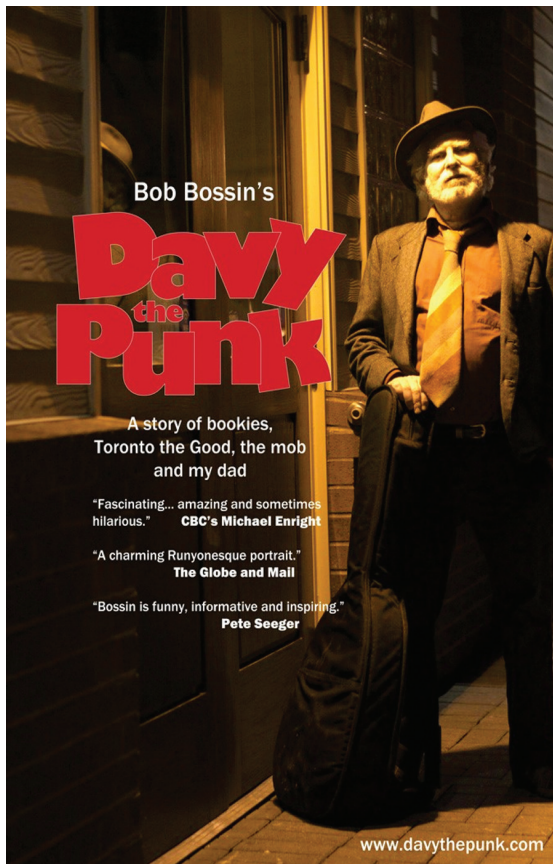


# Davy the Punk by Bob Bossin - A review



Bob Bossin is the author of Davy The Punk and he is also the one-man star of the traveling musical of the same name. For the purposes of this column, we'll consider the book which, simply put, is remarkable.

Davy The Punk is Bossin's dad and the main thrust of the narrative is the experiences Davy had as a horse racing lay-off man and race wire operator during an era from the 1920s into the 1950s. The younger Bossin has crafted an exhilarating and insightful look at how people bet the horses well before the internet; in fact, well before the telephone served such purposes.

Davy The Punk, however, is so much more than just a story about a guy taking bets and disseminating racing information. Bob Bossin has woven his dad's career into several themes that include the state of horse racing in Ontario in the first half of the 20th century, the rise and fall of famous gangsters, the problem with anti-semitism in Canada, and to no small degree, a young man's relationship with an unusual, but caring father.

The best part of Davy The Punk are the anecdotes about horse racing. Early on we hear about Tom Stein, the biggest bookie in Alberta. Stein owned a horse named Peachstone who won so often in Alberta, no one would bet against him. So Stein took him to race in Vancouver where he assumed few knew of the horse's prowess. However, just before post time, Stein got a call from his office in Calgary, telling him everyone had bet on Peachstone and if the horse won, Stein stood to lose thousands. Stein rushes to the track and grabs the jockey, Scotty Craigmyle.

*"He grabs the halter, points a finger at Scotty and says, 'Under no condition, can dis horse win dis race!'"*

*Scotty is trying to figure out what to do. He knows he has to pull the horse, but how, without making it too obvious? He decides he'll break Peachstone so fast and push him so hard for the first half-mile, that he runs himself out. Sure enough, by the half-mile, Peachstone starts to flag. Scotty sneaks a look over his shoulder but what he sees is not good. The closest horse is ten lengths behind and dropping back like a fat cop chasing a schoolboy. That's when it hits Scotty that the other jockeys are pulling their horses too."*

*"So," Davy says. "What happens is, Scotty does the only thing he can. He eases over to the rail, pretends to bump and falls off the horse."*

Circumstance in the early part of the 20th century dictated the career of Davy The Punk. As an 11 year-old, he was peddling newspapers at the corner of King and York. Abe Orpen ran a gambling club nearby and noticed the bright kid who sold him a paper each day.

