

Always on the Brink: Facing West from California

An interview with James D. Houston

by Morton Marcus for *The Bloomsbury Review*

The Bloomsbury Review: Much of your early fiction and nonfiction was set in California, while your later work deals increasingly with the islands of the Pacific. How has living where you do influenced your thematic concerns?

James D. Houston: Let's start with Walt Whitman. The idea of the Pacific Rim goes back at least that far. He never saw California. As far as we know he never got past the Mississippi. But from his far perch on the eastern seaboard he voiced something essential about this side of the continent. In *The Leaves of Grass* there's a poem that begins, "Facing west from California's shores . . ." for me that pretty much sums up where I've been for most of my life.

I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity,
the land of migrations, look afar,
Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled:

My mother and father moved out from west Texas during the depression of the 1930s and settled in San Francisco. When I started college over in San Jose I met the woman I would marry, and her parents had reached this coastline from the other direction, crossing the ocean from Japan. These are two histories that have intersected and intermingled in my life and in my work. Now we're here in Santa Cruz in this old house at the edge of Monterey Bay, where I can look both ways—eastward, back across the continent, where my father and all the Okie and Scots-Irish forefathers came from, and also farther west, toward the shores and islands that make up this big mandala we call the Asia/Pacific region.

TBR: In your new novel, *Bird of Another Heaven*, the narrator has a similar kind of anchorage and vantage point for thinking about his own history—but for him it's San Francisco Bay.

JDH: Yes, it's true; Sheridan Brody is a character with a high awareness of where he lives and how he got there. Call it a sense of place, which is something I have written about a lot and has also been important in a personal way. I think I've been lucky to be able to stay put for most of my life. I've traveled quite a bit, in Europe, in Asia, in Mexico, and all around the U.S., but I haven't had to move very far. My dad never had a job that required much moving. He wasn't in the military or with a university or with a big company. He was a house painter. So he tended to stay put. When I was growing up we moved once, from the city down to Santa Clara Valley. And I see it as a blessing now, coming of age in a relatively constant environment. Where I was born is only eighty miles north of where we are now. When Jeanne and I moved here, after three years in England with the Air Force, and after I finished graduate work at Stanford, we both agreed we wanted to live here, figure out a way to live here. There was no lucrative job calling us. It wasn't about professional advantage. Something about the locale itself had an appeal that turned out to be very strengthening. You might say I was sticking close to my natural habitat.

TBR: And by that, you mean California.

JDH: No, I don't. I mean, not all of it. From top to bottom. That's too big, too sprawling and spread out and contradictory. I have written a lot about this state. As a phenomenon, as a certain kind of sociopolitical force and laboratory, it's endlessly compelling to contemplate and write about. But as a place to call home and identify with, there's really

too much of it. California should be six or seven states. Laid out along the eastern seaboard it would include everything from Boston to Cape Hatteras. It would include the Adirondacks and parts of Appalachia. The human nervous system wasn't designed to embrace something as unwieldy and various as the entire state of California.

When I say natural habitat I'm talking about the Coast Range, which is various enough. But in the valleys and ridges and towns and waterways between Mendocino and Point Conception the continuity of terrain, of climate and flora is familiar and nourishing to me. This also happens to be a very lovely realm, so that's another kind of blessing. I didn't choose to grow up here, but by lucky chance—the lucky choice my parents made—it happens to be my habitat. And in my own life I've found that a sense of place, that kind of grounding is really essential.

TBR: Essential in your life and in your work—and yet it's rather surprising to hear you say this, since so much of today's literature deals more with displacement than with grounding and settlement.

JDH: I think that's right. The role and importance of place is not by any means a widely agreed-upon idea, in American life or in American writing. We're such a mobile society, so much moving because of jobs, or out of habit. And these are such restless and unsettled times, with whole populations on the move from one country to another, one continent to another, the more prevalent mode may well be, as you say, a sense of displacement. And much of our literature these days reflects that, stories of separation, alienation, disconnection, characters who aren't anchored anywhere. And for some obvious and irrefutable reasons. You might say that the times conspire against acquiring an abiding sense of place.

