

Pure Fiction

Mystery, suspense, science fiction—**ANDREA MILLER** profiles three Buddhist-inspired novelists who make up stories to tell the truth about our world.

WHEN I WAS FIRST INTRODUCED to Darcy Lott, she was at work as a stunt double, wearing what she dubbed “the world’s shortest kimono” and preparing to hurl herself off the turret of a Victorian building. She was careful while preparing for the stunt—or wanted to believe she was—but she got distracted at the last minute when a spotlight panned the dark street and she saw her long-lost brother, or what looked like him, on the roof of the Barbary Coast Zen Center. Suddenly the camera was on Darcy and she had to jump. No time to recheck her stunt prep, she missed the catcher bag and crashed into the sidewalk, red seeping from her shoulder. Was it a coincidence that the very next day an old friend of Darcy’s disappeared, echoing the painful disappearance of her brother twenty years earlier?

PHOTO BY LIZA MATTHEWS

This is the beginning of *Hungry Ghosts*, Susan Dunlap’s second book in her Darcy Lott mystery series. But now, with the release of *No Footprints* this August, Dunlap is up to number five. She’s also the author of three other mystery series, one suspense novel, and a collection of short stories, bringing her total number of published books to twenty-four. Of her books, the Darcy Lott series is most clearly about Buddhism. Yet, according to Dunlap, all of them have a Buddhist element. “They do, because I do,” she says.

Buddhist fiction is a slippery fish to define. Some would say it’s composed solely of stories written by Buddhists and/or stories that feature Buddhist characters. Others would expand the definition to include stories written by non-Buddhist authors about non-Buddhist characters, as long as the writing reflects a Buddhist sensibility in addressing themes such as suffering, compassion, and emptiness. The Buddhist canon becomes very large indeed, however, if we go with the more liberal definition. Novelists—Buddhist and otherwise—are interested in the human condition. And since Buddhism rests on a foundation of

PHOTO BY NEWELL DUNLAP

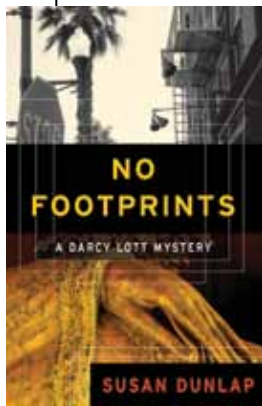


Susan Dunlap is a founding board member of Sisters in Crime, an organization dedicated to supporting women who write mysteries.



Best Not to Wear Red

From Susan Dunlap's novel *No Footprints*.



LEO—GARSON—ROSHI—poured tea into our small ceramic mugs. It was a task I, the assistant—*jisha*—should have done. It was a sign of his concern. I wanted to pick up the mug and drink down his caring, but it was too soon, the tea would scald my tongue, the mug burn my fingers. I put my hand over the cup, feeling the steam. ...

“After I pulled the woman back from the bridge, she knocked me down hard, banged my head. Then

she left her cute red jacket and vanished. Why?”

I was expecting a quote from some ancient Zen sutra. What he said was, “If you’re going to disappear, best not to wear red.”

Huh?

“Where are you now?”

“What?”

He sipped the hot tea, put down the cup, and said nothing. He was telling me—no, waiting for me to realize—that I wasn’t operating in the now. *Now?* “All right.” I took a sip of my tea, using the movement to focus, to let go of imagining and its seductions, of the theories I wanted to try out.

“Now,” I said, “I know nothing about her except that she left her jacket after I saved her from killing herself. I can only speculate—”

“Or not,” Leo said.

Despite everything I laughed. And he smiled too.

“But if I don’t speculate how am I going to find her?”

“Going down the wrong path isn’t necessarily progress.”

From *No Footprints*, by Susan Dunlap (Counterpoint, 2012).

universal human truths, it’s common for writers of all faiths and traditions to express some Buddhist ideas in their work, even if they are unschooled in Buddhism. As Charles Johnson wrote in his foreword to *Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree and Other Works of Buddhist Fiction*, “The Buddhist experience is simply the *human* experience.” Nonetheless, novelists who have studied or practiced Buddhism tend to offer a refreshing perspective by consciously weaving the dharma into their stories.

You could call fiction a lie. It’s an invention, a fantasy. But fiction writers are using their “lies” to tell the truth—as they see it—about our world. And in showing us their truth, they offer us a path to compassion. Novels, written well, take us directly into the hearts and minds of others. These others may be fictional characters but they’re also a lot like our friends and families, our enemies and adversaries, and the strangers on the train or at the grocery store. When we read novels, we see why characters are driven to do what they do, and by extension we get a glimpse of the inner lives of the real people who are all around us.

