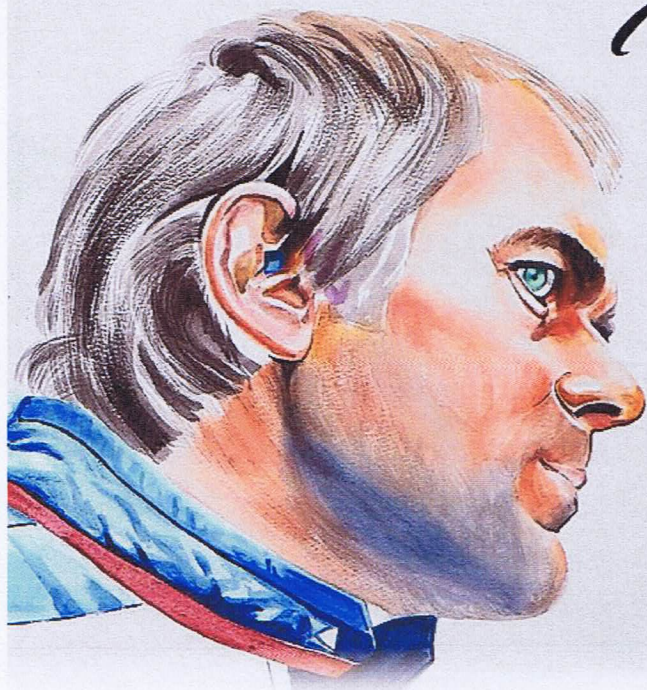


The Artist



YOU'VE SEEN THE PAINTINGS **BLUE HERO** AND **BLUE ONE** ON DISPLAY AT THE **BMW CCA FOUNDATION**. NOW MEET THE **ROMANIAN ARTIST** WHO CREATED THEM.

BY JACKIE JOURET
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY BMW AG
AND JACKIE JOURET



When I ask Adrian Mitu how he became an artist, he opens his notebook and starts sketching. Words aren't enough. The story demands pictures, too.

We're in a café in central Bucharest, Romania, not far from where Adrian grew up or from where he now lives with his wife, Monica. A café is a natural meeting place in any city, but it's particularly appropriate when you're meeting Adrian Mitu: He not only does a lot of his work in cafés, he also paints with coffee—first out of necessity, then because he liked the medium. His work would have stood out under any circumstances, but the fact that it was done with coffee gave it an extra boost when he posted it on the Facebook page for BMW Memorabilia.

Among the model cars and old shop signs, Mitu's paintings of significant moments in BMW history were spotted by Mike Ura, a longtime BMW CCA member, Foundation trustee, and collector of BMW ephemera. Ura ended up buying the entire series and bringing the paintings to the U.S. for display at the Foundation in South Carolina.

If you saw 2017's Heroes of Bavaria exhibit, you saw Mitu's sepia-toned coffee paintings on the wall. That was only the beginning: If you visited the Icon exhibit

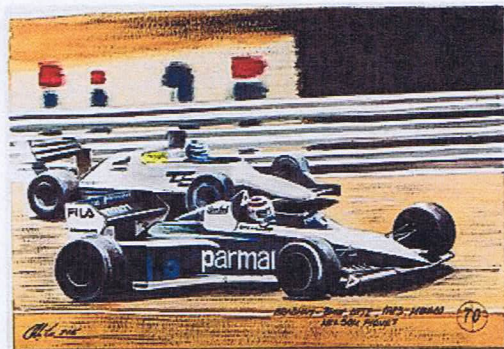


in 2018, you saw *Blue Hero*, Adrian's large-format painting depicting the life of Jochen Neerpasch, the first director of BMW Motorsport. Adrian and Monica came to the U.S. for the unveiling at "The Icon" opening, and they returned that November for the Hilton Head concours. There, Mitu debuted his second large-format piece. Entitled *Blue One*, it explores the history of the BMW M1, and it was displayed at the Foundation next to Lance White's M1 as part of the Passion exhibit in 2019.

The paintings tell a compelling story about BMW's history, but

Adrian Mitu painted the panels for *Blue Hero* in his local café.

