
Mobster: The Improbable Rise and Fall of John Gotti and his Gang by John Cummings and Ernest Volkman, Futura, 1991.

John Gotti is a popular figure with the New York media. Flamboyant and high profile, he features regularly in the headlines and gossip columns of the New York tabloids. His visage is prominent in news magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* and on the 6 o'clock television news. John Gotti is not a movie star, nor does he play baseball for the Mets or the Yankees. He does not act on Broadway or in the latest Hollywood blockbuster. He is not an elected politician. John Gotti, officially at least, sells plumbing supplies. Unofficially, he is the head of the Gambino organised crime family, the most powerful of the five Mafia organisations in New York (and therefore, it would seem, the world).

When he was on trial for the attempted murder of a corrupt crime official who apparently made the mistake of attempting to extort payments from a business protected by the Gambino family, Gotti was met with a crowd of cheering well-wishers as he entered and exited the courthouse. Always available and ready with a quip for the assembled hordes of reporters, Gotti achieved the status of folk hero for the masses of supporters who congregated outside the building.

Cummings and Volkman, veteran New York city crime reporters, trace what they describe as the rise and fall of John Gotti, Mafioso. The son of an immigrant labourer in the Italian slums of New York, Gotti got his start in crime by serving as bookmaker to the students at his former high school. From this inauspicious beginning he rose through the ranks as loan shark, enforcer and hijacker to become the "most powerful crime figure in America". The authors provide us with a condensed social history of "the Mafia", both in Sicily and in America and in great detail demonstrate the machinations, both subtle and brutal, which brought John Gotti to the top of his chosen profession. The book is peopled with characters with colorful nicknames — Frank (Buzzy) Carrone, Joey (Crazy Joe) Gallo, Donato (Downy Wags) Fatico, Vincent (The Chin) Gigante, Salvatore (Sammy the Bull) Gravano — and on the other side, police officers who are not above a payback beating or two when the unwritten rule banning Mob violence against the cops is violated.

Into this world steps John Gotti, whose own nickname "John Boy" recalls memories of television's *The Waltons*. But John Gotti is no gentle, thoughtful farmboy. He is from the mean streets of New York. Even when he was at the peak of his power as head of the Gambino Family, Gotti was known to threaten recalcitrant debtors to his loan sharking operations with personalised vengeance:

"I told him, you better come and check in every week. You miss one week, and I'll kill you, you cocksucker, fucking creep ..."

Take it as read, then, that John Gotti is no angel. This is a man who ordered the execution of a neighbour who killed his 12-year old son in a tragic automobile accident and who ordered the execution of his best friend, his boss and any number of other people. This is also a man who draws huge profits from the sale of heroin and child pornography. He has served time for crimes of violence. All of these incidents and many more are described and analysed by Cummings and Volkman and deserve to be read as a study in evil.

At the same time, however, John Gotti is a media star and something of a folk hero. In this, he joins a long line of criminals in both fact and fiction, who fill the role of folk hero. Robin Hood and Ned Kelly were thieves and heroes. Pretty Boy Floyd and Joey Gallo were thieves, murderers and the heroes of songs by Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan respectively. Marlon Brando and Al Pacino are famous from the Godfather films for making offers that nobody could refuse. Martin Scorsese and the Coen brothers scored critical acclaim and box office success with the films *Good Fellas* and *Miller's Crossing*. In this, they simply followed a long line of other Hollywood gangster films. As Professor Duncan succinctly puts it:

Noncriminals often enjoy, love, even admire criminals. They admire them not in spite of their criminality, but because of it — or at least because of the qualities that are inextricably linked to their criminality. That they sometimes do so wonderingly, against considerable inner resistance, serves only to highlight the strength of the attraction.¹

Not all criminals are folk heroes. As Duncan and others² point out, the psycho-social phenomenon of the elevation of the criminal to hero status is complex and little understood. While Cummings and Volkman do not offer an explanation of the phenomenon, they do provide a detailed and interesting discussion of the facts of one life, that of John Gotti, which in part at least, represents the power of the construction of the criminal as hero. For this reason alone, *Mobster* deserves our attention.

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Wreck Bay—An Aboriginal fishing community by Brian J Egloff in association with members of the Wreck Bay Community. Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1990.

This is the second edition of Brian Egloff's book on Wreck Bay. This new edition contains the same material as the earlier (1981) work. However it is in a more convenient and attractively presented format, in addition it brings the reader up to date with what has happened at "Wreck" (as the locals call the place) in the last ten years.

On the cover there is a lovely painting by Annie Franklin rather akin to the style of Sally Morgan, being an idyllic depiction of koorie kids frolicking on the Summercloud Bay beach at Wreck Bay, while the adults return with their nets and a catch of fish. Despite the indisputable fact that Wreck Bay is a breathtakingly beautiful part of the New South Wales coastline, the cover, like the romantic title of the book, is somewhat misleading.

1 "A Strange Liking": Our Admiration for Criminals" (1991) U Ill L Rev 1.

2 Ibid.

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