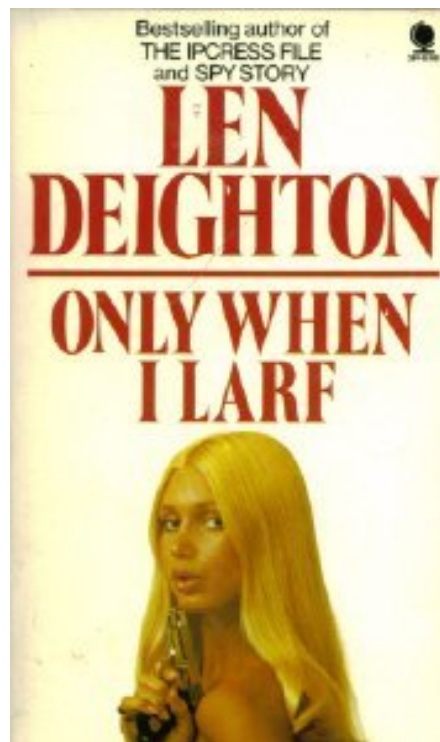




Only When I Larf

Len Deighton

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The three confidence tricksters - two blokes and a bird - had a style that earned them millions. Silas was the leader, slick and self-assured -- but dissatisfied. Bob was the junior partner, longing for the open road where pickings were rich and the living was easy. And Liz, Silas' mistress, was! in between. Theirs was a built-in love triangle with its own rewards! and its own dangers. In New York these con-artists do a 'business deal' worth millions. But back in London Silas' plan to bilk an emergent African nation misfires. Then Bob takes over the running of the operation -- and Liz. A Beirut bank is their target and each member of the trio gets what he or she deserves -- each with a twist of lemon.

Only When I Larf Details

Date : Published 1968 by Sphere Books (first published 1967)

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Author : Len Deighton

Format : Mass Market Paperback 251 pages

Genre : Fiction, Thriller, Mystery, Crime, Humor

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Mike Jensen says

I'm not sure why I read only 20 pages of this story about a confidence team bilking people. Perhaps I fail to identify with people who deserve disapproval. Perhaps the reasonably well drawn characters do not interest me and the marks are shallow, so no sympathy goes their way. At the very least it has something to do with Deighton not revealing enough of the scam up to this point, so plot and character development unfolded without my being clear on why or what it might lead to. I might feel invested if I knew what was at stake with each line of dialog and what those lines were building towards. At any rate, this book is just not for me.

Spybrary Podcast Podcast says

My copy of Only When I Larf includes a wonderful introduction by the author Len Deighton. He sets the scene for this, his first non espionage novel, all about the world of confidence tricksters.

As a student, Len shares with us that he lived in seedy Soho and observed a lot of these con men first hand, watching how they worked and the scams they operated.

Inspired by these dodgy deals, Deighton tells us the story of 3 scam artists - Bob, Liz and Silas.

The book starts with a big con in NYC, the story quickly moves to London where the trio then try to rip off an African nation, selling scrap metal masquerading as arms, then the final big one. I cant tell you too much about these capers as it will spoil the book for you.

Each chapter is written from either Bob, Liz or Silas's viewpoint. This makes for fast reading and a quick understanding of the characters thoughts and motives. The book written as if they are all on a jolly jape has very serious consequences. Len brings us down to earth with a bang. Bob, Liz and Silas are not exactly Robin Hood and his merry men even if they think they are.

Enjoyed this one but not a Deighton classic, it gets a 3 from me.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in February 2004.

At this point in his career, Deighton seems to have been searching for a new direction. The three novels and the short story collection - An Expensive Place to Die, Only When I Larf, Bomber and Declarations Of War - which include Deighton's effective abandonment of his Harry Palmer character are the most diverse of his career. Only When I Larf is the only one of his novels, for example, which could be classified as a comic thriller. (His other works may have comic elements, but here the comedy takes centre stage.) So Only When I Larf and the short stories of Declarations of War mark dead ends, as Deighton never wrote anything like either of them again.

Only When I Larf (joke answer to the question "When does it hurt?") is the story of three confidence tricksters: Silas, an upper class older man whose distinguished war record hid the beginnings of his criminal

career; Bob, young and working class, and tired of always playing subordinate roles; and Liz, Silas' girlfriend, whose beauty is often an important part of building up a relationship with the mark. The novel is told from the point of view of each of these characters in turn, a device which enables Deighton to clearly show the reader the development of tensions between the trio, which gradually build throughout the story, especially after a big con goes badly wrong.

In most of Deighton's novels, the prevailing atmosphere is one of cynicism, leavened with satirical black humour. Here, the proportions are reversed, though the humour is not as amusing as the nuggets in, say, *The Ipcress File*. What drives the plot is the combination of different kinds of differences between Silas and Bob (temperament, generational and class); Liz is a peripheral observer of the friction between the two of them.

I can see why the comedy was something Deighton wanted to try, with humour playing an important part in the earlier novels; and I can see why he never made it quite so central again. There is a bitterness to *Only When I Larf* which makes it hard to like as a comedy, and much though I admire some of the ideas in it and the way it is written, it will never be one of my favourite Len Deighton novels.

Fiona says

Fun story & easy reading.

