

*Illustration from The Dinosaur Duster*

# *An Interview with Donn Kushner*

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• Joanne Findon •



*Donn Kushner, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, while attending a scientific conference in 1986*

**Résumé:** *Écrivain, chercheur scientifique et violoniste amateur, Donn Kushner a passé de nombreuses années à tenter de créer un équilibre entre ses diverses activités. Maintenant, après avoir pris sa retraite de l'université, il se consacre à ses projets d'écriture. Il cherche tout particulièrement à développer le goût de la lecture et à susciter le plaisir d'écrire chez les jeunes gens.*

**Summary:** *A writer, scientist and sometime violinist, Donn Kushner has spent years juggling his many interests. Now retired from university teaching, Donn seems to have energy to spare for his many writing projects. He seems to welcome the chance to enthuse over of his love of literature and the joys of writing for young people.*

**D**onn Kushner and I met in 1994 and chatted in his office at the University of Toronto, where the walls are decorated with stunning black-and-white photos of algae. Recently, we chatted again via email.

**JF:** Yes, in fact I was interested to read that that's one of the things you specialize in, because it struck me that many of your characters also live in extreme environments of some kind. Is this a conscious connection?

**DK:** Well, not a conscious connection — you mean extreme psychological environments?

**JF:** Yes, that's right — they're separated from home, or people have died, or they're facing racism like Amos — extreme situations that call for some sort of heightened response.

**DK:** Yes — poor old Brian in *A Thief Among Statues* is a cold hungry boy, with no one to look at except these statues; and of course you probably have seen, then, the theme in several of my books, the theme about connections between this world and the next. It comes very much into *Uncle Jacob's Ghost Story*, where Uncle Jacob decides to join his friends — and Brian, well, he may have decided to join the statues — his statue is there, but the question would be: is he there or did the artist just make another statue of him? We don't know.

That theme of the two worlds is something which I also used in *The Night Voyagers*, which is about a boy from Central America escaping north. His father comes along — his father was killed, and in fact the boy has seen his father's body, under rather horrifying conditions, and so he doesn't talk, he doesn't speak except to a few spirits that come along with him, who may or may not be all in his mind. I was interested in some of the Mayan legends — the Popul Vuh creation myths. They have the Xibalba — these are the lords of death in the land of death. And in the myths, two heroes go down there, and first of all they're playing ball up above, and the lords are irritated at this and they call them down and kill them, but the skull of one of them manages to impregnate the daughter of one of the lords who goes up to the earth and bears two children, and they later come down and defeat the lords in another ball game. It's a very exciting story, and I used parts of it in *The Night Voyagers*.

**JF:** The myth becomes a sort of template on which Manuel can plot his own personal and family crisis, and helps him make sense of the forces that pursue him.

**DK:** Yes. In the mythologies about the Popul Vuh, the story of the ball game, and the wicked Lords of Xibalba just seemed made to order, the wicked Lords being much like the death squads of Central America and elsewhere. In the Popul Vuh the divine twins avenge the death of their father, by defeating the evil Lords, and of course my story parallels this: Manuel defeats death by choosing life.

**JF:** What kind of a response has the book had?

**DK:** Alas, the book hasn't sold well, but then most of my books don't. It hasn't been reviewed very much either, as far as I can tell. The review in *Canadian Children's Literature* missed the point, I believe, in insisting that I

was telling the Popul Vuh stories from a Judeo-Christian perspective. Of course I was, but I believe that Manuel and his family — whom I imagined as modern Catholics — would have seen them from that perspective too. Never mind, we old cultural imperialists never really learn!

**JF:** *You've also published a science-fiction novel recently, haven't you?*

**DK:** Yes; to come back to the science and extreme environments. It's called *Life on Mars*, and it's my account of what happened on Mars when the Viking Landers came down in 1975. They looked for life but found none, and I explain what the Martians were doing all the time. My Martians were gentle, lovable beings, about ten centimetres high, resembling mushrooms with arms, legs and big eyes. They live under the guidance of their wise chief, "Red-Spotted Serpent," and have names drawn from an old cowboy movie, from a TV ad, and from the 1973 war in the Sinai Desert. All these somehow reached them in two hours of television, and they make up their own stories — and play their own games — in relation to these stories. They are the re-emerging remnants of a much older civilization that suffered a terrible catastrophe in the past. In writing this, I used my knowledge of life in extreme environments, and tried to envisage a form of life that might actually exist on Mars. All life needs water, and they get it from subsurface ice (which may really exist there). They use sunlight for energy (their heads being filled with algae), and live a very chancy existence between the ice fields below and the sunlight above. Life is very precious to them, and the Lander, which somehow brings knowledge of human violence to them, is rather like the Serpent in the Garden.

