

Master of mystery

A conversation with novelist Gary Goshgarian



by Kay Mouradian



Gary Goshgarian.



Kay interviewing Gary for the Armenian Reporter. Photo: Nathan Goshgarian.

Recently I had an opportunity to interview Gary Goshgarian at the Mystery Bookstore in Westwood, California.

Having read several of his novels, I was anxious to learn more about this Armenian novelist, who will one day find himself in the same league as the famed Robin Cook, Robert Parker, and Michael Crichton. Goshgarian's writing and sense of timing is that good. His most recent book, *Skin Deep*, has been called a well-crafted thriller by Publishers Weekly. Fans of psychological suspense with a medical angle will be amply rewarded. It's a gripping, twisty thriller that deserves a wide audience.

Goshgarian's novels carry the thread of "be careful of what you want, because you may get it." And I'll add that you may not be prepared for the consequences, especially in the scientific and medical world. I loved the Albert Einstein quote in his medical thriller *Gray Matter*: "We should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality." The storyline shows how the characters, who desire more intelligent children, find themselves falling into destructive modes, until the hero, detective Greg Zakarian, unmasks the sinister plot.

Goshgarian has a scientific back-

ground. He went to Worcester Polytech on a scholarship, graduated with a degree in physics, but had more fun starting a humor magazine on campus and writing for the college newspaper and the yearbook. That's when he decided to get a graduate degree in English. He was far more comfortable reading and talking about books than with quantum mechanics and acoustic labs. He is an award-winning professor of English at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. He earned his PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has published several textbooks: *Exploring Language*, 11th edition (Longman Publishers, 2007); *Dialogues: An Argument Rhetoric and Reader*, with Kathleen Krueger, fifth edition (Longman Publishers, 2006); *What Matters in America* (Longman Publishers, 2006); *The Contemporary Reader*, eighth edition (Longman Publishers, 2004); and *Horrorscope: An Anthology of Modern Horror Fiction* (Kendall-Hunt, 1993).

But Goshgarian is best known for his novels. Published under the pseudonym Gary Braver: *Skin Deep* (2008); *Flashback* (Forge/St. Martins, 2005), winner of the 2006 Massachusetts Honor Book Award;

Gray Matter (Forge/St. Martins, 2003); *Elixir* (Forge/St. Martins, 2000). Published under his own name: *The Stone Circle* (Penguin, 1997); *Rough Beast* (Penguin, 1995); *Atlantis Fire* (Dial Press/Dell, 1980).

Kay Mouradian: I know your publisher suggested you use a pen name for your more recent novels. Why did you choose the name Braver?

Gary Goshgarian: My maternal grandmother's husband was Garabed Markarian. Although Charles is the English equivalent of Garabed, the literal translation from my 1923 Armenian-to-English book translates Garabed as Braver.

KM: Now I see why the name Markarian keeps coming up in some of your novels!

GG: My father was born in Kharpert and came to America as a refugee. When his father was killed in the Genocide, his mother ended up in a Turkish harem. She was a survivor, one tough broad who connived, wiled, threatened, and managed to escape the Syrian desert. She did whatever it took to save her three kids. When the war ended the Germans and American Red Cross missionaries helped her find a marriage sponsor in America, a Pilar Goshgarian from Providence, Rhode Island. Goshgarian agreed to marry her sight-unseen and become a father to her three children – my father and his two sisters. It took nine months for his mother to find them after he and his sisters had been moved from a refugee camp in Bulgaria to one in Greece and finally to one in Cuba. His mother sent a telegram to Cuba, asking to send the three children by boat to New York, with instructions to take the train in New York to Providence, where a man with a white handlebar mustache, Baron Goshgarian, would meet them at the train station and would be their new father.

My mother was born in Hartford, Connecticut, but her parents came from Sebastia. They survived the Genocide, lived in France for a while, and eventually found their way to Hartford. When mother was seven years old, her mother died. She helped raise her younger brother and sister. When her sister and brother married, her father begged her to marry before he died and suggested the Goshgarian boy from Providence. So my mother married my father. Her father died two weeks after the ceremony, and I was born two years later. My parents divorced when I was seven, my father returned to Providence, and I did not see

much of him throughout my childhood. My mother became a single mother during those provincial days, when divorce was uncommon and obscure, especially in Armenian families. She was happy just being a mom and never remarried. We were poor, but I never knew it, because my mother worked three jobs. I was a latchkey kid and often I was the one who cooked dinner, even Armenian delicacies such as sarma and kufta. One of my mother's jobs was a telephone operator and she would call and walk me through the meals, but sometimes I would surprise her with my own creations.