Three con artist work the big time in the 1960's. There's Silas who is the leader because he was an officer in the British tank division in WWII. There's Liz who is the daughter of Silas' deceased regimental leader and with whom he is in love. And, there's Bob who is always portrayed as the servant or bumbling idiot. He, too, is in love with Liz but, until now, has not made any mention of it.

There first caper was in New York scamming a toy company out of a quarter of million dollars. When they are back in London, they start a second caper scamming the new African country Magazaria out of millions but it goes askew. Their third caper is scamming a London businessman and a Beirut bank. However, for this caper Bob is now the lead man, Silas doubts his ability, and Liz falls in love with Bob.

Can a con con another con artist and still laugh about it?

Manny says

In this rather fine novel about the world of professional con-artists, the author starts off by telling you what it is that distinguishes a master conman from an amateur. Anyone can fool a sucker once. What makes you a master is the ability to do it again. If you're a truly great conman, you can even pull it off a third time. Every time, the mark will somehow believe that it's different now and he's not going to be conned again.

I thought of this a couple of weeks ago when playing backgammon with a friend whom I'll refer to as N. The person in question is an extremely competent gambler, and during some periods of her life has made a living out of playing high stakes bridge. So I was a little nervous, but backgammon is only fun if you play for money. We agreed we would play for one Swiss Franc a point.

N made a suspicious number of elementary mistakes and moaned about how she'd forgotten everything she'd ever known about backgammon. She laid it on really thick, and even gave an absurd explanation of how she

calculated the odds for various combinations. It would have been more convincing if she hadn't then made the correct play most of the time. But she still contrived to lose a few francs.

Well, I was up, wasn't I? So we played again a couple of days later, and I won a small amount again. I started to wonder if I wasn't better at this game than I thought.

The third time, N got a bunch of lucky rolls and came out ahead. I'd got used to winning, and almost suggested raising the stakes so that I could take my revenge. But I managed to control myself.

Okay. I know it's a con. I know N is much better than she's pretending to be. But somehow, at the same time, I'm half convinced that she's really no good and I'm the expert, so why not play for real money?

To be continued!

Jeff Crosby says

Interesting, but a difficult read. Deighton can break continuity as a style device. He does it here in two ways. First each of the three protagonists narrate the novel in first person. Second each gets locked into flashbacks that disperse the narrative. In addition, our characters are not smart enough to be effective con artists. Overall, a disappointment. I reached the halfway point when I gave up. I just didn't care.

Nandini Bharadwaj says

Perhaps it was the fact that it was an e-book, but the mistakes kept pulling me out of the story. The plot is good, but occasionally it spins off into backstories without warning, which was very confusing.

Lacy says

A book set in the 1960's about con-artists.

The first half took me a month to read. Normally I finish a book within 3 days. The characters were interesting but man was it hard to follow and difficult to get in to. Each chapter changed narrators. At about page 110 I couldn't put it down. The character development was over and I was finally into the story. I liked it a little less near the end again, but ended up being able to say I like it.

Valerie Curtis says

I don't know what I thought this was about, but I did enjoy it. I would have rated it 3 1/2 stars :)

This was all about 3 con artists. Each give there "view" during the con. They evolve/de-evolve and you're around for the ride. The humor was very British and I enjoyed it!

Gerry says

Silas, Bob and Liz are three con people, existing in something of a love triangle that often causes stresses and strains in their working relationship.

They undertake a number of scams, picking their marks with care and then very professionally conning them out of plenty of money ... of course, it was money for nothing as far as the mark was concerned!

Some of their tricks worked beautifully but one of them goes disastrously wrong with very nasty consequences. However, their final mark who turns up in Beirut is very cleverly deceived and deprived of a substantial amount of cash, once again for a bag full of worthless paper.

The threesome take off with the proceeds with another lady tagging along but, in a lively twist at the end, two of the protagonists end up with not what they expected!

Some of the scams are excellently described, a couple of others not quite so good but overall it is an enjoyable read and good for a larf!

Tiina says

This was from my bookshelf, so I'd read this before (according to markings, I'd finished reading this in November 2006). It still seemed a fresh read.

I have extreme respect for Len Deighton overall. This is one of the lighter novels, not involving international espionage. Recommended!

Tim says

A one off for Deighton. An almost comedy novel with a loveable? trio of conmen/woman.

Deighton had intentions of writing a factual book about conmen but after some research dropped the idea in favour of a novel.

It's not the first time he's started with an idea only to leave it, change it or resurrect later.

Turned into quite a good film which seemed to disappear off the map, I've never even seen it on TV although his earlier novels that were also filmed turn up regularly.

Simon says

Len Deighton demonstrates his scope as an author with this witty novel about a team of English con artists. With the same attention to character development and back story the reader is drawn into the lives of the characters. would probably make a decent movie !

Stuart says

This is great fun - not as deep as his best work but very enjoyable and easy to read. I seem to recall reading that he had to write it very quickly to establish the copyright for the film, which just goes to show what a great writer he is. I'd love to see the film again but like so many British films from the sixties and seventies they seem to have disappeared into the ether. Each chapter being told from a different character's point of view works really well, as you are never quite sure what the truth is - appropriate for a book about conmen.

Michael says

The book is described as a suspense novel, but this story of 3 con artists working their trade is more interesting for its use of 3 narrators than anything else. However, the device wears a little thin as you go simply because there's no tension from narrator to narrator. Some points change depending on who's relating an episode, but Deighton would have had to have played with this a little more to make it pay off.
