

Crime, Criminality and Fiction: the Murder of Jimmy Hoffa, Mafia and Literature*

(English Version)

Crimen, criminalidad y ficción: el asesinato de Jimmy Hoffa, mafia y la literatura

Crime, criminalidade e ficção: o assassinato de Jimmy Hoffa, mafia e literatura

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Abstract

Objective: This article analyzes the book I Heard You Paint Houses, translated into Spanish as El Irishman. Hoffa, case closed. The book reconstructs various events in the recent history of organized crime and politics in the United States and presents a new version of the death of union leader Jimmy Hoffa.

Methodology: is an analysis and interpretation of a non-fiction work that is systematically contrasted with other similar works. The text locates the historical background of Francis Sheeran's biography on Hoffa,

presents some of the most relevant facts of the development of the mafia in the United States between 1957-1990 and the debates generated by the book. It serves as a pretext to return to analyzes of the relationships between fiction and non-fiction in the social sciences. **Results:** The result of the analysis is that this book presents a plausible version of the facts due to the handling of the sources, the verification of the facts and because it has not yet been refuted with new evidence.

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Keywords: mafia; organized crime; Frank Sheeran; Jimmy Hoffa; unionism.

Resumen

Objetivo: en este artículo se analiza el libro *I Heard You Paint Houses*, traducido al español como *El irlandés. Hoffa, caso cerrado*. El libro reconstruye diversos eventos de la historia reciente del crimen organizado y de la política de Estados Unidos y presenta una nueva versión sobre la muerte del líder sindicalista Jimmy Hoffa. **Metodología:** es un análisis e interpretación de una obra de no ficción que se contrasta de forma sistemática con otras obras similares. El texto ubica el trasfondo histórico de la biografía de Francis Sheeran sobre Hoffa, presenta algunos de los hechos más relevantes del desarrollo de la mafia en Estados Unidos entre 1957-1990 y los debates generados por el libro. Sirve de pretexto para volver los análisis de las relaciones entre ficción y no ficción en las ciencias sociales. **Resultados:** este libro analizado presenta una versión verosímil de los hechos por el manejo de las fuentes, por la verificación de los hechos y porque no ha sido refutada aún con nuevas evidencias.

Palabras clave: mafia; crimen organizado; Jimmy Hoffa; literatura; biografía; sindicalismo.

Resumo

Objetivo: Este artigo analisa o livro *I He Heard You Paint Houses*, traduzido do inglês como *El irlandés. Hoffa, Caso Fechado*. O livro reconstrói vários eventos da história recente do crime organizado e da política nos Estados Unidos e apresenta uma nova versão da morte do líder sindical Jimmy Hoffa. **Metodologia:** esta é uma análise e interpretação de uma obra de não-ficção que é sistematicamente contrastada com outras obras similares. O texto estabelece o contexto histórico da biografia de Francis Sheeran de Hoffa, apresenta alguns dos fatos mais relevantes do desenvolvimento da máfia nos Estados Unidos entre 1957-1990 e os debates gerados pelo livro. Serve como um pretexto para retornar às análises da relação entre ficção e não-ficção nas ciências sociais. **Resultados:** este livro apresenta uma versão plausível dos fatos por causa do manuseio das fontes, da verificação dos fatos e porque ainda não foi refutado por novas evidências.

Palavras chave: máfia; crime organizado; Jimmy Hoffa; literatura; biografia; sindicalismo.

Introduction

Charles Brandt recently stated the following in an interview: “When Frank Sheeran left prison in 1991, he invited me to dinner and said, ‘I’m tired of reading everything they say about me in the Hoffa books.’ I immediately thought I was in front of a man who wanted to get a weight off his shoulders, something that was pressing on his chest” (El Mundo, 2019). This served as the impetus for a project that lasted over three decades and was completed in 2004 with the publication of the book, *I Heard You Paint Houses*, which was later translated into Spanish as *El Irlandés: Hoffa, Caso Cerrado*. A new version of Jimmy Hoffa’s death, the truck drivers’ union leader for over two decades, is presented in the book, which reconstructs a number of recent events in the history of organized crime and American politics.

This is not just another book about mafia bosses and their crimes. Its main goal is to explain Hoffa’s disappearance and death while also describing some of the ways the organized crime was carried out using one of his several armed brigades. The book also updates outdated theories about the election, the government, and John F. Kennedy’s assassination. It refers to Richard Nixon’s election and reelection as well as his alleged connections to the mafia and the focus on the labor unions’ practices (highly permeated by criminality). Brandt uses his biography as a justification for presenting the history of the United States as a whole, from the end of the 1950s to the middle of the 1970s.

This book has generated controversy since its publication due to its content, pretense of concluding the Hoffa case, and discussion of the hotly debated topic of the influence of the Italian-American mafia on politics and society in the United States. On the occasion of the screening of the film *The Irishman*, directed by Martin Scorsese and based on the book, the debates have resurfaced. Is it a true story or a mixture of fiction and reality? Is it a version of the facts that takes certain liberties to make the story more appealing and to attract more readers and viewers? Are the sources and methodology used by Brandt rigorous and reliable? Does the author respond convincingly to the questions?

This article addresses these issues. It is a reflection piece based on research that examines a significant non-fiction work that tells the life story of a person involved in some of the key organized crime events that occurred in the United States during the 1960s. The article also situates the work during the height of the mafia’s influence in the country, compares its content to that of other works and authors, establishes similarities and differences, and assesses the veracity of the narrative, which includes several historical events. As a central axis, it poses

a reflection on the ways of seeing the relationship between facts and imagination/creation in works that are considered “non-fiction.”

The method used to raster the sources started with reading the book and seeing the movie. Afterward, an exhaustive search was made of comments, reviews, articles referring to both book and movie in Spanish and English (Ebsco and Scopus databases for academic articles and an open search for journalistic articles). The versions were contrasted, and based on this, the text was structured taking as a perspective the debate on fiction, non-fiction works, and their purpose of providing an account of the facts, adjusting to the events, as invention and imagination have their limits when intending to relate historical facts. Additionally, lectures on organized crime were reviewed, specifically those on the Italo-American mafia, the partial findings of which are contained in this article.

