

## An Interview With HB3



Hugh Bonar in Avalon, CA

### **How did you come to write the novel?**

It was a long gestation period. I initially started thinking about it fifteen years ago. I wrote some scenes of a guy walking around on an island hallucinating. But I didn't know what he was doing there or why he was behaving in this way. Still, I felt compelled to write something, so the initial version was a sort of plot-less, avant-

garde narrative consisting entirely of Naked Lunch-style hallucination. I never really thought that sort of thing could sustain itself satisfactorily for very long, so the original piece was only about a hundred pages. Curiously, though, it turned out that the character I was writing about was me, only at a later age, and the reason that I couldn't figure out the story was that it hadn't happened to me yet. So it was really only a waiting process until I could discover what the story actually was. And oh yes, I did find out why that guy was walking around like that.

**So the novel's autobiographical?**

No. I discovered in the process that there's really no such thing. Your priority is the narrative, not your own life, so you have to be willing to deviate from the "truth" at any moment. And what are these supposedly objective events? Who are these "real" people? You've only got memories and subjective perceptions, and those are notoriously one-sided. So while writers draw on events from the past, I found it better not to care about the concept of objectivity. When you follow where the story develops, you realize that it's independent of your past. Ultimately it has nothing to do with you, and at that point, you're just a craftsman, which is where you want to be.

**Ok. Let's go back to the beginning. What is your personal experience with Catalina Island?**

Back up eighty or ninety years. My great-grandfather was the personal banker of William Wrigley, who owned the island. Wrigley gave my great-grandfather a plot of land on the bay, and my great-grandfather built a house that remains there to this day. As a child, I grew up going to this house fairly frequently. The island was an overheated playground for the California middle class, erotic and spiritual in a way I found incredibly appealing. However, as always, trouble soon developed. People were crazy and destructive, and things fell apart, as they inevitably do. The paradise that the island promised was never fully realized; there was madness and discord just beneath the surface.

Now, this isn't a particularly original concept. The film "Chinatown" covers the same thematic territory. The character played by John Huston, Noah Cross, is graceful, genteel, and unspeakably evil. He seems to have some connection to the Catalina Island Tuna Club, where some scenes were shot, re-named the Albacore Club for the film. This film made a big impression on me when I first saw it. Later, I found out that not only was my great-grandfather the President of the Tuna Club in the 1920s, but my family used to own the house where the Noah Cross character lives in the film. There are a number of scenes shot at that house.

**That's odd. And what do you conclude from this?**

That reality is very, very strange.

**It seems a strange coincidence.**

I have a lot of those. We all do, I suppose.

**What does the island represent to you?**

It's a willed attempt to create a garden of delights-type Paradise off the California coast. In the 20s, Wrigley and his family set about to correct what was already a beautiful environment by importing sand to form beaches and palm trees to line the bay. And all things considered, he did a good job. We're sorely lacking in capitalists of the William Wrigley and Henry Huntington variety today. Regardless, none of these attempts are ever 100% successful, because human nature itself is inherently conflicted.

**So growing up, you became aware of a discrepancy between the romantic image of the island and the reality of the people living on it.**

Sure, that's one way of putting it. I was very happy to be able to track the lead character, Bill Livingstone, as a young man in the 1930s to an old man in the 1970s. I used to wonder about these older people on the island. You could sense the presence of enormous stories you knew nothing about. It was strange to see people so angry or unhappy in such a beautiful place.

**Let's get back to your method of composition. How, specifically, did you do it?**

Ok. After the initial draft, I picked up the story again in 2004. I'd just finished grad school, and I was desperate to do something creative, to rediscover myself as an artist. I hadn't been to the island in years, but decided to basically show up and announce myself. They got a good look at me, then decided I could stay off and on throughout the summer, where I wrote most of the subsequent draft of the novel as we now know it. That was when things really took off for me. I'd write about taking the boat ride over while, you know, taking the boat ride over. I'd walk around the island and then write about that, contextualized within the narrative. Chapter 7 features a long walk through the island's botanical gardens - I took that walk, then wrote the chapter. And was happy to do it. At that point, the narrative was really "clicking" for me. I had a hold of it, so all I had to do was follow it to the end.

There was also a certain amount of research, and I was trying to immerse myself in the relevant history as much as possible. You know,

library stuff.

I finished most of that draft in October, then filled in some of missing spaces the following year. I showed it to a friend of mine and he was interested in publishing it, but also came up with the idea of a "rock opera" adaptation, which both expanded and delayed the book itself. Since the story concerns a musician, we thought we could create a musical adaptation where different musicians adapted different chapters, so the entire story would be told in a variety of styles and genres. Though ultimately worthwhile, this further delayed work on the actual manuscript, which still needed to be edited. I also started putting out a series of CDs of my own original music as HB3, of which there are now four.

So somehow the book was on the back burner, but several friends prevented it from languishing forever. I received much heroic assistance, exactly on cue, precisely when I needed it. That's one of the reasons I felt the book had a right to come out at all: there was something people were "getting" or responding to.

**How would you describe the style?**

It's hard to overstate the influence Hemingway had on people in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. As far as I can tell, everyone was trying to write like him: not just other writers, but everyday people. I have postcards from my grandparents where, sure enough, they're writing in that distinctly clipped, clear, concise style. However, Hemingway also wrote some incredibly long sentences, typically when he was going into a nostalgic, romantic, or lyrical segment. Zane Grey, who lived on the island, employed something similar, sometimes beautiful, sometimes naïve. These guys are sometimes a little absurd, but, to me at least, frequently likeable. So, generally, I was going for an American naturalism with, of course, an ironic edge. I called it "psychedelic Hemingway," a curious and exotic commingling, kind of like the "honey oil" Bill consumes.

**Earlier, you mentioned music. Tell us about your band, Nature, and how that experience may have influenced the book.**

Nature was an "electro-rock" band before its time, signed to Zoo/BMG in the mid-nineties. We began very ambitiously, and ended ignominiously. For a brief period - perhaps a year - I thought we really had something. We released one album, which was then removed from the BMG catalog as retribution over a contractual disagreement. So now you occasionally see some reference to the album on Amazon or YouTube, with people saying things like, "OMG! How could this band come together and do an album like this, and then disappear?" We've become the ultimate cult band, so cult that almost no one knows we ever existed. I wrote about the experience for the LA WEEKLY, which,

strangely enough, still has the article posted on their website:

<http://www.laweekly.com/1998-05-14/music/welcome-to-the-terra-dome/>

Bill has similar experiences, but in the milieu of 1930s jazz.

**Who is Bill Livingstone? What does he want? What's his flaw?**

Bill is a character who, as an American archetype, thinks Paradise is just around the corner. But when that Paradise fails to manifest, suddenly the past becomes worth recapturing. Ultimately, Bill feels he cannot move into the future without recapturing his past, and this proves impossible. Another way of putting it is that Bill is obsessed the way things are "supposed to be" without looking at the way they actually are. Unless his life is on track in the way he thinks it "needs" to be, he refuses to budge. And so, ultimately, he stays in the same place forever, in an empty Paradise, eternally alone.

That's my melodramatic interpretation. But I'm happy that others have reacted to it differently. There's enough room for different interpretations of Bill's fate, which I take to mean that there's different interpretations for all of ours, too. It is what it is, but it's also what we bring to it.

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