At the Sinaia Concours, Mitu presented each entrant with a painting of his or her car.



what of the young artist who made them? As it turns out, his story is almost as compelling as those of his subjects. "All of my inspiration comes from family and friends," says Mitu, "but the thing that started it all was my grandpa's love of horses. I spent two weeks with him one summer when I was six, and he didn't have TV, so he drew me a side view of a horse. I loved horses very much, too, and I had this inspiration that I could put on paper a thing that I loved very much."

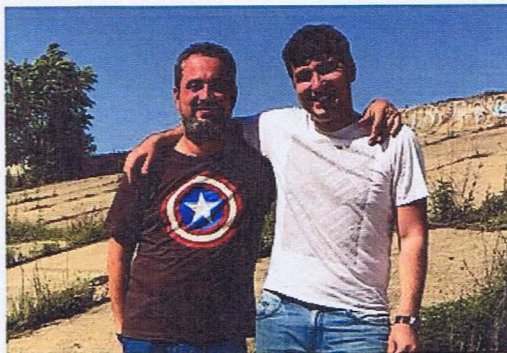
Born in Bucharest in 1985, four years before the fall of

Communism, Mitu had just one visit with his grandfather in the country before the grandfather died. Fortunately, his grandfather wasn't the only one showing Adrian the possibilities inherent in pencil and paper. A few years later, Adrian's father sketched an Oltcit—a compact Citroën built in Romania—in 3D, turning Adrian on to the magic of perspective. "This was fascinating for me, and from that moment, I started to practice drawing," he says. "I got encouragement, which every kid needs, and I started to draw cars—Romanian cars, Czech cars, what we had at the moment."

Mitu's father was a car enthusiast who built his own Dacia from parts that hadn't passed inspection, and which the factory sold at reduced prices. Mitu Sr. worked in a metal foundry, later as a plumber, and he reworked those cast-off parts until they were perfect. He passed his love of cars on to his son, whose artistic talent was encouraged by a neighbor who'd studied under Corneliu Baba, one of Romania's greatest artists.

When Mitu was in the fourth grade, an Easter-time painting assignment on the Resurrection yielded not bunnies and eggs but a stylized depiction of the nighttime crowd in front of the church, illuminated by scores of candles. The painting won first prize in a citywide competition, and the boy realized that he was actually good at something. "I was the grey child, but at that moment, I became king of the





class in drawing," he recalls.

Mitu's parents didn't see art as a career path, however, and they wouldn't let him attend an arts-focused school—until he failed an exam to continue studying Spanish. A classmate's mother suggested architecture, so he showed his portfolio at the Ioan N. Socolescu Technical College of Architecture and Public Works. There Mitu became obsessed with table tennis, practicing diligently enough to become Bucharest city champion. He says that a national championship was within his grasp until he lost focus—which he also did where his studies were concerned. He failed the exams to study architecture at university and was forced to

downgrade to interior design, which he studied for two years before applying again to study architecture. "I was 21 years old, and I only had the summer to prepare," he says, "and if I failed, I couldn't go back to the interior design program."

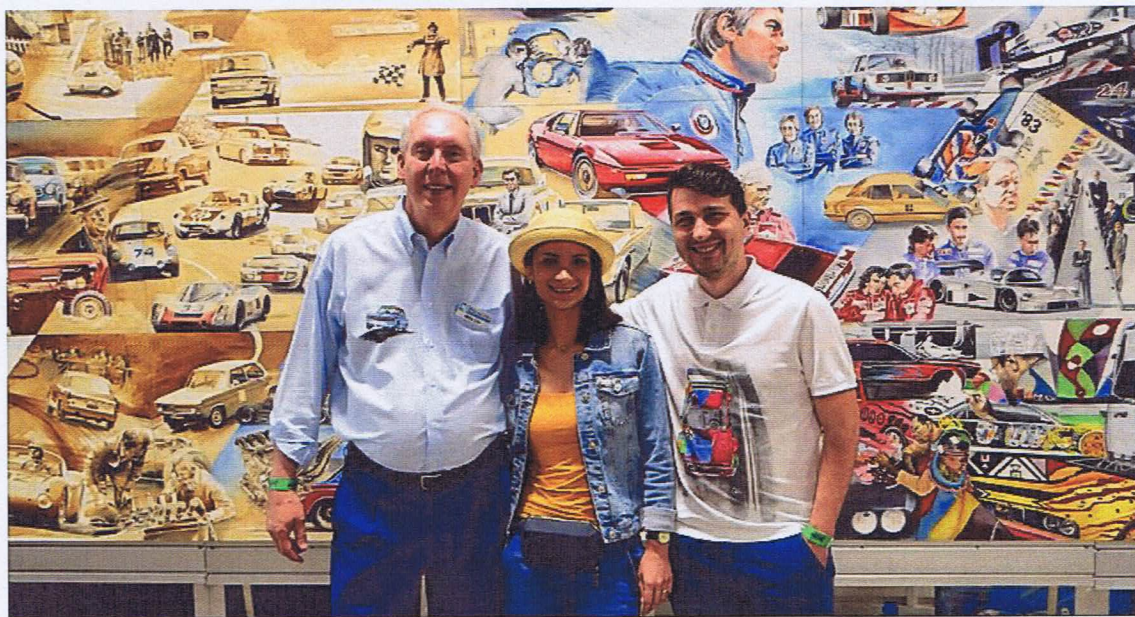
Mitu passed, earning the third-highest grade and admission to the Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism. With that, his architecture career was back on track...until Renault opened a design studio in Bucharest. The studio was led by Stéphane Barral, who visited Mitu's school looking for budding car designers. "I had this passion for car design as an occupation, but I never had someone who could give me the

