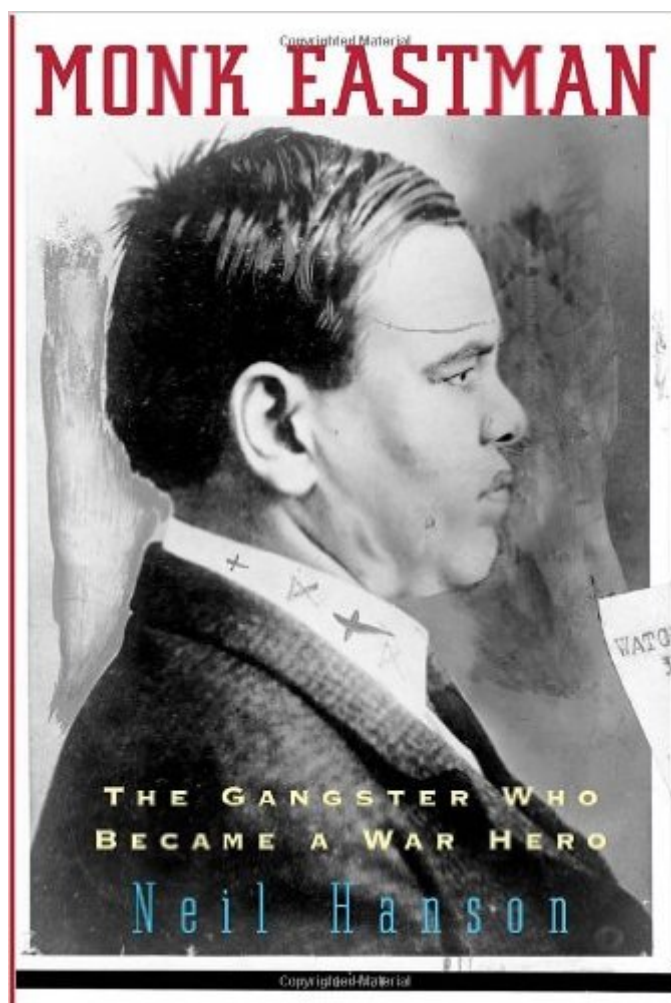


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Monk Eastman: The Gangster Who Became A War Hero



Synopsis

An intimate biography as well as an epic history, Monk Eastman vividly recounts the life and times of old New York's most infamous gangster-cum-soldier as he made his way from the sooty streets and dingy saloons of the Lower East Side to the battlefields of the Western Front. Born in 1873 to a respectable New York family, Monk was running wild in Manhattan's rough Lower East Side by the age of eighteen. He found work as a bouncer when the saloon owner first turned him down because he had two bouncers already, Monk beat them both up and was promptly hired in their place. He soon developed a loyal following of immigrant toughs, and by 1900, he was the most feared gang leader in lower Manhattan, protected by corrupt politicians and crooked cops, and commanding an army of two thousand pickpockets, thieves, prostitutes, and thugs. But changing neighborhood demographics and shifting political fortunes colluded against Monk: after a pitched battle with Pinkerton detectives, he was sent to Sing Sing on a ten-year sentence, and his territory quickly slipped from his grasp. In 1917, no longer safe from the law or from rival gangs, Monk joined the New York National Guard. As a gangster, he'd been the equivalent of a general; as an enlisted man, Monk was just another private. After several months of combat training, Monk's division of Brooklyn recruits was thrown headlong into the bitter trench warfare in Europe. His experience in gangland combat served him well: he was repeatedly cited by his superiors for his bravery and he received a hero's welcome back in New York and an official pardon from the governor. But Monk's gangland past was not so easily erased and caught up with him in the end. In Neil Hanson's able hands, Monk's unique and compelling story becomes an emblem of a time of upheaval for New York and for the nation.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It is difficult to fashion an accurate biography of an individual when the details are missing or buried deep within myths and legends. This is especially true if your subject lives (or lived) on the other side of the law. English historian Hanson has done a creditable job in finding Edward "Monk" Eastman, a notorious gang leader from New York City's Lower East Side. A man who lied about practically everything, Eastman operated from the 1890's through about 1907, when he began a ten-year sentence in Sing Sing Prison. By 1900, at the ripe old age of seventeen, he led a gang of some two thousand thugs, prostitutes and thieves. At his release from prison in 1917, political and neighborhood demographics had changed; Eastman was no longer protected nor trusted by either side and he joined the New York National Guard, lying about his age, saying that he was 39 when he was 42. Shipping out to France as a part of the 27th Infantry Division, Monk and his fellow New Yorkers saw heavy combat beginning in May, 1918, as the Allies began the assault on the Hindenburg Line and the final defeat of Germany that November. Although neither decorated nor promoted, Eastman distinguished himself in brutal combat, repeatedly risking his life to save his comrades. In their eyes, at least, he partly redeemed his nefarious past. Returning to an "honest" civilian life, he couldn't quite remain completely straight and was murdered by person or persons unknown in 1920. Neil Hanson paints a decidedly ugly portrait of New York City's Lower East Side - "one that is undoubtedly true" - comparing it unfavorably to Dickens' London: the Lower East Side was dirtier, scarier and more crowded with downtrodden humanity than practically anywhere else on the planet.

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