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David Means
États-Unis

« The Voyeuristic Impulse »
Why I'm a short story writer

Born and raised in Michigan, **David Means** now lives in the state of New York. He is notably the author of short story collections *Assorted Fire Events* (2002, Fourth Estate) and *The Secret Goldfish* (2004 , Fourth Estate). His short stories, regularly pubished in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Esquire* and *McSweeney's*, have been received with enthusiasm by his peers and American critics.

« In an age of terror, rock and roll, and mass-media gloss, the story writer (in this particular case, me) has a duty to tap the power of a genre that can, in the best cases, shake the reader awake from a deep state of amnesia that might, or might not, be distinctive to the American culture... The strength of the short story resides in the voyeuristic glimpse, a giving in to the fact that all is not knowable, and that only in the poetic, fragmented moments of witness can the nature of the human predicament be revealed. »

David Means

« Short Stories :
le choix des histoires courtes »

Frédéric Boyer (FR),
Geneviève Brisac (FR),
Kirsty Gunn (Écosse),
Thomas McGuane (USA),
David Means (USA)

Mardi 28 novembre à 19H30
à l'Institution des Chartreux
(58 rue Pierre Dupont - 69001)

Version anglaise (VO)

Let me begin by saying what a pleasure and an honor it is to be in Lyon. I'd like to thank Villa Gillet and Guy Walter and his wonderful assistant, Cedric Duroux, for all of his help. I'd also like to thank the French government and in particular those at the French Cultural Embassy in New York for giving such fine assistance. I would also like to thank my translator, Catherine Richard, for bearing with me as I went through a complex process in getting this speech into its current form. I would simply like to offer up, this evening a few thoughts in support of the short story form, and make a few comments on its relationship to the novel.

The Irish short story writer Frank O'Connor, in his manifesto, *The Lonely Voice*, made it clear that he thought the short story was a much harder form, more artistic and more demanding, than the novel. "For the short story writer," O'Connor said, "there is no such thing as the essential form. Because his frame of reference can never be the totality of a human life, he must be forever selecting the point at which he can approach it, and each selection he makes contains the possibility of a new form as well as the possibility of a complete fiasco." The excitement that a short story can generate has to do with the fact that it has been written under extreme pressure and on a sharp edge of chance, and with the possibility of ending, as O'Connor said, in nothing but a complete fiasco." The power of a short story comes, in part, from the selection of the entry point;

the way it dips its toes into the flow of time and then extracts them. Whereas the novel, I would argue, with all of its wide-open room and narrative space is a hugely forgiving form, one that allows the writer to make many mistakes and yet to avoid the complete fiasco.

Writers such as Anton Chekhov, and Jorge Luis Borges, turned to the story as a way to express their genius not to avoid the novel, but because of the enforced demands these forms offered. Borges, who grew up in an Argentine grab bag of a culture, felt compelled to dig in and reinvent what had already been invented; he embodied old modes in a new way–the mystery story, the gothic, the fable, and brought modernity into touch with the primal folk story form, just as Picasso united the two on the canvas. Under the great restrictive pressure of the brevity, of having to keep the story reduced and sharp, Borges created epic diamonds. (And I stress that word, epic.) For his part, the Isaac Babel knew the stakes, a Jew in Odessa finding a foothold among the Cossacks, and honed his no-nonsense style until each story was a firmament and fury, each comma bitten off at exactly the right place. Chekhov, who selected the short story as the medium for his genius, brilliantly picked his points of entry into the stream of narrative and his moments of departure, inventing a entirely new way of looking at the world, throwing his arms completely around his native Russia, and usually in no more than about fifteen pages. Finally, Hemingway, one of my favorites, was at his greatest in his stories. The stories in *In Our Time* still feel wildly new, bright, and as sharp as shards of glass. They produce a kind energy that comes, I like to think, from the fact that Hemingway wrote them in little blue notebooks, carving the tip of his pencil with a knife, at cafes in Paris, and that he had to confront the small space and, in the process, invented a pure, new style.
Thus, out of these limitations of the genre there arise great stakes and high risks but also grand rewards, because in the end a great story takes a small, voyeuristic glimpse and transforms it into something eternal and complete, a closed poetic system that sticks like a splinter forever under the psyche of the reader–a reader who must carry the questions the story has posed forever, through an eternity of narrative space.

In a lecture he gave at Harvard, Jorge Luis Borges stated that: "What's important about the metaphor, I should say, is the fact of its being felt by the reader or the hearer as a metaphor." The same could be said for the short story. What a strong story demands from you, the reader, is really deceptively simple. It demands to be felt as a story. It is so simple, that I believe this is one reason that the story isn't more popular. In order to fully appreciate a good short story, one must suspend many of the skills used when reading a novel. The demands of a story of deeply primal and intimate. A reader must let herself loose to become exposed to the central mystery, and the enigma, of a fragment. To aesthetically appreciate a story one must listen to it the way one listens to a song, with a different set of expectations. The song writer Tom Waits once said. 'In order to catch a song you have to begin thinking like one; they are illogical and unexpected and if they ask you to write them down, you better do it or they will get mad. They are strange containers, songs, they come quickly and if you don't

take them. . .they'll move on." The same might be said for the story.