This article is divided into four sections. In the first, the book is described in detail. The second section contrasts the criticisms that have been leveled at the book and strikes a balance between the positive and negative comments. The third section discusses the consensus surrounding some of the events described in the book as well as disagreements on other events that are raised. The fourth section offers a critical analysis of the sources and methodology Charles Brandt employed in his research. The discussion concludes with some thoughts on nonfiction literature, sources, truthfulness, and credibility.

Francis Sheeran: The Man who Painted Houses

I Heard You Paint Houses. This is the original title of Charles Brandt’s book; such a peculiar title catches the eye. Throughout the book, this expression is quoted on several occasions and it is assumed that it was used in some organized crime circles in the United States to refer to someone who was a *contract killer*, a hit man. The blood that is discharged after an attack splash onto the walls, leaving them painted red. Painting houses was like firing a gun at someone at very close range to kill them.

The book is presented as a criminal biographical sketch and a map of organized crime. It reconstructs the life of Francis Joseph Sheeran (1920-2003), ex-military combatant of World War II, an adventurer, a hardened trade unionist and alleged murderer in the service of the Mafia. The book begins with the Italo-American Mafia’s history and provides a version of some of the events that occurred between 1955 and 1990. There are two additional central characters in addition to Sheeran: Russell Bufalino (1903-1994), for three decades

(1959-1989) head of one of the Pennsylvania-based mob families; and Jimmy Hoffa (1913-1975), the controversial U.S. Teamsters union leader with mob ties.

It's not a novel, but it reads like one. It's part of the genre referred to as "non-fiction literature." Charles Brandt – born in 1969, a former homicide prosecutor and deputy director of the Delaware State Attorney General's Office – had previously published the novel *The Right to Remain Silent* and since 1991 had come into contact with Sheeran as his attorney. This relationship is what gave rise to the need to write Sheeran's biography, especially regarding his eventual involvement in the 1975 assassination of Hoffa. After numerous encounters with Sheeran, lengthy conversations, deliberate silences, and extensive research, Brandt wrote the book, which was first published in 2004 – a year after Sheeran's passing. The work and the long wait produced a work that grips the reader and combines a very well-articulated and written account. It focuses on research that articulates the content of the numerous interviews recorded and filmed between 1999 and 2004 (which allows verifying many of the statements expressed in the book) with other sources that allowed him to cross-check Sheeran's version.

The book is divided into 31 chapters. The first seven chapters cover Sheeran's early years (which were difficult, with a strict and aggressive father), his early adolescence, and his enlistment in the military. He learned to kill in the war in order to defend himself. He later made it part of his trade and became a thug in the service of the mafia. He tells Brandt: "At some point while overseas, I hardened inside, and I would no longer be able to soften again. In the end you get used to death; you get used to killing" (Brandt, 2019, p. 85). His work for the truck drivers' union would thereafter be divided between various errands and "painting houses" (the manner in which assassination orders were received). At times, he also engaged in "carpentry work" (an allusion to making coffins, translated as burying and disappearing bodies).

Sheeran worked on numerous projects after returning to the United States in 1945. He was a nightclub security guard, a clandestine gambling distributor, and even a dance hall instructor. When driving a car, he met Russell Bufalino, who helped him turn his car into a petrol station. It was 1955; they were both 35 years old, and neither of them could have predicted that they would end up being close friends for almost four decades. Italian-born Bufalino had been involved in organized crime since he was a young child, and he had grown up in his family to become the head of the organization by the middle of the 1950s. He was connected to the five most powerful mafia families in New York as well as other crime families spread across the entire nation. He also had the position, influence, and power of a godfather. Bufalino became Sheeran's boss, protector, and godfather.

The Irishman (as Bufalino had nicknamed Sheeran) would be one of his trusted assassins. Nearly two meters tall, powerful, knowledgeable of weapons, a skilled fighter, a coldblooded killer, loyal, and efficient. According to Sheeran himself, while working with Bufalino, he committed at least two dozen homicides, served as a confidential messenger, and committed numerous more crimes, intimidations, fires, extorsions, and assaults. Parallel to this, starting in 1959, he also served as Jimmy Hoffa's armed bodyguard. He was his bodyguard, his goon, his union player, and the executor of sabotages and intimidations against rivals and enemies. He was a friend of both. He kept the loyalty of subordinates to their bosses, located at the top of their organizations: a mafia family and the most powerful labor union in the United States.

From Chapter VIII, while following the thread of Sheeran's life, a sketch of Hoffa's life is presented: it tells of his rise in the union until he became its president in 1957 and a rich and very powerful man with links to the Mafia who used the truckers' funds for his business. He recounts his behavior, relationships, and confrontation with the Kennedy family (Brandt, 2019, chap. 11). Bufalino is also discussed, as are his legal and illegal connections, how he managed his family, and how he engaged with other leaders, thugs, politicians, and attorneys (chap. 9 and subsequent.). Chapter XII bears the title of the book: "I've been told you paint houses." He hears those words when he first speaks to Hoffa on the phone in 1957 and travels to work with him in Detroit. He would remain by his side and in his service for the ensuing 20 years. Systematic, cold, obedient, and loyal, Sheeran was an efficient and valued hitman. Following the trail of Sheeran's life, the book alludes to facts related to the actions of the Mafia, its ways of acting, its hierarchies, its structures and ceremonies; also, of the relations with the world of politics and the United States judicial system, with the powerful and their subordinates.

There are controversial versions of historical events. One of them is the version according to which Bufalino was one of the organizers of the famous Apalachin convention, an event held in a small town near New York in 1957. That event the *Commission* brought together, the highest instance of strategic coordination of the heads of the Mafia families in the United States (the same event periodically held by the Italian Mafia since the late nineteenth century). It is estimated that close to 100 chiefs, deputy chiefs and counselors attended, of which 58 were arrested. This was the first U.S. case involving organized crime in which the FBI intervened, an agency that under the leadership of John Edgar Hoover (1895-1972) had refused to acknowledge the existence of an organization of such scope and proportions. Up until that point, the FBI had concentrated its attention on tracking down communists and snooping on politicians (alleged or real). From this point on, the organized crime network's

organizational chart was developed, and the families, as well as their leaders, followers, capos, middlemen, and “soldiers” (the top tier of previously unknown criminal organizations), were pursued.

