

Author

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Local author writes about men in his life

By LAUREN COMSTOCK
LIVING SECTION EDITOR

IT'S ABOUT football and new-age barbers, about crazy uncles and a bluegrass band, about a stillborn brother and a soldier's brush with a bomb.

"The Men in My Life," author James Houston's latest book, is about what the title says it is — men in James Houston's life.

But, together, the 13 vignettes become a multi-layered book about failures and victories, flights of fantasy and the discovery of reality, coming of age and hanging on to the past.

Each chapter would stand its ground in the best campfire storytelling session, and each carries meaning beyond its entertaining tale.

"People appreciate emotional honesty in writing," Houston said, sitting at the dining room table in his Santa Cruz home. "Writers can voice things that are universally or commonly felt but that people who aren't writers or artists can't express or prefer not to express or want to express and don't know how."

Take the chapter about Houston's short-lived college football career at Abilene Christian College in 1951. He admits in the charged story that he hated playing football.

He writes about his feelings after being kicked off the team for failing to show up for Homecoming: "It took me three full days to realize, to admit what a burden had been lifted from my shoulders, a nine-hundred pound anvil I had been carrying around for half my life. It was a form of weight loss, almost an out-of-body experience. I was airborne. I was freed from something I did not even suspect had been holding me captive. I had been released."

Houston says about that confession: "It's not easy to say you didn't like playing football... it (football) is still one of the great masculine

statements in America."

But Houston has discovered since his admission that there are plenty of other men who hate playing the all-American sport.

Houston has read parts of the book at several literary readings.

"Inevitably, at least one guy comes up to me, in confidence, of course, and says, 'Boy, that's really good. That's exactly what happened to me.'"

A high school football star who quit the sport while in college told Houston, "I'm so glad you wrote that. I could never admit that to myself."

"What I'm finding," Houston said, "is what people respond to is not only the intimacy, but also the vulnerability. The narrator is vulnerable to a lot of feelings people identify with once they're voiced."

FINDING this writing style that so touches readers has been extremely satisfying to Houston, who says his main goal as a writer is to communicate.

He first wrote in this "voice" 20 years ago.

"Toward the end of my father's life I began writing about him and his effect on me," Houston said. "It was a sort of confession to myself in that voice. It was my attempt, as a writer, to deal with my own experience."

The result was published in a chapbook (a small book or pamphlet of poems or stories) called "Three Songs for My Father."

Over the years, Houston was told by many readers that they were moved by those stories, two of which are included in "The Men in My Life."

"There was something about this personal, intimate voice that affected readers," Houston said.

After writing his last book, "Love Life," Houston was ready to try that voice again, he said.

"Love Life" is a novel

written from a woman's point of view. After spending two years trying to think like a woman, Houston said he got in touch with the "woman" part of him.

"I felt like I had a different way of looking at the men in my life," he said.

He also viewed himself and some of his experiences differently.

For instance, the football experience.

He became "at ease" about his failure to become a football star, he said. "There are other ways manhood can be revealed. A sensitive woman is looking for something from a man other than high athletic achievement."

Once Houston began work on "The Men in My Life" the stories began to come together almost of their own accord.

"The football story had been on my mind for between 10 and 15 years," he said. "The lost brother is a story I tried to write immediately after it happened in 1960. I rewrote it in 1965 but I never could get it right."

