

## PROLOGUE

*"Today we settle all family business."*

—Michael Corleone, *The GODFATHER*, Part One

*"You d\*ck!"*

—Jeff Spicoli, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*

Imagine opening the *L.A. Times* book review section and reading this gem about your first novel ...

L.A. Times Book Review

### Jurassic Con

by Richard Ellis

July 20, 1997 12AM PT

RICHARD ELLIS IS THE AUTHOR OF "DEEP ATLANTIC," "THE BOOK OF WHALES," "DOLPHINS AND PORPOISES," "THE BOOK OF SHARKS," "MEN AND WHALES," AND "GREAT WHITE SHARK" WITH JOHN MCCOSKER.

Ever since the 1974 publication of the blockbuster novel "Jaws" and the hugely successful movie directed by Steven Spielberg, authors have tried to improve on Peter Benchley's formula for success. If a 25-foot great white shark could generate all that money, think of what a 100-footer could do! Or a 200-footer!

There is no shark that is 100 feet long, but it so happens that the star of "Jaws," the great white shark (scientific name: *Carcharodon carcharias*), has a relative—or rather, had a relative—that may have reached a length of 50 feet. This is the creature known as *C. megalodon*; megalodon means "giant tooth." The largest known teeth of the white shark are about 2 1/2 inches in length, but fossil teeth of *C. megalodon* have been found that measure 6 inches long. The only *C. megalodon* teeth ever found have been fossils; dark gray, brown or black and made of stone, not dentine. The fact that no fresh *C. megalodon* teeth have ever been found strongly suggests that this giant relative of the white shark is extinct. Of course, there is no way of conclusively proving that this monster does not exist, and this is the stuff that giant shark novels are made of.

In 1983, Robin Brown wrote a novel he called "Megalodon," which described a 200-foot ancestor of the great white shark that was blind, covered with a coat of crustaceans and living at vast depths. In 1987, George Edward Noe self-published a little number he called "Carcharodon," in which the giant shark has been imprisoned for a couple of million years in an iceberg that thaws, and all hell breaks loose because the shark is really hungry. It goes on a rampage like its predecessors in Brown's book, and before we are finished, we have the marine biologist hero renting a Norwegian

whaling ship and shooting the shark with a grenade harpoon. This year's "Extinct" by Charles Wilson, with a jacket advertisement that ominously warns, "Coming to NBC-TV," is set on the Gulf Coast. Even though Wilson gives us a whole new setting, we still have the same old stuff about a gigantic shark rising from the depths with its gaping maw—these guys love to write "gaping maw"—to pluck unwary children and fishermen from the water.

Surely the worst of all titles is "Meg"—it sounds more like a nanny than a man-eating shark—published by Doubleday with all the fanfare of another "Jaws" or "Jurassic Park." Indeed, the advance reading copy that I have in front of me is emblazoned with every sort of encomium and sales pitch, such as the following: "If Peter Benchley, Michael Crichton, and Clive Cussler wrote to combine their talents to create the ultimate summer read, 'Meg' would be the result—an electrifying page turner that will keep more beachgoers out of the water than 'Jaws.' "

Don't they wish. Not only is it not the slightest bit terrifying, it is unintentionally and hilariously funny, largely because almost every page contains a genuine howler. Whenever the author discusses biology, paleontology, oceanography or any other recognized scientific subject, he gets it wrong. It is obvious that Alten equipped himself with a book about sharks, a study of submersibles, some weirdly off-base material about whales and everything that Peter Benchley, Michael Crichton and Clive Cussler ever wrote. Then he mixed them to produce an almost totally incoherent story in which the human characters make no sense, the sharks and whales behave like unknown animals from the planet Zarkon and the technology sounds like a cross between Rube Goldberg and Buck Rogers.

I am not talking only about arcane scientific constructs that only an ichthyologist would notice. I am talking about sentences like this: "His foot knocked over the empty coffee pot, staining the beige carpet brown." Or: "The Megalodon could detect the faint electrical field of its prey's beating heart or moving muscles hundreds of miles away." At one point, the story's adventurers approach the carcass of a "dead humpback whale." Two pages later, it has become a "dead orca."

