



# Jim Lehrer, Busman, Raconteur – and Newsman

*Jim's most recent novel is titled Super and set on the Union Pacific's fabled Super Chief. Although neither of the trains on the mural behind Jim is the Super Chief, this photo was shot by Tom Strongman, who also shot the photo on the cover, in the restored Union Station depot in Kansas City, Missouri.*

**Y**ou hear his voice most weeknights calmly reporting events or describing issues in the day's news. Perhaps you watched him moderate the presidential debates. Maybe

you're among those who have been listening to him from the very earliest days in 1975 when he joined PBS's *The Robert MacNeil Report* as the Washington correspondent, or the following year as the program expanded, renamed *The MacNeil-Lehrer Report* and went national. In 1983 it became the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, eventually changing

*You'd be happy too to find yourself alive and in good health five years after a heart attack, and happier yet to have acquired a dream as has Jim Lehrer, shown here in 1989 grinning happily from the doorway of his very own 1946 Flxible bus.*



Photo courtesy PBS NewsHour

its name once more during 1995-96 season when Robert MacNeil retired. Since then that calm visage and voice are seen and heard on *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* televised by PBS stations everywhere. Today Jim's official title is Executive Editor and Anchor.

Behind that calm exterior, James Charles Lehrer is a man of passions. For certain he is passionate about and for his wife Kate with whom, along with their three daughters and six grandchildren, he celebrated their Golden Anniversary earlier this year. Lehrer also takes great pleasure in story-telling and he's got lots of stories inside of him to share with us in addition to the twenty-two—yes 22—books he has written that have been published to date; two memoirs, 20 novels, plus three plays—and more books are, as they say, “in the pipeline and coming”. Plus he's passionate about buses! Again, yes, you read right—buses. He owns a 23-passenger 1946 Flxible Clipper, but this bus

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goes beyond the vehicle for Jim Lehrer avidly collects all manner of bus memorabilia.

There’s one additional facet to Jim Lehrer that is important to him, with implications important to us all for Jim’s a heart attack survivor. And there are lessons from his experience worth us knowing about and understanding too. So read on and get to know award-winning journalist, newsman, broadcaster Jim Lehrer, off-microphone and out from in front of the camera.

As you may have discerned from the slightly elongated, soft vowels and unhurried cadence of his speech, Jim’s youth and early working years were spent in Kansas, then Texas. He sums up part of his youth by quoting his two-year-older brother Fred who today is a man of the cloth, “As kids, when we believed, we believed diesel fuel.” This is a reference to their dad’s—really the entire family’s—very intense year and a day owning/operating the Kansas Central Lines, a bus transportation company along its daily 150 mile rural route. Though short-lived, running the business and driving the routes really did involve the entire family each and every day as both father Fred and mother Lois drove, often accompanied by 12 year-old Freddy and 10 year-old Jim. When the venture went sour, father Fred took a succession of jobs that moved the family to various parts of Texas, finally settling in San Antonio.

Jim earned his AA degree from Victoria College in Texas, then went on to obtain his bachelor’s from the School of Journalism at the University of Kansas.

No sooner had he tossed one cap in the air than he donned another, following a tradition set by his dad and brother. Actually Lehrer had joined the Marine Corps and been “indoctrinated” during a 12-week boot camp between his junior and senior years. After earning the diploma, it was back to Quantico full-time in Officer Candidate School. Jim’s assessment of that period of his life has as much relevancy today as then, “the best thing being a Marine did for me was make it unnecessary for me ever to have to prove my masculinity to myself or to anyone else. It was as if I had gone through a ritual to manhood, such as Indian tribes and others once practiced.”

Prior to his official separation date, Jim had written what he calls “I-want-to-be-a-reporter-letters” to four news organizations. *The Dallas Morning News* liked what they read so Jim returned to Texas as a night rewrite man. He worked for this paper and subsequently its evening counterpart *Times Herald* from 1959 to 1969. If you recall your history that meant he was

in Dallas when JFK was assassinated and, yes, he covered it and its aftermath. In 1970 the Dallas public television station hired Lehrer. And you can see the handwriting now, right? Less than two years later in May 1972, Jim and Kate, and their by then family of three daughters, moved to Washington DC with Jim named as “coordinator”, a newly created position. In spite of, or because of, his adventures as a coordinator, it was the stepping stone along the path that would lead to MacNeil-Lehrer.

Meantime there was that itch to write that simply had to be scratched. Jim makes it quite clear that writing—good writing—was (and is) important to most serious journalists. As he describes it, “That was about all we talked about at the *Dallas Morning News* and *Times Herald*. We wanted our stories and articles to be well-written. And each of us seemed to be working on a novel of our own, or some other creative writing project.” Jim’s first novel *Viva Max* found a publisher in 1966 but, even better, a young, energetic guy named Mark Carliner put together a deal that ended up with *Viva Max* the book becoming *Viva Max* the movie. For Jim and Kate it was every writer’s dream come true. Consider, Jim’s annual salary in 1966 was \$11,000. Selling the movie rights to *Viva Max* netted him the equivalent of four years salary (\$50,000 less the agent’s 10% commission).

