

ROUND EARTH, OPEN SKY: An Interview with Kirpal Gordon

KATHLEEN HUDSON: The press kit sent to me by Giant Steps Press says that *Round Earth, Open Sky* is a psychological suspense thriller as well as a Native American sci-fi road novel that also doubles as an inquiry into the nature of human identity. That's a whole lot of genres. Which one would you say most accurately describes the book?

KIRPAL GORDON: That's a good question. There is Native American spiritual practice in the tale, especially the medicine practiced by Hopi, Navaho and Ojibwe healers. The sci-fi or mytho-poetic element can be gleaned from the fact that the main character, Sky Man, an immortal, tricked by human sorcery, falls out of the sky and accidentally into a dead human out in the Sonoran desert. By the second chapter the tale most certainly becomes a buddy road novel for Sky Man gets picked up by Moses, a Brooklyn photographer, who is heading back to the Big Apple. Every stop Moses makes along the way---in a desert cantina, in a Hopi village, in Oak Creek Canyon, in Detroit and in Ontario---reveals another clue to the dead man's identity that Sky Man ultimately makes his own, turning the novel's psychological suspense elements into a humorous, sexy, magical inquiry into the nature of human identity. By the way, I lived in Arizona for many years and all the places they hike and camp and visit and photograph are from personal experience, including the final section that takes place on a Canadian isle in the Great Lakes where the story first "came" to me. So, although the telling borrows from many genres, the narrative is driven by a mounting, detective-like body of evidence, some of which contradicts, but all of which Sky Man coheres and resolves so that he can make his ascent to his sky people. Still, for all of that hoopla, the plot is as simple as, "E.T., phone home."

KATHLEEN HUDSON: I recall you working on a draft of this book when I first met you on Goat Creek Road in Kerrville, Texas, in 1994.

KIRPAL GORDON: I started to write notes for the tale as far back as 1986 and still there were still things I yet had to discover. Even though I worked on other books during my time in Texas, the Hill Country was instrumental in my finding many things out about the characters. Hiking and driving through the Edwards Plateau, especially along the Guadalupe River, I found traces of ancestral human settlements which intrigued me, to say the least, and got under my skin.

KATHLEEN HUDSON: Stephen-Paul Martin called the book, “Part mystical vision, part cosmic joke . . . moving past the vanishing point where Jack Kerouac meets Carlos Castaneda . . . leading us to laugh at what we think we know, and to humble ourselves to a world that will always be much larger than we can imagine.” Vernon Frazer wrote, “Moses becomes the first of many colorful and complex characters to try to determine . . . whether Sky Man’s true nature lies in the heavens, the earth, or both. The path to the answer untangles many tangled relationships, past and present, in a highly entertaining journey that will keep your eyes glued to the page and your fingers eager to turn it.” Eric Basso described it as “. . . a surprising, and sometimes sinister, journey toward discovery and self-revelation that carries the characters through the perils of obscure Native American tribal rites to the portals of metempsychosis and the magical reality behind ‘reality’ which erases past and present and, at the same time, recreates them.” Which makes the most sense to you?

KIRPAL GORDON: All three make plenty of sense in spite of each reviewer seeing it his own way. I’d like to think that readers will find it both funny and serious, both Kerouac- and Castaneda-friendly, both up for grabs regarding Sky Man’s true nature and yet highly entertaining as a read, both surprising and sinister. As for a term like metempsychosis, or the transmigration of the soul, especially its reincarnation after death, I must admit to knowing nothing, but as Sky Man says throughout the book’s 185 pages, he doesn’t know either. All the clues he needs are provided because he follows a path of the heart. That’s what it was like writing it as well!

KATHLEEN HUDSON: This novel is a departure for you, is it not? You've been writing a lot of fiction of late to music or in celebration of music, especially jazz. I saw you last summer in Bandera, Texas, performing *Ghost & Ganga: A Jazz Odyssey* with accompaniment.

KIRPAL GORDON: There's no question that the three interconnecting novellas that make up *Ghost & Ganga*, as well as all the lyrics I've been writing to Amercian Songbook classics, have helped me deliver the novel in a more cinematic, you-are-there quality. For me, the struggle has been about developing patience, sitting still, woodshedding my ass off writing draft after draft until finally it all came together though, as you pointed out in your first question, the novel resists classification by genre. My hope is that readers won't care about any of that except a good story.

Kathleen Hudson, Ph. D., teaches in the English Department at Schreiner University in Kerrville, Texas. Founder and executive director of the Texas Heritage Music Foundation, she is also the author of *Writing Songs, Telling Stories: An Album of Texas Songwriters*.

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