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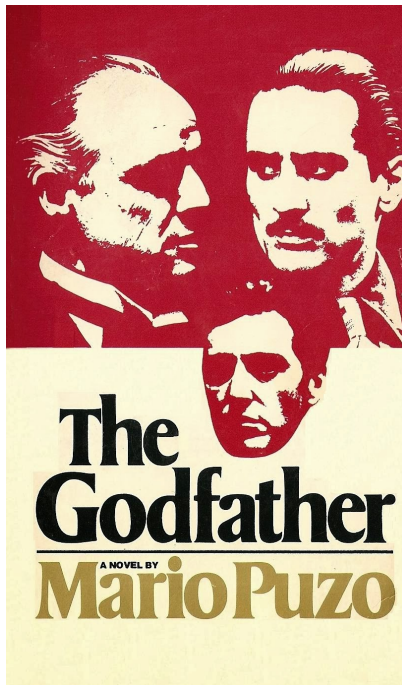
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TW Column by Emily Toth

I’m No Blockhead, and Neither Was Mario Puzo

Do you have advice about writing or any other topic? Emily Toth is the judge for [TW's 2014 Advice Writing Contest](#). [5]
Enter today! Deadline: October 1, 2014.

The question, it seems to me, isn’t whether to write for money. It’s what you’d have to write. Also—how much money?



Writers used to inveigh against the soul-sucking Hollywood machine, which reportedly ruined the art of authors like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Dorothy Parker. They had to write fast, to studio specs, with their work eviscerated by Hollywood hacks.

Then and now, the myth of creative genius insists there’s a Muse and there’s money—and if you’re writing for money, you’re a greedy simpleton, a tool of the capitalist system. Yet, if you’re a surgeon or football coach who makes big bucks, nobody berates you about your salary. Why are writers supposed to be pure and underpaid—or nowadays, not paid at all?

Why are we, almost alone among professionals, expected to be volunteers?

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Published on Talking Writing (<https://mail.talkingwriting.com>)

“Time to grow up and sell out,” the comedian Lenny Bruce used to say. In 1965, that was the advice Mario Puzo later said changed his life. As he wrote in his 1972 memoir collection *The Godfather Papers and Other Confessions*, Puzo was 45, author of a beautiful literary novel called *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, \$20,000 in debt, and “tired of being an artist” when he decided to do what it took to get out of hock.

He sat down to write about the Mafia. *The Godfather* got him only a \$5,000 hardcover advance—but by 1968, the paperback rights sold for \$415,000. Then there was the movie—and forty years later, we still all know about Don Corleone and “make him an offer he can’t refuse” and the horse’s head in the bed.

Could I, a lifelong academic, a bookish individual whose only aggression, ever, has been verbal snark, have written *The Godfather*?

“I’m ashamed to admit that I wrote *The Godfather* entirely from research,” Puzo said. “I never met a real honest-to-god gangster.”

So, yes, I could have researched the book. I don’t have Puzo’s imagination, but I have no ethical problem with writing a bestseller.

Like most mid-listers, I’ve certainly tried. I’ve been writing novels since I was nine years old. When *Daughters of New Orleans*, the only one I’ve managed to publish, sold 100,000 copies in 1983, one of my academic colleagues said, “I hear you’ve written a piece of trash.”

Don’t I wish I could do it again.

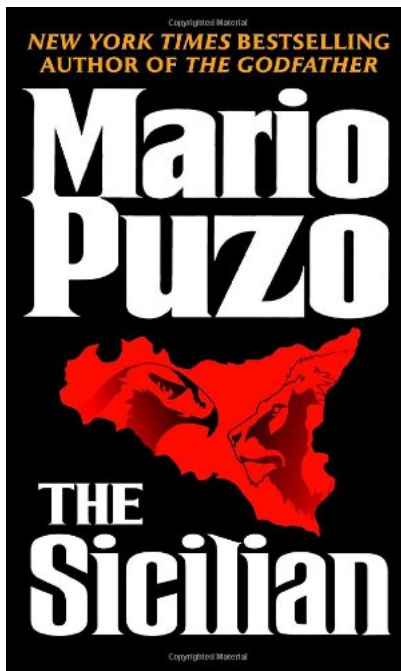
I did get one offer to do a work-for-hire. After *Daughters of New Orleans* came out, a man in Pennsylvania left several messages on my voicemail, wanting me to collaborate on a novel “that only you can do with me.” His plot was about a main character “who can only get off sexually by raping and murdering twelve-year-old girls. I know that’s the perfect book for you to write.”

Well, no. I erased his number. I fumigated my phone.

