

## Arts & Entertainment

# Marblehead Author Takes on Boston's Irish Mob

AMY YELIN

*Special to The Journal*

MARBLEHEAD — Picture this: A reformed mob enforcer decides to attend Shiva for the mother-in-law of a Jewish 'friend.' He plans on bringing his usual — an oversized display of flowers. Fortunately, the florist tells him, "You don't bring flowers to Jews, you bring food." Later, he shows up at the all-Kosher household with two chicken potpies.

It could be a scene straight out of *The Sopranos*. Instead, it's the bizarre, real world of Phyllis Karas, a cardiologist's wife and mother of two grown sons, who spent the last three years rubbing elbows with former mob enforcer Edward Mackenzie, Jr. while helping him write his violent and gritty new memoir, *Street Soldier: My Life as an Enforcer for Whitey Bulger and the Boston Irish Mob*.

The book, which was released on May 1 to positive reviews, follows MacKenzie's life from abandoned and abused child, to career kick boxer, to enforcer for Bulger's South Boston mob.

"My goal," explains Karas, "was to show that there was a human being in there, in Eddie, so readers can understand why he turned out the way he did. Here was a foster child who had a horrendous upbringing, and his story is an example of what can happen when you throw a child away."

Karas' agent, Helen Rees, first introduced the unlikely duo in 1999. According to Karas, it was not love at first sight. "In the beginning, Eddie and I were wary of each other. After seeing his nine-page, double-sided criminal record, I thought to myself, 'this probably isn't for me.' I certainly had my hesitations."

Ironically, Karas' previous memoir with Kiki Feroudi Moutsatsos — Aristotle Onassis' private secretary — provided the inspiration necessary to propel her forward with MacKenzie's project.

"After dealing with some of the people in *The Onassis Women*, and witnessing Kiki's enormous strength, I decided I could probably handle the Irish mob," explains Karas.

Still, the process of writing *Street Soldier* would not be easy. As Karas immersed herself into her subject, she made some disturbing discoveries.

"First, I found myself swearing more," says Karas, laughing. "And I learned some new phrases to add to my vocabulary, such as 'dirt nap,' which is what you take when they 'off' you."

On a serious note, Karas said she was most disturbed by what she learned about Whitey Bulger. “I always believed the Robin Hood myth about Whitey... that he took from the rich to give to the poor. But Whitey had no redeemable qualities. He was a hideous man who is wanted for 19 murders — some with ice picks. He’s second on the FBI’s most wanted list, right behind bin Laden.”

Karas admits that trying to capture the voice of a male, Irish mobster was one of her biggest challenges.

“It was tough writing in Eddie’s voice,” she says. “Unlike in *The Onassis Women*, where I could relate to many of the characters, this was a whole different universe. So I would write a chapter and run it by Eddie to find out if it seemed authentic.”

Despite their obvious differences — which Karas is the first to point out in comments like, “I was living a cozy life in Marblehead while Eddie was growing up a street kid in Southie” — their relationship gradually grew.

“The more I got to work with Eddie, the more human he seemed,” says Karas. “He was always very respectful of my family.” Besides paying his respects after the death of Karas’ mother-in-law, MacKenzie was a guest at the wedding of one of Karas’ sons, and attended Karas’ journalism class at Boston University on several occasions to share his story with students.

At the same time, Karas is not blind to MacKenzie’s darker side. “Like Tony Soprano, he is a man of contradictions,” she says. “On any given day, you can witness his charm and compassion, followed by a comment that’s as cold as ice. It’s part of his dual personality.”

She also acknowledges that not everyone will be pleased with her human portrayal of the former leg-breaker. “A lot of people hate him. There are people who might read this book and find it disgusting,” she says.

Karas remains loyal to and hopeful for him. “He has primary custody of two young daughters. He has a chance now. For their sake, and his, I hope he stays out of trouble.”

In addition to *Street Soldier* and *The Onassis Women*, Karas has also published four young adult novels and is a contributing writer for *People* magazine.

Phyllis Karas and Edward Mackenzie, Jr. will be appearing at the Lyceum in Salem on May 13 at 8 p.m., and at the Jabberwocky Bookshop in Newburyport on May 16 at 7 p.m.

[Back to top](#)