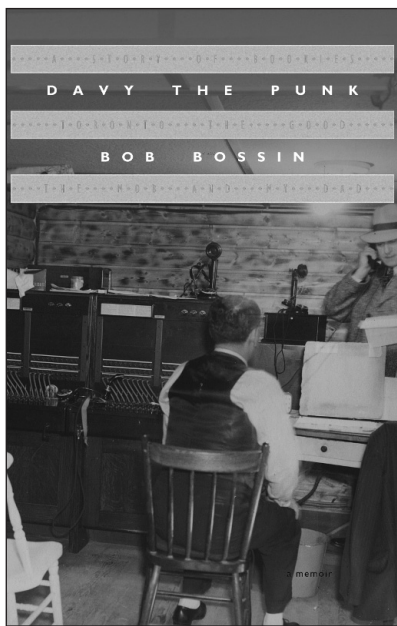


Our Outlook on *Books*

DAVY THE PUNK: A STORY OF BOOKIES, TORONTO THE GOOD, THE MOB AND MY DAD Bob Bossin.

The Porcupine's Quill, Erin, Ontario, 2014. 186 pages.

Reviewed by Stephen Aberle



Several years ago, in a hot little room on Gabriola Island, I got that shiver that runs up and down the spine when you realize you're in on the start of something great. It was the Gabriola Island Theatre Festival, and a few dozen of us were crammed together that August day for the first performance of an early draft of Bob Bossin's new one-man musical show, *Davy the Punk*, a memoir of his father Davy's years in the gambling racket. We sat rapt, transported, nodding, smiling, laughing, closing and opening our eyes, tapping our feet, as Bob told

STEPHEN ABERLE is a Vancouver actor, singer, computer programmer, and sporadic but enthusiastic contributor to the pages of Outlook.

and played and sang his story about times gone by, about mobsters and cops and raids and court cases, about criminal deals and civil liberties, about that thing we spend our whole lives chasing, some of us: the truth—whatever that means—about our fathers.

After the show a little knot of us crowded round Bob to congratulate him. “You should write a book,” said

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someone. “Yeah, I think maybe I will. There's lot of material.” There sure is.

Bob Bossin founded the iconic Canadian folk group Stringband together with Marie-Lynn Hammond back in 1971, and he's spent his life writing and performing since then. If he knows anything—and he does—it's how to craft a story. This is a superbly researched and exquisitely presented book, tender and touching, beguiling and enlightening, hilarious and infuriating. As it's hitting the shelves, Bob is touring that one-man musical of his. Catch it if you possibly can.

A good story is like a labyrinth. You start on the outside, in the wide

sunlit field of Now, and step in and away to another place, another time. The horizons recede. You plant one foot in front of the other. The way is anything but straight; it winds and twists and turns back on itself, right back next to where it was before—next to it but not quite on it, just the other side of that magic line, the boundary of the coiling path of narrative. Reaching the end, which is the centre, you look around and realize that while nothing has changed, neither will anything ever be quite the same. Things you thought were unrelated turn out to be close kin. Close as breath to breath and life to death.

A good story is like a labyrinth, and this is a great story. It seems Bob comes by his mastery of story-telling honestly, or at least naturally. “I loved Davy's stories. I suppose it is because mostly he said nothing. When he did speak, he was gruff. But when he was with Shopsy, Sack Sniderman, and the others, Davy could run neck and neck in a field with Sam Levinson, Damon Runyon and Sholem Aleichem...”

By parts history, anthropology, political science, biography and memoir, the book follows Bob's father, his family, the circles of his underworld and, later, show business associates, and a great deal more. (An index would have been great. Maybe for the second edition...?) “The personal is political,” as the feminist adage teaches us. Here, the political is personal. The events of Davy's time, roughly the

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first two-thirds of the twentieth century, rocked his life and career. Thanks to his son's research and insight, we can learn a lot about those politics and their legacy by reading his engaging story. It's this interweaving of political and personal that gives the book its strength and momentum. Each step on the narrative journey is supported with a wealth of background and analysis, always informative, always entertaining. Horse-racing stories and jokes are some of the best around, and the Bossins, father and son, tell them masterfully.

Dovid Bossin was conceived in Brusilov, near Kiev, and born aboard ship on the way to Canada in 1904. His family travelled from the grinding poverty and brutal anti-Semitism of a turn-of-the-century Ukrainian *shtetl* to the grinding poverty and genteel anti-Semitism of the Jewish ghetto in Toronto *The Good*.

Davy apprenticed with gambling kingpin Abe Orpen, and learned the applied mathematics of the handicap and the "vigorish" (the bookmaker's take), and the certainty that, over time, the gambler loses and everyone else—the house, the bookie, the track, the government, the hoodlums, the cops—wins. It's a lesson to keep in mind in this day of legalized gambling (wait, sorry, "gaming") and state-sponsored addiction.

Davy worked as a tout, a handicapper, a layoff man, a bookmaker, eventually a "bookmaker's bookmak-

er": he became the Toronto manager of the General News Bureau, the official name for the "race wire," the telecommunications network that circulated racing information to interested subscribers. He rubbed shoulders with some of the giants in the gambling

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business, and lived through the days of prohibition, the rise of "organized crime" and the lawmakers' and law-enforcers' efforts to suppress it, the development of the FBI, the Chicago Crime Commission, and the Kefauver Senate hearings into crime. (What did "America's top moll," Virginia Hill, tell the Kefauver committee? No, don't Google it. Buy the book.)

Davy's career illustrates how definitions of "vice" and "virtue" depend on class and power. "As with Prohibition, the laws against gambling sprang from a mix of idealism, hypocrisy and elitism. Underlying the zeal for moral uplift was an almost feudal acceptance of social class." People with leisure to attend the track could bet legally, but "when a worker... bet the same horse with his bookie back in town... he committed a crime."

We can learn a lot from law-and-order campaigns of the past. Davy was swept up in the crusade against illegal gambling and the "delusion" that the race wire was "the key to a continent-wide criminal conspiracy." Unable to gather sufficient evidence for prosecution despite frequent raids (some involving sledgehammers), the authorities came to a "gentlemen's agreement" with the Bell Telephone company, which disconnected Davy's fifty-six phone lines. He brought his case before Canada's Board of Transport Commissioners (precursor to the CRTC), "...setting a precedent that has restricted both public officials and private companies when, in their zeal, they consider abrogating the rights of citizens. Because of the Bossin case, the authorities cannot take away someone's telephone (or internet service) because they do not like what he is doing with it." We owe a lot to Davy the Punk Bossin.

In 1951, a dozen years before his untimely death, Davy went straight and quit gambling to become an entertainment booking agent and manager. He left a lot of admirers and a few unanswered questions, and Bob has pursued these with devotion and determination. The result is a fine tribute to his father's memory, mixing bemused personal affection with razor-sharp social commentary.

And there's a heart-twisting kicker near the end. I won't spoil it for you. You're welcome. ♦