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# DAVID VANN

David Vann sera en France du 17 au 24 janvier 2010 à l'occasion de la parution de son premier roman *Sukkwān Island*.

*Sukkwān Island* tient à la fois de l'autobiographie la plus sincère et de la fiction la plus pure... Jamais encore pareil livre n'avait été écrit. THE GUARDIAN/OBSERVER

Une nouvelle voix talentueuse. SUNDAY TIMES

Un style typiquement américain digne de Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff et Cormac McCarthy, succinct mais foisonnant, où détails et incidents apparemment insignifiants finissent par prendre une importance bien plus grande...

Un texte magnifique, dense et débordant d'émotions complexes. ESQUIRE UK

Un œuvre de fiction vibrante d'intensité et d'émotion – sans aucun doute le plus beau premier roman américain de l'année. THE INDEPENDENT

Une histoire tragique d'une sagesse bouleversante. MARIECLAIRE UK

Époustouflant et magnifiquement écrit... Je l'ai adoré. Un ouvrage qui arpente le territoire littéraire de Richard Yates et d'Annie Proulx. Chaudement recommandé.

SARAH BROADHURST, THE BOOKSELLER

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# THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

## Merciless Alaskan portrait of wild beauty and despair

**David Vann's stark vision of a journey into desolation and self-pity is marked by greatness, writes Ellis O'Hanlon**

"Why spend any part of a life in a cold place? It didn't make any sense to him." But still Jim takes his 13-year-old son to spend a year on an Alaskan island. There in their log cabin, they will hunt, fish, chop wood for the fire; live the classic American frontier dream. It quickly turns sour. Jim -- rotten with misery and dissatisfaction, divorced from Roy's mother, estranged too from his second wife, pursued by the [IRS](#), bitter about women -- has come to the island to heal himself with the fantasy of a new life, but he unravels from the start.

Roy, meanwhile, lies awake at night, listening to his father sob, and during the day has to endure in embarrassment his unwanted confidences and confessions.

Legend Of A Suicide was rejected by every major American publisher before being issued as a collection of short stories by the [University of Massachusetts](#) Press, and went on to be an award-winning bestseller. The paperback now reaches this side of the Atlantic as a novel. Somewhere in between lies the truth. Or a version of it, anyway. Five rather slight stories, variations on the theme of a father's suicide, bookend a remarkable central novella, Sukkwan Island, tracking Jim and Roy, fictionalised versions of the author and his late father, into the literal and metaphorical wilderness. David Vann spent 10 years trying to write about his father's suicide, and then reportedly finished the first draft of this story in 17 days.

If true, it makes his achievement all the more incredible, because Sukkwan Island contains not a single wrong note, and makes most other modern fiction seem anaemic and insubstantial by comparison. As for the details of the plot, they would make Lord Of The Flies look like a Club 18-30 holiday, as man and boy face hypothermia, starvation, attacks by bears, loneliness, depression, alienation, injury and "outrageous winds".

Plot, though, is merely the starting point. It is the shape of Vann's prose which continually astonishes. This is the sort of book which can be opened at random and devoured simply for the rhythm and stark beauty of its sentences. There is something undeniably masculine and visceral about them, with their echoes of Hemingway, [Raymond Carver](#), [Cormac McCarthy](#). Vann is pitiless in his examination of failure and despair, yet there are constant touches of the blackest humour. The book is peppered with some wonderful landscape writing too, of a kind which has been neglected, or maybe just forgotten, by metropolitan novelists. Bleak and steely for the most part, the island on which Jim and Roy are trapped also offers moments of tender lyricism to balance the horrors, as when the teenager shoots a mountain goat on the shore and "the mountains the next morning had snow all along their tops, as if the spirit of the white animal had somehow fled into them".

In the same way, the landscape reflects their disintegrating characters, which means less needs to be said, and thoughts and feelings become adjuncts to the business of staying alive in this hostile environment. Not that Jim lets the proximity of death interfere with his depthless appetite for self-pity. It is an incredible portrait of a pathological solipsist obsessed by women but blaming them for all his woes, who has "no patience for his own mind", and who is haunted to the end by the "crimes he had committed. None of the obvious ones like murder, but all the more important ones." Vann's vision will be too merciless for some, but Legend Of A Suicide marks the fictional debut of a truly great writer.

