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The Spot

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Supporting Info:

By David Means (Faber and Faber, \$23)

Article Type:

Review

Book review

Dek:

A virtuosic writer chooses a bizarre concept to link his latest book of stories.

By Leigh Newman

About ten years ago, book marketers decided that short stories should be published as “linked collections”: Though discrete, each tale had to take place in the same region, feature the same characters or share a common theme. At its best, the link could be a central idea that the author approaches from a variety of angles (as Wells Tower’s *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* did with the notion of disaster). At its worst, concept collections feel like marketing at its silliest (Lara Vapnyar’s recipe-studded *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food* comes to mind).

Taking linked stories to a new extreme, David Means has titled his newest book *The Spot*. Each story features a spot. Literally. A spot can be the space between a broken leg and its cast, or the place in a lake where a city draws its water supply. Using nothing more than good old-fashioned storytelling craft, Means transforms these simple physical locations into places “where the future vanishes,” or where people are “devoured by darkness and then spat out.” The whole thing feels a little postmodern: Where the link should bring familiarity, he adds complex meaning and uncertainty.

As with Means’s previous collections, *Assorted Fire Events* and *The Secret Goldfish*, this book is dark, deep and dangerous. Here, the author’s technical authority continues to astonish. He’ll switch point of view midstory or examine the act of storytelling while telling a tale that you actually want to read. His most typical pieces, at once shadowy and insanely focused, feature bleak Midwestern violence: the crucifixion of a high-school boy, or the murder of a farmer by a hooker.

Others bend time until it becomes as complex as the characters themselves. His weakest story (“The Knocking”) relies too overtly on Rick Moody’s gorgeous, extended rants. His strongest (“Reading Chekhov”) surprises with its abrupt shift into slow, lingering grace—all beauty and longing, little structure or pyrotechnics. Overall, Means’s work is so virtuosic that one thing feels clear: The only link needed is David Means himself.

Means reads with Jonathan Franzen Thu 27 at [Brooklyn Public Library](#) [1].

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