



Voices in the Night: Stories

By Steven Millhauser

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From the Pulitzer and Story Prize winner: sixteen new stories—provocative, funny, disturbing, enchanting—that delve into the secret lives and desires of ordinary people, alongside retellings of myths and legends that highlight the aspirations of the human spirit.

Beloved for the lens of the strange he places on small town life, Steven Millhauser further reveals in *Voices in the Night* the darkest parts of our inner selves to brilliant and dazzling effect. Here are stories of wondrously imaginative hyperrealism, stories that pose unforgettably unsettling what-ifs, or that find barely perceivable evils within the safe boundaries of our towns, homes, and even within our bodies.

Here, too, are stories culled from religion and fables: Samuel, who hears the voice of God calling him in the night; a young, pre-enlightenment Buddha, who searches for his purpose in life; Rapunzel and her Prince, who struggle to fit the real world to their dream.

Heightened by magic, the divine, and the uncanny, shot through with sly and winning humor, *Voices in the Night* seamlessly combines the whimsy and surprise of the familiar with intoxicating fantasies that take us beyond our daily lives, all done with the hallmark sleight of hand and astonishing virtuosity of one of our greatest contemporary storytellers.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Wondrous. Millhauser wants to startle us, and with his latest collection, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author does just that—re-examining fairy tales, folktales and, not least of all, our shared perception of Small Town, USA. Phantoms plague residents in one town; a mermaid washes ashore in another. Few authors would dare retell the story of Rapunzel, but Millhauser attempts it. In ‘American Tall Tale,’ Paul Bunyan engages in a sleeping contest with his brother, James, a ‘do-nothing dreamer.’ Millhauser is unique among contemporary short-story writers: he’s unconcerned with topical subjects or what’s trendy. Instead, his eerie, atmospheric tales remind us of Edgar Allan Poe and the brothers Grimm. Millhauser’s stories feel as if they’d been composed in a distant era, magically delivered from the past to mystify and delight.” —Don Waters, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“Spellbinding, masterly, sublime . . . *Voices in the Night* abounds with marvels. The stories are anchored by dark human yearnings—for perfection, or excitement, or some ungraspable form of fulfillment. These yearnings have a combustible quality. Beware the uncanny magic of Millhauser: Just when you think you recognize a myth, a character, a voice, the familiar tacks toward the strange and unexpected . . . His flexible voice allows for many a quantum leap. The title story, brief as it is, offers a whole universe through the pinhole of a single memory. Millhauser gives us worlds upon worlds—wistful and warped, comic and chilling—that by story’s end, feel as intimate as our own reflections.” —Tania James, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Sixteen stories, from new versions of classics like Rapunzel, to modern-day tales where humdrum, everyday life becomes something quite different—when the normal moves, sometimes slowly and sometimes swiftly, into the strange. . . . Millhauser’s stories bristle with humanity. And the way he moves slowly, almost stealthily toward his conclusions, is a marvel to watch and a pleasure to read.” —Dale Singer, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“The Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and short-story writer Millhauser, celebrated for exploring the strangeness lurking in everyday life, riff[s] on classic and religious fables. His inventiveness shows no sign of waning . . . Throughout the collection, he veers into the realm of fantasy with unsettling and mordantly funny results.” —Carmela Ciuraru, *The New York Times*

“Masterful . . . intriguing and disturbingly intoxicating. Millhauser’s readers have grown accustomed to [his] spectacular feats of literary derring-do thanks to a splendid four-decade career spent enriching the world with narratives that trigger every possible emotion . . . Many of the stories in *Voices in the Night* are set in Millhauserian towns where romantic nostalgia duked it out with disquieting realities; characters must process their encounters with the uncanny without breaking their rose-colored glasses. *Voices in the Night* contains its share of fairy tales, too, [where] mystical happenings are not unexpected, but remain unnerving . . . In this collection, Millhauser’s feats are just as outsize as Paul Bunyan’s.” —Eugenia Williamson, *The Boston Globe*

“A master storyteller. *Voices in the Night* offers 16 new stories with much to appreciate. He tackles tall tales, fairy tales, mermaids and baseball . . . Millhauser is frequently whimsical and often funny, but he tackles serious subjects. There’s a lot of death and finality swirling around *Voices in the Night*, but don’t let that scare you. Millhauser doesn’t tell readers what to think about these heavy themes; he just writes clever stories that make it impossible not to think about them. Unforgettable. Four stars.” —M. Scott Krause, *Vegas*

