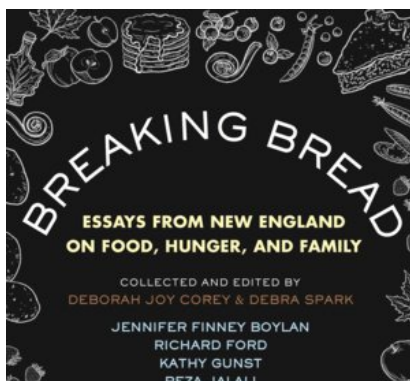


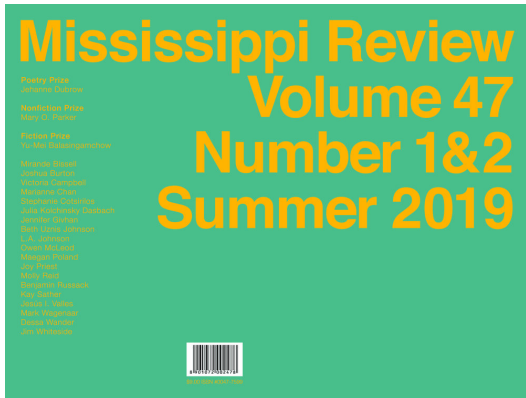
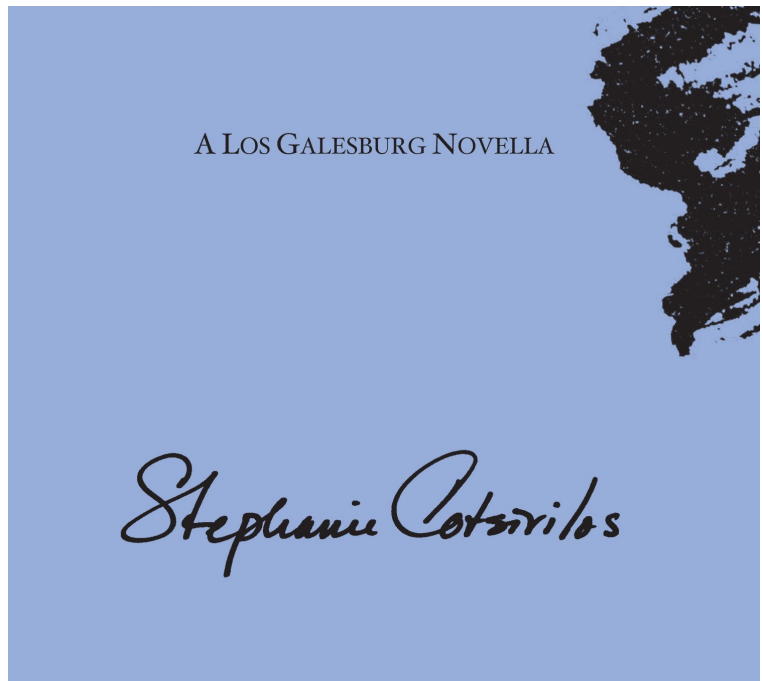
COMMUNITY

MY XANTHI: AN INTERVIEW

WITH NOVELIST, POET AND ESSAYIST STEPHANIE COTSIRILOS

By TNG Online Contributor Mark Wagstaff





Stephanie Cotsirilos' debut novella, "My Xanthi," celebrates a Greek immigrant woman whose grim wartime secrets teach a criminal defense lawyer about love's triumph over injustice. Deploying the humor and ambition driving first-generation American families after WWII, the narrative tracks a deeply personal story that echoes global displacements—whether through historic wars, exploitation and colonialism, or at borders and refugee camps today.

"My Xanthi" joins the literary tradition that produced novellas like "Passing" and "Goodbye, Columbus". In 175 pages, the reader travels through the clashing worlds of cantankerous, loveable lawyer-narrator Nick Milonas: southern California where he lives with his Korean-American wife and twin daughters, the suburban Midwest where his proudly assimilating family raised him outside mid-20th-century Chicago, and the bloody Greek history his forebears and Xanthi, his second-most-beloved maternal presence, fled.

Nick's narration opens with wry self-awareness and a deep-seated anger about injustice: *"I'm a patient man with a wicked temper. The upside? Being pissed off makes me good at what I do: death penalty legal defense."* Devoted to his family, yet passionate and troubled by his marginalized clients, he has two unexploded incendiary devices on his hands—a packet of unread letters from the long-dead Xanthi, and his teenaged daughter Tessa's challenge: Dad, how can you defend those people? Rattled and compelled to answer, Nick spends all night reading Xanthi's letters, mysteriously sent, no return address, by her daughter Koula.

