

A PERSON WITH A NAME

by **Brighde Mullins**

*Ludlow: A Verse-Novel*

by **David Mason**

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**L**UDLOW. THE NAME CONJURES THE PLACE and that place becomes a character in this verse-novel by poet and essayist David Mason. The event the book is based on happened in April, 1914: Eighteen men, women and children were killed by the Colorado National Guard in the coal fields at Ludlow. It was a tragedy, an accident, a travesty, depending upon your point of view.

During this time there was massive turmoil within the labor movement, unrest exacerbated by an influx of immigrants throughout Colorado's mining industry. Progressive thinkers, including Mother Jones, (who makes a cameo in the book) were on the scene. Mason has labored to supply many points of view and much historical insight in his verse-novel; there is an epic scope to his telling. And underneath it all is the land, the place—Colorado, which Mason captures with painterly detail. Here is one incidental passage, from well into the book's narrative:

Sunlight and snowmelt. In the high dry air,  
except in the shade of buildings, heaps of snow  
diminished, sending streams down to the river.  
At night a frozen starlit glaze on streets  
made walking tricky.

Embedded throughout this narrative are descriptive passages that have this degree of precision and place-making. But, still, this is a *verse-novel*, and Mason's virtuosity with description is put to the novelistic purpose of creating a *mise en scène* for his deeply realized drama. Part historical exploration, part fiction, *Ludlow* is both a compelling story and a sustained act of poetic imagination. The inter-chapters, in which Mason describes his impetus, as well as the epilogue and end notes where he cites his sources, are the secret subject of this book. He even provides a hand drawn map of Ludlow and environs. As Mason writes:

These are the facts, but facts are not the story . . . .  
There was a weight, a person with a name.  
That weight is gone, in ashes or in earth.  
The name accrues some glory,

but just as surely dies—much like the dream  
of freedom. One man's calculated worth,  
the kitchen worth of women for whom work  
was never-ending, fall into the dark.

It is in this kitchen, in history's kitchen, so to speak, that Mason has hit pay-dirt, in the character of the miner's daughter Luisa Mole. Throughout the book Mason creates convincing characters—some real, some imagined, but all essential to the telling and understanding of the event. The shimmer of appearances that animate and make a character an object of affection and enduring interest are at work throughout, beginning with Luisa, who is twelve when the story begins. Mason's point of departure is a photograph of a mestizo girl who becomes Luisa:

I have a photo of a photo pinned  
on an artist's easel, around it many holes  
from pins that almost look like bullet holes.  
The photo in the photo's of a girl,  
identity unknown, in flowered smock,  
her dark hair rising from her forehead in  
a crest, then bound behind her head, the rest  
flung forward over her right shoulder.

Part of the pleasure in reading the book is learning which characters Mason based on actual figures from history and which he invented, and here Mason describes his process of imagining the girl Luisa—half Welsh, half Mexican—into being. The characters drawn from history include Mother Jones, Colorado Governor John Lawson, John D. Rockefeller Jr. and the Greek immigrant Louis Tikas (or Ilias Spantidakis). Tikas, along with Luisa Mole, becomes a protagonist and imaginative pillar of the book. We meet Tikas early on, homesick and struggling with his American identity:

Some days this waking to himself became  
unbearable, like some ill-fitting mask,  
the words he'd learned of English hard to hold,  
his village dialect a refuge from  
estranging streets. How long, O Lord, how long  
must one man journey till he finds his home?  
But home was Loutra, poverty, the house,  
the olive press, his father serving coffee.

Through the right-naming, through the nailing of image after image with a light touch that also moves the story along, Mason adds dimension and weight to this singular man. He traces Tikas' journey as he becomes a powerful union organizer, a legend—and it is through Tikas' sensibility and also, as valuably, through the narrator musing on Tikas' sensibility, that many of the book's central questions are addressed, as in this passage:

What does it mean—nation of immigrants?  
What are the accents, fables, voices of roads,  
the tall tales told by the smallest desert plants?  
Even the wind in the barbed wire goads  
me into making lines, fencing my vagrant thought.  
A story is the language of desire.  
A journey home is never what it ought  
to be.

A land of broken glass. Of gunfire.

