David James Duncan (1952-)

Rivers have always fascinated Oregon author David James Duncan, who was born in east Portland in 1952. Though he now lives in Montana on an upper tributary of the Columbia, Oregon rivers run through the current of his fiction.

While still a student at Reynolds High School in Troutdale, Duncan read Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, which inspired him to dive into the world of philosophical literature and religious texts in an attempt to live by the light of an interior spark. His life and his works are peppered with references to Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist writings. Certainly Duncan "found" religion in the waters of the Northwest, especially embodied in his assertion of the holiness of salmon. The spirituality of Herman Hesse, Jack Kerouac, Ken Kesey, Nikos Kazantakis, Mother Teresa, Wendell Berry, Gary Synder, Mahatma Gandhi, Rachel Carson, and Terry Tempest Williams pervades his work.

While working on odd jobs and mowing lawns, Duncan wrote his first novel, *The River Why*, on the banks of Johnson Creek in east Portland. After his manuscript was rejected over twenty times, Sierra Club Books published it in 1983. The coming-of-age novel, which won instant acclaim for its author, follows Gus Orviston as he fishes his way to self-realization and ecological consciousness. His second novel, *The Brothers K*, followed the themes developed in the *River Why* but on a much larger canvas as it chronicles the Chance family's fortunes through a turbulent era in American history.

In 1995, Duncan published a collection of autobiographical stories and environmental essays, *River Teeth: Stories and Writings.* His collection of twenty-two essays, *My Story as Told by Water*, published in 2001, solidified his reputation as one of the environmental movement's most passionate and mystical activists, dedicated to the twin beauties of love and water. In *My Story as Told by Water*, Duncan writes: "I mostly fish rivers these days. In doing so, movement becomes stasis, flux is the constant, and everything flows around, through, and beyond me, escaping ungrasped, unnamed, and unscathed."

Duncan's most recent book, *God Laughs & Plays: Churchless Sermons in Response to the Preachments of the Fundamentalist Right*, was published in 2007. In this collection of essays, he rails against the environmental sins of the Bush Administration while invoking the power of the human heart. He writes: "The heart is an organ that I find, if you have faith and know how to surrender to it, unfolds in a most wonderful and unscientific manner, till it becomes the vastest and most pristine wilderness."

The recipient of numerous awards, Duncan received the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award for *The River Why* and *The Brothers K*. *The Brothers K* was a New York Times Notable Book and won a Best Books Award from the American Library Association. *My Story as told by Water* was nominated for a National Book Award, and *God Laughs & Plays* won the Pushcart Prize.

Written by Bob Bumstead

Further Reading:

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