



## **The Godfather & the Professor; [SOUTH PINELLAS Edition]**

*COLETTE BANCROFT*. **St. Petersburg Times**. St. Petersburg, Fla.: Mar 9, 2003. pg. 1.F

### **Abstract** (Article Summary)

[Mark Winegardner] sees parallels between [Mario Puzo] in 1968 and himself: each in his 40s, each with two well-reviewed literary novels, one of them a New York Times Notable Book. (Winegardner's *The Veracruz Blues*, a novel about Mexican baseball, was named one in 1996.)

Mario Puzo's 1969 novel *The Godfather* inspired three movies; the first, released in 1972, starred Marlon Brando, right, as Don Vito Corleone. Author Mark Winegardner, tapped to write a sequel to Puzo's book, calls the character "a brilliant man, brilliantly drawn."

A black-and-red photo of Mark Winegardner; A hand pulls the words 'The Godfather' by marionette strings.; Marlon Brando in a scene from *The Godfather*.; Photo: PHOTO ILLUSTRATION; DRAWING; PHOTO, Paramount Pictures

### **Full Text** (2833 words)

*Copyright Times Publishing Co. Mar 9, 2003*

Mark Winegardner, sudden literary star, is having a late lunch at a restaurant that serves bison burgers and brews its own beer. "I'm a beer geek. I can smell these places out." He's a big, solid guy with hipster black-frame glasses and a direct manner, not much like the stereotype of the rumped, abstract college professor.

Leaning back in a booth, he runs through the opening scenes of the first *Godfather* movie, with a credible hint of Brando in his phrasing and gestures. But it's the way Vito Corleone is portrayed in the 1969 novel that fascinates him most.

"This is a brilliant man, brilliantly drawn," he says.

And a tough act to follow. The Godfather, by Mario Puzo, was the source of three hugely popular films, two of them masterpieces. It is also one of the bestselling books of all time. Exact sales figures are about as easy to nail down as John Gotti's financial records, but it's safe to say The Godfather has sold more than 20- million copies.

Now Random House wants to add to that record.

In October, Jonathan Karp, then vice president and senior editor (he was named editorial director in February), sent out a request for proposals for a Godfather sequel. He had the blessing of the literary estate of Puzo, who died in 1999.

Karp told literary agents he was looking for an author "who is in roughly the same place in life Mario Puzo was when he wrote The Godfather - at mid career, with two acclaimed literary novels to his credit, who writes in a commanding and darkly comic omniscient voice."

Winegardner, 41, a literary novelist and director of the creative writing program at Florida State University, was one of the writers asked to make a proposal. "I was surprised. I thought, this isn't the kind of book I write," he says. He wrote a proposal anyway, as did three dozen other authors, including some established crime genre writers.

"Random could have chosen a popular writer. The obvious thing was to say this will be written by Insert Name of Big Crime Writer Here," Winegardner says. "That would have been easy; that's what Hollywood would have done."

But Random House didn't do that. It chose Winegardner, and it - well, Insert Most Famous Line From The Godfather Here. (No, he won't talk about the money.)

The news of Winegardner's selection was covered everywhere from the Today show to HindustanTimes.com. But the first burst of media attention is nothing compared with the task ahead. Think of it: Winegardner, the author of three well-reviewed but modest-selling books of fiction, has been entrusted with one of the most beloved properties in American pop culture history.

All he has to do is dream up a few new bloody chapters in the lives of the Corleones, satisfy the demands of 20-million readers and help Random House recoup what is rumored to be a multimillion-dollar investment - all without harming his reputation as a serious literary novelist. And you thought it would be scary to wake up next to a horse's head.

"I know," Winegardner says, "that my life is never going to be the same."

A potent American myth

Winegardner sees parallels between Puzo in 1968 and himself: each in his 40s, each with two well-reviewed literary novels, one of them a New York Times Notable Book. (Winegardner's *The Veracruz Blues*, a novel about Mexican baseball, was named one in 1996.)

But there are differences. Puzo was deeply in debt and supporting a wife and five children when he wrote *The Godfather*. "It was really time to grow up and sell out," Puzo once said.

Winegardner's situation is more comfortable. He lives in Tallahassee with his three children, ages 14, 3 and 1, and his wife, Jennifer, who is a staff attorney for the Florida Supreme Court. He has a career he loves, respect as a literary writer and a prestigious academic position: "I haven't exactly been toiling in obscurity here." And he doesn't see writing this book as selling out.

Although *The Godfather* was a popular novel rather than a literary one - Puzo considered it below his gifts - it told a powerful, resonant story. And that's what Winegardner is excited about.

*The Godfather's* tale of the urban immigrant experience is a potent American myth, Winegardner says. He points out that in the '60s, Westerns still dominated movies and television. "Most of them were very white hat, black hat . . . very simplistic." And very much about loners and outsiders.