IN HER LIFE, Susan Dunlap has been immediately sure of three things: Zen, her husband, and the city of Berkeley. In the 1970s, she walked into a zendo for the first time and felt instantly at home. An only child, she’d been raised by parents of different religions—one Catholic, one protestant—and whatever conflict there’d been in the family was over that difference. As a result, she learned that spirituality was an important issue and that she could make her own decision about it.

According to Dunlap, Zen is a fit for her because it doesn’t demand that practitioners accept doctrine *per se*; instead it emphasizes practitioners’ own experience. She says, “I want to be able to sit quietly facing the wall and know that what is real is what’s going on in this moment, and that there’s nothing else forced upon me.”

It was Dunlap’s husband who got her interested in Eastern spirituality when he gave her a copy of *Autobiography of a Yogi*. They met in 1968 and, as she puts it, they’ve been married “forever.” Her theory is that when your job is writing the thrilling stuff of murder mysteries, you don’t need constant change and excitement in your relationships. Laughing, she adds, “When you kill people in fiction, you don’t need to kill them in your regular life.”

It was early on in her marriage when Dunlap began writing mysteries. One day she was reading an Agatha Christie novel, and she turned to her husband and said,

“You know, I could do this.” There was a long pause from him, as if he were holding back a rude comment. Then he said, “Well, go ahead.”

She did, but it wasn’t quite as easy as she’d thought. Her first novel, which was about twins and encounter groups, didn’t get picked up by a publisher. Nor did her second novel, her third, her fourth, her fifth... but she kept pounding away at her typewriter because she loved writing. Finally, for her seventh book, she landed a publisher.

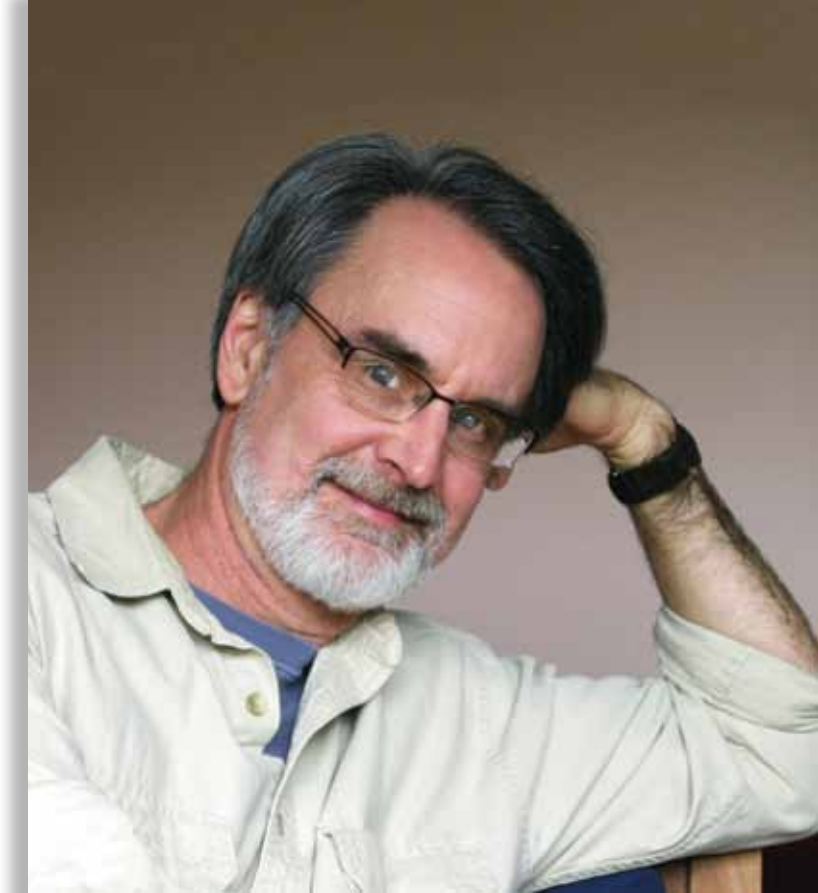
Book by book, the pattern has emerged that place plays a central role in Dunlap’s writing. This reflects the role of place in her life. She grew up in and around New York City. Then in 1968, she met someone who told her it was always warm and sunny in California. It had been zero degrees for a month in New York, and there was a garbage strike raging. Dunlap packed her bags and headed west.

