Press Release

The True Account
by Howard Frank Mosher

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"An erudite and absorbing tweak of the Great Exploration." — Kirkus Reviews

"This may well be the first true American picaresque novel since Huckleberry Finn." — Cathie Pelletier, author of The Funeral Makers

From the author of Disappearances and A Stranger in the Kingdom, the outrageous and unforgettable story of a "true" American original

About the Book

From acclaimed novelist Howard Frank Mosher, whom Richard Russo has praised as "one of our very best writers," comes a tale of adventure that injects a bit of ribald humor into the story of Western expansion. With The True Account: A Novel of the Lewis and Clark and Kinneson Expeditions (Houghton Mifflin, June), Mosher offers comic relief from the numerous scholarly historical works being published to coincide with the bicentennial of the explorers' famed expedition. In Private True Teague Kinneson, Mosher has created an adventurer whose exploits we can only wish were based in reality.

After visiting President Jefferson at Monticello, True — schoolmaster, mad inventor, playwright, explorer, and hero in his own mind — undertakes his own journey west in the spring of 1804. Accompanied by his young nephew, Ticonderoga (and wearing a belled nightstocking to cover the copper crown screwed to the top of his head, the result of a life-altering blow sustained while drinking rum with Ethan Allen), True sets out to beat Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to the Pacific and introduce the propagation and cultivation of hemp, "that panacea for all the spiritual ills of mankind," to the native tribes of the West.
Like an American Don Quixote, True adventures his way from Vermont to the frontier town of St. Louis, then on into terra incognita, encountering a motley crew of dastardly renegades, powerful Indian nations, and formidable women along the way:

- The outlaw Harpe brothers, Big and Bigger, whose murderous habits are no match for True's wily tricks
- Daniel Boone and his statuesque (and husband-hungry) daughter, Flame Danielle
- A group of ball-playing Nez Perce
- Rodeo-riding Shoshone relatives of Sacagawea's
- A beautiful Blackfoot girl, Yellow Sage Flower Who Tells Wise Stories
- The Gentleman from Vermont, a.k.a. the devil himself, True's lifelong adversary

The result is a picaresque adventure, by turns hilarious and affecting, that could be told only by a voice as singular as Mosher's. With *The True Account*, he has written his wildest, most intriguing novel yet, a freewheeling adventure through frontier America by a true American original.

Howard Frank Mosher's work has earned him the highest esteem of some of our most admired writers, including Richard Russo, Oscar Hijuelos, Richard Ford, and Frank McCourt, who has written that he'd "put Howard Mosher up on the pedestal I keep for Wallace Stegner, Frederick Turner, [and] Edward Hoagland." With *The True Account*, he has once again crafted a tale both memorable and enjoyable, one that is sure to stand out from the crowd of books about the Lewis and Clark expedition. As *Kirkus Reviews* proclaimed, "Readers who traveled the continent with Lewis and Clark [in Brian Hall's *I Should Be Extremely Happy in Your Company*] will see the same landmarks and run into the same people, but they'll have a much, much easier trip — and more fun."

**About the Author**

Described by the *Los Angeles Times* as "a combination of Ernest Hemingway, Henry David Thoreau, and Jim Harrison," Howard Frank Mosher is the author of seven novels, including *The Fall of the Year* and *Disappearances*, and one work of nonfiction, *North Country*, a travel memoir. Three of his novels have been made into feature films: *A Stranger in the Kingdom*, which starred Martin Sheen and Ernie Hudson; *Disappearances*, which starred Kris Kristofferson and Billy Connolly; and *Where the Rivers Flow North*, which starred Rip Torn and Michael J. Fox.

Mosher has received a Guggenheim fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Literature Award, the American Civil Liberties Union Award for Excellence in the Arts, and the New England Book Award. *The True Account* will be #6 on the Book Sense 76 Top Ten list for May/June.

Born in upstate New York, Howard Frank Mosher is a longtime resident of Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, where he lives with Phillis, his wife of nearly four decades — the inspiration for Yellow Sage Flower Who Tells Wise Stories in *The True Account*. They have two children.
A Conversation with Howard Frank Mosher

Q) What inspired you to write *The True Account*?

A) For almost as long as I can remember, I've loved stories from the American West. So much so that about five years ago, while visiting my son in Montana, I decided to write my own. As a New Englander myself, I invented an eccentric Vermonter, Private True Teague Kinneson, and sent him on a wild, cross-continental journey to race Lewis and Clark to the Pacific. I regard Meriwether Lewis and William Clark as two of the greatest explorers in American history. At the same time, with all of the hoopla over the 2003-2006 bicentennial of their epic journey, it seemed to me that an irreverent, comic novel about a Vermonter racing them west might be refreshing.

Q) The outlandish Private True, a man of "incomparable ways and stays," regards himself as an American Don Quixote, right down to his chain-mail vest and comically chivalrous code of behavior. Is he based on a real person?