And yet we still have a good body of work where place is profoundly felt, not just as a setting or a backdrop, but as a feature that's working on a character or through a character or somehow bears upon a life. Terry Tempest Williams is this kind of writer, coming out of Utah and the Rockies, and Bill Kittredge from Montana. Rudolfo Anaya writes out of New Mexico, an Indian and Mexican culture that is also a desert culture. I think of Robert Frost, Eudora Welty, Edward Abbey, James Welch, Wendell Berry, Gretel Ehrlich, and Maxine Hong Kingston. Gary Snyder has been very consistent about this, the power of a place or a region to shape your sense of space and time, sense of relationship, sense of self. There's no law saying one place is better or worse than another. But whatever you've been given, it can work on you, work on the way you see, what you expect from the day, from the sky. The subliminal stuff that goes on has always intrigued me. Because my place happens to be this stretch of California, this farther edge of North America, facing east and facing west, a lot of my characters come from here or landed here from somewhere else. When the subject is California, of course, you're not only talking about a physical place with a climate and landscape. You're also talking about a region of the mind, all the dreams that have gathered here, the ones that come true and the ones that unravel here.

TBR: That brings us back to *Bird of Another Heaven*, and also the novel that preceded it. Their perspectives are contiguous yet different. Is it fair to say that in one the hopes and dreams are converging on California from the east, while in the other they're approaching from the islands farther west?

JDH: Yes, in that sense they make a nice pairing. *Snow Mountain Passage* is based on the experience of a family who came out here with the Donner Party back in the 1840s,

among the early travelers who made the epic transcontinental crossing. *Birds of Another Heaven* reaches out the other way, toward Hawai'i, and deals in part with some adventurous islanders who began coming into Mexican California around that same time. They helped John Sutter build his legendary fort in the middle of what was then uninhabited Indian country. They got drawn into the Gold Rush, then married into north country tribes. And a woman from one of those marriages—half Indian, half Hawaiian—ends up being the central character.

I never imagined, by the way, that I would get so involved with historical fiction. I blame it on this old Victorian we moved into back in the 60s. At the time we didn't know it was once the home of one of the younger Donner Party survivors, a woman named Patty Reed. We only knew it was cheap. It was rundown and empty, and we got the whole place, two floors and an attic and a wraparound verandah for seventy-five dollars a month. Only later did we begin to learn there was a story inside just waiting to be heard.

Patty Reed was the younger daughter of James Frazier Reed, the fellow who co-organized the Donner Party out of Springfield, Illinois. It took quite a while, quite a few years, before I got around to seriously researching who she was. For a long time my focus was contemporary fiction and wrestling with current events. But eventually her story led me to examine her father's story, which led to a long look at the Donner Party saga and all it says about the California promise, the great lure, as well as the underside, and then take a longer look at where it fits into that defining era in the exploration and settling of the American West.

So one thing led to another and I wrote *Snow Mountain Passage*, a large part of which, by the way, is narrated by Reed's daughter, Patty, toward the end of her days. As a child she almost starved to death in the Sierra Nevada range. In 1923 she passed away in what is now our bedroom. In the novel she is in her eighties, sitting on the verandah here and thinking back on what brought her west, her family's ordeal in the 1840s, and trying to come to terms with the puzzle of her father's life.

TBR: After *Snow Mountain Passage*, why did you continue to write historically based fiction?

JDH: That's a question I still ask myself. By the time that book was done I figured that was enough history for one career. But in my researches, I kept picking up pieces of another kind of California story and family story that just wouldn't leave me alone, references to this band of sailors who came up the Sacramento River with John Sutter. Years before the Gold Rush Sutter's Fort was already famous as a first destination and resting place for pioneering travelers like the Donner Party survivors. I was fascinated by the idea that when those early wagon parties were making their way west through the Rockies and the Sierras, giving us our emblematic image of American expansion, the Hawaiians were already there. They'd already laid the groundwork for what would become this state's capital city. It's a little known fact that the first buildings erected on the site of what is now Sacramento were Hawaiian grass houses.