With only one exception, all of Dunlap’s books are set in California and, while Berkeley is her first love, the whole San Francisco Bay Area has inspired her work. *No Footprints*, for example, revolves around a mysterious woman who attempts to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge. When the protagonist, Darcy Lott, prevents the suicide, the woman disappears into the night with the words: “By the weekend, I’ll be dead.”

Buddhism and mysteries make a good pairing, says Dunlap, because both ask you “to dismiss what is inessential. To look at what is. In a mystery, things are not as they seem, so what the detective is trying to do is see what the real facts are as opposed to all the things that cover up those facts. That is, the things that other people intend to make the detective believe, the things that the detective herself assumes.”

Mysteries are also a succinct reflection of the Buddhist concept of karma. As Dunlap explains it, at the heart of every murder mystery is a dead person. In normal life, people are killed all the time and they don’t necessarily bring their fate upon themselves. But in a mystery—for it to work—they do in some fashion have to draw the murderer to them. Otherwise, readers won’t really care about the story. The victim in a mystery can cause their murder by doing something evil or conniving or by doing something innocent or even well intentioned. “The important thing,” says Dunlap, “is that they have done something to set in motion the wheel of karma in their lives.”

CARY GRONER DISCOVERED Buddhism in high school and it immediately resonated with him. But his mother thought meditation was peculiar and forbade him to do it. “I’d get caught meditating the way that other kids get caught smoking dope or shoplifting,” says Groner, the author of *Exiles*. “Fortunately, meditation is something you can do without making any noise or attracting any attention, so at night I’d sneak out of bed



Writing is a practice, says Cary Groner. “You have to be willing to enjoy the process and not just look forward to the result.”

and sit on the floor and practice.” It felt quite subversive, which made it all the more appealing.

In his twenties, Groner felt the need for a Buddhist teacher and searched for a fit. Then one day in 1985, he was in Powell’s Bookstore in Portland when he saw a poster for a talk by Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche. “In the poster, Rinpoche was laughing and had this look that was fierce and funny and profound all at once,” says Groner. “I remember thinking, this might be the guy.”

And he was.

Groner spent the next couple of years living at Chagdud Tulku’s center in Cottage Grove, Oregon. “Rinpoche was the full package,” says Groner. “He had deep insight and compassion, yet he was also totally down to earth and very funny. That’s not to say the relationship was all peaches and cream. He had quite a temper and could get wrathful. Being with him was by turns exalting and terrifying, but Rinpoche hammered away at the encrustation of habits I came in with, and I did my best to hang in with that process.”

These days, Groner is studying with Chagdud Tulku’s lineage holder, Lama Drimed Norbu. He does a retreat every summer and he’s part of a small group in the Bay Area that meets to do *tsok*, a Vajrayana Buddhist practice of offering and purification. From Groner’s point of view, he’s lucky. As a writer working from home, he can usually sit for a couple of hours each morning.

Groner writes in various genres. He has more than twenty years of journalism under his belt and writes often about health-care,

specializing in lower-extremity biomechanics. He's been writing plays and poetry since he was a teenager and fiction since his twenties. That said, years went by without him having much success with creative writing. "I wrote plays and couldn't get them produced," he tells me. "I wrote screenplays and couldn't sell them, and I wrote a couple of really terrible novels. Finally I decided if I was going to do this, I had to stop screwing around and really bring some commitment to it."

In 2006, Groner began his MFA in fiction writing at the University of Arizona, and his thesis eventually became *Exiles*, for which he landed a book deal with Spiegel & Grau, an imprint of Random House. *Exiles* is the story of cardiologist Peter Scanlon, who takes a look at the rubble of his failed marriage and moves to Kathmandu to volunteer at a health clinic. Never imagining the risks and hardships he'd find there, Peter takes his seventeen-

year-old daughter with him. The poverty, the child prostitution, the shortage of medical supplies, and the unfamiliar diseases are all a shock, but the encroaching civil war could cost father and daughter their very lives.

"When I started writing *Exiles*, I was interested in the overlap between Buddhist thought and the sciences," says Groner. "So my idea was to write an epistolary novel, an exchange of letters between a Tibetan lama and an evolutionary biologist. But it didn't take long to realize that would be interesting to me and about five other people on earth. If I wanted anyone to actually read the thing, I had to come up with a narrative."

Out of this realization, Groner eventually developed a fast-paced plot, honed draft by draft. There are keys to creating suspense, he learned. Within the overarching conflicts that form the narrative's spine, there need to be other problems that twist and turn, so that

every time a character solves one problem it creates another. That way, there's always a challenge that characters are working on. "This is very much like life," says Groner, "like samsara."

