



LARRY MAYER, BILLINGS GAZETTE

Tourists make their way up the stairs to Clark's signature at Pompeys Pillar Monument in 2014.

# American Odyssey

Novelist Paul Martin reimagines Lewis and Clark's 'Impossible Journey'

JAKE IVERSON  
jiverson@billingsgazette.com

For Paul Martin, the question wasn't why would you write a book about the Lewis and Clark expedition — it's why wouldn't you?

The story sort of tells itself. On the back cover of Martin's new novel "Impossible Journey: Danger, Death, and Deceit on the Lewis and Clark Expedition," he calls it "America's greatest adventure story" and "a latter-day 'Odyssey.'"

Bold claims, but ones that the true tale of the Corps of Discovery's journey back up. The trek — which was led by Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark along with 40 others, comprised of army officers, enlisted men, and a handful of civilian translators and guides — covered 8,000 miles of country from 1804 — 1806. Much of that time was spent exploring lands that no white Europeans or Americans had ever seen before.

It was all new, and it was (mostly) all documented. Each of the captains kept journals, and so did some of the men. If you want the real story of Lewis and Clark, you can read it in their own words.

It isn't just a great story. It's where our mythic version of the American West begins. You can't talk about the West as a concept without starting with Lewis and Clark.

"The journals themselves are already great books," Martin said. "What I wanted to do was take that basic story and turn it into a fictional account, which allowed me to do a couple of things the journals don't do."

Namely, Martin, who spent three decades at National Geographic and has written multiple fiction and nonfiction books, found himself fascinated by the real people who have gotten lost in the iconography of the expedition. One thing about "Impossible Journey" that stands out is how little Lewis and Clark themselves are in it. He's much more interested in the enlisted men.

"The journals are very factual, and members of the expedition are mentioned, of course, but you don't get a whole lot about their

personal background, their family background, their personalities, and so forth," Martin said. "I tried to develop that as a theme for the book."

"Impossible Journey's" main point of view character is a private named Nathan Luck. You can scour the Corps of Discovery's journals and you won't find him. Luck is a fictional character, conceived of by Martin as a way to really insert himself into this well-trod narrative.

Luck isn't just an Army man, he's an aspiring journalist.

In fact, he looks a lot like a younger version of Paul Martin.

Martin served in Vietnam as a Navy journalist. He was in the country from 1970-

1971 and has returned multiple times, for a National Geographic article and for his memoir "Land of the Ascending Dragon." His role in Viet-

nam, where he produced articles for publications including Navy Times and the Saigon Post, is a lot like what Luck is trying to do in "Impossible Journey," documenting both the extraordinary and mundanity of military life.

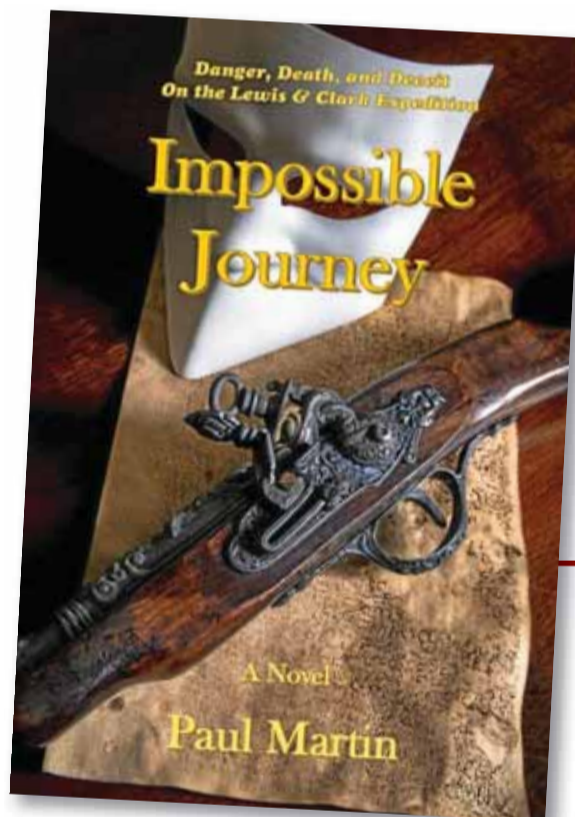
"Nathan was sort of my mouthpiece," Martin explained. "I created Nathan Luck in my mind before I fully knew any of the members (of the expedition) as characters," Martin said.

