

On a MISSION

It's funny how many people can be outsiders in their own country in **Walter Kirn's** new novel.

by Beth Kanter

When Walter Kirn was 12 years old, a group of Mormon missionaries knocked on the door to his family's rural Minnesota home and, for reason he says he still cannot fully explain, his parents let them into the house. What happened next could easily be a purely fictional scene taken from one of his novels rather than a moment from the author and book critic's actual life.

"Suddenly, we were members of an extremely peculiar, demanding religion," Kirn remembers. "We went from a non-churchgoing, unaffiliated nuclear family to devout Mormons. I went from uninvolved to completely immersed."

A few years later, Kirn's parents left the church, but he stuck with it a bit longer, staying with it for spiritual reasons of the teenage boy sort.

"I stayed for the girls," he says with a laugh, explaining that it gave him a social outlet, including a steady offering of dances and other opportunities for boy/girl interactions that he had trouble finding in his small town life and his high-school class of about 25 students. "It gave me a social life I didn't have."

At 17, Kirn did drop out of the church shortly before he would have been sent on the proselytizing mission required of most young Mormon men and women. It's a road not taken that Kirn says he thinks about often, a collection of what-ifs that served as the fodder for his new book, *Mission to America* (Doubleday).

"Part of the book is the imaginative speculation what a mission would have been like," says the 43-year-old author. "When I started the book, it was about a pair of Mormons, but as I thought about it, I veered away from that. It is a comedy that uses religion to get a fresh view of who we are and what we are living like."

In the end, Kim settled on two young missionary men from the fictional Aboriginal Fulfilled Apostles Church as his novel's two main characters—narrator Mason Plato LaVerle and the tragic Elder Stark—who are dispatched from their insular Bluff, Montana, society to recruit new women to perpetuate the sect's genetically needy and thinning ranks. During their journey, which begins in Wyoming and then takes them to a wealthy Colorado ski town, they become involved with an arresting set of characters, including Wiccan teenage girls, a billionaire with a bad stomach, and Mason's love interest, whose youthful indiscretions can be viewed with a mouse click. Along the way, as they charge forward in their van, they are sucked into the new-to-them world of box stores, overpriced coffee drinks, and recreational drugs. At times, they could just as easily be tourists from another time and place.

WHAT'S NEW

- *Mission to America* (available now)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- *Up in the Air* ('01)
- *Thumbsucker* ('99)
- *She Needed Me* ('92)
- *My Hard Bargain* ('92)



"The book in some ways is a cultural Rip Van Winkle story," suggests Kirn, who has lived in Livingston, Montana, for the past 15 years. "It's about a group of people who kind of fell asleep 140 years ago in a different time and wake up in this one. They are culturally alien and spiritually alien. They speak the language. They know something about the technology. They know a little something about the history, but they come at it from a different point of view. I guess more than anything, I wanted to show it is possible to be a stranger in your own land in the United States."

A matriarchal new age church that has separated itself from mainstream American life, Kirn's fictional religion is one that he says in some ways resembles his own "cobbled together" belief system and takes principles from several faiths. In particular, the group in the book focuses on a complex system of "eating and elimination" called "Edenic Nutritional Science."

"It is amazing when you study religion how much it has to do with diet," Kirn explains. "Some people know nothing about Judaism except for the kosher diet. All people know about Mormonism is that they don't drink alcohol. The Seventh-Day Adventists really were the beginning of the health food store movement. Spirituality and religion are intrinsically linked to how we eat."

In this, his fifth book, Kirn creates a sharp-witted work that serves to comment on many of the absurdities of modern American life and values. Listening to Kirn speak about his upbringing and his current writing life in the small town of Livingston, Montana, which until recently has been immune from chain-store-life America, it is easy to see how *Mission to America* reflects some of the dichotomies that have threaded through Kirn's life.

He was raised on a small draft horse farm that his "back-to-the land" parents chose as their family's home while his father commuted to St. Paul every day to work as a patent attorney for a big corporation. ("I grew up in a way almost parallel to the guys in my book," he tells.) He pens well-respected critiques for *The New York Times Book Review*, serves as a contributing editor to *Time* magazine, and this summer stood in for a week as a guest blogger on Andrew Sullivan's website, yet he still has dial-up Internet access.

"If you have high-speed Internet, you have one experience of the world and I don't yet," he comments. "That increasingly is the difference between people."

Back when "blog" was merely a typo, Kirn daydreamed about becoming a writer one day and an astronaut or the president the next. But something about the writing stuck. "I was the kid who walked around in hayfields taking to himself," he says. "I had so much stored up in me that I wanted to say as a kid but never got to say. Writers are people who talk to their selves and wind up putting it on paper. If you took away our paper and our ability to write it down, we'd probably be walking the streets with placards."

As he tells it, Kirn wound up doing well on the SATs, went to good schools (Princeton and then Oxford), started dabbling in poetry and short stories, and wound up writing articles for *Vanity Fair* and other top magazines in New York. He also began writing book reviews, something he says has always been in his blood.

"I am one of those people who scribbles in the margins of books," Kirn says. "Everyone tried to teach me that books are holy objects that you are not supposed to mark up, but I always found myself writing and underlining. To me, book reviewing is

just taking all the underlining and margin writing and putting it together in a more coherent form."

The *Mission to America* author says he must sometimes silence the critic side of his brain when writing fiction, although he readily admits that all writers are critics. The key, he says, is to find a way not to let it get out of control. "Nothing teaches you how subjective reviewing is like being a reviewer," he says, adding that even knowing this, negative criticism still stings.

When Kirn is exercising the fiction part of his writing brain, he does so for long stretches at a time. The Montana-based novelist spends his marathon creative sessions in an old train caboose he has turned into his office. He wrote *Mission to America* out there and most of his other novels. Kirn bought the caboose from a woman who had it sitting in her backyard. The owner's deceased husband had worked on the railroad for many years and her children convinced her it was time to let go of the memory.

"I am sure it is full of ghosts," he says. "It smells like diesel fuel and it's about 100 years old, but there is something about it. I am big on places when I am writing. I put electricity

and heat into it. When it is 30 below outside, it is only about 20 degrees inside. It's rough and rustic as far as writing studios go."

Right as *Mission to America* hits the shelves, the longtime critic will experience reviews of another sort. A few weeks before Kirn's latest book is released, *Thumbsucker*, a movie based on his 1999 novel of the same name, will be released by Sony Pictures Classics. Having the film, whose stars include Vince Vaughn, Keanu Reeves, and Tilda Swinton, adapted from his work stands as "one of the best experiences of his lives."

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"I imagine [having a movie made from your book] could be horrible, but in this case, it is wonderful because it is a good movie by someone who really caught the spirit of the book," he says. "Even though it is a completely different object, it is as though the book got a chance to live again. And, it has wonderful music. I never heard music as I wrote it."

Thumbsucker marks screenwriter and director Mike Mills's feature film debut. Mills champions Kirn as one of the project's guardian angels.

"Walter was so generous," Mills says. "He was almost one of the first people to say, 'You are going to have to let go of the book.' He was never critical, was never adding stress. It made me very loyal to him."

Adapting Kirn's original story and words was a kind of graduate school experience for Mills, one that will stay with him and his work for a long time to come. "I will forever have the imprint of Walter on everything I write," Mills says.

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