The Age of Wire and String Study Guide

The Age of Wire and String by Ben Marcus

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Argument and Sleep Summary

The Age of Wire and String, by Ben Marcus, is a work of experimental fiction that abandons many familiar conventions of the novel, such as plot, characterization, and dialogue, in favor of creating new definitions and explanations of the world. These descriptions, utterly nonsensical in our everyday world, create a weird, funny, and sad alternate reality that seems touched by both genius and madness. When the book appeared in 1995, it was widely hailed as an important new direction in experimental fiction.

The book begins with two quotes. The first is attributed to the nineteenth century American writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Every word was once an animal." The second is from Michael Marcus, who the reader later discovers is the author's father: "Mathematics is the supreme nostalgia of our time." In a preface titled, Argument, the author explains that the book is a catalog of what he calls the life project. He writes that a document offering instruction in what he calls the secret motions of life has long been needed, and this book takes on the huge task of cataloging a culture. By looking at a thing, we destroy it with our desire, Marcus writes, and so the thing must be trained to see itself. This book will deal with the chief concerns of any society, disclosing but not destroying its mysteries. The first section, Sleep, begins with the bizarre entry, Intercourse with Resuscitated Wife, in which the author declares that electricity in a house mourns the absence of the wife, who is the house's energy form. The way to make appliances such as the toaster and the vacuum cleaner work properly is to find and revive the dead wife, and have intercourse with her. Snoring, Accidental Speech, argues that snoring is a language disturbance caused by what the author calls accidental sleeping, which can be partially corrected by filling the slumbering person with cool air, although it often is best to respond to the snores with barks, which slow the sleeper's disturbed speech. If the sleeper's stomach is massaged, the snoring message can be understood, which usually is a plea to be pulled out, because the sleeper is about to drown.

Sky Destroys Dog discusses what Marcus calls air days, which are certain days following a day that a dog in apparently has caused the weather to die by suffocation. The author writes that air days have ancient origins that are unclear, but they are celebrated by fasting. In Ohio, when the population broke their fasts before the storm dogs finished eating the air and rain, mass suffocation occurred. Air Trance 16 surmises that if the wind were to slow down, a man could be seen as he built and destroyed his house. The author writes that if this man were his father, he would shout at his son, his voice blending with weather created by the father to form a small animal that would eat the son from within, while the house was smashed behind him. The Death of Water describes an iron-gray fluid slightly harder than air that affects people in different ways. In 1807, what the author terms a new erosion caused death in the water, but he add that it was not until 1875 that a funeral was held, during which bodies of water began to

gush and then stopped, as graves on all sides began to open. The section ends with Terms, a list of definitions, some of which concern topics mentioned earlier. None of them makes sense in the conventional world. For example, Marcus defines professional sleepers as capable of warding off birds, sealing culprits in houses, enhancing grass, and restoring belief in houses. He writes that a shirt of noise is a garment or a residue of something capable of holding sound and storing messages for journeys, and which can destroy the wearer. An inability to see is called Jennifer, which also can be a partial inability to see hands, or feigning blindness, or diseases resulting from these acts.

Argument and Sleep Analysis

Perhaps the most easily understood part of this book is the Argument, in which Ben Marcus explains his intent in writing it. Even so, the stilted language he uses, like a parody of academic prose, makes his explanation seem strange and hard to follow. It is as if he knows what he means, but only in an intuitive way, not in a way that he can easily grasp or describe on the level of reasoned thought. Immediately, the reader sees that something is wrong or different about this text, and at the start of the section titled, Sleep, that difference becomes blazingly apparent. In the first part of the section, when Marcus describes a man having sex with his dead wife as a way to make household appliances function properly, the illogical and the startling introduction of necrophilia as a desired activity are both disturbing and funny. It's significant that this section begins with a story concerning a dead person, when the section is supposedly about sleep. Death as a kind of sleep and vice versa might play a role in the author's thinking about how people regard the world and life. In subsequent pieces, Marcus introduces topics that will continue to occupy him throughout the book, such as the unexpected uses of air, a fascination with dogs and a conviction that they can kill the weather, and people being suffocated, buried, or eaten from within. Houses and water also are introduced, both of which will continue to reappear in bizarre forms throughout the book. At the end of this section as well as each one in the book, a list of terms is offered with their definitions. In this first section, these definitions do not add much to the reader's understanding of what is going on, because the terms make no sense in the everyday world. All that can be deduced so far is that the world being created in these pages derives from a view far removed from that of conventional understanding. It could be that this world is not Earth, or perhaps the narrator is insane. No clue has been given, other than the opening statement that the book will uncover mysteries of life, what Marcus calls its "secret motions." The reader is left wondering if the book is a joke, or if its strangeness offers a view of life that might have some philosophical value that eludes traditional thinking.

