

AN 'AMERICAN DREAM' BROTHERS LEAVE SOUTH TO MAKE FORTUNE IN CRACK; [FIVE STAR LIFT Edition]

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Then, at 7 a.m. on a Saturday, Adler's telephone rang. It was Terry Colbert, a soldier in the *Chambers brothers'* crack cocaine army. The call took Adler by surprise. He had not tried to reach Colbert, who had testified at the trial, but was trying to recant his testimony. Furthermore, Adler had heard Colbert was in hiding from the Drug Enforcement Administration.

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Steve Weinberg is an investigative journalist and biographer living in Columbia, Mo.

LAND OF OPPORTUNITY One Family's Quest for the American Dream in the Age of Crack
By William H. Adler 415 pages, Atlantic Monthly Press, \$22

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Deep in the article Adler learned the Chambers brothers had grown up in rural eastern Arkansas, moving to Detroit to start a new life.

"I recall thinking that this was the true significance of the story," Adler says. "So many questions came to mind: What pushed these young men out of the South to Detroit and pulled them into their chosen pursuit? Was it in fact a choice? What alternatives did they have? What happens to those who risk almost certain imprisonment, if not life and limb, for wealth, but not only for wealth, for control over their own lives as well?"

With those questions Adler began researching what turned out to be this always fascinating and sometimes maddening book.

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Yet why would they want to cooperate? There were huge chasms of education, class and race between the brothers and Adler, for starters. Furthermore, what would the Chambers brothers gain by cooperating with Adler? They were already in prison, and no book - especially one delving into their lives of crime - would get them out.

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But Colbert had obtained Adler's telephone number from one of the imprisoned Chambers brothers and wanted to talk. They arranged a meeting at a fast-food restaurant near the federal courthouse in Detroit.

Colbert showed up, two hours late, wearing a woman's wig and overcoat. He was a fugitive putting himself in further danger for unclear reasons to talk to a writer. That was the breakthrough. Soon after, Adler had access to the Chambers brothers as well. For reasons never totally made clear, the brothers trusted Adler to tell their story.

Adler tells the story on many levels, but he has put a business emphasis on it, rather than a more sensationalistic crime emphasis. He portrays the Chambers brothers as young men with limited options who made rational (for them) economic choices about leaving the poverty and bigotry of rural Arkansas to seek a fortune up North.

The business they chose required them to act much as chief executive officers at McDonnell Douglas might: identifying a clientele, understanding the differences between selling wholesale and retail, tailoring accounting systems to an idiosyncratic operation, setting salaries and determining the most effective incentives for the line workers.

A secondary emphasis in Adler's book is the biographical - by concentrating on one family, Adler is able to make them come alive, just as talented biographers do.

To phrase the virtues of the biographical angle a bit differently, as readers learn about the crack cocaine business, they also learn a lot about lives they might never otherwise enter. (I have entered similar lives in minor ways while a newspaper reporter in, and resident of, East St. Louis during the early 1970s. Otherwise, I am also a stranger to the drug empire culture.)

Adler had remarkable access to the men and women running the crack empire in Detroit, and he supplemented that access with high-quality journalistic research.

The book has the additional virtues as well of sensible organization, compelling writing, detailed endnotes, a bibliography and a section summarizing the cast of characters - most non-fiction books lack some or all of those virtues in the 1990s.

The maddening aspect of the book is linked to Adler's worldview. By placing the Chambers brothers' entrepreneurial activities in the context of federal government policies during the Ronald Reagan-George Bush administrations, Adler sometimes sounds like an apologist for the drug criminals. Are the Chambers brothers really no worse than tobacco company executives? Adler never answers that question directly, but he seems to imply that maybe the two types of corporate criminals have more in common than it seems on the surface.

My worldview rejects the implication, despite my abhorrence of tobacco. The violence to humans done by crack is more dramatic, less reversible than the violence done by cigarettes. But I am certainly willing to consider a worldview that says the difference is of degree, not of kind.

Adler's book certainly does not have all the answers. But I lack the answers, too, so condemnation would be hypocritical. This is a book that captivates through its reporting and its narrative, while forcing deep thought through its ideology.

[Illustration]

PHOTO; Caption: Photo from book jacket - Land Of Opportunity.