

A Literary Conversation Among Generations: A Guide to Armenian-American Literature

By Michael Bobelian | February 8th, 2011

Every night, my four-year-old daughter chooses a book and we lie down side by side for a bedtime story. Her selections vary from picture-intensive board books to drawn-out storylines. After I finish reading, she tries to repeat the story from memory, leaving out some details, and inserting new ones as she mimics the act of reading. Some of what we read rubs off into her everyday life with consecutive days of Dr. Seuss leading her to speak in rhymes. What started as an attempt to instill a routine to her evening has morphed into a bonding ritual that is my favorite part of the day. In time, I plan to add my newborn son to the daily custom in the hope that both children will grow up to adore books as I do.

I love books. I love reading them. Scratching my thoughts in the margins. Contemplating how many of them to pack for a long vacation. And much to my wife's chagrin, accumulating them.

As I scroll across the shelves of my bookcases, I sometimes partake in a favorite pastime of mine: drawing up a reading list for my children. Some of what I've read is not worth sharing, even the classics habitually appearing on greatest-of-all-time lists and shelved conspicuously at bookstores, sometimes with a badge of honor from Oprah. At the least, I hope my daughter and son read my favorite books, about a few dozen in all. I didn't so much read these books as inhale them during marathon reading sessions.

Some of my favorites introduced me to new cultures or the innermost recesses of the mind. Others displayed a mastery of style or bowled me over with their exploration of the human spirit. It will be a tragedy — for me at least — if *Midnight's Children*, *Steppenwolf*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* remain absent from my children's lives. We are unlikely to discuss these books in any detail. Instead, they can serve as a cultural link between us, helping us share a set of common references and bring about a mutual understanding of the human experience.

Next to these pearls stand the few life-changers. Nothing epitomizes the impact of books on my life more than Robert Caro's [*The Power Broker*](#). Reading it during the summer of 2002 inspired me to become an author, steering the course of my life in an unexpected and fruitful direction. I hope that in the digital age where 140 characters constitute a conversation, my children will be willing to engross themselves in his 1,200-page tome.

And then comes William Faulkner, the author dearest and nearest to my heart. He explores the shadows of the past like no other writer I've encountered. I can't quite discern why I'm attracted to this theme of the past's unceasing intrusion upon our lives. Perhaps my family's century-long journey through exile and survival attracts me to his works, even

though — at least on the surface — the American South brought to life in his stories stands a world apart from my Armenian heritage. A closer look reveals that similarities abound with the sins of slavery overshadowing multiple generations of Blacks and Whites, just as the Genocide continues to cast a long shadow over Armenians and Turks.

It is no coincidence that another genre of writers I adore — Armenian-American authors — tend to harp on the same theme. Yet, I knew very little of this writing until my mid-20s. When my family immigrated to the U.S., I didn't speak a word of English other than “yes” and “no.” My mother learned our adopted language alongside me, and my father, who preferred British and American authors like Somerset Maugham and Ernest Hemingway, had seen little of Armenian-American writing. When he felt like picking up an Armenian title, he naturally deviated to books written in the Armenian language. So outside of William Saroyan, I remained ignorant of Armenian-American literature.

My transformation began fifteen years ago when I picked up Michael Arlen's seminal memoir, *A Passage to Ararat*. I don't remember how I stumbled upon it. Ironically, a first edition sitting on a built-in bookcase in my parents' basement remained undetected until a recent housecleaning. Regardless of the roots of my discovery, Arlen's depiction of Armenian culture and history resonated with me. His focus on the lives of Armenians, on our distinctive characteristics and personalities made me feel as if the author spoke directly to me in his journey of self-discovery.

After that, I consumed a steady stream of books from Mark Arax, Nancy Kricorian, Carol Edgarian, Peter Balakian, Aris Janigian, and others. These works, both fiction and non-fiction alike, mirrored my family's struggles with immigration and assimilation in forging a hyphenated identity, bared open the conflict between generations, and tackled the collective challenge of overcoming loss. I laughed at insider jokes, took comfort in familiar dialogue and familial settings, and shared the characters' feelings of frustration and exhilaration.

The talent erupting from these pages made me regret that I hadn't come across these books earlier. Arax's search for his father's murderers in *In My Father's Name* proceeded as dramatically as any page-turning crime-thriller. The recreation of Armenian life in Fresno in Janigian's *Bloodvine* and *Riverbig*, with its struggling farmers, juxtaposition of provincialism and discrimination, and scenes of communal life, inspired nostalgia for a place and time I had never known, yet wished had lived through. The strayed yet loving dynamics portrayed in the multi-generational family dramas of Edgarian's *Rise the Euphrates* and Kricorian's two novels — *Zabelle* and *Dreams of Bread and Fire* — apply as much to Armenians as any people living within the shadows of the past.

The pleasure of recognizing my people's idiosyncrasies, my family's habits, and my own thoughts in these stories kept me searching for more. I imagine that my children will experience the same joy when discovering a little of themselves and their ancestors in these pages.

