Conclusion: Child Rearing, Time Bargains, and the Modern Life of Fraud

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Conclusion

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In closing this book, I turn to two pasts and two futures. The pasts are those of the pages that precede this one and of the historical moment those pages consider. The futures are the oddly domestic permutations of, first, the Victorian futures market and second, the emergent forms of fraud that continue to fascinate consumers of twentieth- and twenty-first-century popular culture.

I have been arguing that fraud was a vital component of the Victorian home, basic to its daily operations and to its contours in the imagination. In reviewing influential legal contexts for imposture, domestic employment, food, and marriage, I have sought to establish the complexities of duplicity and of the diverse forms of capital that were at risk within even the most secure household. Further, I have been suggesting various of the structures of reading that popular culture offered for the consumption of its own goods. Pleasure, danger, possessiveness, detection, play, and rueful detachment all emerge as salient perspectives in Victorian texts, although they hardly exhaust the possible modes by which Victorian subjects might engage the proximate valences of risk. I return to the past to consider how, sometime around 1860, Victorian mothers became responsible for the economic future of England. I then turn from that past to its futures, in part to note the endurance of its principles (the home produces the nation), and in part to remark how powerfully recent incarnations of swindling work to invest the con with a startlingly cozy and ethical family life.
Conclusion

The future is almost inevitably a space of investment in which one may hedge one’s bets, speculate with measured optimism, or venture full hope that the harvest will be good. It is also, as Lee Edelman has argued, “kid stuff” (2004, 1). Childrearing is a future-oriented pursuit, a sustained practice that engages with time both concretely, in the often rigorous schedules of children’s daily activities, and speculatively, in the hopes that motivate those schedules—namely that the measured disbursement of hours and energy will equip the home’s future adults with desirable sets of skills, attitudes, and ethics. The abstract temporality of investment emerges with particular clarity in a European television spot that won a Silver Lion award in Cannes in 2003. Originally produced in Belgium, the ad depicts a handsome young father shopping with his son in the supermarket. The child is young, perhaps six years old, but he is already very much his own person, at least in the consumer sense of things. Walking to a shelf, he selects a large bag of candy and, looking hopefully up at his father, places it amongst the leeks and celery and oranges in the cart. His father removes the bag and replaces it on the shelf. The child again picks up the bag, returns it determinedly to the cart, and crosses his arms, regarding his father impudently. The father only raises an eyebrow in response and undauntedly subtracts the bag of candy from his groceries. With a defiant gleam in his eye, the boy begins to scream. “I want those sweeties!” he insists in French, “I want those sweeties!” Running through the aisles, the child throws merchandise from the shelves, throws himself on the floor, and makes such a scene that the other customers look reprovingly at the father. The shot closes in on his exhausted face, as the tagline for the ad appears below: “Use condoms.”

Not surprisingly, this commercial sets up a very different perspective on the future than one finds in Victorian England, but it nonetheless helps to define the terms of the argument I’ll be advancing here. In the logic of the brand (Zazoo condoms), to spend in the present is to look forward to profits that accrue deductively, as both libidinal and economic savings in the future: with the wise purchase of condoms, there will be no need to buy big bags of candy, no need to engage with the personal costs of exhaustion or public humiliation. Depending on a logic of regret to promote an investment in the future, Zazoo advocates spending a little money now so as to circumvent a potential tomorrow characterized by shame in the supermarket and the unreasonable (and significantly commercial) demands of a child.

While Victorian popular materials were significantly less contraceptively oriented, the Zazoo ad’s emphasis on quality of life factors into much mid-Victorian discourse about financial and reproductive futures. In fact, throughout the 1850s and 1860s, there was a marked spike in conversation about
the risks involved in both fields and the urgency of policing them. Bringing together the language of economic futurism with the discourse of childrearing, various advisors urged and sometime pleaded with Victorian parents to consider England’s future as they tended their tender crops. The rhetoric in childrearing manuals stands in radical contrast to the message of the condom ad: for the Victorians, the life to be protected was that of the nation, rather than the potential parent, and the savings that might ensue depended on properly dedicated (that is, unselfish) investments in raising up children who would have a similarly unselfish perspective. Mid-Victorian popular culture also regarded the child as a problem, but its vision of a profitable British future depended on properly managing these little crops, not on avoiding planting them in the first place.

