

[Would I Write “The Godfather” for Money?](#) [1]

September 22, 2014 [Money](#) [2]

[Sex](#) [3]

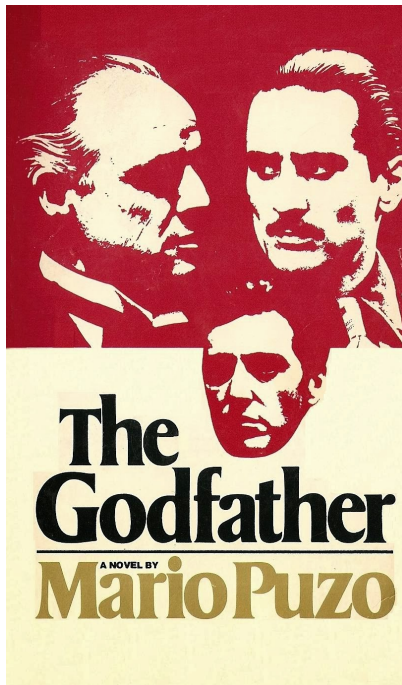
[Nothing but the Toth](#) [4]

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?

Would I Write “The Godfather” for Money?

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“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.

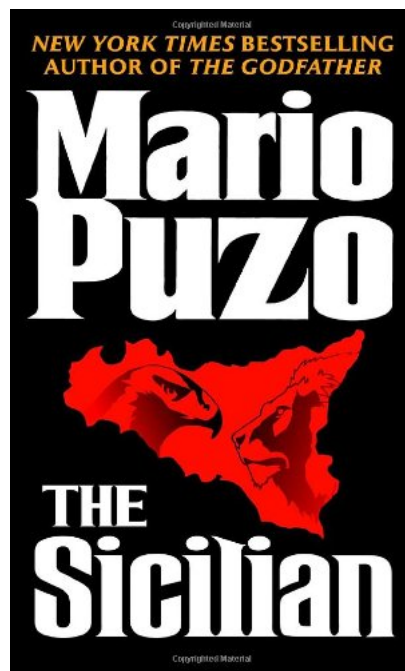
Like most mid-listers, I’ve certainly tried. I’ve been writing novels since I was nine years old. When *Daughters of New Orleans*, the only one I’ve managed to publish, sold 100,000 copies in 1983, one of my academic colleagues said, “I hear you’ve written a piece of trash.”

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.



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.