Xanthi's voice alternates with Nick's childhood memories to envelop him. From the day in 1954 when she arrives at Chicago's Union Station, she embodies the confluence of the Old World's bitterness, the optimism—justified or not—of the New, and something more: *"There she stood, in black garments, individual, resilient . . . She was like that one blade of grass my dad's lawnmower couldn't cut, no matter how many times he went over it . . . She stepped toward us, pulling out of a movie, away from the first decades of a century pockmarked by war, famine, earthquakes, and a Great Depression denting the hubris of Union Station, colossal behind her."*

Through Xanthi's lens, Nick absorbs his coming of age, her wrenching choices, and the deep chasm between law and justice. Xanthi cheerfully rejects English; she protects Nick when his mother is ill; she fears automated appliances unknown in the post-war Peloponnesus; she manipulates family conflicts to survive; she tracks the Milonases' assimilation into America's false innocence as it buckles under the 1960s; she screams in her sleep, haunted by atrocity that stalked her after Greece's brutal civil war. Preparing to return home, she transmits to Nick a tenacious loyalty that defies the law's failure in the presence of cruelty. She also lies.

At dawn, when he finishes reading, Nick entrusts Xanthi's letters to Tessa. Justice remains elusive. Xanthi's calloused hands, love, and laughter, salving what she did to survive, endure.

"My Xanthi" de-marginalizes elder migrant women and positions their voices in a prominence that is often denied. The novella honors the aging, transnational, and displaced who, literate or not, were central to many first-generation families, including the author's. In doing so, "My Xanthi" takes an unflinching look at resilience and love amid humanity's flawed pursuit of justice.



Stephanie Cotsirilos.

A native Chicagoan, Stephanie Cotsirilos has translated New York careers on and off Broadway, in law, and in activism into writing that taps an extended family heritage spanning Greece, Peru, and China. She holds a J.D. from Yale Law School, an M.M.A. from Yale Music School, and a B.A. *cum laude* in Comparative Literature from Brown University. Drawing on her professional background and on the richly mixed legacies of her family's forebears, she seeks to meet readers where memory, humor, injustice, and resilience collide.

She is author of the novella "My Xanthi," released in 2021 by *Los Galesburg Press*. Her forthcoming essay, "Nourishment" will join those of Richard Russo, Lily King, and others in the essay collection, "Breaking Bread" (Beacon Press). Twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize, her work placed as finalist in Mississippi Review's Prize in Fiction (Volume 47) and has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *The New Guard* and its online Bang! series, and *Brilliant Flash Fiction*. Previously, she wrote songs and scripts produced at Manhattan Theatre Club, Playwrights Horizons, and Writers Theatre. She is an alumna of The Writers Hotel annual conference and Storyknife's inaugural retreat for women writers in Alaska, where she was Patrice Krant Fellow in residence. She now lives and writes in Portland, Maine. More at <https://www.stephaniecotsirilos.com/>

Stephanie Cotsirilos lives in Portland, Maine. Mark Wagstaff lives in London. This interview took place on Zoom.

Mark Wagstaff: "My Xanthi" is a novella of large themes. At every turn, it is a story about identity. We're presented with families of Greek heritage and the values, compromises, and levels of assimilation involved in migrating to the US. There is tension between holding onto roots and inventing a palatable self for a new homeland. How crucial are the impacts of that tension between the past and fitting in?

Stephanie Cotsirilos: Critical. In realizing he's loved Xanthi all his life without knowing who she really was, Nick faces unsettling dissonance with respect to truth, language, legacy, values, culture, and the separation of law from justice. Which things to hold close? Where to accommodate? Whom to trust? Similarly, Nick's Korean-American wife wants American success for her daughters but, like the old Greek gals in the book, has ancestral memories of deprivation—so she stockpiles food to avoid starving like relatives stuck in North Korea. Such feelings cross cultures—which was clear when a Chinese-American member of my extended family saw the film "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" and said, "That could be my family." "My Xanthi" explores the importance of extended family when the pressures of assimilation can mean giving up some of that connection. Sympathy with cultural struggle and identity also sharpens Nick's zeal for his clients, some of whom have migrated from Mexico to seek a better life and are caught between clashing worlds. That clash is central to the book.

MW: Xanthi's voice, which drives the story, is doubly-mediated. We read her words in letters to her daughter. And those letters are translated to English, because Nick hasn't sufficient Greek to read them. Has Nick made a deliberate choice about his identity?

