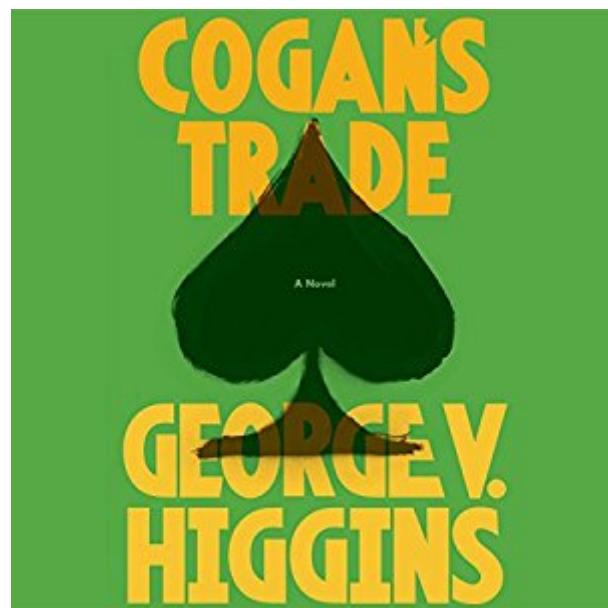


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# Cogan's Trade



## **Synopsis**

Coogan's Trade is the basis for the upcoming movie *Killing Them Softly*, starring Brad Pitt. Cogan's Trade is the top-notch crime novel rated by *The New Yorker* as the "best" from "the Balzac of the Boston underworld". Crackling dialogue, mordant humor, and unremitting tension drive the suspenseful stakes of the game higher in Boston's precarious underworld of small-time mobsters, crooked lawyers, and political gofers as George V. Higgins, the writer who boiled crime fiction harder, tracks Jackie Cogan's career in a gangland version of law and order. For Cogan is an enforcer; and when the Mob's rules get broken, he gets hired to ply his trade: murder. In the gritty, tough-talking pages of Higgins' 1974 national best-seller, Cogan is called in when a high-stakes card game under the protection of the Mob is heisted. Expertly, with a ruthless businessman's efficiency, a shrewd sense of other people's weaknesses, and a style as cold as his stare, Cogan moves with reliable precision to restore the status quo as ill-conceived capers and double-dealing shenanigans erupt into high-voltage violence.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

When you run a business and problems pop up, you have to retain specialists to deal with them. Say you operate a restaurant and your dishwasher breaks down; you have to bring in a plumber to fix it. Your business uses computers to keep track of inventory and your server goes down? Chances are you are going to have to hire an IT expert. So it is with organized crime: when an enterprise goes off the tracks, somebody has to fix it - particularly when the way it goes awry scares

away the customers the business depends on. Thus, when a trio of numbskulls robs a Mafia-protected illegal gambling operation in Boston in 1974. The mob turns to Jackie Cogan to manage the repair job. Fixing the damage is crucial: since the robbery, all the mob-connected card games have shut down and the Mafia is losing a fortune in tribute the games' operators pay to remain in business. The success of one robbery has raised the prospect of copycats, so the perpetrators must be found and dealt with quickly. Cogan is a specialist in fixing this type of problem by a judicious application of violence. It is, in fact, his profession: Cogan's Trade, as it is styled in the original title of the 1974 novel by George V. Higgins (that has been turned into the motion picture, "Killing Them Softly," just released this month). Any thoughtful person who has read one of Higgins' books knows that action is not his mÃ©tier. Higgins, who died in 1999, cut his teeth on organized crime, first as an assistant district attorney, then an Assistant U.S. Attorney assigned to the federal Organized Crime Strike Force, and finally as a newspaper reporter and columnist. Rather than focusing on mob big shots like Mafia Don Raymond Patriarca, or middle-level gangsters like Vincent Teresa, Higgins' early novels, starting with "The Friends of Eddie Coyle" in 1972, concentrated on the world of small-time wise guys who were strictly ham-and-eggers: lunch-pail criminals that have more in common with the blue collar workers who build the skyscraper than the architect who designed it or the board of directors that commissioned it. For these working class criminals, life is an unending procession of tedious days spent working at secondary jobs or running small businesses that cover for their illegal activities. They deal with unsuccessful marriages, wayward children, pushy mistresses (who resent their secondary status) and dim-witted colleagues. Hours are spent during which nothing of substance is achieved: just a lot of meetings in parked cars, business offices and local taverns, engaging in aimless talk about proposed crimes that never come to fruition. Higgins knows these losers. He spent hours listening to Title III wiretap intercepts of their conversations, deciphering their peculiar underworld slang, hashing out their schemes, hearing the dull repetitive monotony of their lives, all in their own words. The real treat in a Higgins novel is his dialog, which captures the cadence, scansion and vocabulary of the cheap crook with dead-bang accuracy. In a Higgins novel, you hear criminals talking to each other the way they actually do - stripped of any glamour or imposed literary devices. And because these criminals are mental lightweights, their plots often go astray. They engage in risky break-ins seeking valuables that, it turns out, have been removed to a bank's safety deposit box a few days earlier; they shoot the wrong person; they rob the wrong store. Or, in the case of Cogan's Trade, they steal \$53,000 from a Mafia card game at gunpoint, assuming they will get away with the theft because the game's operator robbed it himself several years earlier and was never punished for his treachery. This, then,