Above, right Mitu with his brother in spirit, BMW of Romania corporate communications manager Alex Seremet.

Mike Ura, left, has been an important patron of Mitu's work, bringing Adrian and his wife Monica to the U.S. for the premiere of *Blue Hero* at the BMW CCA Foundation.

recipe," says Mitu. "Stéphane told me I could do car design, but I never had time to focus on it, because I had to study architecture. And I was 27 when I finally finished in 2013."

Supporting himself by making architectural models, Adrian began designing concept cars, while also painting classic cars to improve his skills. He preferred painting in cafés to working at home, and when he forgot his watercolors, he painted with the grounds in the bottom of his espresso cup. Coffee gave a warm tone to his paintings, and it inspired his "Morning Coffee" series: one painting a day for a full year, starting on June 20, 2013, and finishing on that date in 2014.



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Mitu was sharing his paintings on his Facebook page, and when he'd attracted 300 followers he decided to celebrate by painting a Mercedes 300 SL. Before he could finish, his followers increased by four, prompting a painting of a Peugeot 304. It was spotted by Peugeot's PR team, who invited Adrian to the Geneva auto salon in March 2014.

"It had been my dream to see the Geneva salon, but I needed €1,000 to go," recalls Mitu. "Instead I got to be one of Peugeot's guests, and I got to talk with [Peugeot styling director] Gilles Vidal, with top Peugeot management." Not long after Geneva, Mitu presented his portfolio to Renault, but his concepts didn't go over as well as his paintings of classic cars. "I can't really play with shapes, starting something from scratch," he says, "but I love history."

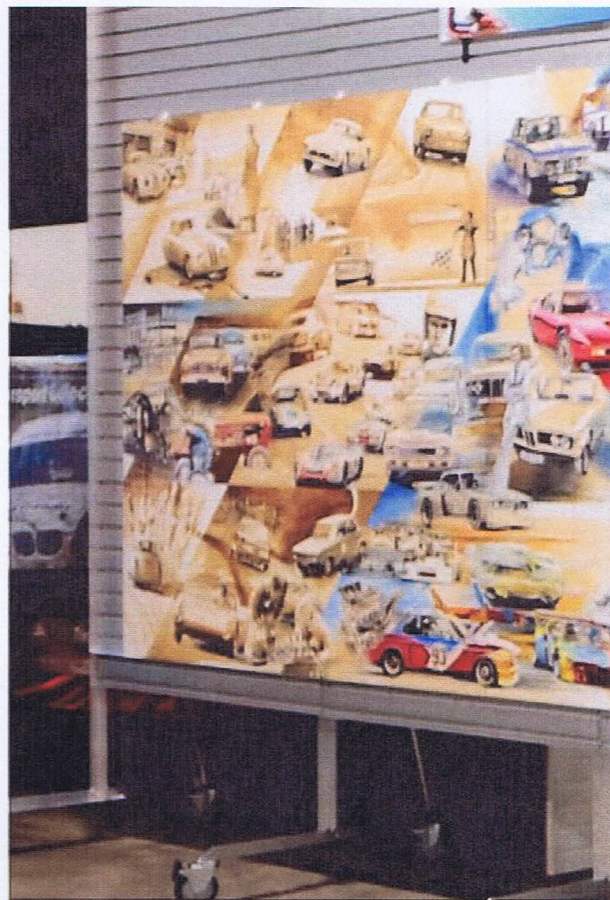
That love was noticed by Bogdan Coconoiu when Mitu exhibited his paintings in Bucharest in June 2014. President of the Retromobile Club of Romania, Coconoiu invited Mitu to the Sinaia Concoors the following weekend, and he purchased some of Mitu's paintings as prizes for the winners—including the 1938 Lancia Astura that won Best in Show. Mitu painted that Lancia again for the 2015 event poster, and he presented

