

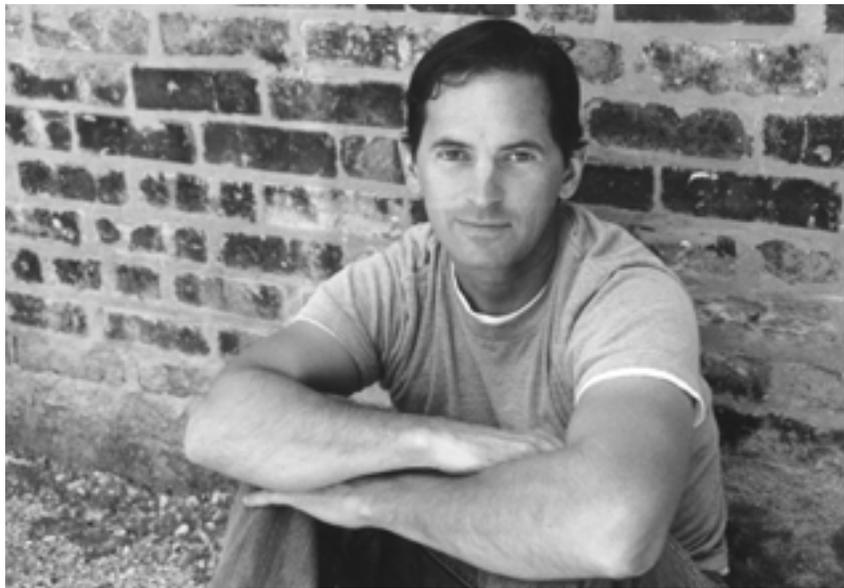


BkMk Press

Recent Author Interviews

An Interview with Billy Lombardo

Author of [Logic of a Rose](#)



Interviewed by Karen I. Johnson

Q.

I would characterize the stories in this collection as coming-of-age stories. Would you agree with that characterization?

A.

Yeah. Absolutely. If I had the chance to meet anyone in history I would go back in time to meet the boy I used to be. Any single day from the time I was seven years old until I was thirteen or so. I think men are greatly shaped by these years, what I call their middle boyhoods, and what happens here is what shapes a man. Maybe women, too, but I hope not.

Q.

Your stories are set in Chicago, your hometown. The stories center around an Italian family, the Bellapanis, who live above a bakery. Is the Bellapanis' neighborhood anything like your childhood neighborhood?

A.

Bridgeport is the name of the neighborhood we both grew up in, and I don't think there's a kid from the old neighborhood who wouldn't recognize any of the places I write about in these stories. I've switched a couple buildings around here and there, but it's the same old neighborhood.

Q.

I guess that means that the boys you grew up with would recognize themselves in these stories. Would they enjoy finding themselves in print?

A.

I stay in touch with a couple of guys from the old neighborhood, and I contacted Kenny Metke, the hero of “The Wallace Playlot.” I sent him a copy of the issue of *Cicada* that it appeared in, and he seemed thrilled to hear from me, and flattered to find he was the subject of a story. He remembered, clearly, the softball scene that urged the story on. I’m pretty confident the others will get a kick out of it, too.

Q.

The central character in most of the stories is a young boy, Petey Bellapani. Petey is influenced largely by his father who works more than one job. Petey has his own paper route, hangs out with some older boys, but seems to be a good kid. Is Petey anything like Billy Lombardo?

A.

He’s as close as I could come to meeting that kid I used to be.

Q.

Please describe the game of pitching nickels, which is the subject of the first story. Did you grow up pitching nickels?

A.

Because I grew up around the activity, it never occurred to me to describe it in the story. The playing area is two squares of cement. You keep your toes behind the start of the first square and toss your nickel to the end of the second square. The closest nickel to the line wins all the nickels tossed. Eventually, we raised the stakes. When eighth grade came along we were pitching quarters.

Q.

You use the story “The Wallace Playlot” to mourn the loss of open spaces that can be used for sandlot baseball—a place where kids can play with other kids without the supervision of adults. Do you see this as a problem for our youth today?

A.

That’s a nice way to look at it. I wrote “The Wallace Playlot” to help me figure out who I was, and why I was, and why the playlot closed and why there was a war and why nobody in my life was talking about any of it. I didn’t pay attention to the world when I was growing up, and when I finally grew up I went back to that place in my life, not so much that place, as that time, to pay attention. The world seemed to take a turn after the playlot closed, and writing that story helped me make sense of much of my life.

“The Wallace Playlot” was certainly about loss, and the loss of place, and I think you’re right about that point about adults. Kids need a place to make mistakes, they need other kids they can make mistakes around and be forgiven, and they need to figure out how to solve problems without umpires and referees. I’m certain this is a problem for some of our youth today, but I’m encouraged by my son and his friends who are forever organizing pick-up games.

