# Hot Ice Study Guide

## Hot Ice by Stuart Dybek

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# Contents

# Introduction

Stuart Dybek's story □Hot Ice□ takes place in a changing working-class neighborhood of Chicago during the 1970s. As is typical of much of his work, Dybek mixes realism with fantasy to create a specific sense of place. At the center of the story is an urban legend about a girl who was drowned in a lake in the nearby park decades earlier and then frozen in the local ice house and the miracles that people around the neighborhood attribute to her. Her story affects the lives of three young men: Pancho, who is fanatically religious to the point of mental instability; his brother Manny, the cynic; and Eddie, who feels both the weight of tradition and the struggle to live a good life in a harsh environment. As they move through their days, Dybek renders with precise clarity the details of a city in transition, mixing memories of ice delivery and sharpening carts and streetcars and riding boxcars with the oppressive, looming presence of the county jail and the boarded windows of a neighborhood that is slipping away from memory.

The story was published in *Antaeus* in 1984, and the following year it was chosen for the O. Henry Award for short fiction. It is one of four Dybek stories that have won O. Henrys, three of them coming from the collection in which □Hot Ice□ appears, *The Coast of Chicago*. In 2004, *The Coast of Chicago* was chosen for the city's □One Book, One Chicago□ program, which encouraged not just students but all citizens to participate in a city-wide discussion club about the book.

# Author Biography

**Nationality 1:** American

**Birthdate:** 1942

Stuart Dybek was born on April 10, 1942 into a Polish family, in a Chicago neighborhood similar to the one in this story. He attended Catholic grammar and high schools and then enrolled at Loyola University, on the other side of the city where a more urbane culture prevailed. He was the first person in his family to go to college. His original major was pre-medicine, but he switched to English after a year. Still, he did not think of becoming a writer. After earning a bachelor's degree from Loyola in 1964, he was a case worker for the Cook County Department of Public Aid, a job that he pursued out of a drive to work for social justice. At the same time, he worked on his master's degree from Loyola, which he earned in 1967. He married his wife Caryn in 1966.

After earning his first master's degree, Dybek went into teaching, first at a Catholic high school in the Chicago suburb of Morton Grove and then for two years at Wayne Aspinal School in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands□a lush tropic environment that was about as far from his upbringing as he could get. In 1968 he entered the prestigious Writers' Workshop program at the University of Iowa, earning a master of fine arts degree in 1973. He then went to Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, where he was still teaching as of 2005.

In 1979, Dybek published his first book of poetry, *Brass Knuckles*. His first book of short stories, *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*, came out the following year and earned him much critical praise. *The Coast of Chicago*, the collection from which this story comes, was published a decade later, in 1990. By the time of its publication, Dybek had been honored with numerous writing awards, including a Whiting Writers' Award, a Guggenheim, an NEA fellowship, a Nelson Algren Award, four O. Henry Awards, a PEN/Malamud Award, and a lifetime achievement award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2003, he published the story collection *I Sailed with Magellan*.

# Plot Summary

## Saints

□Hot Ice□ is divided into sections with a topic title for each. It begins with the story of girl who had been molested then drowned in the park lagoon about thirty years earlier, during World War II. According to the story, her father found her body and traveled with it on a streetcar to an icehouse across the street from the Cook County Jail, at 26th and California, in Chicago. Her body is rumored to still be frozen there and to have special, magical powers: Big Antek, an old neighborhood alcoholic, claims that he once locked himself in the meat locker of a butcher shop where he worked and the girl's frozen body, temporarily stored there, kept him alive throughout the weekend. The nun at the local school believes the girl should be canonized as a saint.

This story is discussed by the three main characters of □Hot Ice□: Pancho Santora, his brother Manny, and their friend Eddie Kapusta. Pancho, who has always been deeply religious, believes that she does hold magical powers, though the other two doubt the story, especially the part about her father riding on the streetcar with a dripping corpse from the lagoon. Pancho asserts his belief in modern saints, referring to Roberto Clemente, a baseball player who died in a plane crash while on his way to help earthquake victims in 1971.

## Amnesia

The second section begins with Pancho already gone from the neighborhood and in jail. Eddie and Manny walk through the neighborhood, as they do on most nights, to go to the Cook County Jail, where Pancho is being held for a crime that is not clearly identified in the story. At his sentencing, the judge offered Pancho the chance to go into the military instead of going to jail, but Pancho, who has been fixated with religion since he was a little boy, laughed and sang to himself and claimed that his one goal in life was to pose for the pictures on holy cards. Manny visited him every week for three weeks, but Pancho eventually asked him to quit coming because he did not want to be reminded of the world outside.

Passing through the neighborhood, Manny and Eddie reflect on the signs of desolation: empty storefronts, wrecking balls, and railroad tracks that have been paved over. When they reach the jail, they walk around it, shouting Pancho's name. Inside, prisoners call back to them, mocking. They ask if anyone knows Pancho Santora but are told that the name is not familiar.

## Grief

At the start of this segment, Dybek reveals that Pancho has disappeared while in jail, with no definitive explanation of where he has gone. There are dozens of theories,

ranging from his having committed suicide or been murdered to his having escaped and gone to Mexico or just to the North Side of the city. Some people claim to have seen him walking the streets or in church. He has become a legendary figure.