KM: I've enjoyed visualizing those Armenian delicacies sprinkled throughout your stories. I have a feeling your mother was also influential in your early literary life.

GG: Yes. She was warm and loving and encouraged me to read. She would read stories to me and I loved the sounds of words. I loved the odd sounds of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Jabberwocky*. I found words interesting and loved working with them for papers in school and while writing short stories. I read science fiction by the pound when I was a kid.

KM: Two of your major characters in your novels have Armenian names: detective Greg Zakarian, in your novel *Gray Matter*; and Steve Markarian, in *Skin Deep*. I found it interesting that both Zakarian and Markarian have an aura of darkness immersed in their beings. Both have strong attachments to their wives – one loses her in a car accident and the other is on the verge of divorce and trying to win her back. I found the grief and loneliness of both these Armenian men painful to read, and I wonder if growing up without a father played a role in characterizing these men.

GG: It may be. There was a gap not having a father. And I may have transposed that loss in developing these characters. My mother was both mother and father to me.

KM: I've appreciated some of the Armenian inferences in your stories, but I cringed often as I read about Steve Markarian and his numerous addictions in the storyline of *Skin Deep*.

GG: But he turns out all right! From a professional point of view, there are not many Armenian-American detectives in stories, and with the hundreds of thousands of books out there, I wanted to have this cop have something unique for this storyline. I was also trying to make a statement that homicide cops see some

Searching for the Turk

In the final moments of the season finale of *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* on the FOX Network, a character named Margos Sarkissian is seen walking away seconds before Cameron, a Terminator-like but highly advanced cyborg sent back from the future to protect protagonist John Connor, jumps into her car, turns on the engine, and her car explodes. Does Cameron survive? Will Sarkissian sell the Turk – a supercomputer that may become SkyNet, a defense system that will set out to destroy humans? Will John Connor save humans from SkyNet and obliteration? Will the Arnold make an appearance on the FOX series? Is it time to rent the Terminator films and enjoy them again? Tune to FOX on September 8th when Episode 10 jump starts season two of the hit series. Perhaps John Connor will find the Turk, before it can unleash a genocide against the human race.



Lena Headey (Sarah), Thomas Dekker (John Connor), and Summer Glau (Cameron) star in *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*.

Hear any other interesting storylines with Armenian surnames or characters? Drop us an e-mail, and we'll share the story with our readers: arts@reporter.am

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of the worst aspects of humanity imaginable and deal with the stress. Every six months homicide cops go through some kind of psychological counseling and sometimes they break down with crying jags and nightmares and can't sleep; sometimes they have the shakes and have suicidal thoughts. Some turn to alcohol and prescription drugs for relief. And some get hooked. While we think of police as a special breed of good guys, a few rungs above us ordinary mortals, they are only human. And detective Markarian's wife in the story was his moral stability, and the thought of losing her was destroying him.

KM: How much research do you do for your stories?

GG: A lot – especially for *Skin Deep*. The police procedural stuff was easy. I know people in the College of Criminal Justice and one of my contacts was a homicide detective who gave me fabulous information. He walked me through crime scenes, giving me material you don't see on TV.

Since Boston has one of the finest

medical communities in the world, it was easy to find doctors willing to be interviewed for my previous novels, but since plastic surgery plays a strong role in *Skin Deep*, none of those surgeons I contacted returned my calls. But I had a great turn of luck. The dean of Cosmetic Surgery at Harvard Med School had just retired, had time on his hands, and loved to talk. He gave me several hours at the tape recorder, leads to where I could watch videos of procedures, and walked me through nose jobs, lid lifts, face lifts, and even a face transplant. I could not have done this book without him.

KM: Years ago I read somewhere that there are two kinds of readers: those that like to be entertained and those that like to learn. But your stories cleverly fulfill both; they entertain and educate.

GG: Yes, I think all literature should do that, especially to educate about the human condition. All good literature is about what it's like to be human. And the science in the stories adds information: about surgery in *Deep Skin*, Alzheimer's

in *Flashback*, and the science of cellular biology in aging in *Elixir*.

KM: Did the story of *Dorian Gray* influence you in setting the plot for *Elixir*?

