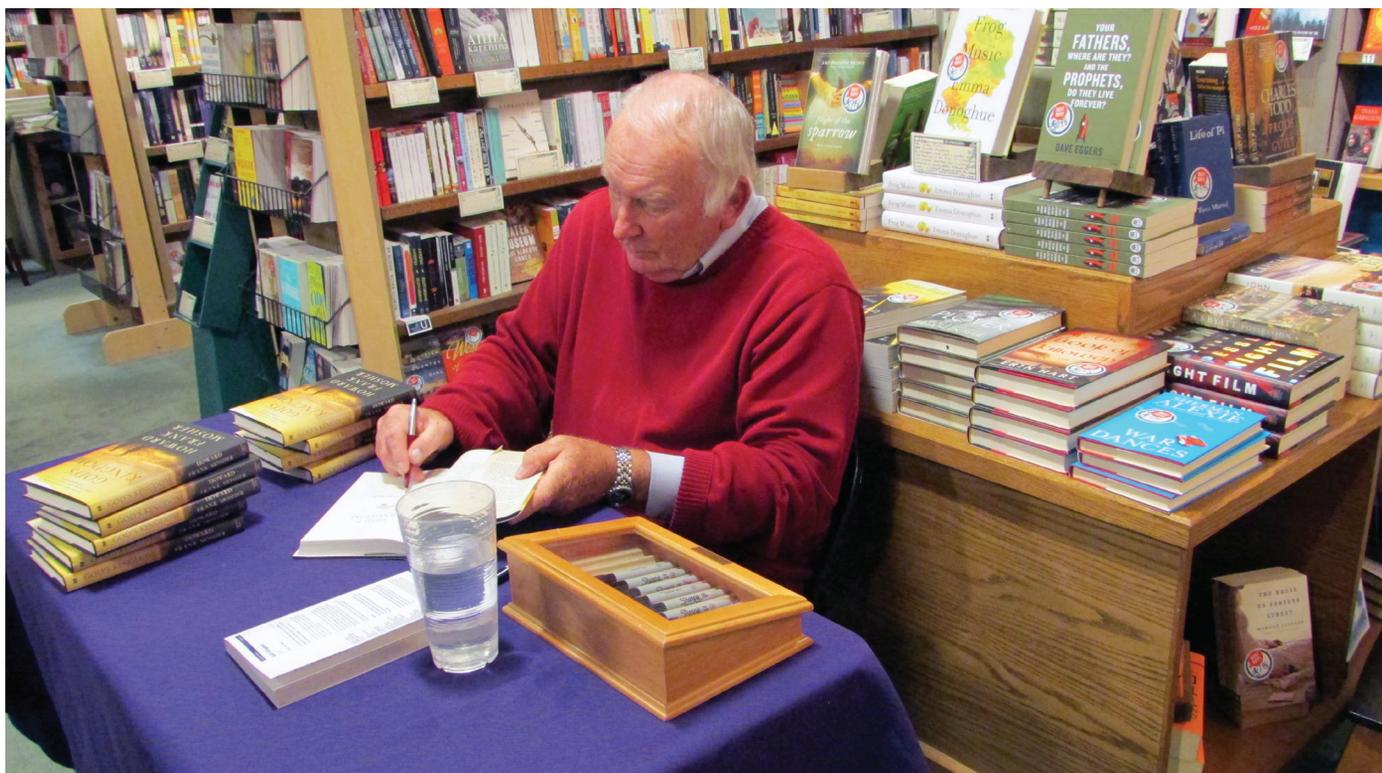


Howard Frank Mosher

“Where the heck is Kingdom County—and who are these people?!”



“Independent booksellers have kept me and my career going. Vermont has some of the finest indie bookstores,” observes Howard, who is shown above during a book signing event at Northshire Bookstore in Manchester Center.

Story and photos by Maria Buteux Reade

MARK TWAIN AND WILLIAM Faulkner had Mississippi; Dickens had Victorian London. Howard Frank Mosher’s muse? Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom. The storytelling came through his genes.

“I spent much of my youth living in my grandparents’ 26-room ark of a falling-down brick farmhouse with my parents and my brother and a collection of eccentric relatives and hobos off the road,” relates Howard. “We lived in the snow belt of upstate New York with no electricity, no central heating or indoor plumbing. It wasn’t unusual to have 25 or 30 people living in this house at any given time. The characters and the four-corners vil-

lage would have fit right in the Northeast Kingdom. Nobody had any money but everyone had a treasure trove of stories. You couldn’t grow up in this environment and not want to tell stories. From the time I was 5 or 6 years old, I knew I wanted to be a writer. But I didn’t have a clue how to go at such a profession.”

