

Plot Master



James Patterson is at ease talking about his writing, his golf game and his refreshingly positive approach to life

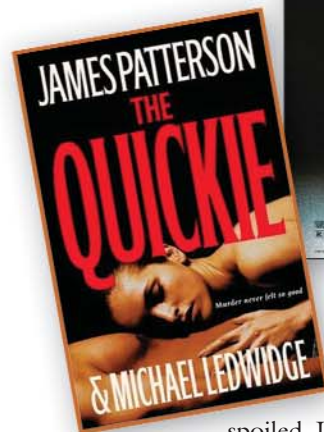
BY GREG MIDLAND

America's best-selling author arrives at Sleepy Hollow Country Club in Westchester County on a warm June morning. He strides through the south entrance of the magnificent clubhouse wearing khaki pants, a brightly colored golf shirt, and a baseball cap that has become something of a signature for him. Printed on the hat's bill is simply "Relax."

Fans of James Patterson will recognize the hat from his recent book jacket photos. The message suits Patterson to a tee: Despite his past inclusion on *Forbes's* Celebrity 100 list and his international book tours, he is delightfully unassuming and, well... relaxed. Were it not for the fact that his image is found on the back covers of 42 books (and counting), which have sold an estimated 130 million copies, Patterson would likely make his way around this genteel club overlooking the Hudson River virtually unnoticed. The only outward sign of his prolonged financial success is a sleek Mercedes S-class sedan, which looks as if it corners as well as the flying kids in his latest young adult novel, *Maximum Ride*.

James Patterson has been on quite a ride himself over the last 30 years, after his debut book, *The Thomas Berryman Number*, won the Edgar Award for Best First Mystery Novel in 1976.

He grew up in Newburgh, N.Y., a kid very much into sports, especially basketball. He was also a standout academic, graduating summa cum laude from Manhattan College and then earning a Masters in English at Vanderbilt University. While he took a few stabs at golf, it wasn't a regular part of his youth. As he puts it, "We weren't a country club family. My mother was a teacher, my dad worked in insurance. I used to sneak on the Powelton Club occasionally, but I didn't really take up golf until I was in my 40s."



Patterson's 1995 *Kiss the Girls* was made into a successful movie, while his latest, *The Quickie*, sits in what has become a familiar spot for him.

Now, at age 60, he is a certified golf addict. "I love almost all golf courses. They're beautiful. Golf isn't a good walk spoiled. It's a good walk made even better." In addition to Sleepy Hollow, Patterson holds memberships at Trump National-Westchester and also a course near his home in south Florida. Though Patterson and his family — his wife, Sue and nine-



year-old son, Jack — live in Florida for much of the year, he looks forward to their annual spring pilgrimage back to the Hudson Valley. "I adore the river. Our house is right on it, and it's something new every day... the light, the color. I tell Jack that the river is life. Follow that sense of the river, and try not to swim against the current if you don't have to."

If that sounds a bit new-agey for a man with an eight-figure net worth, so be it. Patterson comes across as genuine and thoughtful, and not prone to giving pat answers. It is a characteristic honed in his days as a successful advertising executive at the Manhattan offices of J. Walter Thompson, where he worked for 25 years, the last six as chairman, before deciding to devote himself to writing full-time. In that pressurized Madison Avenue environment, Patterson developed a reputation as a decisive leader who gave clients a straight opinion on whether he thought an idea would work or not work. He is the same way toward himself, which is one reason why he is able to be such a prolific writer, with six books due out in 2007 alone.

"I am insanely organized. I'm very focused," he says matter-of-factly. "I have 15 projects going on right now in various stages. I usually write early in the morning and then again in the afternoon, seven days a week. It's storytelling, and it's all in a day's work."

The process truly is work. Patterson starts every book with a heavily detailed outline, a practice that he advises without hesitation to anyone who ever asks him for tips on writing. His outlines include notes on characters, action and plotlines, and he spends a lot of time explicitly writing down what he believes will be the core of each chapter. He then writes the book out longhand, often taking several drafts, and employs someone to type each draft: "She's blind now, and doesn't have any fingers left," says Patterson with a laugh. From start to finish, it takes Patterson about a year to complete a book.

