

Blue Ridge

By T.R. Pearson, Viking, 2000

PAUL TATUM, ONE OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS in *Blue Ridge*, T.R. Pearson's strangely engaging mystery about two unrelated murders, is an actuary. But except as an excuse for providing local color about cubicle life, Tatum's profession is pretty much beside the point.

In fact, finding the point in this clever, occasionally bleak, and highly discursive novel is—well, beside the point.

Pearson, who is known for his anecdotal style, presents an idiosyncratic portrait of lowlife in both southwestern Virginia and New York City. While many of his characters skate on the edge of caricature, reading along as Pearson looses his pen on them, usually in the voice of Paul Tatum, is highly entertaining.

Who knew an actuary could be such a raconteur?

Tatum's description of his next-door neighbor, for instance, is typically expansive: "Hers is the sort of family typical to my street—middlingly affluent and neatly nuclear. She has a husband who departs each morning in the dawning and returns home in the dusk, carries a canvas briefcase, invariably wears chinos and high-mileage nubuck shoes. They have two children. The girl is blond, sevenish and blisteringly disrespectful, while the boy, maybe five, is loud in a far-reaching and adenoidal sort of way. When contradicted, he tends to drop to the ground in a wailing heap. It would appear that he and his sister run the enterprise next door which seems devoted to their happiness and ceaseless transportation."

As the novel opens, Tatum receives the bad news that his grown son, born out of wedlock years ago and a virtual stranger to his father, has been murdered in New York. Armed with a picture of his son at the age of seven, the only picture he has, Tatum flies from Roanoke to New York on the NYPD's dime to identify the body. At the same time, Tatum's cousin Ray, a local cop in a small town in the Blue Ridge, discovers a long-decayed corpse just off the Appalachian Trail. The location of the corpse requires him to share the case with a black Park Service policewoman improbably named Kit Carson.

As it happens, these murders have absolutely nothing to do with each other, but they do allow Pearson to frame his novel with comparisons between urban and rural po-

lice procedure. The urban version is far more entertaining.

Within hours of having arrived in New York, Tatum is up to his eyeballs in local color, most of it unsavory. Having escaped his cubicle, he rarely looks back. In fact, in social situations, he is dismayingly quick to deny the profes-

sion: "Rachel interviewed me after a fashion, asked after my interests and my profession. I owned up to being a neural surgeon with a passion for downhill skiing, and, well into my second gimlet, I disclosed that my friends called me Tod."

For an unassuming actuary from the hills of southern Virginia, Tatum manages to take a lot in stride, although watching Giles, a local drug lord, eliminate some of the

competition does cause him to pause and reflect. "I'm prone to thinking now it was chiefly the velocity that undid me, the Old Testament decisiveness of it all. I was accustomed to the resolution of disputes at all deliberate speed, with claimants and respondents jousting in triplicate over the thorny implications of insurance boilerplate. Here, suddenly, was another way to function and behave, without review, without appeal or reconsideration and everyone with terrible swift swords."

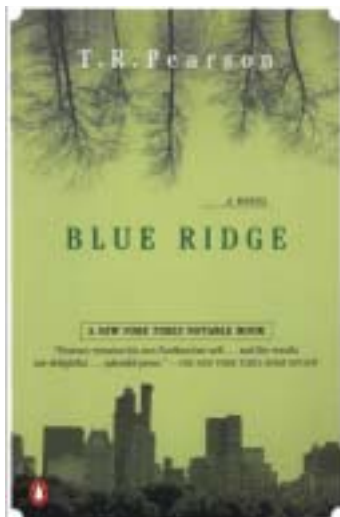
A warning: If you are an impatient reader, inclined to skim over the descriptive parts, this book will drive you nuts. Even a careful reader is going to

stumble over Tatum's description of his tour of lower Manhattan in the company of a pair of thugs: "In between phone calls, Giles pointed out the occasional landmark to me, even had Jumbo stop in traffic in the middle of an avenue in such a way as to frame to Giles's liking a view of the Woolworth Building which Giles calmly recited, while cars piled up behind us, salient facts about."

And despite the feisty presence of policewoman Carson, the Virginia murder plot is far less interesting than its New York cousin.

But this book should not be read for the plot. Read it for the voice, for the sheer surprise of encountering a loquacious actuary who has quite a tale to tell, if you've got the time to listen.

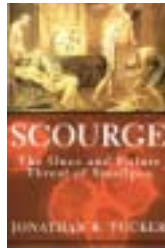
— Linda Mallon





Shackleton's Way: Leadership Lessons from the Great Antarctic Explorer
 By Margot Morrell and Stephanie Capparell
 Viking Press, 2001

Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton and his crew were stranded at the bottom of the world for more than two years. Yet somehow, he was able to lead the entire crew to safety without losing a man. Authors Morrell and Capparell mine this amazing man and his story for lessons on how to lead with authority, integrity, humor, and compassion. Using this story as a centerpiece, the authors interpret Shackleton's success through interviews with modern leaders such as Mike Dale, Jaguar's former chief of North American operations, Apollo 13 Commander James Lovell, and U.S. Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig.

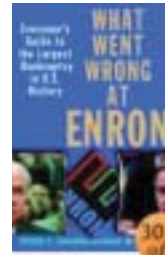


Scourge: The Once and Future Threat of Smallpox
 By Jonathan B. Tucker
 Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001

The eradication of smallpox was one of the great medical successes of the 20th century. But its absence in nature belies its potential as a weapon of mass destruction. Tucker traces its history, and argues that the results of Soviet experiments (prohibited in the United States) could be used by terrorists to decimate the world's population. "Tucker breathes new life into mostly familiar material," says Publisher's Weekly. "The book is difficult to put down."

What Went Wrong at Enron
 By Peter C. Fusaro and Ross M. Miller
 John Wiley & Sons, 2002
 The first comprehensive and clear expla-

nation of what happened at Enron. Whistle-blowing, backstabbing, grandstanding, deception, posturing—the authors take you inside Enron and show you the who, why, what, where, and when of the sinking of this corporate Titanic.



Living and Dying in the USA: Behavioral, Health, and Social Differentials of Adult Mortality
 By Richard G. Rogers, Robert A. Hummer, and Charles B. Nam
 Academic Press, 2000



The authors use the National Health Interview Survey and the National Death Index to make a definitive statement about demographics and mortality. By surveying demographic and sociocultural characteristics associated with mortality, socioeconomic effects, health-related conditions, and health status, they reveal connections among several factors related to mortality chances. Easily understood and cited, their study emphasizes the statistical methods underlying their revelations and invites readers to duplicate their results.



The Risk Pool
 By Richard Russo
 Vintage Books, 1994

No, it's not a novel about automobile insurance. But Sam Hall, the main character, couldn't get coverage if he tried. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Russo produces a novel that is sweeping, funny, and moving. It's the 30-year saga of an irresistible ne'er do well and his introspective son, Ned. When Sam abandons the family, Ned vacillates between his nervous mother and his reckless father, struggling to win his father's affection.

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