

A Conversation with Howard Frank Mosher

The title of your new novel is *God's Kingdom*. Does that refer to an actual place?

Yes. Vermont's fabled "Northeast Kingdom," the setting for most of my fiction, is sometimes called "God's Kingdom," in reference to its remoteness and unspoiled natural beauty.

***God's Kingdom* chronicles the ongoing story of the vastly-extended Kinneson family of Kingdom County, whom you introduced in your 1989 novel *A Stranger in the Kingdom*. Were the Kinnesons inspired by a local family?**

Actually, the Kinnesons are based quite closely on my own family. *God's Kingdom* picks up the story of Jim Kinneson, the 14-year-old narrator of *A Stranger in the Kingdom*, and follows him through his high-school years in the tiny village of Kingdom Common, a few miles south of the Canadian border. In *God's Kingdom*, Jim begins to explore the unspoken "trouble in the family" that haunts his father and grandfather, culminating in a revelation that will change his life, and his place in the Kingdom, forever.

How did the Northeast Kingdom get its name?

Vermont's long-time U. S. Senator, George Aiken, coined the name in the early 1950s. He and a friend were fishing a wilderness pond in the area. "This is a beautiful part of Vermont," Aiken remarked. "It ought to have a special name." A minute later he came up with one: "the Northeast Kingdom."

How long have you lived in the Kingdom?

My wife, Phillis Mosher, and I have lived here all our adult lives. We grew up in rural, upstate New York and came to the Kingdom right out of college. What I discovered was a gold mine of stories that had never been written by anyone. Our first landlady in the Kingdom manufactured and sold moonshine whiskey in order to keep her family afloat during the Great Depression. Some years later, she married the revenue collector who'd declined to arrest her because he knew that if he did, she'd lose her farm. One of my early day jobs was working in the woods with an elderly horse-logger and former whiskey runner named Jake Blodgett. When our son was born, in 1972, Phillis and I named him Jake. In the mid-1970s our neighbor and mentor in all things pertaining to "God's Kingdom," the hardscrabble farmer Margery Moore, was accused of robbing the local bank. She hinted that yes, perhaps she did know something about the robbery, and the loot might be buried at the bottom of a 30-foot-high manure pile that she'd wanted moved for years. The cops moved her manure – found what you usually find at the bottom, and nothing else. The stolen money, about \$30,000, was never recovered.

Does your focus on the tales of the Northeast Kingdom make you a “regional” writer?

If so, that’s fine with me, though I’ve always preferred the term “place-based.” Writing primarily about a distinct part of the country is an honorable tradition in American literature as (my betters) William Faulkner, Robert Frost, Flannery O’Connor, Annie Proulx and many others have demonstrated. As Senator Aiken suggested, the Kingdom is a special place apart: a region of jumbled mountains, deep forests, glacial lakes and scattered hill farms. In the Kingdom, people still live close to the world of nature we were once all part of. “A good place to live and a hard place to make a living,” its residents will tell you. They’re right,

Is the Northeast Kingdom really such a bastion of frontier individualism, and even outlawry, as *God’s Kingdom* seems to suggest?

Yes. In 1968, just up the street from our house, in the picture-postcard-appearing village of Irasburg, one of the most notorious racist incidents in 20th-century New England took place. (The so-called “Irasburg Incident” drives the plot of *A Stranger in the Kingdom*.) In the mid-1970s, on his secret compound straddling the Canadian border a few miles north of here, the world’s foremost ballistics scientist, Dr. Gerald Bull, built his “Supercannon”: a howitzer as long as a football field capable of firing a rocket-assisted “payload” as large as a Volkswagon halfway around the world. After selling his weapons technology to Iran, Iraq, and South Africa, Bull was assassinated by the Mossad. And in 2010, an aggrieved local farmer ran his 250-horsepower tractor over seven police cruisers in the local sheriff’s department parking lot, crushing them beyond recognition – and becoming a local social-media hero overnight. As Jim Kinneson headlines a story, inspired by a similar event, in his father’s local weekly, “Only in the Kingdom.”

You did leave the Kingdom, briefly, to attend the MFA writing program at the University of California at Irvine.

“Briefly” is right. It was the worst decision of my life. I realized immediately that I’d cut myself off from those wonderful stories back in “God’s Kingdom” before I really understood them well enough to write them. Six days after we arrived in southern California, a city telephone truck pulled up beside us. The driver must have spotted our green Vermont license plate. “I’m from Vermont, too,” he called out his window to us. “Go back while you still can.” On the spot, we did.

***God’s Kingdom* is dedicated to your wife, Phillis: “To Phillis, aka Dr. Francine Lafleur Kinneson.” Is Jim’s beautiful, outspoken girlfriend, Frannie, based on Phillis?**

Absolutely. Phillis and I went to high school and college together. We’ve been best friends since tenth grade. Last summer we celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary.

One of the most mysterious characters in *God's Kingdom* is the Rev. Dr. Pliny Templeton, a former fugitive slave, whose skeleton hangs in the science room of the local Academy that he founded. Is Pliny Templeton based on a real person?

Pliny was inspired by the Reverend Alexander Twilight, who built the four-story granite Academy known locally in the Kingdom as the Old Stone House. Twilight, whom Middlebury College claims as the first African American college graduate, was a renowned minister and headmaster.

What are you currently working on?

A non-fiction memoir of the Northeast Kingdom.

Are you optimistic about the future of place-based fiction in the electronic era?

Yes, or in any other era. I think that humans can be defined as “the storytelling species.” Since Homer and the Bible, stories have helped to preserve our history and culture and reveal what it means to be human in a particular place at a particular time. In the end, the place I call “God’s Kingdom” is best defined by its stories. No one writer could ever get to all of them in a lifetime.

For your author’s events for *God's Kingdom*, you’ll be reading an excerpt from the novel, then talking about the topic “Where Does Fiction Come From?” Where *does* fiction come from?

Well, in my case, from some mysterious combination of experience and my diseased imagination. I wrote a primitive early draft of part of *God's Kingdom* when I was 10 years old; added another main element to the story when I was 40; and, umpteen drafts later, finished it last year. I think that the often glacially slow process of identifying promising raw material and then transforming it into fiction is mostly overlooked in standard writing workshops, right through MFA programs. Of course, good material alone isn’t enough. Without it, however, you’re sunk from the start. Most of mine has come right out of the Northeast Kingdom.