When the chapter opens it is Easter Week. In the months since the last chapter, Eddie Kapusta has only seen Manny Santora once, at Christmas time. They ran into each other at a bar, then walked over to the jail, where they threw snowballs at the wall. Now, on Tuesday before Easter, Eddie goes to Manny's house, where they fall into a casual conversation, as if they had not been separated for months.

They go back to the jail, where they once had hollered up at the building when they believed that Pancho was inside. There, they shout again, but instead of joking with the inmates, Manny taunts them, calling them racial and ethnic names and reminding them that they are trapped without freedom. When Eddie tries to stop him, he shouts louder, with worse insults, until the people inside take up a chant for him to shut up and the guards in the tower turn their searchlights on. Eddie finally persuades him to flee, and as they stand behind the icehouse across the street Manny talks about his anger toward everyone inside the jail, from the prisoners to the guards to the wall itself. He says he is going back the next night, and Eddie goes along, afraid to let him go alone.

The next night Manny again shouts obscenities at the jail until searchlights and sirens drive them away. Hiding by the railroad tracks, Manny recalls a time when he was young, when he and some friends rode the freight train that ran on those tracks east to the lake shore. Eddie says he is not going to the jail with him again, and Manny agrees to do something else the following night.

## Nostalgia

On Thursday night, they take drugs and carouse the city, passing a bottle of wine between them. Eddie leads the way to a nightclub with a neon window display that he admires and explains that his hobby has always been looking at window decorations.

When they pass by an open fire hydrant, Manny says that he can smell the water of Lake Michigan coming out of it. It reminds him of when his family used to go to the lakefront at night to fish for smelt, a small silvery fish that is captured in nets by the thousands. Since Eddie does not know about smelt, they take a bus to the lake. On the way Manny tells a story about one time when he was young and swam out away from the shore, how he wanted to keep swimming away but returned when he heard his frantic uncle calling for him.

After taking amphetamines all night, they take quaaludes as the sun comes up. They sit talking at Manny's kitchen table for a long time and then remember that it is Good Friday. Manny wants to follow a ritual that Pancho made up□going to services at seven churches on Good Friday. Eddie goes along with him, though he can hardly keep awake. While Manny goes to the front of each church to observe the service, Eddie sits

in the back. At the last one, before falling asleep, he realizes that the emptiness he has always felt is a sense of grief for the living.

## Legends

The final section of the story starts with the perspective of Big Antek, the neighborhood alcoholic who claims to once have been saved from freezing by the girl in ice. He has recently returned to the neighborhood after having been in the Veterans Administration hospital, and he feels that the neighborhood has changed in the weeks while he was gone.

Eddie and Manny approach him, laughing and drinking and in a good mood, and offer to buy him a drink, which Antek refuses. When they start mocking the story of the frozen girl he becomes angry. Eddie tells him that the icehouse where she is supposedly stored is slated for demolition. Antek goes with them to the icehouse and stands outside while Manny and Eddie climb up the wrecker's crane to enter the building through the roof.

From outside the building, Antek imagines them working their way around in the dark, lighting a road flare that they stole, passing huge blocks of thawing ice until, in the building's basement, they find what they are looking for: a beautiful blonde girl encased in a block of crystal clear ice.

Having found her, Eddie and Manny decide that they cannot just leave her there. They ease the block onto an old railroad handcar that is on the track that backs up into the building and start the car in motion. The tracks, as Manny observed earlier, go to the lakefront, and they decide to take her to the lake and set her in the water, where she will finally be released from the ice.

# Characters

## Big Antek

Big Antek is a local character known throughout the neighborhood. He is an alcoholic who has worked at numerous butcher shops, cutting off fingers out of clumsiness and drunkenness until he only has a few left. Young people like Eddie and the Santora brothers go to Antek because they know that he will buy liquor for them.

During World War II, Big Antek served in the navy, ending up in a hospital in Manila. When he returned home to his neighborhood he found his name included on a plaque commemorating those who had died in battle. Some time later, when he was already solidly within his cycle of being fired for on-the-job drunkenness at butcher shops, he locked himself in the freezer of one on a Friday night and claims that he would have died if it had not been for the legendary girl drowned in the lagoon, whose body, frozen in a block of ice, was in the freezer, radiating energy that magically kept Antek alive until Monday morning.

At the end of the story, Eddie and Manny, who have been out all night, come to Antek to ask him to buy them some more alcohol. They tell him that the old icehouse, where the girl's frozen body is allegedly stored, is marked for demolition. Antek convinces them to go there and try to retrieve the body. He waits outside while the younger men go in and imagines their movements inside, seeing in his mind's eye the hallways that they would go down and blocks of ice melting in front of them until they actually find the girl.

## Eduardo

*See* Eddie Kapusta

## Eddie Kapusta

Eddie is one of the main characters in this story. It is through his perspective that readers are first told the story of the girl frozen in ice, with the details that Eddie remembers hearing ever since his childhood. He is a young man of Polish descent in a neighborhood that is increasingly becoming Mexican. He is close friends with Pancho and Manny Santora.

