

Books & Authors

Powered by What do I read next?



About the Author



Full text biography:

Robert Kurson

Birth Date : 1963

Place of Birth : United States, Illinois

Nationality: American

Table of Contents:

Awards

Personal Information

Career

Writings

Sidelights

Related Information

Awards:

Bookseller's Choice, *Bookseller's*, July, 2004, for *Shadow Divers*.

Personal Information:

Born c. 1963, in IL. **Education:** University of Wisconsin, B.A.; Harvard Law School, LL.D. **Addresses:** Home: IL. Agent: The Lavin Agency, 77 Peter St., Fourth Floor, Toronto, Ontario M5V 2G4, Canada. **E-mail:** robert@robertkurson.com.

Career Information:

Writer. Practiced real estate law; Chicago Board Options Exchange, Chicago, IL, Wal-Mart options trader; *Chicago Sun-Times*, data entry clerk, then features writer; *Chicago Magazine*, writer; *Esquire*, contributing editor.

Writings:

- *The Official Three Stooges Encyclopedia: The Ultimate Knucklehead's Guide to Stoogedom, from Amalgamated Association of Morons to Ziller, Zeller, and Zoller*, Contemporary Books (Lincolnwood, IL), 1998.
- *The Official Three Stooges Cookbook*, Contemporary Books (Lincolnwood, IL), 1999.
- *Shadow Divers: The True Adventure of Two Americans Who Risked Everything to Solve One of the Last Mysteries of World War II*, Random House (New York, NY), 2004.

Also contributor to *Rolling Stone* and *New York Times Magazine*.

Sidelights:

A longtime contributor to *Esquire* magazine, which has a history of celebrating derring-do, author Robert Kurson became fascinated one night after seeing a "Nova" television segment on the hunt for a lost U-boat. For Kurson, while the story of the boat was interesting, the real intrigue lay in the motives of the divers who would risk their own lives to discover this deep-sea wreck that promised neither great treasure nor tremendous archeological knowledge. Instead, as Kurson discovered, the boat lying 230 feet beneath the surface of the Atlantic, just off the New Jersey coast, offered dedicated deep-sea divers something far greater: a challenge.

In *Shadow Divers: The True Adventure of Two Americans Who Risked Everything to Solve One of the Last Mysteries of World War II*, Kurson introduces two such divers. As Susan Larson put it in the *Times-Picayune*, "Even the most resolute landlubber will gain a new understanding of the excitement of deep-wreck diving in this tale of John Chatterton and Richie Kohler, two weekend divers who became obsessed with the wreck." After describing the thrills and terrible dangers of deep-sea exploring, a "masterpiece of explication," according to Mark Bowden in the *New York Times Book*

Review, Kurson introduces the two men who overcame mutual suspicion and dislike to forge a bond and solve the mystery of the boat's identity. Their investigative efforts included six years of research and some frustrating attempts to actually get to the boat. *Wall Street Journal* contributor Robert J. Hughes concluded that the result is "not only a gripping adventure story--shipwreck diving is fraught with peril--but a tale of dogged persistence and growing friendship."

Related Information:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, May 15, 2004, Brendan Driscoll, review of *Shadow Divers: The True Adventure of Two Americans Who Risked Everything to Solve One of the Last Mysteries of World War II*, p. 1595.
- *Chicago Tribune*, July 18, 2004, Jessica Reavcs, "Author Robert Kurson Has No Interest in Joining His Subjects beneath the Waves," p. 1; July 18, 2004, Brenda Fowler, "Secrets of the Deep," p. 1.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, July 9, 2004, Jennifer Reese, "Making Waves: Two New Books Navigate Real- Life High -Seas Adventures," p. 93.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, April 15, 2004, review of *Shadow Divers*, p. 376.
- *Library Journal*, April 15, 2004, Edwin B. Burgess, review of *Shadow Divers*, p. 100.
- *Newsweek*, June 21, 2004, Malcolm Jones, "Diving into a Mystery: The Gripping Tale of the Discovery of a Nazi Sub," p. 68.
- *New York Times Book Review*, July 18, 2004, Mark Bowden, "Das Boot," p. 7.
- *People*, June 28, 2004, Joe Heim, review of *Shadow Divers*, p. 47.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 12, 2004, Daisy Maryles, review of *Shadow Divers*, p. 12.
- *St. Louis Post- Dispatch*, June 30, 2004, Roger K. Miller, "Adventure, Mystery Surface in Story of Sunken U- Boat," section E, p. 3.
- *Sea Power*, August, 2004, David W. Munns, review of *Shadow Divers*, p. 52.
- *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), July 8, 2004, Susan Larson, "The Shore Thing," p. 1.
- *USA Today*, July 15, 2004, Deirdre Donahue, "'Shadow Divers' Brings to Surface the Mystery of a Doomed U- Boat," section D, p. 7.
- *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 2004, Robert J. Hughes, "A Mystery under the Surface," section D, p. 8.

ONLINE

- *Powell's Web site*, <http://www.powells.com/> (July 8, 2004), Dave Weich, "Robert Kurson Dives In."
- *Robert Kurson Home Page*, <http://www.robertkurson.com> (October 14, 2004).*

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, 2005

Gale Database: *Contemporary Authors Online*

Gale Document Number: GALE;H14224097

Source Citation: " Robert Kurson." 2005. Books & Authors. Gale. Gale Internal User 10 Jan 2013 <<http://bna.galegroup.com/bna/start.do?p=BNA&u=gale>>

©2008 Cengage Learning

Title: Into the light: Michael May had everything. Happy marriage, great family, successful business. He was even a world-class athlete. What kind of a man would upset such a perfect life by doing something as crazy as trying to get his sight back?

Author(s): Robert Kurson

Source: Esquire, 143.6 (June 2005): p114.

Document Type: Article

Copyright : COPYRIGHT 2005 Hearst Communications. Reprinted with permission of Hearst.

<http://www.hearst.com>

Full Text:

Humanity has paused on Jones Street near the summit of Russian Hill in San Francisco. Tourists, businessmen, cafe workers, the homeless--all seem to have taken a collective breather at this steepest of places, a city peak where stairs are carved into the sidewalks so people don't topple. Only one person keeps climbing, and he's talking too; he's saving that you can't stop here, that if you just keep pushing you'll see things no one else will see, that Macondray Lane is just over the hill and that it's the most magical place in all of San Francisco, but you'll never see it if you don't keep pushing you'll never see Macondray Lane unless you really know how to look.

Mike May keeps climbing. He is fifty years old and sweeping a red-tipped cane in front of him, a blind man's cane. He lost his sight at age three, blind for life at three. He learned as a boy to listen to his cane echo off cement curbs and street signs, but now he doesn't hear a thing. There's not so much as a pebble in his way, and it doesn't matter that every person seems to have stopped to catch his breath; he won't stop climbing until he reaches the top.

At the peak, May's cane finally stops moving. "There's Alcatraz," he says. He is pointing directly to the site. "Look how the sun glints off the water in front of it."

May takes in the scene for a minute, then begins walking down the hill. A minute later he turns right onto Macondray Lane, a tiny turnoff more pathway than street.

"Look at how green the trees are here. Look how low they overhang the street," he says. "It's like we stepped into Old Europe. It's like we stepped into a whole new world."

May is due at the office of his ophthalmologist, Dr. Daniel Goodman, in an hour. There, Goodman might give him a life-changing verdict. May won't hurry. He just keeps absorbing Macondray Lane, keeps remarking on the yellow of a woman's sunflowers and the splatter patterns made by a man hosing down windows.

