

A Writer Edits Book By California Writers



By MARGARET KOCH
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California is still an adventurous land

It's gamblers' country

People still come here and take risks

Things are ALLOWED to happen out here

Creative adventures in films, dance, crafts

James D. Houston's eyes are dark brown and they get even darker and focus unblinkingly on unseen things when he talks about writing.

We were discussing the new book of fiction he edited.

"For this collection of fiction by California writers I was looking for works that seemed to arise out of life as it is lived here," he said.

Jim Houston, writer and lecturer on creative writing, is explaining the challenges he faced in editing a new Bantam book.

Titled WEST COAST FICTION, the book is just beginning to appear in local and area bookstores. A paperback, it sells for \$2.95.

In referring to "life as it is lived here," Houston means California, of course...

The fabled land of Queen Califia, of Amazon women and dashing Spanish horsemen, of 'quakes and shakes (milk type) and cults and what Houston refers to as the "open society."

The open society in California is open-ended and a person can go in either direction...holistic health or the psychedelic primrose path, self-preservation or the self-destruct scene. It's all here for the taking and using.

Writing is open-ended too in California: "A lot of very exciting creative adventurous works are allowed to happen out here," Houston says.

The 26 works in the book he has just edited are examples of what he is talking about. They represent 26 writers of fiction who are seeing things in new ways, who are drawing their creative strengths from new sources. West coast sources.

One of Houston's own writings is included — a small piece of his recent book, CONTINENTAL DRIFT, in which the underlying earthquake theme lurks like a shark just beneath the surface of the pages.

"There are more writers now on the West coast than anywhere else in the world, in one place."

Not all of them are writing about California, although many are, he qualifies his statement.

"Living and being a writer on the West coast put me in touch with a lot of people out here who are writing."

Of the 26 whose work is included in the new book, he says there are probably 26 more who should be included.

The book is the second in a series. The first was STORIES FROM THE MODERN SOUTH. The third, not yet together, will be FICTION FROM THE SOUTHWEST.

Houston, as editor of WEST COAST FICTION, feels he has performed an important service for the reading public by including the work of contemporary ethnic minority writers.

"They haven't been adequately represented," he points out. "The chicano writers, the Asian-Americans, for example."

He also feels that the new book is a unique collection: "The first I know of that takes fiction from three West coast states and defines the West coast region as a literary region, because this is something fairly recent."

Focus of the book is on writing done in the last 40 years in California, Oregon and Washington.

There is something about the West coast that grabs writers in their vitals — "writers who draw their inspiration from the power of the landscape," is how Houston puts it... "Great lyric passages about the look of the land." Steinbeck, Robbins, Kesey...to name several.

There is that kind of gut writing in the new book and those writers are in it, with others.

Tillie Olsen's "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" and Steinbeck's "Flight" (from THE LONG VALLEY.)

Particularly haunting is Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" from her book, THE WOMAN WARRIOR. Her first book, Houston says.

She tells the story of her father's aunt, a Chinese woman who bore a child (subserviently probably, at the lordly command of a Chinese male). Not only was the child not by her husband, but it came at a time of famine in her village. The woman births her child in a field, then, holding it in her arms, jumps into the family well to drown both of them. She is never afterward spoken of. She is erased from the face of the Chinese earth. The "no name woman."

Wallace Stegner's "New Almaden" from his book ANGLE OF REPOSE, is the dust, the stagecoach clatter, the warm quiet of a summer evening in a California mining settlement. It puts you there with Susan Ward who came from the East coast to join her young mining engineer husband at New Almaden.

And there's Houston's own writing of Monty who lives in a house cut from redwood timbers "hailed out of the coastal fog eighty years ago."

Houston is a Californian, one of that minority breed today, who was born here and went to San Jose State University and Stanford University.

He is now working on another book of his own — stories about contemporary Californians. Non-fiction. He writes about five hours a day. Standing up.

I asked him if he would include the Santa Cruz County murder stories in his book and he looked thoughtful.

"Well," he said carefully. "I don't intend to dwell on them. But it's painfully obvious that the rising homicide rate is part of what's going on in California. The dark powers and the powers of light are both being explored here. I'm more interested in the entire range of possibilities being explored in California."

The recent visit of the Dalai Lama to Santa Cruz is one of the events Houston says have struck him as being particularly significant.

Another thing he mentioned is the largest wind-powered research center in the world which will soon be installed at Pacheco Pass. The pass, named for a historic Spanish family is an excellent choice — no doubt one of the windiest funnels in the state.

"California is a place where exciting things are attempted. The biggest — the best — the worst. It's very exciting to be here and be in touch with people who are on the cutting edge."

Californians, he says, are in the vanguard of that whole impulse, in the entire nation.

"I owe a lot of my own inspiration to William Everson who has really done some pioneer work in thinking about the West coast."

Everson, a poet of renown, wrote the essay "Archtype West."

"What we all have to do to survive, is learn to take responsibility for our lives on as many levels as possible. California leads the way," Houston says.

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