The manuscript arrived at Susie Bright’s house in Santa Cruz looking like any other package. The edges of the thick manila envelope in which it came seemed far more dirty and beat up than they should have been after a couple of days of travelling up the postal route from Malibu. Maybe it had slid around the floor of the filthiest mail truck in California, or maybe it had been re-used by the sender after having been stacked in a dusty, damp corner of the garage for a long time. An eternity.

Susie was used to getting some very strange mail. After all, it was her sex advice column in On Our Backs—the first women-run erotica magazine, which she helped to found back in the ‘80s—that had debuted her alter ego as “Susie Sexpert,” under the banner of which she would go on to become one of the world’s most progressive, provocative and controversial thinkers on sexuality in books like Susie Sexpert’s Sexual State of the Union, Susie Sexpert’s Lesbian Sex World and Big Sex, Little Death: A Memoir. As the editor of more than 30 anthologies, including the popular Herotica series, she had received hundreds of manuscripts just like this one.

But maybe not entirely like this one. As she pulled out the typewritten pages and started to read through them, something about it felt different. Darker. And too close to home.


And then she smiled, rubbing her forefinger absent-mindedly over her lips.

“IT’s perfect.”

INTO THE BLACK

OK, maybe it didn’t unfold with quite so much pulp-fiction melodrama, but that is exactly what Bright remembers thinking the first time she read “Buck Low,” the short story by Tommy Moore that opens Bright’s new fiction anthology Santa Cruz Noir, the latest in a long line of city-specific noir collections from Akashic Books. Though longtime locals will recognize the names of many of the authors who penned the 20 original stories in it—from Lee Quarnstrom to Peggy Townsend to Elizabeth McKenzie to GT’s own Wallace Baine—Moore is one of four writers in the book who had never been published before, and his debut effort about a murderous druggie lowlife on Santa Cruz’s North Coast blew Bright away.

“That was a gift,” says Bright. “In sails almost exactly what you see here. The first draft is so close to this.”

Bright’s associate editor Willow Pennell, who grew up in Santa Cruz, couldn’t believe how creepily realistic the story’s narrator seemed.

“That was one of the first stories to come in. And I was like, ‘I know that guy. I went to high school with that guy.’ Not because he was a jerk, but just the way he talks about the town. It’s local. He’s from here. Like force-feeding crabs into anemones [a habit the narrator discusses in the story]—that’s a kid that grew up with tide pools.”

Santa Cruz Noir is teeming with other local details that will make
WICKED CITY Susie Bright is the mastermind behind “Santa Cruz” noir. Photo shoot thanks to Brielle Tachado at Faust Salon and Spa for hair; the Hat Company of Santa Cruz for Bright’s fedora; and Carlos de la Cruz of Kiss the Past Antiques for jewelry. PHOTO: KEANA PARKER
“There were a couple of times when we got a manuscript and I said, ‘Oh you’re so sweet, it ends happily! No. Go back and break my heart.’ And they were like, ‘OK.’ Then they’d come back and we’d be like, ‘Whoa.’” — SUSIE BRIGHT

readers do similar double takes. It’s divided into three sections, the first of which is called “Murder Capital of the World,” as if to put any question of when Santa Cruz’s notorious serial killer lore is going to come up immediately to rest.

Each story is set in a different neighborhood in Santa Cruz County—and not just the more obvious settings like Seabright, Mission Street, UCSC, Pacific Avenue, Aptos and Watsonville, but also Bear Creek Road, Grant Park, Soquel Hills, the Circles, Seacliff and Mount Hermon, among others.

“I knew what would be more intriguing would be getting neighborhoods that not everybody knows about,” says Bright. “I explained to the publisher that this is not going to be Santa Cruz city limits, this is going to be countywide. The fact that the book begins in Davenport and works all the way down to San Juan Road on the borderline is extremely pleasing to me.”

She also found endless amusement in the way these dark and twisted crime stories subvert the shiny, happy conventional narrative of Santa Cruz.

“I probably laughed a little bit too much,” she admits. “Partly it’s because it’s tweaking the tourist information brochure. It’s not like, ‘Vacation in Santa Cruz!’ So I have to have my evil laughter. But also it’s just that these characters are real. We’ve met them; we know them. They’re our families, they’re our friends and neighbors. And one way this is an interesting looking glass is that I think Santa Cruz is so often portrayed as a quirky utopia. Who’s seen beyond that? I’m just trying to think of who’s written about Santa Cruz in more sensitive or vulnerable or exposing ways. You don’t see it.”

