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'The King of Diamonds' Review: While You Were Out

He always called ahead, making sure no one was home. During one lucrative stretch, he looted six homes for a \$1.4 million haul.

By Edward Kosner May 1, 2024 at 11:23 am ET



PHOTO GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES

In classic cop-speak, the bold, agile perp had a practiced M.O., or modus operandi. The jewel thief would approach one of the mansions of Dallas's oil and tech millionaires at night from a nearby creek or wooded path, first calling ahead to make sure the family was out. He'd scale a boundary wall, jimmy open a sliding glass door to the garden and creep up the steps to the master bedroom, where he'd find the jewel box in which the lady of the house kept the necklaces, rings, brooches and earrings she flaunted at the balls and galas so popular with Big D's new-rich. The family dogs never barked at the intruder, who left waffle-patterned footprints.

The thief didn't grab it all, but carefully snatched the best pieces, leaving the dross behind. Should the couple happen to be at home and awakened by his presence, he'd shine his flashlight in their eyes so they couldn't see his face as he darted off. In the early 1960s, his take ran to \$6 million; during one span in 1961, he looted six homes for a \$1.4 million haul (all in today's money). He was promptly crowned "The King of Diamonds."

That's also the title of Rena Pederson's saga of the master thief's rampage through Dallas and nearby Fort Worth more than a half-century ago. Ms. Pederson is the author of five books and the onetime editorial-page editor of the Dallas Morning News. Deeply researched and fluidly written, her book is something of a shaggy-dog story short of hirsute pooches that meanders to the circumstantial revelation of the culprit.

The void is filled by a detailed social history of the Clint Murchisons, H.L. Hunts, Jimmy Lings and other prime customers of Dallas's flashy new Neiman Marcus emporium and the parallel tale of the city's mob-drenched underworld, part of the "Dixie Mafia." Along the way, there are visits to the Top O' Hill Terrace casino, the local gambling mecca, and the Cipango Club, "a mix of El Morocco and Rick's Cafe" renowned for its "all you can eat for a thousand dollars" cuisine.

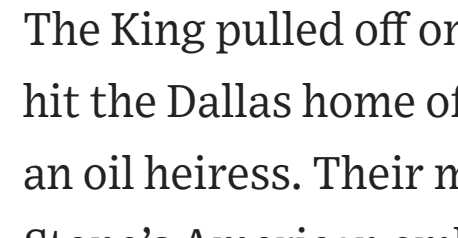
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The King of Diamonds: The Search for the Elusive Texas Jewel Thief

By Rena Pederson Pegasus Books

416 pages

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There are cameo appearances by, among others, Jack Ruby, the killer of Lee Harvey Oswald; Joseph Cavello, the mob boss of Dallas; the stripper Candy Barr; and NFL stars Paul Hornung and Alex Karras. Omnipresent are the city's earnest but overmatched cops, whose phones would regularly jangle with news of the latest break-in. "Because he evaded the police for so long, the King of Diamonds was a superstar in burglary ranks," writes the author. "The Houdini of thieves, invisible

as a ghost, light-footed as Fred Astaire, and able to disappear into the night before anyone knew he was there."

Ms. Pederson chattily injects herself into the narrative, quizzing victims and potential suspects as well as the cops. "In my own way, I was as unassuming as Agatha Christie's rumples Miss Marple," she confides, "but without the hat and knitting. . . . After years of newspaper work, I'd learned how to ask questions and read faces. You could say I'd been around—or at least nearby."

The King pulled off one of his flashiest jobs early in his run, in 1959, when he hit the Dallas home of Bruno Graf, a German émigré, and his wife, Josephine, an oil heiress. Their mansion, designed by Edward Durrell Stone, resembled Stone's American embassy in New Delhi. The splashy dining-room table was on a platform surrounded by a 4-foot-deep moat, which made for novel table talk if precarious seating and eating.

On the night of the robbery, the Graf's stayed late at—what else?—the Jewel Ball in Fort Worth and didn't roll in until 3 a.m. Exhausted, Josephine Graf stashed her jewelry in a dressing-table drawer instead of the safe. While she snoozed, the King crept in and pocketed the gems she'd worn to the dance—a diamond necklace, earrings, a jeweled pin and, as the author describes it, her 20.4-carat ring "as big as the Alamo," a haul worth \$2.2 million today.

Early on, Ms. Pederson introduces us to likely the two unhappiest men on the Dallas police force: Capt. Walter Fannin, the head of the burglary-and-theft department, and one of his crack detectives, the swaggering Paul McCaghren. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in "Hamlet," they are frustrated characters in the drama, more often perplexed than not.

