David Means and the Secret Mystery

Call me a fan. The week, no, the day **David Means**'s new story collection, *The Secret Goldfish*, came out, I rode the number 8 bus to Powell's and purchased a copy. If you are not familiar with Means, stop reading this interview right away and head for your local bookseller. While you're there, also pick up *Assorted Fire Events* (winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award). I can do nothing but sing the praises of Means's work: the deep layering of character, the clear intensity of emotion (the mess of life and love and death), the ambition of his formal risks, and the muscular lyricism of his sentences. Only a handful of other writers (Maxwell, Flannery O'Connor, Paley, Munro, Salter, Dybek, MacLeod) bring me the same sort of pleasure. -Jay Ponteri

Loggernaut Reading Series: With stories like "Lighting Man," "A Visit From Jesus," "Dustman Appearances to Date," "Elyria Man," and "What They Did," you seem to be remaking the American myth, writing a kind of hybrid that embodies certain characteristics of the tale (fantastic flourishes, natural disasters, grotesque details, voice) while also remaining loyal to literary storytelling (which strives for complexity, for deeply realized characters). What about the folktale is so alluring to you?

David Means: I wish I could say, with a straight face, that I'm remaking the American myth. But the stories were all written at different times and under different conditions. There were times when I was working on the stories that I felt myself began to narrow my vision down, and to limit myself somehow. I was thinking a lot about the country, about certain spots that seemed to be waiting for narrative, but then that's nothing new. Sometimes the stories just demanded to be written that way, or rewritten into forms that might seem close to folk. The style and form came out of the digging, the work itself. I'd say they became hybrids as a secondary aftermath. I just wanted to tell good stories, full-hearted, and in a way that pleased me in the end. When you think about it, there really is a fine line between the short story and the folktale, anyway. I'm thinking here about Cheever's story, "The Swimmer," and a lot of Borges, and Singer, and **Isaac Babel**. There's a folkloric element to the form itself, to the brevity, to the weight the small things have to carry.

LRS: Natural disasters and human disasters (along with the grief such disasters bring) recur throughout your work. What draws you to these disasters as a writer? As a human?

Means: I'm not sure. Each story is a different case. Mainly, I'm just looking for story and for my vision. I don't set out to intentionally write dark stories, or to court disaster, or to put characters through hell. As a matter of fact, I'd say it's the other way around. It pains me to no end to see how much stupid suffering there is in the world, much of it needless. On the other hand, when a story goes in that direction, I want to get in deep and examine the hard places, the weak joints, the moments when my characters open up, revealing—how do you use this phrase without sounding silly?—the human condition, the secret complexity, the elemental moments.

LRS: Related to this—your work deals with lost, angry characters, often down on their luck, who turn to violence as a means of survival, yet the moments you choose to explore within these characters' lives tend to be more reflective and quiet. This creates compelling tension between form and content. I wonder what other writers (poets included) influenced your inclination towards more meditative fiction.

Means: I have to believe, and I hope it's true, that it comes out of tenderness and compassion for the kind of people I want to write about. Good stories are often found around the margins, the edges, and I agree with Frank O'Connor who said the story form tends to naturally lean towards the submerged, the lost, those on the edge. Although you can find plenty of stories that disprove his theory. I can't say much more than that about why I might be interested in lost, angry characters, without getting into personal stuff, and I'd rather not go into autobiography. Let's just say I've had some first-hand experience with those on the edge. Including family members. The work is the work, and it stands on its own apart from my own life. On the subject of influences, it's hard to list the influences because when I start I tend to start rambling: the Bible, the **Zohar**, Thomas Merton, Isaac Babel, Chekhov and Hemingway, Faulkner, Beckett, Joyce, Raymond Carver, Denis Johnson, Alice Munro, William Trevor, James Agee, **William Maxwell**, Kafka, and many, many others. I'd also say I'm hugely influenced by music, both rock and classical, and the way songs work, hanging there, limited, only partly finished, but seemingly full, too.

LRS: Do you listen to music when you write? How loud is the volume? When I'm generating new material I try to find some music that

somehow aligns with the mood or the emotional space of the work. When I'm revising I can't listen to anything.

Means: Sometimes I listen to music, but it has to be a certain kind of sound—and the lyrics can't lure me away from the work. But usually I use music to avoid the work. There is no doubt that I've learned a lot about form from listening to Bach and **Schoenberg**—at least I like to imagine that I learned something from Schoenberg's *Three Piano Pieces*: there's something about the atonal quality combined with the brevity and the way they seem, to me at least, to be modern and ancient. And I'm still an old school, diehard Sonic Youth, Dylan, and Springsteen fan, just to name a few.

LRS: In his essay "On Stillness," **Charles Baxter** examines stillness in fiction. Stillness, Baxter explains, includes a pause in dramatic action and in character thought. The narrator or viewpoint character becomes absorbed in "the minutiae of setting," so that objects seem to take on the story's emotional feel. It seems that your work is filled with such moments. I'm thinking of the viewpoint character in "The Nest"; amidst a separation from his wife, he becomes lost in the workings of a hornet's nest. Or "Lightning Man" offers a handful of still moments when Nick, following or preceding some violent lightning strike, becomes lost in the finer details of the Midwestern landscape. I wonder if stillness is not just a kind of necessary distraction of sorts.

