

**WHERE THE RIVERS FLOW NORTH (1994)****My Life, So Far, with Howard***By Jay Craven*

In pondering what it is that Howard Mosher has contributed to my life—I sorted through a steady stream of ideas, then realized that it's really quite simple. Howard taught me to read—and write. Not in the going-to-school kind of way, though he's put in plenty of time teaching English at Orleans High School and coaching basketball at Lake Region.

Howard taught me in the way that has simply come from reading and re-reading his stories, from spending thousands of hours working his lines of dialogue, tuning my ear to his character voices, and visualizing action through his descriptions—to the point that I felt confident enough to add and subtract from his novels—without feeling that I was taking anything away from their essence. How well I've done that is for others to say.

But this twenty-two year apprenticeship has taught me more than I can articulate—about opening characters and story to a hundred dimensions—all rooted in hard-earned emotion. For working color and texture into a dramatic moment, shaping an ironic turn of a phrase, and using action to articulate theme.

This collaboration has taught me how to look deeper into story themes and subtext. In the case of his book and my film, “Disappearances,” I'm still looking — and finding new gems, alongside audiences willing to explore. Howard has introduced me to the power and the glory of imagination in ways I had never experienced before.

So what do you say to the guy? Thanks? Or God damn it, I'm in this up to my neck—and still in debt—all because of you.

But, I assure you—it's been a treat.

People sometimes ask what attracted me to Howard's work. The truth is there was no other choice. I spent sixteen Northeast Kingdom years committed to the idea of merging “community and culture” through my work establishing the Catamount Arts film and performing arts presenting organization. After that, when I moved to make narrative films, Howard's books were a natural, for their deep roots in that same Kingdom, that exquisite, unyielding, damnable place bordering Quebec and New Hampshire.

I loved the irrepressible characters Howard dug out of the woods and hills—the Yankee log drivers, whiskey runners, farmers, deer-jackers, con men, cock fighters, strippers, live-in housekeepers, and even the suspected bank robbers that populated the dusty back roads—rebels still rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Vermont – needing plenty of elbow room and resisting change. You may not find them in the files of the Historical Society—but they are part of Vermont. Think of Quebec Bill's quick summary to his young son — of the whiskey smuggling Bonhomme family's proud contribution to local progress. “Without a reliable supply of liquor, Wild Bill, Kingdom County wouldn't be what it is today.”



With his keen eye, fly-trap ears, and vivid imagination, Howard has rendered an account of living here that is at once larger than life and firmly rooted in the specificity of character and place.

I'll tell you two quick stories:

Last July, I screened *Disappearances in Woods Hole* Massachusetts and afterwards a man rose to speak. "I just don't get the character of Quebec Bill," he said. "He's smart and cunning but also reckless and doomed to failure. Why?"

An oceanographer sitting in the front row beat me to the punch. "Have you ever lived in the Northeast Kingdom," he said. "I have."

But you don't need to know the Northeast Kingdom to appreciate these turns of character. I'm reminded of the time I coaxed legendary maverick film director Sam Fuller to a "Rivers" screening in Avignon, France. I sought out the old cigar-chomping Hollywood tough guy who said he'd been coming to the festival for ten years and never seen a good American independent film. But I got his attention when I told him my lead character was a logger as tough as Fuller was. Sam stopped and looked at me. "You got trees in that picture?" I told him we did and he showed up on time for the screening.

Afterwards, I was nervous but Sam collared me immediately. "Now that's a picture," he said, tears in his eyes. Behind us, a young woman chimed in. "But the lead character, Noel Lord, he's so politically incorrect. He destroys the trees—he cares nothing about the environment."

Fuller turned on a dime. "What, are you a moron?" he said. "The man's a hero."

So, Howard's compassionate rendition of deeply flawed characters fascinated me. And intrigued actors, from Rip Torn, Kris Kristofferson, Tantoo Cardinal, and Genevieve Bujold to Anthony Quinn who lobbied to play Noel Lord but proved not to be right. These actors and I loved Howard's characters – as stubborn, spiteful, irresponsible, enigmatic, and self-destructive as they were heroic, noble, irrepressible, and transcendent. How could I resist? This would be fun.

But there's more. I was raised by a Texas grandmother who turned me on to movies. But the films she took me to were westerns and Tennessee Williams pictures. So while my 7 year-old peers were watching "Dumbo" and "Lady and the Tramp," I was checking out "Red River" and "Cat On A Hot Tin Roof."

In looking at Howard's stories I saw elements of Shakespeare's "Henry IV" in "Stranger"—and traces of "King Lear" in "Rivers" and "Disappearances," but I also found something that resembled the Western. After all, isn't Reverend Walter Andrews in "Stranger" a bit like Shane, striding into town, filling a moral vacuum, and standing his ground to rid the place of the outlaws running the town?

