

Praise for Michael Kimball's novels



“Not only does he address mortality head-on, but his narrator describes the deep and powerful love between his grandparents as his grandfather quietly and desperately watches his wife slowly dying. The grandfather’s narration is powerful and moving... uncomprehending and breathless.”

The Observer

“*Highway to the Heart of America*, Kimball’s first novel... is moving and clever: the open road, so long a symbol of freedom and self-discovery in American fiction, is here rendered as devoid of promise, embodying desertion, desolation and rootlessness... Kimball’s novel reads as a parable about the death of the family, of how impossible family life is in a numbly materialistic society. However, the largeness of the message should not detract from the intricacy of fine, precise storytelling... he has taken American literature somewhere very dark and unsettling.”

The Times

“Kimball does have an arresting talent.”

Sunday Tribune

“Occasionally a novel by a new writer will cause critics to choke with excitement. This is one... Kimball resembles a skinhead at a cocktail party – no quarter given to poxy commercialism. For that reason alone, his achievement is admirable. He ignores the media’s liaison with trends, fame, success and trivia.”

The Scotsman

“A bleak, powerful and extraordinary debut.”

The Bookseller

“Kimball evinces an undeniable feel for the cadences of children’s speech.”

Publishers Weekly

“Kimball has created something rare and brave in his second novel: the voice of an elderly man watching a beloved life slip away, and with it the entire meaning of his own existence... A beautifully tuned, near perfect account of a very ordinary death.”

Metro

“Be warned: this book has the power to make even the most hard-hearted of readers shed a tear... Kimball has broken into new territory: *How Much of Us There Was* is one of the most graphic depictions of illness and loss I have ever read.”

The Glasgow Herald

“A deep love between an ageing husband and wife is given a heartbreaking voice in Michael Kimball’s second novel, *How Much of Us There Was*... Told through the eyes of the husband, the story is tender and poignant. His despair moves us because it is neither fantastic nor indulgent.”

Time Out

DEAR EVERYBODY

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A Novel Written in the Form of Letters,
Diary Entries, Encyclopedia Entries,
Conversations with Various People, Notes
Sent Home from Teachers, Newspaper
Articles, Psychological Evaluations,
Weather Reports, a Missing Person Flyer,
a Eulogy, a Last Will and Testament,
and Other Fragments, Which Taken
Together Tell the Story of the Short Life
of Jonathon Bender, Weatherman

by

MICHAEL KIMBALL



ALMA BOOKS

Now do you remember?

Jonathon Bender

From the *Jefferson City Chronicle*, January 28, 1999

Local Weatherman Dead, Coroner Rules Suicide

Dan Schneider, Staff Reporter

JEFFERSON CITY – The body of former local weatherman Mr. Jonathon Bender was found yesterday after worried neighbors notified the police that Mr. Bender's car was idling inside his garage. The car radio was still playing.

The report from the coroner's office rules the cause of death a suicide. Mr. Bender left what police are calling a suicide note, though it appears to be a series of letters to many of the people he knew throughout his life. The Police Department says that none of the letters give an explicit explanation for the suicide.

Mr. Bender is remembered for his weather broadcasts

on WEXJ, especially his work during the devastating tornado of April 2, 1997 that destroyed much of Market Street and Lime Kiln Road. He was last seen on the air later in that same year. The station did not return calls for comment.

Mr. Bender is survived by his father, Thomas Bender; his mother, Alice Winters (Bender); and his brother Robert Bender – all of Lansing, Michigan. He is also survived by his ex-wife, Sara Olson (Bender) of Jefferson City, Missouri. As of press time, there was no information concerning funeral services.

Everything in Pieces

I never liked my brother much growing up, but I didn't know him well before he died. He moved out of the house when I was still in high school and I never saw him much after that. And it wasn't long after that that our parents separated and then divorced. Our family moved away from each other in different directions and in different ways. I didn't even go to Jonathon's wedding and I never met his wife Sara until his funeral, by which time she was his ex-wife.

We grew up as brothers in the same family, but we had different childhoods. I didn't recognize my mother and father when I read Jonathon's letters. Jonathon's version may have been true for him, but I was the favorite and I don't remember it like that. I don't remember any of the things that Jonathon says our father did to him. I never saw those things happen and it never happened to me. I just thought that Jonathon and our father didn't like each other.

Being Jonathon's younger brother was never easy for me. Jonathon sometimes behaved strangely and he never had a lot of friends. He didn't do well in school or at home. There was trouble in both places for him. He would get detention and get suspended for fighting and skipping classes. Often, Jonathon and our father would get into their own fights after this. I knew that he stopped going to school for a while, but I didn't know that he saw a therapist or that he had to take medication. I just remember that Jonathon was sad and that I didn't want to be around him or admit to my friends that he was my brother.

