



Chasing Phil: The Adventures of Two Undercover Agents with the World's Most Charming Con Man

David Howard

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A thrilling true crime caper bursting with colorful characters and awash in 70s glamour, based on the FBI's first white collar undercover sting.

1977, the Thunderbird Motel. Jim Wedick and Jack Brennan--two fresh-faced, maverick FBI agents--were about to embark on their agency's first wire-wearing undercover mission. Their target? Charismatic, globe-trotting con man Phil Kitzer, whom some called the world's greatest swindler. From the Thunderbird, the three men took off to Cleveland, to Miami, to Hawaii, to London--meeting other members of Kitzer's crime syndicate, known as The Fraternity, at each stop and witnessing the big cons he pulled there. As the young agents became further entangled in Kitzer's outrageous schemes over the next year, they also grew to respect him--even care for him. And Kitzer began to think of Wedick and Brennan like sons, schooling them in everything from writing bad checks to picking up women.

Kitzer was at the center of dozens of multimillion dollar scams, but the FBI was reluctant to turn its attention away from the anti-communist initiatives left over from J. Edgar Hoover's tenure. Wedick and Brennan disobeyed direct orders again and again on their yearlong adventure with Phil, but, ultimately, they triumphed and took down The Fraternity. The case resulted in dozens of arrests and forever changed the FBI, ushering in an era of undercover work and a focus on organized and white-collar crime that continues to this day.

The bonds that Kitzer formed with Wedick and Brennan, amazingly, survived his arrest--they convinced Kitzer to work for them after he'd been caught. The relationships between these three form the emotional center of this jet-setting sting. Anchored by big characters, *Chasing Phil* is high drama and great fun, delivered by an effortless storyteller.

Chasing Phil: The Adventures of Two Undercover Agents with the World's Most Charming Con Man Details

Date : Published October 10th 2017 by Crown Publishing Group (NY)

ISBN : 9781101907429

Author : David Howard

Format : Hardcover 371 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Crime, True Crime, Mystery, History, Audiobook

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From Reader Review Chasing Phil: The Adventures of Two Undercover Agents with the World's Most Charming Con Man for online ebook

Joel says

This book was great. 1970s undercover FBI operation when the FBI had no real procedures around undercover operations. Highly enjoyable story..

Cynthia says

Howard is an enticing writer and picks topics and people who are engaging. His previous nonfiction book Lost Rights that was about the original Bill of Rights one for each of the thirteen states that disappeared at some point. He outlines the significance of the document and the shenanigans of those who help disappear and attempt to resell the documents. It was an exciting paper chase. Chasing Phil is about a con man, Phil Kitzer, and his cohorts who like to make other people's money disappear into the thieves account by manipulating worthless paper. Though I found this paper chase interesting it was less so than the the Lost Rights paper because it was inherently less valuable and though it was at first entertaining to see the twists and turns of these hooligans the lighthearted tone began to wear. I became impatient and angered by what these crooks were doing to some innocent people and, of course, to victims with less noble need for money.

Also, it was unclear how Kitzer and his ilk were pulling this off. Maybe that was my lack of intelligence but I think it also speaks to Howard's failure to outline how the scams worked. This was a departure from his clearer writing about the Bill of Rights. It wasn't amusing to read about scam after scam and the so called great time the thieves were having cheating people and one another. I suppose this is inescapable with such a topic. Kitzer seemed so smug and convinced of his superiority. It got old.

Thank you to the publisher for providing an ARC.

Neil says

I received a free copy via Netgalley in exchange for a honest review.

What a great read.

A true crime story with brilliant tales of the FBI in the 1970's - 80's.

A real eye opener.

Tonstant Weader says

Chasing Phil is the story of the FBI's first major white-collar undercover investigation. Jack Brennan and J. J. Wedick were two young F.B.I. agents, neither of whom had completed the training in undercover work,

but when they followed a tip, met Phil Kitzer, a promoter (conman) who was part of a network of conmen, they felt like they had to go after him right away. So, not really knowing what they were doing, they just did it anyway.

Phil, the man they were investigating was a peripatetic grifter who took them around the globe, meeting with clients, setting up phone banking fronts, and conning people out of millions. His usual gift was to provide fake bank securities that people could use as surety for loans. The mark would pay for their services to help secure a loan, but the poor sap would not get the loan.

He routinely met up with other “promoters” which is what conmen prefer to call themselves, They called themselves The Fraternity. A fraternity of men who shared leads, collaborated on “deals”, and conned each other. No honor among thieves. One of the meetings in the course of this investigation began the most famous undercover operation in F.B.I. history, Abscam.

