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The Salad Oil King

By M.G. Crisci

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★★★★★ /5

There's something about criminal stories that commands our attention. Maybe it's the chance to look behind the curtain of illegality and see just how someone can manage to pull off a wild scheme. Maybe it's the curiosity of wondering what goes through someone's mind and brings them to commit actions the rest of us would never dream of. Whichever the case, the story of Alfonso "Fonso" Gravanese has all the elements needed to be a classic tale of American crime, and it spins out from a master storyteller.

Born in Little Italy, Fonso starts off learning how to con early from watching his father stuff fish full of ice before weighing them to sell to customers. His father's ambition is to get a little extra money for the family, but Fonso's dreams are greater, and he has the passion to pursue them. When his father moves from selling fish to having a butcher shop, he finds ways to get more money from that, too, even studying meat carving, so he can find a way to get more meat from each cut and more money from each animal. After his father's death, he moves on to bigger and better things, finding loopholes in laws that allow him to gain more and more money for himself.

From the first chapters of *The Salad Oil King*, I was completely hooked. It's a book that pulls you into a world not only of domestic corruption, but of international politics, one that sprang from The Great Depression to World War II and beyond, showing how one man can take advantage of foreign troubles to line his own pocket. Personal betrayals and struggles only add to the book's power, as Fonso struggles not only to keep himself on the top when it comes to business, but also to keep his friends and allies.

I'd recommend this book to anyone interested in how corruption can shape history.

Reviewed by Jo Niederhoff

