


**The Mastermind: Drugs. Empire. Murder.
Betrayal.**

Evan Ratliff

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The incredible true story of the decade-long quest to bring down Paul Le Roux—the creator of a frighteningly powerful Internet-enabled cartel who merged the ruthlessness of a drug lord with the technological savvy of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur

It all started as an online prescription drug network, supplying hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of painkillers to American customers. It would not stop there. Before long, the business had turned into a sprawling multinational conglomerate engaged in almost every conceivable aspect of criminal mayhem. Yachts carrying \$100 million in cocaine. Safe houses in Hong Kong filled with gold bars. Shipments of methamphetamine from North Korea. Weapons deals with Iran. Mercenary armies in Somalia. Teams of hitmen in the Philippines. Encryption programs so advanced that the government could not break them.

The man behind it all, pulling the strings from a laptop in Manila, was Paul Calder Le Roux—a reclusive programmer turned criminal genius who could only exist in the networked world of the twenty-first century, and the kind of self-made crime boss that American law enforcement had never imagined.

For half a decade, DEA agents played a global game of cat-and-mouse with Le Roux as he left terror and chaos in his wake. Each time they came close, he would slip away. It would take relentless investigative work, and a shocking betrayal from within his organization, to catch him. And when he was finally caught, the story turned again, as Le Roux struck a deal to bring down his own organization and the people he had once employed.

Award-winning investigative journalist Evan Ratliff spent four years piecing together this intricate puzzle, chasing LeRoux's empire and his shadowy henchmen around the world, conducting hundreds of interviews and uncovering thousands of documents. The result is a riveting, unprecedented account of a crime boss built by and for the digital age.

Advance praise for *The Mastermind*

“As directors, we spend countless hours imagining heightened plots and memorable characters that will leave a lasting impression on audiences. The true tale of obsession, genius, intrigue, and vengeance detailed in *The Mastermind* is as gripping and cinematic as anything we could endeavor to conjure up.”—**Joe and Anthony Russo, directors of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Captain America: Civil War*, and *Avengers: Infinity War***

“With his relentless and fearless reporting, Evan Ratliff has pried open a hidden world filled with high-tech gangsters and drug kingpins and double-crossers and stone-cold hitmen. The story is as fascinating as it is terrifying, and it is one that will hold you in its grip.”—**David Grann, author of *Killers of the Flower Moon***

“If truth is stranger than fiction, then *The Mastermind* is the truest book you'll read this year. The only thing predictable about it is how quickly you'll turn the pages.”—**Noah Hawley, author of *Before the Fall* and creator of the TV series *Fargo***

“This is a mesmerizing, absolutely bonkers story about a man as brilliant as he is villainous. You’ll find yourself sucked in, freaked out, and ultimately blown away by Ratliff’s storytelling and tireless reporting. *The Mastermind* is a masterpiece.”—**Nick Thompson, editor-in-chief, *Wired***

The Mastermind: Drugs. Empire. Murder. Betrayal. Details

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From Reader Review The Mastermind: Drugs. Empire. Murder. Betrayal. for online ebook

Jeanette says

This man, Paul Le Roux, ran an empire. And he did it internationally. Selling "legal" drugs through the internet, after developing an encrypted software. And when you think of Empire, with the big E- this is one. As much as any former multi-continental colonial or otherwise "Empire" within orders / laws/ merchant pathways for productions and distributions- with all authority coming from the "top-down". And within its own shared to the underlings "culture" as well. Countries and substances both, in the dozens.

Evan Ratliff is beyond bravery. I have no full paragraphs that could expand. He's worthy of a Medal of Honor, IMHO. Or whatever the International version of that has become. Because it certainly is not the Nobel Prize. Nor anything the United Nations has applied in the last 15 years.

He's earned it, this author. He risked life and far more than ONLY staying alive (all associated/ related to him as well) doing this book. The details of long telling is not left with voids, either. And if the information is murky or some points associations are not as carved- he let's you know why.

The entire full boat Empire lasted about 7 years, but the people brought down by this in that short period of time! And those tortured, murdered, used as slaves. The Philippines, Liberia, Thailand, North Korea, China, South America, Europe - on and on. Bodies left laying in trash heaps and at times those victims would not even have known why or when it was deserved. Lessons!

