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The late James D. Houston was known for his rich California-centric writing, but the culture and history of Hawaii was an abiding interest his whole life.

# The Last Word

Friends and fans of the late James D. Houston gather to celebrate the writer's newly published unfinished last novel

*Authors - 2000*

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By WALLACE BAINE

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The heartbreaking story of the Victorian-era Hawaiian Queen Lili'uokalani is an important story, and James D. Houston seemed destined to write it.

The celebrated Santa Cruz author had, after all, spent his career focused on the culture, history and geography of the two places on Earth that he loved more than all others — California and Hawaii — most memorably in his acclaimed historical novels "Snow Mountain Passage" and "Bird of Another Heaven."

But destiny had other plans. Soon after Houston embarked on the task of telling Lili'uokalani's story in historical fiction, he was diagnosed with cancer and in April 2009, he died at the age of 75.

On Sunday, however, friends, family and fans of Jim Houston will gather to celebrate the release

of what he left behind of his last literary project. "A Queen's Journey" [Heyday] is a bit more than 100 pages of what will remain Houston's unfinished novel about Lili'uokalani and her fight against her overthrow and the annexation of Hawaii by the United States.

Several of Houston's friends and colleagues — including great West Coast literary names such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Al Young and Alan Cheuse as well as well-known Santa Cruz writers Geoffrey Dunn and Stephen Kessler — will come together at Cabrillo College's Music Recital Hall to celebrate Houston and his final work. Houston's widow, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, will also be on hand for opening remarks.

Forrest G. Robinson, a literature professor at UC Santa Cruz, said that Houston came to historical fiction relatively late in life. "Snow Mountain Passage," Houston's fictional re-telling of the notorious



CONTRIBUTED

Hawaii's last monarch Queen Lili'uokalani is the subject of James Houston's final novel.

Donner Party story, was first published in 2001, 35 years after Houston began his writing career.

SEE HOUSTON ON D2

# HOUSTON

Continued from D1

“‘A Queen’s Journey’ is very much in that historical fiction vein,” said Robinson, “and had he lived, he would probably have written more novels of that kind.”

In much the same way that the Donner Party story remained a kind of creation myth of American settlement of California in the 19th century, the story of Lili’uokalani is at the heart of Hawaii’s cultural self-image, particularly in its tempestuous relationship with the United States.

Lili’uokalani assumed the throne of a sovereign Hawaii in 1891 but was deposed two years later by a group of mostly American businessmen, a coup supported by the landing of U.S. Marines on Hawaii. In exile, the queen fought to have her rule restored, and at one point had President Grover Cleveland on her side. But eventually, Hawaii was annexed by the United States in 1898.

Though a native Californian, Houston was not a Johnny-come-lately in his interest of Hawaii. His first book, in fact, “Surfing” in 1966, in which tells the story of the Hawaiian-born sport of surfing against the backdrop of the American annexation and the tragic attempts of the annihilation of traditional Hawaiian culture that followed.

Like his mentor Wallace Stegner, Houston was focused on the West as a distinct historical place. Also like Stegner, he wrote both fiction

## IF YOU GO

‘A QUEEN’S JOURNEY’

**FEATURING:** Maxine Hong Kingston, Alan Cheuse, Al Young, Karen Tei Yamashita, Karen Joy Fowler and others

**WHEN:** Sunday, 2:30 p.m.

**WHERE:** Cabrillo College Music Recital Hall

**COST:** Free, but all attendees must have tickets, available at the door or in advance at [queens-journey.eventbrite.com](http://queens-journey.eventbrite.com).

**DETAILS:** [queens-journey.eventbrite.com](http://queens-journey.eventbrite.com)

and non-fiction and though he bounced around in genre, he was rooted in theme. In his eyes, what California and Hawaii had in common is that they both represented places presented as a paradise that were fundamentally changed by American expansionism.

“Jim was truly a Western writer,” said novelist and critic Alan Cheuse. “He was intensely interested in a sense of place and the dramatic geography of place. He was very much the successor to Wally Stegner in that his work was rich and mature Western fiction.”

The successful novelist Karen Joy Fowler first met Houston at the Squaw Valley Writers Conference a decade ago. “We shared the same obsessions with California history,” she said. Fowler has been known for genre-hopping, in much the same way that Houston was. But, like Houston, her themes returned to what it meant to live in the

West.

“I began to think of myself as a Western writer,” she said. “And by doing that, I’m placing myself in a tradition that Jim Houston exemplifies.”

Robinson said that, generationally, Houston was in a prime position to witness the drastic change that transformed the West. “He was of a different generation,” said Robinson. “He was born in 1933. By the time Vietnam came along, he was in his 30s. He, like I did, grew up in a different California, where in the Santa Clara Valley, there was nothing but fruit trees. The whole state was transformed in the post-war period.”

Serendipity played a central role in Houston’s life as well. The house near Twin Lakes Beach that he and Jeanne purchased in the early 1960s where they raised their three children was once owned by Patty Reed, one of the survivors of the Donner Party. The Houstons didn’t figure that out until many years later.

Filmmaker Geoffrey Dunn just finished a short film on Houston’s love of Hawaiian culture called “Magic in the Words: James D. Houston and the Spirit of Aloha.” The film was screened on Wednesday as part of the Pacific Rim Film Festival, a festival that Jim Houston co-founded.

Dunn said that Houston’s love of Hawaii goes back to his earliest days growing up in the Sunset district of San Francisco in the 1940s when that area was largely sand dunes.

“I’ve spent the last several months living with Jim’s voice and in his head,” said

Dunn. “And the big revelation I’ve gotten out of that is that the Hawaiian story fueled all of Jim’s work, even his California work. He told me once about his upbringing in the Sunset District that his universe was all sand, and his father was playing all this Okie and Hawaiian music in the home every day. From a very early age, his view was focused in the direction of Hawaii.”