

# HOME TOWN



## TRACY KIDDER

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

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TRACY  
KIDDER

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*Home Town*

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RANDOM HOUSE  
NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kidder, Tracy.

Home town / Tracy Kidder

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-307-82647-3

1. Northampton (Mass.)—Biography. 2. Northampton (Mass.)—Social conditions. 3. Northampton (Mass.)—History. 4. Police officers—Massachusetts—Northampton—Biography. 5. City and town life—United States—Case studies. I. Title.

F74.N86K53 1999

974.4'23—dc21 99-13614

Random House website address: [www.atrandom.com](http://www.atrandom.com)

v3.1

This is a work of nonfiction. Most of the spoken words that appear in this book were uttered in my presence, some recounted to me. I have attributed thoughts to some of the characters, and all of these were plausibly described to me. All names are real, except as noted here. The following are pseudonyms: “Carmen,” “Francisco/Frankie Sandoval” (and “Samson/Sammy Rodriguez”), “Hearth ’n Home Construction,” “Jackie,” “Rick Janacek,” “Willie,” and “Tyrone.”

I describe a criminal proceeding and cite various documents relating to it. Some of those documents were part of official court proceedings, and the others were supplied to me by the defendant. I also refer to various criminal records, which I obtained in accordance with Massachusetts law.

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## FOREWORD

In the days of rutted roads and horse-drawn transportation, tourists by the thousands trekked to western Massachusetts and ascended to the summit of Mount Holyoke. Charles Dickens and Henry James made the climb. Thomas Cole and other, lesser nineteenth-century romantic painters set up their easels near the precipice. The scene they gazed at was, for a time, the most famous landscape in America. Now an interstate highway and a marina intrude on the view. Otherwise, it hasn't changed much. You look out on the valley of the Connecticut River, an expanse of cultivated fields and of forest sweeping away across the horizon, and, at the center, the old town of Northampton.

It nests within natural boundaries. To the east the wide river bends its arm around Northampton's Meadows, planted mostly in corn. To the north and west the foothills of the Berkshires rise up in the blue distance, higher than the town's steeples. When Cole painted his famous picture *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, After a Thunderstorm*—it now hangs in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art—the town was already more than 180 years old. It was nearly 200 when an entrepreneur, hoping to cash in on the view, erected the Mount Holyoke Prospect House. A cable car used to carry up the tourists. It vanished years ago. The hurricane of 1938 battered the hotel and closed it down for good. Only the shell remains. Standing on the old front porch on a windy summer day, at the edge of an eight-hundred-foot drop, you feel grateful for the railing. Down below, the river glistens in the August light. A small airplane wobbles like a gull as it descends toward Northampton's tiny airport in the Meadows. Sylvia Plath visited this promontory and in a poem described the sweet illusions of the view. "All's peace and discipline

down there,” she wrote. Surrounded by what she called “the high hush,” the only sound the wind in your ears, you gaze northwest at the town.

It seems as natural as the hills around it. Among the myriad trees, you can make out some of the roads and white houses and steeples and the back side of Main Street—a line of buildings, tiny from here, a patchwork of red and brown behind the greenery. Only thirty thousand people live in Northampton, roughly the same number as forty years ago, not many more than at the turn of the century. And it still preserves the old pattern of the New England township, a place with a full set of parts. It has rich farmland by the river, an industrial park, a hospital, a courthouse and registry (Northampton is a county seat), and a college (Smith, the famous school for women). A shopping strip follows the line of the railroad tracks and the Interstate, north toward Vermont, for a mile or so. Tree-lined streets of clapboarded houses from the last century surround the old downtown. In recent years, ranch-style houses have sprung up along outlying roads. Their backyards merge into forest where coyotes howl at night.

From the summit, the cornfields are a dream of perfect order, and the town seems entirely coherent, self-contained, a place where a person might live a whole life and consider it complete, a tiny civilization all its own. Forget the messiness of years and days—every work of human artifice has a proper viewing distance. The town below fits in the palm of your hand. Shake it and it snows.

PART I

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CHAPTER 1

*Townie*

He grew up here. He was the youngest of Jane and Bill O'Connor's seven children. His oldest sister called him Todder when he was an infant. His high school friends shortened up his surname and rechristened him Oakie. To teachers and other adults he was usually Tommy. His wife would call him Tom. All his nicknames and the diminutive accompanied him to adulthood. If you do all your growing up in the same small place, you don't shed identities. You accumulate them.

One day when he was ten years old, Tommy O'Connor's Little League baseball coach made him the starting pitcher. A signal honor, but then Tommy couldn't get anyone out. He walked the first batter, and from their lawn chairs on the sidelines the parents called, "Make him be a hitter, Tommy." So he threw an easy one right over the plate, and the batter nailed it. His teammates in the field behind him did as they'd been taught: they talked it up, they chattered, squeaky voices calling, "Hum chuck, Tommy. No batter, no batter. Hum it in there, Tommy baby." He threw harder and walked the next two batters. He eased up and the next kid hit it over *everything*. Many