"A BOOK THAT INITIATES 100 YEARS OF HISTORY"

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Category: Opinions

Tom Vartabedian, Haverhill MA, 7 August 2016

One never knows what the day's mail will bring. One moment, it could be a solicitation from a worthy Armenian Cause. Another time, it could be a publication.

In both cases, there's a plethora of activity that makes my life more compelling --- for richer or poorer. The solicitations are met with prudence. As for the books, journals and magazines, they carry with them a knowledge and understanding that writers will also be hard at work in promoting their craft.

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Such a book is "Impact of an Armenian Nation," which bridges the past, present and future with 100-plus facts about Armenia and Armenians, each so vividly depicted on each page. It's an initiative of the 100 Years, 100 Facts Project created by Lena Maranian Adishian and written by Nareg Seferian that found its way here from the West Coast.

Little did I know that Nareg and I are no strangers. On a personal note, he's followed my writing for years and was happy to briefly make my acquaintance during the Armenian Genocide commemorations at the Statehouse in Boston in 2012.

His letter contained this postscript: "Please keep on sharing your stories, God bless you, particularly at this challenging time of your life," referencing my battle with terminal cancer. In such trying times as these, words of inspiration from writing peers are a blessing in disguise.

The letter also mentioned my work at The Haverhill Gazette and Armenian Weekly, along with the genocide classes we've been bringing to public schools over the past seven years. I was happy to

equate some of my work with their efforts to the cultural mainstream.

"You have influenced the path our project has taken for which we are grateful," they wrote. "Your work with youngsters over the years can only serve as an inspiration for us as we strive to make a difference for a new generation through our own efforts."

Beyond all that, I must admit, this was no ordinary book but one meant to be treasured and preserved for generations to follow. It's a "tour de force" if you'll pardon my over-exuberance, simply because everything I ever wanted to know about my history and heritage is found within its contents.

The collaborators pulled all the stops to make this not only a palatable read but a research tool for anyone looking for a nutshell approach to our most venerable lineage. It all stemmed a year ago from a website which turned into a successful on-line educational initiative that ran during the centennial year.

The 100 separate facts presented through the website --- along with five bonus facts in the book --- cover various aspects of the Armenian experience from historical episodes to features on various Diaspora communities, notable individuals all the way to music, dance, sports and entertainment.

In preparing the website, this spirited duo wanted to showcase the breadth and richness of the legacy that Armenians share as the centennial of a deeply significant turning point of their heritage was being marked around the world.

"In coming up with this revised and updated book version, the idea is to share this work as a commemorative volume, something that could tangibly remain and speak across generations, whether in living rooms, schools or libraries," they point out.

The co-authors took the initiative for such a project by reiterating what we have emphasized all along inside our communities. They list five basic reasons:

- Celebrate our survival.
- Never forget the genocide.
- Be smart. Let's learn it and share it.
- This is as much about the future as it is about the past.
- Do something for the centennial.

They go on to remind us that not everyone can be a scholar or an historian. The key is to involve

ourselves with our ancestry in any way that seems comfortable, whether it's reconnecting with a church, taking an Armenian class, attending a picnic or concert, sending your children to camp, contributing monetarily, visiting Armenia or volunteering your time. The opportunities are boundless.

I often wonder about the apathy that's out there in most every community or why more Armenians don't get involved with their heritage. There are so many talented people in our midst that have skills and resources to benefit our society. So why aren't they engaged?

Perhaps if they discovered this book, attitudes might change a little. No doubt, they'll be impressed by our achievements over time.

As a writer myself, I can appreciate the work that's gone into this monumental enterprise and can only thank Lena and Nareg for the time and commitment they both exhausted.

For more information, please visit 100 Years Facts Project. You won't be disappointed.

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Bohjalian's "Idyll Banter" Still Hits Home

Tom Vartabedian, Haverhill MA, 16 July 2016

What becomes of old books written by well-known authors? They either disappear into a yard sale, found in a disposal section of an antique store if you're lucky, or put on a library shelf with other authors and sold for a buck?

That's where I found a copy of Chris Bohjalian's earlier work titled "Idyll Banter," which was compiled in 2003 by Three Rivers Press, a division of Random House.

If the name didn't catch my eye, it was the photo of a Jersey cow wearing black boots with a red farmer's cap snug on its noggin'.

It was right there on a shelf with other great writers like Grisham, Baldacci, Hemingway and Michener --- thereby putting this Armenian-American novelist in fine company.

For a $5 bill, you could have a lavish collection of good books to last you the summer through and well beyond.

I happened to e-mail Bohjalian about it and he appeared overwhelmed to see an older work still garnering attention. Better there than with hordes of other discards at the annual library sale or collecting dust inside the antique shop.

"One of my all-time favorites," he tells me. "Writing novels and getting them circulated is one thing. 'Idyll Banter' holds a special place. It's encouraging to still see readers gravitating toward them."

And rightfully so. It's a collection of his columns for the Burlington (VT.) Free Press where he has remained a columnist since 1992. He dedicated the work to his family and friends of Lincoln, VT., where he makes his home.

It's quite the treasure about weekly excursions surrounding a very small town, much like Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion" and "Lake Wobegon" series he's done for decades before his recent retirement. I was among his many admirers.

I had my eye on the book but before I could retrieve it, along came another bargain-hunter and quickly removed Bohjalian for a look-see. There she was thumbing through the work before replacing it with the Baldacci. Her loss, not mine.

I already had a copy of "Idyll Banter." So why would I want to duplicate it? Well, the other one is a hardbound version and offered a picture of a typical farm scene. Good, but not a sacred cow.

I would gift it to someone, which is what I usually do with books I read. I'm not one attracted to those book bins by the side of the road. I would rather take it with me to the gym where I work out each morning and put it inside the men's locker room.

Sometimes they go, other times they do not. I will then offer the book to a hospital which I visit weekly for cancer treatments and pass it to the mobile library which visits patients in their infusion rooms. I've gotten books from there. Others I've offered.

Along with the accolades that have been passed Bohjalian's way from columnists like Dave Barry and others of his kind, the author ramrods his way to other subjects quicker than an intrusive squirrel that's gone berserk inside your kitchen while you're away.

Since then, there's been a dozen other books, including "The Sandcastle Girls," which is currently being filmed into a movie. More on this later.

If anything was a breakthrough, you could very well state a case for "Midwives," an Oprah Winfrey selection that grabbed top billing in the New York Times.

Being a columnist myself for 50 years, I would gravitate to "Idyll Banter" and see how another writer approaches life inside his community. I tend to be big on small-town libraries, finding them cordial, home-spun, and definitely a mainstay.

More people visit my local library than any other institution in town. In fact, it's part of a consortium with other libraries in the area. If they don't have a book or DVD you desire, they'll order it for you. Within days, it's yours to enjoy.

In his columns, one especially reached out to me titled "Losing Your Library." Apparently, Bohjalian did some venting here about facing such a loss inside his small Vermont village. It was not due to funding cutbacks or anything of the sort but to a natural disaster.

This one happened to be a flood that rampaged and devastated the area, sending the library to its demise. How sad as roomfuls of books and CDs went floating along with other debris to a shallow grave. I cannot imagine my city without its library.

I wound up donating the book to the mobile at the cancer institute, thinking maybe it might wind up in the hands of another patient. I got my wish.

The following week when the mobile appeared, I checked the contents and Bohjalian's book was nowhere to be found. It's the stuff that would bring a smile to any author's face, even Baldacci.