

# FOCUS

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## OVERHEARD

“Wait! You look like one of those Swedish girls who hold pies.”

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35

The amount of time, in seconds, it takes to perform Samuel Beckett's play "Breath." Allegedly, it is the shortest play ever written and performed.

UNCOMMON *folk*

# Science and Fiction

Professor Marc Meyers, an unlikely breed of engineer-novelist, discusses the inspiration behind his newest book — a tale of love, war and struggle, *Chechnya Jihad* shows just how much science there is behind the art of writing.

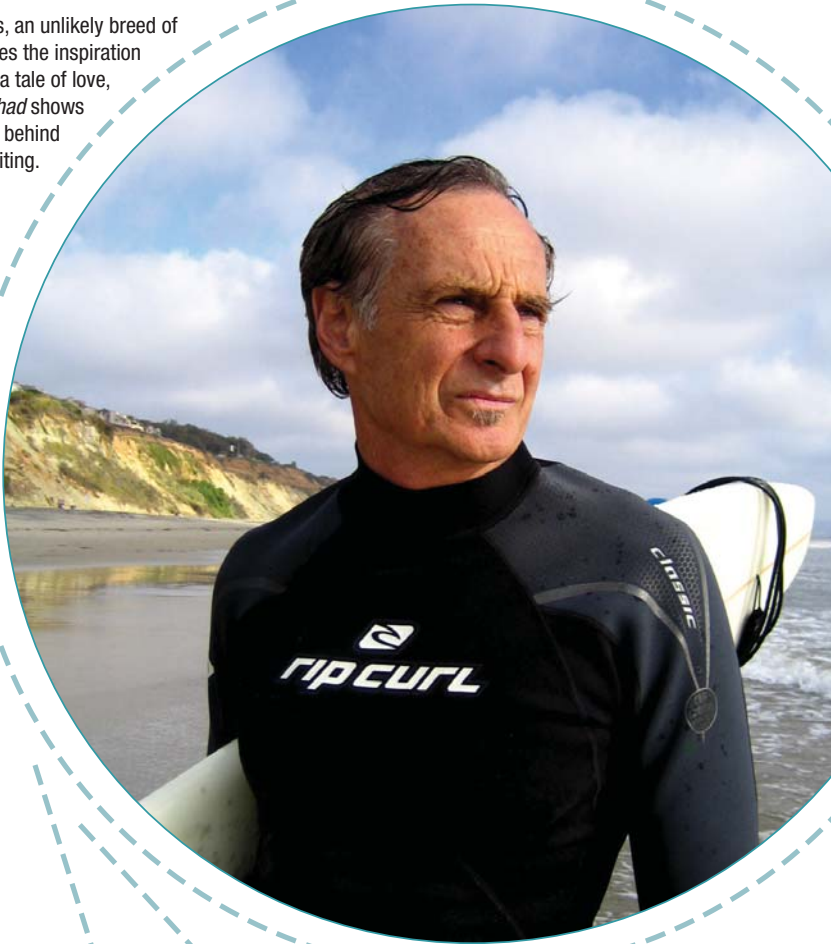
BY MINA NILCHIAN  
ASSOCIATE FOCUS EDITOR

Aerospace Engineering and nanoengineering professor and Brazilian native Marc Meyers has traveled to and studied in various corners of the world — including Germany, the former Soviet Union and New Mexico, where he did intensive work in explosive engineering. Twenty years ago, he arrived at UCSD where he decided to change his field and move away from, as he says, “things that can blow things up,” to focus on nanoscience.

Behind the accolades and honorifics, Meyers is a bit of a free spirit. The back cover of his book features a photo of him at the beach hefting a surfboard, looking beyond at what is sure to be a majestic La Jolla sunset. His desk is a disheveled mess of papers, full of illegible scrawls. His initial concern was not to close the door of his office all the way; “If I wasn’t a guy, it would be okay, you see, but I have to keep it open a little bit,” he said jokingly, surely observing some university policy regarding appropriate student-professor relationships.

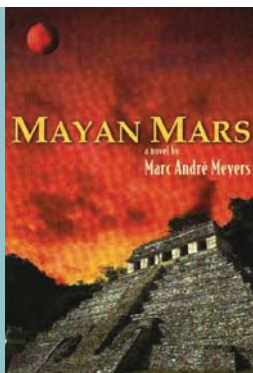
But what truly sets Meyers apart from his colleagues, other than perhaps an especially cosmopolitan background, is partly unrelated to his field study. The engineer has just released his second novel, *Chechnya Jihad*.

See **MEYERS**, page 9



### *Mayan Mars, 2006*

Gustavo Chen is a widowed professor who surfs the La Jolla waves in his spare time. But Chen's life soon kicks into high gear — traversing the globe, the academic takes a one-man stand against the Martian viruses threatening to come to earth and form a killer plague.