"Between '69 and '77, three things totally changed America: *The Godfather*, Watergate and Star Wars," he says. "The *Godfather* is completely different from the Western. It's an urban setting, a modern setting, but it's all about the family, about how you keep the old traditions."

The story's complex moral universe, its tensions between crime and business,

loyalty and power, control and violence, offer rich material for any writer.

"This is a book that's already yielded sequels," Winegardner says. "Writers borrow, rewrite, sequelize. Shakespeare borrowed everything he could get his hands on."

But Winegardner is borrowing from what some readers consider semisacred text. How big a chance is he taking?

At Publishers Weekly, the trade publication for the industry, editorial director John Baker says he can't comment on Random House's choice because "I'm not familiar with this writer at all."

But Carla Jimenez, a member of the board of the American Booksellers Association, the national trade organization for book retailers, knows who Winegardner is. She's co-owner of Inkwood Books in Tampa, where Winegardner has twice come to read and sign his books.

"It's a bit of a risk for the writer and the publisher to follow an act like" the Godfather franchise, she says. But book publishing is always risky, and the franchise may make this less so.

"Random House is a quality, quality publisher. . . . Instead of choosing some blockbuster, celebrity writer, they chose someone who's up to the task," Jimenez says. She says his 2001 novel *Crooked River Burning* was a Booksense 76 selection by independent booksellers, as a favorite book to hand sell: "He's one of ours."

Writing the sequel will "take time away from other books he might be writing, but you have to weigh in the balance the visibility it will bring to anything else he writes."

Winegardner won't talk specifics about his plans for *The Godfather Returns*, which is to be published in the fall of 2004, but he acknowledges that his potential readers already see the story as a continuing one. "I can't pretend I'm writing for readers who haven't seen the movies. But I think I have some elegant ways to work around it."

He has written about organized crime in both his novels. (His latest book, *That's True of Everybody*, a collection of short stories, was published last

year.) The Veracruz Blues explores links between crime and professional baseball, and Crooked River Burning, set in Cleveland, teems with real and fictional music business figures, Teamsters and politicians with Mob ties.

That book also shares a theme with The Godfather: "Crooked River Burning revolves around children and their fathers," Winegardner says of his two-decade saga about a pair of sometime lovers. "The real question is 'Who is my father?' It may seem like a love story, but it's really about their fathers."

Winegardner - who is German-Irish, like the Corleone family's consigliere, Tom Hagen - has started to hear from readers who say the portrayals of Italian-Americans in Puzo's book and the movies are demeaning.

He's not too concerned about it. In Veracruz Blues and Crooked River Burning, he says, he dealt extensively with issues of racial and ethnic stereotyping and that was probably one reason he was selected for the Godfather sequel. "I think Random House wanted a writer with some sensitivity to that."

But he says that won't drive how he writes the book. "This concept that a fictional character should be representative of a whole group. That's a real misunderstanding of story, of what a story is. Story is always about the bad things that happen."

### Undertaking the impossible

Winegardner is eager to get to work on the book, but he's ambivalent about how it's already affecting his life.

He says his agent called the other day and was surprised he didn't have his own secretary.

"My agent says she'll call the dean and tell him I need a secretary. I just feel strange about it. I mean, we do need a secretary, not just for me but as an ongoing thing. But I don't want to seem like some prima donna: 'Where's my secretary?' "

He's been slammed by interview requests. "It's been unbelievable. I came in Monday morning (after the announcement), and I had 625 e-mails."

He's not sure at first he even wants to talk to another reporter. He has classes to teach; he's not on leave yet. Call him back in 20 minutes; he has an appointment.

Twenty minutes later he says, "You won't believe what just happened." The appointment was for an interview with a local television station. The TV reporter's opening question: "So, did you write the first Godfather book?"

He sent the TV guy packing, he says, but he'll talk to the newspaper reporter. Professors appreciate those who do their homework.

Winegardner's colleagues in the FSU creative writing program think he can make the sequel sing. They just hope it won't take him away from the program.

Novelist Robert Olen Butler, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1993 for *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain*, was hired by Winegardner. "He's done an extraordinary job in making this one of the best programs in the country," Butler says.

With the sequel, Butler says, "I think he's going to show everyone that art and commerce can not only embrace, but that they can roll around in a passionate and steamy union.

"If anybody can have it both ways, it's him."

Butler has his own experience with mating popular culture and literature. His 1997 story collection *Tabloid Dreams* was based on real headlines from the *Weekly World News*; its titles include *Woman Loses Cookie Bake-off*, *Sets Self on Fire* and *Help Me Find My Spaceman Lover*. The last grew into a 2001 novel, *Mr. Spaceman*.

"Serious writers do need to come to terms with the zeitgeist," Butler says, "and it's reflected in popular culture."

