

[ HARDCOVER: US ]

## Counterfeiter spills secrets in true-crime story

Can Jason Kersten's nonfiction account of master counterfeiter Art Williams be taken at face value?

BY JAMES PRESSLEY  
BLOOMBERG

You're a 16-year-old slum kid on Chicago's South Side and your girl has a newborn baby to shelter and feed. One day, your mom's boyfriend offers to help.

So you hop into his Cadillac and head to a 19th-century brick building in the packinghouse district. There he shows you his underground print shop, complete with an A.B. Dick offset press and canisters of ink. Forest-green ink.

That's how Art Williams began his apprenticeship as a counterfeiter, writes Jason Kersten in his wild ride into a crook's mind, *The Art of Making Money*.

Williams, says this nonfiction account of true crime, was one of the top counterfeiters of the last quarter of a century, a rogue who later melded Old World printing techniques with digital technology to create a replica of what was then the most secure US banknote ever made, the 1996 New Note.

"The bill felt like a dare to him," says Kersten, who lays out, step by step, how Williams copied the note's features — its acid-free paper, security strip, watermark and Optically Variable Ink, which causes a color to shift at different angles.

If that sounds glamorous, forget it. From start to finish, this is a seedy story from the criminal underbelly of America. Counterfeiters may sound like elite artisans, but the best ones, it turns out, are just cogs in the wheels of organized crime — suppliers of a product used by gambling rackets, drug runners and smugglers, whose patrons aren't likely to run to the cops if they wind up with funny money.

Kersten, who first wrote about Williams in *Rolling Stone*, casts him as a misunderstood outlaw, a Jesse James with an Apple Macintosh and a Ryobi press. There is a whiff of Bonnie and Clyde about this tale, which seems destined to become a Hollywood movie.

At the height of his spree, Williams and his girlfriend fled Chicago in a silver convertible and crisscrossed the nation, dropping fake US\$100 bills at malls. From each purchase of US\$20 or less, they pocketed at least US\$80 in genuine currency and donated the unwanted goods to charity. The book strains to put this shameless crook in a kind light.

By his own estimate, Williams counterfeited some US\$10 million of US bills over 10 years, selling shrink-wrapped batches to crime bosses for up to US\$0.30 on the dollar. He never felt guilty about counterfeiting and spending fakes "felt rebelliously empowering, each dropped bill a nip at the dispassionate system" that he partly blamed for his destitute childhood, Kersten writes.

### Publication Notes



THE ART OF MAKING MONEY: THE STORY OF A MASTER COUNTERFEITER

BY JASON KERSTEN

292 PAGES

GOTHAM

Williams had reasons for lashing out. Abandoned by their father — an ex-con who took up with another woman — Williams and his siblings landed in one of Chicago's few "white projects." A bookish suburban boy, he joined a gang and graduated to car theft. His life was warped by his need for his missing father and money. That story presents Kersten with several challenges. One is to make us empathize with a protagonist who delivers beatings, robs houses and rationalizes his wrongdoing.

"I know every criminal says this, but it's almost like the system wants you to commit another crime," Williams says.

A deeper problem is that this isn't what you expect from a story about a "master counterfeiter." The best passages in the book show how Williams learned the trade and succeeded in copying the New Note with elements as different as phone directory paper, ChromaFlair paint pigment and a rubber stamp made at Kinko's copy center. I was left hungry for more of this and less of Williams's sad quest to find his creepy father.

There's also the question of sources. Kersten reconstructed Williams's story from interviews and legal documents. The Secret Service, which is charged with chasing down counterfeiters, clammed up after granting him one interview, he says.

Though Kersten has stitched together a rattling narrative, the story in places hinges on Williams's version of events. Can he be trusted? This is, after all, a convict. As the book closes, he has pleaded guilty to manufacturing more than US\$89,000 and been sentenced to 87 months. In telling his story, was this master counterfeiter tempted to adjust a color here, fake a watermark there?



Eric P. Lee, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Greater Los Angeles.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

## What would Martin Luther King do?

California civil rights leader Eric P. Lee is under fire from members of his own organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, for supporting same-sex marriage

BY JENNIFER STEINHAUER  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, LOS ANGELES

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference — the 50-year-old civil rights organization founded by Martin Luther King Jr. and others — is seeking to remove the president of its Los Angeles chapter in response to his support of same-sex marriage in California.

