

BEGINNER'S GREEK

Speaking of judging a book by its cover, this novel has nothing to do with learning a classical language. In fact at a local private book signing party, a woman came up to the host and said, "Oh Charlie, are you learning Greek?"

It's actually the title of a lovely poem by James Merrill that goes like this:

To one
 Who smells the sun
 Eyes shut, and tastes that rain is sweet
 Who hears
 Music but fears
 Its presence in empty gardens; or discreet,
 Only observes
 The nerves
 And fibers of a painting---shade, technique
 What is
 Beyond analysis
 Is perilous: we must not wish to seek
 And cry
 "That is what I
 Love, what I cherish!" Instead be wary of such
 Intensity
 That we may never be hurt or happy or anything too
 Much.

So anyway, it all starts with a chance encounter on an airplane. A beautiful young woman is seated next to our hero, Peter Russell on a flight from New York to Los Angeles, and she's reading a book called *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann. This book is generally considered to be a pretty hard slog, so Peter is impressed that she has forged through some 200 pages of it.

a novel

The same thing happened to Jim Collins. He was on a flight to L.A. "and a very pretty girl sat down next to me...and she was reading *The Magic Mountain*." However, her name was not Ginger. And so is he Peter? He tries to deny it but admits, "Peter Russell has characteristics of me and Holly has characteristics of Ginger that go beyond the green eyes...but really none of the characters were based on anybody."

Anyway, during the five-hour flight, Peter and Holly fall in love. They are made for each other. You almost want them to ride off into the sunset in a taxi cab, but then we wouldn't have a novel, would we. Instead, Holly writes her phone number on the title page of the book, rips it out, and gives it to Peter. After an awkward embrace, they go their separate ways. But when he arrives at his hotel, he cannot find the piece of paper for the life of him. He never does.

Fast forward a few years to New York City, where Peter's best friend, who is something of a cad, marries this delightful girl, named Holly. And it's her. So, rather than suffer needlessly, Peter settles for marrying a girl who is nice and all that but not the love of

his life. And then, all of a sudden...oops too much information here; you'll just have to read it for yourself.

So is this what they call Chick Lit? *The New York Times Review* actually uses the term. "You can't say that," snaps Ginger. "You must never use that expression in the same room with Jim Collins." Hmmm. Is she joking or is she serious? We'll go with serious.

Here's one thing for sure. *Beginner's Greek* is a great read, full of all the right ingredients: a likeable hero and heroine, crazy, quirky characters, a few villains that you love to hate, and plenty of unresolved tension to keep those pages turning. And Jim Collins manages to do this with no murders, no gratuitous sex or violence, and sparse use of expletives.

"I even tried as a goal to have none," says Jim of the all-too-common use today one word, adding "there were a couple of moments where it seemed just necessary to do that."

There is one brief sex scene, but it is seen from afar, and it is vital to the story. "I find sex scenes, to read about them, are tiresome, and endless obscenities I find embarrassing," he shudders. Besides, he adds in a stage whisper, "My mother's still alive; I have to think about what she was thinking."

Jim Collins has been compared stylistically, by some, to Jane Austen. "And obviously that's incredibly flattering, and I do love Jane Austen," he admits, somewhat abashed. Besides her, he lists British satirists such as P.G. Wodehouse and Oscar Wilde as influences. In fact, this book has a sort of British feel to it, and like some British novels, it bogs down a bit about two thirds of the way through. But it comes roaring back for a real corker of an ending.

"In Southwestern France in October, the saffron blooms, and the purple of its blossoms matches the purple on the rim of the horizon when the sun has just set." That's not a bad way to start a chapter. Where did that come from? "Actually, that actually is completely all made up...I actually got that from a guidebook." Jim says "actually" a lot. Actually, this



The dust cover of Jim Collins' bestseller, *Beginner's Greek*. The book has nothing to do with learning a new language and everything to do with a chance encounter on an airplane.

James Collins

entire book is beautifully written...lyrical, witty, satirical, and yes, quite romantic, just like the man who wrote it.