I struggled with this book. It is well-researched. The author takes care to write with good descriptions and an active prose. It is really not the book that I dislike, it is Phil Kitzer. He is presented as affable, smart, and charming. In the end, the F.B.I. agents cared deeply about his welfare. I get that, they spent nearly a year traversing the globe, chatting in hotel bars with the guy.

But there are two paragraphs in the book that speak to the consequences of Phil’s “deals”. Phil sold phony insurance to people, people abandoned when they needed insurance. He took people’s dreams and pocketed them. This fraternity bought companies with fake certificates, “busted them out”, stripping them of all their assets so folks lost jobs and futures. They conned farmers who lost the family farm, banks, insurance companies, and governments. When a bank collapses, taxpayers foot the bill, so these men gifted off everyone. I can’t find them charming.

So, everything about this book should work. It’s well-written, has an interesting angle, and involves a character perfect for a movie. Not for nothing, Robert Downey, Jr. is supposed to play Phil in the movie based on this book. For me, though, it lacked a moral center. The few paragraphs near the end mentioning the emotional cost of Phil Kitzer and the fraternity’s crimes seem perfunctory, without outrage.

Here’s the thing. White collar crime is perceived as nonviolent, almost charming. It’s a caper. They get light sentences, they get country club prisons, they get movies. This is not the first. But the idea that their crimes are nonviolent is false. We don’t know how many people killed themselves after Enron’s Ken Lay stole their pensions or died of untreated illnesses because they lost their health care. We don’t know how many kids got a poorer education because Phil ripped off their government with phony bonds. These “white-collar” criminals do violence to people’s future. They steal far more than muggers, millions more than muggers, but are treated so lightly because they do with paper and patter, but they wreak far more damage. I just can’t like a book that gives so little attention to the harm done.

I received a copy of Chasing Phil from the publisher through Blogging for Books.

[https://tonstantweaderreviews.wordpre...](https://tonstantweaderreviews.wordpress...)

Margaret Sankey says

In 1976-77, the FBI became aware of Phil Kitzer, who had parlayed his family's bail bonds business into crooked insurance companies, then larger scams involving busting out distressed hotels, buying into banks and issuing fake letters of credit, all intertwined with other international con-artists and previous targets, and dependent on a world where information moved by telex and a check's float might be a week or more. The FBI, unused to white collar undercover work, and not too thrilled about picking up the tab for impulsive trips to Hawaii, reluctantly allowed its agents to spend a year under the wing of Phil, eventually tracking a vast network of financial crime involving mobsters, inside men at legit banks, Caribbean havens and suckers.

Wanda Keith says

This is one of the best true stories I have read in quite some time. It is reminiscent of 'Catch Me If You Can' but more factual. 'Chasing Phil' is the story of an unlikely pair of FBI agents who get together to do undercover work on one of the smoothest con men in the world of finance. The FBI under J. Edgar Hoover would not allow their agents to do undercover work and would, also, not allow agents to go outside the state where they were assigned. However, this story starts in 1976 and Hoover has been dead since 1972. The target is Phil Kitzer, who looks a lot like Gabriel Macht of 'Suits'. Kitzer has charisma flowing out of him and, even though he dropped out of school in the 10th grade, he can figure out cons that are so wild that most courts wouldn't even try to arrest him because no one could figure out what he had done so, how could he be prosecuted? For whatever reason, this expert con took these two undercover FBI agents under his wing and decided to teach them how the cons were done. For over a year the agents went to numerous states and several out of the country trips and gathered information that put many other criminals in jail. The work the agents did on the Kitzer case led to many other undercover cases by the FBI, including Abscam. I won't spoil the ending by telling you what happened to Kitzer or with the agents. One thing for sure, I couldn't put the book down until I found out how Kitzer would react when he learned his best new pals were FBI agents. I am sure this book will become a movie and Robert Downey, Jr. has purchased the movie rights so look for him to do an excellent job of playing Kitzer. Be prepared to be hooked!

Andrew Diamond says

David Howard's *Chasing Phil* follows the story of two agents from the FBI's Gary, Indiana office who go undercover to infiltrate a ring of stunningly audacious and startlingly successful con men in the mid-1970s. When agents Jack Brennan and J.J. Wedick get a tip about a guy who ripped off a pizza store owner with bogus loan papers, they ask permission from their supervisor to go undercover. The idea was to record the con man, Phil Kitzer, making incriminating statements and possibly mentioning the names of other scammers the FBI could pursue. The scope of the operation was expected to cover one or two meetings.

