

A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL KRİKORIAN

TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF, HOW AND WHEN YOU STARTED WRITING.

My father's favorite word was imagination and he grew one in me early. I was eight years old when I started writing "made up" stories about baseball, centered round Mickey Mantle. One of the few photos of myself that I cherish is of me hunched over a typewriter hunting for keys while on vacation to see my mom's family on the Southside of Chicago. If you look closely at the paper being typed on, you can see the word "Mantle."

Writing was my great escape, as much as getting lost in *Casablanca* or *On the Waterfront*. Thankfully it still is. Be it writing on a computer or a notebook or merely thinking about a story while driving along L.A.'s Harbor Freeway, my "Inspiration Road", I love it.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE YOUR NOVEL?

A strong belief that my real life combined with my imaginary world could be woven into a fascinating tale. Also that feeling I would get when I walked into a bookstore, any bookstore, and saw all those books, hundreds, no, thousands of books and thinking "All these people wrote a book." Then exhorting myself "You, with your life, with your experiences, you can write one, too."

HOW DID YOU USE YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE OR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND TO ENRICH YOUR STORY?

I've had the benefit of living a rather colorful life, rich with fascinating characters and interesting places that I was easily able to write about and, when needed, embellish. I also fully realize that my "rather colorful" life would be boring to some people I know, such as my closest real life friend at the *Los Angeles Times*, Carolyn Cole, a war photographer.

ANYTHING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN YOUR NOVEL?

So much of it.

ARE ANY CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?

All the major characters are based on people I know except Eddie Sims. I've had several friends who have, like Eddie, lost sons to gang violence, but none who took their pain down his path. Most everyone else, Michael Lyons, his girlfriend Francesca Golden, detective Sal LaBarbera, Big Evil and others, I know.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOUR NOVEL IS MORE PLOT DRIVEN OR CHARACTER DRIVEN?

The novel is plot driven, driven like *Fangio* by characters.

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE OR MOST SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Michael Lyons is a fictionalized version of myself, so, yeah, he's my favorite character and, like me, very flawed. He drinks too much, he can be violent, he doesn't have much money, but he's good hearted, loyal, sentimental, and just about fearless, but not without fear.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Though they do not have major roles, metro editor Harriet Tinder and city editor Ted Doot are the two characters I can't stand. They represent the worst of a newsroom, who don't even know – or care about - the streets of their own city. They follow blindly corporate policy line, which is all about the money, the profits. They represent the worst of middle-management in any cooperation in America.

WHAT PART OF WRITING YOUR BOOK DID YOU FIND THE MOST CHALLENGING?

Keeping it tight. Not overindulging and copy editing.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM YOU BOOK?

A compassion for victims of violence and their families, a better understanding of life in a rough neighborhood and, most importantly, an inspiration to fight back, to overcome hardships that come your way, be it in the way of health, employment or love.

One of things reporter Michael Lyons is known for is his ability, his fervent desire to describe the life of a gang member as a human being first, a person with a family, a person with dreams. In real *L.A. Times* life and in the book, too often young men whose lives are described in two words; "Gang member." Lyons would turn that "gang member" into a human being.

HOW DO YOU DIAL UP THE TENSION TO KEEP YOUR READERS ON THE EDGE OF THEIR SEATS?

The first draft of *Southside* had long scenes where the situations would often play out, be it a fight or a key piece of the investigation. Now this upcoming tactic is probably as old as fiction, but, somewhere along the road, I learned to break that scene by simply ending the chapter before it played out. The next chapter would be removed from the previous “left-hanging” scene. Now, that next chapter might be a new set-up scene or it might itself be a continuation of a tense scene we are now just coming back to, the same way you’ll come back to the one we just left. You feel me?

In a TV soap opera it would be a commercial break. In a book, by cutting away from a scene at crucial moment, going to another scene, then coming back to the original scene, it heightens the drama.

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

I am not, nor have I ever been “well read.” About 12 years ago I saw one of the many “Top 100 Greatest Novels of Time” lists. I think I had read 10 or 12 of them. But, even if I had read them all, of the famous writers of the past, Homer and Victor Hugo would stand out for me. I still often pick up *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* and read a couple pages. *Southside*’s Michael Lyons knows two lines from *The Iliad* by heart.

In 1987, while my mother was dying from cancer, I read Victor Hugo’s “Les Miserables”. It was the best book I had ever read.

On another front, I was very taken with Edna Ferber’s *So Big*. I remember reading it on a train ride and being so impressed by the simplicity - and beauty - of the writing. I mean here was a story about a widow farmer in Illinois with a young boy trying to make her hard-dirt farm prosper. If you were to pick a topic I would not be interested in, this might be it. I’m still not even sure why I started reading it, but I’m glad I did.

