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Shifting Compass

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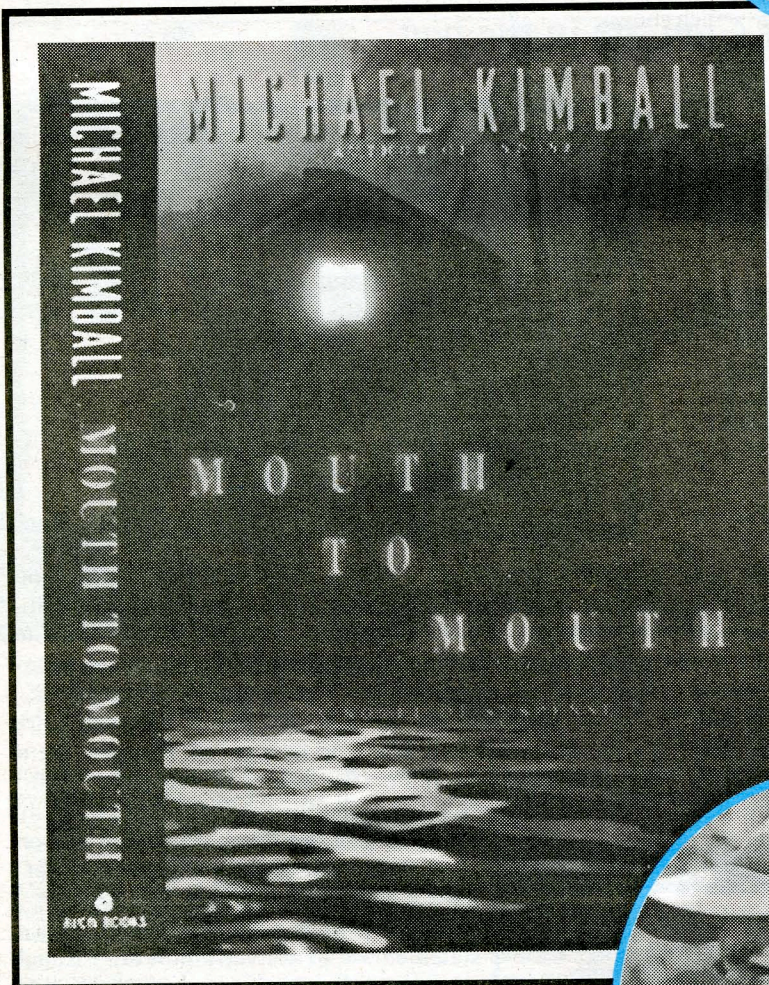
Fred White at the Green Rooster 16

Union Station, the book 20

Gerald Mack conducts the
Worcester Chorus' Spring Choral 21



Award-winning jazz
pianist Sarah Jane Cion.
See page 16 for details.



Shifting compass

An interview with author and Auburn native Michael Kimball



By Michael Joseph Bennett

Along 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 grad Michael Kimball opens his Cape Neddick 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 pinch bar. 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 milkman 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 restaurant. During this time Glenna became pregnant, and the pair moved back to Worcester where Michael enrolled at Worcester State College. He received his bachelor's degree there in 1974.

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, banging out screenplays for such television shows as "Monsters" and travel pieces for *Yankee* magazine.

Eventually he was contracted 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 whom readers would wait 10 years for another novel to appear on the shelves.

Undone, published in 1996, finally showed Kimball's teeth as a writer. The book discarded the crazed comedic elements of *Firewater Pond* and replaced them with the high-voltage pace of psychological suspense. It was a remarkably polished transformation that didn't escape the notice of stateside 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.

When asked to elaborate on his winning method, he begins, "story structure is not a mystery to anybody. I think we have an innate sense of artistic balance, so I feel pretty confident that I can just make it up as I go along, and it will have that structure."

"I do a lot of writing in the middle of the night," he continues, opening a window on one man's creative process. "I cut my old manuscripts into fourths and stack them beside the bed. What I do is roll over, grab a pen in the dark and write notes to myself. Then I throw the note on the floor so I don't write the next one over the last. In the morning I just collect all of the scraps and say, 'Well, this is what I'm going to be doing today.'"

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.

Details

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