THE DENVER POST

Eric Elkins

Book Reviews, Interviews, & Features

31 articles · 2000–2007

Denver Post Staff Writer & Special Contributor

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A tragicomic Holocaust fable

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / March 17, 2002

Humorous and enjoyable are not adjectives often used to describe novels about the Holocaust and its legacy. But more touching than tragic, more absurd than abject, "The Golems of Gotham" captures the fears and pathology of survivors and their descendants without submerging into the smoky depths of the concentration camps themselves.

One of the self-referential messages of the book is that no language can describe what happened - that the atrocities committed by the Nazis are untenable, but the effects are not. Thane Rosenbaum, the son of Holocaust survivors, looks back on those dark times with a new-century perspective, and an almost prescient lack of irony after the events of Sept. 11.

"Golems" examines tragedy without being tragic. It shines a soft focus on the sadness of the characters without descending into the maudlin. It's also very funny and a joy to read.

"The Golems of Gotham" tells the story of a family whose tapestry has been torn not by the Holocaust itself, but by the effects of surviving it. Without the material to repair their fabric, the Levins don't have the energy or wherewithal to even rework it into a patchwork quilt. Young Ariel sets out to rescue her father, Oliver, by bringing back his parents from the dead.

Oliver's parents were Holocaust survivors who were incapable of giving him the warmth he needed to feel safe in the world. Rosenbaum writes, "Of course, when they were alive, parenting hadn't been possible. These were people without much confidence in the preservation and continuity of family... No reason to get too close to a son who might eventually be taken away."

The elder Levins took their own lives during Saturday-morning services while Oliver was away at college, and his wife left him without saying why when their daughter Ariel was still a baby. He doesn't trust the world, and doesn't have the tools to raise his daughter. Exacerbating the problem is that he's a best-selling mystery novelist with writer's block.

Ariel makes a thoughtful but untutored attempt to raise her grandparents in the form of a golem, the legendary 16th-century construct of rabbis in Prague, a man of clay given life to protect the Jews in times of peril. Instead, she summons the ghosts of Levin's parents, and six Holocaust writers who also took their own lives. The "golems" are there to rescue Oliver, but they have their own agenda, as well. And that's when the fun begins.

Rosenbaum's book is crammed with questions and theories, musings and digressions.

The ghosts, who include Primo Levi, Jean Amery and Jerzy Kosinski, spend their time on Earth haunting New York City and discussing their legacies. They try to uncover the reasons they killed themselves after surviving the Nazis' best attempts to eradicate them.

Rosenbaum's golems posit that "We, as artists, were trained at Auschwitz ... and because of that we have no filters, just photographic memories. We know of no way to block out the pain." So while others built new lives and did their best to put the past behind them, these survivors, who turned to art to express their rage and desolation, had no way to turn it off, or hide it away.

Rosenbaum's audacious resuscitation of these real-life writers works so well, you'll forget that he's putting words in mouths that have been closed for some time. It seems as though he's taken the essence of their actual writing, and transmogrified it into the ghosts' dialogue.

In a disclaimer, Rosenbaum says, "Many of the events described in this novel that relate to the pre-suicide lives of the authors, as well as the suicides themselves, did not in fact take place" - but it hardly matters.

One of the most compelling themes of the book is the thought that many of today's Jews, all of whom, in one way or another, have been affected by the Holocaust, are becoming more secular, less spiritual. They may be culturally Jewish, but have left the religious significance of their traditions behind.

Oliver sees no purpose in religious observance, and does little to pass down his cultural heritage to his daughter.

People still crowd Zabar's on Broadway to shovel down bagels and blintzes, but it's not until Ariel shows up, miraculously able to play the canon of Jewish lament - klezmer music - on

an old violin she found in the attic, that residents of the Upper West Side become observant again.

It's the neighborhood's golem-wrought transformation into a shtetl, a Jewish ghetto, a crucible of the spiritual treasures of a people, that brings magic to this book. Gradually, all of New York City changes. The golems, who, understandably, see voluntary tattoos as a travesty, and smoke as an affront to their sensibilities, contrive to remove both from the city. Tattoo parlors close, and the body art disappears from people's limbs. Everyone stops smoking; even the chimneys are rendered useless.

Comparisons to Michael Chabon's brilliant "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay" are unavoidable. Both books discuss the golem; both characterize Jews who live secular lives as a result of the strife in Eastern Europe; both are written in an offhand, approachable prose that's full of lyrical pyrotechnics. Where "Kavalier and Clay" is an epic, spanning decades and characters, "The Golems of Gotham" is more intimate, more situational, and the Holocaust plays a central role in the telling.

If Rosenbaum occasionally overreaches, stretching a turn of phrase beyond plausibility, he can be forgiven.

With compelling characters, both dead and alive, prose that captures your attention but keeps you rooted to the story, serious issues addressed amid humor and fantasy, "The Golems of Gotham" is eminently readable, deeply personal and surprisingly satisfying.

THE GOLEMS OF GOTHAM By Thane Rosenbaum HarperCollins, $25.95

No Potter; this magic a whole new story

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / October 26, 2003

With "The Amulet of Samarkand," comparisons to the Harry Potter opuses are unavoidable. But what starts out feeling like a bit of a fantasy bandwagon retread (parentless boy learns magic under harsh circumstances) quickly becomes a unique, peculiar and dark story all its own.

In "Amulet," the powerful djinni Bartimaeus is conjured by a young, frail-looking boy named Nathaniel and ordered to steal the eponymous amulet from one of the most powerful magicians in London.

Although the setting is the 21st century, the world of "The Amulet of Samarkand," which is the first book of what's being billed as the "Bartimaeus Trilogy," is very different from the one in which we live. The government is run by magicians, who tend to be conniving and untrustworthy (OK, so there are similarities to our own reality). Their power comes from the control, albeit shaky and conditional, of supernatural servants - imps, afrits, djinns and others.

When Nathaniel is very young, his parents sell him to the government, and he's put into an apprenticeship under the roof of a second-rate public servant, who considers himself to be a talented magician. After the boy is humiliated by the powerful and haughty (and, of course, evil) Simone Lovelace, he makes himself a vow to take revenge. But Nathaniel is hot-tempered and still under the power of his dim master. And though he has the talent to conjure the great djinni Bartimaeus, he quickly loses control of the situation, and mayhem ensues.

The world of Bartimaeus is like none other - "magic" is merely the use of enslaved creatures, and that exploitation comes with its own risks. The infighting among the magical politicians, a nascent rebellion among the "commoner" masses (anyone who's not a magician, or, at least, married to one), and strife in Eastern Europe add texture to an already rich story.

The narrative voice changes from chapter to chapter, told sometimes in the first-person by the djinni, and at others in third-person, following Nathaniel's adventures.

Where Nathaniel's chapters are mannered and written in descriptive, detailed prose, the Bartimaeus ones, though no less meticulous, are more off-hand and smart-aleck.

Bartimaeus is a fascinating character - he has no moral compass, and doesn't have any compunction about killing humans when given the opportunity. His only motivation is to accomplish what he's been ordered to do, maybe cause some chaos along the way and get himself released back into his own dimension until conjured again. The Bartimaeus chapters are replete with footnotes, which give expository information about his world and the nature of the creatures the magicians exploit to stay in power.

At times, that information could have been better imparted through the story itself and seems like a lazy, shorthand way of teaching the reader, but the footnotes are still true to the voice of Bartimaeus and can be quite funny at times. In fact, the whole book, though mildly grim and occasionally gruesome, has a light and humorous tone that palliates the more grown-up themes of world politics (England is at war with the Czech Republic), power-mongering (Lovelace is up to something insidious) and unforeseen violent consequences (people do die).

Yes, this is young-adult fiction, but like the latest episode of the kid wizard with the lightning scar on his forehead, its darker vision and compelling story will appeal to pre-teens and adults alike. Closer to the "His Dark Materials" trilogy, by Philip Pullman, though by no means as portentous, this first installment of the "Bartimaeus" series promises interesting developments and deeper, richer storylines in future novels.

Eric S. Elkins is a Denver-based free-lance reviewer.
--------------------------------------- THE AMULET OF SAMARKAND The Bartimaeus Trilogy, Book One By Jonathan Stroud Hyperion/Miramax, 464 pages, $17.95

Baroque Cycle's second entry a wild ride

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / April 25, 2004

There can be no doubt that Neal Stephenson comprehends the late 17th century. From London to Leipzig, Cairo to Edo (by way of Malabar and Manila), his characters in "The Confusion" travel an ever-changing, evolving world of industry and finance.

The novel, Volume 2 of "The Baroque Cycle" takes place a short time after "Quicksilver" (Volume 1) ends - famed Vagabond Jack Shaftoe is still a Barbary galley slave, Eliza is still a financial wizard and Daniel Waterhouse is still the middleman between rival illuminati Isaac Newton and Gottfried Liebniz.

But life keeps getting interesting for the characters, as they stroll, swim and gallop their way through historical moments of the 1690s. Jack, suddenly lucid after years of madness, finds himself participating in a plot with his fellow slaves to commandeer a Spanish ship filled with treasure, pay off their ransoms and emerge wealthy men.

Unfortunately for Jack and his gang, the booty is especially critical to certain gentlemen of great power. The crew's wild adventures, with the ever-swashbuckling Shaftoe at the helm, are recounted in "Bonanza," one of the two novels that are "con-fused" in "The Confusion."

The other storyline, "Juncto," tells the tale of Eliza, rescued from a harem by Shaftoe in "Quicksilver," who, through wit and intrigue, becomes powerful, incredibly rich and sought-after by men of differing means and talents. Where "Bonanza" is a saga of swordplay and action, "Juncto" delves deep into the vagaries of 17th-century finance - the early days of speculation, the birth of The Bank of England, the emergence and destruction of great houses of commerce.

Their stories are enormous, rambling yarns full of unexpected successes and failures. But too often Stephenson's love of the Baroque era and all of its marvels bogs down the narrative. The characters, who, through 900-plus pages of the first book and nearly as many in "The Confusion," have become many-faceted and lovable and worth caring about, are often prone to didactic conversation.

It's not that the particulars are boring or too complicated - Stephenson is a master of analogy and he's adept at infusing dialogue with exposition. But if "Quicksilver" was dense with historical fine points, the stories in Volume 2 are, at times, impervious to light - packed with minutiae. It's interesting to find out how watered steel was forged, or to learn the rationale behind creating a national bank whose mint was first helmed by Sir Isaac Newton, and Stephenson's off-hand way of having characters coin phrases that are still in use today makes their induction into our jargon all the more memorable. But some conversations between characters become mired in the information and revelations the author is eager to share with his readers, causing the flow of the story to falter and stall.

The good news is that, though readers will find a fairly hefty price of admission (the book doesn't really pick up steam until 150 pages or so in), "The Confusion" becomes a brawny, barrel-chested work of beauty. Stephenson's unique prose style - at once charmingly old-fashioned and punk rock snappy - is usually enough of an incentive to keep turning pages.

And Jack and Eliza's love for each other, expressed in some very odd ways, though convincing nonetheless, provides the thread that sews the two stories (and, really, the two volumes) together. Amid the grapeshot and internecine sniping, in spite of enslavement and kidnapping and war and a ubiquitous harpoon, the tenacious romantic connection between the vagabond and the duchess drive the story along, making Stephenson's immense triptych through the Baroque era feel almost intimate. And Stephenson loves putting these two characters into absurd situations and forcing them to think their way out.

Just as with "Quicksilver," "The Confusion" is unparalleled geek literature - deeply moving, painfully detailed, replete with big laughs and packed with hyperkinetic adventure. By novel's end, readers will be antsy to wade through the mire of the cycle's conclusion, "The System of the World," which will be published in the fall.
-- THE CONFUSION The Baroque Cycle, Vol. 2 By Neal Stephenson William Morrow, 832 pages, $27.95

``System" breaks down in final book of ``Baroque Cycle" epic

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / October 24, 2004

What a shame that the reader's relationship with characters who have been elegantly rendered over the course of several thousand pages is the primary impetus for slogging through the first half of "The System of the World," Neal Stephenson's third and final book in his "Baroque Cycle." It's a price of admission that only the truly devoted will find themselves willing to pay.

Not nearly as awe-inspiring as "Quicksilver," or remotely as thrilling as "The Confusion," book three does have its charms. Unfortunately, beautiful writing and the author's lyrical swagger don't finish the journey with the bravado one would expect.

"The System of the World" picks up where the framing story of the first book left off. It's 1714, and Daniel Waterhouse is 67 years old. In "Quicksilver," he agreed to make the arduous journey from the American colonies back to London, and in this novel, he finally arrives. He has been summoned by Princess Caroline of Brandenburg- Ansbach (whose husband, George of Hanover, will eventually become king of England), to somehow mend the acrimony between the great savants Sir Isaac Newton and Baron Leibniz.

If the book already sounds confusing, fasten your seatbelt. Daniel must navigate many opposing currents - Tories vs. Whigs, Jacobites vs. Anglicans (I think), Newton vs. Leibniz, etc. It's not until the story begins to take shape that a functional understanding of the conflicts coalesces, and by then it doesn't matter nearly as much as it did at the beginning.

In "Quicksilver" and "The Confusion," Stephenson mingled two very different kinds of stories - a brain-wrinkling intrigue narrative alternated with the adventures of Jack Shaftoe, who was constantly finding himself in the kind of trouble only a quick wit and a faster sword could get him out of. In "System," the entire 900-page novel is devoted to Daniel's machinations in London. And he's old. And so are most of the main characters.

Occasional flashes of action in the book are buried under near-autistic descriptions of early 18thcentury London. It's interesting to know how the great city sprawled and changed over

time, but less so how a character turned left here, and right there and took another left down the way, to end up ... wherever. Stick a knife fight on a pirate ship in the passage, and all could be forgiven.

Somewhere, in his metamorphosis from science-fiction writer to geek-lit auteur, Stephenson seems to have lost some of the "divine quintessence" that powered his early novels. He spends so much time building the infrastructure of this world, there's very little actual space devoted to telling a great yarn. It's frustrating, because so much in the book is carefully wrought and worthy of attention.

Stephenson elicits an epoch of change and possibility - a time not unlike our own - when a new understanding of the workings of the universe allows for incredible leaps in technological innovation. And just as in the first two books in the trilogy, Stephenson creates many "aha!" moments, where the reader is invited to put pieces together and discover for himself the genesis of a well-worn turn of phrase or timeless invention. If only the story itself kept that spark of ingenuity and joy alive.

But this is not to say that "The System of the World" lacks entertainment value. Stephenson's unique sense of humor is evident throughout the novel, in the witticisms of the characters, and in some of the more absurd situations that crop up along the way. And, of course, the author has a magnificent gift for stringing words together.

Just as in the first two novels, his punk-rock attitude adds flair to his old-style narrative voice. Even some of the most soul-crushing descriptions of London streets still occasionally crackle with Stephenson's literary small arms fire. What's missing is the heavy artillery.

Stephenson's wondrous personages give life to his stories, and if it weren't for an array of articulate characters in "A System of the World," we'd be left with an interesting but not terribly compelling final chapter in an epic that's still quite an achievement.

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The System of the World By Neal Stephenson William Morrow, 977 pages, $27.95

Lazy slackers can't save lazy book

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / May 14, 2006

Douglas Coupland could do better. The author who defined the grown-up children of the boomers as a disaffected, tech-savvy lot in his acclaimed collection of short stories, "Generation X," could have created a much more engaging and entertaining story than he did in the meandering pages of "Jpod."

Sure, the novel can be a fun read, with its loopy interludes (like random quotes for the tech literate from video games, toy packages, websites, epic chain e-mails, etc.), bizarre characters and ripped-from-the-cubicle dialogue, but the gestalt is ultimately an unsatisfying assemblage of ungainly episodes tied together by an unlikable protagonist and his unfortunate band of underachievers.

Ethan Jarlewski is a post- modern bohemian, an unmotivated cubicle jockey, who, with his team of miscreants and misfits, finds off-beat and sometimes creative ways to avoid doing actual work for their Vancouver video game development company. His wacky professional and personal lives are inextricable; he's never really working, but he's always thinking about work. At any given time of day or night, he could be: 1. Programming an ultraviolent hidden level (starring Ronald McDonald as a killer clown) for the insipid family video game his company is producing; 2. Helping his mother with some of the unsavory business aspects of her pot-growing enterprise; 3. Driving to Costco to purchase "a couple dozen boxes (of Cheerios) in a ratio of three boxes of Honey Nut to one box of classic Cheerios" for a senior developer; 4. Enduring his father's whingeing about finding speaking roles in movies; 5. Challenging his team to write letters to Ronald McDonald, explaining why each of them would be the clown's "ideal mate"; 6. Completing a podmate's challenge to find the one non-prime number within a list of the 8,363 primes between 10,000 and 100,000 (and let there be no mistake: the numbers are listed across 18 pages of the novel); or 7. Suffering abuse from a character named Douglas Coupland. Wow, that's original.

The first line of dialogue in "Jpod" is, "Oh God, I feel like a refugee from a Douglas Coupland novel." It would be a forgivable snippet of self-indulgence if Coupland had dropped the joke right there. We get it. But he doesn't let go.

