

A BENCHMARK OF EXCELLENCE- 'THE GODFATHER' LEGACY

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Abstract

Man since ancient times has found a need to communicate, be it their ideas, views or beliefs. Earlier the mediums were inscriptions and cave drawings. As time progressed people began to write on papers and along the 1900's the most powerful media of communication came into being, movies. As time progressed, books and movies began to develop an intricate relation. There were only so many original ideas that the writers could come up with. And even they too were in many ways big and small influenced by books.

One of the most riveting combination of a novel and movies however has to be of 'The Godfather'. Penned by Mario Puzo this is acclaimed by critics and commoners alike as one of the best books ever written. A dark storyline, with grey characters and unforgettable dialogue, it is no wonder that it is one of the highest selling books of all time. Based in the late 1940's Don Corleone and his 'family' have been immortalized in the hearts of everyone who come in contact with this book.

But even more beautiful is the way this piece of genius was adopted as a movie. Of course Mario Puzo was responsible for the screenplay and that was enough to ensure that the film remained true to its roots. But finding men who could play the characters of Don Corleone and Micheal Corleone was still a gigantic task. Legendary director Francis Ford Coppola, then a young man decided to bring in Marlon Brando as Vito Corleone and the then unproven Al Pacino as Micheal. What followed was almost unbelievable. The movie received rave reviews from all critics who viewed it. It went on to break record after record and grossed over 135\$ million dollars. The first two parts of the trilogy have been considered as trend setters in the gangster genre.

Dialogues like, 'I will make you an offer you can't refuse' were written brilliantly and delivered perfectly. The background score by Nino Rota is haunting and mesmerizing at the same time. A variety of movies have tried to capture the aura of the film, but never could. In India,

Rajneeti came closest and yet seemed pathetically short of the mark. Brando won the best actor award, and while Al Pacino was nominated for the best 'Supporting Actor' he never turned up, as he felt he should have been a 'Best Actor' nomination. Coppola and Puzo won the 'Best adapted screeplay' while the movie won the 'Best Picture'. I honestly believe that this is one of the best movies ever made and had the best cast ever.

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Man since ancient times has found a need to communicate, be it their ideas, views or beliefs. Earlier the mediums were inscriptions and cave drawings. As time progressed people began to write on papers and along the 1900's the most powerful media of communication came into being, 'Movies'. As time progressed, books and movies began to develop an intricate relation. There were only so many original ideas that the writers could come up with. And even they too were in many ways big and small influenced by books.

It has been a long held personal belief of mine that good authors are just authors. The ones who leave an indelible image on a reader are not authors, they are storytellers. A rare breed, these are not mere mortals, they are magicians of the highest order. They weave tales that transport us from one world to another. Such men are gifted with not only richness of thought, but of language and wisdom too. Over time there have been men gifted with gab that make a lasting impression. One of the foremost in this regard is Mario Puzo.

One of the most riveting combinations of a novel and movies however has to be of 'The Godfather'. Penned by Mario Puzo this is acclaimed by critics and commoners alike as one of the best books ever written. A dark storyline, with grey characters and unforgettable dialogue, it is no wonder that it is one of the highest selling books of all time. Based in the late 1940's Don Corleone and his 'family' have been immortalized in the hearts of everyone who come in contact with this book.

The book is written in the third person with the narrative jumping to a different central character as per plot requirements. The language is simple and direct with Italian words such as 'Consigliere' etc thrown in to give an authentic Italian feel to the narrative. The narration style is extremely neutral and reads like a report of events which makes it really easy to understand and comprehend. A tangent in the book deals with 'The Godfather' Vito Corleone's past and the details and process of the subsequent forging of the Corleone empire. This provides a historical background for all the events occurring in the book besides sketching the character of Vito more clearly.¹ Although unnecessary from the view of plot advancement, it is one of the most interesting sections of the book.

The vivid description, overflowing with detail, renders possible the fastening heart beat as we progress from lines to pages. Each event brings out the reality of the horror, painting a mental picture leading to a roller-coaster ride, taking us through experiences as varied as erotic

¹ Editor's Journal Edition XVII Pg. 83 Para. 3

to terrorizing. The author ingeniously injects Italian words to lend a sense of authentication and ethnicity. Also, the Mafiosi constantly keep referring to their work as “family business”. Such interplay of language puts forth the moral dilemma faced by a gangster, as it becomes necessary to constantly validate their profession in order to look at themselves in the mirror and keep their conscience intact. Thus Puzo’s simple yet intimidating style makes the reading both engrossing and titillating.

The patriarch and the Godfather is Vito Corleone, he has three sons and a daughter. His eldest son is Santino, a man gifted with brutish strength, maniacal anger and a kind heart. Freddy is his younger brother who is hardworking and extremely attached to the don. Micheal is the youngest brother, similar to the don in nature, he is strong willed and rebellious in nature. Connie is the youngest daughter of the don and the favourite of the family.

