



The Digger's Game

George V. Higgins

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A riveting George V. Higgins masterpiece about Jerry Doherty and his trip to Vegas that puts him eighteen grand in the hole.

Jerry "Digger" Doherty is an ex-con and proprietor of a workingman's Boston bar, who supplements his income with the occasional "odd job," like stealing live checks or picking up hot goods. His brother's a priest, his wife's a nag, and he has a deadly appetite for martinis and gambling. On a trip to Vegas, the Digger finds himself in the sights of a loan shark known as "the Greek." Luckily--if you call it luck--the Digger has been let in on a little job that can turn his gambling debt into a profit, if only he can pull it off without getting himself killed.

The Digger's Game Details

Date : Published January 28th 1973 by Alfred A. Knopf

ISBN : 9780394483160

Author : George V. Higgins

Format : Hardcover 214 pages

Genre : Mystery, Crime, Fiction, Noir, Thriller



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False says

Digger was one of the more interesting Higgins characters I've read about (the others being Eddie Coyle and Cogan.) Now that I'm getting further into reading Higgins, I've noticed certain characters recur in varied degree of focus or importance. Digger is a hard working man, a cautious man, and a caring husband. In the end, the author leaves an open ended question...is he about to be caught and therefore imprisoned (or murdered?) or is he about to get on a plane and be free. I opt for the later. I enjoyed him too much to lock him away. I still have about 20 more Higgins works to go (including non-fiction) and each book only makes me wish he had lived longer to produce more of his wonderful, all hearing dialogues.

Jim says

Higgins is great. He's written what amounts to a dozen scenes with primarily dialogue, and he gets character, plot, action, the whole thing. "Sweating like I did a mile and six furlongs". Higgins has great knowledge of the way things work in the world, first of the legal and other-than-legal business mechanics, and presents these (sometimes extremely complicated) mechanics so well from the level of the characters and where they are, so that it's never expositional but an aspect of the way the characters walk those avenues. For instance, the travel agency scam outlined only as part of three very different characters working together -- two criminals and a corrupt businessman front man, who ends up being the toughest of them, in a way -- and the interaction stems from character and only character, so that the intricacies of what the actual business are described as it goes along, almost offhandedly, as if you were going along with them. And the ending is so downbeat, perfectly so, like November low tide at Revere Beach

Even with the travesty surrounding the potential filming of "Friends of E. Coyle", Higgins is still mightily underrated. NYer once called him the Balzac of the Boston Underworld, and while this is a nice thing to say that gets at some of Higgins' skills, it is limiting of what he can do...for the other great ability of Higgins is his sketch of the human condition and psychology, his understanding of the business of being human, and the manner and style in which he does it, that is, presented not internally but for the most part just presenting how people talk and the subtleties of their interaction. The long scene of Digger going to ask a favor from his brother is a masterpiece, more Shakespeare than Spillane. For all that Elmore Leonard is vaunted for his underworld dialogue, he's a barney compared to Higgins

Rex Fuller says

It's just astounding what Higgins can do with dialogue, making up somewhere around 97% or more of the words in this one. Even so, it does not feel like a stage play. You truly feel the selfish, uncaring, desperate, and dirty world of small-time crooks who aim for one thing and more often than not generate a miserable something else. Guilt is universal, punishment is random, and it doesn't matter if your experience comes to an end because the pleasure of it is permanent.

Tyler says

I would like to start by announcing the fact that I am a big fan of George V. Higgins. His first novel (The Friends of Eddie Coyle) is one of my all-time favorite books. Perhaps someday I'll read it again and present a proper review, but in short, the way the author delivers the plot through the voices of its characters, and the way that those characters are raw and realistic and capable of keeping the story rolling by doing little more than talking contributes to authenticity that is nearly unrivaled in the genre. The Digger's Game shares that authenticity, it shares the character depth, and it shares the quality dialogue that sets Higgins apart from other crime authors. Unfortunately, it's missing something else.