God

God Summary

The section titled, God begins with Bird to the North, Act of Wind, in which God rides a bird northward, and wind affects the motionlessness of the ocean. In riding a bird, God brings with Him a healing wind, which is effective on any land in which certain types of weather do not occur. Certain birds, real and mythological, move the ocean's tide with their beating wings to make the motionless ocean move again. Died is an obituary of Mark Parker, a body king who fought the darkness person, Albert, who each night killed people of light. Parker killed Albert but died himself, as in agony he saw nameless new persons walking unhindered. G-D is described as a mode entered by "flaxen tree tools" capable of creating angels. However, these tools are heavily sugared, suffocating the angels, which can be revived only by needle grasses that pierce the tools, allowing the angels to escape through the holes. Landing on Floating Island of the Gods is described as a form of deafness that involves irresponsible flight within the wind, an activity that the author calls a type of human weather. Deaf to the warnings of others, the flier focuses on a lush patch of earth in the middle atmosphere, where the gods, cooking little birds over a fire, are interrupted by the flier in the sky.

Ethics of Listening When Visiting Areas That Contain Him seems to be about a father making a confession in a low, glass-covered structure, apparently a grave, which is heated by women's manure mixed with a garment of the father. One family member goes to this place and, if it is a child who wishes to absolve the father, the child brings a burlap bag, which reduces the need to cover the grave with blankets in the evening, when the person underground is too cold to converse. The Terms at the end of this section are again mysterious. For example, the author defines God Charge as the amount of something called Thompson that occurs in an individual or a shelter. Thompson is not defined but appears to be a word for God. The Fiend has several definitions, one of which is any aspect of Thompson that that he or she (or it) cannot control. The God-burning system is described as a way Thompson sets himself on fire. Thompson's body is referred to as Perkins, "in order that His physical form never desecrate His own name." A term used earlier in the section and now defined is Western Worship Boxes, which are rough-walled, dank, and finely trimmed wooden structures used for devotional purposes; coffins. Marcus defines The Living as members (although members of what is not explained), people, or things that seem to put their hands in something unseen and too heavy to lift, which is rubbery and hot.

God Analysis

A bird and the wind are introduced in the first part of this section, both of which are symbols or images that will recur throughout the book. Wind from the beating of birds' wings that makes the motionless ocean move again is a mythological way of describing weather patterns that influence our lives. It is as if the author has abandoned scientific

explanations to pursue his own theories about how the world functions. This mythological approach (in a section appropriately titled, God), continues with the naming of apparently important figures in the mythology, but these names are given without elaboration, as if the figures were already well-known. When a person flies on the wind to the land of the gods in the sky, the act is described as a form of deafness, implying that those who would attempt to associate with deities are deaf to the warnings against such behavior. The father in the grave and the burning of Thompson, who seems to be associated with God or a supreme leader, suggest that whatever lies beyond death might offer clarity for those of us still engaged in the messy stuff of life. This section carries a plaintive tone, a kind of longing that seems appropriate to the construction of a new mythology or explanation, however partial and vague, of how and why we are here.

Food

Food Summary

The section titled Food begins with The Food Costumes of Montana describes the covering of a body over the course of a day by various types of food, including bacon, rice, taffy, butter, beans, nuts, kale, noodles, and cereals. Some of these foods evolved into garments with names such as slews, loops, shads, pike rings, and fudge girdles. Just after sunset, the word "food" officially began to be used. First Green describes the replacement of wild growth with cultivated flowers in a prison that projects upward from a garden in the shape of a human, thus confining people within portions of the sky. A few people who remain alive under the gardens try to poison them by breathing together underneath the heaviest stalks, a tactic that has limited success. The argument shifts to the prison publishing industry, and the point is made that no amount of book-style illusion will alter the origin of plants, nor affect the flower growing process of the one honest deity that remains.

