

Basic training in the world of opera

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BY MIKE THOMAS Staff Reporter

"Formal teaching and conducting is certainly what I studied and prepared to do. And I was looking forward to it, not as a fallback in case I didn't have a career, but as my first choice. That attitude and point of view are major reasons why I coach students privately and give so many master classes around the world. But the greatest reason is simply that I love it."

— Sherrill Milnes, from his autobiography *American Aria: From Farm Boy to Opera Star*

The odds of becoming a professional opera singer are akin to those of playing AAA baseball: not good, but not soul-squashingly slim, either. The odds of achieving operatic superstardom are nearly nil. Even a stellar voice is no guarantee of success. It helps, but so do looks and luck and that intangible, uniquely human quality called charisma. A knack for strategic schmoozing can't hurt either. And great hair. Very important, that. But despite the almost certain failure that lies ahead, many travel this well-worn road. Some are fortunate enough to have a seasoned guide who helps them avoid getting lost along the way.

Mid-January, the Northwestern University School of Music. They come one after another, young men and women in a range of ranges, for seven hours straight to his airy second-floor studio, where renowned baritone and Downers Grove farm boy Sherrill Milnes has taught since 2000.

Framed glossies, some askew, of presidents and famous friends and even a becostumed Milnes merrily flipping the bird, stare back from every wall — reminders of an epic and colorful career.

One of opera's shiniest stars throughout his heyday in the '70s and '80s, Milnes, now 70, has come back to roost. And his students, especially, are glad he did. Here for their weekly coaching sessions and voice lessons, they stand in the crook of a black Steinway and, in Milnesian vernacular, "sing their guts"—more than just notes and words. For great singing, he stresses, transcends the technical. "It's very close to heaven."

Though his days as a top-tier vocal virtuoso are through, Milnes remains a much-sought-after oracle for striving singers (and intellectually curious co-workers) who eagerly absorb his been-there-done-that insights.

"I think he gives a sense of what it's like to be on the front lines," says Richard Pearlman, director of Chicago's Lyric Opera Center for American Artists training program, with which Milnes is affiliated. "He conveys a sense of, 'It's like going into battle to go onstage. You've gotta have all your ammunition ready, or you're in deep doo-doo.'"

Post-grad soprano Sarah Stone, one of 13 students under Milnes' tutelage, says working with him is an immensely bolstering experience. "Every time I leave, I know that this is what I want to do and that I love to sing. He just inspires you in that sheer joy of opera and making great sounds."

Undergrad baritone Darik Knutsen appreciates Milnes' demonstrative style. "He'll show me what he wants me to do instead of telling me, 'Now, this is supposed to feel like this.' He'll actually open his own mouth and then use his hands. It's all about getting the right feeling. He's definitely big on getting the right feeling."

Fueled by boundless enthusiasm for his subject and a small cup of minestrone soup from the nearby

Einstein Bagels, Milnes energetically leads his charges through an array of arias by Bizet and Mozart and Puccini, mostly while seated—though rarely still—behind a centrally located desk. The high-ceilinged space, which houses a throne, two large mirrors and several steel file cabinets, is ear-ringingly resonant, and forte phrases pack an extra-potent punch.

Wearing a Technicolor dreamsweater, black pants and scuffed Italianesque half-boots, eyes poring over a score or shut in contemplation, Milnes leads each piece to polished accompaniment using an array of subtle and broad gestures. A ringing cell phone clipped to his belt occasionally interrupts the flow.

"Feel it," he implores. "We need to rely more on our sensations, our feelings of singing, than on sound. The feelings tend to stay the same." "Hammer it." "You've got to hit your own buttons, tighten your own springs." "More shimmer." "You do a funny eye blink when you do that, and it looks odd." "That sounds a little like you have a harelip." "That was quite tasty. I'd buy that."

The terms "booger," "friggin'" and "sumbitch" have their places, too, and every so often he tells a tale of yesteryear. His hair, incidentally, is grayish-brown, full and wavy. In short, great.

When something is awry, he calls a halt and offers directions couched as suggestions. Milnes may be a revered sage, but he's no iron-fisted know-it-all, no blustery bastard when it comes to doling out advice. Still, intimidation is inevitable. At a well-postured 6-foot-2 and possessed of the palpable aura that helped imbue his characters—particularly the slick and sexy villains—with such thrilling vitality, he is an estimable presence. Add to that his global acclaim, and it's a recipe for ruffling. Up close and personal, though, his folksy informality and nonjudgmental nature tend to quell unease, whereupon initial impressions and preconceived notions dissipate.

"I remember my first coaching [session]," says tenor Jamie Dahman, a master's student from Texas. "It's hugely intimidating, because here's a guy who knows what good singing is, and you go in there like, man, I really don't wanna screw up. But then after a coaching or two, you realize it's OK if you make some mistakes."

Says Northwestern music prof and director of opera Noel Koran, in whose rehearsals Milnes often takes an active and welcome part, "Sherrill is a big man in stature, he has a large personality, and rightfully so. Because he has had a large career in a field that encourages and demands, in a way, large personalities. So, yes, that is something for people to deal with. But Sherrill has this amazing ability to, once people are part of the team, just be a regular guy."

Stephen Alltop, another of Milnes music department colleagues and music director of the Apollo Chorus of Chicago, with which Milnes sang the title role of Felix Mendelssohn's oratorio "Elijah" in 1996, considers Milnes to be "a master of stage presence. If there's ever a lesson on how to command people's attention just by how you walk onstage, he's it." Simply encountering Milnes in the hallway, Alltop adds, is "something theatrical."

