

“Greek American Sherlock Holmes to the Rescue.” Review of *Unsafe Harbor*,” by Gus Leodas. *The National Herald*, August 1 (2009) Book Section

By Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.

“Unsafe Harbor” by Gus Leodas revolves around a series of unexplained murders at the Long Island Yacht Club, an exclusive boat club located in Huntington Bay, New York. First, the club’s most vivacious member, an attractive widow named Renata Tredanari, is found naked, raped and murdered on her boat, The Champagne Queen. Shortly thereafter, a student on a magnetic fishing expedition near the club pulls up a “chain wrapped around a man with his hands tied behind his back.” (5) The man is the prominent attorney, Arthur Dryden, also a member of the elite club.

At this point the local community, especially boat club members, begin to panic and Mitchell Pappas, a Greek American investigative journalist, is called in for the rescue. When Leodas wrote his first mystery thriller, “The Forgotten Mission: A World War II Cold-Case Mystery,” he purposely made the lead character Greek American. “And why not?” explains Leodas. “There weren’t any ... Greek American ... fictitious protagonists in any mystery or suspense novels that I read about at that time. So, I called him Mitchell Pappas – Pappas being a popular Greek name and Mitchell because I had a Greek friend named Mitch and a cousin named Micho, thus Mitchell ... and that was close enough to a Greek and English name. I had no previous detectives in mind. My priority was to make him Greek.”

Although Pappas isn’t found drinking ouzo or dancing the kalamatiano, he is very Greek in being an independent worker, in being loyal to his friends, and in the sharpness of his analytic mind. (According to Leodas’ wife, Carole, a graduate of Hunters College with a masters in

education, these traits describe her husband as well.) When Pappas arrives at the crime scene, he struggles to determine if the two murders are related and if so, how. Did the now deceased Dryden kill Renata? If so, did one of Renata's other admirers then decide to kill Dryden to avenge her death?

Among the life-loving Renata's pool of admirers are two of the most powerful men in Huntington Bay, Mario Colarossi and Edward Marlowe. Colarossi, a wealthy businessman with alleged mob connections, had been enamored with Renata for years. They had dated some, but to the best of Pappas' knowledge, they never had sexual relations and when Colarossi proposed marriage, Renata had refused.

If Colarossi saw Renata enjoying one lover after the next, did his frustrations rise to the point of killing her? On the other hand, didn't Colarossi love Renata too much to even conceive of harming her, especially since Renata was also his cousin? Even if Colarossi was innocent of murdering Renata, if he knew or suspected that Dryden had murdered her, did he then kill Dryden (or arrange to have him killed) in order to avenge her death? Yet Pappas has no positive proof that Dryden murdered Renata or that Dryden and Renata even had an affair.

Renata's other politically and financially powerful admirer is Edward Marlowe, director of the CIA and friend of the president of United States. Was Marlowe one of Renata's lovers? If he was, at some point did she threaten to expose him, thus jeopardizing his career? If so, did he (or one of his guards) then kill Renata to silence her? Pappas' life-long friend, Professor Josh Trimble, swears he saw Marlowe leaving Renata's boat around the time of the murder. Yet other boat club members swear that Marlowe was with them the entire night Renata was killed.

The subsequent murders of additional club members could the point the finger at either

Marlowe or at Colarossi. That these two men are political rivals only complicates the situation. Is one of these prominent figures using the murders to frame the other? On the other hand, perhaps both men are innocent and someone else is the guilty party. Adding to the intrigue are the cryptic notes citing lines from Shakespeare and other classic works that attend every murder. Are all of the notes being sent by the murderer or are some (or perhaps all) of them being sent by someone who wants to throw the police investigation off course.

In the Greek analytic tradition, Pappas diligently pursues every clue and evaluates each piece of evidence with a keen eye for multiple interpretations. No one is above suspicion, not even Pappas' beloved friend Trimble or Dryden's wife. With each subsequent murder, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine who killed whom and why. It also becomes increasingly dangerous: each additional death makes it clearer and clearer that those involved in solving the crime are at risk of being murdered too.

Meanwhile Leodas artfully introduces us to additional characters and potential suspects. His descriptions of the complex relationships among various boat club members (alive and dead) are reminiscent of the complicated bonds in Greek villages of old (and those of today which have somehow been spared the effects of commercialism and the tourist trade). Like the traditional horio (village), the Long Island Yacht club is a relatively small community. Everyone knows everyone else. Many relationships extend beyond mutual club membership to include casual affairs, serious love triangles and economic and professional partnerships.

Perhaps because of his Greek background, Pappas is able to appreciate the role of these relationships in helping to solve the crime. Like a skilled Greek politician, he is able to identify actual and potential tensions between news reporters, police officials and other important

characters and uses his diplomatic skills to prevent these tensions from undercutting the investigation.