Based on the contributions of works by other authors – respectively included at the end of the book – conversations with FBI agents, testimonies and Sheeran’s account, Brandt reviews, the structure of organized crime in the United States. Throughout the book members of the five New York families (Bonano, Colombo, Gambino, Genovese and Lucchese) and others located in Chicago or in Las Vegas, California or Miami eventually appear as secondary protagonists.

There is still a record-testimony in Sheeran’s recounting of other significant recent American history events. The Kennedy family is linked to the Mafia. Joseph P. Kennedy is said to have made his fortune as a contrabandist during Prohibition by working with the Italian-American mafia, with which he maintained close ties throughout his life. Allegedly, his son, John F. Kennedy’s campaign for the presidency in 1960 was financed by his father and co-financed by Sam Giancana and other members of the Mafia to whom he had promised to return the casinos and other properties they had in Cuba and that were confiscated by Fidel Castro.

This agreement led to the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 through a joint action with the CIA. The Mafia allegedly assassinated John F. Kennedy in 1963 to prevent his brother Robert, who was the attorney general, from continuing to prosecute the heads of the families and Jimmy Hoffa himself (who allegedly asked the Mafia to assassinate him). It is one of the various Kennedy assassination theories that includes a significant witness. Sheeran implied in his account that he was the one who delivered the guns used in the Dallas attack on behalf of the mob (Brandt, 2019, cc. 13-14).

Other facts related to this event are also reported. Jack Ruby killed Lee Harvey Oswald, President Kennedy’s assassin. The book claims that Oswald belonged to the mafia and had connections to Sam Giancana. This supports the theory that the president was assassinated on orders from organized crime syndicates; additionally, taking this into consideration, upon taking office, Vice President Gerald Ford replaced Attorney General Robert Kennedy and reduced pressure on organized crime and Hoffa. The author recalls that there were several Senate hearings in 1975 to clarify the government’s relationship with the Mafia, and that same year, the CIA publicly acknowledged their alliance with the aim of assassinating or derailing Fidel Castro (cc. 14-16).

There is also a reference to former President Richard Nixon, who is portrayed badly. According to the book, the 1968 Nixon campaign received mob money through Hoffa. Complicity and tolerance with organized crime

followed, and Hoffa – who had been in prison since 1967 for bribing a jury in a previous case – was pardoned by the president in 1971 when he had only served half his sentence. Hoffa had continued to run the union from prison for some time and Sheeran remained his right-hand man (Brandt, 2019, cc. 18-23). With the backing of these organizations, Nixon was re-elected in 1972, followed by the Watergate scandal and his resignation in August, 1974. Brandt affirms that Nixon himself prepared his departure with impunity: a few months before resigning, he appointed Gerald Ford as vice president to succeed him and when his resignation was presented, he was pardoned “for any crime of which he could be accused.” (DC. 19-23).

Even the then young and rookie Senate candidate Joe Biden appears in the book involved in an event in which the mob intervened to benefit him. A local Delaware newspaper published a series of denunciations about possible manipulations of information by Biden. Biden’s lawyer saw to it that the Union blocked the newspaper and prevented their trucks from delivering it. He won the elections in 1973 and remained in the Senate continuously until 2009, the year in which he became vice president during the two presidential terms of Barak Obama (2009-2017). In the 2020 elections, Biden was the Democratic candidate running against Republican President Donald Trump running for re-election.

“Jimmy was not a snitch, but he could pant” (Brandt, 2019, p. 343). This statement by Sheeran about Hoffa heralds the outcome of the story (cc. 14-21). The plot is woven expectantly by Charles Brandt: “hell is going to break loose,” he foreshadows for the reader.

Hell did break loose with Hoffa’s bid for Union presidency again in the 1976 election. Disadvantaged by having lost influence and stopped pulling some strings of power in the Union while in prison, Hoffa began the campaign aggressively with frequent public statements about the Union’s relations with the Mafia and denouncing loans to different mobster families to finance his Las Vegas hotel projects (many of which he himself had facilitated). Trying to protect himself from retaliation by his former friends in organized crime, he warned that he knew a lot about the bosses and the families; that he had insurance in case something happened to him. He announced that they would not dare to mess with him.

However, they did dare. On July 3, 1975, Hoffa disappeared forever. The FBI and other authorities searched for him on land, sea, and air. Establishments were raided in vain, dozens of hectares were excavated, foundations were removed, more than seventy suspects were interrogated (from mafia bosses to drivers, friends, and mafia soldiers). Versions of his disappearance and death were invented for almost three decades and there were at least a dozen people

who declared themselves to be the perpetrators of the murder. The subtitle of the Spanish version of the book anticipates its end: “Jimmy Hoffa, *caso cerrado*” (Jimmy Hoffa, case closed). This is announced because Sheeran himself acknowledged in 2003 that he had murdered his friend and protector on the orders of his godfather, Russell Bufalino.

Sheeran had been granting Brandt recorded interviews for five years and only with the proximity of his death was he encouraged to confess the crime. He detailed how Hoffa was led to a vacant house for an alleged mob meeting. Confident that Sheeran would protect him, Hoffa agreed to go on the date. When they entered the house, his former friend and right hand shot him twice in the head. The body was then transported and cremated in the oven of a nearby funeral home. His body never appeared nor was there evidence to clarify the crime.

Brandt says that he traveled with Sheeran to the house and verified the story he had told him. He had also verified all the events related by him through written sources, conversations with FBI agents, and through newspaper archive work. Brandt affirms that the FBI has not declassified the case files or allowed him access to them, which would allow the Irishman’s version to be corroborated with certainty.

When the first edition of the book was published in 2004, the Fox News network followed the trail of the story and visited the house where the attack supposedly had taken place and requested that a forensic examination be carried out. Blood residue was found on the floor, where Sheeran had reported that Hoffa’s body had fallen, although the DNA test did not clarify whether or not it was Hoffa’s blood. Likewise, in 2001 the FBI had examined a hair and traces of skin found in the vehicle in which Hoffa had gone to an alleged appointment in a restaurant near the house and after almost three decades they verified that they were Hoffa’s. Sheeran’s account, this evidence and the inference from the connection between events allowed Brandt to present his version of the trade unionist’s death.