Between all that work and quality time with his family, Patterson does manage to fit in regular rounds of golf. It helps that he's more into the game itself than the social aspects. "I like to go out in the morning, walk nine or 18 with a caddie or just by myself, and get done in a couple of hours," he said. "I don't really like to play for money. I prefer to

The New York Times

Best Sellers

Hardcover Fiction

July 29, 2007

This Week		Last Week	Weeks On List
1	THE QUICKIE , by James Patterson and Michael Ledwidge.	1	2
2	HIGH NOON, by Nora Roberts.		1
3	A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS, by Khaled Hosseini.	2	8
4	LEAN MEAN THIRTEEN, by Janet Evanovich.	3	4
5	BUNGALOW 2, by Danielle Steel.	5	3
6	THE JUDAS STRAIN, by James Rollins.	4	2
7	DROP DEAD BEAUTIFUL, by Jackie Collins.	7	3
8	*THE BOURNE BETRAYAL, by Eric Van Lustbader.	10	6
9	DOUBLE TAKE, by Catherine Coulter.	8	5
10	PEONY IN LOVE, by Lisa See.	6	3

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Patterson enjoys his frequent summer rounds at Sleepy Hollow.

shoot the breeze and relax with a friend, or with a caddie. I like the exercise and pretending I'm going to get better... which doesn't happen," he says with a laugh.

Like all golfers, Patterson can be a harsh judge of his game. He carries a 10.8 Handicap Index, which he says is about the same as it's been since he joined Sleepy Hollow 20 years ago. He is a powerful swinger, though a recent lower back problem has hampered his distance and caused him much aggravation. His short game and course management skills are excellent, perhaps befitting a person who grinds for pars the same way he grinds out a book. While Patterson certainly gets more enjoyment out of golf when he is playing well, the score is not the thing for him. And neither is work.

"The nice aspect about golf for me is that I'm removed from writing," says Patterson. "I

think about writing the rest of the day. Golf is time when I'm off on my own or with friends, and it's a chance to get away from things."

That is not to say that the game doesn't ever creep into his work. Patterson co-wrote, with Peter de Jonge, a 1996 best-seller called *Miracle on the 17th Green*, which tells the story of a middle-aged golfer who suddenly decides to try qualifying for the Senior Tour. The book was significant for another reason: "That was the first co-authoring job I did," said Patterson. "Peter and I used to work together at [J. Walter] Thompson, and were sitting around talking one day and I told him about this idea I had. So we agreed to write it, and that got me into the co-authoring business." In the years since, Patterson has co-authored 10 books, including two others with de Jonge, *The Beach House* and *Beach Road*.

Patterson genuinely gets a kick out of the fact that his books have such mass appeal. He is a voracious consumer of pop culture, especially movies. Two of his books, *Kiss the Girls* and *Along Came a Spider*, have been made into Hollywood films starring Morgan Freeman as Detective Alex Cross. There are more movies on the horizon, which pleases the author: "I am fanatical about movies. I see everything. I think the key to success in Hollywood is that every scene should move

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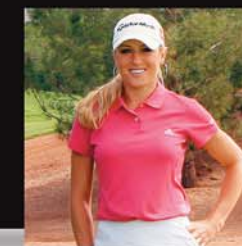
the action forward. The Bourne movies, James Bond, and *Red Eye* are examples of films that have done that." Patterson is absolutely comfortable with the fact that his books are meant to be entertaining page-turners, not laborious manifestos. This makes him a frequent target of book critics, but in characteristic style, it doesn't bother him.

"I don't really care about critics," he contends. "The funny thing is that in the beginning, before I got 'infamous,' the reviews were mostly great. And now I get picked on more than I used to. But here's the thing. I was chosen to receive a Grand Thriller Master award this summer, and one of the things I'm going to say in my speech is that

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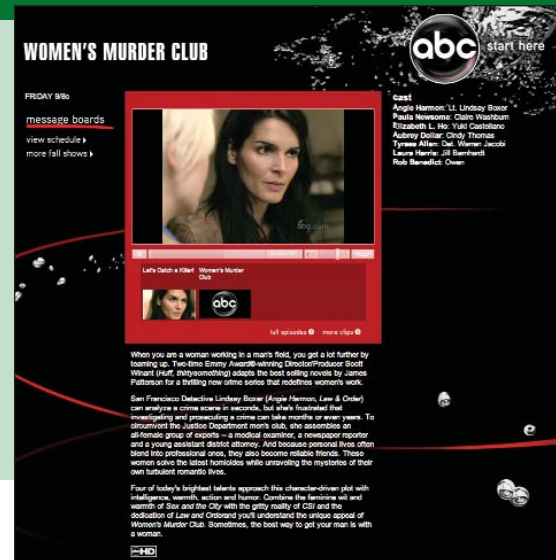
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Must-See TV?

James Patterson makes his first foray into network television this fall, when "Women's Murder Club" premieres on ABC. Based on Patterson's popular series of novels, the show centers around the lives of four women in San Francisco — a detective, a medical examiner, a crime reporter, and a district attorney — who work together on big cases and commiserate about the men in their life. Former "Law & Order" star Angie Harmon, who is married to ex-New York Giant Jason Sehorn, will be among the stars. While Patterson is not writing the scripts, he is actively involved in producing the show.



there are a couple thousand people who are going to be pissed off about this award. But there are going to be several million who are going to be happy about it."

