

# Reflections on My Father

## By Michael Downey

My late father, the writer Bill Downey, was known in Santa Barbara as a jovial, kind, and creative writing teacher who was always accessible to his students. My early memories of him were quite different. Tall and imposing, he lived with the spirit of a warrior. According to family lore, our family was barely hanging on during a particularly bitter winter in Ottumwa, Iowa where I spent my childhood. A neighbor across the street helped himself to our meager supply of firewood that was stacked against the side of the house. Dad immediately knew who did it and he stormed across the street and stood in front of one of the houses. He roared at the top of his voice, "I'm going to set you straight right now. If you take anything else from us, I will drag your ass out of that house and crack your head on the pavement." We never had any more trouble after that.

Dad ran his own business as an automobile body and fender repairman, a trade he continued for decades even when he eventually relocated his family to Santa Barbara. It was dirty manual labor hammering out dented car fenders and preparing painting cars. However, Dad would startle me sometimes by completely dropping this presentation of himself and taking on the demeanor of a philosopher and storyteller. One night he took me raccoon hunting, and when we took a break, he gazed at the star filled sky with a feeling of wonder and reverence. He said that the ancient sailors relied on the stars to navigate long voyages and regarded the natural world as a logical coherent system. I was amazed. How did he know all that?

On another occasion, he came home early from work scrubbed off all the dirt and grease from his job. He proceeded to put on cologne and slacks with a coordinating sports jacket and strode confidently into my classroom for my elementary school's open house. He engaged my teacher and charmed her with his views on American Literature. The next day, my teacher twittered like a star-struck teen-ager and gushed, "Oh your father is so urbane!" I didn't know what *urbane* meant, but I was convinced that it couldn't possibly have anything to do with the father I thought I knew.

By 1965, my parents had divorced and my father with his second wife, Kim, moved our family from Iowa to Pasadena, CA. While living there, I attended California State College at Los Angeles. My Dad and Kim decided to relocate the family to Santa Barbara after a visit there.

During September of 1967, I received a letter from Dad. It contained a clipping from the *Santa Barbara News-Press*. The article byline said it was written by "Bill Downey" and I was stunned. How could my father, the body and fender repairman, be writing articles for a newspaper? Yet, there it was. It was a piece about a small Santa Barbara African American Religious Group called the Nation of Islam, or more popularly known as the Black Muslims. They were a West Coast branch of the same organization that Malcolm X had belonged to. The article explored the group's ideology which stressed self-determination for black people. Dad also explored his own sensibility as a black man living in that era.

The newspaper loved the story and printed it in three installments. Then, they offered him a job as a cub reporter. At the age 45, Dad traded his overalls and tool box for a typewriter and began a new life. Years later, my stepmother Kim told me, "The first time I saw your father working at the body shop, I said to myself. "This man is an artist. He does not belong underneath cars pounding out fenders." She encouraged him to take creative writing classes through adult education even before we left Iowa. She was the one who encouraged him to approach the *News-Press* about writing the piece on, "The Nation of Islam," that he was interested in doing.

The *Santa Barbara News-Press Newspaper* was a conservative organization and Dad found himself confined to writing obituaries. Eventually, he created a popular outdoor column called, "Gone Fishin'." One of my UCSB professors read it avidly. After 16 years, Dad left the paper and began focusing more intently on his writing.

He had four books published. One entitled, *Tom Bass: Black Horseman*, appeared in 1975. Tom Bass was an African American slave born in Missouri in 1859. Bass had a gift for communicating with animals and became a prominent trainer of show horses. He also helped to develop the American Saddle Horse Breed. He trained horses for several U.S. Presidents and received an invitation from England's Queen Victoria to attend her Diamond Jubilee Celebration. These accomplishments stood out in stark contrast to the discrimination that Bass endured as a private citizen. The book remains the only one that Dad wrote that is still in print.

*Uncle Sam Must be Losing the War* was published in 1982 with an introduction written by the late writer Alex Haley. Among the indignities that Dad recalled in this book was his experience of riding on a train with other members of his all-black Marine Corps Unit. The train had a scheduled rest stop in Atlanta, and word had reached the local sheriff that black soldiers were riding on the train. The sheriff and two deputies met the train armed with rifles. They refused to let the soldiers off the train (the soldiers who

were on assignment to defend the United States overseas during WWII). The sheriff declared, "Ain't no niggers going to eat with white folks at our train station."

Dad's third book, published in 1981, was a novel entitled, *Black Viking*. It was based on a historical supposition that Viking Warriors may have sailed to the African Continent and returned home with captives. Archeological evidence seems to suggest that a colony of these captives was established in Greenland.

His fourth book, *Right Brain-Write On*, was published in 1984. This was a writer's textbook of sorts that explored the innate creative capacity of the human brain and its application to the writing process. The book included insights from prominent writers of the day including: Budd Schulberg, Alex Haley, Fannie Flagg, and Charles Schulz.

Over the course of his career, Dad became something of a Santa Barbara icon. He was a founding member of the Internationally famous Santa Barbara Writers Conference. He taught creative writing for many years at Santa Barbara City College, and through the college's continuing education program. He collaborated with the late fiction writer, Sidney Sheldon in a writing seminar program that was sponsored by UCSB Extension in the mid-1980s. The seminar was telecast to twenty college campuses across the country. In his late 60s, Dad developed Pulmonary Fibrosis, an incurable lung disease, that results in respiratory failure. He passed away at age 72 on September 1, 1994.

Written and Submitted by Michael Downey, son of William L. Downey, on February 28, 2021