Confessions of an Economic Hitman
John Perkins

John Perkin’s 2004 autobiography was written in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The book details the author’s participation in some of America’s more dubious foreign policy adventures of the 1960s and 1970s, during his decade as a self described “economic hitman.” Written as a kind of state of the nation address, Confessions deliberately sets up its author as a representative figure, a corrupted New Hampshire innocent who must declare his guilt in order to be redeemed. It speaks to a collective North American “us,” still reeling from the terrorist attacks, and suggests implicitly that if one man can change from agent of empire to critic of imperialism, America may yet reconnect with its founding values.

Although Perkins is much less rhetorically gifted than Barrack Obama, it’s easy to imagine those who made his book a New York Times bestseller also buying the “yes we can” message. Indeed, both Obama and Perkins sometimes evoke the older tradition of the puritan jeremiad, the critique delivered to strengthen resolve in a time of hardship.

This mode of address can sound messianic to those of us outside the US, especially in Australia with our preference for side-of-the-mouth understatement. In his acceptance speech, Obama at least made a point of reaching out to “those beyond our shores.” Perkins displays no such capacity for nuance: “Let this book, then, be the start of our salvation” (iv), he writes in the introduction. His story, thankfully, is interesting enough that we are inclined to overlook such hyperbole.

From 1971 to 1981 Perkins worked as an economist for US consultancy firm Chas. T Main. He was sent to developing countries “to encourage world leaders to become part of a vast network that promotes US commercial interests” (xi). In practice, this meant encouraging the political classes of countries like Ecuador, Indonesia, Panama and Saudi Arabia to take out massive loans that they often struggled to pay back. These were necessary to fund ambitious infrastructure projects, usually built by US construction firms. The book combines travel memoir and a broad brush overview of American
foreign policy during the Cold War, but it is Perkin’s ethical struggle that drives the narrative forward.

How does one become an economic hit man? “It began innocently enough” (3). Perkins, it seems, was not recruited on the basis of any particular aptitude for the dismal science, but because he’d worked for the Peacecorp in the Amazon and personality tests showed he was of weak character, pliable and eager to please. Claudine Martin, an attractive senior colleague, who it is coyly implied slept with him during training, gives him some rudimentary preparation and tells him that he is “in for life” (12).

Soon this American Adam finds himself deliberately distorting economic growth figures in Indonesia (54), providing a Saudi Prince with a live in American mistress (93-94), and accepting a substantial bribe not to publish an earlier version of his memoirs (171). His account of MAIN’s organizational structure is significant. “As an EHM I never drew a penny directly from the NSA or any other government agency; MAIN paid my salary. I was a private citizen, employed by a private corporation” (180). Here we see the outsourcing of dirty work that would later characterise the Bush administration’s War on Terror.

Perkins’s most serious accusations against the US are that it masterminded the suspicious deaths of Ecuadorian president Jaime Roldos and Panamanian President Omar Torrijos in the 1980s. These crimes are not attributed to MAIN, but to forces within the shadowy alliance of US political, business and intelligence interests referred to in the book as the “corporatocracy” (an updated version of Eisenhower’s military industrial complex). The “New Hampshire Prep School on the hill” where Perkins studied, becomes a motif for lost innocence, suggesting the light on the hill that traditionally stood for American promise has dimmed.

While Perkins has great material, he is not a writer. Describing a chance encounter with Graham Greene in a Panama coffee shop, he refers to the British novelist’s famous work “The Pride and the Glory,” (sic) an error which suggests he probably hasn’t read it. He goes to some length to assure us of the veracity of his tale. “This is not a fiction this is the true story of my life” (x). But we automatically mistrust people who are too insistent they are telling a true story, especially when their writing fails to convince. He plants long implausible passages of expository dialogue in characters’ mouths: “The Shah of
Saudi Arabia is your only really ally in the Middle East, and the industrial world rotates on the axle of oil that is the Middle East” (114). He will not allow for the inherent messiness of living, identifying too many neat narrative turning points, and often exaggerating their significance, “It was a night I will never forget, and one that has influenced the rest of my life” (43). He make clumsy use of leitmotifs, “staring into the water of that putrid canal, I once again saw images of the New Hampshire prep school on the hill” (32). Even if all every detail in the passages above is true, the writing does not feel true. Good writing can give the most fanciful nonsense verisimilitude; here the opposite occurs, compelling real life events are made to seem stagy and vaguely manipulative.

The final quarter of the book deals with Perkin’s post-MAIN career as CEO of an alternative energy company, and with his long struggle to write and publish his tell all account. Like a cross between a self-help guru and a vacuum cleaner salesman, Perkins assumes that those who forked out $25 for his memoirs will be irrevocably changed by the experience, “you are ready to leave the book behind and pounce on the world” (225). While few of us are likely to be swayed to this extent, Perkin’s story is an important one and does have something tell us about the workings of US imperialism, even if the lessons we learn are not necessarily those the author intended. Confessions of an Economic Hitman’s amalgam of soppy idealism and virulent self-promotion, is as deeply American as Dreams from My Father, and just as deeply of our historical moment.