Reading “Unsafe Harbor” is like going through the maze of the mythological labyrinth at Knossos, Crete which housed the man-eating Minotaur. As Pappas proceeds through the maze of possibilities, he isn’t sure which way to turn to find the Minotaur (or perhaps several of them.) The ultimate outcome of “Unsafe Harbor” a shocker and it’s a testimony to Leodas’ writing skills that the reader is held in suspense until the very end.

“Unsafe Harbor” received an award at ForeWard Magazine’s 10th Annual Book of the Year Book Fair in 2007 and has been published in Germany and England. Like “The Forgotten Mission,” “Unsafe Harbor” is being sold in various foreign countries in English. It has been praised by readers on the Internet for the freshness and uniqueness of its setting. Leodas is also to be applauded for not relying on fillers, such as sensationalist sex scenes or lengthy descriptions of the personal lives of the detectives, to sustain reader interest. Every aspect of his book is clearly designed to promote the plot.

He (Leodas) promises action, drama and mystery. It is there,” writes the *New York Daily News* regarding “The Forgotten Mission.” The same holds true for “Unsafe Harbor.” It has enough action to make it appealing to a wide variety of readers. It may be of special interest, however, to the academically inclined in that most of the characters are highly educated. Yet even some of the most Apollonian (that is, intellectual) boat club members are subject to Dionysian-like erotic and other obsessions, to primitive revenge fantasies and to other untamed emotions.

Leodas’ parents came to the U.S. before WWII from Pirgi, the largest mastiha village on

the island of Chios. Leodas' father spoke four languages. When his export grocery business failed during the war, he found work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Shortly after the war, he opened a grocery in Astoria where the author worked regularly after school.

Leodas was born in the Bronx, but grew up in the Ditmars area of Astoria where he attended St. Demetrios. "Astorians consider St. Demetrios the Cathedral of Long Island," says Leodas. Upon graduation from New York University, he married Carole Georgaras and began working at the television department of McCann-Erickson/Interpublic, one of the top three advertising agencies in Manhattan. There he produced national television commercials, such as Coca-Cola, Buick, Nestles, Miles Laboratories (Alka-Seltzer) and many more. This led to his starting his own film production company/creative service in Manhattan. Here for 25 years he made short films, corporate films and documentaries as well as television commercials. He also wrote advertising copy and script and met many talented persons, all of which fueled his creativity and ultimately led to his career as a novelist.

Somehow in between making over 1500 commercials (for which he received four dozen advertising and film awards), Leodas found the time to write his first mystery, "The Forgotten Mission," featuring the Greek American protagonist, Pappas. Pappas appears again not only in "Unsafe Harbor" but in Leodas' third mystery manuscript, "The Huntress," and in a fourth manuscript, already plotted but not yet named. In "The Huntress" Leodas includes "clever clues from Greek mythology ... to expose the killers ..." and adds to Pappas' many talents by making him a "Greek chef who cooks classic Greek cuisine." Now Leodas' wife wants him do the cooking. "That won't happen," Leodas says confidently. "She's the best Greek cook I know."

Leodas's fifth suspense novel, which does not include Pappas, is about women working

at the United Nations. One of the most enjoyable parts of “Unsafe Harbor” is that women are not portrayed in a stereotypic unidimensional manner. The major female characters are not simply family women or professional women, but women who value both worlds and experience the conflicts and the joys inherent to having multiple roles.

Leodas is a member of the Directors Guild of America and the Mystery Writers of America. For six years he also served on the board of the Performing Arts Foundation of Long Island. For four years he was a volunteer participant on the board of the Heart Council of Long Island. During two of these years, he served as chairman and made speeches and raised funds to improve heart health in the area.

Following their marriage, Leodas and his wife became active at the Transfiguration of Christ in Corona. Leodas headed the sports program for five years and wrote the monthly church newsletter. Upon moving to the Huntington suburbs, the Leodas family attended St. Paraskevi. They are now members of the St. Nicholas Church which was destroyed on 9/11. The Leodas’ daughter Laura teaches math and their daughter Deanna is a television producer. “All is well on the home front,” Leodas reports.

In the late nineties Leodas surrendered to his muse and decided “to give up the long hours and travel” associated with his advertising and media activities and focus on his family and his writing. “Now,” he states, “I have the time to return to what I realize is passion – writing, loving the challenge (and probably the ‘masochism’ because of the commitment). ... My writing today is not connected with needing finances. It is a source of joy nearly equaling the time I am spending with my grandchildren ... And to prevent the possibility of being hit by a frying pan, I’ll add Carole to my other source of joy.”

When asked what role does Greek culture play in his life, he replied, "I am a Greek American. Is there anything else to be?"