A case can be made that the short story form is better suited (than the novel) to exposing the unique isolation of the contemporary world, a world in which, as the Mexican Nobel Prize-Winning poet Octavia Paz has said, technology forces us all in the same direction" and creates a new kind of isolation, one that comes from being trapped in a techno/corporate/culture, a world in which even the smallest village–such as the one my wife and I used to visit, Agua Amara Spain--is festooned with satellite dishes and the streets are filled with the beeps of cell phones and the songs of U-2. This is what Paz calls "the unification of technology and its geometrical deserts." The world culture starts to flow all in the same direction, a logjam of corporate products on all sides. In many ways, it seems to me, the novel has become part of the corporate landscape; whereas the story, of much less monetary value, remains forever outside the flow.

Frank O'Connor once said: "always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo–Christ, Socrates, Moses.. . .As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel–an intense awareness of human loneliness." Strangely, the short story slips insidiously into the culture of the rock song, the ad lingo, and the voyeuristic television glimpse; it fits right in while, at the same time, opening a door explorations into particular moments of true isolation and silence, and the primal reality of being human; each story does so, most often, by honing in on one or two specific question. What did it mean when the old lady reached up to touch the Misfit just before he killed her? {Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find.") What happened to Gurov and his lover after the story ended and it was clear, in Chekhov's "The Lady with the Pet Dog, "that the end was still far, far off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was just beginning?" Why did the man leap off the train and return to his two children, who were standing alone in a field waving to their adulterous father? (Andrey Platonov's "The Return.") What did the narrator leave out in his confession about the man he killed in Vietnam? (Tim O'Brian: The Man I Killed.")

Admittedly, there are a number of great novels that operate in a way that is, essentially, close to that of a short story, leaving the reader with that open-ended sense of incompleteness. For example, the work of the Austrian novelist, Thomas Bernard. His novels – *The Loser* and *Extinction*, to name two, never seem eager to wrap themselves up; there is an energetic search for something, a series of glances, but one is not forced to feel that he or she is being given some complete picture. (There is nothing more horrifying to me than feeling I'm being forced to see the complete picture.) Then there are the works of Thomas McGuane, who was one of my heroes, a writer who has created, pristine novels that mirror the vast solitude of his western landscapes by focusing in tightly on individual lives. Even longer novels often work by drawing from the short story from, such as *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, which is split up into smaller sections, each one reading like a novella. In these many novels,

it seems to me, the short story form is actually embedded in narrative. (On the other hand, Borges often seems to embed entire novels, of not entire encyclopedias, into a few pages.). I would also argue that the brilliant short story writer, Alice Munro, is partly writing miniature novels; stories that are short but that, somehow, seem to produce wide, long, sprawling gyres of narrative. This is a game a short story writer could play forever: isn't *The Castle*, by Kafka, really just a series of short stories, glimpses of a castle, up on the hill over the town, that is never attainable? Beckett found himself a short story writer in the end, writing shorter and shorter work until he finally produced what he called "Fizzes," small bits of narrative, wonderfully rendered, that seemed somehow to reveal the space just between life and death.

On the other hand, a great number of contemporary novels today seem to me to be too heavy, too long, and trying to educate the reader somehow instead of revealing the human condition through open-ended stories . Many novels remind me of the kind of the SUVs American's often drive, huge, gas guzzling, highly inefficient, and prone to rolling over; whereas most short story seem fast, efficient, poetic, sleek, with clean lines, and it ride like a sports car. Of course like a sports car, it is also prone to the crash and burn. One tends to push a sports car as close to the edge.

Let me admit here, that my initial impulse was, in this speech, to write something attacking the novel. I wanted, originally, to argue that the short story can, and does, hold up, or even surpass the novel. But in truth it is very much like comparing apples and oranges–or even my already mentioned to kinds of cars. In any case, the argument would be much too complex and, in the end, not winnable. There are brilliant novels that read like short stories; there are brilliant stories that read like novels. . But as a short story writer, I feel isolated at times in a culture that often refuses the story. And now, in the middle of writing a novel myself, for the first time, I feel as though I'm swimming far from a shore, out of sight of land, and with nothing but water in front of me. Whereas when I'm writing a story, and I suppose when someone is reading them–the land is always in site, in front, that last page, just ahead, and behind, the title and the open space of the beginning. What I would like to say is that the story can do innumerable things that the novel can't. It can make use the of glimpse. In a vast, complex landscape–it can find the truth, through the glimpse. We are, by nature, physiologically equipped to draw and extrapolate from only a fragment of the landscape. From mere glimpses we draw wide extrapolation We are, inherently, and naturally, short story thinkers; we all understand the strange nature of the Latin phrase, *Festina lente*, hurry slowly. We are creatures of speculation and guess-work.

I have to step back and give my motto, which I actually stole from the writer Italo Calvino, which is the old Latin tag, Festina lente, hurry slowly. If you can explain that statement you can explain the short story. It's a feeling more than anything, and there just isn't a way to explain a feeling, except to show it, and the only way to show it is through a precise series of instruction, to make the reader feel it, too. That's what I really like to do.