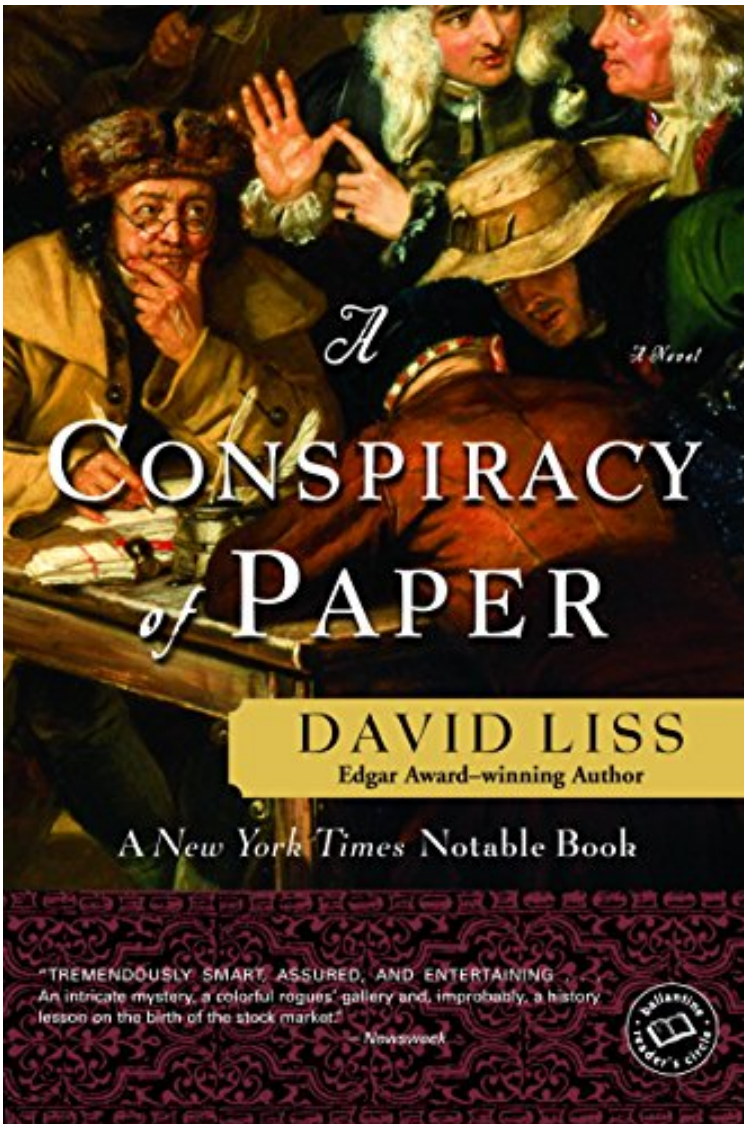


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A Conspiracy of Paper: A Novel



Par David Liss
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurTHE HISTORICAL THRILLER OF THE YEARBenjamin Weaver is an outsider in eighteenth-century London: a Jew among Christians; a ruffian among aristocrats; a retired pugilist who, hired by London's gentry, travels through the criminal underworld in pursuit of debtors and thieves.In A Conspiracy of Paper, Weaver investigates a crime of the most personal sort: the mysterious death of his estranged father, a notorious stockjobber. To find the answers, Weaver must contend with a desperate prostitute who knows too much about his past, relatives who remind him of his alienation from the Jewish faith, and a cabal of powerful men in the world of British finance who have hidden their business dealings behind an intricate web of deception and violence. Relying on brains and brawn, Weaver uncovers the beginnings of a strange new economic order based on stock speculation--a way of life that poses great risk

for investors but real danger for Weaver and his family. In the tradition of *The Alienist* and written with scholarly attention to period detail, *A Conspiracy of Paper* is one of the wittiest and most suspenseful historical novels in recent memory, as well as a perceptive and beguiling depiction of the origin of today's financial markets. In Benjamin Weaver, author David Liss has created an irresistibly appealing protagonist, one who parlays his knowledge of the emerging stock market into a new kind of detective work.

For some years now, the gentlemen of the book trade have pressed me in the most urgent fashion to commit my memoirs to paper; for, these men have argued, there are many who would gladly pay a few shillings to learn of the true and surprising adventures of my life. While it has been my practice to dismiss this idea with a casual wave of the hand, I cannot claim to have never seriously thought on it, for I have often been the first to congratulate myself on having seen and experienced so much, and many times have I gladly shared my stories with good company around a cleared dinner table. Nevertheless, there is a difference between tales told over a late-night bottle of claret and a book that any man anywhere can pick up and examine. Certainly I have taken pleasure from the idea of recounting my history, but I have also recognized that to publish would be a ticklish endeavor: the names and specifics of my adventures would touch nearly on so many people still living that any such book would be actionable to say the least. Yet the idea has intrigued even plagues me, no doubt due to the vanity that breeds within all men's breasts, and perhaps within mine more than most. I have therefore decided to write this book as I see fit. If the gentlemen of Grub Street wish to dash out names of obscure connections, then they may do so. For my part, I shall retain the manuscript so that there can be some true record of these events, if not for this age, then for posterity. I have been at some pains to decide how to begin, for I have seen many things of interest to the general public. Shall I begin like the novelists, with my birth, or like the poets, in the midst of the action? Perhaps neither. I think I shall begin my tale with the day now more than thirty-five years ago when I met William Balfour, for it is the matter regarding his father's death that brought me some small measure of success and recognition with the public. Until now, however, few men have known the whole truth behind that affair.

