

## BOOK REVIEW

## Pelecanos: Greek Americans and African Americans in Conflict and Solidarity

By Yiorgos Anagnostou  
Special to The National Herald

The Turnaround  
By George Pelecanos  
Little, Brown & Company,  
304 pages, \$24.99

I was well into my first reading of "The Turnaround" last November when a newspaper headline demanded my attention. An Ecuadorian immigrant was brutally killed in Long Island – a hate crime. Haunted by the atrocity, I pulled away from the novel for reasons that I will explain below. Once again, one of the nation's most harrowing dramas had played itself out. Teenagers, commonly male, banding together to hunt and hurt immigrants or minorities. Young men, most often white, bonding to harm those not conforming to racial or sexual norms. It is at night when this ritual of terror occurs. The pursuit takes place with some regularity, cruising neighborhoods in search for a target. Alcohol or drugs may be involved, conspiring with the darkness of the hour to unleash racism in its full horror. The moment when hate flashes – in the razor-sharpness of a denigrating slur, the stain of a stabbing knife or the finality of a gunshot – the human cost is unbearable and the scars inflicted upon those involved may take a lifetime to heal.

I felt compelled to return to the novel later that day. "The Turnaround" fictionalizes a real-life incident somewhat comparable with the one in Long Island, this time a 1972 lethal confrontation between white and African American teenagers. In Pelecanos' fictional telling the drama takes place in an all-black community, Heathrow Heights, in Washington, D.C. Two out of the three youths who intrude into the secluded neighborhood are Greek American. Billy Cachoris is at the wheel, while Alex Pappas coils at the back, an unwilling participant. Billy and the third passenger, Pete Whitten, insult a group of local teens, inciting violent retaliation in turn. This racial incident leaves Billy shot dead, and condemns James Monroe to imprisonment for manslaughter. Pete manages to flee the scene unharmed. Alex survives the melee, but his face is permanently disfigured by Charles Baker who is convicted for assault.

An act of racial domination turns deadly, but the line between the perpetrators and the victims is blurred. In the ensuing trial the court punish-

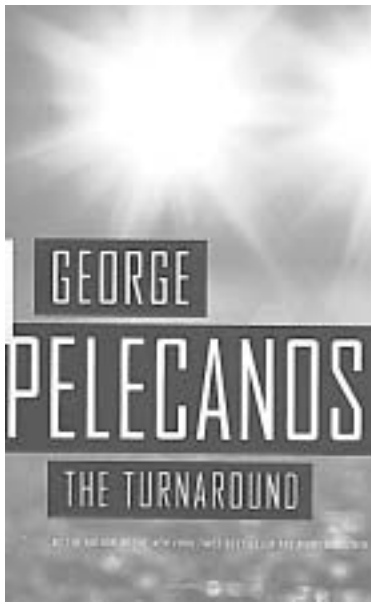
es the black teens who exercised physical violence, and absolves the white teens who inflicted symbolic cruelty. Once the novel establishes the specifics of the incident, the plot fast forwards more than three decades later to address how the participants, now in middle age, fare in life. The novel asks, how do human beings attend to the emotional wounds in the aftermath of violence? Where can justice be found if, according to the narrator, the justice system fails to administer full justice? That November evening, when literature and reality locked in a haunting unison for me, it was "The Turnaround" that I turned, grappling for answers.

Recognized as a prominent American mystery and detective writer, and a noted television scriptwriter, Pelecanos employs fiction to critique the class and racial divide in American society. He also examines social definitions of manhood, father-son relationships and relations between white ethnics and racial minorities.

"The Turnaround" retains its author's interest in crime fiction. It features an investigation of sorts, an amateur one by Alex Pappas, which eventually solves a puzzle surrounding the killing. But the book moves beyond the conventions of the genre of detective novel. It is ultimately preoccupied with the causes of racism, the consequences of hate crime, and the possibility of interracial redemption.