And when the character Coupland enters the novel later in the story, he turns an already fractured narrative into a derivative exercise. No amount of self-effacing humor can rescue the novel from becoming metafiction lite.

I should have loved this book; in many ways, I live the lifestyle of the "podders," and I'm certainly of the right generation. But "Jpod" tries too hard to be authentic. Coupland's chummy, informal style is so loose it has nothing to cling to.

A stronger narrative would have at least given his prose a place to perch, and his characters aren't textured enough to hold the story together. And, yes, I get the point that they're supposed to be one-dimensional caricatures for the author to build up and demolish, creating a searing, funny commentary on today's hardworking slackers. But "Jpod" just doesn't manage to deliver on those terms.

And one more thing: Coupland's reliance on references to "The Simpsons" in order to convey his characters' (and, by association, his) hipness is just tired and pathetic. No matter how smart the TV series still manages to be after nearly 20 years on the air, quoting it is passé. All it would take is one savvy surf through facebook.com to find a more apt reflection of the generation's hyperawareness of pop culture.

And maybe that's the problem with "Jpod" in general: It just feels lazy, as if Coupland was multitasking while he wrote the novel.

Oh. Wait. Now I get it.

Eric Elkins is a Denver area freelance writer, and editor at BiasDotCom.com. His website is DatingDad.com. ------------------- JPOD By Douglas Coupland Bloomsbury, 448 pages, $24.95

A collection with fragile connections

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / October 29, 2006

Opening a book of short works by Neil Gaiman is like tearing into a box full of wrapped presents, confident and expectant that peeling away the paper from each gift will reveal something wonderful and unexpected and rewarding.

The prodigious storyteller, well known for his "Sandman" graphic novels and books like "American Gods' and "Anansi Boys," writes Gothic fiction with a rock 'n' roll beat. He taps into the stories that are told from generation to generation, explores why we all implicitly understand these mythologies, and spins out thought-provoking fictions that yank the reader out of complacency while never failing to entertain.

Unfortunately, Gaiman's latest collection, "Fragile Things," feels more like a wank than a yank. Swamping the few gems that actually make the book worth reading are pieces of indulgent puffery and affected explorations of nothing.

Collected over several years, "Fragile Things" is a grab bag of previously published award-winning short stories and poems, even liner notes from CDs, and fiction that never found a home. Some of the works, like "October in the Chair," where the months sit in a circle and tell tales, are stories-within-stories. Ultimately, the frameworks tend to be more compelling than the stories themselves.

That could almost be said for the introduction of the book, where Gaiman explains why he collected these pieces and the stories behind them. In some ways, the introduction is the most interesting part of the collection. But, just like in the works themselves, moments of brilliance about the craft of writing and the power of words give way to banal observations that don't carry any weight. (And I wish that the story introductions had been placed before each piece, so that I didn't have to keep referring back to the front of the book every time I started to read something new.)

But when the stories do work, they hum. Gaiman's unique voice - mannered, as if even the tales that take place in the present day were written 100 years ago, yet contemporary and offbeat, conversational and fresh - juxtaposes Gothic tropes with a punk-rock heart, yet never becomes cynical. And when given the right vehicle, like the story "Harlequin

Valentine," where the Harlequin character, the archetypal trickster from the commedia dell'arte, visits a chilly Midwestern town, or "Sunbird," which carries itself like a posh, clubby Jules Verne yarn from the 19th century, the stories invite the reader into Gaiman's cozy-yet-unsettling milieu. The author's darkly upbeat humor makes some of his stories funny and frightening all at once.

The real treasure in the book is a novella called "The Monarch of the Glen," which catches up with Shadow, Gaiman's protagonist from his novel "American Gods." The hard-boiled, hulking son of Odin, finds himself wandering through Scotland and dealing with an odd new challenge. Watching him walks the fine line between the modern and the mythical is a true pleasure.

But ``Fragile Things" is ultimately disappointing. Once the reader has opened up every little gift in the box, he or she is left with very little worth keeping; a few sweets to savor and enjoy, but nothing much of lasting pleasure. ------------------- Fragile Things By Neil Gaiman HarperCollins, 400 pages, $26.95

INTERVIEW · LIFESTYLES · PAGE G-03

Betting Big on Bones - Museum volunteers earn right to important finds

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / July 30, 2000

When Denver Museum of Nature & Science volunteer Lorrie McWhinney found a small piece of dinosaur bone in the last few minutes of the 1998 dig season, she had no idea that she had stumbled upon the burial grounds of more than 20 prehistoric creatures. Nor did the Denver woman have any inkling that the site would be named in her honor.

McWhinney, a radiologist at Kaiser Permanente, was just one of many volunteers winding up a two-week stint on the museum's dig site that day. So when museum paleontologist Ken Carpenter sent her and a graduate student hiking up a small valley to look for eggshell material, that's exactly what they did.

It was their last day at a dig site in the once-fertile wastelands near Arches National Monument in eastern Utah.

While working just over the ridge from this valley, they had found dinosaur eggshells. Carpenter thought that was a good indicator that other prehistoric material was waiting to be found.

"I was walking, and could hear my feet crunching on bone," McWhinney said later, describing the day. A line of clouds and heavy rain was rapidly approaching, and the once-bright afternoon light was fading.

McWhinney called out to the graduate student, and asked if she'd found anything. The student was so focused on looking for eggshells, she answered, "No, all I'm finding is bone."

Chunk of bone McWhinney followed a concentration of bone material up to the base of a bush, where she found a silver-dollar- sized chunk that looked important. "I picked it up and held it in my left hand," she remembers.

As the squall line approached, McWhinney made a mental note of where she was standing, lining herself up with a ravine, some bushes and a boulder or two. Then she ran for the

truck Carpenter was driving. She told him she hadn't found any eggshell material, then opened her hand and said, "All I found was this."

Carpenter got out of the vehicle. "Show me where you found this," he ordered.

A drizzling precursor to the downpour chased Carpenter and McWhinney as they ran to the site of her discovery.

Carpenter made some mental notes and ushered McWhinney back to the truck just as the storm hit.

She had found a piece of armor from the tanklike dinosaur Ankylosaur, but she would have to wait another nine months, until the next dig season, to learn how extensive the site was. It proved to be so rich that 25 potential excavation spots have been identified, enough to keep scientists and volunteers digging and researching for years to come. The entire area was named "Lorrie's Site."

First-time discovery The bone McWhinney found belonged to Ankylosaur Gastonia. The dinosaur lived roughly 110 million years ago and specimens have been found on two continents, but this was the first time it had been found in the Ruby Ranch layer of the Cedar Mountain formation. The Cedar Mountain formation is a layer of sediment deposited in the late Cretaceous period, most visible locally in the hogbacks along the foothills and the Morrison outcropping. The Ruby Ranch layer was deposited between 98 million and 140 million years ago, or as Carpenter describes it, "the Dark Ages of dinosaurs."

"And this is the most dinosaurs (of any kind) found in one spot anywhere in Ruby Ranch," he adds.

Last May, braving howling winds and surface temperatures of nearly 110 degrees, the group concentrated on two of the 25 promising spots. In one, the scientists found evidence that two or three ankylosaurs were buried in a group.

McWhinney concentrated on another spot, where an entire creature was thought to be resting. In both places, the concentration of bone was almost overwhelming.

"It was like a Steven Spielberg movie," said McWhinney. "Swish-swish, and there it was."

The paleontologists use hand picks and paintbrushes to clear away the dirt. Each bone or bone fragment is cataloged and placed in its own plastic bag. In places where several bones are piled too closely to remove, the areas are "jacketed" with newspaper and cloth soaked in plaster. These bundles are carefully transported back to the museum, where they can be excavated under better light and in more comfortable conditions.

After examining the way the bones are arranged, Carpenter believes the creatures died on a flood plain. After their carcasses had rotted somewhat, the water of a river came and moved them to their present location. Sinew was left behind, connecting some of the bones, and many of the bones stayed in proximity to each other. Silt and sedimentation covered them as the water washed over, orienting most of them in the north-south direction the river flowed.

And because the remains have always been found in groups, Carpenter believes this dinosaur traveled in packs.

Armored herbivores Ankylosaur gastonia probably were at least 15 feet long and were armored from one end to the other. They were herbivores that lived in what was a semiarid landscape, making their way through small ponds and puddles.

"I imagine herds of these guys waddling across this ridge, with their stubby little legs," Carpenter said. Similar remains have been found in England. Gastonia seem to have become extinct about 100 million years ago, although no one knows why.

Back at the lab, the volunteers work with Carpenter to identify the bones and compare them to other finds.

"We'll try to understand the population that died there," he said. They'll look at the male/female ratio and try to learn the ages of the animals found.

Certification program The Museum of Nature & Science is one of the world's few that allow volunteers to have enough hands-on experience with the bones to make significant scientific discoveries. The museum's paleontology certification program allows adults to pursue their childhood dreams of studying the fossilized remains of ancient life. After completing core requirements, they are allowed to work in the lab or in the field. Further classes allow them to delve deeper into paleontology. (For more information about volunteer programs at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, call 303-370-6419.)

Some of the volunteers are in the process of co-authoring scientific papers, developing poster sessions for conferences and taking courses outside the museum to inform their research. "It's like working with graduate students, without the whining," said Carpenter.

Like McWhinney, most of the volunteers save up their vacation time to participate at the dig site. And with their help, Carpenter plans to spend years to come studying the occupants of Lorrie's Site.

"This is a level of study not often done in dinosaur work," he adds. "It's a snapshot of a herd."

Eric S. Elkins is Colorado Kids editor at The Denver Post. He accompanied volunteers to Lorrie's Site in May. For more information about dinosaurs, watch for a serialization of the National Geographic book "Feather Dinosaurs," along with CSAP-style questions, in Colorado Kids in September.

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B actor keeps his chin up

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / August 13, 2001

With his epic Guy Smiley chin, cult following, and connected friends, you'd think Bruce Campbell would be more recognizable to the general public. But unless you're a fan of his "Evil Dead" movies, watched the one season of his TV show "Brisco County Jr." on Fox, or caught him as Autolycus on the "Hercules" and "Xena" series, you probably only know him as "that guy."

You've seen Campbell as a guest star on TV shows such as "Ellen" and "The X-Files." He's had starring roles in plenty of low-budget films, and smaller roles in several blockbusters. "The higher the budget, the lower the part," Campbell says in his autobiography, "If Chins Could Kill: Confessions of a "B' movie actor." Campbell is signing his book at The Tattered Cover Bookstore in Lodo at 7:30 tonight.

In the blockbuster "Congo," Campbell played what he described as a "dead-in-five-minutes role." In the three "Evil Dead" movies, he carried the films as the hero. As one of the sailors in the film version of "McHale's Navy," he had to come up with his own dialogue. But in "Bubba Ho-tep," an upcoming movie with Ossie Davis, he plays a 68-year- old Elvis chasing down a mummy in a rest home. "A great thing is you can take any part you want. The handlers for Tom Cruise probably wouldn't let him undergo 2 1/2 hours of makeup for this kind of movie," Campbell said in a recent phone interview. His book is dedicated to "the players on the second string - and I cheerfully include myself in that lot." "B' does not necessarily mean bad movie," he said. "It means you don't have the full budgets, you don't have the choice scripts - you have to work smarter, faster. Ninety-nine percent of the people are not movie stars.

The book is for everybody else in the industry. It's by the little people for the little people." The crew members, he explained, are the bottom of the heap. "You have a few big stars at the tip, but the support team is huge! It's so out of whack - actors refer to it as "their movie.' Get out of here."

In his book, he writes: "Personally, I feel that all actors should attend a filmmaking workshop because it would give them a far greater appreciation for all of the hard work done around them."

Campbell got his start making Super-8 films with his high school friends. When they were able to borrow enough money to make their first feature, director and co-producer Sam Raimi was only 19. Now he's the director of such films as "A Simple Plan" and "The Gift." He's working on the $100 million-plus "Spider Man" event film.

"It seems so absurd, yet so fitting," said Campbell about his childhood friend's success. On the set, Raimi winked at Campbell, and said "We're doing the same old gags, just with more money."

Campbell plays a "small, pivotal role" in Spider Man. "I give Spider Man his name," he said. He hardly saw Raimi on the set, which was strange for the guy who was tormented by Raimi from adolescence.

Campbell believes he has a definite advantage over "actors who start out quick and get recognized right away. If you've slogged around in the trenches, you know what filmmaking is all about." Being a cult movie star, he said, "is the best of both worlds. I'm staying at MGM Grand, in Las Vegas. It's a movie-themed hotel." But he can walk through the halls without anyone recognizing him. Then again, he spent five hours signing autographs the night before.

B team Who: Bruce Campbell, signing his book "If Chins Could Kill: Confessions of a "B' movie actor.'

Where: Tattered Cover in LoDo, 16th and Wynkoop streets When: 7:30 tonight

INTERVIEW · BKS · PAGE L-03

Author Winchester maps out exciting life Famed geologist focus of book

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / September 30, 2001

Simon Winchester has been imprisoned in a foreign country, traveled to some of the most remote places on Earth and covered, firsthand, major global crises. But you wouldn't know it from reading his two most popular books, both residing comfortably on The New York Times best-seller list.

The author of "The Professor and the Madman," and his new work, "The Map That Changed the World," has been most successful as a biographer of men whose lives of isolation and study were comparatively sleepy.

"It's weird; I can't really explain it," he said recently, sitting in the bar at a local hotel. "There I was, traveling all over the world, and then writing these books about various places in the world. I thought it was a little bit unjust, and then ironic that the first book I write that's about a historical figure, which doesn't involve any travel, really, suddenly takes off. To this day, I haven't been able to work out why."

In "The Map that Changed the World," Winchester describes the life of surveyor William Smith, who became convinced fossils found in the earth gave clues about the geology of the layers in which they were discovered. His conviction led to 20 years of travel through his native England, in an effort to map the hidden formations there.

Smith's "A Delineation of the Strata of England and Wales With a Part of Scotland" was the first geological map created.

"It is a map that heralded the beginnings of a whole new science." Winchester writes in his prologue. "It is a map that had an importance, symbolic and real, for the development of one of the great fundamental fields of study - geology, which, arguably, like physics and mathematics, is a field of learning and endeavor that underpins all knowledge, all understanding."

Smith's life was one of delight and disappointment. In spite of his accomplishments and his unmatched knowledge of England's geology, the unschooled son of a blacksmith was

humiliated and ignored by most of the "gentle" society of the regency period. Smith was snubbed by the Geological Society of London. His work was plagiarized by a blue-nosed dandy who was the first president of the new-formed society. He spent several weeks in a debtors' prison.

Although his map, published in 1815, was widely recognized as a singular accomplishment, the man himself wasn't acknowledged for his contributions to science until 1831, eight years before his death, when he was awarded the first Wollaston Medal, the geological science equivalent to the Nobel Prize.

In "Map," Winchester follows Smith's life, from his early surveying and canal-building to his stunning, world- changing observations of the ground beneath his feet. Using diary entries, an and aborted attempt at an autobiography, and thousands of pages of supplementary material, Winchester uncovers "a prophet without honor."

He writes, "(The map) was a work of genius, and at the same time a lonely and potentially soul-destroying project.

It required a certain kind of vision, and uncanny ability to imagine a world possessed of an additional fourth dimension. It proved to be the financial ruin of the man who had the vision to see it made."

In the interview, Winchester said, "Think of Smith. Eighteen years, essentially without any money, walking and writing in all weather, all over the country. It's an awesome thing to do."

Winchester graduated from Oxford with a degree in geology. "I used to be a geologist, and I got into journalism when I was in east Africa," he said. "I was reading a book by James Morrison, about his being a London Times correspondent on the Mount Everest expedition of 1953. I read this book, and I thought, oh my god, this is what I want to spend my life doing." That was in 1967. "The Map that Changed the World" is his first return to geology in more than 30 years.

"I'm so fascinated by (geology). I was reminded how fascinating it is, by doing this book. I'd forgotten all about it," he said. Fortunately, Winchester's time away from the discipline didn't diminish his understanding of it. "That's the wonderful thing to me about this book - the geologists are buying it, and finding it, you know, sort of reasonably right."

But why would millions of readers, most of whom think earth science is as exciting as actuarial statistics, be interested in reading about "The Father of English Geology?" Why would anyone care about the two men who helped create the Oxford English Dictionary in "The Professor and the Madman"?

"We're dealing with forgotten figures. The trajectory of their lives is extraordinary, with great triumphs and disaster." he said. "These guys did change the world in a major way, did have an impact. I think that aspect of their story is realized by readers."

Winchester's intensive research on Smith had an unexpected result. "In the end, I sort of loved the old guy. I feel an enormous affection for William Smith. What a great, great man he was."

Winchester also was able to shed light on the film adaptation of "The Professor and the Madman." "Luc Besson first bought the rights to the film, then Mel Gibson joined him," he said. "So the two of them own the property. They've contracted a scriptwriter - not me." Winchester switched to a credible American accent, "No, Mr. Winchester, you're too literary.'" After three revisions, the script was approved by Gibson. "The plan is to shoot this autumn and winter.

Dustin Hoffman is supposed to play W.C. Minor. I'm going to get to play the man he shot dead."

Meanwhile, Winchester is working on a book about the Krakatoa volcano, between Java and Sumatra. In writing it, he's hoping to combine his love of "wandering about" with his success in documenting history.

