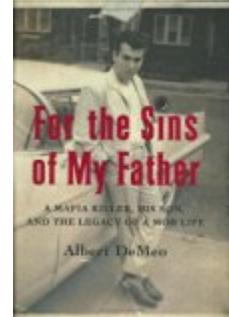


H-Net Reviews

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Albert DeMeo. *For the Sins of My Father: A Mafia Killer, His Son, and the Legacy of a Mob Life*. New York: Broadway Books, 2002. 288 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7679-0689-0; \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7679-0679-1.

Reviewed by Stanislaw G. Pugliese (Hofstra University)
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It was with some sense of trepidation that this reviewer picked up a copy of *For the Sins of My Father*, expecting another work in the interminable genre of Mafia kitsch. Yet potential readers take note: this is not a work that seeks to glamorize mob life. In the same way that Roberto Benigni's film *Life Is Beautiful* was not about the Holocaust, *For the Sins of My Father* is not even really about the Mafia. Rather, both works are parables of the father-son relationship. If Benigni placed his parable in the hell of an extermination camp, Al DeMeo recounts his life in the hell of the Gambino crime family. And here is where one of the many ironies of the book appears: while most Mafia works mythologize the "family," DeMeo's memoir brilliantly counterposes the brutality and greed of the crime "family" with the banal goodness of his biological family.

Roy DeMeo was born in 1942 into a law-abiding family but started a loan-sharking operation that brought him to the attention of the Gambino crime family. Eventually, he rose to the rank of capo based on his lucrative earnings controlling the largest car theft ring in New York City. Increasing pressure from Carlo Gambino and his successor Paul Castellano to augment profits and control the streets led the senior DeMeo into leading a murderous gang of psychopaths. DeMeo's own "associates" murdered him in 1973, the body stuffed into the trunk of his car and discovered on Albert DeMeo's seventeenth birthday.

The fascination of the book lies not in the recounting of this mob life but the inherent tension between this world and a seemingly normal Italian-American life lived in the suburbs of Long Island. The Christmas Eve vigil was marked by an Italian feast of fish while Christmas

Day was celebrated with an "American" menu. "We had the best of both worlds," writes DeMeo (p. 44). That tension becomes unbearable when Albert begins to realize that his father is not a regular suburban father. The first inkling comes in first grade when all his other classmates rise to tell about what their fathers "do." Albert is silent and bewildered: the looks of the neighbors and the snickers of the neighborhood children leave him confused. Eventually the truth is revealed to him by none other than his own father. Young Al DeMeo would accompany his father on his loan-sharking rounds, often stopping at one of the infamous "social clubs" in Little Italy where Aniello Della Croce held court.

How is it possible that a man who could be driven to purple rage when the landscaper accidentally kills a frog with the lawnmower or furiously chastises his son for shooting a chipmunk can be responsible for dozens of gruesome murders? To his credit, Albert DeMeo is clear: he readily acknowledges that his father was implicated in a very real evil; and yet there is a touching humanity to the story.

This is an organized crime memoir that quotes the Bible, Dante, Milton, Shakespeare, and Machiavelli. In a telling scene, Al DeMeo's mother gives him a Bible while his father hands him a copy of *The Prince* (the "Mafia Bible" for Al). Before he reaches puberty, young Al knows that the world is not divided into an easy black-and-white morality.

Not all is grim: the younger DeMeo recounts how—after a contractor bungled a driveway repaving job at their home—the "crew" simply stole an entire street of cobblestones in Manhattan. One could either be enraged or amused by the incident. Young DeMeo is perceptive:

the mob life “simultaneously benefits and enslaves” its members (p. 110). The Faustian bargain is ever-present in his father’s mind. On a rare visit to church on Sunday, Roy DeMeo refuses to receive communion. When asked by his daughter why, he responds that he is no hypocrite and “I know who I am and I know where I’m going in the end” (p. 114). The daughter is blessedly confused; young Al knows exactly what his father means.

“The underworld is as much the product of fiction as of any reality,” writes Al DeMeo, “even in the minds of those who dwell there” (p. 239). For Al DeMeo, who lived in that world, this book was perhaps an attempt at catharsis; dedicated to his father (“that he may find redemption”), the reader can only hope that the author found what had remain hidden for so long.

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