



AUTHOR CHAT

Doctor makes house calls

Tracy Kidder's new book profiles Dr. Jim O'Connell, who tends to Boston's homeless community

By STEVE PFARRER
Staff Writer

In a long career that's seen him win a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, and a boatload of praise, Williamsburg writer Tracy Kidder has tackled a number of different subjects: the computer revolution, elementary schools, civil war refugees, the Vietnam War.

One of the nonfiction author's most memorable titles is "Mountains Beyond Mountains," a 2003 portrait of the late Dr. Paul Farmer, a Harvard University specialist in infectious diseases who dedicated his life to bringing modern health care to some of the world's poorest countries.

For his newest book, Kidder has profiled another Harvard doctor who's also spent his career tending to poor patients in need, this time much closer to home: thousands of people who live on the streets in and around Boston.

To write "Rough Sleepers," Kidder spent five years following Dr. Jim O'Connell, a Harvard Medical School graduate who since the mid 1980s has led the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program (BHCHP), which ministers to the most desperate patients in the city.

During a recent visit to Edwards Church in Northampton, Kidder and O'Connell sat down for a discussion, sponsored by Broadside Bookshop, about how the book came together, the flaws in U.S. health care, and what O'Connell called the most important lesson he's learned during his career: to listen.

"As a doctor, you're trained to do the talking, to diagnose problems and tell people how you're going to help them," said O'Connell. "I had to learn what people wanted, I had to listen to their stories ... it's very humbling."

O'Connell began his specialized work in the mid-1980s, following graduation from Harvard Medical and a residency at Mas-

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ON DISPLAY



STAFF PHOTOS / CAROL LOLLIS

Harriet Diamond works on her art installation "The Maelstrom" at her studio in Easthampton. The work goes on view at the Oxbow Gallery in Easthampton beginning Feb. 2.

Into 'The Maelstrom'

Easthampton artist's installation contemplates the dangers of climate change

By STEVE PFARRER
Staff Writer

About six years ago, in the midst of some of the worst violence in Syria's long-running civil war, Harriet Diamond was contemplating a couple of different projects. On one hand, the sculptor and installation artist was horrified to hear about the millions of Syrians who'd become refugees and thought her art should address that.

But Diamond had also been thinking about a more personal piece, something that would reflect on her life's journey and her wonder about where she was headed in her later years.

In the end, Diamond, 72, opted to make "Driven From Their Homes," a large-scale installation that included dozens and dozens of ceramic figurines, bombed-out buildings made from painted Styrofoam, and a long walkway choked with refugees fleeing the destruction of the Syrian civil war.

Now Diamond, who works out of Cottage Street Studios in Eastham-



Harriet Diamond works on her new installation, "The Maelstrom," in her Easthampton studio. The piece includes painted backdrops, large papier-mache structures, and numerous ceramic figurines.

ton, is about to unveil that other, more personal installation she'd been contemplating several years ago. But this one has "morphed" considerably in

the intervening years, she says, and now contemplates another topical is-

SEE "THE MAELSTROM" C2



STAFF PHOTO / CAROL LOLLIS

Lost at sea: Details from Harriet Diamond's art installation "The Maelstrom," which will be showing at the Oxbow Gallery in Easthampton Feb. 2-26.

'The Maelstrom' seeks to address climate change peril

FROM C1

sue: climate change.

"The Maelstrom," which will be displayed at the Oxbow Gallery in Easthampton beginning Feb. 2, is another of Diamond's large set-pieces, with painted backdrops mounted on the gallery walls, large papier-maché constructions representing water and waves, and ceramic figures battling monstrous seas in flimsy boats.

CHECK IT OUT

What: 'The Maelstrom'

When: Feb. 2 to 26; Gallery hours Thursday through Sunday, noon to 5 p.m., and Fridays noon to 7 p.m.

Where: Oxbow Gallery, 40 Cottage St., Easthampton

Info: oxbowartgallery.com/artists/harriet-diamond

tour of her studio, "It became about climate change and the way it threatens our world. That raises all kinds of questions, like 'How do I respond to the problem personally? How do we respond collectively?'"

Diamond's installation is not yet complete, and she stresses that she won't know exactly how she'll present it until she gets its myriad pieces into the main gallery space at Oxbow.

"A lot of installation art is about collecting and building the different pieces and seeing how they go together, and then seeing how it all

sits in a new environment," she said.

With that proviso, the center of her installation will consist of a giant papier-maché whirlpool, which is littered with debris such as tiny, broken pieces of furniture. A few ceramic figures, their arms flung out in desperation, are trapped in the descending circles of water.

The dark, painted structure is also topped with scaly, whitish material to represent the foam of the churning waves.

Another key part of this giant, expressionist diorama is a ruined building, at the base of which small, gloomy ceramic figures cluster, as if contemplating their end. Others cling to pillars of rock that jut from the sea.

But perhaps the most notable structure is a roughly made boat that some 20 figures cling to. Some line the port side of the boat, as if trying to correct a severe list to starboard, some are trying to pull aboard figures who have fallen into the sea, others seem sunk in despair; a figure in the boat's stern tries to restart an outboard motor.

"To me this is something like you see in the range of responses to climate change," said Diamond. "You have people who are determined to do what they can to fight the problem, some people feel hopeless, there's some nihilism ... and I think for a lot of us, our responses go back and forth."

There's also a bulky, somewhat monstrous looking ceramic figure positioned alone on top of the ruined building, a sort of dystopian Hunchback of Notre Dame, that Diamond refers to as "Western man's frustration."

"When the industrial revolution started, no one was thinking 'This will eventually destroy the world,'" she said. "No one set out to deliberately ruin nature ... but here we are."

Diamond presents all of her work in a combination of dark and muted colors, with some earth tones, and her figurines are not detailed works. That adds to the ominous sense of the installation: The shocked faces of some of the figurines, eyes wide and mouths agape, recall the central figure of Edvard Munch's painting "The Scream."

She says she's done what she can on a personal level to try and reduce her impact on the environment, from installing solar panels at her home in Florence to limiting her travel. But she says she's aware that in the larger scheme of things, these are mostly symbolic gestures, or can seem as such.

"I know a lot of people who are wrestling with these same questions," she said. "You know, in the face of impending catastrophe, what is my response? What should I be doing or thinking or feeling?"

One part of "The Maelstrom" also speaks in particular to the feeling of being at the mercy of forces way beyond our control. A solitary figure sits in a tiny boat, amid dark water that's overhung by a towering wall of papier-maché that's curled at the top, like a giant wave about to come crashing down.

"I do feel very small in a changing world," said Diamond.

That said, from an artistic standpoint, she's also looking forward to putting her new installation into the Oxbow Gallery: "I'm excited about seeing how it will all come together."

"The Maelstrom" will be on view at the Oxbow Gallery Feb. 2 through 26. The back room at the gallery will feature work by painter Karen Evans.

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