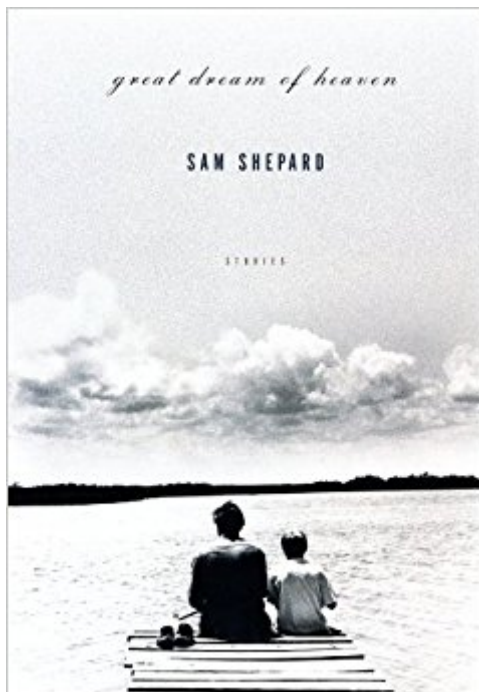


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# Great Dream Of Heaven: Stories



## Synopsis

In these eighteen elegantly terse stories, Sam Shepard taps the same wellsprings that have made him one of our most acclaimed and distinctly American playwrights: sex and regret, the yearning for a frontier that has been subdivided out of existence, the comic gulf of misapprehension between men and women, and the even deeper gulf that separates men from their true selves. A fascinated boy watches the grim contest between a "remedy man" a fixer of bad horses and a spectacularly bad-tempered stallion, a contest that mirrors the boy's own struggle with his father. A suburban husband starts his afternoon shopping for basil for a party and ends it holding one of the guests at gunpoint in the basement. Two old men, who have lived together companionably since their wives died or left them and their children scattered to "silicon computer hell," are brought to grief by a waitress at the local Denny's. Filled with absurdity, sorrow, and flinty humor, *Great Dream of Heaven* is Shepard at his best, exercising his gifts for diamond-sharp physical description and effortless dialogue in stories that recall the themes he has explored with such singular intensity in his work for the theater.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In his second collection of short fiction, *Great Dream of Heaven*, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Sam Shepard offers a resonant examination of interpersonal crisis and revelation in 18 lean tales. At times humorous, tense, and tragic, these stories often focus on the elusive search for connection and understanding, visiting characters at key moments of consciousness or detachment. Seized by

compulsion or repression, many in this work disengage from life by assuming familiar roles or patterns. In "The Stout of Heart," a man obsessed with horse breeding locks himself in his room annually to study catalogues, shutting out his family, while in "An Unfair Question," another man's frustration with his role as husband and father surfaces when he engages a party guest in friendly conversation and ends up holding her at gunpoint. These stories achieve an understated impact due in part to Shepard's knack for acute dialogue and descriptions that reveal his dramatist's eye for sparse but evocative detail. In "Living the Sign," a handmade sign in a fast food restaurant inspires a man to self-awareness, though he finds that its teenage creator is only dimly aware of its significance. "The Remedy Man," the collection's first and strongest story, tells of a guarded boy who comes to realize his potential by helping E.V., the road-worn title character (a fixer of bad horses), break a stallion. "Horse is just like a human being," E.V. tells him. "He's just gotta know his limits. Once he finds that out he's a happy camper." Offering many such moments of distilled wisdom, the stories in *Great Dream of Heaven* are no less brief but memorable encounters. --Ross Doll

"E.V. made no bones about it; he was not a horse whisperer by any stretch," writes Shepard (*Cruising Paradise*, etc.) in the first of 18 brief stories that make up his new collection. "He could fix bad horses, and when he fixed them they stayed fixed." This terse, weather-beaten "remedy man" turns out to be so observant that he gives a bullied boy a new sense of the truly vast scale of life and of his own possibilities. Some of the tales explore how characters fail to connect with any greater vision. Ambushed by sex, buried in habit or gripped by a desperation they didn't know they possessed, they become like blind forces of nature, some of them terrifying and heartbreaking. At his best, Shepard shows us how in brief, bright moments people wake up from the suck and drag of the distractions that cloud their lives. In "Living the Sign" a young fast-food worker commemorates his moment of lucidity by posting a sign that reads, "Life is what's happening to you while you're making plans for something else.'" Shepard shows that consciousness calls out to us: eager to track down the employee who made the sign, a patron asks if anyone there seems "particularly auspicious? Particularly present and attentive?" In classic Shepard style, he also shows in the title story how people can fall apart as quickly and with just as much force as they come together. Like "The Remedy Man" himself, these sketches are simple but deeply intuitive and true. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"Life is what's happening to you while you're making plans for something else." That one sentence

from "Living the Sign", sums up this entire collection of simple stories that really hit the nail on the head. The story itself is a metaphor for the collection: The sentence is posted on a sign in a fast food joint by one of its employees, and the sign prompts one customer to begin a mini journey of discovery to find the one prescient individual among the glassy-eyed help behind the counter. In "The Remedy Man" we get a simple take on the proverbial Horse Whisperer (though E.V., the title character wouldn't classify himself as such - hence the title - he fixes things). But, is this the story of E.V. fixing a horse, or that of him helping a young boy find his own strength and way under the thumb of his controlling father? The characters in these stories, whether a man unable to grasp his role as father and husband who takes another partygoer hostage at gun point or so obsessed with horse breeding that he locks himself away from his family annually to study catalogs, are either at moments of absolute clarity or complete detachment from life. And, Shepard's sharp, concise dialog and writing snaps right to the point every time.>>>>>>

