# Fish in water

Mark Kurlansky writes about what he knows: coastal communities and life on the sea, writes John Freeman | *February 07, 2009*

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**MANY years ago, when he was just a big, strong kid spending the summer working on a lobster boat in Long Island Sound, Mark Kurlansky learned an unusual lesson about how dangerous the sea could be. Connecticut and New York lobstermen were in a dispute about territory that season, but it should have been called a war.**

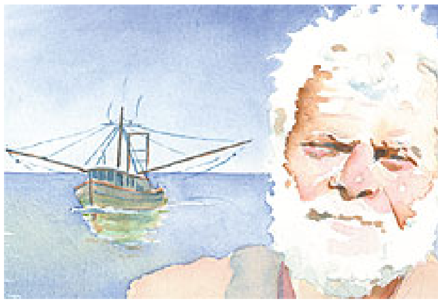

Illustration: Jock Alexander

"You'd be hauling pots and somebody would come by and fire a shotgun at you," he recalls.

Sitting in a swivel chair at his desk on Manhattan's Upper West Side, the burly, sleepy-eyed 61-year-old writer perks up into a froth of indignation. "Talk about an early lesson in the stupidity of war. I'm from Connecticut. And here are my Connecticut friends shooting at me!"

Kurlansky's distaste for violence stuck with him. When his friends enlisted or were drafted for Vietnam, he went off to university to study theatre. He marched in protests and joined the Students for a Democratic Society. But aside from five years away from crustaceans, Kurlansky wouldn't be deterred from the sea.

His tours of duty as a journalist included Miami, Haiti and numerous other places close to water. And his book debut came with A Continent of Islands, a travelogue of the Caribbean. Since then, Kurlansky has made his living largely from things that come from the sea. He has written bestselling books on oysters, the Basque people, who were among the world's first whalers and, of course, Cod, his breakout bestseller on the flaky whitefish.

It was while researching that book that Kurlansky finally reconnected with the salty world he glimpsed as a teenager. He had travelled up to Gloucester, Massachusetts, America's oldest fishing place, a town that has always had a seedy, tough reputation, and remembered how much he liked the place. Then, after the book came out,

Kurlansky kept coming back: for the food and the people and the sense of remove from Manhattan's summer swelter. He also loved the hardscrabble, hilarious fisherman of Portuguese and Sicilian descent, men who might swear and cuss, but also liked to dress up in drag and parade through town on holidays.

The Last Fish Tale, Kurlansky's latest book, is an illustrated love song of sorts to the colour and history of these men and their town, a place like so many parts of America threatened with extinction by the great changes in the environment and the economy. If it does start to disappear, Kurlansky argues, America would lose its true founding colony.

"Schoolchildren in this country learn much about the pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock," he says. But by comparison to the early Gloucester settlers, he points out, the pilgrims were useless.

"They were religious nuts," he continues, his indignation rising again. "You hear all this stuff about how they barely survived; it was partly because they didn't know what they were doing."

Gloucester residents, on the other hand, knew how to fish; they knew they needed salt. They even threatened to go to war with the residents of Plymouth to defend their territory: apparently an old fishing tradition. The Last Fish Tale sounds like an ominous tome, but it's actually an inspiring story about how, as America grew, Gloucester grew as well, thriving on the influx of newcomers. People came from the Azores in large numbers to work the boats; immigrants came from Sicily along with the salt they shipped to the town to preserve its fish.

There were others. Famous painters moved up from New York for the light; industrialists built big summer cottages and lavish hotels. Even the poet T.S. Eliot summered there with his family and worked it into his poetry.

"It's such a typical Gloucester story," Kurlansky says, referring to The Waste Land, that the most important poem of the 20th century would be written about Gloucester only to have the Gloucester part cut.

Gloucester may not have made it on to the map of America's imagination, but in four centuries it hasn't gone the way of Newport, Rhode Island or Nantucket, former fishing ports turned to islands of leisure.

"It's a town of famous artists and writers, but that's because of the fishing," Kurlansky says. "It's a town of an unusual ethnic mix, that's because of the fishing; and it shows that commercial fishing creates a very rich culture.

"It's why tourists are drawn to it; but then they want to destroy it."

