and anthropologists, investigating the ideas about “Italian identity” and how the debate over citizenship, \textit{ius sanguinis}, and \textit{ius soli} (right of soil) is evolving inside and outside Italian society.

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\textit{The Sopranos: Born under a Bad Sign.}  
By Franco Ricci.  
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014.  
336 pages.

Over a span of six seasons, from its premiere in January 1999 to its finale in June 2007, David Chase’s \textit{The Sopranos} established itself among the most popular and critically acclaimed television series of all time, ushering in what many consider to be a new “golden age” of television. Given the show’s critical and popular status, it is not surprising that scores of articles have been dedicated to all facets of the series. Yet, while spawning a number of useful anthologies, the series has received scant book-length attention from scholars: There have been just a handful of books, including Dana Polan’s \textit{The Sopranos}, an excellent discussion of the series’ status as a cultural marker within a vast media economy characterized by “synergy” (Duke University Press, 2009).

Franco Ricci’s \textit{The Sopranos: Born under a Bad Sign} does its part to remedy this dearth of extended analyses, in the process making an important contribution to the literature. In the years following the series’ conclusion, interest remained strong among fans craving \textit{The Sopranos’} return or, perhaps, a \textit{Sopranos} movie or prequel, and it seemed possible, possibly even likely, that something would eventually be done. It was only with the fatal heart attack suffered by actor James Gandolfini (Tony Soprano) in June 2013 that the series seemed to have come conclusively to an end. Yet, it remained a source of interest, and a year later many critics and fans cried foul when it was reported that Chase had announced that Tony Soprano was still alive at the end of the series (Nochimson 2014). As many readers will recall, \textit{The Sopranos’} conclusion brought up more questions than it answered: Tony, Carmela, and son A.J. sit at a booth in a diner awaiting daughter Meadow’s arrival. The sense of dread and menace grows as patrons enter the diner—are they friend or foe, or merely “civilians”? Suddenly, the frame cuts to black, leaving viewers to come to their own conclusions about the ultimate fate of Tony Soprano. Years later, fans’ and critics’ consternation following reports that Chase had revealed the \textit{real} ending led the series’ creator to quickly issue a retraction that his comments had been misconstrued (Weiner 2014). Thus, the show’s conclusion would remain ambiguous. In the end, the series was able to retain the opacity and emotional and psychological depth that had always invited viewers’ active “reading” of the text.

\textit{The Sopranos: Born under a Bad Sign} is a unique, extended meditation on Chase as auteur. His is, after all, the defining and sustaining intellect behind the landmark series,
and Ricci is primarily concerned with how Chase created and extended meaning, not simply via storyline and dialog but also through the series’ aural and visual design. The European and Japanese art-house cinema that thrived in the United States from the 1950s to 1970s was formative in the development of Chase’s artistic vision. Though cutting his teeth as a producer and writer on successful 1970s network series including *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, *The Rockford Files*, and, in the 1990s, the critical and audience favorite, *Northern Exposure*, Chase, following the example of film directors such as Fellini, Polanski, and Godard, bemoaned network television’s reliance on dialog and the marginalization of visual storytelling; he aspired to a more personal form of storytelling with attention to graphic and sound design detail. With these aspirations fully realized in *The Sopranos*, maintains Ricci, the series resided aesthetically in “the hallowed aura of art house cinema” (26).

Ricci describes Chase’s active cultivation of an “ideal viewer” (25). From the start, the series’ superb writing was matched with detailed environments and the mise-en-scène created by Chase, always littered with the ephemera of life in the United States in the early twenty-first century. Ricci describes the ways in which Chase carries on a conversation with the show’s more astute viewers, allowing an interpretive space to make meaning. Magazines, photographs, posters, paintings, films, books, and songs seen in the show are the transient artifacts and phenomena augmenting the meaning—and the process of making meaning—for the audience. Of particular interest to Ricci are the “mise-en-abîme signature moments” in which writer and viewer are complicit in a “dance of creative communion” (23). The book opens with a discussion of the core locations and settings for these moments and for the interplay of characters, narrative, and the carefully crafted, intellectually and emotionally charged objects. Dr. Melfi’s office, the Bada Bing club, and the Soprano home are highly redolent environments possessing unique psychological and emotional possibilities. Within these locations, principal characters interact, the narrative progresses, events are foreshadowed and recalled, episodes and incidents reflect upon one another, all the while navigating the meaning of ethnicity in a largely postethnic United States and the accompanying problems of masculinity and identity.

Perhaps reflecting the centrality of pedagogical and critical concerns, the concluding fifth chapter, “An Appendix of Verbal Bits and Visual Bytes,” is also the book’s longest. The book is the product, in part, of the first-year university-level course on *The Sopranos* that Ricci teaches. His approach is that of the cultural and literary semiotician, and his reading list for the course incorporates gender studies, ethnicity, feminist criticism, mob stereotypes, and Italian-American (“I-Am” is Ricci’s preferred term) culture and language, all of which figure in the book’s analyses of scenes, shots, and their attendant media. Ricci organizes the visual iconography of the show under broad categories such as “Books,” “Newspapers,” “Photographs,” and so on. Each category is introduced with a general description of its thematic and aesthetic context, followed by specific examples. Readers’ analyses may lead to different conclusions than Ricci’s, given the issues of identity, masculinity, and ethnicity inscribed in the series since its debut—but this is, perhaps, the book’s core achievement: It describes the issues involved and provides starting points for discussion and argument. *The Sopranos: Born under a Bad Sign* should be of interest to students and scholars in film/television studies, media studies, Italian American studies, and related fields. Ricci’s
analysis also stands as a useful, and usefully extended, case study for those interested in semiotics, mass media, and aesthetics.

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Works Cited


By Susan Tejada.
385 pages.

Susan Tejada’s In Search of Sacco and Vanzetti: Double Lives, Troubled Times, and the Massachusetts Murder Case That Shook the World is an impressive addition to the already considerable body of work on the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Since the two men’s executions in 1927, scholars have explored many facets of the trial, analyzing the legal arguments presented, the use of inconclusive evidence, and how anarchism and ethnic prejudice negatively impacted the outcome of the court case, to name a few examples. Tejada’s book continues in this vein but with a markedly different purpose in mind. Her main goal, she writes in the introduction, is “to decouple Sacco from Vanzetti and to write a double biography”—one that offers a fuller “portrait of two complex individuals” (ix). The result is a fascinating portrayal of their separate yet intersecting lives rooted within the political firestorm of labor strikes and class warfare that defined the early decades of the twentieth century.

As Tejada correctly points out, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were physically apart for much of the trial’s seven-year span except for court appearances and the final months after sentencing when they were transferred to Dedham Jail. Like the torn edges of the photograph that serves as the book’s cover and section dividers, many of the assumptions that have conflated Sacco with Vanzetti in the past have been shredded by Tejada’s research. She upholds the singularity of each man’s journey from Italy to the United States, each one’s sacrifices, work history, personal life, and experience in prison, offering revised characterizations of a “more reflective and realistic” Sacco and a “more intolerant” Vanzetti than those previously depicted in earlier accounts (x).