

# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *I Sailed with Magellan*

*by Stuart Dybek*

ISBN: 0-312-42411-6

### About this Guide

From the prizewinning writer Stuart Dybek comes a superb new work: a novel-in-stories, eleven masterful tales told by a single voice with remarkable narrative power. In *I Sailed With Magellan*, Dybek finds characters of irrepressible vitality amidst the stark urban landscapes of Chicago's south side; there, the daily experiences of the neighborhood are transformed in the lush imaginative adventures of his hero, the restless Perry Katzek.

There is remarkable music in each of Dybek's intertwined episodes, the rhythm of street life captured in all its emotional depth and unexpected humor: a man takes his young nephew to a string of taverns where the boy sings for his uncle's bourbon; a small-time thug is distracted from making a hit by the mysterious reappearance of several ex-girlfriends; two unemployed youths hatch a scheme to finance their road trip to Mexico by selling orchids stolen from the rich side of town; a young couple's amorous beach adventure is interrupted when an unexpected visitor washes ashore. As these poignant, often funny chapters unfold, Perry grapples toward the exotic possibilities the world offers him, glimpsing them even beneath the at times brutal surface of the inner-city.

Throughout *I Sailed With Magellan*, fans of Dybek will find the captivating storytelling, the sharp, spare prose, the brilliant dramatization of resilient, inventive humanity that they have come to expect from one of America's finest storytellers.

### For Discussion

1. In the story "Live from Dreamsville," Perry conjures an imaginary trapdoor in his bed. What other sorts of "trapdoors" are to be found throughout the stories?

2. Why do you think Dybek chose to title the book after a phrase in a song sung by Perry's little brother Mick?
3. In the story "Breasts" (page 60), Joe Ditto says, "There's always some vulnerability that a personality is reorganized to protest." What sort of vulnerabilities do Dybek's characters carry? What sorts of people do they become as a result, and how are they connected by this psychological process or instinct?
4. Discuss the structure of Dybek's story "Breasts." Why do you think the author employs a shifting point of view? How, other than incident, are Joe, Zip, Teo, and the young brothers Perry and Mick connected?
5. In what way is music — and the making of music — used throughout the book?
6. What sort of images and objects reappear in these stories? Why do you think Dybek returns to this ephemera?
7. Who are the women in this book? Who are they to Perry and what roles do they play in the world of Little Village, Chicago?
8. In "We Didn't," the outside event of a dead body seems to precipitate the end of Perry and Gin's love affair. Elsewhere in *I Sailed with Magellan*, the forces of the characters' environment seem to affect them in tangible and profound ways. What is Dybek trying to say about the city, about community, and about the world at large?
9. Additionally, Dybek's world is one where so much is *overheard*, through open windows, across bars, up through pipes or behind apartment walls. How does this outer-web of information affect change in the book?

## About the Author

**STUART DYBEK** is the author of two collections of short fiction, *The Coast of Chicago* and *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*, as well as two volumes of poetry, *Streets in Their Own Ink* and *Brass Knuckles*. A professor of English at Western Michigan University, he lives in Kalamazoo.

## Praise for *I Sailed with Magellan*

A *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year

A *Chicago Tribune* "Best Book of the Year"

Winner of the Society of Midland Authors 2003 Adult Fiction Award

"Spellbinding stories that are, by turns, hilarious, stunning and tragic, but always deeply moving, genuine and compassionate."

— Donna Seaman, *Chicago Tribune*

"Dream and memory, humor and pathos, song and silence: At his best Dybek combines these disparate elements in a shimmering web."

— Philip Connors, *Newsday*

"All are gems; each glistens with Dybek's spare poetry; combined, they form a vibrant mosaic about a boy's coming of age.... By *Magellan*'s end, you'll never want to leave... [An] A."

— *Entertainment Weekly*

"Vivid... With *I Sailed With Magellan* Dybek solidifies his reputation as the rightful heir to Farrell's gritty realism."

— Albert Mobilio, *The New York Times Book Review*

“A modern master...Dybek is incapable of writing a dull page.”

— *The Seattle Times*

“May propel Dybek into the top rank of living American writers.”

— *Chicago Magazine*

“These pieces are infused with Dybek’s moral intelligence and wisdom, and achieve a kind of elegiac quality.”

— *Esquire Magazine*

“Beautifully realized...a tour de force of American magical realism...this book is undoubtedly his best.”

— *Chicago Sun-Times*

“Stuart Dybek’s new novel in stories...includes a remarkable lyricism and structural spontaneity.... Readers...will undoubtedly hear parts of their own stories in Perry Katzek’s.”

— *The Boston Globe*

“It’s hard to tell where Nelson Algren leaves off and Stuart Dybek begins.... Stuart Dybek is, at this moment, our city’s blue-collar bard. These eleven lovely stories comprise the Chicago novel of today.”

— Studs Terkel

“Stuart Dybek is one of America’s literary masters, and *I Sailed with Magellan* is a forceful new demonstration of his extraordinary skills. This book of linked stories is full of nuance and feeling and the voice of working people from a time when our world and horizons were just a little narrower and our connection to those near at hand somehow even more consequential.”

— Scott Turow

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