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# The Times

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## Death and survival along tobacco road

By **MATTHEW BUDMAN**  
Staff Writer

As you might expect, there are no ashtrays in Richard Kluger's house.

Well, maybe a few.

"That's sort of an ashtray" — he points to a flowered ceramic dish on an end table — "but almost no one we know smokes anymore," he says. "But if they want to, we *do* let people smoke in here."

Still, if you feel self-conscious lighting up around Kluger, well, you should. This Montgomery Township writer has just seen the

publication of "Ashes to Ashes," an 800-page tome that chronicles the last century of American smoking. It's an ugly story, and a frustrating one, haunted by the ghosts of the millions killed by cigarettes.

While the book assigns blame for those 400,000 annual deaths to several sources — a good deal to the government, which has always treated tobacco companies with "kid gloves," and a bit to smokers themselves — most of the animus falls on Philip Morris, R.J. Reynolds and the four other "merchants of death," as they're sometimes dubbed by the three-quarters of Americans who don't smoke.

"For a generation," Kluger says, "these com-

panies have chosen to deny, distort and belittle this mountain of evidence indicting cigarettes as mass killers, all for one purpose — to reassure their customers falsely."

He speaks this sentence slowly, deliberately — it's a practiced one, honed on "The Today Show" and "Charlie Rose," and prefaced with, "Here's a line I've been using" — and yet he delivers it with genuine feeling. Seven years of research haven't inured him to the damage tobacco has done to America.

"Smoking is our leading public-health issue," he says. "Tobacco is the least-regulated consumer product and the most deadly. This has been a privileged character, this product.

Nobody's laid a glove on these people."

"Ashes to Ashes," which delves deeply into the internal workings and research of Philip Morris and R.J.R., is hardly flattering to the tobacco companies, though it affects a nonpartisan viewpoint and works hard to humanize executives of questionable morality.

"I'm sure the companies will think the book is unfair, but they are not going to get a more favorable book from anyone who's not taking their money," says Kluger. He bristles at an early Wall Street Journal review by "a right-

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Richard Kluger



# Ash

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wing ideologue" who dubbed his end-of-the-book regulatory proposal "zealotry." "The last thing I want," he states firmly, "is to be thought of as an anti-smoking zealot. These companies are not going to do anything unless they have to. They never have."

**KLUGER RELAXES** on a blue sofa in a large yellow-and-white sitting room, hands behind his head, his eyeglasses resting on the coffee table. The room has too much to take in at a glance: a fireplace, an antique baby carriage, a spinning wheel, shelves of colorful vases, a quilt (sewn by his wife) on the wall. A life-sized dummy slumps in a rocking chair, jauntily holding a cigarette.

Presumably, the cancer stick is there just for show. Kluger quit smoking in 1973, after a dozen years

of stained teeth. "But I never really inhaled," he insists. "I just puffed. Then I smoked cigars, but when I started working on the book I had to stop. They started having an awful psychosomatic effect on me."

Smokers who read "Ashes to Ashes" may feel the same way, enduring account after account of the biological war they wage on their lungs by years of assault with tar. But Kluger, acknowledging the challenge of breaking the addiction, argues that smokers don't deserve most of the derision heaped on them. "Thirty years ago half the population smoked. Now a quarter do. The people who were going to quit easily have done so, and we're down to the hard-core smokers. A lot of smokers are defensive, stubborn, truculent. This paranoia, this defiance, is a cover for the fear of how hard it is to quit."

Kluger points out that the roughly 25,000 annual AIDS deaths are still only one-sixteenth the number of the 400,000 who die every year from smoking. "Despite that toll," he says, "individual smoking deaths do not attract much attention or sympathy. They do not seem tragic. It steals the last eight to 12 years of the victims' lives, rather than striking people when they're young. It's not a scourge like the Ebola virus; it's a mild, slow-acting poison. And there's a perception that smokers have made a pact with the devil, that they've knowingly traded years of their lives for the right to smoke. These people are not seen as innocent victims."

**ALTHOUGH FEW** Americans — due to the efforts of health advocates and a significant government anti-smoking campaigns — can claim to be innocent of the dangers of smoking, Kluger faults the tobacco companies' obstinate refusal to publicly acknowledge that tobacco is addictive and cancer-causing. That stubbornness has slowed public awareness.

"The public's knowledge of the health dangers has been cumulative, since 1950, when the first major studies were published," he says. "We've had thousands of studies

published by reputable people outside the industry. We've seen dozens of government reports, mostly from the Surgeon General's office.

"The tobacco companies chose *not* to undertake serious research of the issue most of concern to their customers. They knew what they could find could put them out of business, so all their research was on taste, or on changing the nicotine yields. They left the tough work on addiction and disease to outside researchers, and their own scientists did nothing to exonerate them. It was a sin of omission. They simply did not do what they ought to have done."

Tobacco research has, of course, been much in the news lately, with whistleblowers coming forward to reveal that company labs knew years ago that cigarettes were addictive and deadly. Since well before he wrapped up his manuscript in November, Kluger has watched each disclosure with trepidation. "The last two years I've been very worried about getting scooped," he admits. "But I haven't read one word from these whistleblowers that adds anything to our knowledge. Their only real value has been to highlight the obvious. The media has really overplayed these 'revelations.' This is all stuff we've known for years, but no one picked up on it before."

**WHEN HE** has completed his cross-country publicity tour for "Ashes to Ashes," Kluger will continue work on his seventh solo novel, also to be published by Knopf, about 1950s Princeton. The journey back in time is a familiar one: He graduated from Princeton University in 1956, while his wife (author of two books on needlepoint and co-author with Richard of two novels) attended Rutgers' Douglass campus.

They met in 1954 and lived in New York and New Haven, before moving to Ringoes in 1983 and to Montgomery two years ago. It's as to close to Princeton as they could manage. "We both work at home, so we need a lot of space," Kluger says. "We'd love to move into Princeton, but we simply can't afford what's there. We're still looking."

That search is on hold for the moment, while he makes the rounds of talk shows, radio interviews and newspaper profiles, talking about smoking, smoking, smoking.

Is there a final message he wants to convey to average, nonpolicy-making readers? Kluger thinks for a second. "Smoking is bad for you." He chuckles and tries again. "Smoking is *very* bad for you." He leans forward. "If you finish the book and *then* start smoking," he says carefully, "then I haven't done much of a service to humanity."