

Fresh Food

for

BOOKWORM ILLUSTRATION
BY BILL MAYER

STORY BY
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BJ '70, MA '75

Voracious Bookworms

MIZZOU ALUMNI PUBLISH LOTS OF books—novels, short story collections, poetry, cookbooks, self-help, reference, histories, biographies, current events, scholarly monographs, texts for classroom use. It would be easy to fill an entire issue of this magazine with reviews of those books.

An inordinate number come from English department and J-School graduates. That's no surprise, given the emphasis on writing in those majors. Some, though, come from less predictable disciplines.

The most unlikely author of the six included here is **James Czajkowski**, who graduated from the College of Veterinary Medicine in 1985. There's no point rushing to find books under his name, however. His three fantasy novels carry the author's name as James Clemens. His three adventure novels carry the author's name as James Rollins.

A recent Rollins novel is *Excavation*, released last year by HarperTorch, an imprint of the major publisher HarperCollins. No veterinarian plays a big role in the thriller, but several academics do. One of the protagonists is Professor Henry Conklin of Texas A&M, who has just returned to the United States from the wilds of Peru with a

mummy from perhaps 500 years earlier.

Taken from a site generally believed to be Incan, the mummy could prove Conklin's theory that a different Peruvian Indian tribe preceded the Incas. But during a high-tech examination of the mummy, Conklin learns it is something altogether different than he expected.

The theory Conklin has been trying to prove for three decades suddenly seems unsupportable. When it turns out the skull has been crammed with gold, new possibilities open that could endanger Conklin's nephew Sam, who is excavating Peruvian sites with a small professional team. Much of the book is heavily researched, as many of the best novels are. Some of it, on the other hand, reads like science fiction. Somehow, the mixture works to produce a compelling plot populated with believable men and women.

It's a worthy novel to be dedicated to the author's veterinary school graduation class, including his MU roommates Dave Schmitt, BS Ag '82, DVM '85, Scott Wells, DVM '85, Steve Brunnett, BS Ag '82, DVM '85, and Brad Gengenbach, DVM '85. Born during 1961 in Chicago, the author opened a veterinary practice in Sacramento after his MU graduation. He dreamed of writing novels, but could never find the time. Finally, he decided he

just had to try, no matter how much sleep he would lose. Three years later, manuscript in hand, he found a literary agent willing to represent him to publishers. After 50 rejections, he received an acceptance. The sales of all four novels have been so encouraging, and the writing so pleasurable, that Czajkowski has sold his veterinary practice and reduced his clinic hours to part time.

Showing his amazing versatility, Czajkowski published a new Rollins novel in July. Titled *Deep Fathom*, it is mostly science fiction, with some sound historical research and current politics mixed in. The fast-moving, multicharacter plot begins with the first solar eclipse of the new millennium. Solar flares trigger natural disasters across the globe. It appears that only one person can save the human race from destruction—but will he be able to act quickly enough from his submarine deep below the ocean surface?

While Czajkowski is a seemingly unlikely author given his vocation, the other five are all journalism school alumni.

Two of those five are known by millions of readers; it is probably impossible to determine which of those two is the most famous.

One is **Jeffery Deaver**, BJ '72,





whose mystery novels routinely reach national best-seller lists and become movies. Born in 1950, Deaver attended law school at Fordham University after earning his Missouri journalism degree. His first book gave no sign of the novelist trapped inside. Its title: *The Complete Law School Companion*, published in 1984.

Soon after, the novels started oozing from his mind. He published one last year (*The Empty Chair*, Simon & Schuster) and another this year (*Speaking in Tongues*, Simon & Schuster), for a total of 15. Furthermore, Bantam Books this year reissued Deaver's 1991 novel, *Hard News*.

In 1990, Deaver quit his law practice to write full time, splitting his life between Virginia and California.

He could have followed the formulaic route of many other successful mystery-thriller novelists—the same protagonist each time, in slightly different but not dissimilar settings. Deaver chose another route, changing protagonists and geographic settings—riskier for sure than the formulaic approach because he might have lost fans who want predictability in the same way McDonald's patrons want predictability in their fast food.

Hard News, this year's rereleased novel, features a female television journalist named Rune. She wants a promotion to her network's news magazine, a long jump for an assistant cameraperson with the local station. Rune thinks she has found the story to earn her that promotion, a seemingly innocent man convicted

of murder. But the story isn't as straightforward as she first thinks. It turns out her pursuit of the story puts her life in danger.

Deaver features Rune in two other novels (*Manhattan Is My Beat* and *Death of a Blue Movie Star*). But Deaver wanted other protagonists in his made-up universe, so he created Lincoln Rhyme, a quadriplegic criminalist, and Rhyme's protégé, policewoman Amelia Sachs. The novel *The Bone Collector*—featuring Rhyme and Sachs—captivated so many readers that it became a motion picture starring Denzel Washington. Last year's novel, *The Empty Chair*, brings back Rhyme and Sachs, this time in North Carolina where Rhyme is awaiting experimental surgery to partially repair his body.

A local sheriff in a quandary approaches Rhyme in the hospital waiting room, asking for a bit of his time. Pretty soon Rhyme and Sachs are tracking a criminal through rural, treacherous, unfamiliar territory far away from their New York City base.

So, does Deaver stick with Rhyme and Sachs in his 2001 novel, *Speaking in Tongues*? Nope. This time, the protagonists are Tate Collier, a lawyer whose family is the target of a madman, and Aaron Matthews, the madman who is also a brilliant psychiatrist.