The broad chest, the gunslinger gait, the air of supreme self-assuredness all contribute to the illusion. But mistaking Milnes' confident carriage for cockiness, those who know better say, would be wrong. Despite more than half a lifetime of fame and fortune and everything that goes with it he remains, on some level, a dirt-beneath-the-nails laborer at heart—the hay balin', cow milkin', silo fillin' kid made good. Per timeworn adage, you can take the boy from the farm, but you can't take the farm from the boy. Or something like that.

"I don't think he sacrificed himself," says soprano Beverly Sills, with whom Milnes sang onstage and on vinyl. "I think we all make sacrifices as artists. We have to. But in terms of being true to himself, he never changed, he never became a phony, he never stopped talking like a Midwesterner. He is the Marlboro man. He looks it. Put him on a saddle with a funny hat and those big dimples—I mean, he's got it made."

Early on, Milnes sang in his late mother, Thelma's, church choir at the First Congregational Church of Downers Grove, and in high school ensembles. The younger of two musically inclined sons, he also learned to play several instruments. His late father, James, an ordained minister who rose at dawn's crack to tend the family's land, could more than hold a tune. But Mom was the pro—the pianist, the choral conductor—and thus the primary source of her boys' artistic nurturing. If not for her, Milnes has mused, things might have been different. And this: He was born on the right side of the tracks, the side with a well-funded, full-size school instead of a resource-deprived single-room schoolhouse. That helped, too.

His music education intensified at Drake University in Iowa, where he earned Bachelor's and master's degrees, and for a spell at Northwestern. Experientially, stints with Margaret Hillis' Chicago Symphony Chorus and the Grant Park Symphony Chorus (as a soloist) proved invaluable. "He was just a local at the time [late 1950s], and he sang a performance when I was singing in the chorus of 'Carmina Burana,'" recalls Lyric Opera of Chicago general director William Mason, formerly part of the Grant Park group. "And it was just clear this guy was major. It was clear to all of us. It wasn't just me, it wasn't that I was so smart. I think all of us in the chorus and everybody around there said this guy's not going to be a local baritone for long."

And while Milnes "clearly knows his place" in the operatic firmament, Mason says, "he's an eminently decent and likable guy. I think he's one of those people who can be well aware of what his place is without being obnoxious about it."

Serious-minded though Milnes was when it came to his craft, "he was fun, he liked jokes," says friend and fellow Grant Park chorister MaryAnn Recht. "And he was very competitive."

"His competitive spirit was fierce, like a warrior," says her husband Don Recht, also a member of Grant Park and Milnes' sometime Ping-Pong opponent. "I would consider of all the people I've ever met, he was focused more than any of them. He had the talent, he had the ability, he had the looks and he had the drive."

Five years of regional training preceded Milnes' leap, at age 29, into the big time—the New York City Opera—in October 1964. The Metropolitan Opera, not yet at Lincoln Center, followed a year later. But there was no master plan to become what he became, no "angel on my shoulder," he contends. It happened organically, apparently despite early misgivings.

"I was always very nervous in front of an audience and very much preferred to sing in choirs," he wrote in his autobiography *American Aria* (1998), a newly revised and extended version of which awaits release. "I never felt I interpreted the music very well in solos and basically didn't like my sound."

Moreover, he was largely clueless about how to pursue an operatic career, nor was he fully aware of the perseverance and personal sacrifice required to do so. He'd learn.

By late December 1965, with Mom and Dad looking on, an "understandably nervous" Milnes made his successful Met debut as Valentin in Gounod's "Faust." Over the next four decades, he did 654 performances there in 35 roles and was for years one of the venue's biggest draws. The end was less glamorous.

Not long before his final Met gig ("Aida") in March 1997, which few knew was Milnes' last stand in the grand hall, he was effectively and silently dropped from the roster. No apologies, no explanation. The blow hurt deeply and puzzles him still.

But the glory days were indeed glorious. With New York as his home base, globetrotting grew more and more frequent. A guest on the world's most celebrated stages (La Scala, the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, Vienna Staatsoper, Lyric Opera of Chicago, San Francisco Opera), he teamed with Sills, Plácido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti, Jose Carreras, Joan Sutherland and Kiri Te Kanawa, to name but a handful of luminous co-stars.

"Whenever we sang together," Domingo says, "the best of us emerged. I loved performing with him because we challenged each other in every performing aspect."

Milnes, for instance, was known to belt showy high notes—B-flats weren't uncommon—to keep tenors on their toes. Never one to "park and bark," he strove for refined acting, too. "He didn't want to be known just as a vocalist," says Lyric Opera dramaturg Roger Pines. "He wanted the full package, he wanted to create a very complete impression."

And though he breathed somewhat less rarified air than his rock-star-like tenor and soprano contemporaries, life was swell nonetheless: private jets, Concorde jaunts, lavish hotel suites, a 14-room co-op (overlooking the Hudson River), and show-biz pals (the actor and opera buff Tony Randall was especially close, and Burt Lancaster sometimes stopped backstage to hang out). Foreign governments bestowed honors. The White House, where he has sung for every administration since Gerald Ford's, extended invites. His celebrity status was such that major brands, including L'eggs and Toyota, hired him for print and TV ads. Merv Griffin, Mike Douglas and other talk-show hotshots (save Carson, whose pre-interviewer deemed Milnes unworthy of airtime) had him on to chat. And the LP-making was downright nutty. Even today Milnes is easily among the top four or five most-recorded opera singers ever, with 70-plus works to his credit.

A life in music can be richly rewarding. Particularly at the highest heights, it also can be stressful, grueling and, for many, interpersonally ruinous. Opera is no exception, and Milnes has run the gamut. In the early '80s, his booming "Verdi baritone" voice, preternaturally powerful and perfectly suited to such larynx-busting bombers as "Rigoletto," "Falstaff" and "La Traviata," began to waver. The problem, and not a minor one: ruptured vocal cord capillaries. Surgeries and much panic ensued. Although his condition improved significantly, and he garnered positive reviews thereafter, his instrument and reputation were never the same.

