

San Francisco Chronicle

Herb Gold interview: 'elder statesman of the Beat Generation'

By Julian Guthrie | Published 2:54 pm, Friday, April 18, 2014

San Francisco writer and author Herb Gold, deemed an "elder statesman of the Beat Generation," turned 90 on March 9 and celebrated with his kids and grandkids.

From his book-and light-filled flat on Russian Hill, a one-bedroom walkup he calls his "Beatnik pad," the author of more than 20 books talked about the literary life, aging and social media.

He is the father of five grown kids and has six grandchildren, his most recent memoir is titled "Still Alive: A Temporary Condition," and he's written a novel due out this year.

Q: How do you like being called the elder statesmen of the Beat Generation?

A: Well, (Lawrence) Ferlinghetti is older, so it's not accurate. But I tell people that my main social life is going to funerals.

Q: You met Allen Ginsberg while in college at Columbia, correct? What are your lasting impressions of the man?

A: Allen was a good friend. He was serious - about being gay, about love, about poetry, of course. But he also had a good sense of humor. I remember Ginsberg was helping (William) Burroughs write "Naked Lunch." I asked Burroughs why he was addicted to drugs - he'd been addicted pretty much his whole life - and Burroughs said, "It's something to do."

Q: What didn't you like about Jack Kerouac?

A: I disliked Jack intensely. He was a liar, abusive and an alcoholic. I knew his daughter, whom he never recognized. I used to cross the street to avoid him.

Q: A Fulbright Fellowship sent you to Paris, where you finished your first novel, launched your literary career, and became friends with Saul Bellow. What stands out most from that time?

A: I lived in Paris after the war with my first wife. We lived in the St. Germain-des-Pris in this five-story building, and in the next room was (novelist and playwright) James Baldwin. We had to go to a public bath; there was no bathroom except a shared Turkish toilet. I remember a Dutch painter lived on the fifth floor. I was going out one day, and this little bug-eyed guy came asking

for the painter. I said I knew he wasn't there and the man said, "Tell him I came by." I said, "Who are you?" He said, "Picasso."

Q: How did you come to write for Playboy?

A: Oh, I published with them in the '50s. The money was good; it really supported me and my family. I'm still friendly with Hugh Hefner. I think he's around 88, and he just married a 26-year-old. He's a funny guy.

Q: How would you feel about dating a 26-year-old?

A: You got one in mind (laughing)?

Q: What are you working on now?

A: The galleys of my new book, a novel, are over there (he gestures to a desk, laden with magazines and papers). I'm going to call it "Psychopath in Love." It will be out this year sometime.

Q: What would you have been had you not been a writer?

A: I got my master's degree in philosophy at Columbia. My Fulbright was to do a thesis about the French philosophers (Denis) Diderot, Main de Biran and Henri Bergson. My early teaching was philosophy. My first book, "Birth of a Hero," was influenced by philosophy. I probably would have written and taught philosophy. I always suggest that young writers study anthropology or philosophy.

Q: Favorite restaurants or hangouts in San Francisco?

A: I was here as a teenage runaway at age 17. I'd hitchhiked here. And I was here near the end of the war. I've been in this place, always temporarily, for 53 years. My landlord wants me out to raise the rent, but I said they'll have to carry me out. I like Cafe Puccini on Columbus. I like the Crepe House on Polk. I like sushi. My car was stolen so I take the bus. Having it stolen was a great favor, as I was spending a lot on parking tickets. I go to the movies a lot.

Q: What are the best and worst things about a literary career?

A: The best thing is when someone appreciates your work. The worst thing is that you put your head above the trenches and people will want to shoot at you.

Q: Do you use social media?

A: Yes, I talk a lot! No e-mail. No computer. I use a typewriter. People spend too much time staring at their phones. When I see someone - it's always a woman - reading an actual book on the bus, I will go and congratulate her.

Q: Lessons learned?

A: I wake up in the morning and I'm 27 years old, and then I look in the mirror and I say, "Who is the old guy?"

Q: What's next?

A: Well, my kids did a surprise party for me when I was 80. I ordered them not to do another one until I hit the birthday ending in 00. So I'll expect a surprise party in 10 years.

To see a short video of Herb Gold, go to:

www.sfgate.com/news/item/San-Francisco-author-Herb-Gold-28880.php.

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<http://www.sfgate.com/books/article/Herb-Gold-interview-elder-statesman-of-the-Beat-5413781.php>

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