"I always thought that Jim was totally unobservant," notes Ginger of the typically clueless husband that all of us rough/tough guys are. "Now, I found it absolutely amazing to read what he had going on in the heads of women...it's remarkable to me how insightful he is about women's feelings and their notions." So he really isn't a geek; he's an old softie. "People say, 'Oh come on, there's not a man alive like this,'" continues Ginger. "Well, I feel like saying, 'Yes there is!'"

You see the hero, Peter Russell is really Jim Collins and the heroine, Holly Edwards is really Ginger Donelson; it's just that he didn't lose the piece of paper with her phone number on it!

A book by its cover



I think the first time I met Jim Collins was at a late summer barnyard barbecue. While his vivacious wife, Ginger, waded into the crowd with gusto, Jim, tall, bespectacled, and awkward, lurked around the edges. He was visibly uncomfortable. I immediately wrote him off as a gangly geek and sidled off. Probably did something with computers.

So when I heard he'd written a best seller novel, I was surprised. I was even more surprised when I read it. This is a great read, and from its pages leaps the witty, literate, complex and, dare I say it, romantic personality of its author. I had too hastily judged this book by its cover.



Top photo, up until he moved here in 2000, Jim Collins has been a self-admitted city boy. Not only was he born and raised in New York City, he worked there first as a stock broker and later as foreign news desk editor for *Time Magazine*. He also wrote for *The New Yorker*. Above, another copy of the romantic comedy, *Beginner's Greek* changes hands. Fully 80 percent of the attendees at a recent book-signing at Grymes Memorial School were women. *Beginner's Greek* is on sale to the public at Grymes Memorial School. All proceeds benefit the school library.

Photos by Phil and Susie Audibert

"Actually, I'm not Mr. Outgoing, I guess," says Jim somewhat sheepishly from the sunny, high-ceilinged living room of his and wife Ginger's home up by Scuffletown way. "I'm not going around the room, you know, slapping everybody on the back." Jim's speech comes in fits and starts. He says "actually," and "you know" a lot. Sometimes Ginger finishes his sentences for him because, well, his mouth is playing catch up with his mind.

Anyway, Jim is still awkward and uncomfortable, even refers to himself as a "skinny, uncoordinated feebe." But underneath all this runs a steady current of self-deprecating wit and irony that makes it hard sometimes to tell if he's serious. And of course, there's Ginger, who went to drama (draaaahh-mah) school in London, and

loves to act it. She eggs him on, and he bounces off her. These two could be a stand up comedy team; just who is going to play the straight man.

So the killer question is this. Is it possible to find true love? This is important because the hero and heroine in this novel that Jim wrote are desperately trying to find it for 441 pages despite those pesky circumstances that keep getting in the way. It's also important because now that we're sitting at their kitchen table, it is obvious that this couple who seem so different from each other may have indeed found it themselves. Here's Jim's unedited answer.

Sigh, long pause. "Uh... there's a reason they call it fiction." Big laugh. Then he turns serious. "I don't know if actually those love-at-first-sight things really work out. I mean it's a nice fantasy, and I don't know, I don't think any of those love-at-first-sight things, either nothing ever happened because the person disappeared or, I don't know if that actually does work out as I like to imagine it does, but," he takes a quick sip of air, and blurts, "I think you can find true love."

Aha! He said it! "You can find true love." Let us proclaim from the rooftops that Jim Collins is not a geek; he's a hopeless romantic!

He is also a hopeless city boy. Born and raised on Manhattan island, Jim has never lived anywhere else than in the concrete jungle except for when he attended all the best schools: Exeter and Harvard. And Ginger, the opposite, was bawn and raised right heah in Vuhginyuh, grew up in Charlottesville, and went to all the best schools: St. Anne's and draaaaah-mah school in London. And how they met is quite a story because there are parallels and coincidences in this book that make your eyes narrow as you put your hand to your chin and say "hmmmmmm," suspiciously.

