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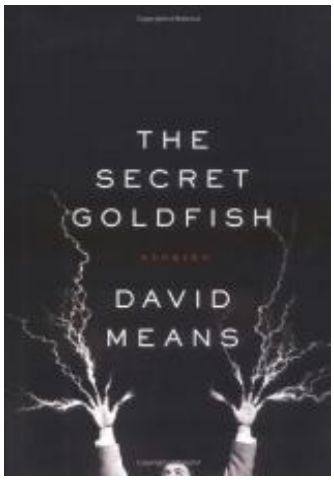
The Secret Goldfish: Stories

by David Means



About the Book

It is a less and less well-kept secret that David Means is one of our best fiction writers. In the past few years he has won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, been a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and received critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. Readers familiar with Means's electrifying work will recognize the vision at play in **The Secret Goldfish** -- a trio of erotically charged kids go on a crime spree in Michigan; a goldfish bears witness to the demise of a Connecticut marriage; an extremely unlucky man is stalked by lightning -- but this new work is funnier, more generous, and bigger in its reach.

Each story stands on its own, and yet linked together they produce a quintessentially American experience -- not the stars-and-stripes-on-the-bumper-sticker kind, but the stoned-and-bored-and-looking-for-trouble kind. Means's writing is shot through with emotion and beauty. A subversive humor -- and an almost religious fervor -- drives these stories, and Means's miraculously precise observations bring them to life.

Eileen Battersby of the *Irish Times* wrote, "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." This is a brilliant lineage, and yet David Means writes like no one but himself.

Discussion Guide

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?

Author Bio

David Means's previous book, **Assorted Fire Events**, won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His stories have appeared in *The New Yorker, Harper's magazine, Esquire, McSweeney's,* and numerous other publications. His work was included in **The Best American Mystery Stories 2001**. Born and raised in Michigan, he lives in Nyack, New York.

Critical Praise

"Achingly intelligent....[David Means] stands among our most gifted younger writers."

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