

There is no decent, inclusive term for a plurality of writers; nothing definitive and evocative like prides for lions or exaltations for larks. Perhaps it's unimportant. Perhaps it's the elusive nature of the beast itself.

But it would be helpful. And it would certainly make things easier for a community like Santa Cruz, which in recent years has witnessed a remarkable coalescence of literary talent and concerns. Then again, it's never been an easy task to determine why writers congregate here or stake out a domain there or whether a given aggregation of writers is greater than the sum of its parts at all. The pursuit of writing being essentially solitary, there is always something vaguely perilous about pigeonholing apparent literary trends, waves or undertows.

It is impossible to press one's fingers to the pulse of Santa Cruz' contemporary literary community without touching on the handsome legacy of central California letters. Old veins run deep. It was between the bays of Monterey and San Francisco that the state found its own voice.

Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce and Bret Harte are only three of the most famous of the Frisco-based journalists who mined a wealth of fact and fiction from the post-Gold Rush California landscape. By the end of the century, the region could claim two formidable native novelists, Frank Norris and Jack London.

The East Coast literary establishment was not impressed, dismissing the Western literature with an air of condescension and disdain that, to some degree, still persists today. But that mattered little. John Steinbeck's reputation rests in the fields and ranges of the Salinas Valley, Robinson Jeffers will always be known as the stern sentry of the Carmel headlands and Henry Miller is remembered for his Big Sur retreat almost as much as for his Paris sojourn.

Most immediately, Santa Cruz lies in the geographical shadow of teeming San Francisco, the city where Kerouac crashed, Ginsberg howled and Ferlinghetti turned on his City Lights. The influence of the unbridled Beats on literary mores is well documented. Santa Cruz, while no real satellite of that scene, was far too close not to have felt the groundswells.

So the context is there. You couldn't very well get away with calling Santa Cruz the literary sticks. There is a distinction, nonetheless, between a community of writers and a mere collection of them. Sheer numbers and shared boundaries alone do not a creative confluence make.

While it is clear that Santa Cruz boasts an unusual abundance of authors, novelists, journalists and poets for a town twice its size, the suspected presence of common denominators still begs interpretation.

To whatever degree Santa Cruz is now a writers' haven, this develop-

Writing on the Wall

Is literature alive in Santa Cruz? When wasn't it? Where is our writing going? Where hasn't it been? We sent some writers out after these questions. Here's what came back.