Vulnerable as many artists are to negative criticism, Milnes has taken more than a few hits in the press. Some glanced off, some left minor wounds. Nearly a decade ago, the New York Times published an article headlined: "As the limelight fades, a star lowers his sights." That one took him off-guard. There were others, too.

In a 2003 Opera News feature, New York magazine classical music critic Peter G. Davis extolled Milnes' raw talent, his "extraordinary vocal endowment," while bemoaning his artistic shortcomings and unrealized potential. He concluded by casting doubt on Milnes' legacy. "[I]t's unlikely," Davis wrote, "that his rather narrow art and self-regarding vocalism will qualify him for inclusion among the greatest artists of the last century."

Aside from the physical problems, Milnes' whirlwind existence gradually wreaked havoc on his relationships. He has four children from three marriages, the first two of which lasted 11 and 25 years, respectively. Both breakups, he says, were "as amicable as divorces can be."

His current wife of eight years, singer and writer Maria Zouves, is three decades his junior, and together they have a 5-year-old son on whom Milnes dotes. Because, finally, he can. Zouves, who comes from a large Greek clan, met Milnes at a master class (he was friends with her voice teacher), but it was years before romance blossomed. They liken themselves to the mismatched couple in "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," with Milnes in the ethnically challenged John Corbett role.

"I think my husband is just a gentleman farmer," says Zouves, a native Floridian. "I'm the Mediterranean, the Greek, the hothead, the passionate one. And he's the one who says, 'OK, now, can I talk to you seriously about this?' And then he goes in for the kill."

Rooted locally in Vernon Hills, they're building an elegant home in Palm Harbor, Fla., outside Tampa. Milnes, who crams a full week's work into a Monday through Wednesday schedule, jets down most

Thursdays to spend extended weekends with the family and to oversee construction. They soon will settle there permanently, and in doing so, be closer to relatives and to Disney World, where annually they convene the V.O.I.C.Experience, a multiday career workshop for budding singers.

Master classes notwithstanding, Milnes is rarely front and center these days. The waves of wild applause, the "bravos!", the constant curtain calls (record: 101) are gone for good. And he seems at peace outside the spotlight. That said, he is neither retired from the stage (he'll appear in a narrative role with the Indianapolis Symphony in April) nor a quaint anachronism. Far from it. Opera is steeped in the past, in tradition, and one of those traditions is the channeling of knowledge to successive generation—something at which Milnes is exceptionally adept.

"He's a real mensch," says leading operatic baritone Mark Delavan, who calls Milnes "one of the most encouraging souls in the business."

Loathe to dole out harsh feedback, Milnes steers equally clear of grandiose compliments and lofty proclamations. "One thing he never says when he hears a singer with an exceptional voice or exceptional talent is, 'I think you're gonna have a wonderful career,'" says Milnes' friend and onetime singing cohort Richard Best, a voice instructor at Southern Illinois University. "Because he knows that we don't know who's going to make it to success in life. There are so many variables, so many elements involved."

At a late-February dress rehearsal for the Puccini works "Suor Angelica" and "Gianni Schicci" in which some of his pupils are prominently featured, Milnes sits, rarely still, at the front of Northwestern's Cahn Auditorium and studies the fruits of his labor. Onstage, they sing their guts and reach for heaven. Every note, every gesture, every emotion registers on his being. At points he seems almost caged, as if merely watching is insufficient. And in some cases it surely is. But not here, not now. This is his place—in the darkness, in the wings, behind the scenes. And it suits him well.

"Do I miss the applause and all of that at the end?" Milnes had asked rhetorically a few weeks prior, pausing to ponder in a song-filled hallway during another rehearsal. "I don't think so. I did it long enough. Well, you never get tired of applause in a certain way, and there are always some high-light evenings where it's just a blowout thrill.

"I must have had enough, though. I don't know exactly why, but I'm not pining."

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'Good Jim' plays it straight

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BY MIKE THOMAS Staff Reporter

Bad Jim died three springs ago in a Sin City frenzy of booze-swilling, high-stakes gambling and lesbian lap-dancing. That's what his twin-in-white (make that off-white) Good Jim insists. That's what he tells his wife. That's what he tells himself.

For years the dichotomous Jims had cohabited in a state of constant conflict, the one possessed by

overwhelming primal urges, the other propelled by loftier endeavors, chief among them poetry, prose, scholarship and family. But, like the two Capt. Kirks and the two Hulks, they did battle, and Good Jim, devoted father and responsible citizen, emerged victorious. Somewhat scarred, but victorious.

These days, all sorts of vices have been curbed, if only because he's trying to stay fit. Dad and Grandpa died way too early, and he'd like to win a few more pots before heading to that big casino in the sky. Spirits, for one, flow a bit slower. Still, when it comes to good red wine, a single glass just ain't enough. Top-shelf vodka has a pull on him, too. And cigarette consumption, he claims, has shrunk to a scant 10 cancer sticks per month, while red meat intake is lower than ever. Which is to say, lower than he'd like.

As for live, girl-on-girl grinding—only in his dreams. The last time said voyeuristic depravity occurred, at Las Vegas' hip strip club Peppermint Rhino, spousal seething went on for weeks before absolution was finally granted.

The one vice Good Jim has not reined in or forsaken, and probably will never forsake until age or death force his hand: gambling. Specifically, poker. More specifically, no-limit Texas hold 'em, a particularly betting-friendly strain of the game about which he so eloquently writes in his newest book and first work of non-fiction, *Positively Fifth Street: Murderers, Cheetahs and Binion's World Series of Poker* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$26). Yes, that beast has him in its grip and won't let go. Not that he minds.

