

Hogan's Heroes

Recalling Memorable Characters, Author Segues from *Serious Matters*

by Ricka McNaughton

Sitting in his Plainfield living room on a recent winter morning, in the cozy timber-frame house that he designed and built with the help of friends in the 1970s, Cornelius "Con" Hogan reverently picked up an old banjo and held it aloft. He turned it about, drawing attention to its distressed patina, the markings along the polished neck and the curious absence of raised frets. One of the first things you might notice about Hogan, as he gets talking, is just how much he notices in general—and that he likes to share, in different ways, things he has come to find interesting and valuable. As he was putting away the banjo, he remembered a story.

Smiling broadly, Hogan recounted, "My father liked to tell people, 'I sent my son to Rutgers University to become a man [invoking a phrase from the school song], but all he did was learn how to play the goddamn banjo.'" In the space of one good guffaw, you came to know something about the character Hogan's father must have been.

It's a device that Hogan uses throughout a trio of books he has written celebrating interesting characters he met, mostly while living and working in Vermont for the past 40 years. In that time, Hogan has had occasion to know, fairly well, Vermonters with all the power and all the troubles in the world. He also came to appreciate people who led rather ordinary lives but did so with special measures of grace, ability or bizarreness. He had long thought about sharing his trove of great characters. "Time just never allowed," Hogan said. Then, finally, it did.

"I was flying between countries and private consulting jobs for most of the last 10 years," he said, "and decided I was going to rough out one story a plane trip." He published his first collection of tales, *Met Along the Way*, in 2005. Encouraged by the response, he came out in 2008 with *Also Met Along the Way*.

Last year he produced *Finally Met Along the Way*. But, perhaps, not so finally.

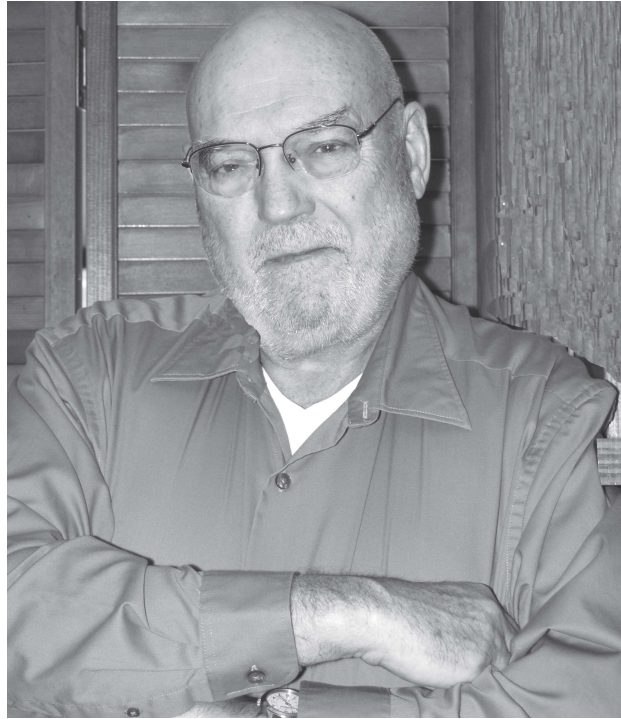
There is quite a lot to know about where Hogan found, or may find, his characters. Hogan's subjects range from heads of state to guests of the state's correctional facilities, from family to special neighbors and friends, to presidential aspirants and even assorted animals. All the *Met* books are illustrated by Montpelier artist Tim Newcomb. "Tim nailed my visions almost every time," said Hogan, "on the basis of nothing more than a few scrawled notes for each story." It probably helped that, as a long-time political cartoonist, Newcomb had a catalogue of caricatures ready to redeploy.

Hogan was himself a highly visible state official under four Vermont governors, spanning two parties and five administrations—an altogether character-rich environment. As commissioner of corrections, Hogan was charged with housing criminals possessed of a wide range of socially unacceptable behaviors and turning them, to the extent possible, into better decision makers. He came to understand key agents of change in government organizations.

"Politically," Hogan observed, "problems always rise to the top [to be dealt with] . . . when, practically, it's the hands-on individual who often sees what need to be done to fix something."

Hogan was tapped to head the greater Agency of Human Services (AHS), a massive umbrella organization in which numerous departments each served jurisdictional bits of many of the same clients. Hogan mulled that picture over and tried something different.

Across department lines, he released managers and service providers from a state of bureaucratic lock-down and had them mix it up a little in the common rooms. The aim was to create better client outcomes through a culture of shared responsibility. To know if it was working, Hogan adapted measures to show which efforts and outlays most benefited overall client well-being, and



Con Hogan. Photo by Ricka McNaughton.

Profile

thus society as a whole. He shared the story of that work in a book coauthored with David Murphey.

Long a concerned player in the health-care reform arena, Hogan has written two books on related concerns with Deb Richter and Terry Doran. Hogan currently serves on the Green Mountain Care Board, charged with finding ways to ensure that all Vermonters have access to care, while reining in spiraling costs. Additionally, Hogan is the current chair of trustees of the Vermont College of Fine Arts and director of the Permanent Fund for the Well-Being of Vermont's Children.

And back home in Plainfield, there's a horse business to tend to with wife Jeanette, daughter Ruth and another couple. Together, they own and operate a stable and riding school of some repute in the wider equine world.

For all that, Hogan never stopped playing the afore-cussed banjo. He has been

part of the close-knit group Cold Country Bluegrass for many years. It appears that, far from confining his post-college career prospects, Hogan's music simply accompanied him along the way.

Hogan's *Met* books feature plainly told tales and vignettes with social, historical and sheer entertainment value. By preserving something important about who they were, Hogan ennobles his characters, great and small. And they, in return, draw a frame around much that Hogan has seen and considered valuable. You can imagine, though, the number of characters who didn't make the cut. "Actually," Hogan admitted, "I've given some thought to doing another book."

In his role as chair of the Vermont College of Fine Arts board of trustees, Con Hogan will be honored in Boston on March 2 with the New England Board of Higher Education's David C. Knapp Award for Trusteeship.

Benefit Reading by Con Hogan

The author, musician, consultant and longtime public servant will read from his trio of lighthearted *Met Along the Way* books on Thursday, January 26, at 6 p.m. at the Blinking Light Gallery, 16 Main Street, in Plainfield. The event is free, and proceeds from book sales will go to support the gallery, a community-focused cooperative run by member artists, musicians and authors. Contact info@blinkinglightgallery.com, 454-0141 or 454-1275, or visit blinkinglightgallery.com.

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