



The Secret Goldfish

By David Means
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Introduction

Internationally acclaimed author David Means reaches a new level of accomplishment in *The Secret Goldfish*, a compelling mix of the tragic and the comic that deepens our understanding of what it means to be human. An extremely unlucky individual is stalked by lightning across the American landscape. Jesus Christ appears to advise a young woman in Michigan. A bog man tells his story from an Ohio field. A goldfish struggles to survive, bearing witness to the destruction of a Connecticut family.

In a style that is instantly recognizable, dramatic and dynamic, and always deeply passionate, Means opens up moral questions and reveals the complexities of life in strikingly new ways. As the *Irish Times* stated, "the roll-call of honor, from Eudora Welty, to John Cheever, John Updike, William Maxwell, to Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff and Annie Proulx, is long and rich. Just when it seems that things could get

no better, along comes David Means."

Discussion Questions

1. In many of the stories in *The Secret Goldfish*, including "Lightning Man," "Sault Ste. Marie," "A Visit from Jesus," and "It Counts as Seeing," and "Michigan Death Trip" violence is visited on characters in strange and inexplicable ways. How did these different iterations of violence contribute to your appreciation of the collection as a whole?
2. In "Notable Dustman Appearances to Date," "A Visit from Jesus," and "Elyria Man," the role of the supernatural or otherworldly comes into play. How did these extraordinary presences impact your reading? Did you sense that these presences were grounded in a spiritual or moral universe?
3. How do some of the author's experimental strategies: multiple perspectives in "It Counts as Seeing"; vignettes in "Michigan Death Trip"; and alphabetic progression in "Counterparts" work to reveal the deeper meaning of the individual stories?
4. In stories like "The Nest," "The Secret Goldfish," "Petrouchka [with Omissions]" and "Counterparts," the author explores the dissolution of marriages and families. How was this theme developed across these stories?
5. Many of the stories in *The Secret Goldfish* are set in Michigan and its environs. Discuss the significance and specificity of setting in this collection. Was it easy for you to "locate" these stories? What were some shared features of their settings?
6. Isaac Babel, Gogol, Sinatra, Hemingway, Walker Evans, Stravinsky, Iggy Pop, Proust. The characters in *The Secret Goldfish* make references to these and other artists. What does this range of cultural references suggest about the characters of *The Secret Goldfish*? What social milieu do many of these stories seem to occupy?
7. What is the effect of mixing realist and fantastic stories in the same collection? How did the repetition of character names from one story to another impact your reading? Did these techniques lead you to insights otherwise not available?
8. In "The Project," the protagonist seeks to "stake out and occupy each province of [his] household." To what extent does this compulsion to see, know, and record everything seem to comment on the process of omniscient narration? Do you think that stories in this collection like "It Counts as Seeing" and "Counterparts" are also open to this reading?
9. Several of the stories in *The Secret Goldfish*, pair human sexuality with secrecy and violence. What is the effect of these connections? Consider stories like "Elyria Man," "A Visit from Jesus," "Carnie," and "Sault Ste. Marie" in your discussion.
10. What is your favorite story in the book? Why?

About David Means

David Means won the 2001 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for his previous book, *Assorted Fire Events*, which was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Award, an *Esquire* Best Book of the Year, a Book Sense pick, and has been translated into six languages. Stories from *The Secret Goldfish* have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Esquire*, *McSweeney*, and *The Best American Mystery Stories 2001*. Means was born and raised in Michigan. He lives in Nyack, New York.