*Orpen started testing him, getting him to calculate payouts on bets laid at different odds. Davy answered instantly. And so Abe Orpen took him under his wing, and into the bookmaking business. A newsboy with a head for figures was as good as gold to a bookie and a job with a bookie was food on an otherwise lean table for an immigrant Jewish kid who slept on a row of boxes in the corner of the kitchen of a tenement in the Toronto slum called the Ward.*

"That generation of immigrants arrived early in the 20th century," Bossin told **Down The Stretch**. "They were at the bottom of the totem pole. For Jews and Italians, white collar jobs were virtually closed. Insurance companies wouldn't hire Jews. Eaton's wouldn't hire Jews. Jewish teachers couldn't get jobs. Some of these clever young guys looked around and the one business that they could use their smarts in was the gambling business, which was primarily horse racing."

Davy the Punk prospered as a guy who 'laid' off bets - if too much action was placed on one horse, the bookies needed a middle man to get others to absorb some of the bet. One of Davy's assets was the ability to hold on to the numbers in his head. By not keeping notes, Davy left very little evidence for the authorities, who, from time to time, tried to wipe out gambling in Ontario.

Bob Bossin makes the interesting point that today the Provincial government offers us countless things to wager on, but in the 40s and 50s, the authorities spent a great deal of time and money charging bookies, raiding their homes and seizing their telephones as proof. In one bungled court case against David Bossin, the Bell Telephone Company asks repeatedly *"to explain what he needed fifty-six telephones lines for"*.

In the 21st century, we take for granted that we can bet at our computers and our phones, pretty well immediately, any track in the world. But before the start of the 20th century, it might have taken days to find out a race result. That changed with the invention of the telegraph and

Bossin points out, this was something of great importance to horse players.

*Nowhere did the telegraph have greater impact than on horse race gambling, which it turned into a continent-wide industry. With the telegraph, information traveled instantly anywhere the telegraph wires went. And among the first place the wires were strung were the racetracks. Western Union stationed some of its first telegraphers at the tracks where they tapped out race results as soon as the horses crossed the finish line.*

Davy the Punk was a guy whose career blossomed because of his total grasp of the 'race wire' as the telegraph was called in horse circles. Davy would translate the dots and dits into race calls, payoffs and past performances. His expertise attracted international attention. For some of the biggest gangsters in North America, Davy the Punk was the man to deal with in the lucrative Southern Ontario market because of the reliable way he operated the Toronto terminus of the racing wire. Bossin tells us wonderful stories of his father's involvement with heavy hitters like Arnold Rothstien, Moses Annenberg, Waxey Gordon, and Frank Costello. The story telling even involves Al Capone and his henchman Frank Nitti.

Bossin's book unabashedly, almost proudly, details his father's life on the grey side of the law. The son knows that the father was a law-breaker but does not believe he was immoral.

*A quarter wagered on a horse was as cheap as entertainment got, and even with the odds against you, a bet held out more hope than the unemployment office. So the bookies prospered and my father prospered with them.*

In the 50s, Davy Bossin grew weary of the constant harassment from politicians who saw illicit wagering as a blight on Toronto the Good. He inherited a talent booking agent business as the result of a gambling debt and spent the remainder of his life booking musical acts and occasionally managing groups. He died from a massive cerebral hemorrhage in 1961 at the age of 58.

Davy the Punk is a wonderful read on so many levels. Horse players will be thrilled at the old school tales of how races were bet and the shenanigans that took place to affect the outcomes. Historians will enjoy the walk through the first 50 years of the 20th century. And for those who are easily moved by father-son emotions, there's plenty of that as well, including, late in the book, a stunning revelation about Bob Bossin's own pedigree.

Bossin tells us that his father was a great story teller. Davy the Punk would be pleased to know he has successfully passed on at least one of his formidable skills.

**It struck me that everything we know about our fathers amounts to a fraction of what we don't and never will.**

Davy the Punk is published by The Porcupine's Quill, Erin, Ontario