The financial futures market also encouraged speculation on as yet unharvested crops. Futures in cotton, for example, were particularly popular and profoundly risky in the 1860s, when the American Civil War produced a cotton famine in England and prices went through the roof. Futures trading was already well established by then and had in fact been in place almost since the stock market was in its infancy. One of its most popular forms was the time bargain, a promise to buy stock at a specified price on a specified date. As Stuart Banner observes, futures trading was largely virtual, in that “one did not need to transfer any stock, or indeed to own any stock, in order to speculate in the market. . . . Neither [party] even needs to be wealthy enough to buy any shares, because the most either could lose from the transaction is the difference in share prices between the two dates” (1998, 28–29).

Despite, or perhaps because of, its uniquely democratic access to speculation, the futures market was riddled with fraud—as Banner notes, “Stock jobbers soon discovered [that] the price of stock was much more easily manipulated than the price of anything previously known” (30). It was remarkably simple to drive prices up or down by forming consortia of speculators who would either puff worthless shares, or buy or sell large numbers of them, in order to skew the stock price for the moment of settling. Apparently the state of affairs was quite bad quite early, for in 1734 Parliament passed Sir John Barnard’s Act, which prohibited trade of stocks that a person did not already own; forbade contracts for trading stock in any time other than the present; and finally, refused to protect, and indeed imposed fines on, those who violated these prohibitions.

The Act was ambitious, but not entirely effective. Futures trading continued but gained the reputation of being the riskiest field for speculation. Over a hundred years later, John Francis’s Chronicles and Characters of the Stock Exchange warned readers away from the market and the jobbers who
ran it. “The great mass of their transactions are without the pale of the law,” he cautioned. “All their time-bargains . . . are illegal. . . . The tricks which are resorted to are numerous. . . . The public cannot be too decidedly warned against the dangers to which they may be exposed [even] in legitimate transactions (1850, 329–30).” Despite the continued relevance of such warnings, Parliament repealed Barnard’s Act in 1860, and futures trading ceased to be illegal. In some senses, the repeal functioned as a kind of surrender to the existence of fraud—which is not to say that fraud became acceptable in 1860, but rather that it was sufficiently commonplace to be set aside in favor of the practicalities of the modern exchange. The rollercoaster of price indexes and price fixing that characterized the 1860s futures markets—most notably in cotton but in myriad other commodities as well—reminded the public of the dangers involved in futures investing, and of the continued presence of sharp characters in what was now a legitimate field of exchange.

**Speculation, Hope, and the Future**

As I have been arguing throughout this book, speculation involved more intimate forms of capital than just money, and angled at profits that were social as well as economic. Dreams of the good life generally took shape against happy domestic backdrops, in which perfect families might caper among perfect furnishings with perfect upholstery. Varieties of perfection were individual, of course, but these fantasies were key elements of both economic and libidinal investing. Such dreams, however, were not always so wise, and Victorian popular culture worked to reinforce that point. In Richard Redgrave’s “Waking Dreams,” for example, the pretty maid’s reverie, coupled with her complete inattention to the eggs at her feet, suggests how irresponsible and self-centered flights of fancy might muddle one’s focus on the present, and hence, make a mess of one’s future (see figure C.1).

The young woman’s desire for upward mobility appears in both the direction of her gaze and her overly pretty attire, the latter contrasting explicitly with the humble condition of her surroundings (note the spider web and the visible shovel and broom). The broken eggs resonate with the notion of smash suggested by the handbill for the lottery on the wall behind her, and suggest too that the engraving offers a double message about wasted assets. To read the broken eggs within the context of reproduction is, admittedly, something of a stretch, but her languid, open posture suggests a susceptibility to seduction that portends a potentially tragic childbearing future, reminiscent of the fate of Hetty Sorrell in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*. It is, I think, fair to say that
those eggs dictate the viewer’s perspective on the young woman’s dreams, by suggesting her inattention to the impact of her present actions on the profits or losses of her future.