Bright credits Ariel Gore—who wrote the book’s second story, “Whatever Happened to Skinny Jane?”—with giving her the best summary definition of noir as a genre: “Often the narrator has her own agenda. The darker twist. Moral ambiguity. More cynicism. More fatalism. And the femme fatale, even if she’s Mother Nature herself.”

At the narrative core of Gore’s story is the most widely known element of Santa Cruz’s dark side, possibly the very person who first made people realize Santa Cruz had a dark side at all: “Co-Ed Killer” Edmund Kemper. For a figure so famous, Gore wanted to find a new and different approach.

“My mom worked on Death Row in San Quentin,” says Gore, “so she was haunted by serial killers. I wanted to look at it that way—how people were haunted by [what Kemper did]—rather than tell his story.”

The short story focuses on a modern-day couple who become obsessed with Kemper, and takes
some crazy twists and turns. Gore wasn’t similarly obsessed with his legend, but she was affected by Santa Cruz’s reputation as a magnet for serial killers—although maybe not as affected as she should have been.

“In the ’80s when I lived in Santa Cruz, we still hitchhiked, even though those guys had ruined it. We were stupid teenagers,” she says.

Gore hadn’t written anything in a noir style until she contributed a piece to the Portland Noir collection. But she admits she’s gotten hooked on it, and is now editing a Santa Fe Noir book. For Santa Cruz Noir, she told Bright she only had one stipulation.

“I told her, ‘I’ve got dibs on the Jury Room,’ she says, referring to Kemper’s famous hangout spot of choice. “That was my only thing.”

SECRET HISTORIES

The Jury Room does play a pivotal role in Gore’s story, and she also drops references to Food Not Bombs serving meals downtown and Halloween at the Catalyst, among other things. Santa Cruz Noir features a lot of local touchstones like these—every dot from Santa Cruz’s designation as a “nuclear-free zone” to sign dancers on Mission Street gets connected over the course of the collection.

Some bits of local history that come up are downright startling. How many people know, for instance, that Santa Cruz County was the center of cockfighting culture in the 1950s? That fact is a central point in Lou Mathews’ “Crab Dinners,” one of the anthology’s short stories that most closely echoes the classic noir fiction of authors like Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain. In Mathews’ story, a mysterious woman walks into a detective agency in Seascape looking for help locating her father, a popular Chinese chef named Leonard Wong who spends most of his time outside the kitchen gambling on cockfights.

Mathews—who teaches fiction writing and lit for the UCLA Extension Writer’s Program and is the author of the acclaimed novel L.A. Breakdown, about SoCal street racing in the ’60s—graduated from UCSC in 1973. He lived in Santa Cruz for more than a decade, and wrote for papers here like Sundaze and Good Times (which is referenced in “Crab Dinners”). He says the Chef Wong character is based on a real Santa Cruz County celebrity chef, Francis Tong.

“He introduced Szechwan cuisine to Santa Cruz County,” says Mathews from his home in Los Angeles. “He was a talented guy, but he was also an inveterate gambler.”

The closing story of the collection, “It Follows Until It Leads” by Dillon Kaiser, tells the story of a Mexican immigrant who got caught up in the drug trade in his native country, and—like so many a noir protagonist—foolishly thinks he can leave his violent history behind him. He builds a new life in Watsonville, but when he discovers that his son is keeping a gun to style himself as a tough guy at Watsonville High, things begin to unravel.

The story culminates in a gut-wrenching conclusion, but besides its power as a piece of hardboiled crime fiction, it also sheds some light on how the influence of the drug cartels...
reaches into field work and other corners of the immigrant Mexican community in South County.

“It’s something that’s huge in Watsonville,” says Kaiser, who grew up there, and graduated from Watsonville High. “But the majority of Santa Cruz County doesn’t see it.”

**FIRST BLOOD**

Kaiser is another one of *Santa Cruz Noir*’s first-time authors. At the time that Bright was accepting submissions, he was working at Bookshop Santa Cruz, and was encouraged by his fellow staffers and writers Richard M. Lange and Aric Sleeper to enter his story. He says working with Bright as an editor was a revelation; though she worked with him on many changes, she had a way of understanding his vision and never compromising it.

“I never felt like anything was being taken away from the essence of what I wanted it to be,” he says.

For the fiction veterans, Bright simply drew on her long lists of contacts.

“She knows everybody,” says Pennell. “She knows people with lots of other contacts. She just put out the Bat Signal.”

