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Introduction

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FICTION / JAMES MECHEM'S LADIES: A
RETROSPECTIVE CELEBRATION, WITH
SPECIAL INVITED GUESTS URSULE
MOLINARO, CAROL BERGÉ, SYDNEY MARTIN,
KENT H. DIXON, ANN MENE BROKER, AND
MARDY MURPHY

Introduction / Robert Coover

James Harlan Mechem is probably the best-known unknown writer in America. Over the past 20 years or so his writing has appeared everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Beyond the major commercial magazines, beyond the academic quarterlies and the "small" presses and the partisan house organs and the authors' cooperatives and the "underground," beyond (that is) both the marketplace and what we call the "little" magazines, there exists in America another prose and poetry outlet—quirky, provincial, highly personal, often esoteric, even illegible, clubby, inaccessible, yet probably just as widely read (not very) as any other—namely, the irregular publications of what might be called the private or hobbyist press. And it is largely here where Mechem's much-loved ladies—Fanchon, Della, Juno, Zinaida, Mona, Madonna, Riva the Rich, Sunny and Bunny and all the rest—have paraded their charms.

Indeed, he is himself the creator and sole proprietor of just such a press, a mimeographed operation called *Out of Sight*, which he describes as "strictly an indulgence of mine" (he speaks of his writing in the same way): "I run my magazine the way I want to, not the way you are supposed to, not the way everybody else does, and it gives me tremendous gratification because it is so personal . . . I've had 50 guest editors. It's been going since 1971. . . . It costs me practically nothing to print (when I do it at home) but I like to get lazy, and do other things, bring poets in, subscribe to everything, go to conferences . . . you know. . . ." (For those who prefer the easy camaraderie of mimeo-sheet exchanges to the fools' gold of Establishment publication: Box 32, Wichita, Kansas.)

Mechem writes so much about himself (sometimes he calls himself Braji Mudlark, sometimes Hugo the Clown or Afshar or Gavin Marchbanks, often as not just "I" or plain James Mechem), that his life would seem to be an open book—but in fact, as with most author-narrators (Henry Miller, for example, or Mechem's own contemporary Jack Kerouac), such a device is actually a subtle form of self-disguise. "I lose count of my myth and my

reality," he wrote in a letter. "I know other people do. But I get confused myself." What is known about Mechem is that he is 54 years old, a veteran of World War II (if his "Interview with James Mechem" in *A Diary of Women* is to be believed, he fought in the Okinawan campaign, "helped to police Korea after World War II," and mostly dug ditches and washed dishes), a jack of several trades but for many years now a public relations writer in the aircraft industry, married and the father of (at last report) five children, and living contentedly in Wichita, Kansas: "I was born in Wichita and I never got very far. I spent 20 years growing up in Topeka and then came right back here. Chance mostly. No. I like it here. I started school here. My mother grew up here. I just like it. Anyway it's the work that has kept us here. We both have jobs here, my wife and I. In aircraft." No, the problem, he says, "is in my head, not in Wichita."

Only Mechem himself is capable of providing a complete bibliography of his work, and he is never apt to do that. Maybe he too is incapable of it. Most of the magazines he has published in have disappeared. Even the manuscripts have vanished. "I always give away my last copy of everything and then regret it," he writes (we were trying to relocate a fine unpublished one-pager about a fracas in a bar—it disappeared into the files of *TriQuarterly* or else strayed in the mails, but in any case now seems lost forever). But perhaps it's just as well: keeps the myth alive. He can speak in *A Diary of Women* of writing innumerable novels or periods "in which I turned out a story a day," and then in *Della* write: "I tell people I'm writing a novel a week. What a gross lie. But I can't help it. I'm a pathological liar." And who can say where the truth is?

For this retrospective we had access to about 40 stories (including seven new unpublished ones), a number of poems and collaborations, and three so-called novels, about a third of which materials were sent to us by Mechem, the rest gathered hither and yon by chance and private enthusiasms (thanks in particular to George Chambers). Though this gave us plenty to choose from, it hardly represented the total Mechem opus. Nor can it really be said to be a retrospective: the oldest story here is "I Must Think of a Way," written in 1966 and published in 1971 ("The Sleep Story," published in 1968, and "Fanchon," published in 1970, could be older), and Mechem seems to have been writing for at least a decade or two before that. The stories are arranged here in roughly (very roughly) chronological order, ending with four new (1976) unpublished stories. The earlier fictions appeared in *West Coast Review*, *Colorado State Review*, *Brown Paper Bag*, *Zeitgeist*, *Gallimaufry*, *Talisman*, *TransPacific*, *Fireweed*, *Northeast*, *The Sunflower*, and *Duck*, and excerpts are used from stories first appearing in *Mikrokosmos*, *Center*, and *King James Version*. The three "novels," *A Diary of Women* (actually a collection of stories), *Women Without Qualities* (a

longish short story), and *Della* (a short novella), were published by Winter House (1970), The Solo Press (1973), and The Fault Press (1976), respectively; and *Slices*, the small collection of poems written in collaboration with Ann Menebroker, was published by the Grande Ronde Press in 1972. We would like to thank all of these magazines and presses for having published Mechem's work in the first place, and for giving us the opportunity of re-printing some of it here.

Mechem, as is widely known, likes to collaborate on poems and short fictions with women, and in addition to the poems with Ann Menebroker, we include here story collaborations with Sydney Martin and Mardy Murphy. We also invited other writers to contribute anything to this feature which might relate to Mechem and his writing—fictions, criticism, poems, parodies, etc.—and four such responses are also included: imaginative essays by Ursule Molinaro and Carol Bergé, a short fiction by Sydney Martin, and an epistolary tale by Kent H. Dixon, as well as two new Molinaro and Bergé stories appropriate to the occasion. The brief italicized paragraphs which punctuate the feature are excerpts from Mechem's stories and letters to the editor, mostly about writers and writing.

I Must Think of a Way / James Mechem

She walked down the street and came to the corner and there was a man in a car passing by and the car slowed down to make the turn and stopped then in front of her and she looked at him and smiled and then screamed . . . She began running then to get away from the car which crawled on the curb and chased her and ended up smashed against an old-fashioned green lamppost . . . the man hanging from the driver's seat, the door opened, and such . . .

A body . . . in bracelets and things, a ribbon in her hair and shoes on her feet . . . then sunk . . . in her belly . . . shooting stars . . .

Disfigures . . . something that has happened and something more . . . until you name it . . .

Something plump and full about you on the sidewalk stopping traffic . . . there you are on the sidewalk stopping traffic in your suit . . . for swimming . . .

On the curb stopping traffic . . . everyone stops as in a dream . . . your dream, coal eyes, you sat up and looked around you and batted your coal