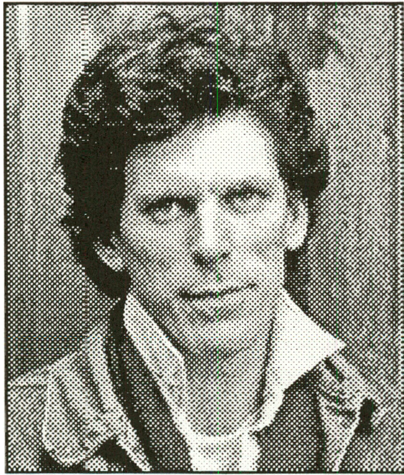

Meeting the Author of *The Brothers K*

David Duncan talks about his Adventist roots: junior camps, a pious mother, and a fundamentalist grandmother with a scatological sense of humor.

by Daniel Lamberton and David James Duncan

This interview with the author of *The Brothers K* was conducted in March 1993 at a park in Portland, Oregon. We sat near outdoor basketball courts where the city's best players meet, and spent the first part of the interview talking about our own middle-aged efforts to keep up with the game. Duncan is a slim, healthy man. He is intense, but laughs easily. He speaks of his attempts to balance writing with being a husband and a father to his three children. I intended to focus the interview in two places—on Duncan's experiences with Seventh-day Adventists—both his mother and grandmother were Adventists—and on his methods and beliefs about writing. But Duncan is affable and before I knew it, we had talked more broadly for nearly three hours.

Duncan says he has worked hard to keep his imagination directed toward writing and so, rather than teach or go on the writing/workshop circuit, he has spent most of his adult life working at low-paying manual labor jobs—driving a truck and running a landscape service called the "Lawn Ranger." He says, "I've always wanted to be real pure about how I approached fiction, and it felt better to indenture my body than my imagination." What follows are some of Duncan's statements about his experiences with Adventism and his own spirituality.

Lamberton: Both of your books, *The River Why* and *The Brothers K,* are set in the Pacific Northwest. Did you grow up here?

Duncan: I grew up in east Portland, which is mostly working class. My grandparents came from Trout Lake, Washington, which had quite an Adventist enclave. They were dirt poor—families of eight or twelve in one-room houses at the sawmill and orchard camps. But they were very hard workers. After church they liked to drive us through Portland's posh west hills neighborhoods and say "You too can have this one day." And I would say, "No I won't. It's not any dream of mine." But now I am living in west Portland. It would make my grandparents happy.

Lamberton: Your books show evidence of a lot of reading, and feature rather young people who know a lot about books and the natural world. This wasn't the usual profile of a 1960s Adventist adoles-

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cent. Did you read a great deal when you were young?

Duncan: I read voraciously, starting in high school. I lost a brother when I was in seventh grade, and I began to question things. I had an older friend who went off to Stanford University. He started sending me reading lists and books, and my friendship and correspondence with this guy grew so much more interesting than anything in high school that I basically quit studying everything except great novels.

Lamberton: And the natural world; did you spend a lot of time outdoors?

Duncan: Most of the religious experiences of my childhood occurred on rivers. The natural world that was here, shreds of which still survive, is incredibly beautiful to me. I don't need a more articulated proof of God's love for man than what the world, before it gets mucked up by humans, is like. That to me is intoxicatingly beautiful, and I just don't want anything better than that. The unspoiled world is the most important church by far.

Part way through reading The Brothers K, *my mother went to her Adventist pastor. He said, "There's nothing your son could say about the Adventist clergy that would be more humiliating to us than the things that the Adventist clergy have actually said and done." I thought, what a great guy!*

Lamberton: It is powerful to think of the particular *place* where one sees God. Ignatius Loyola used to pray by visualizing the place where he imagined God to be. He would wonder, "How do things sound and smell and look, here where I am? If at Calvary or in a different place, how should I approach God here? What should my prayer be here?"