The story starts as I would expect a Higgins novel to start. Digger's preparing for a job, a job involving stealing checks, and he's talking to the guy who set the job up. It's a great introduction to the character and a great bit of banter between the two. The check thieving, however, ends up having little to do with the rest of the book, and doesn't involve any consequences either. It's as if the scene exists to set the tone and reveal that Digger's in a rough financial situation.

That's about it. That's the book, more or less. Digger's in a rough financial situation because of some bad decisions, and he's trying to get out of it. His explanation of those bad decisions is a great scene, but we don't get to that until we're a quarter of the way through a book. In fairness, it is a short book, but it just doesn't grab you like the other Higgins books have. I didn't feel like I gave a damn about any of the characters or anything that was happening until a scene where Digger goes to his brother for help and they talk for fifteen pages or so about their differences and more or less what a screw-up Digger is. I thought at that point, "alright, this is good stuff," but those great scenes are a little fewer and farther between than I expected or hoped from this book.

It's a good book about a guy in trouble who's doing the jobs he knows he shouldn't be doing to get back out of trouble. It has some great criminal conversations as you would expect from Higgins, and the characters are good but they won't stick in my mind like the characters of Cogan's Trade or Eddie Coyle, and their story is just not quite as interesting.

I give it three stolen fur coats out of five.

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Josh says

I'm predisposed to like seedy, beat-down, dialogue-heavy crime thrillers about small-time lowlifes, so Higgins is right up my alley, but he's no rote genre hack. The book is structured as a series of conversations between two or three people, with a minimum of exposition and a maximum of attention to detail to what characters' speech patterns reveal about them as people. No character is sympathetic, with the partial exception of a priest who is the main character's older brother, but each character is funny and real. You don't waste time as a reader trying to identify with anyone. You just detach yourself and take it all in, all that hilarious, profane dialogue and the darkly comic defeatist lives of small-time players on the margins of crime. I'll be reading more of him.

James says

A terrific novel by any standard. Everyone remarks on Higgins's dialogue, which is *not* "realistic" but stylized; these people deliver monologues the way in which characters in musicals burst into song. I assume that the talk of real dirtbags isn't as interesting or funny. For me, the draw of Higgins's novels is the way in which they dramatize the kinds of things that go on in offices and at work all the time: the plot here about the Greek, Torrey, and Schabb could be replicated (minus the guns and mob junkets) in a thousand offices on Monday morning. This one also has three absolutely terrific set pieces: the Digger's wife giving him a hard time for how he eats and spends money, when the Digger asks his brother (a priest!) for eighteen-thousand dollars, and the one later on in which the Greek gets upset at the new office digs. Yes, there's some crime, but very little. This isn't a caper, but a great portrait of an unlikable loudmouth who gets himself in trouble. You'll read it, I don't know. Two, three days. Three days. (That's my weak imitation of Higgins.)

James says

This staccato Southie noir has lashings of the distilled tough-guy talk for which Higgins is justifiably famous, but the narrative just never really takes off. On a family trip to London when I was a teen, I bought a discount omnibus comprising *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, *Cogan's Trade* and *The Rat on Fire* to read on the plane trip home. I chose it because Norman Mailer, with whom I was besotted, was quoted on the cover as saying (about *Eddie Coyle*), "What I can't get over is that so good a first novel was written by the fuzz." The collection electrified me. I read all three novels back to back. Ever since, I've taken a sort of proprietary hipster's pride in Higgins as my personal discovery. I got excited about reading him again after the release (and subsequent disappearance without a ripple) of the excellent film version of *Cogan's Trade*, *Killing Them Softly*.