So many interesting short stories. I love Sam Shepard as an actor, but I really love his writing.

Always enjoy Sam Shepard's eye on the world in his stories.

Great classic narrative by great classic actor and playwright

I first became acquainted with the plays of Sam Shepard in Atlanta, in the 1970's. There was only one true avant-garde theater, "Kelly Seed and Feed" and Kelly was a big promoter of Shepard's plays. In particular, I remember truly enjoying "Angel City" which I would later see again in London. My English friends who accompanied me were rather dismissive: "intellectual masturbation." My retort: Then aren't all plays? This is the first collection of his short stories that I've read. There are 18 stories, which mainly feature the down-and-out and the dysfunctional, with many of them living in the American West. There is the "cat woman" in "Betty's Cats." Her friend is trying to help address the odor problem that concerns the Health Department; the cat woman cannot resolve the issue because her trailer is not level. Hum. In another story, a man is torn between two women; one who wants him, another who doesn't. In a third story there is a member of the subset of Americans who hate all the French due to one incident in France that did NOT involve a French

woman, but rather a Swede, fittingly entitled "It wasn't Proust." A perceptive two-page story concerns a New Mexican who feels like a foreigner when he goes to Santa Fe. (a lot of us New Mexicans can feel that way.) The collection starts strong, and ends strong. The first story, "The Remedy Man," is about a specialist who fixes bad behavior in horses. The solution is most memorable. And the penultimate story involve two old guys living in Twenty-Nine Palms, CA, and after 12 years have established a stable and seemingly eternal routine that is about to be interrupted. Shepard is a master of observation, capturing a detail that conveys so much. In "The Door to Women," all the women have finally left home, leaving only the grandfather, who is a somewhat of an invalid, and the grandson. The grandson, in his mid-teens, has to cut his grandfather's toenails: "Brittle chunks of yellow nail popped over the boy's head and landed on the parquet floor of the tiny living room." In the story of the two men living in Twenty-Nine Palms, they go to lunch every day, walking down the road to Denny's, wearing their Stetson's, which they never place rim down on the table for a reason. They wear bolo ties: "Sherman had trouble selecting a tie clasp for his bolo but he finally decided on the horseshoe silver-plated one with inlaid turquoise marking the nail holes." Shepard is also an actor, most famously portraying Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff*. He started his career in Greenwich Village, and "hung with the Chelsea Hotel crowd, and much before his marriage to Jessica Lange, had an affair with the singer Patti Smith during their Chelsea phase. With that sort of background, I found it even more of a marvel that he was able to obtain the experiences necessary to successfully write about the misfits and the eccentrics of the American West, and to be able to write from both the male and female perspectives. I'd love to obtain greater insights into what Shepard saw, perhaps with another tour "off the beaten path," enjoying the mixed pleasures and experiences of the campgrounds and "motel motels of the American West. I felt a couple of the stories had a too abrupt and therefore clunky end but who knows, perhaps like life itself but I'll withhold my special 6-star rating for the overall collection, though numerous of the stories are worth that, and give a 5-stars, plus.

A little too slick, a little too quick. There are eighteen stories in this collection and they all read like magazine short-shorts, so I'm surprised to note that only two of them were first printed in mags. I

catch myself thinking, invidiously, that Sam Shepard is just too good-looking to write a powerful story, but then I recall that he's really a very fine playwright, possibly the best in the USA. I first saw True West on stage a good 25 years ago, with Ed Harris playing the lead, and I can't think of any American stage play that has delivered as much punch. None of the stories in "Great Dream of Heaven" have that sort of impact. Shepard is as good an actor as any, and a guy on the right side of a lot of social issues, so I feel presumptuous NOT finding his stories very solid. I have to wonder why he bothers to write them; he plainly doesn't need the trivial income or the plaudits. It's not that the stories are badly crafted. If anything, they're technically glib. Almost all of them portray moments of failure, epiphanies of emptiness, in the lives of vulnerable losers like the majority of "us". Shepard seems possibly to have been influenced by short-story 'specialist' Raymond Carver; both writers give us a vision of life as a bumpy succession of disappointments heightened by an occasional intense grief. But whereas Carver's strength is in his fraternity with his losers, Shepard comes across as "judgmental", willing to exploit his characters for a fashionable well-turned scenario. Hey, maybe he really is just too good-looking to empathize with his own people.

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