A) When my mother, who's 88, finished reading the book, this was the first question she asked me. (I think she was half afraid that I'd say yes, me.) In fact, I didn't really have any real model in mind for Private True in the way, say, that his descendant, editor Charles Kinneson, in my novel *A Stranger in the Kingdom*, is based on both my father and my uncle. After some reflection, I suspect that True is probably this writer's alter ego. Then again, in his dedication to a unique brand of independent-minded individualism, he's my idea of a quintessential Vermonter.

Q) How did you come up with Private True's nephew, the young painter Ticonderoga Kinneson, who accompanies True across North America?

A) Well, I needed a reliable narrator. True's much too outrageous to tell his own story. Ti thinks the world of his uncle, and if *The True Account* has such a phenomenon as a theme, I suppose it is their friendship as they take the early American West by storm. As True remarks, Ti is quite deficient in "ways and stays," but he loves the West, as I do, wants to record it in his paintings, as I do in my stories, and he absolutely adores Yellow Sage Flower Who Tells Wise Stories, the beautiful young Blackfoot woman whom he meets on the upper Missouri.

Q) Is your wife, to whom you dedicated *The True Account* and most of your other novels, really the inspiration for Yellow Sage Flower?

A) Yes.

Q) How long did it take to write *The True Account*?

A) Five years. It probably went through 40 to 50 drafts, several of which were more than 1,000 pages long. It began as a straight biographical novel of Meriwether Lewis, evolved into a comic novel with Thomas Jefferson's illegitimate son as the main character, then underwent a third transformation when my longtime friend and editor, Harry Foster, mentioned that his favorite character was a then-minor figure in the novel, the Vermont playwright, explorer, and schoolmaster Private True Teague Kinneson. Harry wondered if I could bring True forward in the story somewhat. In fact, True veritably leaped front and
center. A year later, *The True Account*, in its current format, was finished.

**Q) Did writing *The True Account* require any interesting or unusual research?**

**A) Over the course of the five years it took to write *The True Account*, I retraced the Lewis and Clark Trail, from St. Louis to the Pacific, three times. Also, I visited Meriwether Lewis's grave on the Natchez Trace in Tennessee, northern Montana, where Lewis had an encounter with several young Blackfeet; Pompey's Pillar, on the Yellowstone; and Monticello, where President Jefferson and Lewis came up with the concept of the expedition.

Along the way, I fished the headwaters of the Missouri and Columbia rivers, hiked in the Breaks of Montana and the Bitterroots of Idaho (where the party nearly starved to death), and had several interesting encounters myself, including one with a Nez Perce elder who seemed to have absolutely magical abilities.

I was equally amazed by how much of the country still looks nearly identical to the descriptions in the explorers' journals, and how much is totally unrecognizable.

**Q) In your research, what books and documents did you find especially useful?**

**A) The actual journals of Lewis and Clark, Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage*, and James Ronda's excellent *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians*. The early 19th-century painter George Catlin's *Life Among the Indians* was very useful and fascinating. I found *The Natural History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, by Raymond Darwin Burroughs, wonderfully interesting. And for Yellow Sage's background, *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains*, by John C. Ewers, was indispensable. The trick for me, however, was fitting the research into my story rather than the story into the research.

**Q) What do you like to read?**

**A) The classics. My favorite writers are Shakespeare, Dickens, Twain, Jane Austen, Fielding, Thoreau, Faulkner, Robert Frost, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Hemingway. Among contemporary writers, I especially like Richard Russo, Amy Tan, Barbara Kingsolver, Kent Haruf, Donna Tartt, and the essayist Edward Hoagland. As a storyteller myself, I'm especially fond of novels with strong narratives: *Cold Mountain*, *Lonesome Dove*, *The Little Friend*. Also, I'm a great fan of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James Lee Burke, and Elmore Leonard.**

**Q) Why do you write?**

**A) I grew up in a vast extended family of exceedingly eccentric grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, hired men and women, and assorted Dickensian hangers-on of every description, all of whom seemed to be storytellers. I'm still writing some of the stories I heard as a boy. Ultimately, though, writing is a mysterious process. I'm not sure what drives me to do it. Perhaps the best answer I can give is the same answer Private True's brother — Ticonderoga's much put-upon father — gave to a stranger who inquired why, under the sun, True insisted on wearing at all times an Elizabethan codpiece. As Ti's father said, why not?**

**Q) What's next? Do you have another novel in progress?**
A) Yes. I'm just finishing a novel called *Waiting for Teddy Williams*, in which — hold on to your hat — with the help of some rapscallions from Kingdom County, Vermont, the Boston Red Sox win their first World Series since 1918.

