The Mafia has long held a spot in the American imagination. Despite their earned reputation for brutality, the Mafia has been glorified in countless movies, books, and television shows. Not so in this book. Selwyn Raab makes no attempt to perpetuate myths about the Mafia; instead, he exposes them as a serious threat to honest citizens: The collective goal of the five families of New York was the pillaging of the nation’s richest city and region, he writes. These five families—Bonanno, Colombo, Gambino, Genovese, and Lucchese—were responsible for corrupting labor unions in order to control waterfront commerce, garbage collection, the garment industry, and construction in New York. They also ran illegal gambling operations, engaged in stock schemes, and initiated the widespread introduction of heroin (among other drugs) into cities of the East and Midwest in the 1950s, leading to accelerated crime rates, law-enforcement corruption, and the erosion of inner-city neighborhoods in New York and throughout the United States. Five Families offers a comprehensive look at the inner workings of the various clans along with vivid profiles of the gangsters who led—and continue to maintain—this criminal empire.

Beginning with a brief history of the Sicilian origins of the Mafia, Raab exhaustively explains how the Mob took over New York before spreading to cities across America, particularly Las Vegas, their most successful outside venture. He also shows how the New York Mafia lost a great deal of power in the 1980s and 90s due to many significant busts and effective plea-bargaining. However, since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the F.B.I. has been focused mainly on external threats, leaving the Mafia room to regain some lost turf by moving into new avenues of crime. An investigative reporter for 40 years, Raab interviewed dozens of prosecutors, law enforcement officers, Mafia members, informants, and Mob lawyers, providing anecdotes and inside information that tell the true
My Personal Review:
This is a great book on the history of the American Mafia with some new insights on its origins and how it came to the US, also how it functioned and bled New York for 70+ years. Raab has done a masterful job of combing through the myriad newspaper, court documents and sources out there and assembled a chronological narrative of each of New York’s Mafia Families. It is a riveting read, entertaining and informative. It gives new insights into the semi-legit rackets and old history like Apalachin, JFK’s assassination, Lucianos war-time aid to the US, and Jimmy Hoffa. Of particular value is how the new focus on terrorism post 9/11 may give the Mafia a chance to regroup.

However, these strengths are also its weaknesses. It focuses exclusively on New York City. It says how New York made satellites of Mafia Families in other cities but never explains how things worked in other cities or how the New York Families subdued other mafia groups around the country. It also would have been interesting to learn how New York mafia groups related to and cooperated with families in other cities, especially Chicago. It never explains how the New York Families could run crews in other cities with active Mafia Families, like Newark and California.

Raab also relies heavily on FBI and Court transcripts, and sometimes his explaining the investigations and pursuit of the gangsters is too long and pulls the book off track. We want to learn about the Mafia and how it functions, not read a police investigative-procedural drama.

The most glaring mis-step is Raab’s over-simplification and neglect of other criminal organizations, especially Meyer Lansky, Moe Dalitz and other Jewish gangsters. He falls into the unsophisticated, overly simple and even anti-Semitic line of how Meyer Lansky, Moe Dalitz and other Jewish mobsters were merely junior partners and accountants for the Mafia. Lansky, Shapiro and others were major bootleggers and labor racketeers in their own right. They worked in conjunction and on equal footing with Luciano and Mafia gangs. Jewish and Italian gangsters during Prohibition and after formed a symbiotic partnership. Lansky never would have been as successful as he was without his partnership with Luciano, and vice versa. Lansky and Dalitz took their bootlegging profits and began building Las Vegas, Luciano and Cstello and other Mafia magnates were equal partners to be sure. The hit on Siegel almost certainly came from Lansky. Lansky and Dalitz needed no financial backing or approval from the Five Families. The Mafias later success in skimming the Vegas casinos would not have been possible without the pioneering efforts of the multi-ethnic and sophisticated syndicate that emerged from prohibition.

Raab also completely ignores major bootleg/gambling syndicates such as Lansky/Siegel, Legs Daimond or Waxy Gordon in New York, Boo Boo Hoff
in Philadelphia, Longy Zwillman in Newark, Moe Dalitz in Cleveland or the Purple Gang in Detroit. These syndicates needed no backing or permission from any Mafia family to operate and run successful criminal enterprises. After Prohibition, Lansky, Dalitz and others continued to engage in lucrative financial rackets, money laundering, and major casino operations in Las Vegas, the Bahamas, Switzerland and Monte Carlo into the 1970s. These sophisticated white collar crimes dwarfed the more provincial operations of extortion, loan sharking and drug pushing engaged in by most street crews of New York's Five Families. By suggesting that these Jewish criminals could only at the most serve as trusted accountats to Mafia families not only falls into worn out offensive stereotypes but also gives an inaccurate picture of the true nature of organized crime.

Raab also gives short shrift to Russian, Asian and multi-national organized crime syndicates operating in the nation today. In making the Mafia the center of organized crime activities he has given a myopic picture of organized crime, past and present. Law enforcements high profile and much touted focus on the 5 Mafia gangs has probably given these newer criminal syndicates room to grow and expand from the 1980s through today.

Raab sets out to write a history of New York's 5 Mafia Families and he succeeds in spades. His only weakness is taking the mystique of the mafia at face value and portraying them as the end-all and be-all of organized crime in New York and throughout the country.