



The Setup: A True Story of Dirty Cops, Soccer Moms, and Reality TV

Pete Crooks

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The pitch went like this: Chris Butler, a retired cop, ran a private investigator firm in Concord, California. His business had a fascinating angle—his firm was staffed entirely by soccer moms.

In fact, Butler employed PI Super Moms: attractive, organized, smart, and trained in investigative techniques, self-defense, and weaponry. *This American Life* host Ira Glass described them as “MILF: Charlie’s Angels.”

When this story came across Pete Crooks’s desk when he was working at *Diablo* magazine in 2010, he was instantly hooked. He’d heard a little bit about Butler and his super moms in the news; they’d been featured in *People* magazine and on *Dr. Phil*. What Butler’s publicist was offering was too tantalizing to pass up: an opportunity to ride along with Butler and a few of his sexy PIs as they prepared to start filming a reality TV show.

But after the ride-along—and after he started receiving mysterious emails from one of Butler’s employees—Crooks started to realize something didn’t seem right. After doing a little digging, he discovered the “sting” he’d seen only had one real victim...him. The PI bust had been a setup.

Crooks wasn’t a hardboiled crime reporter. He did lifestyle pieces for a regional magazine. The more he learned about Butler’s operation, the more he realized he was in far over his head. But swallowing his fears, he decided he was going to write an expose on Butler and his entire organization. He soon found himself deep in the underbelly of fake sting operations, wannabe celebrities, police corruption, drug-dealing, reality television, double-crossing employees, and more twists and turns than a dozen crime thrillers.

The Setup: A True Story of Dirty Cops, Soccer Moms, and Reality TV Details

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From Reader Review The Setup: A True Story of Dirty Cops, Soccer Moms, and Reality TV for online ebook

Dan Herman says

It's always funny when people try to translate the things they see on the movies and TV into their everyday life.

It's confusing when they do so in the midst of filming a reality TV show. Things get meta, fast.

Pete Crooks is a mild-mannered journalist who's just trying to finish an assignment about a local PI when he gets tipped off that the ride-along he went on was a setup. This draws him far too deeply into the web of intrigue, backstabbing and outright pettiness that almost all of us not there associate with California.

Crooks is an able reporter and a pretty good writer, though his constant jumps in the narrative (I believed this guy, but I didn't know x, y or z) are more jarring than helpful - if you're trying to bring the reader along with you, don't spoil the ending?

Casey says

An interesting story ruined by waaaaaaay too much extraneous junk about the author, his goofy magazine, and the press junket he went on afterwards. see photo for an example.

Anna Janelle says

This book has everything that my deep, dark, trashy reality-TV-loving inner self doesn't want to publicly admit to loving: liars, cheats, and sociopathic con-men. (While I wouldn't casually announce it at dinner parties, I consider myself a chronic closet talk show/ reality TV show fan. Dr. Phil? Love it. Dance Moms? I DVR it. World's Dumbest Criminals and Cops? My favorite shows to watch while nursing a particularly intense hang over. And I won't even talk about the time my husband took me to the Jerry Springer show. As a audience member, mind you, not a guest;) I know. This stuff is mind-rot, drivel, the down of America. Whatever. I agree, but it is mindless entertainment that I can turn to when I need a break). This book is about the quest for reality-show fame - for any sort of fame, really, and the lengths that some people will go to claim their 15 minutes of glory or infamy.

In 2010, Chris Butler made a splash when he appeared on multiple media venues (Dr. Phil, The Today Show, featured in People magazine) promoting his P.I. Moms. This is the story of how local San Franciscan journalist/editor, Pete Crooks, got entwined in a unbelievable story of hidden debauchery, illegal drug trafficking and dirty cops when covering the seemingly innocent fluff story of a proposed Lifetime reality show centered around Butler and his P.I. Moms. (This reality show never aired due to the malicious internal sabotage from one of Butler's employees, the douchiest villain to grace the pages of true crime since Scott Peterson, male actor/model/part-time P.I and full-time liar, Carl Marino.) It is a wild ride down the rabbit

hole that unearths unsettling setups and betrayal in the San Francisco Bay Area.