Duncan: A friend of mine who's been a Jesuit for years (and in Nepal for years, so he's kind of Hindu-Buddhist-Jesuit-Zen monk) recently became a Trappist. He's always been an activist, so his life has taken a huge turn toward the contemplative. There's a whole enclave of monks at his abbey that all do zazen, Buddhist meditation. But he doesn't. He sits in the lotus position with the other guys, but his prayer is just the name of Jesus. That does it for him. I love those kind of crossovers, you know. That moves me more than anything that comes out of Billy Graham's mouth ever will.

Lamberton: How autobiographical is your fiction?

Duncan: I don't feel that its that autobiographical. I'm trying to tell a story that *feels* true. I'll occasionally play with a firsthand experience, but in a very blithe way. In autobiography I become obsessed with honesty. Before I would even try to publish an essay about my brother's death, ["A Mickey Mantle Koan," *Harpers Magazine*, September 1992], I ran it past my mother and sister to see how it squared with their memories. But in fiction I allow myself complete freedom to enter the lives of the characters and imagine, "wouldn't it have been wonderful, or moving, or sad in a spiritually helpful way if this had happened?" And I'm just off.

Lamberton: Have you been imaginative through most of your life? Or do you feel imagination is something that takes over only when you start to write?

Duncan: I think it was always there. I wrote a story in the second grade that was published in a PTA magazine. It was about Jesus finding different kinds of injured animals every birthday, because his family was so poor they couldn't buy him presents. So he would go to the wilderness and find cool animals, and that would be God checking in—"Here, have a sheep this year. Here, have a bird with a broken wing." Also, I used to take little toy soldiers and set up virtual landscapes in the yard, always with a hose. Always I liked running water, rivers in my imaginary world. These worlds would get more and more involved for five or six days till Mom would say, "You're flooding the driveway."

Lamberton: But she didn't worry about your imaginative life?

Duncan: She didn't seem to be worried that my imaginative life was intense when I was young. I think in some ways school and church lessened that intensity. They try so hard to channel the imagination down straight and narrow paths. The imaginative life for me was not a fearsome thing. It was freeing. So maybe my rebellion against time-worn channels was stronger.

Lamberton: How did your family take *The Brothers K?* Especially your mother?

Duncan: It was difficult for her to read because she feels all books are autobiography or history, and she felt that "our" story was being totally distorted. She was very upset part way through the book, so she went to see her Adventist pas-

tor. He said, and I think this is almost an exact quote: "There's nothing your son could say about the Adventist clergy that would be more humiliating to us than the things that the Adventist clergy have actually said and done." I thought, what a great guy—what a good thing for him to say! And when she read through to the end, she saw there were Adventist characters who weren't painted as ogres. Then one staunch Adventist friend of my mom's read the book and she thought it was excellent. So that helped. My mom needed to hear from a friend that my book had some saving graces, that it wasn't trying to tell bad, lying stories about her family, that it didn't have anything to do with her family.

Lamberton: I imagine some Adventists ask what your connection to the church is.

Duncan: I never went to an Adventist school. My brother, who has three degrees from a conservative Baptist seminary, went to an Adventist academy, but got kicked out. My grandmother was an Adventist terror. In terms of her rigidness and her constant judgments, she was similar to the mother in the novel. There was also a side to my grandmother which I don't know how to portray. She had this wonderful, scatological sense of humor—so that even in the midst of her rage, I could figure out ways to make her laugh. But I wasn't trying to re-create my grandmother in *The Brothers K*, with Mama Chance. I was just trying to create a wounded person. I think a lot of fundamentalists are wounded people whose hurt makes them want the world to be much simpler than it really is. They want something that is absolutely secure, that never waivers, that does not require hard decisions. When you can cling to a dogmatic system, the gray areas disappear. But I live in the Willamette Valley where it's gray most of the year.

Lamberton: I was impressed with what your memory of events like Sabbath school could bring up. The book took me back to my childhood's camp meetings, to the smell of Vegeburgers and things like that.

Duncan: I went to Adventist summer camps a couple of times—to Big Lake. I enjoyed it. There was a thing called Wilderness Outpost where you could hike to a lake and get the hell out of the camp, and that's what I always did.