### *Chechnya Jihad, 2010*

Assistant professor Jean-Claude Delvaux discovers a powerful explosive that's stolen by terrorists. When Delvaux travels to the Middle East to retrieve the explosion, he's swept up in the struggle for Chechen liberation and finds love, violence and Osama bin Laden.

# UCSD Professor Gets Inspiration for Novel From His Own Experiences

► MEYERS, from page 7

Taking place in Chechnya, a small country located in southeast Europe and north of the Caucasus mountains, Meyers tells the story of an assistant professor, Jean-Claude Delvaux, and his accidental discovery of an extremely powerful explosive as well as his travels to the Middle East. In his quest to prevent a catastrophic attack with the very explosives he discovers, Delvaux encounters and becomes a part of the violent struggle for Chechen liberation, witnesses tragedy at the hands of violent extremists, has an encounter with Osama bin Laden and eventually falls in love with a Chechen woman.

Meyers got the inspiration for the illustrious tale back when he traveled to the Soviet Union, specifically to the Caucasus Mountains, where he gained a better understanding of the Middle East and Islam.

"I went to the Soviet Union four times, I went to all these places that organized conferences for explosives," Meyers said. "One of the conferences was in the Caucasus. And that's what I think was the kernel for this novel. It was in a small town and I met the people. They sacrificed a lamb for us."

Meyers' narrative was also influenced by his wife, who is originally from Iran.

"She told me a lot about Islam," Meyers said. "Islam is very often stereotyped in the United States. The image of terrorists blowing things up, that's kind of associated with Islam."

In fact, one of the main plots in the novel is the Chechen struggle for independence at the hands of the Russian government. Some well-known jihadist fighters even make an appearance as characters in the novel, including Osama Bin Laden.

"I have him as a kind of dramatic character, a charismatic character," Meyers said. "He's very tall, he quotes a lot of the Qur'an. Al Zawahiri, his right-hand man, is the more practical, operations guy."

Meyers considers himself something of a maverick in his field: Not many engineering professors have much of an affinity for creative writing.

"I am almost a singularity in terms of engineering professors," Meyers said. "Doctors write books, lawyers write books, but very few engineering professors do."

He's had a passion for both reading and writing from a young age. His taste in literature ranges from Hemingway to Neruda, and his love for writing started as early as when he was 11 years old, when he began writing poetry and was encouraged to pursue writing by his family and his local priest.

"I wanted to become a writer," Meyers said. "That was my first dream. I used to write poetry. It's a talent I had, it comes from my mother's side."

While he eventually decided to pursue engineering (an interest he says he inherited from his father, who was also an engineer) Meyers never abandoned writing altogether — although as a student at Brazil's Federal University of Minas Gerais, during Brazil's military dictatorship in the '60s, the hobby proved dangerous.

"I was in engineering school in my senior year, and it was the year of the dictatorship," Meyers said, who witnessed his friends become targets to the Brazilian intelligence agency. "My poems had gotten published in the print plan for the university. I didn't know that the censors would go down there. They went there and they got the poems and they threatened to arrest me. I went to the United States before anything could get started."

In the past 40 years that he's been living in the United States, he's published two novels and is currently working on his next, *Squid*, which will be about the violence in drug cartels in Mexico (inspired by his trips down to Baja Mexico). While each of Meyers' books take place in different parts of the world and have separate storylines, they do share a common thread: each incorporates the author's engineering knowhow.

His first novel *Mayan Mars*, published in 2006, was about the catastrophic leak of extraterrestrial matter, and was also based on work Meyers was doing in developing technology to

store the dust that collected from an aeronautic mission to Mars. *Chechnya Jihad* addressed Meyers' curiosity while working on explosives in New Mexico as to what would happen if such weapons were stolen.

Meyers insists that, contrary to popular belief, science and creativity can certainly mix; his talent as a writer and abilities as an engineer, he says, are more closely related than one might suspect.

“

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MARC MEYERS  
AUTHOR AND UCSD ENGINEERING PROFESSOR

"In science, I like mostly the creative parts," Meyers said. "Two qualities that I have are curiosity — I'm a very curious person — and I have imagination."

While Meyers has been able to reconcile science and fiction, the mixed reactions from his colleagues have surprised him.

"Some of them are very understanding; some of them don't even want to talk about it," Meyers said. "It's an anathema to them. I thought they would be more supportive."

Still, the author-engineer hopes to bridge the creative divide.

"I think the fact is that many of these engineers never read a book after they got out of college," Meyers said. "They don't read. I'm an anomaly. Maybe I can be an inspiration for them."

The professor urges his students and colleagues of all ilk to look to more creative pursuits; Meyers himself took a UCSD extension course in writing before beginning work on *Chechnya Jihad*. And for him, fiction writing has little to do with the recognition or profit at stake.

"I feel that there are injustices in the world," Meyers said. "And if I write about them I can be able to extract them out of my soul and put them in this framework, and people read it, they will become sensitized."

Readers can contact Mina Nilchian at mnilchia@ucsd.edu.


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