.