Six years ago, on a day much like this one, May had a chance encounter with Goodman, a purely accidental meeting. The doctor asked if he might use ultrasound equipment to peer into the back of May's right eye. May assured him that he was permanently blind, a diagnosis made by renowned ophthalmologists. Goodman looked anyway. He told May about a recent surgery, a stem-cell-and-cornea-transplant procedure, the rarest thing.

Then Goodman told May, "I think we can make this happen, Mike. I think we can make you see."

All May had to do was give the okay.

Give the Okay? And out of gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see (Isaiah 29:18). Sight was biblical. You had to give the okay.

May did not jump up and down, and he did not scream out. He was fairly stunned by the offer, and he sensed the hugeness of the opportunity. But he also knew his nature. He was a thinker who needed to consider every facet of a decision, especially one so monumental. He asked a few technical questions. He made a few jokes. Then, in the soothing and measured way in which he had spoken since boyhood, he told Goodman that he would consider it.

At home in Davis, California, May started thinking, but his thoughts were not about eureka's or new worlds or a new life. Rather, they were about the life he had now, one he had often told himself he wouldn't trade for anything. He

was happily married to a wonderful woman. He deeply loved his two young sons. He was the founder and CEO of Sendero Group, a successful start-up that had designed a portable global-positioning-system unit--a real breakthrough--for the blind. He was fantastically mobile, capable of getting himself anywhere in the world. He was a sky diver, lecturer, guitarist, mentor. He had been the first-ever blind CIA analyst, lived in Ghana, come face-to-face with evolution on the Galapagos Islands. He still held the world speed record in downhill skiing for the blind--sixty-five miles per hour. He was thought by some blind people to be the epitome of what a nonsighted person could be. "In the world of really cool blind guys," his friend Bryan Bashin would tell people, "Mike is about the coolest." Most of all, May didn't feel as if he was missing out on a thing.

Weeks passed. When May mentioned the surgery to people, their responses were predictable and explosive: Sight means you get to see your wife and children; isn't that reason enough? But May didn't conceive of it that way. He felt so fully invested in his family, so in love with them, that he couldn't imagine anything--not even vision--deepening his connection to them. I already see my wife and kids, he would think to himself. And he felt that way about much of his life--that everything already seemed so wonderfully vivid.

There were risks to vision, too. What happens, he wondered, when a person introduces an earthshaking event like new vision into a thing so finely balanced as a good marriage? Marriages come undone from financial setbacks or job transfers. Here, he would be changing the universe.

Business demanded his full attention. Start-ups pass through a critical stage, and May's was precisely at that point. There was no telling how profound his obligations to new sight might be--the surgery, the adjustment, the checkups. It was tough enough to spare a day to go skiing. It seemed impossible to ask Sendero Group to spare its CEO time for a new life.

There were also physical risks. He would be forced to ingest highly potent antirejection drugs, which posed the serious prospect of kidney failure, liver failure, and systemic malignancy--cancer. He might suffer pain. And if the operation proved unsuccessful, May might lose the sliver of light perception he had retained since childhood, the bit that allowed him to distinguish between brightly and dimly lit rooms. Light perception can be precious to the blind. When he talked to his wife, Jennifer, about the prospect of surgery, she told him that she didn't worry about their marriage or the side effects of the drugs or even that he might not think her beautiful when finally he saw her. She said she worried only about his light perception.

Dr. Goodman placed the chances for successful surgery at fifty-fifty. And that was just for the first year. Even if the procedure worked, May's new cornea could be rejected at any time. He might have sight for a few months, a few years, or a lifetime--no one could say.

And what of his blind world? For years, May had been part of a community of blind friends, agencies, and colleagues. The notion of seeking vision felt like a divorce to him in ways, and he found himself thinking in those terms, wondering if he still would have visitation rights and who might take custody of his relationships. He asked two close blind friends about how the community would receive him if he became sighted. They could only say, "We'll still be your friends. But the community overall? We just don't know."



May, age three, sits in the driver's seat of his father's car, just before the accident that almost blinded him and led to Goodman's formation of the organization.

Then came the whispers. Some arrived via e-mail, others in conversation with the vaguely informed. They all said

the same thing: People given sight after a lifetime of blindness had hell to pay for it. And there wasn't a damned thing a person could do about it once the terrible gift of vision had been granted.

More weeks passed, then months. May's life continued to be good. He grew his business, savored his family, and knew, better than he'd ever known, why he wouldn't trade this life for anything. He had devoted himself fully to the proposition that while life with sight might be wonderful, life without sight was wonderful, too. And here was the final proof of that: Nine months had passed and he still had not given Dr. Goodman the okay.

Then he heard the rumbling. It was a sound May had known since boyhood, the sound the world makes when it pauses for that fleeting moment while a person decides whether to stand still or leap forward. It was a sound he had learned to hear from distances no one else could imagine.

On a sunny spring morning in 1957, Ori Jean May sent her two young children, Diane, four, and Mike, three, outside to play while she finished washing dishes. The Mays recently had moved to Silver City, New Mexico, where Bill May had taken work mining copper. Inside their nearby garage, Mike found a glass jar packed with powder, perfect for making mud pies. He dumped the contents into some nearby sitting water. A plume of gas rose from the water. Nearby, a pile of garbage sat burning.



Meeting President Carter at Moffett Field, Mountain View, California, 1994. May urged White House support for adaptive technology for the blind. Later that year, he accepted and donated his first surgically assisted corneal transplant to repair the eye lost 63 years to his sight eye.

Inside the house, Ori Jean dried the last of her dishes. A moment later she heard an explosion. She ran to the garage. Mike was lying on the ground, covered in blood and pocked with glass. Diane sat in shock. Ori Jean wrapped Mike in a blanket and rushed him inside.

Outside the Silver City hospital operating room, a doctor told Ori Jean that Mike was going to die. She asked if there was any hope. He told her there was none. Ori Jean kept waiting.



Doctors sewed five hundred stitches into Mike. They still expected him to die. The next morning, they told Ori Jean that they now believed Mike would survive but that his eyes had been terribly damaged. She had one thought: The eyes don't mean anything-the only thing that matters is that he's alive.

For six months, Mike could do little more than lie in bed. His left eye had been obliterated, his right eye irreparably damaged. May's father blamed himself for the accident. The powder was calcium carbide, a chemical that reacts violently with water to produce the explosive gas acetylene. If only he'd cleaned out the garage when the family moved in.

Ori Jean read the Tolkien trilogy, aloud to her son and found herself, curiously, thinking of her own father. He had lived in Mexico, eloped with his wife, moved to Chile, raised his kids on two continents. While most people allowed life to happen to them, her father had always stepped forward and hunted experience, demanded it, and when it came he accepted it, good or bad. And it was that part--the good or bad--that mattered to her now. It was the stepping forward, no matter what, that would be everything.

Ori Jean told the family's social worker she wanted Mike enrolled in traditional kindergarten, not blind school. She wanted him involved in as many normal activities as possible. She wanted him, she said, to step forward. Before school, Mike was fitted for a pair of dark glasses. He broke them walking into a wall. Ori Jean bought him another pair. He walked into a pole. She got him more glasses, dozens more, as many as it took.

When kindergarten began, Diane and Mike walked to the bus stop by themselves, holding hands. On the bus, Mike sat down backward and missed the seat. On the playground, he walked into a swing set full of flying children, one of whom crashed into his mouth and sent him sprawling backward. At home, Ori Jean listened to Diane's and Mike's stories from school. She told them that school sounded fun.