In "The Turnaround," the sociology and the history of Heathrow Heights is critical to the story. Originally a community of relocated former slaves, Heathrow Heights strives for a modicum of civic pride under layers of abandonment, racism and scarcity. It is a place under siege, assaulted by the neglect of city officials and absentee landlords during daytime and by racist intruders at nighttime. "To some of the middle and working-class white teenagers of the surrounding area, who learned insecurity from their fathers," the narrator lets out, "Heathrow Heights was the subject of ridicule, slurs, and pranks. They called it 'Negro Heights.'" The place is devalued, and its residents face class exploitation and racial discrimination. "Calling my mother a nigger after she's been on her feet all day, wearing that cleaning uniform of hers," James Monroe despairs over her dual domination. "She who has never judged anyone."

It is not unusual for the public to



refer to these kinds of places as ghettos infested with social pathologies, and to blame dysfunctional families and resident passivity for inner city plight. Pelecanos refuses to succumb to this popular mythology. He is too sociologically alert, too sensitive to the complexities of race and class to allow his fiction to function as an incubator of racial stereotypes.

His answer is to portray Heathrow Heights as a diverse place, and its residents as human beings capable of both lofty achievement and petty failure. Individuals may toil to improve their lives and sacrifice themselves for others, but they may also collapse under the weight of hopelessness. Ernest Monroe for instance, a family man, takes pride in his work as a bus mechanic, serving as the role model for his son James. A gas station attendant, James emulates his father's work ethic, and aspires for middle class respectability, his ambition only to expire in the aftermath of the racial incident. Charles Baker, in contrast, the one who scars Alex Pappas' face for life, finds himself engulfed in resentment and violence. His masculine toughness is displayed against a background of family disintegration – father's absence and mother's alcoholism – and the trauma of sexual molestation.

Pete, Billy and Alex also represent different worlds. Pete, a son of a successful lawyer, enjoys great class privileges. To the consternation of his father, he associates with ethnic peers, considering them, however, his social inferiors. In contrast, the social ambition of Billy, the son of a

car salesman, and Alex, son of a diner owner, is rather limited; they are both mediocre students. But a vast gap separates them. Billy shares Pete's condescension toward Alex. And they fundamentally differ in their racial attitudes. Billy is taught by his father to despise black people and to be afraid of them; Alex, who works at his father's diner with an all-black crew, learns to respect them.

Despite their differences, however, Pete, Billy and Alex share an important asset. The dominant society does not judge them by the color of their skin; race does not interfere in their everyday realities. This is unlike the experience of James Monroe when he steps outside the boundaries of Heathrow Heights in search of work. As a gas station attendant, the prejudice of blacks as unreliable workers places him on a daily trial, a disadvantage he compensates for to his own detriment: "never calling in sick, even when he was sick."

The racial divide catapults the teenagers into violent collision. Their worlds clash because their worlds are arranged hierarchically. Insulting Heathrow Heights becomes a rite of passage where white teenagers learn to exercise a sense of social and racial superiority. Humiliating the locals serves Pete as yet another occasion to assert his dominant social position. And for Billy, racial abuse offers a convenient venue to assert masculine bravado.

"The Turnaround" meanders through worlds of petty crime, vicious violence and family dissolution. It offers glimpses of hypocrisy and self-interested calculation among the wealthy; hedonism among nouveau rich drug dealers; and quiet despair or angry restlessness among the underprivileged. Devoid of authenticity and meaning, these worlds spin in a moral void. In juxtaposition to this vacuum, the novel offers a working and middle-class ethic defined by hard work, care for family, immense self-sacrifice, fairness to employees, pride in professional work and decency in social conduct. These values crosscut the racial divide, as both the Pappas and the Monroe families possess them.

The novel works as a morality tale, detailing how both families strive to keep at bay the external forces that threaten their moral fabric. But this world is fundamentally threatened by yet another force, an internal one: the racial incident that set Alex against the Monroe brothers

in the past continues to divide and torment these fundamentally decent people. To overcome this racial divide a redemptive solution is necessary, a closure.

