

Alumni Profile

RAELYNN HILLHOUSE, MA'89, PHD'93

When Missouri Ozarks native Raelynn Hillhouse left Washington University to study abroad her junior year of college, the resulting experiences changed her life. Hillhouse had enough credits to graduate, so she spent her final years as an undergraduate traipsing about Eastern Europe as an exchange student. The history and German area studies major was fascinated with the region—and she had a penchant for getting involved in “hands-on” learning. Her curiosity often led to dangerous situations: “I was in Poland poking around the Gdansk shipyards ... doing everything I could to immerse myself in these places ... that’s when I found myself facing the barrel of a Kalashnikov,” she says, somewhat nonchalantly. Hillhouse was taking photographs and seemed suspicious to the Polish police who cornered her. She managed to talk her way out of the situation, and that was just the beginning of her exciting adventures.

The list of Hillhouse’s exploits is fascinating: For some extra cash, she ran Cuban rum between East and West Berlin, laundered Eastern Bloc currencies and even smuggled jewels and artwork from the former Soviet Union to the West. And though Hillhouse did return to the United States for her master’s degree in Russian and East European studies and doctorate program in political science at U-M, she always managed to slip back to Europe even while enrolled in Ann Arbor. Her experiences provided much of the fodder for her new book, but she’s quick to point out that truth is, indeed, stranger than fiction. “As I wrote the spy novel, time and time again, I found myself having to tone down things that had really happened to me, because no one would believe it.”

Hillhouse concedes that her youth might have something to do with the gutsy moves she made. “I was in my early 20s and having the time of my life,” she recalls. But after the wall came down, things changed. “It was boring once Communism was gone. The systems [in the countries she visited] were obviously repressive and horrible in many aspects. Once that was gone, Eastern Europe became far less interesting.” And so she’s left the adventure-seeking behind. Hillhouse currently lives in Hawaii, and she’s turned her attention to her upcoming books—a sequel to “Rift Zone” and another book set in Afghanistan during the Cold War detailing the origins of Al Qaeda.

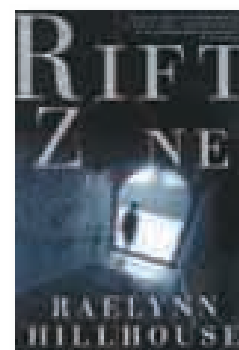


Courtesy of Raelynn Hillhouse

Rift Zone by Raelynn Hillhouse, MA'89, PhD'93, Forge Books, 2004, \$24.95.

When the Berlin Wall tumbled in 1989, the Cold War thriller genre tumbled with it. Indeed, there has been a dearth of good spy novels since that time, but Raelynn Hillhouse successfully fills the void with “Rift Zone.” This new fast-paced thriller tells the tale of American professor Faith Whitney, the daughter of a Bible-smuggler living in Germany in 1989.

To make money, Faith fearlessly smuggles antiques and other items between East and West Germany,



while managing to elude the Stasi (the East German police). But when she’s recruited by the Stasi to deliver a package to Moscow, Faith becomes entangled in the center of a plot to assassinate Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

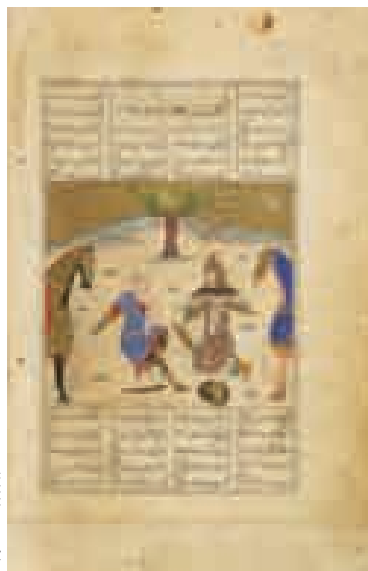
Hillhouse tells a heart-pounding story that is both suspenseful and intriguing. The idea for the book came to her when an adviser at U-M joked about someone taking out Gorbachev before it was too late. But perhaps what’s most fascinating is that much of “Rift Zone” is based on Hillhouse’s own life. The manner in which Faith is recruited by the Stasi is taken directly from Hillhouse’s own experiences. When asked what other parts of the book mirrored her European adventures, Hillhouse chuckles, “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.” She goes on to say, “The whole thing is based in fact. I’m Michigan trained. I took great care to make sure everything was very accurate in terms of historical details, etc. Is it lifted straight from my life? No. Are there pieces lifted from my life? Definitely.”

“Rift Zone” is a compelling read, and Hillhouse’s knowledge of Cold War Europe certainly shines through in her work. This page-turner will have you begging for more.

Raelynn Hillhouse is the Alumni Author Series featured author this month. For an exclusive Q & A with the author about her experiences in Eastern Europe and how she wrote the book “Rift Zone,” visit www.umalumni.com (click on “Events, Programs and Clubs”).

Persian Treasure Revealed

For the first time in 40 years, the U-M Museum of Art has unveiled to the public one of its great treasures—an illustrated Persian manuscript produced in Baghdad in the 1460s. The manuscript details the “Shahnama,” a dramatic telling of the legendary exploits of Persian kings and heroes. Composed by a court poet in the 11th century, the “Shahnama” was often illustrated by the most prominent Persian calligraphers and painters of the past. The manuscript will be on display at the Museum of Art until December 19.



U-M Museum of Art