

SUN HOUSE

by

David James Duncan

reviewed by Hank Lentfer
Author of *Raven's Witness* and *Faith of Cranes*

Just twenty-six letters. In this language anyway. And none of them outlandishly different from any of the others. Haikus. Manifestos. Suicide Notes. Treasure Maps. Constitutions. Divorce Papers. The Bible. Postcards. And now, *Sun House*, David James Duncan's long-anticipated novel, an epic tale heaving with heart and humor. Guided by Buddhist monks, Indian poets, Irish bards, and 'Dumpster Catholic' mystics, it wanders through Portland alleys, Seattle classrooms, Rocky Mountains, and Montana ranchlands. Along the way, Duncan's meticulous arrangement of those twenty-six squiggly lines carry the spark and heat and intimacy of in-the-flesh, on-the-ground, camp-fire-infused, whiskey-enhanced experience. It's a mystery how a story pinned so thoroughly to the flat page swells and floats, wafts and winds, sifts and settles into huge and unseen dimensions.

In the opening chapters, the narrative takes a smooth bend through a roadhouse in Houston, Mississippi. It's 1934, night time. A bluesman is on the stage when a brawl erupts. The place explodes, busted chairs, bottles and teeth everywhere. *That crazy Son, though, kept right on playin'*. The bluesman gets a hold of the neck from a shattered wine bottle and slides it onto to fingers until he finds the best fit. The fourth.

When Son starts playin' again a sound no one ever heard is born. Busted glass bottle neck on American steel. The notes pour out all slippery, grabbin' men by the mind 'fore they know what him 'em. Son builds it real slow but never backs off, till he gets his guitar crashin' six ways to Sunday. Then, real sudden, the crashin' stops and Son leaves just one lonesome string, the survivor, lettin' out this loooooong moan. Bam! All over that room the fighting goes still. But Son don't know it. Son is eyes-closed, head-back bringin' it, pullin' from a place so broke but overflowin'.

We humans have always carried a leaky drum of heartbreak on our backs. Pretty much all us, all the time. The fine-hearted, busted up characters in *Sun House* are no exceptions. These singers, farmers, thespians, scholars, restaurateurs, street walkers and priests shoulder barrels of abandonment, betrayal, broken bones and shattered dreams. They flail and flounder, staggering beneath the weight of dying parents, wavering faith and lost loves. There's comfort in their company, a welcome solidarity along the path of becoming more fully human. These characters

become friends and then teachers as they each, in their own way, begin *pullin' from a place broke but overflowin'*.

Sun House is a cathedral, a high-domed room of stories the reader enters and never fully leaves. Although Duncan labored for years in its creation, the vaulted architecture is not his creation alone. Duncan introduces the book's bibliography as *an honest, though not exhaustive, list of books that have helped me, many of my friends, and the dramatis personae of Sun House find and maintain our ways*. The list includes works both obscure (The Bijak of Kabir) and well known (Gary Snyder's Axe Handles). Duncan's life-long study, digestion and synthesis of these texts into an edible story is a profound gift to readers (like me) who hunger for the insights of ancient texts but lack the appetite to read them on my own.

The bluesman making music in a brawl is inspired by the chaos around him to reach for something new, to put broke glass on six strands of American made steel and play a note, the survivor, that cuts through the violence. For fourteen years Duncan has stayed true to his craft as, across the country, children get shot and greed-blind politicians get elected, poverty spreads and forests burn, waters warm and salmon vanish. Sun House rises from and *through* that loss and violence. It is a loooooong pray-full note, a sustained tone vibrating with heartbreak, humor and healing. It is a story like no other and echoes far beyond the book's covers. In the clear reflection at the book's end a vision shimmers. We're all there. Stomping and flapping and wagging, ten-toed, tree-rooted and webbed footed, striving and caring and crying and loving and singing, pulling from a place broke but overflowing.

The great poet Rumi wrote:

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

Sun House is that field.