One of the more imaginative inventions in the C. megalodon canon is Alten's explanation for why the giant sharks have remained unnoticed for so long. It seems that they live in the very deepest part of the ocean, the bottom of the Mariana Trench, which has somehow become a hydrothermal vent area, bubbling with superheated water. "The water temperature above the warm layer," he writes, "is near freezing. The Meg could never survive the transition through the cold in order to surface." Whoa! What happened to physics as we know it? Only in Alten's topsy-turvy world can there be a situation where warmer water remains below colder water. There is no way Alten could have written this nonsense unless he had convinced himself that it wouldn't matter if he played fast and loose with reality. "Listen, man," you can hear the author say, "this is fiction—I get to make stuff up."

Like this phantasmagorical description of the monster shark: "It's totally white,

actually luminescent. This is a common genetic adaptation to its environment where no light exists.” As a helicopter hovers above this luminescent monster, “The Megalodon launched straight out of the sea like an intercontinental ballistic missile, flying at the hovering helicopter faster than [the pilot] could increase his altitude ... Only the seat belt kept his body from falling into the night where the garage-sized head closed quickly, its fangs 5 feet away.”

In another encounter, the shark approaches a submarine that “... at 3,000 tons easily outweighed her. But the Meg could swim and change course faster than her adversary; moreover, no adult Megalodon would allow a challenge to its rule to go unanswered. Approaching from above, the female accelerated at the sub’s hull like a berserk, 60-foot locomotive ... BOOM!!”

As might be expected, the shark is dispatched by an intrepid marine biologist, but nothing in this ridiculous book compares with Alten’s unbelievable conclusion. The hero, Jonas Taylor (Jonas, I ask you!) is in his one-man submersible when, like the biblical Jonah, he gets swallowed by the shark. He climbs out of the submarine, reaches into his backpack, where he always carries a fossil *C. megalodon* tooth, and he carves up the shark and kills it from the inside. Then he climbs back into the submarine (which he relocates by shining his flashlight around in the belly of the shark) and ejects himself from the shark’s mouth. As Dave Barry says, I’m not making this up.

Under ordinary circumstances, a book as terrible as this would hardly be noticed or, at least, it would be recognized for what it is: a steppingstone to a Hollywood extravaganza with expensive special effects, throbbing music and plenty of blood. But “Meg” is being hyped so hysterically that it doesn’t matter if it makes any sense or even if it’s readable. It’s enough that it’s about a giant shark that glows in the dark, launches itself like an ICBM and eats 14 whales at a time.

When Doubleday published “Jaws” in 1974, it paid Peter Benchley an advance in the mid-four figures. Now the same publisher has joined the ranks of those who can twist their own definition of literature (there must be another name for this stuff) to justify paying a million dollars for this outrageously awful book, crammed with egregious errors of fact and stuffed to the gills with writing so terrible that it would insult the intelligence of a sea cucumber.

And the most embarrassing thing about all of this is that they—and the author—are proud of what they have done. On the flap of the copy I have, somebody wrote, “Steve Alten’s story is an inspiring tale of perseverance against the odds, and the power of a good yarn. In a single month, he went from being an unemployed father of three with \$48 in the bank to a multimillionaire author and screenwriter.” Doubleday was obviously looking for another “Jaws” to make it rich. For publishing this rubbish, it ought to be ashamed of itself. I am more than a little embarrassed to see that in his author’s note, Alten acknowledges me and John McCosker for our book, “Great White Shark,” as “an excellent source of information on both Megalodons and great whites.” If “Meg” is what we spawned, then we ought to be ashamed of ourselves too.

I can't remember who I called first but my publisher already knew, and they were livid. I told my editor I needed to respond. He agreed, but he needed to read it first ...

Steve Wasserman, the *Times* Book Review Editor was the man pulling the strings. He called me and confessed that he was angry with Doubleday for having quoted his free-lance reporter Mike Clary's article, "*A Real Rags to Fishes Story*" (published Monday October 21, 1996), TWO WORDS: JURASSIC SHARK.

Upon receiving my retort, he gave it to Richard Ellis and instructed him to go after me again, waiting until he had it, then publishing both on the same page.

What the hell?

### **'Meg' Bites Back: Steve Alten vs. Richard Ellis**

L.A. Times Archives

August 3, 1997 12 AM PT

To the Editor:

As a first-time novelist, I have been forewarned to ignore the good, the bad and the ugly when it comes time for critics to review my work. I do not write to please literary critics; I write to please readers who just want to enjoy the act of escaping in an action-packed commercial novel. But after reading Ellis' castigation of *MEG* (Book Review, July 20), I felt a response was in order.

