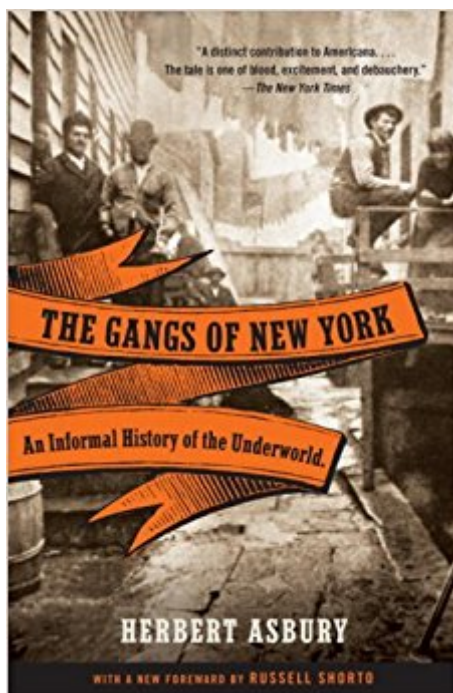


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# The Gangs Of New York: An Informal History Of The Underworld



## Synopsis

The basis of Martin Scorsese's acclaimed 2003 film, *The Gangs of New York* is a dramatic and entertaining glimpse at a city's dark past. Focusing on the saloon halls, gambling dens, and winding alleys of the Bowery and the notorious Five Points district, *The Gangs of New York* dramatically evokes the destitution and shocking violence of a turbulent era, when colorfully named criminals like Dandy John Dolan, Bill the Butcher, and Hell-Cat Maggie lurked in the shadows, and infamous gangs like the Plug Uglies, the Dead Rabbits, and the Bowery Boys ruled the streets. A rogues' gallery of prostitutes, pimps, poisoners, pickpockets, murderers, and thieves, Herbert Asbury's whirlwind tour through the low life of a nineteenth-century New York has become an indispensable classic of urban history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Journalist Asbury pulled this book together from several official sources, including police records as well as unofficial ones such as the rough memories of criminals. True to the title, the book is a history of crime both organized and not that permeated the dirty underbelly of New York City and its boroughs in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of these gangs were so vicious they would post signs warning police to stay out of their neighborhoods or else! The 1927 volume is the basis of Martin Scorsese's forthcoming film of the same name starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Titanic heartthrob Leonardo DiCaprio, so make sure to have at least one copy on hand. This edition contains numerous illustrations and a foreword by Jorge Luis Borges. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"A distinct contribution to Americana. . . . The tale is one of blood, excitement, and debauchery." •The New York Times "One of the essential works of the city. . . . It owns a direct pipeline to the city's unconscious." •Luc Sante, author of *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* "A universal history of infamy, the history of the gangs of New York contains all the confusion and cruelty of the barbarian cosmologies." •Jorge Luis Borges "One of the best American books of its kind. Mr. Asbury writes in a direct and engaging manner." •Edmund Pearson, *The Saturday Review of Literature*

Herbert Asbury has developed in this book a delightfully readable (and read-out-loudable) history of the dark underbelly of New York City--the picaresque and downright nasty underground of gambling tongs, gang warfare and thorough political corruption. I of course came to this book only recently, after having seen the Scorsese film of the same name. It is in fact quite wonderful to see the liberties Scorsese took to make a challenging film and not just a recapping of this oral-style history. Familiar names and events and places appear in the mist, but in a whole new context. This book will let you know that the incredible Scorsese movie merely scratches the surface of the NYC underworld from the Civil War era to the start of the 20th century, if this book is to be believed. It is this last point that gives me some pause about this book. As I said before, this book is eminently readable and enjoyable. The webs of rivalry and alliance, of rumbles that go on for hours, riots that go on for days, tales of violence and retribution and a host of characters whose corruption and indulgence overshadow even the prohibition days of Chicago. Asbury freely admits when some of his tales are mere folklore, stories that criminals pass along to each other as legends, drastically overexaggerated to confer the level of respect of awe that a gang leader or significant change of the balance of power has earned. But sometimes it's hard to believe the level of reliable research that could have gone into so many other tales. The histories of particular criminals are detailed down to their dismemberment by cannon fire in the Civil War, or their miserable ends to cowardly ambush or the breaking of spirits after a particularly bad loss of business or to a mightier opponent, or to their incarceration, and the mug shots are wonderfully stylish, but it is hard to stomach easily the thoroughness of the information, unless Asbury was a devotee of the Five Corners and other such areas of ill-repute in its heyday. No doubt there was prodigious information provided by police records and other data, but perhaps this is a book to be taken more as a work of social anthropology than history--an examination of the underworld culture of NYC in this time period

rather than a necessarily accurate historical document. One part bragging, another part horror, and a wonderful gaze at the debaucheries of the ale houses and gambling establishments down Asbury's nose in a way that seems sometimes sincere, sometimes a little over the top for the sake of appearances, this book is worth the read, especially to spread stories to others...just don't accept it readily as 'fact.'

The title mentioned for this review would much better fit the bill for this book. As you may know the movie picture of similar title, this book does not represent anything more as inspiration which it is based upon. Being published for the first time in 1927, this book very much describes the history of the underworld in Manhattan as you may call the pre-mafia period. At that time Manhattan was New York and the Irish overwhelmed the Italians at that point of about 10 to 1. Research has been based on storytelling and news articles, but nevertheless make this book a good read as long as you take it with a pinch of salt. The terminology of 'half a dozen' and 'most ferocious of its time' are featured often and betray its inaccuracy, but going back in time this book might be the best you can get as far as a detailed description of the times. It is great to see the likes of Bill the Butcher, the Monk with the notches in his club and similar characters from the movie appear in their real-life habitat and timeline as you will find out that some of them could never have known each other. It is advised, however, to take a good look at the map of Manhattan before you read this when 'lower East Side' or 'fourty-second and third avenue' don't ring a bell in your mind, it makes this book much easier to read. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in gangster tales or New York history. Being a fan of both made this a good fit for me.

The Gangs of New York is an introduction to the gangs which proliferated in New York, primarily in the notorious Five Points district on the Lower East Side, in the nineteenth century. We're introduced to a number of famous characters, from the mythological Mose with his superhuman strength, to Bill the Butcher, to the Whyo gang, to the tong wars of Chinatown, and to the Monk Eastman gang and Big Jack Zelig. Although the book is introduced as a work of sociology, it's more a book of popular and cultural history. Many of the tales Asbury tells on this book are based on rumor and myth and often it's not quite clear what's factual. Also, the language itself is a little old-fashioned, and Asbury is blatantly racist at times (take this sentence, for example: "[The Bloody Angle in Doyers Street, in Chinatown] was, and is, an ideal place for ambush; the turn is very abrupt, and not even a slant-eyed Chinaman can see around a corner." (p. 286)). The Gangs of New York is also dated in that the author will say something like, "such-and-such is located at

such-and-such address, where now there's a such-and-such." The New York City that Asbury wrote about was obviously much different from what it is now. But this volume is nonetheless an excellent introduction to the gangs of New York City in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. You don't even have to know too much about the city's history in order to enjoy the book. I've always been fascinated with deviant behavior in history, and for that alone I thought highly of *The Gangs of New York*.

Arrived on time and in good shape. To understand Gangbanging today you have to know the history of it in the past. This book helps you get at the roots of the problem that is still plaguing us in the inner-cities all over America as I speak. It is a must read!

I love this book. I could care less if it's historically accurate. The first half of *Gangs of New York* is one of the most fun reads you can have, if you're into that period of history.

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