

# Airships Short Guide

## Airships by Barry Hannah

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# Characters

Many of the most memorable characters in this collection are scarred by some traumatic incident, often in childhood or marriage. Many of these characters relate one central incident from their past that changed or determined their life. The narrator in "Love Too Long," obsessed with his long-estranged wife, concludes that "Nothing in the world matters but you and your woman." The family often exerts a claim on a character that cannot be denied.

Often Hannah's central character is an *homme manque* — a gifted or talented individual — like French Edwards, the tennis player, or Arden Quadberry, a saxophonist — unable to fulfill the promise he shows in youth. In other stories, Hannah's protagonists are marginal characters who hover on the fringe of respectability.

Still other characters never demonstrate any distinctive qualities and are remarkable for being so completely ordinary. They barely manage to survive, either literally or figuratively.

Like the narrator of "Testimony of Pilot," they struggle through life as deaf musicians or, like the narrator in "Eating Wife and Friends," on a diet of poison ivy.



## Social Concerns

Hannah sets his characters against an established order, a background of normalcy, in which the freakish, the nonconformist, and the unusual is at the forefront. Implicit is the assumption that the polite and genteel nature of society, especially Southern society, is only a thin veneer. Behind it are grim realities and sordid existences that belie the cheerful, complacent face of society.

Most of the stories in *Airships* employ a contemporary Southern setting.

Hannah's image of the New South still owes much to the Gothic traditions of Southern fiction. Junk cars replace cypress moss, but the New South carries the weight of the past.

Several of the stories in *Airships* are set during the Civil War and focus on individual humanity of characters caught up in gruesome battles. Combat, and violence in general, is never an impersonal or abstract action in Hannah's fiction. All of the Civil War stories in *Airships* make at least passing reference to the Confederate general Jeb Stuart. In some, such as "Knowing He Was Not My Kind Yet I Followed," Stuart himself appears.

As in *Ray*, the Vietnam War as well as the Civil War figures importantly. In one of Hannah's most compelling stories, "Testimony of Pilot," an extraordinarily gifted musician has a love affair interrupted and ultimately destroyed by what the Vietnam War does to him.

He flies a Navy jet to Jackson, Mississippi, only to tell his girlfriend, "I am a dragon. America the beautiful, like you will never know." But his girl says he has so changed that she hardly knows him.

Hannah is very much an American author, concerned with the American landscape and American imagination.

He seems to fight against the idealized portrait of America as a dreamland of order and plenty. Instead, these stories often focus on the waste, the unfulfilled promise, and the squalid. Hannah, like many of his most admirable characters, relentlessly pursues an inclusive vision that affirms life only by facing it squarely.



## Techniques

Since almost all the stories in *Airships* (as well as all his other works) are told in the first person, Hannah creates a wide variety of narrative voices. The authenticity of these narrative voices is one of Hannah's most distinctive features and one of his great strengths as a writer. Rarely do Hannah's characters fail to convince. Their language is colloquial, urgent, and direct.

Hannah's stories are not unlike tales.

If they are improbable, their narrator usually acknowledges that fact. Driven by the narrator's need to explain, the pace of the stories is often very fast, almost breathless. But the bizarre events in *Airships* are set in the context of an individual's experience and, consequently, the horrors described are often understated.

There is frequently a twist or especially a bizarre turn at the end of many of the stories in *Airships*. Unexpected deaths, for instance, conclude at least six of these twenty stories.

## Themes

Many of Hannah's stories deal with failed, frustrated affairs between men and women. Rarely does sex have anything to do with love. More often sex is a transaction, an instinct, or bribe.

Love is frequently an uneasy combination of responsibility, guilt, and lust.

Friendship between men, although it too usually derives from interdependence, offers considerably greater promise in Hannah's work than relationships between men and women.

Violence is commonplace in these stories. Those that deal with the Civil War come by violence almost naturally, but so do many of Hannah's contemporary stories. The deaths he portrays are seldom natural. Suicides, terrorist bombings, and cannibalism are more typical than heart attacks. Moreover, there is a very personal quality to violence and murder in his stories; violence is almost always direct, deliberate, and immediate. In "Return to Return," for example, a son provokes a stroke in his mother's lover. In another story, set in the future, a group of lodgers help their landlady clean, roast, and eat a man. In "Behold the Husband in His Perfect Agony," an Indian spy for the North during the Civil War unwittingly kills his wife.

## Literary Precedents

There are unmistakable references to other American writers, especially Southerners, in *Airships*. In "Dragged Fighting from His Tomb," a story set during the Civil War, the narrator says: "Nothing a body does disgusts me."

Almost the exact language appears in Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana*: "Nothing human disgusts me."

In "Constant Pain in Tuscaloosa," the memory of Flannery O'Connor's Church of Christ without Christ is evoked by a minister's saying, "I don't think Jesus wants you. He's too dead to want. He was a hell of a sweet genius guy, but he's dead." Similarly echoes of Carson McCullers, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty appear throughout *Airships*.

Like many Southern authors, Hannah sees normal or conventional society, especially its religious institutions, as a fraud. The Gothic elements of Hannah's fiction usually arise from discovering the truth behind some cozy and conventional lie.



# Copyright Information

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