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Author feels 'Fever' for life's big adventures

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PROFILE

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We read fiction in part to gain access to the fascinating lives of extraordinary characters. But every once in a while, an author comes along whose own life stretches the bounds of plausibility and overshadows the fictional character he's created.

Such is the case with Sean Rowe.

But before we get to the head-on train collision, the Huck Finn raft trip down the Mississippi River, the JFK crew seat at an exclusive New England prep school and the Mary Kay LaTourneau-like small town scandal, a bit about his debut novel, "Fever" (Little, Brown, \$19.95).

In "Fever," former FBI agent turned cruise lines security chief Matt Shannon learns that his stepbrother plans to hijack the Norwegian Empress, make off with \$30 million in drug money and disappear at sea. The oddball supporting cast includes a symphonic cellist, a former Weeki Wachee mermaid and a soldier of fortune with a taste for human sushi.

"Fever" is witty, fast moving, occasionally goofy and intermittently thrilling; James Patterson calls it "'Ocean's Eleven' meets Carl Hiaasen."

It doesn't take long to segue from the merely fictional to the downright unbelievable when chatting with Rowe from his home in Chapel Hill, N.C. A career journalist who worked for the Miami Herald and New Times in Miami and Broward County, Rowe has crammed several lifetimes and a few second chances into his 41 years.

The son of an Appalachian coal miner turned literature professor, Rowe grew up on the edge of the Okefenokee Swamp, where his life took its first major detour in his early teens.

"I was going to junior high and getting restless and bored and then I got seduced at age 13 by my biology teacher and scandalized Douglas, Ga., with this affair, the kind of thing nowadays they would put her in jail for," he says. "My sister suggested getting out of there and going away to one of those fancy New England boarding schools."

Rowe suddenly found himself in the hallowed halls of Choate Rosemary Hall, sitting alongside future captains of industry and presidential timber. Within a few months, he earned an academic scholarship from ketchup magnate Howard Heinz.

"I made good grades because I really liked it, unlike other kids there," he recalls. "When I was on the crew team, I rowed in the bow of the boat in the exact same seat that John F. Kennedy rode in when he was on the crew team. There are all these great famous ghosts lurking around there."

His good fortune continued when he received the coveted Morehead Scholarship to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. But before starting college, Rowe took his second major detour for some serious adventure with Choate buddy John Ruskie.

"When we got out of high school, we went up to La Crosse, Wis., and built this ramshackle raft out of empty oil drums and lumber and off we went, thinking it would be a six-week trip down the Mississippi River. Well, we made it but it lasted six months. There was no motor on this thing; the only navigational capacity we had were oars. We were constantly trying to stay out of the ship channel and not get run over by the barges. It

was one hell of an adventure."

The erstwhile Huck and Jim stopped at every river town along the way to hit the local libraries and drink a few beers. Their luck ran out just south of Memphis.

"We hit a bridge pylon and it just destroyed the raft," he says. "It was February by this time and we nearly died of hypothermia."

They were rescued by the Coast Guard and housed in a Baptist mission for the night. The next morning, they continued on by land to New Orleans and Mardi Gras. Rowe worked aboard the Mississippi Queen riverboat just long enough to buy himself a motorcycle, on which he crisscrossed North America and spent four months in Mexico before returning to start college.

Fast forward to a January night in 1999. Rowe was bar hopping in downtown Fort Lauderdale with journalist friends to celebrate his impending move back to Chapel Hill to write novels. When a slow-moving freight train blocked their merry path, Rowe decided to put a quarter on the track.

"Here's what happened next: I stood up and walked backward straight into the path of a second oncoming freight train that was going full speed in the opposite direction," he recalls.

The impact threw him across six lanes of traffic on Broward Boulevard.

"Brittany, the wife of former Fort Myers News-Press reporter Bob Norman, basically saved my life because she yelled at me and slapped me around until the paramedics finally arrived," Rowe says. "I am told that I actually flat-lined in the ambulance going to the hospital. I don't remember the impact, I don't remember any pain. It was just like turning off a light bulb, just blackness. There aren't many who have lived to tell about it."

A withdrawal from morphine and months of pain followed. It was a fitting cap to the worst year of his life, during which his eight-year marriage had ended, forcing him into bankruptcy; he'd left journalism for the unknown and was drinking as much as a bottle of Maker's Mark bourbon a day.

"Lying there in that hospital bed, I realized I'd better get busy doing some things I really wanted to do," he says.

Rowe hopes to follow "Fever" with a straight-ahead thriller called "I-95," then a rock-and-roll novel. Looking back, he doesn't regret the adventurous years at all.

"I was re-reading 'The Republic' the other day, and Plato recommends that nobody go to college until they're 30," he says. "I used to say that journalism is a young man's game until I realized that everything is a young man's game. Writing is sort of like swimming or tennis; you can start late."