

FRANK M. AHEARN & EILEEN C. HORAN, *HOW TO DISAPPEAR: ERASE YOUR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT, LEAVE FALSE TRAILS, AND VANISH WITHOUT A TRACE* (1st ed. 2010).

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Reviewed by Doug Mondell
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Suffolk University Law School

“I for one would never trade my peace of mind for a second career in illegal skip tracing. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t people still happy to break the law for the right price.”¹

Frank M. Ahearn and Eileen C. Horan’s *How to Disappear: Erase Your Digital Footprint, Leave False Trails, and Vanish without a Trace* is an interesting read about the personal information each and every one of us leaves behind on a daily basis, and how it can come back to haunt us. Ahearn and Horan use this book as a service to those who are thinking about going off the grid, or those who may not have the money to pay for a professional to help make them disappear. The central theme of the book is that if someone desires to not be found, or simply limit the amount of their personal information that is available to be discovered, it is possible to disappear, but it is going to take some time and money. Ahearn and Horan explicitly recommend not doing anything illegal in order to disappear, but also discuss illegal ways which pay help people in covering their tracks better, and admit that breaking the law may be necessary.

¹ See FRANK M. AHEARN & EILEEN C. HORAN, *HOW TO DISAPPEAR: ERASE YOUR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT, LEAVE FALSE TRAILS, AND VANISH WITHOUT A TRACE* 39 (1st ed. 2010).

Frank M. Ahearn was a high school dropout and bounced from job to job before finding his true passion, being a skip tracer.² Soon after he became successful in this lucrative endeavor, it was Frank met Eileen C. Horan whom he hired to be the bookkeeper for his skip tracing business. Ultimately, Eileen would become Frank's partner and the two worked together on a number of assignments. Both Frank and Eileen began using their skills to help people disappear who needed or wanted to do so, only after they had spent a number of years working as skip-tracers, finding people who did not want to be found. What's more is that both of the authors even used illegal methods, methods that could have led to their spending a significant amount of time in federal prison, to find their targets. Frank M. Ahearn is also the author of *The Little Black Book of Skip Tracing: Creating Pretext, Mastering Social Engineering and Finding Anyone Anywhere*,³ *How to Disappear from Big Brother: Avoid Surveillance, Prevent Unwanted Intrusion and Create Privacy in an Era of Global Spying*,⁴ and *The Digital Hit Man: His Weapons for Combating the Digital World*,⁵ which all focus on controlling personal information in the digital age.

Criminal law is discussed throughout Ahearn's and Horan's book, specifically how both state and federal statues against fraud have the ability keep people who would like to disappear, for whatever reason, from doing so completely. That is, unless they are so desperate that they are willing to break any law necessary to ensure their disappearance. Although, the book hardly does anything to deter readers from breaking the law, in fact it barely discusses the consequences

² See *id.* at 11 (defining a skip tracer as "a person who tracks people down and uncovers private information for a living. Targets include jailbirds, deadbeats, subpoenaed witnesses, and just about anyone else who's trying to hide").

³ See FRANK M. AHEARN, *THE LITTLE BLACK BOOK OF SKIP TRACING: CREATING PRETEXT, MASTERING SOCIAL ENGINEERING AND FINDING ANYONE ANYWHERE* (2015).

⁴ See FRANK M. AHEARN, *HOW TO DISAPPEAR FROM BIG BROTHER: AVOID SURVEILLANCE, PREVENT UNWANTED INTRUSION AND CREATE PRIVACY IN AN ERA OF GLOBAL SPYING* (2014).

⁵ See FRANK M. AHEARN, *THE DIGITAL HIT MAN: HIS WEAPONS FOR COMBATING THE DIGITAL WORLD* (2012).

of fraud at all, it does make mention that the benefit of committing fraud is most likely not worth the risk of getting caught by law enforcement.