The effort by the Atlanta-based organization is meeting stiff resistance in Los Angeles from both the board of the local chapter, whose chairman is secretary of the state Democratic Party, and the City Council president.

During the battle last fall over Proposition 8, an amendment to the state constitution that banned same-sex marriage, the chapter's president, Eric P. Lee, was more than a tangential figure for the opposition. He was front and center at an opposition group's large rally at City Hall and marched in the blazing sun for 24km in Fresno. Many other local African-American pastors prepared mailings featuring church leaders in support of the proposition and linking their views to US President Barack Obama, then the Democratic nominee for president.

Lee "was very helpful to us," said Rick Jacobs, head of the Courage Campaign, a left-leaning political action group in Los Angeles that fought to the initiative.

While the Mormon church raised a great deal of the money in support of the proposition, the role of African-American churches, and their voting parishioners, was

not insignificant. Exit polls in California found that 70 percent of black voters backed the ban, which passed with 52 percent of the vote.

Lee's opposition to Proposition 8 "created tension in my life I had never experienced with black clergy," he said. "But it was clear to me that any time you deny one group of people the same right that other groups have that is a clear violation of civil rights and I have to speak up on that."

In April, Lee attended a board meeting of the civil rights organization in Kansas City, Missouri, and found himself once again in the minority position among his colleagues on the issue of same-sex marriage, but was told, he said, by the interim president of the civil rights organization, Byron Clay, that the group publicly had a neutral position on the issue.

So a month later, Lee said, he was surprised to receive a call from the National Board of Directors summoning him immediately to Atlanta to explain why he had taken a position on the same-sex marriage issue without the authority of the national board.

Explaining that he was unable to come to Atlanta on such short notice, Lee then received two letters from the organization's lawyer, Dexter M. Wimbish, threatening him with suspension or removal as president of the Los Angeles chapter if he did not come soon to explain himself.

Wimbish did not return calls to his office, nor did Raleigh Trammell, chairman of the organization's national board. A woman who identified herself as Renee Richardson left a voice

mail message for a reporter, saying the organization did not "discuss internal matters." She did not return follow-up calls.

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— Eric P. Lee, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Los Angeles chapter

The issue attracted the attention of the president of the Los Angeles City Council, Eric Garcetti, who wrote to the board in support of Lee.

Because chapters of the leadership conference operate autonomously and presidents are picked by local boards, it is not clear that the national organization has the authority to remove Lee from his post, which he has held for two years.

"It's been our position that the local board hired him," said Reginald Byron Jones-Sawyer, chairman of the local board and secretary of the state's Democratic Party. "And, in fact, we are also the ones that approved his stance on the position of marriage equality. We have asked the national board if we have violated any procedures, and we have not gotten an answer."

Lee, the former pastor of In His Steps, an African-American Wesleyan Church in Los Angeles that he described as "very conservative," said he saw failures both in the leadership of the conference ("Dr King would be turning over in his grave right now," he said) and the largely white anti-Proposition 8 movement that did not more actively seek the support of church-going African-Americans.

"The black church played a significant role in Proposition 8 passing," he said. "The failure of the campaign was to presume that African-Americans would see this as a civil rights issue."

[ SOFTCOVER: US ]

## Cao Naiqian's dark, raunchy vision of the Cultural Revolution

Bestiality, the drudgery of rural life and an awful lot of swearing reverberate through the pages of 'There's Nothing I Can Do When I Think of You Late at Night'

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

If you're at all susceptible to them, books can radically change your mood. Last week I read Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and was in seventh heaven when engaging with its panache and literary wizardry. My days raced by. After that I turned to Cao Naiqian's (曹乃謙) *There's Nothing I Can Do When I Think of You Late at Night*, newly translated from Chinese, and the contrast was dramatic. I slept badly, dragged my feet, and felt the world must surely be able to offer a more invigorating spectacle than the depressing world I was confronting.

Yet many of the great and the good from the world of Chinese literature in translation have come together to celebrate this book. Goran Malmqvist, the member of the Nobel Prize committee said to be responsible for giving the 2000 prize to Gao Xingjian (高行健), is Cao's translator into Swedish and encouraged the present translator

John Balcom to undertake the task, and Howard Goldblatt, finest of translators of modern Chinese fiction, is thanked in the book's acknowledgements. Balcom makes comparisons with Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell. All seemed set for a great read. So what happened?