Eddie, whose last name is the Polish word for □cabbage,□ is characterized as an observer. While Pancho is a religious fanatic and Manny is a realist, Eddie does not have any such clear-cut perspective. Instead, he is noted for his devotion to his friends. For a long time during the period covered by the story, he loses contact with Manny because he has to quit high school and work a night job to pay his bills, but then, one spring day months after they have seen each other, he goes to Manny's apartment, and they resume their friendship just as it had been before. When Manny turns angry about

losing Pancho and goes to the county jail to shout obscenities at those inside, Eddie would like to stay away, but he feels obliged to go along rather than letting Manny get into trouble alone.

While they are out on the street drinking, Eddie takes Manny to see one of his favorite window displays, the neon palm tree at the Coconut Club. He explains that his hobby ever since he was young has been looking at the decorations in windows, indicating that he is more of an observer in life than a participant. While Manny attends Good Friday mass, Eddie sits in the back of the church. It is there that he realizes that his life has been full of mourning for the living, which would account for his affection for the way the neighborhood once was but will not be any more.

In the end, though, Eddie shakes off his moroseness and becomes an active participant, presumably helping Manny steal the frozen girl from the icehouse and take her to the lake, where she is set loose from the suspended animation that has held her for decades.

## Padrecito

*See* Pancho Santora

## Manny Santora

In the story, Eddie describes Manny as a realist. He is one only by contrast to his older brother Pancho, who spends his childhood fantasizing about being a religious figure. In grammar school, Manny found it difficult to deal with the nuns who considered him a disappointment after his pious brother, and so he transferred from the Catholic school to the public school, which he seldom bothered to attend.

When Pancho is in jail, Manny is devoted to him, visiting him regularly until Pancho asks him to stop; after that, Manny still goes to the jail with Eddie, walking around the walls at night, shouting out Pancho's name. After Pancho disappears, Manny becomes angry and abusive when he goes to the wall of the jail, shouting offensive comments that make the prisoners inside angry enough to chant in unison against him. He continues to go back, taking a chance that the guards will arrest him, until Eddie refuses to go with him, at which point he loses his anger almost immediately and gamely offers to do something else, as if he had not been full of rage just moments before.

Manny's devotion to the memory of Pancho drives him to follow a ritual that Pancho made up of going to seven churches on Good Friday, even though he and Eddie have been out all night drinking and taking drugs and are beyond the point of exhaustion. While Eddie finds it difficult to keep up, Manny follows the ceremonies with the interest Pancho would have shown.

Manny's true personality is shown in a childhood memory that he shares with Eddie. He recalls being at the lakefront once in the middle of the night while his family was fishing

for smelt. He swam away from shore, relishing his freedom and the touch of the water, only coming back because he thinks of his uncle on the pier, desperately calling for him. His dream of escape is mirrored in the end when they leave to release the girl in ice at about the same place in the lake, giving the freedom that Manny once desired.

## Pancho Santora

Pancho is the oldest of the three friends who prowl around together at the beginning of this story, the older brother of Manny. He is devoutly religious and always has been, though his fascination with religion manifests itself in unique ways. As a child, he pretended to be a priest when he was playing in the back yard with the other children, which led to his nickname, Padrecito, or Little Priest. He served as an altar boy and spent money on different colored shoes so that they would match the different colored vestments that priests wore on various feast days. He believes in the miraculous powers of the girl in ice because he believes in miracles in general. The nuns at his grammar school love Pancho, and later in his life, after he has fallen into trouble with the law, Eddie notes that Pancho would have been fine being an altar boy all his life, that it was his vocation.

In high school Pancho is a member of a street gang called the Saints. He is arrested on a charge that Dybek does not explain in the story, and at his trial laughs at the judge who tries offering him the option of going into the military instead of going to jail. In jail, Pancho's spirit deteriorates. After a few months he tells his brother to stop visiting, because he does not want to be reminded of the outside world until he can go into it again.

Pancho's eventual fate is not explicitly given: everyone in the neighborhood knows that he is gone from the county jail, but there are dozens of rumors about what happened to him. Some people say that he hanged himself or was killed by another inmate; others say that he became a trustee and escaped; others say that he was transferred to another jail for the mentally ill; and others say they have seen him walking the streets of the neighborhood or lighting a candle in church or riding by on an elevated train. In the end, he has become as much of a neighborhood legend as the girl frozen in ice.

# Themes

## Religion

One of the most prevalent themes in this story is religion, in particular how Pancho Santora relates to Catholicism. Pancho is described from the start as believing in □everything□ghosts, astrology, legends.□ In particular, he focuses his willingness to believe on the religion in which he is raised. As a small boy he dresses up like a priest and pretends to hold Mass in his back yard. When he is old enough, he becomes an altar boy, whose job it is to assist the priest in serving the Mass.