Brian, Treated to a Delicate Meal is defined as a way to ward off travelers, because denying Brian food will encourage travelers either to sleep or to lie down until Brian finishes eating. The author does not define or identify Brian, but he writes that sleeping travelers generate a force field within the dining car that repels travelers who are standing up, which allows Brian to be eatwn, and that is why some travelers are kept constantly asleep. A traveler who lies down but does not sleep through three cycles of Brian being fed will progress to another phase beyond a traveler who is just rising, and the first traveler will be able to eat.

Food Storms of the Original Brother declares that a brother is built from food, in the way that the air is filled with tiny particles. The author discusses what he calls atmospheric food, found over the ocean and cities, which comes from the skin of birds, combustion products at festivals, pieces of grain, salt spray from the oceans, bread and other material from plants, and bits of rain containing what he calls beef seeds. Marcus writes that food sometimes attracts people by falling onto various surfaces, but huge meals are served in the air's upper layers, which creates human parts in the air. The correlation of food parts and people was first made by Jason Marcus, described by the author as the original brother. During a storm made of grains and seeds, Jason ate and reconstructed parts of himself.

Hidden Food, from Above declares that ownership of hidden food is a big problem. The author sets out rules under which ownership of hidden food is determined between a scavenger and the original hider of it. Food may be hidden in structures, within manufactured landscapes, or suspended from the hips of a citizen. In the latter case, the scavenger must trade it for something of value. The food can be retrieved by the original owner if it is taken by someone who is not a bona fide scavenger, but the owner has to pay a pound of custard for it, and must have carved the word "mine" into the husk of the food. Terms at the section's end include Carl, which is food built from twigs

and cloth. The Fudge Girdle, mentioned earlier, is a spreadable garment of crumpets made from "chocolage," which is secured with wire. The cloth-eaters are the first group to consume large amounts of fabric. A food posse is a group that wipes out food by throwing it into various strange places. A Food Map of Yvonne is a parchment that these where things eaten by females can be located, or where food has been eaten, made, or talked about, or a scroll made from skin and grains.

Food Analysis

In this section, the book's humor outshines the disturbing or disconcerting nature of its oddness, probably because the topic of food is not threatening. Everyone is familiar with jokes about food, and the notion that food could be used as clothing is amusing. The image of gardens that confine men to sections of the sky is a poetical way of suggesting that the cultivation of a garden can act as a kind of fence, cutting off the gardener from the rest of the world. The idea that some people, hidden underneath gardens, might try to kill them, could imply that a few people regard gardening not as a principally nurturing activity but as just another form of rigid conformity and possessiveness that separates humans from one another. This leads into several considerations of the ownership and partaking of food, in one case, food served in a dining car, and in another piece, food that apparently descends from on high. The author's brother, Jason Marcus, is introduced as the person who originally recognized a correlation between food and people, which could be interpreted as "you are what you eat," especially hearkening back to the first piece in the section about wearing food. This leads into an examination of food that is hidden and found by scavengers, and how to determine who owns it, which is amusing but also carries an undercurrent of warning in a world beset by starvation and poverty. Many of the terms in this section concern foods made of strange materials, and how to disseminate or locate food. In the end, the apparent silliness of this section is supplanted by the suspicion that a serious point is being made concerning how we think about food as a commodity and a possession rather than as a resource that must be shared with fellow humans.

The House

The House Summary

The section titled "The House" begins with "The Golden Monica," which describes the phenomenon of an intruder into an American home who kills himself in the presence of the family. He ties up the family with wire or rope and forces them to watch as he commits suicide, usually with a lotion, although he may also use a pistol or knife. He lies there until one of the family members escapes, who is always accused of murder and confesses to it. The act is called a monica because the hostages are forced to watch it, and the event leaves a long-standing scar.

