

KEVIN STARR

## A *Boom* Interview

**E**ditor's note: Narrator of the desires that gave California rise and the experiences of countless Californians, Kevin Starr has written the most comprehensive account of the place. A native son and fourth-generation San Franciscan, he chronicled the dream while living it. His California Dream series tells the story of the American state's rapid, monstrous growth, along with its struggles, dips, and dodges from moments that could have snuffed out the dream and utterly snubbed the dreamers. Reckoned by some as tending more to tales of optimism and swashbuckling heroism amidst the troubles—in true glass-half-full California style—both Starr's personal and literary approach to California are actually much more variegated and complex. Between writing the first and second volumes of a new series some call his magnum opus—the first volume titled *Continental Ambitions: Roman Catholics in North America: The Colonial Experience*—*Boom* editor Jason Sexton recently managed to catch up with Starr. In this interview, we see the personal side of this historian—addressing religion, values, and matters of public concern—including his wide-reaching polymathic abilities that enable his unique kind of magisterial interpretation of the golden state. With ongoing reflections on the place—its past, present, and future—here we see Starr chronicling his own place in California's ongoing saga, living even more meaningfully into the reality of the dream. This interview was conducted by Jason S. Sexton.

**Boom:** If you had to choose, what are three values that matter most to earlier shapers of California?

**Starr:** I frequently use the phrase “a better life for ordinary people.” That, I think, sums up the top three values motivating migration to California: life, the improvement of life, the ability of ordinary people to achieve such improvement for themselves. That is the theme of most of my volumes, or at the least, the background to those volumes, since I frequently concentrate on extraordinary people coming to California as well.

**Boom:** What do you think are the biggest threats to those values today?

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**Starr:** The growing divide between the very wealthy and the very poor, as well as the waning of the middle class, as expressed geographically in California by the global wealth of the coast from San Diego County to Marin County and the rapid socioeconomic falloff evident in certain interior regions.

**Boom:** How have your views of California changed over the years?

**Starr:** As I grew older and a little wiser, I became more connected to what the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno describes as “the tragic sense of life.” My first volume is only tangentially connected to this tragic sense of life, while the volume dealing with recent California, *Coast of Dreams*, seems almost obsessed with it. That is

because the present is exactly that: present to us in all of its complexity.

**Boom:** What is the main goal of the historian? And how do you see your work fitting together with the other guild of California historians?

**Starr:** It is the task of the narrative historian such as myself to assemble a narrative of what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls Representative Men and Women, and to place such figures in the context of their times, and thereby create a pointillist-realist probe into the past.

**Boom:** You never went through the tenure track route in academia, opting for an entirely different track altogether. Was this a good move? Do you have any regrets about it?

**Starr:** I am very proud of my diverse services as an Army officer, a senior tutor at Harvard, a librarian/civil servant, a newspaper columnist, a magazine contributor, a communications consultant, and the writer of a number of histories. As Paul Anka wrote for Frank Sinatra, “I did it my way,” thanks to the support of my wife Sheila and my commitment to the education of my children and grandchildren.

**Boom:** People have called you a booster and an optimist, classically juxtaposed to Mike Davis,<sup>1</sup> but my first intro was reading how you accounted for my own story. So I checked for your handling of Tracy, I checked for the homeboys and the matter of mass incarceration—and you had it! And it was troubling. You told things as if you were there, but you managed to not completely fall into the noir California. You kept things sunny. What would really make you despair for California?

**Starr:** As far as I’m concerned, despair is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Given the ordeal of the world in general, Californians would be grossly self-indulgent to afford themselves the dubious pleasures of noir instead of committing themselves to what Josiah Royce and Carey McWilliams describe as the struggle for corrective action.

**Boom:** Californians have serious amnesia. What do you hope to accomplish with drawing from the deepest visions of this place, even back to the conquest?

**Starr:** As a graduate student at Harvard supported by a Danforth Fellowship, I had the opportunity to read somewhat extensively in the history and literature of the United States and, thereby, to come to the conclusion that a fusion of forgetting and remembering, amnesia and obsession with the past, is characteristic of our entire American civilization and not just California.

**Boom:** On the *Boom* board, we have a number of figures committed to efforts to revive nativism, what about the Native Indians here is critical to sketching California’s future?

**Starr:** One of the pleasures of my decade of service as State Librarian for California was the opportunity to get to know the various components of Native American California and to respect the complex cultural consciousness of these First Californians, from whom we continue to learn to this day. If you want to find an example of Unamuno’s tragic sense of life, just look at the way we treated those Native Americans

in the nineteenth century: which is the theme of Helen Hunt Jackson’s great book, *Century of Dishonor*.

**Boom:** What is a Californian, and can you describe the character traits of a good Californian?

**Starr:** I have always approached the history of California as part of the history of these United States. I, therefore, resonate with the remark of my friend the late Wallace Stegner that California is like the rest of America, only more so. I grew up in California, a fourth-generation Californian; but I discovered California as the theme for history as a graduate student at Harvard, which meant that I perceived this history from a national and comparative perspective. Lately, my thinking has taken a comparable Asia/Pacific and Latin American direction.

**Boom:** You used to sign your books saying that the best Californians are those who choose to come here. Is this still true?

**Starr:** I still adhere to that belief. After all, I was born in 1940, when California had slightly less than seven million people. Today, that figure has become something like forty million and counting. I was born into one of the states of the American Union. By the time I was in my sixties, I was living in a nation-state of global significance. Today we are all living in a nation-state that is the sixth largest economy on the planet. Talented and hard-working people from around the globe have come to California to make this happen.

**Boom:** I recall asking you in 2013 why you didn’t write historical theology. This book—*Continental Ambitions*—where did it come from?

