

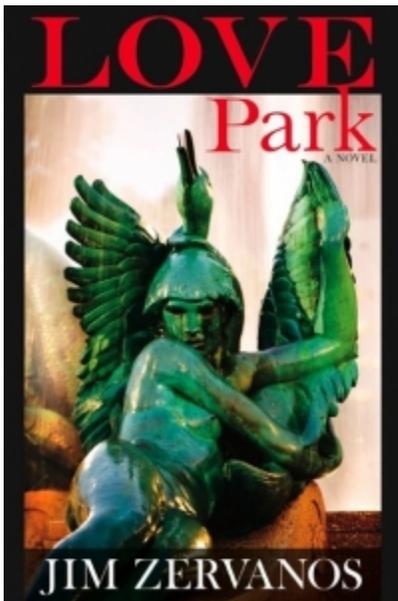
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[Love Park](#)



At a recent reading, [Jim Zervanos](#) explained that his debut novel, *Love Park*, was written in part as a response to John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, which itself had been written as a response to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. In short, Updike loved the premise of a novel written from the point of view of a young drifter, but he wanted the story to include a wife, child, and mortgage. The result: not as much drifting, but plenty of angst. Continuing on this path, Zervanos envisioned Peter Pappas, *Love Park*'s beleaguered protagonist, as a spiritual cousin to Sal Paradise and Rabbit Angstrom. Like Angstrom, Pappas is 26 years old and dealing with all the issues inherent in that fragile age. Yet the issues that Pappas must deal with are a lot different from those of his predecessors. Unlike Angstrom (and even *On the Road*'s Dean Moriarty), Pappas has never been with a woman in the Biblical sense—let alone been married. Instead he lives in his parents' basement where he laments that life is passing him by. Hence the update to which Zervanos referred: as with previous generations, “kids today” face the age-old problem of watching the promise of youth vanish, but in increasing numbers, they're seeing it happen from the sheltered vantage point of their parents' basements. For Peter Pappas, the journey from basement to real life

takes on epic proportions.

As the novel opens, Peter is pining away for his college girlfriend, with whom he always intended to write a book on Philadelphia's public works of art. The only problem is that he hasn't seen her since college—a good four years earlier. Now he's living in his parents' basement and painting other people's apartments for a living. (That he's invariably painting them white only underscores the void that his life has become.) Adrift in a relatively pointless existence, he meets a middle-aged widow named Daisy Diamond, whose mysterious relationship with Peter's father pierces the bubble the protagonist has been living in for so long and thus forces him to take his first tentative steps into the world at large. That Peter is completely smitten with Daisy only complicates matters, but complication is exactly what Peter's life needs. After all, he's been avoiding entangling relationships for all of his life, sidestepping various forms of commitment, and, in general, refusing to take risks—refusing, that is, to live.

And while living may be painful, it ultimately, Peter begins to realize, beats the hell out of the subterranean existence he's been calling a life for so long.

In addition to the influences that Zervanos has cited, *Love Park* boasts a number of other literary forebears as well. The forbidden relationship with Daisy Diamond (and the ugly truth it obscures) clearly echoes *Oedipus Rex*. The same relationship is also reminiscent of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*—only it isn't Daisy who carries the tattered love letter through her life this time around; it's Peter. Likewise, a passage near the end of the novel in which Peter observes that “we keep crawling, clawing our way back into the current, back toward our place of origin” offers a poignant twist on the final line of *Gatsby*: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” Yet if there's a single touchstone for *Love Park*, it has to be Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, as both works read with a high degree of confessional zeal, particularly when it comes to their protagonists' issues with family and sex.

Overall, *Love Park* represents an excellent debut. Throughout the novel, Zervanos demonstrates that he is steeped in literary, artistic, and cultural traditions, yet that he is also in touch with the real world. A sensitive, intelligent novel, *Love Park* provides a compelling, excellent read.