is the basic outline of Cogan's Trade. The plot mechanics consist of Jackie Cogan figuring out who did the job, then setting things back in order. On the way, we hear various criminals - including Cogan himself - bitch about their bosses, reminisce about previous capers, and discuss the minutia of their lives. Some of their dialog is hilarious, but it is hilarious in an unintentional way, not because they spout glib wisecracks like Philip Marlowe, but because of the fact that they approach their professions with deadly earnestness, and express themselves in the lurid language of petty criminals. The action in the novel is relatively minor. Three people are killed, quickly and efficiently. One man is savagely beaten. And that's it. The amount of mayhem, given that the novel is 224 pages long, is really rather minor. But action is not what Cogan's Trade is really about. The novel is a short, trenchant case study of a unique form of American capitalism. In it, Cogan is portrayed dealing with his own untrustworthy subordinates, resolving a dispute with a subcontractor he has hired to perform a murder, and dickering over work-related expenses with the reluctant, bean-counting attorney who serves as the intermediary for the Mafia boss who has hired him. In the end, he finds that he has been cheated on his fee for resolving the problems caused by the original card game heist. Although this capitalistic subtext is not ladled on, it clearly underlies the entire novel. A perceptive critic has pointed out that Higgins doesn't actually write crime novels - he writes social histories, among which are studies of criminals. Cogan's Trade is clearly one of these: a microeconomic study of the criminal subclass at work and play. Only the most willfully ignorant reader will miss this underlying message of this novel. Cogan's Trade is an excellent book, Higgins plying his own trade at the top of his form.

There isn't any question that George V. Higgins was a master of the Boston lexicon and he tells a pretty good crime story as well. This is an eminently readable book with characters that jump out at you in their reality. The plot revolves around an armed robbery, where some not-so-smart hoods decide to rip off a high stakes poker game that is supposed to be under mob protection. The mob calls upon Cogan, who is a hit man, to exact retribution. The plot is entirely believable and, for the most part, so are the characters. The problem I had was that \*all\* the characters sound alike. Mr. Higgins uses authentic street slang for all his characters, but after a while they all seem to sound alike and kind of blend into the same character. This effect is especially noticeable if you read two or more GVH novels in a row, as I did. I got the impression that Mr. Higgins enjoyed using the vernacular so much that he ended up overdoing it. But you need to judge that for yourself. The book is a good read and well worth the purchase price. If you enjoy real-life crime fiction, you ought to try this book.

George Higgins wrote like no other author. A fast paced read told almost totally in dialogue. you have to read this if you like the '70's mob movies, it captures the underbelly of that scene rather than the Don Corleones. Great book.

Of the great George V. Higgins crime novels, this is at the top level. Again the story is told mainly through dialogue, in Higgins' incomparable way, the way individual Boston criminals actually talk and do business, and the nastiness of relationships between them drives the action forward to a callous and inevitable climax. The hidden matters in this book, the hinted-at backgrounds are always melding the action as a 'verity noir' accompaniment which is totally convincing. Yet there is huge humour in the talking, and this book is strongly recommended to anyone who enjoys a fully satisfying story. One would not like to be Cogan's target when he's being paid to undertake business!

After watching the movie "Killing Them Softly," I really wanted to read the book on which it was based. I read "The Friends of Eddie Coyle" first, since it is the prequel to this one. I was not disappointed. The book follows almost exactly like the movie, with just a few exceptions. Lots of profanity, and violent and adult themes, but it is a classic mob tale, told from the bottom up. Loved it.

As an admirer of G.V. Higgins's writing, particularly his genius with writing dialogue, I was disappointed the first time I came up empty when I searched Kindle for his work. A year later I stumbled on a reference and to one of his works and did another check, and sure enough he is now in Kindle format. If you haven't sampled his work, please give him a try. If you know some of his books, there may be some undiscovered material. Cogan's trade is a good sample and I recommend it. Now if I can just get Len Deighton, I'll be delighted.

Sophisticated if ponderous and slow moving by crime novel standards. A brilliant book despite what I found to be some stylistic flaws, The plot line makes his other books seem cheery.

Good book. Dialogue is from the block. Realistic.

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