

Gritty and raw: New York author Arthur Nersesian

His Armenian heritage is making its way into his stories



by **Kay Mouradian**

Arthur Nersesian read a chapter from his latest novel, *The Sacrificial Circumcision of the Bronx*, at Vroman's bookstore in Pasadena a few weeks ago. Trying to interview him became a challenge. I was in an environment far too chaotic for an in-depth conversation with this New York author. An author who preceded Nersesian's reading that evening brought with him a noisy fan base drinking wine and milling around both authors while Nersesian was busy trying to sign books. Waiting for a moment when I could talk to this Armenian author, I decided to chat with two of the twenty-something girls in the audience, **Gilda Davidian** and **Lisa Narinian** of Highland Park. Both had read several of Nersesian's novels. Gilda described Nersesian's work as gritty and raw. Since the title of Nersesian's first novel is *The Fuck Up*, I knew exactly what Gilda meant. Two of Nersesian's books, *The Dog Run* and *The Chinese Takeout*, were favorites of Lisa Narinian's. The communal feeling portrayed in *The Dog Run* triggered a desire to go to New York and *The Chinese Takeout* helped Lisa see New York through the eyes of the characters in the story . . . a testament to how Nersesian's writing can affect a reader. Nersesian has been a fixture in the writing scene for many years. He was an editor for *The Portable Lower East Side*, which was an important magazine during the 1980s and early 90s and for 10 years was an English instructor at a community college in the Bronx. He writes briskly and acutely, with a good sense of detail. He is also a poet and playwright and three of his works have been optioned for film.

His most recent book, *The Sacrificial Circumcision of the Bronx*, is the second of five novels that features an Armenian protagonist throughout the series. Uli Sarkisian is a former FBI agent suffering from amnesia trying to discover his own past. His name alludes to Ulysses. But I became fascinated with another character, Paul Moses, who has a strong secondary focus in *Sacrificial Circumcision*. Paul was the estranged elder brother of the wealthy and famed New York architect, Robert Moses. Robert was considered the "master builder" of mid-20th century New York City, Long Island, and Westchester County and was a polarizing figure in the history of urban planning as he changed shorelines and transformed neighborhoods forever. Nersesian's own neighborhood in 1968 became a casualty of Robert's urbanization as his family was forced to move from their Midtown apartment – the

result of an eviction to make way for an office tower. It had a traumatic effect on the 10-year-old Nersesian, and the following year his parents divorced. Evictions then became a part of Nersesian's life . . . in Brooklyn Heights with his family, then Times Square, Chelsea, and the Upper West Side until 1982, when he found stability in a one-bedroom apartment in the East Village, where he has lived ever since.

Nersesian's previous novels were about marginal characters living in New York who became victims of forces – personal, political and social – they could not comprehend. This new series is more in the genre of science fiction fantasy and I think it is prudent for readers to read the first book in the series, *The Swing Vote of Staten Island*; otherwise the story continuum could become confusing. I asked the author for a brief description of his vision of the five stories: "Although the story opens in America of 1980, Uli goes through aspects of Ulysses' journey in both *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*. In book one, in this fictional place set up by the federal government, Rescue City, we see his fighting against the cyclops and the sirens and so on. In book two, after he escapes Rescue City, he finds himself stuck in an abandoned subterranean shelter, attempting to escape. Throughout book two there are allusions to Hades."

I went to Turkey in 1994. I wanted a first-hand experience and I found it weird, a strange mix, and I was getting ill.

Nersesian explains that while the series can be considered a thriller, it is also an alternate history of the United States. "It opens with a fictitious 'dirty bomb attack' on New York City in 1970. Nixon is in power, the Vietnam War is on, the Weather Underground and other domestic terrorist organizations are working. A major aspect of the work is the government's response to events. When the lower classes of New Yorkers are unable to find alternate living conditions, the Feds step in, offering temporary asylum to those who apply – like New Orleans. This group consists of fringe aspects of New York culture as well as the American counterculture at the time. But instead of a matter of months, these people wait as years pass," he says.

As book one opens, it is 1980 and Uli finds himself in the middle of this geographically isolated city in the Nevada desert, not knowing how he or anyone else got there or who he is. Slowly he comes to understand that the army which initially governed the place has pulled out. Rescue City is now divided by two warring gangs that are much like our political parties. Their slang names are the Piggers (reminiscent of the Republicans) and the Crappers (alluding to the Democrats). Eventually he sees his job there as trying to bring order and restore freedom.

