



Chemical Cowboys: The DEA's Secret Mission to Hunt Down a Notorious Ecstasy Kingpin

Lisa Sweetingham

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In 1995, after receiving a tip from an informant that a new drug called Ecstasy was being pushed in Manhattan's nightclubs, DEA agent Robert Gagne embarked on a mission to unravel one of the world's most lucrative drug-trafficking networks. *Chemical Cowboys* tracks Gagne as he infiltrates New York's club scene, uncovering a multimillion-dollar criminal empire that spans continents. At its helm is Oded "Fat Man" Tuito, an Israeli fugitive and elusive drug kingpin who combines Wall Street business savvy with old-fashioned street smarts and a taste for violence.

A taut behind-the-scenes glimpse into an international criminal enterprise, **Chemical Cowboys** is a riveting tale of one man's obsessive pursuit of justice—and the personal cost of that obsession.

Chemical Cowboys: The DEA's Secret Mission to Hunt Down a Notorious Ecstasy Kingpin Details

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Valorie says

Chemical Cowboys: The DEA's Secret Mission to Hunt Down a Notorious Ecstasy Kingpin by Lisa Sweetingham traces the evolution of the popular rave and nightclub drug, Ecstasy. DEA Agent Gagne first notices the drug in its early years, when it was known as a "kiddie dope" and overlooked by officials focused on harder drugs like cocaine and heroine. Infiltrating the New York night club scene, Gagne and his partner track nightclub owner Peter Gatien and his league of employees including Club Kid King Michael Alig (remember the movie Party Monster?... that guy). But Gatien and Alig are just small pieces in a larger, more world-wide drug puzzle full of danger, violence, death, and money. At the top of the international drug chain is Oded "the Fat Man" Tuito, and Gagne soon sets his sights on catching and convicting Tuito, as well as some of his other associates and drug pushers.

Sweetingham takes the reader around the world, from Israel to Amsterdam, to Belgium and France, and back to the United States into the club scene and the mob. We witness law enforcement around the world working together to gain evidence and convictions. We are also given the ins and outs of how big time international drug dealers hide out, hide evidence, launder money, and pass drugs through airport and port security.

This is a book full of twists and turns, with real life people and events and only minor details changed, mainly for the sake of condensing or protecting some of the people involved. When you read this book, you don't feel like you are reading some stiff account of justice in action— it is certainly not dry. Sweetingham has written the book with enough personality and excitement that one could easily be reading a crime mystery novel. This book is further proof that the things that happen in real life can be just as good as anything you see on TV or read in fiction. What makes this book even more fascinating is that you know while reading it that these things really did and are still happening all around you. Names, places, and events are all familiar and distinct.

You'll learn a lot of about drug trafficking and how law enforcement tracks down criminals. I wasn't aware that there were so many restrictions and regulations in place for Agents, and it was frustrating to me to see the bad guy get away so many times! This book must have taken a lot of time, and had to have required Sweetingham to research a lot. The sheer detail and specifics of the book shows that Sweetingham really knows what she is talking about and properly investigated the key players and chronology from beginning to end and everything connecting in a confusing and intricate web of drug crime.

Chris says

Worth buying for the byline photograph alone.

Bridget says

Chemical Cowboys looks into the lives of many drug dealers and cops. For the longest time Cocaine and Heroin were the most talked about drugs. That all changed with the blink of an eye. All of a sudden there

was a new club drug called Ecstasy. A few smart but crooked businessmen decided to take on this new drug and smuggle it to the United States. Luckily for the DEA, they had Bob Gagne as a detective. While other cops were chasing the known big wigs, Gagne talked his partner Germanowski into going after the new love drug because he knew it was going to be big. They even dressed up in drag to get into a nightclub so they could buy some pills.

A few different countries decide to team up and share information because this new drug is popping up everywhere. This is the key to bringing these drug lords down.

This was an amazing book. I don't know about you guys but I love to learn. Even if I just learn one new word from a book, I'm satisfied. Chemical Cowboys has so much information and Lisa Sweetingham knows how to deliver knowledge without sounding textbook like. A couple of things that I learned were that prisoners in Israel can take a vacation once every three months, even they were sentenced to life in prison. I also learned that therapists used to give Ecstasy (except it was called MDMA) to couples in couples counseling. That's just the tip of the iceberg. Lisa can teach you a lot through this book. I recommend it to anyone who wants to learn more. This would be great to give your father on Father's Day.

Thank you Tracee from Pump Up Your Book Promotion and Lisa Sweetingham for sending me this book to review.

