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*The Middle of the Air* by Kenneth Butcher

Throughout his career as a ceramic engineer, Kenneth Butcher has been involved in many scientific research projects. He has gone from developing filters that eliminated impurities in molten metals to experimenting with affordable rechargeable fuel cells to consulting with a company about the feasibility of a plant that would sell the by-product from recycled coal ash. But his curiosity has also led him to solve problems of a more unusual nature.

One such occasion came while he was working for a company that produced pumice-like material used in the chemical industry. One day, his secretary pointed out a *Wall Street Journal* article about how jean manufacturers were having trouble with the materials used to stone-wash their jeans. The materials were breaking down and clogging the machines. So Butcher and his team found a way to use his company's product to solve this problem. A patent for stones used to stone-wash jeans is now one of the 15 he holds. And being such a good guy, he added his secretary's name to the patent to reward her for pointing out the article.

Another unusual project came when a friend who owned a cookie company approached him about designing an oven that could bake the world's largest cookie. The feat required a 100-foot oven. With the help of his sons, who are also engineers, Butcher built an inflatable dome out of Mylar. After running thermal conductivity tests on cookie dough, they arrived at a way to bake the dough. Despite wind gusts that played havoc with the Mylar, threatening rains, and 45-degree weather, the cookie baked perfectly. Using a surveyor to confirm the diameter and an accountant to weigh the dough, they were able to list their cookie in the *Guinness World Records*.

So what kind of novel would a materials engineer who figured out how to stone-wash jeans and bake giant cookies come up with? At first glance, the plot involving a missing truck carrying nuclear waste tied to rogue elements in the government sounds like a clichéd idea. But just like his scientific curiosity led him to odd projects, Butcher goes for unexpected plot twists and

quirky characters. The cast includes an Ecuadorian biophysicist who translates animal thoughts into human speech, a clairvoyant girl who draws visions of angels on a scroll, and an artistic grandfather who paints portraits of famous people in unexpected settings. The plot twists include the appearance on the town square of a three-foot replica of the missing truck, complete with an exact license tag, a nighttime raid on a former NASA satellite tracking facility, and U. S. Army Rangers performing unusual maneuvers along the Appalachian Trail.

When explaining his transition from engineer to novelist, Butcher says that working in a research lab was fantastic training for writing a novel: "Your mind is always looking for ways to put pieces together. What are the key components, and how do they fit together? The same thing happens in a novel. How do the plot and characters fit together?"

In *The Middle of the Air*, Butcher skillfully blends his diverse scientific knowledge into a rollicking literary techno-mystery that all makes perfect sense.

*Kenneth Butcher lives in Hendersonville, North Carolina.*



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