Mason has braided the imaginary characters' stories with the historical figures' known paths, creating an arc and an occasion. In one early scene the now-orphaned Luisa witnesses Mother Jones give a rabble-rousing speech. Years later Luisa imagines Mother Jones in prison, and she remembers her:

Luisa did not dare to say a word,  
but thought of Lefty at the opera house,  
the speeches from the stage,  
that little cursing granny with her glasses  
whipping up a frenzy just by talking,  
applause like thunder underneath the roof.  
That night she hardly slept while Mother Jones  
was near, across the river, under guard.

Because the reader is seeing Mother Jones through Luisa's eyes, and we know Luisa to be the benevolent, spirited anima of the story, the description of Mother Jones as a "little cursing granny" takes on splendid, comic dimensions. Indeed, there is something Dickensian not only in Luisa's name, but all through her adventures in and around Ludlow: her dual identity as a ward of the state and a child of the universe makes the story feel necessary in its telling.

The verse-novel is difficult to write; it demands a particular set of tools of its author. It also places an unusual set of demands on a reader. The genre's attractions for this reader are the known pleasures of poetry, its abeyances, sculpted suggestiveness, absences and white space. A novel seems to provide the opposite

pleasure. The novel as a story-telling vehicle is marked by its inclusiveness and breadth. The unfolding of the story, the pattern and build-up of the events that create a sense of engagement, suspense and story anxiety are not usually associated with the poet's craft. Mason ups the ante even more by adding a historical dimension to the mix of his ambition, making *Ludlow* a verse novel set in the American West—a particular genre in itself.

Mason writes in blank verse, using this common English meter to create a tautness that keeps a reader's heartbeat in rhythm with the book's structure of discrete chapters that move chronologically over the terrain. He deftly handles several strands of this story through the book's stanzaic form. These stanzas also serve perfectly as thought-containers for the characters that are introduced and sustained throughout the narrative.

On a surface level, the brilliant John Sayles film *Matewan* uses similar structural strategies and narrative techniques in fusing together inherited materials to create a distinctly American labor-tale of mythic proportions. *Ludlow* has a similar structure and shape; and the thematic resonances and sympathies of the film and verse-novel make them companion pieces. The difference lies in the emphasis—one is a cinematic contemplation in poetry, the other a poetic contemplation in film. Mason, who worked in the movie business in the 1980s, discusses the link between the poem and the cinematic form in his epilogue when he writes that “verse is often more cinematic than prose in its rhythm and images, its narrative economy.” Mason has been influenced by the techniques of film-making, and he goes on to discuss the use of film-viewing metaphors as a way to teach his students how to read an Eliot poem. This is a fascinating insight into his process, and into the choices that he made to write *Ludlow* as a verse-novel instead of a screenplay.

But Mason is a poet first, and he privileges the word and the descriptive power of the word. In the first section of the book, he writes:

A solitary cone of rock rose up  
 from lacerated land, the dry arroyos,  
 scars that scuppered water in flood season  
 down to a river. In dusty summertime  
 the cottonwoods eked out a living there  
 in a ragged line below the high peaks.  
 The ground was a plate of stony scutes that shone  
 like diamonds at noon, an hour when diamondbacks

coiled on sunbaked rocks. Or so I pictured  
 in color films imagination shot.

This passage highlights the language that he has at his disposal, as well as the landscape that he knows so well and can describe so adroitly, and not only as setting or backdrop. This is language as character and as character-forming in a distinctly American setting.

Mason's topic is as much the historical event that is the occasion of the poem, and which hurtles the story to its conclusion, as it is the contemplation of the writing of the poem and the meta-poetic apprehension of the telling. "I became a poet when my roots crossed with my reading," Seamus Heaney has written, and that statement is corroborated by Mason's description of his approach to his own material and process. "The fact that I have spent much of my life in Southern Colorado, where my family goes back four or five generations, certainly did not hurt," he writes. Mason's source materials, then, are not only the first hand materials of the practicing poet, his senses, his descriptive powers. They are also the historian's materials, the oral histories, the received materials of the past. In his endnote Mason writes that "To me, the story is a remarkable and irreducible element of humanity." In *Ludlow* he has found a form to hold this story, and he has created a truly great American character, a heroine of epic proportions, in Luisa Mole, a girl summoned from a photo of a photo.