

“The Bookie” one-page summary

Only in America. An Italian boy, one of eight kids from an immigrant family in the poorest slums of industrial Pittsburgh, discovers his amazing talents. He garners the grit, determination and personality to build the most successful business of its kind, employ thousands, and make soaring profits. There’s only one problem: it’s all illegal.

“The Bookie” tells the true story of Tony Grosso, the legendary numbers boss of the largest criminal enterprise in United States history. And along the way, with lifts in his shoes and his beguiling smile, he crushes his competition, bribes every cop in his path, and navigates the criminal justice system to perfection.

Grosso’s glorious life of crime begins on the steps of Mellon Bank in 1933 when the newspaper boy’s chance encounter with banking heir Paul Mellon leads to an ill-considered bet on a baseball game. Grosso loses the bet and his newspaper money. His older brother, Frank, fighting demon alcohol, convinces Tony to join him in taking horse racing bets. Down on his luck and without his meager newspaper money, Tony reluctantly agrees, takes \$50 in bets and narrowly wins the seventh race at Saratoga when the favorite comes up lame.

Returning home from the war in 1946, Grosso admires the gambling operation and restaurant/bar set up by Frank, but recoils at losses caused by monthly police raids. He recalls advice from Paul Mellon that good businessmen control events and bad ones guess. So Grosso takes one thousand dollars from Frank’s cash reserves and bribes Lawrence Maloney, the chief vice detective. Maloney not only gives Grosso advance notice of raids, he shuts down nearly every competitor. Soon, numbers runners from other bosses lay off their money to Grosso’s operation, which becomes freaking massive.

Enter Dick Thornburgh, the ambitious prosecutor who wants headlines. Thornburgh prosecutes Maloney, using Tony as his key witness. To avoid jail himself, Grosso testifies that he has “retired” from the numbers business. Upon his attorney’s advice, he enters into his black period – losing friends, watching daytime television, helping his wife operate her restaurant, and babysitting their young daughter.

Thornburgh, doubting Grosso’s claims of retirement, relentlessly pressures Frank for information. However, Frank grows weary and soon dies. At the blackest moment, as Grosso contemplates the vision of his brother in the funeral home, a doctor tells him that Frank died on an unfortunate day – the Pennsylvania Lottery announced its Daily Number game and “Frank would have made millions taking Daily Number bets.”

The temptation is too great, and Grosso gets back in business with a great idea. The state lottery pays a paltry 500 to 1 for the winning three-digit number. So Grosso rebuilds his success and fortune by offering a 600 to 1 payoff.

As profits pour in to the Grosso operation, Thornburgh zeroes in on his high profile target. He nabs Grosso on a tapped telephone line. When one of Tony’s bribed cops commits suicide, the marshals move in. Grosso is convicted and sentenced to sixteen years, a virtual death sentence. When led from the courtroom, Grosso marvels at the punishment: “I must have been a hell of a businessman.” His attorney agrees: “You were the best.” The story closes with visits to his grave by some of the runners whose lives benefited from working for the greatest numbers boss of all time.