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John Kosner ▼

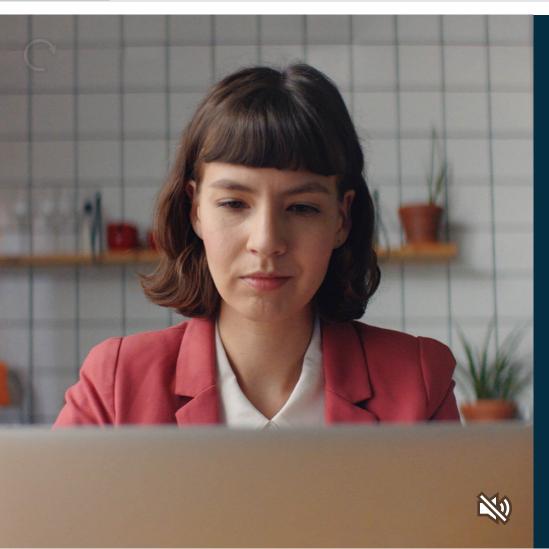
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Review: Take the Money and Jump

Air piracy in America peaked in the early '70s, triggered by D.B. Cooper's exploits and a design quirk of the Boeing 727. By Edward Kosner

Nov. 9, 2023 at 6:01 pm ET **Listen** (6 min) Gift unlocked article



but no trace of Cooper has ever been found.

Mexico. The refueled jet headed south. Over the Cascade mountain range, Cooper jumped from the plane's rear-exit stairway, the cash in a bag tied to his body. Years later, some of the money turned up half-buried in the wilderness—

were delivered on the tarmac in Seattle, Cooper directed the pilots to fly to

An artist's rendering of Cooper in his shiny wraparound sunglasses quickly became a pop icon. The skyjacker also triggered a run of bizarre copycat crimes. Now John Wigger, a history professor at the University of Missouri, has reconstructed Cooper's story, among others, in "The Hijacking of American Flight 119: How D.B. Cooper Inspired a Skyjacking Craze and the FBI's Battle to Stop It." Meticulously reported, the book belongs on the shelf with other pop histories of the febrile last decades of the 20th century in America. Over time and as the number of

GRAB A COPY copycat skyjackers increased, the author writes, the FBI and other The Hijacking of American Flight 119: How authorities developed a profile of the D.B. Cooper Inspired a Skyjacking Craze kind of desperate man who seized and the FBI's Battle to Stop It planes: "He was at one end of the mid-twenties-to-mid-forties age By John Wigger range," Mr. Wigger tells us. "He had Oxford University Press recent triggers—divorce and the loss

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get lost in dense clouds of minutiae.

Louis because security at that airport was lax.

engines.

recalled.

made a complicated series of demands." The skyjacker's job was made easier by the 1964 introduction of the Boeing 727—with its rear trijet and aft exit stairway—which enabled hijackers to escape by parachute without being swept against the wings or tail, or cooked in the exhaust from wing-borne Mr. Wigger offers an encyclopedic account of skyjacking. Many air pirates in the 1960s, he tells us, including Black Panthers with criminal records, landed in Havana; the Cubans stashed most of them in what they called Hijack House. Others received a long sentence in Cuban prisons, much of it served in solitary confinement. The experience dashed any fantasies about life in Castro's Cuba. "Compared to this, San Quentin was a country club," one wised-up revolutionary

of his job—that pushed him over the

edge. He spun elaborate ruses and

need to know about many other peripheral figures. Mr. Wigger also delivers a potted social history of American commercial aviation—including the fact that flight-attendant supervisors would pat their charges on the rear before takeoff to make sure they were wearing a girdle. There's the history of the parachute, too. Still, the skyjacking narratives are inherently compelling. The case of American Airlines Flight 119 came soon after Cooper's caper. The air pirate fit the profile: Marty McNally, a 28-year-old from Michigan—divorced, jobless and in debt. He was familiar with aircraft after serving as a flight electrician aboard Navy patrol

The author uses the post-Cooper 1972 hijacking of American Airlines Flight 119,

from New York to Los Angeles—with stops in St. Louis, Tulsa and Phoenix—as

about that episode and others—the search for perpetrators, their capture or

the scaffolding on which he hangs his tale. But he also slathers on so much detail

demise, the denomination of bills in the ransoms demanded—that the reader can

Unless you skip many passages, you'll learn the college background and marital

status of almost every FBI agent investigating these cases and more than you

planes tracking Russian submarines off Alaska. He'd hatched his skyjacking

scheme in a desperate effort to change his luck and chose to catch the plane at St.