In contrast, I’ll offer another image, Arthur Boyd Hilton’s 1862 woodcut for the monthly magazine *Good Words*. Entitled “My Treasure,” the tableau signals a more appropriate system of feminine investing (see figure C.2). The treasure in this image is not suspended, virtual, or unlikely; rather, it is very much present, filling the lap of the pretty young mother. These are expensive children, if their grasping hands tell true; but, the title suggests, they are decidedly valuable. That value, of course, is affective, rather than monetary—the young mother is not planning to sell her children. Their worth is an abstraction of “treasure” rather than a specific figure in pounds and pence.

Our own culture, too, generally thinks of children as expensive little creatures, rather than as means of accruing economic profit. We are in that way indebted to the nineteenth century’s various movements to reframe the child in the popular imagination. The Victorian period witnessed the birth of an imperative to cease thinking of children as so much working capital and to
conceive of them instead as investments in, and beneficiaries of, the nation’s future. Child labor laws and education bills recontextualized the economics of and investments in childbearing, anticipating Lee Edelman’s theory of “reproductive futurism,” which locates the Child as the embodiment of the expectant logic on which Western capitalist society depends, and by which it reproduces both its structures and its subjects. Sustaining and rationalizing the suffering of the present with the promise of a better future, the Child, Edelman argues, “remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” (2004, 3). The political potential behind the implicit nihilism of Edelman’s theories merit more and different discussion than my work in this chapter allows. Here, I draw far too briefly on his notion of reproductive futurism to articulate how Victorian market anxieties found their way into the discourse of childrearing. The title of Edelman’s current project, *Bad Education*, allows me to begin that work.

FIGURE C.2
Bad Education

As Susan Zieger notes in her reading of *Nicholas Nickleby*, “a child can only signify as a desirable commodity when it becomes expensive” (2006, 12). There were monetary expenses to Victorian childrearing, of course, but it more crucially involved investments of time and energy in the interests of producing a desirable product. As Edelman’s work would suggest, that product might better be termed a subject or, within Victorian discourse, a pupil. Surprisingly, then, sources such as *Eccles Household Guides*, popular in the 1870s, figure children as stocks, and their education a form of futures trading in which present costs are sustainable because they promise deferred profits: “No time, expense, or zealous care is too great to bestow on the culture and correct training of our children. There is no office higher than that of a teacher of youth, as there is nothing on earth so precious as the mind, soul, and character of a child” (1877). That child was to be profitable not in and of himself, but as part of a larger community: the nation. However, investments in children could prove rather a bad bargain. *Nicholas Nickleby* nicely illustrates the rationale behind this logic: in the sadistic passages of Dotheboys Hall, the boys are supposed to receive education; instead, the Squeers family abuses them, starves them of both food and information, and forces them to work. As Zieger notes, these boys present an ominous glimpse at a blasted and potentially violent future. In a moment of odd agriculture, late in the novel, Ralph Nickelby passes a burial ground: it is “a rank, unwholesome, rotten spot, where the very grass and weeds seemed, in their frowsy growth, to tell that they had sprung from paupers’ bodies [who] lay thick and close—corrupting in body as they had in mind; a dense and squalid crowd” (750). The weeds that symbolize the harvest of a neglected pauper class correspond with a thornier plant in the novel, namely little Wackford Squeers, son of the one-eyed schoolmaster who runs Dotheboys Hall. Explaining why he has hired Nicholas Nickleby as an assistant, Wackford Sr. contends that he needs a second, a “man under him . . . till such a time as little Wackford is able to take charge of the school.”

“Am I to take care of the school when I grow up a man, father?” said Wackford junior, suspending, in the excess of his delight, a vicious kick, which he was administering to his sister.

“You are, my son,” replied Mr. Squeers, in a sentimental voice.

