

Bad education

Local author and educator Patricia Kokinos takes on America's "broken" public school system in her self-published, award-nominated novel, Angel Park

~ By MARISSA LANDRIGAN ~



Former Ventura County assistant principal Patricia Kokinos' book *Angel Park* is a finalist for Foreword Magazine's Book of the Year Award.

Racism, power politics, unchecked egos and blind bureaucracy all plague the people in charge, some of whom suffer heart attacks and suicidal depression due to the stress and seeming hopelessness of an unbending system. No, this is not the latest news from Capitol Hill or even the White House. It is the portrait of the American public education system as painted in Ventura author Patricia Kokinos' book, *Angel Park*. A fictional novel about public education reform, *Angel Park* is meant to be the kind of story that could happen anywhere. And, according to the author, much of it has.

"One of the reasons I chose to write a novel," Kokinos says, "was that I thought if I wrote this as nonfiction, no one would believe it had really happened."

The drama of the book is meant to underscore the dire circumstances facing America's public schools, and it is no exaggeration. The characters in *Angel Park* are inspired, at least in part, by Kokinos' long career in public education.

More than 25 years on the frontlines of the public school battle brought her to the realization that penetrating changes are needed in the education system, and *Angel Park* is meant to draw readers into making that same conclusion.

The story has even garnered national media attention. *Angel Park* was recently named as a finalist for ForeWord Magazine's Book of the Year Award in literary fiction. A national magazine dedicated to reviewing the best books published through small or independent presses, ForeWord has chosen to highlight *Angel Park*, not just for the stellar writing, but for the significance of the topic it wrangles.

Kokinos' decades in the public education system make her more than qualified to write about the need for change and to suggest possible solutions. Her career began as a high school English teacher, with journalism, cheerleader coaching, school newspaper and yearbook on the side. In order to do more to change the social structure, Kokinos became an administrator on the school and district level, in small and large towns on both sides of the country. Working hard to create change in a flawed structure, only to see her hard work dissipate when she stepped down or moved on to another position, Kokinos finally realized she had to do more to affect the necessary reforms.

"It's as though the entire public education system is a giant rubber band that just snaps back into place," Kokinos says. "It became apparent I needed a bigger audience." Kokinos began working on *Angel Park* more than 10 years ago while still serving as an assistant principal in Ventura County. She recently felt compelled to quit that position in order to complete the book and continue her crusade.

"This book had to be done," Kokinos says. "It all had to be said." Yet with so much educational experience to draw from, Kokinos still chose to write a novel rather than a nonfiction account of her own encounters. She believed it would allow a different connection to her audience. It was important to her that she dig deeper, to allow her readers to connect with what she calls the emotional truth of the broken system.

"Education reform has been talked to death," Kokinos said, "and I wanted to bring a broader perspective on the need for change." As Kokinos points out, great new ideas often stem from the world of fiction. With an abiding belief that books can change the world, and a humble desire to follow in the footsteps of John Steinbeck and Upton Sinclair, Kokinos began her journey.

But most of the agents and publishing houses she met with did not share her conviction that a fiction novel about the problems facing America's public education system needed to be published, distributed and read widely. After receiving rejection after rejection from presses saying they simply could not sell a book about education, Kokinos decided to publish it herself through the independent self-publishing house iUniverse. Tackling her own marketing, Kokinos has landed the book on the shelves of the Ventura Barnes & Noble store, and she isn't stopping there.

Starting at the bottom and affecting change at the ground level isn't just how Kokinos published her book; it's also what the book is about. Her views on the types of reform needed are deep and progressive, and Angel Park allowed her to expound on those views in a way that would be compelling to readers who share her frustration with how children are educated in America.

“The public education system is like a collapsing brick building we've tried to hold up with too many piecemeal solutions — drug awareness programs, mentoring programs, gang resistance programs — without bothering to look at the flaws in the foundation,” Kokinos says.

Kokinos believes the solution lies in changing the very structure of our schools, which hasn't made tackling change easy in a system that shudders at the very idea. Moving from overcrowded, overworked classrooms to smaller schools with teams of teachers that function more like coaches running a series of extracurricular activities would make school more relevant to students and, therefore, more productive, she says. Smaller teams build camaraderie among students and teachers, and show them how the most boring of subjects can change their lives and futures.

“Schools should be the safest, most welcoming place a child can be,” Kokinos says, “because for many students that struggle, school is the only chance they have at a better life.”

Which also, Kokinos notes, would solve many of the other problems plaguing our country. Better schools lead to better jobs and fewer citizens on government-assistance programs, as well as fewer students turning to gangs, drugs or crime to provide for themselves. Turning the public education system upside-down and reforming the very core of the organization is an intimidating task, but Kokinos is not frightened that easily. This is just the beginning of her crusade to fix public schools.

“People are beginning to open to the idea that a change needs to be made,” Kokinos says. “We used to say that changes in public education moved at a glacial pace, but I think we're on the verge of an oceanic advance.”

She may be right. After all, there are some big celebrities throwing their names into the ring of public education reform. Bill Gates and Eli Broad just announced a \$60 million campaign to alert the public to the crisis in American schools in an effort to make public education a major issue in the 2008 presidential campaign. Under the slogan “Strong American Schools,” the project will include television and radio advertising, and a national network of operatives and volunteers. Kokinos cannot wait to get involved. More books may be on the horizon for Kokinos, but right now she is looking for any way to devote herself to the cause of education reform. She relishes the possibility of a Book of the Year Award — not for her own ego, but to further the publicity needed to achieve the transformations she knows are necessary. “An administrator's job is to bring together diverse viewpoints in order to reach a compromise,” Kokinos says, smiling. “I can't help it — I've always been an agent of change.”