It's yet another window into the soul of someone who is at ease with himself, his life, and his work. It doesn't hurt that any negative press from critics is more than counterbalanced by the thousands of letters written to him by fans, which include a few recent occupants of the Oval Office. "George Bush Sr. sends me a hand-written review of all my books. President Clinton is a fan, as is the current president. That's nice for me, a real thrill," he adds.

"You're a kid from Newburgh and you have presidents reading your books. It's cool."

Ah, Newburgh. Though Patterson doesn't get there too often anymore, it is still a place that is close to his heart. In speaking about how he handles the interviews and appearances that have become routine for him, he harkens back to his days in Newburgh. "One of the nice things is that I have friends who go all the way back to grammar school, and they all say I'm still the same a--hole I've always been." If he's ever tempted to let success go to his head, he would hear about it.

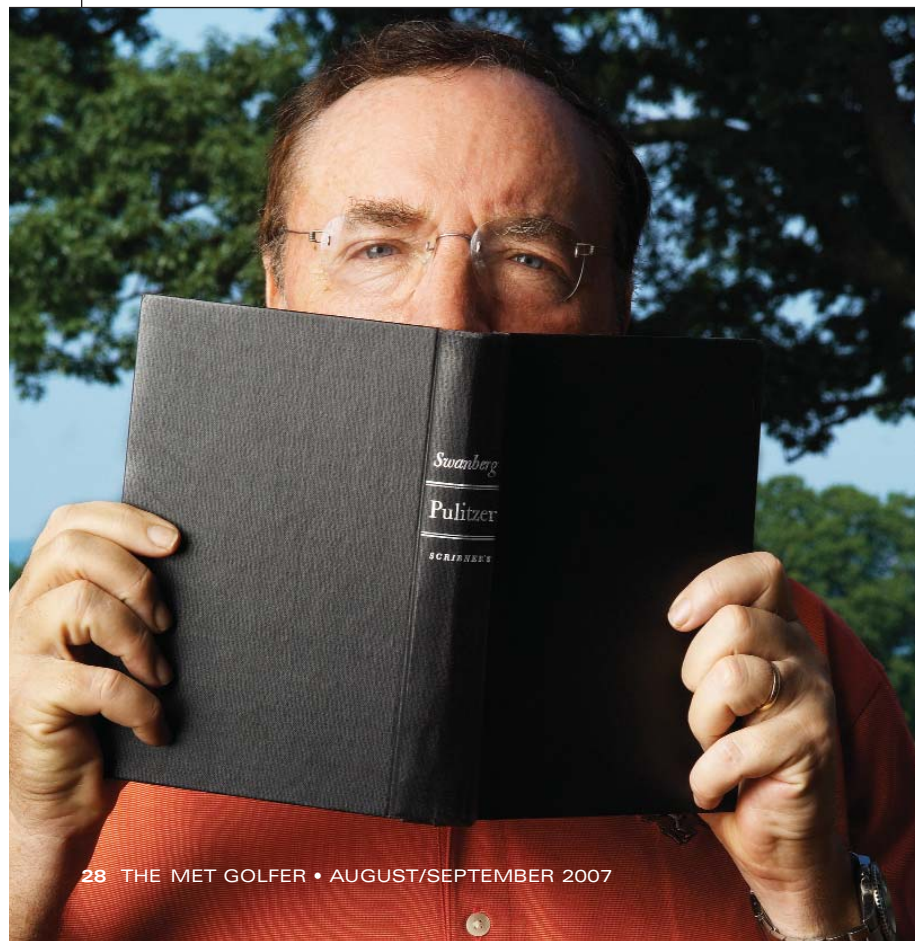
Patterson reads at least three newspapers a day (*The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*) and likes to collect as much information as possible on current events. "Politics is fascinating to me. I want to hear what the far left and the far right and Democrats and Republicans all think." Though he didn't share his political leanings — especially not with presidents of both parties as fans — he expressed nothing but disdain for those in politics and elsewhere who think they have all the answers: "It drives me crazy, people who say 'my view of the world is right and yours is stupid.'" He just as easily can apply that to critics who disparage his work and the intelligence of his audience.

Those moments of negativity are few and far between for James Patterson. "Someone once said you're lucky if you find something you like to do in life, and then it's a miracle if someone pays you to do it. So I have that situation, and it keeps getting better and better."

Spoken like someone who has been very good at following his own advice to not swim against the current. ■

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There is one prize that James Patterson still has his eyes on: a Pulitzer.



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