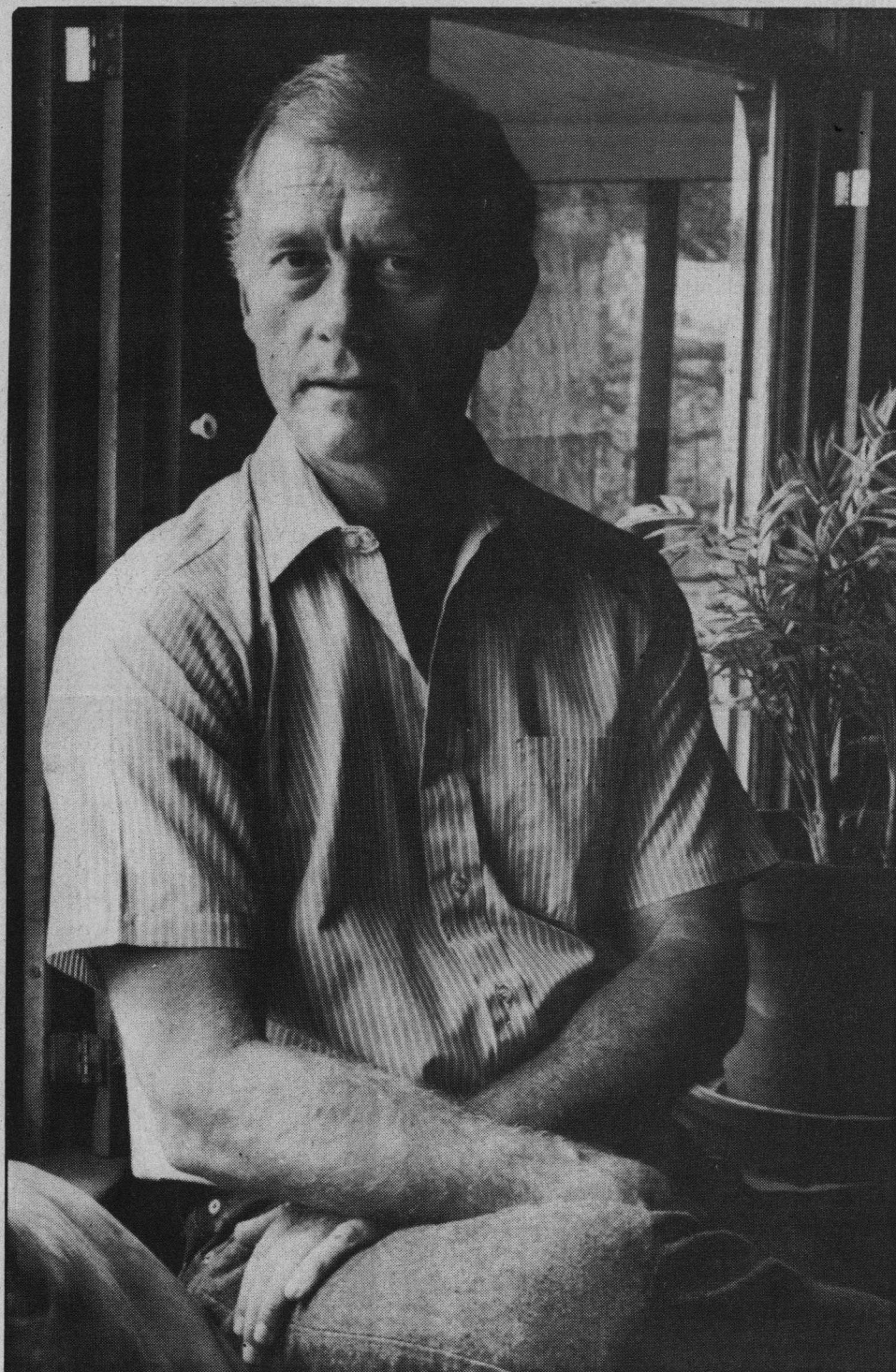
"Last summer, I was in Honolulu, and I just suddenly got the angle on it."

"The dangerous uncle story came out of nowhere," he said. He began to write a note to himself about an episode with his renegade uncle. The note turned into half a story before the day was over. "It was like a gift," he said.

There are three humorous sub-stories interspersed with the more serious chapters. They are titled "The Hip Plumber," "The Kung Fu Teacher With Eyes Like G. Gordon Liddy" and "The New-Age Barber."

They are lighter in tone and definitely humorous, but serve to illustrate another kind of male-to-male experience, Houston said.

"Being under the sink with a plumber is a ludicrous situation. Women won't do it. It is so stupid and residential and funny... There's a kind of intimacy there that's very male, but I didn't want to be



Chip Scheuer

Santa Cruz author James Houston says readers have responded well to the emotional honesty in his recently published book, 'The Men in My Life.'

heavy-handed. This way you can have a little fun with it but hopefully convey something about it."

Writing "The Men In My Life" was a catharsis of sorts for Houston.

"A lot of these stories I've

been carrying around with me for years," he said. "To finally release all that stuff, find a voice for it, find a book for it — it has given me a great sense of satisfaction."

"The Men in My Life," by

James Houston, \$14.95, is published by Creative Arts Book Company. It can be purchased at local bookstores, including Capitola Book Cafe, Aptos Bookworks and Plaza Books in Santa Cruz.