the poster's original artwork to 94-year-old King Michael I, whose family owns Peles Castle, the concours location.

By then, Mitu was painting every car in the concours for the event program and the car's owner, a practice he continued after BMW of Romania began supporting the concours in 2016. Enter Alex Seremet, BMW of Romania's corporate communications manager and a passionate enthusiast of vintage cars and history. Seremet told Mitu that he'd just gotten an autograph from his hero, Jochen Neerpasch, at Villa d'Este, which prompted Mitu to tell him how he'd met his own hero, Stirling Moss, seven months earlier. "I'd made a painting of Sir Stirling winning the 1955 Mille Miglia, and I sent it to him in London," Mitu says. "The day after Monica and I got married, I got an envelope from Stirling Moss saying, 'I love your work. If you are ever in London, come by.'"

Coincidentally, Adrian and Monica had just been given two tickets to London as a wedding present. On November 20, 2015, Mitu was in Moss' living room, showing him more work and listening to his stories.

"Stirling was so gentle, and he really listened to you," Mitu says. "I'd never met someone who listened in that way, and I decided



to listen to Alex tell me about Jochen Neerpasch. I saw the gleam in his eyes, and I started making connections: What if I help Alex have the same experience I had with Stirling, help him meet his hero?"

BMW's first Motorsport director, Jochen Neerpasch, appeared at the unveiling of *Blue Hero* in Bucharest.

Mitu was in the midst of a series celebrating Moss' life, but he put it aside for a new project:





Blue Hero, celebrating Neerpasch. The project wasn't funded, however, and Mitu was running short on money as Christmas approached. He'd been all-in on his career as an artist for two years, but it wasn't yet paying the bills. "I decided to put aside *Blue Hero* to do a one-month painting marathon on the history of BMW in public, in a café," he says. "I was afraid to ask Alex, but he was very open to the idea."

"I had the privilege to be the right man at the right moment," Seremet says. "A BMW dealer had rented a big space in a new shopping mall, and he didn't know how to use it. We approached the dealer, and Mitu got a place to do a performance. Before that, the dealer just had a car there, and no one noticed it. All of a sudden there was a big event in the mall!"

Working from photos and suggestions from Seremet, Mitu ended up making 101 paintings,

finishing three and starting another every day for 30 days. Those are the images he posted to Facebook's BMW Memorabilia page, where they were seen by Mike Ura in Texas. "I was intrigued by the fact that he was painting with coffee, and also by his imagination," says Ura. "A lot of the Blue Coffee paintings

Adrian and his wife, Monica, were on hand when *Blue Hero* had its U.S. premiere at the BMW CCA Foundation.

At Hilton Head later that year, *Blue One* provided context for BMW of North America's M1 Procar.

are from press photos, but there are touches of imagination. One of the paintings is of a BMW 700 racing, and there are kids peeking through the bushes and smiling, watching the race. He adds these details... and he pays remarkable attention to the background, the buildings behind the car."