# the guardian

David Vann's reworking of his dad's suicide is an extraordinary, ground-breaking piece of fiction, says Alexander Linklater



David, aged six, with his parents (and a family friend, far left) on the Vanns' hunting ranch in Alaska.

Before reading [David Vann's](#) book, there are three things you should know. The first and most important is that, though this is a work of [fiction](#), the suicide of the title was a real one. The sombre American edition (it came out in the US earlier this year) makes this explicit, up front, in a note on its inside flap. The British edition, however, omits that note. Vann's dedication remains – "For My Father, James Edwin Vann, 1940-1980" – but it is now left to the author's acknowledgments at the end to remove any ambiguity over the fact that his father killed himself.

For sure, it would be an odd reader who had not already come to this conclusion, but it needs to be stated from the outset. There must be no ambiguity, because unless this is clear, the far more profound and shocking ways in which Vann goes on to break with actuality may be muddled and diminished.

The second thing you need to know is that this is a collection of stories and not a single narrative. (...) There is no single death. Though all the stories are connected, there is no single story. The power of Vann's "legend" emerges from the way a real-world event is imagined, changed and reimagined as if it were taking place over and over again, in parallel but contradictory worlds.

Then there is the third thing you need to know which is, rather, something you must *not* know. As this book reimagines its central death, an event occurs that utterly transforms the encounter between protagonist, father, author and reader. Do not let anyone tell you what this event is before you start. To know what happens in advance would be to spoil not just a narrative surprise in a heart-thumping tale, but the entire apparatus Vann has constructed to wrench out the dreadful and meaningless facts of existence, to master them, and, in a violent act of fictional transmutation, to reconfigure them as something not less, but more real.

David Vann is a young American author whose first book was a memoir, *A Mile Down*, about how a boat he had built sank in the Caribbean, in a peculiar echo of previous family accidents. He might also, here, have written a memoir of his father's suicide, but such a memoir, however direct, however honest, however lacerating, could never have reached the psychological depth, the real-world knowledge, of the fiction that he has produced instead.

(...)

And then in the central story (or novella) of the book, "Sukkwan Island", that wilderness opens up. A 13-year-old Roy is taken to a remote Alaskan hut by his father and it becomes clear that the father is using the son in a desperate, last-ditch attempt to rebuild his life and stave off the encroaching dark. Roy listens in the night as his father weeps, cringes, confesses his sexual cravings, jabbars his delusions, begs his son for forgiveness. Roy does not have the mental equipment to interpret this, nor is there another soul for miles around. Psychological and physical survival become the same thing.

Without striking any hysterical notes, Vann's writing gradually marks out a score of unholy human pain. There are hints of Hemingway in the control of the style, but the tide and undertow of its meaning are Dostoevskian. Father and son cannot leave this place. You, the reader, will not be able to leave it either.

Vann inhabits and possesses his father's shame-diseased, dying, subjective experience, claiming it – appallingly – as his own. You draw breath at the daring of it. The stakes are high and serious. There is no border here between external and internal realities; this is a book that must already have changed things in the author's world. What of Vann's family? What of his mother? What of the other women in his father's life, whom he evokes and implicates and hands over to the reader for judgment? Are they also his to possess?

*Legend of a Suicide* is a book that exists in what may be the last taboo region of literature. When another American writer, James Frey, published a furious memoir of his struggle with addiction – *A Million Little Pieces* – he was pilloried and discredited by American critics and readers, Oprah Winfrey, most notably, after it was discovered that he had been dishonest with his facts.

When Michel Houellebecq's mother disowned him for producing what she saw as a travesty of her real self in his fiction, Houellebecq retreated into the French role of the amorally licensed artist. When, more recently, novelist Julie Myerson produced a literal account of her son's drug use, the British reaction was dominated by critics who declared that it was a story that should not have been told.

