

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*Gone Baby Gone*]

### All in the Family

By Steve Sailer

WITH "THE SOPRANOS" wrapped up, there's a general feeling that the Italian mafia has finally been exhausted as grist for movies and TV. What Hollywood needs now is a new favorite crime-prone immigrant group, of which there is no shortage of candidates.

Here in Los Angeles, the more dismal murders—such as one teenager shooting another over graffiti-tagging rights to an alley—are committed mostly by the usual suspects. In contrast, the colorful capers that Quentin Tarantino or the Coen brothers would find cool, the seemingly brilliant schemes that somehow go awry and end in a bloodbath, are perpetrated mostly by white newcomers from either the Middle East or the ex-Soviet Union: Armenians, Israelis, Persians, and the like.

Yet Hollywood seems instead to be falling in love with an ethnic group that has been here even longer than the Italians: the Irish. Working-class white Boston, where killings, while rare, frequently remain unsolved, has been the setting for the recent Oscar-winners "The Departed" and "Mystic River."

Now failed leading man Ben Affleck (perhaps most notorious for bombing in "Pearl Harbor"), who won a screenwriting Oscar a decade ago with his best

friend Matt Damon for their movie about a Boston prole, "Good Will Hunting," has returned to his roots. He has co-adapted and directed "Gone Baby Gone," a detective thriller by *Mystic River* novelist Dennis Lehane set in Boston's grimy Dorchester neighborhood.

Well, Dorchester is not exactly Ben's roots. He was born in Berkeley, California and was raised in Cambridge, which is just like Dorchester, if Dorchester were home to Harvard and MIT. Like Damon and so many other younger stars, Affleck is from the artsy-lefty upper middle class. (The clearest exception to this trend is Dorchester-born ex-thug Mark Wahlberg, who was electrifying in "The Departed.")

This modestly budgeted film noir about neighborhood private eye Patrick Kenzie trying to unravel the kidnapping of the four-year-old daughter of a cocaine-addicted single mom hinges, like "The Maltese Falcon," on the snoop's devotion to his profession's ethics. Affleck's direction is a bit choppy, and the plot eventually becomes either bafflingly complex or nonsensical, but the overall impact is strong. "Gone Baby Gone" is hardly "The Departed," but it's more watchable than "Mystic River."

Affleck assembled a fine cast, with old reliables Morgan Freeman and Ed Harris as the cops. The role of the detective's girlfriend/partner doesn't make much sense (this is the fourth novel in Lehane's series, so presumably their implausible relationship was explained earlier), but it provides Affleck an excuse to point the camera at the most adorable starlet of the moment, Michelle Monaghan.

As the private eye, Affleck cast his own younger brother, making this the

second straight movie starring Casey Affleck that I've reviewed (he also played "the Coward Robert Ford" in "The Assassination of Jesse James"), and that's plenty.

Film-noir detectives have traditionally been world-weary types, such as Humphrey Bogart and Robert Mitchum, but Casey, a small youngster with a pinched baby-face, looks like he's trying detective work because he's not sure he's mature enough yet for law school. Casey is perfectly fine in both films, possibly because he gets a lot of real life practice at the main demand of these roles: acting peeved and perturbed when nobody takes him seriously.

Casey's sister-in-law is actress Jennifer Garner, and his wife's brother is Joaquin Phoenix. Would he be starring in movies without all these connections? Golden Age Hollywood was intensely nepotistic in the executive suites, but the modern industry is more nepotistic in the above-the-line jobs because power has migrated from the head office to whomever is raising the money. Ben Affleck's famous name was responsible for scraping together the \$19 million for "Gone Baby Gone," so he got to cast his baby brother.

Surprisingly, Hollywood nepotism is seldom fatal to films because its beneficiaries, like Casey Affleck, are almost all at least competent. Why? Let's do the numbers. If, say, 1 percent of all adult Americans have the natural talent to be a movie star, director, or screenwriter, and maybe 10 percent of them try to make it in the business, well, that's still 200,000 people to choose among! So, among that qualified 0.1 percent, it's whom you know that counts. ■

Rated R for violence, drug content, and pervasive language.

## BOOKS

[*The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*, David Halberstam, Hyperion, 736 pages]

# Recalling the Forgotten War

By Walter M. Hudson

THE FIRST YEAR of the Korean War, so terrible and so filled with shattering human error, is the subject of David Halberstam's last book, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*, finished just days before his death in a car crash last April. After that first year of war was over, the great campaigns essentially ended, and the conflict bogged down into World War I-style battles, dragging on painfully for two more years. It was, as Halberstam writes, a war that was puzzling, gray, and distant—seemingly “without hope or resolution.”

