

Jim Misner  
Interview by Sue Staats

One of my favorite parts about interviewing Stories on Stage writers is coming upon something in their published biography that just begs for exploration. In Jim Misner's case, it was the mysterious reference to a career in "entertainment." Exactly what kind? Hmm... but we'll get to that. First: Jim's stories have a confidence, an ease and a richness that's clearly born of a lifetime of closely observed experience. But he's a relatively new writer, little published and not from the Sacramento area. How in the world, I thought, did he come to our attention? Well, in a word — connections.

*Edited for length and clarity.*

**Sue:** So, Jim, how did you come to the attention of Stories on Stage? How did we find out about you?

**Jim:** Well, through my son Sam, actually. He's an actor and singer (of the folk-rock duo Misner & Smith) and he knows your directors, Jessica and Joshua Laskey, and he gave them my new book of stories. And they liked enough of what they read to ask me if I wanted to do this. That's the connection: nepotism or whatever you call it. But that's how it came about.

**Sue:** Well, it worked to bring us another great writer and it's a good story as well. So, tell me about this collection. It's titled *A Short Ride*, right? I tried to find it on Amazon and couldn't and I'm wondering where it's for sale.

**Jim:** Here's what happened. I self-published it. I did not expect it to be sold in bookstores, it was to be given or sold to friends and family. I'd already produced all this writing, all these stories, and during COVID isolation I decided to take them and put them together in a book form. I think I have about 40 copies.

**Sue:** Be sure to bring some to our event — I know people will want to buy the book after hearing the stories. What made you decide to collect them into a book?

**Jim:** Well, I just had all these stories. And it took a lot of organizing to decide which one went where, but I did very little editing once I decided. They had been workshopped in a variety of workshops and I been out reading stories at different open mic situations, especially one here in Petaluma at the local coffeehouse that was really well attended. And I did a couple down in Marin and maybe another dozen or two over the over the years I was writing.

**Sue:** I wanted to ask you how you started. Your work has a kind of ripeness that younger writers don't often have — one of the benefits of starting later in life, I would guess.

**Jim:** When I retired, I ended up taking a creative writing class at night up at Santa Rosa Community College. As I understand it, they have one of the oldest groups of students in the state, a lot of people go back to college for whatever reason. My reason was, I just wanted to take a writing class. And immediately, in the first evening, I found something. I'd experienced it once many years before, in the '60s, and then when my kids were young, in my 40s, but I'd never followed through on it. But this time, I just connected from the first exercise. I mean, literally, I was onto something, and I realized it, too. I think it I couldn't have done it before. I couldn't have gotten near to what I was knowing and experiencing and sharing. When I was younger and wanted to be a writer, it was because it was cool to be a writer or a songwriter. I was reading contemporary poetry and literature and Kerouac and, as I was in my early 20s, I wanted to write like they did. And then real life intruded.

**Sue:** Right, real life. You mention in your bio that you retired from the “entertainment business,” but you don’t say what kind.

**Jim:** I knew that question would come up! I was going to write in my bio that I was a “turf accountant,” but my son Sam said nobody would know what that means.

**Sue:** What *does* it mean?

**Jim:** Well, in London, where my grandfather was from and where bookmaking has always been legal, the guys who do it are called “turf accountants.” The “turf” part is related to horse racing. But really, I was a poker player, all my life, starting with home games. And the older I got, the more serious it got. And I eventually started going to cardrooms and learning, in those days, a different game called lowball. This later became Texas hold'em. I played a lot of poker. And I also worked in the industry, here in Sonoma County. I didn't have to commute and I didn't have to do the other work I'd done for years in the chemical industry. I found a kind of home there — and also, actually, a lot of good material. I wasn't writing at the time, but I always thought like a writer. I just felt the stories, characters, plots, even people's lives. I mean, it was just all in there. So that was the “entertainment business.” I used to tell people I worked with that we were really in the entertainment business. Getting people to come to our card room, poker room, required us to be entertainers in a sense.

**Sue:** What job did you do in the business?

**Jim:** Primarily, I played poker. I was called a proposition player. When I say this, people say, “Oh, you mean like a shill?” I say, yeah, but a proposition player's different. A proposition player plays with his own money and agrees to be at the club for a shift of, say, six hours and play in the games.

