



Pam Houston. Web site file.

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 like they come home
 when **I come to the West.**

Pam Houston

With Robert Wilder

Pam Houston is the author of two short story collections, *Cowboys Are My Weakness* and *Waltzing the Cat*; an essay collection, *A Little More About Me*; and a novel, *Sight Hound*. She is the director of creative writing at UC Davis and teaches at many conferences and workshops in the United States and abroad. Robert Wilder spoke to Houston at The Trading Post in Taos during a break from their teaching at the 2007 Taos Summer Writers Conference. Houston and Wilder are also among the teachers at the 2008 conference. This year's keynote speaker is Natalie Goldberg, the subject of a previous interview in *El Palacio* (Vol. 112/3. Read it at elpalacio.org).

Wilder: As a person who grew up in the East and now is very associated with the West, do you see yourself now as a westerner?

Houston: No, no. I think I'll always feel like someone who grew up in New Jersey. And I don't mind that. In fact, I see myself very much as someone who fell in love with the West who grew up in New Jersey. That seems to me like a particular subcategory. The West is my home. I hope never to live back East, though there are places back East that I love to visit. Even the difference between California, where I teach, and Colorado, where I live—when I get off the plane in Colorado, my whole body relaxes. Like there's something about this region and the color of the air here and the sky, the Rocky Mountain region, which absolutely feels like home in a way that I never imagined anywhere could feel like home. Because I never had that feeling of home as a child.

But do I feel like a westerner? No. I feel like someone who loves where they live and who feels like they come home when I come to the West.

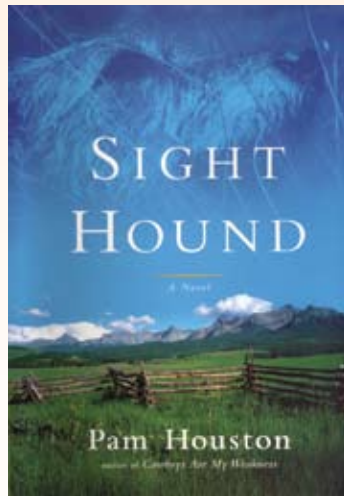
Wilder: Some people would say—not to embarrass you—that you are a major western woman figure. People view you as this sort of ideal, maybe idealized version of this symbol of western women. Is that a great responsibility, or is that something you just don't think about?

I wrote **from the time** I was little, like four, but
I **never thought** that was what I could do, **at that age.**

Houston: People want me to be a certain way. They want me to be brave. That's the biggest thing. They want me to be a river guide forever. They want me to be the woman who didn't have kids and can leap onto a bucking bronco. And I have never been that woman. I was a river guide. I was never brave. I was good at it. But I was never not afraid. I feel like in my work I'm trying to be absolutely as honest as I can be, in fiction or in nonfiction. I don't mean like tell the exact truth of my experience. I mean I'm trying to get at some kind of essential truth about what it means for me to be alive. So I don't feel like I'm misleading people about my bravery. God knows. I read even those early stories and *Cowboys* and I think, this woman was scared to death.

So in a way, the western thing is the same. It's like, sure, I write about the West. I think I wrote well about the West. I think I found my voice here. If I were a westerner, if I had been born here, I might not have even seen it. And I'm so much a person who came here and let the West blow my mind. Which is because I grew up in suburban Pennsylvania, and that's a big part of the puzzle. Without that step, I might write about the West in a completely different way.

Wilder: When you were at the Jersey shore, growing up in Pennsylvania, did you see yourself then later becoming a writer? How did you see yourself working with the stuff that made you a little different than your average teenager growing up? I don't know if you want to call it an artistic sensibility or the fact that something was a little different for you. When did you decide that that was going to turn into something like writing?



Houston: My parents were a lot older than most people's parents. And I was an only child. So there was that sort of basic fact. They were alcoholics. So it was just a very isolated childhood in many ways. No siblings, much older parents who were mostly out. I think that set the tone for it.

I had this fantastic babysitter named Martha Washington who taught me to read when I was two. So I think that was the avenue into words and books. But I was thinking the other day and I was remembering back to being in high school and college and when I would

have boyfriends and, especially because I went to Dennison, this very preppy college. So I would have boyfriends, I would go to their parents' country club or whatever. And of course, those boys were trained to get very proprietary very fast. Like *my* girlfriend, *my* country club, *my* parents, *my* summerhouse. And this thing would happen to me. And even in high school when a boy tried to claim me. I wrote from the time I was little, like four, but I never thought that was what I could do, at that age.

