

*The Godfather Returns*

By Mark Winegardner

Reading Group Questions and Topics for Discussion

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1. *The Godfather Returns* begins with Nick Geraci's unwanted assignment to kill his mentor. In chapter 11, the atomic bomb test in the desert hints at a turning point for the United States. What other events in this novel signify a changeover, a minor revolution taking place? How does the Corleone family attempt to adapt to these changes?

2. The novel opens against a setting of atomic bomb tests, Hollywood entertainers and their excesses, and Vegas nightlife. Taken together, what do these suggest about 1950s America?

3. In chapters 3 and 4, most of the major characters are traveling: Michael and Kay celebrate their fifth anniversary with a seaplane trip to Lake Tahoe, Tom Hagen meets with Ambassador Shea at the Vista del Mar Golf and Racquet Club, Francesca arrives in Tallahassee to start her freshman year at Florida State University, and Nick Geraci pilots two Dons from New York to Rattlesnake Island, headquarters of Vincent Forlenza. Discuss the significance of these journeys for the characters involved and how these events contribute to the story.

4. In chapter 21, Michael Corleone tells Tom Hagen: "This is America, my orphaned friend. Running from who we are *is* who we are." What do you think he means? Do you agree or disagree?

5. As a protagonist, is Nick Geraci sympathetic? Why or why not?

6. Who is the hero of *The Godfather Returns*? Nick? Michael? Fredo? Francesca? Which character is most worthy of your sympathy? What does the novel's lack of traditional heroes suggest about its subject? About fiction in general?

7. Compare Fredo Corleone and Johnny Fontane. What is each man's deepest

wish? Name some personality flaws that hamper them.

8. Compare Fredo's quest (Colma East) to Michael's (family legitimacy). How are they similar? List the obstacles to these goals. Which scheme is more likely to succeed?

9. Describe the dynamic between Kay and Michael. Why does she remain in a marriage despite the crimes she attributes to Michael?

10. Discuss Fredo's double life as a mirror of Michael's double life as CEO of a corporation with legitimate business interests and boss of the country's most powerful crime Family.

11. Compare the conflict between Nick Geraci and Michael Corleone to the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. What other events from the novel mirror actual historic events?

12. Johnny Fontane is often considered a thinly-veiled version of Frank Sinatra, though he also shares much in common with Dean Martin, Al Martino, and many other Italian-American nightclub singers of this era. Try to identify the other characters in this novel who may have real-life counterparts.

13. Nick Geraci shoots a television set. Fredo Corleone kills a car. What do these actions reveal about these men?

14. Discuss Fredo's forays into show business. Where is he successful? Where does he fail, and why? Can you make connections between Fredo's manipulation of appearances to his brother Michael's sleight of hand in covering up much of the Corleone Family's illicit activity?

15. Michael's military experience in the Pacific earned him medals. What does Michael learn from his war experiences? How does Michael's understanding of murder influence his later decisions, particularly his plot involving Nick Geraci and Rattlesnake Island?

16. When Michael kills for the first time, it is as a soldier in the Pacific (chapter 21). Compare his reaction to this incident with Nick Geraci's reaction to killing Tessio in chapter 1.
17. Tom Hagen and Fredo Corleone angrily confront each other twice in the novel, once at the 1956 political convention in Atlantic City (chapter 15), then again in 1957 after Fredo's disastrous encounter with his wife, Deanna Dunn, her co-star, Matt Marshall, and an unlucky poodle (chapter 17). How would you describe the relationship between these two? What has elapsed in the time between these two encounters?
18. In an interview, Mark Winegardner described the world depicted in *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Returns* this way: "For the first time in American history, the government might be your enemy and the mobster on the corner might be your friend." Discuss incidents in *The Godfather Returns* where it seems the actions of the government do not differ from those of the mob.
19. *The Godfather Returns* has two epigraphs. The first is a Sicilian proverb; the second reads: "*They were killing my friends.* —Audie Murphy, most decorated U.S. soldier of World War II, when asked how he had found the courage to fight an entire German infantry company." Connect Murphy's statement to this novel. What do you make of the fact that both Michael Corleone and Nick Geraci belong to a group Tom Brokaw famously praised as "the greatest generation"?
20. Chapter 15 shares a Corleone Family strategy: "To build power, sometimes one must control those who seem the least powerful." A similar phrase comes up again in regard to the state trooper who foils the farmhouse meeting of the Families in chapter 20. How does this concept work? Why does it succeed?
21. The narrator believes the custom-built maple table which brought about "the single most devastating blow ever dealt to organized crime in America" should be in a museum. It's not, though. Where is it? Do you find its new location significant? Ironic? Why?
22. Like *The Godfather* and the film versions of *The Godfather* by Francis Ford

Coppola, *The Godfather Returns* tells a profoundly American story, touching on issues of ethnicity, immigration, assimilation, and racism. It also critiques and challenges American success stories, complicates the mythic American dream, and satirizes capitalism, corporations, and democratic government. The novel provides several possible causes for the Mafia's decline, including: "The tendency in all businesses created by first-generation immigrants to be destabilized by the second generation and ruined by the third." Discuss this notion from chapter 20.

23. What pressures or circumstances influence Tom Hagen's surprising action at Louie Russo's supper club in chapter 30?

24. There's a subtle, playful motif of doubles in this novel. To mention a few: double bed, double Scotch, double doors, double crosses, double-parked cars, even characters who do double-takes and speak double-talk. Both the Cuban dictator and Nick Geraci survive assassination attempts through the clever use of a double. The novel features a set of literal twins, Francesca and Kathy, as well as several pairings of figurative twins: Michael and Tom, Michael and Geraci, Michael and Vito, Tom and Vito, Francesca and Sonny, Fausto Geraci and Vito Corleone. Explore these similarities and differences.

Several events recur in different contexts (the giving and receiving of watches, airplane flights, Michael bribes a theater owner, Hagen bribes an ice cream stand owner, etc.). The novel depicts characters mirroring each other (Phil Ornstein and Johnny Fontane in chapter 4). Fredo destroys three mirrors, one in the men's room at Tony Molinari's funeral in 1955, the other two in his room at the Château Marmont in 1959. There's a double-header ball game and a restaurant named Two Toms. Characters echo each other's phrases too: "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day," to name just one. What is the effect of these repetitions, mirror images, and doppelgängers?

25. Consider the multiple meanings of the book's title. To where does the Godfather return? If the title is a reference to Michael, which characters also return in this novel, and what kind of returns are they?