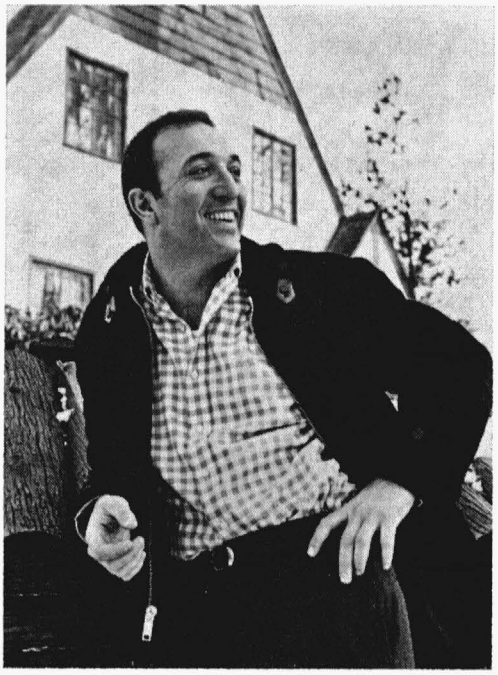

Bruce Jay Friedman, *Author*

By Frank Borsky

The author of this interview is one of Bruce Friedman's oldest friends—from the day he arrived on the campus. Borsky, A.B. '51, was an Army combat reporter in Korea; worked for International News Service in the Atlanta, Ga., bureau; was a reporter for the Jersey Journal in Jersey City, N. J. and for the past five years has been a reporter-rewriteman for the New York Journal-American. He writes: "Like Friedman, I often recall with pleasure my college days. Missouri was wonderful, wonderful, wonderful."

Bruce J. Friedman, a tall, quick-smiling New York magazine editor, sat in his office overlooking Madison Avenue, sipped a scotch-on-the-rocks and said:

"Go easy on me, Frank. The other interviewers have been pretty kind. I hope I'm not going to get stabbed in the back by my old friend from Missouri."

I assured Friedman that he didn't have anything to worry about. I was not, like most of America's critics, an admirer of his books—but I could recall with pleasure and nostalgia our days together at the University of Missouri.

Out of sheer self-defense, if nothing else, I wasn't going to blow the whistle on some of Friedman's more outrageous capers in Columbia—since I was involved in a few of them.

Friedman, B.J. '51, is the author of a currently best-selling novel, *A Mother's Kisses* (Simon and Schuster), about a brooding, 17-year-old boy named Joseph who is having trouble getting into college. Through the antic, hilarious efforts of his mother, Meg, the boy winds up at a place called Kansas Land Grant Agricultural.

How closely Joseph is modeled on himself is of course something that only Friedman can say. But Kansas Land Grant is unmistakably the University of Missouri, its foliage blooming, its females as beautiful as in memory, and its Midwestern culture a revelation to the teenager from Bensonhurst, Brooklyn.

"I wanted to go to school in the East but colleges in those days were tight," Friedman recalled. "But I have no regrets now. From a writer's standpoint, Missouri was very good for me. It helped me get away from the East—and most important—introduced me to a culture that was more representative of America than New York. The whole experience was very important for my personality developments.

"Some of the different cultural experiences are dealt with directly in my work. But I don't like to think of my work as geographically based. I think of it as dealing with human relationships. In *A Mother's Kisses,* the Midwestern college scene is secondary to the human relationships. I'm more concerned with people than with things in my work."

Friedman came out of Missouri to pursue a career as a newspaperman. He never made it—and now qualifies as perhaps the most successful "failure" the University's School of Journalism ever produced.

"The height of my ambition at that time was to be a reporter," he said. "I always nursed a kind of frustration about reporting. But now, as a novelist, I have the chance to do some in-depth reporting for magazines. Right now, I have several assignments and I'm looking forward to them. I look at these (assignments) as a good opportunity to refuel as a novelist."

