

## A. G. Lombardo

**Age:** Sixty-two. **Residence:** Los Angeles. **Book:** *Graffiti Palace* (MCD Books, March), a novel that retells *The Odyssey* during the 1965 Watts riots in L.A., featuring graffiti scholar Americo Monk as a tortured Odysseus. **Editor:** Sean McDonald. **Agent:** Bonnie Nadell.

HAVE been a writer since I was twelve years old, but life gets in the way of art until, older and wiser, you learn art and life are hopelessly knotted up. In my twenties I married, had kids, worked full-time odd jobs—truck driver, *TV Guide* writer, etc.—but I wanted to do only one thing: write. I wrote bad stories, ripped up failed chapters of novels. Finally I finished my degree and started teaching high school English in Los Angeles.

Clichés have a grain of truth: All English teachers are frustrated writers and poets, right? Years passed

as I taught English, raised a family, traveled; still I never stopped writing. Like the jazz sirens that bewitch Americo Monk in my novel, the muse always called me back. I wrote at night and during summer vacations; my wife, like Odysseus's Penelope, had—and has—*heroic* patience.

A decade passed, and it dawned on me that I was a writer because *that's what I did*. Maybe an unpublished writer, but, by Zeus, a writer.

Back in the nineties I published two short stories in literary magazines. I kept writing. I was a published author, though not in danger of winning any awards for prolific output; writing a novel eluded me.

*Graffiti Palace* was the amazing confluence of three worlds that crashed together: *The Odyssey*, graffiti, and the Watts riots.

Years ago I began teaching *The Odyssey* to my high school seniors. Exploring the parallels between Odysseus's mythic adventures and modern life with students ignited my imagination. At the same time graffiti muscled its way into my consciousness. It was everywhere: on the walls of my school, on the buildings I drove past. Some of my students doodled graffiti in their notebooks. I found some essays and taught my students lessons about taggers and street art. I took them on a field trip to the Watts Towers, a fantastic series of sculptures by Simon Rodia. From this strange brew of ideas Americo Monk was born, a street-haunting scholar caught in the 1965 Watts riots and struggling to make his way home to his pregnant girlfriend, Kar-mann. Monk—a new, gritty Odysseus—battles with his wits and heart through the fire and madness, as cops and street gangs scheme to seize the secrets of his graffiti notebook.

I wrote *Graffiti Palace*, off and on, for about five years. I sent queries to agents who seemed open to edgy material and voices, agents who represented writers I admired. A few agents asked

to read the first chapter; no one asked to see the rest. Imagine my surprise when Bonnie Nadell—who represented one of my favorite writers, David Foster Wallace—called me on the phone to say she liked the chapter and to send her the book.

Bonnie and I edited the book for almost two years. I was teaching full-time, and we cut and reworked about a third of the novel. Bonnie is not just an agent, but an editor as well, and finally she said it was ready, and she was right: She sold it in just a few days to MCD Books, an imprint of Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Sean McDonald, president of MCD, helped me hone and polish a few rough spots, and this past spring *Graffiti Palace* hit the bookshelves.

Write every day. You are what you do. Follow your literary lights and heroes and you will best them. The gatekeepers—agents, publishers, editors—exist not to bar or break you but to find and raise and shout your new voice to the world. Persevere and travel the odysseys of your imagination and you will find a way home.