The Enemy in House Culture refers to a practice called house burial that began around 1979 in the Southwest. It involves covering shelters with seeds and baking them in steam that the author contends has been fossilized by the sun. The original practitioners were mainly grass-dwellers, but were succeeded around 1983 by another tribe who practiced sleep migration, which the author does not define. He does say that something called sleep collaborations were held in Texas and Ohio in 1987. This involved "gevortsing," which uses upsetting images of houses taken from dreams as aids in teaching people how to destroy themselves while sleeping until something that is apparently bad about their lives is chased away from their homes. Works from the War Between Houses and Wind describes what the author calls grass guards, who swung a kind of weapon called a shade stick that kept the sun from conspiring with the grass to destroy the house. Marcus writes that dogs were the initial shade-chasers, also called Persons, although they were not human. Shade has always fended off enemies, the author mysteriously contends, but grass came before houses. Marcus gives a brief history of what he calls lawn boys or moronies, who protect houses from wind during storms in the street, often sacrificing themselves in piles on the grass. The author explains that air kills itself in remote areas and the debris settles on grass, which sharpens it. Men may not walk on these areas, but when children sleep there, a funeral held for the dead air goes over them. The sky can also be placated by other types of sleeping. The author writes that the sun has wires, which are measured to determine the perfect place to build houses. The houses contain written prayers that ask for exact measurements.

Exporting the Inner Man defines coughing as a way to move people or things between levels, although these levels are not explained. This process can be stopped if the person's methods of breathing are obstructed, which will cause his or her limbs to inflate when the person coughs. An exact crouching posture must be used to prevent the hiding person from disappearing inside the cougher.

Views from the First House establishes that the house is divine or sacred to many people, and the basic terms and beliefs of a house-worshipping religion called Messonism are given. Another so-called shelter cult known as Perkins is described, in which people are not allowed to sleep in or near houses, because the sleeper would be

the first to be attacked by the fiend. The developer of the first shirt shelters and land scarves, John, is introduced, whose theory was that family members should live in what is called a garment hovel, made by zipping fabric onto a house and adding a hood. John claimed that people traveled together in public areas called tunics made of cotton. The author claims that human ideas about houses can never be exhausted, because they extend into concepts of what he calls heaven construction theory. This section's list of terms includes Ohio, which is the word for a house, whether standing or destroyed. A land scarf is a garment that also can be used as a landmark, a shelter, or means of conveyance. The term expanded house refers to the swelling of various body parts to create hollowness that can be inhabited. A gevorts box is an abstract house, which the author says was constructed during the sleep collaborations in Texas and Ohio that he described earlier. Moronies are stout boys whose job is to ward off winds during what the author calls house wars. He describes The Mother as the softest place in the house, smelling sweetly of food, and cooing the names of other people.

The House Analysis

The house is a major symbol in this book, but it often is associated with sadness, death, or burial. The first part of this section, describing a phenomenon in which an intruder ties up inhabitants of a house and forces them to witness his suicide, is symbolic of the negative impact a self-destructive family member can have on relatives at home. Significantly, one of the inhabitants always escapes from the house but also is always charged with murder and confesses to it. This outcome is a metaphor for the intensity of the guilt family members are apt to feel over the death or other destructive behavior of a close relative, so that even when a family member escapes the home, he or she cannot escape the guilt. Looked at this way, the author's take on the home might be pessimistic but it makes sense, because home often is where the saddest and most debilitating things in life happen. Several pieces in this section offer a history of house-dwelling and construction that focuses on sleep, grass, and wind. The house is where people sleep but it also often is where they die. Grass, an element of Nature, is described as preceding houses and is associated with protection against bad weather, which is a function readers normally would associate with houses. In the author's construct, though, the house seems delicate, almost alive. Indeed, an abstract version of it apparently exists, and people's bodies can swell to generate hollowness that can be inhabited, like a house. It would seem that the house, an object of worship, is also a concept, an emotion, and a receptacle of powerful memories.

