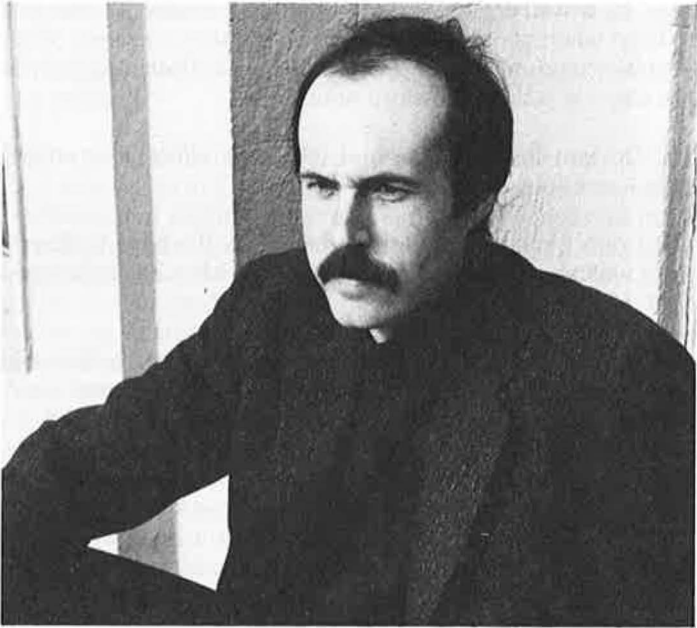


Kem Nunn: An Interview

Mona Houghton



Kem Nunn is a young writer whose novel, *Tapping the Source*, published in 1984, was nominated for the American Book Award, best first novel. He holds a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of California, Irvine. He has also taught creative writing at that same university. Currently Kem Nunn is working full time on his second novel.

Northridge Review: In *Tapping the Source* you accurately capture a certain Southern California essence. Are you from here?

Kem Nunn: I grew up out in Claremont, but I've been living in Huntington Beach for the last couple of years and in this immediate area, counting off a year in New York, for the last ten years.

NR: You were raised with television and film. Do you think this has affected your writing style?

KN: Everyone has to be affected by the mass media these days. In a way I view it as an updated version of the oral tradition when people sat around and told stories to each other. Television and movies have filled that void. Watching them is one way we pick up on story now.

NR: Do you think movies and television affect your writing style — the visual aspects of it?

KN: I don't know. I get asked that a lot. It's hard to dissect one's writing on that level — in terms of what has influenced what. I like movies, but I like to read too.

NR: In the Los Angeles Times Book Review, Carolyn See said your "parents" include Hammett, Chandler, and James Cain. Did they play a big part in your development as a writer?

KN: I like Chandler and Hammett, and James M. Cain to a lesser degree. But the book that has made a big difference to me is *Dog Soldiers*, by Robert Stone. It's a book that is not squarely in a genre and yet when you read it you can't help but hear the voices of Chandler and Hammett and some of those people kicking around in there. It is a hard boiled novel with a fast paced plot, yet it is a novel of ideas at the same time. When I read *Dog Soldiers* I was impressed by that particular combination. What I am getting at is, *Tapping the Source* does owe something to the Chandler/Hammett genre, in terms of its shape and structure, but, like *Dog Soldiers*, it, too, is a book of ideas. I did not sit down and think — I want to write a mystery in the tradition of Chandler, no, I didn't do that. I was more interested in doing a novel in the slightly nearer tradition of the California hard boiled novels — like *Dog Soldiers* or another book called *Cutter and Bone*, by Newton Thornburg.

NR: Do you have any writing rituals?

KN: I am a believer in sitting down at the same time each day.

NR: Which is what time?

KN: Usually in the late morning. I like to work in the middle of the day.

NR: For hours and hours?

KN: I rarely work for more than two hours at a time. I might sit down late in the day for another one or two hours. It depends. Certain stages of a book lend themselves to longer work periods. Other stages tend to burn you out in an hour.

NR: Did *Tapping the Source* start out as a plot or as a character or characters?

KN: It started out in three different places at once, really. One day I was sitting in Oakley Hall's office and he said he heard something that might interest me, and he went on to tell me a story about these guys and a girl who get caught smuggling drugs across the Mexican border and the guys end up giving the girl to the cops in exchange for their freedom. So, I had this set up in mind. At the same time I ran into this young jailbird of a kid on a construction job I was on. He had just gotten out of jail. He was about seventeen or eighteen years old. Anyway, he had been living at the beach with this middle aged, drug dealing, biker guy who liked to get laid by young girls. The kid's job was to hang out at the pier and pick up girls and bring them back to the apartment. The biker supported him for doing this. If the jailbird kid failed to bring girls home, no matter the reason, the biker would punch him out. So this story was kicking around in my head along with the Mexico connection. Then I started to think about what would happen if the girl who disappeared in Mexico had a brother who found out she'd gone south and had never come back. What would he do about it? I had been looking for a way to write about Southern California and the surfing scene in a way that hadn't been done before. These ideas began to take shape together. So, I guess you could say it was a combination of both plot and character.