"The Turnaround" does not offer an in-depth exploration of the inner lives of the characters in the aftermath of the incident. Instead, the characters function as social types, standing for different resolutions to the injuries of the past. Charles Baker is consumed by rage, seeking retaliation through blackmail. In contrast, Raymond looks for reconciliation through mutual trust, an attitude that seems to also console James. The narrator merely states the posture of Pete Whitten, who pursues a successful career unaffected by the incident, still blind to the humanity of the Monroe brothers. On the contrary, Alex builds a relationship of trust with Raymond, acknowledging his culpability in the incident. The narrator leaves no doubt as to Alex's regret: "Alex could have demanded that Billy stop the car. He knew that what they were about to do was wrong. He'd let it happen. Because of his inaction, many lives had been broken."

In the figure of Alex, the author construes a Greek American hero who refuses to forget inter-racial conflict in the past and who initiates action to restore justice in the present. He is portrayed as a dreamer, who invests in solidarity between Greek Americans and African Americans.

"The Turnaround" navigates an uncharted terrain in Greek American history, doing so from a unique vantage point. Instead of focusing on ethnicity alone, it concentrates on race relations. It thus demonstrates that in addition to ethnicity, racial issues also shape Greek American lives. In this respect, it rings a bell for artists, researchers and educators. It signals that cultural and historical renderings of Greek America will remain one-sided unless one situates Greek America in the wider landscape of U.S. racial relations.

One wishes however, that "The Turnaround" probed deeper into the race-issues that it raises. Whatever little Alex and Raymond let out on how racism infiltrates lives is simplistic, inchoate. Even Alex, the only character drawn to reading shows no interest in probing the topic. When he is called by Raymond to account for the incident, Alex's explanation is offensively timid; and his defense of Billy rings as unconvinc-

ing.

Furthermore, the novel is shy in addressing the multifaceted ways in which race may still be an issue in the multicultural present. For socially underprivileged African Americans such as Charles and yet another black character, Deon, race matters; stepping outside their circles and into the world of expensive establishments and stores is an uncomfortable reminder of their social and racial marginality. But what about Raymond? Because "The Turnaround" does not chart his transition from inner city to middle class respectability it is as if his racial identity and underprivileged background ceased to be a factor in the aftermath of the incident. Does the novel imply that race no longer matters in the lives of educated, middle-class blacks such as Raymond, particularly those who have escaped the inner city?

Last but not least, a related question: Alex and Raymond find themselves connected in what seems an equal relationship. Championing hard work, enjoying meaningful relationships, building on the possibility of redemption and healing the wounds of the past, both enter middle life contently, contemplating the potential for further fulfillment. But there is an economical asymmetry between the two but the novel but abstains from exploring it head-on. Unlike Raymond, Alex owns commercial property. It is this asset that affords James an opportunity to set up his own auto-repair business in partnership with Alex, making possible inter-racial redemption. Was race a factor in this inequality? Historians argue that working and middle-class white ethnics were afforded far greater opportunities than their African American counterparts. As a work concerned with the effects of the racial past in the present, "The Turnaround" owes a more substantive look on how Alex's past positions him as economically superior to Raymond. One only hopes that Pelecanos, a writer so much invested in exploring the racial divide, will tackle these delicate issues in future work.

Yiorgos Anagnostou is associate professor of modern Greek at The Ohio State University. His book "Contours of White Ethnicity: Popular Ethnography and the Making of Usable Pasts in Greek America" is forthcoming from Ohio University Press.

## The Switch From Temporal To Eternal: Are We Prepared For Forever?

By Rev. Dr. Frank Marangos  
Special to The National Herald

"Prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do."

I Peter 1:13-15

After years of extensive planning and expensive commercials the conversion – the switch – from analog to digital TV occurred on Friday, June 12, 2009. The new dedicated digital broadcasts promise a tremendous increase in video and audio clarity. The change was scheduled to occur in February, however, news reports began to circulate claiming that an estimated 6.5 million American households remained unaware. Congress intervened by providing a four-month extension.