How those sailors got there, and what a Swiss opportunist like Sutter, still often referred to as "The Father of California," was doing in Honolulu—that's a story in itself. But the arrival of these Hawaiians in the Central Valley offers further evidence that California had already become a cultural crossroads, which some people still perceive as

a fairly recent development. By the late 1840s when American and European pioneers began to arrive in large numbers, this region had already been settled by Mexicans moving up from the south, with Chinese and Hawaiians coming across from the Pacific side, and of course the hundred or so native tribes with their hundred different languages who'd been here for thousands of years.

TBR: But that's only part of the story. As you said, the central character is the daughter of one of these Hawaiians...

JDH: Yes, and this is the part that really led me toward *Bird of Another Heaven*. Sooner or later all those men married into California tribes, and a lot of their descendants are still around. Through some oral interviews from forty years ago and various other sources, I happened on a mixed-blood woman born in a tribal village in the Sierra Nevada foothills in the 1860s, about the time of the Civil War. When she was twelve both her parents passed away, her Hawaiian father and her Indian mother, and she went to work as a domestic for a wealthy white rancher. By the time she was eighteen she could speak three languages—English, Hawaiian, and her tribal tongue—and this gave her a rare kind of cultural mobility for a woman of her time. By the 1880s, it is said, she'd returned to her father's homeland, living in Honolulu in some kind of relationship with David Kalakaua, the last king of Hawai'i. Then she came back to the West Coast and she may have been with Kalakaua when he died in San Francisco, at the Palace Hotel, under mysterious circumstances, in January 1891.

Now whether all this was true or partly true or had become a kind of folk tale in the way oral stories can transmute after many tellings—here was a situation that seemed, from a novelist's point of view, too good to leave alone. Here was a life with range and

mobility, a singular woman who becomes confidante and consort to an enigmatic king, and whose life contains these two parts of the world that have long intrigued me, California and Hawai'i during the final years of the monarchy there, which was a particularly volatile time.

Another power struggle was in play, you see, this one about control of the Pacific and the trade routes with Asia. The United States had expanded all the way out here to the coast. We were looking farther west, looking to extend the military and economic reach. And Hawai'i was the ideal mid-ocean hub. For years politicians and sea captains had considered Pearl Harbor to be the finest anchorage in the Pacific. It was a nearly landlocked fishing lagoon, and we wanted to militarize it. But Kalakaua didn't want to let it go. Hawai'i was still a sovereign and independent kingdom. He believed it belonged to the Hawaiians and should be governed by them, and he didn't want to turn over any part of it to a foreign power. He was caught in a lopsided struggle that finally led to the overthrow of the monarchy in 1893 by a coalition of white businessmen and some United States Marines—a takeover now regarded as America's first exercise in regime change.

TBR: There's a lot of history in this novel, and yet it plays against a later time. As with Patty Reed in *Snow Mountain Passage*, isn't there a character, alive a hundred years later, who ruminates over those events and also tells his own story?

JDH: That's the narrator, Sheridan Brody, a San Francisco guy in his mid-thirties who did some graduate work in anthropology at U.C. Berkeley. Now he's a Bay Area talk show host with an independent station in danger of being bought out and dumbed down by a big media conglomerate. He also happens to be descended from this mixed-blood woman, a fact he learns early in the novel. Thanks to an unexpected call during one of his

late-night shows he discovers an unknown branch of his family tree, an ethnic background his parents had never talked about, discovers he's the great-grandson of a woman who was half California Indian and half Hawaiian. As he begins to seek out the truth of her life, it puts his own life to the test. So yes, it's one of those stories where, in order to get it told, you have to tell two stories. One comes rising up beside the other. One is played against the other, one voice against another, one ethnicity against another, one century against another, and it's the two together that make the story whole.

TBR: Before these last two novels, you hadn't written any historical fiction. And I'm reluctant to pigeonhole them that way. But I feel compelled to ask what you think of historical fiction as a genre?

