

READING GUIDE

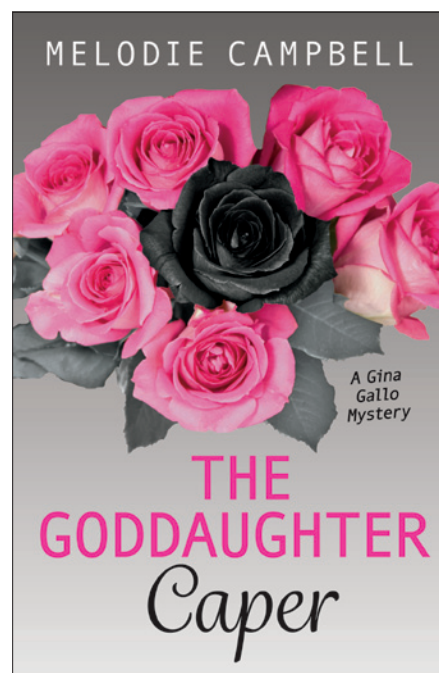
THE GODDAUGHTER CAPER MELODIE CAMPBELL

Reading level: 2.5

Interest level: Adult

Themes: crime fiction, murder, female sleuth,
the mob, senior citizens, retirement, humor,
smuggling

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Summary

The Goddaughter Caper kicks off with Gina Gallo, goddaughter of the local crime boss, having coffee with her interior-designer cousin, Nico, in her Uncle Vince’s upscale bistro. It’s a popular place, and tonight one of Gina’s best customers, Mrs. Drake, is there as well, flashing the new sapphire ring she bought at Gina’s store.

Gina and Nico have barely sat down to talk about colors for Gina’s upcoming wedding to journalist Pete Malone when a man’s dead body is deposited behind the restaurant. Turns out it’s Wally the Wanker—a car thief and drug dealer who Gina knew back in high school. Cause of death: two gunshots. Gina is tasked to drive Wally’s body to her cousin Tony’s chop shop for disposal. She is furious to still be mixed up in the family’s mob business: she has a wedding to plan, and a shower the next day!

Later, when cousin Sammy calls—Vince’s underboss—and tells her it wasn’t their hit, Gina is confused. Through discussion with Paulo, the family lawyer, she begins to suspect that maybe Wally had been blackmailing people for money—after all, it was what he’d been known for in high school. Gina’s mind sets to work trying to figure out who might have wanted to kill the man.

When Gina arrives at her store the next morning, she finds out Paulo has dropped off a beautiful wooden box containing part of her late Uncle Seb’s inheritance. Taken with Seb’s art studio, Gina’s inheritance totals about \$2 million. She plans to use some of it to pay the family back for setting Nico up in his interior design store; she doesn’t want him bound by the ugly ties created by family money.

Nico is setting up his store nearby when Gina gets his call: there’s another dead body. A middle-aged man has been Fed-Exed in a coffin to Nico’s store. They decide they need to dispose of the body. Sammy tells Gina to call Jimmy, an octogenarian mobster recently released from prison. Turns out a delivery was mixed up: Nico got the body; Jimmy got the statue that Nico had ordered for his store. Jimmy advises them to leave the store and he’ll sort out the mix-up.

Instead of taking away the dead body for disposal, however, Jimmy’s men accidentally take away the box containing Gina’s inheritance. When Gina can’t get anyone on the phone to



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straighten it out, she and Nico decide to track down Sammy at a family hideaway on the lake shore. They don't find Sammy, but they do find many ill-made coffins. While they're trying to decipher the meaning of all these coffins, Paulo calls and tips Nico and Gina off that the police are coming to raid the place. They hide in a secret cubby but are caught nonetheless by Officer Spence, another high school classmate of Gina's. And the coffins? Empty.

Nico and Gina's detainment is short-lived: Aunt Miriam shows up with all the other aunts and springs them by threatening to reveal a childhood secret of Spence's. Thus freed, Gina attends her dreaded wedding shower, where she learns that Mrs. Drake wants to purchase sapphire earrings to match her ring—and she wants to pay in cash. And the Drakes have just purchased a condo in Scottsdale, too...with cash. Gina smells a rat, but can't put her finger on why.