*There's Nothing I Can Do* was first published in Chinese in Taiwan in 2005, and an edition for China followed two years later. (This is yet another tribute to Taipei's eminence in the world of Chinese-language publishing, as neither the author nor the content has anything to do with Taiwan — though I did notice one comic reference to the old cadre who is prominent in the tale, saying the villagers should "liberate Taiwan and rescue [its] commune members from [their] abyss of suffering".)

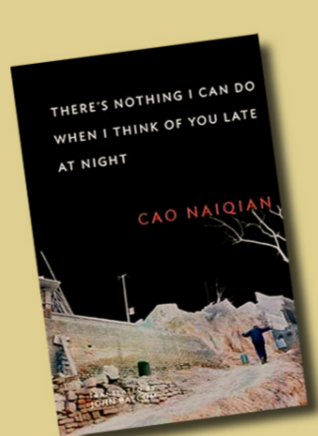
The book consists of 30 stories, many published in magazines in China during the 1980s and 1990s. But the same characters reappear and the work ends up becoming

a sort of novel. It's set during the Cultural Revolution and the location is Shanxi Province, a short distance from the border of Inner Mongolia. The author, who comes from that area, wrote the whole book in Shanxi dialect, something the translator, who has enough problems without needing more, doesn't attempt to replicate.

The feeling you have is that this is the remotest and poorest village imaginable. It has almost no connection with life elsewhere, and the characters, all of whom live in caves, have names like Lucky Ox, Zits Wu, Little Dog, Big Dog, or just Dog. Moreover they all appear to have only two interests in life — food and sex.

From the first story onwards an atmosphere of gross farce is established. As you progress through the book you encounter sex with animals, two men sharing a wife, and sex with one's mother. The final tale, *Corncob*, seems to be an attempt to combine all these things into a single narrative, though it

### Publication Notes



THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO WHEN I THINK OF YOU LATE AT NIGHT

BY CAO NAIQIAN

232 PAGES

COLUMBIA

ends in tragedy rather than remaining on the absurdist level most of the other stories inhabit.

So why did this book, which on the face of it must sound high-spirited and rambunctious if nothing else, depress me so much? I think the answer lies in its repetitiveness.

Take the language first. It's tempting to say that swear words proliferate, but the actuality is that it's just one, the dreaded f-word, that reappears over and over again, perhaps thousands of times in all. It appears as an adjective and as part of some of the characters' names as well as a simple expletive. This becomes extremely wearying, like the endless reappearance of the French word "merde" in Alfred Jarry's classic satirical farce *King Ubu*.

The effect of this repetition is numbing on the reader's sensibility, and in the end it just becomes boring. Is that really what the book is like in the Shanxi-dialect Chinese, you wonder? It's clear that what the translator is trying to do is

convey some aspect of the original, and that what Cao is himself presumably trying to convey is the terrible narrowness of his characters' horizons, just humping animals and eating awful food and talking in this endlessly dumbed-down, mind-numbing manner.

The subject matter, too, mostly concerns the repetitive preoccupations of rural life — the castration of animals, the biting of gadflies and the burning of wormwood to ward off mosquitoes. The only pleasant place near the village is rarely visited because it's believed to harbor ghosts.

Against this background, dreams of copulation are never far away. The Communist Party is portrayed as being just one more cross the poor peasants have to bear. Supposed malefactors, or simple fools, are frequently tied up and beaten by the local Committee for the Dictatorship of the Masses. Apparently this passed China's censorship because the book is set in the past and not the present.

Balcom is a distinguished translator, incidentally. He's translated several Taiwanese books including *Running Mother and Other Stories* (奔跑的母親) by Guo Songfen (郭松棻) [reviewed in the *Taipei Times* on March 29, 2009] and a version of the *Wintry Night* (寒夜續曲) trilogy by Li Qiao (李喬).

This collection of bizarre tales is probably intended as a send-up, simultaneously compassionate and farcical, of official versions of the virtuous life of the countryside, to experience which Mao Zedong (毛澤東) sent down a whole generation of young city-dwellers. And it's perhaps wrong to give the impression that the entire book is depressing — maybe it was unfortunate that I read it so soon after Ackroyd's dazzling tour de force. Nonetheless, this is certainly not a volume to be recommended unreservedly to the fainthearted. It's slightly unnerving, too, to learn that the author is, of all things, a police detective in the very province he writes about.