At the time, the FBI had no history of running undercover operations. J. Edgar Hoover had prohibited them out of fear that his agents would become corrupted by associating too closely with the criminals they were supposed to be arresting. But this was 1976-1977, and with Hoover recently gone, the FBI was beginning to change its ways.

Unfortunately for Brennan and Wedick, neither man had been chosen to attend the Bureau's first class in undercover training. Not only did they have to go in cold for their initial meeting with Kitzer, they had to use their real names and IDs. They had to charge incidentals on their personal credit cards and hope to be reimbursed. The FBI didn't even have rules for what an undercover agent could and could not do, which

would lead them to have to make a number of increasingly difficult spur of the moment decisions.

Brennan and Wedick's informant introduced them to Kitzer by phone. After a number of calls, Kitzer asked them to meet him in the bar of a motel near Minneapolis. The agents, having no disguise, were so unprepared that Kitzer's first comment on meeting them was, "Christ, you guys look like a couple of feds."

The three men had a few drinks, chatted about ways to acquire and sell stolen government bonds, and generally hit it off. Kitzer, then drunk, told them to get in his car for a ride. Brennan and Wedick looked at each other, unsure what to do, since there was no protocol for what an undercover agent should do in this situation, and they had no backup to bail them out if things got dicey. The agents got into the car and hoped everything would be OK.

As they talked, they began to understand that Kitzer was no two-bit con man. Nor was he the type to go in and rob a bank of a few thousand dollars. Kitzer and his international ring of co-conspirators would literally steal entire banks by forging papers that guaranteed millions of dollars in funds and getting the bank's owners to turn over the entire operation to them. Then they'd empty out the depositor accounts, sell fake certificates of deposit and fake loan guarantees that would never be honored.

They didn't just do this to banks. They did it to hotels, land development projects, insurance companies, and all sorts of other businesses. Some of their scams were so large, they put the economies of small countries at risk.

When Brennan and Wedick returned to the office, they tried to explain to their supervisors the magnitude of what they had uncovered. It took them months to get the higher-ups in the Bureau to understand the scope and complexity of the operations these two agents had stumbled into.

For much of the book, the agents and the few above them who understand what's going on spend an enormous amount of time and sweat just pushing requests through the FBI bureaucracy to allow Brennan and Wedick to follow Kitzer to his next destination. The scammers fly from airport to airport on the spur of the moment, while the agents have to get on the phone and ask headquarters if it's OK to break diplomatic protocols by pursuing the operation into another country without officially warning the other country that they're coming. In some cases, the agents find themselves working in other countries, unacknowledged and unprotected. Other times, they're in countries with no working phones (yes, that was a thing in the Caribbean of the 1970s) and the FBI has no idea where they are or even if they're still alive.

In one incident, the only plane tickets Brennan and Wedick can get on an hour's notice have GTR (Government Transport Request) stamped across the top—a dead giveaway that they're feds traveling on government orders—and they have to try to hide their tickets from the crooks who they're chatting with as they board. And all this is happening while one agent has to travel the world with a tape recorder the size of a brick strapped to his back.

Phil Kitzer turns out to be a fascinating character. He's intelligent, charismatic, and persuasive. Because he has a deep knowledge of banking, finance, insurance, and law, he is often the lynchpin on which the scams of other con men depend.

Kitzer also has a thorough knowledge of the criminal justice system, which he has easily outwitted before. When the government brought its best lawyers to take him down after a massive insurance fraud in the 1960's, he not only got himself acquitted of all charges (though he was clearly guilty), but he humiliated the prosecutors in the process.

During their months of travel together, Brennan, Wedick, and Kitzer develop a strong friendship and a deep mutual respect. Though Kitzer may be on the wrong side of the law, he's an extraordinary person by any measure, and a hard guy not to like.

In one scene, when Kitzer still has no idea that Brennan and Wedick are undercover agents, he explains to them in chilling detail the inner workings of the FBI's decision-making process, which he's managed to infer by simple observation. He then goes on to analyze the tactics and shortcomings of federal prosecutors, and describes how he can easily outmaneuver them. Brennan and Wedick know he's not just talking. He's actually done all the things he describes.

