



Home > Authors > Profiles

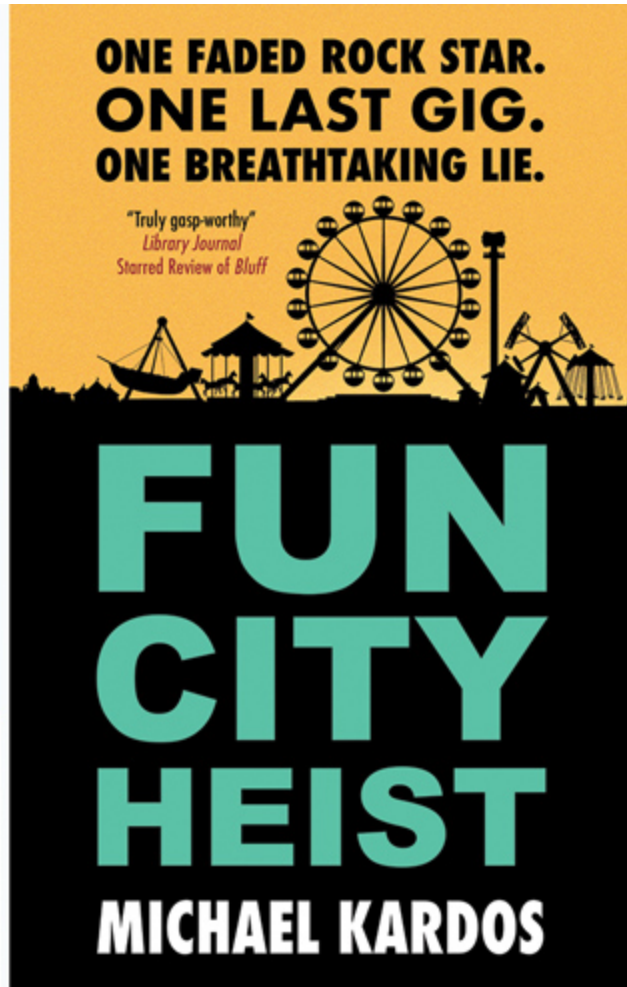
Creative Director, Adult Trade - Bloomsbury Publishing Inc - New York, NY.

NEXT JOB ▶

Michael Kardos Finds His Groove

Michael Kardos took inspiration from the Jersey Shore of his youth—with its famed Haunted Mansion and legendary music scene—for his latest novel

By David Adams | Oct 24, 2025



Late-night horror movie fans from New Jersey will remember the ads. “The Haunted Mansion at Long Branch is a living, breathing nightmare of more than 30 incredible rooms, each with its own very special surprise,” a

disembodied voice intones over ominous organ music and footage of costumed college kids creeping through poorly lit passageways and emerging, bewigged and splattered in fake blood, from the “graveyard of the living dead.” Count Dracula and Renfield, his spider-munching servant, are among the creatures of the night “waiting for you,” the voice whispers, at exit 105 off the Garden State Parkway.

From the Haunted Mansion’s opening in 1978 until it was destroyed, along with the rest of the Long Branch amusement pier, in a wind-whipped blaze in 1987, as many as 100,000 visitors per week made the trek to the Jersey Shore town. As far as glory days go, it was the briefest of runs, but if you timed it just right, like novelist and Long

Branch native Michael Kardos did, it might have given you a lifetime's worth of material.

RELATED STORIES:

- [PW issue Contents](#)
- [More in Authors -> Profiles](#)
- [More in articles by David Adams](#)

Request permission to
reprint of this article.

FREE E-NEWSLETTERS

☒ PW Daily ☒ Tip Sheet

SUBSCRIBE

[More Newsletters](#)

"That's the terrain that's just embedded in my skull," Kardos says over Zoom from the classroom in Rehoboth Beach, Del., where he teaches high school English. "Every time I try to set something somewhere else, it ends up being pulled back into Jersey."

Tanned, trim, and affable, he looks nothing like the rock 'n' roll drummer he once was or the stressed-out co-conspirators he regularly inhabits on the page, including in his latest novel, *Fun City Heist*. Out in December from Severn House, it's a breezy, Donald Westlake–inspired crime caper set on the Jersey Shore and featuring a climactic sequence on a haunted house ride not unlike the Haunted Mansion, where Kardos worked as a teenager.

It's not the first time the Pushcart Prize winner has drawn from his formative years on the Long Branch pier and boardwalk in the mid-1980s. His previous novel, *Bluff*, which follows a disgraced magician into the deadly world of card sharps, was inspired by his first summer job, performing magic tricks of the disappearing-kerchief variety in a small booth on the boardwalk. He still

remembers negotiating his salary with the owner of the concession. "The minimum wage was \$3.35 an hour, so I very seriously said, 'I think I deserve at least \$1 an hour more than that.' And he goes, 'Sold!' I felt like I was getting away with murder."

