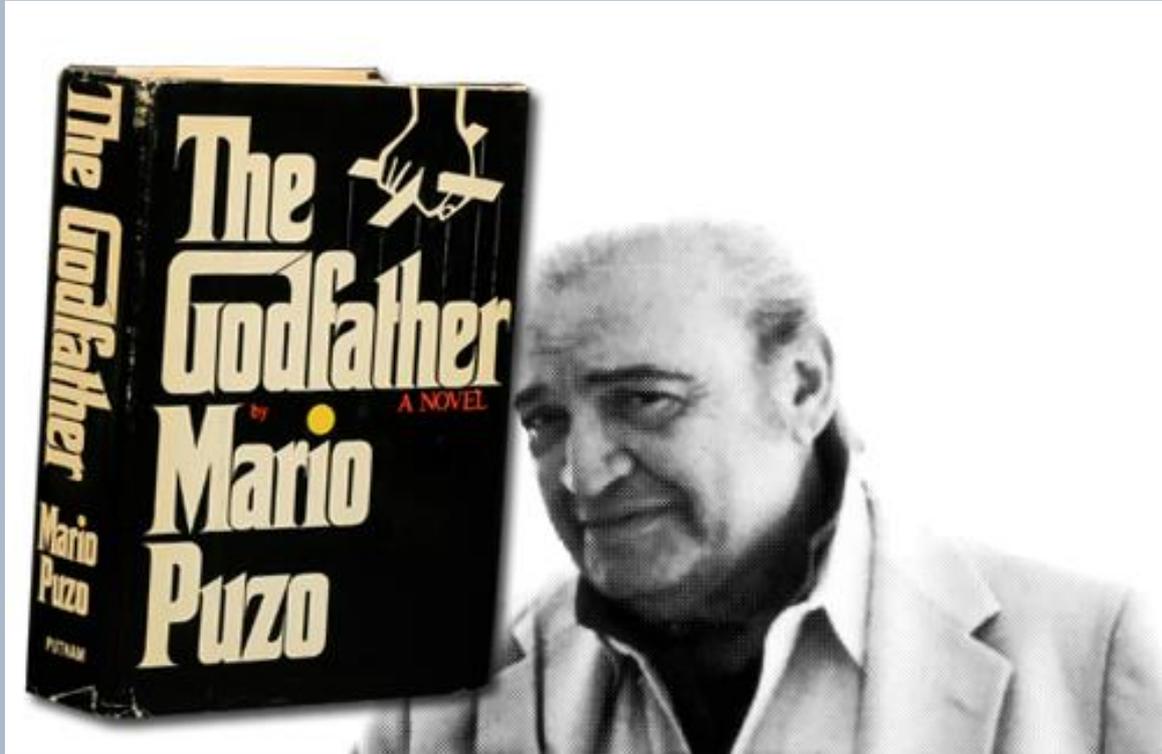


Article

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The Father of The 'Godfather' Turns 100: A Tribute to 'DON' MARIO PUZO



“ITALIANS HAVE A LITTLE JOKE, THAT THE WORLD IS SO HARD, A MAN MUST HAVE TWO FATHERS TO LOOK AFTER HIM, AND THAT’S WHY THEY HAVE GODFATHERS”.

100 YEARS AGO, on the 15th October 2020, THE “DON” BEHIND “THE GODFATHER” WAS BORN!

It is the hundredth birth anniversary of legendary author and screenwriter Mario Puzo. He has penned many novels but is mostly known for his most legendary and loved work, “The Godfather”. What was the impact of “The Godfather” on Hollywood, rather on world cinema? How did “The Godfather” change everything? What did it do to Mario Puzo, especially? “The Godfather” brought many actors and artists into the limelight. It helped Marlon Brando to make an

amazing comeback in Hollywood. Everybody thought Marlon was a fading star, but he proved otherwise with his breathtaking performance as Don Vito Corleone. “The Godfather” changed the perspective of filmmaking. It made people read the book, to watch the movie and appreciate both equally, which is rare. And most importantly, it made a ‘Mafioso’, a ‘protagonist’, or simply a ‘hero’.

It inspired so many ‘Godfathers’, in different countries, wearing different

costumes, speaking different languages. It portrayed the real and raw nature of organized crime. In overall filmmaking, it set a bar, so high, that until now, only a handful of movies have been able to exceed it. The character of “Vito Corleone” inspired so many Mafiosos and other ‘criminal’ characters in the films which were followed in later films. His voice, nature, personality, lifestyle, sense of justice was intimidating and intriguing even to commoners. After its release and until now, we may have seen countless personality traits of “Vito Corleone” in protagonists and antagonists of many movies. “Oh, he is like the godfather..... he reminds me of the godfather character”... God knows how many times we may have uttered this sentence after seeing someone either in movies or in real life.