In late May of 2000, Good Jim, a.k.a. James McManus, 52, an award-winning poet and author who teaches literature and writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, endured countless hours of play and many grueling rounds to reach the finals of Binion's World Series of Poker, a \$20 million-plus annual event that draws high rollers from all over creation to the venerable Horseshoe Casino in Las Vegas. Positioned in seat three near Jesus (the swing-dancing stock trader from Pacific Palisades, Calif., not the Christian savior), a flip book of family photos propped behind him, and legendary card shark Amarillo Slim Preston looming somewhere in the background, the former "wretchedly sanctimonious," Bronx, N.Y.-born, Lisle-bred altar boy somehow managed to parlay a \$4,000 advance from Harper's magazine (on whose dime he'd originally winged in to profile rising female card stars—"chicks with decks") into a cool quarter-million. Hence the aforementioned Rhino revelry.

But *how*? How in Kenny Rogers' name did McManus, a first-timer and an amateur to boot, go the distance? Maybe it was his inscrutable poker face, which he wears, along with a neatly trimmed graying goatee and minimalist specs, even in poker-less everyday life. Maybe it was the different hats or the titanium progressive bifocal shades he sported throughout the tournament. Or, most likely, this killer combo: Lots of practice, God-given talent, laser focus and a heaping helping of that inexplicable cosmic force called luck.

"Some people are more comfortable doing something cerebral for 10 or 12 hours in a row, and other people get antsy or they can't concentrate. I feel very comfortable sitting there for long stretches, sometimes 24 hours, and just concentrating on a card game," McManus says. "I feel like I'm in my element. I love to do that. And I don't feel like it makes me a special person. It's just that those are my rhythms. Other people would just jump out of their skin."

Bottom line: he won and won big. Big enough to gain minor fame and sign occasional autographs. Big enough to significantly shrink his mortgage. Big enough to want—no, *need*—more of the same over and over and over again. In short, he's hooked.

Nearly seven months after hauling home the phattest booty of his betting existence, McManus' 19,000-word Vegas adventures, pared down from a whopping 30,000, became Harper's December 2000 cover story, got optioned thereafter for a Lion's Gate/Dreamworks production, served as the basis for a 2002 "X-Files" episode, and ultimately grew into *Fifth Street*, in which the sordid and much-publicized Ted Binion murder trial and McManus' own colorful exploits keep things humming along nicely.

Next month, the champ will be out West once again in the hopes of recapturing yesteryear's magic—or even a fraction of yesteryear's magic. Chances are he won't, but he's a gambler, and Chance is his middle name. (Actually, it's Loughlin.) The Horseshoe in nearby Hammond—"the boat," as McManus and his ilk call it—is swell for mid-level local play, and there's a relatively inexpensive private game he buys into, mostly for camaraderie and free finger food. He also spars often against virtual table mates using

sophisticated computer software that replicates, if only technically, the real McCoy: the World Series of Poker. But nothing, *nothing*, he would tell you, matches the thrill of Vegas. For a card-playing competition junkie like himself, it's Valhalla.

Not far from the city, in a homey North Shore home filled with original artwork, hundreds of books, and a dog-resistant brown leather sofa, McManus brings up two young daughters and an excitable but friendly pooch named Buzz with his self-possessed second wife, Jennifer Arra. She has been McManus' Rock of Gibraltar since 1989, three years before they were married at sea by the captain of a small Alaskan cruise ship. Prior to their meeting, his life had been less than rosy following a bitter divorce. Now it's better than ever, and it seems his card playing has benefited from the upswing.

"I have mixed feelings about him continuing to play at the stakes he's playing at," Arra admits, "because I'm much more of a worrier than Jim is."

McManus: "And I would just rather play a high-stakes game." To Arra, kidding: "The children's education is *sooo* important."

"It's less a source of conflict than it used to be," Arra says of her husband's wagering ways. "I think that the big win gave Jim a taste of something that he hasn't gotten over. And so, obviously, I totally don't blame him. He wants to re-create that magic."

McManus agrees, but is quick to note that he never uses dough earmarked for family stuff—i.e. college savings, grocery cash, vacation funds. His habit is fueled solely by monies earned from free-lance magazine work and book reviews. This, presumably, is the main reason Arra lays off and lets him have at it.

When he's not gambling or writing or reading or fathering, McManus is teaching. His offerings at the School of the Art Institute include a small seminar, "The Literature and Science of Poker," which follows "The Philosophy of Love, Sex and Marriage" in a cramped corner room on the sixth floor. The course, rather atypical academic fare, fills up quickly.

With McManus acting as guru, ringleader and chief needler, a fairly gender-balanced group sits around long tables discussing the game, *his* game, as it relates to art and life. Test and paper scores determine how much fake dough they'll get for their semester-ending tournament.

"The way you play a hand of poker relates to your emotional state. It's not just numbers and math," McManus tells the group during one such session. Seated near the door, a half-drunk bottle of Snapple at the ready, he spends a while reading aloud from David Mamet's classic pokercentric play "American Buffalo" before schooling them in the basics of hold 'em.

"Are you too artsy to understand this?" he asks, looking up with the merest hint of a grin. It's obvious he enjoys prodding the semi-rapt assemblage into consciousness by making off-hand and sometimes off-color remarks, by assigning them wryly uncreative nicknames like "60s Chick" and "Guy With Red Nail Polish."

Toward the end, McManus distributes poker chips and guides his charges through various play scenarios, punctuating the action with incisive pointers, nuggets of hard-earned, real-world wisdom. If they glean nothing else from their educational experience, if they remember not one line of Dostoevsky, at the very least they'll know that "drawing dead" is the worst thing you can do, that it hurts when "the river" jumps up and bites you on the testicles, and that pokerspeak for a pair of queens is "Siegfried and Roy."