I’ve read all but a half-dozen of Lehrer’s 20 books including

both of his memoirs, a 1990 article he wrote for *Smithsonian* magazine about those who he is “just delighted to be one of Them, one of the possessed who cannot keep from collecting”, and the foreword he penned to Howard Suttle’s engaging book *Behind the Wheel* that relates Suttle’s 28-year career as a Greyhound driver between Joplin and Kingman along Route 66. As a reader (and listener) I couldn’t help but form an impression, an idea of who I thought the man Jim Lehrer might be, what he might be like as a person should I ever meet him one-on-one. Happily when that chance meeting took place, I was not disappointed. He is engaged and engaging. His sharp mind and dry, but easy, sense of humor meant I found myself sad as our conversation came to an end.

Life changing as *Viva Max* had been, 1983 brought Jim an even greater life experience scant months after he’d celebrat-

**See LEHRER page 14**



Photo courtesy PBS NewsHour.

## Lehrer from page 7

You can see a tiny portion of Jim's bus memorabilia collection behind him in his "bus room" at home.

Photo courtesy PBS NewsHour.



ed his 50th birthday—a heart attack.

We all know “the rules” for healthy living and we read about the blood pressure and cholesterol relationship to the heart practically everywhere. But nothing — even when issued as a warning by our very own physician—is as poignant as when someone with Jim Lehrer’s communicative skills is willing to share not just the experience, but tap into and express inner feelings about this experience that leaves a person so shaken, so vulnerable. Would that there was space here to share the 50-plus pages of Jim’s memoir *A Bus of My Own* that relate the before-during-after. There is room however to pass along some of Jim’s acquired wisdom that’s applicable regardless of our age or stage of life.

Most of us can only imagine what day-to-day life must be in the nation’s capital, especially for those with face or name recognition. Jim’s doctor had obviously figured out that treating his patient’s medical condition required more than just dealing with the physical. It needed to include mental and emotional aspects too. Jim was asked to make lists; list of all the things in life that caused stress or anxiety and in another prioritize the

And it was while recuperating in those now long-ago early 80s that Jim found his mind repeatedly going over those bitter-sweet days of Kansas Central Lines. Subsequently he commenced collecting bus memorabilia ranging from timetables, station signs, models—and yes, finally the real deal, his own 23-passenger bus, a 1946 Flxible (no it’s not missing a vowel, the name is correct—Flxible). A chapter in *A Bus of My Own* has you riding along with Jim as he describes getting his purchase home from a town, a six-hour drive away, on the Tennessee-Virginia border. If you’ve ever doubted the wisdom of any choice you’ve ever made, you’ll relate “in spades”.

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things that are really important to do or accomplish, and yet another list of the things that really aren’t all that important. Then using the first two lists, create a third list that is the New Life List to guide and define how the hours and the days should be spent going forward.

What’s important to Jim? “Topping the list is family, writing and PBS. I really do enjoy my work. How long will I stay with it? Well, either until I’m no longer having fun or someone at PBS comes to me and says, ‘You know, Jim...’” And with the *NewsHour* broadcasting at the end of the workday, since 1983 Jim makes two days out of each one by taking a midday nap. “I may not sleep the entire time, but I lie down and snooze and rest. That also means no business lunches which also goes along with the foods I now eat, having finally discovered fresh fruits, vegetables and such. Kate and I also carefully consider every social invitation before RSVP-ing, asking ourselves whether, ‘we really want to go and make small talk while juggling small plates and glasses of some beverage.’”

Jim aptly sums up his hobby with, “At the risk of overdoing it, I think a case can even be made for a serious purpose to what we (collectors) are up to. I believe it is not farfetched to claim that what we do for strange reasons is good for society. Remember, please, that it has been the collectors and the pack rats among our ancestors who have preserved the little things of our history. They are the ones who stuck away old kitchen utensils and postcards and children’s toys and diaries and dresses and the other items of personal life that now hold positions of honor in the Smithsonian and other museums of American life. There are important people and organizations at work preserving the big things of life, like buildings and battlefields, but it is left to the rest of us to preserve items such as .. well, bus depot signs.”

While I’m not a “betting person”, I’ll wager that tonight when you tune in *The NewsHour* you’ll listen, and watch—and process what you see and hear in a slightly different way. Now you will also see husband, father, grandfather, bus and bus-memorabilia collector, and heart attack survivor Jim Lehrer.