Seven

“Millhauser has long excelled at the three major forms of fiction, but *Voices in the Night* should fix his reputation as one of the two or three best short story writers alive in America . . . What separates his short fiction from that of his contemporaries is [that] his fictions are unabashedly thought-experiments meant to lead the mind and spirit down a dangerous path toward pseudo-collective hysteria (‘Arcadia’ [is] one of the funniest American stories I’ve read in the last ten years), encroaching mania, epistemological blindness, communal oblivion, Emersonian philosophical splintering, and the vertigo of rumor. The stories are hilarious in the vein of Kafka, magical—that is to say not really magical at all—in the vein of Bruno Schulz, formally daring in the mode of Poe and Borges, although these similarities have been overstated. And they are written, this time around, firmly in the spirit of Hawthorne. That is to say they are twice-told, in the vein of Shakespeare’s ‘Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale,/Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man’ . . . It’s a welcome thing that these signs and wonders and experiments, these invitations into the fold of American madness, are extended on every page of *Voices in the Night*. This is especially true when the mania of so much American fiction is cosmetic—when so many writers are playing the game rather than fashioning it themselves.” —Jonathan Sturgeon, *Flavorwire*

“Brilliant . . . powerful. Each work is a delight and revelation. Beautifully made fantastic tales such as Millhauser writes don’t begin from nothing. As in the tradition of Nikolai Gogol, Italo Calvino and Gabriel Garcia Marquez (to name a few revered creators of fiction that carries us beyond the normal), most of them grow out of everyday incidents and lead us right up to the line between the ordinary and the magical. And sometimes they help us to cross over . . . But this collection it isn’t just a regional fantasia, all stories about the other side of normal small-town life . . . Let’s call [them] borderline pieces—easily described as magical realism, or perhaps, turned on their heads, tales of realistic magic. However we might describe it, *Voices in the Night* is a smorgasbord of deftly created short fiction by a great imaginative talent. Millhauser stands tall in the company of a growing number of contemporary American masters of magic, from Ursula K. Le Guin to Aimee Bender and Kelly Link. To use his own plain, down-home metaphor, Millhauser has polished his mirrors in the halls and bedrooms and bathrooms and elsewhere, and it will do us all good to take a look at the reflections the glass throws back at us.” —Alan Cheuse, *National Public Radio*

“A tour de force . . . What happens to a small town when something strange and supernatural takes over? Pulitzer Prize-winning author Millhauser explores that intersection of familiar life and disturbing, often bizarre events in *Voices in the Night*.” —Arun Rath, *National Public Radio*

“Pulitzer Prize winner Millhauser imbues classic fables with a hyperrealistic sensibility in this collection of 16 stories. In his capable hands, figures like Rapunzel, Buddha, and Paul Bunyan assume new and dazzling nuances.” —*Time*

“Evanescence and bloody, obsessive and meditative, historical and futuristic, dystopian and romantic: Millhauser’s brilliant work thrives in the fecund, mucky cracks of human contradictions. The stories in *Voices in the Night* revise traditional tales, entwine shadows of individual terror and community panic, and dazzle with nimble allegory. Millhauser’s characters seek improvement, order and happiness, usually finding or making trouble in the process . . . He plays fluidly across genre—gothic, horror, hyperrealism, fables—and evokes not only his acknowledged influences, Nabokov and Mann, but also Poe, Calvino, Borges and Millet. In these stories he savors the perverse, morbid and dark; yet some tales add lighter touches to scriptural history and the fairy canon. His virtuosity is evident.” —Valerie Miner, *Chicago Tribune*

“American literature never had a magical realist tradition to call its own, but it’s always had writers eager to

blur reality and the metaphysical . . . For decades Millhauser has [been] our national laureate of the weirdness of our normal lives. The stories in his masterful new collection riff on advertising copy, board reports, mythology and sports announcing. But within that breadth of styles he consistently prompts the reader to sense some shadowy but important news that's about to be delivered . . . He isn't concerned with death so much as with the elements of human nature that are hard to articulate or that speak to our fears. It's why [here] he's written stories on the long spiritual transformation of Buddha and the prophet Samuel, or riffed on fairy tales, tall tales and mythology . . . Millhauser doesn't deliver a firm moral lesson—he is the last writer who'd have a problem with us perceiving our world differently. *Voices in the Night* is defined by its playfulness; Millhauser tweaks genres and expectations like a carnival strongman bending steel bars. He is also the last writer who'd have a problem with abandoning the laws of physics—if he can make a good story out of it.” —Mark Athitakis, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“Masterful, imaginative, impressive . . . Millhauser covers much ground in this collection. Many stories are set in small towns, with comfortably recognizable characteristics. Yet each has its own twist; something slightly askew whereby a single complication, placed under closer scrutiny, turns into a revelatory experience . . . The humor is first-rate, tickling the brain until the build-up explodes into irresistible laugh-out-loud funny. Millhauser's writing is impeccably fluid, while sneakily deceiving. For hiding beneath what seem to be easy, flowing, and uncomplicated tales, which include our funny quirks, odd ways, and frail vulnerabilities, lies our deeper shared commonality of desires, fears, and needs. The stories are well balanced, resisting any danger of becoming heavy-handed or too philosophical. Rather, they quietly draw us in, ultimately coaxing us closer to embrace the characters—and ourselves—in a more honest light.” —Peter Fritz, *Everyday eBook*