By the time Mike was six, his father was drinking heavily and had stopped working. Ori Jean moved the family to California so that she could find her own employment; she would not wait around hoping for someone else to fix things. She now had four children. All the kids did chores, especially Diane and Mike, who cooked dinner, cleaned the house, and baby-sat the youngsters. Ori Jean treated Mike no differently from his siblings, and the kids took the cue and ran with it. They paired blue and red socks while folding his laundry. They gave him dog food and told him it was cereal. Ori Jean shrugged it off. So long as no one was getting hurt, children had to learn to solve their own problems. Soon, Mike was telling his siblings that the "cereal" was more delicious than corn flakes and asking for seconds.

Ori Jean kept Mike in regular school and encouraged him to try things, to try everything, to jump in. See what's over there, she told him, and that way of seeing made sense to Mike--he could always see like that. He learned to ride a bike, then smashed Diane's. He asked to try his brother's. Soon, there were four mangled bicycles in the May garage. Ori Jean told him that kids fall down all the time when they're trying to make things happen.

In fourth grade, Mike joined the after-school flag-football program. His strategy, on defense was to rush in and, since he could not see who had the ball, grab everyone's flag. He crashed into his own players, into benches, into referees. He scared the hell out of opposing players. He joined soccer, kickball, and baseball and ran full speed into everything--his sister could barely stomach the sight of his daily bumps and bruises--because to do it any slower meant he might miss something, and Mike was quickly becoming unwilling to miss anything at all.

The same year, he applied to be a street-crossing guard. The principal forbade it. Mike could not stand the idea of standing around when he had the chance to try something. He suggested that other kids could tell him when to put up his stop sign. The principal told him that the idea was to look for cars. He insisted that he could hear the cars coming and could see them that way. Soon Mike was wearing a Day-Glo orange vest and escorting kids across the street.

At home, Ori Jean waged a full-scale war on her maternal instincts. When Mike came home and explained his bloody face by saying he'd had a bicycle race in which he hit a tricycle, flipped, and skidded down the sidewalk, she shouted down her impulse to banish bike riding and instead asked him who won the race. After Mike asked permission to ride another bike downtown by himself, she pushed a thousand nightmare scenarios out of her mind and told him, "Of course. Just stay on your side of the street." While the mother of Mike's best blind friend continued to fix the boy's meals for him, Ori Jean enrolled Mike in cooking school.

After Mike turned thirteen, Ori Jean asked Bill to move out; his drinking had worsened and he was no longer fit to

live with the kids. Mike scarcely missed a beat. He got interested in ham radio, then decided to build an eighty-foot tower to maximize range. Ori Jean bit her lip as she watched Mike put up the first ten-foot section, then the second. By the time he was teetering at forty feet, she could no longer stand it and got in her car and drove away; she still doesn't remember where. When she returned home, there was an eighty-foot tower on her property.

When Mike was sixteen, a blind friend invited him to check out his parents' Honda 90 motorbike. The boys drove it up and down the driveway, learning to use the gears. Then they had an epiphany: If they could just drive it to the school grounds, they could ride gloriously unimpeded around the track. Mike got on the front, his friend sat on the back. They turned off the engine, listened for traffic, then started the bike and drove across the street. They repeated the procedure numerous times--engine off, listen, engine on, ride--until they arrived at the school. On the track, they began to circle slowly, getting a feel for the arcs of the turns. Soon they had the Honda cruising, opening the throttle on the straightaways. A police siren wailed. Mike managed to stop the bike. He told the policeman that he and his friend were blind. The cop flat-out didn't believe him. Mike finally proved it by showing him his braille watch. The officer told the boys he had to call this one in, that they could have killed someone. He kept lecturing, but Mike could hear a certain admiration in his voice, too. The officer walked the boys and their bike home. He didn't tell their parents. He didn't call it in.

And this is how it went for Mike as his youth unfolded. He drove his sister's Datsun 510 up and down the driveway. He joined the wrestling team. He used echolocation to hold his own in Ping-Pong. He played guitar. The more he did, the harder it got for him to imagine stopping there, and this held true even when his experiences had rough endings, even when he crashed into poles or fell off bikes, and soon Mike got to thinking that as long as he could try things he'd always be okay.

After high school, May enrolled at the University of California at Davis. On his way to a degree in political science, he played intramural soccer, dated girls, and lived in a mud-hut village in Ghana. He earned a master's in international affairs from Johns Hopkins, then began wondering what it might be like to work for the CIA. The agency had never employed a blind analyst. That made the place intriguing. The CIA was out of favor politically and had lost its romantic public sheen. That made the place irresistible. They made him a political-risk analyst on Africa. His work was exciting and important, and the agency called on him when tumult hit his countries. Yet, at bottom, the CIA was still government work. No matter his talent, he would always move up the wage-and-promotion ladder predictably. By now, predictability to May was beginning to feel a little like death.

He took technology-based jobs with the Bank of California and TRW. He also learned to ski. Fast. At the 1982 World Winter Games for the Handicapped he stunned competitors by placing his sighted guide--also on skis--just a few feet in front of him; most everyone in the world used guides safely stationed yards behind. May's method allowed for more precise direction but greatly increased the risk of high-speed collision and entanglement. The other skiers did not know that May had been crashing forward his entire life. He won three gold medals.

In 1984, organizers of the Winter Olympic Games in Sarajevo invited amputees to compete in a skiing exhibition but refused the blind; there just wasn't room enough for both skier and guide. That struck May as unfair. He and his guide paid their own way to Sarajevo. He wrangled press passes from KCBS radio in San Francisco, which put them on the mountain. May interviewed athletes, moving from place to place on his skis. After the amputees took their turns, May's guide said, "Hey, Mike, I think we can take our shot." At first, the idea sounded crazy: There were guards everywhere, he was in a foreign country, his own organization had forbidden his participation. Then he heard the rumbling.

A few minutes later, spectators began pointing to the top of Mount Jahorina. Cheers erupted. May and his guide were flying down the course, the tips of their skis separated by their trademark twenty-four inches, the first blind skier in Olympic history. A Yugoslavian guard stepped onto the finish line and drew his gun. The guide yelled, "Get out of the way!" May knew there was trouble. He crossed the line anyway.

It was in this year, too, that May helped launch his first startup business. He joined several engineers to design and market the world's first laser turntable, a machine that played vinyl records with lasers, not needles, the true precursor to the CD player. The company raised \$7 million from venture capitalists. When investors pulled the plug four years later, May was devastated. But he'd gotten a taste of what it felt like to be a pioneer, a feeling he wanted to last. In between, he set the world speed record in downhill skiing by the totally blind--sixty-five miles per hour.

The record still stands.

At around the same time, May met a woman who had volunteered as a ski guide for the blind. He was immediately drawn to Jennifer for her overarching curiosity about the world and her attraction to the artistic. He could tell by the reactions of others that she was a looker, too. They began dating. She found him charismatic and a wonderful conversationalist. He took her to ride horses, sightsee in Europe, ski in South America. Best of all for May, she didn't seem overly impressed by his capabilities as a blind man.

May tried a few other start-ups before founding Sendero Group, maker of a handheld braille-and-talking GPS tool for the blind. Early on, he trained a blind Vietnam vet on the device; the guy's fondest wish was to go to the grocery store by himself. He and May followed its prompts to the store. When they arrived, the man borrowed May's cell phone and called his wife. "Is there anything I can get you from the store?" he asked, and May heard an immense pride in the man's question. He knew then that Sendero Group was the most worthwhile endeavor he could have dreamed for himself and that growing and nurturing this business was the most important thing he could do. To consider Dr. Goodman's offer of new vision, at such a critical juncture for his business, in the midst of so finely balanced and rewarding a life, at such great risk to his health, seemed the very definition of crazy.