**Starr:** In *Continental Ambitions: Roman Catholics in North America, the Colonial Era*, I employ the same narrative technique that I use in my *Americans and the California Dream* series: a blend, that is, of the nineteenth-century American historians, Vernon Parrington, Van Wyck Brooks, Perry Miller, and Alan Heimert, under whom I did my doctorate at Harvard. I would describe this technique as pointillist-realist narrative, animated by an underlying and continuing dialectic that only rarely surfaces in an explicit manner.

**Boom:** Does the conquest sweep in the same way that California’s modern history does? Has California been a microcosm of the US even in the earliest images?





**Starr:** The long history of California—Native American, Hispanic, American, global—simultaneously shows discontinuities of growth and development and continuities of continuing aspiration. Certain basic paradigms continue: land and water, for example, continuing through the mining era, the agricultural era, the era of urbanization through dams, aqueducts and reservoirs; or the interaction of nature and technology; or a pursuit of pure science anchored in nineteenth-century astronomy. I am not suggesting cause and effect here but, rather, paradigms that repeat themselves.

**Boom:** What role do churches play in the California drama, in the past and today?

**Starr:** As is the case with the rest of America, religion—as a matter of imaginative and moral formation, language and metaphor, and guide to the good life—has played a most important part in the development of American California. Until very recently, we must remember, Unitarian minister

Thomas Starr King and Catholic Franciscan missionary Junipero Serra represented California in the National Statuary Hall in our nation's capital.

**Boom:** And how did the reformation, coming on its five-hundredth anniversary, help shape any of this vision?

**Starr:** Protestantism dominated the colonial era, the early republic, the nineteenth century, and the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Whatever one's religious traditions may or may not be, this Protestant matrix goes a long way in helping us to understand our national culture—hence, the importance of the Reformation and Protestantism in the formation and emergence of our national character.

**Boom:** You've written that California grew up innovatively as both a religious and secular state, which my students are always surprised to hear. And your work famously revised Hubert Howe Bancroft. But do you think the religious and secular can continue to work together? Or does the runaway

tendency of secularism prove nonconductive for the flourishing of all groups here?

**Starr:** I do not accept this disjunction between religion and the world, or the world and religion, in the American experience. The first 150 years of American California showed a strong presence of organized religion as a social and cultural catalyst. Thanks to our separation of church and state, we Americans remain capable of rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. These days, the great religions of the world have brought to America and to California their transformative insights. As a force, religion remains in the private sector, but as Mark Twain said of the mistaken newspaper reference to his passing, the reports of the demise of religion as a force in American life have been highly exaggerated.

**Boom:** What role does faith play in your work and writing, both earlier and now? And how would you describe your relationship to the Church?

**Starr:** As far as my relationship to the Roman Catholic Church is concerned, I am proud to be a member in reasonably good standing of this 2,000-year-old faith community. I share this distinction with 1.2 billion Catholics worldwide. As James Joyce said of the Catholic Church: here comes everybody!

**Boom:** Will you ever write your own memoir? Especially your own “becoming Kevin Starr” years from your early professional life, along with the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s? Some have identified the novel *Land's End* as filling this role. Is this true?

**Starr:** I don't think I would ever write a memoir. In a very real way, my books constitute a kind of memoir or at the least some form of documentation of my inner landscape. I'm not one for much introspection. I prefer to define myself through family, friends, community, and the act of writing. I do, however, plan to augment *Land's End*, expanding it to a full narrative of the life and death of Sebastian Collins, who constitutes the closest I've ever come to an alter ego.

**Boom:** Catholic social teaching informs a lot of Jerry Brown's rationale for big decisions he's making in Sacramento; how does it inform your own work?

**Starr:** As you suggest, Governor Brown has successfully internalized Catholic social thinking. Like Governor Brown and thousands of others coming of age in Catholic San Francisco, I absorbed this tradition as well. In later life, I had the pleasure of discovering Monsignor John Ryan's classic *The Living Wage*, which further solidified my thinking in this area. I have also been influenced by John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, emphasizing fairness. As a graduate student, I had the honor of being a member of the Leverett House Senior Common Room at Harvard when Professor Rawls was writing this magisterial book. Other influences on my social thinking—especially relevant to public service—have been the *Analects of Confucius*, Cicero's *De Officiis*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and Lord Peter Hennessy's recent *Whitehall*.

**Boom:** What do you make of Pope Francis?

**Starr:** During my lifetime, Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis have served as popes. Each of these men was remarkable in differing and shared ways. Two of these popes—John XXIII and John Paul II—have been raised to the altar as saints. John Paul II was an eminent philosopher, with an ability to project himself as an ecclesiastical rock star. Pope Benedict XVI continues his work as one of the leading Catholic theologians of our recent era. Pope Francis shares many traits with his predecessors, to include a capacity for off-the-cuff commentary in common with John Paul I. Like John XXIII, Francis projects warmth, accessibility, love and friendship. Like John Paul II, he is a tireless traveler. The images that come to mind when I think of Pope Francis are the photographs of him embracing the truly afflicted. As pope, Francis has de-imperialized the papacy.

**Boom:** What are the movements in California that you find most hopeful, either for the future of California or else for the future of the US and the world?

**Starr:** I ride DASH to the USC campus on the days I teach. The movement I love the most is the movement of the DASH bus filled with human beings of every age and occupation from every corner of the earth riding to their day's work. **B**

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Susan Moffat, “Dueling Prophets of Next LA: Mike Davis Sees Murky Decay, While Kevin Starr Embraces Shiny Optimism,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 November 1994, <http://articles.latimes.com/1994-11-19/news/mn-64521-t-mike-davis>.