"That's enabling me to do two things - a lot of history, because it erupted in 1883, so I can do a lot of documentary research, which I love doing. But I can also go there," he said. Winchester's current project marries his adventurous life with his talent for writing about arcane history.

INTERVIEW · AE · PAGE E-01

Paving the way for gold "Neutron' plugs tout the film

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / December 30, 2001

In his new movie, Jimmy Neutron says, "I may be small, but I have a big brain."

But it's his oversized head and pointy hair that kids have recognized since November of last year. That's when the teaser trailer for the Nickelodeon movie, "Jimmy Neutron, Boy Genius" was released with "Rugrats in Paris." The film opened Dec. 21 in Denver.

Since the release of that trailer, Jimmy Neutron - described as "one-third Einstein, one-third Bart Simpson, and one- third Jim Carrey" - has been ubiquitous. His presence on TV, on film and in video games is unprecedented for an animated entity.

"Last January, starting every month, he had a cartoon short on Nickelodeon that was linked to a game on his website," said Albie Hecht, co-producer of the movie, and president of Film and Entertainment for Nickelodeon.

"And then, in April, we had him as a presenter on the Kids' Choice awards, when he came on to a live TV show and said he broke the cartoon barrier."

Over the summer, young Neutron began to wreak havoc on Nickelodeon TV shows. He turned the SpongeBob Squarepants characters into live-action puppets for 10 seconds, and forced the Rugrats crew to speak in Spanish.

Co-producer Steve Oedekerk, best known for his "Ace Ventura" movies, says Nickelodeon is the perfect company for launching such a totally digital, multiplatform character.

"When you pitch an idea that's, hey, what if Jimmy came out in the middle of, like, "Rugrats,' and started messing with the show, and you don't hear "no,' that's almost impossible!" he said.

The kid channel's flexibility and creative efforts made Jimmy one of the most recognized characters in animation, seven months before the movie was released, and more than a year before the TV show's debut next September.

"Last June, when they did TV Q Scores for animated characters, Jimmy appeared in the top 20. Kids called it the "Jimmy Neutron Show,'" said Hecht.

The Q poll runs twice per year, and measures the popularity of characters. Jimmy, who still doesn't have a TV show on the air, was in the same neighborhood as established cartoon characters.

Making of Jimmy The story of Jimmy's genesis, from nascent idea to omnipresent entity, requires the same suspension of disbelief one needs to fully enjoy the movie.

In 1995, DNA Productions, a Dallas-based animation company founded by John A. Davis and Keith Alcorn, won two awards for a short feature called "Johnny Quasar." When Steve Oedekerk saw a snapshot from the short in a digital animation industry magazine, he was inspired.

"It just had a great feel," he said. "I loved the colors, I loved the style, and that was at the time there were a lot of people trying to do photo-real CG (character generation), as they are now. It was great just seeing a cartoon living in 3-D space."

Oedekerk approached Davis and Alcorn with the idea of developing a TV show about Johnny and his dog, Goddard.

With Oedekerk's help, DNA brought the property to Albie Hecht at Nickelodeon.

"We initially brought it in as a TV series," said Oedekerk. "I was pushing for using CG the way people haven't used it, yet."

He pitched the idea as a way to create an all-encompassing franchise.

"You can reuse these assets," he explained. "And, once we do the series, we'll have all these assets available for a movie, we can use the same assets for TV commercials ... you can use the same assets for games, and the Internet," he told Nickelodeon brass. "And I said "I want everything,'" Hecht said with a laugh.

The movie, with the main character's new name, was fast-tracked for production.

The TV shorts and online games were only the beginning of Jimmy Neutron's meteoric rise to recognition. Earlier this month, the video game company THQ released the first of three titles starring the diminutive prodigy. THQ and Nickelodeon began developing the video

games as soon as the movie was given the green light. They worked directly with the film's production team, to ensure consistency and quality.

"We had the game developers travel to DNA during the game production to meet with John (Davis) and bounce ideas off of him," said Aly Sylvester, director of development and production of Nickelodeon Media Products. "He was very open to interacting with the game producers to make sure we got it right. The game developers were able to utilize the actual digital ... files of movie characters and props and re-purposed them for the PlayStation 2 and GameCube format."

Hecht said Jimmy Neutron's virtual existence "enabled us to put him everywhere. Everybody has adapted him as his own. It wasn't like he was shmeared onto a magazine page or grafted onto the Internet."

If ever there was a character created for the modern world of media, Jimmy seems to be it.

"He fits every form of media well. It seems that, no matter what the department, everybody takes Jimmy as "Oh, this is perfect for us,'" said Oedekerk.

"Reusable assets' Nickelodeon coined the term "reusable assets" for Jimmy and his world, but Neutron is not the only charming and misshapen computer-generated movie character appearing on small screens this winter. Following on the heels of its incredibly successful DVD release, the video game version of "Shrek" is a launch title for Microsoft's Xbox.

"Shrek' is definitely a reusable asset," said the game's producer, Ken Fox. "As the video game licensee for "Shrek,' we believe (it) ... transferred beautifully from film to video games, due to the strength of its compelling story and memorable characters."

TDK Mediactive worked closely with Dreamworks and PDI, the animation company behind "Shrek," to make the game look as much like the film as possible.

"We were able to reference a large number of the original models from the film," said Fox. "Although the models were not directly usable in the game, they were invaluable as reference material. We also received design feedback from the director, script feedback from some of the original writers, and had several meetings with the creators of the visual look of the film."

Where the two movies differ, however, is in their approach to the idea of creating a multiplatform franchise. Where "Jimmy Neutron" has the built-in support system of the Nickelodeon-industrial complex, "Shrek's" handlers couldn't easily place the ogre into different forms of media. Other than in a fighting game for Game Boy Color, Shrek's green face hasn't seen the light of day since the movie was released last summer.

The Jimmy Neutron games, both online and in boxes, were designed and produced in tandem with the movie. The slow burn of teasers, shorts and appearances grew into an explosion of products and exposure this month.

"Shrek," on the other gnarled hand, relied on the release of the DVD and the excitement of the new Xbox console to raise awareness of the title.

"Both the Xbox game and the DVD shipped within just a few days of each other, which really helped both partners reach a wide audience and synergistically maximize the exposure," said Fox. The interval between "Shrek's" release in theaters and its appearance on shiny disks allowed fans to breathe and eagerly anticipate their chance to control the heroic ogre in his world. "Jimmy Neutron" could overwhelm potential admirers with his relentless exposure.

What's to keep viewers from tiring of the boy genius and his friends before the first TV show hits the waves next fall?

"We'll keep it alive by keeping it fresh," said Julia Pistor, executive producer of the film, and senior vice president of Nickelodeon Movies.

"We've never had a character as amazing as Jimmy. This guy has really captured all of our imaginations," added Hecht.

Nickelodeon launched Jimmy Neutron's digital cranium into the minds of kids worldwide, but has no plans to use the same marketing model for other properties.

"I think it's just unique," Hecht said. "When Steve and John brought us Jimmy, we were just struck by how special he was. It was not only the digital nature of him, it was not only the character, it was also the look. I don't think we can replicate that on many others."

Expert chips away at "Ice Age' Curator finds inaccuracies, but doesn't get too heated up

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / March 18, 2002

Although the new movie "Ice Age" takes place during the Pleistocene Epoch, audiences shouldn't expect to see an accurate depiction of that time, when large portions of the Earth were covered with glaciers.

"Probably more people will see that movie than will come to this museum," said Russ Graham, chief curator at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. "And if the movie people could have done an accurate job, it wouldn't have affected the story. In fact, it would probably have made it better."

Graham, a paleontologist, specializes in ice age mammals. "I've been doing that for about 30 years, now. I'm interested in how communities evolve, and how - exactly what they were showing in the film - how animals respond to climate change."

But Graham did enjoy the movie, which is about the adventures of three prehistoric animals who try to return a lost baby to its family. He tried not to let the inaccuracies bug him too much. "You sort of have to divorce yourself," he said. "You know, ("Ice Age') isn't science. You sort of look at it to see what is accurate, and what isn't."

"The ice age we think of basically goes from about 2.6 million years ago to about 10,000 years ago," said Graham.

Strangely, many scientists believe we're still in the midst of that same climatic epoch.

"We're just in a warm interval now," he said. "Climate people 20 years ago thought we were in a global cooling period."

Ice ages are caused by variations in the Earth's orbit, which can be calculated fairly easily. "We should be headed into another ice age," he added. "But that's being superseded now by global warming, which is being caused by greenhouse gases in the atmosphere."

So are we better off with our greenhouse gases and depletion of the ozone, than heading into another era of frigid global temperatures?

Graham smiles, but won't give a straight answer. "It's sort of a value judgment that people have to make," he said.

"The real concern for the global warming is the rate at which it's occurring. You're always going to have climate change, no question about that. Which way is it going to go?"

Graham thought some of the animals in the movie were appropriate for the time. "The mammoth was very well- reconstructed," he said. But moody Manfred the mammoth (voiced by TV star Ray Romano) picks up two anomalous friends during the film - a sloth and a saber tooth tiger.

"The sloth would have been much larger than what they depicted. It had these great big claws that looked terrible," Graham said of the wisecracking Sid (voiced by John Leguizamo). And as for Diego the tiger, voiced by Denis Leary, "The saber tooth they had was the South American form," said Graham. "(The filmmakers) had time and geography all mixed together, because the mammoths never got to South America - they were all North American or Eurasian."

"We did a lot of research early on," countered Chris Wedge, who directed the film. "I kind of felt a responsibility to portray some historical truth. At the onset, we talked to a lot of people, made a lot of visits to the American Museum of Natural History (in New York City). What we tried to do on every character was base it on something that we'd seen. Ultimately, we took a lot of creative license. But most of the animals are based on things that were there. I have to say, as far as the animals go, we were very faithful to what existed there. I don't know if there were any saber toothed squirrels - that was just a joke."

The most glaring inaccuracy in the film for Graham is when Sid the sloth, lost in an ice cave, comes upon a frozen Tyrannosaurus rex, its mouth open in a silent roar.

"Dinosaurs had been extinct for 63 million years," said Graham. "The ice age didn't develop until about 2.6 million (years ago), so you've got about 62 million years of warm. In some cases, there probably wasn't an ice sheet even at the North Pole." Hence, there's no way a dinosaur would have been frozen, mid-growl, in a block of ice.

Comedian first, then an author Franken spears self-help books

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / June 2, 2002

When you think of Al Franken, you probably run the stream of consciousness progression of his many incarnations - Emmy Award-winning "Saturday Night Live" writer, pathetic self-help guru Stuart Smalley, author of "Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot," hilarious strange bedfellow of Ariana Huffington on "Politically Incorrect." But no matter the project, comedy is his foundation.

"I do consider myself, first and foremost, a comedian," he said in a recent interview. Franken's latest book, "Oh, the Things I Know! A Guide to Success, or, Failing That, Happiness" (Dutton, 128 pages, $19.95), is a parody of the many inspirational self-help books on the market. Although it pokes fun at celebrity authors like Anna Quindlen and Maria Shriver, it's not a political satire.

"I just don't always want to do political stuff," Franken said. "I thought a pure humor book was in order. This seemed to be a funny area to do, without having to do any research, other than reading some other self-help books."

With chapter titles like, "Oh, the Weight You Will Gain!" and "Oh, Watch Out for Disgruntled Former Employees!" this is not your usual candy-coated inspirational tome. In fact, Franken readily admits in an early chapter that he'll "cite examples of bad advice from other people, and, to keep you on your toes, give you a little bad advice myself."

That bad advice can be anything from "Although money can't buy happiness, it can buy certain pills that will make you happy" to "That's why if you want to be a winner, you've got to look like a winner. And that means starving yourself to the point of bone loss." Franken even includes a chapter titled "Oh, Just Looking at Your Spouse Will Make Your Skin Crawl!" in which he explains that "every marriage goes through a stomach-turning phase." His wife of 26 years didn't take it personally.

Emmy-winning writer "We made a deal that she wouldn't read it as I was writing it so that it would be easier to write," Franken said.

"She's a good sport."

Franken was one of the original writers for "Saturday Night Live" in 1975. He left the show in 1980, only to return in 1985, to create New Age TV host Stuart Smalley. During his tenure at the show, he won four Emmys for writing and one for producing. Franken's 1996 political satire, "Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot and Other Observations" was No.1 on The New York Times best-seller list for five weeks. His follow-up, "Why Not Me: The Making and Unmaking of the Franken Presidency," was a fictional account of his election as the 43rd president of the United States.

"When I worked on "SNL' I worked on a lot of the political stuff," he said. "The mission of what we did on "SNL' was to be as funny as possible and not take sides. No writer's political viewpoints should prevail. When I left the show, I thought I could let my political stance out, and I did with the "Rush' book. At the time, the so-called Gingrich revolution was in ascendance. So there was something I was very angry about. So it really provided the motivation to write it."

"Oh, the Things I Know" is a return to Franken's comedic roots. "I originally wanted to write an advice book on how to rise up the corporate ladder," he said. "But this one seemed to be, in an odd way, richer. (The idea) was brought to me by my publisher, who actually gave me Anna Quindlen's book and Maria Shriver's book. And I read them pretty quickly, and said, "Hmmm, this would be a good area to give advice that would not insult the reader's intelligence so much.'"

Knows bad advice Of course, Franken can recognize bad advice when he receives it. "The worst advice I've ever received is sort of, not necessarily advice that has been given to me directly, but that I've sort of internalized," he said, "which is that you should always have principles, and tell someone when they're wrong." Apparently, this is not only in regard to one's spouse.

"That is in regard to pretty much everything. But, it's more career-related." Although Limbaugh is no longer in the limelight, Franken still feels like the conservative host owes him some gratitude. "I think he's lost enough weight that he might not be considered big and fat. I think he lost, like, 100 pounds. I saved his life, and he has not thanked me."

The true key to success, or, failing that, happiness, Franken said, is "Working hard, but not to be totally consumed by success. You gotta find your own level of success and embrace it."

Philosophers' funny flare-up ignites a bestseller 'Poker' stirs embers of history

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / September 25, 2002

How does a short, controversial encounter between two of the greatest minds of the 20th century become the basis for an international best seller? How do you turn a bit of a historical snack into a multicourse meal? "(It's) the idea of really seeing history through a keyhole - telling a much bigger story through a very small incident," said David Edmonds, co-author (with John Eidinow) of the wildly popular nonfiction book "Wittgenstein's Poker" during a recent telephone interview. Edmonds was in his home city of London, preparing for a U.S. book tour, including a stop at the LoDo Tattered Cover Book Store, 1628 16th St., at 7:30 tonight.

"There's something also gratifying about having this tiny little blip of history that you can somehow master," he said. "Except we discovered we could not master it, because there were so many different versions to what happened."

Edmonds is referring to the very foundation of the book: On a cold Cambridge evening in October 1946, philosopher Karl Popper was a guest speaker at a university discussion group. He knew the renowned Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom Popper considered his archrival, would be there. What started out as discourse quickly turned into an argument between the two men.

The legend is that Wittgenstein, who had been unconsciously handling the room's fire poker, gestured at Popper with it, maybe even threatening the guest speaker. Even today, nearly 60 years later, disagreements rage over the details of the altercation. Only one thing is sure: Both men were there, and it was the only time the two of them would actually go head-to-head over the issues that were central to their principal philosophies.

"Wittgenstein believed that at their core, all our so-called philosophical problems are nothing but linguistic puzzles, solvable by conceptual analysis," said Edmonds. "Popper believed that philosophical problems went much deeper than that, and that language itself could not help solve them. The best that language could do is help clear up what they were in the first place, but it couldn't solve the depth of these problems."

It is not that Wittgenstein thought philosophy was just a diversion.

"It wasn't merely a game, because he did feel that these philosophical puzzles kind of grasped us by the shoulders and shook us, and made us think, and confused us and gave us angst," said Edmonds. "He was constantly in angst about these issues. He didn't think they were trivial, but he thought they were solvable by language."

Fortunately for the authors, the differences between the two men were relatively easy to explain. "We were lucky because they could have argued about other things," said Edmonds. "But this is actually about as central to philosophy as you can get. They might have argued about some area within philosophy, but the argument was actually about philosophy and the meaning of philosophy and the point of philosophy. So, it's essentially the fundamental question in philosophy, which is: 'What are you trying to do by studying it?' " What makes the differences between the two men so fascinating are the parallels in their upbringing. Both were born into Viennese families that had abandoned their Jewish roots. Both men ended up immigrating to England. But Wittgenstein was the son of a steel magnate, and Popper came from a bourgeois background. While Wittgenstein was part of the Vienna Circle, a confab of brilliant thinkers, Popper always found himself outside it. In some ways, his status as outsider molded his best-known philosophical underpinnings. Many of his ideas came from a desire to refute the concepts put forward by the circle.

If "Wittgenstein's Poker" is starting to sound like the literary equivalent of a high-fiber diet, it is not. One of the true delights of the book is how funny it turns out to be.

"I think the most difficult aspect of the writing of the book, in a way, was trying to get the tone right, because the incident at the heart of it was a kind of funny anecdote," said Edmonds. "So we had to strike a careful balance between treating the investigation story seriously but also kind of enjoying the stuff it threw up." The authors treated the subject matter seriously and let the narrative itself provide the laughs.