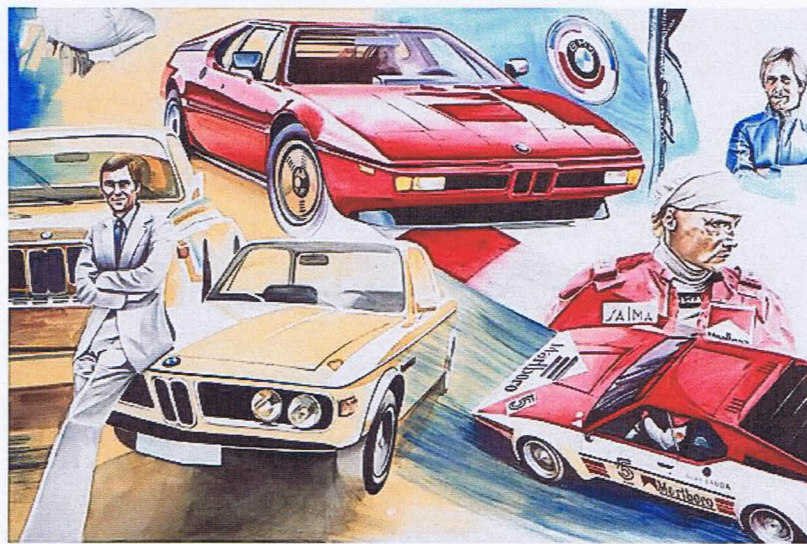


Ura began communicating with Mitu, and eventually he asked to buy the entire series of coffee paintings. "Some had been sold already, so he repainted about 30 for me," says Ura. "I think it gave him a big boost of confidence, and when the paintings showed up at the Foundation, other people started getting works done. Andrew Wilson has several, and Dirk de Groen has a really cool one that shows him and his wife at the end of the Mille Miglia."

The international attention for *Blue Coffee* helped Alex secure funding for the completion of *Blue Hero*. "It was challenging to do this art project in a small country with meager resources—Romania is 0.1% of BMW's total sales—but the moment someone from the BMW CCA Foundation was interested, we got the recognition that justified the support," Seremet says. "Actually, the recognition justified far more support than Adrian got!"

Finishing *Blue Hero* was only one of Mitu's goals. The other was to bring Seremet in touch with his hero. They'd met at Villa d'Este, of course, and again when Alex worked with Neerpasch on a story about the M1 in Germany, but this would be far more meaningful. They invited Neerpasch to come to the painting's unveiling in Bucharest, and he agreed. In April 2018, the painting was unveiled onstage in a movie theatre, with a Q&A attended by some 150 journalists and a screening of *Adrenalin: The BMW Touring Car Story*, in which Neerpasch features prominently as BMW's first BMW Motorsport director.

Blue Hero, which measures roughly five feet tall and twelve feet long, features countless vignettes about Neerpasch's life, from his apprenticeship in Porsche's tractor division to his successes with BMW and Mercedes racing teams and the creation of the Art Cars. "I provided information," says Seremet, "but I could not imagine how all of



Neerpasch's life could be put into pictures and be understandable."

Mitu did, however—and the work reads like the interior of an Orthodox church, telling a lifetime's worth of stories through pictures that need no words to be complete.

By the time *Blue Hero* premiered in Bucharest, Ura had already arranged to purchase it for display at the Foundation. Seremet helped with the logistics, and Adrian and Monica flew to South Carolina for the painting's U.S. debut. It was their first trip to the U.S., a watershed event for a young artist steeped in American culture through music and the movies. They also got to visit New York City, taking in the major museums and even stumbling upon a gallery exhibit of the paintings of Norman Rockwell, whom Mitu cites as a major influence on his painting-as-storytelling.

More important, though, were the people they met while here.

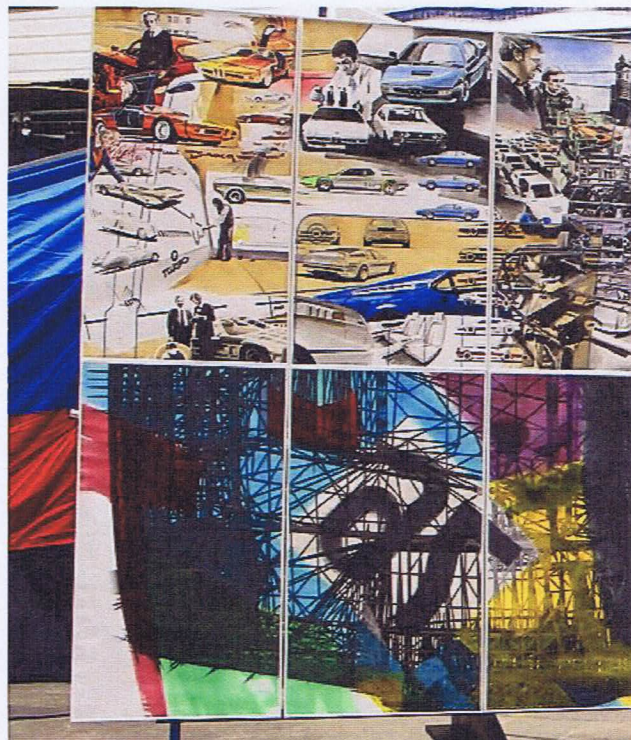
"I got to meet Mike after two years," Mitu says. "That was cool! It's kind of Freudian, but he's become my new grandfather, and that relationship is very important to me. I'm an only child, and I didn't have much time with either of my grandfathers. I've always been searching for heroes and grandfathers, and