Tragically, however, despite countless warnings, more than 3 million American households remained unprepared for the conversion. In fact, a Missouri man who did not understand why his television stopped displaying his favorite program used his high-powered rifle to destroy his set. After a standoff with police, the man was taken into custody still insisting that faulty rabbit-ear antennas caused the problem. His wife, on the other hand, claimed that her husband was unaware that the switch was going to take place. "He has been drunk a long time," she said.

Are you prepared? No, I am not referring to the arrival of digital TV,

or to the summer vacation months. I am speaking about the future arrival of Jesus Christ. Are we prepared for our Savior's Second Coming? The announcement of His return is mentioned during each weekly Divine Liturgy, with the congregation praying that we might be prepared and find a "good defense before the awesome judgment seat of Christ." Likewise, the first Sunday after Pentecost, commonly referred to as the Sunday of All Saints, focuses our attention on the manner that we shall experience the Final Judgment. We are warned to be prepared for this event as it will be the biggest switch that will ever occur in history, when life as we know it will be converted from the temporal to the eternal. On that day, we will no longer be able to claim that our transmissions from God are garbled and fuzzy. His signal will arrive with great strength, clarity and power!

Are we prepared for this switch? If, after years of announcements and warnings, millions of American households remained unaware and ill-equipped for something as insignificant as TV reception, how many of us will be prepared for our Lord's Return? I am fearful that like the unfortunate man in Missouri, many will be oblivious of the temporal to eternal switch due to "spiritual intoxication!"

How can we more adequately prepare for the sudden Second Coming of Christ? There is a passage in the Holy Scripture that provides a wonderful image of preparedness. The Old Testament reference describes how God expected the Jews

to eat the Passover meal. When God's chosen people were preparing to flee from their Egyptian captors, Moses instructed them to eat with their "cloak tucked into their belt, their sandals on their feet, and their staff in their hand" (Ex. 12:11). It is significant to note that these very articles of clothing provide the scriptural key to unlocking a major portion of the deep spiritual meaning behind the priestly vestments used by Orthodox bishops and priests. The staff, belt and sandals are all used to emphasize the need for vigilance, trust and faith in God as Savior – signifying our need to be ever prepared for the final Passover – the transition and switch from the temporal into the eternal.

When the Bible speaks of tucking our cloak into our belt, it is referring to our spiritual focus. Like the Jews in Egypt, we must be ready to respond to God without delay. But if we are not prepared to follow our Lord's directives by adequately focusing on His Word, our lives, like hastily worn clothes, might get snagged along the journey on the branches and thorns of secularism. Nothing must be allowed to so constrain or impede our path to God. If, however, we are to properly prepare to experience this most important historical conversion then our spiritual focus should be tightened and held fast by the "belt of Truth" (Eph. 6:13).

Imagine how many times the announcement concerning the analog to digital switch was broadcast over the television airwaves during the past few years. It was seen and

heard by millions, and yet without the focus of conviction and the dedication of action, it went unnoticed. Saint Paul insists that if we desire to "fight the good fight" we must focus on correct priorities and "clothe ourselves in Christ" (Galatians 3:27). As such, the belt of God's truth must be accepted, worn and tightened around our spiritual waists. If we are to properly prepare for His Final Coming we must be ready to convert our mind to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, our hearts to the elimination of vice and our bodies to the humble display of virtue. Only in this fashion can we prepare to switch our reliance from the temporal data of human knowledge to the eternal truths of God's wisdom. Therefore, as David insists, "having our trust in God's plans and purposes . . . we can stand firm" (Psalms 33:11; 20:8).

Together with the belt of truth, our preparedness should be accompanied by the wearing of trustworthy sandals. In ancient times, because it was feared that they would not be able to withstand the punishment of a long journey, shoes were not worn but carried. Scripture informs us, however, that due to the loving kindness and faithfulness of God, the shoes and clothes worn by the Jews during their 40-year sojourn in the desert, did not wear out (Ex. 29:5)! Consequently, unlike many other religions, Christians pray with their shoes on, signifying our abiding faith in a Savior who protects and sustains our every step. Shoes represent our faith in His promises and our determination to

prepare for His Return by remaining obedient to His will.