But co-writing a book can provide its own difficulties. "John (Eidinow) started with the history, and I started with the philosophy. But we bashed it back and forth so often that, by the end, there was barely a sentence that was not touched by both of us," Edmonds said.

And the book is seamless. There is no telling where one of the authors starts and the other ends.

"We were told by our editor that he's never come across a book by co-authors where they were still friends at the end of the process," he added.

As BBC journalists, the two writers had known each other for some time.

"John had been the presenter of a politics program on the BBC World Service, and I'd been the producer," said Edmonds. When Wittgenstein's letters were published in 1998, Eidinow passed them to Edmonds. "I thought they were the funniest letters I'd ever seen. I put them up on the wall, and I would just look at them and giggle every now and again. And then I thought, well, you know, this is such a great story, I should try and persuade the features department of BBC World Service to do a little five-minute package on it."

The BBC was not interested "so I put (the letters) back on the wall, and I gathered more and more information."

But why should readers even care about these two figures? "They're really important; both of them are two of the most important thinkers of the 20th century," Edmonds said. "They've both been extremely influential in very, very different ways. Wittgenstein's been extremely influential. He wouldn't like it said about him, but he is probably the inspiration for some the constructions of post-modernism.

"Popper also was widely regarded as one of the top two philosophers of science in the 20th century, with Thomas Krug. (Wittgenstein and Popper) are extremely important figures in their own right."

But just because something is good for you does not mean it's tasty. Fortunately, "Wittgenstein's Poker" is both.

That's probably one reason it is a nonfiction phenomenon.

Another explanation of the book's success is this: In a post 9/11 world, Popper's work is realizing a renaissance of relevance. "I think it's true that post-Sept. 11, Popper has much more to say about the events in context than Wittgenstein; and in particular his critique of fundamentalism. Not just because he was really attacking fundamentalist political movements - Marxism, fascism and so on," said Edmonds, "but his works are equally applicable to fundamentalist nationalism and equally applicable to fundamentalist religious beliefs, all sects of thought that in effect don't allow any critique of them, don't allow any

tolerance and openness. So, I think he would have a lot to say about fundamentalist religious movements of which Sept. 11th is the product."

How is that for a well-rounded meal? It's fresh, hot, delicious and even good for you - ``Wittgenstein's Poker" is the best kind of food for thought.

'American Ground' an uplifting look at 9/11 aftermath

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / November 10, 2002

Most works you'll find about the events of Sept. 11 concentrate on the suffering - the personal stories of loss and the heroic efforts of the firefighters and police. And after more than a year of perusing similar accounts, you're probably done reading those narratives. So on first glance, William Langewiesche's book "American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center" would seem like one to skip. But the author, a national correspondent for The Atlantic Monthly magazine, wrote a very different kind of piece. The book is more a symphony than an opera; the composition ranges in tone, at times triumphant and at others tragic, but never resting too long in either camp.

"I was very aware that I was surrounded by the extremes of emotion," Langewiesche said during a recent phone interview. "It was a very emotional scene, and the American response to this was emotional for understandable reasons. My job, however, is to sort of move beyond that." Langewiesche was granted exclusive access to "the Pile" during the nine months of demolition and cleanup. His work, which originally appeared as three articles in the Atlantic, focuses on what happened behind the scenes.

"I really wasn't writing about Sept. 11 itself," he said. "I was writing about the American response that unfolded as a result of Sept. 11." To do so meant committing himself to long days and nights in a place that was dangerous both physically and politically. "American Ground" tells how order emerged from extreme chaos and how a few men rose to oversee the cleanup efforts, despite infighting, struggles for power and physical peril.

"The people I was writing about were primarily the unheralded ones, the ones the public and press didn't know about - the ones you had to live inside the perimeter to know," he said. And what makes "American Ground" so compelling is the ways in which these men, and the people who worked under them, improvised and collaborated to get things done.

"There was no way, for the first three months, you could impose standards of safety measures - it was way too chaotic," said Langewiesche. "When it was at its most dangerous and chaotic was precisely when, for those same reasons, you couldn't impose conventional

safety standards." But nobody was killed during the cleanup, and very few were seriously injured. "Individuals realized that they had to look out for themselves and their immediate neighbors on the pile - that they were going to have to use their own brains. It was liberating (for them), and incredible how people rose to it."

For Langewiesche, that response was more thrilling than the heroic posturing most of the U.S. saw in press coverage. "It was really quite amazing, and heartening in the way these people responded to the attack," he said. "I had a feeling that, though the extremes of emotionalism and hero worship were perfectly understandable, and maybe even necessary, they, to a large degree, played into the hands of our enemies. I mean, they could easily have been interpreted as a sign of weakness.

"On the other hand, if this other thing could have been known; if the information could have gotten past the mystery of the pile, and there was very little to do with wallowing and grief going on, you'd think somehow, it was such a positive response, it would somehow cause those same enemies to take pause and say, 'Wait a minute. Are we actually hurting this country, or are we, in fact, watching its strength emerge?'"

Langewiesche saw in the process of responding to the tragedy a reflection of the American character. "On every level, both in the good and the bad there, it was a microcosm of America," he said. "And in that turmoil lies our strength. Rather than marching teary-eyed in lock-step, we were scrambling at the site, in a pretty chaotic way, and that was much more about what the real nature of America is; and in the long run, much, much stronger and more impressive than any lock-step emotionalism."

"American Ground" is a dry-eyed look at difficulties and triumphs that occurred post-Sept. 11. It draws the reader in with gripping details and lucid style. By rendering candid character studies of the men who claimed their positions in the cleanup efforts, Langewiesche's opus is at once detached and intensely personal. At the same time, he avoids the weepy sentiment that would reopen the pain of the tragedy.

"Basically, a lot of the press, like a lot of the nation, was in some sense wallowing in the tragedy, and I didn't choose to wallow in it," he said. "I mean, I was there very specifically to write about the people who were not wallowing. I was there to write about the people who were responding to the damage. So rather than writing about people engaged in looking backward, I was writing about people who were engaged in looking forward."

Distinguished for his coverage of intense conflicts, Langewiesche was undaunted by his surroundings. "I am familiar with war zones, and this sort of thing is the kind of thing that you get used to in detail," he said. His ability to see through the heartbreak to the achievements on the pile translates into writing that allows the reader to understand what happened, and why the American response was so unique.

To achieve such a close-up view of the inner workings and tensions on the site, Langewiesche had to earn the trust of the people doing the work. "I'm kind of an immersion guy anyway. I move slowly. I think one thing I do is really, really listen to people. I don't need a tape recorder, and I don't carry a camera. I take minimal notes. If you really listen to people, they know it. They understand and respect that, and they respond in turn by opening up. It's a combination of moving very slowly, by listening very carefully, and by sharing the risk, which I did quite a lot.

Within a couple of weeks, people weren't making distinctions between me and them. I was them, we were all in it together, we were all living, breathing the experience."

By immersing himself in the midst of ``the texture, the smells, the tragedy, the loss of life," Langewiesche was able to find the emotional core of the cleanup efforts. And just as a virtuoso composer of music balances the tone and structure of his work, Langewiesche draws the reader through his months at the site by adjusting the rhythm of his narrative and giving weight to the issues the general public knew nothing about. By the end of the book, sadness and anger are still there, but more immediate is the sense that something happened after the initial tragedy that was much bigger than the events that spawned it.

Theme of Jewishness opens door to inclusion at book festival

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / December 2, 2002

"It's not enough that the author is Jewish," said Simon Zalkind, organizer of the Leah Cohen Festival of Books and Authors.

He was referring to the manner in which the Jewish Community Center chooses books for the festival, which has taken place for more than 30 years. The festival runs through Dec. 15 at Mizel Center for Arts and Culture.

"The way we define a particular book as Jewish is that it has certain themes, content, characters that reference Jewishness in a way that gives the book some of its sense of flavor," Zalkind said. So what makes "Man Walks Into a Room," the acclaimed debut novel by Nicole Krauss, appropriate for the festival?

"I'm Jewish, and I'm going to write, in some way or other, from my own experiences," said Krauss, who will talk about her book at the festival Tuesday night. Krauss spoke from Detroit, where she was participating in another Jewish book festival.

"Whenever you're writing fiction, you're writing, if not your literal autobiography, your metaphysical or emotional autobiography. And for me, that's going to be the experience of being Jewish."

In a lyrical, gentle voice, "Man Walks Into a Room" tells a story of loss and reinvention. English professor Samson Greene is found wandering in the Nevada desert, lacking all memory of his identity or any recollection of how he arrived there from his home and wife in New York.

When doctors find a benign tumor on his brain, their removal of it returns only Greene's memories up through his boyhood. He doesn't recognize his own wife and has no memory of the past 25 years of his life.

"Once you know my family background, in a way it begins to make more sense why I wrote this book," said Krauss.

"As a kid, growing up, memory was really, really important in my family — the sense of trying to remember and preserve where we came from. And it was problematic, because my four grandparents came from four different places in Europe, and during the war, they left those places and the lives that they lived there. The people there, the objects in that life, the houses, the way of life were totally destroyed. They survived that, but much of their lives and their families did not. So that, just like Samson, they had to begin a second life. The book is about what it means to begin a second life." The concept of memory is certainly a touchstone of Jewish culture and tradition.

"For us, it's sort of what we had," said Krauss. "It was a necessity because our lives have been, over however many centuries, uplifted and changed and destroyed so many different times. It's been a necessary thing for some kind of line of continuity."

Jewish observances over the course of the year tend to focus on remembering. Passover is about recalling the details of the exodus from Egypt, and modern Jews are raised with the responsibility to "never forget" the Holocaust.

"As a kid, I was really nostalgic, and always had a kind of sense that I was supposed to remember something that was impossible for me to remember," said Krauss. "The line of memory was kind of falling off at a certain point and fading. So, in a way, I'm not that far from Samson."

Krauss, a finalist for the Yale Younger Poet's Prize, uses her considerable poetry-writing chops to weave a tale with a sweetness to it that moderates the aching sense of heartbreak.

Even though Samson Greene has no memories beyond his 12th year, he's still able to function as an adult. He comes across as a man wandering around in his pajamas — slowly awakening to the world, but retaining a fuzzyheaded perplexity about his place within it. He's a modern-day Rip Van Winkle who feels like he just awoke from a decadent, decades-long Sunday afternoon nap. His friends look at him quizzically, hoping for the merest glimmer of recognition, but Greene is unable to meet their needs. Eventually, he must leave his unfamiliar surroundings.

Although Krauss's protagonist happens to be Jewish, the book is not overtly so. And "Man Walks Into a Room" is capturing the attention of readers across denominational lines. That's precisely what Zalkind likes about the book festival.

"I always strive for a kind of depth and comprehensiveness that makes this the place to shop for books of Jewish content," said Zalkind.

Books and authors What:Leah Cohen Festival of Books and Authors When:through Dec. 15 Where:Mizel Center for Arts and Culture, 350 S. Dahlia St.

Admission: $5 per event; a festival pass is $45 Information:303-316-6360 or www.mizelcenter.org/literary.htm Note:Nicole Krauss and Jonathan Safran Foer will discuss their books at 7 p.m. Tuesday

Rob Schneider dishes comedy on his terms

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / December 16, 2002

Rob Schneider knows comedy. And he doesn't care much if you don't share his sense of humor.

"I've got to do what I think is funny," he said on a recent press trip through Denver to promote his newest yukfest, "The Hot Chick," which opened Friday at area theaters.

Perhaps best-known as "the copy guy" on the "Saturday Night Live" seasons of the early '90s, Schneider has made a name for himself starring in and co-writing the popular but panned flicks "Deuce Bigalow, Male Gigolo" and "The Animal." He also had cameos in most Adam Sandler movies as the "You can do it" guy.

But in person, Schneider is smaller, smarter and better-looking than you'd expect from his onscreen persona. As he moseyed into a suite at the Brown Palace hotel, his diminutive size and denim-blue eyes were his most prominent features. A few speechless moments after he took in the spacious surroundings, he ambled to the hearth, where he found an old photograph of four former presidents standing in that very room. He pointed to each one in turn and said, in slightly different voices, "I invaded more South American countries than you did." "No I invaded more South American countries than you did."

"Rob is more dry wit," co-star Anna Faris said earlier. "Even though he plays big on camera, he makes a lot of little comments."

But on the big screen, Schneider's brand of humor is not for everyone. Not that this fact matters too much to him.

"It's gotta shock, it's gotta be outrageous," he said. "It's funny, because there's the question of how far you do go?

Is there a line? There's no line, it's more like a tide - it ebbs and flows. You just gotta feel it."

Schneider takes chances with his comedy because he believes it's his responsibility. "Artists have to lead and not be reactive. I gotta do what I think is funny."

"The Hot Chick" did make him laugh. And if you voluntarily shell out the bucks to watch him portray a high-school girl trapped in a man's body, you know what you're getting yourself into. In "Chick," a snooty high-school-senior girl magically switches bodies with a scuzzy, 30-something thief. She wakes up to find additions to her anatomy that make her shriek.

But Schneider and director/screenwriter Tom Brady believe "Chick" has more to offer than broad comedy and goofy, over-the-top gags.

"I think this movie's going to do something for me," Schnei- der said earnestly. "It was so much fun to play, and I figured, we got to do exactly what we wanted to."

"There are people out there who think of certain kinds of comedies as being broad or lowbrow," said Brady, who, with Schneider, also wrote "Deuce Bigalow" and "The Animal." "But now that we've had a chance to make one that we really wanted to make, I think people will see that we tried to make some good messages and a story that'll work. And you care about the characters, and you root for them - all the good things about movies, the reason we go to see them."

Faris agrees. "Rob and Tom worked really hard on the script. They were passionate about doing a project that was really funny, but also had some messages," she said. "They're both really sentimental guys."

High aspirations for a flick where Schneider runs around in women's panties and a bra.

"Every day, you'd come to the set, and Rob would be wearing some crazy new pair of panties and a little T-shirt," said Faris. "It was really fun, because it felt like my wardrobe was exactly the same as his."

"I don't know how much he'll admit it now, but toward the end of the shoot, the character was inside him, and he didn't have to try anymore," said Brady.

Or maybe he just liked wearing women's underwear. "He never complained," Faris said with a laugh.

"It was fun," said Schneider. "It was fun being that girl. The energy was fun."

And if other actors have gained accolades for their cross-dressing work (think Dustin Hoffman in "Tootsie" and Robin Williams in "Mrs. Doubtfire"), will Schneider get a call from the academy?

Schneider laughed. "If you would've said a year ago, 'Hey, next year at Oscar time, they're going to be thinking Adam Sandler and Eminem' ... I think my performance is really good. I don't know what everyone else is going to think about it, but I felt good about it."

Don't be fooled. Schneider knows the reality of awards recognition, and it's unlikely he'll get Oscar's attention for this film. But he is happy for the success of his good friend Sandler in "Punch-Drunk Love."

"Adam Sandler is doing what Adam Sandler does, but it's within a forum now where critics can go." And here Schneider slipped into an officious voice, "I can accept that, now, he's not Billy Madison. He's in a Paul Thomas Anderson film. It's a guy with three names, not two names."

Brady said working with Schneider was rewarding because "the more difficult a task I gave him, the more embarrassing a situation he had to climb out of, or the harder an acting challenge, the funnier he was."

For "Hot Chick," Brady came up with some whoppers. "(I) put him in the most difficult situation I could, which was to play a woman, to play a teenage girl, to play a Hispanic gardener who's really a teenage girl, these really crazy, uncomfortable situations one after another. ``He is fearless, and that's why it's so exciting as a writer and director to work with this guy," Brady said. ``With Rob, if a human being can do it, he'll give it a try. And that's the greatest liberation for a writer."

Gibson confronts his own demons

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / February 9, 2003

Do an Internet search for William Gibson, and you will learn he coined the term "cyberspace," changed the face of science-fiction writing with his award-winning 1984 novel "Neuromancer," is considered by most to be one of the big daddies of the cyberpunk aesthetic and he is an only child who lost his father at age 6 and his mother when he was 18.

You will find more than 100,000 links to the author's work via the search engine - you will learn much about the space the author fills, but little of what makes him tick; lots of context, very little content. The exception is his personal "blog" (web- log), where, in addition to pages of anecdote and reaction, you can find a short autobiography - a quick look into the author's being.

From the start, he quotes Gene Wolfe, who once said "being an only child whose parents are dead is like being the sole survivor of drowned Atlantis. There was a whole civilization there, an entire continent, but it's gone."

Gibson's newest novel, "Pattern Recognition" (Putnam, 368 pages, $25.95), grapples with questions and concepts of identity. It explores the ways in which context has become more important to the world than content. It feels deeply personal, as if Gibson is trying to expunge, or at least expose, the puzzles of his own back story. It could be an effort by the last survivor of Atlantis to explain to himself what happened. Even his struggles to define the protagonist during the early stages of writing sound like demon-wrestling.

"The viewpoint character had arrived, and I had her in London," he said during a recent phone interview. "She had this inexplicable effect, and I couldn't understand where it was coming from. So I kept writing her back story in New York."

