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Shifting Compass

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By Michael Joseph Bennett

A long Maine's southern coast snow lies deep and kisses the surf after a recent storm. Crows weave among the tall pines while deer bound across shore roads with wide-eyed grace. An afternoon sun pokes through the scudding clouds as Auburn resident Michael Kimball opens his Cape Nedick door for a visitor.

Born in Worcester in 1949, Kimball has fashioned his increasingly acclaimed writing career from the rough fabric of a life uncommonly lived. A snippet from the summer before his high school freshman year illuminates. "My buddies and I always slept outside," he remembers. "We'd siphon about a gallon of gas from somewhere then use it to go water-skiing."

Kimball's blue eyes focus somewhere out over the frozen pond behind his Maine home and flicker for a moment. As he begins again his deep resonant drawl, more Down East in timbre than the Central Massachusetts he'd left by 1974, proceeds slowly with subtle regret."I never was a good student all through high school. I probably averaged about three days a week my senior year."

But it was in Worcester while working on the docks for Universal Car Loading in the city's rail yards where the author first began to experiment with fiction. As he recalls this period just out of high school, Kimball perks a bit— and his odd innate humor surfaces. "I first started writing stories when I was going to Quinsigamond [Community College] night school while working as a stevedore. I remember one [story] where I was whacking my foreman with a pitch bat. Then there was another one on monkeys trained for war."

"I was 18," he adds.

Also recalled are odds and ends that included jobs as a darkroom assistant for Baratta Advertising and as a millman for Hillcrest Dairy. After Quinsig, Kimball headed north to Maine with his wife, Glenna. For three months the couple lived at a campground, going over a plan to open an organic food store. But Kimball opened his Cape Nedick door for a visitor.

Details

Who: Michael Kimball
What: Book signing
Where: Barnes & Noble Books
470 Southbridge St., Auburn
When: Thursday, March 30, at 7:30 p.m.

Later that same year Kimball began his career as a public school music teacher, returning his family to Maine, this time to the small town of Whitefield. "Music has always been my first interest," notes the author and accomplished guitarist. It was during this period when he finished the manuscript that would become his first novel, the bizarre, comic, Firewater Pond. A whole new career was just beginning to unfold.

"Once I knew Firewater Pond was going to be published, I gave my notice. I had been teaching music for about 11 years and was really burned out."

Indeed the book went on to garner considerable review attention, most notably the accolades of fellow Maine writer Stephen King, who was so impressed while reading it in manuscript that he assisted in conveying the novel to print. From there, Kimball spent time as a freelance writer to help pay the bills, bringing out screenplays for such television shows as "Monsters" and travel pieces for Yankee magazine.

Eventually he was contacted to do a contemporary reworking of an unfinished script left by the deceased Academy Award-nominated screenwriter, Alec Coppel. Best known for his work on The Captain's Paradise and Vertigo, Coppel's work was a revelation to the young novelist.

"Seeing how Coppel had structured his script was probably the best education I'd ever had as a writer," Kimball admits. The work signaled a change in style for the artist from the pace of psychological suspense. It was a remarkably polished transformation that didn't escape the notice of state-side readers as well as those in Europe, where Kimball continues to be translated widely.

And now arrives what is unmistakably the author's darkest novel, the recently released Mouth to Mouth. A New England tale of obsession and revenge set against the backdrop of one particular family's unspoken history, Mouth to Mouth burns up page after page with power and pace and Kimball's signature deftness of plot.

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But he admits the hours spent in revision—necessary to pull off his intricacies of plot—bring him to a point where "by the time I finish one of these novels I have no compass."

Later this month Kimball's bearing will again point south as he signs copies of his newest at the Barnes & Noble store in Auburn.