**Praise for Howard Frank Mosher**

**For The Fall of the Year**

"I have always enjoyed reading the novels of Howard Frank Mosher, and I was especially taken by *The Fall of the Year*, which brings together in one book all of his considerable strengths . . . Mosher's language — always a pleasure to read — attains a level of astonishing grace and beauty here as he brings Kingdom County to life once again." — Jay Parini, author of *The Apprentice Lover* and *Robert Frost: A Life*

"Few writers create characters as wondrous and idiosyncratic as Howard Frank Mosher — and fewer still offer us stories with as much grace and humor and heart. He is, pure and simple, one of the very best we have." — Chris Bohjalian, author of *Buffalo Soldiers* and *Midwives*

**For Northern Borders**

"One of our very best writers . . . Mosher offers us a landscape, both natural and human, worth knowing, worth believing in." — Richard Russo, author of *Empire Falls*

**For A Stranger in the Kingdom**

"Reminiscent of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Anatomy of a Murder* . . . absorbing!" — Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, *New York Times*

**For North Country**

"Mr. Mosher has transformed the northern U.S. frontier and the southern coast of Canada into one long and bountiful literary landscape, and in doing so has made me see America more vividly. His wonderful itinerary is bright with anecdote and history and lore, and most importantly with affection for his human subjects." — Richard Ford, author of *Independence Day*

"I'd put Howard Mosher up on the pedestal I keep for Wallace Stegner, Frederick Turner, Edward Hoagland . . . The book makes you want to get into the car and go. It shows America is still virgin territory for the traveler with a warm heart and a ready pen, characteristics Mr. Mosher has in spades." — Frank McCourt, author of *Angela’s Ashes*

**Advance Praise for The True Account**

"In an age of irony and cynicism, the comic novel in the great American tradition has all but been lost. Pale imitations attempt to skewer rather than elevate and thus contribute even further to this decline. Upon this gloomy scene sails a ship of wonders, Howard Frank Mosher's thoughtful, provocative, and frequently hilarious *The True Account*. A story at once
cleanly literary and joyously goofy, Mosher gives us a sideways view of the famed expedition of Lewis and Clark and in doing so offers the profound implication that things are rarely as they seem." — Jeffrey Lent, author of In the Fall

"Howard Mosher calls to mind the best of Mark Twain — mischievous, touching, and very funny. Private True Teague Kinneson is an uproarious literary creation, a flamboyantly addled expeditionary whose company you'll never regret." — Carl Hiaasen, author of Hoot

"With the same comic imagination that made Disappearances one of my favorite novels of all time, Howard Frank Mosher sends Private True Teague Kinneson out on the Lewis and Clark trail for an uproarious, outrageous, and unforgettable adventure." — Dayton Duncan, author of Out West and coauthor, with Ken Burns, of Lewis & Clark

"With stunning verisimilitude, Howard Frank Mosher — a national treasure of a writer — recreates vividly the geographical, philosophical, and historically eccentric travails of his iconic explorers. This is a knowledgeable, provocatively melancholy, wildly comic novel, which reconfigures the American past. It is a bold act of the imagination!" — Howard Norman, author of The Haunting of L.

"A fascinating narrative — a great read!" — Oscar Hijuelos, author of A Simple Habana Melody

"Part riotous adventure, part book of wonders, and part historical travesty, The True Account is a generous cornucopia of a book by perhaps this country’s finest storyteller. I have not read a better novel, or a funnier one, in a long, long time." — Lawrence Millman, author of Last Places and Lost in the Arctic

**From The True Account**

The crowd now began to press around my uncle, shouting "Tar and feather him" and, more alarming still, "Lynch the old fool." My uncle objected to being called old, said he would not stand still for it, and began to cite instances from both the classics and the Bible in which men "well stricken in years" had performed amazing feats of vigor. But before he knew what had happened, someone had thrown his own rope around his neck and yanked him off his mule.

I reached for my firelock as several men, led by the bear owner, hauled my struggling, protesting uncle through the mud toward a flagpole. I raised my rifle and, terrified though I was, felt fully prepared to shoot the ringleader, when another shot rang out over the streets and a deep, commanding voice shouted, "Unhand that man."

A tall rider dressed in buckskin, with long red hair flying out from under a black hat, galloped into the crowd on a big bay horse, striking right and left with the barrel of his gun. To the mob, some of whom demanded to know what authority the man had to curtail their sport, he shouted, "Unless you want my pappy and forty armed clansmen down on your town like the Furies of Hell, you'll restore law and order here yourselves and mind your manners. If you have any manners to mind."

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With his stocking cap askew, one overshoe rolled up and the other down, and his crimson codpiece half undone, my uncle jumped to his feet and pulled the rope off his neck. "Private True Teague Kinneson, with eternal gratitude, sir," he said, saluting smartly.

"Flame Danielle Boone, scout and frontierswoman," cried his red-haired benefactor, grabbing his hand and pumping it up and down like a fellow soldier. "I'd be honored to invite you to escort me at the ball tonight, private, as my personal guest."