SAMUEL LIGON, ADAM O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ,
DAN J. VICE, & ZACHARY VINEYARD

A Conversation with
Stuart Dybek

May 18, 2007

On September 25, 2007, the MacArthur Foundation named Stuart Dybek a 2007 Fellow, noting that his work "dramatizes how a new storytelling tradition takes shape; his writing borrows from the literature and iconography of the Old World yet emerges from the New World—from the speech and streets and music and movies that feed the imaginations of contemporary American communities." The very next day, he received the Rea Award for the Short Story. "The beauty of these two awards," said Andre Dubus III, who served on the Rea Award jury, "is that it gives Stuart well-deserved time to create. And that benefits all of us."

In his work, Dybek explores the memories and legends of his upbringing in the Polish neighborhoods of Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s. He grounds the reader in the physicality of those places, while at the same time daring to blur the boundary between the real and the dreamlike. Time does not often move in a straight line, but seems to spiral outward, and to double-back on itself, in ways that feel fluid and organic rather than planned. "The state you want to get to," he says, "is surrender. When you're controlling… you're never going to find the accidents, which is what art is all about."

He is the author of three books of fiction: *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (1980), *The Coast of Chicago* (1990), and *I Sailed with Magellan* (2003); and two collections of poetry: *Brass Knuckles* (1979) and *Streets in Their Own Ink* (2004). His poetry and prose have appeared in numerous periodicals, including *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The Paris Review*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and *The Best American Poetry*, among others. In addition to the MacArthur Fellowship and the Rea

Award, Dybek has received honors including a PEN/Malamud Prize, two Pushcart Prizes, and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Stuart Dybek holds a BS and an MA from Loyola University, and received his MFA from the University of Iowa. In 2006, after over 30 years teaching at Western Michigan University, he had a homecoming of sorts, becoming Distinguished Writer in Residence at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. He spoke with us over lunch at the Palm Court Grill in Spokane.

ADAM O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

I Sailed with Magellan, while considered a novel in stories, seems linked less by narrative than by something else. How do you see these stories as connected?

STUART DYBEK

One reason to work with linked stories or a novel in stories is to escape a certain tyranny of chronology, without losing the power of narrative in the process. Each story, of course, has its own narrative design, and each story, with the exception of something like "*Qué Quieres*" and maybe "Blue Boy" is chronological enough. But the arrangement of the stories departs some from linear narrative. Still, there's a kind of chronology. That is, the stories begin with the narrator as a child and end with a funeral. But the reader participates in constructing a timeline.

I always look for something to counterpoint narrative with: image, mood, thematic motifs, et cetera. And that counterpoint is often as important to linking the stories as a narrative line can be. The metaphorical dimension of a book can be as powerful a unifying force as story or characterization. What one is ideally trying to do is to generate a dynamic interaction between the various elements.

Of course novels that put their pieces together in ways other than straight linear narrative can accomplish the same reassembling of fragmented reality.

In *Magellan*, besides the centrality of place around which the stories gravitate, there are other connections, such as the repeated motif of music. Music figures heavily in the characterizations and I wanted each character to have his or her own song. And place is, for me, one gigantic, infinitely complicated image. So when somebody says that Eudora Welty is a writer of place, Joyce is a writer of place, or, as they should

say, Kafka is a writer of place—you can talk about geography and so on and so forth, but really, for me, what each of these writers has created is this infinitely multi-layered, gigantic image that encompasses character. Place is metaphorical context.

SAMUEL LIGON

Can you talk more about the tyranny of chronology?

DYBEK

In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust talks about the tyranny of rhyme forcing writers into their greatest lines. But I think the tyranny of chronology is not as benevolent a tyranny as poetic musical patterns that lead to the invention of form, which is what Proust is talking about. One can fall into a forced singsong pattern with rhyme—that's a danger. And chronology too can invite you to fall into this numbing pattern of first this happened, then next this happened, then next that happened. When I taught sixth grade and asked the kids to write a story, many of the stories would begin with, "*Briiiiiinnggg!* The alarm clock rang." They wanted to start a story at the beginning, waking up—then next you brush your teeth and eat your Wheaties, and by the time you get to the part about how you killed your brother, you've got five pages invested in just doing your toilette. Obviously there's a valence that is necessary as to what moments in our lives or imaginations are important enough to get written about that has nothing to do with chronology.