Arthur Nersesian is unique, and I'm not sure where that places him in the gallery



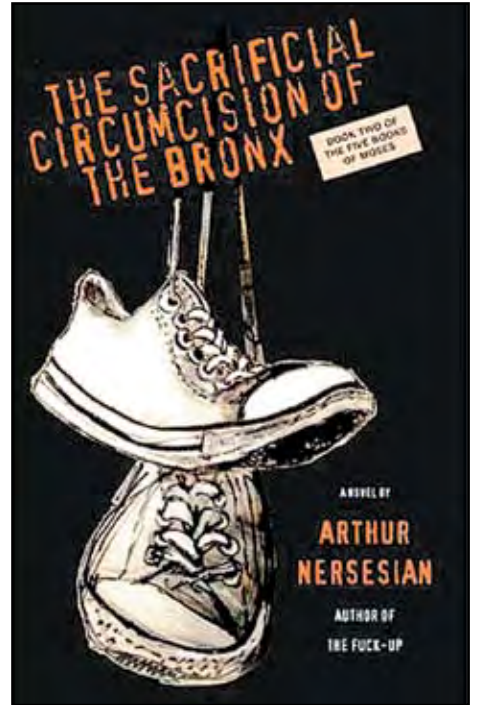
Arthur Nersesian.

of writers in my mind. Looking at his picture you may think he is a replica of one of the marginal characters he writes about, but there is an interesting story behind the wild hair and the less-than-groomed beard. Arthur is one of three sons born to an Armenian father and an Irish mother. Since he was frequently mistaken for Patrick, his identical twin, Patrick asked Arthur to grow a beard so that Patrick, the groom, would be easily distinguishable at his wedding. I'm assuming that by fulfilling his brother's request, Arthur either has a great sense of humor or thoroughly enjoyed the new identity, and I suspect it was probably a bit of both. The Arthur I saw at the Pasadena reading was clean shaven and with his wavy gray hair looked more like a 1960s English professor. And he was as helpful as any teacher guiding a student as he interrupted our brief interview to spend time with a young Asian writer who had mailed him a chapter from his novel. Arthur is responsive to his fans and his willingness can reap interesting results such as this fascinating tale he told me during our interview:

Arthur Nersesian: I got an email from a fan who told me that my book *The Fuck Up* was translated into Turkish. I said 'No.' It was translated into several languages but never Turkish. He suggested I go on the Internet and type in *The Fuck Up* in Turkish and tell me what you see and I see this strange language and did not recognize it, so I contacted my publisher suggesting that my book had been pirated or stolen, and they informed me that they had sold the rights. 'To Turkey?' I asked. 'Yes,' they said. But whenever they sold the rights they always sent me a copy of the contract, but in this instance they did not. 'How could you do this without even telling me,' I asked. I'm Armenian and I don't know how I would have reacted if I had known. They did it behind my back with no indication that they had done this.

Kay Mouradian: Did they pay you for the translation?

AN: Yes, they lumped it into my royalty check without telling me. There was absolutely no indication that they had done this. Soon afterward some Armenian friends said this isn't a bad



Cover of Nersesian's latest book.

thing. There is a humanist and liberalist movement in Turkey and seeing that we Armenians are human beings and we are writers is important and is good for our cause. From now on people who are reading my work are going to know I'm Armenian. *Chinese Take Out* was the only story where I mentioned I was Armenian and from now on there will be some kind of Armenian insignia in my stories because I don't want people to think I'm not aware. What my publisher did really pissed me off. If they had contacted me I would have thought about it and I don't know if I would have accepted the offer.

KM: Have you been to Turkey?

AN: My father's father is from Harput and his mother was from Constantinople. I remember my father would say he'd come home from school in the 1920s and his parents and their friends would be somber or crying about their lost ones and there was a heavy humidity in the air. I think it had a really traumatic effect on him. I went to Turkey in 1994 because I wanted to see these people. I wanted a first-hand experience and I found it weird, a strange mix, and I was getting ill. I wanted to see the place where my grandmother was from. I still think of it as Constantinople. On a tour, Turkey still presents itself as a victim as they said we were invaded by five armies, the English army, the French army, the Russian army and the Armenian army. They actually said that. Wow, the Armenian army really did a job on you guys! After about a week when I was leaving, a Turkish official took a look at my passport and pulled me out of the line, let everyone go and then with a smirk he handed me my passport. I'm glad that happened because any notion of reconciliation... those people there don't have any perception of what really happened.

Jennifer Belle, author of *High Maintenance*, describes Nersesian as this generation's Mark Twain and the East River as his Mississippi. My own intuition predicts that we will be hearing a great deal more about this Armenian author. He has a great talent. ■

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