The nuns at the Catholic school admire Pancho because he is so devoted to his duties as an altar boy. He believes that he has a guardian angel, which is a specifically Catholic concept. He also does penance during Lent, inflicting pain on himself and offering up his suffering for the souls in purgatory. By the time he is an adolescent and in trouble with the law, he ruins his chance to avoid jail time by being glib with the judge, wearing his necktie like a headband and telling the judge that he plans to grow up to pose for holy cards.

Pancho's fixation with Catholicism is easy to understand: he lives in a predominantly Catholic neighborhood. The neighborhood is changing from Polish to Hispanic, and both populations have strong ties to the Catholic Church. One sign of the Catholic influence on the neighborhood is the very fact that Manny and Eddie can find seven churches within walking distance on Good Friday. Another is the hymn, □Tantum Ergo,□ which they hear even as they are walking up the street. Dybek reinforces the reader's awareness of religion by marking time in terms of the Christian calendar, with scenes set at Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, etc.

## Community

□Hot Ice□ often relates events from a communal perspective, giving readers facts as they are understood by everyone who lives in the neighborhood. The first case of this is the initial story of the girl in ice. The details given are identified as being the ones Eddie Kapusta heard, but it is also clear that the story is known by all. Everyone knows Big Antek's story, too: how he once was saved by the girl in ice and how he has lost his fingers working at a succession of butcher shops. The communal perspective is made even clearer when Pancho disappears from the county jail: stories come in from all over the neighborhood, with rumors of sightings and speculation, but no one, not even Pancho's own brother, knows for sure what happened to him. All of these theories suggest a community of people who struggle to answer the same question, who know each other, talk to each other, and are aware of significant events in one another's life.

## Post-War Society

This story could not have taken place before 1971 because the death of Roberto Clemente, is mentioned, which occurred that year. Still, there is much about the environment surrounding Eddie, Manny, and Pancho that hearkens back to a more distant past, particularly to the period just after World War II. The most direct connection to this time is Big Antek, with whom they interact regularly, if only to have him buy liquor for them. The war and the injuries he sustained in it changed Antek's life and are probably the cause of his drinking problem, which has given him a skewed outlook, making him believe he was saved by the frozen girl. Big Antek lives in the past, in his memories of ice delivery trucks and rag carts and Bing Crosby playing on tavern jukeboxes, and he tries to make the young people see that history and care about it.

The neighborhood's link to the past is not only tied to the views of one man, though. This story depicts a working-class neighborhood that is past its prime, decaying from neglect. During the war and the years immediately following the neighborhood was in its prime. During World War II, U.S. industrial cities such as Chicago ran at full tilt, churning out products for the war effort, and after the war, with bombed-out European cities trying to rebuild, the booming U.S. economy kept these cities productive. The streets now are deserted, with no thriving businesses mentioned beside taverns where people while away their lives. But the city features that were functioning around the time of the war□icehouses, streetcars, freight trains, and the regular rhythm of a fully functioning economy□haunt the memories of older neighborhood men.

## Coming of Age

The three main characters in □Hot Ice□ are in their teens, even though their socioeconomic situation has caused them to take on adult behaviors early. The events of the story cause each of them, in his own way, to cross over from childhood to adulthood.

At the beginning of the story, Pancho is poised between two sets of beliefs. He is a devout Catholic, but he also is a gang member and engages in life on the streets. When he is arrested and brought before a judge, he claims both identities: he says that he wants to be a holy card model (which Dybek foreshadows earlier in the story by saying that the nuns thought Pancho looked like a saint, such as St. Sebastian or Juan de la Cruz), but he also points out that he is a captain, which is a street gang title. On the streets, this dual personality has served Pancho well, but in jail he faces tougher conditions than he has ever known, and he snaps. When Manny visits, he finds that Pancho's buoyant spirit is gone and that he has lost his faith in his guardian angel.

Eddie approaches life as a bystander at the beginning of the story. He recalls stories, but not stories in which he participated. His favorite hobby is looking in storefront windows, not engaging with the people inside. At the end of the story, though, he becomes involved, helping Manny free the girl's body from the ice that has held it frozen for decades. Like her, he is shaking off inertia.

Manny describes himself as a loner, and throughout the story, when faced with adversity, he tries to reinforce that self-image by driving people away. When he thinks Pancho is in jail, he jokes with the people inside, but once Pancho has disappeared he turns angry. He disappears from Eddie's life for months. He mocks Big Antek for believing in the girl in ice. In finding the girl at the end, and in deciding to facilitate a rescue of her by letting her drift off into the lake (a dream of freedom he once had for himself), Manny is no longer a loner: he has matured into a man who understand responsibility.

# Style

## Point of View

This story is told in third-person limited omniscient point of view, which means the author limits what he reveals to certain characters, all of which is told in third person. For the most part, the narrative focuses on Eddie Kapusta's thoughts, but at various times it drifts into the minds of other characters or into the perspective of the community as a whole. For instance, the opening paragraphs, relating the background information about the girl in ice, contain a broad perspective, explaining what a variety of people knew or thought of the story, but this information is then planted into Eddie's mind, with the narrative mentioning several times that the details being relayed are just the version that Eddie had heard or had imagined.