Officially, the FBI has not accepted this version of the death of the union leader, nor that the murderer was Sheeran. Neither has this version been denied. Nor has the FBI allowed access to its files.

Versions of a Crime

The book is a biography supported by an investigation that aims to reconstruct past events on which there is no consensus. The story catches the reader from the beginning by the use of language, by the way it builds an almost police

plot and the way it gives a look at the society and politics of the United States over several decades.

As is often the case with this type of book that deals with crucial events about which different versions have been raised, *I Heard You Paint Houses* has defenders and detractors. Among the first are the journalist and writer Arthur Sloane (1991), who met Hoffa in the 1960s and is the author of a biography of him. When Brandt's book appeared in 2004, Sloane sent a message to the author – included in the epilogue of the next edition of the book – in which he states that he is convinced that Sheeran was the author of the murder and stresses the accuracy of the narrative.

Likewise, veteran journalist Jerry Capeci, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Mob* and who covered mob attacks between the 1960s and 1970s, lends credence to the book and believes that Sheeran indeed murdered both Joseph “*Crazy Joe*” Gallo and Hoffa, found the book convincing. After reviewing the facts, he states: “The account that Frank Sheeran provided about the disappearance of Hoffa, – to use an expression that I have heard repeatedly in the murders and trials of organized crime – rings true” (Capeci, 2005, p. 410). Capeci points out that Sheeran's statements for the book differ from those before him that were made under the promise of immunity from authorities. In addition, the book provides many details of the relationship between Hoffa and Bufalino, the operation and internal dynamics of the truckers' union and Joe Gallo's Hoffa's murders that no one had done before. Capeci claims he believes everything the book says.

But there are also detractors who question its veracity. Andy Petepiece (2004) was the first to dispute claims made in the book. He clarifies that the Apalachin was not a raid; it was by chance that the FBI came to that house and ran into the mob convention. Likewise, he questions Brandt's claim that Bufalino was an important mob boss. To Petepiece, Bufalino was just the boss of a small Pennsylvania mafia family and therefore could not have the impact assigned to him in the Commission.

This would demonstrate Brandt's lack of knowledge about the *Cosa Nostra* and affects the content of the work as a whole. Petepiece points out other inaccuracies in names and dates. He questions Sheeran's claims, such as that Jack Ruby (Lee Harvey Oswald's killer) was a member of the mob, stating that he was just a small showbusiness owner. This affects Sheeran's version of the assassination of J. F. Kennedy by the mob.

Other inaccuracies exist, according to Petepiece (2004). For example, when Sheeran claims to have taken Bufalino to the Apalachin meeting (it was proven that Hoffa arrived driving himself); or when he indicates having killed the mobster Joe Gallo, there are testimonies that say the opposite (such as that

of his bodyguard). In addition, at one point Sheeran tried to trick Brandt with a false letter from Hoffa that reaffirmed his stories (Brandt himself recounts it in his book and Sheeran justifies it by stating that it was insurance to deny everything to the authorities if they decided to involve him). Petepiece concludes that, ultimately, there is no way to corroborate whether Sheeran's story about Hoffa is true or false. There is not sufficient evidence to prove it either way.

Veteran journalist Dan Moldea (1993), another expert on the life of Jimmy Hoffa and author of *The Hoffa Wars: The Rise and Fall of Jimmy Hoffa*. In a later edition of that book, an annex is published in which he also disputes the veracity of what Brandt's book postulates. Moldea considers that Sheeran was one of those who took part in the murder, but not the one who committed it. Moldea believes the primary assassin was Sal Briguglio. Considering that Sheeran always denied having been Hoffa's murderer, that the FBI tests did not confirm that the blood in the house where everything supposedly happened belonged to the Union leader, that Sheeran changed his version in the end seeking to sell his story well, and that he had forged a letter from Hoffa that would confirm some of his accounts (which Brandt acknowledges in the book). Finally, Moldea highlights that there is no evidence of the alleged incineration of the body. The FBI checked and found no evidence in the area. Disgusted with the success of the book, Moldea states that there is a lacks rigor and sources, since the story was based only on the interview with Sheeran without contrasting or verifying what he said.

An article by Bill Tonelli (2019) also questions the content of Brandt's book. Tonelli wonders, referring to Sheeran, *how is it that for two decades a criminal was under the radar of justice and was not convicted (although in fact he was investigated, charged, and sentenced in 1991 to 23 years in prison)?* Tonelli also points out that Sheeran was not a top member of the mob; he was a step at the bottom of any hierarchy and was very little known. For this he died in the dark in a nursing home (actually, Brandt's book paints him as a frequently drunken thug who was in the service of Bufalino and Hoffa). Tonelli disputes the book and wonders: how is it that at the end of his life Sheeran began to confess incredible secrets that he had kept for decades, revealing that he was actually the unseen figure behind some of the biggest mob murders of all time? For Tonelli the answer is: to not get involved and not go to prison; furthermore, out of loyalty to Bufalino – who died only in 1992 – and others who survived him. Tonelli also questions if Sheeran was Joe Gallo's murderer. He quotes Gallo's wife, who describes the killer in a way that is very different from Sheeran's appearance. Tonelli also doubts Sheeran's language; he denies ever hearing anyone mention painting houses and doing carpentry work. Sheeran made it up. Brandt points

out, in defense of this, that the gangsters of some cities and states tend to have their own jargon.

The editor of *I Heard You Paint Houses*, Chip Fleischer (Brandt, 2019) responded to this criticism, calling it “a simplistic and intellectually dishonest mockery.” Fleischer maintains that the reviewer is unaware of the abundant evidence contained in the book. These are opinions, not serious analysis. Tonelli does not know that Hoffa’s own son affirmed that only with his father would he have agreed to go to the place where he was murdered. A judge had urged Sheeran to admit his participation in the crime. Tonelli ignores and minimizes the importance of Bufalino in the mafia network and does not refute anything said in the book. Tonelli also ignores Brandt’s expertise as a former prosecutor and misrepresents what the FBI reported about Sheeran. In addition to this, Fleischer emphasizes that the book does not take into account the annex to the 2005 edition, which contains the addition of corroborations to clarify doubts. Fleischer closes by saying that the book was published 15 years ago and no one has offered any evidence to refute any of the facts narrated there.