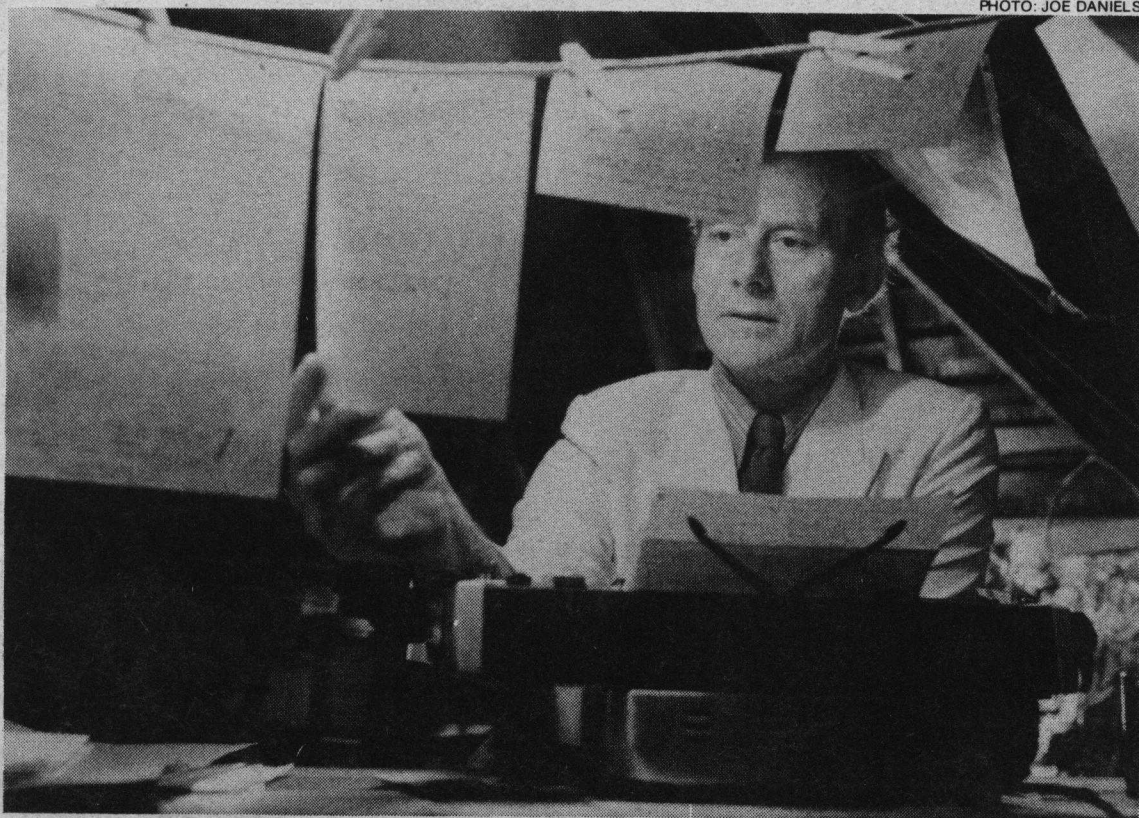


PHOTO: JOE DANIELS

NOTES OF A NATIVE SON. Santa Cruz author James D. Houston reflects on the region's literary history.

Dave Barber

ment came late. If California's notable early scribes found themselves here at all, they were invariably on their way to someplace else. True, Bret Harte penned his classic story, "The Luck of Roaring Camp" here in 1868, a work which secured his literary reputation and remains memorialized by Felton's Roaring Camp and Big Trees Railroad. But it would be another full century before Santa Cruz would evidence anything that could be mistaken for literary ferment.

Santa Cruz became a university town in 1965. To seed a grove of academia atop a small provincial city composed mainly of blue collars and surfers and senior citizens is to place a far higher premium on printed matter. Needless to say, books and college campuses go hand in hand. As it turned out, however, there were other forces at work.

James D. Houston, a true veteran among Santa Cruz writers, arrived in town several years before the University, fresh out of the Stanford MFA writing program. Regionalism has always been an abiding concern in his perspectives on writing. He has edited a pair of anthologies — *California's Heartland* and *West Coast Fiction* — which explore just that subject and

his latest book, *Californians*, is an effort to take some personal steps towards a definition of the state at large.

"Santa Cruz was anything but a literary community when I first got here," he says. "Cabrillo had just opened. There was no University. Peter Beagle was getting settled in Bonny Doon and I was working on a novel, but that was about it."

The first real stirrings of Santa Cruz' literary awakening, recalls Houston, had nothing to do with UCSC. Rather, it was through the opening of the now-fabled HipPocket Bookstore squeezed in beside the Saint George Hotel on Pacific Avenue. What co-owners Peter Demma and Ron Bivert brought to town wasn't just another modest retail business. The HipPocket was a trippy nod to California's budding counterculture. When one of its icons, Ken Kesey, published his sprawling novel *Sometimes a Great Notion* in 1964, the HipPocket hosted a merry and prank-fraught reception featuring a contingent of Kesey's La Honda cohorts.

"It was a focal point," Houston confirms. "It got things rolling." By 1967 things had rolled far enough along to support a chain of

scheduled readings at the old Catalyst on Front Street. That series was christened by Peter Beagle, reading from *The Last Unicorn*, and Houston, himself offering selections from his novel-in-progress, *Gig*.

Meanwhile, there were more wheels in motion. Morton Marcus, who had originally met Houston at Stanford, had been hired as an English instructor by Cabrillo College and was busy guiding the Cabrillo Poetry Series into prominence. Marcus was able to obtain the services of such a luminary as Robert Bly, and when Yugoslav poet Vasko Popa read in 1969, a crowd 700 strong forced the event to be shifted into the more accommodating arena of the Cabrillo cafeteria.

"That was something of a heyday," reflects Marcus. "As early as '68, we were getting people from New York, Iowa, everywhere. Santa Cruz was listed in *Coda* as one of three or four leading towns on the West Coast reading circuit."

