

Personal medical mystery spawns prof's latest book

It was a personal medical mystery that gave McKay Jenkins the idea for his latest book. In it, the Cornelius A. Tilghman Professor of English at the University of Delaware, and author of numerous other nonfiction works, investigates the prevalence of chemicals in common consumer products and the extent to which those substances make their way into our bodies.

Jenkins was hospitalized a few years ago, undergoing tests for what turned out to be a benign tumor. During that time, he says, public health professionals paid a visit to question him about toxins to which he might have been exposed over the years. The list of potentially dangerous substances was frightening and made him want to learn more.

"We're talking about a lifetime of exposure to chemicals in everything from cosmetics to herbicides to plastic water bottles to lead paint," he says. "You're basically surrounded by

this stuff day after day, just in the course of your normal activities, and it gets into your body one way or another."

Jenkins started his investigation by reading hundreds of studies to learn about the science involved and to get a clear picture of the general consensus among reputable researchers. He interviewed academic experts — including fellow UD faculty Doug Tallamy, professor and chairperson of the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology and an authority on native plants, and Gerald Kauffman, project director of the Water Resources Agency at UD and an instructor in civil and environmental engineering and in public policy — as well as others knowledgeable about the subject.

"I'm not a chemist, and I'm not writing for chemists or for chemical engineers," Jenkins says. "I'm writing for an intelligent but non-specialist audience. So I do what journalists do. I read the research, I interview scientists, and I look for a compelling way to tell the story."

He decided to focus the book on personal narratives of some of the many people he interviewed. He spent time, for example, meeting with organic farmers, visiting a woman suffering from multiple chemical sensitivity, touring a water treatment plant, turning a toxicologist loose in his own home to point out hazardous substances, and walking the aisles of a big-box store while studying the labels on all types of products. He and Kauffman collected water samples while canoeing on the Brandywine, and Jenkins traveled to New England to meet with people who had been part of a "body burden" study conducted by the Alliance for a Clean and Healthy Maine, in which they were tested for the presence of toxic chemicals in their bodies.

Jenkins' book, which will be published later this year by Random House with a working title of *What We're*



McKay Jenkins, Cornelius A. Tilghman Professor of English

Made Of, has been compared to the Rachel Carson classic *Silent Spring*. That book, published in 1962, investigated industrial pollutants and their effect on the environment, while Jenkins' work deals with everyday consumer goods. People tend to feel uneasy about the subject matter, he says, because they aren't sure how dangerous some substances are or how much individual consumers can do to protect themselves.

"It's very hard to prove a connection between 'chemical A' and 'disease B,'" he says. "But we should at least be aware that these chemicals are in our consumer products and in our bodies, and there are all kinds of individual decisions and choices we can make."

Those choices might include replacing commercial household cleaners with more natural products, buying organic food and foods without excessive plastic packaging, deciding not to use lawn chemicals, or becoming politically involved in larger issues of regulating and monitoring chemical exposure.

Jenkins also is the author of *The South in Black and White: Race, Sex and Literature in the 1940s*; *The White Death: Tragedy and Heroism in an Avalanche Zone*; *The Last Ridge: The Epic Story of the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division and the Assault on Hitler's Europe*; and *Bloody Falls of the Coppermine: Madness, Murder, and the Collision of Cultures in the Arctic*.

— Ann Manser