In an effort to get her inheritance back, Gina talks the next day with Jimmy and his partner in crime, Mad Magda. They agree to unbury her inheritance if she meets them in the Gallo family section of the graveyard that night with a couple guys.

When a magazine ad catches Gina's eye—something about Jimmy doing burials out of the retirement home?—she smells another rat. Sammy informs her that the family now runs a business disposing of bodies that other people have offed. The Gallos aren't involved in the killing, Sammy insists, just the disposal. The venture will raise funds for the retirement home's Last Chance Club, so they can afford to travel to Vegas. There's a healthy dose of money laundering mixed up in this too. It's all too much for Gina to make sense of.

One thing she has managed to make sense of: why Wally the Wanker was killed. Wally was peddling OxyContin to the upper classes in cahoots with Mrs. Drake's husband, a well-known physician. When Dr. Drake pulled out of the deal, Wally tried to blackmail the good doctor. He got shot for his efforts, his body dumped in behind the family's restaurant by Dr. Drake (moments before joining his wife for a nice dinner). It looked for all the world like the family did it. Mystery solved.

Gina, Nico and Pete head to the graveyard to dig up Gina's inheritance with the assistance of Jimmy and Mad Magda. A variety of relatives greet them, plus members of the Last Chance Club. Spence and another police officer turn up, curious as to why the group is about to dig up a box. But Gina and the other family members confuse him so much with their stories and explanations that he eventually leaves them to it, unable to determine any wrongdoing.

Unfortunately, the group discovers that Mario got Gina's box mixed up with another box, and accidentally cremated her two-million-dollar inheritance. Gina is enraged until Pete calms her with his own confession: that he is a millionaire ten times over, due to an inheritance from his own grandfather.

Questions for Discussion

1. Gina Gallo has a wry sense of humor, like when she says she tries to stay clear of certain family businesses because she's allergic to prison cells (ch. 1). How does humor make a character more likable? Find other examples of Gina's humor throughout the book.
2. Merriam-Webster defines a euphemism *as a mild or pleasant word or phrase that is used instead of one that is unpleasant or offensive*. Gina uses euphemisms for when people get hurt, shot or killed. For example, in chapter 1, she doesn't say Wally the Wanker was *shot*—she says he was *plugged*. For what reason do we often use euphemisms? Think of three euphemisms that you have used in your day-to-day life.





3. What's a chop shop? What do you know about the trade in stolen cars?
4. In *The Goddaughter Caper*, Gina sometimes talks to the reader directly, as in chapter 2:

*It was almost nine. I drove to the place I was supposed to go.
(Don't ask—I can't tell you.)*

Having characters speak directly to the reader is relatively unconventional in fiction. What is your opinion of this technique?

5. How is describing a character as “a fellow who looked like a refugee from the heavy-metal era” (ch. 3) more effective than simply detailing what the man is wearing?
6. In chapter 4, another dead body shows up as Nico is getting his interior design store set up. Gina examines it and decides that, due to his rings, the man would have had money, and therefore would have been important. Discuss our human association between money and a person's value. Is our bias of any value?
7. Despite her healthy income, Gina chooses to drive a nondescript sedan. She does this so as not to draw attention to herself, given her family connections and her position as owner of a jewelry store. But is there another part of her personality that shines here, as illustrated by this choice?
8. Gina detests the tradition of stapling ribbons onto a paper plate and using it as a hat during wedding showers, and she dreads this occurrence at her own shower (ch. 8). What is the significance of traditions that surround holidays and major life events? Which traditions do you dislike and why? Which ones would you hang on to?
9. What do you know about slapstick comedy? What in *The Goddaughter Caper* reminds you of this comedic genre?
10. If you could take Gina Gallo out for coffee, what three questions would you ask her? What three questions do you think she might ask you?
11. As you see it, why does Gina so detest the idea of belonging to a mob family?
12. Gina Gallo comes from an Italian family. Make a list of details that confirm and add to this cultural identity in *The Goddaughter Caper*.
13. At the book's end, Pete tells Gina about an inheritance of his own that he had been concealing from her. Assess his motivations—and his means—in terms of whether you consider them fair.
14. Devise another title for this book.
15. As you see it, what is the theme of *The Goddaughter Caper*?