Not to speak of the myriads of pharmacies that he used and put "under" within his scam "assistance". More than a couple were in Chicago and in Minneapolis. One I knew personally because he was a customer in my youth when I did pharmacy sales and dispatch.

This is one of those real world situations for which if you read it in fiction, you would say it is too wide and too severe to be believed.

Believe it.

Jared says

It is a compelling enough story, but the book suffers from a few flaws:

- The author inserts himself into the story a few too many times. This is a pet peeve of mine.
 - We don't *really* get a close look at the life of the main subject, Paul Le Roux.
 - Given the way the book is structured, it is hard to follow the plot at times. The individual vignettes are fine, but how exactly do they line up?
-

Victoria says

Thanks to Random House and Netgalley for the advanced copy of this upcoming true crime work. I requested it because I knew I had read something about the main character (the Mastermind) but I couldn't remember where or when. After finishing the book, I determined from the author's notes that it was long form articles by the same author that I had read in The Atavist. This book expands on those articles about an international criminal and possibly genius and was a great read. I applaud Mr. Ratliff for his dedication in reporting this story, both in time and effort. Good journalists are truly like a dog with a bone, not willing to quit until their curiosity is satisfied, and luckily, they share with us. There is so much that is fantastical in this tale, it is hard to believe it was all possible. The end was a bit of a letdown, but that was due to the facts not the writing. Highly recommended for fans of true crime.

Randal White says

An amazing story! Reads like a Vince Flynn or James Bond type thriller. Who would ever have believed that there was actually a "super-villain", who manipulated events world-wide, all the while staying hidden behind the scenes? I couldn't put it down!

Melody (OhTheBooksSheWillRead) Hawkins says

The Mastermind by Evan Ratliff is a non-fiction true crime book that focuses on the rise of Paul Calder Le Roux. Le Roux was a drug lord of international consequence. He was unique in that he was a techie, his specialty being encrypting software to enable the purchase of legal pharmaceuticals over the internet.

This story concerns a criminal organization that conducted business on six continents and involved thousands of people. Amongst the various international crimes involved, are acts of hitmen, international arms dealers, and illicit drug smuggling.

Ratliff engaged in exceptional research in order to write this book. He spent several years conducting interviews and reviewing documents in addition to working with various law enforcement agencies, local and governmental, foreign and domestic, including Interpol, the FBI, and the DEA. Although he encountered rampant corruption along the way, in addition to missing, murdered, or just plain terrified witnesses, Ratliff persevered to determine how the various crimes were connected.

I would recommend this book to fellow fans of the true crime genre. Especially those who enjoy a good conspiracy theory. There are not many books that I would recommend to my dad, but this is one of them.

Thank you to Random House and NetGalley for my free e-ARC.

Angela H. says

The book is about LaRoux, a mastermind behind multiple illegal smuggling! He's a genius in maintaining an empire of crimes through manipulation of the laws within the countries he operated. He manages stay hidden yet present in his empire and instill fear as a quiet, merciless leader.

Read the book to find out more about his illegal empire.

Murtaza says

Very strange and dark story about a man, Paul Leroux, who used his coding knowledge to eventually set himself up as some kind of barbarian drug kingpin. I am impressed at the massive amount of reporting that went into this story over several years. Despite that, it was not really my favorite. There is lots of blow-by-blow of this complicated and disturbing criminal plot but not much reflection on what it all means for our society and the human condition.

My own takeaway is that Leroux was a disturbed man who was completely enslaved to his passions. Like a crazed colonial official from a Joseph Conrad novel, he exploited the weak institutions of third world countries to live as a man outside of any legal or moral constraint. The violence and depravity of his organization was completely gratuitous. In the end he only got caught because it didn't seem like he cared about getting caught.

If you like true crime books you will like this one. I give it three stars out of respect to the years of grueling reporting that went into it. I feel however that the inevitable movie about Leroux based on this book will be more entertaining.

Jamma says

Thanks to Random House via NetGalley for this ARC in exchange for an honest review.