Soon afterwards, Marcus sensed there was sufficient interest in the community to orchestrate events of a more ostensibly local timbre. He was right. For two years running in the early seventies, regular weekly readings were staged in a number of area restaurants. The ensuing

success of those gatherings were small but valuable literary foot-holds that came to be complemented by other indigenous productions: the free *Sundaze* newspaper with its vivid creative writing supplements, Paul Krassner's *Realist* journal originating from La Selva Beach and the quartet of poetry festivals conducted at the Civic between 1973 and 1976.

Those festivals were not the most sterling contributions to Santa Cruz' literary history, but they were easily the splashiest. Poetry, after all, is not a particularly common avenue for spectacles. But mingle local poets on the same stage with Famous Names like Snyder, Burroughs, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, Rexroth and Bukowski, throw in a jazz band here, and a knot of drunks in the crowd there and spice up the proceedings with something like 1975's bomb-threat, and poetry won't stay ignored for all too long.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that the University has played a minor role through all this. The campus has truly been a bellows for the inspired commitment to literary affairs within the community. A telling number of Santa Cruz writers have either been supported, assisted or given a financial leg up by its programs. Early on, it carved out a place for a venerable poet-in-residence, William Everson, and has supplied the town with such significant scholars as Page (The *Shaping of America*) Smith and Norman O. (Love's *Body*) Brown.

Like any genuine phenomenon, there has been more to literary Santa Cruz than meets the eye. Tillie Olsen, arguably one of the country's important women writers even on the basis of a small body of published work, has lived here quietly for quite some time. Aged sci-fi master Robert Heinlein has found the County ideal for a thoroughly reclusive lifestyle. Thomas Pynchon, the shadowy author of *Gravity's Rainbow* who has blazed new trails in literary anonymity, is rumored to have lived at one time in Aptos.

By the middle of the last decade, no one could dispute that Santa Cruz had inked its own place on the West Coast literary map. The glitter and occasional havoc of Poetry Festivals, the collective scholarship of UCSC and a resident stable of published authors made for the sort of broad artistic upwelling that was bound to earn outside recognition. And sure enough, a contemporaneous issue of *New West* magazine found editor Jonathan Kirsch casually referring to Santa Cruz' "informal literary colony" as if it was as intrinsic to the area as sempervirens or Brussels sprouts.

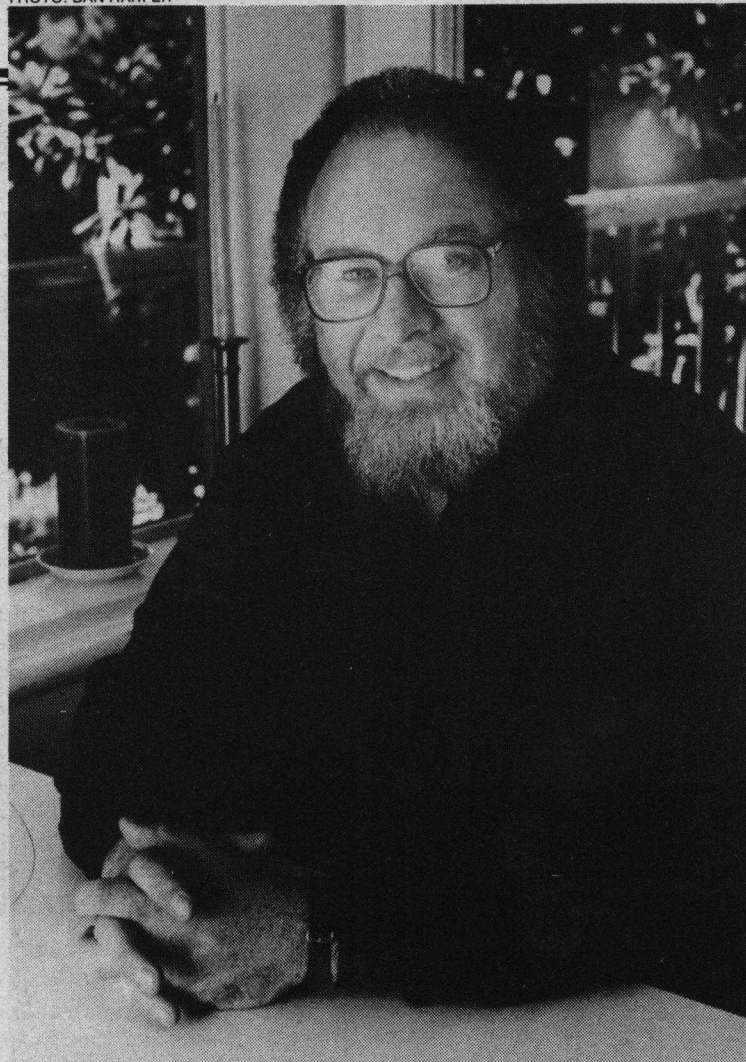
Even so, the informal seemed to eclipse the colonial. The Poetry Festival succumbed after its 1976 edition to a variety of social and economic ills and organizational