The FBI finally comes fully onboard with the operation when some of Kitzer's associates connect with members of the Mafia in New York. Then the operation that the Gary, Indiana office has spent so many months just trying to keep afloat becomes the FBI's number one priority. As one agent remarked decades later, Brennan and Wedick's undercover work exposed so many criminals, the FBI could still have been working on the cases in the 1990's if they chose.

Things get dicey for the agents as the operation moves to New York. With the involvement of the Mafia, the agents face their first threat of real violence. At that point, they're still working under their real names. Anyone can look up their families in the phone book. They've even had to turn over their social security numbers to some particularly paranoid criminals who wanted to check their credit records.

The amazing thing about this book is that it keeps getting better as it goes on. I won't spoil what happens when the agents finally reveal themselves. The book takes an unexpected turn there, and it's a good one. It's rare to find a non-fiction book in which the story and the primary characters deepen unexpectedly at the end, but this one, and it's well worth the read.

Carolyn says

I knew this would be a must-read for me upon learning that this book involved two FBI agents working out of the Gary, IN field office in 1977. I had occasion to be in that office, regarding a political corruption investigation, during the period of time that this saga was beginning to take place. (Also working there as an agent at the same time was Robert Hanssen, the future spy for the Soviet Union.) My personal interest aside, this book turned out to be a real page-turner.

What makes this story exciting is the fact that these two agents were in on the earliest undercover operation ever undertaken by the FBI. J Edgar Hoover had been averse to his agents working undercover, so the agency didn't begin to delve into this type of work until after his death in 1972. (So those FBI plants we suspected during the protest movements of the 60s were paid informants, not undercover agents.) At the time these agents in Gary got a tip about a financial con man working on an international scale, undercover training had only recently been initiated by the FBI, so these guys were pretty much just winging it during this whole escapade, inventing it as they went along, chasing Phil.

So much of this operation would be impossible today. These FBI agents posed as con men, eager to get in on the action with Phil Kitzer and his many shady contacts all over the world, and did so under their real names. No internet, no google searches. But there were so many close calls, when their ruse seemed on the verge of being discovered, and they had to think quickly and squirm their way out of compromising situations. Sometimes the suspense is almost unbearable, even though we know they did live to tell this complex but

exciting tale.

Kaitlyn says

Some parts of Chasing Phil sound like they're directly from a movie. Charming con men drinking all day and all night. Mobsters shaking people down for a payment. Phony bank robberies. Elvis Presley's plane... Kitzer was a larger than life character with a stranger than fiction life that makes for an engrossing read at times. Unfortunately, this level of entertainment is not sustainable. Pages and pages on end of convoluted financial dealings and legal loopholes are about as interesting to read as your last bank statement. Needless to say, I have mixed feelings about the book.

Two things are undeniable. The first is how important this case would prove to be for the FBI and (presumably) other enforcement agencies in the country. Wedick and Brennan began the investigation just as the FBI began to offer training for undercover operations and years before they offered any kind of support for agents returning to their regular lives after an operation. Wedick and Brennan received none of this training. They went undercover using their real names and, while they made an effort to avoid talking about their personal lives in any detail, they remained as close to the truth as they could. They often traveled without informing anyone at the bureau beforehand and relied heavily on their ability to memorize complex details about the illegal activities of their group. With no protocol in place, they had to make it up as they went.

The second is how much work David Howard had to do to make this book as interesting as it was. Even with the quirky characters, the thousands of pages of court testimonies he used as the main source couldn't have been very exciting. Out of what would have otherwise been impossibly dull material, Howard gives us colorful three-dimensional characters and compelling stories.

I received a free copy of this book from the publisher in exchange for my honest review.

Elaine Aldred says

The first observation the wily con artist Phil Kitzer made when he first laid eyes on FBI agents J.J. Wedick and Jack Brennan was that they looked like a couple of feds. That was their first and unbelievable saving grace. The second was the pair's ability to adapt to a rolling series of incidents in which the faint-hearted would have cracked, because of their combined lack of experience as undercover agents and the bureaucratic red tape they had to wade through. They were often left with little or no back up to call on if it all went wrong. So began an extended operation which had only got off the ground through Brennan's sheer bloody mindedness and belief that what Kitzer was doing was as bad as robbing a bank with firearms. Today, white-collar crime has become commonplace and something to be stamped out as quickly as possible. In the 1970s, financial crime was not taken very seriously and the FBI, having taken a political pasting after Watergate, was not keen to do anything unduly inventive with regards to investigation (let alone be involved in a convoluted, hands on, intelligence operation lasting about a year). With great foresight, Agent Brennan petitioned to be allowed to pursue Kitzer whom Brennan suspected was committing financial cons at a very high level, involving eye watering amounts of financial transactions in what could only be considered a monetary shell game.

