



Franco Ricci. *The Sopranos: Born Under a Bad Sign.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. x + 324 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4426-4764-0; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4426-1571-7.



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Rethinking the Narrative: A New Way to Watch *The Sopranos*

Franco Ricci's *The Sopranos: Born under a Bad Sign* explores the richness of a television series that simultaneously captivated audiences and stirred ethnic controversy. While some viewers of *The Sopranos* see it as an entertaining collection of sex, violence and dialogue, others see offensive language and dark humor. However, Ricci explains that the face value of the series is merely the tip of the iceberg of what it has to offer the viewer. Utilizing several methodological frameworks, such as psychoanalysis, philosophy, and gender studies, Ricci explains the significance of the series outside of the simplistic view of prime-time entertainment. He gives the reader a new intellectual and philosophical lens for looking at the HBO series by explaining various scenarios and putting them into a more philosophical and cultural context. The work delves into what made *The Sopranos* so important for modern television viewership and how it fostered new ideas of what it means to create a self-made, independent, and true (viz. identifiable) identity in modern America. Ricci comments on several overt themes of the series, including gender and ethnicity. He also serves

to explain the finer details of the series, commenting on everything from the left-right brain paradigm and its effect on the polarization of characters, to the abundance of artworks and artistic artefacts that, as he points out, lends the series its ironic bite and sardonic wit (p. 22). *The Sopranos: Born under a Bad Sign* explores the themes and relationships of the television series through different gender, social, ethnic, and philosophical theories in order to provide the reader a more in-depth and honest look at modern-day television, as well as life in an increasingly results-driven society.

The book is organized into seven parts. There is an introduction, five body chapters, and a short conclusion. Each chapter explores a different form of active viewership and asks the reader to question interpretations of the series on a scene-by-scene basis. Ricci provides detailed examples from *The Sopranos* and other sources to prove different philosophical premises and to help the viewer think outside the box. The book's organization gives the readers the opportunity to reach several diverse conclusions and invite them to watch *The Sopranos* with

a new eye for complexity and social commentary. Active viewership, Ricci seems to claim, involves prior reference knowledge and a keen mind's eye.

The introduction, "Coming Heavy: Revisiting, Rereading, Rethinking *The Sopranos*," serves to situate *The Sopranos* into its role as cultural phenomenon and describes its legacy among, and references to, classic mob movies. Ricci elaborates on why these classics are important to replicating the internal dialectic that one can sum up in the question, who am I? The author argues that advertising and sale value have given *The Sopranos* an oversimplified and literalist appeal, and that readers should rethink how they watch the show. The introduction also explores why *The Sopranos* was so controversial to audiences that are offended by ethnic, social, and sexual stereotyping. Ricci also gives credit to the show's producer, David Chase, for his effort in creating "the highest-quality television program in the history of television that featured the best writing the medium had ever entertained" (pp. 21).

The first chapter, "Inner Sanctums," explores the three most abundant settings in the series and the semantic value of the objects that are stored and manipulated within them. The chapter explores the themes of patriarchy, existentialism, and Italian-American ethnic pride, among several others, through the analysis of materialism. As the primary chapter of the book, it also is the most detailed and analytical section of the work.

The second chapter, "When I Grow Up I Want to Be an American," questions notions of ethnicity and the American "melting pot" from a modern-day standpoint. As the author states, "In Today's America, real ethnic awareness is waning, dissolved in the flotsam of melting-pot commercialization" (pp. 199). In an America where Italian culture is assimilated, its unique characteristics are glorified. In the second chapter, Ricci serves notice that ethnicity plays a major part in self-identification, which is a nice segue into the third chapter.

Chapter 3, "God Help the Beast in Me," takes a more gendered outlook into creating meaning within the television series. Tony Soprano's relationships with the women in his life are most important. Among other things, how Tony interacts with his mother, Livia, his wife, Carmela, and his therapist, Jennifer Melfi, according to Ricci, are pertinent to understanding how feminization affects his macho Mafioso lifestyle. The chapter looks to *The Sopranos* as an arbiter between notions of the "perfect" label and self-gratification. Ricci is able to tie themes of creating meaning into the modern American

narrative of everyday life à la *The Sopranos*.

Chapter 4, "Two Tonys: Drawing Conclusions from Mediated Mob Images," focuses on Tony's dualistic nature and how his personality affects his relationships. The idea is that Tony cannot create a single identity for himself, as his relationships and roles as father, boss, and patient forge a more ambiguous identity than he would like for himself. Tony's idealizations and self-questioning are a major theme in *The Sopranos*, and Ricci considers this psyche up to the very conclusion of the series.

The final chapter serves as a conclusion before the conclusion. The fifth installment in the book allows the author to introduce several particular nuances that he would like to point out to the reader and viewer of the show. This chapter is organized with bulleted lists. Although the sources are interesting, Ricci would have been better advised to include more of these bulleted points in the main narrative.

The conclusion is fairly short and puts Ricci's view of *The Sopranos* into a broader context of intellectual television viewership. Ricci does a fine job of reiterating many of his most emphasized points. He again states the importance of keen viewership. He states, "Unquestionable quality, upbeat style, irreverent themes, David Chase subverted staid television structures in favour of a discourse that privileges active vision, super verbal acuity, detailed depiction, and post-viewing contemplation as a means of active intellectual viewer involvement" (p. 264).

Franco Ricci's *The Sopranos: Born under a Bad Sign* provides an interesting take on a controversial, but much-heralded, television series. The author explains that *The Sopranos* helped germinate a more profound outlook on the American Dream through several psychosocial standpoints. Rather than just a valuable source of entertainment, *The Sopranos* held back no punches in terms of social commentary. Ricci's work allows the reader to use *The Sopranos* to understand the questions of race, gender, and society that frequently give the television series a more nuanced meaning than the gratuitous sex and violence would indicate. The book is replete with psychoanalytical and historical references (Ricci cites Aristotle, Lacan, Plato, Freud, Jung, among others), references to the show's mob-related predecessors, and excerpts from the dialogue and action of the show itself. Prospective readers should note that Ricci wrote his book with those who have already watched the series in mind, as the book does contain spoilers. The critique of the Mafia in modern

Americana has become a popular topic among authors. There are also quite a few works on *The Sopranos* and its role in television history.[1] Nonetheless, Ricci's *The Sopranos: Born under a Bad Sign* is an important read for those interested in psychoanalysis, social commentary, history, and American popular culture.

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