

Do Italians really do it better?

The glory days of the Jewish mob

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Tony Soprano is a wimp. At least, he's nothing compared to the gangster legends of the past, claims novelist Leo Rutman.

"I really think the '20s through the early '60s was the golden age of the Mob," says Rutman, author of the Mafia epic "Thy Father's Son."

"The people around today — the Gottis, the Gravano, the Tony Sopranos — I just think they're secondhand thugs. Dumbed-down. Watered-down. It may sound strange to talk about the

An elderly Jewish mobster said, "Our farm team is all gone."

golden age of the Mob, but those guys had a lot more vision."

In the book, Davey Rossi, an up-and-coming prizefighter, is the adopted son of a Mafia don. He plunges into family secrets that take him back into the past — when Jewish gangsters vied with the Italians — then forward to a climax in which the dons of the Five Families are scheduled to be killed on the same evening.

"The Jewish gangsters

were more in control in the '20s," says the 53-year-old Rutman, who became fascinated with the mob after seeing Sergio Leone's classic mob film "Once Upon a Time in America."

"Often the Italians, although they won't admit it, took orders from the Jews. The thought was, the Italians will kill each other; the Jews will kill for each other."

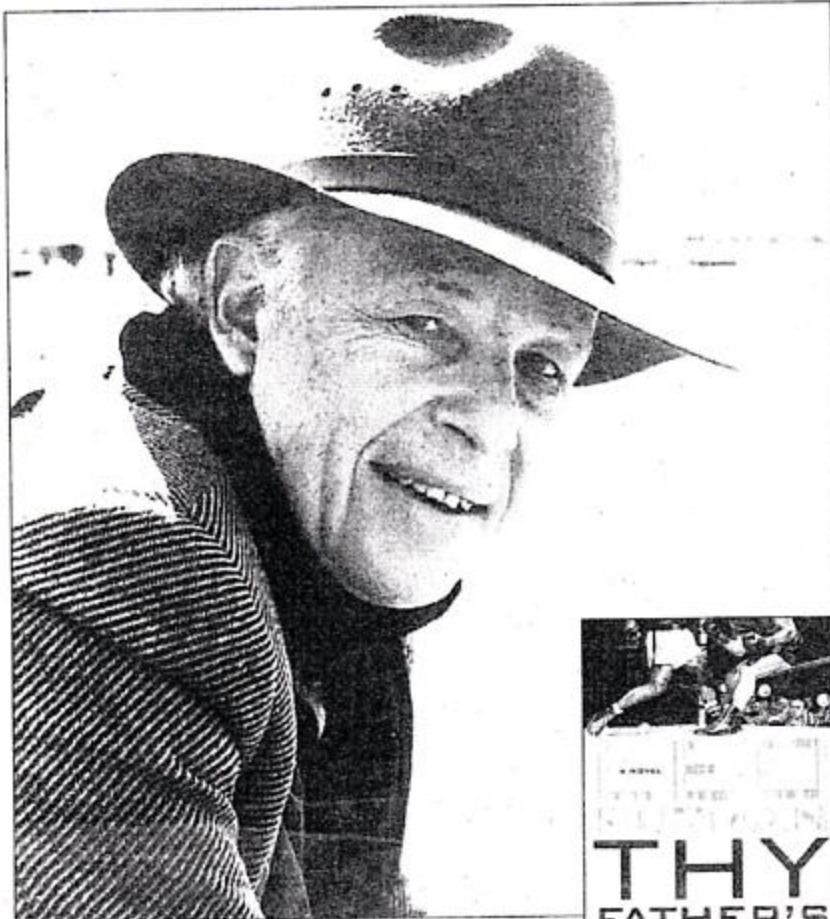
Born in the Bronx and then raised in Queens and Manhattan, Rutman previously chronicled the city in books like "Five Good Boys," a fictionalized account of the 1951 City College basketball point-shaving scandal; and "Clash of Eagles," which speculated upon what would have happened if the United States hadn't entered

World War II.

Rutman, who is also a playwright, attended college with Francis Ford Coppola and actress Lainie Kazan ("My Big Fat Greek Wedding").

Though he's fascinated by New York's gangster past, the author says he doesn't romanticize mob life or old-school mobsters.

"I don't see them as nobler compared to the gangsters of today," says Rutman. "But I do understand where they were



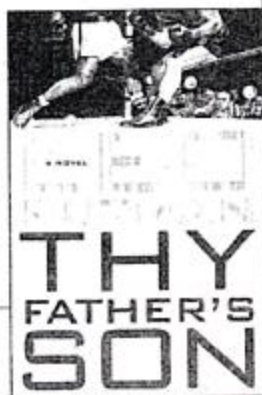
"The world has changed — except for the Italian gangster," says Leo Rutman, author of "Thy Father's Son."

coming from — which was nothing. Now, a lot of these guys aren't doing it out of want; it's just there for them. I'm appalled by what gangsters do in general.

"I heard a story just the other day about an elderly Jewish mobster being

asked, 'Where did they all go?' He said, 'Our farm team is all gone.'

"Just like the Jewish boxer," the author added, "which was prevalent in the '20s and '30s. Why should you risk your life in the ring when you can be a doctor or lawyer or



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engineer?

"The world has changed — except for the possible exception of the Italian gangster."