

Out Of The Blue

THE TEACHINGS OF DON REDONDO

By Tom Threinen

In 1968, the University of California Press published *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, the Ph.D. thesis of a brilliant young student named Carlos Castañeda. The book chronicled the meetings of Castañeda with a Yaqui Indian shaman named Don Juan Matus, who lived in Mexico's Sonora Desert. The meetings occurred over several years and involved the use of certain plants, substances, and rituals to achieve alternative views of reality. Castañeda became Don Juan's apprentice and chronicled their encounters in a series of books (*A Separate Reality*, *Journey to Ixtlan*, *Tales of Power*, etc.) that gained immense popularity in the psychedelic and post-psychedelic eras of American and global alternative culture.

In 1975, Drew Kampion encountered a very similar story within the surfing world. Kampion was Contributing Editor to

Surfing magazine when he met a young man named Careless Constipeda, a chronic student at Los Angeles Valley College, who'd been working on his Associate of Arts degree (a two-year program) for several years. Constipeda was studying the mind-altering characteristics of surfing and the effects of waves on a person's idea of reality. He too had met a guru, a Malibu beach bum named Don Redondo, who taught him about surfing, surf culture, and other strange and wonderful things.

Several stories chronicling Constipeda's encounters with Don Redondo appeared in *Surfing* in the 1970s, along with a regular column titled "Ask Don," in which the surf guru himself answered reader's questions. Subsequently, an additional story, entitled "Don Redondo Goes Surfing with Bob Dylan" appeared in *The Whole Ocean Catalog* in the 1980s.

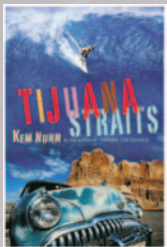
Tom Threinen, who illustrated those early Don Redondo stories, has joined author Drew Kampion in recreating these characters and their stories for *The Surfer's Path* in hopes that new readers will be, if not enlightened, at least amused by them.

SLOUCHING TOWARDS TIJUANA

An Interview with Kem Nunn by Enrique Gili



SCOTT WINNER



Just south of Imperial Beach, where the Tijuana River empties into the Pacific Ocean, the borderland is tinged with desperation and madness. A no-man's land on the ragged edge of the continent between California and Mexico is the setting for Kem Nunn's latest novel, *Tijuana Straits*. A crime

novel set among the dunes and mudflats of the Tijuana River Valley, home to nature-loving surfers, Border Patrol Agents, horse ranchers, psychos and desperados.

Ex-surfer, ex-convict, ex-drug runner, Sam "the Gull" Fahey is on a downward spiral. Too much beer, bad karma, and a fondness for meth define much of his day-to-day existence. A dissolute slacker, eking out an existence as a worm farmer, the middle-aged Fahey is a shambling wreck of a man facing the abyss, when he's offered a shot at redemption.

A chance encounter between a half-dead woman wandering the dunes and a lone man tracking feral dogs sets the novel in motion. Magdelana Rivera, a Mexican environmental activist who has fled Tijuana is on the run from thugs eager to settle a personal vendetta. Fahey reluctantly comes to her assistance.

Nursed back to health after ingesting polluted water, Magdelana enlists Fahey's support to recover documents she believes will implicate a US businessman guilty of monumental environmental crimes in Tijuana's colonias.

Tijuana Straits is "surf noir" at its finest from the man who invented the genre. Kem Nunn is a deft storyteller who writes lyrically about surfing with a knack for dialogue and action. Between baroque passages, his prose chronicles life along the border, factory work conditions and dangers of the drug trade. The book was titled *Tijuana Straits* because his editor thought readers couldn't pronounce "slough" (as in slew) and because Nunn liked the connotations of "straits" (as in dire) for his characters.

Like his prior surf novels, *Tapping the Source* and *The Dogs of Winter*, Nunn offers a dark vision of California's surfing subculture with furtive characters living on the fringes of society. Fahey is

reminiscent of Nunn's burnt-out photographer Jack Fletcher, the unwitting witness to murder and mayhem in the murky north woods gloom of *The Dogs of Winter*.

The backdrop to the action is Fahey's favorite surf break, now so polluted that anyone daring to enter the water must take antibiotics afterwards. *Maquiladoras* (borderland assembly plants) ringing the river valley spew toxins so foul, they poison the wombs of the women working in them.

Armando Santoya is the demon seed of the factories. Magdelana's nemesis is a drug-addled, vicious killer living in an abandoned recycling plant. Nunn tracks his descent from fighter to bereaved father to dope fiend turned assassin, a tragic figure sliding into madness driven by economic forces beyond his control.

The narrative segues between the three characters' narratives adding layers of psychological depth that builds suspense towards a violent climax. The third and final act of the book is dedicated to a slam-bang action sequence, as Magdelana, Fahey, and Armando criss-cross the mudflats in a lethal showdown between hunter and quarry.

This is a book perhaps best savored with two tabs of Percocet, a six-pack of Pacifico, and Jackson Brown's *Running on Empty*.

Q. After writing *Tapping the Source* and *The Dogs of Winter* did you intend to create a surf trilogy?

A. No, that was inadvertent, more of a happy accident rather than premeditated. I started out in Mexicali and gravitated towards the coastline. Border cities have a lot of the same problems, so I shifted my focus.

What was the allure of *Imperial Beach* and the *Tijuana River Valley*?

Back in the '30s and '40s, the Tijuana Slough was a latter-day Todos Santos, drawing big-wave riders from all over the region. The break lies between the gates of two cities, San Diego and

Tijuana, framed by the bullring and the hills of Point Loma. I did some research, discovered the forgotten lore of the region, and called my buddy, surf historian Matt Warshaw. He said, "Now that's a Kem Nunn kind of place."