No matter the money, I can’t write about violence toward women, children, or animals. I also can’t write sympathetically about war. The weeks that I spent researching the Battle of Gettysburg for *Daughters of New Orleans*—those materials still haunt me. I read the letters and diaries of young men—teenagers—who were going to die. I can write about crime, especially if some of the good guys win, as they do in *The Godfather*. I can write about self-defense, I think. But not war.

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Still, let's suppose I want to make a killing (bad word choice) as a writer in these barbarous times. How do I sell out? Hollywood is no longer considered crass (I did sell my Grace Metalious biography to the movies, though the film hasn't been made). Writing a “pot boiler”—a bestseller—isn't something you can just sit down and poke out in your spare time. Sure, you can e-publish your novel, but then you have to spend all your waking hours promoting it.

What about porn and erotica? Since the Net gives it up for free, writing dirty books doesn't have the payoff it used to. I'm also squeamish about whips, dog collars, coprophilia, necrophagia, and that sort of thing. I guess I could write some of it, but I'm afraid I might wind up laughing as well as hurling. Which probably would not be a turn-on to the publishers and consumers of porn.

Could I write erotica for money? Maybe. According to the source of all low and questionable wisdom—Wikipedia—erotica is any artistic work that “deals substantively with erotically stimulating or sexually arousing subject matter.” Also, erotica has “high-art aspirations.” What could be more suitable to an academic researcher?

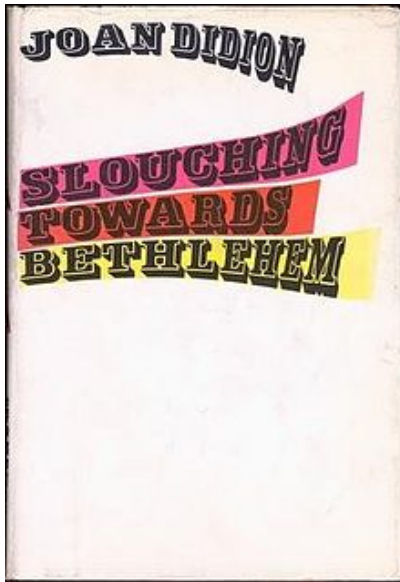
One of my students, who shall remain nameless, did attempt erotica for money but ran into a snag. Some of the, um, poses didn't actually work—including at least one discussed in Dr. Ruth Westheimer's *Sex for Dummies*. It was anatomically impossible. That was a terminal screwup for my student's aspirations—though her field research did excite her husband, who fell on the floor and laughed his head off.

I, meanwhile, found another possible path to sell out my pen. Wikipedia helpfully informed me about “curiosa,” defined as “erotica and pornography as discrete, collectible items, usually in published or printed form.” Would that mean sexy stories written to order, with the clients' names used for the main characters? I could do that. I could thumb through *The Kama Sutra* and adapt positions like “the Sphinx” to my clients from, say, Bunkie, Louisiana.

The trouble is, how do you find such clients? Do they slink around on eBay or Craigslist? Selling out can be a tough business, especially for a reclusive academic.

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Or it could just be that the wages of sin have been overrated. As Joan Didion claims in her preface to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, “Writers are always selling somebody out”—which means there may not be much of a demand.

Now, I can imagine one other kind of sellout: writing political speeches for loathsome candidates. I can easily name—and so can you—candidates whose very names make us cringe and shiver. (Get together with out-of-state friends and play a conversational round of “my governor is worse than yours.”) Luckily, I haven’t been approached by any such candidates. I would have to be quite rude.

So, I suppose I do have standards for what I’d write for the money—as opposed to the Art. (I already have tenure, so there’s no need to sell my soul for that). I won’t write drivel that’s anti-woman or anti-union. I won’t do violence—but sex, maybe.

Best of all would be if I could write in the vein of the late Nora Ephron. She was the rich and successful screenwriter of *When Harry Met Sally*, with its immortal line about imitation, flattery, and boundless joy: “I’ll have what she’s having.”

That’s an offer I couldn’t refuse.

Publishing Information

- [The Godfather Papers and Other Confessions](#) [6] by Mario Puzo. (Putnam, 1972).
- *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* by Joan Didion (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968).

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Emily Toth is a contributing writer at *Talking Writing*, where her column “Nothing but the Toth” appears regularly. She also writes the Ms. Mentor online advice column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Emily reports that she was one of the “victors” of NaNoWriMo this past November, during which she wrote a novel in just one month. She hopes to follow Dr. Samuel Johnson’s famous advice that no one “except a blockhead, ever wrote, except for money.”

Congratulations to one of our favorite writers—and to the judge of [TW’s 2014 Advice Writing Contest](#) [5]. Be sure to enter your own advice about what you would and wouldn’t do for money (or any other topic you’d care to hold forth on) by the contest deadline: October 1, 2014.

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