

American Success Story: American Gangster is a near-masterpiece

By Adam W. Morrison

From the first moment Denzel Washington's character, Frank Lucas, takes the screen we get an idea of how ruthless this character is. From there, Director Ridley Scott's *American Gangster*, is a sprawling crime story, with Lucas representing the criminal and Richie Roberts (Russell Crowe) portraying the cop wanting to bring him down. For each man, neither will back down. It's only toward the very end of the film, that these two characters meet, and when they finally do, it's a beautiful scene.

The film begins in late 1960's, set in rough Harlem. Bumpy Johnson, played by Clarence Williams III, asks where the sense of ownership has gone. Within several minutes, the renowned criminal, Bumpy, dies inside one of the many 'white-owned' stores in Harlem. With Bumpy gone, from a fatal heart attack, there seems to be a minor power struggle in Harlem. Frank decides to import heroin into the United States, but does so in an unexpected way. He buys directly from the manufacturer, cutting out the middle man. The heroin comes from South-East Asia, during the Vietnam War. This influx of drugs turns Lucas into a

kingpin. To help manage his drug empire, Lucas brings his brothers into the business, and sells his product under the name of Blue Magic.

Around the same time, Roberts is having a tough time. He's in a bitter custody battle with his ex-wife, played by actress Carla Gugino, and has found himself ostracized from the rest of the force because he and his partner found over \$1 million in dirty money and decided to turn it in.

The real irony involving these characters is while Lucas is a drug kingpin and murderer; he is a real family man, even going as far as buying a mansion for his family. Roberts, while on the side of law and order, can't make time for his son.

Roberts, because no one on the force wants to work with him, is told by his superior he can create his own task force to bring down the drug business in New York.

For a long time, the investigation goes nowhere until Frank shows up at the Ali-Frazier fight wearing a chinchilla jacket. Frank and his wife get better seats than the Italian mobsters. This not only catches the attention of some corrupt cops, but Roberts as well, who is taking photos at the event.

It's impossible to fault the performances of the actors.

Washington and Crowe (who were both nominated for best actor in 1999 and 2001) are spectacular. Washington gives real life to this character, making him an almost larger than life figure. However, several scenes show the brutality needed when given his profession. One scene in broad daylight on a crowded street is a genuine shock moment. The best scene showing his influence is when he talks with his nephew about why he doesn't want to try out for a spot with the Yankees. He simply tells him he wants what his uncle has: power, respect, and money.

Crowe, say what you want about his anger issues, continues on his stellar blockbuster streak. Even when a film is not good, like *Cinderella Man*, he's still outstanding. But the major surprise in this outstanding cast is Josh Brolin. Playing Detective Trupo, he embodies the role of corrupt cop, using his badge as influence. His scenes with Denzel are really quite excellent.

Because this is a Ridley Scott film, it's great to look at. I've got a soft spot for 1970's NY movies, whether it be films from that actual decade or current films. The almost unforgiving and gritty atmosphere often seen is classic old New York. It's a city that'll eat you alive. Scott also has a bril-

liantly edited sequence showing Thanksgiving from three perspectives. For Lucas, it's with his family and a gorgeous feast. For Roberts, it's a pickle and chip sandwich. Finally, we see the results of those using Blue Magic, as Scott doesn't shy away from graphic needle use. This stuff is just as unnerving as the torture sequence in *Casino Royale*.

Those expecting an action driven film will be disappointed.

Instead, screenwriter Steven Zaillian chooses to focus on how Lucas was able to bring the heroin into the States, and the personal lives of both main characters. These are much more than the standard cops and robbers.

Watching this, I couldn't help but be reminded of *The French Connection*, Director William Friedkin's outstanding 1971 crime thriller. Both are set in 1970's New York, both centre around heroin, and they both portray two charismatic sides of the law. Hell, they even mention the movie twice. There are also shades of *The Godfather*, with a raid being intercut with a church service.

At its core, *American Gangster* is the rise and fall of a businessman.

Rating: *1/2 (out of ****)**

'The Alchemist' proves to be nothing short of a good read

By Vicky Rockett

Book: *The Alchemist*, by Paulo Coelho

In a world beset by constant competition and obsessed with financial gain, Paulo Coelho offers simple and refreshing words about living life to its fullest potential. His novel

The Alchemist is a mysterious and significant piece of fictional work.

The central character, Santiago, is an unconventional shepherd boy traveling the vast lands from Spain to Egypt. A recurring dream has inspired Santiago to set off in search of an unknown yet extremely valuable treasure. The novel follows the boy on his perilous journey as he confronts the many challenges along the way, which include an ambitious thief, a huge tribal battle, and a relentless, harsh desert.

It appears as if the boy's search is futile, yet his belief and determination to fulfill his destiny drive him

onward. During a time of defeat, the boy is told by a sympathetic king "The secret of life is to fall seven times and to get up eight times."

Inspired to continue, Santiago finally reaches his goal, at which point he realizes his treasure is not so valuable when compared to the experiences and lessons of his sole journey. "His heart was speaking of other things. With pride, it told the story of a shepherd who had left his flock to follow his dream...confronting the people of their times with their preconceived notions."

Critics across the globe rave

about the original style and unique simplicity of *The Alchemist*.

Harper Collins claims reading it "was like getting up at dawn and

seeing the sunrise while the rest of the world slept." Paulo Coelho's many books have been translated into 41 languages and have sold more than 52 million copies in 117 countries. His works continue to inspire an ever growing audience across the world.

His works are especially significant in our society today in which we are trained from a young age to merely digest selected information and regurgitate it upon

request. Very rarely are we offered genuine guidance in pursuing and achieving our truest dreams and desires. Paulo Coelho is no stranger to this sad reality. Born into a rich Brazilian family, Paulo was expected to become a great politician. His truest desire, however, was purely to create works of art and to write novels. Much like Santiago, the shepherd boy, Paulo persisted against many difficult obstacles (including a disappointed family who immediately abandoned him) in order to pursue his dream.

Paulo Coelho is himself an inspiration, and through his works of fiction he shares insightful and wise thoughts on life's experiences.

In *The Alchemist* he reveals what he believes to be the "world's greatest lie" and "why it is so important to live our personal calling" His latest novels *Eleven Minutes* and *Zahir*:

A Novel of Obsession again take a different perspective and original tone. All are well worth the read.