Animal

Animal Summary

Animal begins with Dog, Mode of Heat Transfer in Barking, which explains that dogs depend on the principal that fluids expand when heated, because this causes the dog to expand. It then becomes less hungry, because it contains less matter than when it was smaller. Warmer portions of the dog rise through its cooler parts, to be replaced by cooler parts, which, if the dog barks, will warm and rise, creating what the author calls a dog current. In this manner, barking is transferred to the entire dog.

Silence Implies the Desire is about wearing clothing during sex. In legal-sounding language, the text discusses how a woolen scarf worn by animals may be used to establish that sex did or did not occur, or to turn the event into a story. Circle of Willis is about an area in which singing bird can encourage a pedestrian to bother a group of people. In medical-sounding jargon, the text describes how bird sounds affect the pedestrian's brain, which is sectioned into what the author calls nine loaves, but apparently two sections called the Kathryn and the Beatrice resist birdcalls. Horse, Distinct Category, contends that horses are racially related, as well as by nationality and culture. The author writes that this has been true since ancient times. Migration, military conquest, and political boundary changes all have affected horse populations, and the types of society in which horses are found vary as widely as all these influences that brought them into being.

Where Birds Have Destroyed the Surface describes a system of detecting the position of remote things, including birds, by filling their mouths with cloth. Marcus writes that this also provides information about the location and emotional state of "the father" concerning birds. The process works through an object called a directional cloth that transmits of pulses of wind or what the author terms film, which then must be chewed. However, the film waves can be blocked by birds using sky interception, or SINTER, which is an acronym for "sky interception and noise transfer of emergent rag forms." The distance between boy and father, or between boy and bird, is measured by gauging the time it takes for the bird to reach the cloth and begin pecking. The cloth, called blain, makes the bird crash. The writer contends that the sky speeds up in accordance with the speed at which cloth is chewed, but a bird that moves at the speed of the sky is invisible, and can lodge in the father, where it pecks out an exit but does not use it. Instead, it watches the boy as it controls the father. Terms include The Ben Marcus, which is a false map made of skin, or an article of clothing so heavy that the wearer cannot move, or the progenitor of what the author calls the antiperson. The definition of Representation Life is quickness with minimal emotion, gesturing, speech, or imagination. Sky Interception or SINTER is an obstruction that takes the form of patterns or clouds people see when birds fly in front of sunlight shining on the landscape and water.

Animal Analysis

By now, the reader is becoming familiar with certain obsessions in this text. The idea of a "dog current" sparked by the dog's barking that results in cool and warm air rising through the animal seems to fit, somehow, into the skewed worldview emerging in the book. Similarly, the notion that clothing could prove or make a fiction of sex between animals does not seem astonishing in the context of the world the author is creating. The piece about horses adds a pseudo-historical context to this section on animals, while the bird story is a virtuoso performance of bizarre, funny, and inventive mythologizing. Associating the bird with a sky that speeds up in accordance with how rapidly cloth is chewed suggests that time speeds up and things get out of control when one is anxious. In that sense, the bird must represent a powerful force of some kind that can get inside the boy's father and take control of him, an animalism or primitivism that deprives him of reasoned self-control. In Terms, the detachment of the author referring to Ben Marcus as an antiperson, and the scorn for any way of living that is devoid of emotion and imagination give clues to what the author might think is missing in most people's everyday life.

Weather

Weather Summary

The section titled Weather begins with Weather Killer, which tells the story of a place where people live in all sorts of shelters, including scooped-out dogs, and where even a person's hair could be stolen, and eating is secret. A wind gun punches holes in skin, the rain never stops, and children roam outside, cooking nuts in the grass. Eventually, there is no season, the sun begins to make a noise, and the society moves underground. The wind grows strong and reverses, jerking birds upward, and holes form in the earth. A boy walks among people. He kills them, departs, returns, dies, is mourned, and a new boy arrives, carrying a wire. He examines the tombstone, and holds the wire to a scaffold.

Continuous Winter, in Law explains that the term continuous winter refers to a change in the alternating seasons. What the author calls written forms of winter mostly are changed through a precise methodology. If X > Fire uses language that sounds like mathematics jargon to maintain that a girl burned in water is the key to what the author calls the God-Burning System. The girl is used as a current meter in a river to calibrate what Marcus says is a drowning balance, which measures the speed of a river in which a given number of girls have burned while using a wire to make transmissions of a religious nature.

