Nick Bilton's 'American Kingpin': The first great Internet manhunt

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American Kingpin

The Epic Hunt for the Criminal Mastermind Behind the Silk Road

By Nick Bilton

Penguin. 328 pp. $27.

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

In a June 1, 2011, blog post on Gawker, Adrian Chen revealed that drugs could be bought and sold online “like books or light bulbs. Welcome to Silk Road.” A few days later, standing next to two oversized printouts of the Silk Road website, U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer warned that the one-stop shop was “the most brazen attempt to peddle
drugs online that we have ever seen.”

Neither Chen nor Schumer, however, envisioned that within a couple of years the Silk Road, brainchild of Ross Ulbricht, a twentysomething former Boy Scout and physicist, would gross $1.2 billion in drugs, weapons, and poisons. Nor could they have known that apprehending “The Dread Pirate Roberts” (Ulbricht’s online identity) would take the combined efforts of agents in the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Department of Homeland Security, the Internal Revenue Service, the FBI, the U.S. Attorney’s Office, and some luck.

In American Kingpin, Nick Bilton, a special correspondent for Vanity Fair and the author of Hatching Twitter, provides an addictive account of Ulbricht’s “ultimate free-market idea” and the two-year manhunt to unmask and apprehend him.

Bilton is a splendid investigative reporter. He makes superb use of chat logs and messages between Ulbricht and his employees (including the shadowy “Variety Jones”); Ulbricht’s personal diary; thousands of social media messages he commented on; interviews with Ulbricht’s classmates, friends, lovers, and federal agents; and trial transcripts.

Although on occasion Bilton overdoes it (for example, by ending almost every chapter with a cliffhanger or telling us far more than three times that agent Gary Alford read everything three times), he knows how to tell a story. He takes us inside the heads of his characters, and he explains, in detail, the dark side of the Web, the role of Bitcoin in laundering money, and the temptations and technological challenges faced by law enforcement officials.

As he ends the suspense, Bilton leaves his readers (appropriately) unsettled. To be sure, the Silk Road has been shut down; Ross Ulbricht and his confederates are in jail; Ulbricht’s laptop is in the Newseum in
Washington. But, Bilton indicates, Silk Road 2.0 and other secret and secure websites have filled the void. Back on the job after he helped nab Ross Ulbricht, Department of Homeland Security Agent Jared Der-Yeghiayan is told by a customs agent that a large cache of blue ecstasy pills has been plucked from the mail. Indeed, more than 20 percent of drug users now get their drugs online. Some of these drugs, like fentanyl, a synthetic opioid made in labs in China, are 50 times stronger than heroin.

Investigators once speculated that there was more than one "Dread Pirate Roberts." Turns out they were right.

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