Spiritual epiphany came from his 8th grade English teacher, Earla Armstrong. “This woman universally and intensely hated all kids. Running true to form, she confiscated one of my early attempts at fiction when I should have been starting my homework. After crumpling up the paper and tossing it in the trash can, she uttered with a contemptuous sniff words

of advice that turned out to be the best counsel for a writer at any stage. ‘Mosher, if you want to write stories, you need to do three things. Revise your work. Read the classics. And write about what you know.’ In 60 years I’ve never had better advice about writing,” Howard remarks.

Howard and his high school sweetheart, Phillis, earned their degrees from Syracuse University in 1964. “I thought graduate school would teach me to write stories that someone other than Phillis would want to read,” Howard says. “But we had no money, so we figured we would find teaching jobs. We heard about a couple of positions in English and science at a school up in northern

Vermont. We knew nothing of the area but we wangled an interview. If we got the jobs, maybe we'd live there a year or two till we went to grad school."

They borrowed his grandparents' baby-blue Super 88 Oldsmobile, and as they traveled north into Vermont that April day, they seemed to be moving backward in seasons. Upstate New York was turning spring green; Lake Willoughby remained solidly frozen. "We stared up that mountainous gap and Phillis said, 'My goodness, it looks like the glacier came through here just five minutes ago.' Welcome to the Kingdom..."

Howard and Phillis landed the jobs ("The superintendent was desperate to find warm bodies to fill the vacancies," he said wryly), graduated from Syracuse a month later, and then got married. "We came up here the day we were married and pretty much knew this was the place for us." The couple has been married for 51 years, residing in Irasburg for most of that time.

The town has changed very little in the four decades they have lived there, aside from the 21 wind turbines on the ridge. You can still walk Irasburg mountain for miles and be more likely to encounter a deer, moose, or black bear rather than a farmhouse or a road.

"The Northeast Kingdom reminded me of stories I'd read and pictures I'd seen of Vermont during the Depression," Howard reminisces. "When we began teaching here, most of the kids came from 50-cow farms, and their families earned a little income from maple sugaring or selling firewood and doing odd jobs. People could get by, but that kind of self-sufficient, smaller family farm is almost a thing of the past."

"We were fortunate to know people who dated back to the Depression and Prohibition," Howard continues. "Survivors, stubborn hill farmers, independent-minded folks, almost to a fault. These people had led hardscrabble but fascinating lives. They skated on the edge of the law in some ways and would probably be thrown in jail now. It's a disappearing life, and people aren't cut out of that cloth anymore."

The Moshers' landlady Verna made moonshine in the 1930s to save the family farm. The backwoods logger Jake Blodgett ran whiskey from Canada. An-



Looking up the gap at Lake Willoughby, which tends to remain frozen solid as late as May. Upon seeing it for the first time one April, Howard's wife Phillis remarked that it looked "like the glacier came through here five minutes ago."



A few miles away from the Moshers' home in the town of Irasburg is this school in Orleans where Howard and Phillis began their teaching careers in the late 1960s.

other friend, Marjorie Moore, was part Abenaki, part French Canadian, part Yankee, and a world-class storyteller. "She probably shot deer out of season to feed her family. Never got a license but drove anyways. The police suspected her of robbing the local bank and she never bothered to disabuse them of that notion, despite it being false." Margie owned one of the last real hill farms in the Kingdom when she died at 93. As people began to open up and share their accounts, Phillis and Howard knew that he would write the stories of the Northeast Kingdom.

Then California intervened. "After a few years of teaching, and still thinking graduate school held the key, I applied to the MFA program at University of Cali-

fornia-Irvine and earned a fellowship," Howard explains. "We left this magnificent Kingdom and drove across country to Los Angeles. We hadn't been there but two days when I realized I had made a disastrous decision. If you like to write about weird things and odd people, there were plenty of them in California. But if I wanted to catch a brook trout or talk with an old-timer about smuggling whiskey, I was out of luck. I had cut myself off from the material I knew I wanted to write."

Salvation came courtesy of a traffic light and his Vermont license plate. "Phillis suggested we go for a drive and figure out our situation," Howard recalls. "By sheer luck, much the way we wound up in the Kingdom in the first place, we



Alexander Twilight's Athenian Hall (above), now better known as the Old Stone House Museum in Brownington, served as the model for Howard's Kingdom Academy in his novels' fictitious village of Kingdom Common, and the courthouse in the novels was inspired by this courthouse (below) that stands on the main street of Newport.



ended up at the corner of Hollywood and Vine. I swear if the streetlight had been green rather than red, my life might have turned out differently. We stopped and a city telephone truck pulled up next to us. He must have seen our green license plate so he rolled down his window, leaned out, and shouted, 'I'm from Vermont too. Go back while you still can!' We took this as divine intervention. A week later we were back in Vermont without jobs or money."