JDH: First of all, I'm not sure "genre" is the right word here. There are so many ways we use historical material, no one term can really contain it—all the way from costume romance to Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon*. What's more, reading a story from the nineteenth century doesn't necessarily mean you have to leave the modern world. The story might be set a century ago or two centuries ago, yet still have a contemporary resonance. It's a matter of perspective, the authorial perspective that is brought to the telling. A number of compelling novels from recent years have used history in ways that shed bright light on the world we live in now: *The March* by E.L. Doctorow, *Sister Moon* by Karen Joy Fowler, *Hummingbird's Daughter* by Luis Alberto Urrea . . .

TBR: *Farewell to Manzanar* could be on a list like that.

JDH: Well, thanks. But that's not fiction.

TBR: Not fiction, but still a narrative that reads like a novel, and it's still in print, I think, after thirty years, still being used in schools and colleges throughout the country. The

account of your wife's incarceration as a child during World War Two in an internment camp for Japanese Americans—in a strange way, isn't this another story that links California, as you say, to the shores and islands farther west?

JDH: That's surely one way to think of it. This state is sometimes described as the last stop, the end of the line, the place, as Joan Didion once observed, "where we run out of continent." But that's only true if you're looking from east to west. If you happen to be approaching from the other direction, as my father-in-law did, this is the first stop, your point of arrival. It's the coastline that faces Asia, and as of the outbreak of World War Two almost all Asians who'd immigrated to the U.S. were found in California, Oregon and Washington.

Not long after Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese military in December 1941, an entire subculture was rounded up and evacuated to ten camps, remote and godforsaken places well inland, away from the coast—120,000 people, whole families and mostly native-born American citizens, my wife among them, her nine brothers and sisters, her mother and father. The book we wrote together is her story, her family's story. She was seven when the war started, eleven when they got out of Manzanar. Twenty-five years later we sat down in our living room here with a tape recorder and she began to voice things she'd never talked about, not with me, not with anyone. She possesses a photographic memory and a kind of total recall. It was a huge catharsis and a turning point, reaching that place where she could get it out and finally say "Farewell" to all the stuff she'd internalized since childhood: the fears, the guilt, the self-blame that somehow she deserved to be treated that way because her background was Japanese.

TBR: I imagine you must have been affected by these revelations. After all, you were a co-writer and also, in this case, the husband. Did the experience change you in any way?

JDH: For me, meeting Jeanne and her family, then working with her on *Farewell to Manzanar* was a huge awakening. I touched on this in *In the Ring of Fire*, going back to the one time I met her father. This was years before we were married.

As a white guy, six foot two, from an Okie/Texas/Alabama lineage, you have a lot of tribal affiliations that seem to define the natural order of the world. Suddenly you walk into the yard of a man who is sharecropping strawberries outside San Jose but was born in Hiroshima. He had to leave Japan when he was seventeen because the family ran out of money. Thirty years before I was born, he had immigrated east across the Pacific, to find work, to find a fresh start. He and my dad had at least that much in common. His home region was in a deep depression when he left Japan for the Land of Promise. It's an amazing destiny that Jeanne and I would meet in college because these two men, our two fathers, from their opposite directions, would both end up in Santa Clara Valley.

But that was a while after World War Two. Before the war he farmed, he fished, he worked his butt off for thirty-seven years, raised ten kids, came to love America and wanted to become a citizen but immigration policy in those days prevented anyone born in Asia from naturalizing. So right after the bombing of Pearl Harbor he was classified as an "enemy alien", separated from his family, and spent a year in a military prison at Fort Lincoln, near Bismarck, North Dakota, a year he would never talk about. It's no wonder he wouldn't talk to me. After the war ended and the camps closed he stopped speaking to Caucasians. It was a point of honor. That's what I felt coming from him, in spite of the callow innocence I brought to that encounter. Here was a man with a profound sense of

dignity and honor who had not been broken, had found a way to continue in spite of all that America—and Japan—had thrown at him.