Wendy says

Journalist and author Lisa Sweetingham takes the readers behind the scenes of the investigations into major Ecstasy rings, while following the career of Special Agent Robert Gagne. For many years, Ecstasy was not taken all that seriously. It was "kiddie dope". Special Agent Gagne with the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) would play an integral part in changing that. Gagne was passionate about his work and wanted to make a difference. While most DEA investigations were focused on cocaine and heroin in and around 1995, he was hoping to go in a different direction, go after a lesser known drug. A call from an informant who was given a sample of Ecstasy by two Israeli Nationals was just the break he needed.

Ecstasy got its start as a psychotropic drug and was quite popular for couple's counseling during the 1970's and 1980's. It's official name is 3, 4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). It earned the name "Empathy" because of the effects it had on users, including a feeling of euphoria and heightened sensitivity; however later came to be called Ecstasy. In 1988, MDMA became a Schedule 1 Drug, determined to be highly addictive and with no real medical purpose. The effects of the drug diminish with each use, causing users to use more and more to gain the same results as when they begin taking it. The side effects and consequences of using Ecstasy, especially long-term use, can lead to permanent brain damage and even death.

While very popular among young adults, Ecstasy knows no boundaries. It holds appeal to a wide spectrum of people from all walks of life. As the drug grew in popularity and there was a greater demand for the drug, it became all the more challenging for law enforcement officials to crack down on it. When one person in the Ecstasy chain was arrested or disappeared, another was immediately ready to take that person's place. The Ecstasy business was ever changing and growing rapidly.

The book opens with a stakeout in Los Angeles in November of 1999. DEA agents followed their suspects and watched as they abandoned a SUV. Suspecting it was a trick set up by the suspects to make sure they were not being watched, the agents laid in wait, keeping an eye on the vehicle for days. Eventually, they made a move on the vehicle and discovered the body of a man linked to the Israeli mafia. There were

obvious signs of his having been murdered. Suddenly, the stakes had risen and it was not just about the drugs anymore.

In 1973, President Nixon's declaration of war on drugs led to the establishment of the DEA. In the early years, the DEA went after anyone they could get, and that often meant the little guys. Today, they go for those higher up in the hierarchy. They want to suppliers and the cartel heads. It was no different for Special Agent Gagne and his partner, Special Agent Germanoski. The agents began by investigating two low level Israeli drug dealers in New York in 1995 and worked their way up from there. They infiltrated the nightclub scene, posing as gay ravers, in an effort to bring down Peter Gatien, a well-connected nightclub owner who they believed was a major player behind the scenes of the Ecstasy trade. Unfortunately, the jury found him not guilty despite the damaging evidence against him. Special Agent Gagne was not so willing to let it go, and, as a result, suffered a blow when he is assigned a desk job, his maverick style finally catching up with him. However, that did not stop him from doing what he could to stay involved with the Ecstasy scene.

In 1995, when Gagne and Germanoski began their investigation into Ecstasy sales, the drug was barely a blip on the map. As time went on and the demand for the drug grew, other agencies across the globe began to take notice. The problem was so widespread that it did not take long before law enforcement agencies around the world joined forces to tackle the growing problem. The effort was lead by Gadi Eshed with the Israeli National Police. Once the various law enforcement agencies came together, their jobs suddenly became a lot easier. The tangled web of the Ecstasy underworld, at least that under investigation, was beginning to be unraveled.

The drug was being imported into the United States from Holland. Israeli Nationals played a large part in the organization and distribution of Ecstasy during the 1980's, 1990's and early 2000's. It was even tempting enough for the Israeli mafia to take up. The three countries, working with other countries across Europe, were able to put a major dent in the Ecstasy trade.

While Special Agent Gagne plays a large part in Lisa Sweetingham's book, he is not the only major player, nor even the most important. The bringing down of a major Ecstasy kingpin, Oded Tuito, and many others tied to the industry was the result of the hard work of many. While jurisdictional issues occasionally came into play, for the most part the various law enforcement agencies involved worked together for their common cause. They relied heavily on confidential sources, such as informants. In fact, many of their leads come from those on the inside.

It will come as no surprise that I am a fan of crime fiction, especially mysteries. I am fascinated by the investigative process, the discovery of clues that lead to another and another and how it all comes together in the end. True life investigations are even more fascinating in many ways. You may not be able to get into the characters' heads quite the way you can in fiction (which is one of the aspects I especially find appealing in reading fiction), but you can get a glimpse at how crimes are really solved and of our legal system at work.

I have a new found respect for the hard work and dedication of those investigating drug crime rings and just what they are up against. They have an immense amount of patience, that's for sure, and their job requires meticulous attention to details. I am glad to have people like Special Agent Gagne and Commander Gadi Eshed on the job. They both take their jobs very seriously and it shows in their work product—and in their personal lives.

