

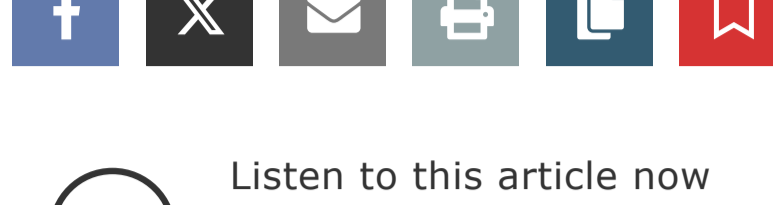
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TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

Mystery novel set in Trempealeau County written by state cheese association director awarded

Caden Perry 4 hrs ago 0

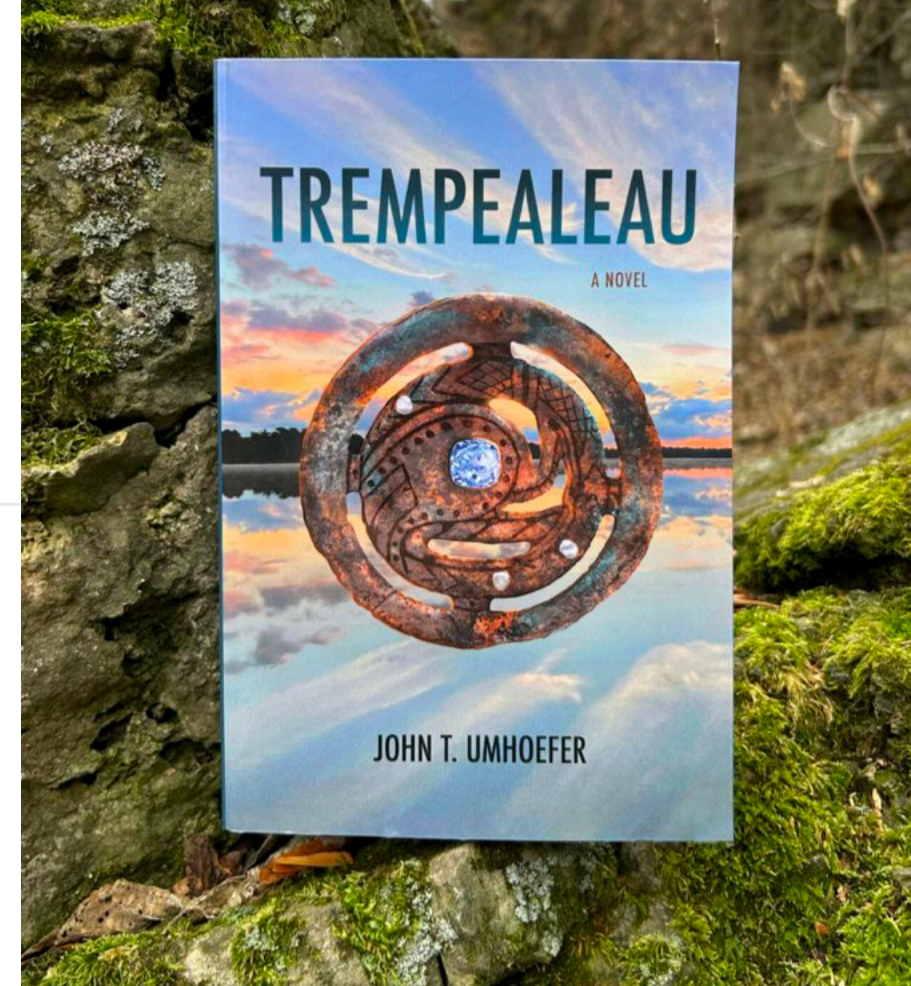


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In January 1974, NASA's Skylab 3 identified a "large, circular land structure," near La Crosse that was not previously identified. Universities and NASA speculated the circular formation may have been created by an ancient meteor strike or river patterns, and the mystery is at the center of John Umhoefer's inspiration for "Trempealeau," a new fiction novel receiving prestigious awards.

The Executive Director of the Wisconsin Cheese Maker Association, Umhoefer made his hobby an award-winning spectacle of indie writing with his debut novel. "Trempealeau" was awarded Friday with the Kirkus Reviews Top 100 Indie Novels of 2023, as it walks readers through a fictional sci-fi secret that has real-life connections to La Crosse.

"I was growing up at the time in La Crosse and that always stuck with me," Umhoefer said of the NASA discovery. "It's the core and basis of the story, this mysterious circle in western Wisconsin. The middle of the circle, where the story really has its core, is in Trempealeau County."



The cover of "Trempealeau," by John Umhoefer. JOHN UMHOEFER, Contributed

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The fictional story spans two generations of Wisconsin residents piecing together a mystery surrounding strange geological formations kept secret by locals and the government for as long as the formations have existed. A woman whose farm is in the center of the formation, a cheesemaker and an old UW-La Crosse professor try to uncover the secret and decide if it should stay hidden or be revealed to the public.



"I've been working with dairy farmers and cheesemakers for 30 years and traveling all over the state and I have a sense of the pride that they have in their land and defending as well as keeping strong their local communities" Umhoefer said. "This story is really about these people that have this secret, and it means everything to them to keep the secret from the rest of the world."