Take Ginger. The heroine in this book has green eyes just like her. But it's more than that. It's back in the early 1990s and "I was dating this horrible man, and this woman who knew both of us took me out to lunch and told me he was cheating on me with not just one but several other women." (That's one suspicious coincidence right there; the hero's best friend is a notorious philanderer) "So, that afternoon I had a meeting at Fox TV to pitch a comedy idea and the guy who was interviewing me who was head of Fox TV comedy development said so what is it you want to do? And I said, 'I want to break... up... with... my... boyfriend,'" she mock sobs.

And so this producer guy introduces her to a couple named Peter and Lisa (in the book, the hero's name is Peter) and Peter just hap-

pens to be Jim's best friend, although Jim is not a philanderer; he's just a single ex-stockbroker turned journalist living in New York. And so they arrange for them to meet, despite the fact that Peter has something of a crush on Ginger and his wife, Lisa, has something of a crush on Jim. Are you with me so far? Because this book is full of situations where people have crushes on other people that for one reason or another will never work out.

Anyway, the similarities with the book end here because Ginger and Jim have a wonderful time together, are married in 1994 while he is working for *Time* magazine as editor for the foreign news desk, and they live happily ever after, amen.

Whoa! Too fast! There's a lot of in-between stuff here that has nothing to do with the book. For one, Ginger and Jim have two beautiful daughters, Daisy and Lizzy, age 11 and 13 today. And their parents could only wonder what was going through these children's heads when New York City buses blew by bearing big screen Calvin Klein ads of androgynous pretty-boys dressed only in bulging thongs. Sex in the City! Not for these kids, thank you. Time to move to the country.

Jim jokes that Ginger announced to him they were moving to Virginia the morning after their wedding. "It's not true," she protests from her kitchen up by Scuffletown way. He turns semi-serious. "I learned that Virginians take this Virginia deal very seriously, and it had always been a dream of hers to buy a house and land in Virginia and move back here."

Ginger jumps in. She counts as close friends, to this day, girls she met in school in Charlottesville... girls who attended Grymes Memorial School. "And honestly, the reason I knew, when we were looking at different areas where I wanted to live, was Grymes...the girls who came from Grymes were just so imaginative and funky and relaxed and artistic." Today, Ginger helps write the annual Grymes variety show, and Jim has recently rotated off the Grymes Board as its treasurer.

So, anyway, they moved from the big city to up by Scuffletown way. "As a place to be semi-forced by your wife to move to, it's not that hard. It's not that tough a sell,"



Jim Collins and wife Ginger Donelson relax in their Orange County home. Fiercely proud and protective of her husband, Ginger has closely followed the meteoric rise of Jim's novel, his first, as a bestseller.

Photo by Phil Audibert

smiles Jim. "And I am not a nature boy. I am not a country person, but I've always loved to be in the country." As two English setters exuberantly bound around in the hall, Jim drops the startling news that he has never had a dog before now. "It's changed my life... one of the main incredible things about living here, actually, is having a dog."

And so, the reverse is also true: you can take the boy out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the boy. "Being here, I feel I should be huntin' and shootin' and fishin' and ridin' and doing all this stuff." But he doesn't. He took one riding lesson; when it came time to take a second it was too cold and he let it drop at that.

And so what do they do for fun? Jim has to think about that one. He mentions that Ginger gardens and plays tennis. And??? He shrugs and then says, tongue planted firmly in cheek, "We really haven't got that straightened out." Actually, something he said earlier in the interview answers the whaddya-do-for-fun question. What Jim Collins does for fun is write. Unlike many authors, most notably Truman Capote who described the act of writing as bleeding through your eyeballs and fingertips, Jim Collins loves to write.

He started *Beginner's Greek* in 2001; he finished it in 2005, "not because it was hard to write but because it was so much FUN to write. I just kept going and going and going." In the end, he had a thousand pages of manuscript! That translates into, depending on point and page size, a 600 to 700-page book! So after he finished the manuscript he had to cut it down by fully a third to its present size.

