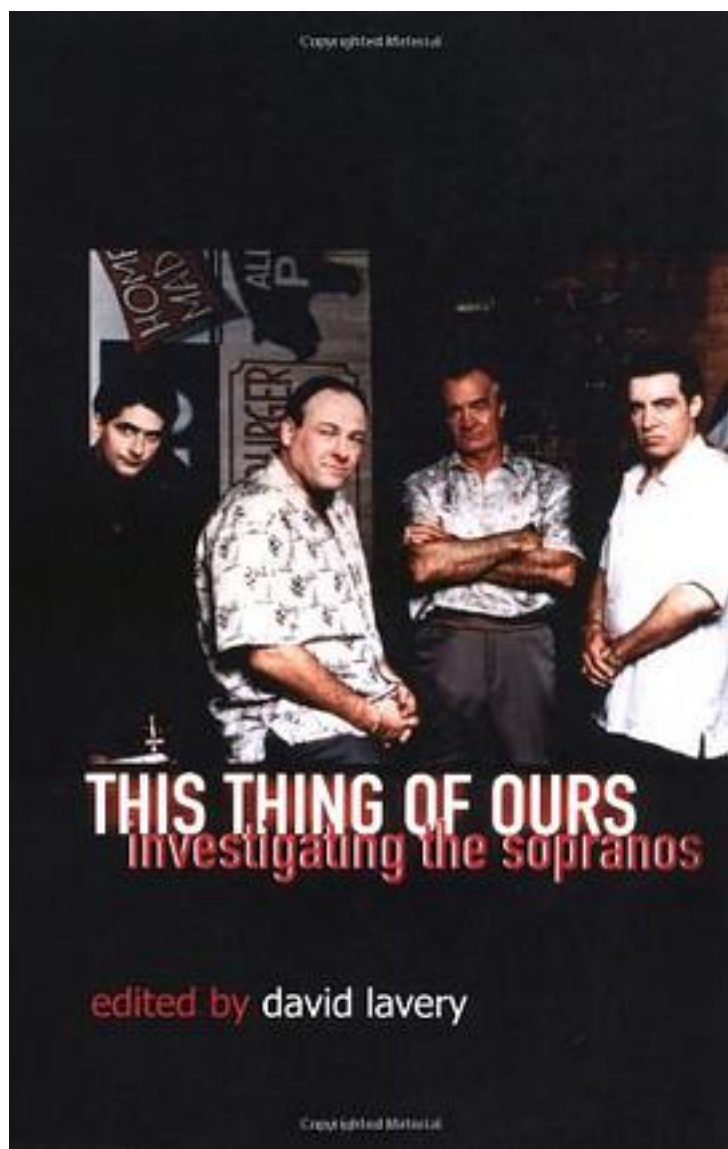


This Thing of Ours



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著者:Lavery, David 编

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In a first-season episode of *The Sopranos*, Tony Soprano is once again in conflict with his uncle Carrado "Junior" Soprano. Tony is in no mood for conciliation, but neither is Junior, who warns his nephew not to return unless he is armed: "Come heavy," he insists, "or not at all." As a work of popular culture, a ground-breaking television series, and a cultural phenomenon, *The Sopranos* always "comes heavy," not just with weaponry but with significance. The cultures of the United States, Great Britain and Canada, Australia, and even Italy (where it premiered in the spring of 2001) have come under its influence and contributed to the cultural conversation about it. Talk, discourse, about *The Sopranos* has migrated far beyond the water cooler, and not all of it has been praise. David Chase's *The Sopranos* has also received starkly contradictory critical assessments. In the eyes of Ellen Willis (whose seminal essay in *The Nation* is reprinted in this volume), for example, the HBO series is "the richest and most compelling piece of television -- no, of popular culture -- that I've encountered in the past twenty years...a meditation on the nature of morality, the possibility of redemption, and the legacy of Freud." Others have condemned it for racial and sexist stereotypes, excessive violence, and profanity. These eighteen essays consider many facets of *The Sopranos*: its creation and reception, the conflicting roles of men and women, the inner lives of the characters, obesity, North Jersey, the role of music, and even how food contributes to the story.

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