Then he heard the rumbling. For forty-three years, he had lived his life one way, by crashing through at that most fleeting of moments, at the time when the world stopped just long enough to allow a person to decide whether to stand still or leap forward.

He called Dr. Goodman.

"Dan," he said. "I'm in."

Macondray Lane is swallowing May. He stops to examine a stone bench outside one residence, a vaguely crooked balcony at another, and a cast-iron lamppost at a third. He lifts away overhanging vegetation as if it were a wedding veil. He marvels at the size of things.

"Look at that huge eucalyptus tree!" he says. "It must be eight feet in diameter. And look how the lane narrows. You can almost touch the front doors on both sides of the street at the same time. This is the kind of place trolls might live."

May is cutting it close for his appointment with Dr. Goodman. He is already overdue by three months, which is not like him. And this one is important. Still, May won't rush. There are a million things to absorb on Macondray.

"We'll be fine," he says. "Let's keep looking."

Dr. Goodman explained the surgery in detail to May. There would be two operations, each on his only remaining eye, the right eye. The first, a transplant of corneal limbal stem cells from a donor cadaver, had been conceived by a Colombian doctor as early as the mid-1960s but had only recently become practical in application. Corneal limbal stem cells provide a clear protective surface over the cornea, the window to the eye. Like all adult stem cells, they constantly divide and grow new cells to replace the old ones that have sloughed off and fallen away. That replenishing keeps the surface of the cornea clear. Without these cells, the cornea becomes like a dirty windshield in a car without washer fluid to clean the surface.

The chemical burns that robbed May of his sight also had destroyed his ability to make these stem cells. That is why May was never supposed to see again. But when doctors figured out, in the early 1990s, how to transplant the cells from the eyes of donor cadavers, things began to change. May's donor had been a young kid killed in a motorcycle accident--a frequent kind of contributor. The donor cells, if they took, would function as if they were May's own, dividing and replenishing, and would allow the surface of his cornea to remain clear, possibly for his lifetime.

May would then go on a program of immunosuppression drugs to keep the stem cells from being rejected. In the near future, science might be able to grow a person's own corneal limbal stem cells in a petri dish, thereby eliminating the risk of rejection. But for now May would have to wait months until his body accepted the donor

cells. After the cells took, he would have a second surgery--a routine corneal transplant. Fewer than five hundred people in the world had undergone the stem-cell procedure. Dr. Goodman knew of none who had been blind for life. But if it all worked, May's sight might be restored, even to 20/20.

Goodman placed the first-year chances for success at 50 percent. The medical risks were as May remembered them: loss of light perception, spontaneous cell rejection, and side effects from drugs, including possible kidney failure, liver failure, and cancer.

There were other risks, these harder to quantify. Goodman told May that while there had been only a handful of patients in written history who had gained sight after a lifetime of blindness, many of them had suffered depression in the aftermath. Goodman had come to know May since meeting him nearly a year before and said he believed May could handle the outcome emotionally. But he also warned that even with a perfect anatomic result, the visual outcome was uncertain. Little was known about the nature of long-standing visual deprivation. The mystery, Goodman said, was whether vision for May would be the same as vision for the normally sighted.

Ordinarily, May, a man of great curiosity and resourcefulness, would have researched the case histories and made himself an expert on new vision. Instead, he confirmed the date of the surgery with Goodman, then resolved not to learn very much at all. He was in this for the experience, and he would not skew his own adventure by ingesting the reactions of others. "I don't expect this to change my life," he told his friend Bashin. "I do expect it to be interesting."

But history had amassed against May. Woven into obscure medical texts and out-of-print monographs on the subject of restored sight, a single truth emerged: Nobody messes with new vision after a lifetime of blindness and comes out of it okay. Nobody.

In 1688, a Dubliner named William Molyneux posed a now classic question to his friend, the philosopher John Locke. He asked Locke to imagine an adult who had been blind for life and who had been taught to distinguish between a cube and a sphere by touch alone. If such a man were then made to see, could he distinguish, by sight alone, the cube from the sphere?

Molyneux argued that such a man could not distinguish between the two by sight alone. Locke agreed, as did Bishop George Berkeley, another of the day's giants of philosophy. Their reasoning boiled down to this: Experience with vision was a necessary component of sight. Without visual experience, one could not truly see.

History records only about twenty cases of sight restored to a person blinded for a lifetime. There are a few dozen more cases in which long-blind patients who'd once had useful vision regained their sight. The experience of both groups is largely similar. Together, they form a landscape for the kind of fate that looked to await Mike May.

Many patients experienced an initial euphoria as light rushed into their repaired eyes. They saw color and motion immediately--a miracle. But they soon discovered that they could not perceive space; they could not perceive height, distance, depth, or three-dimensional shapes. Steps looked to be a collection of parallel lines drawn on a floor. Cups and plates seemed a group of circles. The moon was a "white round thing ... as near as someone standing nearby." The patients were, essentially, seeing the world in two dimensions.

Spatial perception was just part of the problem. The newly sighted also found it difficult to make sense of an object by sight alone, to see an object as meaningful rather than as just a pattern. And this was true even if they'd had a lifetime of experience touching and using that object. One patient saw his familiar radio as a "red mark," his window frames as a "series of lines." Another was shown a cross. She was able to identify the length, breadth, and even the shape. But she could not give the object the name "cross"--it did not have that meaning to her--even though she had traced the shape across her torso daily in religious ritual. It looked as if the philosophers had been right: Visual experience was necessary in order to truly see.

But where was one to get such experience? It turns out that the visual experience needed by the newly sighted person is not the kind he simply can accumulate after surgery. The experience he needs is the kind compiled and assembled in early childhood, while the brain is still fantastically plastic and capable of assimilating massive

amounts of information. Young children process trillions of visual and other sensory experiences in their earliest years to form a meaningful and predictive picture of the world. Newly sighted adults cannot do this. Their brains, like the brains of all adults, are much less flexible. That's why adults find it so much harder to learn a foreign language than young children do. The newly sighted person cannot hope to amass and incorporate even a fraction of the experience of a small child. Yet without that experience, his world cannot help but look like an abstract painting, a colorful collection of flat and meaningless shapes.

Lacking the power of experience, the newly sighted person takes in the universe in ways the rest of us can't imagine. When he opens his eyes, he is bombarded by information, most of it too abundant and complex to process. Even if he manages to keep up, he cannot readily distinguish important information from the trivial. Nor can he perceive how parts fit together to form a whole. Objects seem to run together. "Three days after surgery," writes neurologist Oliver Sacks in his classic study, *Virgil and his wife* "had gone to an IGA, and Virgil had seen shelves, fruit, cans, people, aisles, carts--so much that he got scared. He needed to get out of the store and close his eyes for a bit."

The ability to read facial expressions and detect gender--hugely important human traits that begin developing in infancy--is severely impaired in the newly sighted, a potentially devastating blow. "I cannot say whether a person is beautiful or ugly, nor what expressions he has," one patient said in *Sight Restoration After Long-term Blindness*, a monograph published by the American Foundation for the Blind in 1971. Others dreamed of people without faces.

Such were the physical and experiential problems associated with new sight. They might have been the least of the patients' worries. There was a world of psychological issues looming, any one of which seemed enough to undo a person.

