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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ BIOGRAPHY

For Members Only: The Story of the Mob's Secret Judge

G.T. Harrell
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“If we wanted something we just took it. If anyone complained twice they got hit so bad believe me they never complained again.” —Henry Hill from the movie *Goodfellas*

In the heart of Manhattan’s Little Italy violent men whose last names ended in vowels congregated for decades in private clubs—members-only establishments—to relax together over card games or weigh in on whether one of their own deserved to have his life extinguished. Bosses of the crews spoke their minds on such mortal matters yet only the top consigliere could make the final decision to eliminate or show mercy.

G.T. Harrell insists that ultimate power didn’t rest with Vinnie “The Chin” Gigante who shuffled through Greenwich Village in a bathrobe or a prime media magnet like John Gotti. The real bosses preferred to operate in obscurity and none was more respected or feared than “The Judge” Paulie “Lefty” Della Universita. From the ‘40s into the’90s if Paulie ruled that you’d broken the code you were as finished as Jimmy Hoffa.

For Members Only had its genesis in a series of recorded conversations between the author and Paulie’s younger brother Sonny Della Universita a.k.a. Tony Bastiano an affable man who spent time in prison for heroin distribution but also ran an impressive experimental theater. Though the many caper stories and background on the mob’s dicey inner politics make for engrossing reading Harrell deserves particular notice for backing up and explaining the situation for Sicilian and Italian immigrants early in the twentieth century. Many had to choose between the rackets and dire poverty. He shows quite convincingly that organized crime was and still is controlled from Sicily.

Harrell worked in management for Scottish and English newspapers as well as for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *New York Daily News*. He extends himself a remarkable distance considering such journalism experience advancing many claims uncorroborated by disinterested authorities. Partly charmed by the uncle-like Sonny Harrell seems fleeced at times though he voices the same complaint a reader would: “One of the frustrations in compiling this book has been the absence of solid evidence.” The murders of John and Robert Kennedy are explained with familiar supposition but the notorious rub-out of Jimmy Hoffa is certainly presented in a new light: Sonny claims to have destroyed clothes with Hoffa’s post-mortem body fluids on them.

With tough-guy language choices similar to James Ellroy’s true-crime books the author disdains the harming of innocents but presents the Mafia’s pragmatic code of ethics as an alternative morality system which he understands if not supports. It’s a narrative certain to hold attention—Americans continue to be fascinated by inside peeks at the mechanics of the shadow economy. Harrell uncovers a bit that hasn’t hit the airwaves but wiseguys aren’t about to reveal their biggest secrets to even a reasonably sympathetic journalist. Fuggetaboutit.
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