From that point on, the Northeast Kingdom became Howard's graduate school, of writing and of life. Phillis found a job teaching science and Howard heard about a man named Jake Blodgett who still logged with a draft horse. "He answered the door, a big man with snowy white hair and piercing blue eyes that could cut right through you if he didn't like you, and he didn't like many people. He asked what I had done for work, and when I told him I had been a schoolteacher, he gave a sardonic laugh and said, 'That ain't gonna help you none up in the woods.' But he took me on even though I didn't know the first thing about logging with a draft horse," says Howard.

Over lunches in the woods and as they hunted and fished, Jake told Howard many of the stories from Prohibition and the Depression that wound up in his first book, *Disappearances*. Jake became the inspiration for Noel Lord, the old logger in *Where the Rivers Flow North*. "Jake made relentless fun of me until his dying day, but he was one of my early Northeast Kingdom mentors," Howard remembers. "He was tickled when we named our son after him."

The Kingdom has provided Howard with rich material for 50 years, and his greatest fear is that he will never get around to writing more than a tenth of the stories he has stockpiled. People come to his house and offer up a good story or he will read something in one of the papers. "You've seen the disclaimer in the front of many novels: The characters in this book are not based on real people. That's the biggest fib! Who else would they be based on?" asks Howard.

"My rule of thumb is never to use writing to hurt someone. I sometimes alter the details to disguise the outlaws of the Kingdom but when they read their stories, they'll recriminate with me for not elaborating more than I did! 'Not only did



The fictitious Kingdom Common is an amalgam of many real places, and its storied buildings include Irasburg's church (above) and the Irasburg Common with its baseball diamond and shopping block, where Ray's Market and the post office actually stand.

I knock that guy down, I pistol-whipped him with his own gun!”

Hunting and fishing also figure prominently in Howard's novels. He surmises that that deer camp is more about family traditions than about hunting: the food, the pack basket, the wood stove, the sense of place, and those who came before. A shared language, a common experience, that unites generations.

Howard has written 11 novels, mostly based in Kingdom Common, and anyone familiar with his work can envision the fictionalized village. At its heart is the central green with a well-used baseball diamond. The classic white Common Hotel stands on the north end of the common while the church graces the south side. James Kinneson's newspaper office and the brick shopping block spread along the east with the bank just up the road. The railroad cuts across the street south of the bank. Anchoring the western edge of the common are the stately Kingdom Academy and the imposing courthouse. Behind these edifices, the American Heritage furniture factory sprawls along the rail-

road tracks beside the Lower Kingdom River.

“People call or write asking, ‘Where can I go and visit Kingdom Common?’ I tell them that it's an amalgam of many places including upstate New York, Québec, and Maine, but they persist. ‘Yes but where can we go and see it?’ If you want to see the village, you have to read my books!” he emphasizes.

Howard transported various elements and structures from all over the Northeast Kingdom and created Kingdom Common. So if something feels familiar, it probably is.

The baseball diamond and church come from Irasburg, along with the shopping block. The bank, railroad, and hotel were lifted from Orleans, and the courthouse is based on Newport's own. The Ethan Allen furniture factory still exists in Orleans and inspired the American Heritage mill. Kingdom Academy may well be the most impressive building of all, modeled on Athenian Hall, also known as the Old Stone House Museum, in Brownington. Alexander Twilight, Middlebury Col-

lege's first African American graduate in 1823, built this four-story granite structure from 1834–1836. Each granite block weighs upward of 1,000 pounds. According to the history, Twilight accomplished this construction with a yoke of oxen, a bull wheel and block and tackle, and a few local farmers. It looks almost identical to the two earliest classroom buildings at Middlebury College.

In Brownington, Alexander served as the minister of the Congregational Church as well as headmaster of Athenian Hall. Alexander and his wife taught everything for decades, from first grade through solid geometry, French, Latin, and Greek. He became the model for Kingdom Academy's headmaster, Reverend Doctor Pliny Templeton. Howard has been working on a novel about Templeton for the past decade.

“Every morning when I get up, I'm just an aspiring writer,” Howard comments. He works at his kitchen table daily from 7:30 a.m. to noon or 2:00 p.m. and then heads to the hills for a long walk. He writes long hand on yellow tablet pads,



Howard figuratively transported many structures from all over the Northeast Kingdom in order to create the imaginary Kingdom Common; one of them is this building, the huge Ethan Allen Furniture plant in the town of Orleans that sits opposite the railroad tracks and the downtown area's Main Street.

which allows him to go slowly and think about every word he commits to paper. "Some writers like to get each chapter as close to perfect before they go ahead, but I like to write the whole draft straight through. It's often the fast writing when I'm taking the story out of my head when I have my best ideas."