**Sue:** How does that benefit the cardroom?

**Jim:** It keeps the games going. The more players you have, the more likely they'll stay in play.

**Sue:** I'm fascinated. I know nothing about this business. So, I have to ask, was what you were doing legal?

**Jim:** Well, like the dealers, we had to be licensed. We all were. I also ran tournaments and balanced the cage. I did it for about 14 years. And I retired from it. So that was the entertainment world I worked in. And I know it will make people curious, especially those who don't know much about it. But yeah, it was legal.

**Sue:** What do you think of the popularity of televised poker and these very lucrative tournaments?

**Jim:** I can hardly watch it. It's not interesting to me. I played a couple of big tournaments in Reno a little bit, but didn't really enjoy it. I didn't enjoy tournament poker.

**Sue:** Why? It seems pretty exciting.

**Jim:** Because I was doing it full time.

**Sue:** Do you still play poker occasionally?

**Jim:** Well, before COVID, I would go once a week. There's a big casino and card room in Sonoma County about five miles from my house. I'd go and play for a couple of hours and then I'd have to leave. But then COVID hit and I just quit going. I'm due to go back.

**Sue:** I have to say, poker's loss was writing's gain! You mentioned that you got a lot of material from your work, so it's interesting that the three stories being read at the event are all cowboy stories. And I don't see anywhere in your bio that you were a cowboy! Tell me about the inspiration for these stories. They're all about one character, Dell...?

**Jim:** Dell Davies is his name, he's a rodeo cowboy. The first and the main story about him is a love story and the other two are shorter. One is about Dell after he retired and the third story is about Dell's ashes. They picked these three and it's odd because they were not sequential in the book at all, it's just that they were all about Dell. I think they really got the character. And I intentionally spread those stories out.

**Sue:** There's so much authentic detail in these stories, but it's not a life you've ever lived. Where did that come from?

**Jim:** I did a lot of driving and vacationing around the mountain states and the Southwest. I didn't know much about rodeo until I wrote these stories, but I did love traveling from Taos to Glacier Park and in the northwest. And even back into the '60s crossing the country. "A Short Ride" is about a couple of brothers riding freight trains. It's all fiction. But my buddies and I did that. In the '60s, the early and middle '60s, we crossed the country. Okay, back to the cowboy stories. I don't know where "Rodeo Days" came from. It just came. It's like I was hearing it, like I heard their voices. I write by ear. I hear stuff. And I love writing about the mountains and the West and the Old West.

**Sue:** I am very much looking forward to hearing these read. I understand your son Sam is the actor who's going to be reading? How do you think it will be for you seeing your son read and, as an actor, interpret your stories?

**Jim:** Sam is a very talented songwriter. He amazes me with the with the poetry in his music. So, I'm flattered that he will read it. Months ago, once he had read my book, he was the one who passed it along (to Jessica and Joshua.) So, it's a thrill to have him reading it.

**Sue:** Has he ever read your stories before?

**Jim:** Well, he and his brother, who has recording studio of his own, have recorded some of the stories for my pleasure as a surprise.

**Sue:** So, your short stories are out in the world. Are you working on anything else? What are you writing these days?

**Jim:** Just emails. And I'm okay with it. I could be spending some good time writing, and when I was creating the stories, I had a great time. But I feel okay with where I'm at. So, the short answer is no. It's regarding ambition. I don't have much.

**Sue:** Your life sounds peaceful and wonderful. And you seem content. Would you say you've been lucky?

**Jim:** Well, when you're a gambler — and I was a professional gambler, with two different careers, the "turf accounting" and the poker — you get well-acquainted with luck, when you're lucky. And you

certainly get well-acquainted with it when you're unlucky. And I always considered myself lucky — not *real* lucky, but lucky enough. Sometimes I've run into really lucky people and they didn't miss. But I was pretty satisfied knowing that I could rely on luck when I needed to. It's kind of like, we know what we need to know when we really need to know it. I've kind of thought of luck that way. I dodged a lot of bullets. I mean, not literally. But I've been lucky, yeah.

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