These are examples of fictionalised memoir, fiction exploiting elements of memoir, and memoir that would have been safer as fiction. The extreme reactions to them were defined by the way they put an idea of the real under threat, exposing and tampering with inner lives, not just inside a book, but in the world.

Vann goes beyond such distinctions. His legend is at once the truest memoir and the purest fiction. You need to know it is based on facts to understand just how far he has gone in creating a new reality. But you also need to remain ignorant of the fictional surprise he has in store, so that it can hit you with the full force of new knowledge. Nothing quite like this book has been written before.

# The New York Times

## Exit Wounds

By TOM BISSELL

Published: November 28, 2008

Suicide is an exploded bridge that can never be repaired. All its secondary victims can do is stare across the chasm and hope the other side is more peaceful than this one. In his first book, "A Mile Down," David Vann wrote of his attempt to surpass the modest seafaring efforts of his father, who killed himself when Vann was a boy. In search of answers, Vann built a ship and set out for the watery depths — only to come close to reuniting with his father in the void. This was an exorcism that wound up needing an exorcism. One hopes, for Vann's sake, that the novella and five stories in his second book, "Legend of a Suicide," helped provide it. An author more haunted by paternal amputation would be difficult to imagine. A sadder book about fathers and sons would be impossible to imagine.

The book's central character is a boy named Roy. The novella and four of the five stories take place in Alaska, where Vann himself grew up, and only the novella steps outside Roy's first-person narration. While the father's suicide is dramatized explicitly just once, it exerts its gravitational pull on every page.

From the shores of Vann's Alaska one can see the Russia of Turgenev's "Fathers and Sons." One can also see [Richard Ford's](#) "Rock Springs" and [Tobias Wolff's](#) archipelago of perpetual struggle.

Structurally dependent on epiphany and defiantly plainspoken, "Legend of a Suicide" is about as unfashionable as fiction published in 2008 can possibly be. Its language ranges from the undeniably evocative ("I slipped out into the soft, watery world of Alaskan rain-forest night") to the iffier register of quasi-Hemingway. Thankfully, examples of the former vastly outnumber the latter.

A few passages nevertheless have a confession-booth, vaguely essayistic feel. In "Ketchikan," a 30-year-old Roy returns to his Alaskan hometown and, after listing its many eccentricities, notes, "This was overwrought, but it seemed in keeping with the indulgence of this trip, with the extravagance of an attempted return to childhood." At the story's end, Roy tells us that "the divorce and suicide that I had let shape my life so permanently had been something else altogether. . . . And what, then, of what I had become?"

It is hard to know who, exactly, is speaking: the art or the artist? In his acknowledgments, Vann writes, a little inelegantly, that his stories are "fictional, but based on a lot that's true." Fifty years ago, when writers were romanticized differently, it was less problematic to imagine an author and his narrator as an essentially Siamese-twin phenomenon. Today, such a determined blurring may strike some readers as self-consciously therapeutic or, worse yet, self-serving. Vann's narrator speaks of the "last beautiful, desperate, far-ranging circlings" of his father's life, but he may as well be describing the overall method of these stories.

In "Ichthyology," Roy watches two "slick and merciless" silver-dollar fish, recently introduced to his aquarium, attack a "lazy, boggle-eyed" tankmate, sucking out both its eyes. The story returns, stunningly, to this image in its final lines. Much of Vann's book works this way. The smallest moments of unease are placed on the narrative scale as if they were lead bars. Suicide gives everything it has not destroyed a dreadful, unfamiliar weight.

In the novella, "Sukkwan Island," the powerful and supremely vexing centerpiece of the collection, Roy and his father make a final attempt at reconciliation. The father has bought a cabin in the Alaskan wilderness with the intent of spending a year there with his son, homesteading and living off the land. The first half of the novella is narrated from Roy's close third-person perspective, the second half from the father's. In the first few pages Vann shows the reader an unassuming set of rustic implements: some rope, a few screws, a battery. By the story's end the rope has become a noose, the screws have been driven into the reader's fingernails, and the battery is wired someplace unspeakable.