The very prospect of learning to use new vision could be overwhelming. "This is too long and unhappy a road, leading one into a strange world," a patient said. Others felt dislodged from their previously comfortable existence. "How comes it that I now find myself less happy than before?" asked another patient. "Oh, I was much more at ease in my blindness!"

A patient might begin to feel as though he belonged neither to the sighted world nor the blind world. Or he might buckle under expectations from his family or society, who had expected him to see as the sighted do. Some expected hallelujahs and new lives. Their letdowns crashed heavy.

Some patients lost confidence. Once able to move assuredly about the world, they now saw danger in speeding automobiles and swooping birds. Others seemed shaken by how different objects seemed than they had presumed them to be. Vision also delivered ugly images. One man was distressed by the sight of another blind man walking in the street. Professor Richard Gregory told how his subject, S. B., had become disturbed by the sight of chipped paint. While blind, he had conceived the world as perfect, as a sort of heaven. The sight of imperfection in the form of chipped paint shattered that conception for him.

The final tally was devastating: Patients who had their sight restored after years of blindness suffered from depression, most often severe. The crisis might express itself in weeping spells, anger, irritability, even a clawing at the eyes. Some patients resisted further progress. Others refused to use their vision. In Gregory's celebrated case, S. B. simply withered and died.

The case histories go on and on, and the more you read, the better you understand how it must be so, how human nature cannot help but buckle under the weight of new vision, a gift nothing like what anyone could imagine it to be.

And yet when you look deeper into the lives of those patients, especially in Sacks's and Gregory's detailed accounts, you notice that none of these patients lived to leap forward, none of them hunted experience, none of them seemed the type to open the throttle of a Honda 90 on the straightaway of his high school running track.

None of them heard the rumbling.

Near the end of Macondray Lane, May turns and takes a last look at the path he has traversed. "I think people walk

by this place every day and don't know it's here," he says. Then he makes his way to a twisting set of wooden stairs, walks down, and emerges at Taylor Street. He unfolds his red-tipped cane, plugs in his company's talking-and-braille GPS unit, and programs the machine to guide him to Dr. Goodman's office.

"We've got one more big climb," he says. "But we'll make it."

In November 1999, May entered the hospital for the first of the surgeries. Goodman scraped off the bulk of the scar tissue and transplanted a doughnut of stem cells into May's eye. Goodman sent May home to allow the cells to take. He got sick from the anti-rejection drugs. There was no visual benefit.

Four months later, Ori Jean arrived at Mike's house to care for his two sons. May and Jennifer were due at Dr. Goodman's office the next morning for the second surgery, the one for sight. The corneal transplant was routine. Goodman placed bandages over May's eye and told him to come back the next morning for a quick exam. May figured it would be weeks before the bandages finally came off.

The next day, Goodman sat May in an examining chair and pulled off the bandages. He held open May's eye. Torrents of light rushed in and the world lit up, shiny objects whooshed against a dark wall, and a person--a person!--with arms and legs and a white coat stepped aside, it was all pouring in, the person stepped aside and there were flashes, everything was everywhere, and it was all light and colors, every color, and May saw Jennifer, and he knew it was her, and he looked at her hair because he knew she was blond, and he finally put together his thought, everything was still rushing in, and his thought was this, his thought was, Okay, that's blond.

"Holy smoke," May said.

"Can you see a little bit?" Goodman asked.

"I sure can," May said.

Goodman brought Jennifer to May's chair.

"Hi, sweetie," she said, her voice trembling. "Uh-oh, you're making a funny face!"

May looked into Jennifer's eyes. He reached for her shoulders and found them perfectly. He pulled her toward him.

"Come, baby!" May said. He kissed her.

May stared at Jennifer's face. He could see her cheeks bunched up, and he knew that bunched-up cheeks meant a smile. He saw her nose but needed to touch it to understand how it looked. He stared longer. She was definitely smiling.

May asked Dr. Goodman about a shiny object across the room. Goodman told him that it was a mirror. May stood up and walked gingerly across the room to the mirror. For the first time in forty-three years, he saw himself.

"Oh, what an ugly cuss," he joked.

"What do you see?" asked Jennifer. "Do you see your beard?"

"I can see my cheeks raising up and my beard, dark shirt..."

"That's navy blue."

"Navy blue."

May looked longer. The sight of his beard felt strange to him, this dark splotch on a light-colored face. And he thought, That guy looks tall.

May looked at everything in the office, and everything was fascinating. Light and information kept blasting in, and he wanted to keep up with it all, to catalog this incredible parade. When Goodman finally sent him on his way, he could not take a step down the hallway without asking Jennifer, "What's this? What's that?" He touched everything. Is that a step? Is that a flower? That's a painting? Let me feel it. Can I touch that plant? Let me touch a car. That's a red zone on the street. I can see the red."

Driving home, the world rushed in. He saw a tree that Jennifer told him was, in fact, a cement divider. He saw exit signs and recognized letters but could not read the words. He saw the water below a bridge and that the water was moving. He told Jennifer, "I'm thrilled. It's endless. This is thrilling."

An hour later, Jennifer pulled the car into their driveway in Davis. May's two boys, eight-year-old Carson and six-year-old Wyndham, were in the backyard playing. They ran into the house, said, "Hi, Dad," and scrambled upstairs to play in their rooms.

"Wait, I can see now!" May called after them.

The boys kept going, and May loved that-it was no big deal to them. He asked them to bring him their homework and drawings. He wanted to see the blues of their eyes. He'd always heard that they were different blues, one deep and the other pale, and he wanted to see what this blue was all about. The boys ran downstairs and climbed into May's lap. He saw both blues. He asked Carson, "Where's that missing tooth?" Carson opened his mouth, and there was the black space next to a bunch of white teeth. Carson showed him a spider. Wyndham showed him a ceramic dish he'd made. They showed him a picture book of animals and asked him to guess which ones were which. May got the camel right, but the rest he didn't know. He'd call a dog a horse, which made the boys laugh hard and May laugh harder.

Ori Jean took in the whole scene. May had not seen his mother since he was three years old. He stood and moved toward her. He looked into her eyes and took her hands and felt her face. He didn't say much of anything. He just kept looking and touching and looking and touching.

May's older sister showed up later. On the way to his house, she'd purchased a rubber nose and glasses and a crazy wig. May opened the door and felt his sister's face.

"You haven't changed a bit," he said.

Anatomically, May's eye was near perfect. His vision was about 20/80. He could see buildings from hundreds of yards away but also the grain in a piece of wood and the wisps of hair on Jennifer's arm. His ability, to see detail from any kind of distance was weak, though his vision was not blurry. Like the patients in the case histories, he could distinguish color and detect motion excellently but struggled to perceive space and to see height, distance, depth, and three-dimensional shapes. To May, the moon looked like a big streetlamp. He made very little of faces or facial expressions. Why did faces look so spastic when people spoke? And faces told him nothing about a person's gender. Information rushed in, much of it too complex and too fast to process. All of it fascinated him. All of it felt like an adventure.

He seized on the practical advantages immediately. At a business conference just two weeks after surgery, he stood in line at the hotel without his cane and marveled at the power of knowing when to move forward without asking. He rode elevators for the pleasure of finding the lobby after the ride. In conversation, faces flapped and eyelashes flickered so distractingly that he had to close his eyes to concentrate. A woman's low-cut top proved especially interesting.