There are a lot of players mentioned in this book, both criminals and authorities. Usually I do not have trouble keeping several characters straight while reading, but in this case, it proved to be a bit of a challenge. Fortunately, Sweetingham did try and help, reminding the reader of the link between one person and another without being repetitive; however, I would not have minded having an organizational chart to help me keep it all straight. Especially one or two involving the various criminal groups.

I never know quite how to review a nonfiction book. While the events covered in the pages of Chemical Cowboys are factual and a matter of record, I do not want to spoil the book just the same. I will not go so far as to say the book reads like fiction, but I will say that it flows smoothly and the author has done a good job in presenting the information she has gathered. Is the book suspenseful? Yes. Informative? Absolutely. Did I enjoy it? Very much. Chemical Cowboys was without a dull moment. Sweetingham kept me interested from the very first page through to the last.

With both the law enforcement officers, the criminals and those who fall somewhere in between, the author presented them as the human beings they are, with their strengths and vulnerabilities. At times she talked about their families and their hopes and dreams, along with their failures. The people described in the book are more than just names on a page. Lisa Sweetingham saw to that.

While the efforts of the DEA and their allies had a major impact on the Ecstasy trade, the distribution and abuse of the drug continues still today. There are new criminals in place to do the dirty work, and law enforcement agencies all over the world continue to do what they can to make our streets safer.

Melinda Elizabeth says

It began as a good book, I enjoyed the chapters on the New York club scene in the early 90's and the undercover investigations that took place, but when it became all about extradition and boring legalese it lost me.

B... says

Remember “e”? Remember the 90’s and early 00’s, when Ecstasy was plastered all over the newspaper and television media, billed as the drug menace du jour? Pop culture has always overlapped heavily with drug culture, and in the late 90’s, Ecstasy was at the center of both. Like cocaine in the 80’s, Ecstasy had its’ moment in the limelight, and eventually took its’ place in the cosmopolitan of American pop culture. Chemical Cowboys is the story of how Ecstasy came to prevalence, and, ultimately, how law enforcement reacted to stem the import and circulation of “kiddie dope.”

Chemical Cowboys reads like that which it professes to be - a thoroughly-researched and intricately-woven account of lawmen versus outlaws. There are few surprises here - we all know how things will end up; it’s the getting there that makes the book fun and worthy of a read. While there are many characters in the story, and relatively little character development, one must remember that this is not a tale of emotions and introspection. This is the true story of the rise of Ecstasy to near-glamour-drug status, and with it the emergence onto the international stage of a relatively new crime syndicate - the Israeli mafia. Even more so, this is the story of the DEA becoming aware of the rising popularity of Ecstasy, and struggling to find its’ footing on unfamiliar ground; trying to contain the import and sale of a drug about which it had very little prior knowledge.

What starts off as a chance encounter between an informant and two ecstasy dealers grows over years into a multinational antidrug operation, garnering unprecedented cooperation between American and Israeli law enforcement. The story’s protagonist is Special Agent Robert Gagne of the New York Field Department, who must balance a desire for the demanding and often-chaotic life of a field agent with a competing desire to have a “normal” life and a family. While the story features several other important characters, on both sides of the law, none are presented to the reader on such an in-depth level as that of Gagne. Nonetheless,

Sweetingham does an appreciable job of juggling a relatively large cast of characters, imbuing each with as much a degree of humanity as can be expected from the surprisingly brief 425 pages.

Reading *Chemical Cowboys* feels much like watching a crime drama movie, due to Sweetingham's fast-paced storytelling. Additionally, the recent time frame in which the book is set makes many of the events especially relevant to 20-somethings such as myself, who were too young at the time to have fully comprehended the rise of cocaine in the 70's and 80's. *Chemical Cowboys* serves to fill in - in impressive detail - the driving forces behind the emergence of Ecstasy in mainstream American culture, as well as describe the struggle that ensued between the smugglers who made a living outside the law, and those who made it their mission to bring the outlaws to justice. A worthwhile read for those who have an interest in learning more about the Ecstasy phenomenon, as well as those who enjoy nonfiction crime stories as a genre.

Sara says

I just read *Clubland* before this book and I wish I would have read this one first. This book was more of an in depth look at the whole ecstasy/drug trade.

Jennifer Walker says

In *Chemical Cowboys*, Lisa Sweetingham does not so much tell a story as weave a tapestry, creating a rich picture of a world most people would never dream of. Through the course of the tale, the reader is transported back and forth through time until they have gained a nearly overwhelming level of detail into each character, details that give great understanding of who they are and what motivates them. The reader is taken from the very beginning, when the drug was first introduced, through its introduction in the clubs, its peak of popularity around the turn of the 21st century and finally its dramatic decline due to the DEA's efforts in cooperation with other countries.

