

# Books

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## Searching for a place to be

Author Michael Rumaker returns to North Carolina to give a series of readings from his work exploring what it means to be gay

By Katherine Duncan

SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES

When 19-year-old Michael Rumaker arrived at Black Mountain College in June of 1951, after a 600-mile drive south from New Jersey in a friend's "new green Chevy," he was nervous, excited, and full of anticipation for a place he'd heard described as "a hotbed of communists and homosexuals."

Years later, Rumaker remembers his reaction to this comment in an oppressive McCarthyite era, "my young, queer ears really picked up. It definitely sounded like the place for me."

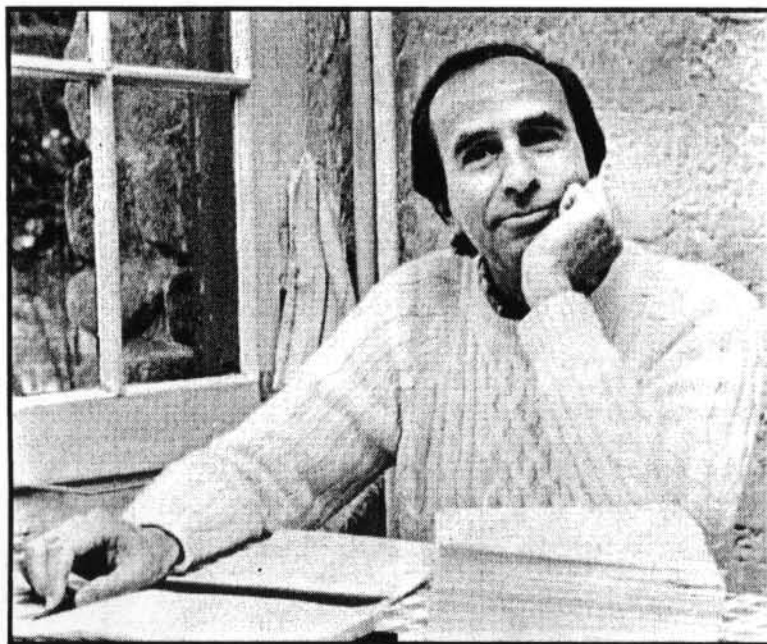
Infatuated with the Western North Carolina landscape, Rumaker thought, "maybe here I could finally learn to write; equally as important, maybe here I could find a place to be."

Rumaker returns to the mountains this week to give a series of readings in the area. The writer will be at Malaprop's Bookstore/Cafe at 3 p.m. today. He will also give readings at 3:30 p.m. Monday at the Laurel Forum at UNCA and at 4 p.m. Tuesday in Canon Lounge on the Warren Wilson College campus.

Rumaker's visit coincides with the publication of "Black Mountain College Dossier #6, Eroticizing the Nation: Michael Rumaker's Fiction" by Leverett T. Smith, professor of English at North Carolina Wesleyan College.

The dossier is published by the Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center, a non-profit organization established to honor the students and teachers of this influential college.

After graduating from Black Mountain College in 1955, Rumaker went on to earn his MFA in creative writing and literature from Columbia University in 1970, the same year he received a Dell Publishing award. He has



KATHY GARDNER

Michael Rumaker works on the manuscript of his new book "Pagan Days," at the kitchen table where he writes in his apartment in South Nyack, N.Y. The alumnus of Black Mountain College returns to Western North Carolina this week for a series of readings.

been writing and teaching ever since.

Rumaker has published several works of fiction and non-fiction. In 1992 he was a Lambda Literary Award Finalist for his novel "To Kill a Cardinal."

Rumaker's work has recently been cited in Gregory Wood's "A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition," and in John Loughery's "The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities, A Twentieth Century History." Rumaker's poem "The Fairies Are Dancing All Over The World," has been included in the recently-published "Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature: Readings From Western Antiquity to Present Day."

He is currently Adjunct Full Professor at City College of New

York.

The search for a "place to be" has continued through Rumaker's writing, from his early stories full of repressed, stoic characters, to a recently published book entitled "Pagan Days," written from the unspoiled perspective of his childhood.

His search for a place as a gay writer has been vast and often painful during times when being "queer" was neither understood nor accepted.

In Rumaker's 1979 book, "Robert Duncan in San Francisco," he describes his life during the late 1950s in San Francisco where he and many fellow Black Mountain students lived after the close of the College.

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*Black Mountain College "attracted misfits," noted Rumaker as he talks about the college's "live and let live" atmosphere that initially drew him in. Although the college was a short-lived, but highly potent experiment, it had a lasting effect on the lives of those such as Rumaker who continue to feel its impact.*

open air of the city in spite of the rigidity that was everywhere. It seemed that everybody was writing and painting and making music ... To me, the look and talk of those most actively involved was like and extension and coalescence of earlier Black Mountain change around, that had cohered and emerged simultaneously in Swannanoa Valley and the Bay Area."

At the end of the book, he recounts being arrested in a gay section of town under the bogus charge of vagrancy.

After this experience, he felt isolated and disillusioned, realizing the rigid parameters of a society that he would inhabit as a gay man.

"Quite literally, I didn't know where I stood; there seemed to be no right place for me. ... The need for a place to be was so terrific I went to any length to find it. So perhaps it was that I hitchhiked,

to New York, to Black Mountain, to San Francisco, to find a habitat to receive that. But I ended up looking for it in places where it wasn't. ... Forced to the fringes, I took to the mountains in my head, became a guerilla, became self-reliant."

Later, in Rumaker's 1981 novel, "My First Satyrnalia," a gay writer overcomes his despair through an acceptance of himself, renewing his faith in humanity.

In this book, and subsequent writings, Rumaker begins to explore what he calls the "many levels of gay sexuality," noting what he sees as a prevalent "disconnection between the physical and the spiritual" in gay society.

The seeds of Rumaker's eventual openness in his writing were perhaps first planted in the soft shadows of the protective mountains surrounding Black Mountain College, where his mentor, Charles Olson, encouraged and nurtured him as a writer. "We were allowed to take chances and were free to be what we were there ... a confluence of energies emerging from a need for a place such as Black Mountain College brought it together."

The unusual gathering of students and teachers at Black Mountain from 1933-1956 included the likes of composer John Cage, choreographer Merce Cunningham, writers Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, and artists Jacob Lawrence and Willem de Kooning.

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