At the same time, fiction is a temporal art. Its main subject is time. Its great power is chronology, because chronology has an inescapable way of translating into cause and effect. It's deceptive and illusory, but that's the power of linear narrative. If we write that such and such happened at ten, and such and such happened at eleven, we assume they are connected and that what happened at ten caused what happened at eleven. It's how fiction makes the chaotic world understandable. That's why people require stories—one great reason, anyway. Stories make the chaos understandable by arranging it along a timeline. But linear narration is only one way to perceive reality, and one of the things I like about a novel in stories is that it offers other ways to look at reality. Stories can be beads on a string but the form of linked stories can also offer a more crystalline, gemlike, faceted form.

LIGON

Are you consciously trying to break chronology? In *I Sailed with Magellan*, it seems that "We Didn't" comes chronologically before "Lunch at the Loyola Arms."

DYBEK

Yeah, it does. Jerzy Kosinski, when he was at his best as a writer, wrote a book called *Steps*, which was called a novel, but is a novel in stories. It works on that counterpoint principle—it counterpoints unidentified dialogues, which I love, with narrative sections. Kosinski called such counterpoint "anti-rhythms." They break up the pattern of "first this happened and then that happened": the writer has established another pattern. First a narrative passage, then a more dramatic dialogue, then back to narration, et cetera. If you disrupt linear narrative, you have to replace it with some other form. That arrangement of fictional elements into form can also include a rearrangement of time, so that one isn't breaking chronology so much as allowing fictional form precedence over it.

LIGON

On my first read of *I Sailed with Magellan*, I read "Breasts" out of order. And because I read it out of order, when I got to the end, I didn't understand the shift in point of view—

DYBEK

When "Breasts" was published in *Tin House* and later in *Best American*, the departure the ending takes was lopped off; the story ends with the guys arm wrestling in the bar. And I like that freeze-frame ending, too. But I always knew that in the book the story was going to make a leap and circle back to what actually happened to my brother—which seems outside the frame of the story.

The murder in "Breasts" is based on something that happened in my neighborhood. A small-time hood was found with his balls blown off. In writing the story, I tried to research the actual murder in newspaper files, but I couldn't find any record of it. After a while, I began to think I'd made the whole thing up. Not only that, but my brother, Tom, told me two different versions of the ending. The first version is the one I

used in the story. I asked him to tell me his version of the story again, years later. I said, "Hey, tell me again what happened about sticking that rifle through the curtain and everything." He said, "Oh, no, I never did that." I said, "You told me you stuck a gun in the curtain." "No, I couldn't have done a thing like that." Damn, I thought, maybe I made everything up.

The story is a composite. Grafted to the story of the mob guy's murder was an unrelated image I saw once as I walked by a bar in my old neighborhood: two guys sitting there. One guy was in an undershirt and clearly had a case of—what's that called—you know, when men get breasts? It's a hormone problem. Anyway, the other guy was feeling him up.

And the image stuck in my mind. Then I was with Paul D'Amato—the photographer whose lovely photo is also the cover photo for *I Sailed with Magellan*—in Chicago on Cinco de Mayo, and we saw these masked wrestlers in wrestling matches in the middle of the street. They had a ring set up. And it suddenly came to me that one of those guys in the bar was a *Luchador*, a Mexican masked wrestler. Part of what was pleasurable about the process of writing that story was that once I failed in researching it, I never knew exactly what departures it might take.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Do you usually know where you're going, or what's going to happen in a story?

DYBEK

A lot start out that way; I think I know what they are. But then a digression occurs, and I'll think, Oh shit, if I do this, I've just ruined a perfectly straightforward story and doomed myself to three more months of writing something I could have finished in a week. Because I had it all nice and thought out, and now what am I doing? And those are real risks. It'd be nice to say that every time you make a digression you get a good story out of it, but, in fact, I've ruined any number of stories that I think would have been pretty nice stories by chasing after digressions I could never find my way back out of.

DAN J. VICE

The story "Blue Boy" digresses a lot, but the timeline is really tight, as if you know exactly what the chronology is and then you play with it. Is that still a result of muddling around?

DYBEK

Yeah, it was a mess. I never knew if that story was going to come together. The other thing is, I didn't know if it was a story or a memoir. When I decided finally to call it a story, that's when I knew I had the *Magellan* book. That was the pivotal story. I realized the characters in it and the place, Little Village, were at one with several other stories I had already written, but now, with "Blue Boy," I saw how they were all related, fragments of the same whole.