The most profound and telling bit of professorly opining comes when McManus broaches the hows and whys of betting. "If there's other things in my life to make me happy, I can bet with aplomb," he says. "You just feel better when you have certain things in your life."

At the moment, Good Jim's certain things are but a short train ride off, awaiting his arrival in a quiet nook of Midwestern suburbia. Like teaching, like molding young minds (and, when he feels the urge, messing with them), fatherhood and family draw him out of his writerly shell, out into the world.

Most important, they lend context to his merry obsession. Bellied up to felt, neat stacks of multihued clay

arrayed before him, adrenaline surges and the race is on. He loves the race, would doubtless like nothing more than to cream his opponents, finish first each and every time. He won't, of course, but it doesn't much matter. Because even when he loses, he's already won.

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Chicago journalist raises a literary treasure

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BY [MIKE THOMAS](#), STAFF REPORTER

The boy is 6, maybe 7, and riding shotgun sans seatbelt in a Lincoln Continental, watching America's fabled landscape whiz past. Forests, deserts, mountains, valleys. Back home, in Skokie, classmates toil over math and reading. Not this lad. He's playing sanctioned hooky, accompanying Dad on sales trips and loving it. Barely out of kindergarten, he has criss-crossed the contiguous 48 on nearly every highway and byway known to mapmakers. He'll do likewise for another decade. Occasionally, he'll drive.

Dad—Jack, large of frame and resolute of purpose—owns Lubri-Tech, a manufacturer of motorcycle paints and lubricants. Nine or 10 months a year, he hits the road, trunk laden with samples and suitcases, to peddle his wares. While he's gone, wife Annette, a teacher and homemaker, holds down the fort and raises three kids. One by one, she springs them from school and nest for quality time with the old man.

Home means familiar foods, familiar streets, familiar faces. Away, most everything is strange and new. There is, however, a common thread: Stories, lots of stories. Dad talks of post-college copper mines and colorful childhood pals—memories rendered always in vivid detail and with perfect cadence. The longest tales are serialized, unfolded gradually over many days. Mom, every bit Dad's yarn-spinning equal, has gems of her own. The best ones recall her childhood with immigrant parents. Of how, for instance, she once came home from school to discover they'd moved. (Moved!) That image lodges in the boy's noodle and never leaves.

Speed ahead to mid-2004. Dad has passed on. Mom imparts writerly wisdom. The boy, Robert Kurson, aka "Rob" aka "Bob," is 41, the father of a young son, and large of frame. He's also a celebrated storyteller. Thanks in no small part to heredity, to perpetually perked adolescent ears, he has a knack for narrative, a sense of timing. His words are read nationally, internationally. Peers bestow honors. In the pages of Chicago and Esquire magazines, he has written several deft stunners. Among them: a touching and insightful profile of Robert Earl Hughes, the world's heaviest man, and the National Magazine Award-nominated "My Favorite Teacher," a chillingly heart-wrenching account of loneliness and murder at Glenbrook North High, Kurson's dreaded alma mater in Northbrook, his past and present home.

Suffice it to say, Kurson despised Glenbrook, was ridiculed regularly there and swapped fists with tormenters. As a result, he flunked classes and sank into sadness. Nowadays he's far

removed from that world, if only emotionally.

Roughly nine years since his first-ever professional byline appeared in the Sun-Times sports section, Kurson has surfaced with a new and wildly acclaimed book, **Shadow Divers** (Random House, \$26.95, reviewed on Page 12D), about a sunken Nazi U-boat (an enigma originally dubbed "U-Who") and the divers who repeatedly defied death to solve her long-held mysteries. A follow-up to Kurson's fine previous efforts, *The Official Three Stooges Encyclopedia* and *The Official Three Stooges Cookbook*, *Shadow Divers*, in stores Tuesday, promises to blow them out of the water.

Random House editor-in-chief Jonathan Karp calls *Shadow Divers* "the best and most thrilling true story that's crossed my desk since *Seabiscuit*." (Also a big-screen smash, *Seabiscuit* has sold millions of copies worldwide.) Unsolicited reactions from merchants, sales reps and other advance readers, he marvels, have been astounding and "far surpass anything I've ever published in my 15 years at Random House." The publisher liked *Shadow Divers* so much, in fact, that Kurson was handed a two-book, seven-figure deal to write "whatever he wants."

More: Glowing jacket blurbs from Clive Cussler, James McManus, Hampton Sides, Scott Turow and Sen. John McCain, an immensely confident 125,000-copy first printing, large orders from booksellers big and small, raves in *Newsweek*, *People*, *Publishers Weekly* and the *New York Times*, foreign rights sold in seven countries, Book-of-the-Month-Club Main Selection. As Lt. Col. Frank Slade might put it, "Hoo-ah! The boy's on fire!"

Throughout the 80s, Kurson majored in philosophy at the University of Wisconsin and studied law at Harvard. Both disciplines, he says, taught him valuable skills — clear thinking especially. They were, in effect, support beams for the career he'd eventually strive to build.

Uberauthor and fellow Harvard alum Turow, under whom Kurson did his first law internship, says that while Kurson's success is anomalous, his avocation is not. Law and literature, after all, have several things in common. Words, for one. "They both really are dedicated to the study and application of language," Turow explains, "so it's really not that surprising that, although people moan and groan about legal prose with a good deal of justification, it's also the case that there are a lot of lawyers who are really good writers.

"And obviously, beyond that, both reporters and lawyers often have in common an intense curiosity, and a sort of empirical intelligence that insists that something's not true unless it's shown to be true. They're not inclined to be intuitive, at least in terms of the way they approach the world."