"My joke," Kardos continues, "is that I got into magic the minute I thought it was cool and I got out the minute I realized the girls didn't think it was cool." Next up was the gig at the Haunted Mansion, which he recalls piping "Alfred Hitchcock *Psycho* music and all the other things they probably never paid to license" over the loudspeakers. "But in the sound room itself, they'd be playing the Violent Femmes, they'd be playing Bowie, stuff like that." It was a musical education that made up—at least in part—for the one provided by his parents, who took him to not one but two Barry Manilow concerts when he was young.

Thankfully, there was plenty of other good music swirling around the boardwalk in those days: Billy Joel, Elvis Costello, and, of course, Bruce Springsteen. (Though, for a Jersey Shore kid, the Boss wasn't really an option. "I don't even know if I liked him," Kardos admits. "It was just like, Do you like air? I guess I like air. It was in the ether.") Learning to play the drums happened almost by accident—too many kids had already signed up for saxophone in the fourth-grade band. "It came pretty naturally," he says. "The challenge of it felt like the good kind of challenge, frustrating in the right way. Magic was the same way—both mechanical and intellectual at the same time."

After graduating from Princeton with a music degree in 1992, Kardos spent eight years playing drums professionally, mostly in 13th Floor, a bluesy, Billy Joel–adjacent rock band he formed with his college buddy Josh Kutchai. The group's only album, released in 1996, got regular airplay on college radio, but they eventually learned, as Kardos puts it, that "being number one in Oneonta, N.Y., doesn't necessarily propel you to the next thing."

The band's breakup was far less traumatic than the one described in *Fun City Heist*, whose mellowed-out protagonist, Mo Melnick, is the former drummer for a semi-famous rock group called Sunshine Apocalypse. Twelve years after their lead singer moved to Florida and sent the rest of the group a cease-and-desist letter, he shows up in their Jersey hometown with a plan to get the band back together for a performance that will make them rich, or land them in jail.

Unlike Mo, whose post-rock career plans involve little more than renting beach umbrellas, Kardos wanted to do something creatively fulfilling after 13th Floor called it quits. "I was always reading a lot," he recalls, "but I started to realize that on the flaps of books, the author bios mentioned that so-and-so had an MFA from this or that school. The internet was just developed enough that I could look up what that meant. It was like, oh, okay, this could be a way for me to try something artistic but different. Get me out of Jersey for a while."

He landed at Ohio State, where he embarked on a crash course in the writers his classmates were talking about but he hadn't read, including Tim O'Brien, Tobias Wolff, and George Saunders, whose *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* made a particular impression because the author came from a "nonliterary world," like Kardos did. His vague plan, as he says, to "go and obsess over writing for three years and come back to Jersey and get a job" changed for good when he met his future wife, the poet Catherine Pierce, at Ohio State and they decided to pursue their PhDs in creative writing at the University of Missouri. From there, the couple traveled south down I-55 to Mississippi State University, where they co-directed the creative writing program for 15 years.

In between classes, they somehow found the time to have two children and publish nine books between them, including Kardos's fiction debut, the linked story collection *One Last Good Time*, and his first foray into crime writing, *The Three-Day Affair*. If not for Covid, they might still be in Mississippi, but when classes went online they decamped to Rehoboth Beach, where Pierce's family is from. One semester turned into two, then into a year and a half, and by then both of their kids were enrolled in local schools and had gotten used to being around their cousins and grandparents. So, Pierce and Kardos decided to make the move permanent. "Mississippi was a great place in so many ways," he explains, "but it was really far from the people we needed."

Or, to put it in the terms Kardos uses to describe his decision to leave his professional music career behind, "it felt right until it felt wrong." Though he frequently mentions his "lack of planning," it's obvious he has the skill every good drummer—or magician, or teacher, or novelist, for the matter—needs: the ability to recognize when the time is right to switch up the tempo, or change tunes entirely. Living back at the beach, with a new novel on the way and his oldest kid fresh off his first summer job on the boardwalk (thankfully, a more wholesome version than Long Branch's circa 1985), it's clear Kardos has found a groove. All that's left is to find some local musicians to jam with. "It's a good town for it," he says. "There's a million bars and places to play."

A version of this article appeared in the 10/27/2025 issue of *Publishers Weekly* under the headline: Hometown Hero

ALSO ON PW



**Our Annual Book Biz
Events Calendar**
[more...](#)



**This Week's Starred
Reviews**