“Oh my eye, won’t I give it to the boys!” exclaimed the interesting child, grasping his father’s cane. “Oh, father, won’t I make ’em squeak again!”

It was a proud moment in Mr Squeers’s life to witness that burst of
enthusiasm in his young child’s mind, and to see in it a foreshadowing of his future eminence. He pressed a penny into his hand, and gave vent to his feelings . . . in a shout of approving laughter. (108)

The penny pressed into little Wackford’s fleshy hand echoes the irony of impression on which this passage depends: Squeers has impressed his values on his son, who is well prepared to take in hand both paternal economy and paternal cane. Squeers’s pleasure derives from a sense of profit in his child, whose vicious avarice confirms that Squeers has raised him right—for the business of Dotheboys Hall, in any case.

The lesson of the Squeers patrimony suggests that children will learn all too well the lessons of their youth. Those lessons impinge not only on the future happiness of the family, but on the economic future of the nation. As The Training of Young Children suggests, “The habit of pilfering any thing, however slight, blunts the sense of honour, and leads to fraud and dishonesty. These are solemn reflections, and should lead you to see how important it is to sow the good seed early, and not to make excuse that you have not sufficient time for these things” (1863, 32). The necessity to invest in children, to see them as the nation’s future harvest, suggests how maternal education was increasingly responsible for nipping bad economic traits in the bud. In 1844, Sarah Ellis wrote to the women of England: “You have deep responsibilities; you have urgent claims; a nation’s moral worth is in your keeping” (1844, 18). In 1872, Mrs. Henry Wood’s Our Children reiterated Ellis’s message with renewed urgency, suggesting that England’s future was in peril. Wood argues that the parent who will “wink at . . . the slight moving of a ball on the croquet lawn into a more advantageous position for its owner, or the sly peep at a companion’s card, or the dexterous abstraction of a counter from the heap of a next neighbour” will reap an unhappy harvest for the country. “From whence,” she asks, “come the clever forgers, the sharp practitioners, the unscrupulous speculators, the men and women who borrow without the intention of paying again? . . . Are they not . . . the fruit ripened from seed which has been for long years slowly but surely growing out of those small acts of dishonesty in the little child?” (135). Redefining the meaning of profit by encouraging parents to invest responsibly in a vision of responsible future traders, these works argue that both fraud and its prevention begin at home.

Thus for Wood, and for many of the manuals alongside which her book appeared, sound parental investment, in contrast to foolish speculation or benign neglect, offers a prophylactic approach to the perils of futures trading. Good education was a necessary preventative to the kinds of bad education
that might produce little schoolboys like Wackford Jr.; or big business boys like Nick Leeson, whose duplicitous futures trading brought down Baring’s Bank in 1995; or Jeffrey Skilling, whose inventive mark-to-market accounting allowed the Texas energy company Enron to count expected future profits as present assets throughout the 1990s. Obviously, a moral education was not adequate to counteract the lures of a capitalist society that increasingly measured value by the capacity to purchase consumer goods. The options market and the fraud that characterized it became the wave of the future, while the bad education of profiting by others’ losses brought about the harvest we’re still reaping today. In the shadow of Enron, in the company of bad children in supermarkets, the only truly safe investment in the future of nineteenth-century markets may have been latex after all.

Reading the Present

While writing this book, I have been living simultaneously in nineteenth-century Britain and twenty-first-century America. The recent scandals involving Enron and Martha Stewart suggest the enduring relevance of the paradigm I’ve been modeling in the preceding pages: it is significant that, as the biggest corporate swindle in recent years unfolded, both the government and the popular media turned their attention to the specter of a fallen domestic angel. Throughout the 1990s, Martha Stewart built an empire as a modern Mrs. Beeton. A successful television show, an international magazine, and product lines that included cookware, linens, and fresh flowers all helped to consolidate Stewart’s reputation as America’s reigning homemaking queen. However, when Stewart was indicted in 2003 on charges of obstruction of justice, conspiracy, making false statements and securities fraud, she toppled from her pedestal. By 2004, she had become the new poster child for corporate fraud.