Far from doing "in-depth" stuff at J-School, Friedman covered such assignments as agricultural conferences. "I was no heavyweight in reporting," he recalled. "I never got my leads right. But I felt I did have a little skill as a feature writer. Actually, I did a

lot of weather roundups and I remember writing about the temperature 'dipping down' or the mercury 'taking a dive' a thousand times."

Eventually, Friedman was given the job of doing drama criticism for The Missourian—the assignment he enjoyed most at J-School.

"It wasn't that big a plum," he said, "but it was a lot better than the ag conferences."

I remember Friedman's tour as The Missourian critic very well. In his own mind, he took on some importance professionally for the first time in his life. When he came home from the Stephens Playhouse at midnight, he would sit down in the dining room of the Phi Sigma Delta house at 600 Rollins and carefully bat out his review.

"Looking back on it, I don't think they were very good," he said laughingly.

Friedman was—and is—the pessimist supreme. Whatever he did, he would insist he had done badly. After an exam, for instance, he would moan the blues, and cry: "I didn't do very well." As it turned out, of course, he consistently did very well. His grades were a solid B and he was no "grind," leading a full social life.

But he was not a conspicuous "man about campus" and he candidly admits:

"No one knew who the hell I was."

In any event, there is no doubt that Friedman's experiences at Missouri helped shape his life, and influence his writing. This is evident in the boarding house routines in *Stern,* his first novel, and in many of the short stories in *Far From the City of Class,* and of course, in the college sequence in *A Mother's Kisses.*

He was never too keen on the fraternity system but it was important to him at the time. "It was an anchor for me, it provided security," he said. "For one thing, Eastern fellows were regarded with a healthy suspicion by Missouri boys. They generally considered us to be outsiders. But then, a writer by definition is generally considered an outsider in any group."

Friedman's career after Missouri began with two years as lieutenant in the Air Force. He was assigned to St. Louis as a reporter with an Air Force training magazine that, he says, "turned into a literary sheet."

In the Air Force he started to think about writing of another type. "I came in contact with people who had writing on their mind and we turned the magazine into something literary.

"And then, I had a kind of shattering experience. I was in an airplane with some kind of lunatic Air Force major. I had the feeling that—well—that he was trying to kill me. He was an authentic psychotic. I was very upset and I didn't know what to do about it except write a story."

He sent this story to *The New Yorker* magazine, which sent it back with rejection slip asking if he had written anything else they might be interested in. "I didn't have anything else to send them so I wrote another story, 'Wonderful Golden Rule Day,' and they bought it," he said.

Following his Air Force tour, Friedman moved back to New York, taking a job as an editor of adventure magazines with Magazine Management, a firm he is still with.

"I came home and went to the Associated Press and couldn't get a job," he admits. "Some gray-haired man ripped some wire copy from a machine, handed it to me and said 'give me a lead.' Honestly, it looked like a big bale of hay. As soon as I sorted it out, this man grabbed another bale and asked for another lead. I was scared out of my wits. I guess they were trying to see how cool I was. Anyway, they practically threw me out."

At Magazine Management, Friedman fashioned a career as one of the best editors in his field. At the same time he was writing for such magazines as *The New Yorker, Commentary, The Antioch Review* and *Playboy.*

Then, in 1962, Friedman's first novel, *Stern,* was published. *Stern,* a novel about being Jewish, delicately, humorously and powerfully records the state of mind of its protagonist, a young suburban husband beset by a consuming anxiety.

Stern was hailed as a major work, written by a novelist of outstanding talent and importance. The New York Post said: "At one stroke he has taken his place among the gifted writers of his generation." The New York Times said: "Mr. Friedman's style is a pure delight—supple, carnal, humorous and at times slightly surrealistic." *Time* magazine said: "A novelist with an antic imagination and a style to match."

