The most important film of the season must be "Road to Perdition" which pairs two strong Irish gangland parents against each other in an atmospheric whiskey war of the 1930's. Answering the age old question of what does daddy do for a living, Michael Sullivan (Tom Hanks) inadvertently takes his stowaway son, Michael, Jr. (Tyler Hoechlin), on a job that goes bad and plunges the two into a noirish race across rural Illinois with a hired killer on their heels.

"Perdition" is a stylish gangster movie with a level of historic verisimilitude not seen since "Bonnie and Clyde" (1967). The father and son drive around in a big black Buick with suicide doors and a single windshield wiper on the driver's side. Director Sam Mendes ("American Beauty") re-creates an entire 30's household and gives the film a real "feel" for the times. He demonstrates an astute attention to detail that is rivaled only by his camera man, Conrad L. Hall, who ought to win a third Academy Award for the brilliant cinematographic techniques displayed throughout.

But "Perdition" is not a perfect work. Frankly, it suffers from its source material which is a graphic novel. There is something comic bookish about a number of scenes as well as how the story itself plays out. If a Japanese director had staged the rain swept shootout sequence, for example, it would have been called "art," which is probably the level to which Mendes aspires. But the director also falls into a Hitchcockian lull, a sort of effect over logic where if he had looked at the dailies with any objectivity he would have seen how silly some of the movie's moments are.

Hanks plays Michael, Sr., with a somber world weary style that is truly complete. A religious family man living a modest life with his wife and two sons, he owes a huge debt of gratitude to John Rooney (Paul Newman) who saved the Sullivans from the depths of despair millions suffered during the Depression.
Sullivan is an enforcer doing the boss's bidding, blithely protecting his interests to the point of covering up son Connor Rooney's (Daniel Craig) callous murders. That is, until he survives a gunfight and reads a hand written note straight out of Hamlet. This sets him on the road, literally to a city called Perdition, to protect his son and set things straight within the gangland community.

Stalking them is contract killer and freelance photographer named Maguire (Jude Law), a quietly careful man who "shoots the dead" and is not above assisting them in attaining that goal. When we first meet Maguire he is walking beneath Chicago's El carrying his camera equipment. As he lumbers toward us, the effect is of an ever expanding hallway of pylons, a metal forest of columns growing behind him, a forest where he is the wolf about to begin his hunt. Law slouches and walks pigeon toed and looks like a derby wearing weasel.

Jude Law plays a photographer who shoots the dead -- and assists in their demise when necessary -- in "Road to Perdition."

Rarely, however, has there been a greater waste of screen talent than the minuscule part given Jennifer Jason Leigh. She has almost no lines as the wimpy home maker who knows what her husband does for work, but beyond that there is nothing, no motivation, in short no reason for selecting her for the part.

And at one point in the script there is a wry comment which has more meaning, if you read between the lines, than may have been intended. It comes from Michael, Sr., who tells his son that if he is not back within a certain time, he is to take the whole story to the church. "Go to First Methodist, not Father Calloway," an implication the Catholic Church was well aware of its gangster parishioners and was probably in cahoots.

"Perdition" can be viewed as a social comment on father-son relationships or as a lavishly appointed period piece. It can also be watched strictly as a good old fashioned gangster film with more depth of character than most. No matter how much you deconstruct it, "Perdition" is an excellent film and a likely candidate
for numerous Oscar nominations.

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