

BIOGRAPHY Santa Cruz novelist writes up a storm

James Houston undergoes 'very liberating experience'

By RICK CHATENEVER
Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY'S storm, floods and mudslides of 1982 affected a lot of people in a lot of different ways. For local author James D. Houston, the storm brought things into focus, got him going on his new novel and put him through a literary sex change.

The narrator of Houston's just-released novel *LOVE LIFE* is Holly Doyle, 32. Wife, mother and used-to-be country singer, Holly is now trying to hold her domestic life together — or else let it go and find herself — after discovering her husband Grover is involved with another woman.

Tall, athletic with smiling eyes and a booming laugh, Houston has long been one of Santa Cruz' best-known and best-liked novelists. As he was to discover, writing from Holly's point of view was "a very liberating experience."

He didn't get to Holly until his first and second drafts ran aground. Stymied, he thought, "let's do some free associating in Holly's voice and see what happens. That's when the dam burst. I got quite a ways into it before realizing, oh, my God, I'm going to have to write this whole book in a woman's voice."

LOVE LIFE is a spin-off of Houston's earlier novel *CONTINENTAL DRIFT*.

"People kept asking me, what happened to that family? They wanted the saga to continue. There was a sense that there was something more to tell about that family."

The first novel had been told from the point of view of Montrose Doyle, a newspaper columnist in a barely-fictionalized coastal California community, sitting on a fault line and besieged by a string of serial murders. Holly Doyle is Montrose's daughter-in-law.

"I'm really interested in generational sequences, in relationships between children, parents and grandparents. It's impossible to understand one life in isolation."

He foresees one more novel in the series, this one focusing on Montrose's younger son Travis.

Once he began looking at things through Holly's eyes, "I began to discover there were things that were easy to write about in a female voice that would have been harder to get to in a man's voice. Weeping, for example — the variety of weeping — of tears. Or maternal instincts. All men have them, but I had never been able to get at them before."

In the earlier novel, set almost a decade earlier, Holly had been introduced as a writer and singer of country music during her college days in Berkeley.

The country connection — Holly's affinity for Hank Williams, Jack Daniels whiskey, pedal steel serenades and late nights in western-style roadhouses — "was a given I had to proceed upon."

But music has always provided both rhythm and theme to Houston's writing, beginning with his novel *GIG*, about a musician in a

piano bar and continuing through *NATIVE SON OF THE GOLDEN WEST*, whose protagonist is a guitar-playing admirer of Django Reinhardt.

"The role of popular music in the American imagination has always been pretty strong, pretty profound. I know that song lyrics and titles have been important to my life, a way to key into times in my life. They're like an available tool, a source of imagery and language that I'm drawn to."

Like music, geography — more particularly, local geography — is a thread running through Houston's writing.

"The landscape is real important to me personally. I have spent almost my entire life between here and San Francisco. I joke that I was born at one end of the Santa Cruz Mountains and moved to the other. In *CONTINENTAL DRIFT* the landscape was a presence in the novel. I get a lot of nourishment, of sustenance from it."

Houston had been reading Big Sur poet Robinson Jeffers when he was beginning *LOVE LIFE*, and he became intrigued with Jeffers' descriptions of people living at the ends of canyons, barely and precariously connected to the outside world.

The situation "reverses western mythology, the myth of expansiveness," said Houston. "It used to be that if there was pressure on a relationship, you'd jump on a horse and ride to Phoenix until the dust cleared."