The Method She Employs Against That Which Cannot Be Seen quotes "our mother," who wrote a book in 1989 concerning weather used underground and how to improve many types weathers, including what the author calls backward wind, yellowness, and nonvertical rain. A quote provided from the mother's book advises that the wind of a storm should be captured in an egg, heated on the belly, mixed with the hair of someone who saw the storm, and given to a hungry boy. This will cause the storm to leave the sky in favor of the boy. The author contends that this is how Mrs. Marcus caused hurricanes to enter Jason. Survival, Marcus writes, is impossible unless a small house is constructed of boy's hair. Several rituals are described, and the author says his mother taught that for each person there is a double, made of wind. The author apologizes to Mother for digging, but says she initiated this procedure of burials. He assures her they will not dig in her area.

The Religion claims that this activity resembles other functions involving slow-moving children and older, harmless people. The author declares it is difficult to live as a man, and that some people try to become the "thompson," or supreme leader, but escaping from animals, particularly the dog, is almost futile. Digging a hole and climbing into it is the quickest way to exit the scene. Terms include air tattoos, which are recordings of sky films stolen and smuggled by people considered to be sky oracles, who rubbed the films onto their bodies. These people often are held underground in vats of lotion to keep the sky colors on them bright. A backward wind is defined as a forward wind. For each locality that exhibits what the author calls wind shooting, another place gets the

same wind in reverse, which shows that the tail and head of any so-called wind fragments that are killed always move against the same skin made of dust and precipitation. Frusc is a brown, heavy air that that arrives before people speak. Human Weather is generated by talking, or when either systems or societal figures sweat. Rain, which is hard and shiny, is broken into knives for cutting. When death itself is translated into words, it becomes, "To empty the body of knives." The Sky Films of Ohio are the first recordings of the sky, which were made in Ohio using a device designed by Krup. The Sun is the place from which the first sounds came. The Wind Gun is a sequence of numbers, often between twelve and thirteen, which tell the wind to change locations.

Weather Analysis

As the book continues, the new world created by Marcus takes shape through repetition of his obsessional interests and through an emerging logic in his apparent illogic. For example, the reader is no longer surprised by the idea that weather can be killed. If weather is taken symbolically to mean emotional weather, then the descriptions of how the rain never stops, there are no seasons, the sun makes a noise, and people move underground all begin to make sense. When the wind reverses, a change in emotional weather is signaled. The appearance of a boy who kills people and departs, and then returns and dies, to be replaced by a boy with a wire, must have something to do with the author and his brother, Jason. The wire symbolizes connectivity of a kind that has not been fully explained but that must have to do with human relations, with the past, and with the dead. A God-burning system, girls burned in water, and a book about weather written by "our mother" all suggest attempts to understand and come to terms with trouble and death. The boy digs (attempts to understand), and assures his mother he will not dig near her, which implies that she has died. It follows that the stories should move on to the contemplation of religion and of a supreme leader, because these are human-made ways of coping, rather than relying on the supernatural forces that were considered in the section titled, God. Many of the terms in this section deal with the interaction of natural forces with humans, or even the appropriation by humans of such forces. The two become so closely interrelated that it is hard to separate them, even to the point of a definition for human weather.