The action-packed storyline may have been a departure from Groner's original idea for *Exiles*, but one element, at least, has remained the same: the theme of science meeting Buddhism. In the finished book, the science angle manifests as Peter, the American doctor with a background in biology, while the Buddhist angle manifests as a Tibetan lama. Peter and the lama meet in Nepal, and their conversations challenge Peter to think deeply about issues such as evolution, the mind, and the nature of existence.

"Writing from a spiritual perspective can be tricky," says Groner. "You want to be true to your interests and experiences, but you never want to turn your work into propaganda. It's important to remember that your job is to write, not proselytize." Although *Exiles* deals with Buddhism, Groner is primarily focused on telling human stories and revealing how people are led by their foibles to some sort of crisis and then to understanding. "This," he says, "is what all storytellers do, regardless of whether they have spiritual inclinations or not."

Groner occasionally experiments with magical realism, but these days he does so sparingly. Despite his admiration for writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Groner feels that, as a reader, unearthly happenings engage his skepticism and pull him out of a narrative. Magical realism, Groner says, can "distance the reader from the real human experience unfolding on the page."

"Real" is not a word that Groner hesitates to use when describing fiction, because, for him, fiction requires relentless honesty. As he puts it: "The revision process not only involves looking at structural issues, such as information release, rhythm, and tone. It also involves relentlessly ferreting out anything dishonest in the writing, by which I mean anything that is not how things are in real life."

Groner often hears writers claim that writing is their meditation. But in his opinion, these two activities are distinct. Writing, for him, is more like a waking dream—the writer is following the story that he or she is creating. Meditation, on the other hand, is much more open and free. Yet Groner says there is one way writing and meditation are the same, and that's the flow they share, the way they both make you lose track of time.

"Writing and meditation are compatible," says Groner. "Anyone who's tried to sit quietly for periods of time knows the fantastical capabilities that get unleashed when all you're looking for is quiet. I sometimes keep a little pad and pen with me so that if I get a good idea I can jot it down and forget about it, because otherwise I try to hang on to it and it becomes extremely distracting.

"Sitting practice relaxes and opens my mind, and this allows for free play of the imagination that can be conducive to writing."



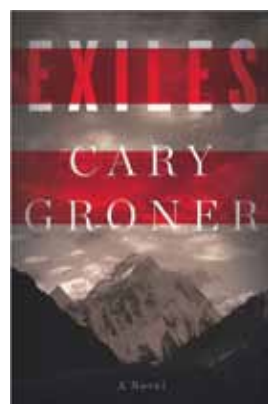
Kim Stanley Robinson's new novel *2312* is an epic story of interplanetary love and strife.

"LITERATURE IS MY RELIGION," says Kim Stanley Robinson. "The novel is my way of making sense of things." He doesn't meditate, nor does he call himself a Buddhist. Nonetheless, he's quick to acknowledge that Buddhism has had a profound impact on him and his writing. Zen philosophy, in particular, has taught him to stay in the moment, to pay attention to the natural world, and to ground himself in work. In interviews he frequently speaks of the Zen rubric "chop wood, carry water" and claims that it could just as easily be "run five miles, write five pages." In Zen, according to Robinson, there is ritual in daily activities—gardening, washing dishes, looking after little children. "This puts a spark into things, a glow around them," he tells me. "It gives a meaning to life that I appreciate very much."

Robinson is best known for his science fiction trilogy about terraforming Mars: *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, and *Blue Mars*. Buddhism does not play an obvious role in these titles. It does, however, in his alternative history novel, *The Years of Rice and Salt*, and in his series about climate change, which kicks off with *Forty Signs of Rain*. *The Years of Rice and Salt* is a re-imagining of the Black Death and its aftermath. According to history, the plague wiped out a third of Europe's population; then Europe recovered from the loss and colonized large pockets of the globe. But what if the plague had wiped out 99 percent of all Europeans instead? Perhaps, Robinson posits, Buddhism and Islam would have become the two most influential world religions. *The Years of Rice and Salt*



Mercy Was In Short Supply From Cary Groner's novel, *Exiles*.



HE'D HOLD OUT hope until the very end, he couldn't help it. And even though he probably wouldn't pray, he wasn't above a little bargaining. If you took man to be made in God's image, this made more sense, anyway. Mercy was in short supply, but commerce was common as dirt and understood by everyone.

