

TALKING WITH PAUL WATKINS

# THERE'S DIRT UNDER HIS NAILS

Meet an author who takes a hands-on approach to writing fiction. BY MICHAEL GILTZ

**P**AUL WATKINS is nervous, which would surprise anyone familiar with his fiction. The 31-year-old has set his muscular literary adventures in World War II Germany, revolutionary Ireland, and northern Africa in the 1920s.

And he does all his own research, flying biplanes across the Sahara, working on fishing boats, clomping through countless battlefields—"self-imposed Outward Bound," as he puts it.

The hard work has paid off. Watkins' first novel, *Night Over Day Over Night*, published in 1988, was short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize in Britain, and his talent has been favorably compared to Hemingway, Conrad, and other weighty literary names. And yet, he *is* nervous.

The source of that unease is the subject of his latest novel. **ARCHANGEL** (\$24, Random House) is about eco-terrorism and the radicals who devote their lives to doing whatever it takes to protect the earth, like inserting timber spikes into trees to disable logging equipment. As always, Watkins did extensive research—camping in the forests of Maine, where the novel is set; devouring radical environmental literature; and eventually gaining the confidence of eco-terrorists willing to talk. "They're not crazy," Watkins says, choosing his words carefully,

suspecting that most people will picture these extremists as tie-dyed, unregenerate hippies. "These are people who believe they will be exonerated by history."

Maybe he's reluctant to say too much because he got burned when his last book came out. *Stand Before Your God*—a boarding-school memoir about his days at prep school in England—brought him a lawsuit along with the usual laudatory reviews. Although Watkins had changed the names in his book, "the school I attended is around 575 years old, so every name in the English language is represented there at least five times over." Shortly after publication, a former student—whose name happened to be the same as a particularly vile character in the book—sued his publisher and won about



LIFE AND LIMB: Watkins' current novel, *Archangel*, grew out of environmental concerns

\$30,000. "If it had been Victorian times we'd have grabbed some pistols and shot each other in the park," sighs Watkins. Then *Esquire* chided him for having the temerity to pen a memoir at the tender age of 29. He's probably lucky that a two-year relationship with Jennifer Beals isn't mentioned too often, which could really hurt his stock in the literary world.

Now living in New Jersey with wife Cath, Watkins is a writer in residence at the Peddie School, where he's finishing up his next novel (about Warsaw Pact spies who assume their fake identities for good after the fall of communism). He's also a new dad, and his little girl Emma has given Watkins fresh insight into his work. "I noticed there's a complete absence of children in my fiction," he says. ♦