



James Rollins used to be a veterinarian. Now, he writes action-adventure novels.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES ROLLINS

History's mysteries

"There's a little bit of Clive Cussler, Michael Crichton and Dan Brown in my novels, and a little Conan the Barbarian in me," James Rollins is fond of saying. After publishing four novels in the early 2000s, Rollins, 58, left his Sacramento veterinary practice and became a New York Times best-selling author whose 22 books have sold more than 20 million copies in 40 languages. His real thunder is the 15-title action-adventure **SIGMA Force** series, starring a covert team of ex-special forces officers with expertise in the sciences and black ops. It combines history with the mythical, led by Rollins' trademark phantasmagoria. Rollins' latest entry is **The Last Odyssey**, in which an ancient map is discovered that traces Odysseus' route home after the Trojan War, as described in Homer's epic poem "The Odyssey." One of the stops was Tartarus, the Greek version of hell. Guess where **SIGMA Force** is headed?

In your research for *The Last Odyssey*, what was your single most shocking discovery?

How much we underestimate the technology of ancient peoples. I had a chance to study the Antikythera mechanism at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, a Greek device from the first century B.C. Most archaeologists now accept that it was the first known analog computer.

One of your characters reflects that "knowledge is never truly lost." Which is the foundation of your work.

All my books have explored historical mysteries, but nothing truly remains buried forever. When Greek and Roman civilizations collapsed, the Islamic world picked up the torch of science and

innovation and kept it. And when that Islamic Golden Age faded, Italy and the Renaissance preserved that knowledge and carried it forward yet again. By his own admission, Leonardo da Vinci was influenced—even borrowed—from earlier Muslim inventors.

You juggle both science and history in your thrillers, and there's always something new to learn.

While there is certainly lots of science in the new novel, I'd say it sheds more light on history—specifically, a mysterious era known as the Greek Dark Ages, a shadowy time during the Bronze Age when three civilizations were laid low during a massive war, which many historians have dubbed "World War Zero."

Little is truly known about this turbulent period. Even the identity of the force that laid waste to the Greeks, the Egyptians and the Hittites remains unknown and debated. In fact, one of the only accounts of this war-torn time comes from Homer's "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey."

A few words about your hunting-gathering process, please.

I always have my antennae up for seeds that might be part of a story. I'm looking for basically three things: an historical mystery, a bit of science to explore and exotic locations in which to set a story.

To accomplish that, I subscribe to over 20 scientific journals, and I journal extensively while I travel. I love walking up to someone in a foreign country and asking them to tell me something about their village that no one knows. And perhaps because of the anonymity of such a question, they do.

What's next?

I have an anthology of SIGMA short stories coming in September, and I'm finishing next year's SIGMA novel, tentatively titled *The Savage Zone*. But further details are classified. □

To pre-order *The Last Odyssey*, visit jamesrollins.com.



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