Ahearn and Horan's book starts with an introduction by Frank Ahearn in which he tells the story of how he decided to use his knowledge of skip tracing to help people disappear. From there, the book discusses the ways in which skip tracers find information about their targets to give some background information on the practice of skip tracing. Next, the book talks about how long it would take a person to vanish and the preliminary steps to take in doing so, and finally discusses all the ways in which someone needs to cover their tracks if they truly want to disappear and remain unfound. The book is 208 pages, yet reads fairly quickly and is filled with a generous amount of humor, as well as interesting tidbits about personal information and how easily it can fall into the wrong hands.

The authors' thesis that it is possible for anyone to disappear as long as they follow an extremely long list of tasks may be without flaws. But, the logic that a person can expunge all the personal information about them that is waiting to be found, without breaking the law, does not receive the necessary consideration. For instance, Ahearn and Horan discuss how, during their skip tracing years, they would call banks or phone companies and give false information to persuade the customer service representative to provide the information about the target for whom they were looking.⁶ The authors described this as a time in their lives filled with extreme paranoia, and admit that they could have been arrested for their actions, but do not do enough to persuade readers against using similar tactics to erase their own personal information.

One step, of many, in the disappearance process is that the person looking to disappear need to call all companies that would have any personal information about them and change that

⁶ See Ahearn & Horan, *supra* note 1, at 5.

information, i.e. the way your last name is spelled and your address. Where a person can run into legal issues is when the company has their Social Security Number on file. Obviously, changing the name that the company has on file is not going to help that person escape a pursuer if the company also has their Social Security Number. While acknowledging the illegality of doing so, the authors also concede that in some instances it may be necessary to break the law to protect oneself.⁷ Again, the authors fall short in explaining exactly why it actually may not be advantageous to break the law.

Identity theft is an increasing problem around the world.⁸ However, to combat this issue, the laws of the United States are particularly unforgiving on those who are found guilty of identity theft. For most of these crimes the punishment is fifteen years in a federal prison, not to mention other fines that may be imposed as well.⁹ The author's argue that if you are being stalked, and your life is at stake, the threat of prison may not be as overwhelming as the threat of death or other bodily harm. Unfortunately, the book disregards the seemingly obvious choice of going to law enforcement for help. On the other hand, if a person is looking to disappear because they did something illegal and law enforcement is after them, adding another few charges to their rap sheet may not be a big deal.

This guide to disappearing is certainly an entertaining read, but falls short in its feasibility and assumes that everyone wants to erase all traces of themselves and flee the country. Most people are not actually looking to escape their lives and leave their friends and family behind while they waste away on a tropical island. Most people in this day and age simply want to know that their personal information is protected and that it is not being disseminated to those

⁷ See Ahearn & Horan, *supra* note 1, at 57-58.

⁸ See Herb Weisbaum, *Identity Thieves Changing Tactics to Steal Your Money, Report Says*, NBC NEWS (Feb. 2, 2016), archived at <https://perma.cc/QL67-437P>.

⁹ See 18 U.S.C.S. § 1028(a)(7) (LEXIS through Pub. L. 114-114).

who should not have access to it. The biggest strength of this book is that it is certainly eye opening. There is story after story of how ill-protected a number of companies treat the personal information of the clientele and how willing they are to give it out to anyone who tricks them into doing so. While the whole book will not apply to most people, it is certainly still usable for the information it gives on the best ways people can protect themselves. Again, the lack of discussion about just how severe the consequences could be for someone who breaks the law to eliminate their personal information and disappear is concerning.

This guide was extremely enjoyable, but left numerous questions to be answered after its conclusion. The actual execution of going off the grid was never truly explored. A very broad overview was given to the steps people would need to take if they wanted to disappear. It is, however, more instructive to those who simply want to protect their personal information and not fall prey to identity theft. I would highly recommend anyone who is worried about the possibility of their identity being stolen to read this book. It is a good step to take in ensuring that he or she is doing everything in their power to stop identity theft . . . while remembering that they should still act within the law, of course.