The charges of economic malfeasance resulted from Stewart’s sale of ImClone stock on December 27, 2001, one day before its value plummeted when its cancer drug, Erbitux, failed to obtain regulator approval. By selling on December 27, instead of the December 28, Stewart saved just over $50,000. ImClone CEO, Sam Waksal, also sold large quantities of ImClone stock on December 27. His broker, Peter Bacanovic, was Stewart’s broker as well. Questioned by authorities, Stewart adamantly denied having received a tip, but when Bacanovic’s assistant admitted to telling Stewart to sell, the indictments followed.
But, as Diane Brady reported in *Business Week*, “The trial of Martha Stewart was always about more than telling the truth” (2004). In the wake of the Enron scandal, Brady felt it necessary to remind her readers that Stewart’s case “was no Enron, laying waste to billions of dollars of shareholder value. Martha Stewart didn’t cook the books. She didn’t loot her company. Nor did she set out to dupe her investors.” Nonetheless, Stewart emerged as the most celebrated fraud of all—and this despite the fact that the securities-fraud charge against her was dropped.

The Enron debacle entered the public eye in late 2001, when the company’s creative accounting practices finally failed to cover the fact that it was bankrupt. Although the Justice Department announced a criminal investigation in early 2002, it handed down no indictments of Enron’s chief executives until early 2004. In the meantime, the Department indicted Martha Stewart. Martha’s story was simpler, more homey, than the mess of Enron. As The Guardian reported, Stewart’s own lawyers “asked if the justice department was attempting to deflect public attention from its failure to bring charges against senior executives of the firms involved in the most calamitous scandals of last year: Enron and WorldCom” (Teather 2003). Although Justice vehemently denied the allegation that they were attempting to distract the public, many media commentators opined otherwise.

I’m not a Martha defender, nor was I ever a member of Save Martha, but I watched with fascination as she took the hit for Enron, both publicly and legally. And I was hardly alone. The world responded with alternate horror, indignation, and delight as the domestic goddess, who seemed always to have a hot-glue gun at the ready, fell from grace. As Enron shareholders reeled from their losses, the public found Martha Stewart on the cover of every magazine and in the coverage of innumerable television programs. Enron was, it seems, too complicated, too terrible for popular engagement. Martha offered the opportunity to domesticate economic dishonesty, to take the frightening and confounding questions of fraud home for private consumption. Her sentence echoed that impulse, beginning with six months in a minimum-security prison, and concluding with a return to the domestic space on which she founded her empire. The specter of her house arrest was deliciously ironic.

I find an irony closer to my own work in the remarks U.S. Attorney James Comey offered at the press conference following her indictment. “This criminal case is about lying,” he said, “lying to the FBI, lying to the SEC, and lying to investors. . . . It’s a tragedy that could have been prevented if these two people [Stewart and her broker, Peter Bacanovic] had done—only done what parents have taught their children for eons. Even if you’re in a tight spot, lying is not the way out” (“U.S. Attorney Makes Statement” [2003]).
Turning from the chaos of the stock market to the straightforward logic of childrearing, Comey implied that at least some responsibility for the corrupt state of modern economic practices lies with parents. In seeking answers to the densely complicated questions of commerce, it seems that, even now, there’s no place like home.