**JF:** *And again, you're using another world to reflect back on this one.*

**DK:** Yes, you see I'm not that fond of a lot of science fiction. In order to be really interested in science fiction I have to know if the characters have any sort of emotions that I can identify as human. I think that to be interesting to me all literature has to deal with the human condition. Otherwise, what's it all about?

**JF:** *You grew up in Louisiana, and you still have family there. Were there people in your family who habitually told stories? Or people in your community?*

**DK:** No, it wasn't that; there were not people there who told stories. It's a Jewish family, as you probably guessed. One regret I have is that my grandmother probably had some stories that could be told, but I didn't get them at the time. We heard about their youth in New York, you know, and they had hard times. My mother and father were second cousins; their parents came from the same city in Lithuania.

**JF:** *Where do get your ideas for your stories? Do they just come to you?*

**DK:** Well, that's a good question. All the kids ask that. And I sort of brood over things. I see something, and I think it's going to make a story. Now for

example, with *Uncle Jacob's Ghost Story*, before my nephew Tony became very famous as a writer he was quite a good artist; he was talented, and in fact I even thought of having him illustrate *The Violin-Maker's Gift*. But the publishers weren't very keen on that. And so I said to him, 'Tony, I want to make a simple story for you to illustrate.' And the idea just came to me that there'll be this man in a news stand watching three dancers; and he realizes that only two of them are alive and one of them is a mannequin stolen from a window. He sees them again, and again only two of them are alive, but it's not the same two.

**JF:** *And that was the original seed of the story?*

**DK:** Yes. And then again, the idea of two spirits and three bodies; you can do something from that!

**JF:** *In Uncle Jacob's Ghost Story I was struck by the way in which the wonder of life in the physical world is depicted — particularly in the scene where Paul is granted this clear vision of the blood, the muscles and even the atoms inside the body of the water snake. It's as if you're suggesting that the unseen world of microorganisms is akin to the unseen spiritual world. Is this a connection you were hoping readers would make?*

**DK:** That's a good point — it's a scientist's view of the world.

**JF:** *How about the seeds of ideas for some of your other books?*

**DK:** With my dragon book, I began thinking about dragons when I was sitting in the library; and I thought, I know, I'll get a dragon who becomes very small and gets shut up inside a book; and all I had to do was fill in the details. So that's what happens; if I get a good strong idea it just goes on, you see. And the details just seem to come.

When I first got the idea I began reading about dragons. And I learned that one of the things dragons do is they have treasure. And I thought well what treasure would he have? Well, it could be a book. And then, since I love books, by implication all books! And so it came out from that.

Now my little dinosaur book, *The Dinosaur Duster* — well I guess I can tell you! There is a story — a rather off-putting story, about a young man who has a job in a funeral parlour; and he goes into the room following the boss. And there's a man lying there dressed in a brown suit; and his wife says, "oh he looked so much better in a blue suit." They go to another, and there's a man lying there in a blue suit; his wife says "he'd look so much better in a brown suit." Later on, the man had on a brown suit; and the young man said to the boss "I bet I know what you did; you changed the suits on those two men." He shook his head and said, "No, just the heads!"

**JF:** *[Laughter]*

**DK:** Actually, the idea of head-switching was my grandson's. I go down to see them in Pennsylvania, and their daddy said, "Grandfather will tell you

a story." And the kids were into dinosaurs very much. And suddenly the idea came, "I know! Switch the heads!" And then, you see, I had also had various social visits with museum people, who were very nice and very knowledgeable people. But I thought I'd poke gentle fun at them by having them mistake the two switched heads for new species! I thought that would be fun, you see. But actually, what happened with that particular story, I went upstairs and there was a typewriter; and I typed out the first version in an hour, including my Carpathian folksongs!

**JF:** *The titles are a scream!*

**DK:** And I kept them; except for one I had to change; originally it was the Czar's third son has only one leg; and the editor said oh, we can't talk about an amputated child! I said fine, we'll make it the Czar's third son has only ten toes. Then you wonder: what about the others — do they have fourteen or fifteen or something? You don't know.

**JF:** *What was the genesis of **The Night Voyagers**?*

**DK:** As I recall, I had long been interested in the idea of a Central American child coming to Canada, and had even thought of one who was ill, staying at a church manse, from whose window he could see a creche in the snow. Then the animals began to speak to him. This story never took off in that form, and a variant (very much of a variant, I think) became *A Thief Among Statues*. I still liked the idea of a child from a hot tropical country being exposed to Canada, and then thought of the gods of that country being somehow involved. However, the idea of the family travelling north was there from the beginning, as it would have to be for a Central American family coming to Canada.