Another recent article kept the controversy going. Jack Goldsmith (2019) in *The New York Times* questions various aspects of the book and takes up Moldea’s (1993) and Tonelli’s (2019) criticisms. First, Goldsmith recounts that Sheeran had always pleaded not guilty and had told different stories accusing others of being the killers, but from 1995 Sheeran started changing his story in an apparent effort to get a book deal. Brandt writes that only in 2003, at the end of his life and in filmed testimony, did Sheeran admit to having killed Hoffa (when he could no longer be prosecuted, a reason that led him to plead his innocence).

Second, Goldsmith doesn’t think Bufalino and Sheeran were close enough, or that the former accompanied the latter on the plane that took him to Detroit to kill Hoffa. For him, no mob boss would do that (Brandt describes this closeness and includes photos of the two, including one in 1986 together in a nursing home with Bufalino in a wheelchair). Third, the book offers no direct corroborating evidence of Sheeran’s involvement in the murder or other novel elements, apart from the confession (the author believes Sheeran; contrast to the fact that the FBI listed Sheeran as early as 1975 as one of the likely killers. In addition, Goldsmith verified the story when they visited the house where the murder supposedly occurred and the FBI also confirmed that the traces of blood found corresponded to Hoffa).

The critic wonders why would the mob conspirators involve Sheeran, a long-time Hoffa loyalist, with the attendant uncertainty about how he might behave and with so many unnecessary loose ends. (Sheeran claims it’s because Bufalino was loyal to Hoffa and was used by the mob. There was no other way

to get close to Hoffa without him suspecting, since he totally trusted Sheeran. In addition, to involve Sheeran at once prevented him from later betraying them, since he would implicate himself). Goldsmith recognizes that Hoffa was killed at the behest of the Mafia; that bosses feared, among other things, that Hoffa could regain control of the union's multimillion-dollar pension fund that the family would use as its own major fund, but Goldsmith does not think that Sheeran was the murderer and considers that Sheeran tried to sell a story for profit.

In this same way, the reporter and documentarian Vincent Wade (2020), who at the time revealed the story of Hoffa's disappearance, wrote an article in a 2019 Daily Beast issue stating that he did not believe in Sheeran's version. Although Wade accepts that this was a mob hitman and close friend of Hoffa, Wade points out that Sheeran was a liar. Wade believes there is no evidence to place Sheeran at the scene of the crime. He believes a narrative about three mafia men from New Jersey had murdered and disappeared Hoffa on Tony Provenzano order (a capo). Sheeran was considered by the FBI to be the last of six suspects out of Michigan; mainly, due to his close association with Hoffa and his links with members of the mafia.

Between credits and discredits, the debate is back on the front page. It was fueled by the recent Scorsese film. The script was written by Charles Brandt and is faithful to the content of the book.

Agreements and Disagreements about the Mafia and Hoffa

I Heard You Paint Houses recounts many facts from recent American history from the late 1950s to the late 1980s. There is an important biography of Hoffa's life, rise to power, and death (Walter, 1972; Sloane, 1991; Moldea, 1993; Rivers, 2015) and, in greater number and scope, books on the Italian-American mafia in this period (Sondern Jr, 1974; Warren Commission, 1964; Kennedy, 1968; Maas, 1969; Diapuolos and Linakis, 1976; Giancana and Giancana, 1992; Mustain and Capecci, 1992; Hersh, 1998; Dallek, 2001; Mike, 2009; Dash, 2009; Raab, 2015). Historical and sociological research, biographies and non-fiction research on the subject and the period join some facts that no one disputes anymore.

- a. The life of Jimmy Hoffa, his dedication to the truck drivers' cause and his rise in the union organization to achieve great power as president over the most important union in the United States.
- b. The infiltration of the mafia into the unions – including that of the truck drivers – manipulating strikes, extorting businessmen, exercising violence by competing with each other and mobilized their hosts

according to the interests of the mafia kingpins, their leaders and their relations with the political class. A million members, their families and relatives, was an important electorate.

- c. Illegal and violent methods used by unions against employers, competitors and those who hindered their leaders in corruption management of the truckers' funds. Hoffa's predecessor in the presidency of truck drivers' union (David Beck) was jailed for bribery, as were Hoffa and many other trade unionists.
- d. The crimes committed by Hoffa, his arrest, and conviction for jury manipulation (he was in prison between 1967-1971) and the pardon granted by President Richard Nixon in 1972 with the initial ban on being candidate again as president of the union organization.
- e. The indirect management of millions in union resources by the mafia were used to finance their investments in construction, casinos, and other sectors of the economy without being pressured: it was the Mafia's private bank.
- f. The relationship of the Kennedy clan with the Mafia, of Father Joseph P. Kennedy, who made his fortune illegally at the time of Prohibition (1920-1933) by importing liquor from Scotland and by associating with mafia bosses (Sam Giancana and Frank Costello, especially), and of son John F. Kennedy, elected with economic and logistical support from the Mafia (in addition to the manipulation of the votes in Illinois) in exchange for favoring and protecting their illegal interests and activities and to try to rescue their expropriated properties in Cuba.
- g. The action of Robert Kennedy (1925-1968) against the mafia and against Hoffa when he served as attorney general named by his brother (1961-1964). Prosecutor Kennedy with his actions and research revealed organized crime and from then organized crime began to be fought by the Justice Department and FBI. Before Robert Kennedy and in the following two decades there was a collusion and tolerance of the mafia by the authorities.
- h. The Appalachian meet more than a hundred mafia bosses and chiefs from all over the country in 1957 (the same year Hoffa was elected president of the truck drivers' union). This convention was intended to stop a new wave of violence among families that had led to the death bosses such as Francesco Scalici and Umberto Anastasia, and soldiers and middlemen, as well as to rethink the distribution of business areas.
- i. The alliance between the Kennedy administration, the mafia, and the CIA in the attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro in the frustrated Bay of

Pigs invasion. In 1975 there was official research into this. Just before testifying, Samuel Giancana was murdered.

