



## MY LIFE, SO FAR, WITH HOWARD – PART 2.

Jay Craven

*Editor's note: Last week, Jay presented the first part of his dedication speech presented earlier this month at the Burlington Book Festival. The Festival celebrated the work of the Irasburg writer during an opening night tribute. This week's installment concludes Jay's presentation.*



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 Mosher'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 dismiss 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 ill-fitting clothes. Or the perpetually cranky Rat Kinneson in “Disappearances.” Or world-class scoundrel Resolved Kinneson in “A Stranger in the Kingdom”—drawn straight from Italian 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-two 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-two 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."