Ellis, who authored "*The Great White Shark*," vehemently attacks everything from the title of the book to my research, which depicts "sharks and whales behaving like unknown animals from the planet Zargon ..." Funny, I don't remember the planet Zargon being mentioned in Ellis' book, which was a key source of information regarding the Megalodon's behavior. I do remember reading in Ellis' work that an 18- to 20-foot great white shark's ampullae of Lorenzini is sensitive enough to "detect an electrical field distributed throughout a 1,000-mile-long copper wire hooked up to a size D flashlight battery." Now, for some reason, Ellis feels that a 60-foot Megalodon should be deficient in this area.

He states that "only in Alten's topsy-turvy world can there be a situation where warmer water remains below a colder water" and conveniently misses the point. Hydrothermal vents continuously pump superheated 600- to 700-degree Fahrenheit water into the trench, more than sufficient to maintain the warm layer I describe. Furthermore, I would be happy to share with the book reviewer current research on plate tectonics and ocean climates which indicates that, prior to the last ice age, warmer currents heavily laden with salt ran beneath colder surface waters. (Guess this also violates Ellis' laws of physics.) Superheated hydrothermal waters contain high quantities of minerals, making these waters heavier than the colder, lighter waters

above. It was only a short time ago that scientists believed life could not exist without light. On July 15, the *New York Times* quotes Dr. Lindsay Parson, a geophysicist at Southampton Oceanography Center, as saying, "... we've seen that plumes from these hydrothermal systems rise about 200 meters off the bottom and then they start to spread out ... out like smoke from a factory chimney." This is almost exactly how I describe the Mariana Trench on page 77 of *MEG*, published long before this new discovery! And keep in mind, since we've never even explored the Mariana Trench, who knows what life forms could potentially be down there, including Megalodons? What really irks me, though, is that the reviewer quotes numerous mistakes from the novel, mistakes which exist only in his advance reading copy. Give me a break! For readers unaware of what advance reading copies are, ARCs are typically laced with mistakes; after all, these copies are unedited manuscripts printed only for book dealers and sales reps. The *MEG* advance reading copy ("any quotes must be checked against finished copy") was issued a full eight months prior to the release of the hardback. Nevertheless, Ellis' critique mentions ghosts and mistakes, none of which show up in the hardback sold to the general public. Ellis, an author himself, should know better. Was no one professional enough to bother checking that the "empty coffee pot" was filled?

Of special interest to the many readers who enjoyed *MEG* and have written to express their enthusiasm may be a quote from Ellis' own book. In this passage regarding Megalodons, Ellis writes, "All the evidence seems to point to their [Megs] fairly recent disappearance ... because we need mysteries— and because the sea so readily supplies them— Megalodon will remain the *bête noire* of the monster hunters." Despite this provocative comment of his own, almost half of his review of *MEG* was devoted to his own outrage that I, as one of his readers, would dare to even pen the book, that I was fortunate enough to have my first novel so well published and promoted. But isn't this the very goal that all writers dream about?

I suggest Ellis simply accept *MEG* for what it is, a fun, action-packed novel. As a first-timer, I take constructive criticism seriously because I endeavor to become a better writer. Perhaps the next time Ellis is given the opportunity to critique a new author, he will have at least the kindness to respond to the published version of the book.

Steve Alten, Boca Raton, Florida

### **Richard Ellis replies:**

Alten seems to believe that it was his job to write whatever came into his head and that his sharp-eyed editors would correct his mistakes. I wonder how all those strange sentences got into the manuscript in the first place. Does Alten think that type is set by

hand these days and that malicious typesetter-gremlins inserted the errors of fact, confused biology and ridiculous technology? (Lucky for him, they filled the “empty” coffee pot.) Are we to believe that the lovely phrase “decapitated at the knees” (found in the advance copy but not in the final published version), is a typesetting error, or did Alten write that himself?

It is true that all those scary phrases (“Don’t even think about going in the water”) are missing from the published version, but even though the advance copies were intended only for sales reps and reviewers, they exist. You cannot recall them because they are full of “ghosts” (whatever they are) and mistakes. (Typos are another matter altogether.) People read these things, Steve. If you didn’t want anyone to read “decapitated at the knees,” you shouldn’t have written it.