At the same time this story glorified the sacred, unchaperoned space of the playlot, it hinted at its flipside: parentlessness. There was a war going on, and I was reading those same headlines that Petey Bellapani was reading, and I don’t remember ever having a conversation about Vietnam with a single grown-up in my life.

Q.

In looking back to the late 1960s and early 1970s when the Vietnam War made headlines, what kind of conversation with adults about the war would you like to have had and is your experience in not having such conversations a lesson for today’s parents?

A.

Looking back on it, I don’t really know. I think it’s possible that any talk of the war would have saddened me deeply as a kid. I felt that my experience was peculiar in that I was a paper boy, and saw the headlines every day, but that was it; I knew nothing past the front page news. If there’s a lesson in that for today’s parents, I’m not even sure that I know it. As the father of two boys with old souls I still don’t know how to go about these conversations.

Q.

I loved the rhythm I found in your stories. Two stand out in this regard: “The Wallace Playlot,” which takes place on a lot where boys play baseball, and “The Thing About Swing,” which is set in a Laundromat. “Swing” reads as if it is a dance between a young woman and a young man even though the dance does not occur. “The Wallace Playlot” becomes an audience sing-along. Were you conscious of that rhythm when you wrote those stories?

A.

I had no idea what I was doing when I wrote “The Wallace Playlot,” but the seed of the story began with that scene with Kenny Metke catching softballs, which is very visual. Eventually I got swept up in the collective song and choral movement of the neighborhood as they were drawn to the field as witnesses.

I knew a little bit more when I wrote “The Thing About Swing,” but not much. I wanted to write about beauty and love and

regret, and as I began to listen to the sounds of the Laundromat and watch Danny and Rene move around each other, I began to feel the rhythm of it.

Q.

The two stories, “The Logic of a Rose” and “The Hills of Laura” deal with a young boy’s awareness of and curiosity about the maturing bodies of young girls. I was impressed with your ability to treat this topic with sensitivity and a touch of humor. Considering our current cultural emphasis on sex, both in print and on television, do you think that readers today might be pleasantly surprised by your approach to this subject?

A.

I’m not sure how to answer this one. First, would they be pleasantly surprised because a man was able to approach the subject with sensitivity? I suppose there are people who would be pleasantly surprised for this reason. But I wouldn’t know how else to approach it. I hope they’ll feel that love is the point. The only point, really.

Q.

Will we read about Petey Bellapani in other stories in the future?

A.

Until I figure everything out, or at least until I make sense of the first fifteen years of my life, there’s a chance he’ll pop up as a character in another story or two, maybe even a novel. I’m currently working on a dramatic adaptation of this collection, so I’m living with him every day it seems. I’m kind of hoping that someday I’ll write something that he has nothing to do with, but even if he doesn’t work his way in as a character, he finds some way to poke his head into my business. I’m afraid I may be stuck with him.

Q.

Your stories include baseball and the novel you are working on is about baseball. Tell me about your interest in America’s pastime and about the novel.

A.

I never played baseball growing up. My wife bought me my first glove when I was thirty, my sons made me fall in love with the sport, and the novel has pushed me to study it. It’s about summertime and dreams and history.

Q.

You have no formal training as a writer. Now you teach young people at the Latin School in Chicago how to write. How does your teaching influence your writing and what do you consider the advantages and disadvantages of being self-taught?

A.

Ooh. That’s a tough one. I feel like everything I do influences my writing, and everything I do influences my teaching. I hope you’re right, though, about that part about teaching young people at The Latin School how to write. I hope I’m doing that somehow, but I’m not sure. As for my own education, and the pros and cons of being self-taught, if I had paid any attention in school I might not have needed so much self-teaching; that would have been a better way to go. I don’t think I would wish my learning history on anyone.

Q.

You have published poetry and short stories and now you are working on a novel. Do you have a favorite means of expression?

A.

I suppose I’d have a say the short story is my favorite medium right now. I like the idea of novels, but I’m afraid I don’t yet know enough about the craft to put it up there. In the end I don’t think it much matters; whether I’m reading a poem, or telling a story, or just muddling through the day with my family or friends, it’s the same thing I want to accomplish.

Q.

You are working on a journal to be published by the Latin School. The journal will showcase high school writers. What are your hopes for this journal?

A.

I want to get my editors from Chicago area high schools working with writers from around the country to help each other become better writers and editors. I want creative writing teachers to use the book as a text for their classes, and I want students to mark up the stories or poems, to scratch out lines and change them, to write AWK and SDT (show, don’t tell) and NICE! in the margins, and I want young writers to say, “I can do this better,” and then I want them to do it. I want young people to put words together in ways like no one else before them, to make something beautiful from the stuff of their lives, because I think they’ll be happy when they do.

Q.

Is there a timetable on the publication of the first issue of the journal and what will it be called?

A.

The inaugural issue of *Polyphony H.S.* should be out in April 2005.