The book is also filled with other secondary yet crucial characters. Chief in them is Tom Hagen, an Irish in an Italian house, he had been adopted by Sonny as a kid. He is Vito’s godson and acts a consigliere to the family. Kay Adams is Micheal’s love interest who has an idealistic and clean view of the world. Luca Brasi is Don Corleone’s most faithful lieutenant and his chief enforcer. Virgil Sollozzo is the chief opponent of the Corleone family in this book. There are five other major families in New York, but the Coreleone’s are the strongest, largely due to the don’s personality and granting of favours through which he has the political system in his control.

The *Godfather* trilogy presents Vito as the paradigmatic Mafia don. When placed beside him, Barzini lacks class, Don Ciccio looks cruel and petty, and Don Fanucci is smalltime and brutish. Even Michael, despite his tremendous successes, loses in such a comparison, as he appears lacking in warmth and *joie de vivre*. It is unclear whether we are to believe Sollozzo’s words about Vito, that “the old man [is] slipping,” but even if he is, even if Vito walks right into an assassin’s bullets and survives only through sheer luck, he is still the Godfather *par excellence*. He is wise and intelligent, an excellent reader of others’ intentions, and a smooth, subtle talker, able to convince with words, not only bullets. The most exceptional thing about Vito, and the way in which he most outshines his son, is the manner in which he conducts his personal life. Though a ruthless, violent criminal, Vito is also a warm, loving father and husband, and the paradox of his character is that it is precisely the warmth of his humanity that makes him appear superhuman. In his later years, Vito comes across as relaxed and playful, even mellow. He has lived a rich, full life and earned a quiet retirement. As a younger man, when he is played by Robert De Niro, he is caring and devoted but also silent and intense. Unlike Michael, he does not let this intensity eat away at him. There is never any tension for Vito between the two meanings of “family” (i.e. blood relations and crime family), and he doesn’t feel conflicted about what he’s doing. Only when he learns that Michael has killed Sollozzo is he noticeably pained. His intensity is that of a hard-working man, though one who still manages to come home at the end of the workday to spend time with his family. In short, Vito comes across as both the perfect father and the perfect Godfather, making him a difficult model for all of his children, especially Michael, to imitate.

Michael dares to acknowledge the other reality of his family's life. He does so with contempt, promising never to be a part of his family's business. Even his attire sets him apart from the rest of the family, associating himself with another, larger organization: the US military. Ironically, perhaps, the film's first line, from a business associate asking a favor of Vito, is, "I love America." This statement is used pragmatically, as a means to persuade Vito that the man's request does not clash with the nature of his request: the vengeful murder of men who violated his daughter.² Incidentally, one of the first things out of Vito's mouth in the film is a corrective response to this man, who insists that justice be served for his daughter's sake. Vito tells him, "That is not justice." This moral rebuke establishes Vito as a man who is not unaware of moral boundaries, but a man who, when catered to, is nevertheless willing to violate those boundaries. In this way, the film seems to be a moral test for the viewer. Knowing at the outset that Vito and Michael both have consciences, able to make ethical distinctions, how will the viewer respond to the fairly static, seemingly "positive" portrayal of Vito and to the more dynamic, negative portrayal of Michael?

The book opens with the wedding of Connie Corleone, daughter of Don Vito 'The Godfather' Corleone, head of the most powerful of the five great Mafia clans or 'families' of New York. Don Corleone is shot at by a new contender for power in the city, Virgil 'the Turk' Solozzo, who plans to obtain power by the lure of vast profits in the drug trafficking trade. After the Don is incapacitated by his assassination attempt, the book follows the Corleone family's progress as they must now adapt to the changing times and power dynamics and maintain the Corleone empire. Santino 'Sonny' Corleone is too blunt and brash a man to ever become Don while Freddie is weak and ineffective. The book follows the journey and transformation of the youngest, and hitherto the Don's most distant, son Michael as he realizes that though he may have tried to live by society's norms, rejecting what his father represented, inside lives a true Sicilian who will stop at nothing to get what he wants and protect those he loves. Michael has a tough task ahead of him, he has to locate his father's would-be assassin, crush the rival gangs and regain once more the respect that the name Corleone inspired in New York.

Michael's concern of the Future is that, from the beginning of the story, he does not know what to do with the rest of his life. He has competing visions of his own future which must be sorted out: one is a future with his girlfriend Kaye who will not tolerate a life of crime, and the other is a future as the head of his family's criminal empire. Michael's concern is to see which Michael wins out.