Stern was followed by a volume of Friedman's short stories, *Far From the City of Class* and, this year, by *A Mother's Kisses.*

In the months prior to the publication of *A Mother's Kisses* he was true to form. "They (the critics) are going to murder me," he would moan. "It's the second one—that's the big hurdle." I felt sure the book would be a success. And, of course, it was. The New York Times said about the novel:

"Run, push, play dirty. But get *A Mother's Kisses.* Meg is the most unforgettable mother since Medea. Meg is heaven and hell jammed into a hammock-sized bra and too-tight girdle.

"She is Theda Bara with a henna rinse, and Molly Goldberg with a plunging neckline . . . synopsizing a Friedman plot is like making a tracing of the Mona Lisa. You can reproduce the shape and dimensions but nothing that reveals the work's unique quality."

The *Saturday Review* welcomed "the most fabulous mother in modern fiction . . . and at the flick of her tongue she arouses your horror, sympathy, laughter or dismay.

"Friedman is a wild poet of the secret life, one of the funniest of writers, but a dark echo to the laughter that gets painfully close to the bone."

Newsweek said: "The book abounds with brilliant scenes and sufficient comic characterizations to populate a dozen novels, so rich and profligate is Friedman's inventiveness."

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While Friedman will not admit the book is autobiographical, it is plain to anyone who knew him at Missouri that the "tall and scattered looking boy with an Indian nose" in some ways at least fits the author. On the pitfalls of writing an autobiographical novel, he says:

"If it's successful, all is forgiven. As soon as an old friend read the book, he called and threatened to sue. He had a healthy walk-on. Then when the reviews started, he called and demanded to know how come the mother was getting all the notice."

"Actually," Friedman said, *"A Mother's Kisses* wasn't going to be about the mother at all. I wanted to write about a certain kind of melancholy atmosphere that seemed to me to exist in the forties—and the book was supposed to begin where it now ends, with the boy in college. But, in the writing I found that I wasn't interested in college."

Friedman is "coasting awhile," but he has his next book firmly charted. It will deal with contemporary issues. *"A Mother's Kisses* represents the period before *Stern,"* he said. "The next book will be what happens after *Stern.* It will address itself to contemporary issues—the loneliness that exists in certain circles—and the frenzied activity not dealt with effectively in contemporary novels."

On the personal side, Friedman married Ginger Howard, of Clayton, Mo., shortly after he left service. They have three sons, Josh, Drew, and Kipp, all of them, Friedman jokingly says, were named after bit players in the late TV movies. They live in Glen Cove, L. I.

Despite his writing commitments Friedman does not intend to leave his post with Magazine Management.

"The job is stabilizing," he said. "With all the fuss about the book I find this so. I have always been successful at being a schizoid.

"During the day it's magazine work. At night, usually between 11 and 1 a.m., I write. And I find the job and writing not entirely incompatible. If I had a whole day of yawning, I'd be a mess. I don't ever intend to just write novels. To my way of thinking, the ideal career is to write books, stories and stay abreast of the times. I'd like to do an original film and flirt with the theater."

It seems that Friedman will get his wish. He has several assignments from leading magazines, an original film assignment, and an option on his book for a Broadway musical and possible Hollywood movie.

His world has changed. He is sought out. He has grown in depth, dimension and stature. He is without doubt one of the most important men of letters to come out of Missouri—and at 34, he ranks among the top writers on the American scene. But to me, an old classmate, Bruce Jay Friedman has not changed —except for a receding hairline. He is the same "tall and scattered looking boy with an Indian nose" that arrived on campus in the fall of 1947.

And he wears his success as casually as the battered brown shoes, checkered sports jacket, wine-colored tie and brown chino pants he used to sport around the campus at Ol' Mizzou.

Once again St. Louis alumni have enjoyed a successful "Night at the Opera." Here is a portion of the crowd on a tour backstage of the Municipal Opera—that's a stage setting in the background. The alumni saw "The Sound of Music" production. Elmer Richars was in charge of tickets.