He formed the offer in his mind and sent it out: Kill me, then. I'm all I have to trade. But let Alex live; she's

worked hard, and she's young, and she deserves to see something come of it.

As if this thought had somehow penetrated her sleeping mind, Alex stirred and murmured. "Dad?" she said.

"Here." His voice a dry rag in the wind, caught on some nail.

She crawled toward him. He met her halfway and

helped her to his little section of wall. She draped herself across his lap, facing out, toward the doorway, and he stroked her hair. He'd always done this when she was a child.

She whispered, her throat parched, "Will anyone find out what happened to us?"

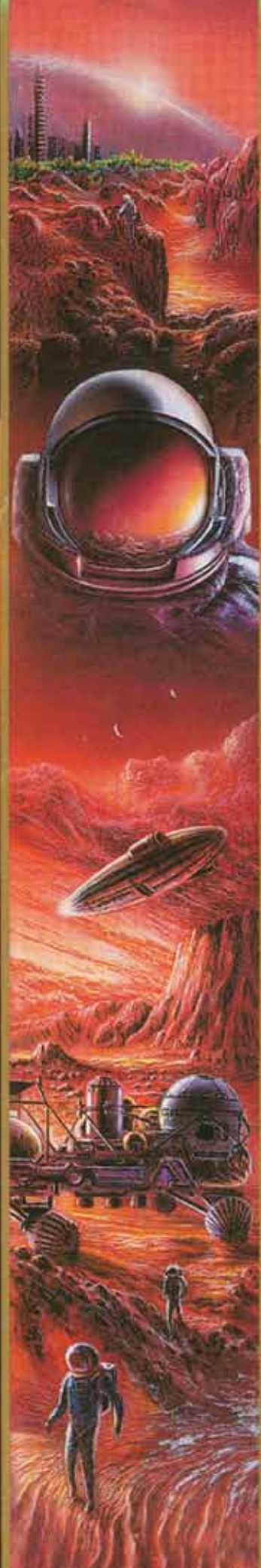
He knew what she meant by this; she meant her mother. He doubted anybody would ever know. He wasn't sure Cheryl would care, anyway, at least about him, but there was no reason to point this out. "It might be better if she didn't."

Alex lifted a hand, then touched her fingertips to the packed earth, as if testing its solidity. "I guess so."

She adjusted her position. Her ribs pressed on Peter's thigh, and his foot was going to sleep. He wanted her to be comfortable, so he held still; he wouldn't be needing the foot, anyway, once the sun rose.

From Exiles, by Cary Groner (Spiegel & Grau, 2011).

PHOTO BY LIZA MATTHEWS



From the cover
of *Red Mars*

is the tale of several main characters and their reincarnations, spanning the fourteenth century to the modern age. Over their lifetimes, the characters struggle to better themselves, and between lifetimes they meet in the *bardo*, the gap between death and rebirth according to the Tibetan Buddhist understanding.

Like Cary Groner, Kim Stanley Robinson is deeply interested in how Buddhism and science intersect, and this is the theme he explores in *Forty Signs of Rain*. The book opens with the scientist Anna Quibler showing up for work one day at the National Science Foundation and discovering that Khembalung, a country she's never heard of before, has established an embassy in the building. It turns out that Khembalung is a small, new country of exiled Tibetan Buddhists who originally hail from the mythical kingdom of Shambhala, and that among the monks at the embassy is the Panchen Lama. That is, Robinson clarifies, "the real Panchen Lama who the Dalai Lama designated, who the Chinese immediately kidnapped, and who has been disappeared ever since. Well, in my novel he's living under a pseudonym in the NSF building."

Forty Signs of Rain was inspired in part by the Dalai Lama, particularly his thoughts on the common ground shared by science and Buddhism. Scientists and Buddhists both investigate the nature of reality; they both look at the world and ask, How can we make things better? How can we reduce suffering?

"I could not be more impressed by the current Dalai Lama," says Robinson. "He's always a presence in my house—his photo is on the refrigerator and next to my desk." When Robinson read that the Dalai Lama was going to speak in Washington, D.C., he got tickets and flew out. "It was bizarre," says Robinson. "There I was at the Washington Wizards basketball arena with 13,000 people, and the Dalai Lama was speaking. I put this event straight into the novel exactly as it happened. I couldn't help it—it was so incredible."

These days, Robinson writes his novels outdoors in a little courtyard on the north side of his house. It's shady there, so he can see his laptop screen, and he simply puts a tarp overhead if it's raining and bundles up if it's cold. As he puts it, being outdoors transforms writing into an adventure, into an interaction with about fifty little birds, the trees, the clouds, the changing of the seasons.