The relationship between Michael and Kaye is one of manipulations. Michael keeps his Mafia involvement a secret in order to receive Kaye's love and support. Kaye is concerned with keeping Michael from becoming like his father. Act by act, we see them relate through their ways of thinking about their future together. Kaye and Michael's conflict is over whether or not Michael will become like his murderous father.

Michael and Kaye rationalize their relationship to be together. Michael is obliged to his family, and he rationalizes these obligations are what keep him involved in the family

² The Guardian Book Reviews : - Godfather: The World That Was

business—and that he is still the man Kaye loves. Kaye rationalizes that Michael's obligations demand that he do things which she should not know about. Rationalization keeps their relationship going past the point where, if Kaye were aware of all the facts involved, their relationship would have ended.³

Michael is constantly faced with decisions relating to his future, yet he believes he can delay the decision of determining what that future will be (either a future of crime or a "civilian" future with Kaye). When the "Turk" needs to be killed, Mike chooses to be the assassin, when order needs to be restored to the New York crime scene, Mike chooses to eliminate the people threatening that order. Michael is the logical choice to become the new "Godfather." However, he is not aware that these choices have taken away his power to put off determining whether or not to be the next "Godfather."

Michael's feelings are the source of his problems. His mixed feelings about his family allow him to become involved in their criminal activity even as he promises Kaye he will never do so. Michael's feelings are what make him vulnerable, as demonstrated in Sicily when his love for Appollonia leads to her death by a bomb meant for him. Feelings are what stand between Michael and his destiny as the next "Godfather."

Michael finds that he is the logical successor to keeping the Corleone family on top among the families. Rather than being driven by his feelings of distaste for the Mafia, he becomes driven by the logic which will protect what his father's Mafia activity has created. Michael's attention is focused on temptation, believing it to be his problem. For example, the temptation to join in the family business.

Michael's efforts toward conscience begin when he protests to Kaye that the Mafia business belongs to his family, not to him. Michael also forgoes his status as a "civilian" to be the one to murder the "Turk" for his family. He is the voice of conscience for Fredo, for Carlos, and for anyone who would take sides "against the family."

Other people's preconceptions about Michael allow him to be effective. His preconceived status as a "civilian" allows him to surprise and murder the "Turk." Preconceptions about his abilities as a new Don lead Tessio and Barzini to underestimate him and tip their hand making it possible to eliminate them during his godson's christening. Kaye's preconceptions about Michael's morality allow him to lie to her effectively and convince her he is not a killer.

Ending his life as a "civilian" by becoming the new Godfather aids in the effort to achieve the Objective Story goal, however, it undermines Michael's efforts to resolve his personal angst. The more Michael adopts the manners of the heir apparent to his father's power, the more difficult it will be for him to refuse his inheritance. By the end of the story, he has made too much progress as the new Don to go back to his civilian ways, having finally become a true "Godfather."

³ How Godfather came to be a classic: Wesley Snipes

Kaye has the fixed attitude that organized crime is evil and that Michael must not be involved in it. Her attitude almost prevents her from marrying Michael and constantly threatens to destroy their relationship.

Kaye's concern and her area of greatest impact is with the drives that are at work in Michael. She needs to know that Michael's drives are pure and that he wants to avoid the ways of organized crime. She is concerned also with maintaining a genuine love for him, which she demonstrates while Michael is in Sicily by constantly writing and trying to reach him. Finally, even when Michael is obviously mixed up in the Mafia, she only needs to hear that he isn't and she remains satisfied about his drives and their love.

Kaye's dream is that she can keep Michael from becoming just like his father, even after it is obviously too late. She also has the hope of being Michael's wife and of their having a family together. This hope is realized, but achieving her dream is impossible.

But even more beautiful is the way this piece of genius was adopted as a movie. Of course Mario Puzo was responsible for the screenplay and that was enough to ensure that the film remained true to its roots. But finding men who could play the characters of Don Corleone and Micheal Corleone was still a gigantic task. 'Legendary director Francis Ford Coppola, then a young man decided to bring in Marlon Brando as Vito Corleone and the then unproven Al Pacino as Micheal. What followed was almost unbelievable. The movie received rave reviews from all critics who viewed it. It went on to break record after record and grossed over 135\$ million dollars. The first two parts of the trilogy have been considered as trend setters in the gangster genre.'⁴

Dialogues like, 'I will make you an offer you can't refuse' were written brilliantly and delivered perfectly. The background score by Nino Rota is haunting and mesmerizing at the same time. A variety of movies have tried to capture the aura of the film, but never could. Brando won the best actor award, and while Al Pacino was nominated for the best 'Supporting Actor' he never turned up, as he felt he should have been a 'Best Actor' nomination. Coppola and Puzo won the 'Best adapted screenplay' while the movie won the 'Best Picture'. I honestly believe that this is one of the best movies ever made and had the best cast ever.

⁴ Oscar Classics: Page 57