LIGON

What's the difference between memoir and fiction?

DYBEK

For me the difference is what your allegiance is to. In fiction, my allegiance is always to imagination. And in memoir, it's to memory. Which isn't to say that memory isn't hugely imagined. But it means in fiction that it's any crazy thing that occurs to you that's going to make the story better. The more lies, the more you can invent, the better the story. I think even the mechanism is different.

Mary Karr has a wonderful essay she wrote about the James Frey flap, when he admitted to faking his memoir—I'm not going to quote her as elegantly as she said it, unfortunately—but Mary said that because your allegiance is to memory in memoir, you have to stick to that. It drives you to do research that you might not have done if you didn't feel about it so strongly. And again and again that research leads you to surprises, things you would have never, with your own imaginative powers, concocted. And I think she's right, that that's one of the ways memoir works. Now, that doesn't mean a fiction writer can't do that; fiction writers do it all the time. But it's a choice in fiction, whereas in memoir, according to Mary, it's obligation.

ZACHARY VINEYARD

How do these ideas of allegiance apply to poetry?

DYBEK

Nancy Eimers, a poet whose work I admire, was talking to a group of students who asked if she ever wrote fiction, and Nancy, who's very modest, said something like, "No, I don't have the imagination to do it. I need to stick closer to my own life. I couldn't make up stories." And it suddenly occurred to me that when the whole creative nonfiction and memoir publishing blitz came along, many poets—Li-Young Lee, Garrett Hongo, Michael Ryan, Debra Diggs, Mark Doty, et cetera—wrote memoirs. It seems poets saw the memoir as a form carried over from poetry. Perhaps it was a post-confessional evolution. Yet I think of poetry as a grand fiction. I don't think there's a right or wrong vision of it, it's just how you're wired.

LIGON

What do you mean by a grand fiction?

DYBEK

I mean, to my mind, Eliot and Pound would both be grand fiction writers. Wallace Stevens, as well.

VINEYARD

When you mention Wallace Stevens, I think of the "supreme fiction." He was kind of under this influence that everything was imagined, even the reality that we have, this place, this world, that anything physical is just this imaginative power—

DYBEK

Yet you have poets moving naturally into memoir. There's a connection there, an implicit notion that poetry is autobiography. For me, even though I often work with autobiographical material, whether I'm working with poetry or fiction, I'm thinking of it as invention—an invented reality. I don't feel Mary's obligation to root memory in fact.

I remember Toby Wolff saying something along the lines that the

subject of a memoir, as he saw it, was memory itself, including memory's fallibility. Memory's subjective truth. So there's differing emphasis, different degrees of objective or factual reality. Rather than walled cells there's a kind of fluid continuum along which different writers locate themselves.The same writer within the same book can locate him- or herself at different places on the continuum in different chapters and sentences, so long as signals to the reader are clear.

And then there are hybrids, the nonfiction novel, or, in the novel itself, you have the roman à clef, a form that predates the whole current fascination with memoir—*The Sun Also Rises* is one of many examples. Supposedly, people who knew that exile crowd were able to identify exactly who those characters were despite the fictional disclaimer. And that notion of hybrids makes me think of your earlier question about the novel in stories, as that's a hybrid form too. It shocks me when I think back to the lists that appeared when the century turned—lists like "The Hundred Best Books of the 20th Century"—and left off those lists was *Winesburg, Ohio*. Such a seminal book. It gives you some notion of this unexamined allegiance to the novel. There are so many novels on those lists that are inferior to that brilliant, still haunting, ever-haunting book by Sherwood Anderson. Or Hemingway's *In Our Time*, or *Cane* by Jean Toomer, which is way underrated. Dos Passos pissed old supporters off later in life when he turned into a conservative, and his writing went to crap too, I guess. But if you look at some of his early books, like *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.*, that great trilogy—those are really novels in stories. Mosaics. Crazyquilts.

A novel in stories is a hybrid form. One of the problems with hybrid forms is that they lack good names. *The prose poem*—what the hell is that? I mean, *creative nonfiction*—that is such a lame term. You know what Grace Paley said to me about the short-short once? She said, "Stuart, that sounds like a stutter." No—*stammer*. She said, "It sounds like a *stammer*."

