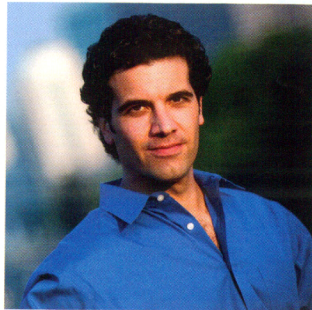


## Love at first write



A debut novel is the high point of an author's career. "It's a GO and the hardbacks are being bonded for release," shouts Jim Zervanos's publisher. Zervanos's debut novel, *LOVE Park*, hit the shelves in May, and there's no stopping where it will go from there! So how does a kid go from playing baseball in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to becoming an author living in Philadelphia? **Pamela Spyr**s had a chat with Zervanos to find out where his inspiration to become an author came from and where he plans to go with it.

**Pamela Spyr**s: Authors are constantly reading. What's on your shortlist at the moment?

**Jim Zervanos**: Just last night I finished one of my favorites, Philip Roth's first, *Goodbye, Columbus*, and I'm nearing (once again) the end of *The Great Gatsby*—these two are books I return to every few years, for good health. I recently read Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* and Curtis Sittenfeld's *American Wife*, which I thought deserved all the high praise it got last year—she's an author whose next book I'm looking forward to reading.

**PS**: So you're an English teacher at Penncrest High School in Media, Pennsylvania. What's the most challenging assignment you've given to your students? And how do you make it exciting for kids, or even relevant to their lives today?

**JZ**: A book report on *LOVE Park* of course! Let's see...during the last month of the AP Modern Literature class I teach, my students make a short film. They're reading J.D. Salinger and considering the relationship between film and literature. They've written their own "modern" short stories, and now, in small groups, they develop an original screenplay and make a movie that runs anywhere from five to twenty minutes long. In the last decade, since I first assigned this project, the quality of the films has evolved in ways I never expected, along with technology. My students put a lot of time into these projects. They are naturals when it comes to

telling stories through sound and images—they've grown up with digital video cameras. The finished products are stunning. In the last week of the semester we have a Movie Night, our own little festival, when we gather in my classroom and watch all the student films "on the big screen."

**PS**: So many writers collect real life experiences for their work—and I'm sure being of Greek decent you've got plenty of stories to tell! Do you ever struggle with how much to fictionalize an actual event versus being true to the facts?

**JZ**: I remember one short story I wrote in my twenties. I gave myself an assignment to write a story that had no "Greek" element for once. For some reason I didn't realize yet, everything I'd written had some Greek aspect. I thought of myself as American after all; I was just trying to write the best stories I could. The first draft was okay—it was about a married couple living in the suburbs of Philly—but when I changed the wife's character into a Greek exchange student who had married this American too soon after college, the whole story fell into place. That experience helped me understand what I'm interested in deep down, even in my own personal life: the tension between modern American life, which is dominant, and traditional Greek life, which is in the background. This balance is endlessly fascinating to me. The book I'm working on now is inspired by the journal I kept while living in Athens for a year, with my wife, during our first year of marriage. I thought of keeping the book a memoir—there are hilarious and amazing "real-life" experiences that need no exaggeration or alteration—but I can't seem to get at the truth I'm after if I'm not making stuff up.

**PS**: I understand you're a graduate of Bucknell University and I know Philip Roth went there as well. Did you ever get an opportunity to meet him?



**JZ**: No, never had the chance to meet Philip Roth, but I've always felt proud to share his alma mater. He's been a tremendous influence in my life and my work; I really connect to his writing. In a sense, he's been my greatest teacher, alongside John Updike. I can identify with their sense of place, their sense of connectedness with their roots—not to mention their fascination with the themes of religion, sex, and art.

**PS**: So unfortunate to lose John Updike this year... What would you say set him apart from other authors?

**JZ**: Updike was the first writer I read who made me want to be a writer. In college, when I read the first pages of *Rabbit, Run*, I was drawn instantly to what I saw as a kind of athleticism to his prose. There was sympathy and irony working together in the narrator's voice, and I felt tuned in to his young male characters; he also had a painter's eye for color and detail, and I liked that. A few years later, when I really set out to write fiction, I would read Updike for inspiration—any random page would do—to feel the rhythm of his language, and it wouldn't take long to get the fuel I needed.

**PS**: Were there any Greek authors who influenced you?

**JZ**: Nikos Kazantzakis is among my favorite authors. *The Last Temptation of Christ* is a book that influenced me profoundly, not just as a writer. Who else examines the modern struggle between flesh and spirit, and between past and present, with such ferocity? I admire his bravery, his passion, and his compassion. I also like Harry Mark Petrakis very much; when I read his novel *A Dream of Kings*, I aspired to write with that kind of exuberance.

**PS**: Do you have any other creative outlets besides writing?

**JZ**: I do actually! I have a passion to paint, though I'm in withdrawal, having been immersed in writing this novel for the past

five-plus years. Still, I've managed to make at least one painting a year, but I'm determined to do a lot more. Drawing and painting were my first creative passions. As a kid I would doodle for hours. Painting is a real outlet for me—to get away from formal thought, away from language altogether. I like Van Gogh, Pollock, and Warhol—big, colorful paintings. In my own paintings, I'm open to any subject matter—portrait, still life, landscape, or abstract—but inevitably I bring my experience and sense of humor to the picture. In that sense, my writing and painting have a lot in common.

**PS**: If *LOVE Park* were turned into a Hollywood movie, whom would you like to see in the cast?

**JZ**: What a fun movie to cast! Definitely Monica Bellucci (or Penelope Cruz, or Selma Hayek) as the forty-ish "exotic widow." Daisy Diamond. Need we go on? Okay, this will seem odd, but, honestly, Seth Rogen would be the perfect Peter Pappas—the smart, but comically bumbling, leading man, the middle son, lost among this cast of attractive, dynamic characters (I saw in the news that Seth Rogen just dropped a lot of weight—he'd have to gain those pounds back). If Christina Ricci can still pull off an eighteen year old, she's a shoo-in for Peter's brilliant goth-hippie sister, bound for California—otherwise, or better yet, Ellen Page, of *Juno* fame. A few years ago, Billy Zane would have been the perfect Andrew, Peter's cool and handsome older brother; now, with a touch of gray, and still with that twinkle in his eye, he might make the perfect Father Pappas—dashing and ageless. Mrs. Pappas is strong, lovely, and elusive: Isabella Rossellini. Allen Arkin is Uncle Theo; Olympia Dukakis, the volatile, yet elegant, Yiayia.

**PS**: Well sounds like you're ready to hit the big screen with that star-studded cast!

**JZ**: Just show me where to sign!