helms went largely unassumed. Marcus emphasizes that this bottoming-out of community energy was not just internal. "About the same time, I began noticing a severe drop-off at readings throughout the state and the Northwest," he says. "It's not that writers weren't writing. Just that more of them, so to speak, were underground."

But Santa Cruz has several things going for it that other towns do not. And it is these constant and characteristically quiet elements that provide some of the best clues to why Santa Cruz has experienced a revival in its overall attention to the word.

Intelligent and solvent literary journals, for example, are a dying breed. Yet Santa Cruz has been graced with a number of them. George Hitchcock's *kayak*, published from his own home, "more or less quarterly," is a testimony to artistic perspicacity and keen editorial insight. Ignoring many of the staid conventions by which university poetry mills grind, Hitchcock's resourceful vessel of literature and art has seen 60 issues and launched many an unappreciated poet off into more deserving latitudes of praise.

Quarry West, a journal published under the auspices of UCSC's Porter College, has attractively blended local and national voices in each of its 15 issues. The four editions of *Moonjuice* have been devoted to the poetry of Santa Cruz women. Both incarnations of Stephen Kessler's *Alcatraz* are ambitious, eclectic anthologies with a decidedly regional emphasis. *Hambone*, edited by Nate Mackey, is an impressive recent addition to the ranks.



PRIME MOVER. Morton Marcus, a seminal force in Santa Cruz poetry, surveys the "scene" which he helped generate.

Then there are the Santa Cruz small presses and fine printers. They are an extraordinary lot. Two Julys ago, the first Santa Cruz Small Press Book Fair showcased over 20 County-based publishing enterprises whose works ranged from limited edition hand-set broadsides to comprehensive volumes of regional history. Granted, many were not commercial ventures, but the distinction and sweeping

appeal of such locally published books as Western Tananger's *John Barleycorn* (Jack London's largely ignored "alcoholic memoirs") and Unity Press' *Calamari Cookbook* prove that small presses by no means have to accept scraps off the tables of Random House or Knopf. With its severe discipline and painstaking craft, letter press printing can be thought of as a realm unto itself. Santa Cruz is

fortunate to have a few outstanding practitioners in its midst. Gary Young's Greenhouse Review Press and Felicia Rice's Moving Parts Press stand for just about everything that modern mass publishing does not: each printing run is slow and singular and their texts retain the sense of preciousness all books evoked before the means of production became commonplace.

William Everson was recognized as a master printer long before he took up residence in Santa Cruz, yet some of his most beautiful creations have been accomplished here under the name of Lime Kiln Press. All of his projects return printing to the rigorous and demanding art it once was. He also exemplifies the idea of a printer as an interpreter and midwife of a text rather than simply a duplicator of it.

His 1975 homage to Robinson Jeffers' poetry, sheathed in a cypress case and with an inlaid square of chiseled granite, was designed on a scale that could accommodate and do proper justice to Jeffers' typically long line. *American Bard*, completed last year, is Everson's unique rendering of Walt Whitman's prose preface to *Leaves of Grass* into verse.

Whitman himself printed the original edition of *Leaves of Grass*, embracing a tradition where the writer is involved in every aspect of nurturing a manuscript into book form. This too is a rare custom that is perpetuated locally. Besides poet-printers Everson, Hitchcock and Young, George Fuller, with his Jazz Press, seeks to integrate the unnecessarily disjointed elements of writing, editing and publishing.

