
Scams and Flimflam

The Other True Crime

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This list covers nonfiction on specific famous hoaxes and scams as well as overviews of the topic. Many of the books gathered here began as long-form news articles that were developed into a book. A short section of media items rounds out the column along with great podcast suggestions for gathering background information on what is undoubtedly a scintillating topic for users of all types of libraries.—*Editor*

T rue crime is a perennially popular category in library collections, and librarians are quick to identify and order a wide range of titles to keep shelves stocked. True crime is an expansive genre, containing many sub-genres and categories. Topically, it may cover contemporary or historic topics and crimes both graphic and relatively mundane. True crime writing targets broad and scholarly audiences and many styles and kinds of crimes. A recently popular sub-genre of true crime is the scam investigation or exposé.

While many popular true crime titles focus on missing persons, serial killings, or murders, scam writing tends to focus on nonviolent escapades like financial fraud, impersonation or identity theft, or forms of legal chicanery. A scam implies intent to deceive or mislead but does not necessarily imply physical violence. Titles about scams, hoaxes, and similar misdeeds appeal to readers who may have exhausted a library's collection of true crime or may find true crime titles to be too dark or violent for their own tastes. Search terms that relate to materials on this topic include "imposters" and "imposture" (from relevant Library of Congress subject headings), fraud, hoaxes, and deception. As such, it may be difficult for patrons to find these titles organically, so readers' advisory or promotional efforts are crucial to expose these titles to true crime aficionados.

The genre has expanded in recent years, possibly due to the success of many popular titles analyzing the 2008 financial crisis or the documentary and subsequent MTV series *Catfish*. Postmortems of financial fraud constitute their own sub-genre of true crime, combining financial analysis with a focus on the personal impacts of fiscal policy. There are plenty of tales of historical hoaxes, but hoaxing in the age of the internet carries its own special intrigue, piquing curiosity in investigators and readers alike. In an era of fake news and disinformation, readers are engaged by stories that explore the gray areas of modern ethics and the ways technology has complicated interpersonal relationships. Many readers also enjoy the "whodunit" element, similar to mystery lovers, trying to stay one step ahead of the scammer.

THE ALERT COLLECTOR

This list represents titles that either provide a topical overview of the theme or have been published in the last decade and focus on relatively recent escapades, and mixes writings focused on both protagonists and antagonists. Fiction, in literature or media, is not included on this list, nor are audiovisual materials not available in library-friendly formats (e.g., streaming-only movies or other material behind subscription paywalls).

Abagnale, Frank. *Scam Me if You Can: Simple Strategies to Outsmart Today's Rip-off Artists*. New York: Portfolio, 2019 (ISBN: 9780525538967).

Abagnale's earlier works may already be on your shelves, but this most recent title from reformed scammer and inspiration for the film *Catch Me if You Can* skews more towards advice than confession. The author focuses on practical tips and suggestions for avoiding common scam such as phishing emails and compromised ATMs. Abagnale is engaging and straightforward, and includes persuasive anecdotes from his own experiences as well as interviews with experts in a variety of security fields. *Scam Me if You Can* is published in conjunction with the AARP, an imprint that might help this title reach those who are most likely to benefit.

Carreyrou, John. *Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Startup*. New York: Vintage Books, 2020 (ISBN: 9781524731656).

An in-depth analysis of the rise and fall of scam startup Theranos and its founder Elizabeth Holmes. Carreyrou compiled hundreds of interviews in his examination of why and how Holmes was able to attract so much venture capital, talent, and media attention to her startup. *Bad Blood* places Theranos in context at a nexus of technology, medical needs, and economic forces that made the technology seem important and always just plausible enough. The book is littered with characters, but Carreyrou's tight writing keeps the narrative from sprawling or rambling excessively, and the scientific jargon is rendered distinguishable from the spin.

Goffard, Christopher. *Dirty John and Other True Stories of Outlaws and Outsiders*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018 (ISBN: 9781982113254).

A popular example of the multi-format media-spanning work popular in the current era, *Dirty John* started out as an *L.A. Times* piece. From there, author Christopher Goffard translated the work into a popular podcast series, and the story was adapted for a scripted series on Bravo. In this tale of whirlwind romance gone awry, Goffard maintains a sense of suspense that translates to multiple platforms—even if the story is already known, the experience is engrossing. A compilation of Goffard's journalism is available under the above title, with stories ranging from ten to seventy-five pages and covering a broad range of reporting beyond true crime.

Hellman, Peter. *In Vino Duplicitas: The Rise and Fall of a Wine Forger Extraordinaire*. New York: The Experiment, 2017 (ISBN: 9781615193929).

Based on stories originally printed in *Wine Spectator*, Hellman's story of wine forgery routinely discusses price tags in the multi-million-dollar sphere. Rudy Kurniawan scammed big names in the wine world with "forged" bottles of wine, blended generic wines with the labels of pricey French collectible bottles. The elaborate prose, although characteristic of wine writing, won't appeal to all readers, nor will the name-dropping. There is a strong voyeuristic appeal in tales of betrayal from within a specialized community, especially a rarefied group like oenophiles, which does recommend the book. An unaffiliated documentary on the same topic is listed in the media section.

Levin, Josh. *The Queen: The Forgotten Life Behind an American Myth*. New York: Little, Brown: 2019 (ISBN: 9780316513302).

Although most titles on this list focus on recent scams, *The Queen* examines a contemporary stereotype through the lens of an origin story. Linda Taylor became a cautionary tale for politicians based on welfare scams in the 1970s, but allegedly bilking taxpayers may not have been the worst of her crimes. Taylor was an experienced grifter, manipulating lonely or desperate people in her path and expertly avoiding honest answers to questions. Levin's writing interrogates Taylor's life in a contemporary context while analyzing the way she served as a scapegoat for other social fears and anxieties (including racism) in a way that possibly overlooked her most egregious acts.

