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***Greedy Sparrow* Author Kasbarian Rekindles Armenia's Past**

By Tom Vartabedian

Lucine Kasbarian has written about marginalized peoples and cultures. Her last book, *Armenia: A Rugged Land, an Enduring People*, was a simplified compilation of Armenian history for younger readers. Now, the author has struck the folk tale market with an endearing tale called, *The Greedy Sparrow*, which she aptly dedicates to her ancestors and family. The story was first put to paper by Armenian poet Hovhannes Toumanian at the turn of the 20th Century.

The story, expressively illustrated by Moscow-based artist Maria Zaikina, tells of a sparrow who catches a thorn in his foot. As he asks for help, he sets off on an intriguing cycle of action that transports him through the Armenian countryside, encountering people engaged in traditional folkways. It ends with a surprising twist and conveys moral messages about greed, selfishness and using one's judgment.

An interview with the writer reveals some interesting facts about her new work, book publishing and Armenian folklore in general.

**TV: How did you learn of this tale and what made you want to retell it?**

**LK:** Long before I knew who Hovhannes Toumanian was, my father would tell me this story at bedtime in his family dialect. His grandmother, Hadji Touma Kazanjian, was a celebrated storyteller in Dikranagerd, Armenia. She would recite this and other tales from Western Armenia to my father when he was a child, singing and dancing as she did so. Toumanian collected stories from the Armenian oral tradition -- the sparrow's tale included --- and wrote them down, many for the first time. Since we descendants of genocide survivors have few tangible heirlooms, the sparrow's tale is especially precious to me. So I dedicated *The Greedy Sparrow* to my forebears, great-grandmother and father. I wanted to retell this tale because it contains timeless lessons for everyone, not just for children.

**TV: Why does your retelling end differently from the popular version of the tale?**

**LK:** As Armenian Library and Museum of America curator Gary Lind-Sinianian will attest, not all folk tales have a moral to the story. Some were just fantastical, outrageous or stood up for the underdog. The original tale of the sparrow contained the same lesson as *The Greedy Sparrow*, my original composition, yet I chose to present a variant of this tale --- which was also in the oral tradition --- because it most clearly conveyed that manipulation and dishonesty have their consequences. And unlike how the tale has been told orally, my version incorporates native Armenian landmarks to introduce readers to our patrimony. The wedding, for example, takes place on the island of Aghtamar, a place of great significance for all Armenians and very much in the news lately.

**TV: Tell us about the illustrations.**

**LK:** I gave my publisher an illustrated storyboard and authentic Armenian images, which our illustrator faithfully followed while putting her unique stamp on the book. I had suggested the superb Maria Zaikina to my publisher some time after the Armenian Poetry Project's Lola Koundakjian first pointed me to Maria's folk animations. The publishers immediately loved Zaikina's work and hired her.

**TV: What significance do you feel folk tales possess? What does this tale tell us about Armenians and their culture?**

**LK:** Folk tales can touch everyone, regardless of age, social, educational or economic status. They instill certain values and have withstood the test of time because of their simplicity, humor, wisdom and understanding of human attributes. I hope the cultural practices depicted in the book will show Armenian children everywhere that our time-honored traditions are highly prized. To address the deeper implications in *The Greedy Sparrow*, I've created a discussion and activity guide on my website.

**TV: How did you find a publisher for this tale?**

**LK:** Years ago, I attended a workshop. When it concluded, a book editor invited me to submit a manuscript proposal I had in mind --- and what eventually became *The Greedy Sparrow*. She liked my proposal and asked to see the manuscript. Ten years later, between publicity assignments, I sent it to her. By then, she had moved to another publishing house and said folk tales were not popular among --- nor purchased by --- major bookselling chain stores for their supervisors to consider it a worthwhile investment. I received the same response when I sent the manuscripts to a second editor. His publishing subdivision had officially ceased producing folk tales because they were not deemed popular or profitable enough. The third editor, whom I'd respected for many years, then received my manuscript and acquired it for her publishing house.

**TV: Your first book was published 10 years ago. Why did it take so long to publish another?**

**LK:** After the collapse of the Soviet Union and around the time I was writing and editing for magazines in New York, I was asked to write a straightforward introduction to the Armenian nation, which had regained its independence after 70 years. That resulted in *Armenia: A Rugged Land, an Enduring People*, published by Dillon Press/Simon & Schuster. I continued working full time, eventually garnering media coverage for books produced by Hearst Magazines. When I became Publicity Director for the Boston-based Red Wheel, Weiser and Conari Press, I was again in charge of seeking media exposure --- this time, for about 60 books a year. With that workload, pretty common for publicists, I rarely saw my family, let alone wrote for my own pleasure. I eventually moved back to New Jersey and formed my own

business, Progressive Book Publicity. However, when my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, I took an extended leave-of-absence to help care for her. During this time, my own writing again was not a priority. However, it's common that after years of promoting other peoples' books, energy develops within a publicist to produce their own work. Between elder care, a marriage, a new home, and shuttling frequently between New Jersey and Massachusetts, this book materialized.