Most of the time, Jim writes in a barn. There, he's fixed up a bare bones plywood-paneled room with nothing on the walls but a couple of windows. In the corner sits an unused (?) exercise machine. A

computer screen, a keyboard, an ergonomic office chair, and a cordless phone stare at each other blankly. The room is devoid of distractions.

James Collins, as he is known on the cover page of his book, is not one of those writers who sets aside a certain inviolate time where he must...be...left...alone...to...(gasp) write. "I am not the kind of person who can be that way. So, I would let things interrupt me." He worked nights, weekends, whenever he felt like it. And he did not limit himself to a certain number of words per day, as some authors do. There's a famous photograph of Hemingway, shirtless and standing at his dresser, clacking exactly 500 words per day on an old portable Royal before he would allow himself to carry on with his huntin', fishin' and drinkin'.

"I never got in that kind of a rhythm...there were some days when I was trying to figure something out...or trying to get something right...and I would write five words and other days when I would try to make up for time and write 3,000."

Working off a rough outline, Jim says the book just sort of happened. "So many things occurred to me while I was writing it, it would have been impossible to actually plot it all out, every little bit...but as far as my headlights were ahead of me, I always knew pretty much where I was going."

It's obvious he has tremendous fun with his characters. "It was not agony; it was not, 'Oh my God,' every day, squeezing the rock to get some more blood out of it, which was great because it kept me going. At least I'm enjoying it."

And so here's another big question: Is there another book in the wings? The answer is yes, but he has told nobody about it, not even Ginger. "I think when you talk about things too much, it just kind of loses something...so I feel it's better to just keep it to myself."

Here's a question that all we frustrated closet novelists ask. How do you find a publisher, especially a publisher as big as Little Brown? There is a short answer and a long answer to this. The long answer is you better have a darn good book already written, because editors these days don't have the time to clean your mess up.

The short answer is, it's all in who you know. That sounds snooty, pessimistic, and depressing, but, regrettably, it's true. "The most important thing, really, was getting an agent," explains Jim. "You have to get a credible and good agent." And Jim, with his pedigree as an editor at *Time* and a freelancer to such publications as the *New Yorker*, was introduced to a "credible and good agent," by "a friend of a friend."

Otherwise, he readily admits, he would have been doing the frustrating and confidence-eroding slow head-bang like the rest of us. "To get the attention of an agent who will do you any good seems so hard because they're getting stacks of stuff...they're so inundated. To get

something they are going to pay attention to, coming out of nowhere over the transom is just really difficult. So that was the great leg up. But if the book was terrible, obviously then no matter what kind of connection you have is not going to help."

So, the agent pitched the book to 20 or so publishers, and five took the bait. It was then "auctioned," and the highest bidder (for an undisclosed sum, that is rumored to be substantial) was Little Brown. The book came out Jan. 9, and there has been a steady buzz about it ever since. Already, there is talk of a movie, and an audio version, "60 percent shortened," was recently released on CD. Jim jokes that it doesn't hurt to share the same name with best seller business writer, James Collins (*Good to Great, Built to Last*). "People often think that I am he."

Fiercely proud and protective, Ginger Googles her husband every day, reads all the reviews. He reads none of them... well, almost none of them. A story in the *New York Times* on January 17 called him "toothsome and literate." It has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Vanity Fair*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *People Magazine*, *Boston Globe*, *Daily News*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *San Francisco Chronicle* to name just a few.

Most recently, what Ginger calls a "full page rave," appeared in the *New York Times* Book Review the Sunday before last. And it's funny that the reviewer also judged a book by its cover in that he made some assumptions about the man staring back at you from the dust jacket. In that photograph, Jim is not wearing his trademark glasses.

There's also an occasional down side. "There was a wretched, horrible, terrible, stupid, idiotic, bad, dumb review in the *Washington Post* Book Club" that Jim found "incredibly irritating." Well it is. Too bad he read that one.

Anyway, right after this interview was conducted, Jim and Ginger flew to London where she threw a party for him in honor of the book's Feb. 4th release across the pond. He's done a few small public readings from Vermont to Orange, and he will appear at the Charlottesville Festival of the Book this spring.