It would be tiresome to again discuss the mistakes in “Meg”; after all, the author made them in the first place, and accusing me of reading the wrong version of his book seems a poor defense indeed. Rather, let me address the one subject that seems to have many people confused—none more than Alten himself.

For the record, I am working now from the hardcover published version of “Meg.” On page 11, we read that the giant shark was living in the “tropical bottom layer” of the Mariana Trench, “the water layer above the warm layer is near freezing. The Meg could never survive the transition through six miles of icy water in order to survive.” (That the shark manages this “transition” by swimming through six miles of warm blood will not be discussed here.)

In my review, I wrote that “only in Alten’s topsy-turvy world could there be a situation where warmer water remains below colder water.” Alten defends this physiological inversion by writing, “Hydrothermal vents continuously pump superheated 600- to 700-degree Fahrenheit water into the trench, more than sufficient to maintain the warm layer I describe.”

No they don’t, Steve, because there aren’t any hydrothermal vents in the deep trenches. Putting a convenient hydrothermal vent in the Mariana Trench is the sort of irresponsible act that Alten employs in his pathetic effort to inject a little verisimilitude into his otherwise implausible tales. (Another possibility is that he reads as poorly as he writes and couldn’t tell the difference in all the fancy reference books he used.)

The *New York Times* story about the discovery of a new vent field in the Atlantic does nothing to validate his misconstructions. In the Times article, Dr. Lindsay Parson says, “... plumes from these hydrothermal systems rise about 200 meters off the bottom and then they start to spread out where they become neutrally buoyant.” In other words, the heated water from hydrothermal vents rises and disperses. How Alten can read that as a warm layer that remains on the bottom is a mystery to me.

Regardless of what the warm water would do, however, Alten confuses deep trenches with hydrothermal vents. The two are completely different and are not found in the same location. The trenches are deep, V-shaped canyons, usually with a flat

bottom that results from sedimentary fill. Rather than being sources of heated water, the trenches are, probably because of the thick layer of sediment, cooler than the areas immediately surrounding them.

The rift zones are located along submerged volcanic ridges and have nothing whatever to do with the deep trenches. The vents pump superheated water into the water column, which, because it is spewed out under great pressure, disperses and rises. It does not sit in a trench, because the hydrothermal vents that Alten claims to have read so much about (not, I'm happy to say, in my book "Great White Shark"; I would hate to be held responsible for that too), are not in the trenches.

I wrote that Alten's "sharks and whales behave like unknown animals from the planet Zargon" (not Zargon), and he said that he didn't remember my mentioning the planet Zargon in my book, the "key source of information regarding the Megalodon's behavior." Thanks for the plug, Steve, but I don't know anything about Megalodon's "behavior," and neither does anybody else. We can speculate that it was a large-prey predator—it certainly had the requisite equipment— but the only thing we know for sure is that it is extinct. In his letter, Alten writes, "Since we've never even explored the Mariana Trench, who knows what life forms could be potentially down there, including Megalodons." We haven't done that much exploration of the moon or Mars, either, Steve. Do you think there might be Megs there too?

Alten seems to believe that a "first-time novelist" who had received an enormous amount of money ought to be immune from criticism ("I suggest that Ellis simply accept 'Meg' for what it is, a fun, action-packed novel"), as if the combination of innocence and megabucks excuses sloppy writing and dumb plotting, or worse, that everybody ought to love the book. What are a few minor mistakes, anyway, when compared to a movie deal? (Besides, if the critics were so smart, they'd be writing million-dollar novels themselves, not worrying about the stupid difference between vents and trenches.)

It is certainly Alten's prerogative as a writer of fiction to invent anything that takes his fancy; if he wants to include a 60-foot-long bioluminescent shark, a heat-trapping trench seven miles down or even a man who slices his way out of a shark from the inside, I wish him the commercial success that he insists is "the very goal that all writers dream about." I was upset (but hardly "outraged") by his sloppy writing and his clumsy attempts at "science," but it is far more distressing to read his defenses of these inadequacies, as when he tries to rationalize his erroneous interpretation of the cold water/ warm water conundrum, or worse, when he suggests that Carcharodon megalodon exists today. To infer that there are much bigger and nastier sharks than those in "Jaws" swimming around is the cheapest sort of sensationalism, and—if possible—makes his letter worse than his book.

Wasserman asked me if I would be responding again. I said no, my limit for being publicly ridiculed by some asshole with a personal vendetta having reached its limit.