Mr. Balfour first called on me late one morning in October of 1719, a year of much turmoil upon this island: the nation lived in constant fear of the French and their support for the heir to the deposed King James, whose Jacobitical followers threatened continually to retake the British monarchy. Our German King was but four years upon the throne, and the power struggles within his ministry created a feeling of chaos throughout the capital. All the newspapers decried the burden of the nation's debt, which they said could never be paid, but that debt showed no sign of decreasing. This era was one of exuberance as well as turmoil, doom, and possibility. It was a fine time for a man whose livelihood depended upon crime and confusion. Matters of national politics held little interest for me, however, and the only debt I cared for was my own. And the day I begin my tale I had even more pressing cares than my precarious finances. I had been long awake, but only recently out of bed and dressed, when my landlady, Mrs. Garrison, informed me that there was a Christian gentleman below who wished to see me. My good landlady always felt the need to specify that it was a Christian gentleman come to visit, though in the months I had resided with her, no Jew but myself had ever entered her premises. That morning I found myself disordered and in no condition to receive visitors, let alone strangers, so I asked Mrs. Garrison to send him away, but in her intrepid manner for Mrs. Garrison was a stalwart creature she returned, informing me that the gentleman's business was urgent. "He says it relates to a murder," she told me in the same dull tone she used to announce increases in my rent. Her pallid and beveled face hardened to show her displeasure. "That's what he said: murder. I cannot say it pleases me, Mr. Weaver, to have men come to my house talking of murder." I could not fully comprehend why, if the word was so distasteful to her ears, she should pronounce it quite so loudly within the halls, but I saw my task was to comfort her. "I quite understand, madam. The gentleman surely said 'mercier' and not 'murder,'" I lied, "for I am engaged in a concern of textiles at this moment. Please send him up." The word murder had caught my attention as well as Mrs. Garrison's. Having been involved in a murder of sorts not twelve hours earlier, I thought this matter might concern me indeed. This Balfour would certainly be a scavenger of some kind: the sort of desperate renegade with which London seethed, a creature who combed the dank and filthy streets near the river, hunting for anything he might pawn, including information. No doubt he had heard something of the unfortunate adventure with which I had met and had come to ask me to pay for his silence. I knew well how to dispose of a man of this stripe. Not with money, certainly, for to give a rascal any silver at all was to encourage him to return for more. No, I had found that in these cases violence usually did my business. I would think of something bloodless: something that would not attract Mrs. Garrison's attention when I escorted the blackguard out. A woman with no taste for the talk of murder under her roof should