“In several stories [the] acclaimed Millhauser doesn't so much defend the pervasiveness of unexplained phenomena in everyday existence as slyly report it. In off-kilter accounts of how ordinary life unravels mystically in small towns, and strange goings-on subtly or dramatically alter the townspeople's behavior, he deploys a unnamed narrator—dutifully generous with details—who reports legend and fact with equal avidity. And what legends they are . . . Millhauser is a supremely gifted miniaturist. For nearly 40 years, he has pursued a career as a writer of short stories and novellas that has yielded an impressive body of work . . . Dating back to his first book, he has explored, and cleverly exploited, that strange moment when realism veers or erodes into fantasy. In *Voices in the Night*, with its preponderance of concerned citizens faithfully reporting dissolution on Main Street through the mystical and macabre, Millhauser comes on like the bizarro world Sarah Orne Jewett we've all been waiting for, even if we didn't know it. Unlike collections that strive [for] a mostly unified voice, *Voices in the Night* is a protean work that collects at least a half-dozen distinct voices . . . A worthy collection from a master of an increasingly rare art.” —Steve Nathans-Kelly, *Paste*

“Captivating stories, whose decidedly fantastic perspective on what we like to think of as ordinary life infuses mundane existence with a persistent sense of mystery and wonder. Millhauser's gift lies in his ability to maintain plausibility while at the same time allowing surreal qualities to flourish . . . In these enchanting, unsettling stories, Millhauser bursts the boundaries of the world we think we know, to help us see it anew.” —Harvey Freedenberg, *Shelf Awareness*

“The towns in Millhauser's stories are haunted. The characters—nearly all of them—are frenzied. They see phantoms, they fixate on surreal happenings, they hear voices in the night. But Millhauser isn't a horror writer; his latest collection elegantly toes the line between the real and the surreal, and many of the stories examine how we attempt to collectively explain the unexplainable . . . He is calling attention to the value of storytelling, as opposed to cut-and-dry fact-gathering, as a means of conveying truth . . . Like Fox Mulder, or even Wes Anderson, Millhauser is a delightfully playful truth-seeker who uses factual language not as a definitive descriptor, but as a jumping-off point for fuller understanding. *Voices in the Night* expertly toes

the line between the real and surreal—and thoughtfully examines how we talk about, and document, the latter . . . Whimsical, fantastical, macabre.” —Maddie Crum, *The Huffington Post*

“Mind-boggling wonders receive calm scrutiny in the fiction of Steven Millhauser. His tone can be comical, eerie or some slippery combination of the two . . . He enchants you. The closing story, ‘A Voice in the Night,’ is quite unlike anything else he’s done, as it cycles through three permutations of the same story: the Biblical tale of Samuel being called by the voice of God; a 20th-century youngster’s experience of reading and pondering that Bible story; and a 68-year-old author reflecting on how the story has resounded for him over six decades. It’s as close to straightforward autobiography as Millhauser has ever come—and it feels like a key to his whole narrative universe . . . These 16 stories find him at the peak of his powers.”

—Michael Upchurch, *The Oregonian*

“Vividly imaginative . . . In this new collection, Pulitzer Prize-winner Millhauser draws a gauzy curtain of hyper-reality over mundane events and creates an atmosphere of uneasiness that accelerates to dread. He establishes tense yet wondrous tones while never resorting to melodrama; his cool, restrained voice is profoundly effective . . . The gem of the collection is ‘A Voice in the Night,’ in which a young boy in the author’s own home town is transfixed by the biblical story of Samuel, who heard God’s voice and knew he must obey . . . The cumulative effect [of] the voices throughout is to transport the reader to an alternate world in which the uncanny lurks pervasively beneath the surface.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“A master storyteller continues to navigate the blurry space between magic and reality in 16 comic, frightening, consistently off-kilter tales. Millhauser emerged in the '70s with his sensibility fully formed, taking Bernard Malamud’s heady mixture of Jewish mysticism and urban life and expanding its reach to encompass palace courts and big-box suburbia. In this collection [he] complicat[es] our notions of suburban comfort [and] as ever [is] an incessant tinkerer with ages-old myths, fairy tales and religious stories: Among the best entries here are ‘The Pleasures and Sufferings of Young Gautama,’ a tale of the young Buddha that pits foursquare language with its hero’s roiling spiritual despair, and irreverent tweaks of tales about Paul Bunyan, Rapunzel, mermaids and the prophet Samuel. Millhauser intuits modes of storytelling like nobody else, and even his satire of sports-announcer—speak in ‘Home Run’ elevates the quotidian to the cosmic. A superb testament to America’s quirkiest short story writer, still on his game.”—*Kirkus* (starred review)

About the Author

STEVEN MILLHAUSER is the author of numerous works of fiction, including *Martin Dressler*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and, most recently, *We Others: New and Selected Stories*, winner of the Story Prize and a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. His work has been translated into seventeen languages, and his story “Eisenheim the Illusionist” was the basis of the 2006 film *The Illusionist*. He teaches at Skidmore College and lives in Saratoga Springs, New York.

Users Review

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