What made this a great read (apart from the reality TV raunch that I so love) is the quirky voice of Pete Crooks. In terms of covering the larger-than-life personalities of this case, the author is both witty and cutting, but also, in turns, empathetic and fair-minded. (Side note: the author could also be rather self-congratulatory and over indulgent in repeatedly reminding the author that *he* was the journalist who cracked this whole case open. I've noticed this with journalists who write full-length features - the pluming of their literary accomplishments and the puffing repetition of the reminders of their hard work. You could call it a pet-peeve). Overall, it was a fast, fun read that had incredibly memorable characters. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it to fans of celebrity gossip, "reality" TV and the lighter side of investigative reporting.

Thanks NetGalley **blows kisses**

Kali says

from kalireads.com:

Some stories are too far-fetched to be fake, as an author creating true crime out of thin air would add more cash and prizes, more glitz, more glamor. Pete Crooks' *The Setup: A True Story of Dirty Cops, Soccer Moms, and Reality TV* is so bizarre at every twist and turn it could only be true. The players' motives here are petty, the suspects' behaviors inexplicable, Dr. Phil enters the story twice, becoming first excited, then disappointed. *The Setup* is, in other words, an incredibly human tale.

The story begins with Pete Crooks, humble entertainment reporter for lifestyle magazine *Diablo*. As a former East Bay resident myself, I'm familiar with *Diablo* magazine and its focus on the finer things in life: weddings, wine, local celebrities. When Crooks hears about Chris Butler's PI firm in Concord, CA, he jumps at the chance to ride along on a case. Butler's PI firm doesn't employ the usual muscled ex-cops, but instead turns to an untapped resource in the more suburban cities of the East Bay. He staffs his office with soccer moms.

Gun-toting, cam-wearing soccer moms catching cheating husbands in the act! Getting home in time to make dinner for the kids! The PI moms had appeal, and got a lot of national press, including Dr. Phil, before reaching out to local mag *Diablo*. But from Crooks' first meeting with Butler and his bevy of investigating moms, things didn't feel right. And then, like something out of a crime novel, an anonymous source reached out to Crooks. An e-mail from source Ronald Rutherford (! You can't make this stuff up!) insisted Butler and his PI moms weren't what they appeared—they'd hoodwinked national media, and now they'd taken Crooks for a spin in their fantasy world.

At each step of the way, the issues surrounding Butler, his side-kick Carl Marino, and the moms become more complicated, unusual, and hilarious. Lifetime begins filming a reality show about Butler and the PI Moms. Chris Butler's BFF also happens to be the head of Contra Costa County's drug task force, Norman Wielsch. At the center of this storm of trickery, caught in the middle of this web of deceit and jealousy and desire to make primetime television, is one entertainment reporter from a regional magazine.

Rose says

It's rare that I get through 200 pages of a 300-page book and then give up, but there we are. I picked this up because the premise sounded so fascinating: a lifestyle reporter covers the story of the then-upcoming Lifetime reality series "P.I. Moms," a show which was to follow around retired cop Chris Butler and his posse of soccer-moms-turned-private-eyes. Except that Butler and the moms are fabricating most of their cases -- it's not a real case they take reporter Pete Crooks along on for his article, but rather a set-up, populated entirely by actors.

I thought the book would peel back the layers of how much reality is in "reality television," and what lengths some people will go to in order to achieve fame. But the book ended up reading more like a crazy soap-opera-procedural, and became more and more about former-cop Butler's illicit drug trade, and less and less about the trappings of fame and the costs people will pay to achieve it. I wasn't so much interested in stinging Butler to reveal his side business of selling drugs; I wanted to spend time on why on earth he -- and the ordinary women he hired -- faked so much of their business transactions, and why they were so apparently desperate to be famous.

So, despite being 2/3rds of the way through, I'm calling a halt. I flipped through the remaining third of the book, but as what I was most interested in is never addressed, I feel no need to finish. It might be a fine read for people who are interested in a crazy undercover story, but if you're looking for commentary on fame and the reality TV phenomenon, give this one a pass.

Cori Arnold says

The first two thirds of this book were awesome. The gritty details of the almost unbelievable unfolding of the deception and crime were un-put-down-able. The behind the scenes details of the transcripts and first hand views were both shocking and a way to prepare you for the next level of shocking detail.

I feel like the last third was a stretch to far or some sort of make it longer filler. I think some of the (sparse) details left to unveil in the last part could have slid in to the first two thirds of the book.