In a departure from Gibson's earlier work, "Pattern Recognition" takes place in the present, or maybe just a few minutes from now. Cayce Pollard is a "coolseeker"; supremely intuitive when it comes to finding the next big fad, she has a strange, visceral reaction to certain corporate logos. Hilfiger nauseates her. The Michelin Man causes allergic paroxysms. But between her logo sensitivity and almost paranormal sense of what's cool, her services are

in demand worldwide. In London to consult on logo design with Blue Ant, a massively influential advertising firm that's "more post-geographic than multinational," Cayce finds herself chasing down the brains behind "The Footage" - short film scenes of ambiguous origin that mysteriously appear on the Web and have spawned a mythological following of geeks and groupies who analyze each new fragment as it emerges.

But Cayce has her own baggage to sort out along the way.

"A week after 9/11, I sort of crept back and tried to remember what this novel was that I'd been writing," Gibson said. "I realized that the world of the back story literally had ceased to exist. It was a very, very strange sensation.

It didn't really exist anyway, because I was making it up, but it had become a sort of parallel time track that wasn't there anymore, and then I realized that she was there." This moment of epiphany, of fiction couched in real-life events, drove the character's path through the novel. "The minute I was looking at the computer file, I realized that, in the imaginary world of my novel, Cayce was in New York right at the minute I was looking at the screen."

Cayce was in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001. And, though he wasn't supposed to be, and didn't tell anyone he was there, her secretive father was, too. His disappearance coincides with the events at the World Trade Center, and Cayce has no idea what happened to him. And, just as with Gibson himself, her newest endeavor is colored by her internal grief for her lost parent - she takes on a risky project that forces her to depart from what's comfortable and easy to find the solution to a conundrum that's intrigued her for years. Gibson writing about the present is an equally risky venture.

"I've been threatening to do this for the last three books," said Gibson of setting the novel in the now. "I think, in a way, the books themselves always felt to me more like alternate presents than viable futures. I don't buy it that I was writing about the future. I know, historically, that science fiction invariably turns out to be about the period in which it was written. So, I always embraced that as part of the process. My take on 'Neuromancer,' culturally, is that it's a fable of Reaganomics - sort of, if this goes on, if you wind up with no middle class, this is what the world will feel like."

But that's not to say he wasn't forced out of his comfort zone. To tell this story required a rewiring of Gibson's mechanisms as an author.

"This was a very challenging book for me," he said. "I had no idea how different it would be, as a result of changing a couple of what seemed like very basic parameters: It's in the present ... (and) there's only a single narrative viewpoint. The single narrative viewpoint is, by and large, in real time. Cayce wakes up, and lives a chapter, and goes to sleep, more or less. I've never done that before - I've always relied on multiple points of view and a lot of sort of literary jump cuts.

"I think I had to develop a sort of different narrative musculature," he added. "So at first, it was very, very slow going, indeed, and I mistrusted my sense of timing, because I was used to a more like MTV modality."

And keeping "Pattern Recognition" in the present forced Gibson to relinquish some of his most effective literary devices - ways of writing that have defined his work. "I had these reflexes that made me want to invent a gadget that would get me out of a plot corner, and then I'd realize, no, I can't do that, in terms of the path of set myself, that would be a copout," he said. "I've got to find something in the real world that can do that."

In the book, the man who sets Cayce on her task to find out who's composing "The Footage" is a media magnate with seemingly infinite resources. Hubertus Bigend sees the snippets as "the most brilliant marketing ploy of this very young century." These fragments of "a product that may not even exist" are enticing to him, because even without knowing their context - whether they're part of a whole work, released in sequence, or perhaps random oddments of cinema - more and more people are being inculcated into the mythos of their existence. Gibson's books have always intimated that the Web is a breeding ground for the esoteric.

"There's been a theme that runs through my last three books that bohemias may have become impossible," he said. "Bohemias as we knew and loved them were actually some sort of organic evolutionary function of industrial society. But in a post-industrial society, where what we're really selling is sizzle - it's flash, other than product - it may be impossible for there to be bohemias in the traditional sense."

In the book, Bigend says that "far more creativity, today, goes into the marketing of products than into the products themselves, athletic shoes or feature films." Content becomes less important than context - the outward identity of the product takes a front

seat to its actual function. This commodification of cool has changed the nature of consumption.

"The Seattle bohemia that gave us Kurt Cobain and Nirvana was on the catwalks in Paris, recommodified, within three months of its discovery by the media," added Gibson. "I suspect that the bohemias' function may have been reborn in the world of bloggers. I actually know for sure that there are scenes on the Internet that nobody knows about and nobody cares about, and within those milieus, very specialized sensibilities are evolving. And I don't know whether any of them are liable to be the next big thing, but I think they serve, somewhat, the same function. I hope they do, because I have a soft spot for the products of bohemias."

Wrapped up in Gibson's exploration of the concept of identity - both of people and of products - is a plaintive cry for our lost future. "I believe that we don't have the luxury of an imagined future in the way that my parents had it or in the way I had it myself as a child in the '50s," he said. "What we had then was a much longer 'now.' 'Now' was maybe even a few years long, because things just didn't change that quickly. And in a world where things change as quickly as they do today, it's impossible to calculate a future." Perhaps, by tweaking his approach to storytelling, Gibson was finally able to explore personal issues of his own context in the world that he was previously unable to unravel. "Some people say, in fiction, technique becomes the enemy," he said. "That which you learn to do really, really smoothly and well and effortlessly, becomes the thing that gets between you and whatever the real issue is."

Whatever the author's motivation, "Pattern Recognition" is one of his best books in years. Though longtime fans will probably need to adjust their expectations of finding a fully realized possible future, most readers will be plenty satisfied with Gibson's rich, nuanced look at the present. Even more, peering into the sci-fi icon's own struggles with identity and personal history makes for a fascinating exploration of unknown terrain.

Gibson will be at the Tattered Cover Book Store in LoDo, 1628 16th St., at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday. Free tickets for a spot in line will be available beginning at 6:30 p.m.

Cannell moves beyond his mastery of dialogue

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / March 9, 2003

It's 2 in the morning and you can't sleep. You slip down to the family room to channel-surf for a while, hoping for something, anything, to distract you. But, rather than finding a single show and sticking to it, you have to decide between ancient episodes of "The Rockford Files," watching a young Johnny Depp play a cop in "21 Jump Street" or taking in a classic "A-Team" plot. So you flip among all three, smiling every time a character opens his or her mouth.

In spite of the cheesy clothing and retro hair, the dialogue still works and the stories are still compelling. Then the credits roll, and as they finish, you catch an iconic moment in television history. And because you're watching those particular shows, you catch it three times: It's that guy with the trademark goatee, clicking away on an old typewriter, flamboyantly pulling up the sheet of paper, and tossing it into the air.

That guy is Stephen J. Cannell, an American institution.

"I see it all the time, like everybody else," said Cannell, in Denver recently to promote his latest novel, "Hollywood Tough." "I do channel-surf, and I see episodes. 'Rockford's' on WGN now. It's interesting, because when I see certain episodes, I remember things that happened around those episodes." Cannell told the story of sitting in his hotel in Milwaukee during the current book tour, and happening upon an installment of "The Rockford Files" that he'd written with "The Sopranos" phenom David Chase.

"It was the end of the year, and we were trying to do this script," he said. "We knew it was the last script of the season - we were out of material. The director had already checked in, and we didn't have a screenplay for him. We had a really funny idea, and we had two acts plotted. And we were so tired - I don't know what it was, but we couldn't get the end of the thing right. No matter how hard we tried. I finally said, 'David, we gotta throw this thing out. We gotta come up with something else.' So we came up with this story, 'The Dwarf in the Helium Hat,' that was on the other night. And we literally plotted it in two hours. It just fell together.

"It just brought back that whole anxiety thing," Cannell said. These days, though still working in television, Cannell has different challenges. The third book in his hit crime novel series has just hit the shelves, and he's hard at work on the fourth.

LAPD police officer Shane Scully is back in action, after running down rogue cops in "The Viking Funeral." This time, he's hunting a New Jersey Mafia transplant who's trying to take over the Hollywood film scene. But Scully's motivation to take the guy down is personal. "(Scully) connects with this hooker he's asked to find by a friend," Cannell said. "She ends up being murdered, and he literally goes on the warpath. She was the prettiest girl in Teaneck, N.J., who came to Hollywood to be a star, and ended up dealing drugs and doing drugs, and then was a strawberry down on Adams."

Cannell's protagonist has matured over the three books, and his motivation has changed.

"I think, in my novels, and even in my television, a character needs to grow," he said. "If he or she becomes the same person, book in and book out, I'm going to get tired of writing those characters and you're going to get tired of reading them. So my job is to keep twisting and bending and changing."

Over the course of the three Shane Scully novels "The Tin Collectors," "The Viking Funeral" and now "Hollywood Tough," the protagonist seems to have climbed a mutation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to a point where he's finally in a place to ask questions about himself and his future.

"In the first book, Shane is kind of disenfranchised; he's a loner. He's unhappy with his life. He's re-examining his early life," said Cannell. Scully is looking for affiliation, for a family. And by the end of the book, he has it. In "The Viking Funeral," the character faces new obstacles to happiness. "He has to come to grips with, really, the darkest moments of his life. And he goes down to the bottom, where he contemplates suicide. I wanted to take him down to the bottom," said Cannell. When Scully comes out the other side intact, he has a new way of looking at the world.

"He now has his son, he has his wife, and his life is different, and he is a more emotional guy," Cannell said. "So in the third novel, he's beginning to say, should I be a cop? Is this really the right life for me? But it's all he knows. I think, when you're writing a series, it's pretty easy to play another melody with the same instruments. And that's what I want to

try really hard not to do with Shane. A big part of each book, now, is figuring out what his journey's going to be, what he's going to learn, how he's going to change."

Writing novels after several decades of crafting one-hour television series has provided the writer himself with new challenges and opportunities for growth.

"Television is very dialogue-intense kind of writing," he said. "Screenplays have no description. They're not visual at all. If I were writing a scene in a screenplay, I might say, 'exterior diner, day, a greasy spoon.' And that would be all - and then the location department would go out and pick this great, interesting diner. But in a novel, I have to create all that. So I work really hard to make people see what I'm seeing. To me, that's one of the changes in the writing. I mean dialogue is pretty much the same, but the omniscient author is such a great tool in a book; you can go into a character's head and really deal with their thoughts."

Still, the strongest component of Cannell's books is the dialogue. And though his prose has improved and matured over the course of the series, it still doesn't work like his mouth music does.

"I think I've always been a pretty good dialogue writer, and I've always been good with colloquial idiom," he said. "If I'm writing a gang-banger, or I'm writing a Mafia guy like I do with 'Hollywood Tough,' I go to great extremes to make sure I'm getting as close to the contemporary argot as I possibly can. Nobody, without being in the gangs, can be 100 percent current, because the life of a gang or street expression is about six months. By the time you learn it, it's already not being used anymore. But, my job as a writer is to get as close as I can."

Cannell's creations communicate in rhythms and dialects that evoke a specific time and place. In fact, the city of Los Angeles comes across almost as a character in its own right.

"There's a high level of romance in Los Angeles," Cannell said. "It's a very plush landscape to write about. It has a noir quality about some of its history, especially in police drama. It is a colorful place. I was born there, I lived there my whole life. I love the city. But I see its warts, too."

Cannell's books are about more than tough-guy heroes taking it on the chin and coming back for more. Between his research and his earnest attempts at conjuring the underbelly of the glamour and spark of Los Angeles, Cannell digs deep into his characters" impulses.

"In 'Hollywood Tough,' I have this character named American Macado. He's the head guy in the Valley gangs," Cannell said. "He's a guy who really wants more for his people. He really wants Hispanics in Southern California to have good education and good jobs, but he has chosen as his weapons, to achieve this, drugs and money. And he's a really smart guy, and now as he's about 28 years old, he realizes he's chosen the wrong tools. There's no getting out of it now. So he's a guy filled with remorse, and at the same time, filled with a sense of wanting to do something. I found him to be a really interesting kind of complex character, and I made him up out of my head, and now I have to be him."

Eric Elkins is a Denver-based freelance writer.

Technology leads resurgence in animated films

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / March 12, 2003

When Disney's "Beauty and the Beast" scored a best-picture Oscar nomination in 1991, it marked a renaissance in big-screen animated fare.

The first animated film to be nominated for best picture, "Beauty" captured the attention of kids and parents alike.

Its rich visual style, catchy music and in-jokes for grownups made it one of the most popular films of the '90s, with more than $378 million in box office sales.

The technical wonders of "Beauty" were based on a late-'80s eruption of innovation within the animation industry.

In turn, the film's triumphs spawned a virtual smorgasbord of new capabilities in cartoon storytelling. This year's Oscar nominees for best animated feature, which are a direct result of the success of films such as "Beauty and the Beast," promise a similar surge in future cinematic thrills.

'Rabbit' a landmark When the live-action/animated hybrid "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" astonished audiences 1988, it sparked a powder keg of inspiration. The movie, with its resuscitation of classic Disney and Warner Brothers characters, tickled adults, said Don Hahn, who was an associate producer on the film. He says the resulting popularity of animated features occurred "in no small part, because 'Roger Rabbit' reminded people of that joy."

The success of the film spawned a major revolution in animation technique; the three-dimensional rendering and the way the cartoon characters interacted with live actors and their environments was incredibly credible. In fact, those techniques found their way into one of the top live action movies of 2002, "The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers." Golum, so extraordinarily real in the film, is essentially a three-dimensional cartoon character.

"You could arguably say they're (Roger and Golum) the same technique," said Hahn, who produced "Beauty and the Beast" and a stable of other animated films.

"Who Framed Roger Rabbit" will be released on DVD on March 25. The film won four Academy Awards, including best sound effects, best visual effects, best film editing and a special achievement award.

But it was only last year that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences offered a separate category to honor animated movies, and, because of the rules, only three films were nominated: Disney/Pixar's "Monsters, Inc.," DreamWorks" "Shrek" (the winner) and Nickelodeon's "The Adventures of Jimmy Neutron." Noticeably missing was Hahn's "Atlantis," a Disney film that discarded the familiar conventions of cute sidekicks and jaunty music, going for boyish adventure instead.

The nominees were kept to three because that is the maximum number of films that can be nominated if fewer than 15 eligible animated features are released. This year, with 17 animated films eligible in 2002, five nominations were allowed. The nominees are Fox's $350 million-plus hit "Ice Age," DreamWorks" "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron," Disney's sensation "Lilo and Stitch," its relative bomb "Treasure Planet" and the Japanese film "Spirited Away," which was overdubbed in English and distributed by Disney.

"For me, having a separate category for animation means that there's enough animation happening that it deserves an Academy honor," said Chris Wedge, the director of "Ice Age," who recently signed a five-year, multipicture exclusive contract with Fox. "I think that's good for the people who like making movies this way, and it's good for business. The interest means there's more money to make these movies."

Different styles The five nominated films are vastly different in their visual styles. "Ice Age" comes off as a sort of three- dimensional "Coyote and Roadrunner" homage; "Lilo and Stitch" has an old-fashioned watercolor look to it; "Treasure Planet" blends computer generated science-fiction images with classic Disneyesque characters; "Spirited Away" is the quintessential anime feature, replete with Japanese mythical icons and a fluidity of motion that gives the film its dreamlike essence; and "Spirit," with its hand-drawn characters and computer-generated set pieces, feels like a majestic Western epic for kids. Notably, though all three of last year's nominated movies were 100 percent computer-generated, only "Ice Age" is all CG in this year's pool.

"I don't know if it's relevant or not," said Wedge. "All of the other films, except for maybe Miyazaki's ('Spirited Away') used a significant amount of computer graphics that are made to look like they fit in a drawn movie. So it's always a style choice."

The blurring of the lines between drawing and computer-generated graphics can help with storytelling, said Mireille Soria, co-producer of "Spirit."

"Even though it does have a traditional look, you couldn't have made this movie even five years earlier than we did, because there was so much 3-D technology that went into it. It was really a blend."

Hahn sees the future of animation as a sort of compressed conflict. "Everything will change and nothing will change," he said.

"For every advance in the way cartoons are made, they'll only be as good as the stories they tell. You're still trying to get the audience in your story and (to create) characters your audience will relate to."

Wedge is of the same opinion. ``For us animators, it's not the technology that makes the movie. It all boils down to telling a story that people will want to listen to."

'Holes' movie mission: Keep story intact - 'Survival Guide to Camp Green Lake' hits shelves

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / April 15, 2003

"It's not that it's dark; there's scariness, there's suspense, but that makes stories interesting."

That's author Louis Sachar's take on the movie "Holes," based on his award-winning young adult book. But don't believe him. Any flick that opens with a kid putting his bare foot on a rattlesnake because he'd rather be bitten than spend another day digging ditches in a desolate camp for troubled youths, can rightfully be described as dark.

That's not to say that the film, starring such luminaries as Sigourney Weaver, Jon Voight and Tim Blake Nelson, is not entertaining or isn't appropriate for its intended audience.

"Here was a book, that had this incredible puzzle, with great soul and humor and heart, and then it had real substance," said the film's director, Andrew Davis.

The author and Davis were eating breakfast at a local restaurant, in town to talk about the new movie, which opens Friday nationwide.