The father, a dentist who has quit his practice in Fairbanks, imagines himself as a high-north survivalist. He is, in fact, woefully unprepared. He does not know the name of the nearest inhabited island or how to build a cache for winter food or how to repair the cabin's damaged roof or how to keep the bears away. (Not everyone who lives in places like Alaska is born knowing how to MacGyver a water filter out of bark.) The father does not even have the sense to prevent his increasingly terrified son from overhearing his hopeless nighttime sobs.

"Sukkwan Island" is about the love of a powerless boy for a weak father. While his father goes to pieces, Roy busies himself with fishing and chores, activities that showcase Vann's grimly observant facility with natural-world detail. When Roy bashes in the head of a Dolly Varden trout, he hunches down "to look at it and watch its colors fade." An early pink salmon lies "gasping and wild-eyed" after the boy scoops it up by the gills and heaves it onto the beach. (Warning: the fish-trauma-per-page ratio here makes "The Old Man and the Sea" seem like a paean to ichthyophilia.)

Every night, Roy goes to bed to the sound of his father's weeping. "I'm sorry, Roy," he eventually tells his son. "I'm really trying. I just don't know if I can hold on." Later, after he confesses that he once got crab lice from a prostitute and passed them along to the boy's stepmother, he asks, "Do you think I'm a monster?" Soon enough, a bit of dialogue as innocent as "Maybe we should go for a hike" becomes a portent of doom.

And yet this man is never hateful. You'd have to go back to books like "The Mayor of Casterbridge" or "The Great Santini" to find a father capable of such loathsome deeds brought to life with such empathy. After one bit of appalling fatherly negligence, Vann writes, "There were no good times after this." And there are 50 pages to go.

The central event of "Sukkwan Island," shocking for several reasons, appears to take place in a parallel universe. The Roy and the father of the other stories cannot be the Roy and the father of this story. Vann does not choose to explain this, and he should not have to. But it is strange, like encountering Borges, in waders, within "A River Runs Through It."

The reportorial relentlessness of Vann's imagination often makes his fiction seem less written than chiseled. One cannot say that Vann does not do humor well because — here, at least — he does not do humor at all. What he does do well is despair and desperation. In spite (or maybe because) of this, he leads the reader to vital places. A small, lovely book has been written out of his large and evident pain. "A father, after all," Vann writes, "is a lot for a thing to be." A son is also a lot for a thing to be; so is an artist. With "Legend of a Suicide," David Vann proves himself a fine example of both.

# THE SUNDAY TIMES

## Legend of a Suicide by David Vann

The Sunday Times review by Peter Parker

Brought up in Alaska and California, David Vann was given his first rifle at the age of seven and shot his first buck at the age of 11. This passion for hunting and firearms was handed down to him by his father who, when Vann was 13, blew his own head off with a .44 Magnum handgun, a weapon more often used for bringing down grizzly bears at close range.

Coming to terms with this appallingly violent act of self-destruction has been a long process for Vann, but those 30 years of grief, guilt, rage and confusion have now been distilled into an American classic. Consisting of a novella and five short stories, *Legend of a Suicide* approaches the defining event of Vann's life from a number of different and often brilliantly oblique angles. Although it is evident from what Vann has written elsewhere that much of this material is based in detail upon real events, the book is far more than a lightly disguised memoir, playing instead a set of elaborate variations upon a central theme. (...)

The most startling variation occurs in the novella, *Sukkwan Island*, in which the 13-year-old Roy is taken homesteading by his father. His parents have separated and Roy has been living with his mother and younger sister in California. His father, Jim, takes him to live off the land on the isolated island of the title, part of the Alexander archipelago off the southeast coast of Alaska. Jim has also separated from his second wife and it soon becomes clear that the purpose of this trip for him is as much to escape the disasters of his own life as it is to bond with his son. Furthermore, for all his masculine posturing, Jim spends his nights in a welter of self-pitying tears and proves incompetent at living in the wild, several times placing himself and Roy in mortal danger. The twist that occurs halfway through this harrowing but beautifully wrought novella is so unexpected and shocking that it would be unfair to reveal it, but Vann — who has described *Sukkwan Island* as a “psychological revenge story” — uses it to convey in the most extraordinarily concrete way the burden a suicide places on those left behind.