Initially, Kurson had no interest in studying law. He barely knew what lawyers did. But his college grades rocked, and opening a philosophy shop post-graduation seemed less than feasible. Plus, Harvardites could write their own job tickets and TV's "L.A. Law" made counselors seem cool. Within 24 hours of arriving on campus, though, he smelled trouble: someone used the verb "triangulate" in social conversation. Horror! That's when the modest and plain-spoken Kurson knew he was in the "wrong place." Despite such terrifying early warning signs, he stuck around and earned his parchment.

Upon graduating, in 1990, he easily landed a high-paying position practicing real-estate law, which he quickly came to loathe. Material possessions—BMW, high-end stereo, fancy-schmancy 26-speed bike—did little to quell his mental unrest. It got so bad that every Sunday night, he grew anxious at the sight and sound of that ticking stopwatch on "60 Minutes." Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick. It meant only one thing: another week of torture drew nigh.

But he kept on keeping on, curious to know, was the drudgery ceaseless or just a phase? The verdict: ceaseless. Fed up, he quit.

"He's not cut out for that sort of scrambling to put your name on a bunch of projects so your boss sees that you're hustling to make partner," says his younger brother Ken, a longtime Esquire financial columnist and co-writer of the best-selling *Leadership* with former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani. "He's just not a political guy, or someone who builds coalitions to persuade everyone of his indispensability. That's not how he's put together as a human being."

Seeking quick megabucks, Kurson tried options trading for a while (a bust), briefly re-entered the law as an in-house counsel, hated that too, quit again. Thereafter, while mustering the "emotional commitment" necessary to alter his life trajectory, he got a yearlong gig hanging blinds and draperies. Most customers, unaware of his intelligence and accomplishments, regarded him as vapor. The Invisible Man. (How he'd wished for that at Glenbrook.)

"They would speak in front of me as if I didn't exist, the way that some people talk in front of taxicab drivers. Like they can't hear and they're not real people," Kurson says over dim sum in Old Chinatown. "Because I was covered in plaster and drywall and was just a common laborer to them. I was in some very fancy homes and some people would look right through me. It was a very interesting experience."

And all the while, he thought about writing. At one point, he penned something for Ken, then an intern at Harper's, to put before the magazine's executive editor, Michael Pollan.

Pollan was unavailable to speak for this article, but Ken remembers things clearly. "I was starting to get some success as a writer and Rob had said to me a couple of times, 'You're doing this, and I've had this feeling for a long time that I could do it, but I don't know the mechanics ... I'm here and I don't know anyone.' So I said, 'Why don't you write something, and I'll try to get it shown around, and we'll figure out if it's any good, if it's the kind of stuff that people would like.'"

The stuff: A "sweet memory" of Danny Crawford, Northeastern Illinois University basketball star and respected NBA ref. Amateurish transition mistakes aside, Pollan thought the piece promising and rife with raw talent. More than a mentor, he advised, Kurson needed practice.

"I wrote down everything Michael said and I conveyed it to Rob," Ken says, "and he took it to heart and put that f-----' big brain to work on, 'OK, that's a place to start.'"

When Kurson, ignorant in the ways of "nut grafts" and "cutlines," joined the Sun-Times in late 1994 (despite impeccable credentials—albeit non-journalistic ones—no other publication would hire him), he compiled golf guides, coded box scores, answered phones, earned basement wages—and liked it all. *Loved* it. This was his chance to shine. If he screwed up, bye-bye dream.

"I had a hope that someday, somebody in the sports department might give me one chance to write something," he says. "And I believed that if I had even one byline, I could show them that I was special in some way, so I stayed."

"He realized he had to pay some dues," says Kurson's then-boss, Bill Adeo, former Sun-Times and current Tribune sports editor. Impressed by Kurson's desire and educational pedigree, Adeo took a chance and brought him aboard. "I don't know if he knew exactly that the dues would be coding box scores, but he knew it, and I think it was good for everybody to see that he was willing to do that. And I think that's why so many people are happy about his success, because they know he paid the price."

Higher-profile sports articles (including a hard-won scoop on Harry Caray's radio successor) led to feature pieces that in turn led to Sunday Metro spreads. In 2000, he left for Chicago magazine. Soon, Esquire came calling. Both mastheads now bear his name.

"Part of what struck me was not necessarily the writing, but just the fact that he had a terrific instinct for magazine stories," says Chicago magazine's editor Richard Babcock, who brought Kurson to glossier pastures. "Looking straight ahead, he could see around corners. He could see the angles on things."

Kurson's prose, Babcock notes, "lets the story tell itself," and is "a measure of how hard he works to get the information. Because he's not relying on language or style, although his language and style are very elegant. He's relying on facts. And the best stories are based on the accumulation of fact."

Esquire editor-in-chief David Granger is likewise impressed. "There's this apparent simplicity to his writing style that masks a very complicated and engaged mind," Granger says. "When you read him it seems like, 'Well, of course. He's writing these very simple sentences, it couldn't be written any other way.' But the simplicity is the result of a lot of research, a lot of thought, and a real special kind of analytical mind. And so there's a muscularity that arises out of that that just is incredibly compelling, especially for a men's magazine."

A few years ago, after a friend of Kurson's brought the incredible U-Who saga to his attention (its entire crew remained entombed on board, it sank very near the U.S. mainland, and no expert in the world knew why), he watched a November 2001 "Nova" special on it called "Hitler's Lost Sub." His childhood touring the U-505 (a sister of U-Who) at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry came rushing back.

Deeply intrigued and wishing to learn more, he and his wife of ten years, Amy, flew to New Jersey so Kurson could debrief Richie Kohler and John Chatterton, world-class divers and the sub's most knowledgeable explorers. After 14 hours, Kurson came away dizzy with details—personal dramas, swashbuckling adventure, bitter rivalries—and giddied by his good fortune. He had stumbled onto a whale of a tale, and it was his for the crafting.