Nature and ecology have always played a significant role in Robinson's life. When he was a child, the coastal plain of Southern California was orchard country, planted with lemon and orange groves, avocado and eucalyptus. At age ten, Robinson believed he was the Huck Finn of this terrain and he dressed like him, exploring the irrigation ditches and the creeks. But in his teenage years, the bucolic orchards were ripped up and replaced with the concrete of condominiums and freeways. This made science fiction feel eerily familiar when he started reading it. In the rapid change and heavy-duty mechanization of the fictional future worlds, he recognized his own home. "It struck

me," says Robinson, "that science fiction was my realism."

In his SF, Robinson strives to convey a sense of hope about the environment, because he feels that despite the bad choices we're making right now, we're not necessarily creating a dystopia or apocalypse. "Science is powerful, people are smart, and there's potential to have both good and bad at once," he says. But people need to think deeply about possible ecological solutions, and fiction can be an accessible foundation for doing so. "I want to leave people with the sense of having had a lot of fun reading a novel, but I also want to lead them to interesting questions. That's really what science fiction always does."

In addition to SF, Robinson resonates with poetry and, when the renowned Beat poet Gary Snyder was teaching at U.C. Davis, he informally audited classes with him. "I was writing my novels at the same time," says Robinson, "so taking a break for Gary's class put extra stress on my novel-writing schedule. But it was worth it because Gary is truly an exemplary figure. I always joke that Zen Buddhism must be good for you—Gary is living proof of it. And he jokes himself about how, after spending ten years sitting on his butt, everything looks good to him ever afterward. But he's a very positive force in a lot of people's lives, including mine. He's informal, but very sharp, very generous. I think he always thought I was an oddball. You know, what is this science fiction author doing in my class writing second-rate nature poetry?"

Then Snyder's wife convinced Snyder to try Robinson's *Red Mars*, and he crunched through the whole trilogy, saying he never knew science fiction could be that good. Snyder is now retired, but the two writers have become friends and they see each other whenever Snyder visits Davis.

According to Robinson, writing is intimately connected to impermanence, to the fleeting present moment. "We're always in the present," he says. "There's a present in which I write sentences. Then later there's a present in which someone else looks at those sentences—the black marks on the page—and at that moment in their mind they make up a story based on the sentences that they read, as well as images from their own life. So there are the black marks on the paper, which are always there and continue year after year to be the same, but the book is only alive when someone's reading it. It's an interesting kind of impermanence. It's similar to music in that you always have the scores but you don't have the performances except when it's being played."

Reading, concludes Robinson, is what makes fiction live. ♦

ANDREA MILLER is deputy editor of the Shambhala Sun and the editor of the anthology *Right Here With You: Bringing Mindful Awareness Into Our Relationships*. Miller recently completed her MFA in creative writing and is still futzing with her first novel.

An Empty Land

From Kim Stanley Robinson's novel
The Years of Rice and Salt.

WE ARE REBORN many times. We fill our bodies like air in bubbles, and when the bubbles pop we puff away into the bardo, wandering until we are blown into some new life, somewhere back in the world. This knowledge had often been a comfort to Bold as he stumbled exhausted over battlefields in the aftermath, the ground littered with broken bodies like empty coats.

But it was different to come on a town where there had been no battle, and find everyone there already dead. Long dead; bodies dried; in the dusk and moonlight they could see the gleam of exposed bones, scattered by wolves and crows. Bold repeated the *Heart Sutra* to himself. "Form is emptiness, emptiness form. Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond. O, what an Awakening! All hail!"

The horses stalled on the outskirts of the town. Aside from the cluck and hiss of the river, all was still. The squinted eye of the moon gleamed on dressed stone, there in the middle of all the wooden buildings. A very big stone building, among smaller stone buildings.

Psin ordered them to put clothes over their faces, to avoid touching anything, to stay on their horses, and to keep the horses from touching anything but the ground with their hooves. Slowly they rode through narrow streets, walled by wooden buildings two or three stories high, leaning together as in Chinese cities. The horses were unhappy but did not refuse outright.

They came into a paved central square near the river, and stopped before the great stone building. It was huge. Many of the local people had come to it to die. Their lamasery, no doubt, but roofless, open to the sky—unfinished business. As if these people had only come to religion in their last days; but too late; the place was a boneyard. Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond.

From *The Years of Rice and Salt*, by Kim Stanley Robinson (Bantam Books, 2002).