Bear in mind that the agents worked in an era before the convenience of mobile phones, portable computers and all the other types of technological advances we now enjoy in surveillance and information gathering. Much of the investigation was down to face-to-face exposure, leg work and research done through reams of paperwork; as well as seat-of-the pants chutzpah.

Chasing Phil is one of the most tense and nerve-wracking non-fiction accounts I have ever read, because of the number of times the two agents came nail-bitingly close to being exposed; as well as the final outcome which set a new level for both undercover work and large scale crime investigation. There are also many insights into the moral difficulties of undercover agents when they adopt a persona and have to run with it. Chasing Phil is a testament to the two agent who had to hold their nerve, particularly as their investigation took them into some murky waters, and the next number in the growing body count connected to people the agents and Kitzer were doing business with might have been theirs.

Even though the events of the book took place in the 1970s, people essentially remain the same. For anyone wanting to write a crime thriller, this is an excellent book to really get under the skin and into the mind of a highly charismatic individual manipulating the world of finance to their own avaricious ends.

Chasing Phil was courtesy of Pan Macmillan via NetGalley.

Genny says

Interesting but not thrilling...and at times repetitious. It might play better as a movie with the many suspenseful moments where they almost get caught, but on paper it lost a little. It was also discouraging to see how easily the cons worked within the banking system and then thwarted the justice system. No wonder we have Enrons and Bernie Madoffs.

Lisa says

(I won this title in a Goodreads Giveaway.)

In the world of confidence schemes, the scam victims often become easy marks because they suspend their common sense. They are so eager for results that they overlook red flags, inconsistencies and even their own gut instincts. The subject of this remarkable story, con man Phillip Kitzer, experienced his own willing suspension of disbelief as he accepted the cover stories (and ultimately friendship) of two undercover FBI agents who infiltrated his world for months. At a time when the FBI had little experience with undercover operations, the agents found themselves accompanying the capricious Kitzer all over the world as he flitted from one scheme to another. The agents' naivete and occasional missteps sometimes put them perilously close to discovery (and me on the edge of my seat). Ultimately, their work on the ever-expanding case led to important breakthroughs within the FBI, as the agency realized the intricacies and scope of white-collar crime, and better understood the value of undercover investigation.

This was an absorbing, enjoyable read. Author David Howard's writing style is very approachable, combining investigative journalism with a deft narrative hand that brought his characters to life. The structure is mostly chronological, with some flashbacks to fill in some biographical and historical background. The story is solidly researched, and provides sufficient detail without getting overly bogged down, focusing mainly on action and dialogue. For author Howard to portray the victims and the perpetrators with empathy and nuance is a real credit to his skill.

Fausto Betances says

Great portrayal of a professional con(fidence) man. This kind of books are generally accused of glamorizing crime but I couldn't help liking the intrigue around and skills of the main Mr. Phil. Very entertaining.

Valerity (Val) says

This is a good story about a couple of young hotshot agents starting out in the early days of the FBI (1970's) who go undercover to bring down a con man named Phil Kitzer and end up taking down a large ring of loosely associated grifters, 130 cases in all. They would fly to meet Phil in one state and never know where he would talk them into going next, making it hard for them to let their FBI handlers know where they would end up going. Many times they'd end up flying to another state on one of Phil's whims to put together a deal or meet with other grifters. Once they even ended up in another country without being able to notify the handlers what was going on, causing them all kinds of headaches with the bosses at the FBI. This would be a good read for most true crime readers. I was given an ARC by NetGalley and the publisher for review.

Carlton Phelps says

What a great read. The life of an undercover FBI agent was unheard during the Hoover days but when Jim Wedick and Jack Brennan set out to take down the world's most charming con man, Phil Kitzer, little did they or the FBI know that they were about to become world travelers as part of the Fraternity was busted. No honor or loyalty between crocks. This was a multi-million dollar enterprise that was finally brought to justice.

You need to pay attention to detail as you read to get a feel of just complicated it was when these people became part of your life. It always ment the investor would lose tens of thousands of dollars and some scam, the crocks never call it scams, were done you faced ruin. Unless it was a bank, they stayed quite and wouldn't help the FBI. Afraid of what their customers would do if they knew how easily the banks were scammed.

This was the start of the FBI changing how they did business and never looked back.

Don't miss reading this book.