SC: It's less deliberate than organic. He's the product of the assimilation his parents value so highly. Like Nick, I grew up in a striving household that initially functioned in both Greek and English, and my own first language was Greek. I can vouch for its tough alphabet and diacritical marks. Nick would have had to make a huge effort to embrace that instead of Americanization. To return to Xanthi's voice, its timber and cadence triggered the story, as did Nick's voice. My goal for Xanthi was to render the rhythm and meaning of her Greek while writing English, to make the English sound translated, to capture, if I could, sentiments like "I eat the universe to find you."

MW: In a story about two generations of lawyers, it's clear that notions of duty, of fidelity, thread through all other considerations. Nick tells us he learned about fidelity from Xanthi. How do you see the practice of law shaping these characters' actions?

SC: Loyalty, law, order—and, by implication, chaos—especially torment Nick and Xanthi. You're correct to juxtapose and possibly connect duty and fidelity to due process and legal practice. But is that connection authentic? Does it yield justice? Does hazard intervene, and is it more powerful? What Xanthi knows and what Nick discovers even more deeply than he already has is that law can be both champion and enemy of what is right. Thanks to Xanthi's story, the possibility of mercy hovers. Bryan Stevenson's memoir, "Just Mercy", is eloquent on that possibility. Xanthi's example to Nick is of duty driven not by abstractions but by love for family—which is why she traveled to America to work and send money home without seeing her grandchildren for years.

MW: Xanthi's arrival in 1954 is presented as an insurgence of the Old World into the New. Xanthi is beautifully described as "like that one blade of grass my dad's lawnmower couldn't cut." Does she embody a cultural disconnect between an immigrant family that "made it" and a reminder of what's been left behind?

SC: Both a disconnect and a reminder that becomes more precious as time passes. Once she is gone, there is little in Nick's life with Janet and his daughters that holds hands with Nick's background. His clients share the migrant experience or the injustice of racism and exclusion, but no one seems to bring to him, as Xanthi did, the echoes of what his own family might have been if they'd missed the boat, so to speak. Not only is Xanthi the avatar of what Nick's family left behind, she is also the holder of a lamp up to what it is, exactly, that Nick's family has opted for, and what blessings and lies inform the American Dream. There's a stark contrast between an ancestral history of subjugation and a family's aspiring to an American future. Yet through the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the rising Civil Rights Movement, Xanthi sees the fissures in a mainstream American society that has comfortably cast myriad races and ethnicities as suspect.

MW: There's a notable amount of conflict between the older women in the family, jousting for authority and prestige. Is the role of older women, as arbiters or antagonists, a subtext here?

SC: Yes, absolutely. Xanthi, Nick's grandmother, his mother, Janet, and other women form unseen alliances and carry the weight of various insights throughout the book. Elder women in particular lie at the core of some mystery Nick strives to unravel. Even the relatively young Janet hints—possibly from the viewpoint of a non-Western matriarchal power structure—that she performs silent assists for Nick and would lie to him if necessary to protect something essential. So it may be that the women are guardians of a knowledge and reality different than the more mainstream one in which Nick's father operates.

MW: In Xanthi's letters we see a strong understanding of children's needs. The choices and consequences of parenting are a recurrent theme. If Xanthi represents "peasant ways," do you see these parenting choices being shaped by social class as much as by cultural identity?

SC: In the book, certain parenting themes transcend class and culture. For example, in defiance of Greek village tradition, Xanthi and her husband encouraged their girls to read and to question society with some sophistication, but not without a heavy price. I think she and Nick's mother, Mrs. Helen, share the wish to honor children's autonomy. For example, Mrs. Helen asks about the wishes and need for love of the pregnant teenager whose father wants her to get an abortion. Xanthi declines to pass judgment on the girl and will not even divulge the girl's name to Koula. Despite the class and cultural differences between Mrs. Helen and Xanthi, they share a sense that even a girl in deep

trouble deserves affection and respect. There is something about the truth of children that these women are protecting.

MW: The book has several sets of fathers and sons and mothers and daughters. How do gendered roles shape the narrative around family dynamics?

SC: Hm. You make me think that the father-son relationships can carry admiration and love in the book, but also challenge and combat, particularly if the sons go astray. The mother-daughter relationships, though often fraught, seem to incorporate a sense of conspiracy.

MW: The story is rich with “Immense, character-shaping women.” Pitched against these women is the keynote theme of male brutality—whether the brutalities of the law (punishing each trivial mistake with excessive incarceration) or the brutalities of lawlessness in the Greek Civil War (arbitrary violence enabling private vendettas). Nick observes that Xanthi and his mother are “a team, ready to clean up after male brutalities.” Are the women performing a traditional role, in repairing the damage done by men?