hardly countenance an act of mutilation paraded down her staircase. I took a moment to order my receiving room, as I called it. I took two rooms of Mrs. Garrison, one private, the other in which I conducted my business. Like many businessmen for so I fancied myself, even then I had been used to order my affairs in a local coffeehouse, but the delicate nature of my work had made such public venues unacceptable to the men I served. Instead, I had set up a room with several comfortable chairs, a table around which to sit, and a handsome set of shelves that I used to store wine and cheese rather than the books for which they were designed. Mrs. Garrison had done the decorating, and while she had given the room an inappropriately cheery tone with its pinkish-white paint and light blue curtains, I found that a few swords and martial prints about the walls helped to add a sufficiently manly corrective. I took pride in these rooms being so very proper, for the genteel tone put the gentlemen who came to seek my services at ease. My trade frequently involved the unsavory, and gentlemen, I had learned, preferred the illusion that they dealt in simple business nothing more. I should like to add, though I risk accusations of vanity, I took pride in my own appearance as well. I had escaped my years as a pugilist with few of the badges that gave fellow-veterans of the ring the appearance of ruffians missing eyes, mashed noses, or such like disfigurements and had no more to show for my beatings than some small scars about my face and a nose that bore only the mild bumps and jagged edges that come with several breakings. Indeed, I fancied myself a well-enough-looking man, and I made a point of always dressing neatly, if modestly. I wore upon my body only clean shirts, and none of my coats and waistcoats were more than a year old. Nevertheless, I was none of your sprightly popinjays who wore the latest bright colors and frills; a man of my trade always prefers simple fashions that draw to himself no particular attention. I seated myself at my large oaken writing desk, which faced the door. I used this desk when I ordered my affairs, but I had discovered that it served to make clear my authority. I thus picked up a pen and contorted the muscles in my face to resemble something like a man both busy and irritated. When Mrs. Garrison showed this visitor in, however, I was at pains to conceal my surprise. William Balfour was no prig as we called thieves in those days but a gentleman of fine dress and appearance. He was perhaps five years younger than myself: I gauged him at two- or three-and-twenty. He was a tall, gaunt, stooped man with something of a sunken look on a wide, handsome face that was only slightly marred by the scars of smallpox. He wore a wig of the first quality, but it showed its age and wear in its stains and a dingy sallow color poorly hidden by powder. Similarly, his clothes bore the signs of fine tailoring, but they looked a bit over-used, covered with the dust of road and panic and cheap lodgings. His waistcoat in particular, once laced with fine silver stuff, was now tattered and threadbare. There was, too, something in his eyes. I could not tell if it was suspicion or fatigue or defeat, and he observed me with a skepticism to which I was all too accustomed. Most men who walk through that door, you understand, had a look prepared for me, scorn, doubt, superiority. A few even had admiration. Men of this last category had seen me in my prime as a pugilist, and their love of sport overcame their embarrassment at seeking the aid of a Jew who meddled in other men's unpleasantries. This Balfour looked at me as neither Jew nor pugilist, but as something else, something of no consequence whatsoever, almost as though I were the servant who should take him to the man he sought. "Sir," I said, standing up as Mrs. Garrison closed the door behind her. I gave Balfour a short bow, which he returned with a wooden resignation. After offering him a seat before my desk, I returned to my chair and informed him I awaited his commands. He hesitated before stating his business, taking a moment to study my features I should say gawk at my features, for he regarded me as more spectacle than man. His eye roamed with clear disapproval at my face and clothing (though both were cleaner and neater than his own), and squinted at my hair; for, unlike a proper gentleman, I wore no peruke, and instead pulled my locks back in the style of a tie-periwig. "You, I presume, are Benjamin Weaver," he began at last in a voice that cracked with uncertainty. He hardly noticed my nod of acknowledgment. "I come on a serious matter. I am not pleased to be forced to seek your peculiar skills, but I require the assistance that only a man such as yourself can provide." He shifted uneasily in his chair, and I wondered if Mr. Balfour was not what he claimed if he were perhaps a man of a much lower order than he affected, masquerading as a gentleman. There was, after all, the murder he had spoken of to Mrs. Garrison, but I now could not but wonder if the murder he mentioned was the one that so plagued my own thoughts. "I hope I am able to be of some assistance to you," I said, with practiced civility. I laid down my pen and cocked my head slightly to show him that I put my full attention at his disposal. His hands shook distractingly while he studied his fingernails with unconvincing indifference. "Yes, it is an unpleasant business, so I am sure you are quite equal to the task." I offered him a brief bow from my chair and told him he was too kind or some other like platitude, but he hardly noticed what I said. Despite his attempts to perform a sort of fashionable lassitude, he appeared for

all the world like a man on the brink of choking, as though his collar tightened about his throat. He bit his lip. He looked about the room, eyes darting here and there. "Sir," I said, "you will forgive me if I note that you appear a little discomposed. Can I offer you a glass of port?" My words all but slapped him in the face, and he collected himself once again to the posture of an insouciant buck. "I must imagine that there are less presumptuous ways for you to inquire into a gentleman's distresses. Nevertheless, I shall take a drink of whatever quality you have upon you." It was not out of deference that I allowed Balfour to insult me freely.

Once I had established myself in my trade, it took no great amount of time to learn that men of birth or standing had a profound need to demonstrate their superiority not to the man they hired to meddle in their private business, but to the business itself. I could not take Balfour's freedoms personally, for they were not directed at me. I also knew that once I had effectively served such a man, the memory of his discourteous behavior often inspired him to pay promptly and to recommend my skills to his acquaintances. I therefore tossed off Mr. Balfour's insults as a bear tosses off the dogs sent to bait it in Hockley-in-the-Hole. I poured his wine and returned to my desk. He took a sip. "I am not discomposed," he assured me. If the quality of my drink pleasantly surprised my guest, as I expected it should, he thought this fact not worth mentioning. "I am certainly tired from a poor night's rest, and indeed" he paused to look at me pointedly "I am in mourning for my father, who died not two months ago." I offered my apologies and then startled myself by telling him that

I too had recently lost a father. Balfour astonished me in return by telling me that he knew of my father's death. "Your father, sir, and my own were acquaintances. They did business together, you know, at times when my father had the need to call on a man of your father's . . . sort." I would like to believe that I showed no surprise, but I doubt it was so. My given name is not Weaver, but Lienzo. Few men were familiar with my true name, so I could not have anticipated that this man would know the identity of my father. I could not guess what else Balfour knew of me, but I asked no questions. I only nodded slowly.

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Liss isn't finished with Benjamin Weaver. Booklist