It certainly makes you wonder about the true lives and motivations behind the "reality" television stars. An eye-opening expose from an "accidental investigative journalist"!

Daniel says

This review originally published in Looking For a Good Book. Rated 4.0 of 5

Riveting! I sat down to read this in the morning and finished the book before bedtime.

It is absolutely amazing to me the temerity and lack of morals that some people have. This book explores and exposes those types of people.

The Setup is an appropriate title as there are multiple set-ups within. The first is the set-up that begins the unravelling of a personal kingdom. Chris Butler ran a Private Investigation business, but supposedly a

business with a bit of a twist...his PI's were 'soccer moms.' So innovative was this idea that Butler was working on a television deal for a 'reality' show of his soccer-mom-PI's. They'd been featured in *People* magazine and guests on the Dr. Phil show, and had hoped to gain a little publicity from a Bay-area magazine *Diablo*. Butler invited *Diablo* writer, Pete Crooks to ride along on an actual sting. Everything went swimmingly. Perhaps too much so, as Crooks was first surprised at how quickly the action developed (there was no need to wait around all day with the hopes that something would happen); at the seeming lack of concern over being spotted; and the taking of the 'victim's' car by the client without a resolution.

Crooks' suspicions had him hesitant to write the personal interest story the Butler hoped would be good PR for his reality show.

Although there is the opportunity to write this like a true-crime mystery novel, Crooks take a more direct/reporter approach and lays out the facts as he sees it and he often falls into fortune more than actually 'uncovers' anything. An anonymous 'tip' comes to Crooks from someone within Butler's organization, and it is the constant insight from the insider that lays the foundation for a federal investigation.

Yes... a federal investigation. Not because Butler is possibly providing phony investigations for a television series, but because Butler has other, illegal dealings going on, which also include high-ranking police officers. Crooks is tossed into the middle of all this, but steps aside to let the lawmen do what they need to do, while the insider continues to inform to both the authorities and Crooks.

Crooks, early on, lays out his suspicion as to the 'insider' and repeats it a few times. Perhaps I've read too many fictional mystery books, but this immediately had me thinking that it would NOT be the person Crooks suspected. It was a bit disappointing that Crooks nailed it straight off.

But what is almost as interesting as Butler's sting and fall, is Crooks' relationship with the insider. Crooks lays it on just a little bit thick that he looked upon his informant almost as a friend (it was Crooks the insider went to for help finding a trustworthy law official) so that when the insider later 'bashes' Crooks' role in the set-up, Crooks can't help but be hurt. Crooks also carefully points out that the insider's motivations for doing the right thing are suspect and that the insider is barely 'better' than Butler and the bad cop.

Yes...I am not naming the 'insider.' No...it is not because I am avoiding 'spoilers' but because it is my impression is that the informant is a fame junkie and I don't think this person needs to have their name out there, searchable, any more than possible.

This is a fascinating book on many levels. From a study in human behavior to a modern mystery to an insider look at reality tv, this book has a lot in it and is easy to access.

Looking for a good book? *The Setup* is a non-fiction book that you will not want to put down.

Gina Grone says

This was pretty good, but it definitely was written by a journalist new to novel-writing, as it was obvious that he had a hard time stretching the story out. Interesting story though and even better that it was true!

Olaf D says

Recommendation: The Setup is a fast paced memoir by the now retired senior editor of the magazine Diablo and his quest to expose a drug scandal embedded in the Narcotics Enforcement Agency. That has implications all of the Continental U.S. In this book, Crooks is contacted from a secret source claiming that a PI has faked cases for Dr. Phil, CBS 5, The San Francisco Chronicle and many other major publications and got picked up by a reality TV producer over fake setups. He accuses the PI of some scandalous drug practices that include the Superintendent of Narcotics Enforcement in the town of San Jose, where the story is based. Crooks battles with mental and real-world threats in this page-turning true story as he finds himself in a case of corruption bigger than he can handle. The case was eventually picked up by the Department of Justice and finally the FBI. To anyone who enjoys mysteries, and won't sweat over some risqué content, I fully recommend this book!

D.J. Goodman says

The actual story was very interesting but there was way too much padding. If the book had been about fifty pages shorter it would have been more of a page turner.

(Here's a fun game, though: after reading the book, go find all of its one star reviews and imagine they were written by Carl Marino, because if he's half the nutso douche depicted in the book then one of them out there probably is.)