Davis, who's best known for directing "The Fugitive" and a passel of action flicks such as "Under Siege" and "Collateral Damage," might not seem the obvious choice for the big-screen adaptation of an immensely popular children's book.

"I was given the book as a gift," Davis said. "My kids read it and my wife read it and we loved it. They were dying to have me do something like this. So we approached Louis about it and asked him if he would let us make the movie."

Good directorial fit Sachar was thrilled when Davis showed interest in a film adaptation, because he was sure the director would keep the depth and the darkness on the screen.

"I wanted Andy to do it, because I knew he took the story seriously," he said. "He wasn't going to treat it like, 'Oh this is a children's story, so let's make it over-the-top zany or the

characters too cartoony.' And he would give it the same seriousness he gave 'The Fugitive,' the same level of tension and excitement and grip that I thought other people might be afraid of for a children's book."

Davis sees no contradiction between his previous films and "Holes."

"I think the themes in this thing are very consistent with what I look to do," he said. "I love humor. Even my darkest movies have had zaniness in them. And I point out that it's about an unjustly accused kid, like 'The Fugitive' is. So there's empathy for this guy. You're caring about Stanley, no matter what happens. I'm very happy to do this kind of thing."

Misadventures abound In "Holes," Stanley Yelnats is a youngster who tends to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Walking home from school, he's hit in the head by a pair of stinky baseball shoes. He's picked up by the police on his way home, because the spikes, which had once belonged to a pro athlete, had been stolen from a charity event at a homeless shelter.

Stanley finds himself at Camp Green Lake, where he's forced to dig a hole every day, ostensibly to build character.

But that's only one of several story threads in the film.

The author and director aren't worried that children won't bezz able to follow the other plotlines, which are interwoven with Stanley's experiences with the Warden (Weaver) and her assistant Mr. Sir (Voight).

"Kids are so used to nonlinear stories," said Davis. "We're not worried about the kids. It's the critics and the old people who will say, 'What the (expletive) does this have to do with that?"'

During the film's production, Sachar and Davis were united in their conviction to ensure that the book, with all its texture, twists and tension, made it to theaters intact.

"When we were making the movie, a lot of times people would say, 'Well, you know, what about this and what about that?"' said Davis. "We're doing the book, guys (was the response). We're not negotiating. Kids are scared in the book, there's heavy themes in the book, we're not making a Disney movie."

Which is ironic, because Disney did end up with a share in the film.

And Sachar is pleased with how his story came out on the screen.

"I really like this movie," he said. "In fact, I'm surprised at how much I like it. I normally don't like movies, once I've read the book. I figured, since I'd written the book, I really wouldn't like it. But I just can't tear myself away from it.

"We keep doing these screenings in the cities, one after the other. We introduce it, start the screening, then go to dinner, and then come back, but I keep having trouble leaving it. Each scene works so well, it just hooks me."

Davis finds satisfaction in the fact that both the author and fans of the book find the movie so faithful to Sachar's vision.

"That's the nicest part; the people who find the book so wonderful, which is everyone, keep coming out of the screening saying, 'I was so worried you were going to (expletive) it up, but it worked!'" -- 'Survuval Guide to Camp Green Lake' hits shelves "There's no lake at Camp Green Lake."

There's no getting out of digging a new hole every day, 5 feet deep and 5 feet across, for the young wards of the camp, either.

In the novel "Holes," Stanley Yelnats, who believes his incarceration is because of a family curse, blames his "no- good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather" for his bad luck. But as his soft hands toughen with every new hole, Stanley begins to realize there's more to the digging than everyone thinks. The Warden is looking for something.

The novel's three narratives, which converge over the course of the book, follow Stanley and fellow inmates Zero, Armpit, X-Ray and others; the genesis of the Yelnats' family curse in Eastern Europe; and the sad yarn of Kissin' Kate Barlow, who turned to a life of crime after personal tragedy. Sachar weaves the tales together and builds on themes of friendship, compassion and redemption.

And even though, as Stanley's nemesis Mr. Sir likes to say, "This isn't a Girl Scout camp," the book is packed with laughs, mystery and adventure.

As Sachar said, "There's this sense of hope and warmth that Stanley has. That despite the 150-year-old family curse, (his family is) always optimistic."

"Holes" won the Newbery Medal in 1999, the National Book Award, and a slew of other honors. Before the success of the novel, Sachar was perhaps best-known for his "Wayside School" chapter books for children. Along with the film adaptation of "Holes," Sachar has a companion book titled "Stanley Yelnats's Survival Guide to Camp Green Lake."

"It assumes that the reader has been sentenced to Camp Green Lake," said Sachar. "There are short stories about Armpit and Squid. There are really fun survival tests in it as well." - Eric Elkins

INTERVIEW · SCENE · PAGE F-01

Western compass - Ivan Doig's literary landscape defines a time and a place

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / April 23, 2003

To say Ivan Doig writes books about the West would be like saying William Faulkner was a writer of Southern fiction. Both statements, while true, would understate the tapestries of the authors' bodies of work and their places in American letters. Doig could be the literary spawn of Faulkner - each has captured a particular sense of time and place in his prose, and the idea of memory, almost a character unto itself, is a consistent theme in their works.

Doig's first book, a memoir called "This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind," was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1978. Still popular, it's an expressive look at Doig's formative years among ranchers and rugged settlers near White Sulphur Springs, Mont. An accomplished freelance journalist, Doig had gone back to the settings of his childhood to research the true foundations of his memories.

"Part of the impetus behind my writing of the book was to try and fix permanently into book form my father's generation; what the story of that generation was," he said during a recent phone interview. "And by memory and everything, I was able to retrieve much about that way of life by going out journalistically with tape recorder and my wife's camera, and going to all the places where I had lived; where my dad and grandmother had lived.

"I went to Montana for a couple of months and just did that. I did things like, we carried water from the neighbor's house and I paced off how far it was - how far we carried those buckets of water. And measured the size of rooms in every house and did diagrams and looked at the artifacts that people had. So, it really was a feeling on my part that, hey, this is a really sizable, notable and, in some ways, kind of noble effort that these people's lives added up to: to try and find a distinctive way of life on this big, unrolled carpet of land."

In "This House of Sky," Doig overlaid his own recollections of rural Montana with the results of meticulous research and dozens of interviews to deliver a palpable panorama of reminiscence. "Memory even has its own voice or dialogue or something in 'This House of Sky,'" he said. "I'm not sure there is a quotation mark anywhere in the book. I deliberately put any of the dialogue and any of my between-chapter musing on the nature of

remembering into italics, trying to signal the reader that this is memory speaking - this is memory's voice."

Doig is speaking at the Boulder Public Library on Saturday, as the featured author in its ninth annual Western Book Discussion Day. "It is a full-blown speech on the craft of writing that went into 'This House of Sky,'" he said. "Why the book became a memoir rather than bad poetry or a bad first novel, and some of the lasting effects of this book and other books like it - other Western memoirs, books by Bill Kittredge, Terry Tempest Williams. I've got a short list I reel off. It's an attempt to say how this book came to be and what books of this ilk seem to have meant, particularly to Westerners."

The event starts at 10 a.m. with small discussion groups. Doig's talk will begin at 1 p.m., after an introduction by Patricia Limerick, director of the Center of the American West and a professor of history at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Doig also will be available to sign his works at the end of the day.

Doig has written nine books, with his 10th, "Prairie Nocturne," due this fall. His popular novels, such as "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" and "Winter Brothers," are set in the northwestern United States and meld historical truthfulness with rich characters and poetic prose. Doig's work is compelling, but it doesn't depend on nonfiction elements for its texture.

"You don't have to do the long archaeological digs on your own family or people you grew up around," he said, discussing his fiction. "And you are not confined as you are by the journalistic efforts of reporting accuracy. It's really kind of a liberation. " Doig, with his McCaskills and Barclays, has created a mythical land inhabited by pioneers of Scottish descent who strive and struggle to make a life in Montana. The families, whose experiences resemble those of Doig's own ancestors, are an amalgamation of memory and invention. They are fictional souvenirs of a defining era in the American West.

But it's "This House of Sky" that consistently corrals new readers and sets them on a path of discovery into the author's opus. "Partly they identify with the Western scene - the place, plus family," he said. "Some people get taken by the language, by the deliverance, the lyricism. I look back at a diary that I kept while writing the book, and I said to myself on the page that it would be wonderful if I could put poetry in every sentence. So, I deliberately tried to make the language dance."

It does, but it also sings.

INTERVIEW · BOOKS · PAGE EE-02

Assimilation, intermarriage and cultural identity

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / August 17, 2003

So this Jewish guy walks into his daughter's preschool. She'd left her lunch in the fridge, and despite his full knowledge that she'd be fine without it, the father drove across town to bring it to her. "There's nothing more melancholy," he thinks, "than a carefully prepared object left behind, and the piercing heartbreak I experience at the sight of it overwhelms me."

He finds her, asleep on her little mat, and before long, Daddy himself is lying there next to her, unable to move.

Charles Belski is lost, stuck in the limbo between culture and spiritualism, history and assimilation. And though his issues may be rooted in particular religious soil, perhaps he's suffering from an American disease.

"The English Disease," by Joseph Skibell, is about Belski's struggles with his own ambivalence. The title refers to an archaic name for depression. But the professor, an expert on Mahler, suffers from something richer and more confounding.

"In the beginning, I think he's really totally alienated and isolated. Not only from Jewish life, but, life in general," Skibell said during a recent phone interview. The novel, Skibell's follow-up to "A Blessing on the Moon," is the humorous and touching story of Belski's odyssey toward some understanding of who he is and where he's from.

"Hopefully, through the rest of the book, he's sensing that he's sort of starting to pick up pieces of his lost identity," Skibell said.

But that journey is fraught with joy and heartbreak, frustration and illumination. And Belski doesn't navigate his way along the currents; others convey him through his life's expedition. His own lack of energy, or motivation, or maybe even understanding of what's important, makes him powerless to do much for himself.

Luckily, Skibell's protagonist concedes his shortcomings and can almost laugh about them. Though he may not recognize it, this ability is emblematic of his cultural history. "Part of that is this tragic sense of life also simultaneously being a comic sense of life. There's so much tragedy in our history," said Skibell.

"Charles actually feels that sense of unhappiness, that tragic sense of sadness. There's also this sense of irony: He knows it's sort of absurd to feel it. That kind of keeps that internal monologue having at least two sides," Skibell said.

It makes Charles endearing, in a peculiar way. With his sense of humor, knowledge that his abject outlook is funny and his earnest desire to find meaning, Belski is more than just a Jewish protagonist. He's an American father, cut loose from any sort of spiritual source, wrestling with his own insecurities to help his baby daughter find her own way. A guy who doesn't know what he believes can have a tough time with the concept of his child's spiritual growth.

"Charles goes through a big trajectory," said Skibell. "He may be ambivalent about how observant they should be. I think, in the beginning, he definitely would have been ambivalent about his child's Jewishness."

American parents, no matter their religion or cultural background, struggle with the same issues. "In the book, Charles compares people in the West - and certainly in America - to Wagner's stereotypical concepts of Jews. We Americans have all become 'rootless,' 'nomadic,' and 'cultureless.'" Skibell said. "We're expected to live without a defining culture, without a shared hierarchy of values. And there's this whole conflation of the psychological ego with the archetype of the hero, so that we somehow imagine that to be heroic, to live a full and adventurous and meaningful life, we need to be as rootless as the Lone Ranger and wander as much as Ulysses."

Jewish adults have long struggled with the elasticity of the definition of Judaism - is it a spiritual orientation or a cultural history? Can it be one without the other? The renewal of religious behavior by many Americans - Jewish or not - could be a result of the same conundrum.

"Once it seemed that American-ness had something to do with values like liberty and freedom from tyranny, inventiveness and a sense of democratic justice," said Skibell. "But now it's basically just the fact that we live all on a common land mass and participate, not in

a common culture, but in a common economy. And ultimately the question is: How sustaining can that be?"

As a sense of common culture has broken down, more and more people are trying to find something deeper and more meaningful to fulfill them. "You know, without the spiritual or religious component, how long will the cultural elements survive? I think that's the tension, because without the religious element, I don't see how Jews in America wouldn't simply end up like any other ethnic group, assimilated and intermarried, knowing, perhaps, that you had a grandfather who was Italian, say, and maybe even identifying with that Italian-ness, by going to the opera or eating Italian food, or using some Italian slang, but it's not the same thing as being Italian."

For Belski, both assimilated and intermarried, that tension is not academic. He has a child. How can he find joy in his background - an inherited past he has cast off, a cultural collective consciousness fraught with tragedy and repackage it as a gift for his daughter? "All my life," the character explains, "Judaism seemed little more to me than a highly articulated form of ethnic paranoia, but now, having all but abandoned it, I couldn't help feeling its loss, as though I been denied an ancient birthright, or had thoughtlessly traded it away for the thin gruel of modernity and an attractive wife."

"The way I was thinking about it, the sort of breaking of the train of transmission that the Holocaust was leaves a character like Charles out in the wilderness Jewishly, and culturally, in terms of his own identity," Skibell said.

"And so I think over the course of 'The English Disease,' what he's trying to do is actually find his way back as much to that lost source as he can."

In 21st-century America, who isn't trying to do the same thing?

'Sweetwater' author navigates among water, fire, fog

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / August 31, 2003

"I am really intrigued by the notion of water," author Roxana Robinson said, smiling. "I think it's an extraordinary presence in the world, and as I write in the book, it's beautiful and it's so powerful and it does so much for us."

We were driving through a late-afternoon deluge, the windshield wipers barely effective against the downpour. In Robinson's latest novel, "Sweetwater" (Random House, 336 pages, $24.95), rivers, lakes, drought and fire form an underlying harmony to the discordant melody of a remarried widow trying to find her place in her new husband's family.

Just as water, and the lack of it, plays an important role throughout her book, the typical Colorado summer thunderstorm had its own influence on our conversation. Robinson's arrival at DIA had been delayed when lightning kept all airport workers off the tarmac. Her plane had arrived but couldn't approach the gate without guidance.

Rather than wait to meet her downtown, I offered to pick her up and drive her down the I-70 flood plain to her hotel. When Robinson was finally able to find her way to baggage claim, she mentioned that the effects of the drought in the novel would have been more timely last summer, when it was a bigger concern.

Finally en route, Robinson and I discussed "Sweetwater" and the way water and fire shape her story's flow. "(Water) just seemed like the most important part of the natural world to me - one of the most basic and one of the most crucial," she said. "It's more important than light to life. So it seems really central and really beautiful."

In "Sweetwater," Isabel Green has found her way into a relationship that doesn't quite fit. Her first marriage ended in the death of her journalist husband, a man depressed and capricious, exciting and frightening. Her new husband, Paul, seems to be placid and stable but carries his own hidden undertow. When Isabel and Paul arrive at his family's lakeside lodge and cabins deep in the Adirondack Mountains, she meets his brother, who is lively

and intelligent, with values and concerns much like her own. Isabel is forced to navigate her new family's ebbs and flows - currents, shoals and all.

"You have your own tribe, and your tribe teaches you customs and language and food and celebrations," Robinson said. "All these things you learn from your tribe; and when you marry somebody else, you are marrying someone from another tribe. There is this juggling going on with each of you - silently or sometimes vocally. Sometimes, you are consciously or subconsciously trying to persuade your mate that your tribe's customs are really better. It's better to shout. It's better to hug. It's better to be polite. It's better to stand up. It feels a little threatening, these strange customs. Why would you do it like that? Why would you act like that?"

Most daunting for Isabel is her new mother-in-law, Charlotte. Already somewhat scarred from her experiences with her first husband's mother, Isabel isn't sure what to make of this fussy, outspoken woman who likes her scotch.

"I was interested in the relationship between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law," she said. "I just think that connection is really important because the husband's mother is tremendously important in terms of the family. A wife coming in, either as a young wife, or, as in Isabel's case, a wife in the middle of her life - it's very tricky territory. It has to do with a certain kind of power - domestic power that needs to be yielded or shared, most beneficially shared. And love plays a big part in it. Love can be very possessive and greedy or it can be generous and open-hearted. And so, negotiating that territory is a very important part of a woman's life. In order for Isabel to negotiate it, I had to have those women be very important, those two mothers-in-law."

And then there's the weather. For Isabel, the climate in the Adirondacks has serious effects on her experiences with Paul's family. Alone with Paul's brother, a sudden storm enveloping their truck, she breaks down and realizes she married the wrong man. Isabel wonders how she could have made such a mistake.

"There is something called 'the fog of war' - it means there is turmoil that surrounds anybody who's trying to make decisions in the middle of a war," Robinson said. "The fact that your sight is limited, the fact that the events that surround you have so much urgency (can mean) that your mind is really in a state that's not capable of making good decisions. I think that we're always operating in the middle of a fog of war, and you can look back at an

episode or part of your life and say, 'Oh my God, why didn't I realize that this was the wrong person for me marry?' or, 'How could I have taken that job? It was so obvious that it was the wrong job for me.' But at the time, because of other elements of the situation and because of the fog of war, you made the bad decision in a way that made sense at the time. You don't see the enemy troops crouching behind the hill to your left. You can't see them and you don't know they're there.