- j. The recognition that Joseph Valachi (1904-1971), a member of the Genovese family, was the first member of Italian-American mafia to break the *omertà* (law or oath of silence) and revealed unknown aspects of the organization and its ways of behaving when he became a protected witness in 1963. With the *Valachi Papers*, the structure of organized crime, its ritual, hierarchies and ways of acting began to be revealed.
- k. Hoffa's ambition to regain his position in the union upon his release from prison led him to act recklessly and threaten to denounce and reveal his successor's links to the Mafia. It put at risk the Mafia's access to the union's pension fund millions in resources.
- l. The Mafia's prevention of Hoffa's eventual re-election to the union's presidency and his assassination. This reaffirms that in Mafia affairs violence was organized. The murders were authorized exclusively by the bosses. Only when there were disputes between families and their bosses was the established order broken. It could only return to its usual "normality" through new agreements.
- m. Participation in the conspiracy led to Hoffa's murder by people linked to organized crime: Mafia bosses Russell Bufalino, Anthony "Tony" Provenzano, of the Genovese family (and his hitman lieutenant Salvatore "Sal" Briguglio); Mafia operatives Anthony Giacalone, Samuel and Paul Vitale, as well as Chuckie O'Brien (in the past, very close to the union leader).
- n. Frank Sheeran was on the FBI's list of suspects in Hoffa's murder and disappearance.

Regarding other facts there are partial agreements and open disagreements. Thus, the imaginative capacity, intentional distortion, or certain liberties in making stories more attractive comes into play, but also keeps the core attached to the facts. The following are the most relevant disagreements of the book:

- a. Sheeran's claim that he brought Russell Bufalino to the Appalachian meeting and that it was a raid is questioned. Various sources suggest that the Mafia boss arrived by his own means and that there was no raid by the authorities. The mafia bosses were discovered by chance in the investigation of a different case.

- b. On the intervention of the Mafia in the assassination of John F. Kennedy (as stated in Brandt's book) there is no clarity as yet. There are different theories:
- Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson was involved, as he was to be removed for Kennedy's re-election (he was implicated in four major criminal investigations)
 - The CIA associated with Cuban exiles because Kennedy intended to dismantle the agency for its involvement in the assassinations of foreign leaders. The agency would use Cubans who did not agree with the government's policy toward the island.
 - Israelis who organized the strike because Israel was uncomfortable with Kennedy's pressure against its secret nuclear program and annoyed by Kennedy's sympathies for Arabs and the use of ex-Nazis in the US space program.
 - Kennedy was assassinated because powerful actors in the U.S. economic, military, and political sectors and Cuban exiles did not share their supposed condescension toward Cuba and because of his intention to withdraw troops from Vietnam (which affected their business, economic and strategic interests).¹
 - There was a conspiracy. According to Warren Commission: it found no evidence that Lee Harvey Oswald (the assassin) or Jack Ruby (the assassin's assassin) were part of any conspiracy (domestic or foreign) to assassinate President Kennedy. The commission claimed the assassins acted alone.
 - The Mafia who thought that if it killed the president, it would remove his brother from the Prosecutor's Office and it would stop pressuring and persecuting them (a thesis supported by Brandt's book [2019], that includes Sheeran in the plot).
- c. Jacob Rubenstein, alias Jack Ruby (1911-1967), is identified by Brandt's book as someone close to Sam Giancana and who had links to the Dallas Mafia. This version is denied by others, who identify him as a nightclub manager and businessman, who claimed to have killed Oswald because he was confused and unbalanced when he fired, and that he had not planned it. The Warren Commission established that there was no connection between Ruby and Oswald and that they were not in an alleged mafia conspiracy.

1. A partial summary is published in Time magazine (1964, August 21).

- d. The book states that Hoffa and the union – and, eventually, the Mafia – supported Richard Nixon’s election in 1968. Some books claim that Nixon’s links to the truck drivers’ union and with mobsters such as Mickey Cohen, Meyer Lansky, Frank Costello and Tony Provenzano were strong. Some people deny these relationships and recall that Nixon pressed the Congress on comprehensive legislation to fight organized crime in 1970. The government launched the bill that gave federal prosecutors the right to indict criminal conspirators for crimes such as threats, murder, bribery, extortion, or embezzlement (it became known as the RICO [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act] of 1970).
- e. Certain expressions that are supposed to be part of mafia slang at that time are not clear, such as the one used in the title of the book: *I Heard You Paint Houses*. Some people argue that Sheeran invented them; others do not refer to these expressions.
- f. There is no agreement that Frank Sheeran was an acknowledged mob killer. Some people do not know him, other people recognize him as a drunk and a little close to Hoffa. He is profiled by FBI as a hitman and a syndicate criminal. And lastly, Brandt (2019) highlights him as an expert assassin under Bufalino and Hoffa.
- g. There is no agreement on who and how Hoffa was killed. It is said that he was killed and then buried in a barrel with cement, or that he was killed and then put in a car that was then taken to a scrap metal compressor, or that he was shot and then buried at sea, or that he was killed and sent on a ship to the Middle East, or that *he had been thrown alive from a plane in the Great Lakes region*. It is also said he was crushed by a lumber machine, that he was killed by Richard Kuklinski with an ice pick and then buried in the trunk of a car. Frank Sheeran claims he shot him twice in a house on July 30, 1975, and then he had him cremated in a funeral home furnace.

What is fiction and what is fact in the Hoffa murder story? As it is a mystery that has remained unclear for almost three decades, and because the book mentions important facts about organized crime and its relationship with politics and power, the debate about these facts remains open.

The Debate between Fiction and Reality in Biographical Accounts – Sources, Truthfulness, and Credibility

A particularly relevant issue to take into account in the analysis of any research on social facts – regardless of the genre chosen for its writing – is related to the sources, their treatment and the possibilities of verifying the statements. The truthfulness and credibility that an investigation can achieve depend on these. This issue is immersed in the debate around the question of fiction and reality in biographical narratives, which are works considered “non-fiction”.