But the novel in stories equates with the most fertile period in American literature, which to me is the 1920s, when everybody was experimenting like crazy and great works were coming out of it. *The Waste Land* has about it the scale of a novel. Its fragmentation makes one think of a novel in stories.

VINEYARD

How do you see place applying to poetry?

DYBEK

I wrote an essay on that subject, in which I argued for place being an underrated element in poetry for several reasons. It's fashionable right now to flee from narrative elements in poetry—and that's not limited to poetry; that's through all the arts. Artists don't want to paint decorative paintings and they don't want to paint paintings that have narrative. And classical music, which at one time was programmatic, no longer wants to suggest narrative elements. So it's not strictly poetry that takes that stance.

But if you look at a poet like Frost or a minor poet like Masters—when you start getting into that notion of place, narrative isn't far behind. And then major/minor gets thrown around quite a lot. Place gets confused with local color. A fine poet like John Haines, for instance, is assigned by some critics a local color, or minor status, because Alaska figures so repeatedly in all his work, whereas that's not true of fiction. In fiction, being a writer of place is joining a grand tradition, whether it's Bellow, Farrell, Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Faulkner.

No matter what genre, place is image and also a formative element for me, and in that it transcends genre. And I'm interested in what transcends genre. Different genres all have their signature modes. The narrative mode would be the signature mode of fiction. But if you look at Kafka, Flannery O'Connor, Babel, these are great lyricists. In the 20th century, certainly the signature mode, at least of American poetry—probably Western poetry—would be the lyrical mode. And yet Phil Levine is a great storyteller on the page, and so was James Welch, as was Hugo, who I also admire. That whole Montana bunch liked story.

VICE

We hear about the death of the story, that no one reads stories, and yet every few years we hear that the story is back. Why do you think that cycle occurs?

DYBEK

I'm hoping that it is a cycle—that stories will come back. I'm not so optimistic they'll return as a commercial form. John Cheever was one of my teachers at Iowa and he actually made a living writing stories, but today it's nearly unthinkable for any writer, with the possible exception of Alice Munro, to support themselves writing stories. And

yet overlapping my life are writers who actually did that. I don't see that happening again. A novel is just a much more commercially viable form. One thing the novel really offers is getting to know a character that you can identify with, and it's hard to do that kind of characterization in a single story. We have great short story characters, but you don't get to spend the face time with them as in a novel.

LIGON

Your books of fiction have a similar shape, yet they don't feel redundant. Do you look back on them and think—

DYBEK

If I think about them at all, I think of the accidents that happened.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

What's a good example of that?

DYBEK

Once at Case Western Reserve before I read we went out and really drank. Instead of reading, I self-indulgently and drunkenly started telling stories onstage. I felt ashamed as I began to sober up. And the guy who invited me said, "You know, you did go on a bit, but those were really great stories. You ought to write them." At that time, I was going to tons of comedy clubs and listening to people like Lenny Bruce. I thought, What a neat trick it would be to try to write a poem like a comic monologue—I was never able to pull this off—but poets are doing it now, you know, Billy Collins does it. So I tried to do that with these stories I told on stage, and the piece turned into the story "Blight." That story was so digressive I needed a principle by which I could digress and come back to the linear narrative that's kind of threaded through the story. So an accident of sorts generated a literary strategy.

VICE

That style of digression comes up in *Magellan*, too; it seems like the kind of thing a writing workshop would tell you to remove.

DYBEK

Bad advice sometimes, especially when one's voice is in a formative stage.

VICE

How do you decide when to leave something in, even though it's unlikely to please a committee?

DYBEK

What the workshop's trying to teach you—and what you're trying to learn—is control. And I think it's right that you have to be able to control a story before you can surrender. But control is only a temporary state. The state you want to get to is surrender. When you're controlling something like that, you're never going to find the accidents, which is what art is all about. And when you begin to digress, then you've opened yourself up to accidents. I was just talking about "Blight," and one of the accidents that I found in "Blight" was the line, "Back to blight." As soon as I had that neighborhood phrase—the kids always said "Back to blight"—I had this mechanism in the story from which I could digress and always come back, a transition, and for me the art of the short story is the art of transition. Also a little chorus. And I thought, This is a move I'd like to repeat in another story.