People who dedicate themselves to their writing rarely regret the time and energy spent, regardless of the money earned or fame achieved. It is not unusual for one of Howard's books to go through 50 or more drafts. He has written and discarded several books but might keep parts or stories that still have promise. "I've carried around some of these stories since I was a kid," says Howard. "A couple of times a day, if I can write something that makes me laugh out loud even if I know I'm not going to keep it, that's a joy."

Writers, like parents, often have a favorite child. Howard's is *Northern Borders*. "Like Austin Kittredge, I spent so much time with my grandparents. They probably inspired the idea of this deep relationship between a boy and his grandparents, almost a second set of parents."

Disappearances? "That book has drawn

the most praise and the most criticism. My editor thought Wallace Stegner would love the story so he sent him an advance copy thinking we could get a nice quote for the book jacket. Well, we got a quote but it wasn't exactly the one we were looking for. Stegner wrote back and said, 'This novel is a hymn to irresponsibility.' I should have said to the editor, 'That's a great quote! Let's put it on the cover!' But Stegner couldn't see anything funny about whiskey running and although I love the book, he was right: it probably is a hymn to irresponsibility. A few years later when *Where the Rivers Flow North* was published, my editor sent Stegner a copy and he loved it. In fact, he gave me an endorsement and recommended me for a Guggenheim Fellowship, which helped tremendously. We later became fast friends for the rest of his life. But we never mentioned the first situation."

Waiting for Teddy Williams came in one fell swoop. "I was driving home in 2002 from a cross-country book tour, like the one in *Great Northern Express*, and I was hell bent to get home to Vermont," Howard says. "But just as dawn was breaking on the New York State Thruway, I had this

flash image of a small boy standing in one of those sideways windows on the second story of a Vermont farmhouse. He was looking out and standing in the moonlight against the barn door was a guy smoking a cigarette who looked a lot like the great Red Sox player Ted Williams leaning on his bat in the on-deck circle. I stopped at a little diner in Batavia, New York, pulled out my notebook, and in the next five minutes I outlined the major structure and characters of what would become *Waiting for Teddy Williams*. I realize now that I must have been thinking about those things for quite a while and suddenly it came together. It took a couple of years to write that book but that was a gift, a free throw, and doesn't happen very often."

"Jay Craven has done a fantastic job with his film versions of five of my works," says Howard. "He's a genius with casting: Bruce Dern as the grandfather in *Northern Borders*, Kris Kristofferson as Quebec Bill in *Disappearances*, and Rip Torn as Noel Lord in *Where the Rivers Flow North*. My novels are expensive to film because they often involve a shootout or a train wreck!"



“Every morning when I get up, I’m just an aspiring writer,” Howard says. Working at the kitchen table from morning to early afternoon is pretty much a daily routine; writing draft copies completely through in long hand on paper tablets, he says, allows him to proceed slowly and carefully, and think about every word.

Jay Craven in turn credits Howard as being a mentor and friend. “Howard has a wonderful sense of humor and exceptional generosity. He gives freely of his time, especially to writers of the North Country, from the Adirondacks over to Maine. He’s been a responsive collaborator on my film versions of his work, showing up on the set convinced that the latest film is the best one of all. Howard has uniquely contributed to the narrative of the Northeast Kingdom through his rendering of larger-than-life, deeply human characters. He sees their terminal flaws and heroism coupled with self-destructive qualities.”

Howard affirms, “If we want to maintain these wonderful stories, we need to capture them. The landscape is lovely and trout fishing great, but it’s the people.”

And through it all, his beloved wife, Phillis, has remained his loyal supporter. “For 38 years, she taught science and served as a counselor in local high schools. I wouldn’t have been able to devote myself to writing novels were it not for Phillis’s undying belief in me and my work.”

Creativity also runs through their two children. Jake lives in Montana and works

as a writer and a photographer for outdoor magazines and Annie is a singer and songwriter in Nashville. Howard’s 100-year-old, sharp-as-a-tack mother lives with Howard and Phillis in Irasburg. With genes like that, Howard should have plenty of time to tackle his trove of stories. ¶

Maria Buteux Reade has a home along the Battenkill River in Arlington, VT. After 27 years teaching English, she now balances freelance writing with work at Someday Farm in East Dorset.



**Howard Frank Mosher
as Reader**

“Independent booksellers have kept me and my career going. Vermont has some of the finest indie bookstores, and the most brilliant readers I’ve ever known are booksellers. We’ve got to keep the bookstore as a center of our communities.”

“I read voraciously. Richard Russo, Annie Proulx, Richard Ford. The Southern writers William Gay, Tom Franklin, Carl Hiaasen. Suspense thrillers by Elmore Leonard. John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Anne Tyler and Alice Hoffman. I dearly love *Cold Mountain* and *Lonesome Dove*. I re-read a lot of authors I came to as a kid: Twain, Dickens, Jane Austen. Fielding, Flannery O’Connor. Still following Earla Armstrong’s advice: Read the classics.”