### About the author

Mario Puzo was born in the Hell’s Kitchen neighbourhood of New York City in 1920 to Italian-born parents. He was brought up in an Italian ghetto amid poverty. From an early age, Puzo wanted to be a writer – a dream that earned the scorn of his family. However, as a young man, he pursued his dream, despite his family’s complaints, and eventually he managed to become moderately successful by writing short stories and two literary novels that earned him a meagre amount of money.

Then, at the age of forty-five, Puzo set out to write a book that would make him rich. It took him three years to research and write *The Godfather*. A major Hollywood film studio bought the film rights to the book at the manuscript stage. *The Godfather* became an instant bestseller, and within a year, it had achieved worldwide fame. Puzo went on to collaborate on the screenplay of the film with its director, Francis Ford Coppola. For their efforts and achievements, the two men won an Oscar in 1973.

Puzo went on to write other books throughout his career, including *Fools Die* (1978), *The Sicilian* (1984), *The Fourth K* (1991) and *The Last Don* (1996), but none of them came close to achieving the same level of success that *The Godfather* had attained. Two of his other film-writing successes included *Superman I* and *Superman II*, which helped to further his international fame. Puzo died of heart failure in July, 1999 at his home in Long Island, New York.

### About the film

Francis Ford Coppola’s masterpiece, *The Godfather*, is universally recognized as one of the greatest films of all time. From the start, both Puzo and Coppola envisaged the famous actor Marlon Brando playing the role of Don Corleone. Brando accepted the pair’s invitation to play the Godfather and managed to deliver one of the most powerful performances in film history. In fact, the ‘sit down’ scene, in which Don Corleone meets with several criminals at the beginning of the film, is widely believed to be one of the greatest moments in film history. His mesmerizing portrayal of the Mafia boss earned him an Academy Award for Best Actor. However, Brando refused to accept the award and boycotted the awards ceremony to protest at the way in which Native Americans were being portrayed by Hollywood at the time. He was only the second actor to turn down a highly coveted Academy Award.

Finishing at almost three hours in length, *The Godfather* remains faithful to the book – although many of the subplots had to be dropped in order to focus the story on the transfer of power from Don Corleone to his youngest son, Michael. The young, virtually unknown actor Al Pacino took on the role of Michael, and by the end of the film, he had managed to portray the character’s astonishing transformation from idealistic war hero to hardened Mafia boss.

Coppola, who is himself an Italian, succeeded in giving the film an authentic Italian feel. He said, ‘It was my intention to make this an authentic piece of film about gangsters who were Italian – how they lived, how they behaved and the way they treated their families and celebrated their rituals.’ The film won three Academy Awards, establishing itself as one of the greatest films in history. It spawned two sequels, both of which earned widespread critical and popular acclaim.

### Summary

Telling the story of a mighty New York Mafia family, *The Godfather* became a worldwide sensation when it was published in 1969, and again when it was released as a film in 1972. Its author, Mario Puzo, had succeeded in creating an epic work of imagination that nonetheless captured the very essence of what it was like to be part of the Mafia – the Italian criminal organization whose inner workings had previously been so carefully hidden from public view. It gave people a chance to see what really went on behind the scenes within the subculture of the Mafia.

*The Godfather* tells the story of two generations of the Corleone family. The head of the family – or the ‘Godfather’ – is Don Vito Corleone, who is the leader of
The Godfather

a vast criminal empire. He was born into a poor family in Sicily, but his family moved to New York, where he has succeeded in building up a criminal empire, sending his underlings to wound and murder people – but only when his opponents refuse to be ‘reasonable’. In this way, for behaving honourably within the Mafia’s standards of behaviour, he has managed to earn the respect of the other Mafia families. In short, Don Corleone is both feared and respected.

Corleone has four children. His oldest son, Sonny, is a violent and impulsive man who lacks his father’s far-sighted genius. His second son, Fredo, is a weak and impressionable man who ultimately chooses to betray his family. His youngest son, Michael, wants no part in his father’s business. However, other rival Mafia families, sensing that there are internal conflicts within the Corleone family, almost succeed in assassinating the Godfather, and as a result, Michael is sucked into a raging whirlpool of murder, violence and betrayal. The novel ultimately charts Michael’s transformation from an innocent, idealistic young war hero to a ruthless Mafia chief.

Background and themes

Living by old-world laws in the new world: Sicily is an island off the coast of Italy. In the past, the law of the island centred on revenge – ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. The Corleone family immigrates to the United States from Sicily, and Vito Corleone takes with him his belief that the law won’t be able to protect him or his family. Therefore, he takes it upon himself to protect anyone who turns to him for help – provided that they agree to acknowledge him as boss, overlord or Godfather, and to repay him by doing him a ‘favour’ when the time comes.