The Godfather will be celebrated for one more contribution. The Godfather, especially Mario Puzo gave birth to infinite numbers of iconic quotes and dialogues, which we still use, mimicking Vito and Michael Corleone.

“A man who doesn’t spend time with his family can never be a real man.”

Mario Gianluigi Puzo was born in the Hell’s Kitchen area of New York City to Italian immigrants, Pietradefusi, Province of Avellino, Campania. When Puzo was 12, his father, who worked as a trackman for the New York Central Railroad, left his family, and his wife Maria was forced to raise their seven children. This incident must have really left a mark on young Puzo. You may see from where and why Puzo used the now-iconic, above-mentioned line in “The Godfather”.

Puzo grew up in a difficult situation and then, he served in the US Armed Forces. He fought for the US Air Force in Germany in World War II. After the war, he graduated from the City College of New York. Puzo married a German woman, Erika, with whom he had five children.

“Great men are not born great...they grow great.”

In 1950, when he was 30 years old, Puzo’s first short story, ‘The Last Christmas’ was published in the American ‘Vanguard’. After the war, he wrote his first book, ‘The Dark Arena’, which was published in 1955. In 1960, Bruce Jay Friedman hired Puzo as an assistant editor of a group of men’s pulp magazine with titles such as Male, Men. Puzo had memories, stories, probably many nightmares related to World War II. He had experienced the war very closely. It obviously must have left some impact on him. The author inside him was urging him to write something on or related to World War II. Under the pen name Mario Cleri, Puzo wrote World War II adventure features for the magazine- True Action.

Puzo was nearing 50 now. Still, he hadn’t gained the ‘fame’ one would think he would, by now. Puzo wished to write something that will please and be relatable to both commoners and the people often labeled as ‘the public’. As everyone, he wanted to become ‘successful’ too. This was just a period of gathering experience for Puzo. In one of his interviews, he had mentioned that, “When a young writer who says-‘everyone must read whatever I write’, matures or evolves over the time, he then realizes the true identity or mindset of the ‘reader’. Eventually, he comes to know about the tastes of readers, what they

like, what they dislike, what they prefer, and only then the true or 'real' writing process starts." Here we can see how mature of an author he was, and how much his experience had taught him.

“Power isn't everything...it's the only thing.”

The above-mentioned quote is from Puzo's novel, "The Last Don". Puzo had to wait many years to 'live' the above-mentioned quote. In 1969, when he was 49 years old, Mario Puzo's most acclaimed work, "The Godfather", was published. After that, people realized the true potential of Mario Puzo. People 'met' the powerful writer inside him, while reading "The Godfather". According to Puzo, the story of godfather came from research into organized crime and was not at all based on his personal experiences. He said that he was looking to write something that would appeal to the masses.

Upon its release, "The Godfather" broke records; readers were absolutely amazed and taken aback by it. And eventually it created history. It changed Puzo's life forever. The novel remained on The New York Times Best Seller List for 67 weeks and sold over nine million copies in two years. The journey of "The Godfather" from the small village of Sicily to big cities such as Las Vegas and Los Angeles, which eventually captured Hollywood and then, the complete United States, had pleased every American reader and was absolutely breathtaking.

"The Godfather" opened the doors of Hollywood for its makers and creators. Mario Puzo was one of them. So was Francis Ford Coppola. Francis Ford Coppola, a rookie at the time, aspiring to be a successful director, dearly wished to

make a film on the novel and Mario Puzo did not just give it a go, but also helped Coppola in writing the screenplay, providing him full moral and technical support. This was certainly not the first time that a film was being made based upon a novel, but the film broke all the records made by the novel, and as we know now, the film is as successful, if not more, as the novel. "The Godfather" is regarded as one of the best 'book to movie adaptations' of all time. Huge efforts were put into the making of this film. The studio wasn't ready to hire the actors that the director and casting director wanted. The shoot was delayed and was behind schedule. Francis Ford Coppola was threatened to be fired from his chair as director. Overcoming all these difficulties and setbacks, finally, "The Godfather" was released in America in 1972. It surpassed literally everyone's expectations. It became an instant hit. It was praised for its every single aspect. As a result of all of this, it earned 11 Academy Award nominations and garnered 3 wins. Out of the 3 wins which included Best Picture and Best Actor in a Leading Role for Marlon Brando, it won the Academy Award for Best Writing (Adapted Screenplay). Naturally, this award belonged to Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola. This was Mario Puzo's first accolade. Unfortunately, Puzo was unable to attend the ceremony and therefore his daughter accepted the award on his behalf.

“Friendship is everything. Friendship is more than talent. It is more than government. It is almost the equal of family.”