I don't think that Jonathon would have told me about any of it, though. We didn't talk much when we were kids, and we almost never talked after we became adults. He never told me, for instance, that he and Sara had divorced. I don't know why, but somehow I thought that he had become happy after leaving home.

It was our mother who called me to say that Jonathon had died, and I thought that he must have been struck by lightning when he was chasing a thunderstorm or that maybe he got too close to a tornado. Jonathon was obsessed by the weather when we were kids, and he once told me that the clouds were his friends and that they had formed to protect him from the sun, which he thought was trying to cook him for dinner. He often talked about the weather trying to kill him, but I never thought it would lead to Jonathon killing himself.

My father wouldn't go to Jonathon's funeral, and I didn't want to go either, but I drove my mother down to Missouri for it. After we buried him, we stayed to sort through his belongings. We gave some of his furniture away to Goodwill and then we rented a dumpster to throw almost everything else of his away. His house was filled with so many things that nobody else would want.

But I saved all of the short letters that Jonathon had written in the last days of his life. I also saved a box filled with things that Jonathon had saved from his own life – old family photographs, crayon drawings, yellowed newspaper clippings, pages that were torn out of an encyclopedia, report cards, notes that his teachers sent home, a story he wrote about a summer vacation that our family never took, X-rays from his dentist, his birth certificate, his marriage certificate, his divorce papers – nearly any written document.

The letters are written to nearly everybody Jonathon ever knew. But I don't know why he wrote to the Easter Bunny, to Santa Claus, to our high school, or to a few people who he knew were dead. I don't know why there are so many short letters to so many different people. I don't know why there wasn't just one suicide letter to everybody and I don't know why he never sent the letters either.

I read all of the letters, but I still didn't understand what had happened to Jonathon. That's why I began asking other people about Jonathon's life – my mother, my father, his ex-wife, anybody I could find who Jonathon named in the letters. I went back home to our old neighborhood and asked some of the neighbors about Jonathon. I talked to the people he went to school with and worked with. I was trying to make some kind of sense out of Jonathon's life, but I didn't believe most of what these other people told me.

My mother didn't want to talk about Jonathon, but she let me read over thirty years of her diaries. She said that most of what I wanted to know would be in them, and I have included many excerpts from them here even though many of the entries seemed doubtful to me.

I also got in touch with Jonathon's ex-wife, Sara, who seemed to resent the fact that I was giving Jonathon so much attention now when I had given him so little while he was alive. She allowed me, though, to include excerpts from the eulogy that she gave at Jonathon's funeral.

Still, it wasn't until I started to ask my father questions about Jonathon that I began to understand his childhood and what my father must have been like for him and also for my mother. I began to realize that I had been wrong about a lot of

things concerning Jonathon. You will see what I mean: I have included parts of those conversations here too.

Now I know that Jonathon's life was difficult and painful, and I am ashamed that I did not recognize that fact even though I lived in the same house with him for half of my life. Jonathon's life broke and his mind broke and everything was in pieces. It is all still in pieces. Jonathon left all of these fragments behind and I have tried to put them back together in some kind of order. I hope that this holds him together.

Robert Bender
July 25, 2007
Lansing, Michigan

A Chronology of Jonathon Bender

- 1966 Conceived, probably on his father's birthday, in San Clemente, California.
- 1967 Born during The Great Midwest Blizzard in Lansing, Michigan.
- 1968 Cannot do much for himself.
- 1969 The birth of his brother, Robert.
Jonathon asks for him to be returned to the hospital.
- 1970 Fears taking baths.
- 1971 Fails to blow out the candles on his birthday cake.
- 1972 Breaks a window with his face.
Thinks he has gone blind.
- 1973 Falls in love with his babysitter.
Beaten by his father for leaving a door open.
- 1974 Cannot stop hiccupping.
Runs away from home; returns the same day.
- 1975 His father teaches him how to fight.
Thinks he is crowned the Burger King.
- 1976 Wears red, white, and blue clothes every day for a whole summer.
- 1977 Tries to stop his father from choking his mother.

- 1978 Runs away from home again and hides from his father in the neighbor's garage.
His blackouts begin.
- 1979 Thinks cancer is contagious.
- 1980 Begins high school.
Worries he caused his grandfather's death.
- 1981 Finds his father's pornography and begins to learn about women.
Feels he is beginning to rot after getting a cavity filled.
- 1982 His first visit to a psychiatrist.
- 1983 His first sexual experience with a girl who is not in a magazine.
- 1984 Loses virginity; does not want it back.
- 1985 Breaks up with first real girlfriend.
Graduates from high school.
Leaves home to begin college.
- 1986 Tries to hug his father, but his arms are not long enough.
His mother worries about him being away at college.
- 1987 His parents separate.
Considers suicide after reading depressing novels.
- 1988 Stops going to class or studying.
His parents divorce.
An airplane explodes over Scotland.