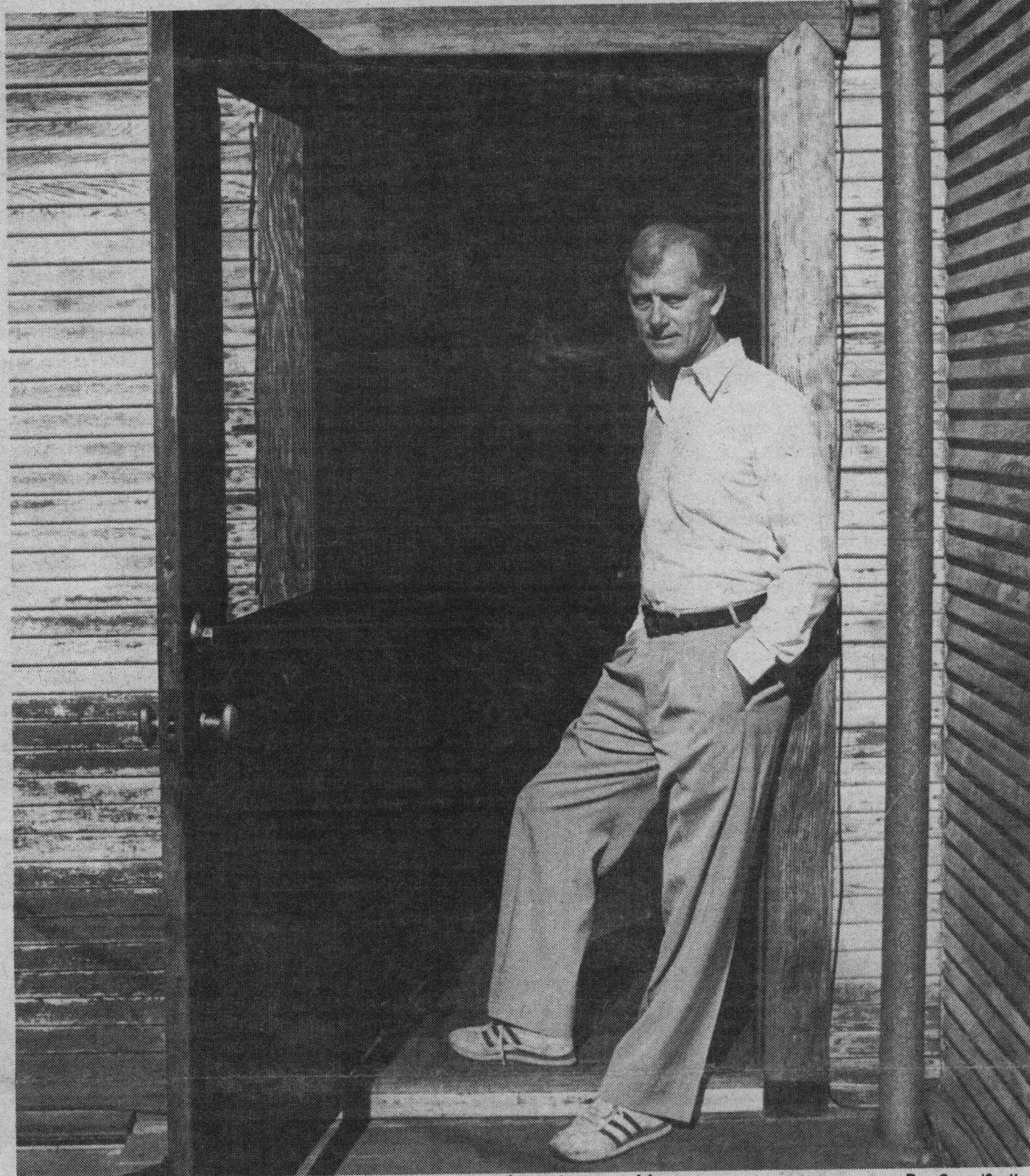
After Santa Cruz' big storm hit, "all these stories began to trickle down from the mountains, about people trapped for a week, about survival problems." Houston appropriated the storm for *LOVE LIFE*, trapping Holly, Grover and the family in their isolated home for a week, forcing them to deal with things they would prefer to run away from.

In past works — such as the non-fiction award-winning *CALIFORNIANS* — Houston has encountered other myths that are ripe for dispelling.

"Part of California mythology is that it's the land of the rootless, a place to come to get away from somewhere else, a place to play that final card. From the East Coast people see it as a land of uprooted people. But I was born here, my kids were born here, you can go over to the central valley and find people who have been here five generations. There are a lot of people here who have deep roots — it's just that they're outnumbered."

As an author of fiction — and a self-described "language nut" — Houston finds himself firmly entrenched in another outnumbered band.

"One of the ironies of writing in America is that we have a declining literacy rate. Reading fiction is a declining activity. Most people don't do it. If you sell 50,000-60,000 copies of a novel, you're going to be on the bestseller list — but there are 240 million people in this country? What are they reading? Labels on Valium bottles?"



Santa Cruz author James Houston

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

At the same time the rate of word literacy is declining, the rate of screen literacy is increasing. Houston pointed out that his most commercially successful project *FAREWELL TO MANZANAR*, co-authored with his wife Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston about her experiences in a Japanese internment camp during World War II, was now in its 16th printing.

"That's still not near one million copies," he observed. The TV movie based on the book, in contrast, had been watched by 20 million people in one evening.

"The bottom line is communication," he said. "As a writer I still love fiction. It's really the most rewarding kind of work — the biggest challenge and the biggest thrill."

Writing for the screen, in contrast, "is still an in-between medium. There's a lot of shorthand, a lot is assumed. One thing that is assumed is that a good actor will have charge of this or that character. It's sort of a muted artform. But as an American alive in 1985, I have to pay attention to film."

It's just one of the contradictions one discovers in Jim Houston's line of work.

"Secretly, every writer wants to be a wealthy saint," he confided. "He would like to keep his spirit clean, to be outside corporate corruption — but he still wants to be

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rewarded handsomely for delivering his message to the public. It sounds like a contradiction, like wanting to be a Zen executive or something, but Americans keep being drawn in that direction. We just see it as a contradiction because of our Puritan upbringing. Everything is either clean or dirty, like Reagan's foreign policy, everyone's either with us or against us. That's the wonderful thing about Asian philosophy — contradictory impulses can co-exist."

Speaking of contradictions, now Jim Houston has to get on with the business of promoting *LOVE LIFE*, even if he'd prefer to stay home and write another one.

He'll be signing copies of the book beginning at 2 p.m. Oct. 13 at the Capitola Book Cafe. In addition to his regular schedule teaching writing at San Jose State, he's hopping all over the San Francisco Bay Area these

days, giving readings, signing books, appearing on radio broadcasts and college campuses.

Published by Alfred A. Knopf, the book has gotten some favorable early attention, including a lengthy review in the *New York Times*. It is already in its second printing — "a good sign, a real good sign," he said.

"I think I'd rather stay home and work on another novel," he concluded, "but you have to put a certain amount of effort into letting the world know you're there. The shelf life of a book is so short now and the pressure in the business is getting so intense. If you spend two years writing a book, you have to do whatever you can to get it launched, to get some visibility."

"Communication is what I'm interested in. If nobody reads the book, I have a serious communication gap."