"So, Isabel sort of stumbles through this passage in her life, making one decision after another with the best intentions. She makes them in ways that seem intelligent at the time. They turn out in some ways not to be the right decision. And then you have to live your way out of a poor decision. You have to decide either to live with it and do the best that you can or you decide to change it, which is also difficult."

Sometimes, you can only pray you'll live your way out of a poor decision. Toward the end of "Sweetwater," the drought-desiccated forest surrounding the lake succumbs to flames, and Isabel, Paul and the others must find a way along the back roads to safety.

"It's another primal force," said Robinson. "Water is something we are used to and that is a part of everyday life.

Fire is tremendously alarming. It's not something that we have any degree of comfort with. A human response to fire is fear. A human response to fire is very, very different than the human response to water. Once you put people within the arena of a fire, they start to act in ways that they wouldn't ordinarily."

The imminent inferno forces the family into a crucible of "fog of war" decision-making. The danger of the blaze and the forced close quarters of a single car squeeze the characters into their own conflagration. "Nobody in that car can hide behind courtesy or pretense, because everyone is operating in extremeness, and they might die because of the collective decision that they all make; they all might die or they all might live," she said. "When people are under pressure, they say and do things that they wouldn't ordinarily do or say. (Isabel) learns things or says things that she wouldn't have necessarily done otherwise."

Isabel's response turns out to be very much like the aspects of water Robinson holds most dear. "I love its fluidity. I love the fact that it never chooses one form. It's constantly changing, constantly adaptable. It's one of the great strengths of anything."

A model for surviving the fog of war?

"It's something that is useful to think about."

Eric Elkins is a Denver-based freelance writer.

'Outsider' romances cowboy life - Ranchhand deconstructs myth

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / September 21, 2003

Tom Groneberg doesn't consider himself a cowboy.

"You know, I don't think I ever was," he said during a recent phone interview. Groneberg is the author of "The Secret Life of Cowboys," the memoir of his nearly 20-year pursuit of the Western life. "I guess I kind of struggle with that in the book, trying to fit in. The cowboys are the guys in the last chapter, at that branding - the guys that wake up at 4 in the morning and just work and work and work. In a lot of ways, if I were to say I was a cowboy, it takes away from them and what they do."

Fresh out of college, not sure what to do with his life, a young Groneberg answered an ad that said, "Hard work with horses in a beautiful setting." Within weeks, he was driving from Illinois to the Kingdom of Breckenridge Stables in Summit County, where he spent the summer doing odd jobs and leading overweight, argumentative tourists on horseback rides through the mountains. He fell in love with the life, the smell of the tack in the barn, the way a twitch of his horse's ear can paint an entire picture. He returned the following summer with Jennifer, his love, his future wife, and by the end of the season, he knew three things - he wanted to be with her forever, he wasn't ready to give up the Western life and that working on a dude ranch would never make him a cowboy.

"They do serve a purpose," Groneberg said of tourist ranches. "They introduce people to the lifestyle. I have kind of a jaded view of them, in that, I think they just show the good things about the West. You get yourself up on a horse and go off into the mountains; you don't have the experience of the nitty-gritty; fixing fences - the hard, physical labor. It's not really something everyone wants to do on vacation."

In "The Secret Life of Cowboys," Groneberg recounts the years of hard, physical labor he put in after persuading his fiancée to start their life together in Montana. After an abortive attempt at attending graduate school in Missoula, Groneberg opted for a $35-a-day job as a ranch hand in the western part of the state. He and Jennifer found a small cabin close by, and Groneberg started his painful hero's journey into adulthood.

In prose as dogged, unselfconscious and laconic as the men he meets and wishes to emulate, Groneberg tells the tale of his two loves - his wife and the considered life of a cowboy. While painfully honest about his failures, he's equally reluctant to outline his successes.

"I guess that's the way I am in real life," he said. "The successes I can overlook, but the mistakes I tend to dwell on.

I showed my parents an early version of the book. My dad's suggestion was, 'Don't be so hard on yourself.' That's kind of what the book is about. I didn't want to write a book that was, 'Look at me, big-time rancher, doing this and doing that.' I guess it's just not who I am."

Who he is in "The Secret Life of Cowboys" is an outsider trying to find his way into a brotherhood he admires. He takes a long, loving look at the world of the modern cowboy - the tattered dreams, the thankless work and the small rewards that mode of existence has to offer.

"Outsiders can see things that insiders can't," he said. "I had someone tell me they lived in Miles City for years and never saw the neon bar signs on Main Street the way I saw them - the check mark on the outline of the state above the Montana Bar, the green bison head. I think, as an outsider, you look at behavior and situations and try to figure out what it will take to move to the other side, to become one of the people you long to be."

Groneberg is still not sure what made him throw all of his worldly belongings in his beat-up car and drive west, but it wasn't something as obvious as a love of old-West literature or family vacations to Colorado.

"I had a fella ask me if I grew up watching Westerns, if that's where the seed was planted," he said. "And I said 'No,' I never watched Westerns or any of that stuff growing up, that I can remember. You know, we went to the dude ranch in Colorado when I was young, but that was just one year out of however many years of family vacations. It was definitely not a trend that we'd always go out West and try to get the cowboy experience. I think the reason I went to Breckenridge was that I had nothing to lose, really. I could always go back to Illinois if it didn't work out."

Every boy wants to be a cowboy at some point in his life, but not every boy has the courage to risk everything on that dream. "I think that there's this huge myth that cowboys don't

really have to answer to anybody, and that they're just out riding horses and being happy and being macho. And that's got a huge appeal to people," Groneberg said.

In the book, he writes, "The West is everything we want to be; it is our potential for love and success, it is possibility and imagination. And the fence that defines the boundaries contains us, keeps us from getting lost in all of that possibility, saves us from straying too far from ourselves."

Groneberg doesn't think he's a cowboy. He writes, "The myth of the cowboy. I chased a dream and it kicked me in the teeth. Yet I find myself falling for it again and again." Groneberg writes that "the most authentic cowboys I know are just men," and goes on to say, "their hearts are as big as dump trucks, full of the land and the life they love."

Maybe the author's own big heart won't allow him to look in the mirror and see a cowboy, but the people who read his book won't see him any other way.

Magnum opus of geek fiction - 900-page 'Quicksilver' opens 'Baroque' trilogy

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / November 9, 2003

It would not be an insult to call Neal Stephenson a geek god. "You might want to explain that geek is used in the technical world as a term of affection for someone who's fascinated by something," he said recently. Stephenson was in Denver to promote his latest tome, "Quicksilver," the 900-page behemoth that starts his new trilogy, "The Baroque Cycle."

Stephenson earned a core group of fans with two visionary cyberpunk novels in the '90s, "Snow Crash" and "The Diamond Age." But it was his brilliant, funny historical fiction/ science fiction hybrid "Crytonomicon" that brought him into the semi-mainstream.

In person, Stephenson is wiry and tightly strung. He takes his time answering questions, careful in his responses.

"Quicksilver" takes place in the 17th century and follows two ancestors of the heroes from "Cryptonomicon." Daniel Waterhouse, the son of a Puritan revolutionary, gets caught up in the early days of the Royal Society, hanging around with the likes of Isaac Newton and Robert Hooke. He's an early "natural philosopher," which is what scientists of the time called themselves. "'Science' back then existed, but it meant something different," Stephenson said. "It meant knowing things or a discernment of things in general. What we call science, they called natural philosophy."

The aptly named Half-Cocked Jack Shaftoe is a legendary vagabond. Born in squalor, he proves his bravery as a mercenary, is decisive under the most extreme conditions, but still tends to get himself in trouble. The "Imp of the Perverse" seems to ride on his shoulders, persuading him to make decisions he knows will lead to trouble. And just as in "Cryptonomicon," the Waterhouse story arc, though thrilling in its own way, is relatively placid, while Shaftoe's adventures tend to be of the swashbuckling kind. The two men are tied together by a mysterious, brilliant woman, Eliza, who, Candide-like, finds herself at the heart of huge historical events.

But the characters are not the stars of the novel. What makes this piece of geek fiction such a magnum opus is its paralytic detail of the inner workings of the baroque era - new discoveries, religious uprisings, revolutions, entirely new ways of seeing and explaining the way the world works.

"I think that the subject matter here is the driver," said Stephenson. "It's not my imagination. In the period of time that's covered by 'The Baroque Cycle,' you've got the invention of modern science with the Royal Society, you've got this conflict between Newton and Leibniz, you've got the Sun King, Louis XIV, at Versailles, and all his wars and intrigues, and so on. You've got cultural conflict going on, not only between the Catholics and the Protestants, but also between all of Christendom and the Turk, the world of Islam.

"You've got Peter the Great, and the high age of the Samurai in Japan. You've got the Great Mogul in India - all of this stuff is happening at the same time. You've got the invention of modern banking, the modern economic system, the modern system of government. It's a fantastically fertile time, and sometimes it feels like everything that happened since then is sort of like a bunch of footnotes to this period.

"Some people very much enjoy books that have that kind of content," Stephenson said. What makes "Quicksilver" roll is how seamlessly the details are worked into the narrative most of the time. The characters are compelling and draw the reader into the arcana as they muddle their way through a pivotal era in human existence. And, as in "Cryptonomicon," Stephenson proves himself to be the master of the analogy. His ability to explain complex concepts with everyday objects is art in its own right.

"I think that, if you understand some concept, and think about it long enough, it's possible to find analogies," he said, which is way too humble. Anyone who can use embroidery to illustrate the power of binary mathematics should be editing college textbooks in his spare time.

"I was just following my nose, and my nose led me to this period, because it seemed like there was a lot of interesting material here," he said.

One of the most compelling themes is the way the natural philosophers attempted to bridge their logical and experimental exercises with their religious beliefs.

"Nowadays, there's a kind of widely shared assumption that science and religion are opposed to each other," Stephenson said. "The conflict that people perceive now has to do with the theory of evolution and that kind of thing. But back then, the extent to which people worried about a conflict had to do with the question of whether human beings have free will, or are we just mechanisms - are we just machines that are bound by deterministic law? It's still a thing that computer people talk about today - is the brain just a digital computer?

"So, with a few exceptions, I think that the scientists - the natural philosophers of that era - absolutely sincere Christians of one type or another - saw it as their obligation to come up with a scientific theory that was not only scientifically correct, but that supported their brand of Christianity. And they all assumed that science and religion should naturally lead to the same conclusion."

Don't be intimidated - "Quicksilver" is replete with sex and blood and quirky, laugh-out-loud humor. But if your inner egghead isn't sated by the time you finish reading "Quicksilver," go to www.metaweb.com, where Stephenson and friends are compiling page-by-page annotations of the historical and scientific concepts in the novel. ``Quicksilver" has more detail than most historical fiction, more laughs than most farces and more fantastical escapades than most adventure novels. It's geek literature of the highest order.

QUICKSILVER By Neal Stephenson William Morrow, 927 pages, $27.95

INTERVIEW · SCENE · PAGE F-01

Worshiping the past - Caretakers stoke spirit of 1889 synagogue

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / November 17, 2003

TRINIDAD - Like the vestigial shadow of the valuable Southwestern rug that was stolen from Temple Aaron during a break-in in 1990, Trinidad's nearly vanished Jewish community has left an indelible impression on the city.

The rug was never recovered, but its imprint remains in the main hall of the old synagogue - a glimmering whose edges are defined by the place where the carpet rested for decades.

"It was woven between two telephone poles," says Leon Rubin. He and his wife, Catherine, are the longest remaining members of the congregation and are its de facto champions.

Temple Aaron is the oldest synagogue in Colorado that has remained in the same location. (Denver's Temple Emmanuel, which was founded in 1875, moved to its current digs in 1957.)

The building sits like a sentinel over downtown Trinidad. Its brown brick exterior is cracked in places, and the surrounding lawn is desiccated from the recent drought. But the building is imposing and powerful, like a dormant giant.

During the day, the main sanctuary is bathed in the rich glow of sunlight pouring through the more than 100-year- old stained glass. Most of the time, the hall is full of emptiness and silence. An enormous antique Estey pipe organ sleeping in the balcony overlooks rows and rows of empty pews.

"Isn't it beautiful?" says Catherine Rubin, president of the temple sisterhood. "I just wish these walls could speak: Oh, could they tell us things. You can imagine."

If the building could speak, it might complain of aches and bruises. The 113-year-old structure is due for major healing - walls are cracked, windows are out of alignment, and the temple is in dire need of a security system.

Fortunately, the Colorado Historical Fund recently awarded a grant to Temple Aaron, and work on the edifice has just begun. Over the next several years, nearly $200,000 will be poured into the renovation, with Colorado Preservation Inc. doing the work.

"The folks at Temple Aaron have done a tremendous job of stewardship of this important building with limited resources but a great deal of care and concern," says Estella Cole, an official at the Colorado Historical Fund.

"The Temple is such an important visual landmark in Trinidad that those of us here at the fund are delighted to be able to partner with the congregation and CPI in moving forward with critical masonry and window repairs," she says.

In 1883, roughly a dozen Jewish families, led by Saul Jaffa, Trinidad's first mayor, founded the congregation. The temple was built for $8,050 and completed in December 1889. According to an early copy of the Trinidad Daily Citizen, the building was "a thing of beauty, a perfect gem."

"When they came overland in the 1880s, how desperate they must have been to find each other; and then they started the cemetery, immediately. That happens," Catherine Rubin says. "They say as soon as Jewish people form a congregation, they know that death is inevitable, and so they get a burial ground. And we have a lovely cemetery.

"They were mostly German Jews and (from) Alsace-Lorraine," she says. "One family came, and another family came."

At the time, Trinidad was experiencing an economic boom, the result of coal mining in the area. Jews and other Eastern European immigrants followed the Santa Fe Trail to southern Colorado and set up shop as merchants, doctors, lawyers.

By the 1920s, Temple Aaron's congregation had reached more than 100 families.

The Rubins, who now own two eponymous department stores in Raton (the first opened in 1916 by Rubin's father), became members of the synagogue shortly after they were married.

"I'm from Albuquerque, and we were married in 1946," says Catherine Rubin. "And we came to Raton. That's only a short 57 years ago. Can you imagine? I never thought I'd even live that long, let alone be here."

A couple befriended the Rubins, and they came to Trinidad. As many as 25 people attended Temple Aaron in those days.

"They were very, very nice to us," Catherine Rubin remembers of the congregation. "I was the youngest among us.

And so we became quite enamored with this, and we became active.

"And so what happened, after all these years, (is) we became kind of the keepers of the keys," she says.

Today, about 18 people attend Temple Aaron. They come from Denver, Colorado Springs, Walsenburg, Trinidad, Raton and New Park, N.M.

"Everything that's Temple Aaron is us old fuddy-duddies," Catherine Rubin says. "There aren't any others that take the interest. They don't have time. Leon's been on the foundation for many years. And I'm president of the sisterhood. And how I became president: Somebody at age 80 said, 'I'm not doing it any more; we'll appoint Catherine.' So I guess, until I die - I guess I'll stay on it as long as the other ones."

There's a black-and-white photo of the congregation from the early 1950s hanging on a wall in the synagogue.

Several dozen people, most of them quite old, are posed - stiff, unsmiling, except for a youngish couple sitting in front. They look dynamic and happy. It's the Rubins. Everyone fits on the now-erstwhile antique rug.

Rubin looks at the photo. "There's how many of us alive? Three of us?" he asks his wife.

"Four," Catherine Rubin answers. "Not very many, but of course they were a little aged to begin with."

"All the rest of them are memories," Rubin says.

The Colorado Historical Fund hopes to preserve some of the more tangible memories of Temple Aaron's history. But most important to the Rubins is the addition of the security system.

The antique rug wasn't the only valuable artifact pilfered from the building, and the memory of the robbery still haunts the Rubins. And like the historical heritage of the Jewish community of Trinidad, or the stolen rug, without safeguards both human and electronic, Temple Aaron and its physical and cultural souvenirs could quietly disappear.

INTERVIEW · SCENE · PAGE F-12

Janis Hallowell Spiritual tale 'Francesca' lets readers explore faith

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / May 9, 2004

Amid the uproar surrounding a famous auteur's interpretation of religious events, one might miss a thought- provoking debut novel about the nature of belief and miracles. "The Annunciation of Francesca Dunn," by Janis Hallowell, is a seemingly simple story about a young Boulder girl who may be carrying a miracle in her body.

Told in three narrative voices - those of Francesca's overworked mother, the girl's troubled friend and a homeless man who believes he has a preternatural sense of smell - the book, in its spare language, reads almost like a set of contemporary gospels.

"I wrote three narrative voices in the first-person so that they could each tell part of the story from their different perspectives," Hallowell wrote in a recent e-mail. "Francesca is the young girl at the center of the story; she's the one they all project their beliefs upon. The three first-person voices alternate and circle around Francesca."

Hallowell switches to the third-person as well. "Francesca's third-person chapters are told from a perspective slightly above and behind her; an ageless, wise part of her," Hallowell wrote. "As if it is her soul voice speaking.

Francesca's chapters are also told in the present tense. This allows Francesca's soul voice to be immediate and present, in contrast to the others telling the story in the past tense."

The changes in perspective and tense make the tale almost disorienting at times - the reader begins to wonder who is "right" or what the truth really is.