"He was with his wife, who was pregnant at the time, and Richie's girlfriend at the time was there, and my wife was there," recounts Chatterton, a Vietnam vet and a former commercial diver, who now hosts "Deepsea Detectives" on the History Channel. "And we were like, 'Hey, we're going to throw a bunch of steaks on the grill.' 'No. We have to go. I have to write.' It's like, 'Yeah, you have to write, but you gotta eat dinner, too.' And he was like, 'No. I have to write. Now. I can't drive. Amy, you drive the car.'"

"He was just so enthusiastic," says Amy. "We were driving away, and he said, 'I think this is a really big story.'"

In assembling *Shadow Divers*, Kurson became obsessed with getting it right. With corroborating history and understanding why Kohler and Chatterton did what they did. With making sure readers knew precisely how it felt to work at great depths, the potential victim of powerful currents and hungry sharks, of twisted steel and impenetrable darkness, of "the bends" and "nitrogen narcosis."

He even took diving lessons in severely misguided anticipation of seeing the shattered sub for himself—230 feet down in some of the most merciless waters on earth.

"You cannot spend time with two men who demand as much of themselves in order to know themselves, and then go do a shoddy job telling their story," Kurson says. "I had to do everything they did in order to know my side. This was going to reflect on me and how I handled

this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

One problem: Kurson, a thoroughly Midwestern landlubber, the anti-Aqua Man, can't swim—not a stroke. His utter ineptness showed. Almost immediately, the puzzled instructor called him aside and asked, "Why?"

Kurson told him.

Floored, the instructor questioned his pupil's sanity and strongly suggested he break all ties with Kohler and Chatterton, both of whom also thought the tenacious writer nuts for wanting to follow them into treacherous abyss. Well-meaning and admirably dedicated, but nuts.

"His original thing was, 'You have to take me to the U-boat,'" Chatterton says. "He was like, 'I Must Be There.' And it was like, 'Um, dude, out of all the things that are going to happen, that's not one of 'em.'" They'd lost three divers on U-Who expeditions, and weren't about to lose another.

Crestfallen but no less determined, Kurson plowed onward. Month after month, for two long years, he interviewed and researched and wrote. He jetted to Germany to trace the roots of sunken sailors. He visited and revisited the recently restored and relocated submarine U-505 in Chicago. He constantly phoned Kohler and Chatterton with questions and follow-ups and follow-ups of follow-ups. He even made an overnight voyage to an Atlantic wreck site (the destroyer USS Murphy) aboard their dive vessel, the Seeker, to see them in action. Doing so, Kurson says, was both eye-opening and stomach-churning. Mainly, it seems, the latter.

"Eleven o'clock the night before, the boat slipped her lines and left the inlet," says Kohler, the owner of a glass-repair business. "And it was not rough. Of course, if Rob talks to you, he'll tell you how it was like, killer seas. But obviously it wasn't because we went diving. But he was green. I've seen people laying on the floor and just rolling about, wishing they were dead and saying, 'Please, kill me.' Rob wasn't that bad. He just kind of stayed in his bunk almost the entire time. But then he did come out at certain moments. Like, when I came up from my dive, he came out and he wanted to see what I'd gotten. Then he just ambled back to his bunk."

"They were all laughing at me," Kurson says. "I was holding on for survival. Not only was it not calm, I had to literally hold on for my life or risk being thrown overboard and drowning."

At some point, a meatball hero (not his) caused hurling (his).

"This was relentless pounding, no matter what Richie says," Kurson contends. "It was rough. I can go on any amusement park ride, I fly an ultralight airplane. No problem with any of that. But this boat ride was just like Poseidon had come out and started pounding with a fist for 26 hours."

Nausea and all, the experience—one of many—helped bring Kurson closer to his subjects, to his book, to himself. Though apparently not close enough. He says diving lessons remain a possibility, and for this reason alone: the U-boat. It's all about the U-boat. Like Kohler and Chatterton, he's happily, hopelessly smitten. He wants (needs?) to see what they saw. Only then will he truly complete what has been, in every sense, the story of his life.

"These guys felt, for very different reasons, that their lives were at stake in this," he says of Kohler and Chatterton's single-minded pursuit. "If not biologically, then emotionally. This was about who they were. And once I understood what it was about, the book became clear to me and the project became about who I was."

And then it was everything to him.

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

Have voice, will sing

April 14, 2006

BY [MIKE THOMAS](#), STAFF REPORTER

It's Friday night and the Dragon is soaring.

On a makeshift stage in the smoky bar of Brunswick Zone, a sprawling and sometimes brawling Oak Lawn bowling joint whose 40 bustling lanes are a symphony of strikes and spares and gutterballs, South Sider Scott Neilsen breathes fire into John Mellencamp's seething "Rain on the Scarecrow" and briefly slips Earth's surly bonds.

"Rain on the scarecrow, blood on the plo-owww," he yowls, growing more confident with each venomous verse. "And son I'm just sorry they're just memories for you now."

The music blares, multicolored lights swirl, spectators smile. For these few minutes, he is someone else, somewhere else and loving it.

Occasionally, his tempo falters or he's slightly off-key, but overall it's a swell performance. Many of those that follow will be less swell.

"I'm not a perfect singer or nothin', but I can sing really decent," says Neilsen, who speaks in the no-frills Chicago-ese fashion of someone Slat's Grobnik would have liked to booze with at the Billy Goat. "I can get the crowd going and stuff. And it's about having a good time, that's all. I'm not here to make myself famous or anything."

Reflective of his mythical nickname, Neilsen, 35, has a narrow face and slicked-back hair that give him a somewhat serpentine appearance. His clothes -- a blue-and-red hooded sweat jacket with flames running down the sleeves, a T-shirt bearing silk-screened dragons and a thick red-and-silver metallic necklace from which hangs what appears to be a talon -- augment the effect.

