

**Access World News**

GETTING TO 'HEAVEN' A 6-YEAR JOURNEY FOR WRITER

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Author: Kathy Montgomery, *The Arizona Republic*

Six years after the publication of his blockbuster, Mitch Albom has discovered there's life after Tuesdays With Morrie - and it's in the hereafter. His first novel, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, went back to press three times in its first week of publication.

Albom will read from his new book Friday at Tempe Cinemas at a book signing to benefit Hospice of the Valley. He'll also participate in the Arizona Kidney Foundation's Authors luncheon at the Phoenician on Saturday.

Five People begins with the death of Eddie, an 83-year-old maintenance man. Inspired by Albom's uncle, Eddie feels as used up and abandoned as the seaside amusement park where he works. Lonely since the death of his wife, his body bent and ruined, Eddie believes his life never amounted to much.

The book follows Eddie through his journey into heaven, where he meets five people who help him understand the meaning of his life. Albom talked recently about the inspiration for the book, his life since *Morrie* and his plans for the future.

QUESTION: *Tuesdays With Morrie* was a publishing phenomenon, remaining on the New York Times bestseller list for four years. Was it hard to get started again?

ANSWER: Well, I guess that's part of why (*Five People*) took six years. Nobody wanted to publish *Tuesdays* in the beginning. Then, after it came out, all people wanted me to do was *Wednesdays With Morrie* or *Things Morrie Told Me That I Didn't Put in the Book*.

But I had said what I wanted to say. Part of the hard part was saying no. It took time. I wanted to wait until I had a certain feeling.

Then, I was on an airplane one night, and remembered a story my uncle told me. He used to tell this story every Thanksgiving about how he was rushed to the hospital for open-heart surgery.

He remembered waking up and seeing all of his dead relatives waiting at the end of the bed. We all said, "What did you do?" And he said, "I told them to get out of here. I'm not ready yet."

That was floating around in my head, and I thought, what if a guy went to heaven and could get all of his questions about his life answered?

Q: What made you decide to take on fiction?

A: After *Tuesdays*, I wanted to do something different. I had always wanted to write a novel. ... On the other hand, I've always been a storyteller. Fiction is not that much different.

Q: Even so, you spent a lot of time on research.

A: Yes. I did a lot of research, amusement-park research, war research. I didn't actually go to heaven, though.

Q: Like *Tuesdays With Morrie*, this novel concerns death. Is that a coincidence?

A: No. *Tuesdays* was sort of thrust on me. After that book came out, my life changed 180 degrees. Everyone who

talked to me, talked about death and grief. So my world kind of became that.

Some of the episodes (in the book) are a direct line to things I've heard from people I met. Like when (Eddie) meets his wife (in heaven). He says, "I never wanted anyone else." And she says, "I know. I felt it."

That was very deliberate. I've met so many people who had lost someone and felt frustrated. They don't know what to do with the love they still have. They say, "Am I wasting my love?" I don't think it's possible to waste love. I created this world that's what I wish it would be.

Q: On the other hand, the two main characters are quite different. Morrie is a professor. Eddie is an amusement-park maintenance man.

A: That I didn't discover until I started the book. My uncle was really like that. A lot of the things that happened in the book, happened to him. He died when he was 83. He never left his hometown except to fight a war. He'd always say, "I never done nothing."

I realized there are a lot more people like him than there are like Morrie. Morrie knew he was special. Eddie thinks a meaningful life is reserved for someone else. I decry that. Even the most invisible people can make a difference in the world. What's more invisible than an amusement-park maintenance man? But if he doesn't do his job, you're going to notice.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: Sleeping. Obviously if it took me six years to write this one, I'm not moving at a very fast pace. I hope to write more novels. In some ways it's been a tough six years. At times I felt a lot of pressure to say yes to something I didn't want to do. Then the pressure is on to prove that your instincts were correct.

Now, people come up to me and they have two books in their hands. They say, "I really like your books." That 's' at the end of it is really gratifying.

Meet the author

WHAT: Reading and book signing benefiting Hospice of the Valley.

WHERE: Tempe Cinemas, 1825 E. Elliot Road, Tempe.

WHEN: 7 p.m. Friday.

ADMISSION: \$17, \$7 with the purchase of a book (\$19.95). Purchase tickets at Changing Hands Bookstore, 1825 E. Elliot Road, Tempe.

DETAILS: (480) 730-1142.

IF YOU GO

Arizona Kidney Foundation's 24th annual Luncheon

WHAT: Four authors discuss their work and sign copies of their latest books: Mitch Albom (*The Five People You Meet in Heaven*), Laurence Bergreen (*Over the Edge of the World*), Sandra Brown (*hello darkness*) and Peter Straub (*Lost Boy, Lost Girl*).

WHERE: The Phoenician Resort & Spa, 6000 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix.

WHEN: 10 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Saturday.

ADMISSION: \$125.