

Check it out: David Means' "The Knocking"

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Abstract

In the March 15, 2010 issue of *The New Yorker*, David Means published a short story titled "The Knocking" (find it online here) that I found interesting for its clear emphasis on sound—particularly on noise.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, Listening, Literature, Noise, Sound

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In the March 15, 2010 issue of *The New Yorker*, [David Means](#) published a short story titled "The Knocking" (find it online [here](#)) that I found interesting for its clear emphasis on sound—particularly on noise. In a nutshell, the story presents us with two neighbors who don't like each other from first sight: one who lives upstairs and makes noise all day, and one who lives downstairs and has to cope with the constant influx of sound. What strikes me as interesting is that the narrator, understandably annoyed, describes the sounds coming from his neighbor's apartment as "knocks." The story, which aims to give us a look into the sad life of the man downstairs who can't stand the noises coming from upstairs, actually ends up being a study in noise.

"The Knocking" is all about knocks: knocks as sounds and knocks as noise. The story starts out with a perturbed narrator, annoyed by the sounds emanating from the apartment above him. In the first paragraph—comprised of just two sentences—the sentences seem to flow like sounds floating in the wind. But don't let the sensation fool you, the noises come off as rough and harsh (or at least that is how the narrator perceives them): "I know, as I wait, that the knocking will begin again, if not in the form of his tapping heel, then as some other kind of knocking; perhaps the sound of the hammer he uses to pound nails..., or the rubbery thud of his printer at work..., or the thump of his mattress hitting the slats." The narrator admits that the sounds are not knocks per se, but that they became knocks over time due to their "mechanistic, reproduced quality." Noise is clearly in the ear of the beholder, according to the narrator. However, further down, the narrator shows us a deeper understanding of the knocks: "At some point the sweet, even anachronistic, broom swish switched over to knock mode; not so much the actual sound but, rather, the intent behind the gesture had gone from the act of sweeping to the sound that the act made, so that it was clear to me below that what had started out as a normal cleaning routine had, perhaps in response to my moaning and occasional shouts up at the ceiling between sweeps, shifted to knocking." The noise is displaced from the listener to the one making the noise; if the intention is to make noise, noise it is. As the story flows he understands the sounds his neighbor is making as more than just annoying raps; he shows us how the sounds gain meaning via the listener as well as the the person making the noise.

Eventually the sounds become a metaphor for what is going on inside of him. The narrator has come out of a failed marriage, and we find out that before he moved to that apartment, he was married and had children. All that is left is an apartment and a fussy neighbor upstairs. The repetition and the lifelessness of the knocking echo the emptiness of his life. The knocking mocks what is left. This is best illustrated when he tries to explain to himself what happened in his marriage through his theory of love:

"Love is a blank senseless vibration that, when picked up by another soul, begins to form something that feels eternal (like our marriage) and then tapers and thins and becomes wispy, barely audible (the penultimate days in the house by the Hudson), and then is, finally, nothing but air unable to move anything (the deep persistent silence of loss; Mary gone, kids gone)"

It is one of the most beautiful passages in the story, and does justice to the theme of sound in the story. Love becomes sound, and instead of love at first sight, we have love at first vibration.

Sounding Out! • Check it out: David Means' "The Knocking"

This story brought together two of my passions: literature and sound. Although I don't claim that Means is the first author to focus a story on sounds, he did well by reading in those sounds the lives of the listeners/characters. "The Knocking" is short and enjoyable, but it is also meaningful and deep. I did not know about David Means' fiction until this issue([here](#) you can see the collections he's published, and [here](#) you can read his latest story in *The New Yorker*), but after reading this story and noticing his attention to sonic detail, I wonder if his other stories are just as mindful. It's refreshing to find fiction that attentive to sound, even if it brings back memories of my own noisy neighbors.

Bonus Track: read a brief interview of Means in *The New York Times* by clicking [here](#).

