

Al Capone: His Life, Legacy, and Legend.

By Deirdre Bair.

New York: Nan A. Talese/Random House, 2016.

416 pages.

Murder, Inc., and the Moral Life: Gangsters and Gangbusters in La Guardia's New York.

By Robert Weldon Whalen.

New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.

290 pages.

As the iconic line from *Godfather Part III* has it, “Just when I thought I was out . . . they pull me back in.” Both Al Capone and *Murder, Inc.* must be feeling this heat. These two defining entities associated with organized crime in America have recently been pulled back into the popular and critical imagination with the publication of *Al Capone: His Life, Legacy, and Legend*, by Deirdre Bair, and *Murder, Inc., and the Moral Life*, by Robert Weldon Whalen. While Bair and Whalen acknowledge the sizable literature and the well-trod ground that already exist on both subjects, both authors bring fresh sources of information and new reflections on the history of “gangsterism” in the American context. Together these two stories demonstrate that this history is more complex and untidy than we have taken it to be.

Bair’s work is the more accessible. In a clearly written and chronological fashion, she takes us from the early days of Capone’s life in Brooklyn to his arrival in Chicago; ascendance as “Scarface Al,” the world’s most notorious gangster; difficulties with the law and imprisonment for tax evasion; prison life in Alcatraz; and his secluded and mentally challenged existence in Miami in the last decade of his life. Some of this covers familiar ground, especially the sections dealing with Capone’s rise to power in Chicago and the struggles to thwart rival gangs and the law simultaneously. By drawing credibly and for the first time on the remembrances of Capone’s descendants, as well as on extensive archival documents, Bair presents a more nuanced, more personal understanding of Capone. For example, describing the period when Capone was being hunted down by law enforcement officials and fellow gangsters, Bair paints a more benign picture of Capone with friends and family at home or in one of his hideouts and retreats in Illinois, Wisconsin, or Florida. He is shown giving parties for upper-crust society in Miami, attending high school football games, cooking pasta for reporters, and not so innocently trying to bribe jurors and government officials. In this way, Bair gives us a Capone who is at once courteous and ruthless, respectful and vicious, sincere and manipulative. Countering the well-documented, and well-earned, beastly image of

Capone prevalent in traditional accounts, Bair flushes out his life as a devoted son, dutiful husband, and loving father. Criminals, we learn, are not criminals in a totalizing manner.

Perhaps this more complex rendering of Capone's life is best captured in the extensive discussion of his relationship with his wife, Mae. This may be the most telling, and paradoxically the most enigmatic, narrative in the book. Bair suggests that "Al elevated Mae to sainthood, and she stood upon her pedestal with dignity and grace" (133). Throughout Bair's discussion of Capone's adult life, Mae is depicted as an exceedingly strong woman and utterly devoted wife, companion, and caregiver. Surely this was by no means easy. Enduring Capone's numerous trials, imprisonments, hideaway retreats, and most significantly his severe mental incapacities due to his untreated bout with syphilis, Mae displayed love for and devotion to Capone that is described in extensive detail. Yet Bair also points out that Capone was far from the perfect husband. He had numerous sexual liaisons. Prostitutes were readily available. Indeed, Capone contracted syphilis from one such illicit affair and passed it on to Mae. Still, in her nuanced treatment of Capone's private life, Bair engages an aspect of his legacy not typically addressed this fully.

As Bair takes us on this more intimate journey, she expands upon what has been a developing trend in biographies of Capone. From depictions of him as a vicious thug (Peterson 1952) to a more nuanced treatment of his life and character (Schoenberg 1992) to his contradictory status as an unlikely hero (Bergreen 1994), Capone has emerged as a psychologically complex personality. Bair extends this trajectory by interpreting Capone's motives and actions with the help of Capone's descendants. In a broader context, Bair suggests that the distinction between criminals and noncriminals is not as categorical as traditional literature has proposed. Indeed, to depict Scarface Al as capable of both cruelty and nobility, as Bair does, challenges us to rethink the ideas of evil and good, especially as these have shaped our theories of criminal behavior.