On June 23, 1972, under the name Robert Wilson, McNally boarded the 727 with

a round-trip ticket for Tulsa. In his briefcase were a cheap wig, rubber gloves, a

smoke grenade, a sawed-off machine gun and a pistol. Once airborne, he ducked

into the lavatory and emerged wearing the wig and gloves, clutching the machine gun. Mr. Wigger delivers a taut account of the episode—the return to St. Louis to collect the \$500,000 and parachutes that McNally demanded; the delay when an angry civilian trying to thwart the skyjacking drove onto the tarmac and crashed his Cadillac into the 727's landing gear; McNally's daredevil jump from the plane after he ordered it to be diverted over tiny Peru, Ind.; and his loss of the loot in midair. After landing and hiding his parachute under a rock, McNally made his

way to Peru and roosted in the same motel as several of the FBI agents hunting

of his ransom note, which had been retrieved from the plane's aft staircase.

him. He was finally captured after the FBI matched his fingerprints on fragments

The jury took less than an hour to convict McNally after the government called 52 witnesses against him. He was sentenced to two life terms but was eligible for parole after 15 years. A number of the other early Cooper copycats also received long sentences but served only a fraction of the time behind bars. McNally was the last skyjacker to parachute from a plane, Mr. Wigger writes. Air piracy peaked between 1968 and 1972, then petered out thanks to stiffer penalties imposed for the crime, the introduction of stringent airport security and the installation of an ingenious mechanism ensuring that the aft stairways on 727s could never be opened in flight.

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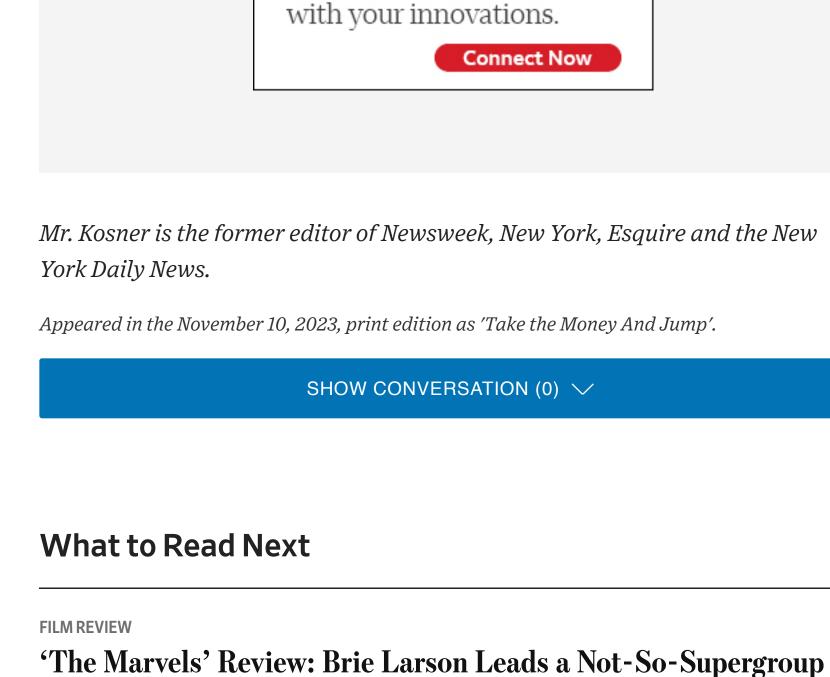
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It would be ironic if it turned out that D.B. Cooper survived long enough to savor

the postmodern crime wave his madcap exploit inspired.



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