Seal, Mark. *The Man in the Rockefeller Suit: The Astonishing Rise and Spectacular Fall of a Serial Imposter*. New York: Viking, 2011 (ISBN: 9780670022748).

In another long-form journalism piece expanded into a book, this time originating in *Vanity Fair*, Seal writes in florid, descriptive prose in telling the story of a serial imposter and con man who was eventually caught out only for attempting the abduction of his own daughter. Although Rockefeller's case progressed between the *Vanity Fair* piece and the book, the latter is stretched somewhat thin from the original content. There is plenty of scam to be uncovered with a little more of a gritty edge than some comparable titles, but one of the main elements of the mystery was unresolved at the point of publication (for even a more recent edition), so curious readers are left in some suspense.

Tattersall, Ian, and Peter Névraumont. *Hoax: A History of Deception*. New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2018 (ISBN: 9780316503723).

This highly readable, image-rich overview of "charlatanism, fraud, and fakery" (p. ix) through the ages presents a collection of fifty hoaxes, both historic and with contemporary implications, focusing on facts over trying to find

a consistent narrative thread. Individual entries are short and stand alone. Historic topics, some of which may be more familiar than others, are often tied to contemporary themes, like the relationship between gladiatorial contests in the Colosseum and contemporary wrestling. Organized chronologically, the book can be dipped into and out of, read at one's own pace, and then the references followed up on.

Williams, Rachel DeLoache. *My Friend Anna: The True Story of a Fake Heiress*. New York: Gallery Books, 2019 (ISBN: 9781982114091).

My Friend Anna offers an inside look at the experience of being scammed from a victim of heiress impersonator Anna Delvey. What Williams brings to the table is personal insight into how Delvey managed to fool so many people for so long. The ease of reading, and a willingness to be frank about how she herself was repeatedly taken in, makes up for somewhat weaker chapters on the author's personal story. Broad media coverage of Delvey's ongoing fraud and subsequent trial means the story might be familiar to true crime aficionados already, and forthcoming Netflix film on the case means the topic is likely to stay in pop culture for a few more years at least.

Wright, Tom, and Bradley Hope. *Billion Dollar Whale: The Man Who Fooled Wall Street, Hollywood, and the World*. New York: Hachette Books, 2018 (ISBN: 9780316436502).

A whale, in the casino and gaming industry, is a high-stakes gambler with money to spend. At the outset the subject of the book, Jho Low, certainly seems to qualify—the authors provide a laundry list of celebrations and bigwigs that evolves into a laundry list of underhanded deals and back room bargaining. The tale Wright and Hope uncover is similar to other titles on this list, but Low never quite comes together as a focal point, making it difficult to figure out exactly how he was able to wield the kind of influence he did. It is a familiar story of mysterious riches and ostentatiousness, but the authors repeat themselves more than occasionally.

Young, Kevin. *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Forgeries, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News*. New York: Graywolf Press, 2017 (ISBN: 9781555977917).

On the more academic end of the spectrum is this well-reviewed meditation on the origins and meanings of hoaxes. Poet Young meditates on the haves and have-nots of hoaxing—who scams, who gets scammed, and why the distinction matters. He discusses events both current and historic, and the writing is analytic as well as lyrical. In Young's estimation the greatest American hoax is the existence of racial categories, and many (if not all) hoaxes and frauds can be related back to this false dichotomy. It's a hefty but worthwhile text, perhaps useful to explore as an e-book where the length will not put off interested readers.

MEDIA

Cunningham, Alexandra. *Dirty John*. Los Angeles: Atlas Entertainment, 2018. DVD.

This soapy eight-part miniseries on Bravo fictionalizes the titular story in Goffard's collection (above). The titular character is played by Eric Bana and the protagonist is played by Connie Britton, who received acting accolades for the role. The plot remains mostly true to the story, that of a woman who is taken in by a handsome grifter she meets on an online dating site. The show is probably the weakest link in the franchise, having received mixed reviews, but with big-name actors in the main roles and broad distribution on cable and streaming services, there is likely to be demand.

Marie, Jane and Dan Gallucci. *The Dream*. Podcast. <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/stitcher/the-dream>.

Stitcher and Little Everywhere's podcast series focused on multi-level marketing sales in the first season, and the second season focused on the "wellness" industry. The reporting team combine interviews with laypeople and experts, alternating between sympathy and skepticism. One highlight of the first season is a confrontational interview between the host and a direct marketing lobbyist, which is offset by more personal interviews earlier in the season with her family members who have participated in direct marketing sales parties. Although podcasts aren't necessarily collection eligible, host Jane Marie is under contract with Atria Books for a book based on the podcast, entitled *Selling the Dream*.

Sour Grapes. Directed by Reuben Atlas and Jerry Rothwell. London: Dogwoof, 2016. DVD.

This 2016 British documentary about the wine impresario who turned out to be fleecing his friends at auction is also the subject of the book *In vino duplicitas* (above). Drawing from contemporary footage and original interviews, directors Reuben Atlas and Jerry Rothwell delve into the world of wine connoisseurs. A scam that can be difficult to parse on paper becomes more understandable once viewers meet fraudster Rudy Kurniawan and his victims and understand the specific context of the scam. While the topic may not be a priori interesting to many viewers, the movie provides a critical perspective on the culture of wine with plenty of tongue-in-cheek interview excerpts.