But the biggest reward Jim Collins received from this work came in a toast...two toasts actually...at a party his mother threw for her son and 170 of her closest friends in Palm Beach. First up was daughter Daisy, age 11, who has only read the prologue which tells of a chance encounter on an airplane. Apparently some dedicated soul at the country club that hosted this bash made an ice sculpture of an airplane, complete with windows and propellers and what-all.

"The guy who made that ice sculpture; he worked on it more hours than it's actually going to exist, and that's the kind of care my father took with the book," improvised this 11-year-old. Her parents, needless to say, were bowled over.

Then it was the 13-year-old's turn: "Parents often have to apologize for bragging about their children, and now I have to apologize, as a child, for bragging about my father. I find the situation reversed," Lizzy reportedly said, adding that as she read the book, she forgot that it was written by her own father. "She started crying and so did everyone else," sniffles Ginger.

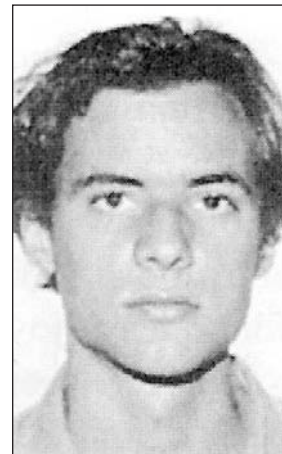
Of this incredible performance, Ginger credits declamation day, where every child has to make a speech at Grymes. Of the 60 thank-you notes that have come in so far from that party, every single one mentioned the children's toasts.

And even that old sphinx-like softie Jim Collins was visibly moved.



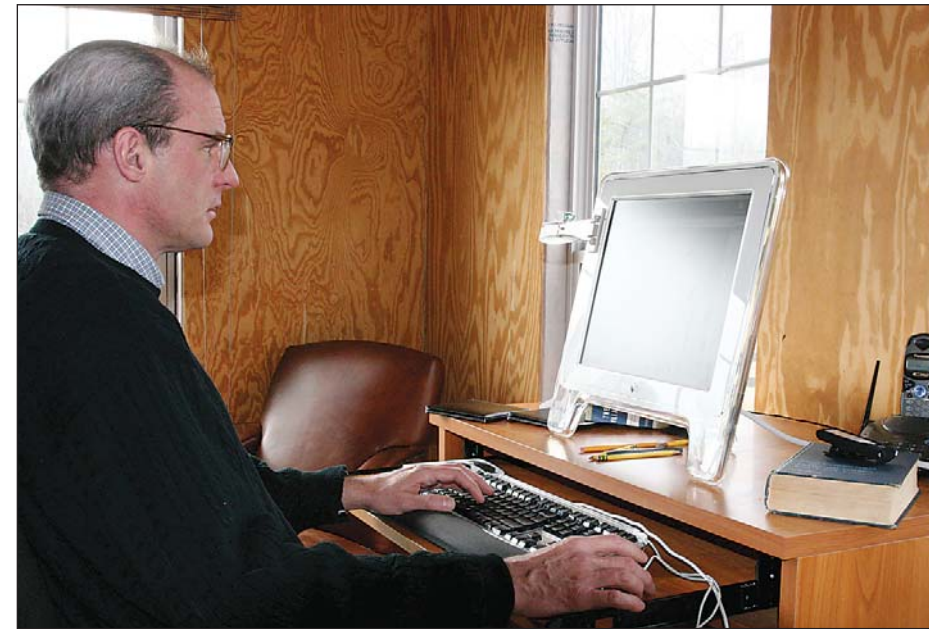
A rare photo of the Collinses on their wedding day in 1994.

Contributed photo



Jim Collins graduated from Harvard University with a degree in history in 1980.

Contributed photo



This is where it all happens...a stark plywood-paneled room in an old barn. Jim Collins took four years to write *Beginner's Greek*. Today, he is already hard at work on a new novel, but he's not saying a word about it to anybody, not even to his wife.

Photo by Phil Audibert