Finally, the staff held by every Orthodox bishop represents our dependence on God. Through this grand symbol, Orthodox faithful are to learn to lean on Christ during the difficult moments of life's journey. Like Moses raising his staff over the Red Sea to divide it (Ex. 14) or over his people so they could overcome the venom of vipers (Ex. 21) and prove victorious in combat (Ex. 17), we, too, are invited by our respective hierarchs to receive the grace, guidance and protection provided by God. Many, however, mistakenly assume that financial, political, academic, military, or positional strength will enable them to attain victory. Yet, the finest way of preparing for life's final conversion is to learn - in the here and now - to rely on the Grace of God, who can inspire our thoughts, words and actions.

The United States government spent over \$2 billion to prepare its citizenry for the analog to digital conversion. For those who could not afford the purchase of new technology, more than \$650 million was spent to provide free converter boxes. And yet, on Friday, June 12 countless individuals were reported as folding aluminum foil balls on old useless antennas trying desperately to receive a signal that – unfortunately – just wasn't there anymore!

The hierarchical staff of the Orthodox Church is a symbol of our utter dependence on God's strength, mercy and grace. The cross-topped staff of the bishop is, ultimately, a

spiritual antenna reaching unto heaven – searching and receiving a clear signal from God. Rather than continue to wrap the weak tinfoil of humanistic philosophies around our hearts, souls and minds, we might consider switching to this more effective mode of communication.

Some people may think this is premature. They do not believe there are any signs that the Second Coming will occur in their lifetime, after all, 100 generations have come and gone since St. John wrote the Book of Revelation and in each generation some believed it was time. They are missing the point. All of us will experience the return of the Lord and the Day of Judgement, though most of humanity will have already passed away. It is our own inevitable death that we must be prepared for.

In the end, let us utilize the quiet of our summer to examine our attitude to our spiritual belt, shoes and staff – our preparedness for the temporal to eternal conversion that will one day most certainly occur. Let us dedicate ourselves to becoming fully prepared and spiritually equipped for this final and most important switch!

Rev. Dr. Frank Marangos is the Dean of the Archdiocesan Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in New York City. He is also an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Saint John's University (N.Y.). Readers may visit <http://www.thecathedral.goarch.org/OnlineSermons.dsp> to view the on-line sermon that inspired this article.

Stay informed all year round, anytime, anywhere  
Become an online subscriber of The National Herald and get...

ONLY\*  
**\$34.95**  
a Year!

- daily updates with news covering the community, Greece and Cyprus.
- immediate access to our previous editions.
- edification that every Greek American should have!

Visit us online at  
**www.thenationalherald.com**  
or call us: **718-784-5255 ext.108**

\*The price indicated above is for current subscribers. Regular price is \$45.95/year.  
Alternative for current subscribers is per 3 months \$14.95, per 6 months \$23.95

**ΕΘΝΙΚΟΣ ΚΗΡΥΞ**  
Από το 1915 για τον Έλληνα

**The National Herald**  
Bringing the news to generations of Greek Americans

Law Firm

**JOHN SPIRIDAKIS**  
The Law Firm the Community Trusts

**ACCIDENTS - MEDICAL MALPRACTICE**

- Construction
- Car/Motor Vehicle
- Head injuries
- Slip & Fall
- Wrongful death
- All injuries
- Estates & Wills
- Divorces

Free consultations • Home & Hospital visits • 24 Hours • 7 Days

Legal expenses are payable at the conclusion of the case only if you win

"To receive our special care"  
Call us at (212) 768-8088 or (718) 204-8600  
Toll-Free 1-888-SPIRIDA (774-7432)  
nextlaw@aol.com • www.lawhelp1.com

OFFICES: Manhattan, Queens (Astoria), Brooklyn, Long Island, LICENSED: New York, New Jersey