

## Book Review Wise Guy by Nicholas Pileggi

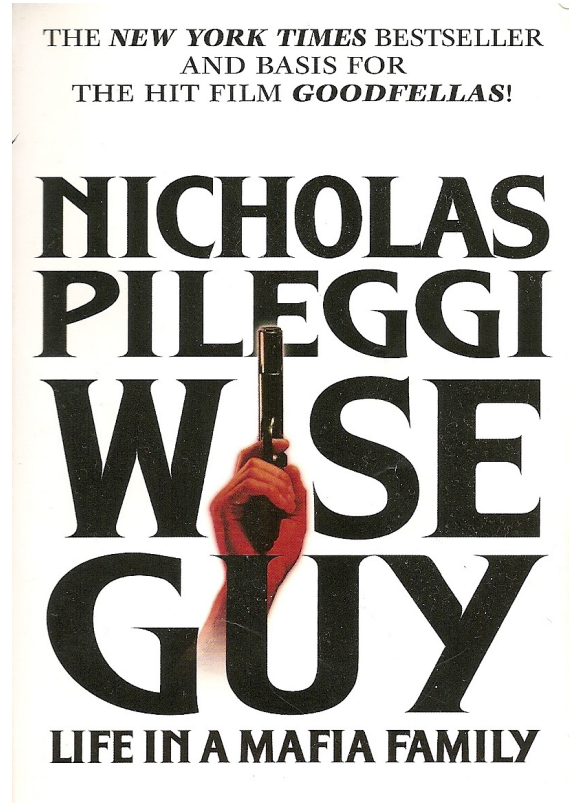
BY BRENDAN DAVIS

Even if you haven't read *Wise Guy*, there is a good chance you already know the story of Henry Hill. Martin Scorsese based his hit film "Goodfellas" on this 1985 tell-all book, and the movie remains one of the highest rated gangster films of all time. Anyone who enjoyed the movie will absolutely love the book and anyone who plays *Crime Network* will find an endless source of inspiration in Hill's account of mafia life.

Written by Nicholas Pileggi (who also wrote *Goodfellas*), *Wise Guy* provides a street level view of life in the Lucchese crime family from the perspective of Henry Hill, a lowly associate. Hill Explains, in vivid detail, how crimes are committed, how people are murdered and how a crime family operates. He even explains how stolen goods are sold on the street. Reading the book is like being beside Hill as he greases hands and lights fires for Lucchese capo, Paul Vario. Henry's narrative isn't just a peephole into a rarely seen underworld of vice; it drags the reader into that world as deeply as Tolkein drags the reader into Middle Earth.

Pileggi does the right thing by keeping his ego in check and allowing Henry Hill to tell the tale in mostly his own words. Narration shuffles back and forth between the two men (and occasionally Hill's wife Karen), but everything is anchored in Hill's voice and perspective. This not only gives the reader a better sense of what gangsters do, but also how they think. And Hill proves capable of telling of his own story, in a voice saturated with authenticity. He makes no attempt to justify his past, or paint himself in a different light than his companions. Nor does he color his tale with exaggerations of his exploits or importance, something much too common in the genre. Hill takes us through the world of gangsters with the confident authority of a tour guide who is not afraid to delve into the least savory areas of his subject.

Paul Vario is a foundational figure in Henry's universe. He brings a young Henry Hill into the family as an errand boy for his cab company and molds him, with the help of Jimmy "The Gent" Burke into an expert



criminal. The book's author, Pileggi, describes Vario as a someone who moved "in the lumbering manner of a man who knew that people and events waited for him.... [h]e seemed invulnerable. deliberate. He exhorted the sort of lethargy that sometimes accompanies absolute power". This power, and invulnerability, appears to be what attracts Hill not only to Vario, but to the life of a gangster as well.

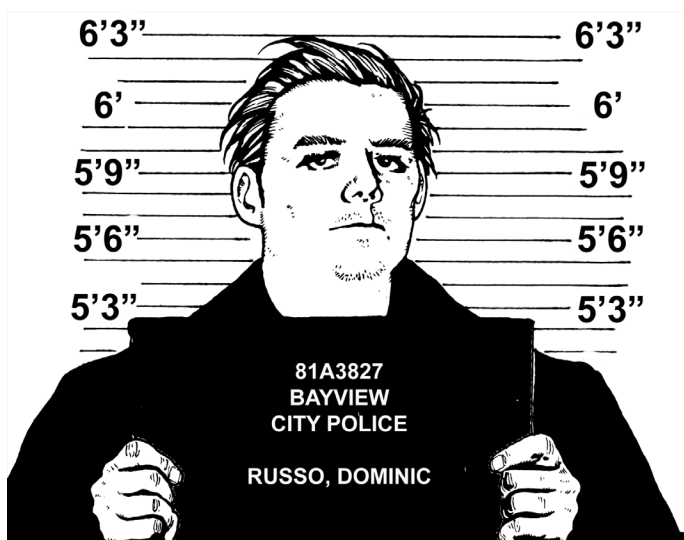
Hill delights in telling his readers about the perks of mob life. He never becomes a made-man, but people still treat him differently. He can park where he wants to. He doesn't have to wait in line for anything. And he doesn't even have to show up for work. Hill and his crew don't play by the rules you or I play by, because even the police are in his capo's back pocket and Hill has the street smarts to get out of trouble when he gets caught breaking the law. When he does end up going to jail, he and his friends all get special treatment. The world Hill creates for the reader is one where the normal rules don't apply. He makes it clear to readers that he has figured stuff out they never will. Like a computer wiz ruling the console with a book of cheats, Hill floats through

life, breaking laws and busting heads without fear of the consequences...at least, for a while.