**JF:** *You've said, in other profiles of you, that you started out writing stories that were not deliberately targeted at younger readers, and that it was editors who said "This is a children's piece." Can you talk a bit about that process of finding an audience for your work?*

**DK:** That was *The Violin Maker's Gift*. Various readers liked it. And the first publishers I showed it to said, well, this is fine, but the language is too complicated. Then I kind of put it away for seven years, and then I picked it up again and sent it out again, and Macmillan picked it up actually and liked it. And after quite a while and some changes — Babette wasn't in the original version...

**JF:** *I remember reading that somewhere and it astounded me, because she's such an important character.*

**DK:** She's a very important character. They said there should be a female character, and I said fine, and then suddenly she took on a life of her own; in fact she is something like a chorus, maybe to announce from the very first that something is going to happen. She's very important.

There's one gentleman who is a composer, who's expressed a great interest in making a musical out of that. I have to change it, if it's ever going to be, because a lot of what goes on goes on in what is *not* said. And you can't put that on a stage.

**JF:** *In A Book Dragon, aside from Nonesuch's adventures through time and across continents, there is a strong moral subtext in the book — never didactic, but always there under the surface. His spiritual growth and his change from your stereotypical dragon, valuing strength and so on, to somebody who really values other kinds of treasure. Was that part of your initial idea?*

**DK:** No it wasn't, actually, it wasn't. I think all of my books have moral subtexts. It's not preachy, but it's important — I do sort of admire courage, if you wish, I admire sticking to one's family and helping people and so forth, and my characters do. Nonesuch does try to help his new family and so forth.

By the way, I don't know if you noticed, when he has this argument with his grandmother about destroying the universe. He sees her in the fireplace, and she's saying that people aren't of much account anyway, and he's trying to say why people should be saved, because they write books — I'm influenced there by the Old Testament, in Genesis when the Lord is talking to Abraham about the destruction of Sodom, and Abraham says "what if there are 50 just people in there?" and the Lord says "I won't destroy it for 50," and what if there's only 45, I won't destroy it, and it keeps on going down ... until if there's ten and then he stops. Lot and Mrs. Lot and the two daughters — that's only four. But anyway, I was influenced by that particular argument there.

**JF:** *The House of the Good Spirits is one of your most ambitious novels. You've tried to do a lot of things in that one book — from telling the story of Amos's own struggle with racism to filling in a whole section of history. And then there is the spiritual dimension which draws on both the symbols of the African storytelling tradition and Judaeo-Christian beliefs about death and the afterlife. Can you talk a bit about the process of writing this complex book?*

**DK:** The original idea was about somebody who goes into a haunted house. There are many stories about that, and I thought, okay, it'll be a black child who goes into the haunted house, and he'll find black ghosts. Okay. Where do they come from? Well, they're escaped slaves. How do slaves escape? And I had read this book, *Slave Narratives*, by Arnot Bolthom; and I remember reading the case about a man who escaped by attending his wife; his wife was very light-skinned, and they dressed her up to look like a young white man and he pretended he was the servant of this young white man. Then I thought, "aha! we'll get him to escape with another white man, and they'll be pursued by slave catchers and all get drowned; the slave-catchers will become devils who are after the soul of the white man." The idea will be: can

you save his soul? Which he does at the end, of course.

Then I began reading up on this and I read this big book, *The Blacks in Canada* by Wiggs, which is obviously a professor's book because he obviously had the skills for looking at historical records. And I learned about the blacks who came up at different times, and the War of 1812 and so forth. And then the idea came while I was writing it that their chaplain wrote this letter complaining about the cold and making a reference to purgatory! He being of a literary turn. Then I thought "well, the powers up above, my heavenly powers are jokers" — as you've probably noticed — "and they heard that and they figured, well, we'll put them down there for a while."

Then, you see I had a scientist from Nigeria who had come to work with me over the years. I'm still in touch with her, and we have published some papers together; and her husband had also come over. They were Ibos; she was Ibo actually, he wasn't. He was a Hausa. And I was looking into Nigerian folktales; she brought me over these Ibo stories, which I used. Things about the Tortoise.

**JF:** *That was a way of linking the mythic subtext with the people.*

**DK:** Well, I liked using the Tortoise and he's an interesting character, sort of a joking character, and he came along for that, you see. And the other characters — well I like the old bootlegger, old Lester, and this Mr. Stern I liked, obviously. And then I had to figure out how my nasty characters would come in. The Brimstone brothers were an invention of mine.

