

A TALE OF SKI BUM SUSPENSE IN 1980s ASPEN

GRADUATING FROM MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE, Alex Cavanaugh opts to put off entering the real world and instead gets in a car with his girlfriend and drives to the Neverland of Aspen for a year as a ski bum.

Sound familiar? The scenario is as old as ski resorts, and has brought countless powder-hungry pilgrims here over the decades for a winter-long — sometimes lifelong — deferment of grown-up responsibilities.

In Jeff Howe's new novel, "Into the Roaring Fork," the carefree entry into ski bumhood prompts an unexpected tale of suspense. Set in 1985, the book has Alex arriving in an Aspen of decades yore, with cocaine shipments rolling brazenly through the private airport at Sardy Field and the rampant public consumption of the drug earning the town its "Toot City" nickname.

Working days at Aspen Mountain Sports for \$6 an hour, Alex picks up a side gig as a low-level coke courier for an acquaintance. That job leads him, unexpectedly, into the local backcountry where he stumbles on a kidnapping plot and crimes far more nefarious than his own.

The novel is the first from Howe, who — like his main character — ski-bummed in Aspen for the winter of 1985-86 with his college girlfriend. Howe sold advertising for KSPN during his stint here sowing his wild oats. Now 52, he's married with two kids and running his family manufacturing business in Cincinnati.

"That year has always stuck with me," Howe says of his Aspen days. "I look at that very much as a coming-of-age period for me. We were on our own, with no rules — it was 'anything goes' and I was living away from home for the first time."

When he heard a story about a late-90s abduction of a young woman, it dovetailed with his Aspen memories and the drug world of the

era in his imagination, and spawned the story that would become "Into the Roaring Fork."

"Back then everyone was doing blow," he says. "So I had an idea of Alex Cavanaugh as a character, based on me, and asked 'What if I made a bad decision? What if I got involved in that?' And 'What if this guy was committing a crime and he came upon a crime that was of a much greater magnitude?'"

Written in clipped, no-frills sentences with a breathless plot that deftly fills in backstory as it propels itself forward, "Into the Roaring Fork" is a page-turner.

The book mixes fact and fiction in its approach to the local landscape. Howe captures the spirit of the ski town and of Carbondale, and name-drops local landmarks and institutions like the J-Bar and Obermeyer, but he takes some liberties with the backcountry. Some of the climactic events, for example, take place on an invented midvalley trail near an invented Oar Lake.

Howe wrote the book over the course of about nine months, diligently sitting down to write for at least an hour a day — sometimes

early in the morning, sometimes late at night after putting the kids to bed. A guitar player and pianist on the side, Howe borrowed his approach to writing from his disciplined approach to practicing music.

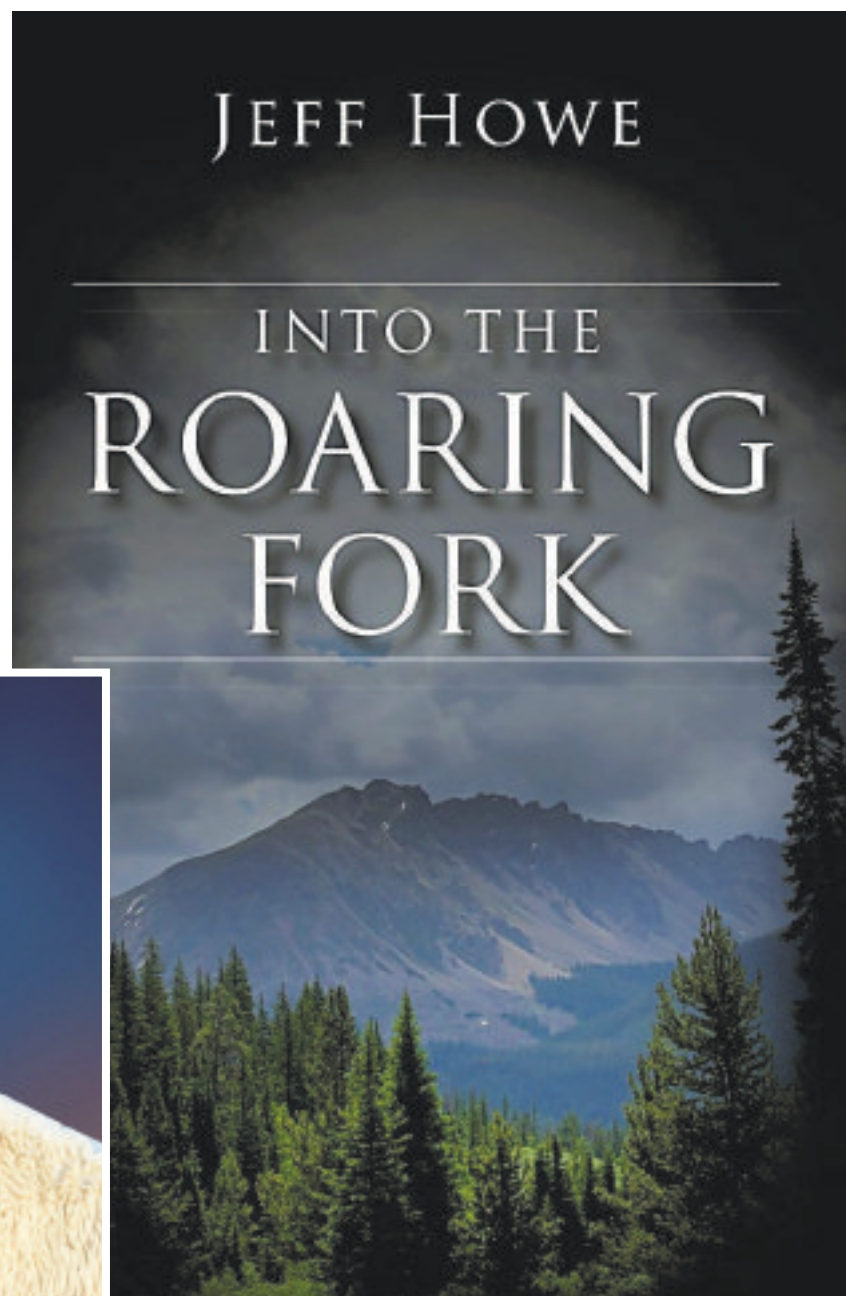
"That's the side of me that says, 'I'll do scales until my fingers bleed to get it right,'" he explains.

He unsuccessfully shopped his manuscript to literary agents before revising and deciding to self-publish it

for a spring 2015 release. He's already at work on a follow-up novel.

Over the years, Howe has made occasional trips back here, including a visit that coincided with the 2001 Avjet plane crash and a vacation with his family this winter, during which he got to see "Into the Roaring Fork" on the shelves of Explore Booksellers.

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Jeff Howe's new novel "Into the Roaring Fork" takes place in Aspen in 1985. Howe used his experience ski-bumming in Aspen for the 1985-86 season as an inspiration for the self-published book.