David Kirby, a poet who has been on the FSU faculty since 1969, says he's delighted that Winegardner has the opportunity to tackle the Godfather sequel. "The only pleasure in any kind of art is doing the impossible," Kirby says.

"What Mark has undertaken is clearly an impossible task. I can just imagine him thinking" - Kirby grins and rubs his hands together - " 'This is going to be so hard!' "

Kicking the story's guts out

Winegardner's route to becoming a writer and college professor was as unlikely as his path to *The Godfather Returns*. He grew up in Bryan, Ohio, a town known for manufacturing Dum Dum suckers and Etch A Sketches. His parents owned an RV dealership.

"Until I was 7, we lived in a trailer. My mother doesn't like me to say that; she always says, 'But it was a double wide.' She doesn't want anyone to get the wrong idea."

He says his mother inspired him to become the first person in his family to finish college.

"If my mother had been born 10 years later, she would have gone to college. She never got a B; straight As, K through 12. Then she got engaged to my father, the perfect C-minus student - and he went to college. What the hell is that? But back then, that's what you did."

His mother did eventually get a college degree. "She graduated a year after my sister, who's 4 1/2 years younger than me."

Winegardner's mother was a great reader and taught him to love books. But, he says, "Becoming a writer was a little more odd. Where I grew up, nobody became a writer. It was like someone becoming a rodeo clown or a porn star. It was just so silly and unlikely."

Winegardner worked at the student newspaper at Miami University in Ohio ("the real Miami") but found he didn't have the bulldog instinct that reporting can require. What he loved was the writing. So he concentrated on fiction.

One of his favorite teachers was Steven Bauer. Once, Winegardner wrote a short story and took it to a fiction workshop class "just ready to be stroked. And Bauer said, 'This is a good story.' That's all he said. And everybody just sat there. He said, 'Repeat after me, this is a good story.'

"And everybody said 'This is a good story.' And then he said, 'So now let's kick its guts out.' "

Winegardner grins. "I was just flooded with love for the guy. I didn't know it until that moment, but I wanted to be a good writer more than I wanted a love-in."

He earned a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing from George Mason University in Virginia. And he discovered another passion: teaching.

"You start out wanting to be the kind of teacher you wish you had had," he says. "If you're really passionate, if you do it long enough, you become the kind of teacher you should have had."

Piano lessons for Horowitz

He doesn't agree with the people who say you can't teach writing, that it's a talent some blessed few are born with.

"No one says you can't teach anyone to play the piano. It's true you can't teach sick freak genius. You can't teach someone to be Thelonious Monk. You can't teach someone to be Horowitz.

"But at some point Horowitz was a kid; at some point somebody gave him piano lessons."

Of course, even Horowitz had to practice.

"Everybody understands that if you want to be a dancer, a jazz musician, a sculptor, an architect, that means years of really, really hard work. Thinking you can just up and write a book is insane."

One thing Winegardner emphasizes to his students, he says, is the importance not just of reading, but of reading like a writer.

"Everybody who's ever taken a lit class has learned to interpret a story or poem. But interpreting is such a pretentious way to read. 'What does it mean? Explain what it means.' Maybe it doesn't mean anything. Maybe it just is.

"The writer's question is much more humble: How does it work? But it's not

an easy question to answer."

Winegardner taught at Miami, George Mason and George Washington University before becoming director of the writing program at John Carroll University in Cleveland. He came to FSU six years ago and was named director of its creative writing program a year later.

He says, "When I got here, people said, 'This program is one of the best-kept secrets in American literature.' I said, 'Let's tell.' They said, 'It's a sleeping giant.' I said, 'Let's wake it up.' "

The program has between 60 and 70 graduate students. "Six years ago we were recruiting primarily regionally. Now we're recruiting internationally," Winegardner says.

One of those graduate students, Tom Bligh, calls Winegardner "one of the best teachers I've had.

"He's better at getting inside a story than anyone, figuring out what makes it work. The same thing that makes him a good writer makes him a good teacher: He's incredibly, impressively resourceful."

Bligh thinks the sequel is a good fit for Winegardner. But he says, "I do have a sense of loss as well. He'll be away from the program for at least a year. . . . We'll miss him in the next year and hope he comes back."

Winegardner talks about the program with a passion that suggests he will, and of course, time off to write is part of the job description. But this isn't just any book. Does *The Godfather Returns* scare him?

"The truth is, no," he says. "I don't mean to sound arrogant, but I think writing any book is scary. It's hard to write a book.

"But fear isn't the word. Whatever anxiety I feel about there being a built-in audience for it is immediately counterbalanced by how wonderful it is to have a built-in audience."

But he knows that a sequel to *The Godfather* may call for reinventing himself as well. "I'm still trying to pretend I'm the same guy I was a month ago."

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**[Illustration]**

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Companies: Random House (NAICS: 511130 )

Dateline: *TALLAHASSEE*

Section: *FLORIDIAN*

Text Word Count 2833