About what has been called “non-fiction works” – also called, in a more restrictive way, “literary journalism” (a more restrictive term because it excludes historical works, biographies, stories about real events not conducted by journalists) – there is a dichotomy in the different versions. At one extreme exists those that state that any story is partially immersed – to a greater or lesser extent – in fiction, since there are only versions of the facts filtered through subjectivity issues, the language, the way of interpreting, the belief system, convictions and imagination. It is a relativistic position on the knowledge of social reality that, ultimately, expresses skepticism about the possibility of knowing and does not consider necessary a marked criterion between the fiction and the reality.

On the other hand, there is extreme radical realism, which states that one can reach an absolute, unquestionable, and objective knowledge of reality in which subjectivity does not intervene at all and what one does is to conceptually reproduce the world and facts to faithfully portray reality. Any narrative of events, characters and processes must correspond to facts and story. That is what objectivity is all about.

Figure 1. Contrast between reality and fiction



Source: Authors' Elaboration

The first view assumes that the subject recreates reality through language, and also creates it. When narrating facts, one takes the liberties of imagining, inventing, “complementing” facts about which one does not have complete information and, as usually happens especially with the testimonies of people as part of the events, as sources for different interpretations. Although the intention is to narrate something real, imagination exists and the aim is to make the story believable. The second version is conveyed in the corresponding conception of knowledge, which states that there is a relationship between science and reality. Writers should claim a strong relationship to make their accounts reliable and persuasive, able to withstand disputes, debates and possible questioning. Knowledge is a conceptual reconstruction of the world which aims to argue its validity as a socio-scientific representation of reality; it is sufficient, in terms of rigorous methodologies, reliable sources and verifiable versions. Finally, a narration of events can be reconstructed through the sources used (Agazzi, 2020).

The issue is not that easy to present as a dichotomy; although it is useful to clarify the differences of the two extreme and opposing views. In this regard, the approaches of John Hersey (1980) and Roberto Herrscher (2018) are important to analyzing the relationships between works of facts and fiction that are considered “non-fiction” and that include different modalities, such as stories, biographies, historical novels, and chronicles.

There are four perspectives:

1. Non-fiction strictly adheres to the facts. It is the result of well-documented inquiries, with cross-referenced sources, verified data, testimonies contrasted with documented sources; in short, a wide network of empirical evidence. Here, there is no room for literary liberties that affect or distort the core of the facts. Herrscher (2018) states, “When there is not enough information, no matter how hard one rummages, sometimes one must make the decision to abandon the realm of nonfiction or to abandon the project outright” (p. 283). There is no place for speculation or conjecture. One must be faithful to the facts and maintain all the references that allow for the verification of statements’ accuracies, as expressed by Domenico Chiappe (2010) in his work *Tan real como la ficción (As Real as Fiction)*. When there is a lack of sufficient, verifiable, and reliable information, this affects the basic core of the story that intends to provide an account of the facts therefore, giving up or postponing writing is the best solution. Information deficits should be carefully weighed before inclusion.
2. Nonfiction with literary liberties may include the invention of characters or the invention of attributes or thoughts assigned to characters

or conversations, or places or events that never existed (although they may have existed). The stories gain in dramatic tension. These stories are made more attractive to readers; even the facts are presented as if the work were a novel. However, rigorousness is lost and the correspondence between what is reported and what happened is forgotten. Ramón Tijeras (2011) asks and answers:

How does one transform reality into a novel? In a simple way: inventing dialogues that may have been but that did not take place, describing moods and landscapes with such subjectivity that they do not correspond to reality and transferring to the reader thoughts and appreciations that have nothing to do with contrasted and true facts to give a sensation of environmental realism (p. 4).

Similarly, Roberto Herrsche (2018) states, “We can make our pen fly so that what we saw and what we heard shines through. But what we did not see, what we did not hear belongs to the realm of the novel” (p. 246). Nevertheless, many authors defend this type of work. Truman Capote himself responded to his early critics by calling them “sweaty typists” who took it upon themselves to describe reality without style or much imagination.²

3. Discard the non-fiction genre and present the work as fiction based on true stories. They can be historical novels, biographical accounts, biographies reconstructed with the testimonies of the character and other people close to the author. John Hersey’s criticism of the founding triad of nonfiction literature (Truman Capote, Tom Wolf and Norman Mailer) is that their works ended up falling into fiction, even though they dealt with true stories. Their excuse was that they were giving an account of facts through a novelty style that did not fit into the classical genre molds, but they resorted to wrong information, or invented facts and dialogues, forgetting that everything that is written must be rigorously true; if it is not, the most honest thing to do is to declare that they are novels based on true stories.³
4. To fully accept that these are fictitious or invented works without the intention to reconstruct facts, even though the characters may have

2. Included in *El oficio de escritor* (González, 1959).

3. Hersey’s reviews are directed at Truman Capote (1988) *Ataúdes tallados a mano*, Tom Wolf (2010) and Norman Mailer (2006). All three cases resorted to dubious, invented, imagined or simulated sources. What they reported was shown as true stories, but in reality, they were embellished versions, inaccurate statements, or lies and fabrications. Roberto Herrscher (2018) analyzes these cases in the light of Hersey’s approaches in his book on literary journalism.

existed. They are fictionalized versions of facts, but do not claim to correspond to what was told and what happened. These are made-up stories. In Domenico Chiappe's (2010) words: "The fiction writer creates a story that appears to be true, while the journalist (and those who write non-fiction stories) ignores everything that does not seem to have happened. The fiction maker, even when inspired by reality, separates the references. Invents, imagines" (p. 10).

According to Charles Brandt (2019), the book *I Heard You Paint Houses* corresponds to the first genre; non-fiction literature strictly adhering to facts, although it can be read almost like a novel. On the contrary, for its critics, it is a non-fiction work with a lot of liberties and without a rigorous contrast of sources, testimonies, or analysis of evidence. It mixes truths (many of them widely spread) and lies, fabrications or misrepresentations of the facts.

If the work falls into the first category, there are fundamental aspects to comply with, as it is always the case with social research. Serious and rigorous research has some fundamental attributes:

- a. Statements should be subjected to verification with other sources. A single source is not acceptable (especially if it is a testimony).
- b. Cross-referencing should be used. This is because there are usually several sources for the same fact. The sources should be investigated and their validity, content and coherence should be analyzed.
- c. Previous contributions that have been accepted as valid because of their managed rigorousness and seriousness, and their methodologies cannot be disregarded. They should be verified or refuted.
- d. Credit must be given to sources and traces should be left so that they can be consulted and verified.
- e. The methodology used, how sources and informants were located, who they were and why their versions are credible and reliable should be detailed.
- f. Compare versions and establish why one is preferred over the other(s).
- g. Relevant information may not be omitted or misrepresented. And
- h. Impartiality must be specified in the investigation.

