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Writing from the Roots

Geoffrey Dunn

I'm not sure now of the exact circumstances, though it was sometime in the early '70s that my cousin Kenny handed me a book called *Gig* by James D. Houston. I was still in high school and had not yet taken to reading, and the thought of struggling through a whole novel really wasn't all that appealing. "The guy who wrote it lives here in town," my cousin said. "Pretty good book."

It was months before I opened it, but once I did, *Gig* was hard to put down—or at least relatively hard for someone who would rather be shoveling horse manure than holding a book in his hands. I remember being amazed by Houston's opening lines:

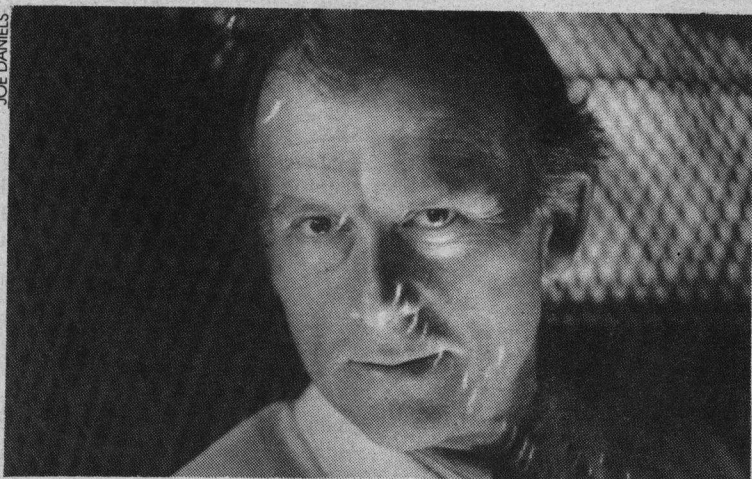
"There's a restaurant outside of town, above a bay where vacationers come to fish in the summer and lie around on beaches. It's a wide bay, protected by a jutting headland. At night the restaurant's orange table candles and ties of colored lights reflect in the water so that it resembles, to boats offshore, a casino on the Riviera. . . ."

That was *Santa Cruz* he was writing about, *my hometown*, in the pages of a real book. I kept rereading *Gig's* opening chapter, delighting in Houston's rich descriptions of the sights and smells and, most important, the *feel* of Santa Cruz. Never before had I realized that one could actually write about where one was living. All of the other books I had been forced to read in my youth were about far-away places—Paris, London, New York—but Houston was writing about the here and now, about the soil beneath my feet. This was an important discovery for someone who thought he might one day want to be a writer (never mind the fact that he didn't yet like to read). It gave a new legitimacy, and urgency, to everything I wrote in English III.

I read Houston's next novel, *A Native Son of the Golden West*, my first summer out of high school. By then, I had begun to read voraciously, trying to make up for lost time in between baseball and farm work, and Houston was now being joined by the likes of Hemmingway, Steinbeck, Twain, Salinger, Brautigan and Fitzgerald. In my eyes, at least, he compared quite favorably, given that he was still writing about a place and a way of life (in this case surfing) that I could claim for my own. Although it would be years before I would actually meet him, Houston possessed a literary voice that felt close and familiar. It felt like home.

It was to be four years before I read Houston again, this time his nationally acclaimed novel *Continental Drift*. Four years can be a long time, especially when a college career is sandwiched in between, and by then I had lost my hometown naivete. In 1978 I was an angry young man, steeped in the writings of Marx, Mao and Che, ready to change the world and to make revolution. *Continental Drift*, focused as it was

JOE DANIELS



James D. Houston

on the relationships of a middle-class Santa Cruz family, thus seemed tame and provincial to me, not to mention apolitical.

While I remember enjoying various passages of *Continental Drift*, particularly vivid references to the old Catalyst and the Santa Cruz Mountains, I dismissed it at the time for not being socially relevant. I was asked to review it for a now-defunct local weekly and declined.

Five years later I was presented with a similar offer from the *San Francisco Review of Books*, this time for Houston's nonfictional *Californians*. I accepted, and quickly set about writing a harsh, political critique. Once again, I loved certain portions of the book, especially a moving portrait of Houston's father dying of cancer, but I felt that it spent too much time celebrating the comfortable, white-wine and college-educated population of California. Looking back, I now realize that I really wasn't criticizing Houston's book, but rather the book I wanted him to write. It wasn't fair nor all that constructive, though I had trouble seeing that at the time. We had a bitter exchange in the next issue of the *Review*, neither one of us giving any ground.

Two years later, I still hadn't met the man, though as I was to find out, we lived within a mile of each other. Occasionally, our articles would appear simultaneously in local publications, but our physical paths never crossed. In the spring of 1984, however, I became involved in a film project with Houston's eldest daughter, Corinne, and later was asked to write an article about a book which his wife, Jeanne, had written with a Vietnam vet. Santa Cruz is a small town and our roads had finally converged.

We met on the second-story deck of his aging, magnificent East Cliff home, the sun just beginning to break through a damp, early-morning fog. Tall and angular, Houston is built like a Cumberland pine. Part WASP and part mountain man, with a touch of Cherokee thrown in for good measure, he appeared on the deck quietly and gracefully, as is his style. He grasped my hand firmly, nodded

hello, and peered into me with his probing brown eyes. He was friendly, if reserved, courteous and good-natured. He never said a word about my review of *Californians*, probably never will. In all honesty, I was relieved.

Since then, I have read and reread most of his many books: *Gasoline*, *Farewell to Manzanar*—written with his wife and which chronicles the plight of her Japanese-American family through World War II internment—and *Love Life*, narrated from the perspective of a young woman who has just discovered her husband is having an affair and which is set during the great storm of 1982. Recently I discovered a little known wonder of his called *Writing from the Inside*, which is full of tidbits and suggestions and anecdotes about writing.

Houston has made me laugh, cry, think and despair. Occasionally, he irks me when our politics still differ. But all the while I marvel at the mastery of his craft, the careful and precise way he places words on a page and shapes his stories.

And now I have just finished reading his latest book, *The Men in My Life*, to be published this month by Creative Arts Book Company in Berkeley. It is a wonderful and moving collection of essays on what Houston calls "kinship," those inviolable ties which have bound him by blood, duty, art and fate to other men throughout his life.

Perhaps it is because I am currently settling into family and fatherhood, a little less angry than a decade ago, that I am so joyfully appreciating Houston's writing once again. I think it is fair to say that a sense of family and troubled roots rests at the center of all his works, and he is a keen observer of that volatile, complex web of relationships.

Blood is thick, Houston is saying. Life is a long haul. A life of writing is even longer. The pine bends, but it doesn't break.

James D. Houston will be signing books at a champagne reception hosted by the Capitola Book Cafe, Wednesday, June 3, 7-9pm. Book sales that evening will benefit the county schools and public library.