

Financial hitman

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Sue Grossey reviews Robert Mazur's account of life, and near-death, as a professional money launderer.

Everyone in the world of AML has heard of **Robert Mazur**, who, as an undercover US Customs agent, helped to bring down Pablo Escobar's organisation and was portrayed in the 2016 film "The Infiltrator" by Bryan Cranston. But it seems that he has more to tell, and I fear for his safety when I see that the title of his next book is "The Betrayal".



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This time, he's working for the Drug Enforcement

Administration, which suits him: "I was now on the front lines of a war that was assaulting America in more ways than one, doing what I wanted to do for the rest of my career." And his target this time is no single drug tsar or cartel, but the professional money launderers who work for them – "hundreds, probably thousands, of private bankers in the world's biggest international banks, washing trillions for Mafias, so they can control countries and the lives of ninety-five percent of the people on this planet". To this end, Mazur becomes Robert Baldasare, in charge of an investment business and a mortgage brokerage business

– the perfect front for a professional money launderer.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this book is reading of the respect that Mazur has for his quarry. (He observes sharply that this position is not shared by all his colleagues: "In my view, too many agents failed to recognize that we were outsmarted and out-resourced by the cartels.") A great deal of psychology is at play: "It was most important that he learn those things [about me] through his own questions and not my offerings. His discoveries had twice the power of my telling him the same." And the key to success – as is so often the case in life – is empathy and mimicry: "We had to think like criminals." At the start of the book the criminals are thugs straight from Central Casting, but as Mazur/Baldasare gains the trust of his clients and starts to mix with more senior figures, he has to assume the mannerisms, vocabulary and methods of the sophisticated professional money launderers he is targeting. He apes their delusion that they occupy a moral high ground when he explains to a client what he (as Baldasare) will and will not do: "The blocks [of cocaine] could be done, but I don't want to be involved myself directly... It's best never to mix blocks and green [money]."

Mazur's descriptions are terrific – no doubt a product of his training to observe and remember everything. Making a movie of a Mazur book must be a delight, when we learn that “as he strutted into the Club Colombia de Tampa, a mecca for many of the movers and shakers in Tampa's Hispanic community, Francisco Saurez was on the hunt”, while another character is “a serpentine professional”. And Mazur is the master of the chapter-end cliff-hanger: “I had no idea I was walking into an alliance that would end with a gruesome murder.” However, this fast-paced, thriller-like style, which is interspersed with almost autobiographical sections, makes it difficult for the reader to know what is objectively true and what is remembered interpretation – particularly for those scenes where Mazur could not possibly have been present. But as the book progresses, I start to wonder whether this disorientation is deliberate. For it becomes clear that nothing is clear – that the central theme of the book (indeed, its very title) is the uncertainty about who can be trusted and who is on which side. As Mazur himself confesses at one point, “it was getting hard to figure out who was betraying whom in this game”. And he himself, as an undercover operative, is part of that: “I was beginning to have trouble living with myself. Lying to both the bad and the good guys was already tormenting me.”

It is no spoiler to reveal that Mazur survives his stint as Baldasare – otherwise we wouldn't have this exciting book. In the epilogue, he sets out the three things that he believes must happen if we have any chance of winning the war on drugs and crime, and one of them is the vigorous prosecution of money launderers: “The current strategy employed by most governments – fining institutions for laundering carried out by mythical systems failures – must not continue. Long prison sentences for individual launderers must become a very high priority.” As for Mazur, when he agreed to be Baldasare he promised his wife and himself that it would be his last undercover operation, but then he attends a briefing on how drug money is being funnelled to terrorist groups to fund their activities...

The Betrayal will be published in North America in April and in the UK in May.

Susan Grossey is an author, specialising in real-life financial crime (<http://www.thinkingaboutcrime.com/publications.htm>) and the fictional kind (<https://susangrossey.wordpress.com/purchase/>).

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