Renata says

I loved the This American Life episode about this story, and I picked up this book at some point when it was a Kindle Daily Deal and never got around to reading it...until now. So I'd kind of forgotten some of the details from the TAL episode, and the book obviously goes into it all in way more depth. And also some MORE stuff happened after the episode was recorded. So it felt pretty fresh to me even though I'd heard a lot of the story before. It's a seriously intense story and I admire all the investigative work Pete Crooks did. But also I kind of didn't care? I'm not a big fan of true crime/mysteries and in retrospect, the This American Life episode had exactly as much detail as I wanted about this. If you are a fan of true crime you might appreciate this book more than me. I definitely highly recommend the This American Life episode though! (<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio...>)

Jameskpolk says

I read this real quick- it's a fast easy read, but I probably wouldn't recommend it enthusiastically to anyone. A couple of Bay Area men pursue fame in the worst way possible, faking private investigations (using attractive single soccer moms) for journalists in hope that the publicity will get them noticed and on TV. And it worked for a time- Dr. Phil and People Magazine came calling. When they end up conning a reporter from a local magazine and he gets wind of the ruse, he digs further and uncovers some major illegal activity.

The story is fairly interesting, but there are issues. The author compares almost every situation to one crime movie or another, his handling of the identity of his Deep Throat-like informant is clumsily handled, and some of the picture choices included to illustrate his points simply boggle the mind. And though it reads as a screed against the pursuit of fame, the last 40 pages detail the dueling movie-rights and book deals that the author and one of the perpetrators (a fame-hungry actor upset he didn't have a bigger role in the proposed reality-TV show) are lining up. It reads as if the author has been caught up in getting famous just as his subjects had.

I liked the fact that they totally duped Dr. Phil on his show, though. That guy is a blowhole.

Megan Sensiba says

a little slow

Lindsey Lewis says

I received a free digital ARC of this book from NetGalley to review. I was not required to positively review this book and all comments and thoughts in the review are my own.

When Pete Crooks was handed an assignment by the editor of a local magazine called Diablo, he thought it might be fun to investigate a developing sensation - a Private Investigative agency whose PI's were soccer moms had hit it big on a Dr. Phil episode and were set to start filming their own reality series. He was glad to focus on local entertainment and even more excited when he witnessed the agency at work. However, his ride-along quickly spiraled into a real life nightmare when a whistleblower's email about the set-up being faked grew into a trail of criminal accusations.

The thrilling tale of corrupt cops, self-centered, backstabbing, and attention-seeking informants, a journalist who refuses to let his story go, drug deals and prostitution spins an intricate web of grey area where no one's motives are clear and everyone's emotional stability is in question. It serves as a cautionary moral of the lengths people will go to for fame and fortune as well as a lesson about trusting the people who are supposed to uphold law and morality. There is a section at the back with a follow-up on the central players in the book, that gives it a bit of a "documentary" feel and restores at least some faith in law enforcement and government. In today's society, where police accountability is a prominent and controversial issue, The Setup serves as both a story of fear (rogue cops) and one of hope (when the investigation leads to conviction).

The juxtaposition with the unfurling case and the author's interest in film noir nicely accentuates the drama of the story. By occasionally discussing the techniques and common elements of film noir in relation to PI Moms, Crooks is able to delve deeper into the psychological mess of the key characters. The way the book is laid out allows some plot twists to occur naturally, as if the story is unfolding in front of us, rather than messing up chronological order like some nonfiction works do. It is also nicely paced, and not as repetitive as some other NFs I've read.

Overall, The Setup is one of the most interesting and well-written non-fiction books I've ever read. It's a must-read for anyone interested in crime or the cultural emphasis of fame. It's sexy, scandalous and sensational, all of the characteristics people look for in the true crime genre.

Jennie says

It is an interesting story, but the writing is inconsistent.

I understand this is an ARC, but editing would not fix what I am referring to. It would take a substantial rewrite. The first quarter of the book seems to have the most issues and then the writing gets much tighter, but then the problems return. It's a bit more than the way things are worded, it also has in issue revealing the facets of the "case." There is no suspense at all.

Readers from the San Francisco/Bay area might like it better due to local interest.

And this is an advance copy, so the writing issues may very well be resolved for publication.