It's hard to believe this is not fiction. The story of Paul LeRoux is just so incredible. One can only wonder what may have happened had he put his considerable talents and smarts to something legitimate. Evan Ratliff spent four years researching this book and it certainly shows in the details he gives us. And I wasn't bogged down by these details - I found them fascinating. The book is as good as any mystery thriller. I would recommend this to anyone who loves this sort of real life thriller.

Nick Black says

for fifteen years or so, since selling my first startup, i've dreamed of moving into the criminal cartel space, building one up around me and some trusted rogue engineer associates, with the eventual goal of turning warlord in some ungoverned territory and building out a libertarian paradise. turns out someone already did most of that, and did a pretty decent job, too.

Niklas Laninge says

A top notch story which Ratliff has taken really good care of. True crime doesn't get any better than this.

Kenneth says

This was decent brain candy non-fiction. A rollicking adventure tale but, as thoroughly reported as it is, it seems to me to be that there is still more to the tale and it doesn't quite live up to its billing.

Bonnie Brody says

What does the murder of a female realtor in the Philippines, shot by a 22 under each eye, have to do with small pharmacies all over the United States that are filling prescriptions over the internet? In addition, what does the foregoing have to do with hitmen, international arms dealers, the smuggling and selling of cocaine and meth, and other international crimes? If you want to know, read this book which is an investigative reporter's dream (or maybe nightmare). The author spent several years working with various police agencies in several countries, the FBI, Interpol, the DEA, etc. to figure out how all of this was connected.

Witnesses often disappeared or were killed. Some of the agencies, and those who worked there, were crooked. The author, Evan Ratliff, realized that police in the Philippines, Somalia, Colombia, and other countries involved in this huge conspiracy, often made so little money that they were unable to live on it. Naturally, they were the perfect targets for payoffs.

If you are a computer buff or a techie, this book is perfect for you. There is a lot about encryption, including a brief mention of Edward Snowden, and the programs that lie just beneath the surface of the regular internet that most of us are not even aware of.

As the author looked into the selling of drugs and arms, murders and international connections, one name kept popping up - Paul Calder Le Roux. When described, he didn't look the part of the mastermind behind all of this. He was very overweight, dressed casually in shorts and flip-flops, but believe me, you didn't want to get on his bad side.

The book is rather complex to follow, mainly because large and brilliant conspiracies are complex and difficult to unravel. If you are a conspiracy theorist, this book is a golden find. It is heavy reading and I was glad that the author included a 'cast of characters' in the beginning as I referred to it many a time.

I love non-fiction books about true crime and there are not much worse crimes than those described in this book.

Matt says

Evan Ratliff has delivered an almost unbelievable account of a sociopathic software engineer who gradually slips through the veil into a shadow world of drugs, mercenaries, and contract killings, eventually becoming a global kingpin able to sponsor coups, buy off politicians and law enforcement, and ship arms, drugs, gold, and diamonds around the world, unfettered. If Mastermind were not such an impressive display of in-depth journalistic talent, it would make an incredible spy-thriller novel. The cast of characters is a rogue's gallery of the greedy and lost who are motivated by cash and an exotic lifestyle even if it means operating in a narrow grey area of legality which often slips into outright violence. But, the central antagonist of this story, Paul Le Roux, is Ratliff's clear obsession. Le Roux is the closest I've ever seen a real person come to being a

Bond villain. He's tech savvy, incredibly wealthy, kills for the most minor infractions, and (view spoiler). Hell, he even bought a yacht originally named "Thunderball".

I don't want to get into all the details because this is the rare non-fiction that you legitimately could spoil, but suffice it to say, that such a character could exist in the real world, and for the US government to have so profoundly erred in their treatment of his conviction is an utter disaster that will certainly be regretted in years to come. Because Le Roux isn't done. If you enjoy spy or adventure novels, true crime, legal thrillers, or even just good gumshoe reporting, devour this book.

(A copy of this book was generously provided to me from Random House through Goodreads Giveaways)

Myles says

In Evan Ratliff's absorbing account of Paul Le Roux's criminal empire, I am reminded of another criminal trial that is presently wrapping up, and a couple of trials that ought to be but are unlikely ever to take place.

