There was a time when Bill Scheft ’79 wrote fiction from 10 a.m. until noon in a windowless, five-by-five closet inside his spacious midtown Manhattan apartment. Then he’d walk a few blocks to the offices of the Late Show with David Letterman, where, since 1991, he has been a comedy writer, specializing in monologue jokes and Top Ten lists. One day his wife, Adrienne Tolsch, warned Scheft to wait longer before emerging onto the street: “You’re going to get hit by a cab,” she said. Scheft admits that writing fiction makes him “a little lightheaded. You sit down and try to get yourself into this state of mind—you are maneuvering in this world. You’ve got to sit there in the silence and let the answers come into the silence. You’ve got to stare into the abyss. It’s the antithesis of joke writing.”

Not that Scheft’s novels—the last three have been published—aren’t funny. After all, he was a standup comedian for 13 years, touring the United States, Canada, and Australia (“I was a good act, not a great act—Jews, sports, and weather”). His newest fictional effort, Everything Hurts, explores the world of mind-body medicine with Phil Camp, a protagonist so hobbled by lower-limb pain that he becomes a virtual agoraphobe and writes his wildly successful, nationally syndicated advice column flat on his back on a pad in his New York apartment. “To walk and sit and run and bend like any other neurotic forty-six-year-old had become his full-time job,” Scheft writes. “Phil’s part-time job was urinating. Fifteen times a day.”

Phil does leave his apartment and becomes a patient of a mind-body doctor whose hit book on pain is called The Power of Owl! The protagonist’s ordeal parallels certain experiences of the author. “I dragged a foot, limping, in constant pain, for four years,” Scheft relates. “I was told there was nothing wrong with me, it was psychogenic. I wrote this book to ‘art’ myself out of the pain. The guy in the book got better before I did. Ten days after I sold the book, I went to see another doctor, who took one look at my most recent X-rays and said, ‘You need a hip replacement.’ And that was it. But I do believe in psychosomatic theories; the pain is real, but the root of the pain is in the brain. I’m a big fan of the examined life—I’m in my third decade of psychotherapy.”

Letters & Letterman

Bill Scheft writes comic monologues and fictional dialogue.
In one stunning shot, we fly just above a caravan of camels—320 camels, to be exact, joined by 660 donkeys, sheep, and goats and 500 humans in a vast, winding procession across the desert. At another point, a howling sandstorm makes us want to squeeze our eyes shut. The union of high-tech film hardware with ancient landscapes gives *Journey to Mecca*, a 45-minute IMAX movie now on world tour, the feel of a Cecil B. De Mille picture raised to the fourth power.

It includes unprecedented images—like the first footage shot inside Mecca’s Grand Mosque, and the sight of two million pilgrims gathered on the plains of Arafat during the hajj, the 1,400-year-old pilgrimage to Mecca that every Muslim endeavors to make at least once. And that camel caravan is the longest in film history. The 70-millimeter IMAX format has “been used, for example, to present great events in space and underwater;” says Taran Davies ’93, the movie’s co-producer. “The hajj is one of the great cultural and spiritual events on earth, but one which most of us know far less about than we do about things that happen in outer space and under the sea.”

Davies first made documentary films at Harvard, and after college rode horseback with some classmates around Lake Baikal in Siberia, filming *Around the Sacred Sea* (see July-August 1995, page 52). Travels in Central Asian nations like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan led to *The Land Beyond the River*, which PBS aired. In 1996 he switched to finance with Loeb Partners on Wall Street, but the 9/11 attacks, from which Davies fled by bicycle, were “such a clear moment, in terms of what path I needed to take.” He grabbed his film camera and three weeks later was in Afghanistan; his *Afghan Stories* appeared in 2002. Davies’s wide travels, and those of his business partner, Dominic Cunningham-Reid, converged when they founded Cosmic Picture in 2004, and “All roads led to Mecca,” Davies explains. *Journey to Mecca* took five years to make, and required no fewer than 85 permits from government agencies in Saudi Arabia; the diplomatic process of building relationships was one that Cunningham-Reid summarizes as “a million cups of tea.” Cosmic Picture also raised the $13-million budget from an international corps of investors, hired actor Ben Kingsley to narrate, made a distribution deal with the National Geographic Society, and booked the January 2009 world premiere in Abu Dhabi. In coming months, *Journey to Mecca* will show at the Smithsonian Institution, at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, and in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and other American cities. Endorsed by both the Dalai Lama and the archbishop of Canterbury, the film has drawn audiences in Kuwait, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Canada.