Lamberton: So is there some autobiographical sentiment in the book?

Duncan: I don't think there's anybody who's received fundamentalist indoctrination as a child who doesn't have a lot in common with any other child who has. Baptists know the same songs as we do—"This Little Light," "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam," all those.

Lamberton: A bookstore owner told me you actually started this book off by writing about Baptists. Is that true?

Duncan: That's right. Because Baptists are a flagrant example of an anti-literary, monocultural, close-minded understanding. But I didn't know enough about the Baptists. When you go back to the well of impressions, when you're conjuring everything you can from a childhood in church, it has to be there firsthand. So it was the Adventists for me. Those Adventist preachers that I had to listen to all those years were the guys I wanted to answer; it felt good to create Elder Babcock. And the split in my own family's religious beliefs was like the split in the novel. Adventist versus non-Adventist. My grandmother was only 17 years older than my mother, and lived just down our street. My grandfather was also raised in an Adventist family, but he didn't go to church at all till he was diagnosed with cancer in his late 70s. He worked on Saturdays. He didn't give a poop what the Bible said, he wanted to make money. And my father was a jock, an abandoned kid, stuck in an Adventist boarding school. But he was never successfully indoctrinated in the Adventist "way." So I had this double generation of two males who were completely uninterested in religion, and two females who were very traditional and who wanted us to embrace the old family religion.

My mother's not somebody who goes around judging others—a thing that drives me crazy about fundamentalist religions of all stripes. But she grew up in an Adventist community, went to an Adventist school, and knew Adventist kids, so that when the fire and brimstone preachers talked

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about everyone who wasn't an Adventist going to hell, that was fine with her. Everybody she knew was saved. When I heard the same things in sermons as a boy, though, it meant that everybody I knew in public school, all my friends, were going to hell. So the same message for me was disturbing.

Lamberton: How did you learn to write? How would you answer that?

Duncan: Well, I never took a fiction writing course. But as a young man I did have an intense longing for something like an apprentice-master relationship. In fact, I tried for one. There was a man, a Southern writer I admired, Andrew Lytle. I offered to become a slave on his farm in exchange for writing tips. He said forget it. Thank God. I was young. People really want to surrender to someone who knows.

One of the many problems when people talk about inner experience is that there's no context, no stage on which it can take place. Humans are best able to convey inner experiences through carefully constructed rites, and you almost have to be initiated into the meaning of the rite.

Think of the pathetic reverence Robert Bly gets. Or Pat Robertson. Or Rajneesh. I think the same impulse creates monsters out of some evangelists: people don't want to have to think. But I feel we're put here to struggle and doubt. I love the line "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." As far as learning how to write, I think just reading great, difficult books was an important part of it, just to see how far I could challenge myself. Writing criticism wasn't too helpful. I imitated other writers when I was young. I think that was helpful. I would imitate Mark Twain and Dickens. I loved the way they worked, the rhythm of those long 19th-century sentences.

Lamberton: You sound in your conversation and writing as if you've kept a strong sense of the spiritual. How is it to write of that?

Duncan: *The River Why* is really a book about spiritual conviction, and the scene where Gus gets God was absolutely heartfelt. I would never write directly about anything I would call mystical experience. But I felt it would be a denial of the very few most important experiences in my life to leave the metaphysical dimension out. I felt I had to labor for 200 pages before I had created a world where spiritual feelings could be incarnate. One of the many problems when people try to talk about inner experience is there's just no context, no stage on which it can take place. Humans are best able to convey inner experiences through carefully constructed rites, and you almost have to be initiated into the meaning of the rite before you're not talking gibberish.

Another problem when people talk about spiritual experience is they say, "I felt, I had, I did, it was my experience." But if you've had a genuine spiritual experience, you haven't had anything. Your *spirit* has had an experience, and for the rest of you to talk about it is creating a false claim.

Lamberton: I think that something you do well in your books is display frequently avoided responses to religion—you show how even in our own spirituality there are things to mock and that most of the time, we don't have a clue.