But I never forgot.

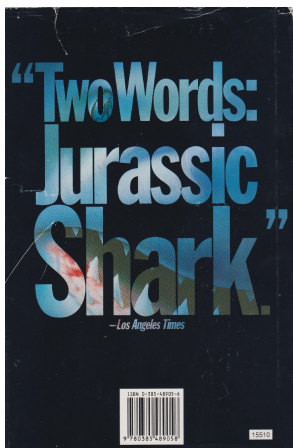
The research for *MEG: Legacy* brought it all back ... along with scientific evidence from the Mariana Trench revealing hydro-thermal vents and plumes, glow-in-the-dark sharks and who's your daddy, Dick!

Conveniently, Richard Ellis died of a heart attack a few weeks before I wrote this (yeah, I have anger issues).

Rest in peace ...

## Steve Alten's belated response: June 2024: *MEG Legacy* Prologue

TO: Mr. Richard Ellis, Author and Fish Painter  
FROM: Steve Alten, Bestselling Author of Factional Thrillers



A lot has transpired since *L.A. Times* book review editor Steve Wasserman hired you to do a hatchet job on my first published thriller, *MEG: A Novel of Deep Terror*. It seems your pal was incensed at my former publisher (Bantam-Doubleday) for quoting his free-lance reporter Mike Clary's article, "*A Real Rags to Fishes Story*" (published Monday, October 21, 1996), opened with: TWO WORDS: JURASSIC SHARK.

When I read your first hate-strewn, 1,400-word diatribe, my first two thoughts were, "why is Richard Ellis picking apart errors from an unproofed advance reading copy?" and "why is he reviewing a work of fiction as if I had intended it to be a master's thesis on deep sea vents?"

My purpose in engaging with you now after a 27-year silence isn't to hide behind the fact that *MEG* is fiction, thereby rendering most of your tantrums moot—no, sir! The reason I chose to reach out to you now is *MEG: Legacy*, a seven-volume Collector's Edition set featuring all six *MEG* novels (soon to be seven), along with four novellas, six graphic comics, fan appreciation bonuses ... and something I know you'll be bugging Santa for—my own seven-part memoir detailing some of the insane situations I have found myself in—like this "circle-jerk" you and your pal, Steve Wasserman conjured up and actually hoped I would continue (I declined)—each response dragging my career and the *L.A. Times* Book Review section's reputation down with it.

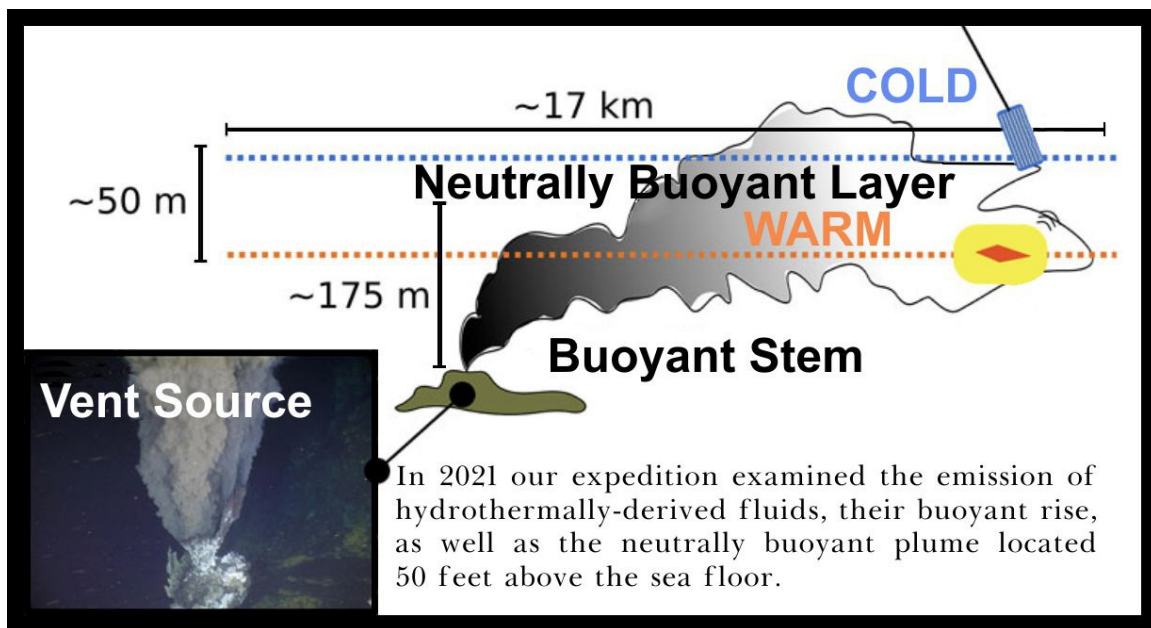
*Irresponsible ... pathetic ... reads as poorly as he writes ...* remember those words,