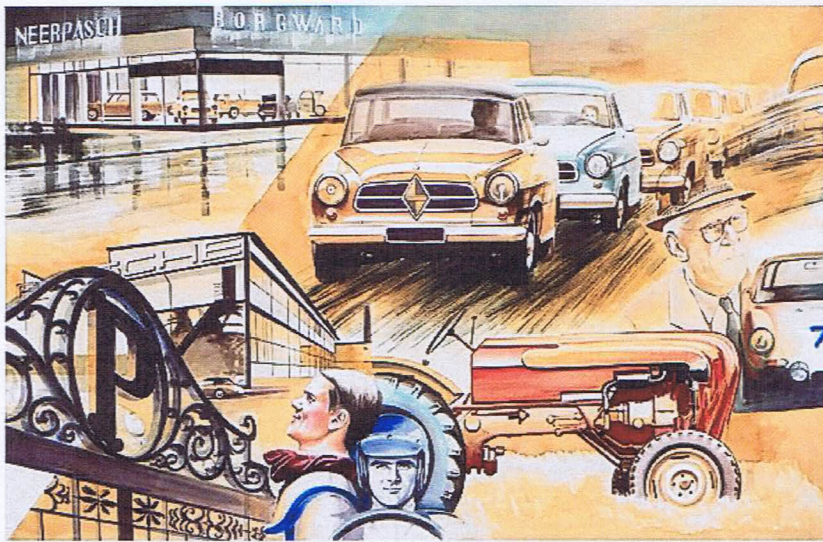
Panels from *Blue Hero* depict scenes from the career of Jochen Neerpasch.

brothers like Alex."

Ura has his own grandchildren in real life, but he's happy to serve as mentor to Mitu. "He's special. Both he and his wife are special," he says. "He's got such passion, and such enthusiasm. There's something bigger there."

Indeed there is. Mitu followed *Blue Hero* with *Blue One*, another large-scale piece commemorating the M1, and assembled on a structure that





mimics the M1's tube frame. "Blue One is dedicated to Mr. Mike," Mitu says. "I relied on Mike's knowledge of the M1 to tell the story, just like I did with Alex's knowledge of Neerpasch and the BMW brand. I was using Chris Bangle's philosophy of letting people contribute, and I like taking friends' stories and putting them on paper."

Ura is an M1 owner, and he bought *Blue One*, too, arranging

its debut at Hilton Head. The painting wasn't quite done, and Mitu applied the final touches on the concours lawn—making his second trip to the U.S. six months after his first. *Blue One* is now on display at BMW CCA headquarters in Greer, SC. After that, Ura hopes to exhibit it at another auto museum in the U.S., along with *Blue Hero*, which remains on display at the Foundation along with a number

Yes, there is a tractor in the Neerpasch story!

of Mitu's coffee paintings.

So what's next for Adrian Mitu, now that his massive BMW projects have been sold? He's done another project for BMW of Romania, mingling elements of the new 7 Series with scenes of Bucharest. He restarted work on the Stirling Moss project—unfortunately, Moss died earlier this year at the age of 90—and he'd like to do a similar series on the life of American actor John Cazale. "Actors are my first heroes," Mitu says, noting that he learned colloquial English from episodes of *Inside The Actor's Studio*, which also informed his sense of storytelling.

"How good would it be, my story, if I had instant success, if everything had been easy?" he asks. "That's not a story. You won't even get a beer from your friends for that story!"

Adrian Mitu's story is already worth more than a beer, and he's only 35. His story has just begun, and it has a long way to run before it's finished. The next chapters should be very interesting indeed. **R**