John Umhoefer, author of "Trempealeau" and Executive Director of Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association. JOHN UMHOEFER, Contributed



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Writing started as a hobby for Umhoefer, and it grew over the years as his career with the Wisconsin Cheese Maker Association advanced. He said his passion for writing only expanded over time as he continued working on it and reading more fiction every day.

"Trempealeau" is the only Wisconsin novel to receive the Kirkus Reviews award this year. Kirkus Reviews sees around 10,000 books each year for its review catalog. Only some receive Kirkus stars, and even fewer earn honors like Umhoefer's listing.

"I'm really excited to be in that category. I think it's great that a Wisconsin story has made that list. Just looking at the winners last year, this is pretty unique, so I'm thrilled," he said.

For Umhoefer, this is not the end of his writing saga. A sequel to "Trempealeau" is already in the works. He said that while his novel has a complete and satisfying ending, there are some mysteries left open that he wants to explore in his next book.

"For now, I'm enjoying where this could go," he said.

It is not clear whether NASA did any follow-up research on the land structure identified by the Skylab crew.

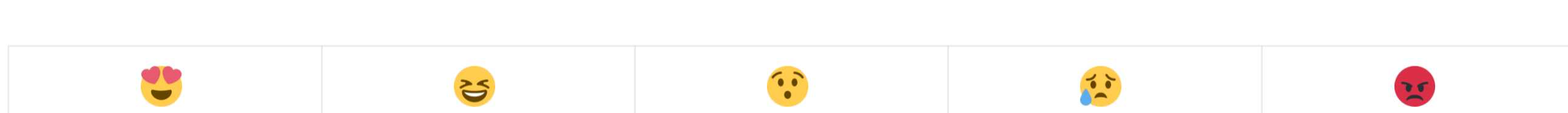
"Trempealeau" is available for pre-order on Amazon and Barnes & Noble, with a full printed release scheduled for Jan. 9, 2024 -- 50 years after NASA first identified the geographical feature.



The La Crosse Tribune reported Skylab 3's discovery in the La Crosse area on its front page Jan. 14, 1974. La Crosse Tribune Archives

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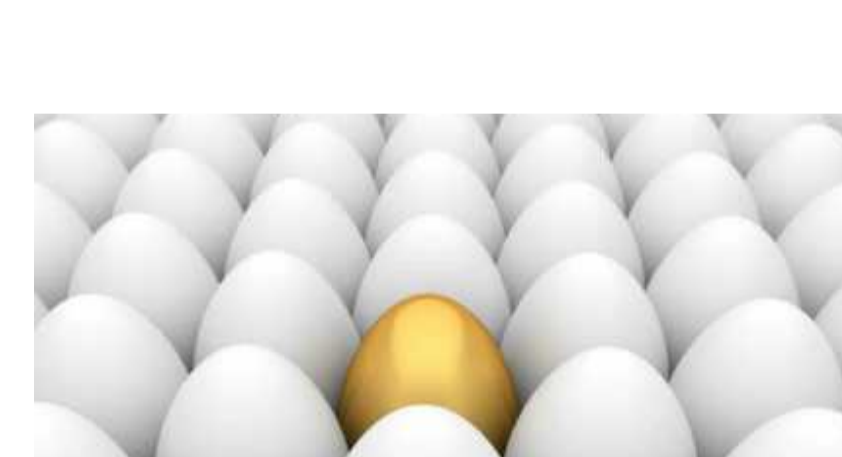


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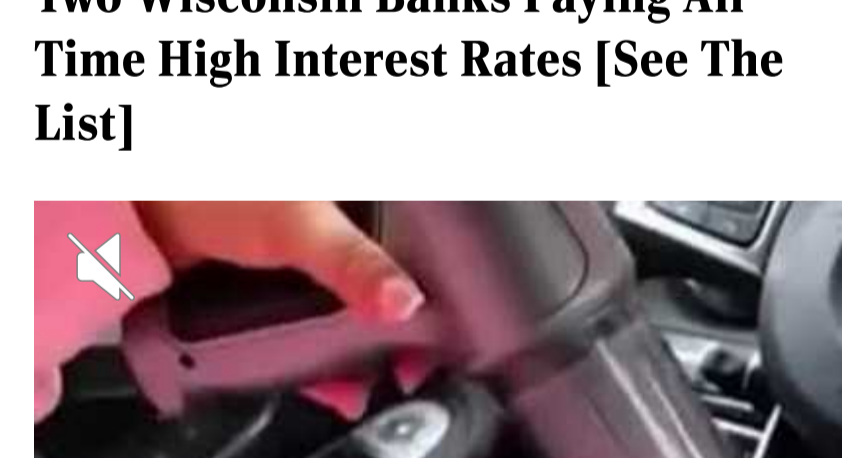
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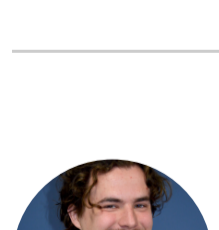
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By Caden Perry Reporter

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