The book has a healthy bibliography of sources Martin used to turn those scant historical details into a novel. There's the classics, of course, books like Stephen Ambrose's "Undaunted Courage" and Ken Burns' four hour documentary "Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery." Martin noted that he is particularly indebted to Charles Clarke's "The Men of the Lewis and Clark Expedition," the rare tome that centers on the enlisted men, and the expansive, 11 volume set of the expedition's journals published by the University of Nebraska Press and edited by Gary Moulton.

Martin's challenge was to use this historical background to tell a compelling narrative. That served a couple purposes, for one, he wanted something that would



Paul Martin



COURTESY IMAGE

### To learn more

Paul Martin's "Impossible Journey: Danger, Death, and Deceit on the Lewis and Clark Expedition" is available in paperback and as an e-book at [paulmartinbooks.com/impossible-journey](http://paulmartinbooks.com/impossible-journey).



COURTESY MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

This masterpiece oil painting by Charles Russell is titled "Lewis and Clark meet the Indians at Ross' Hole." It shows the famous explorers in the far background with Native Americans up front. Russell liked to paint scenes from the perspective of Native Americans.



MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

'Lewis and Clark at Three Forks' is one of the large murals Edgar Paxson painted for the entry room to the House Chambers in the State Capitol.

# Odyssey

From B1

appeal to anyone, not just a history buff. And he's also a journalist, not a historian. There's nothing new that he can uncover about the

expedition. But what he can do is add texture and color to the dormant past, turning these men from names into a book into real people with agency and complex personality.

"Every fact you could possibly want to know

about the journey is out there," Martin noted. "The only thing I can do is try to bring drama and human interest, and to create some dramatic tension."

One of the ways Martin did that was by adding a villain. Luck's POV chapters are interspersed with a narrative from a character referred to as "The Judas," a sinister British loyalist saboteur trying to destroy both the expedition and the young country it's representing. Along the two-and-a-half-year journey, Martin's villain locks horns with Luck, and also notably with Charles Floyd, the only member of the expedition to die along the route. Historians generally agree that Floyd was felled by appendicitis, but Martin noted that the symptoms of that ailment are awfully similar to that of cyanide poisoning.

"I looked for factual problems that had occurred along the route, and tried to see how I could cast that in a way that a villain might have had something to do with it," Martin explained.

The invention is a bit pulpy, but it's also not all that far-fetched. To our knowledge, the British never sent anyone to interrupt the Corps of Discovery, but the Spanish

did. Worried that the expedition would encroach on their colonial holdings, the Spanish sent an armed expedition to intercept the American voyagers. They were, of course, unsuccessful.

Martin has been interested in the story of the expedition for most of his life. He grew up in Clinton, Missouri, the state where Lewis and Clark's journey began. This story, as he jokes in his author's note, is sort of a birthright.

But it's deeper than that. Martin, who is now 77, has a genuine respect for these men, and the magnitude of the task they accomplished. The Corps of Discover is so well documented, woven into the history of Missouri and Montana and the West at large. But when you just sit down and think about it, the enormity of the journey is well summed up by Martin's book's title: impossible.

Martin served in Vietnam and has worked all over the world. Still he insists there's "no way" he could have made it as a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

"None of us today could endure the things that they put up with," he said. "Every day they were facing injuries, drownings, grizzly bears, buffalo, starving. It

just went on."

In "Impossible Journey," Pvt. Luck notes that he was joined by, "rivermen, boatbuilders, sailmakers, woodsmen, marksmen, hunters, trackers, traders, trappers, tanners, blacksmiths, gunsmiths, car-

penters, masons, fishermen, millers, cooks, bakers, salt-makers, tailors, cobblers, interpreters and musicians."

"Gosh," Martin exclaimed after reading the passage aloud. "What a bunch of talent they put together!"



JEFFREY G. OLSON, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Sgt. Floyd Monument, in Sioux City, Iowa honors Charles Floyd, the only member of the Corps of Discovery to die during the expedition. Floyd plays a major role in "Impossible Journey."

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