Means: I think the stillness you mention comes out of what Andre Dubus called vertical writing, rather than horizontal; going down deep, and deeper, into the situation instead of moving to some end point. If you don't have that stillness in short fiction, you end up leaning too hard on plot, or irony, or some technical device. Or maybe if you use plot too much, or you're ironic, or silly, you can't have that stillness. In part I think it's inherent in the form. There's a great story by Eudora Welty called "The Whistle" that is so still and quiet and lovely it's amazing. Maybe it's the fact that survivors, or those who suffer, tend to find solace in those moments of silence. But I agree with Baxter's general premise, although I don't think you can make a conscious decision to include stillness in the work. You can't just say: I'll slip some stillness in here, and some more here.

LRS: I like the notion of vertical writing. It reminds me of reading Munro's stories, how they peel back layer after layer of character, deepening complexity and sustaining, as Flannery O'Connor put it, the mystery of personality. I wonder if there really is no ending point. That

is, even when a short story stops, that mystery of personality resonates.

Means: Well, I think Munro said something, in an old interview, about starting a story with a feeling and then building around that feeling. I love her work and think it's deceptively daring in the best way, moving around within the bounds, the confines, of the form: she takes these huge risks, but they're hard to see if you're focused on her subject matter, which is quiet and isolated. She also said, somewhere else, that she works very hard, and I think what she does is the result of a hell of a lot of rewriting. I don't think there really are ending points, at least not in the stories that work, but rather a kind of forward movement radiating out from the terminus of the story. That's what stories do best. They leave you with this sensation of having gone through something and then, in the end, carrying it with you. Novels don't do that. A good novel leaves you with this deep sensation of completeness, I think, whereas a story is just a blip, a ping. Where the story ends is a risk the writer takes; the reader feels that risk too, and goes along with it.

LRS: Your work takes particular interest in the interior lives of characters. Specifically I'm thinking of "Coitus" and "The Project," in which the narrator's and point-of-view character's consciousnesses are closely detailed—guiding the reader to leap from one interior mode (e.g., memory, thought, perception, fantasy, dream) to the next. Each interior beat feels like an action in and of itself, in that it both forwards the narrative line and reveals character. This seems like a conscious departure from fiction with protracted action and elaborate plotting. Do you see this as a kind of aesthetic choice on your part?

Means: I'm not sure if it was a choice or a matter of simple artistic survival. There was a point in my life as a writer, actually a day, when I threw up my hands and began to write differently. I just went into my own isolation. I embraced something in myself. My inclination for years was to avoid writing the way I really wanted to write and to shape stories into that horizontal mode. I'd also been trying to write chronologically, to avoid my own style and the fact that I did not think in an orderly fashion. Mainly style is a way around certain deficiencies and an embrace of certain abilities. Those leaps you mention, and the interior modes, usually arrive out of the story, intense revision in some cases, and throwing stuff out. I think about story first; mainly in terms of making something happen and having some sort of real situation between people. For example, when I was writing "The Project," I was spending way too much time thinking about termites in my house,

crawling around, and then I thought: what if someone were as obsessed with searching around the house as I am? In "Coitus," I really was thinking about a fishing accident, about what would happen if your waders filled up when you were fly-fishing; and I was thinking about a specific scene a trip I'd taken up to the Two Hearted River, with a buddy of mine—about adultery, and about those two people in bed during a hot summer afternoon. So I always have the story as my main concern, first. If the story happens to go deep into the various interior modes, it still has that narrative drive subsurface.

LRS: Your sentences are some of the best I've read. Do you fine-tune all the way through the drafting process or do you write sloppily and then, in revision, begin tinkering with sentences?

Means: I write the first drafts and then work at the sentence level. Often I do the first draft by hand, put it into the machine, print it out and start editing. Each story, of course, is a new experience, and some come a bit easier than others, but I've never finished a story in less than a couple of months. In a few cases the story came out pretty much full-formed, like an aberration, in one sitting, but that was only the first draft. I try as hard as I can to throw the bad stuff away. You have to say to yourself: do I really want to put my name on that story?

LRS: I think full omniscience is largely absent in published short fiction today, especially in America, and yet a captivating omniscient voice permeates your work. I see it more as a central intelligence that comments on your characters and their situations in ways they cannot, yet also, at moments, closely inhabits these characters (and sometimes multiple viewpoints within a single story—human and animal!). This central consciousness seems to link the stories together thematically, tonally, and syntactically. What effect do you think you achieve with this more distant omniscient voice?