**JF:** *I liked the linkage between the mean kids in the real world and these Brimstone brothers.*

**DK:** I couldn't leave the mean kids to be emissaries of the devil — absolutely evil. And again, in working over the story, I liked that little scene in which old Lester catches them trying to pee on the wall — he humiliates them and tells them to act in a decent way, and they do begin to act in a decent way, and I thought that that would show that they weren't the devil themselves, but if you really told them to behave themselves they would actually behave themselves; I'd like to think that's so! But I did not want to leave them as the real devils.

**JF:** *How have young readers responded to it?*

**DK:** A number of readers seem to have liked it. I've been especially interested in black children reading it, and, in fact, I was told by someone of a seven-year-old kid who said he was reading it. I've never had anybody tell me that I shouldn't be writing this sort of thing.

**JF:** *Well, in fact, that was my next question, whether you'd been caught in the appropriation of voice issue.*

**DK:** Actually what happened was, with the *House of the Good Spirits*, last year or the year before during Black History Month, they hired an actor, a Mr.



Ishmael from a theatre company, to read it at the Science Centre, and he had a very appreciative audience. I've never had anybody saying "you shouldn't be writing this." At the same time, I think that one of the reasons I've had trouble publishing it in the US is that aspect of things.

Anyway, I've had no trouble over that book; I would rather welcome some, quite frankly — I could use the publicity! It hasn't been reviewed much; it hasn't been reviewed in the Toronto press, or in the black press here.

**JF:** *And I wonder if this is a quiet sort of censorship, or if it's just that they've overlooked it.*

**DK:** Well, it's hard to say. I'd be interested in reading a critical review of it, you know. The reviews I've had have been quite good, actually. There was a good one by Mary Ann Stouck in *CCL*.

I think that for one thing, *The House of the Good Spirits* is not only about a black child, it's about relations between black and white people. Some of the major characters are white — Li'l Massa, Mr. Stern, and others; somebody has to write about them. In the case of Amos, yes he is black; but he's also a loner, and a somewhat intellectual child of professional parents, and I know something about that! And one sees all sorts of people in the universities who are quite different from each other; even from different parts of Africa, there may be very large differences between them.

In the past there was a good deal of collecting of native myths and legends by white people; and now the natives are collecting their own legends and publishing them, which is great. But I don't regard collecting myths and legends of a non-literate culture as stealing. Where does the stealing come in? Right now, Thomas King writes these fine stories. They're fine stories and he deserves all the success he has, and I wish him well. But first of all, what language is he writing in?

**JF:** *He's writing in English.*

**DK:** He's writing in English, a European language. I understand that when native languages were first put in written form, it was done by European missionaries, and I'm delighted to see native writers now using this for their own purposes. But I don't regard it as an appropriation if they do this.

For example, let's take this wonderful song, "Let My People Go," sung by black slaves about "When Israel was in Egypt's Land." Now, should I regard that as an appropriation from the Jews? Of course I don't. They're taking a Bible story and retelling it to fit their own circumstances.

But I tell you, this issue has influenced my writing in this way: I don't think I would write another book about black people, just as such — I mean, I may have some black characters in the book. But for example, Nancy Jackson, who has done the etchings for several of my books, told me that down in New Jersey there were Native Indians who bought or otherwise got black

slaves and set them free — and it sounds like a wonderful story. Somebody should write it up, it would make a wonderful book for children — but it's not going to be me! In fact, if I met a young black writer who was looking for a theme, I'd say, "go look at that."

**JF:** *The pivotal moment in **The House of the Good Spirits** comes when Li'l Massa says of the slaves, "these are my people."*

**DK:** That's where he saves his soul! And I tried to have a feeling of redemption afterward.

**JF:** *And throughout the book he is vacillating between staying with his slaves or not.*

**DK:** They had to look after him; they couldn't leave him.

**JF:** *Underlying many of your stories is a sense of an inclusive spirituality. In **The House of the Good Spirits** both the Christians (black and white) and the Jewish Mr. Stern sail off into the afterlife together. There seems to be enough room here for every reader to enter in. Is this something conscious, or does it just emanate from your own views?*

**DK:** Probably the latter. As I said, my heavenly powers, the Central Office, these are sort of jokers. It's not for me to tell what the nature of the heavenly powers is. In point of fact, theologically speaking, especially in Uncle Jacob, it is more of the Greek than anything else. In the *Iliad*, what you have is the gods playing and carrying out their various adulteries and so forth, and all these are translated as human tragedies. And this is what you find in *Uncle Jacob's Ghost Story*, where you have the gods making bets whether Princep will go to Sarajevo or not. So I suppose one could say I have not necessarily an atheistic view, but an agnostic view of a universe presided over by mocking spirits. It certainly is not any one theology. I could well see Mr. Stern and the Christians heading off to wherever they're going, and being surprised at what they find. They're all getting along fine, anyway.

