

James Patterson has sold US\$1.5 billion worth of books, but tells **Henry Sutton** he doesn't consider himself a writer

# Just a scribbler

**T**he figures, as James Patterson might describe them, are awesome. He has had more than 35 *New York Times* best-sellers, including five at the top spot, in a single year. He outsells J.K. Rowling, John Grisham and Dan Brown put together. This year he is on target to sell more than 20 million books in the US alone, adding to his US\$1.5 billion in global sales, making him the world's best-selling author by a mile. He is also the most borrowed author from British libraries.

Amazingly, Patterson doesn't think of himself as a writer. In person he is not remotely awesome, nor flashy, but softly spoken and modest. "I recently had [my 61st] birthday party," he says, "and asked 16 friends; some went back all the way to kindergarten and the consensus, which I really like, was I'm still the same asshole I always was. There didn't seem to be a lot of airs. I don't think of myself as a writer. I think of myself as [my wife] Sue's pal and [my son] Jack's friend and I like to scribble. That seems to be the truth about who I am."

Well, sort of. Patterson's "scribbling" isn't just a super-efficient brand; it is also a collaborative effort, honed and refined by a number of highly talented individuals. The biggest charge, which Patterson has to tackle endlessly, is that he doesn't

actually write his own books. In his airy but simple office, overlooking the Hudson River 65km upstate from New York City, Patterson shows me the piles of manuscripts he is working on. "This is a rewrite," he says, flicking through a thick wedge of paper. He explains that the numerous pencil marks on the type are his additions and changes. "This is my third rewrite on a co-written book. I get all this baloney about well, what does he do? Does he even look at them? Well yes, he does look at them."

You only have to dip into the first novel that Patterson wrote, single-handedly, in 1976 to divine some idea of his talent. *The Thomas Berryman Number* is a cool, stylish suspense thriller featuring a cold-blooded assassin. It also brilliantly pits a small-minded, southern mentality against a laid-back, northeast seaboard, metropolitan sophistication.

But Patterson says the book was "a struggle to get into some coherent form. I felt *Berryman* had a lot of good sentences. A lot of times you get people writing wonderful sentences and paragraphs and they fall in love with their prose style, but the stories really aren't that terrific. *Berryman* was better written than the story."

Over the years Patterson has focused on telling compelling stories rather than writing good sentences.

He never set out to write *Ulysses* (which he has read three times) but mass-market, commercial fiction. And for a long time he didn't take it seriously. Patterson's day job was in advertising. By 39 he had been appointed chief executive of J. Walter Thompson, North America – the youngest in the firm's history.

However, advertising was never a great love. "I got to the point of hiring people I liked to be around, but there were too many layers and too many people who really didn't know what they were doing. And it was too silly to get nutty about – it's a frigging cereal."

He left a decade ago, not to concentrate on his writing but to cut the stress and improve his lifestyle. "I had to drive back to the agency from the shore one Sunday," he says. "I was stuck in wall-to-wall traffic heading into Manhattan and realised I needed to get on the other side of the road."

He promptly married Sue, a striking Norwegian, then Jack arrived. Patterson could not be more committed to both – but they seem hardly to have put the brakes on his scribbling: he now has three best-selling crime series in his oeuvre and with 10 books being published this year he begins work at 5.30am, seven days a week. Obviously, he is no slouch – nor is he just a name on a dust-jacket.