And doesn't "Disappearances" explore some of the same themes as John Ford's "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" where the aging gunslinger played by John Wayne recognizes his own



extinction and yields to Ranse Stoddard, Jimmy Stewart's modernizing force of civilization? Except in "Disappearances" we see a father strangely yielding to his ironically named son, Wild Bill.

Which leads us to another Mosher staple—even in today's post-modern world—Howard's love of family. His insistence on the ever presence of the past. And his deep connection to culture. Here his stories part company with westerns, which are mostly set in places inventing themselves for the first time—with no law, no community, no traditions, and no transmitted culture. Indeed, no real past.

Mosher's Kingdom County is a place where, to quote William Faulkner, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

Think of the unresolved killing of black school teacher Pliny Templeton and Elijah Kinneson's closely held secret about madness and murder in "A Stranger in the Kingdom"; of Quebec Bill Bonhomme's thirty-year search for his abandoning father in "Disappearances"—and Cordelia's recitations of Shakespeare, Milton, the Greek poets, and that great New England transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson who, like Cordelia, trusted intuition and imagination, to the point of defying more "rational" thought.

Howard's stories also provide an uncommon connection to the natural world. I've found that many urban critics consider films that treat the natural world as inherently nostalgic—as if nature were inert and already extinct. But in "Where the Rivers Flow North," Noel Lord cannot let go of this spectacular natural setting that has both tortured and rewarded him—but neither can he tame it.

In "Disappearances," another dimension opens up. Here's a note from an Enosburg dairy farmer: "I saw "Disappearances" last night at Enosburg and had to write," he said. "I'm a third generation Vermonter on my father's side; my mother was Canadian. I was brought up on a dairy farm and my wife and I still run the same farm, milking 30 Jerseys. I feel I can give some perspective on your film. Although the hills of Vermont are outwardly very pastoral and full of grandeur, I have always believed them to be full of mystery and secrets—even ghosts. The story hits close."

In our time of intensifying environmental crisis, isn't it appropriate to see our natural world as something more than a cesspool that we must clean up? Isn't it also a vital cultural and even spiritual force?

Howard's also funny. Think of Bangor, in "Where the Rivers Flow North"—in her floppy hat and misfitting clothes. Or the perpetually cranky Rat Kinneson in "Disappearances." Or world-class scoundrel Resolved Kinneson in "A Stranger in the Kingdom"—drawn straight from commedia del arte with his insatiable appetites for whiskey and the imported "housekeeper" Claire LaRiviere. A little know fact—leathery old Oscar winner Jack Palance was lined up to play him. "They'll never forget a son of a bitch like Resolved," said Palance. "No one will. He's damn funny, too. Of course, I'll play him." After we made our deal, according to his agent, Palance vanished on a drinking spree into British Columbia. He understood Resolved all right.



Writer Jeffrey Lent said it best during a recent conversation. “Howard Mosher is simply the funniest writer – then he paused and completed his sentence. “Anywhere.”

Finally, I love women—most of all my supportive and sacrificing wife in this twenty-year film endeavor, Bess O’Brien. And I love Howard’s women—even though I sometimes tweak them a bit in a way that Howard once remarked, “makes everyone deal with each other a bit more than I do.” It’s the movies, after all. But in a film industry that regularly sells women characters short, Howard’s women are distinctive, powerful, and dimensional. Again, think about Marie Blythe, Cordelia in “Disappearances,” Athena Allen in “Stranger,” and Bangor in “Rivers,” a character even hard-bitten New York Times film critic Caryn James praised for, “a freshness rarely seen on screen.”

“She is so tough and blunt,” James wrote, “that when she begins to cry about the children she never had it becomes clear that emotion has been a luxury in her hardscrabble life.”

Despite all this, Howard has gotten some bad reviews. We all have. And even though he says he secretly thinks the negative reviews are probably right and he’s suspicious of the outright raves—Howard also reserves a special place for his bad reviews – on his Irasburg garage door, where he blasts them to smithereens with his shotgun.

The twenty years I’ve spent working this material has been the most challenging and satisfying period of my professional and creative life. And I can’t imagine having done it with anyone more generous than Howard Mosher. Ask Leland Kinsey, who will be reading his fine poems later. Or a first time writer like Joda Dodge, a Northeast Kingdom kid with a determination to simply write down his experiences from a cross country motorcycle trip—or Chris Bojahlian whom Howard encouraged from his early days.

Thank you, Howard, for what you’ve given to us individually and collectively, stimulating our imaginations, challenging us, and rendering to us a fresh and original vision of our own world. In our increasingly hyper-commercialized and homogenized culture, you’ve helped us lay claim to our own stories and speak with our own voices.

We tribute you here tonight as our kindred spirit, for all of this and for allowing us to inhabit the unforgettable, evocative, haunting, magical, mystical, tough, and deeply human worlds you’ve created, writing out on yellow legal pages draft after draft after draft, shaping these indelible stories—that become a part of us.

And now, as you would say—“All this makes me want to read the books.”