



## *Welcome back, Adventure Man!*

**Steve Snell** is clear about one thing: he wants to be a hero, play the lead in the movie of his life. His is an art with a strong element of popular entertainment. All the same he's a guy full of contradictions, sentimental and ironic, private and sociable, sincere but silly, self-aware but spontaneous and wide-eyed.

Oscar Wilde posed the problem: "One's real life is so often the life one does not lead." Steve is trying to figure out where to come down on that conundrum. What after all is one's real life, and in particular what would the real life adventures of a youthful American white middle-class male be today? He's drawn to the lives of the explorers, the woodsmen (Daa-vy Crockett!), the dead white male heroes of the past, despite all their admittedly sordid back stories. He's looking for ways to revive the tall tales of legendary American humorists. He claims he's not being cynical, he does want to lead what appears to be the life of a hero even if he senses that, as Wilde suggested, it may not be possible, the twist today being that it has often fallen prey to a consumerist hijacking. The artist himself is not averse to selling an adventure or two: what Alaskan wilderness scene would you choose as a backdrop for your likeness printed on a coffee mug?

And so he calls his works "pseudo-adventures" almost daring us to take them, him and ourselves, seriously. Sporting a coonskin cap, he paddles down the Connecticut River in a shine-y new couch boat that he's constructed. It's made of wood, it floats and it's in the form of a nice-looking sofa. "Are you the King of the River? I brought you this tribute," exclaims a passing kayaker. (Steve had gotten his trip publicized in the local media.) Alone he hikes from the northwest corner of Massachusetts, mostly through the woods, to the University of Massachusetts Studio Art Building in Amherst in order to create an M.F.A. thesis exhibition. This journey is ingeniously filmed with a video camera mounted high on his walking stick. At the end of Steve's movie, there's a Holy Grail moment as he leaves his campfires behind and, to a stirring soundtrack, enters the Art Building which fades into a glowing image of the building at night. He puts his name spelled out in (plastic) violets embedded in (plastic) grass in one cubby hole of his installation. Did he see something like this in the woods or is this a child's fantasy? Either Mother Nature has found a native son or he's a supreme narcissist. And he quickly grins when asked if he is. There's something typically American about his narcissism. Like Mark Twain and Garrison Keillor before him, he mixes self-aggrandizement with a good dose of homey self-deprecation—pseudo-adventures, indeed.

But then we come back with Steve to the archetype itself. Mythic quests are inherently illusory. There are no giants out there in the Alaska wild, only in us. Walking through the western Massachusetts woods on his thesis quest, Steve repeatedly calls out a warning "hey, bear" and it's hard not to laugh—also when he points to a beaver dam and says very seriously, like the true Scoutmaster he may be, "beavers." He may be afraid that there really are bears out there, but his folksy call seems to mock that reality, or else to render it a funny, self-conscious mental state.

Does he ever change from the innocent or unthinking adventurer into a reflective hero, meditating on his past, giving up a naïve hope for the future? He says, disarmingly, that he doesn't have it all figured out, he's not sure what values he's espousing, he's young and ambivalent. His audience is the community he lives in. He is creating a community, finding a place and making it a little bit better, as he ever so deftly manages to make us laugh—and also to care.