"Reviewers and marketers say the book doesn't provide easy answers, but they don't talk about the deep unrest that readers have described when they realize they are on their own to decide whether there are 'real' miracles in the book," Hallowell wrote. Though the novel flows easily, the questions it raises by story's end stick with the reader. "My deeper mission was to raise these questions and to put them out to the reader to weigh in his or her own mind - be an active participant in the experience of the novel and think through some of these issues," she added.

It helps that the setting of "Annunciation" is a place known for religious gurus and spiritual flakes. "In the '60s and '70s, Boulder had the reputation for being a breeding ground for 'spiritual' happenings," wrote Hallowell. "Boulder is seen, still, as a place where squishy New Age fanaticism runs rampant. But being a resident of Boulder, I don't see that so much these days. I see lots of money and SUVs and people with big mortgages and kids on soccer teams."

In fact, Hallowell doesn't believe Boulder's hippie rep plays much of a role in the book. "I set the novel in that affluent, safe community to purposely contrast the bizarre events that take place with the middle-class, well- educated, college town they take place in. I guess Boulder seems to me like any number of small cities in the country - Portland (Ore.), Madison (Wis.), Raleigh-Durham (N.C.). The idea was to set the novel in a sort of upper-middle-class 'everytown' USA." Still, for local readers, the city is always pregnant with some sort of spiritual potential, as if the people are in a constant state of gullibility and/or open-mindedness. It seems fitting for the ways people react to Francesca's apparent connection with divinity.

"It seems to me that although most people won't admit it, most of us would like to believe in a divine fix," wrote Hallowell, "just as we hope for a miracle cure, a lottery win, a knight in shining armor. There's always that little crack of hope that there really is a God and that there really might be a miraculous event. When people ask me if there are 'real' miracles in 'The Annunciation of Francesca Dunn,' I like to quote Einstein, who said, 'There are two ways to live life: One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."'

In any case, readers of "Annunciation" are incited to explore their own notions around the rewards and limits of faith. Hallowell's effort is an opening to conversation rather than a didactic narrative.

As she wrote, ``Mel Gibson has said that his film (``The Passion of the Christ") is an expression of his belief. My book, in contrast, is a cautionary tale about the dangers and seductions of belief. In a way, 'The Annunciation of Francesca Dunn' is an antidote to 'The Passion."'

INTERVIEW · STL · PAGE L-01

LEARNING JEWISH TEXTS

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / May 20, 2007

Though the neighborhood surrounding it has deteriorated, and the outside world has exerted some influence on the school, the heart of Yeshiva Toras Chaim Talmudical Seminary/Denver hasn't changed much in the 40 years that it has instructed young Jewish men in sacred and secular learning.

But the heart of this Orthodox seminary isn't in the neighborhood off of West Colfax Avenue that surrounds the school, where 52 high school and college students live and breathe Jewish life.

It is through a pair of swinging doors in the dining room, until recently unremarkable, that open into the beis midrash, or "house of learning."

In honor of the yeshiva's 40th anniversary, a group of alumni pitched in to build an ornate lintel to surround the doors leading to the place where students and teachers spend most of their days interpreting and arguing about the meaning of the Torah, which is the first five books of the Bible, and commentaries written over millennia by the great rabbis.

This form of instruction, where students and sages study and debate the Torah together, has always been the model for teaching Jewish law. But the teachers at the yeshiva also consider secular study for ninth- through 12th- graders an essential element of Jewish education.

"There has always been a stronger emphasis than (at) your typical East Coast yeshiva about the secular program," says Rabbi Aaron Kagan, the 10th-grade teacher and a son of one of the school's two founders, Rabbi Israel Kagan.

Six college students and 47 high-schoolers from the U.S., Canada and Mexico are enrolled at the boarding school.

They all live in an apartment building at Colfax and Perry Street that has been converted to dorm rooms. It's across the street from a McDonald's restaurant, where the students will never eat because they keep kosher and take all of their meals in the campus dining hall.

A few blocks away, at the former Hebrew Alliance campus, students spend mornings and most of the afternoon studying and discussing the sacred texts, but reserve the late afternoon for education in more quotidian subjects, like English, science and math.

Studying the arcane meanings of ancient writings isn't a prosaic exercise. The rabbis believe that understanding Torah leads to being a better person in the world.

"The goal is to produce a young man who would be very knowledgeable, very able to pursue his career of Jewish life according to the Torah laws," says Rabbi Isaac Wasserman, who founded the school with Israel Kagan in 1967.

Torah study in the beis midrash is a noisy, chaotic affair.

The room, small, lined with bookshelves, short lecterns and wooden chairs scattered in no apparent order, hums as young students and wise rabbis work in groups to tease out understanding of the Torah and its applications to the world around them.

Verbal sparring has been the keystone of Torah studies for thousands of years. The beis midrash at Toras Chaim a living connection to that vibrant past, and even the rabbis, who've been studying the same texts for decades, don't always agree with one another.

Moshe Robinson, 20, a student in the college program, says he is awestruck when watching Israel Kagan debating with the other rabbis.

"You know that right after that conversation, they're the best of buddies, and they have the utmost respect for each other," he observes. "But when they're fighting, and they go back and forth, you just don't know what's going to happen. The whole room just lights up when that happens. And afterwards, you go, Wow, I wish I could talk like that."

Founders' sacrifice In the late 1960s, when they brought their wives and families from the heart of the yeshiva system in New Jersey to Denver to start the school, Wasserman and Israel Kagan had already established themselves to be young men of wisdom.

"They both could have easily gotten very respectable positions on the East Coast, with many more students to pick from, and they could have had a much bigger yeshiva," Aaron Kagan says. "But there was a world out there that needed exposure to a yeshiva system, and so, at great sacrifice to themselves and their families; they just went out and did it."

At the time, Denver's west side was a thriving Jewish enclave, and the school, the only yeshiva between Chicago and the West Coast, became a hub for Jewish learning.

Today, the yeshiva is an accredited high school. Students in the college program typically complete a degree that prepares them to become rabbis, or spend a year in beis midrash study before moving on to a larger school on the East Coast.

The rabbis have high expectations for their students' involvement in Jewish life, no matter what path they take after completing their formal studies.

"Whatever they do, they carry with them basic Torah values: to lead, to be an example to others of what God expects of us, to be honest in business dealings, and to be exemplary in their character development. And to realize that Torah learning is never-ending," Kagan says.

In spite of competition from yeshivas that have cropped up around the U.S. in the last 40 years, the school has built a solid reputation for being a place where learning is combined with warm, familylike relationships between students and teachers.

"That's created by the fact that they're all away from home - even the local students have to stay in the dorms," Aaron Kagan says.

One of the primary reasons parents from across North America send their sons to study under these rabbis is that reputation for kindness.

"Our rebbeim are people who are here not just to earn a living, but to fulfill a life's mission - a mission to be able to transmit, to teach younger students that which they believe in," Wasserman says. "And the environment here has been such that there's been a close and warm relationship both inter-staff, and in terms of staff and students." "(The rebbeim) have a much more friendly manner; you enjoy learning with them," Robinson says. "You can talk to them outside, so inside you can learn with them."

In recent years, the yeshiva has created ways to bring the beis midrash alive for the Denver Jewish community in general. The school's outreach program, The Jewish Experience, is dedicated to this purpose.

Building community "The yeshiva's goal was to allow their talented rabbis and educators to be available to the larger community, to offer sophisticated learning opportunities, and to

be more active in building the Jewish community at large," says Rabbi Raphael Leban, director of outreach at The Jewish Experience. The program offers classes, hosts events and runs a Sunday school for children.

For the rabbis and students at Yeshiva Toras Chaim, bringing the values of learning and study and a considered life to the greater community is an essential element of being Jewish.

As Robinson says: "You're only making a living out there. The Torah way of life is what you're living."

Eric Elkins is a freelance writer and vice president of marketing at FEED. You can find his blog at datingdad.com.

Fun-for-all challenge met Game makers aim wares at both children, adults

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / June 10, 2001

In the world of first-person shooters, violent adventures and button-mashing fight games, finding titles that are fun for both kids and adults can be a challenge.

The spectrum runs from straight learning-based activities to exciting games that don't teach specific skills but encourage divergent thinking and problem-solving. Although family-friendly games are being released by the big developers, smaller companies are also producing high-quality diversions for the very young.

School Zone Interactive's titles are adapted from its series of educational books, used by school districts around the country. Their "electronic workbooks" tackle math and language arts for children from 2 to 12.

While a 4- or 5-year-old may be ready to work through the letters of the alphabet, a first-grader will work on decoding words and building vocabulary. The child completes a worksheet geared toward the skill being developed, then plays a game as a reward. This model of exercise and play is a common one in educational software.

On the other hand, Richard Vincent, president of Kutoka Interactive, wanted to develop educational software that integrated the learning into the adventure.

"The activities are not cutaways," he said at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in May. In his "Mia" series, children control the movement of a beautifully rendered mouse through stories. Along the way, players must solve problems to progress.

These activities actually fit into the stories' narratives. The child might have to help build a control panel by adding and subtracting hours from clocks, or solve math riddles to open doors. The game play is intuitive, and the video sequences are fun to watch. Games that are worthwhile for kids don't need to be yawn-inducing for adults.

NewKidCo is releasing titles that will keep the whole family involved.

"Sesame Street Sports," for PlayStation and Game Boy Color, has your favorite characters bouncing, riding and floating their way through the well-known environs of the PBS show.

"Tigger's Honey Hut" has mini-games and amusing activities for very young gamers, and "Goofy's Fun House" will appeal to young kids and their parents. As different puzzles are solved, full-length classic Goofy cartoons are unlocked. Of course, the major game developers are not ignoring families. Electronic Arts' Harry Potter titles, to be released this winter with the film, follow the story with dedication. Not only do players explore Hogwarts, they ride broomsticks through the forest and solve puzzles along the way.

Godgames' "Stronghold" is a simulation where fortresses are built and defended. LucasArts' graphic adventure "Return to Monkey Island" and cart racer "Super Bombad Racing," complete with a pint-sized Darth Maul pitted against other baby-ized "Phantom Menace" characters, will entertain families for hours.

Another major movie tie-in is Knowledge Adventure's "Jurassic Park III" series for children.

"These games bring the fun of the Jurassic Park dinosaurs to little kids," K.A. representative James Tuverson said.

Knowledge Adventure's titles are very inventive. In "ScanCommand," players use barcode readers included with the game to scan in pieces of DNA that give their dinosaurs specific attributes. The object is to use their dinosaurs to save trapped kids in the park. The nonviolent computer board game "Danger Zone" has games, obstacle courses and puzzles to complete. In "Dino Defender," young players must trap escaped creatures with tranquilizer balls, flares and nets. Meanwhile, UbiSoft is creating kid-friendly games with stunning visuals. "Myst III: Exile" is the latest chapter in the saga of puzzlers that have caused whole families to park in front of the screen together, working their way through complicated mysteries. Their title, "Disney's Tarzan," is as much fun to watch as it is to play.

Fleeing Nazi terror for Africa

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / October 3, 2003

There's a scene in "Nowhere in Africa" when the wife (a radiant Juliane Kohler) learns from a letter that her mother and sister have been taken to the concentration camps in Poland.

Rather than attempt to console her, the husband (Merabe Ninidze) says, "You know what? I envy you for getting this letter, for the certainty!" It's a shocking, powerful moment that brings the horrors of Nazi Germany to pastoral Kenya, where this German-Jewish attorney has brought his wife and young daughter to flee the terrors taking place in their homeland.

"Nowhere in Africa," which won the 2002 Academy Award for best foreign language film, is an epic tale of a family trying to survive the privations of their new situation and the internal struggles that are tearing them apart. The story is told in the juxtaposition of sweeping African vistas with intimate closeups of the characters.

Husband and wife, cut loose from their roots, destitute and depressed, struggle to maintain their rocky relationship.

The daughter, Regina, grows up a stranger to the land of her birth, but never completely sheds her alien essence in Africa. At the core, though, is their loyal cook, Owuor, who is both their confessor and caretaker. He's the voice of Kenya, spiritual and full of strength, and the more family members embrace him, the better they are able to adjust to their new surroundings.

The film is beautiful to watch, heartbreaking at times, but ultimately sweet and buoyant. Rated R for adult situations and some nudity, the film is adapted from the book by Stefanie Zweig, which is based on her own life.

The two-disc set offers the film in widescreen format, with subtitles and extras such as commentary, deleted scenes and a making-of featurette. If you don't speak German, you'll need to choose between subtitled commentary and subtitled dialogue. Producer Peter Hermann discusses the logistics of filming in Kenya. If you're musically inclined, reading the sheet music to selections of the haunting score is entertaining.

Interviews with the stars produce the occasional gem, though female lead Juliane Kohler seems distracted. At times, the questions are much longer than the responses. But far more compelling (and distracting) is the traffic behind the speakers - guys carrying big drums of water, people milling about, someone walking a dog. The interviews are cobbled together, filmed on-set and not spectacular.

The interview with author Stefanie Zweig has miserable sound quality, but is worth watching as she compares the film and its actors with her own experiences as a refugee in Kenya during the late 1930s and early '40s. She shows just a few pictures from her time in Africa, and the comparisons between the film adaptation and actual events are interesting. ``Nowhere in Africa" is an art house film that translates well to even the smallest screen.

Branding Denver: Watch what you wish for

By Eric Elkins / Special to The Denver Post / October 28, 2003

Recently, Mayor John Hickenlooper announced that he wanted to rebrand the city; give Denver a new image to make it a more desirable place to visit.

"Some parts of your brand you might use to attract tourism," Hickenlooper said. "Different aspects of your brand you might use to attract business to open an office here. And when we get down to communicating a brand, it's images, it's phrases, descriptions."

Of course, there are images, phrases and descriptions that the mayor may not want to include when trying to attract visitors. And the message he sends to one kind of traveler might not help him catch another kind.

For instance, in trying to draw more national business conferences, the motto "Denver: The hookers are easy to find" could trigger some commerce associations to jump into contracts for national confabs here in the city.

Unfortunately, some family-values groups might find the phrase a bit of a deal-breaker. On the other hand, promoting what some say is a lack of cultural and ethnic diversity in the city could attract a whole new group of visitors and their dollars, though maybe not the people we'd actually want.

"I come to Denver for the fresh air, fresh seafood and diversity," said Karen Sullivan, a former Colorado State student who now lives in San Francisco and rarely travels back to the Mile High City. "No wait, just the fresh air."

We won't remind her about our high-pollution days.

There is a way to bring in college kids from around the country, though. The Denver metro area could become the next Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Once students learn how much more quickly they can get hammered at high altitude, they'll overrun the city. Imagine clearing out space along the South Platte River, dumping several tons of sand and installing giant outdoor heaters in strategic locations: instant spring break! Lure revelers to the Mile High City with the promise that the drinks are cheaper and they'll need fewer of them. Produce a

video commercial showing wild coeds saying things like, "Wow, I had half a beer, and I am wasted! Is it hot in here? I think I'll take my shirt off."

Promoting the idea that "Denver is close to nothing but itself" could appeal to urban dwellers from the East Coast who just want to be in a place where another city of great historical or cultural significance isn't a short drive away.

Come to Denver, see the sights, hang out in your hotel room, and never feel the guilt of missing out on a visiting a "national treasure" a mere hour's drive away. Take satisfaction in the fact that you have few options. Unfortunately, foreign travelers could be turned off by the idea of using the city as a base and exhausting all possibilities within a couple of days.

Comparing Denver with other places may not be such a hot idea, either. Sure, "Denver doesn't smell as bad as Greeley," is true (except on those days when the wind blows from the north, and you get the idea that the Purina factory is experiencing some sort of core breach). But, just like saying, "Denver: Less patchouli than Boulder," it's terribly obvious and a cheap shot. "Albuquerque without the corruption" wouldn't do much to garner new visitors, and neither would "Easier to navigate than San Francisco." Obviously, "Our traffic's not quite as bad as L.A.'s and New York City's" probably wouldn't lure too many businesses, but it could help local radio stations bring in national ads aimed at commuters.

If rebranding's really going to work, the mayor and his marketing crew will have to persuade winter sports aficionados to fly into DIA but never find their way up to the mountains.

"I don't think people come to Denver unless they have family or friends here," said Hollie Rogin, a Boulder resident.

Sure, Denver is the gateway to some of the best skiing in the world, but why stop in the city on your way to the slopes? "Growing up, we always landed at Stapleton and headed straight to the mountains," she added.

The answer is to establish the idea that skiing and snowboarding are overrated, so why bother driving all the way up to the mountains? This strategy would have to be managed very carefully, limiting advertising and promotion to the corridor between the airport and the ski areas. Get would-be skiers into the city first, and then somehow manage to keep them here long enough to spend some cash. The city and county of Denver could design

immense billboards along I-70 with pictures of people looking frozen and miserable on the slopes ("Stay toasty in Denver"), or images of 20-somethings who've been injured trying to grind the rim of a half-pipe ("Denver: No steep hills."). The mayor's office could work with local hotels to offer "No-ski" specials for tourists who change their minds and decide to stick to the flatlands ("Don't ski, kids stay free!").

Mayor Hickenlooper has set himself quite the task in rebranding Denver as it exists right now. He may be better off just making stuff up.