As the story progresses, the focus stays with Eddie, making this predominantly his story. When Manny acts erratically, for instance, the narrative does not explain what he is thinking, but it does give Eddie's thoughts about his behavior. When Eddie and Manny do not see each other for a few months, the narrative explains what Eddie has been up to, while Manny's actions are left unexplained.

One notable shift in the point of view occurs when the narrative dips into the mind of Big Antek, which occurs in two significant places. In the □Saints□ section, the description of Antek's night in the freezer is begun as something that he told to Pancho: as the paragraph progresses, however, Dybek gives finer and finer details about that night, things that Antek would not have related in a story, about physical sensations and brand names. It is clear after a while that the story has temporarily shifted to Antek's point of view. The □Legends□ section is mostly from Antek's point of view, giving his thoughts as he stands outside Buddy's bar and sees Eddie and Manny approach. When they are separated from him, having gone into the icehouse, the narrative reveals their actions as Big Antek imagines them. The very last section is then told from Manny's point of view, with his observations and thoughts.

## Myth

Myths are usually handed down from generation to generation, with no direct evidence of their source. Often myths incorporate supernatural elements. In □Hot Ice,□ Dybek uses the emotional power of myths to charge modern life with a sense of religious awe.

He starts the story with the mysterious tale of the girl who was drowned and then frozen in ice by her grieving father. The tale includes several elements, such as the fact that the girl was young and innocent and her father carried her to the icehouse on a trolley car, that sound exaggerated. The fact that the basic story has grown to mythological importance can be seen in Big Antek's description of her great beauty and of her shining hair and in the way he and others attribute miracles to her.

The disappearance of Pancho represents a myth in the making. Readers can see the members of the community trying to fill in the gap in their knowledge about his fate by grasping at rumors. While some of the rumors, such as the ones that have him die in jail or run away to another country, might seem plausible, it is more likely that the ones that have him remain a part of the community as a ghost or phantom are the ones that will survive to be told to future generations.

# Historical Context

## Rust Belt

Chicago is one of the large northern U.S. cities that fell from prominence in the 1970s, losing its place as an important manufacturing center as economic conditions changed. These cities, dotting the map from Illinois to New York, came to be referred to collectively as the Rust Belt.

Historically, the United States has been a world-class economic power, in part because of its huge crop lands in the South and its manufacturing base in the North. Cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Buffalo, which had good methods of transportation (rivers, lakes, or railroads), developed as centers for industry, with factories that pumped out the manufactured goods, from cars to paper to buttons, that powered U.S. economic growth. Particularly after World War II (1939-45), which had itself brought an end to the previous decade of economic depression, the industrial cities in the North produced the durable goods that made the United States one of the world's economic superpowers.

In the 1960s and 1970s, though, U.S. manufacturing lost its dominant position in the world market. Innovations in transportation and shipping, new trade agreements, and continuing struggles between organized labor and corporate owners led to conditions that made it less expensive for U.S. companies to import goods made overseas than to buy American-made products. Manufacturing became less and less important as a part of the economy, taken over by service jobs and jobs dealing with information processing in the new computer age. Factories closed and jobs left the cities. Areas such as the one described in □Hot Ice□ that had once been bustling with factories and with well-paid factory workers became depressed and empty. Populations in the Rust Belt cities dropped throughout the seventies, eighties, and nineties, but as of the early 2000s are on the rise again.

## The Transformed Catholic Church

In this story, the main characters, particularly Pancho, retreat from the harshness of their blighted urban surroundings into the colorful mysteries of the Catholic Church. At the time, however, the Catholic Church was actively trying to be more open and less mysterious. In the early 1960s, under the auspices of Pope John XXIII, the church convened the Second Vatican Council (commonly referred to as Vatican II) to initiate changes that would make the Church more open to its followers and the people more familiar with their clergy and liturgy. Over the course of four annual meetings, from 1962 to 1965, the council discussed such matters as the church's relationship to other faiths, the role of the clergy in the lives of their followers, and the reform of the liturgy used during Mass. The form of the council was open debate, so that conservative and progressive movements within the church were able to express their concerns equally.

In the end, Vatican II led to the most significant changes in the Church since the Reformation. Mass was changed from the traditional Latin to the language of parishioners. Music was given a more prominent role. Lay people□those not fully ordained by the Church□became participants in the Mass. Priests and bishops became more accessible to the people they serve, instead of being insulated in the church bureaucracy.

Traditionalists regretted the changes that had made the Catholic Church more accessible, feeling that the religious experience should be based in mystery not familiarity. By the time this story was published, the tide had turned against the changes made by Vatican II. Pope John Paul II, who began his reign in 1978, was one of history's most popular popes, traveling widely to encourage participation in the Church by those who had traditionally been left out, but he was also strongly conservative, opposing the progressives who wished to bring changes to the church, such as acceptance of homosexuals or ordination of women.

# Critical Overview

After □Hot Ice□ was published in *Antaeus* in 1994, it was chosen for the prestigious O. Henry Award for short fiction. It is one of four Dybek stories given this award; this story and two of the other award winners are included in the 1990 collection *The Coast of Chicago*.