She connected with Mathews, for instance, through their mutual friend Colin Wilson, author of the 1960s novel-slash-anthropology-class phenomenon *Crazy February*. Mathews, in turn, introduced her to Moore, a Santa Cruz expat now doing film and video production out of Malibu who had literally no footprint in the lit world.

“They said, ‘We really like your story, but we can’t find anything about you online,’” remembers Moore. “And that’s because there isn’t anything.”

Still, Bright found him, and as he worked with her on “Buck Low,” he was impressed by the fact that whenever he would want to take something out, thinking it might be too extreme, she would be the one who’d want to keep it in.

In general, Bright says, one of the hardest things about working with authors was getting them to go as dark as the genre required.

“They’re all people who have read a lot and watched a lot of black-and-white noir movies. So it wasn’t like I had to say ‘this is n-o-i-r,’ it wasn’t that basic. But thinking about existential loss, a lack of neat conclusions, the fear and mistrust, the femme fatale, it ain’t gonna end cute. That kind of thing,” she says.

“There were a couple of times when we got a manuscript and I said, ‘Oh you’re so sweet, it ends happily! No. Go back and break my heart.’ And they were like, ‘OK. Then they’d come back and we’d be like, ‘Whoa. I mean, it was there all along.’

“I think Jill Wolfson’s a good example,” Pennell says. “Because she writes teen books, and she just wasn’t ready for anybody to die. Somebody had to die. And she sure ran with that.”

Other established authors were happy to oblige, like Vinny Hanson, a celebrated author in the “cozy mystery” genre known for its gentle and lighthearted approach to crime.

“I was saying to Vinny, ‘Are you ready for everything to go very bad, and for your protagonist to have no moral compass?’” remembers Bright. “And she was like ‘Oh, yes.'”

**A TIME FOR NOIR**

“Many people have asked me: do you think noir fits a certain moment that we’re in?” says Bright. “And
I’m like, ‘Well, I’ve never been in a moment where it didn’t feel right.”

Certainly, though, there is plenty of relevance in this time of fake-news hysteria and reactionary backlash for a genre that features criminal antiheroes and no end of moral ambiguity. Bright sees something deeper, too, at a local level.

“The famous noir films like The Big Sleep came post-World War II, but the literature came out of the Depression, and out of the sense of ‘nobody gives a damn about you, and nobody is coming to rescue you,’” she says. “The class conflict in Santa Cruz County today, which explodes into ethnic and community identities and localism identities of all kinds, is as strong today as it ever was, and so is that sense of ‘does anybody give a damn about these people?’ The working class voice of Santa Cruz in our book is something that is undeniable.”

All of the heavy themes aside, though, the book is escapist crime fiction at heart, and a lot of fun for fans of the genre. It’s clear that the people behind it enjoyed making it that way—especially Bright, who has a charming and hilarious enthusiasm for even the most obscure elements of putting together this collection.

“I love chapter ordering. It’s like, ‘now let the melody unfold.’ I feel like you want to be bookended by two killer stories, pardon the pun, and in between you want these different emotional peaks, humor, being knocked sideways. The only part that was hard was the suspense of whether we’d get all our neighborhoods covered, and then having too many good stories, and the pain of telling somebody who’s just fabulous ‘we couldn’t include you this time.’ I’ll never get over that,” she says.

The stories she wanted to publish but didn’t have room for could fill an entire second volume, says Bright. “I anticipate that in a small town like this, people who don’t see their story in here will be like, ‘Did you have to fuck Susie Bright to be in here?’ No … unfortunately! There were no sexual favors exchanged,” she says. “Maybe I’ll do a book like that in the future.”

**‘SANTA CRUZ NOIR’ EVENTS**

There will be a number of events over the next few months around Santa Cruz Noir.

The book’s launch, featuring authors, performance and signing, will be Tuesday, June 19, at 7 p.m. at Bookshop Santa Cruz, 1520 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz.

The first library author talk for Santa Cruz Noir will be at 2 p.m. on Saturday, June 30, at the Santa Cruz Public Library - Scotts Valley Branch, 251 Kings Valley Road, Scotts Valley. The second is 6 p.m. on Thursday, July 12, at the Santa Cruz Public Library - Aptos Branch, 7695 Soquel Drive, Aptos.

There will be a “Latinx Santa Cruz Noir” writing workshop at noon on Saturday, Oct. 13, at the Museum of Art and History, 705 Front St., Santa Cruz.

First Friday on Oct. 5 will feature Noir Shadow Puppets for all ages at 5 p.m. at MAH.

A Santa Cruz Noir “Murder in the Stacks” Clue game for all ages will be held at 11 a.m. on Sunday, Oct. 21, at MAH.