Richard Ellis, because you are about to eat them. It turns out that my “fiction” was correct, and your “opinion stated as facts” would have been better served up to the sea cucumbers.

In 2016, scientists aboard the NOAA ship *Okeanos Explorer* discovered hydrothermal vent fields and active sea mounts in the Mariana Trench. Since then, many more vent fields were discovered in both the trench and the Marianas Back-Arc thanks to *SuBastian*, a new kind of remotely operated vehicle (ROV) developed at the Schmidt Ocean Institute in Palo Alto, California. Guided from the surface by the Schmidt research vessel, *Falkor*, the vehicle can stay underwater for weeks at a time.

As for my “defiance of the Laws of physics” regarding the warmer water below colder water explanation, it is water DENSITY not temperature that matters more. (SOURCE: Frontiers in Earth Science, 25 October 2022)



But wait, there’s more.

I believe you also hurled a few snarky insults at my “phantasmagorial” (your word, Mr. Magorium—not mine) description of the monster shark: “It’s totally white, actually luminescent.” I direct you to the March 3, 2021 issue of *NATURE*, where the researcher reports multiple sightings of “glowing bioluminescent sharks.”

While it’s nice to be proven right, that was never my objective, nor is it now. I write to entertain. Conversely, you and your pal Wasserman (by his own admission) orchestrated this nonsense as payback for a tagline. However, none of that remotely justifies your amateurish and outright nasty decision (allowed by Wasserman) to purposely and with malice of heart give away the ending (and not just once but several times), ruining it for the *Times’* Book Review readers who may have actually wanted

to read MEG.

*"As might be expected, the shark is dispatched by an intrepid marine biologist, but nothing in this ridiculous book compares with Alten's unbelievable conclusion. The hero, Jonas Taylor (Jonas, I ask you!) is in his one-man submersible when, like the biblical Jonah, he ..."*

Growing up in Philly, we used to call that a real "dick move."

A **"DICK ELLIS MOVE"**: The act of purposely giving away the ending of a book or movie just to ruin the experience for others.

Hey Dick, did you know that MEG was named a "Top Selection for Reluctant Teen Readers" by the Young Adult Library Services? Or that the MEG series has been used by thousands of high school English AND Science teachers to entice their reluctant teen readers to read?

I TEACH 12TH GRADE MARINE SCIENCE AND USE MEG IN MY CLASS.  
THANK YOU FOR WRITING A BOOK THAT IS INTERESTING TO MY STUDENTS  
AND YET HAS THE SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION IN IT THAT I WANT THEM TO LEARN.  
—JENNIE FAGAN NEASE HIGH SCHOOL SCIENCE DEPT.

MR. ALTEN, YOUR BOOK IS ONE OF THE THINGS THAT PROVED TO ME I  
WANTED TO BECOME A RESEARCH SCIENTIST IN MARINE BIOLOGY. THANK YOU.  
—MEREDITH CAVANAGH

For many of these new MEGheads, my novel was the first book they ever finished on their own ... but far from the last.

MY ELEVENTH GRADE INTENSIVE READING CLASS RECENTLY FINISHED  
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COPIES OF BOTH THE TRENCH AND PRIMAL WATERS FOR THE STUDENTS  
WHO WANTED TO KEEP READING THE SERIES.  
—TERI SMITH, READING TEACHER

MY NAME IS KIM MARTIN AND I HAVE BEEN READING MEG TO MY SEVENTH GRADE  
CLASS. THEY LOVE IT. I CAN'T TELL YOU WHAT IT FEELS LIKE WHEN I LOOK  
UP AND THE ENTIRE CLASS IS JUST STARING AT ME TO READ.

To learn more, go to [www.SeaMonsterCoveHS.com](http://www.SeaMonsterCoveHS.com)

Steve Alten, Ed. D.