Persons

Persons Summary

The section titled Persons begins with Half-Life of Walter in the American Areas, which describes Walter as a summons issued to those who serve in what the author calls animal forces. This summons is a sound that induces young men to become so-called animal helpers, which led in 1986-1987 to mass warfare. In Mexico, dog helpers were often deaf, and by 1990, the term Walter was applied to deaf soldiers of Mexico. In 1992, the call was used to anger American men and to cause suicides on battlefields in the Middle West. Flap, Wire, and Name states that family energy from the naming of a man can be converted into electricity through the use of an electric cell called a wire man. Unnamed men connected by a wire and covered with a flap are dipped in a room containing waters that the author says are unrelated. Relatives leave through room via the wire. When fathers leave, they take along cells and water which become the names of new children who are floating in their houses. The Animal Husband is a story told in the language of a small boy who is his father's animal assistant, taking care of a giant bird that eats air. The boy's father appears to be named Michael, and the mother seems to be no longer with them. The boy lives in a big house, and buries food for the day when the bird goes away. He thinks back to an earlier time, when he was happy with his brother, Jason or Jase, and their grandfather. Their father made shows with light that the boy enigmatically describes as moving through a cup of powder. The boy talks about chewing cloth and digging holes and the father being hauled away. On some kind of bundle, the father was scratching what he thought the animals were saying. The boy lost an animal named Monk, whom the father said had to go to the other side of the bird to be repaired. The boy kept some of Monk's hair. He also has an animal named Cheeser that has been shorn and that his father hits, but the boy rubs Cheeser and feeds him grass. He prays to the bird, knowing that the sky is a bird. He hears nothing but scratching. The animals have stopped making weather, because their mouths have been stitched tight. There is a yellow hole in the bird, and hair falls to the grass in the form of drops. The bird has no stitches.

Leg of Brother Who Died Early describes an object whirled in the air to approximate a dead brother's speech. This object, called a roarer, is later revealed to be the dead brother's leg, which the author writes can stand in for the living brother, indicating that death may have come to the wrong brother. The living boy also swings a shrunken leg inside his pocket, ceding his life to the brother who preceded him. Hidden Ball Inside a Song is about the hiding-ball game, in which people chase a horseman named Stephen while a song is played. Lyrics are not allowed. The objective is to crush Stephen with music. Terms include Bird-Counter, a man who counts birds, people, or others as they enter or leave an area, which prevents them from entering or leaving. The word John means to steal, and to place blame for it onto the victim of the theft, and John also is defined as a "house-garment correlationist," which refers to the first maker of so-called shirt shelters, who was mentioned in the section titled, The House. Secret melodies that that are not audible but that arise around the legs people are called Leg Songs,

although people cannot notice the songs inside their bodies if their legs are wrapped in cotton. Leg Songs also can be precursors to sexual intercourse, or the sounds made by a person who has just died, or a device that allows a brother to commune with a dead brother. Michael% is the degree to which a man is the father, Michael Marcus, or a name for a man one wishes were the father, or the art of changing all names to Michael, or any method through which patriarchy is described. The Weather Killer is a person or team who kills the air. Our Jason is described as the first brother, who arose in the Californias, and was the antiperson's first love.

Persons Analysis

One of the most striking aspects of this section is that while it begins in the book's usual, stilted tone of a manual, it gradually shades over into the voice of a small boy who seems to be trying to understand his family in this weird environment. The section begins with a discussion of war, and how young men are drawn to it by a specific call or sound that induces them to become the helpers of animals who apparently are central to the wars. This idea that lower primates actually lead war and men follow could be a comment on the degradation of humans by war; a kind of devolution that reduces them to animalism. It also foreshadows the difficulties of family life that are to come in this section. Next, the section veers back to electricity, one of the author's favorite topics, combined with names, water, and wire, all of which also have made regular appearances in the book. The small boy's voice then takes over, as he helps his father care for a giant bird that eats air. Often, the author seems to be working on a level of intuition and emotion that is not entirely accessible to reasoned analysis, but these reappearances of important forces in the world, such as electricity, water, birds, and air suggest the power of big mysteries in life, especially to a child. The boy buries food, the life-sustaining substance, for the day when the bird goes away, which indicates that the giant bird provides for humans. The boy's father makes pictures using powder and light, like some antiquated method of photography whose mechanisms are unknown to the boy. Pets die, and the boy prays to the giant bird, which turns out to be the sky, a symbol for the great unknown. The boy's brother has died, and he whirls one of his brother's limbs to approximate his voice, and this leg can actually stand in (a goofy pun) for the dead brother. Loved beings, pets, and a brother have died, and the boy waggles his own shrunken leg, his penis, trying to transfer his life-giving force to the most-loved of them, his brother, whom he feels should be alive instead of him. From here, the story goes to a description of a game in which someone named Stephen, whom the reader has never met, is chased by people who try to mutilate him with music. This piece seems to come from somewhere deep inside the author, beyond the reader's comprehension, as if certain secrets and mysteries can be broached but never explained. Many of the terms in this section are refrains on its themes, the most straightforward of which are the definitions of the author's father and, especially, his brother, identified as the first love of the author's life.