Non-Muslims like Davies and Cunningham-Reid cannot enter the holy city, so they trained two all-Islamic camera crews to shoot images like the spectacular aerial shot of thousands of pilgrims circling the Ka’ba, the black cubical building in the center of Mecca that is the most sacred site in Islam. (Islamic tradition holds that Abraham [Ibrahim] built the first structure on the site, and all Muslims face the Ka’ba when praying. Abraham’s centrality indicates, as Davies explains, that the hajj actually connects with Jewish and Christian, as well as Islamic, traditions.)

*Journey to Mecca* tells its story by dramatizing the pilgrimage of Ibn Battuta, who set out from Tangier in 1325 and arrived in Mecca 18 months later. (He then kept voyaging, for 29 years and 75,000 miles more, becoming the best-traveled person of antiquity—and also the only person to have both a crater on the moon and a mall in Dubai named after him.) His hajj, described in his memoir, the *Rihla*, waited only seven centuries to find its way onto the big screen.

An astonishingly long desert caravan (above) is part of *Journey to Mecca*, as is a blinding sandstorm (top).

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*Journey to Mecca* screened Large Streaming

*MONTAGE*
“I was really lucky to get into standup just as the comedy boom started,” he recalls. “Clubs were opening up all over.”

muscles. As Woody Allen said, ‘If you can do it, there’s nothing to it.’ It’s formula—the setup and punch line and the glue between them.” Writing full-time for Letterman means cranking out 50 or 60 jokes per day. “Dave will check 10 to go on cue cards, and use five,” says Scheft. “And that’s a good day. Dave’s voice is always in my head; he’s the smartest guy, and the best writer, in the room.”

Scheft grew up in the Boston area, the fifth of six children. “Growing up in a large Jewish family, there’s never enough guilt to go around,” he explains. One of his uncles was Herbert Warren Wind, long a fixture at the New Yorker and author of several books on golf and one on tennis. “He had the biggest influence on me of any man,” says Scheft. “Uncle Herb was so generous, showing me the possibilities of the writer’s life. If I think of myself as a writer, he is something else.”

The Ringer, Scheft’s first published novel, has a character based on Wind—an elderly writer whose nephew makes a living as a hired athlete (a “ringer”) for restaurant and corporate softball teams in New York City.

During the 1980s, Scheft himself made some cash doing exactly that; an outfielder, he had played a little baseball at Harvard, though he switched to Crimson sportswriting when he was cut from the team. He concentrated in classics, having fallen in love with Greek and Latin (“I thought the Church was going to come back”) at Deerfield Academy.

After college, he continued sports-writing for two years at the Albany Times-Union, but soon moved to New York City and began performing standup at the renowned comedy club Catch a Rising Star. (He’d done standup a few times at Harvard, and once won a talent show at Quincy House.) He succeeded Bill Maher there as a house emcee, a slot Scheft held from 1982 until 1987. “I was really lucky to get into standup just as the comedy boom started,” he recalls. “Clubs were opening up all over.” He performed on the road 30 weeks a year, and did “every TV show except the two that could actually help your career—Tonight and Letterman.”

Scheft had always wanted to write for television but couldn’t get such a job “because of a decision I’d made at age 18, to go for the Crimson, instead of the Lampoon.” Eventually he ran into Letterman’s executive producer while eating lunch at the Friars Club and submitted some jokes; the first one to air was, “Liz Taylor and Larry Fortensky had their first fight, over whether he should unpack.”

Eighteen years later, he’s still there, minus a couple of leaves to write books. He still enjoys comedy writing and calls it a job that’s about “service.” In his mind, though, Scheft didn’t consider himself truly a writer until The Ringer appeared in print in 2002. “When you get a novel published,” he says, “you have to admit you’re a real writer.”

~CRAIG LAMBERT