The relationship between good and bad: One of the most fascinating things about The Godfather is the contradiction that lies at the heart of the story. The reader’s mind tells them that Don Corleone is a murderer – a bad man. However, the reader’s heart tells them that he is a good man because he has intelligence, integrity and loyalty, and because he loves his family and risks his life to protect them and hundreds of other people. It is true that he is a murderer, but he is a reluctant murderer – one created by the history of his origins. His dearest hope – which is sadly destined to be unrealized – is that his children will grow up to become honest American citizens.

The ways of the Mafia: The Godfather gives the reader an inside look at the hidden world of the Mafia. The Mafia system has its own laws and doesn’t hesitate to apply its own brutal form of punishment for transgression of its laws. The characters in the book are colourful and yet realistic, and the plot is melodramatic and yet entirely believable. Despite the book’s readability, however, the reader mustn’t forget that the heart of the story is tainted by violence and cold-blooded treachery. It is a good story – but also a dark one.

Perils of power: Puzo said, ‘The Godfather is about a powerful man who builds a dynasty through crime, but he wants his son to be a senator, a governor. It’s about the very nature of power – what it does to you. I think it’s a tragedy.’ The Godfather paints a clear picture of the lust for power that many men have – not only criminals but also upstanding citizens.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–3

Before reading

1 Discuss: Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. Who do you think the man in the picture is? Why do you think this? What is the man doing in the picture? What do you think he is like? Why do you think this? Do you like the picture? Why or why not? Does it make you want to read the book? Why or why not?

2 Discuss: Ask students if they have ever seen the film version of The Godfather. Did you like the film? Why or why not? Do you remember the story in the film? Get students to recount the story as completely as possible, and write notes on the board to record what the story is about.

3 Research: Ask students to bring information about the Mafia to class. Put a large piece of paper on the wall and get students to attach their information to the piece of paper to make a wall display.

After reading

4 Role play: Put students into groups of three. Student A is Don Corleone, Student B is Tom Hagen and Student C is Jack Woltz. Corleone and Hagen should explain to Woltz what has been done to his racehorse. Woltz should ask them questions about the act and say things to show him how he feels about it. When they have finished, some of the groups should stand at the front of the classroom and perform their role plays in front of the class.
The Godfather

Chapters 4–6
Before reading
5 Research: Ask students to bring information about Sicily to class. Then put them into pairs and get them to attach the information to a piece of paper folded into three panels in order to make a travel brochure for the island. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and present their travel brochures to the class.

6 Research: Put students into pairs and get them to look up the word revenge in a dictionary or on the Internet. Make the exercise into a competition – the first pair of students to find the definition wins. They should stand up and read the definition out loud to the rest of the class. Finally, they should use the phrase in a sentence as an example.

After reading
7 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to take turns describing Michael from the point of view of a) Apollonia; b) Captain McCluskey; c) Kay; d) Sonny; and e) Tom Hagen.

8 Artwork: Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture to describe a scene from Chapter 4, 5 or 6. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class, and the class should guess which scene the picture illustrates.

Chapters 7–9
Before reading
9 Guess: Ask students to predict what will happen to Michael and the other characters in Chapters 7–9.

After reading
10 Check: Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Michael and the other characters in Chapters 7–9. Check if their predictions were right.

11 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture of one of the characters in Chapter 7, 8 or 9. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class, and the class should guess which character the picture illustrates.

12 Discuss: Put students into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:
- Who are the following people: Don Tommasino, Fabrizio, Cab, Apollonia and Vitelli?
- What characteristics does each person have?
- What are their jobs?
- Where do they live?
- What is each person’s relationship with Michael?
- How is each person important to Michael’s life?
- How does Michael feel about each person?
- How does each person feel about Michael?

13 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture to describe the scene in which Apollonia is killed. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class. The class should draw the picture as it is being described and then compare the pictures.

Chapters 10–12
Before reading
14 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 11 is called Ghost from the Past. What is a ‘ghost from the past’? Who do you think the ghost from the past is? Why do you think this? Do you like the title of the chapter? Why or why not?

After reading
15 Discuss: Write the word betrayal on the board and teach students what it means (to lie or be unfaithful to someone). Then put students into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:
- What examples of betrayal can you find in Chapters 10–12?
- Why do you think the men choose to betray their families?
- Do you think they are right or wrong to betray their families? Why do you think this?
- Who do you think will betray Michael? Why do you think this?
- What do you think Michael will do in response to the betrayals? Why do you think this?
- Do you think Michael has betrayed Kay? Why do you think this?
- How do you think Kay feels about the way Michael treats her? Why do you think this?

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.