Ultimately, any accounting of Armenian-American literature begins and ends with Saroyan. Despite his productivity and legendary status within our community, Armenians confine him to two works: *My Name Is Aram* and *The Human Comedy*. What a pity! Though he produced some flops, his best works fill up a couple of bookshelves with a diversity in style and structure glimpsed in few writers. The short stories in *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze* capture the ethos of the Depression through a portrayal of a youthful, desperate, artist's voice. While this collection catapulted

Saroyan to literary greatness, it remains, like many of his other works, obscure. One of my favorites, *Rock Wagram*, explores the internal conflict of a man pulled between tradition and assimilation, shedding light on a struggle common to many Armenian-Americans.

Saroyan's mastery of the short story traversed several decades. Various volumes gathered his best works but *Fresno Stories*, a pocket-sized book one can devour in a day, is as enjoyable as any. The collection covers his entire literary journey from a young upstart celebrating the joys and angst of his Armenian-American childhood to a reflective sage reminiscing about adolescence. The stories are simple and delicious: some of them strive for greatness.

During the past eighteen months, I spoke to Armenians in book stores, libraries, civic organizations, and universities across the country during my book tour. Regardless of the venue or make-up of the audience, Armenians lamented the dearth of literature chronicling our unique experience. The assumption is misplaced. *Forgotten Bread*, a recent compendium of Armenian-American writing organized by David Kherdian, makes plainly clear that Armenian writers have been conveying our story for a century now. The problem has been connecting these writers to readers.

It is heartbreaking to conclude that having spent so much time, energy, and resources maintaining our institutions, traditions, and heritage, Armenian Americans have done almost nothing to champion our literature. With no guidance from Armenian-American leaders and organizations, I had to discover these books almost entirely on my own. Armenian bookstores carried few of them, especially the older titles. Two of my cousins spent every year from kindergarten through high school at an Armenian day school, yet neither had read any of these books other than *Passage to Ararat*. Inquiries at a couple of other schools confirmed this trend. With few exceptions, younger Armenians remain unaware of most of these authors, other than Saroyan and Balakian. You can add Arlen to this pairing among older generations but not much else.

We pay a price for this omission. As it does in so many other societies, literature can serve as a cultural glue. It can provide common pillars of identity for recent immigrants and multi-generation Armenian-Americans and function as a depository of our neglected history. And like other traditions that shape and give meaning to our identity, it can bridge the gulf between generations, fostering a conversation between parents and their children about our heritage and one's place within it.

Armenian-American authors have bestowed us with an astounding gift by exploring every element of the Armenian experience, memorializing, and bringing to life our tortured and inspiring story, and they have done so through compelling prose and passionate storytelling. I want to bequeath this gift (see Reading Guide) to my children. Yet, I fear that I remain in a tiny minority.

In a passage from Saroyan's oft-recited quote, he lamented that our "literature is unread." Sadly but needlessly, he was then — and still is now — right.

Reading Guide

This is a list of Armenian-American titles I would recommend to my children as they grow older — to any Armenian for that matter, both young and old. It is by no means exhaustive or a list of the greatest hits. They are simply my favorites. The list excludes translations, authors outside of the U.S., and several worthwhile scholarly titles that most lay readers are unlikely to take interest in.

Mark Arax, [*In My Father's Name: A Family, a Town, a Murder*](#)
Mark Arax, [*West of the West: Dreamers, Believers, Builders, and Killers in the Golden State*](#)
Michael Arlen, [*Exiles*](#)
Michael Arlen, [*Passage to Ararat*](#)
Adam Bagdasarian, [*The Forgotten Fire*](#)
Peter Balakian, [*Black Dog of Fate*](#)
Peter Balakian, [*The Burning Tigris: the Armenian Genocide and America's Response*](#)
Viken Berberian, [*The Cyclist*](#)
Michael Bobelian, [*Children of Armenia: A Forgotten Genocide and the Century-Long Struggle for Justice*](#)
Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, [*Smyrna 1922: The Destruction of a City*](#)
Carol Edgarian, [*Rise the Euphrates*](#)
Vartan Gregorian, [*The Road to Home*](#)
Garin Hovannisian, [*Family of Shadows: A Century of Murder, Memory, and the Armenian American Dream*](#)
Richard Hovannisian, [*The Republic of Armenia \(Volumes I – IV\)*](#)
Aris Janigian, [*Bloodvine*](#)
Aris Janigian, [*Riverbig*](#)
David Kherdian, ed., [*Forgotten Bread: First-Generation Armenian American Writers*](#)
David Kherdian, [*The Road from Home: The Story of an Armenian Girl*](#)
Nancy Kricorian, [*Dreams of Bread and Fire*](#)
Nancy Kricorian, [*Zabelle*](#)
Micheline Aharonian Marcom, [*The Daydreaming Boy*](#)
Micheline Aharonian Marcom, [*Three Apples Fell from Heaven*](#)
George Mardikian, [*Song of America*](#)
Markar Melkonian, [*My Brother's Road: An American's Fateful Journey to Armenia*](#)
Aram Saroyan, [*Last Rites: The Death of William Saroyan*](#)
William Saroyan, [*The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and Other Stories*](#)
William Saroyan, [*Fresno Stories*](#)
William Saroyan, [*Here Comes, There Goes, You Know Who*](#)
William Saroyan, [*The Human Comedy*](#)
William Saroyan, [*Madness in the Family*](#)
William Saroyan, [*My Name is Aram*](#)
William Saroyan, [*Obituaries*](#)
William Saroyan, [*Rock Wagram*](#)
Leon Surmelian, [*I Ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*](#)