

Boys will be men

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [July 17, 2002](#) issue

Think of a conflict between father and son, and chances are good you'll find it buried somewhere within *Road to Perdition*, director Sam Mendes's first film since the hugely successful, if flawed, *American Beauty*. Based on a graphic novel (a high-end comic book) written by Max Allan Collins and illustrated by Richard Piers Rayner, *Road to Perdition* is a great-looking gangster movie set in 1931 Chicago, when the Capone gang flourished and lesser mobsters came to the big city to pay homage or seek favor.

One of these out-of-town kingpins is John Rooney (Paul Newman), an Irishman who rules his midwestern kingdom with an iron fist and an itchy trigger finger. His crown princes are his son, Connor, a chortling enforcer from the Richard Widmark school of psychotic gangsters, and Michael Sullivan (Tom Hanks), a soft-spoken professional who is, for all intents and purposes, Rooney's adopted son whom the malignant monarch loves and respects more than his own blood.

Set against this Shakespearean tale of a cruel and powerful warlord and his potential heirs is the very different relationship between Michael and his two sons. They adore their mysterious father. Thirteen-year-old Michael Jr. is reaching that point in life where he wants to know what his dad does for a living. He sneaks into the back of Michael's car one night, where he witnesses Connor and his father commit murder.

This act sets the main story in motion: Michael's family is vulnerable to attack since there is now a "witness" to the crime. Connor, who sees this as an opportunity to curry favor with his father while striking a fatal blow against his rival, commits a heinous act of violence, and just like that, *Road to Perdition* turns into a revenger's tragedy, with Michael and Michael Jr. seeking justice for the wrongs that have been done to them.

The film is beautifully photographed by the estimable Conrad L. Hall, with individual shots that resemble aged oil paintings. To that end, the film includes a slow-motion death scene that is pure poetry, a silent and bloody sequence that would bring a smile to the weathered face of the late Sam (*The Wild Bunch*) Peckinpah.

The acting is also brawny, including Newman as the malevolent gang boss; Daniel Craig as the demented Connor; Jude Law as a photographer and hit man who is hot on Michael's trail; and Stanley Tucci as an even-tempered and very businesslike Frank Nitti, one of Capone's associates.

The script, by David Self (*Thirteen Days*), is better than the novel, which is too thick with flesh-ripping shootouts, and features an absurd subplot in which Michael (called "the Archangel of Death") tries to take on the Capone empire single-handedly.

The flaw in the film, amazingly enough, is Hanks's performance. Hanks is not only a fine actor who has gotten better over time (as displayed especially in his multilayered performance in *Castaway*), but is gradually becoming something of an American movie legend in the mold of Jimmy Stewart or Cary Grant. I can understand his desire to play a dark, violent role. But whether it is due to Self's script, Mendes's direction, or Hank's own inherent goodness, he is never convincing as a professional killer.

The filmmakers could easily have inserted scenes that would make Hanks a lot more despicable (not to mention realistic), but they don't do it. They want Hank's character to be a bad guy, but not so bad that the audience will begin to dislike him. (It's called having it both ways, like having Julia Roberts play a hooker, but never showing her humiliating herself or getting slapped around by a pimp.)

Road to Perdition is an often mesmerizing gangster film that helps to revitalize the genre. But it would have worked much better with the central character played by someone whose search for forgiveness and redemption on the road to hell involved a longer and more uncertain journey. By casting Hanks, and protecting him with a soft script, the odyssey feels like a done deal.