The 1990 *Antioch Review* refers to *The Coast of Chicago*, Dybek's second collection, as □paradoxically vivid and realistic,□ calling his portrait of growing up in Chicago □richly remembered.□ Don Lee, writing in *Ploughshares*, focuses on Dybek's propensity for shifting from what he calls □a gritty realism befitting Chicago's South Side to metafictional techniques which transform images into reverie, the tangible into the mythic.□ He finds that, given the diversity of the subjects Dybek writes about, such shifts are entirely pertinent, noting, □Nothing could be more appropriate.□

In Michiko Kakutani's review of *The Coast of Chicago* for *New York Times Book Review*, she compares the book to Sherwood Anderson's classic short story collection *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). While Kakutani finds that the Dybek's book lacks Anderson's cumulative effect, mostly due to the lack of a common character carrying over from story to story, she thinks that the individual stories in *The Coast of Chicago*, including □Hot Ice,□ □possess an emotional forcefulness: they introduce us to characters who want to take up permanent residence in our minds, and in doing so, they persuasively conjure up a fictional world that is both ordinary and amazing.□

In March of 2004, the mayor of Chicago announced that *The Coast of Chicago* had been chosen as that year's entry in the city's □One Book, One Chicago□ series. This honor includes having the book read at high schools and colleges throughout the city in hopes of creating a massive book club spreading across one of the country's largest metropolitan centers. In addition, the city arranged public reading from the book by actors from the world-renown Steppenwolf Theatre Company; discussion groups; and tours of the neighborhoods discussed in the stories.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

# Critical Essay #1

*Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, Kelly explains how the story does not divert from conventional reality as much as it first appears to do so.*

Stuart Dybek's story □Hot Ice□ ends with the memorable scene of two neighborhood friends, who have been estranged, united in a combined effort: they ride off on, of all things, a railroad handcar, a device hearkening back to the Civil War period, transporting a corpse frozen in a block of ice. The corpse signifies a local legend, in which a young woman was rumored to have been killed some thirty years earlier and carried to the local ice house by the deceased girl's grieving father. In the ensuing years the girl's fame has grown: she has been nominated for sainthood by the parish nun and Big Antek, the local drunk whom everyone knows, swears that her body, in its ice block, was in a freezer he managed to lock himself in over a weekend and that her presence kept him from freezing. Dybek renders Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, as he does in other stories, in harsh, unforgiving scenes of urban decay. In this story the residents want to believe that this miraculous corpse is among them, protecting them with its magical powers, but wanting and getting are in no way connected in the cold reality of □Hot Ice.□

The late appearance of the actual girl in ice and the way that Manny Santora and Eddie Kapusta deal with finding such a mythic figure appear to come from a reality that is different than the one set up in the preceding pages. They are certainly welcome developments, providing relief from the grueling existence and empty dreams that fill up this long story: readers cannot help but feel, maybe for the first time, that things will turn out well for these characters. Nonetheless, these events represent a different reality than the one that has been established. At least, they seem to. However, the fact that the corpse in an ice block exists and that two characters ride off on a handcar to release it into the lake are clearly prepared for throughout the story.

This is a story about urban reality, but within that reality, this is a story about myths. It establishes two categories of myths, religious and secular, and examines the circumstances in life that lead people to repeat them, build on them, and eventually start creating new myths of their own. The story of the frozen girl is just one of numerous myths told in the Pilsen neighborhood, creating an environment of heightened expectation. Dybek contrasts the oppressiveness of city life, consisting of crumbling buildings, police and jailers, drugs and alcohol, and unemployment, with the characters' own beliefs in powers from beyond their experiences, like those of their myths, can save them.

The setting Dybek uses for □Hot Ice□ is based on a real place: the Pilsen neighborhood exists as of 2005 with the streets, intersections, and landmarks mentioned in the story, including the Douglas Park lagoon where the girl was rumored to have drowned and the Cook County Jail where Manny and Eddie meet at night, and the shoreline of Lake Michigan. The sounds, smells, and sights of this neighborhood are meticulously rendered. The story is not limited to recording empirical reality, however. It

stretches current reality backwards, rendering for readers a neighborhood that contains vestiges or memories of its own past. Streetcars, ragmen, knife sharpening carts, icemen, taverns with Bing Crosby on the jukebox, and butcher shops that would hire the crazy old neighborhood alcoholic who has already cut off several fingers at other butcher shops, all these elements convey the neighborhood as it once was.

Just like the two levels of everyday life□the old, which is a dim and quickly fading memory, and the new, which does not have anything appealing to offer the story's young men□there are also two levels of myths. The old ones are the Catholic myths, the stories of martyrs and saints that have inspired the faithful for generations. These are the ones that are taught to the neighborhood children, with unpredictable results. In this story, Pancho is fanatically devoted, Eddie is guardedly reverent, and Manny is flat-out skeptical (at least until he follows in his brother's footsteps by attending Good Friday services, but even then his is a secular, not sacred, devotion). Regardless of one's level of commitment, one cannot live in the neighborhood Dybek describes without being aware of its Catholic tradition.