*The Independent*

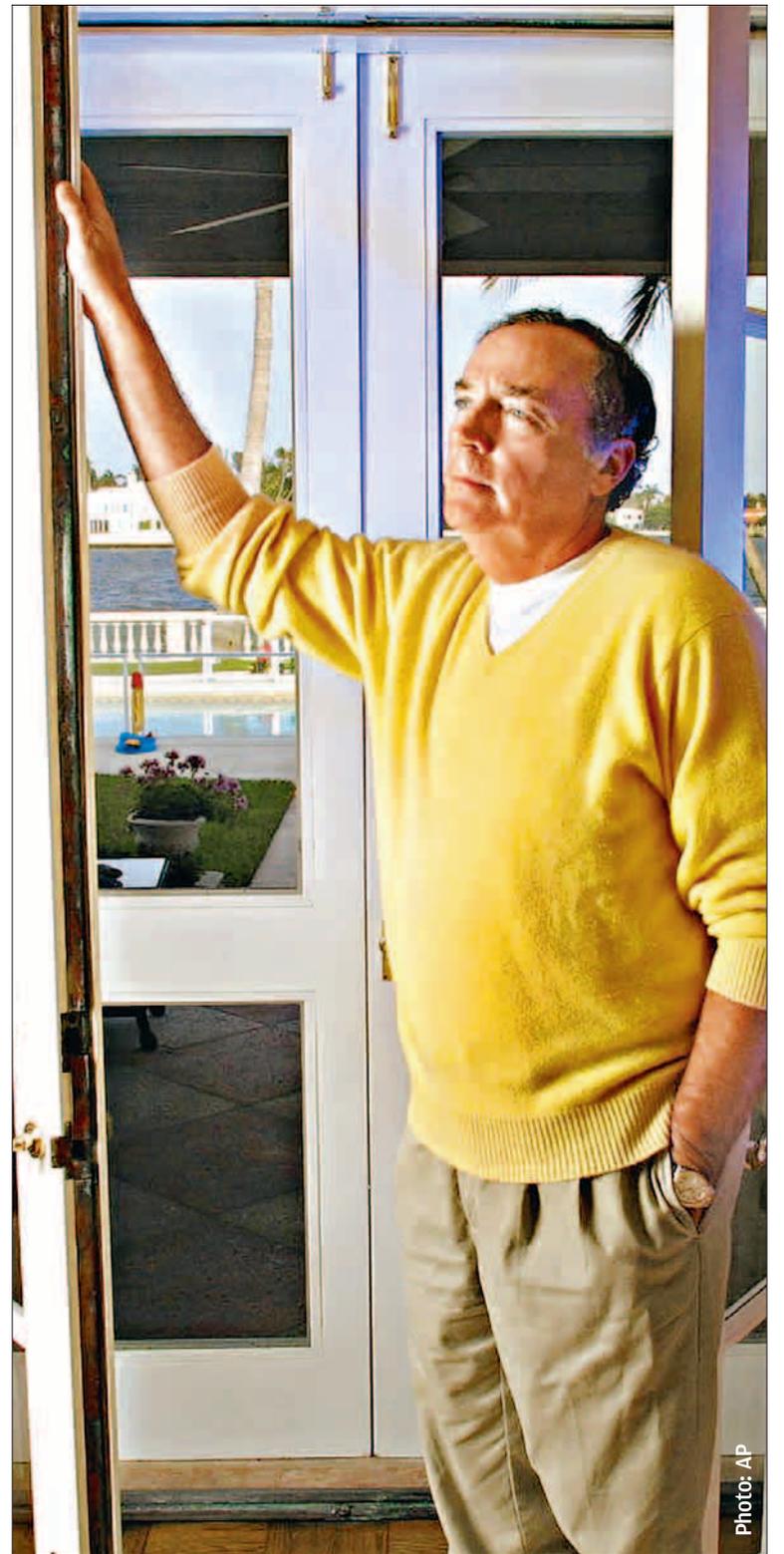


Photo: AP

## Book of the week

### TRAVEL



**Meeting Mr Kim**  
by Jennifer Barclay  
Summersdale  
HK\$120  
★★★★☆  
Nick Ryan

Burned out, rootless, lost: it begins with a familiar premise. Like others of its ilk, *Meeting Mr Kim* is part journey through a landscape at once exotic and familiar and part voyage into the soul. It is also the first western travel book on South Korea in about 20 years, earning itself plaudits from the likes of Simon Winchester and Margaret Drabble.

Hitting her 30s, Jennifer Barclay found herself with a string of failed relationships, a high-pressure career in Vancouver and a sense of "lost" or missing opportunities. Hers was a footloose existence that had

taken her from her rural English upbringing to a whirlwind (broken) marriage in Greece and onwards to working her way up from office junior to youngest agent in the country's hottest literary agency.

Unlike her friends, settling into city life or simply settling down, Barclay seems to have chosen the more adventurous approach: she becomes friendly with a guy in a bar, a drummer eight years her junior, and follows him and his band to their three-month slot in a luxury hotel in Seoul.

While much of the early part of her book concerns the rather strange, almost cold and insular world of the hotel – with the band leader forcing everyone into Spandex and Barclay subsisting on western food she buys at a high price from a supermarket – the narrative eventually flows out from this at-times "typical" westerner abroad theme.

It is only when they venture farther afield on the band's rare days off, and when she hits the road



**Jennifer Barclay rubbed shoulders with ordinary Koreans.** Photo: Corbis

herself, that the true Korean spirit and country are slowly revealed.

Some of what follows is familiar: the stranger-abroad syndrome, where the reader is encouraged to laugh at the locals. "The express bus terminal was modern, enormous, and splendid, but when I asked the

girl behind the ticket counter in my best Korean if there was a bus, *bosu*, to Kongju, she ... giggled, said something to her colleague, and tried her best to ignore me. Because I didn't go away, she finally did summon assistance ... a young man who spoke English and explained I was in the Honam Terminal but should be in the Kyongbu Terminal. Such was the Seoul-style humiliation of the beginning of my first trip into the country."

While the detail on culture and history is there (if a little light), Barclay does find herself in a variety of unusual and interesting situations as she delves deeper into the nooks and crannies of the national psyche.

There is the Buddhist monk who insists on giving her a lift to his monastery and letting her sleep in the storeroom, then imparting words of wisdom as she climbs the steps to the top of the mountain behind (mirroring the steps to enlightenment). As she leaves, he swaps holiday tales and postcards with her from his trips abroad.

At a popular beach destination she deals with the maddening crowds of day-trippers, snapping away with their cameras and leaving a sea of litter, before fending off the grubby hands of a desperate student. In the industrial fishing town of Kampo she finds friendship with a young fisherwoman, sharing her house and meals, forging a bond that is more than language deep. Her encounter with the eponymous Mr Kim, a keen English speaker and walker who is both hospitable and welcoming, touches her deeply.

More comical is the insistence on quaffing soju, Korean whisky, with complete strangers often shocked at seeing a foreigner in their midst.

That theme of not fitting in, of loneliness, is strong throughout the book. Mirroring it is a Buddhist subtext, of a soul in search of itself.

While no Bruce Chatwin or Paul Theroux, Barclay writes well and *Meeting Mr Kim* succeeds where a lot of travel books have failed: it is entertaining, endearing and educational.