Still, I have to say that the writer that made the biggest impact on me was not a novelist, but rather a sports columnist, the *Los Angeles Times*’ Jim Murray, who died many years ago. I loved the way he threw in historical and cultural references to his stories. You could be reading about Sandy Koufax, and out of nowhere, and most fittingly, Rembrandt might show up. Or the Battle of Issus. I do that in my writing, particular the many essays I have written for the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*. I have a cast of characters, from Seabiscuit to Alexander the Great to, yeah, Sandy Koufax that I like to add to the tale. That’s pure Jim Murray influence, though I didn’t even realize that till I started thinking about my writing inspirations no more than a year ago. I just liked Jim Murray. I had no idea how much of an influence he was on my own writing.

Damon Runyon. I just like to say that name. It reeks of characters. When I was 19, in Chicago madly in love with a girl who thought of me more a Benny Southstreet than a Sky Masterson, I read ***More Guys and Dolls***, a collection of Runyon's short stories. It didn't even seem like writing to me, but rather someone just telling stories. I felt I was right there at Mindy's watching these tales unfold. I love a quote about Runyon, attributed, I believe, to columnist Jimmy Breslin. It was something like "He did what all good reporters do. He hung out." That's me, I hang out a lot.

Of the current writers, George Pelecanos is tops. He wrote some of my favorite episodes of *The Wire*, my favorite work of creativity. David Simon and Ed Burns and their writing corps on *The Wire* are in a class by themselves. I don't know how many times my girlfriend has come home, seen me watching *The Wire* and either said "Not again", or simply shook her head, went to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of red wine.

I give a special nod to Michael Connelly who I credit with getting me back into reading in the mid-1990s. Somehow I got either ***Concrete Blonde*** or the ***Last Coyote*** and was soon hooked on Detective Hieronymus Bosch. Connelly led me back to Raymond Chandler, who sent me back to Dashiell Hammett. Michael Connelly, when I meet him, impressed me equally with his kind, humble personality and generosity.

WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

Ideally, I'd write two hours in the morning, maybe even more. By 9 or 10 a.m., I've already accomplished something for the day. It's a good feeling. Later, I would edit what I wrote or write some more new stuff. At night, I might think of another series of events that propel the book and roughly write it. My ideal writing process described here is, alas, seldom accomplished. I need to be more disciplined.

Though I've only done it once, writing on a train, not a subway train, but a real Amtrak train, is magical. I want to do that again really soon. I did it two years ago on the Coast Starlight from Los Angeles to Oakland, a trip I highly recommend. For the record, I flew back.

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

I heard Michael Connelly say something like "Write the book you would want to read". I liked that.

Though I have never read any of his fiction, in Stephan King's ***On Writing*** there is a sentence that I used to keep on my fridge that was something like "If you are not willing to write your ass off, don't even think about becoming a writer".

My cousin, Greg Krikorian, one of the best journalists at *L.A. Times*, often said "Writing is rewriting." I know many have said that, but he's the one I that pounded it into my mind.

WHAT IS THE WORST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

I don't know. I guess I must have dismissed it as stupid and forgot about it. I'll say "outlining" is not high on my list of writing advice. I know some people rave about outlining, but it's not for me. Writing a novel is like living a story out, it has unexpected twists that lead you where you might not have been planning to go. And if you get there and don't like it, you can always go somewhere else.

Like watching a really good movie or even reading a good book, I don't want to know the ending until, well, the end.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU? ANY NEW BOOKS IN THE PIPELINE?

I envision reporter Michel Lyons to be a four part series, starting with *Southside*. Next is *Westside*, where Lyons is now working for the online news organization "L.A. Watch". Although he is still entrenched in the Southside, this book finds Lyons reporting on a homicide on the city's most exclusive street, Mapleton Drive in Holmby Hills. After that, *Northside*, where the pornography world is explored, then *Eastside* from which the Mexican Mafia spreads its tentacles to all quarters of the city.

ANY FINAL WORDS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY ABOUT YOURSELF, YOUR NOVEL, OR LIFE IN GENERAL?

When Pat told me over the phone that Oceanview had decided to publish my novel, it was a lovely moment. But, it was topped later that very day when I told the two most important women in my life, my sister Jeanine and my girlfriend Nancy, about that phone call.

My sister was having a bad day at work when I walked over to her and told her "Come outside. I want to tell you something." Now my sister has been through a lot of bad with me. So as we walked toward the door, I sensed her tension rising, preparing for what would likely be more bad news. But, once outside, I told her "I'm going to make your day better." Very slight pause. "My novel is going to be published." That moment, the look on her face, I will always cherish.

When I told my girlfriend, who has stuck with me in hard times, even supported me, she was nearly dumbfounded before she lit up and demanded, "Let me see the email!" It took nearly a minute for her to believe that phone call from Pat. When she did, it was beautiful. So thank you Oceanview for providing those moments.

My life has had many memorable moments. Some of them sad, some of them joyous, some of them very troubled, but they have all been, even the darkest of them, poignant in their own way. And I guess that sums up how I feel, how I live and how I write about life, in my wonder-filled real world and in the wonderful world of my imagination.