The newest level of myth is represented here by the stories surrounding Pancho Santora and his disappearance. This mythology is so new that readers can see it developing throughout the course of the story. Pancho's experience is established from the beginning of the story as the perfect fertile ground from which a myth can grow. He has spent his life surrounding himself with mystery, associating himself with not only the Catholic traditions but with ghosts and astrology as well, which shows his religious devotion to be part of his general inclination toward the supernatural. But Pancho is more than just a head-in-the-clouds idealist: he is a man of the people, a gang member, a product of his tough urban environment, and he ends up in one of the least idealistic environments imaginable, the county jail.

In jail, Pancho becomes the inspiration for a new urban myth, one that springs from within the neighborhood and stars a local boy: the story of the man who disappeared from custody. Like all myths, this one has something familiar in it. Jail break stories often entail the basic premise of a person managing to get lost within a system that exists manifestly to keep tabs on people. Moreover, as is common with myths, Pancho's story exists in various versions. Some of the theories about his fate (such as that he might have killed himself or had his throat slashed or even that he was allowed to take the judge's offer retroactively and choose military service over jail) seem plausible. Others (such as people's reports that he walked out unnoticed, that he fled to Mexico, or is now haunting the El) may seem less likely, but that imaginative element makes them suitable for gossip. □Rumors were becoming legends,□ Dybek tells his readers, □and no one knew how to mourn a person who had just disappeared.□ The element of the unknown and the discomfort about unknowing are the main ingredients needed for an instant urban legend.

The story of the girl in ice is the bridge between the sacred myths of the church and the newly-forming secular one about Pancho. As the ancient nun, Sister Joachim, calls attention to in the story, the legend of the girl is certainly similar to church-sanctioned stories about martyrs: notable similarities are that the girl who dies defending her

virginity is enshrined immediately by her father and is credited with miracles and cures. The links to the Pilsen neighborhood of a generation or two back, just real enough and yet fanciful enough, are established with the details about the streetcar and the icehouse. In telling this tale, carrying it forward, Eddie and Manny and the young men of the day open their imaginations to miraculous occurrences in their own times.

This story would be complete if it left things at this point, showing how Christian tradition affects myths developed two generations back, which spawn new myths. But at the end Dybek changes this story from one about imagination to one about reality, with the girl in ice as more than just a legend: she actually shows up. Before her appearance, all of the fantastic elements of the story are in the minds of the neighborhood people, stewing under the oppression of unyielding reality, aching for a miracle. Having her actually appear in the story changes the tone, giving the story in a more playful and imaginative guise.

At least, it would, if she actually did appear. The scene in which the girl in ice is found is itself shrouded in mystery, in unreality. For one thing, Dybek tells the events through the point of view of Big Antek. Antek is the one person in the story who claims to have actually seen the girl in ice, but the circumstances in which he claims to have seen her are dubious. The widely accepted narrative has her body taken to the icehouse immediately after she drowns, and it is in the icehouse that she is found three decades later: Antek's report that he encountered her in a butcher's freezer may be a figment of his liquor-soaked mind, a convenient fiction for someone desperate to believe. Antek's reliability as a witness is questionable at best, and the happenings in the ice house at the end are told from his perspective. Dybek paints the whole scene of the girl's eventual discovery with lurid, surreal descriptions, from the break-in through the roof to the screwy sense of order that takes over any abandoned building (in this one, it is the odd sight of ice machines stacked floor-to-ceiling) to the slanted, melting ice blocks to the unnatural light of the road flare that illumines Manny and Eddie's way.

Perhaps the most obscure detail, though, is the one that immediately precedes the discovery of the girl. Eddie and Manny, straining to see into the blocks of ice, find their vision confounded by the thousands of cracks forming inside of the massive blocks: □They could only see shadows and had to guess at the forms: fish, birds, shanks of meat, a dog, a cat, a chair, what appeared to be a bicycle.□

Was the girl from the lagoon actually frozen in the icehouse? The idea seems unlikely from the start, as the three protagonists point out in arguing its probability in the opening scene. It seems more likely at the end, when Manny and Eddie think they have found her and decide to free her; the narrative relates her discovery as a matter of fact, not delusion. But their having found her is only as likely as their actually having seen a dog or a cat or a bicycle frozen in a block of ice.

In the end, they probably do ride off toward the lake with a block of ice: though the act of commandeering a railroad handcar and taking off down the tracks with it is unlikely, it is just the sort of remnant from a bygone era that the neighborhood Dybek describes here could support. They probably do not, however, actually find the girl in ice, but only

fantasize that they do. There is plenty of evidence throughout the story for believing that readers are not meant to believe that the block of ice actually contains human remains. Manny and Eddie have been up all night, drinking and taking drugs; the ice factory is dim, abandoned, and shadowy, with strange lights suggesting bizarre phantasms; and they have heard legends about the girl's existence all their lives.

The story works just as well without having to believe that Dybek is claiming an actual miracle. Taking the characters at their word, believing what they believe, would make the world of the work a magical place where supernatural things can occur. Being skeptical, though, makes it even more magical: Dybek's neighborhood is a place where two people can look into the lurid obscurity of a block of ice and hallucinate the same thing, bringing the myth to life with their imaginations.