Not much happens in *The Digger's Game*. A small-time hoodlum owes money to some bad men. He pulls a caper. The bad men don't get along. That's about it. I'm not a reader to whom plot matters a great deal. I read crime fiction, when I read it, for the atmosphere. As Edmund Wilson famously put it, Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd? So, I'm not sure why *The Digger's Game* felt like it was missing a key something. There were lines of dialogue in this novel that were so laconic that I couldn't understand what the character was saying until I'd repeated the line out loud a few times. Perhaps with further reflection, what seemed unsatisfyingly incomplete about the reading experience will be revealed as brilliantly elliptical. At any rate, I'll be back. I can't get enough of that hard-boiled ABI Paddy palaver.

Phil Overeem says

Almost as great as *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*--that's a tall order. *The Digger's Game* is still essential, and if you'd like a short course in writing dialogue without needing much narration, grab it.

Joseph Hirsch says

Elmore Leonard tends to get the lion's share of the credit when people talk about crime writers who have a way with dialogue, but, in truth, George . V. Higgins is the king. Don't get me wrong. Leonard's writing

features some impressive volleys, but Higgins takes dialogue to a whole new level, making conversation the very narrative engine of his works. He's a complete original, too idiosyncratic really to even give birth to imitators, since it's pointless to try to copy him.

"The Digger's Game" follows the travails of a degenerate gambler, and his brother, a not-so-degenerate man of the cloth. The former brother digs himself a deep hole with a loan shark, can barely make his vig, and sets out to pull a robbery for insurance money.

That's the plot, in bare bones, but it doesn't do justice to the music of Higgins' writing, which, I should add, isn't for everybody. The author once said words to the effect that he wasn't a crime writer, that he did character studies, and the characters he was studying just happened to be criminals. That's certainly the case here, and the book isn't so much what it's about, as how it's about it, if that makes any kind of sense at all.

All in all, a solid book.

Jim Davis says

DKF. Surprisingly it was the dialogue that other reviewers enjoyed so much that turned me off. I felt that the dialogue seemed like someone just recorded everything the characters said without applying any literary license to separate the interesting parts from the dull and mundane. I gave up at about the 15% mark and at that point nothing much had happened.

Gary Baughn says

Another great Higgins exploration of midlevel gangsters in Boston. It begins with a conversation that can't be beat, and then continues with one well-dialogued situation after another. Now I know why they call them "Wise-Guys," because they all think they are smarter than whomever they are working with, when in reality they are all dumber, because they all think they have the situation figured out, and they haven't, because some part of the situation is not under their control, including what the other wise-guys are thinking. Eventually they all trip over their own belief in their wisdom, but along the way it is a lot of fun pretending we are smarter than all of them, and it also is fun being in on the racket, no matter how slimy the racket might be.

Ben Loory says

all the dialogue of his other books, but somehow none of the tension.

Andrea says

I think Cogan's Trade is the best of the first 3.

I was working in Boston in the late '70s in the Kenmore Square area. It would be hard for anyone not

familiar with the territory then to figure out what is going on as the characters drive all over the place.

I find the dialog fascinating and familiar but it might be alien to younger readers.

Still a nice respite from SF and Fantasy.

Allan MacDonell says

Heroes are in short supply in the novels of George V. Higgins where all characters are craven antagonists. The sneer-talking players in *The Digger's Game* scrape for advantage over one another in the grubby 1970s Boston underworld, a scabrous playground where the highest human aspiration is to become a successful mooch. In the business of grown men plotting to obtain something in exchange for nothing—nothing beyond an exercise of brute force or crude cunning—a person is occasionally hurt, killed even. But Higgins plays no favorites among his creations, and no character's untimely and brutal departure would be any sadder than the snuffing of any other habitué of the Digger's milieu, a fecund and fetid showplace where the winners are defined as born-to-lose skeeves who have cheated circumstances in such a way as to be temporarily unaware of their impending doom. As much as I love finishing Higgins's books, I'm taking a break from his not-so-wise guys before they discolor my worldview.

Greg D'Avis says

90% dialogue and what great dialogue it is. Higgins' first few books are masterpieces.