A few days later, Wyndham asked him to play catch in the backyard. The conditions were excellent: sunny day, green grass, white-and-black soccer ball. Wyndham kicked the ball, and May could see it rising off the grass and moving toward his right, and he found himself moving to the right, too, and he got near the ball before it skidded by

him. He missed a few more. Wyndham kicked another ball, this one to the left by ten feet. May ran and jumped into the air, reaching his hands above his head. The ball hit his fingertips, and he pushed his hands together, pushed them as hard as he could, and the ball stuck there, and it kept sticking even after May hit the ground. "Nice catch, Dad," Wyndham said. By the end of the day, May had caught twenty balls. That night, he told Jennifer he felt like a kid again but that the best part was that he and Wyndham had played exactly as they'd played since the day Wyndham had been born.

May wanted to touch everything. Even when he could clearly perceive and identify all object, he felt as though he couldn't truly see it until he touched it. Molyneux, Locke, and Berkeley had been right: May could not distinguish a sphere from a cube by sight alone. After he touched it, then he could see it.

He continued to struggle to see things in three dimensions, and his world stayed much like an abstract painting, a huge collection of colorful, flattened shapes that didn't always make sense. Information flooded his head, a never-ending flow that he could sometimes stem only by closing his eyes. High-speed events, such as the passing of cars and bicycles, became frightening; his brain simply didn't have time to interpret the information. Things often looked very close, scary close. Previous patients had been undone by these kinds of threats. May told himself that this was part of the adventure, that the leap forward wasn't really a leap at all if everything felt safe. He began to contemplate skiing without his guide.

Every day seemed like a new adventure. Once, while walking to get a haircut, May smashed into a gray concrete bench that he couldn't distinguish from the gray sidewalk--depth again. The collision tore the skin on his leg and face. At the salon, for the first time in his life, he saw his own blood, a brilliant red swirl in a stylist's sink. On another occasion, while flying on business, he told the woman seated next to him about his surgery. She asked if he could identify her eye color. She leaned in very close. May had never before looked closely into a stranger's eyes. He was overwhelmed with emotion and couldn't speak. That day in his journal he wrote, "I understand a bit better now why so much is made of expressions in the eyes as it is talked about and written about passionately and poetically."

May attended a Santana concert and marveled at how much movement came from the musicians and how closely that movement matched both the sound and the feeling of the music. He watched his first fireworks show, standing down terrible memories of the explosion that had taken his sight at age three. He videotaped Wyndham's Little League baseball games. He gawked at women, sometimes with Jennifer's helpful play-by-play; it might take him five full seconds to identify a halter top, but it was worth it.

Most gratifying, however, was that he seemed to be living life just as he had before the surgery. He ran his business with the same single-minded focus. He traveled to conferences, brainstormed improvements, wrote grant proposals. He still laughed with Jennifer at the same parts in movies, took her to the same restaurants, argued about the same little things. He coached soccer, cooked dinners, and learned to sort laundry. He stayed frustrated that she was disorganized. She stayed frustrated that he couldn't drive. People were astonished, even horrified, to learn that May had not made a list of things to see, despite the fact that he might lose his vision at any moment and without warning. "You literally haven't seen the stars?" people would ask. Too busy, May told them. "You haven't made safari plans?" I've got homework to help with, May said. It would have made no sense for May to tell these people that the best thing was that while vision was fantastically interesting, it hadn't really changed his life.

About six months after his surgeries, May came to the attention of vision scientists, who asked to test him in a laboratory setting. He agreed, expecting it to be interesting. He didn't know the half of it.

Ione Fine and Alex Wade slid May into a functional-magnetic-resonance-imaging scanner, a technology used to measure brain activity. When asked to distinguish colors, detect motion, or identify two-dimensional shapes, the parts of May's brain responsible for processing that information lit up like a pinball machine. But when asked to perceive an object in three dimensions from different angles, distinguish faces from other objects, or identify common objects, the parts of his brain responsible for those bits stayed dark; there simply was no activity. May's eyesight was fine. It was parts of his brain that were no longer working.

Why these parts? The question fascinated Fine and Wade. They spent months with May in the lab. They came to

this answer: The areas of the brain responsible for processing color and motion and for identifying two-dimensional shapes are more primitive, more hardwired into human evolution. They are formed very early and can survive nonuse. The parts of the brain responsible for spatial perception, judging faces, determining gender, and identifying common objects in three dimensions, however, reside in more plastic areas that cannot survive years of darkness.

That made sense to the scientists. Human beings don't encounter new colors or new motion as they go through life. Green is always green. Motion is always distance over time, regardless of our experience of the world. This is the kind of thing the brain seems to take care of earliest, before experience is an issue to humans. But perception of three-dimensional space, facial expressions, and common objects--these rely on a very sophisticated knowledge of the grammar of the world, on tiny clues highly dependent on context and experience. Knowing whether someone is happy based on a one-millimeter shift in her upper lip or that the slight difference in shading on an object means that it is thicker than a virtually identical object is not instinctive; it is learned. Without the nourishment of such learning, the parts of the brain responsible for those processes go dark. And, Fine and Wade told May, they were likely never to come back.

That meant May would have to use cumbersome work-arounds to see much of what sighted people see automatically. He would have to build a database of clues--earrings, long hair, plucked eyebrows--to help determine gender by face. He would have to employ usable context--an orange, round blob on a basketball court is most likely a basketball--to identify simple objects. He would have to spend time thinking about whether a skyscraper was a big thing far away or a little thing close up. All of it would require massive cognitive effort, the prospect of which had been enough to threaten the emotional well-being of May's predecessors.

"He put huge amounts of work into all this," Fine says. "We could see him laboring. We knew about all the depression in the case histories. We kept asking him, 'How are you feeling? Are you okay?' And Mike would look up with that smile of his and say, 'I'm fine. What's the problem?' And he just kept working."

May continued his adventure, even as his life unfolded much as it had before the surgery. He experimented with binoculars, which brought vistas rushing closer. He soloed on Jennifer's bicycle for a half mile after Carson assured him he would call 911 if May got hit by a car or flipped over a pile of leaves. During a camping trip, his sons talked about the stars. After he put them to bed, he took his binoculars out to a field, lay on his back, and finally looked to the sky. The sight was wondrous, but the part that really moved May was that it was his sons who had inspired him to look. The blind community embraced him. And in 2001, Sendero Group received a \$2.25 million grant, an event May told people was among the most important in his life. He had promised his sons to do something dramatic if the grant came through. He let them shave off his beard. They all looked at his strange, smooth face in the mirror for what seemed like a very long time.

May arrives on time at Goodman's office. Near the examining room, a woman with a guide dog asks, "Is that you, Mike?" May stops and says, "Yes, it's me." The woman is there to consult with Goodman about sight-restoration surgery. She asks, in so many words, how May has been handling it.

May takes her hand. He does not promise her the moon. He says nothing of a new life. Instead, he tells her that if she's the kind of person who embraces change, sight can be an incredibly interesting experience.

"But I'm still Mike May," he says.

In the examining room, Goodman and May discuss their kids' Little Leagues and compare opinions on Barry Bonds. Goodman then dims the lights and uses sensitive equipment to look into May's eye.

For minutes, Goodman doesn't say a word. May's expression never changes. Then Goodman steps away and brightens the lights.

"All healthy," Goodman says. "Things are looking nice."

Kurson, Robert

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Kurson, Robert. "Into the light: Michael May had everything. Happy marriage, great family, successful business. He was even a world-class athlete. What kind of a man would upset such a perfect life by doing something as crazy as trying to get his sight back?" *Esquire* June 2005: 114+. *General OneFile*. Web. 17 Dec. 2013.