As he does on most karaoke outings, Neilsen has brought a zippered CD case stuffed with 20 sing-along selections -- 25 bucks apiece -- randomly snagged from his private stash of around 500. Among karaoke's staunchest disciples, toting one's own tunes is not uncommon.

"If they don't have the music you want, or if they've got crappy versions of it, or it's not the version you're used to singing, it's better in a way to [bring] your own stuff," he explains.

Growing up around Archer and Pulaski, Neilsen, who works the third shift Sunday through Thursday at a zinc oxide processing plant in Burr Ridge, sang with three bands. But rock 'n' roll aspirations soon flagged, and at age 20 karaoke entered his world. He's been doing it with ever-increasing fervor since then.

"It makes me feel good to be up there," he says. "It gets rid of my anger and stress. If something goes wrong in my life, I can channel it into the music. If I had a bad day at work or something bad happened to me, it just helps me breathe, relax. Instead of turning to drugs or alcohol, I sing."

KARAOKE THERAPY

Karaoke didn't used to be an every-night affair at the Caribbean-themed Lake View hangout Trader Todd's, as it is now. Says co-owner and namesake Todd Hyatt, "Until about two years ago, we never put signage up. It was just kind of our dirty little secret."

These days, the decades-old Japanese import is an asset rather than a liability. Exactly what's driving the ongoing fascination, no one can say for sure, but some think TV's top-rated talent show, "American Idol," has something to do with it.

Jack Dreznes is one of them. The longtime proprietor of Chicago's Beverly Records, he started selling karaoke CDs in the early-to-mid-'90s, and today they're 20 percent of his business. "[People] want to practice at home, and when they do go to the clubs, they want to know what they're singing," he says.

And an increasing number of newbies are getting braver.

"More people are getting more adventurous," says Dean Sakurai, owner of Chicago's Star Tracks Karaoke, which hires out KJs (karaoke jockeys) and equipment to bars and private gatherings. "We're getting more people coming up who've never sung before."

Hundreds of taverns, bars and restaurants in the Chicago area use karaoke as a means to boost business. Countless more offer it on the sly. Add to that KJs who cater parties (weddings, company outings, birthday bashes) and one thing's for sure: If this industry isn't growing, it's definitely not shrinking.

One reason for the ongoing mania may be karaoke's purported healing power. Says Peter Parker, publisher-owner of Karaoke Scene magazine in Southern California, it's "very therapeutic to a lot of people for a lot of different reasons. It can be psychologically therapeutic, it can be physically therapeutic." He mentions a wounded Vietnam vet friend of his who karaoked his way through stuttering and substance abuse. "Music can change people for the better."

So can audience response. "When you get that adoration of a crowd," says Bart Loiacono, publisher of the West Chicago-based newspaper Karaoke NiteLife, "if you've got 50 people in front of you screaming and yelling and applauding when you're done, let

alone a thousand people, there's a definite high there."

'Y'all feel me now?'

On a recent Thursday night at Division Street mainstay Mother's, veterans and greenhorns gather in a darkened subterranean nook toward the rear and take on "live band" karaoke. Instead of a KJ running the show, flesh-and-blood musicians provide ear-bleedingly loud accompaniment. Absence of inflatable pigs and caged babes notwithstanding, it gives participants a more immersive, ostensibly truer-to-life experience -- complete with tinnitus.

Early on in the singing rotation, local artist manager and vocal trainer Adrian Love (introduced as "the greatest karaoke singer of all time!") makes his way up front on crutches. "Y'all feel me now?" he asks, before dedicating a lilting rendition of the Temps' classic "My Girl" to "all the special girls in the house." Upon finishing, he is cheered wildly and returns barside to lube the pipes. "It's all about the therapy and it's all about the training," he says of his frequent appearances here. "It's all about keeping my skills where they need to be."

Days later, at Trader Todd's, Monday evening revelers enjoy half-price everything -- including, for some, crucial liquid courage -- while belting quickly recognizable fare (Buffett, Bon Jovi) chosen from a thick binder of 3,500 songs. Patron plaudits are next to nil, but nobody seems to mind the dearth of fanfare. At least no one boos, and that's good enough.

Lisle resident Jenny Yahoudy, 23, a part-time student at the College of DuPage, has a faraway gaze and sways almost imperceptibly as she clutches a bottle of beer and does a mercifully on-key interpretation of Bon Jovi's raspy anthem "Dead or Alive."

"I'm kind of in my own little place and not really paying attention [to the crowd]," she says afterward, brewski still in hand. "It's hard. You've got the lights on you and everything. But it's just an outlet, and I enjoy it."

GIMME THE BEAT, BOY

Things are grooving along nicely at Brunswick Zone. The air is thick with secondhand toxins and folks are well on their way to buzztown. Karaoke-wise, the rotation is stacked for an hour past the midnight closing time.

Onstage for his second turn, Neilsen attempts to raise the roof with Tom Cochrane's celebratory "Life Is a Highway." Tossing his head back when appropriate and gripping the mike like a pro, he gives it gusto as audience members chime in.

A while back, he sang Dobie Gray's "Drift Away" in a haunt on Southwest Highway to an even more raucous group. "Everybody was singin' Gimme the beat, boy, free my soul," Neilsen recalls, crooning the catchy refrain. "They were all clapping and getting into it. It was awesome, man! I felt like a rock star!"

His spotlight session over, he sucks down Lites and schmoozes with pals at his now-packed table and around the bar. Grinning and gabbing, he's noticeably looser, more jovial than before. Maybe it's the beers. More likely it's the music. The stress-melting,

soul-soothing, transporting music.

For this dragon, it's the only way to fly.