Moreover, in a biography – as is the case here – methodological aspects should be considered to provide a convincing, accepted, and reliable reconstruction of the facts (Balán, 1974; Bourdieu, 1989; Denzin, 1989; De Miguel, 1995). On the one hand, to keep in mind that there are different levels of truth: the life actually lived, the life told, and the life recorded in writing that is complemented

by other sources. On the other hand, in the relationship between the life lived and the life told, there are usually omissions, misrepresentations, lies, and interests in affecting third parties or exonerating them; it signifies unspoken intentions. The researcher is faced with the task of uncovering the truth, looking for inconsistencies, contradictions, falsehoods and manipulations.

One should also consider that memory is often faulty, selective, or intentionally managed. The perspective of facts and of life changes greatly with the person's age. Similarly, one must always ask oneself why someone wishes to relate his or her life, what the purpose is, if there is any undisclosed interest, why a certain moment or juncture is chosen and how it affects what is going to be told.

In addition, this type of work includes a double subjectivity: that of the main character who selectively presents and recreates his/her own life and with his/her own way of seeing the facts and the world (affected by the time that has passed); and that of the writer, who questions, transcribes, writes, provides logic, and orders the story. There is always a need to cut, select, include, or exclude events. All of this has implications for the work as a whole.

As these types of works tell life stories, they often combine socio-scientific analysis and art-literature. Writing is often particularly difficult. Fiction and non-fiction must have clearly defined boundaries.

Closing with Questions

In light of the previous considerations: Is the story told in *I Heard You Paint Houses* true? Are the sources reliable and well used? Is the methodology used by the author in the construction of the story relevant and rigorous? Are Brandt's responses to his critics convincing?

As previously reviewed, there are several questionings of Charles Brandt's (2019) book and some of them refer to the methodology and sources. Dan Moldea (1993) has been one of those who has questioned the book the most. He disputes the credibility of its contents, especially, Sheeran's version of having been present and having participated in many events related to Hoffa and his death. Moldea states that in his research and for many years, he interviewed more than a thousand people and consulted different written sources, and their versions do not correspond to Sheeran's. He expresses that a work based on a single source is not reliable, especially if it is of a convicted felon and a liar who claims to have understood and seen everything, to have been at all the important events of Hoffa's life, and have seen the actions of the Mafia for three decades.

Similarly, critics point out that Sheeran changed his version several times. In addition, he went so far as to forge Hoffa's signature to try to lend credibility to his version of certain events, therefore he lied or made up an ending to make himself seem more important and to be able to profit financially from the sale of his story. In this case, there is a gap in the truth lived and the truth told by Sheeran and recorded by Brandt. The author may have been careless in verifying the facts by cross-checking sources and inquiring further. Critics also criticize the fact that only at the end of his life (almost octogenarian) did Sheeran begin to tell things he had kept quiet for decades. Suddenly, he remembered and left a record of events lived for more than fifty years. This suggests selectivity, intentionality, manipulation, and self-serving testimony.

Brandt's answer to these questions is based on a statement made in the epilogue to the 2005 edition and included in subsequent reprints:

In some jurisdictions, the reliability of a confession is enough to be convicted, in others, some corroborating evidence should be added. In this case, in 1999, Sheeran had confessed to me that he had lured Hoffa into the seat of a maroon Mercury [...]. On September 7, 2001, the FBI announced that a hair had been recovered from the car's back seat headrest and, after all these years, it had been DNA tested, effectively confirming that it was Hoffa's hair. Sheeran's confession and that important piece of forensic evidence had been more than enough to convict Sheeran. I myself have sent four defendants to death row with less evidence than all the evidence I have amassed against Sheeran, based on his own words. (Brandt: 2014, p. 427).

This quotation raises several considerations. First, that for the author Sheeran's confession was convincing. He states that he is not a novice in the field, as he has wide experience in judicial work and corroborating evidence. Therefore, he is supposed to be an expert on interrogation and false confession, lies, and inconsistencies. Second, Brandt had forensic evidence, was able to verify Sheeran's account of Hoffa's death by visiting the house where it occurred, and had evidence of a blood trail on the floor of the house. All this led him to infer that Sheeran's version of the union leader's death was true. Third, throughout the book, Sheeran's assertions are contrasted with other bibliographical sources, from accounts, press reports, documents, Hoffa's biographies, the *Warren Commission Report*, and Robert Kennedy's book-testimony. Fourth, Brandt himself revealed Sheeran's attempt to forge a letter from Hoffa attesting to various events recounted by him. In doing so, he did not give up the investigation; on the contrary, he insisted that Sheeran relate facts that only he knew because he had been the main character. This insistence is not a lack or a

weak point of the work and of the book; on the contrary, it allows readers to appreciate the persistence of the researcher and writer to unveil facts that had not been verified.

However, having read and reread the book, there is a feeling that Brandt gave full credibility to Sheeran, despite the fact that Sheeran had previously lied to him and others. This could be justified because he avoided going to jail as a confessed criminal, but also – as several critics claim – because he was looking for money and waited until he was close to death to make the final confession; or both.

There is also the feeling that Sheeran was always conveniently on the scene at important moments: in the prelude to the Commission meeting at Apalachin (leading Bufalino to it); in the plot to assassinate J. F. Kennedy (delivering the weapons); in delivering weapons and money for the foiled Bay of Pigs invasion; in delivering money to finance Richard Nixon's campaign; and then, in securing a pardon for Hoffa at the place where Joey Gallo was assassinated, claiming to be the assassin. Too many coincidences or events that made a critic claimed that Sheeran looked like the Forrest Gump of the Mafia, alluding to the famous character of the eponymous film that always appeared in the climaxes next to important characters of the story.

Brandt's critics will try to prove that their arguments are true with new inquiries and Brandt will respond by defending his version. Until this version of Hoffa's death is conclusively refuted, it will stand.

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