But I would have this feeling—because I had it the other day in an awkward situation, it took me right back to this feeling—where every cell in my body was so prepared for flight. We'd go to the summerhouse on whatever, Lake Michigan. Every cell would get ready to fly. And like if this stiff breeze had come through the window, it would just pick me up and take me out the window. And I didn't know what that meant then. And I'm sure it happened, things got ugly in my house a lot, and I'm sure that's where the originating moment of that feeling was. But that feeling like I was going somewhere. I was going somewhere. And that we could all

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sit around and pretend we were going to have this conversation about, oh, my girlfriend, and then we'll get pinned or whatever people did at Dennison, but it wasn't really going to happen to me. Because this breeze was going to pick me up and take me somewhere.

And I think that's about the West. I think it's about writing. I think it's about living this life, which still doesn't look at all normal. Like I'm still leading this life which, however much I wanted it to get to normal from here, it's just not going there.

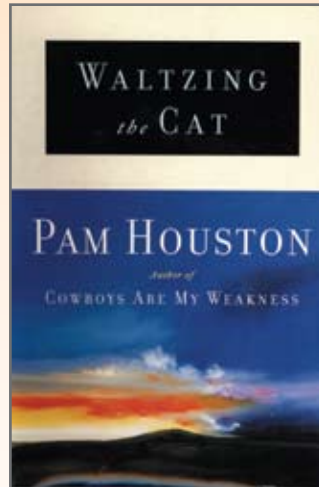
Wilder: I think many people know about your love for sports. Not a lot of people know about your love of art and museums. Talk a little bit about where that started, or what you do now.

Houston: One reason I don't speak about it is because I don't feel very qualified. I accidentally find art that I love. I almost never go to a city without checking out the museum. I used to go into an art museum, like the Institute in Chicago or MOMA, and I used to just be faced with everything I didn't know. Wow. Here's everything I don't know. And there's something I like. But it doesn't matter because I so don't understand it in context that I may as well not even like it. But these days, like many other things, I'm just easier on myself. And I can go and see what I respond to and not be hard on myself.

But I also love other art forms. One thing that I haven't talked much about that I do feel more comfortable talking about than visual art is theater. I'm such a novice. But an appreciative novice. I went to New York just to see the Tom Stoppard play *The Coast of Utopia*.

Wilder: What was that like for you?

Houston: My mom was an actress, so I grew up sort of backstage at the theater. No particularly great art kinds of theater, but pretty good sometimes. But I love theater, and I love Stoppard, and I had read a couple of lukewarm reviews of



Waltzing the Cat followed *Cowboys Are My Weakness*, the 1993 winner of the Western States Book Award.

that play that were around and my colleague walked out of it. I just decided I had to go see it. Because one thing I love more than anything is really, really long theater. Like I saw *Angels in America*, a marathon. I saw this play that was in Denver at the Royal Shakespeare Company, which was actually seventeen hours. But this Stoppard play was about the Russian Revolution. And he's such a genius, because it's so much about ideas. He's just talking about desire and art and freedom and democracy and socialism, for eleven hours, and it was just, to say I was enraptured for the whole eleven hours, wouldn't be the slightest overstatement. It was magnificent. And to me,

you just can't spend eleven hours better. Absolutely no one knows that about me. To me, you can't spend eleven hours better than that, sitting in a theater watching an eleven-hour Tom Stoppard play.

Wilder: What about a baseball game with extra innings or an overtime Denver Broncos game, or a Bruce Springsteen concert?

Houston: More than a baseball extra innings, maybe not more than a Bronco AFC championship. Maybe not more than the Colorado Avalanche in the Stanley Cup.

Wilder: Eleven hours of Bruce?

Houston: Where are the seats? ■

Robert Wilder's essays have appeared in *Newsweek*, *Details*, *Salon*, and *Creative Nonfiction*. He teaches English at Santa Fe Preparatory School, and his column "Daddy Needs a Drink" is published monthly in the *Santa Fe Reporter*. His first book, *Daddy Needs a Drink*, was released in paperback in May. His second, *Tales from the Teachers' Lounge*, was published by Delacorte last fall. Photo by Jennifer Esperanza.