One story, *Rhoda*, describes Roy's stepmother and her own dysfunctional family, and appears largely comic. It is only later, in a casual aside, that we learn that the latent violence of Rhoda's parents' relationship had catastrophic results. Indeed, violence, suppressed or otherwise, runs through all these stories, not only in relation to Roy's father but also, as a series of aftershocks, in Roy himself: from his apparently mindless shooting out of streetlights as an adolescent in suburban California in *A Legend of Good Men* to the wanton destruction of salmon fingerlings in Ketchikan when as an adult he returns to the Alaskan coastal town in which he was raised. While none of these stories is for the faint-hearted, they are leavened by flashes of dark humour and by the sheer quality of the writing.

For Roy's dentist father, who, squinting into mouths, sees “his whole life reduced to something cramped and small”, the idea of the wild offers a means of escape. Vann writes about that landscape, the sea and the often hostile physical world his characters inhabit with the sort of precision that comes from lived experience and close observation, and in a prose as clear and bracing as a mountain stream. Psychologically, too, this is a compelling book that equally precisely delineates the contours and limitations of masculinity, and the sheer effort required by unanchored people attempting to find purchase in a world that is “held in place, as it turned out, by nothing at all”.

# San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

## Legend of a Suicide

By David Vann

As its title indicates, David Vann covers some very shadowy territory in his fiction debut. It is partly a physical place but, mostly, the danger zone exists primarily in the brain. Of the six stories, the longest is the novella "Sukkwan Island," which forms the dark heart of a dark collection.

The major characters, a father and his son, float through each story in one form or another. (...)

Although there are intimations of death and shadows in the short stories, nothing quite prepares one for the depth of despair that lingers over the haunting "Sukkwan Island," the most disturbing and unsettling of the pieces. A father has asked his 13-year-old son, Roy, to go with him to the wilds of Alaska for a year to live off the land. The father is a former dentist from Fairbanks who has a messy personal life - his constant cheating and lying has led to divorces from two women, the boy's mother and the boy's stepmother. He also has problems with the IRS. He feels that getting away from civilization will give him a new lease on life and will also allow him to get to know his son better.

"Something's been missing," he tells Roy, "but I have a feeling that being here, with you, is going to fix all that."

The son has mixed feelings. Not wanting to upset his father, he has agreed to the improbable plan even though he misses his mother, his younger sister and his friends back in Santa Rosa. The boy's new home is a small cedar-framed cabin on Sukkwan Island, about 50 miles from Ketchikan. Surrounded by miles of rain forest, it is accessible only by seaplane or boat. They have no neighbors and no indoor plumbing. Among the items they bring with them are two rifles, a shotgun and a pistol.

Life is hard on the island. They fish for salmon, stave off bears and, at one point, nearly die during a hike when they get lost on the trail. At first, Roy thinks living on Sukkwan is like camping or, perhaps, a rougher version of the television series "Little House on the Prairie." But most every night the father weeps and moans before nodding off to sleep, engulfed in despair that he can neither break away from nor adequately explain. Moreover, the father confesses to things that a father shouldn't tell a son. Roy fears the worst: that his father might kill himself and that he will be stranded in the wild with no means of escape.

As his father's physical appearance deteriorates - his unkempt, unwashed hair grows longer - his mental state becomes increasingly erratic. When the father says it would be fine with him if Roy returned home, Roy, despite all his misgivings, decides to stay. But when, out of desperation and wishful thinking, the father contacts Roy's stepmother to see if they could try to somehow mend the relationship, the story takes a deadly and irrevocable turn as Vann descends into a deep hole, a yawning chasm of anguish and desolation that, up until the final sentence, leaves one speechless.

With "Legend of a Suicide," Vann looks into the dark and isolated heart of the American soul. It is a devastating journey that is difficult to read but impossible to put down and equally impossible to forget.

June Sawyers is a writer and editor in Chicago