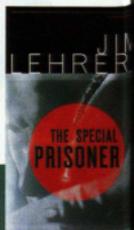
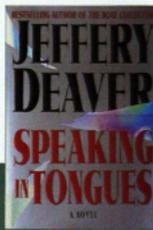
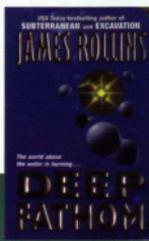
Rumor has it that Rhyme will return soon in another novel. Deaver is a writing machine. Somehow, though, his prolificness has not cheapened his books. The plotting is sound yet with unexpected

turns, the characters are full-blooded. Overexposure might be Deaver's only worry. But most writers would love to wrestle with that problem.

Jim Lehrer, BJ '56, is well-known, too—as a novelist, a playwright and anchor of *The NewsHour* with *Jim Lehrer* on public television, formerly the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*. His novel published during 2000, *The Special Prisoner* (Random House), is notable for its examination of the trauma caused by war. The main character, Bishop John Watson, rose through the church ranks only after suffering extreme torture during World War II, as a prisoner of the Japanese. Watson thought he had conquered the memories until, 50 years later, he sees his torturer. It surprises Watson how avidly he wants revenge. What should he, will he, do?

Last year, Lehrer's 1995 novel, *The Last Debate* (Random House), found a new life in trade paperback and as a Showtime cable television original movie. The timing was brilliant, given the presidential election in progress. Considering the real-life outcome of the Al Gore-George W. Bush competition, the novelistic scenario sketched by Lehrer five years earlier doesn't seem so outlandish anymore. In the novel, the Republican candidate, a fundamentalist demagogue, looks like a shoo-in over the colorless liberal Democrat. Then the televised national debate occurs in Williamsburg, Va. Four journalists will be asking the questions.

Secretly, they are supplied with dam-





aging information about the personal life of the Republican candidate. There is not enough time to check the allegations before the debate. What will the questioners do? And will Tom Chapman, a journalist covering the debate for a national magazine, reveal the debate behind the debate as he pieces together what's going on behind the scenes? Few novels have ever examined the politics-press nexus so compellingly.

Margaret Engel, BJ '73, had a two-book 2000. A serious-minded investigative journalist most days, Engel, who has reported for the *Des Moines Register* and the *Washington Post*, also writes light-hearted, indispensable reference books. Last year, she, with husband Bruce Adams, traveled from their home base in Bethesda, Md., to update their 1997 book *Baseball Vacations: Great Family Trips to Minor League and Classic Major League Ballparks Across America* (Fodor's). With daughter Emily and son Hugh often in tow, Engel and Adams crossed the nation, noting not only the quality of each baseball stadium, but also the quality of the food, lodging and sight-seeing attractions in city after city.

Later in the year, Engel and her twin sister, Allison, completed their new edition of *Food Finds: America's Best Local Foods and the People Who Produce Them* (Quill, an imprint of Harper-Collins). First published in 1984 and updated in 1991, the book featuring local foods that can be ordered anywhere in the nation seems fresher than ever. It is the

inspiration for a show of the same name on the cable television Food Network.

Letha Albright, MA '89, published her first novel during 2000—after a long apprenticeship. *Tulsa Time* (Oak Tree Press) caps almost a decade of trying to break through as a mystery writer. Albright lives in Columbia, where she edits the magazine of the Missouri State Teachers Association. Her path to journalism and fiction writing was not a straight line. Her undergraduate degree is in psychology. She has worked as a wilderness guide and at a sawmill.

Albright thought about writing mystery novels for a long time, but did little tangible until 1992, after learning she had multiple sclerosis. Not knowing how many productive years she had left, Albright started writing feverishly. She completed two manuscripts, but literary agents and book publishers seemed unimpressed. Late last decade, she began the manuscript that would become *Tulsa Time*, set in the Oklahoma county where Albright had lived for eight years. The protagonist is Viv Powers, a small-town newspaper reporter. She's shocked to hear her lover, musician Charley Pack, is accused of murdering his band's financial backer. Powers is certain on one level of his innocence—but he's certainly acting guilty. Powers decides she'll do her best to solve the murder. The plotting never falters, the foreshadowing is superb, and Albright is an accomplished stylist, not something common in mystery fiction. Her belated start is of high quality.

James S. Hirsch, BJ '84, published his first book during 2000 as well. It would be nice to say it's fiction, but it's all-too-tragically factual. The book is *Hurricane: The Miraculous Journey of Rubin Carter* (Houghton Mifflin). Hirsch, a former *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* reporter, lives in the Boston area, a few states over from New Jersey, where boxing champion Rubin "Hurricane" Carter and an alleged accomplice went to prison for a 1966 triple murder. Twenty-two years later, Carter won his freedom after a judge exonerated him. Many writers had chronicled the case, but Carter had never told his story in full. Hirsch approached him, eventually becoming Carter's authorized biographer.

Authorized biographies are usually laundered of controversy. Not this one. Hirsch won unusual access, and as far as can be determined never pulls punches, not even when in the presence of a professional fighter. The book is a masterful combination of Carter's life story and an indictment of the criminal justice system that let the real killer or killers go free while incarcerating the wrong men. *

Steve Weinberg, BJ '70, MA '75, is the author of six nonfiction books. He is currently under contract to publisher W.W. Norton for a biography of Ida Tarbell, and is revising The Reporter's Handbook: An Investigator's Guide to Documents and Techniques, for Investigative Reporters & Editors in conjunction with St. Martin's Press. Weinberg lives in Columbia, where he teaches off and on at the MU journalism school.