NR: What do you think of plot — as a novelist? What role does it play in your writing?

KN: I think of plot as metaphor.

NR: What about style? What is your advice to beginning writers on this subject?

KN: Do it the way it feels right. I don't have any elaborate theories on the subject. I just try to hit something that feels right.

NR: Are you conscious of that *thing* you are trying to hit?

KN: Basically when I write all I am conscious of is a certain rhythm, a certain flow. I've heard other people say much more academic things about how they structure their sentences. I have to admit that I only have a certain rhythm in mind and I work for that rhythm and if it seems like I'm on . . . fine. I don't dissect the language much more than that.

NR: Your title, *Tapping the Source*, promises such romance. Why did you suddenly relate it to drugs? Why did you sully the romantic image?

KN: I like the reverberations I found in the triple meaning. I think within the fictional world of the novel it still has a romantic significance. Ike does fall in love with the ocean and with communing with nature. And then you find out that Hound and Preston attached themselves to the saying because it was an "in" joke, because it had a drug significance. Then there is also the idea kicking around in there somewhere that the source is 'self' in some way, that people choose themselves, for the good or for the bad. This is what Ike finally grasps — this idea of choice.

NR: Hound Adams. There is some truth to his view of the world and of morality, yet he is such a villain. How do you resolve this kind of character?

KN: Well, he's also not much of a thinker. He's this guy who mouths a lot of ideas he's heard, but really has no ideas of his own. He's like a guy who has read a lot of Carlos Castaneda. He is smart enough to know there should be just enough truth in his philosophic mutterings in order for him to be seductive to the people he wants to attract. Yet, when examined, none of it is really accurate. He is always saying people make their own truth, and people choose their own values for good or for evil, which is true up to a point. But then Hound is connected to Milo Trax who in turn is connected to people who kill other people. We all know that isn't right, no matter what you say about good and evil being different sides of the same coin, or

about a person being able to choose his own values. There are certain places where the line is drawn.

NR: Why did you choose to allow Hound to be so appealing?

KN: When you write I think the more you get into characters the more you try to find reasons for liking them yourself. And so I like to think, in spite of Hound's big sin and all that he has become involved in, that there are still vestiges of the man he should have been. That is why Hound is still courageous.

NR: Why is Hound Adams celibate?

KN: I like the moment when Michelle tells Ike she hasn't been getting in on with Hound. Because Ike is still in doubt as to who Hound is, this confuses the issue even further. So, I like it for that reason in terms of the nuts and bolts of putting the story together. And later, there is a hint that Milo and Hound might be homosexuals, which I thought of, on Hound's part anyway, as part of his trying to thwart convention, a Castaneda sort of thing. To become a man of wisdom, you have to unlearn conventional things, and one of the ways you unlearn them is to participate in various rights of passage.

NR: Does Hound believe he is becoming wiser or does he know he is a very evil man?

KN: Hound has really gone crazy. There are times when he believes his own rap. There are other times when he sees himself as real screwed up.

NR: So many sexual issues in the novel are dealt with even-handedly and without judgement — Gordon coming on to his teenage niece, Ike's incestuous tendencies, Ike's total immorality and infidelity — that I must admit I was taken aback by Ike's very callus and puritanical view of the young women he procures for Hound Adams. Why does he view them so harshly?

KN: I think that connects to the 'coming of age' issue in the novel. How to conduct yourself in the world, and more specifically, how to conduct yourself sexually, is one of the things you have to figure out at some point. Ike has come out of a background where he has no experience with people. He's only had his grandmother who preached the puritanical line to him. When he lands in Huntington Beach and there are people in his life for the first time, he has to interact with these people and try and figure out what to make of it all.

NR: But why does he judge the women so harshly?

KN: Well, he eventually judges himself harshly too. Before, he had romanticized sex. All of a sudden he's around these girls who make a joke about the romanticism. Ike finds himself with these people who are screwing one another for all the wrong reasons. He is torn. There used to be something romantic about it and now there isn't.

NR: Ike becomes very jaded in the story. Does he, or can he, redeem himself?

KN: I like to believe in a world where redemption is at least possible. Redemption through love. So the answer is yes. He is a redeemed person. He has come of age.

NR: Why did you stop short of showing us exactly what Hound does with the porno films?

KN: If I had it all to do over again I might even cut some of that out. The idea I was working with, in terms of plot, is Milo's story. I've thought about it since and have come to the conclusion that I wouldn't have Hound making the porno movies. It seems corny to me now.

NR: I didn't think it was corny. It was disconcerting that Ike never reacted to being in them.

KN: Well, you see, I wanted a certain amount of open-endedness in the story, a certain amount of ambiguity in the end of the book. The classic detective novel ends when the detective tells everyone what happened. Basically, I didn't want one character in *Tapping the Source* saying — now here's what happened. Instead, I wanted certain issues to remain unresolved, to let some things stay in the air. My original intention was to leave it more open-ended than it is, but my editor said I had to satisfy reader expectation.