Duncan: This woman from the *New York Times* called to interview me about *The Brothers K*, for one of those information boxes the *Times* will occasionally put inside a review. She said, "In your books, people are religious, then sacrilegious. What's with the back and forth?" I said, "You know, there are two indigenous gods in the Northwest, Raven and Coyote. They're an ancient tradition here. And they're both revered, but they're both irreverent characters. It feels natural to me as a native Northwesterner to cross back and forth." And she said, "Raven, Coyote? What are you talking about?" Then she quoted me as saying "He likes to write religiously and sacrilegiously," something I didn't say, because she had no idea what I was talking about. I read a lot of mystics in the Christian tradition, and I wouldn't say there's a self-mockery there, but I do feel that Christianity's loss of its own mystics, of the loss of respect for mystics and their importance in the formation of priests or theologians or preachers, is a huge tragedy.

Lamberton: Have you filled up that loss in your books with things from Eastern religions? In *The Brothers K* you make quite a few references through Peter to Eastern spirituality. What's happening there?

Duncan: As my personal odyssey goes, I was so disillusioned with things Western that I was only able to regain respect for the Christian tradition through the back door. The Oriental door. These people were able to make sense to me, not only of my brother's death, but also

of the state of the world and its darkness. They offered me a real metaphysic that enabled God to remain compassionate despite the suffering of the world and its humanity. I first encountered Oriental thought in high school—in the flip Buddhism of Kerouac, and the sincere Oriental leanings of Hesse. But, unlike a lot of people then, I went back to the source of the material, read the Tao Te Ching, the Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Koran. When you start reading a Taoist mystic, then a medieval Christian mystic like Meister Eckhart, then a Sufi mystic like Rumi, you're reading what seems like the same person. As evidence to a skeptical mind, I found the unity of these discrete traditions overwhelming. I would say this unity was the real focal point of my education. And it was an education that I received, not through universities, but through a circle of passionate friends. There were probably a thousand books that a handful of us read together in our twenties.

Lamberton: I've felt that what you've done in your books is extremely genuine in its Christian foundation and sentiment.

Duncan: I truly feel that Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism are essentially the same. There is one God. For all humanity and for all creation. I wish I could be kinder to those who feel that its only their God, but I can't. Saying that, I think it is important to follow just one guide. You can't have 10 gurus. When you utter your prayer, which one do you pray to? You have to be clear on that, but that part of me is private.

Lamberton: That reminds me of the story about Jung. He refused to go into a meeting of people discussing his theories because he said "there are too many Jungians in there."

Duncan: I would hate to be a Duncanian.

Lamberton: To all of us there is a huge importance attached to the ability of language to make reference to the world. Language contracts may be suspended or broken, but there are circumstances where breaking this contract is unacceptable. Many reading your books will ask whether you write of real bodies, real pain, real places. This is an important question to them. Are you eager to say your novels make no direct references to real people and places, or do you think that maintaining a tie to actual reference should even be an issue? I've sort of asked you this already.

Duncan: Well, I have a better answer to that question than the one I gave earlier. People love to create autobiographical links between writers and their fiction. Especially if they like the fiction there is an impulse to give it greater authenticity by finding direct links to the author's life. But I don't like to talk about autobiographical links. The essential miracle of literature for me, is that we all sit down, as readers, with these black, dead marks on a page, and with nothing but our feeble training back in grade school and these marks, we re-create a world, we create these characters, we give them life. It's the individual reader who does that. The author is done, the author has vacated the scene. It's the reader alone who resurrects all these emotions. And what a miracle! What a skill. To me it feels like some ontological proof of the inner life that we can do this through literature. And it denigrates, or just lessens the beauty of that experience to try to verify it with little autobiographical linkages.

I don't think a book should be more powerful for readers because they know Princess Di really did walk through a room referred to in some scene. That's a meaningless angle. If you've been moved to joy or tears by a work of fiction, it's your inner life that deserves the thanks. It's nice that the author had the initial experience, but the reader re-creates an original experience in just as valid a way as the author did. I think that's just great. The fact that I had brothers and a family and stuff is secondary. The reader's re-creation is the essence of what fiction is about.