

# Gangster Squad



By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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Gangster Squad is an exceptional work of art revealing that there is no difference between an apocalyptic world ravaged by zombies and a post-war City of Angels consumed by malevolent greed.

The profound impact of *Zombieland* director Ruben Fleischer's skilfully crafted portrait of Los Angeles' kingdom of gangster in 1949 is grounded in how delicately he peels away the layers of the shocking and violent nature of human beings, yet manages to deliver a soulful and emotional journey into the compassion of humaneness.





Set against the background of an affluent world dominated by power at its most corrupt and evil, it deals with the relentless warfare between Brooklyn-born mob king Mickey Cohen (Sean Penn), who runs the show in this town, reaping the ill-gotten gains from the drugs, the guns, the prostitutes and-if he has his way-every wire bet placed west of Chicago, and Sergeant John O'Mara (Josh Brolin), a man who's come back from war and can't quite figure out how to live in peacetime.

Ironically, with the outstanding *Zombieland*, Fleischer placed a group of ill-fated characters in an apocalyptic nightmare; the nightmarish hell of *Gangster Squad* is not sci-fi, but a fictional account of real-life events that shaped our future and are prevalent in daily news headlines in which innocent victims are killed in gang warfare.

## **Penn's and Brolin's outstanding performances**

If there's one reason to see this film, it's most definitely for Penn's and Brolin's outstanding performances, well supported by Ryan Gosling as a charismatic cop, Nick Nolte as Chief Parker, Anthony Mackie as a switchblade-wielding cop, Giovanni Ribisi as a family man and electronics specialist, Robert Patrick as gunslinger Max Kennard, Emma Stone as Gosling's sweetheart and Mireille Enos as O'Mara's wife.

Although the film ultimately belongs to Penn and Brolin, it's a terrific ensemble piece in which the faultless synergy and volatile energy between performers allows the characters to burst to life; Fleischer competently commands intimate moments that reveal the true nature of the characters and vividly uses the language and visual dynamics of film to emphasise the world of the characters, and how it motivates and controls their sometimes irrational behaviour

A major contribution to the overall impact and success of *Gangster Squad* is Will Beall's exceptional screenplay. Beall, who launched his writing career in 2006 with the publication of his acclaimed first novel, *L.A. Rex*, after working for 10 years as a homicide detective and gang investigator with the Los Angeles Police Department, proves that if you write what you are familiar with, the truth and honesty of the telling results in superior storytelling that is provocative, commanding and laced with a wicked sense of humour.



Visually arresting, spectacular, and filled with meaningful intent

Fleischer knows how to make the most of a great script and turns words into action that is visually arresting, spectacular, and filled with meaningful intent. 1940s' Los Angeles was an era of affluence and corruption, and Fleischer meticulously captures the period. He allows for a breathtaking visceral cinematic tour de force that culminates in an emotional connection between the audience and film; he masterfully uses the medium to bring the story to life.

In one scene, when O'Mara vengefully approaches Cohen at Slapsy Maxie, the nightclub where Cohen spends his evenings dining with the public officials that he keeps in his pocket, Fleischer uses Steve Jablonsky's powerful score to turn an ordinary event into extreme suspense; he places a Christmas tree with all its trimmings in the midst of a thundering shoot-out, and through meticulous editing by Alan Baumgarten and James Herbert, the popping of bullets in effective slow motion is intercut with smashing baubles. Another unforgettable moment in the film is when O'Mara bursts into his house to find out what happened to his heavily pregnant wife after the mobsters riddled their house with bullets.

## **Voluptuous, shocking and poetic**

In the tradition of classic shoot-outs like Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, Brian de Palma's *The Untouchables*, Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, and Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, Fleischer pays respectful homage with *Gangster Squad*; the bloody deaths are voluptuous, shocking and poetic.

Flawlessly lensed by Australian-born Dion Beebe, who studied in South Africa before moving abroad, the stylistic Film Noir approach, combined with a contemporary digital format, adds texture and ambiance to the period and gives the film a believable and authentic constructed realism. Beebe's "nourish" lensing perfectly captures the conflicted lives of men imprisoned by greed and caught between the wholesomeness of family and decadence of corruption.

From its shocking opening scene to its illuminating finale, Fleischer and his creative team immerse the audience into the reality of Los Angeles in the late-40s. The reality allows for a real connection between the violence, compassion and camaraderie.

*Gangster Squad* is also not just a film about violence, but a powerful statement of how crime and gangs can tear the fabric of family and society to shreds. Fleischer shows that violence in film can be graceful, and its poetic justice underlines the cruel and malicious nature of human beings and their intentional or inadvertent actions.

If you enjoy crime films and human dramas with bite and aptitude, *Gangster Squad* provides ideal escapism into the past, allowing a harrowing story of corruption and evil to resonate and reflect our contemporary crime ridden cities.

## Behind the scenes

Ruben Fleischer, the film's director/executive producer, a former history major, couldn't wait to delve into that world. "It was such an exciting time: that elegant, art deco, post-war era when the city was really being reborn and expanding," he observed. "There was exuberance about the victory overseas, the men coming home, and the economy coming back. I've always been fascinated by that period, so when the opportunity to explore it came along, I jumped at it."

The movie is based on former Los Angeles Times writer/editor Paul Lieberman's book, *Gangster Squad*, his non-fiction account of what he calls "the battle for Los Angeles", which took place between the police and Cohen's crew from the mid-1940s all through the 50s. Will Beall, a former LAPD homicide detective, penned the script.

"What struck me about these guys is that they risked everything - and not for recognition, not for medals, not for monetary gain, but for the future of the city," Beall said. "They believed in the promise of L.A."

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## ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za)

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