

David Means

The Secret Goldfish
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Did you intend to connect these stories thematically? There seems to be a thread that holds them all together.

When I got the stories together for the book my central idea was to create a kind of album, a series of stories that would congeal like a good collection of songs might, one playing against the other, each different and yet held together somehow.

In one early review there was a mention of religious undercurrents in these stories. Was that perceptive, or was the reviewer seeing something that wasn't there?

The short story is naturally a religious form. I mean there is an element of parable in all stories, really, and a sense that we should, or can, learn from them. The ancient teaching stories of the Sufi Masters, Tales of the Dervishes, collected by Idries Shah, are a great example. Careful reading and discussion of a story was a primary form of education. Belief is a form of narrative — it's a way of looking at the story of life. I'm concerned with the outer edges of belief, the place where it might or might not break apart. For example, the horrible characters in "Hunger," willing to go to the very edge, to perform heinous acts against a fellow human; where is the deep grace in that story? I'd venture to say it is in the structure of the story itself, in the way it turns back around itself and the fact that these souls are still out there, moving forward. In some of the stories — "Sault St. Marie", and "Carnie" — the hope and grace is deeply submerged, and it might not be there yet, or it might be in the very act of looking closely at these dark things.

Some of the stories in *The Secret Goldfish* seem like modern folktales. What compelled you to write like this?

There really isn't a dividing line between parables and folktale and short stories — not really. In any case, art isn't supposed to be familiar. It wants to astonish, and in turn I wanted to astonish myself at some level, and writing stories from the point of view of a bog man, or about dust clouds that formed human shapes, just seemed natural to me.

In "The Secret Goldfish," "Counterparts," and "Petrouchka," you write about adultery? What brought you to tackle a subject that has already been addressed so often and so well?

There are a limited number of truly primal subjects at hand; death and birth, are two, old age and youth are two more. In the middle of those things is adultery, or maybe I should just say: betrayal. Of course there are as many forms of adultery as there are snowflakes, and yet — like snowflakes — there is from a distance a kind of formal shape and size that does fit all. I've been married for a while and I've lived inside a marriage and feel that it is one thing I can write about with full authority. I think that is the great apex where vows, mystery, carnality, and imagination meet. It's the place where things are sorted out, where the bones are exposed, and where people often find out the deepest, most secretive elements of their makeup.

That brings me to the narrative strategies. Do you consider yourself an experimental writer?

Not really. At a fundamental level most fiction is experimental. To imagine is to experiment. I just try to live up to the demands the characters make, and to find a way into the story that works. I think William Maxwell once said that he tries to respect his characters and to respect the material. Part of respecting the material is knowing what to leave out, or what to cut out, and knowing what the silent parts, the empty space, can provide. If I was deviating from what might be seen as the usual, typical story form at all (whatever that might be), it was often in order to allow the stories to open up — as all stories must — into the blank spaces on the page. There isn't much room in a short story, so there has to be something to widen the narrative, to make the reader feel implicated in some larger drama, one that takes place outside the events at hand. Sometimes form itself can do this.

Even though some of these stories are tragic, isn't there also an element of humor in your work?

I'd have to say that I hope these stories are imbued with life, with whatever it is that makes up a series of events that seem, somehow preposterous, lifelike. Under the closest scrutiny the worse-case scenarios can become vested in light.