

The Express: Criminal masterminds mainly exist in fiction

Express, The/The Express on Sunday (Published as Express, The (London, England)) - December 5, 2011

• Author/Byline: Nigel Burke

CRIME thrives in a recession. So shall we be seeing the return of that repellent but fascinating figure, the master criminal? After the heist at my local Asda superstore the other week when two thieves had to push their getaway car to the petrol forecourt to fill-up, I would say not.

Criminals are more interesting than detectives. I always had more time for Auric Goldfinger and Dr No than James Bond as he creeps around the world like a homicidal school-prefect. Give me Raffles, Modesty Blaise and Fu-Manchu any day over Poirot or Rebus. But real-life criminals fall abjectly short of the fictional ideal.

In an effort to get the real crooks to understand their shortcomings I've compiled a guide to the key attributes of the master criminal alongside real-life examples where villains have fallen short.

Proper villains are masters of disguise. Raffles the gentleman thief was a chameleon who could maintain two separate identities while playing top-class cricket in each, and the talented Tom Ripley murdered his friend Dickie Greenleaf and stole his life. By contrast, Ayrshire man John Cole gave a completely false name to the policeman who stopped his car but the word "John" tattooed on his knuckles gave him away.

A German robber was jailed for four years after he attempted to rob a bank wearing a mask that he couldn't see out of, causing him to lift it up. He was outdone by an American robber who wore a plastic bag over his head and had to remove it when he began to suffocate. Englishman Clive Brown went better-dressed to rob a shop wearing a motorcycle helmet. It was the words "Clive Brown" stencilled on the helmet that sank him.

Even the A-list crooks who robbed Graff the jeweller in New Bond Street of GBP40million in gems in 2009 failed to foresee that when they tricked a professional makeup artist into providing their disguise on the morning of the robbery, the make-up artist might watch the evening news and put two and two together.

The master criminal must be a brilliant forger and manipulator of documents. Picture Warren Beatty in a cat-burglar outfit breaking into a print shop to mark the plates from which half the world's playing cards would soon be made. In 1994 Grantham couple Linda and Peter Garnett tried to deposit a stolen banker's draft for GBP9,768,453 and 35 pence into Linda's account at the Midland Bank. To save an extra journey they deposited their housing benefit cheque at the same time.

NOTHING is more important than the getaway car. Diabolik, the master jewel thief of Sixties Italian pulp fiction had a blonde supermodel girlfriend to assist him, and they maintained a stock of his 'n' hers E-Type Jags in black and white respectively, driving them into concealed roadside tunnels when hard-pressed by the cops. Barry Smith from Rotherham robbed a jeweller and got clean away but his getaway vehicle was a Volkswagen Beetle painted with red and black spots to resemble a ladybird. This was noted and a police officer saw the car later parked outside Barry's house.

A key lesson from Diabolik is to plan your route. In 1998 Hamid Shamsollahi made himself easy game for a customs search when his 15ft high lorry, carrying GBP7million of heroin, got stuck in the 14ft 3in high Blackwall tunnel.

Many real-life crooks fall down on the paperwork. Under the leadership of Ernst Stavro Blofeld, SPECTRE had an extensive bureaucracy. Modesty Blaise wasn't all feline art theft and throwing knives.

She had business managers and an accountant. When John Rusnak, the rogue currency trader, fraudulently hid \$700million of losses he kept his fake documents in a folder labelled "fake docs".

British insider traders Christopher McQuoid and James Melbourne's bookkeeping was just too good. What eventually linked McQuoid, the inside tipster, to Melbourne, the apparently unconnected outside trader, was that Melbourne deposited a cheque for precisely half his trading profits in McQuoid's bank account.

Goldfinger always carried a .25 calibre automatic - a tiny weapon but he got in close and never missed. Andrew Burwitz from Wisconsin attempted a drive-by shooting at his ex-girlfriend's house but forgot to wind down the window.

With her mastery of the fighting arts Modesty Blaise defeated male opponents including a fencing master and a sumo wrestler. In 2009 two drunken muggers accosted a pair of women in Swansea and got beaten up. The "women" turned out to be cage fighters in drag on their way to a stag party.

But physical prowess doesn't make a master crook. Planning does. Watch Ocean's Eleven to see just what care it takes to case three casinos. Poor homework sank Trinidadian Auburn Mason when he tried to hijack an airliner with a fake bomb and force it to fly to Gatwick

in 2000. He was arrested at Gatwick, which was the plane's original destination anyway. Kate Davis tried to smuggle cocaine through Manchester airport in a golf bag but her golf chat with the customs officer hit the rough when she didn't know her handicap.

Perhaps the saddest shortfall of real-life crooks is among the hackers. The elite hackers of fiction are sexy tomboys with glossy black bobs like Lisbeth Salander with her dragon tattoo and Angelina Jolie in the film Hackers, each able to download colossal sums of cash and government databases effortlessly into their laptops.

Real hackers are male, dandruffy and get caught a lot. Hundreds have been arrested after boasting about their exploits on internet forums. Despite their superior IT skills they are no cleverer than the low-tech Trevor Arthur from Manchester who had several stolen bank cards but no PIN numbers.

He spent several days trying out random numbers at his local bank machine until they came for him.

IT WOULD be unfair to say the criminal community never has flashes of brilliance. Scandinavian crooks noticed shoe shops in Sweden put the left shoe out on display while Danish shoe shops leave the right shoe out. That allowed the crooks to steal and match designer shoes into pairs.

Today's real master extortionists tend to be boring. They have learned that, just as the highest form of warfare is to win without fighting, the highest form of crime is to take our money without breaking the law. Enter the licensed car clampers, the bailed-out bankers and, at the centre of the web, the Treasury, dry and implacable as Moriarty, happy to tax criminal proceeds and legal earnings alike.

- *Index terms: Crimes; General News; Automobile Dealers; Food & Beverage Stores; Gasoline Stations; Grocery Stores; Grocery exc Convenience Stores; Justice Public Order & Safety Activities; Motor Vehicle & Parts Dealers; Police Protection; Public Admin; Retail Trade; ASDA Group Ltd*
- *Locations: United Kingdom, Europe, Western Europe*
- *Record: 94094105*
- *Copyright: Copyright © Express Newspapers, The Express/The Express on Sunday, All rights reserved.*