The home is a space of cultivation and imagination in which one inevitably encounters the conflicts of the outer world. In my own home, in 2007, in the final stages of writing this book, I’ve been indulging myself by watching two recent television series about fraud: the BBC-produced *Hustle* and FX’s *The Riches.* Both the British and the American shows give swindling a domestic life. *The Riches* does so most obviously, in that it is about a literal family of cons who take illicit possession of a deceased wealthy couple’s home and property. The British actors Eddie Izzard and Minnie Driver play the American Wayne and Dahlia Molloy, parents of Cael, Di Di and Sam. Together, they are a family of “travelers,” or grifters, who at the season’s start have been surviving on picking pockets and running short cons (in the pilot episode, the family crashes a high school reunion, stealing name tags and wallets in a dizzying spree of impersonation and theft). When first we meet the Molloys, they are part of a much larger band of “travelers,” an extended family unit whose speech, style, and RV-living habits mark them out as stereotypical redneck trash. By the end of the pilot, however, the Molloys have stolen the “family” money and fled the “family” camp. When another pair of “travelers” pursues them in a high-speed chase, the result is the car accident that kills Doug and Cherien Rich, a wealthy couple on their way to a new million-dollar home in a new gated community. The Molloys take their keys, their papers, their laptops, and their identities, thereby grifting their way into the American dream. The show encourages its audience to side with the Molloys, not against them, cueing viewers to celebrate even as the family fleeces “buffers,” or regular folk—folk like most of us. Illegitimately seizing the lifestyle to which many Americans aspire, the Molloys become con artists we learn to love.

It’s easy to root for the Molloys, though, especially because the writers grant them far more ethical probity than their marks. Wayne and Dahlia are considerably more appealing than both the sleazy millionaires whose lives they assume, and the almost universally obnoxious wealthy characters that surround them. In one episode entitled “X Spots the Mark,” for example, “Doug’s” reprehensible boss insists that he bring in a wealthy investor or lose his job. “C’mon family, lots of easy marks around,” Wayne cajoles, as he, Dahlia, and their children pore over recent newspapers in search of a likely dupe. Son Cael sums up the qualities of the ideal mark: “They can’t know us,
they can't be too smart, and they've got to be greedy as shit.” The Molloys’ eventual target compounds the moral reprobation of greed with statutory rape. A washed-out baseball player, Rudy Blue, has just finished doing time for seducing an underage girl when the Molloys seduce him, in turn, into an elaborate long con involving insider information, extortion, and the illegal development of environmentally protected land. Given that Rudy finds none of these ethical obstacles sufficient to offset the promise of exorbitant investor profits, it’s hard to have much sympathy for him as the Molloy family (in concert with the residents of a local trailer park) stage a dramatic investors’ meeting that ends in a fake murder. As Rudy flees the scene, leaving behind a supposedly dead supposed FBI agent (actually, the Riches’ pool guy) and half a million dollars, the Molloys celebrate only briefly, as does the audience. Going directly into “Doug’s” boss’s coffers, the money does support a corrupt real-estate firm, which does build illegally on environmentally protected land, so that the swindle itself does little to advance the moral high ground. In effect, it allows the Molloys only to sustain their imposture, not to abandon it. At the close of the episode, Wayne and Dahlia discuss the scam as they make love. “Next time, we should keep the money,” he says, musing. “I wouldn't have to pretend to be a lawyer.” Dahlia’s response sums up both the pleasures inherent in watching The Riches and various of the reasons it has less pleasure than it might. “Well,” she says, “you got a job. I got a job. The kids are in school. We live here now.” The Molloys have, in effect, become The Riches, and while the audience has learned to prefer the impostors to the originals, the Molloys have nonetheless acquired the domestic and professional headaches (household budgets and unpleasant dinner parties, job anxieties and unpleasant social obligations) that mark the daily lives of many modern Americans. In The Riches, after the fun of watching the cons infiltrate the gated community, the lines of impersonation begin to blur. “We’re buffers now, baby,” Dahlia says, and in that, the Riches are a little too close to home (“X Spots the Mark” [2007]).

The alternative family of Hustle has more style and fewer familiar threats than The Riches, in part because the writer, Tony Jordan, elected to leave domestic life off the screen. Inspired by old-school films like The Sting and newer heist movies like Ocean’s Eleven, Jordan also did his homework, reading stacks of books on the art of the con. Fascinated by “the way that the knowledge of the long con had been passed through generations,” Jordan elected to create a metaphorical grandfather, father, and son, so as to convey “this sense of someone passing it on to someone, passing it one to someone” (Jordan 2004). Early on, he says, he knew that he
didn’t want . . . to see any of their domestic lives. I didn’t want to see where they li—it was all going to be hotels and all about, you know, cool. . . . So I didn’t want to go and suddenly see ’em pull off this great long con, and then going home and cook an egg and chips. It just wasn’t going to work. So then I thought, well, I’m going to have to replace that with something . . . [and] I realized that basically what I was doing was constructing a family. (ibid.)

