

Gemorra

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [April 21, 2009](#) issue



Nominated as Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards and awarded the Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, *Gomorrah* chronicles the violent activities of the Camorra, or “the System,” the sprawling crime syndicate in Naples and surrounding provinces. The film, directed by Matteo Garrone, is based on a 2006 book by Roberto Saviano, which was a best seller in Italy. Since the book’s publication, Saviano has been living under government protection, his life threatened by angry members of the Camorra.

Gangsters are often portrayed in movies as romantic or sexy figures—as in *The Godfather*. There is nothing romantic or remotely positive about the working stiff and head honchos in Garrone’s film. They are a menace not only to Naples and Italy but to the world: they take their ill-gotten gains and invest them in heartless global schemes (one of their favorite money-makers is the illegal dumping of toxic waste). *Gomorrah* takes us into a sordid world in which life is cheap and friends turn on friends. *Gomorrah* qualifies as a revisionist gangster movie; in showing a cruel, bleak world, it overturns conventions of gangster films the way the opening of *Saving Private Ryan* overturns conventions of World War II movies and *Unforgiven* upends expectations about westerns.

Five different screenwriters (including Saviano) worked on the film, which weaves together five stories: one about a 13-year-old who is trying to work his way into the

System to ensure his survival; one about a pair of trigger-happy louts who love guns and the concept of power; one about a smooth-talking higher-up and his idealistic protégé, who are involved in shady business deals; one about an aging accountant who is losing control of his fiefdom; and one about a skillful, soft-spoken tailor who makes massive amounts of money for his bosses by running a sweatshop that produces high-fashion knockoffs. This last vignette is particularly poignant in conveying how evil can cast a shadow over anyone who seeks the light through generosity or altruism, loyalty or art. New themes and conflicts arise in each successive scene.

Garrone was trained as a painter, and he uses his painterly eye to create images that are both impressive and heartbreaking. These include a segment in a glowing tanning parlor that looks like something out of *2001: A Space Odyssey*; a tracking shot of two skinny young men in their underwear shooting oversized guns into the sea; a shot showing raw terror on the face of a weak man who has made one too many compromises in his life; and the startling image of a young boy hurrying down the street, ignoring the cries behind him, as his trusted friend is murdered in the background.

Gomorra has been criticized for being too graphic and pessimistic, but perhaps that response is to be expected for any piece that upsets film conventions.