I love Latin American music, how they get into these ecstatic choruses that are totally different than the chorus that appears in a pop song. And they'll just riff on the same chorus. So, when it came to "*Qué Quieres*," I had that chorus/transition again. It was a different version of "Back to blight," and once I had that chorus, I could keep digressing and coming back. The thing is, the chorus has to be interesting. I couldn't sit down and make one up. They have to come to you out of the material.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

In "*Qué Quieres*," you change modes in the end in a different way. Did something intuitive bring you to that?

DYBEK

Yes and no. When I listen to Latin music, it's all based on riffs that are rooted in chant; it's like rock and roll and the blues—if you

go way back, you're back in church. Those Hispanic singers go back to Santeria, Voodoo, West African forms that became hybrid religions. And Conga players, you know Conga is all about chant. As a kid watching *I Love Lucy*, Ricky Ricardo would beat this conga drum like a clown, running around yelling, "Babaloo." We just thought it was a funny word, "Babaloo," but he was actually chanting the name of a great god.

And so when you're trying to set up this chorus, behind it all is a kind of chant, and at the end of the story what I wanted to happen was that suddenly you break into this kind of prayer, this litany intended to have that chant quality.

VICE

Growing up in a tradition like Catholicism, do you find that it's impossible to get away from it?

DYBEK

Well, I think it depends on the writer. And even if you define yourself against it, you're not getting away from it.

VICE

What you're describing, and the way it seems to function in your stories, is more cultural than spiritual.

DYBEK

It is, I think. However, it puts the possibility of the spiritual in the story, and a lot of the vocabulary—I mean, we all do this for whatever reason—the vocabulary of awe and mystery, the lexicon of all that stuff, the religions kind of own it. And so, even when you're writing about the profane, a lot of times you're borrowing from religion the vocabulary to express profane moments of mystery and awe. Just as our government reaches into pro football and football reaches into war. I bring it up only because—where do you go to get your metaphors, your figurative languages?

In a lot of cases, these stories that explore the cultural side of religion are about perception—perception changed through intense, sometimes ecstatic moments. There are a variety of rabbit holes through which you can fall down into another dimension. Once you've done that, you might not reemerge as a believer, but you come out with your perception

changed. And religion is just one of them. So you enter that church, and you're in medieval times suddenly, and there are all these suffering icons and so on. Or you enter a bar, and everything changes. Or you get on a motorcycle and go a zillion miles an hour. Or you have an intense sexual experience, or you play music and it changes your life. In all those cases, there's some emotional experience that's changed your perception.

VINEYARD

Are you influenced by the surrealists at all?

DYBEK

I'm interested in most all categories of the fantastical, for lack of a better word. I taught a course once that tried to involve it all. Speculative fiction, ghost stories, the grotesque, surrealism. It was an anti-realism class. I know that a real, bona fide surrealist would insist he had a political agenda as well. I'm interested in people who have harnessed dreams—Kafka, Bruno Schulz, Yeats, when he worked with folkloric material later in his career. It's all one broad category to me. Borges and speculative fiction writers, Calvino.

LIGON

In "Pet Milk," you're able to move in many directions with time, and the story seems to be about time and memory. But echoing Dan's earlier point, a workshop might say about that story, "What does Pet milk have to do with anything? What does the grandmother have to do with anything? We need to get to that train." Why does that story begin with the coffee and then move to the grandmother?

DYBEK

When I wrote it, it started as a poem, and all I was trying to do was write a still life. I love still lifes. And of course, you know, so many poets are influenced by paintings. But I couldn't bring the objects I placed on the table alive. I don't know why my still life was a can of Pet milk, but it was. Actually, I finally asked myself that question and I had the association with my grandmother. The story is based on an image. You have to create the image, and then the narrative is a way of exploring the image. And so it opens with the can of Pet milk—you begin creating the image and layering emotion through anecdote.

There's this line in Cole Porter's "Everytime We Say Goodbye"—"Ain't no love song finer but how strange the change from major to minor." And he's right. That change from major to minor, which is at the heart of Gershwin and at the heart of Cole Porter, you can't wear it out. There's a move like that in writing when an image opens into narrative, or conversely, when narrative closes into image, it's like the change from major to minor. It's so beautiful to watch that little motion.

I mentioned transitions earlier and the most important line in "Pet Milk" is the line in which he looks from the milky coffee and sees the sky doing the same swirls above the railroad yard across the street. Because that's the central transition in the story. Once you've established for the reader that you can make a transition like that, then you can do anything. You have permission to use the image to go anywhere you want. Total major to minor freedom.