SC: I return here to the conspiracy among women. I’m not sure that the women simply clean up after the brutalities of men—recall the women throwing stones at the young girl in Xanthi’s village—but, rather, clean up after brutalities, period. It’s not that women would behave so perfectly if they had more power, but that women in traditional Greek roles knew how to weaponize their purported powerlessness. As for Xanthi’s own form of justice, yes, of course, she uses the lawlessness of the male society to her own ends.

MW: It’s unavoidable in the narrative that Xanthi is with Nick’s family and not with her daughter Koula in Greece. There are economic reasons for this and Nick wonders if the letters are payback, “For displacing Xanthi’s daily habits of love away from you and toward me and my family.” Many women go through the same struggle. How crucial is that displacement of affection?

SC: There are many authors who deal with this displacement of affection—or at least mothering time—among women of color expected to care for the homes and children of white families. I think that form of displacement does affect the characters in “My Xanthi,” but Nick more slowly. He received the privilege of Xanthi’s daily love, and only realizes late in life that such daily love might have felt stolen to Koula. I’m glad you asked about her. She has probably had to deal with that theft her whole life. She went through many losses and she has become stolid and seemingly undemonstrative. The reader will decide how undemonstrative Koula really is. Even I wonder why she sent the packet of letters to Nick. She probably knew his Greek was halting. The letters might be a form of challenge: find the secret in these words if you can. Koula enters into Nick’s life by sending those letters. And, perhaps, by doing so, she reclaims her place in Xanthi’s life.

MW: The story makes effective use of a number of classic literary devices: familiar things seen through a stranger’s eyes, letters which explain things unknown at the time, and fragmentary, overheard conversations. What led you to tell this story through those classic devices?

SC: They developed naturally. I had to stay with Nick’s reality so the reader could follow where he was, physically and emotionally, the night he confronted his past with Xanthi. Flashbacks through him to her inner life would have diverted the narrative and given him a non-believable power to enter Xanthi’s mind. That would have diluted her voice. So the letters did a lot of work in permitting her to emerge vividly on her own and to see things as only she could. As for the heating vents, I didn’t anticipate the function they would serve. I was just telling about something I knew to be a sensory truth—that Nick lived in a house with a forced hot air heating system. But thanks to the air ducts, you heard something different from downstairs depending on which room you were in upstairs. That meant that different characters heard different pieces of what was going on. Those overheard conversations carry the reality of each moment.

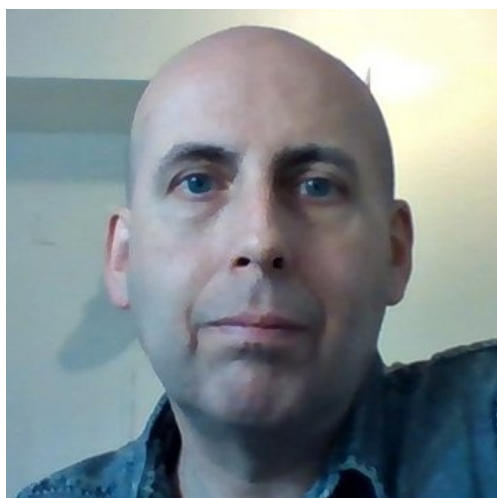
MW: It feels as though you could share a world of stories about the Milonas family, in the way that Salinger did with the Glass family. Do you have plans to follow up any of those tantalizing hooks from “My Xanthi”?

SC: Yes, and I think Tess will lead the way.

MW: What are you working on just now?

SC: A novel entitled "Expiration Date". Based on a true story, the novel is literary fiction with legal thriller plot twists. It's about a murder victim's mom, the mom's childhood friend, and a death row prison guard, all three of whom face becoming collateral damage in Arkansas' grisly solution to its broken supply chain of lethal injection drugs. By the time the three of them cross paths in Arkansas, they've found a way to throw sand into the gears of pending executions, and discover something rash and true and brave in themselves.

::TNG::



Mark Wagstaff.

Mark Wagstaff's work has appeared in *The Write Launch*, *Garden*, *The Meadow*, *The Piltdown Review* and *The New Guard*. He won the 39th Annual 3-Day Novel Contest with the off-kilter rom-com "Attack of the Lonely Hearts," published by *Anvil Press*. Mark's second short story collection "Burn Lines" was published by InkTears. His new novel "On the Level" will be published in Summer, 2022. www.markwagstaff.com

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