

# Mayan Mars: TMS Member Mixes Science Fact and Fiction in New Novel

Maureen Byko

In his many years working in university research departments, Marc Meyers has seen enough drama to fill a book. And so he has.

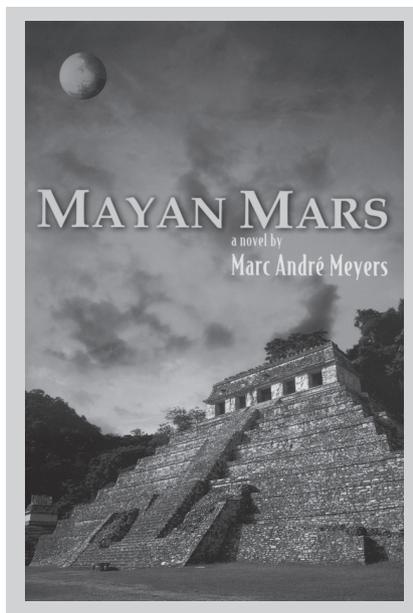
Meyers, a professor of materials science at the University of California at San Diego, has created a world of cutthroat competition, greed, and lust found behind the scenes of a government-funded university research program. Make no mistake, *Mayan Mars*, released in October by Green Grass Press, is fiction. To the best of Meyers' knowledge, NASA has imported no deadly viruses from Mars, and he has never witnessed the carnage of a Mayan human sacrifice. It's no coincidence, however, that like Meyers, the book's lead character, Gustavo Chen, works at the University of California at San Diego. Like Meyers, Chen is a materials engineer with extensive experience in explosive welding. And also like Meyers, Chen worked on a project that evaluated whether explosive welding could be used by NASA to safely seal Martian soil samples.

"It's like I take little bits and pieces from everywhere," Meyers said of his fiction. "It's based on reality, based on things I see."

Meyers, 59, has enjoyed a career that offered him ample time to study not only the dynamic behavior of materials—his area of expertise—but the behavior of people involved in university research. He has earned such honors as the TMS/AIME Distinguished Materials Scientist/Engineer Award in 2003 and the Humboldt Senior Scientist Award in 1997. In 2005 he co-organized the Symposium on Biological Science for the TMS Annual Meeting, and he has authored or coauthored a lengthy list of books and technical papers.

His professional experience was essential in developing the colorful details

that permeate the pages of *Mayan Mars*. Consider, for example, this description of a professor named Chuck Carbone: "Typical engineer: overweight, four pens and pencils in his front pockets. A man of little imagination and even less uncertainty. Things were either white or black for Carbone, and he was always right." It is an unflattering description, but some would argue this is the kind of criticism



to which insiders are entitled. Meyers comes from a family of engineers, at least on his father's side. On his mother's side were the writers. In fact, when he was young he hoped to become a writer. His father, however, had a different future in mind for Meyers: become an engineer, guarantee yourself a job, and then make time to write.

So he followed his father's wishes, but never lost his desire to write creatively. In 2001, Meyers published a book of poems, and next, a book about Chechnya. Finally came *Mayan Mars*. This work Meyers is most proud of. "It's almost like a dream come true. It's something

I always aspired to as a kid," he said.

The book, which revolves around a NASA plan to retrieve soil samples from Mars, originated from a project in which Meyers was involved to explore that very possibility. "There was this concern by NASA that they were going to bring back bacteria," Meyers said. "Our conclusion was it's not very safe." That conclusion sent his imagination on another course: What if NASA proceeded anyway? What if data were manipulated so the project appeared safe? And a plot was born.

Meyers knew that colorful villains are essential to good storytelling, and found his easily within the engineering community. Researchers can be overly competitive to a fault, he said. Universities sometimes show preferences for professors who can attract research grants, regardless of their teaching skills. "It's so competitive to get grants," he said. "The atmosphere becomes so cutthroat. I see professors teaching ethics who should not be doing it."

Meyers also knew that every successful novel needs some passion, and he had to look no further than the professor-student relationships that are forbidden but frequent on campuses. He has never had an affair with a student, Meyers said, but knows of numerous people who have.

Meyers describes his characters as "a mosaic," a conglomeration of people he has met over the years. The world of science research, since it is made up of humans, is far from pure, and that's what makes it a fascinating backdrop for a science fiction tale.

That's one reason, Meyers laughs, that he could never quit his career in engineering to become a full-time writer. "Then I would not have any characters," he said.

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