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### Murder, I write

By Curtis Seltzer

**BLUE GRASS, Va.** Writing fiction is a self-issued license to lie about yourself, peddle stories that are deliberately untrue and portray individuals, living and dead, in ways both fair and not.

No one seems to get too worked up about this type of white-collar crime as long as the perps wear sweaters with holes in the elbows and claim to be novelists.

What a racket!

In **The Point of the Pick**, my novel in progress, I'm selling a plot that is driven in part by a Mafia effort to take over a union-owned bank in Washington D.C., in 1975.

One of my credibility problems is that I know nothing about how criminals, organized and otherwise, think, talk and act other than what I've read or seen on a screen.

It should come as no surprise that Blue Grass is not crawling with bosses, underbosses, *consiglieres*, made men or made women—who are a different kettle of fish in a manner of speaking.

We did, however, witness the organized paintballing of several innocent cows a few years back that I would credit to our account. And I need not mention rogue pigs running free on a public road or teenage boys in jacked-up trucks gouging doughnuts in the high school lawn. Some of us aspire to be known as Minor Misdemeanor, Inc.

I knew four guys in high school who drifted into this life. All are now dead as a result and, accordingly, refuse my interview requests. Two got involved in Pittsburgh massage parlors in the mid-80s on opposite sides of a turf war. Another was local muscle, a Mafia soldier who served time. The fourth, reportedly, died piloting cocaine into south Florida while flying too high himself.

I have a couple of better sources. I'm friends with Dan

Moldea, a courageous crime reporter, and several high school pals might share a few stories. But I feel a little funny about poking my nose into both what I don't know and also none of my business.

I've had only one first-hand brush with the Mafia. I was given information years ago that showed a big Washington bank was knowingly making bad loans to insiders and was being targeted by the boys who had just been run out of the Teamsters Union.

A D.C. police detective told me that the Pagans Motorcycle Club of northern Virginia did the enforcement work for the local Mafia. True or not, I decided that I did not like carrying a loaded .38 in my

briefcase. I got the information into The Washington Post and The Baltimore Sun without being targeted. The bank and the union were spared.

This is a small and shaky platform from which to write about imagined murders and a criminal conspiracy.

The Mafia is an easy target, at least for writers. It is America's most-publicized criminal business owing to its pervasiveness up and down the economic ladder and movies like The Godfather.

The Italian-American Mafia appears to be our largest and certainly most familiar crime business. Yet, every ethnic group has its own band of criminal brothers who do these things for one reason—money.

Despite federal prosecutions, witnesses breaking the Omertà and imprisonment of bosses, the Mafia continues to earn perhaps \$100 billion or more annually, mostly tax-free. At that number, it ranks as America's 20<sup>th</sup> largest corporation by revenue.

The Godfather was an oddly romanticized version of the New York Mafia in the 40s and 50s. The film's portrayal of Mob executions was bloody, graphic and unfamiliar to the 1972 movie audience. It continued the glorification of bloody endings that

Arthur Penn started in his 1967 root-for-the-outlaw film, Bonnie and Clyde.

The Godfathers violence, its vocabulary and its way of dealing with problems looked cool to kids who had no experience with Mafia reality.

Mario Puzos Godfather concentrates on the struggles within the Corleone organization and between it and rival crime families. Murders and beatings are always directed at each other rather than civilians. The movie leads you to think that Mafia violence stays within its own borders.

There's only one scene in Godfather I that portrays the Corleones business practices. That occurs in the bedroom of the unlikeable studio head, Jack Woltz. To force Woltz to use Corleone-favorite Johnny Fontane in an upcoming picture, Luca Brasi places the severed head of Woltz's prized stallion in his bed as he sleeps.

(The Mafia did *not* strong-arm Harry Cohn, head of Columbia Pictures, to cast Frank Sinatra as Maggio in From Here to Eternity. Cohn was a long-time friend to Chicago mobster John Roselli and Longy Zwillman, the New Jersey crime boss, who lent him money to buy full control of Columbia.)

However, another New Jersey Mafioso, Willie Moretti, and two thugs did persuade bandleader Tommy Dorsey in 1943 to sell Sinatras contract back to the singer for \$1. Dorsey was told to sign or else as Moretti jammed a gun barrel down the trombonist's throat.)

The purpose of organized crime is to make money illegally. To that end, the Mafia engages in both little crime and big crime.

Little crime is retail in the neighborhoods. It's the extortion of protection money from the corner grocery and the loan-sharking to individuals and businesses at 10 to 20 percent a week. It's the hijacked truck, the burglary and the arsons that send a message. Little crime commonly preys on the vulnerable and the ethnic

group from which the criminals come.

Big crime is the wholesale side. Its the big busin ess of muscling in on legitimate enterprises like supermarkets and malls, corrupting unions, swindling stockholders, setting up offshore gambling, stealing and fencing, counterfeiting goods, laundering money and trafficking in drugs, human beings, fake Viagra and toxic waste to name a few.

What you dont see in Godfather I is the smorgasbord of little crime that Corleones underlings cooked up daily to fund his kingdom. And you dont see much of the big crime that ripped off everyone in higher prices, shoddy goods and padded costs that were nothing but money transfers into Corleones pockets.

Crime pays, and ordinary citizens are the ones who pay for it.

What interests me as a writer is that Puzo had no first-hand knowledge of the New York Mafia or any of the grisly scenes he describes in his 1969 novel and subsequent screenplay. Some material was based on well-known gangland hits. Other scenes he just plucked from the smells of Hells Kitchen where he grew up.

Its widely accepted that Puzos depiction of Mob w ays affected real Mafiosi more than their ways dictated his writing. The Mafia adopted the term, Godfather, only after Puzo popu larized it. They also embraced, Ill make him an offer he cant refuse.

The Corleones come across as heroes, as honorable tough guys with certain family values operating in a tough business with few values.

My Mafia characters have few redeeming social values, but I, too, have fallen into the trap of showing them primarily as hit men for hire and not as crooks, thieves and terrorists who get

their way through intimidation.

Since I'm intending to make millions from a mass-market novel just like Mario Puzo did, I will steal his example.

First, I'll change my name to Salvatore Sal, The Scribbler, Seltzeroni.

Then I'll continue to write about what I don't know as long as it's really violent, cool and icky.

Maybe I'll have a cover design that shows blood dripping off the point of a pick.

And to get published, I will make Random House an offer it can't refuse.