Whalen's account of *Murder, Inc.* also takes a fresh look at the history of organized crime in America during the 1930s and 1940s. He examines the careers of members of this loose organization of mostly Jewish and Italian American murderers for hire and contrasts this analysis with a description of the motives and lives of the "gangbusters" attempting to fight the evils of the mob, with a special emphasis upon New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and New York State Special Prosecutor and Manhattan District Attorney Thomas E. Dewey. Whalen sets the emergence of *Murder, Inc.* within the larger moral and popular imagery of mobsters at the beginning of the last century. Through an examination of gangster films of that era, he suggests that at that time, and to some extent now, these films had a popular appeal because they moved viewers to reflect on core questions of "good and evil, fate and choice, excess

and restraint” (30). In so doing, these films bring to the surface the imperfect and uneven way in which American society has been organized to distribute opportunities for economic success and assign moral value and purpose to some people but not to others.

From there, Whalen takes us into the lives of La Guardia, Dewey, and former Murder, Inc. boss Abe “Kid Twist” Reles, whose testimony during Dewey’s famous trials brought many of his associates to justice, but at the cost of his own life. There are also cameo appearances by gangsters Lucky Luciano, Frank Costello, and Albert Anastasia on the one hand and gangbusters Lewis Valentine, Bill O’Dwyer, and Burton Turkus on the other. With precision and detail, Whalen presents the series of maneuvers each side engaged in to ply their trade—the gangsters and their run of murders to support the mob’s economic interests and enforce its control on the one hand, the politicians and their efforts to bring these murderers to court and to challenge the underlying appeal of the gangster life in the general public on the other. This narrative climaxes in the Murder, Inc. trials in New York City in 1940 and 1941. Whalen argues that over and above the instrumental task of prosecuting crimes these “trials were about ritually purging the accused from New York City’s moral space” (157). Here Whalen is less a historian and more a moral philosopher—a dual role that he plays throughout the book. In this case, he argues that the conviction of the Murder, Inc. defendants not only rid society of people who had done unspeakable evils but also shielded society from the “moral chaos” that would have ensued if gangsterism and its challenge to fundamental values had been allowed center stage.

Taken together, the works of Bair and Whalen lead us to question, or at least suspend, our routine understanding of the rise and persistence of organized crime in America. Both studies chronicle evil but suggest its form and shape cannot be neatly summarized in terms of good guys versus bad guys. For her part, Bair creates a more sympathetic portrait of Capone, not by dismissing the illegal acts he perpetrated, but by making him more human. Whalen, while arguing that the Murder, Inc. criminals could best be described as “stupid evil,” could at the same time contend that the machinations of these individuals and the “messy” response to them by law enforcement officials reveal the ambiguities and mysteries of evil beyond the actual characters involved. As Whalen suggests, “good and evil grow up all entangled together” (7).

Both Bair and Whalen take on familiar topics. Yet Bair brings new data to bear upon the life of Capone by uncovering family stories, documents, and other archival information. In so doing, she adds to interpretations of Capone not simply as a monstrous criminal but also as a complex personality. Still, Bair misfires at times, such as when describing the larger social contexts that may have contoured Capone’s behavior. For example, in describing Capone’s gener-

osity, Bair at one point attributes this to a general Italian or Italian American cultural trait of taking care of those in need. There is no evidence provided to support this assertion. Indeed, much of the research literature points to the tight circle of familism, clans, and provincial attitudes Italians and Italian Americans drew around themselves. At the same time, Bair also suggests that there was a sharp divide in terms of the public's perception of Capone. While the upper class of society viewed him as an "ill-mannered, semiliterate outsider" (97), the general public's view by and large was one of "reverence, adulation, and homage" (97). Perhaps Bair can be forgiven for hyperbole. However, a more systematic attempt to gauge these public attitudes would have been useful and would have provided more opportunity to see how Capone's public behavior made sense within the context of his personal life and how "the one might had influence or bearing on the other" (3).

Whalen's analysis is more sociological, at least in terms of its intentions. It ties gangsters and gangbusters in a moral, theatrical battle over the basis for solidarity in society. In so doing, it widens the conversation about the role that organized crime has played in shaping American culture over the past century. What it does not fully address, however, is how these moral conflicts affected everyday social life. If the Murder, Inc. case is a "profoundly moral issue, not despite its ambivalence but precisely because of its ambivalence" (208), we are still left with the more prosaic questions about what that sense of "ambivalence" might have meant for different populations or how this ambivalence about the morality of organized crime might have played itself out in the "moral spaces" that local people occupy—on the "street corners," "down alleyways," or "into the neighborhoods" (7).

Perhaps the most significant contribution of Bair and Whalen, besides careful scholarship and new perspectives, is that they keep the discussions about the nature and role of organized crime moving forward, challenging ways in which we have viewed organized crime, criminals, and the systems responsible for corralling them.

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