He was 65 or 66 and would pass away before we met again. But I often think of that afternoon, meeting the grandfather of our three children. It was the beginning of an education that continues to this day. A window had been opened. It was my first glimpse of another place, another way of being in this land, of a life and a history that reaches both ways across the water.

TBR: With *Bird of Another Heaven* behind you, what's next? What are you working on now?

JDH: Not long ago I pulled together some of my shorter pieces, some fiction, mostly nonfiction that hasn't been previously collected. It's called *Where Light Takes its Color from the Sea*, coming in spring 2008 from Heyday Books in Berkeley. Now I'm moving into another novel, though I'm not ready to say much about it. I'm still in that stage of discovery Wright Morris talked about when he said writing is finding out what you don't yet know about what you know.

TBR: This reminds me of something you once wrote, to the effect that every story is a mystery story.

JDH: It's true. At least in my experience. That's what keeps you on this path, keeps it interesting. And I don't necessarily mean a murder mystery, figuring out who killed the lifeguard they find floating face down at the end of chapter one. I might be driving along the freeway when some memory starts to roll, or some conversation I overheard, and I get this buzz across the top of my scalp that I now call the literary buzz. It can come in different sizes. It might be a short-story buzz; it might be a novel-size buzz, a galvanic

tingle that tells me there is some mystery here I need to know more about. I guess it's like the sculptor who sees a chunk of marble and knows that somewhere inside a statue is waiting. Whether it turns out to be fiction or nonfiction, at the center there is always a mystery that has to be explored with words.

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PARTIAL LIST OF BOOKS BY JAMES D. HOUSTON

Fiction:

Gig, The Dial Press, 1969

A Native Son of the Golden West, The Dial Press, 1971

Continental Drift, Alfred Knopf, 1978

Love Life, Alfred Knopf, 1986

The Last Paradise, University of Oklahoma Press, 1998

Snow Mountain Passage, Alfred Knopf, 2001

Bird of Another Heaven, Alfred Knopf, 2007

Nonfiction:

Farewell to Manzanar (with Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston), Houghton Mifflin, 1973

Californians: Searching for the Golden State, Alfred Knopf, 1982

The Men in My Life, Creative Arts, Berkeley, 1987

In the Ring of Fire: A Pacific Basin Journey, Mercury House, 1997

Hawaiian Son: The Life and Music of Eddie Kamae, Ai Pohaku Press, Honolulu, 2004

Editor:

West Coast Fiction, Bantam Books, 1979

The Literature of California, Volume One (with Jack Hicks, Maxine Hong Kingston and Al Young), University of California Press, 2000

Always on the Brink: possible sidebar

An excerpt from *Bird of Another Heaven*, © 2007, by James D. Houston

Published by Alfred Knopf Inc.

San Francisco, 1987

I never tire of looking out at the bay, this long blue lake, this inland sea. This morning, from my perch, I can contemplate the narrow passage they call the Golden Gate. A thousand posters and guidebooks and song sheets and old fruit-crate labels have depicted it as a sun-drenched entryway and point of glorious arrival. But today I think of all the departures the gate has witnessed, the vessels large and small leaving the safety of this nearly landlocked harbor to buck the swells of open water, heading father west.

Almost a century ago, long before the bridge was built, the U.S.S. *Charleston* steamed between those famous headlands carrying the body of David Kalakaua home to Honolulu, its flags at half-mast, the Stars and Stripes, the red, white and blue flag of the Kingdom of Hawai'i. Offshore from the Embarcadero, flags had been lowered on every vessel. Upon the deck his coffin was displayed. After the long cortege down Market Street, it had been escorted to the ship by six Fleet Marines while minute guns had fired into the air above the city. Courts had been adjourned for the day, the Custom House and the Produce Exchange were shut down, as thousands lined the boulevard, watched from windows and from rooftops, to see the marching bands and fire brigades, somber civic leaders, and the Society of Pioneers, and the yellow-plumed Fourth Cavalry, all saluting this final exit of the first king of any nation to set foot upon U.S. soil, and the first to die here. In our democratic land they loved him, they loved his royal excess. He brought joy and scandal and controversy and legendary appetites.