The name *Dempsey Holder* keeps resurfacing in connection to the novel.

Dempsey was the guy who pioneered the Tijuana Slough. A great man of surfing. The term Big Kahuna might be an overstatement, but he was certainly The Man in Southern California. Riding 20-30ft winter swells without the benefit of a leash or a wetsuit.

Did you surf the Slough?

No, I was scared off by the pollution.

Allan Weisbecker has referred to your work as mythopoetic; do you know what that means and would you care to define it?

Don't know. It's a phrase that can mean everything and nothing. You'd have to ask Weisbecker that one.

Writers are often prolific readers, so who's been an influence on you?

As a writer you have to be in love with language. I would have to say novelist Cormac McCarthy. His novel *Blood Meridian* is among my favorites; you can trace the cadences of his prose all the way back to Faulkner.

So, do he-man writers get together and exchange notes?

Robert Stone is a friend of mine; he's supported my work from early on.

Writing fiction is a difficult way to make a living; is it enough?

I get by. All of my books have either been optioned or sold as screenplays to Hollywood. In Los Angeles the film industry dominates; creatively, it can be extremely frustrating. Yet the film industry has opened doors for me that perhaps teaching would not have. On a project for Warner Brothers, they sent me to New York to hang out with homicide detectives, as a research assignment. I like meeting people with interesting stories to tell, especially people doing unusual things in the world.



GREG JONES

Out Of The Blue

Wasn't Brad Pitt eager to make *The Dogs of Winter* into a movie?

I've met with Brad Pitt; he said he liked the novel. Hopefully, he can find the right director suitable for the material.

How do you arrive at a subject, and when do you know you're ready to begin?

A novel has to sustain you for two or three years. The characters have to keep you interested enough to hang around in your head.

On a personal level what purpose does the novel serve for you?

Writing is a way of engaging with the world and a way of making my voice heard.

To what extent are your characters based on real people and events in the surfing community?

I mix and match, everything goes into the hopper. Rarely has a character been directly based on a person that I've met. Larry Mathews is perhaps the closest I've come. He and I spent a lot of time together. He runs an office of economic development in Crescent City. He exposed me to the culture of the Hupa Indians and life on the reservation while doing research for *The Dogs of Winter*.

You portray a lot of rough characters and seedy locations in your novels; how do you achieve that level of authenticity.

When I'm researching a novel I just try to be invisible and observe the phenomena around me. You don't want to interrupt the flow of what's going on around you. So, I'm a fly on the wall trying to disturb things as little as possible.

Have there been any strange parallels between your fiction and your life?

While researching *The Dogs*, I was on the Olympic Peninsula in a tiny town on the Pacific Coast that had the only surf shop for miles around. It's named Tapping the Source, and the owner was a big burly guy who looked like he stepped off the pages of one of my novels. He'd read the book and was blown away that I was standing in his surf shop.



SCOTT WINER

Fans of *The Dogs of Winter* claim they know the location of the mysto spot; is there one?

The Pacific Northwest begins one hour north of San Francisco. There's miles upon miles of secret spots, hidden covers, and weird breaks that are rideable only under certain conditions. It's so wild and remote, it's hard to say what's out there.

Any surfers past or present that inspire you?

Like anyone else, I'm kind of in awe of Laird Hamilton. Greg Noll in '69. Mickey Dora mooning the judges at Malibu before walking off into the mist.

Mickey Dora's name has been invoked so many times. What's up with that?

His story is perhaps the most interesting. Unlike Dempsey, his reputation isn't based on his prowess as a big-wave rider. Dora seemed to embody everything that was cool about California's surf culture. He was stylish both in and out of the water. A Jack Kerouac of the surfboard.

Does surfing act as more than metaphor for you?

It's been a part of my life, and it's something that I'm drawn to. Surfing puts you in touch with Nature and the energy of the waves, which feeds into how we interact with Nature and how we treat our environment.

A major theme of *Tijuana Straits* is the despoliation of the California coastline, yet you find beauty amid the slop. Is it an elegy to a forgotten way of life, or is there hope for the future?

It's difficult to be optimistic. California's coastline is being lost to mindless over-development. There's a lot of pressure being placed on the beach. We have a president that doesn't believe in global warming. But it's just not surfers that need to be concerned; as a race of people we are in a crisis.

That's a pretty grim outlook; are you always that bleak?

I'll take a quote from the 20th Century painter Francis Bacon: "Be optimistic about nothing."

He had an artistic temperament; how about real life?

[laughs] Surfing good waves and receiving big pay checks. Surfing does have an aesthetic; do you think a person's perception of Nature lends itself to that?

Surfers either feel connected to the environment or they don't. Wave size and conditions allow for endless style variations. Power turns and carving across the face of waves have their place in larger surf. In slop it's kind of ridiculous. At a Huntington Beach surf tournament I witnessed a lot of ass-twitching – surfers in a crouching power stance attacking waves in 2ft swell. David Nuuhiwa was hired to enforce the line-up. Sitting on the outside on a longboard he decided to ride one in between heats. He took off effortlessly, eased into a big round bottom turn, skegs the board 180°, soul arches, extends his arm, and then hangs-ten. The crowd went nuts.

Do you surf much these days?

I surf local spots and try to say away from crowded line-ups. **What challenges remain out there for you?**

I always think the next novel will be better than the last. You'll never get better unless you keep working.

Enrique Gili is a freelance writer based in Southern California.