_Hustle’s_ family isn’t the couple with three kids who’ve moved in down the block. They are adults, and there’s no blood between them. Beautiful and stylish, the show’s characters, sets, and fashions are almost unrelentingly sleek. That shiny veneer not only works to cover over the games they play; it also belies the profound moral dedication they have to one another and to those for whom they care (one episode in the first season involves a major grift so as to help a fellow con artist who requires medical care). Behind the glamour and the dazzling sleights of hand, that is, _Hustle_ offers some old-fashioned family values.

More broadly, _Hustle’s_ agenda addresses directly the issues of personal and corporate greed that were so familiar to the Victorian public. There is a strict ethical code behind their choice of marks. “You see,” the cast repeatedly reminds the audience, breaking the frame so as to create the connection and identification essential to the show’s success, “The first rule of the con is, you can’t cheat an honest man. It’s never been done.” One week, they scam a greedy government minister. In another episode, they take down a pair of corrupt investment bankers. As the executive producer, Simon Crawford Collins, remarks, “Our characters are not in the business of tricking defenceless old grannies out of their life-savings. Indeed when they learn they might have made an error of judgement—they are mortified and swift to take action to put the natural order back to rights. The ‘marks’ they target are given their just comeuppance” (“Producing Hustle” 2007). Expert acting, clever scripts, and slick cinematography together have made _Hustle’s_ unusual “family” welcome in millions of British living rooms each week.8

These modern progeny of the Victorian domestic fraud plot transform the swindlers into families—families that many viewers might think they’d like to have to dinner. Yet, twenty-first-century consumers are generally a cagey bunch—and no wonder. We live in a world in which only the spam filter stands between us and the daily barrage of emails soliciting the unwary into more and less elaborate cons. Nor do recent events on the national stage do much to inspire confidence. Since I began my research, the Enron boys have been convicted, but Ken Lay died before going to prison and before hand-
ing over the Enron cash, which estate laws safely secured to his family. Paul Wolfowitz has been forced out of the World Bank, Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez seems to have no memory of how “mistakes were made,” and many of my compatriots share with me a distinct suspicion about the electoral process. As these names become history, I have little doubt that others will replace them, bringing fresh scandals to the international stage.

On the one hand, modern audiences can share with their nineteenth-century predecessors the pleasures of fraud safely packaged for entertainment, welcoming the opportunity to process virtually the events and circumstances that comprise the modern landscape. Yet, fraud is now so ubiquitous as to be de rigeur, and it is significant that the swindlers of *The Riches*, *Hustle*, and the latest *Ocean's* film encourage affiliation rather than rejection. Various Victorian authors (Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens, in particular) had already begun to experiment with domesticating their con artists, making pets or, in rare cases, heroes of them. The resulting serials, from Collins's *No Name* to *The Riches*, from *Our Mutual Friend* to *Hustle*, consistently remind their audiences that swindling permeates modern life, but they also complicate their basic premise that there’s a sucker born every minute by underscoring the fierce loyalty among their family units. This new breed of popular swindlers promotes not only honor among thieves but also—ironically—a rare sense of secular faith.

And on that note I conclude. Throughout this book, I have been mulling the relationship between real events and popular representations. I have collected thousands of Victorian ballads, tales, melodramas, novels, illustrations, and legal records, all of which declare openly the enormous potential for fraud in the world. More recent forms address a world even more pandemically corrupt than its nineteenth-century counterpart. Yet, while suspicion offers at least a chance to avoid bad surprises, unrelenting vigilance seems not to be a particularly appealing psychological perspective. Thus, where earlier Victorian texts about swindling allowed their readers to practice accommodating themselves to risk, more modern domestic fraud plots offer something more. Rather than simply reiterating and reinforcing the values of wariness, they offer the rare, surprising, valuable capacity to practice trust.