

con games

Something about April always reminds me of confidence games — those traps set to snare unwitting victims and take something (often cash and humility).

Maybe it's the fact that the U.S. government reaches into my pocket this time of year and fleeces me out of my hard-earned money under the rubric of taxes. But contemplating my tax forms (designed to create confusion, as any good con game does) made me think of the classic con men of old — you know, the ones immortalized in the great con-game films and novels of all time.

In contemporary film, no one has more to say about the con than writer/director David Mamet. In films such as *House of Games*, *The Spanish Prisoner* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet delivers tight, crisp dialogue and elaborate setups. They also all show the devastating psychological effects of getting cheated. One of his characters asks "Why do they call it the confidence game? Because you give me your confidence? No, because I give you mine."

Ricky Jay, a raconteur if there ever was one, shows up in both *House of Games* and *The Spanish Prisoner*. Jay makes his living as a sleight-of-hand artist and an author. His books show why he is a master of addressing cheats, hustlers, imposters, pretenders and other hoaxes and cons.

In the 1930s and 40s, the country



TAX SEASON REMINDS US ALL OF CLASSIC CON GAMES IN FILM AND LITERATURE

BY MARK LUCE

spawned schemers like microbes in a petri dish. Fortunately, we had writers who wonderfully and darkly chronicled by a series of writers.

For double-crosses and scams where the cost could be your life, check out Dashell Hammett's *The Glass Key* and *The Maltese Falcon*. James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*, also provide wonderful insight into life's seamier side.

Crime master Jim Thompson provides another look at schemers in his excellent novel, *The Grifters*, where a mother and son exchange notes — and much more — on the business of cheating. This, too, was adapted into a won-

derful film starring Anjelica Huston, Annette Bening and John Cusack.

We would be remiss not to mention two more classics of page and screen that will come in very handy if you ever head to the pool hall. *The Hustler* and *The Color of Money* prove the folly of letting ego triumph over common sense. It's tough not to love Paul Newman in both the films, and Tom Cruise gives a great performance as the flaky Vince in *The Color of Money*.

But as good as the movies are, the books are even better, written in jolting style — and with different storylines — by master William Tevis. You'll have to look hard and probably pay a pretty penny to find the books. But for all the insight into the mind of a hustler they are worth their weight in gold.

So, potential suckers be on your toes, don't trust anyone and remember that strangers — no matter how polite — may be out to fleece you.

Mark Luce, who manages to con his way on to this back page every month, is a free-lance writer based in Lawrence, Kan.

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