

INTRODUCTION



Donald Barthelme

(1931-1989)

Donald Barthelme is one of the most imaginative and innovative American authors of this century, and probably the most imitated short-story writer since the 1960's. He was born the oldest of five children (at least two others are also respected short story writers). His father was a successful architect. In 1933, the family moved to Houston, which would remain one of Barthelme's part-time residences. During his two years at the University of Houston, he studied journalism; he then worked as a reporter for the *Houston Post*. After serving in the U.S. Army, Barthelme founded a literary magazine and began working at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, where, in 1961, he was appointed director. The next year he moved to New York and began publishing in *The New Yorker* magazine, to which he would continue to contribute regularly. The majority of his work, collected in his many short-story volumes, and even one of his two novels, *Snow White*, first appeared in *The New Yorker*.

Throughout his career, Barthelme has rejected the conventional forms of fiction, traditional narrative plot and characterization, the unities of time and space. If the novelist's task is to reflect and comment upon reality, then the novel must lack structure--since beginnings, middles, and endings are not 'real.' Instead, Barthelme writes fiction that at times evokes mood; frequently, he writes "metafiction," fiction that takes as its subject the very act of writing a story: Verbs and nouns take the place of plot, event, and character (*The Dead Father*). At other times, he is concerned with social themes or the dilemmas of human interaction and loneliness.

Barthelme's forms that of the verbal collage, juxtaposing the beginning, middle, or ending of a story--or a sentence--with bits of other beginnings, middles, or endings. Typically, he interrupts a narrative or dialogue with contradictory or self-reflexive material. Often, he re-creates slang or metaphor in new and outrageous terms. All these devices function to jar the reader out of his complacent expectations of human response and language. The reader must reconsider language and communication in new, more authentic terms.

Barthelme's early works are primarily concerned with social issues--modern, brainwashed society, narcotized by the media--and they portray a world of zombies spouting texts and technology in response to every emotional confrontation, as in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*. The volumes *City Life* and *Sadness* treat, in addition, the unreliability of irony as a weapon against a spiritually sullied world. *Guilty Pleasures*, one of his most humorous books, contains numerous literary parodies, as it satirizes the tinfoil nature of contemporary America.

Barthelme has been widely praised--and imitated--because of his innovative and witty use of language, specifically the dislocations of sentences through transformation of slang, metaphor, and grammar. In fact,

as Barthelme utilizes a vast array of verbal pyrotechnics--changing parts of speech, new words and spellings, puns and at times, outrageous wordplay ("Jean-Paul Sartre is a Fartre")--[Postmodern profundity]--to draw the reader's attention to impoverished human communication, he touches on larger, existential issues. In a world devoid of ultimate assurances and meanings [Atheism], the only valid way of asserting one's identity and authenticity is through the authenticity of the world.

Barthelme has been criticized for not writing a body of larger, more sustained fiction. In fact, if his novels, *Snow White* and *The Dead Father* were his sole publications, they would ensure him of a permanent and honored place in American letters. *Snow White* details the plight of the legendary mythic figure in the modern world, playing out the script (the fairy-tale role) to which she was born in a world of small men within the sexual, social, and moral expectations of 1960's America. *The Dead Father* focuses on the need for yet repulsiveness of authority in the form of a gigantic, dying father figure, who represents the aggregate of religious, mythic, historical, literary, and linguistic tradition. A third, less successful novel, *Paradise*, tells of a fifty-three year-old New York architect and the three girls who invade his empty apartment.

As the 1980's approached, Barthelme began, in *Great Days*, to experiment with a more poetic style that incorporated musical techniques--producing, for example, sonata-like structures (theme A, theme B, theme A) to evoke a certain mood. *Great Days* also utilizes a new dialogue form, as it explores the serious issues of time and mortality. Barthelme's characters here, interestingly, are less abstract, more human. *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* actually alternates short stories with dialogue-arias; here again one finds the Barthelme wit and the dislocations of traditional meaning in the service of eliciting an authentic response from the reader. He writes, for example, "Youth, Goethe said, is the silky apple butter on the good brown bread of possibility." [What "authentic response" does this elicit? And what makes it "authentic"? Is the best example of Barthelme's "wit" the critic can cite a quotation from Goethe?]

Since the mid-1960s, the postmodern writers--including Robert Coover, William H. Gass, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon (as well as Julio Cortazar, Italo Calvino, Robert Pinget, and Claude Simon outside the United States)--have been concerned with language and the difficulty of utilizing it as an emblem of authentic participation in an alien universe. Barthelme's work illustrates that words ultimately remain the only link with this vast and indifferent world. The creative and honest use of language is the most effective measure against isolation and loneliness. [Perhaps so, for atheists.]

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