

***An Interview with the Author:
Patricia Kokinos answers the questions most asked by readers,
radio/TV hosts, and the press . . .***

- 1. *Why have you chosen fiction for a book about changing the schools?*** First, I love to read fiction, and I can think of many times in my life when a good novel would have taught me much more than the dry texts I was exposed to. Second, there are about 400,000 non-fiction books now in print about education, and there is just no need for another one. Finally, I wanted the story to engage the reader emotionally, through the trials of the characters and the irony of the situations. We have all been involved in issues with rigid bureaucracies and I want readers to feel the utter importance of making sure our schools do much better than that.
- 2. *Your book is a mystery about a suicide, but the mystery seems to go deeper than that. What is the larger mystery your protagonist investigates?*** The suicide is, of course, the core of the mystery. When did school become a matter of life and death? As the story plays out, however, Connie discovers the mystery at the core of her own life--why she is the way she is, where she is going from here, how she can make a difference in the world. She is kind of an Everywoman, someone just like the rest of us, who faces her own deeper questions and finds out that they are, indeed, intimately tied to the way we run our institutions and our whole society.
- 3. *How close to reality is the story of Angel Park? Is this your personal story?*** Erica Jong says that all writing is autobiographical, so I suppose this story is, too, because we can't help referring to our own situations and emotions. However, what I discovered in my 25 years as a high school English teacher and then a school and district-level administrator on both sides of the country is that "the system" never changes and the ironies are universal. All of the incidents in this book really

happened, but not all to me, and not all in the same place. I began to see the real events as a microcosm of everything that was wrong with the way we are doing the school business. Then it occurred to me that our needs to change the system correspond directly to the changes we need to make within ourselves. The story became a deeper mystery about our communal “Earth-School” adventures.

- 4. *Are the forces operating in school systems any different from the forces operating in other American institutions?*** No, and that’s exactly the problem. We all accept the blind bureaucracies, the power politics, the self-serving agendas, and even the corruption as simply the cost of doing business. I think we can do better than that, and I hope that seeing the way these issues operate in schools will startle readers into rethinking what we consider acceptable in the way we treat kids. Do we really want to give them the message that life is hard and then you die? At the start of a new millennium, aren’t we clever enough to figure out that kids will do better when they are nurtured and treated as individuals with unique talents and learning needs? Certainly, that goes for all the kids in the world, so we’d better get started if we want to make humane and important changes on the global level.
- 5. *You have an image in Angel Park of students moving along a conveyor belt in a factory. Is that how kids today feel about school?*** Actually, a lot of older kids look at school as more of a prison, keeping them from what they want to be doing with their lives. This is the exact opposite of what we think we want school to be, but we haven’t designed our system to deal with kids’ individual talents and needs or to help them understand what they’re doing in life. That’s the point of the conveyor belt image: Uniform metallic objects, bouncing along a conveyor belt, being shunted into different grades of quality or dropped off into the slag piles when they don’t

measure up. Despite the fact that the Industrial Revolution is well over and the Information Age is upon us, we have done nothing to change the concept of our educational system from a “factory model” to one that is about nurturing human beings to bring their talents to a faster and smarter world.

- 6. *That sounds like you have a more “organic” image in mind. How does our concept of school need to change?*** Organic is a good, if overused word, and I think it’s overused especially because we feel surrounded by mechanical, bureaucratic entities over which we feel we have no influence or control. “Organic” implies fresh, nurturing, supple, natural, growing--and none of these apply to our educational system. I should really be writing a book called *The Greening of Education*, because that is precisely the direction we need to take: Away from the mechanical testing, grading, slotting, and quality indicators that our corporations have foisted on education as if kids were widgets, and toward a “family model” of teaching and learning that creates teams of teachers and students, collaboration in smaller and more personalized environments, and the kind of higher order thinking and creativity that develop individual potential. We aren’t just churning out factory workers anymore. The world has changed dramatically, and our kids need to be smart, flexible thinkers who know how to use electronic tools to create knowledge.
- 7. *What do kids want out of school, particularly in high school?*** High school kids want some meaning and purpose, beyond “it’s in the curriculum.” They want what everyone else wants from their work, a sense that it’s useful and that it will make a difference to someone. No one is more attuned than high school students to what they perceive as “busy work.” And they are perfectly tuned lie detectors. They want the truth; they want to know what’s really going on. They want to know what they’re

good at, and what they're going to do with their lives. They want some freedom to explore and, even if they don't know it yet, some freedom to grow--even some time to interact with their teachers and coaches on a more personal level for the kind of guidance every kid needs. That all implies a much bigger and better mission for high schools than we currently hold, and the opportunity for high school teachers to employ all the creativity and inspiration they can muster to keep kids involved and productive. All of that is going to take a rethinking and reinvention of the system as we currently know it.

- 8. *How do you think your novel, *Angel Park*, can have an effect on an issue this big?*** My novel can help with the most important first step, which is opening readers' eyes to a new way of thinking and providing a new perspective not only on school systems but also on how we live our lives. You're right, this is a big issue, and one of the most important ones we will face this century : How can we create schools that will train our students to be productive and happy contributors to our way of life and to the world? Isn't that really the main question? To that end, I have created a companion website, www.ChangeTheSchools.com , which takes up the issues of *Angel Park* and provides information about school change. The theme of my site is "Changing the Schools Can Change the World," and that's also the title of my monthly newsletter, which is now going out to parents, educators, readers, and numerous others all over the country, and even abroad. I seem to be intent on expanding my small circle into a grassroots movement to educate people on the need for new national policy, so we can not only rescue the American Dream, but also use the power of that dream to inspire and help children in the rest of the world.

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