Because there is everything transitory about labeling some-

thing a "scene," Santa Cruz deserves better. Because there is nothing shallow about a synthesis of diverse artistic concerns, Santa Cruz as a community has only begun to tap its resources for sustaining a viable awareness of books and authorship. Because there is a certain mosaic-like quality to whatever sort of literary identity Santa Cruz may lay claim to, the town's prospects seem to rest on a healthy accumulation of shoulders.

To anyone impassioned with the idea of Santa Cruz earning a decisive literary reputation, a review of the last year and a half must be encouraging. Waves are being made. There has been a Small Press Book Fair each of the last two summers. There has been the reincarnated edition of the Civic Poetry Festival — which, for all its vaudevillian overtones, generated a surplus of literary energy and emotion. There has been a flock of variegated readings: Bookshop Santa Cruz' annual Spring series; a women's poetry series entitled Celebration of the Muse; a works-in-progress reading sponsored by the local chapter of the National Writers' Union; Allen Ginsberg bopping and beating his not-quite-dead poetic horse; and a unique Writers Against Nuclear Arms evening at Loudon Nelson.

The recent flurry of activity has been well-received — sometimes beyond expectations. When Stephen Kessler and Morton Marcus staged a pair of "Living Anthology" poetry readings at the 150-seat Kuumbwa Jazz Club last Fall, there were people standing in the aisles and many others turned away at the door.

But that's not the whole story.



HITCH YOUR KAYAK TO A STAR. Poet/editor/playwright/publisher/actor/director George Hitchcock under one of his many hats.

Platforms such as these don't just materialize — they are made possible by the fine joinery of small blessings. Things like KUSP's weekly poetry show; like the ongoing women's writing workshops conducted by Ellen Bass, Maude Meehan and others; like UCSC's Literature/Creative Writing major, one of the few undergraduate programs of its kind around, like the new Literary Resource Center organized by George Fuller and Lorena Cassidy; like a good half-dozen independent area bookstores, none of which are utterly shackled to the proselytizing policies of the New York publishing industry.

Santa Cruz is also home to a growing number of screenwriters. James Houston and Peter Beagle have devoted a considerable por-

tion of their talents to film over the years. Tom Rickman, who came close to winning an Oscar for his *Coal Miner's Daughter* script, is a local resident. Charlie Haas, recipient of generous helpings of praise for his script-work on Walt Disney's *Tex*, was a UCSC product and formerly cranked out humor pieces for *Sundaz* and *City on a Hill*.

This is not to say that Santa Cruz is a literary Yellow Brick Road. There are conflicts that locate it firmly on this side of the rainbow. Morton Marcus points out that community support of writers doesn't always translate into monetary support. "The Arts' Commission and other funding bodies have never really gotten behind the writers here," he says. "A writer's hard-pressed to stay local and make a decent living."

Santa Cruz, it appears, is a good place for untried artists to cut their literary teeth and an even better place for established writers to hold fort. But few successful writing careers could bloom solely from the sustenance of the local community. Reputations and enduring contacts just about always have to take root elsewhere.

The fact is that Santa Cruz' provinciality slices both ways. What it gains in spirited autonomy, it can lose in arbitrary parochialism. Perhaps the greatest thing a writer of any stripe or genre can ask for is a degree of independence, a bit of breathing room away from literary pretensions, conventions and hierarchies. Santa Cruz grants that, but only at the risk of uneasy and unresolvable isolation.

Yet there is no doubt that the disturbing current condition of national writing and publishing makes a community such as this one all that much more worthy of notice and analysis. Literary incubation isn't what it used to be. Thirteen publishing interests now account for at least 60% of annual, nation-wide book sales. Two bookstore chains alone — B. Dalton and Waldenbooks — sell over one-third of the books America buys. Over the last decade, corporations like CBS, MCA, ITT and Gulf & Western have acquired formerly independent publishing houses. The American Booksellers Association (ABA) reports that "the erosion of bookstore profitability over the last four years has been measured and found to be alarming."

Couple these trends with the inevitable homogenization that any mass-marketed product is subject to and American letters seem ripe for paralysis. These days, even proven writers are having manuscripts turned down left and right on the speculation that they will not sell enough to warrant the investment. The promising literary climate of Santa Cruz is more than novel. It is a potential model for widening the banks of a dangerously narrow mainstream. □