**TV: What attracted you to writing and publishing? How does publishing run in your family?**

**LK:** Well, I come from a family of readers, writers, editors, teachers, artists and even librarians. My granduncle, Hovhannes Der Kasbarian, was secretary of the Armenian Progressive School in Dikranagerd who was slaughtered with other Armenian community leaders during the Genocide. His nephew --- my father Charles Garabed --- followed in Hovhannes' literary footsteps. Using the penname C.K. Garabed, he has been a lifelong writer and commentator in the Armenian press, a member of the Armenian Literary Society, and a columnist for *The Armenian Weekly* for the past 20 years. My brother Antranig is a former editor of *The Armenian Weekly* and a journalist in his own right. My maternal uncle, the late Nishan Hamparian, was an art director/ graphic designer and the principal of St. Illuminator's Saturday School in NYC. He was a stickler when it came to proper Armenian language use and was a great influence on our families. My other late maternal uncle, Ardash Hamparian, along with my father, were also driving literary forces in our family. Uncle Ardash was a book production guru who had worked at most of the major book publishers in NYC. He also handled book production for the Armenian Prelacy and received the St. Mesrob Medal from Catholicos Karekin 1 for his lifetime contributions to Armenian publishing. His sons --- my cousins --- Aram and Raffi Hamparian of the Armenian National Committee, are frequent contributors to the Armenian press. Ardash's daughter Lorig Hamparian (also a cousin) is a school librarian. Nishan's daughter Anahid Hamparian (another cousin) is an award-winning art director at the very publishing house where *The Greedy Sparrow* was published, though she does not influence book acquisitions. I also married a writer --- journalist David Boyajian.

**TV: What did you read when you were growing up?**

**LK:** One of the first books Mairig [Mother] read to us was a volume of Armenian history and legends she purchased in 1958 from the Mekhitarist Fathers in Venice. It was written by Father Vahan Hovanesian and titled *Badmoutiun Hayots*. I still think it's one of the best, most clearly written Western Armenian-language history books of its kind for children. Even as a child and still as an adult, I wish there were more Armenian folk tales available – either in simple Armenian or English. Today, many Armenian folk tales can be read in Western Armenian, thanks to Matig Ebligatian, who established the Cilicia Publishing House in Haleb in the 1980s.

**TV: Whom do you admire in the literary field of folklore?**

**LK:** The late librarian, storyteller and author Virginia Tashjian is one. Another is author-illustrator Nonny Hogrogian who won a Caldecott Medal for retelling and illustrating the Armenian folktale, *One Fine Day*. Researcher, writer/editor Susie Hoogasian-Villa is yet another. These women --- whom I envisioned as the keepers and disseminators of our Armenian folk traditions in the American literary world --- are my abiding heroines. Their books are listed, with purchasing information, on my website. I also have great reverence for the folk wisdom passed on to us through epics like *David of Sassoun*, *Gilgamesh*, *Aesop's Fables*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and *Tales from the 1,001 Arabian Nights*.

**TV: Are there any misconceptions about writing?**

**LK:** I think by now we know it's a misconception that being an author is a lucrative profession. It isn't, unless your name is Gabriel García Márquez, John Grisham or Bill Cosby. Writers write because they have a need to express themselves with words, whether there's money in it or not.

Another misconception is that you can only get work through connections. While connections can help, they don't compensate for ability. In fact, connections can work against you, at least in my family they can! My father and I can attest to how we have gotten jobs --- he as a columnist for *The Armenian Weekly* and I as an author --- in spite of and not because of the fact that our relatives worked at the publishing operations we approached.

Another misconception relates to what I do for a living. My background in book publicity does not make me a book agent or an acquisition editor. These are very different jobs and we do need Armenians to fill these roles. If I collected a dollar every time someone asked me to ‘agent’ their work or to ghostwrite a memoir, I’d probably have enough airfare to go to Armenia.

**TV: What advice do you have for those who want to break into book publishing?**

**LK:** To apply for book publishing jobs, visit career boards like [www.PublishersMarketplace.com](http://www.PublishersMarketplace.com). For aspiring writers, write every day, whether you plan to reveal your writing to the world or not. Subscribe to magazines like *Writer’s Digest*. Join publishing societies such as National Writers’ Union and critique groups such as those at Grub Street. Visit local bookstores to see what topics are popular, how books are visually designed and what types of writing styles exist.

Attend book conventions such as Book Expo. There, you can preview what’s coming to bookstores, attend helpful seminars, and perhaps even showcase your work directly to editors who greet conventioners between their appointments. Consult the *Literary Market Place* (LMP). This directory lists all publishers and agents, their areas of specialization, and how to contact them. More tips appear in the ‘Resources’ section of my website, [www.lucinekasbarian.com](http://www.lucinekasbarian.com).

That said, if you have an idea, don’t worry about whether it’s in vogue right now or not. If it has merit, and you are prepared to be your works’ best advocate, it will find an audience. Ultimately, there are no shortcuts. Pound the pavement, pay your dues, do your best work and work your way up.

**TV: What are your other interests?**

**LK:** I am a Western Armenian folk dance performer. I also love mountain hiking with my husband and friends and feel that doing so activates a cellular memory for the mountains of Armenia.

**TV: What are your future plans?**

**LK:** There are several. One family project involves the memoirs of my grandfather, Hampartzoom Hampartzoomian, a native of Sepastia. His writings about traditional folkways in the village of Khorokhon will interest those who wonder what life was like in Armenia prior to the Genocide. My brother has been translating this work into English.

**About the Author**

Lucine Kasbarian is the author of *The Greedy Sparrow: An Armenian Tale*, illustrated by Maria Zaikina and published by Marshall Cavendish. Kasbarian is a syndicated journalist and director-on-leave from Progressive Book Publicity, which promotes social justice activist-authors and their books. A graduate of New York University's journalism program, Kasbarian belongs to the National Writers Union, and the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators, among other organizations. The author and her husband, journalist David Boyajian, live and work in Massachusetts and New Jersey. For the production of *The Greedy Sparrow*, Kasbarian served as the model for the illustrator's rendering of the bride's features. The bride's wedding costume in the book even bears a resemblance to that of Kasbarian's own folkloric bridal gown. Further details about the book are available at [www.lucinekasbarian.com](http://www.lucinekasbarian.com).

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