Joaquim "El Chapo" Guzman Loera, head of a deadly Sinaloa Mexican drug cartel sits in a Manhattan prison awaiting sentencing for murder, money laundering, drug trafficking, racketeering, and organized crime.

Donald J. Trump, President of the United States, may never stand trial for conspiracy to commit fraud in the transfer of his father's real estate empire to himself and his siblings, for conspiring with a foreign power to undermine the security of the United States, or for conspiring to launder money for known Russian kingpins.

Advances in logistics, computer payment systems, and social media have made massive online fraud in the distribution and consumption of barbiturates eminently feasible for at least a generation. It was these systems which made Le Roux's online prescription services a foregone conclusion and to some degree, virtually unassailable. Nobody will face trial for this: not the courier companies, not the managers of the Internet infrastructure, and as we've seen, not the social media companies that lure the eyeballs of millions of people.

The drugs Le Roux distributed under American law were not "controlled substances" at the time his business swung into full operation. The admittedly brilliant computer programmer used the infrastructure to climb into the stratosphere of the wealthy few.

This newfound power led him to even bigger crimes corrupting public servants in many countries, hustling methamphetamines out of N. Korea (most likely manufactured with the participation of the Kim family), originating targeted assassinations, and shepherding tons of cocaine around the oceans for the El Chapos of the drug world.

Whether the drugs are controlled substances or not seems to be beside the point. There's something about our society that seems to be out of control, something that the wealthiest have figured out: that accountability and transparency have gone out the window.

Corruption is on the ascent across the globe. Vast sums of illegally acquired money and tax-sheltered money move across jurisdictions with the aid of bankers, lawyers, and border personnel. Dictators like Rodrigo Duterte assume power with a mandate to clean up the drug trade in his country so he takes the opportunity to assign death squads to mete out rough justice, but the biggest criminals remain hidden.

Le Roux's saga changed dramatically when he turned state's evidence in rolling up many of his employees and may walk out of an American prison in another ten years.

American prosecutors blurred their priorities enough to give Le Roux an exit plan. First they built a case to convict him of the initial online drug business, then they compiled a record of racketeering and mob-style violence, then another case of shipping controlled substances around the globe, and finally there is a case that he conspired with North Korea and Iran.

American law enforcement found a treasure trove of contacts and information in Le Roux's cooperation, undoubtedly offering him inducements to stay onside, more than we're ever likely to know, and enough to keep him from being criminally accountable on his international crimes.

On one hand you ask yourself: "Well, if El Chapo gets caught and sent to prison after all the drug smuggling, murders, and payoffs to politicians surely the world is a just place after all. With any luck he won't escape a US SuperMax prison."

But for Donald Trump the only exit will be at the ballot box. He has earned the biggest get out of jail free card almost no matter what he does next. There will be a lot of hemming and hawing but the next president will likely do what Barak Obama did and let bygones be bygones. Why? Because ultimately Americans believe the institution would take too big a hit to its prestige to indict either a sitting or past president.

As we learn in this story Trump is negotiating with a regime in N. Korea that not only is building a deliverable nuclear arsenal, but also manufactures massive quantities of methamphetamines bound for the US market. Trump's bro-mance with Kim Jong-un is nothing short of disgusting.

It will be a similar logic to the "too big to fail" rationale taken to preserve US financial institutions.

The question remains "is it right?"

As we roll up environmental protections, human rights legislation, economic redistribution of wealth, and democratic protections around the globe not only is it wrong it risks dooming our society and civilization.

And yet I am a businessman in retail who suffers from an extreme form of accountability. When people leave my stores unhappy, as they sometimes do, a few of them leave really nasty reviews on Google or YELP. So before I begin criticizing seasoned US prosecutors I best settle up with my conscience.

This is a really complex environment to do business, even the business of the people. The prosecutors enforce laws written long before the electronic communications environment we find ourselves in today.

No wonder they had a hard time nailing Le Roux's business.

Amar Pai says

Crazy story! Who knew that the guy who wrote TrueCrypt would be a shadowy criminal mastermind. Well, sort of a mastermind. Real masterminds don't get caught