Lisa Sweetingham, a senior staff writer at CourtTV.com, shows her incredible level of knowledge and many hours of painstaking research in the writing of this book. Every I is dotted, every T is crossed, and no stone is unturned. *Chemical Cowboys* is both an entertaining read and a valuable history. It is the ultimate in crime drama, because it is at once fantastic and true.

Steven Jr. says

When I decided to set out to write a crime thriller that revolved around the drug war, I decided that researching DEA investigations would be a good start. *Chemical Cowboys* was one of the first books I picked up in my endeavor to learn more about drug investigations.

That was in 2014. The book has been sitting on my shelf for almost four years before I finally got around to picking it up. That should give you an idea as to how fickle I can be with pushing forward with a writing idea. But I digress.

Chemical Cowboys initially follows DEA Special Agent Bob Gagne of the New York Field Division as he blazes a trail in the War on Drugs: building large investigations against ecstasy dealers. Before Gagne's push,

ecstasy was considered "kiddie dope" in comparison to marijuana, cocaine, and heroin.

Gagne was the game changer on the government side. His opposite: Israeli ex-pat Oded Tuito, also known as the Fat Man, a fugitive in his homeland who brought the ecstasy trade wholesale to the United States by way of the Netherlands.

Lisa Sweetingham does an excellent job chronicling the paths of both Gagne and Tuito, as well as their various cohorts. The end of the book shifts the focus to the Israeli National Police as another player enters the ecstasy game. The events read as if they could have been penned by the Law & Order team, or as if they could be turned into a David Ayer crime thriller. Some events almost seem too strange to be true.

Chemical Cowboys also does an outstanding job highlighting something that many outside of criminal justice circles and Israeli national circles may not know: Israel's massive organized crime problem, particularly with one Ze'ev Rosenstein. While throughout the book, international law enforcement cooperation is mentioned several times in detail, it is the closing chapters of the book dealing with Rosenstein that detail just how critical that cooperation is when dealing with transnational criminal enterprises.

I would definitely recommend Chemical Cowboys to fans of the true crime genre and those wanting an inside look into the War on Drugs. It is a fascinating, well-constructed read.

Caitlin says

Anyone who attended any raves in the 1980's or who went to a bar in Dallas during the same time period for that matter knows something about Ecstasy. For a period of time before it became a Schedule I drug it was easily obtainable & frequently used. Once it became a Schedule I drug, it was still frequently used, but more expensive & somewhat harder to find.

This well-written book is an account of one DEA agent's years-long quest to take down an Israeli crime boss who was responsible for the importation of much of the Ecstasy sold in the United States. This is an investigation that took place over many years & the book covers all of it, including another look at the Michael Alig case.

This book is full of facts, figures, & details, but never reads like it is. It is fast-paced, interesting, & provides a unique perspective on how cases such as these are made. Whatever your take is on the legality or illegality of drugs, it's hard to deny that Tuito was a hardcore criminal & hard not to cheer when he is taken down.

This was an excellent read & would make a great gift for Father's Day offering all the action anyone can handle in a well-written package that will keep you reading to the end.

Laura says

Wow does this books suck so far. I'm on page 56 and still don't give a fuck. Another pile of shit.

Laura Hinrichs says

This book came highly recommended. It was slow and plodding. I kept trudging through it thinking it would get better. I was wrong.

Marcus says

Weaved together as a tale, this book of non-fiction accounts is an interesting read. If you ever wanted to know the history of Ecstasy/MDMA, this is the definitive volume you need to read. Chemical Cowboys covers its early history, major criminal cases, and more, once read you will be an expert on this topic. I could not put this book down, every new tale was interesting and made me want to read more. The author does a good job trying to balance the perspectives of cops and crooks within this tale. One con of this tale is how well informed the cop sections are versus their counterparts. I wish they would have interviewed more criminals for the book. If you like criminal justice books, investigative tales, or are interested in drug history, this is a must read.

Justin says

I actually didn't finish this book. For such a potentially exciting topic, it read very slowly. Add to that the often bizarre and disturbing nature of many of the passages, and I ended up putting it down about a third of the way through.

Mike Schneider says

Fairly interesting non-fiction account of how the Drug Enforcement Agency works its way up the drug organizations to try to take down the top guys. I enjoyed it for the insight it gave into this effort. The book seems well-researched and is certainly well-documented, but after a while, it becomes a recitation of arrests, turning the arrestee to an informant, then arresting the next rung. I'm sure the actual work is much more interesting.
