

BOOK REVIEW: '90 CHURCH: INSIDE AMERICA'S NOTORIOUS FIRST NARCOTICS SQUAD' BY DEAN UNKEFER

Posted by: Jack Goodstein June 6, 2015 in Book Reviews, Books, Editor Pick: Books, Editor Picks, Genres, Memoir

REVIEW OVERVIEW

Reviewer's Rating ★★★★★

★★★★★ **Summary:** An account of police authorities acting as badly as the criminals they seek, often worse.

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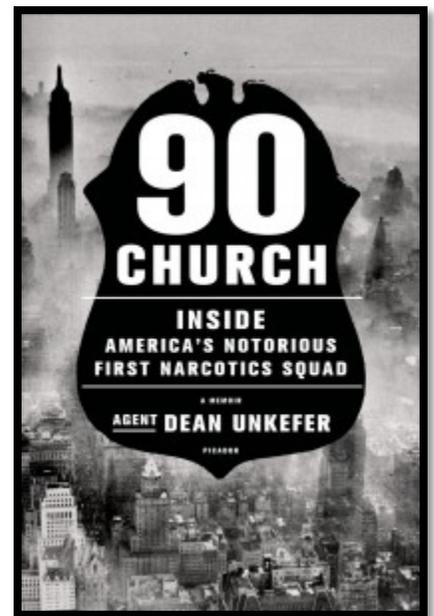
Before there was a DEA, America's war on drugs was handled by an agency called the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. The New York office was headquartered at 90 Church, a retired post office in Lower Manhattan, hence the title of Federal Agent Dean Unkefer's wildly violent memoir of his time with the Bureau, **90**

Church: Inside America's Notorious First Narcotics Squad. It is a story of a squad of agents bent on doing whatever it took to make cases against the drug hierarchy. They were uninterested in the small fish, unless they could be used to get to the bigger fish. They were not only firm believers in the idea that the ends justified the means, they also saw nothing wrong with using those means for their own benefit. It is an account of police authorities acting as badly as the criminals they seek, often worse.

Unkefer arrives with his family from the mid-west in 1964, a naif still wet behind the ears. He has all sorts of ideas about fighting for truth, justice, and the American Way, a creed he learned as a child watching *Superman*, but it doesn't take long for him to understand that at 90 Church things don't quite work that way. His memoir is a collection of scams, shoot outs, and double crosses, the kinds of stories you'd likely find in a James Elroy novel.

You meet agents like the wise cracking Dewey Paris and the master planner Michael Giovanni. You meet entrapped informants like the ad man Eliot Goldstein and the low level pusher Pepper. You meet organized crime big shots like Dominic Scarluci and the Medally Brothers. All drawn with the kind of realism that suggests that the narrator knows what he is talking about and no matter how hard to believe, what he is telling you is in fact what was going on.

Unkefer writes with conviction. Despite the fact that he has changed names, despite the fact that he invents conversations and dialogue, despite the fact that his account reads like a novel, the reader can't help but wanting it all to be true, all to be just the way he describes it. Perhaps this is because he is as hard on himself and his own dishonorable behavior as he is on everyone else in the book. He never paints himself



as a saint. He does drugs. He cheats on his wife. He uses junkies. He may feel bad about it at first, but he doesn't stop. And if he's willing to say these things about himself, what he says about others would have to be true. If this were a novel, Unkefer would be the very model of the reliable narrator. He calls **90 Church** a memoir, and I for one am willing to believe him.

And if the 'good guys' are sometimes just as bad as the 'bad guys,' indeed sometimes worse, that may well be a very accurate description of reality.