- 1989 Graduates from college.
Cuts off contact with his father.
- 1990 Disappears for a year.
- 1991 Chases a tornado.
Lies on resume to get weatherman job.
Gets camera time in a small market.
- 1992 Meets Sara Olson, who recognizes him from television.
- 1993 Starts living with Sara.
Gets distracted by airplanes.
- 1994 Attempts to make it rain; fails.
Marries Sara.
- 1995 Attempts to conceive a child with Sara; fails.
Buys a house with a cracked foundation.
- 1996 Committed to a mental hospital by Sara.
Months pass; gets himself out.
- 1997 Sara separates from him.
- 1998 Begins looking for his childhood.
Loses job.
Refuses to sign divorce papers.
- 1999 Tries to remember his whole life.
Commits suicide in his car in the garage at his home in Jefferson City, Missouri.

The Life of Jonathon Bender
(b.1967–d.1999)

1999

Dear Everybody,

Here I am sitting in my kitchen with everybody who I can remember and it is crowded in here. Everything that I can remember is falling out of my head, going down my arm, and out my fingers. I can feel it happening inside me and sometimes it hurts.

The kitchen needs to be remodeled, but Sara and I divorced before we could turn it into something new again. The flowered wallpaper is peeling in places and now I can see all of the cracks in the plaster underneath. Now I can see that the flowered wallpaper was holding the wall both together and upright.

My mom and my dad aren't married anymore either, but they are both here. I think that I see my brother Robert toward the back of the room. I haven't seen him in years, but I don't think that he wants to talk to me. We never knew what to say to each other anyway.

I'm not sure what to say to everybody yet. It feels as if everything is falling down around me. The kitchen floor is old linoleum and I don't know whether the flooring underneath it is any good anymore. Whoever lives here next will probably have to tear it all out.

All four of my grandparents are dead, but they are here too. I have invited everybody.

There is Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. They really do exist, at least for a little while.

There is my first grade teacher, Mrs. Sussex, and my high school history teacher, Mrs. Thorp. I wonder if they know that I am almost dead.

There are some of the people from the neighborhood where I grew up – Mrs. McCoy, Mr. and Mrs. Evers, Mr. and Mrs. Hall. There are some of my childhood friends. Hi, Steve. Hi, Jim. Hi, Al. I'm glad that you could come.

There is my track coach, Coach Brackett. I recognize him by the stopwatch hanging around his neck. There are some of my other teachers from middle school and high school, and a few of my professors from college. I hope that I remember everybody's name.

Whose dog is that? There is a stray dog in here or maybe it is the one my parents never let me have. There is a brown squirrel in here too and the sun is in here keeping everybody warm.

There are so many things that I already can't remember that it makes me feel as if little pieces of me are already missing.

The countertops are made out of all of these little tiles and some of them are cracked and missing too. The cupboards have so many layers of paint that they either get stuck or they don't close anymore.

Here are my therapists – Dr. Adler and Dr. Morris and Dr. Gregory. It looks as if they brought me some more medication. I tried to keep taking it. I tried to get better.

There is my babysitter Kathy Granger. I wish that my mom and dad could still hire her to watch over me for two dollars an hour.

There are a bunch of my ex-girlfriends here. I can see Candace and Marie and Angela and Megan. I can see the second Megan. I can see Debbie and Laura and Simone and Amanda. I haven't seen any of them for years, but they all look the same age as they were when they liked me or I liked them.

I have disappointed so many people.

There is David Vaughn, my roommate from freshman year of college. Hey, David. He just nodded back to me. He's talking to Carol McAnallan. I'll write about that later.

I'll try to remember everything that I can. The only thing holding me together is my past.

There is Mr. McComb, the news director from WEXJ, the television station where I was the weatherman. Now he knows that I won't be forecasting the weather anymore. There will still be weather. There just won't be me.

I don't see Sara anywhere, though. Maybe she is waiting until later in my life to show up, until I have written to everybody else. I hope so. I hope that I get to see her again.

I'm going to write everybody letters about everything that happened. I always thought that my life had been continuous, but now I can't remember anything except for isolated instances. I hope that these were my defining moments.

Your son, your grandson, your brother, your friend or neighbor, your student or classmate, your patient, your co-worker, your ex-boyfriend or ex-husband, your ex-everything, the weatherman,

Jonathon Thomas Bender
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