Over time, the cops interviewed more than 2,000 people and gave lie-detector tests to some 200 of them. But because so many of the thefts were associated with social events, the police began focusing on potential suspects from that world—frequent escorts at debutante balls, event planners, florists, catering staff and others involved with the posh galas.

An athletic, social-climbing doctor drew attention, along with an interior decorator, a hair stylist who primped many of the victims, an Italian gallery owner who made busts of wealthy patrons in their homes, and a local doyenne described as "a cross between Auntie Mame and Lady Macbeth" who might have directed a young accomplice to steal the jewelry. The cops also suspected a notorious gigolo, pimp and gambler. They followed the burglar's footprints home to a house owned by a man from a prominent hardware-store family, only to be stymied by protective politicians.

"The King of Diamonds" ends inconclusively with the author speculating that the thefts actually involved three of her characters—one who got the original idea and then teamed up with two others. Still, it's quite a yarn. "When people look back on the King of Diamonds era," Ms. Pederson concludes, "they don't remember the excesses—and inequalities—as much as they remember the great flair and style. They remember the larger-than-life characters who lived with gusto, partying as if there were no tomorrow."

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Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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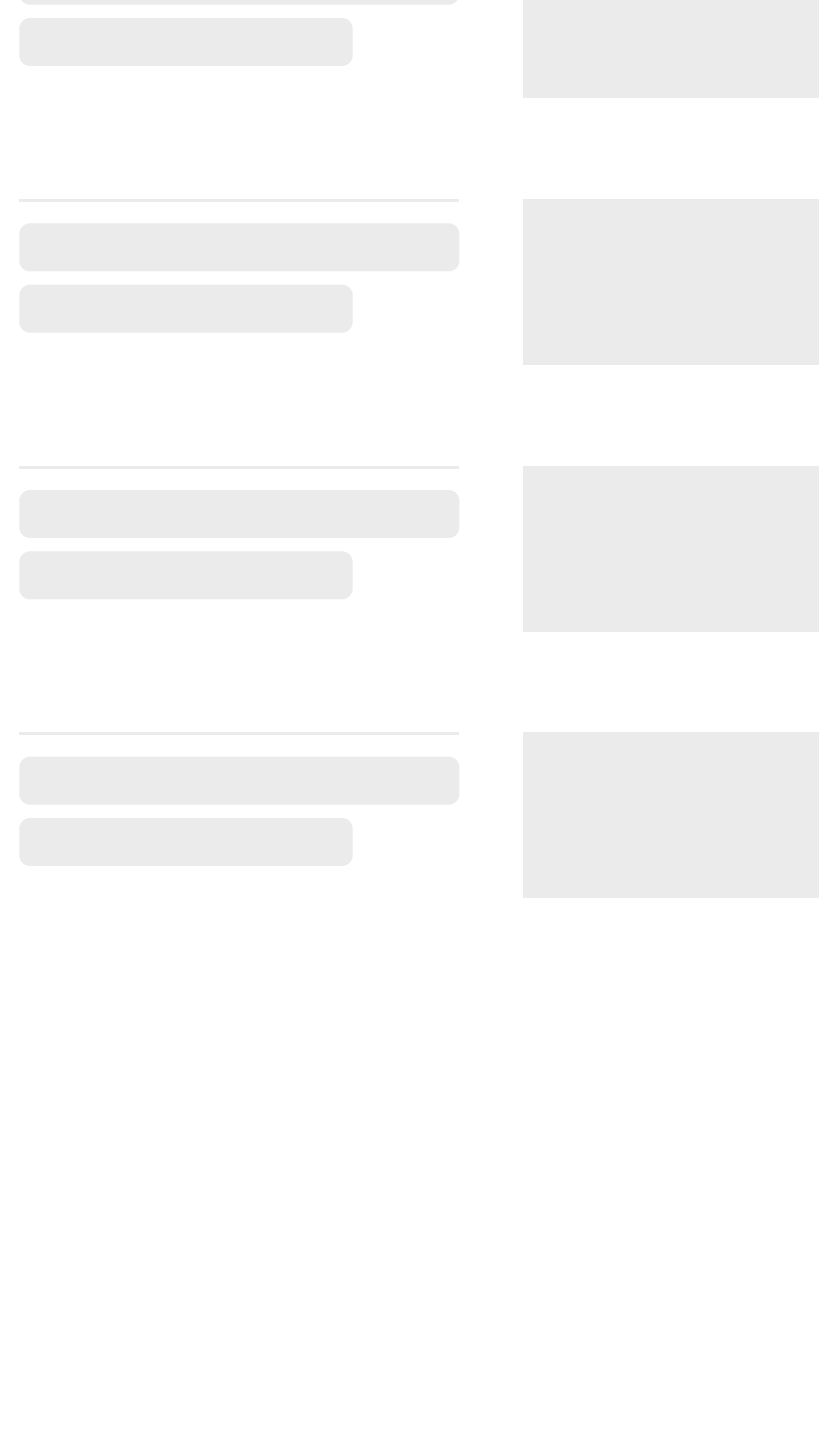
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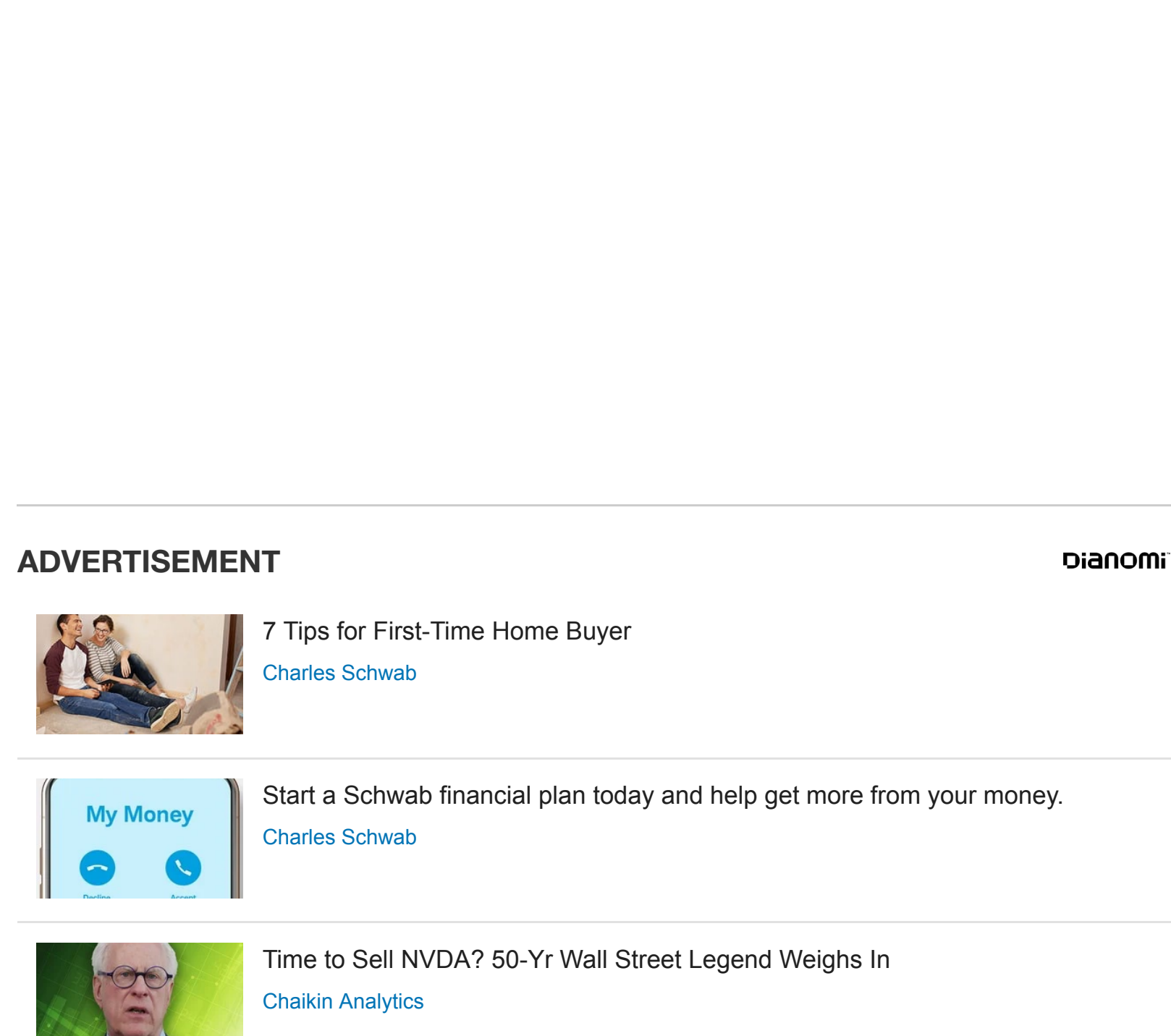
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