GG: Everyone asks that question. I haven't read that since high school, but certainly I know about what happened and the aging in the picture. There is no free lunch. I needed an aspect of *Elixir* that would be interesting and I wanted to show the paradox of a father being 20 years younger than his own son. So, again, a cautionary... be careful what you wish for because tampering with the natural order can screw things up. That epiphany comes from having taught Mary Shelley *Frankenstein* for 30 years.



Goshgarian told me a story he heard from David Kherdian, about a childhood conversation with William Saroyan. Saroyan told the young Kherdian, "Armenians don't read." And I have found that to be true as I walk into Armenian homes and never see bookcases filled with books or even a book lying



Covers of *Skin Deep* and *Flashback*.

around. If we Armenians want our culture perpetuated, we must understand that it will never happen unless we encourage our young to read. Great writers like Gary Goshgarian have been readers since childhood.

For those of you who have not yet read any of Goshgarian's works, I suggest you head to the nearest bookstore and pick up his latest book, *Skin Deep*. This medical thriller will keep you reading and wondering what will happen next. 𐌌𐌍𐌔

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Two Albees, two Barsoumians



reviewed
by Aram
Kouyoumdjian

Playwright Edward Albee announced his presence on the theater scene exactly 50 years ago with an explosive one-act piece innocently titled "The Zoo Story." Since then, the author of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *A Delicate Balance*, *Seascape*, and *Three Tall Women* has become a monumental figure in American theater. Albee, who turned 80 this year, has remained an enfant terrible of the theater, composing subversive fare like *The Goat* at an age when playwrights would ordinarily be decades removed from their best work.

Over the past couple of weekends, "The Zoo Story" was paired with another Albee one-act, "Counting the Ways," in a guest production at the Luna Playhouse in Glendale. The two pieces were staged through the efforts of two Barsoumian brothers – actor Raffi Barsoumian and producer Shahe – and director Hayk Hambartsumyan.

In "The Zoo Story," Barsoumian portrayed Jerry, a young man who strikes up a conversation with a stranger named Peter (Adam Siladi). Peter is sitting on a park bench reading a book when Jerry approaches him and says, "I went to the zoo today," thereby setting into motion

an initially innocuous – but ultimately tragic – encounter between them.

What ensues is not so much dialogue as monologue. In manic mode, Jerry tells Peter all about his life – his upbringing in a dysfunctional family setting, his difficulty in sustaining intimacy with women, and his hostile relationship with his landlady ... and her dog. In a strange way, Jerry's diatribe is his attempt to reach out to Peter and make a connection. At the same time, Jerry resents Peter and his middle-class existence. The resentment escalates into conflict when Jerry situates himself on Peter's bench and demands that he give it up.

Barsoumian served up a confident Jerry in a polished performance that was technically proficient more than it was visceral. Siladi was less convincing in depicting Peter's discomfort, fear, and, in the end, horror. As such, little tension vibrated between the two characters, blunting the piece's edge, despite Hambartsumyan's well-paced direction. Nor did the production fully engage Albee's absurdist humor, a key element of the playwright's signature style.

An entirely different atmosphere pervaded "Counting the Ways," in which Albee tackles love and marriage, both of which he delights in savaging. Very short scenes comprise "Counting the Ways," which revolves around an unnamed couple. He and She sometimes share the stage, or else they appear singly to voice their private ruminations as they try to resolve whether love is essential to living.

The fragmented piece featured Barsoumian and Eryn Joslyn – both in their 20s and too young to portray the play's long-married couple. Angela Lansbury was in her 50s and William Prince in his 60s when they starred in the American premiere of "Counting the Ways" over



Top: Raffi Barsoumian and Eryn Joslyn in "Counting the Ways".
Left: Raffi Barsoumian and Adam Siladi in "The Zoo Story".

30 years ago. Albee's script seems to require an older cast, given its underlying proposition that a life shared over the course of years imparts wisdom even as it induces weariness.

Their youth notwithstanding, Barsoumian and Joslyn exhibited charming rapport in their repartee, although the production had difficulty in navigating a consistent tone. Hambartsumyan's direction oscillated between serious relationship drama and screwball ro-

mantic comedy. And where the play's penchant for absurdism was concerned, his approach again proved somewhat tentative.

Production values were modest. The black backdrop that substituted for a set design was particularly stark. As a whole, however, the effort was ambitious in tackling such challenging fare – and noteworthy in showcasing a full contingent of very promising talent. 𐌌𐌍𐌔