**JF:** *Many of your characters — even the light-hearted Mr. Mopski in **The Dinosaur Duster** — are marginal figures in some way; many are immigrants who are homesick or at least feeling lonely and displaced. Is this a conscious concern of yours, or do the best stories just seem to come out of those situations?*

**DK:** Marginal. Well, they are often lonely. It's true, I suppose none of them are in positions of great power. It's true of Jacob, and his ghostly friends are immigrants — and of course the dinosaurs! I guess I find myself more attracted to such folk, it's true — I hadn't thought about that so much. Amos's parents aren't so much, and they have a fairly stable family, but when it comes down to it they are immigrants — temporary immigrants. It could be part of my Jewish background too. In the past, Jews often settled in seaports because they might have to move suddenly. In science, in microbiology and biochemistry, Jews are very well represented; in other branches of science, rather less so. In the past, few of the ecologists were Jewish; now some are.

But I think part of the ethos might have been that you might suddenly have to pick up and go. If you're studying things in a test-tube, you can get an answer in a short period of time. But if you're an ecologist and you have to wait for trees to grow, well maybe you're not going to be here! I think that in the past there has been the idea that you might have to pick up and scoot. And my characters do sort of pick up and scoot!

**JF:** *The dragon Nonesuch, interestingly enough, is marginalized by choice.*

**DK:** Yes. He chooses to become small.

**JF:** *And he finds himself drawn to these creatures around the pond.*

**DK:** In point of fact, dragons are water spirits too — like our poor Loch Ness Monster. But he would have stayed there if it hadn't been destroyed. And he would have stayed in the monastery too.

**JF:** *And Manuel in *The Night Voyagers* also is marginalized when he refuses to speak.*

**DK:** Manuel stops speaking, not because of a conscious decision, but because of the shock of seeing his father's body being washed away. For this reason, he gets closer to the dead than to the living, until the end. You will have noted that, as in some of my other books, he's a person living in the boundaries between this world and the "next," if such exists.

**JF:** *In some ways your style reminds me of that of the folktale — where much is suggested rather than spelled out in detail, and the reader/listener is left to fill in the gaps in the text. Is this an effect you strive for?*

**DK:** It's my style, I think, that I've developed. I hope they do have weight. I tend to remember a lot, Shakespearean sonnets, parts of the Bible. I was just telling the students I was talking to yesterday that they should read the Bible to see how you can say a great deal in a few words. And I talked about the beginning of the Book of Kings, where it says "King David was old and stricken in years, and he put on clothes but he got no heat." There's also a statement from Tacitus, who was writing about a very bad time when people were killed for what they might say; he says "We should have lost memory as well as voice, if to forget had been as easy as to keep silent." Very heavy words. Anyway, I don't want to speak archaically, but I try to say what I have to say through simple words. And the rhythm is very important. And it's informed by a generally ironic spirit!

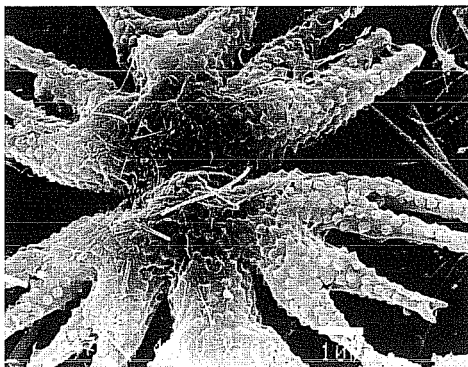
**JF:** *When do you find time to write in your busy life?*

**DK:** Well, even when I was a full-time professor I would take time to write. But the way I would do it ... I would just take the odd time here and there ... sometimes when I had to finish off something I would just get down to it, but even at other times if I, say, spend an hour writing in the morning, then when I walk to work I'm thinking about things, problems that come up. And I do a lot of travelling too, so I think then, and then I can sort of sit down and write

on trains and so forth. So I've taken time to write. I still have somewhat irregular times of writing. I have to watch it — I get a little idea for writing and I may want to sit down and write it separately from what I'm supposed to be doing! It's a family thing to do other things!

**JF:** *Well, thank you very much for taking the time to chat with me about your work.*

After my visit to Donn's office I lingered a moment, admiring those photographs of algae again, and thinking how they offer the viewer access to an invisible world that is both strange and marvellous — much like Donn Kushner's books.



*The alga Micrasterias radiata*

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