NR: Speaking of reader expectation, does Hound die in the end?

KN: Yes. I figured Preston blew everyone off — a convenient way to end a book.

NR: In your novel the idea of "paying back favors" is a strong theme. Do you think people pay back favors in order to make

themselves feel good or because one must do what must be done, as in Preston's case?

KN: Dick Blackburn, who did a piece on the book for L.A. Style, noticed that the romanticism of the book came out of the western tradition rather than the "Chandleresqueness" of the Californian novel. That was the first time anyone mentioned that but I think it is there. It is some of the source. If Chandler and Hammett were influential in the shape of the novel, then I think some of those Sam Peckinpah films, like *Ride the High Country* and *The Wild Bunch*, also influenced me a lot. The plots in those films revolve around the western tradition of strict codes. You owe someone, you pay them back.

NR: Hound has perverted that.

KN: Yes, overall, but still, he opens the gate for Preston and Ike that night at the ranch because he owes Preston one.

NR: What about Preston?

KN: Preston has pronounced judgement on the whole scene. It is all rotten.

NR: Including himself.

KN: Yeah — including himself.

NR: You are so explicit in your descriptions, at grabbing hold of the action and diving the reader into it headfirst. Why didn't you take your audience through the scene where he Samoans torture Preston?

KN: That is a funny kind of choice you make as a writer. You've got the chance for another action scene, or you have the chance for a dramatic moment. In the case with the Samoans I went for the dramatic moment, hoping it would be a dramatic moment for the reader as well. I wanted the reader to be with Ike when he is in the hospital and he looks down the corridor and he sees Barbara and these bikers and he and the reader both think at the same time — oh no, something terrible has happened. It is a decision. You skip the event so you can have the moment of realization, on the part of the character and the reader.

NR: Did you ever write the scene, just to see it?

KN: No. I pretty much knew how I wanted it to work.

NR: You paint a bleak picture of the 'family.' Does this have to do with your vision of California or of the condition of the American family?

KN: Mine is a bleak vision in general. The family gets sucked into that. I tend to see it as a fallen world, a world without grace. Maybe redemption is possible through love in some way, maybe grace is possible. Maybe it can be realized, but it cannot be taken for granted.

NR: All the kids in your book have been victimized by their parents.

KN: I wasn't consciously thinking of making a statement about family. Rather, I wanted the core of the book to reflect my own vision.

NR: However Barbara, Michelle and Ike all go back to their families, to recuperate, despite the abuse that drove them from these homes.

KN: That is true.

NR: What about evil?

KN: I think there is a fundamentalist point of view — Ike's grandmother is the spokeswoman for it — which identifies certain things as being evil. If you have an incestuous relationship, or even incestuous thoughts, you are evil. For Ike, Hound's vision plays against this because Hound says that's bullshit. If you want to have an incestuous relationship, and you both have a good time with it, then what's wrong with it? And what Ike has to begin to see is that, in this instance, maybe Hound is closer to the truth than the grandmother. But Hound might take some girl out and cut her throat and, because it happened, well, she must have wanted it to. It was her karma. Finally Ike begins to see that people must operate under a situation ethics. For Ike there is his grandmother on one end of the spectrum and Hound at the other.

NR: Where does Preston fit into this scheme?

KN: Preston is between Ike and the grandmother. He is convinced redemption is not possible for himself.

NR: Why does he think that?

KN: Because he cannot forgive himself for the fact that Janet Adams died. He holds himself responsible. He was a golden boy type. He had charisma. But he couldn't live with the fact that someone had died. That was unacceptable to him.

NR: Did he do what his preacher-father would have wanted him to do?

KN: Yeah, essentially. He passed judgement on himself, and his life since then has been an extended suicide.

NR: You have used tattoos repeatedly and symbolically. I'm intrigued by tattoos myself. What do they mean to you?

KN: Preston afflicts himself with tattoos. Ike does it for the same reason. They consciously deface themselves. They have that same meaning to me. I also like the idea that Ike takes his place in a certain echelon of society, among the poor white trash to which he belongs by birth. He claims his birthright by getting a really big, dumb tattoo.

NR: Do you have a tattoo?

KN: No. But I've come close a couple of times in the past, when I'd had too much to drink.

NR: If you did have a tattoo what would it be?

KN: I don't know. At this point I like to think that I would never get one, but if I did, it would be for similar reasons as Ike's.

NR: The climax, in action and plot, is an occult gathering of very rich and amoral people. Are you making a point about decadence?

KN: It was basically a case of trying to figure out what could be really evil. And the idea of people being killed ritualistically seems to me to be the worst.

NR: Was it a comment on wealth or the wealthy at all?

KN: Not really. What I wanted was something terribly bad. The occult seemed believable. I've read things that indicate this sort of thing goes on in those kinds of places.