Eventually, Hill's ways catch up with him. The lifestyle takes a toll on everyone he knows as his universe implodes in the wake of the biggest robbery of its time: the Lufthansa Heist. This is the peak of the story and the beginning of the decline for Hill. After the police find the get-away vehicle and begin putting the pieces together, Jimmy "the Gent", with the backing of Paul Vario, starts taking out anyone connected to the heist. When Henry gets busted for running a narcotics ring, and the possibility of him cutting a deal seems likely, Jimmy sets his sights on Hill. This is perhaps the emotional core of the book.

As the book unfolds it builds both Jimmy "the Gent" and Paul Vario into father figures for Hill. As the reader, you begin to admire both these men for their ability to shield Hill from the consequences of his behavior. Because of this it is hard to imagine how they, particularly Paul Vario, could kill someone they practically raised. In many ways this is the book's central point and the central contradiction of mob life. Important as family is, business comes first. The reader doesn't doubt that Vario has paternal feelings for Hill (he even sheds tears when he withdraws his protection from Henry), but he is still willing to let Jimmy kill him to help preserve his criminal empire and save his own skin.

As a reader, I can't recommend this book enough to anyone with a shred of interest in true-life crime or the mob. There are some important differences between the book and the movie, but most of them were made because of the demands of the film medium. And each



one (both the book and the film) is a masterpiece in its own right).

As a game master, I think *Wise Guy* is a must-read for those running a Crime Network campaign or something similar. It is filled with useful information about mafia life and crime. Sometimes the level of detail is excruciating, but it never ceases to be entertaining.

## Coming Soon: Agency Resource Guide (Fall 2010)

Filled with information of government departments and agencies, the Agency Resource guide will help both Players and GMs run a counter terrorism campaign. Inside, readers will find new equipment, new agencies, new rules and agency overviews. There will be a ton of additional background material as well, and an entire section devoted to GMing Terror Network sessions. We don't want to give away too much, but we know our customers are going to love the Agency Resource Guide.

## Crime Network Poll Did Tony Soprano Get Whacked?

When the last episode of *Soprano's* Season Six aired, this was the debate that raged across the blogs. For those who don't know, in the last episode ends on a somewhat ambiguous note. It never actually shows Tony getting shot, but the way the scene is edited, and the many hints dropped over the course of the episode, convince many that he was killed in a mob hit. Others believe Tony made it out alive. We took the liberty of conducting our own poll, and here are the results:

In the final episode of the *Sopranos*, do you believe Tony got whacked?

- |   |      |
|---|------|
| Yes, he sleeps with the fishes          | 60 % |
| No, he's living it up at the Bada Bing! | 40%  |

## Surfing the Web

The web is a great resource for gamers. Each month we will highlight a website we think our customers will enjoy. This month we talk about [AmericanMafia.com](http://AmericanMafia.com), a website devoted to material on *Cosa Nostra*.

[AmericanMafia.com](http://AmericanMafia.com) was created by Rick Porrello, a writer and police chief with an interest in all things mafia. As a writer, Porrello has met with great success.

His book “To Kill the Irishman: The War that Crippled the Mafia” is being turned into a feature film that stars Val Kilmer and Christopher Walken. Another of his books, “Superthief: A Master Burglar, the Mafia and the Biggest Bank Heist in U.S. History” won praise and received a second place award for book of the year in ForeWord Magazine. As if he wasn’t busy enough, he is also an accomplished jazz musician and has made television appearances as a mafia history commentator.

What I like about Rick Porrello’s AmericanMafia.com is it has so many resources for a Game Master running a mafia campaign. It has everything from histories and overviews of 25 mob cities to a user forum that is just teeming with content. Let’s face it, half of a GMs effort energy is spent on research, and this website is a treasure trove of background information for any Crime Network campaign.

Personally, one of my favorite parts of the site is the Mob City page, which is an interesting feature which gamers will find especially useful. It is a great aid when your players surprise you by taking a trip to Denver or Chicago. Just click the link to the city, and you have a history of the mob presence in the area and up-to date information on the current bosses.

There is also a book list page. I almost ignored this at first, but it actually proved a great find. It can be tough to find good books on the mafia (finding books on the subject is easy, but finding good ones is another thing entirely). The book list is rather extensive, and includes a number of books I had never encountered before. If you are on the prowl for true-crime books, this is the place to go.

Unlike a lot of similar websites, AmericanMafia.com has feature articles, and they are all worth checking out. There is a recent article about Jewish Gangsters, while another explains how racketeering works; there is even an article highlighting female participants in the ‘Ndrangheta (the Calabrian Mafia). I really like the selection of articles, and hope to explore several of them in depth in the course of my next campaign.

If you plan to run Crime Network, definitely check out AmericanMafia.com. As every GM knows, sometimes the information you need isn’t the information that is generally available. Game Masters need the details that are often overlooked in broad treatments of a subject. AmericanMafia.com might just have what you are looking for in those cases.

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