

The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of a forest floor. It is densely packed with green clover leaves, which have a characteristic four-leaf shape. Interspersed among the green clovers are several brown, dried leaves, likely from deciduous trees, showing various shapes and textures. The lighting is natural, creating a mix of bright green and earthy brown tones.

# *MoreMatters*

O N L I N E M A G A Z I N E

March 2012



# King Arthur's Challenge

A 15-year dream is realized

BY TIA SWANSON

Sean Pidgeon wrote his first novel at age 10, a 100-page Jules Verne knockoff he called *The Underground Adventure*. At 12 came his second attempt, *The New Civilization*, a piece of science fiction inspired by Isaac Asimov that checked in at more than 150 pages.

Then life intervened. It came first in a budding interest in science, so strong that he eventually became a graduate student in physics. Then came the need to make a living, and then marriage. Soon Pidgeon, the youngest in a large family of Englishmen, had a job in science publishing, an American wife, a house in South Orange and one, and then two, little boys.

But the dream stayed with him. "I always wanted to write novels," he says. "Corny but true." And so, when an idea for a story about a modern-day scholar searching for the historical truth of King Arthur came to him in the early 1990s, and when the main character crystallized during a long, solitary drive through Southern England not long after, he didn't brush it aside.

He set to work.

For years, he caught the 6:30 a.m. from Mountain Station, a near-empty train that usually allowed him a half hour to write on his way to work. He would put in nine hours at his publishing house, then retreat to a deserted lunch room to write for another hour or so. And he would try to write another half hour on

the train home. Then on Sundays, when the boys were out of the house at Hebrew school, he would devote a few more hours to the task.

In 2007, more than a decade after he had begun, Pidgeon finished his novel. And then he caught a little luck. It came, of course, as it could only in these two towns. His wife, Sharon, went to pick up their younger son, Ethan, at a play date. And she discovered that Ethan's friend's mother was a literary agent. Sharon mentioned the novel and the mother/agent offered to read it.

It turned out that the agent was well-known and respected. More importantly, she liked the novel. "I think you've got something,"





# Celebrity Readings

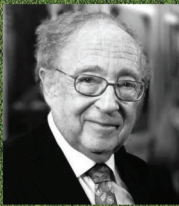
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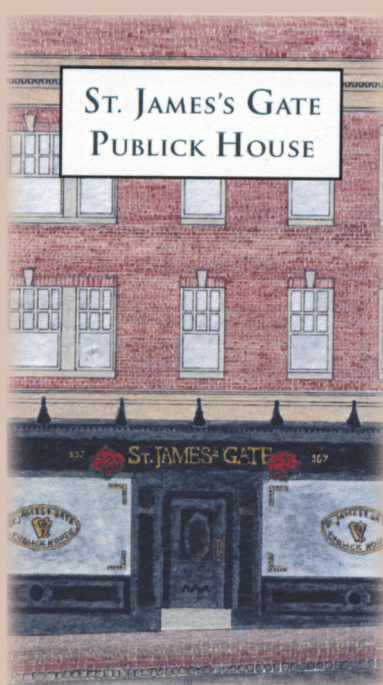
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Pidgeon remembers her saying. Of course, she went on to say "very diplomatically" that it all had to be rewritten. After all, Pidgeon confesses, he had no real idea how to construct a novel. Additionally, his chosen subject was "absurdly complex," dealing both with the Arthurian legend and his modern-day protagonist, as well as reams of historical documents, both real and created.

In the end, Pidgeon began again, creating a 100 page plan and doing detailed character sketches and scene-by-scene rundowns. He rewrote nearly all the novel, which now clocks in at 103,000 words. It took another five years. Finally, in early 2011, the agent decreed that the book was ready to be seen. They sent it out and waited. And suddenly last summer, more than 30 years after his first attempt at a novel, and 15 years after conceiving the idea for this one, Sean Pidgeon got a book contract. If all goes as planned, *Finding Camlann* will be published in early 2013 by Norton. (Camlann is the name given to King Arthur's final battle.)

For the British, of course, the magical and mythical Arthur is the first true British king, the Briton who defeated the Saxons and united the kingdom. Pidgeon explains that British children are fed tales of King Arthur with their mother's milk. He doesn't remember ever not knowing of him. Still, there is no consensus among historians about how much of Arthur's story is real, or even if he actually existed.


While he doesn't think he has any more interest in King Arthur than the average Englishman, Pidgeon was drawn to a group of books that came out in the early '90s, all purporting to find the historical truth of the man. He read them eagerly, but didn't learn much. "It was all so highly tendentious and circular," he says. "I thought, 'This isn't right.'"

It came to him that the material was actually better suited to a novel, something that starts as fiction, but then slides toward

truths of some sort or another. Like other novels in the same vein, the hero of the modern story finds his life beginning to echo the myth he chases. Pidgeon even added his own version of Arthur's love, Guinevere, although in keeping with the book's spirit she is not a queen but a professor of linguistics.

Living in America and setting a novel in the land of your birth has both positives and negatives. Pidgeon says he views his native land through a "nostalgic lens," and that this helped with the tone of the book, but living here "was extremely inconvenient for research on the ground," a comment that is a classic example of British understatement.

While he's lucky in that his job takes him to Britain four or so times a year, and he was able to squeeze a bit of personal time in to many of the trips, he also has a large spread-out family to visit. He says he spent most of his time "dashing all around to see everybody," and then maybe driving four hours to the middle of Wales to spend an hour in a pub soaking up the atmosphere so he could get his descriptions right when it came time to write back home. It was not uncommon, he says, for him to drive 1,500 miles in a week, crisscrossing the south of Britain.

All of that effort is surely worth it now. Sitting in a South Orange café drinking tea, Pidgeon, dressed unobtrusively in jeans, with gray glasses and a shaved head, still seems somewhat awed by how it has all played out. "I feel incredibly lucky," he says. He knows how many finished and unfinished manuscripts are out there, awaiting a publisher. His is no longer one of them; and he already is at work on a second novel, albeit in much the same way he did his first – on the train and during off moments. His boys are now adolescents. His wife has gone back to school. And he has kept, and will continue to keep, his day job. 

*Tia Swanson has many ideas for various novels, none of which has ever been brought to fruition.*