As Kurlansky tells it, though, so far most of those attempts have come to amusingly swift ends. Gloucester was the setting for The Perfect Storm and, for a time after the film, curiosity seekers would stop by, discovering a town that had yet to adapt to shilling itself.

"They could walk by the Crows Nest bar, avoided by locals for being so seedy, and see real alcoholic drinking," Kurlansky writes.

A friend of his even thought of setting up a "Perfect Storm tour", which would have included a trip out to rough sea to imitate getting lost in a gale: "like it was an aquatic dude ranch", Kurlansky says with a laugh.

Ultimately, interest in The Perfect Storm died down and now one can barely sell the T-shirts drummed up by the film. In truth, Gloucester has seen -- and survived -- many more threats from the outside world.

The arrival of frozen fish -- invented by Gloucester resident Clarence Birdseye -- didn't sink it. Nor did the English pioneering of trawl-fishing by steamship, which obliterated fish stocks. Some 386 years after the Dorchester Company of England decided to set up a fishing station in what is now Gloucester, the town has returned to being a port of mostly small fishing vessels, holding non-transferable licences, struggling to make a living from the sea.

GLOUCESTER'S tenacious, but continued success at remaining an authentic fishing port amid the rich real-estate free-for-all of the New England coastline makes this book something of a small departure in Kurlansky's career.

Although parts of The Last Fish Tale will be unfamiliar, even to Americans, it is not a resurrection, or a eulogy, or even a correction to history, tasks at which Kurlansky has become expert as a writer living in a country with perpetual amnesia.

This role has made Kurlansky something of an island unto himself, the sense of which only intensifies during a visit to his windy office, a small apartment stuffed with books and flyers from old concerts of Jimi Hendrix.

His debut novel, Boogaloo on 2nd Avenue, a hurly-burly re-creation of the freewheeling 1970s in New York's hip East Village, landed long after the rents in that neighbourhood had cracked $2500 a month and most of the Jewish delis had shut their doors. 1968, his award-winning history of the seminal year in Western cultural life, also hit bookstores after that period had been turned into a databank for advertising and empty truisms about change and mind-opening. Even Nonviolence: The History of a Dangerous Idea, his tiny, but surprisingly successful book on the history of the idea Gandhi popularised, was published at a time when George W. Bush had started up a drumbeat for war with Iran.

The Last Fish Tale, however, isn't a rearguard attempt to resurrect history, but rather an attempt to preserve it and its lessons in advance. And there's a chance Kurlansky the activist has learned from this experience. On the day we speak, he is putting the finishing touches on an advertisement set to run in the pages of The Nation and The New York Review of Books. It is a petition, signed by nearly 100 writers and intellectuals, pleading with President Barack Obama to think twice before putting a huge new push into the war in Afghanistan.

"That could bog the whole thing down," Kurlansky says, dismayed. "He wants to send 30,000 troops to Afghanistan: what a disaster!"

Listening to Obama's inauguration speech, Kurlansky heard some things he liked, and others he very much didn't. Along with a small, but vocal minority of the US Left, he wasn't weeping: "I cringed when he talked about the great moments in American history -- Valley Forge, the Normandy invasion -- they were all battles!"

Kurlansky is realistic about the effect such gestures as his advertisement can have on the governing of America's overseas conflicts, and he isn't one to rain on hope.

"We just had a good example of what unadulterated support can lead to," he says, referring to Bush's record after September 11.

In the meantime, he is too busy to become consumed with second-guessing the new President. This May, he will publish a new book on depictions of food in art commissioned by the Depression-era Workers Progress Administration in America, as well as a translation of Emile Zola's novel, The Belly of Paris.

Behind that, he has four other books in the works: a collection of short stories that revolve around food, a biography of Birdseye, the founder of Birds Eye frozen foods, a new children's book, and a book on Haiti.

"I've always felt like you get up in the morning and get to work," says Kurlansky, explaining his busy slate of projects. "I would feel very uncomfortable not working, in fact."

Time runs out. It's a lesson the sea has also taught Kurlansky. "They lost two people just last week," he says about Gloucester, where through the years 10,000 seamen have been swallowed up. "No one knows what happens. Who knows: maybe someone just clipped them in the night."

*John Freeman is the American editor of Granta magazine.*

*The Last Fish Tale is published by Jonathan Cape. Mark Kurlansky will be a guest of the Perth Writers Festival at the end of this month.*