A few years after he took over the crime syndicate once run by Johnny Torrio, an observer of gangland Chicago called Al Capone "an unusual hood. He has concentration and executive ability beyond the ordinary. He is utterly fearless except when it is sensible to be afraid."

For six years, 1926 to 1931, Capone was (in fact and in name) Public Enemy No 1. At the height of Prohibition, his “Outfit” raked in millions of dollars from bootlegging, gambling, prostitution and drugs — and waged a brutal war against rival gangs, getting away with scores of murders, including the St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

Powerless to pin any crimes on Capone, the feds finally got "Scarface Al" (a moniker he hated) on tax evasion charges, sending him to Alcatraz, where he was reduced, physically and emotionally, to a shell of his former self, possibly by the ravages of neurosyphilis. Capone died at his home in Florida in 1947.

Almost seven decades later, Deirdre Bair reminds us, "the frenzy of publicity he inspired during his lifetime has increased exponentially and shows no signs of slowing down." In 2014, Smithsonian magazine named him one of the 100 most influential individuals in American history.

In "Al Capone," Bair (the biographer of Samuel Beckett, Simone de Beauvoir, Carl Jung, Anaïs Nin and Saul Steinberg) acknowledges that the paucity of written sources and flaws in the content and interpretation of stories written about Capone during his lifetime make it difficult to add much to existing accounts of how this Brooklyn-born Neapolitan in his 20s displaced Torrio and ran the Outfit. The traditional methods of discerning the nature of a figure's personal relationships, letters and diaries, "are mainly non-existent," she adds.

Recognizing that "all we have are speculation and probability," Bair has capitalized on interviews with Capone's descendants. The result is an engaging biography that debunks many, many myths about Capone and captures him as a complex person, devoted to his parents, his wife, his siblings and his son; popular at times with the masses; clever and charismatic; and, at the same time, a monster whom authorities "held responsible for everything but the Chicago fire."

Although she can be a tough-minded critic, Bair tends at times to accept as valid the testimony of Capone's descendants (many of whom never met him), especially when it validates his essential humanity. She suggests that if Capone had wanted to run for mayor of Chicago, "he probably would be elected, and honestly at that — no ballot box stuffing would be needed."

Although she knows that he was a serial philanderer and had several mistresses, Bair asserts that Al "took care never to dishonor" Mae, his wife, "while he was out and about." Government prosecutors, she writes, "had so little insight into the man's character. They knew that in his public life he was the personification of evil but when it came to families — and especially children — they ignored the evidence that he was the model of rectitude and loving paternal behavior."

And when Capone was in jail, suffering from syphilis, and deemed by some to be "nutty as a fruitcake," Bair indicates that Mae's claims that her husband was just fine "ring true ... Just being with her was enough to bring him back to reality."

That said, Bair's account does generate considerable sympathy for Capone. In the tax evasion trial, she reminds us, the judge broke with long-standing practice to reject a deal Al's lawyers had made with prosecutors (whose case was "full of holes") to plead guilty in return for a sentence of 2½ years in prison, sending him away instead for 11 years. While Al was in jail, he clearly received inadequate care for his syphilis. After his release, he had a mental age of 10 or 12 years old.

But Bair does not provide satisfactory answers to the most fundamental conundrum posed by Capone's descendants: How could a person "be so admirable and still be guilty of the terrible things he did?"

Her speculations about his outsize afterlife, which includes books, films, websites, T-shirts featuring his mug, restaurants claiming he dined there, and comparisons with Donald Trump, however, should command our attention. Capone was embraced as "gorgeously and typically American," the "perfect counterpoint to the political paradox that was Prohibition," she writes, and then abandoned during the '30s when people were out of work, hungry and homeless.

Those days, Americans who view dead gangsters and bullet-ridden cars as "entertainment," divorced from reality, may identify with a man who thumbed his nose at social conventions, disobeyed the law and
got away with it, for a time. And, Bair concludes, Capone illustrates venerable American traditions: a tendency to conflate fame with notoriety and, when a legend outruns a man and the facts, to "print the legend."

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