**Source:** David Kelly, Critical Essay on □Hot Ice,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

# Topics for Further Study

The story explains that Big Antek came home from World War II to find himself listed on a plaque of people who had died in the war. Research the story of someone who was erroneously listed as dead in war, in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, or in Hurricane Katrina, and write a short story about how their family dealt with finding out they were alive.

Read about the lives of Catholic saints and prepare a chart explaining which ones you think would be Pancho's favorites and why.

Find a modern myth in your area that is similar to the story of the girl frozen in the ice, and report to your class on what is known about how this myth began.

Diagnose Pancho's psychological state, from the beginning of the story until the people of the neighborhood lose track of him. Explain which psychological conditions best describe his actions.

At the end, Eddie and Manny ride off on a railroad handcar. Create a model of a handcar and prepare an explanation of how one works.

# Compare and Contrast

**1984:** Many veterans who returned in the 1960s and 1970s from Vietnam continue to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The assumption is that Vietnam vets are like Big Antek, struggling with the fracture that military service has made of their lives.

**Today:** Because of experiences with returning Vietnam veterans, the U.S. government increases its efforts to care for veterans' mental health, although such programs are not always properly funded.

**1984:** High school students dropping out of school can find well-paying, hard labor jobs.

**Today:** Many manual labor jobs go overseas. High school education is necessary for even basic employment in the post-computer age economy.

**1984:** Stories about ice houses and trolley cars contain enough familiar elements to be romanticized by those telling neighborhood legends.

**Today:** Legends still pop up about modern ideas such as cell phones and chat rooms. Some websites specifically report on urban legends.

**1984:** The traditional Polish population of Chicago's Little Village/Pilsen neighborhood, where this story takes place, is becoming mixed with Mexican immigrants.

**Today:** Little Village/Pilsen boasts the largest Mexican community in the Midwest and is second only to East Los Angeles in the country.

**1984:** A judge might offer a young man who has been arrested the option of joining the military instead of going to jail.

**Today:** Many communities adapt mandatory sentencing guidelines that strip judges of the power to offer such an option.

**1984:** Fishing off-shore near Chicago for rainbow smelt in Lake Michigan is popular, mostly among people from working-class families, as it has been for generations.

**Today:** Most of the smelt in the lake are gone, their population having been decimated in the late 1980s by a loss of mysis shrimp, their primary food source.

# What Do I Read Next?

Tony Fitzpatrick, a Chicago poet and artist, covers roughly the same territory that Dybek does in his poetry collection *Bum Town* (2001).

Many critics point out that Dybek's writing comes out of a Chicago tradition of gritty realism that started with James T. Farrell, the author of the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy in the early 1900s. The three Lonigan books—*Young Lonigan*, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, and *Judgment Day*—have been collected in one edition as *James T. Farrell: Studs Lonigan* (2004).

The lyricism of Dybek's fiction becomes solidified in his poetry. His *Streets in Their Own Ink* (2004) are drawn from his own life, taking a closer look at his upbringing and the Chicago that he once knew.

For thumbnail sketches of stories that have circulated in Chicago neighborhoods for years, readers may enjoy *Chicago Sketches: Urban Tales, Stories, and Legends from Chicago History*, published in 1996 by June Skinner Sawyers. Her explanations of the local lore are quick summaries, but they capture the sketchy, mischievous nature of such stories.

# Further Study

Casey, Maud, "Chicago Stories: A Profile of Stuart Dybek," in *Poets & Writers*, Vol. 31, No. 6, November/December 2003, pp. 34-40.

This cover story, published just as Dybek's book *I Sailed with Magellan* was about to come out, contains background information about his life in the location where the story is set, as well as information about his career and influences.

Gladsky, Thomas S., "From Ethnicity to Multiculturalism: The Fiction of Stuart Dybek," in *Melus*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Summer 1995, pp. 105-18.

This thorough examination of Dybek's stories includes background information about the Polish American literary tradition.

Kantowicz, Edward, "Polish Chicago: Survival Through Solidarity," in *Ethnic Chicago: A Multicultural Portrait*, edited by Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'A. Jones, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1977, pp. 173-98.

Kantowicz looks at the history of Chicago's Polish community, one of the city's dominant ethnic groups, based in the neighborhood that Dybek discusses in the story.

Kirch, Claire, "Windy City Oracle: Stuart Dybek," in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 250, No. 44, November 3, 2003, pp. 49-51.

This article, based on an interview with Dybek, outlines his thoughts about writing and about the ways the publishing business changed over the years he has been a writer.

Nickel, Mike, and Adrian Smith, "An Interview with Stuart Dybek," in *Chicago Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Winter 1997, pp. 87-102.

In addition to other issues, Dybek talks about being labeled a "Chicago writer," despite the fact that he has not lived in Chicago in years.

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Kakutani, Michiko, □Lyrical Loss and Desolation of Misfits in Chicago, in *New York Times Book Review*, April 20, 1990, p. C31.

Lee, Don, Review of *The Coast of Chicago*, in *Ploughshares*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Spring 1991, pp. 228-29.

□Noted by the Editors,□ in *Antioch Review*, Vol., 48, No. 4, Fall 1990, pp. 545-46.

BOOKRAGS

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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