Means: Certainly, writing a story is a balancing act between the various elements that might or might not go into it, and in the end most of the choices you make are intuitive, bouncing off all of the other literature—in that anxiety of influence—and your own moral stances, your own sense of the secret mystery that's buried in the way lives transpire. That includes the choices you make in the revision process, too. Some writers lean on plot more than others; some skimp on story and derive more from poetics; there's that kind of spectrum—with someone like Beckett on one end and someone like Chekhov on the other. I don't think omniscience is missing from short

fiction today. What's sometimes missing is that deeper sense of story beneath the surface, and the care it takes to bring it to life completely. If you don't have that, then you just have something that is operating symbolically, and that's not enough.

I don't think that answers your question about omniscience exactly. Maybe I can't answer it. I think the old Hemingway iceberg metaphor still works; there has to be a great deal beneath the surface, and whatever it is down there has to be fully felt. You can do a lot of fancy things, lots of acrobatics on the tip, dancing and spinning around, but you'd better be sure you've got something deep going on, something as warm as blood or it's all just the tip and nothing else. The reader will examine the story, turn it around, fold it up, and unfold it, bring it up to the light, examine it under a lens, and it has to hold up. I just read the story "Runaway" by Alice Munro and I stand in full amazement at what she did in that story, moving across boundaries of point of view, taking us into one relationship and then another, twisting the neck of the story into a helix; inverting it around and presenting us with an essential mystery, unsolved, and leaving it dangling there forever in the eternal space at the end of the story: a dead goat unseen on the edge of the narrative. And it's a wondrous work of art; it stands perfect and complete. That's the mystery of a good story. All of the parts, in the end, clinch up against each other into something that is finished.

I find it amusing when a writer has to explain something that is virtually impossible to explain. We all talk about our work—as I'm doing here—but we're really building, when we do so, a kind of house of cards around the work itself, and no matter what an author says publicly about how he or she does it, the truth of the matter is that the process is vastly complex. In a way, it's better to turn to critics like **Hugh Kenner** — I'm thinking about his wonderful book, *The Pound Era* — to help understand how this stuff gets done. But it's fun to listen to writers try to speak in public. I just read a wonderfully clear essay about Cormac McCarthy by the writer Dagoberto Gilb, and in it he says the following: "...when I think of how writers are supposed to be, I think of Cormac McCarthy: don't say anything, don't be flattered by praise or disrupted by criticism, don't read anything they write about you, just do your work, because that's the thing. Which is just about everything I can't seem to do and wish I could." You know, that's how I feel, in a way, about doing an interview and trying to explain how one writes. There are some writers out there who just talk too much. You know they’re building scaffoldings around the work, trying to hold it up.

LRS: Of late what distracts me from the work at hand is the process of getting my work out there, i.e., the time and mental energy I expend trying to place stories in magazines, query agents and presses (last month I decided against going to a writer's conference because, well, I thought it would be better to stay home and write), and yet I know it needs to be done. The task I guess is learning how to keep the business end of things (this includes facing rejection, etc...) separate from the work, or to keep the work in the forefront of my mind. As Gilb's essay suggests, easier said than done.

Means: My approach is to take it one story at a time, and to think of finding a home for that story. The main thing is to try to make the story so good—at least in the terms that you set up—that some editor, somewhere, will have to take it. Maybe even against her will. But the truth is, some of the better writing might be hard to place. All of that—the self promotion, the readings, writing reviews—is a huge distraction from the work, and for me at least I'd rather not do too much of it. I'm not an actor. I'm a writer. Writers, for the most part, like to be alone. Should be alone. That's why they do what they do.

LRS: Maybe an interview is most helpful if the answering part cannot only touch the reader, but you too. What question would you like me to ask you?

Means: Oh, I don't know. Saul Bellow just died yesterday, so maybe something along the lines of: What do you think of Saul Bellow? That would give me a chance to talk about the fact that I met him once. I was working in New York, and he came into the office and walked down the hall past my desk and I stood up and shook his hand. He was dressed up in his dapper garb, wearing an elegant hat—actually it was in his hand—and I knew, right then, that I'd have to open up a conversation. My big chance was at hand. So I told him I was from Michigan and that I grew up near **Ring Lardner**'s hometown, and we began to discuss Lardner for a few minutes. We shook hands again and he said he was looking forward to reading my work. (There wasn't any, but I didn't let on to that fact.)

My father didn't take me fishing that often, but he did sit and talk with me about Bellow. I went to Chicago three times last year, and I took my kids on a train from **Kalamazoo**, Michigan into the city one time—I think it was in July. Going by train is still the best way to see that hidden landscape, and entering Chicago that way, shuddering through the rail yards in **Gary**—I was happy to see that the USS plant

was still spewing clouds of pollution, and we passed, parked on sidings, weird kettle cars that were full of molten steel, you could see the bright hellish bubbles of it, looking down from our vantage. That trip, and Bellow's death, reminded me of a trip into Chicago I took with my grandfather, as a kid. He was a dapper, self-made businessman of the old school. Having him take me around was very much like getting a free tour of a bygone city, a place that no longer exists except, thankfully, in *The Adventures of Augie March*. ❖