Document URL

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA132676025&v=2.1&u=lom_accessmich&it=r&p=ITOF&sw=w&asid=65ceaa5e5b4bd4aefc5b85f01eef7ba

Gale Document Number: GALE|A132676025

[Top of page](#)

Title: When seeing prevents believing; blind for 43 years, Mike May is reborn into a world of colour, motion and mystifying faces

Author(s): Brian Bethune

Source: Maclean's. 120.19 (May 21, 2007): p70.

Document Type: Book review

Full Text:

Discuss - is this true? (of or pertaining to the most perfect embodiment of something)

*Humans are quint-essentially visual animals. To see means to understand in human language: for us a picture really is worth a thousand words. Our most celebrated miracle workers, religious and medical, are those who bring sight to the blind. Most of us can't conceive of a calamity, short of death itself, worse than losing our vision, or of a gift greater than its restoration. Most of us, that is, except for the long-term blind themselves.

Crashing Through (Random House) is Robert Kurzon's mesmerizing account of technology entrepreneur Mike May, blind since 3, and his recovery of his sight 43 years later **through** a revolutionary stem-cell procedure. May's predecessors were few in number-since an instance in Arabia in 1020, only 20 cases have been recorded of people regaining vision in adulthood after being blinded as young as May-but united in their surprising unhappiness. Each one struggled with the newfound ability, and each one was catapulted into emotional upheaval and depression.

Sidney Bradford, a Briton who lost his vision at 10 months and recovered it 51 years later in 1958, was a classic case. Bradford was known for his cheerful confidence: he wielded a circular saw with aplomb, strolled **through** traffic and rode a bicycle (with one hand on a fellow cyclist's shoulder). When psychologist Richard Gregory visited him the day after the operation, Bradford was still intoxicated with colour and motion, but Gregory soon found problems beneath the surface gaiety.

On a walk, Bradford was terrified by the traffic he once manoeuvred with ease. In a museum, he recognized an object only after he was allowed to handle it. Then touch made sense of vision: "Now that I've felt it I can see it," he exulted. Worst of all, no matter how hard he tried, faces meant nothing to Bradford-he couldn't recognize individuals or gender or emotion. When his wife smiled, Kurzon reports, "Bradford knew neither that she was happy nor even that it was she." He grew ever more depressed. Just 19 months after his surgery, aged 54 and perfectly fit, he died. In Gregory's mind, Bradford "simply gave up and let go."

May, too, was a blind high achiever, a champion skier and former CIA analyst of remarkable courage and intense curiosity. Although he felt no pressing need to see, certainly not his loved ones, whom he knew well by touch, there were some untouchable things he wanted to see: panoramic views and, less poetically, women at topless beaches. Kurzon recreates the moment of (literal) enlightenment in a lovely

piece of writing that conveys May's surging joy as his remaining eye came back to life. "A cataclysm of white light exploded into May's eye and his skin and his blood and his nerves and his cells; it was everywhere, it was always moving and always still, and someone inside him made him laugh."

But Bradford's frustrations soon be devilled May as well. Depth, perspective and shadows defeated him; he could not tell his two sons apart by their faces. The fault, vision scientists were now able to tell him, lay not in his eye but in his brain. Humans don't passively see what's before them, but impose a vast body of prior learning on images in order to make sense of them. That's why babies handle, taste and poke everything they meet, building a library of information about the nature of their world. And that's why May is not fooled by optical illusions or repelled by images that twist human features. Those visual tricks work by exploiting the gap between what's actually present and the brain's expectation of what it ought to be seeing-a gap that simply doesn't exist in May.

Children devote billions of neurons and years of unconscious effort to distinguishing and reading faces. It's one of their hardest tasks-even teenagers still have trouble with some adult expressions. But all that brain-power had never been switched on in May. Not visually, anyway; in all likelihood the neurons had changed jobs, and busied themselves boosting May's sense of touch and fine-tuning his exceptional powers of echolocation. And they weren't coming back

It was a horrible, depressing shock. But unlike Bradford, May was not about to go gentle into that good night. He studied endless strings of visual clues, like the differences between plucked and natural eyebrows, that signal gender and identity, and slowly learned how to distinguish individuals, even if he's not always successful. What comes naturally for most of us will always be a struggle for May, and it's all the more precious for that.

Bethune, Brian

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Bethune, Brian. "When seeing prevents believing; blind for 43 years, Mike May is reborn into a world of colour, motion and mystifying faces." *Maclean's* 21 May 2007: 70. *General Reference Center GOLD*. Web. 9 Jan. 2013.

Document URL

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA163739186&v=2.1&u=lom_accessmich&it=r&p=GRGM&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALE|A163739186

Poodles to Purple Numbers from Pi Press provided a lively primer in the miracle of the brain.

Sight recovery after a lifetime of blindness is extraordinarily rare. For accounts of those cases (the first dates back about a thousand years) I relied on M. Von Senden's hard-to-find book *Space and Sight* from Methuen & Co., and Alberto Valvo's equally rare pamphlet "Sight Restoration after Long-Term Blindness: The Problems and Behavior Patterns of Visual Rehabilitation," from American Foundation for the Blind. For the case of Virgil, I read Oliver Sacks's beautiful article "To See and Not See," originally published in *The New Yorker* and taken from his book *An Anthropologist on Mars*, published by Vintage Books. I learned the case of Sidney Bradford from Gregory's seminal paper, "Recovery from Early Blindness: A Case Study," written with Jean Wallace and published in the "Experimental Psychology Society Monograph No. 2," and from interviews I did with Gregory in England.

I came to understand the technical and scientific details of May's own case through extensive interviews with Fine, Boynton, Wade, MacLeod, and Dr. Daniel F. Goodman. Invaluable to me was Fine's groundbreaking paper "Long-term Deprivation Affects Visual Perception and Cortex," published in *Nature Neuroscience*, volume 6, number 9.

The revolutionary and complex stem cell surgery that restored May's vision was explained to me by Dr. Edward J. Holland, director of Cornea Services at the Cincinnati Eye Institute and professor of clinical ophthalmology at the University of Cincinnati; Dr. Ali Djalilian, assistant professor of ophthalmology at the University of Illinois at Chicago; and by Dr. Goodman, the ophthalmologist who performed the operation on May.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

I spent hundreds of hours over two years interviewing Mike May: at his home in Davis, California; alongside him during his business trips to Chicago, Washington, D.C., Sacramento, San Francisco, London, Los Angeles, Kalamazoo, and the Kirkwood Ski Resort in the California mountains; and by telephone and Internet during his travels to Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Central and South America.

Jennifer May granted me dozens of hours of interview time, both at her home in Davis and by phone. Carson and Wyndham May popped in and out of interview sessions to add memories of the year in which their father gained vision. I interviewed May's family, friends, and teachers to learn about his life.