In 1973 Puzo couldn't attend the Academy Award Ceremony to collect his Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay. He

filled up his absence in 1975, when he collected the Academy Award for Writing (Best Adapted Screenplay) along with Francis Ford Coppola for “The Godfather Part II.” “The Godfather Part II” won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1975. Like “The Godfather Part I”, Puzo had an immense contribution to the success of “The Godfather Part II”. In 1975, upon winning, when Coppola and Puzo went on the stage to collect the award, Puzo, in his acceptance speech, thanked ‘his’ godfathers, among many others. He said, “I thank and am grateful to my three godfathers, who helped me to bring my novel, ‘onto the screen’. It was like, you all were watching my novel on the big screen. Whatever I had in my mind while writing the novel, it was all there, present on the screen. I thank the three godfathers for that!” Among many other people, Puzo especially expressed his gratitude to his dear friend, Francis Ford Coppola, who helped Puzo wholeheartedly, remained true and honest to the source material—the novel, while making the film, and despite many difficulties, stood firm and was the driving force behind the ‘classic’. Apart from all this, a question still pops up, who should thank whom? Should Mario Puzo thank the three actors for portraying the three godfathers flawlessly, or, should the three actors thank Mario Puzo for creating such powerful characters in the first place? This question itself is inevitable.

“I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse”.

This, probably, is the most known and recognizable quote of all time. After 1972, even a kid in kindergarten would throw this quote in front of his friends, just to look cool, or just to feel like a ‘don’. This line has immense amount of power in

it. The whole character of Don Vito Corleone can be beautifully summed up by this line. His power and charm, his fear among the people, everything about him can be reflected in this one line.

Unfortunately, unlike Don Vito Corleone, Puzo and Coppola couldn’t make an offer which the studio won’t refuse. This is related to the filming of “The Godfather Part III”. There was a huge time gap of 16 years between “The Godfather Part II” and “Part III”. “The Godfather Part III” released in 1990. The makers and creators were almost the same. Puzo and Coppola had teamed up once again for the last time. They wanted the name of the film to be “The Death of Michael Corleone”. But, Paramount Studios refused their ‘offer’. They gave a red signal to this title and therefore the title, which was finally decided, was “The Godfather Part III”. This was the original ‘offer’ of Paramount Studios and they were so firm on it from the start, they refused to accept any other ‘offer’. In September, on account of “The Godfather Part 3’s 30 year anniversary, Paramount Studios announced that the film will be re-released with the title- “Mario Puzo’s The Godfather, Coda : The Death of Michael Corleone”. Also, as this year is Mario Puzo’s hundredth birth anniversary year, the film will also be available on Blue Ray DVD.

“Revenge is a dish best served cold”

There are a ton of scenes in “The Godfather” which give a ‘soul’ to this line, thus making it immortal and invincible. A well-known film producer finds the decapitated head of his favorite horse lying on his bed beside him in the morning—this scene is so powerful that it is now

studied in film schools and writing workshops across the world.

Mario Puzo wrote many films, other than “The Godfather”, but unfortunately, the other films weren’t a huge success when compared to “The Godfather”. But if someone wants to know how powerful and genius of a writer Puzo was, he/she may watch any random scene from “The Godfather” and they will realize his potential. Also, a survey can be conducted by asking various acclaimed filmmakers, what is their favorite scene from “The Godfather”. Either while reading or while watching, one will realize that the book and the movie aren’t acclaimed just because of the amount of sharp, witty and powerful dialogue. The Godfather’s real power is in the scenes or sequences where there is a lack of dialogue, but the silent atmosphere conveys more than dialogues ever could. This is the real potential of “The Godfather”. And there is no doubt that everyone who was attached with the making of this masterpiece is an absolute genius. Be it the editor Walter Murch or the cinematographer, ‘the master of shadows’- Gordon Willis. Without them and many others, “The Godfather” wouldn’t be the masterpiece, upon which every budding filmmaker looks up to.

In an interview, Mario Puzo was asked- “Which version do you prefer- the book or the film?” Puzo answered, “If you

decide to make a list of the greatest movies of all time, you can’t afford to omit “The Godfather Part I. But that is not the case with the novel. It captures a bigger and far greater ground. Hence, in my opinion, the two can’t be compared.” Maybe that is why Puzo wanted to write a “Godfather Part IV”. He had the basic structure ready in his mind, if that would have been completed and made, then maybe a different history would have been created.

Puzo died of heart failure in 1999. Post Puzo’s death, his last novel was published-named ‘Omerta’. According to some critics, ‘Omerta’ is not written by Puzo. An anonymous writer wrote the book and claimed that the book was written by Puzo.

In Puzo’s hundredth birth anniversary year, we will realize that the internet is full of his memories and stories. The iconic quotes and dialogues written by him are immortal and unknowingly, almost everyone is using them in their day-to-day conversations. These lines and quotes are simple, but they have a bigger and deeper meaning hidden in them. A layman says- “A common man should be lucky enough to not see the ‘court’, ever in his entire life.” Puzo says, “The lawyer with the briefcase can steal more money than the man with the gun.” “We, all the cinephiles and book-worms of the world, bow to the master, the legend, the ‘father’ of “The Godfather, “Don Mario Puzo”!

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