Unimportant, however, it was not. And the first year was the most crucial of all—from the summer of 1950, when North Korean T-34 tanks roared across the 38th parallel and sent South Korean and American forces into disarray, to the late spring of 1951, when Douglas MacArthur was relieved of command and returned to a tumultuous homecoming in the United States. It was a year as dramatic and dizzying as any in 20th-century American history: a summer of seemingly unstoppable Communist advance with American and Korean forces desperately falling back and clinging to the Pusan Perimeter; an autumn of triumph with the spectacular turnabout at Inchon, the North Korean army crushed and the United Nations forces hurtling toward the Manchurian border; a winter of overwhelming Chinese counterattack and, again, ignominious American retreat and defeat; and finally, a spring with a climactic show-

down between Commander in Chief Truman and Supreme Far East Commander MacArthur with both the Korean War and Cold War coming into the Main Streets and living rooms of America.

In New Journalist style, of the kind Halberstam used so masterfully in his greatest book, *The Best and the Brightest*, *The Coldest Winter* begins in October 1950, *in medias res*, as it were, with the Eighth Regiment of the U.S. First Cavalry Division at Unsan, north of Pyongyang. MacArthur had landed at Inchon the month before, routed and effectively knocked North Korea's army out of action, and was, with permission from Washington, rushing toward the Yalu with the goal of unifying all of Korea.

Americans at home were elated—assured of total victory—supplies were already being rerouted to Europe, and there was much talk about the boys being home for Christmas. But the soldiers themselves were wary. They were in unknown, harsh country, and rumors and fragmentary intelligence indicated that huge Chinese armies were hidden in the mountainous terrain. At Unsan, a small part of those forces struck, and the Eighth Regiment was badly mauled and nearly overrun. Eight hundred of the 2,400 men in the regiment were casualties.

But what makes the story even more incredible is what happened after Unsan. The Chinese attacked, then vanished once more. A more obvious warning could not have been made: hundreds of thousands of Chinese had already crossed over the Yalu River and were poised to strike the overconfident, overextended UN. But despite all the warnings, despite the growing obviousness of disaster, the United Nations forces kept on going, moving their strung-out units toward the Chinese border, daring Mao and tempting fate—a bet, as Halberstam notes, not a strategy. Indeed, he calls it a kind of “madness,” but not all blame can be put on MacArthur. It was a collective irrationality, the weakness of many men of power

that allowed this to happen, that plunged the United States into military disaster and the subsequent Truman-MacArthur feud, the closest thing to a military-political crisis America has had since the Civil War. It was an example, after all, of human choice and agency, not impersonal forces.

Halberstam has taught us before, wisely and well. *The Best and the Brightest* was a ferocious demolition of Kennedy's New Frontiersmen. The Whiz Kids, the “Harvards,” were, as he finally called McNamara, fools. Halberstam laid them bare: trapped by the crisis psychology of the Cold War—but more importantly, by their own egos and weaknesses—these apparently high-minded men (liberals virtually all) steadily, consciously, willingly immersed America in the Vietnam debacle.

Older, wiser, less impassioned in *The Coldest Winter*, Halberstam does not quite as ruthlessly flay the men who led American politics and arms in 1950-51. Less language like “brainwashing” and “lies” here: one gets the feeling that even the weakest and most foolish men in this book are somehow better, more open and outright even in their flaws than the dissembling intellectuals of Camelot. The message in Halberstam's last book is the same: character is still destiny, even when events seemingly ride mankind.

And what character studies Halberstam gives us in *The Coldest Winter*, page after page of them: whole subchapters devoted to MacArthur's father and mother (appropriate for a man of such Shakespearian complexity); telling episodes of Kim Il Sung and Syngman Rhee's youthful days, revealing the origins of resentment pent up for years; scathing passages about the pettiness and bigotry of even lesser figures, such as Edward (Ned) Almond, one of MacArthur's corps commanders. Human agency, in weakness, is everywhere. But so is human fortitude and, ever so rarely, genius: Halberstam rightfully credits Gen. Walton Walker's dogged stand at the Pusan Perimeter in the late summer of 1950, MacArthur's imagination and