Human vision—and the brain's role in it—is a massively complex subject. It was explained to me in person by Dr. Richard Gregory in England; Professors Ione Fine, Geoff Boynton, and Donald MacLeod in San Diego; Dr. Alex Wade at the Smith-Kettlewell Eye Research Institute in San Francisco; and Dr. Steven Shevell at the University of Chicago. I benefited greatly from the textbook *Sensation and Perception* (sixth edition) by E. Bruce Goldstein, published by Wadsworth; I can't remember reading a textbook at once so engaging and educational. For the role of knowledge in vision, I read Richard L. Gregory's books *Eye and Brain: The Psychology of Seeing* from Princeton University Press, and *The Intelligent Eye* from McGraw Hill, as well as his monograph "Knowledge for vision: vision for knowledge" from *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*. V. S. Ramachandran's *A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness: From Imposter*

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Mike has often said that his life story is as much about his mother as it is about himself. Why is this?
2. Do you think you would allow your children to take the risks that Ori Jean allowed Mike to take?
3. Mike compiled a big list of reasons to decline new vision. He could list only one reason to go forward: curiosity. Why was curiosity so important to Mike?
4. There came a time when Mike's struggle with his new vision became so difficult that he nearly destroyed his anti-rejection medication. Why didn't he simply let his vision go and return to his very full and satisfying life as a blind person?
5. Mike chose not to read about his predecessors in history, all of whom seemed to suffer a profound depression for having dared to see after a lifetime of blindness. Why did he ignore these case histories?
6. How would you describe Mike's new vision? Is it what he, and the scientists, expected? How is his sight different from traditional sight, and what challenges does his new vision pose?
7. Robert Kurson describes the world Mike sees as similar to a modern abstract painting. How is this so?
8. Describe Mike's relationship with his wife, Jennifer, before and after the surgery. What challenges does vision pose in their relationship?

9. Early in Mike's new vision, he is astonished to learn that highway signs hang over the road and that stop signs aren't yellow. What are some other visual aspects of our world that sighted people take for granted and never discuss?
10. How do Mike's children react to their father's new vision? Was it what you expected? Was it how you would expect your children to react? Is it how you might have reacted if it was your father who came home with new vision?
11. Why do you think those patients who came before Mike had such bad results emotionally? Why do you think Mike's results were so different?
12. In what ways, if any, was Mike worse off for gaining vision? Were there things he saw that he wished he hadn't seen?
13. Were you surprised at Mike's reactions to the sight of certain things? The homeless? The heavyset person in Costco?
14. Dr. Ione Fine must teach Mike to do a lot of "cognitive heavy lifting" in order to make sense of what he sees. What is meant by this? How does Mike teach himself to see?
15. The book often stresses that vision is dependent on knowledge. How is that possible? What is the implication for Mike's new vision?
16. If you were in Mike's place, and given all the risks he faced, would you have gone forward with new vision?
17. Discuss the significance of the title *Crashing Through*. Have you ever had a similar experience in your own life, of meeting challenges by throwing yourself headlong into a risky adventure?

September 2013

<http://www.nobhillgazette.com>
Living Legends

Mike May Doesn't Do Miracles

by Jane Ganahl

When **Mike May**—blind since toddlerhood—opted to have the risky surgery that would restore his sight, he didn't do it to make headlines or to salvage a life that was miserable. "My life was already pretty great," says the 59-year-old technology executive and inventor. "But I'd lived my life as a pioneer, so getting the operation was grist for the mill."

Since losing his sight at age three in a chemical explosion, May had indeed defied all expectations: he broke world records in downhill speed skiing, joined the CIA, participated in the Olympics, and became a successful entrepreneur and family man. He never saw himself as disabled.

"I never sat around wishing I could see," he tells us. "But then I met a doctor in 1999 who was one of the few doing stem cell transplants. I wasn't even looking for a doctor and met him by chance."

In fact, he had accompanied his ex-wife, **Jennifer**, to her routine eye doctor appointment on Post Street when he happened to meet Dr. **Dan Goodman**, who asked to examine him after hearing his story. Upon doing so, he dropped the bombshell: there was a good chance that, with surgery, May would be able to see again. A new stem cell transplant procedure was in development for only a fraction of cases, and the blindness that May had experienced, which was caused by a chemical burn, made him a good candidate for a reversal.

One would imagine that such news would be cause for wild celebration, but May greeted it instead with thought and reflection. "I thanked him and said I'd like to think about it," says May. After all, he knew that even if the surgery worked, history was against him. At that time, fewer than 20 cases were known worldwide in which a person gained vision after a lifetime of blindness.

Besides, he had already accomplished so much as a blind person, both with product development and national public speaking on behalf of the blind—he has, to date, met four presidents—in addition to acts of heroism, many of which are explored in the biography written about May's life, *Crashing Through: A True Story of Risk, Adventure, and the Man Who Dared to See*, by journalist **Robert Kurson**.

As a blind downhill skier, May set the speed skiing record for a totally blind person (65 miles per hour), won six international medals, and was featured in a **Warren Miller** ski movie and on

ABC's Wide World of Sports. Still unsatisfied, May decided to crash the 1984 Olympics in Sarajevo.

"There was a chain of circumstances that led us there," he says. "We wanted to be part of the first disabled ski run, but blind people were not allowed. So we got press passes from CBS to report on it, and after everyone had gone, my guide said, 'let's just go!' So we did, and it was great—up until the moment a guy appeared at the finish line with a rifle pointed at us. That was a rather dramatic end to it," he laughs.

"Anyway, we stole the show and the media were all over us. Our escapade evolved into what is now the current Paralympics."

After getting his master's degree from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, May worked for the Central Intelligence Agency as a political risk analyst, for the Bank of California in automating wire transfers and cash machines, and for TRW, where he forged a new business area. His start-up ventures have included developing the world's first and only laser turntable, inventing a portable heating cushion for sports and medical applications, and starting up two companies, which incorporate adaptive technology for the blind. One of those was the Sendero Group—which made the first accessible GPS for the blind—in 1999, the same year that he began his journey back to sight.

He decided to go for the surgery, despite knowing it could mean a painful and lengthy rehabilitation process. After the bandages were removed, May was able to see his two young sons for the first time, and his then-wife's face. "It was a pretty incredible time," he says. "The first time I saw anything—ocean waves, my kids, any of those firsts—it was incredibly fascinating."

As word spread about May's new ability to see, albeit imperfectly, he found himself at the center of a media storm. "I had to be careful with the blindness community—I didn't want it to sound like I thought that regaining my sight was the greatest thing ever," he says. "It was not a Biblical event, not a miracle. I was asked to appear on both the Oprah and Geraldo television shows, and I had to say, 'No, I don't do miracle shows.'"

And now, ten-plus years later, May's vision is roughly the same as it was immediately after his surgery. In fact, in some ways, it has improved. "With experience I've learned to make more out of the vision I do have. For example, if I see an object, I don't know at first if it's a motorcycle or a person. In the beginning, figuring that out might have taken me ten seconds, and now it takes two seconds."

And still he continues to press for better tools for the blind—including the GPS his company invented.

"It's a GPS that talks and gives directions, which greatly enhances accessibility for the blind," he enthuses. "We're in the process of making adjustments now to adapt it to smart phones, and, unfortunately, the iPhone model isn't driven by high quantity and low cost, so we can't price it at 99 cents."

May's work has taken him all over the world—especially Washington, D.C., where he served on President Obama's White House delegation to the 2010 Paralympics, and met with the President in 2009 regarding accessible technology for the disabled.

Although his main residence and his company are located in Davis, San Francisco is in his heart. For one thing, he met his new love there. "Her name is **Gena Harper**, and she's a blind, very successful financial advisor for Morgan Stanley, and she is on the board of Lighthouse for the Blind. She is more than my match in terms of being a go-getter," he laughs.

"I love exploring the city, and my girlfriend and I like to go dancing at the Sir Francis Drake's Starlight Room. They are terrific to us there."

May will never be accused of being complacent in the way he lives his life. He is always pushing boundaries, always reaching beyond. But, he says, that's just him.

"If people had the chance to go to the moon, most wouldn't go," he notes.

Would he go? "In a second!" he laughs.

Jane Ganahl is a Bay Area journalist of 30 years, the author of the memoir, *Naked on the Page*, and co-founder of the Litquake literary festival.