The Society

The Society Summary

The section titled The Society begins with Automobile, Watchdog is a funny description of a car. For example, the front appears to be identical to that of a horse-drawn carriage, but without the "neighing unit" whose snorts and brays divert the airflow. The passenger is described as a triangular opening between the steering wheel and the street. If any air flows into the car, the driver or passenger coughs and is expelled into the ocean, carrying with him bits of scenery. Swimming, Strictly an Inscription defines swimming as a eulogy delivered beside a grave. By extension, it is a commemoration of the dead that involves arcing movements of the limbs. Nowadays, people swim in large groups as they await open graves. Welder, Cessation of All Life declares that welding can involve the entire body, as in what the author calls somatic welding, or it may be confined to repairing the body's hinges. To weld normally replaceable parts is called maintenance. To weld pieces that appear because of outside changes, such as lack of air, is called work. The female welder is less easily blinded by sparks than the male. Arm, in Biology defines the arm as a percussion instrument known worldwide and throughout history. The arm resonates when the skin is struck. Rhythmically, arm-playing can be very complicated, especially in Oriental medicine. In Western medicine, withered arms often are tuned by a mechanism that activates as an individual begins walking.

Accountant, Vessel of Notice states that an accountant is a vessel. Inside it, substances can be and then moved, divided, reduced, or enumerated. This process, which counts and reenergizes both people and money, identifies or shrinks them for a moment, and then forgets them. The accountant is required to maintain physical integrity when very hot. The names Albert, Jennifer, and Frederick are popular for accountants, but these names tend to die at high temperature, which has led to the secret flourishing of unaccounted-for civilizations. Outline for a City asserts that the unwound skin of insects is similar to musical notes, which is why musicians gather at marshes and swamps to peel the skin off insects. A mist of released insect spines creates a garment that protects the music, which goes to places the insects had left. The perfect recipients of such treasured music are those most often blamed for singing: the happy person, the mosquito, and the improperly designed house. Terms include The Age of Wire and String, which is a time when English scientists created a method of conversation based on the pattern of flutters that emerges when string and wire are used to cover the mouth during speech. Patriarchal figures such as Michael Marcus were also created during this time. Frederick is cloth that contains Braille writing. Put on in the morning, Frederick is readable at any time, and the bumps containing its messages can be transferred to others through physical contact. To frederick (in lower case) also means to write or engrave something. Messonism is a religious construct whose principles consist of: wonderment at any place in which houses came before people did; the so-called sacrificing of houses during the fall season; projecting images of houses; a silent response to weather; the assembly and use of string; and the idea that principles cannot be set by an any text. The Smell Camera is an object that can grab and keep odors.

Hand Words are signals that can be given by displaying patterns on the hand. The Wire is the only thing in contact with everything else. It is the shortest distance between two objects, and it carries the shreds of hands that pulled too strenuously, would not let go earlier, or arrived too quickly.

The Society Analysis

It's interesting that the author would choose to begin a section on society with a description of the automobile, which many people consider to be a major alienating force in society. The pollution outside the car that causes driver and passengers to cough and be expelled into the ocean is a quirky way of commenting on the adverse environmental impact of cars on the earth, and suggesting that what needs to be done is return to Nature. In the next piece, why the author would equate swimming with death is problematic, but swimming is a suspension over depths that is achieved only by a kind of flailing, and in that regard, there is a thin line between life and death, and much that is unknown. Similarly, talk of welding the body and of the arm as a percussion instrument with curative powers may have metaphorical significance concerning the effects of the individual on society and vice versa, but these connections are not easily or cleanly made. The piece on accountants is quite funny, and seems to be an application of the author's bizarre style in this book to bean-counters as a satirical target. Why the unraveling of insects should be equated with musical notation is explainable on the simple level of insects that make music, just as humans do, and creaking houses, but beyond that, the effect of the author's strange new world is more important than trying to explain what everything in it might mean. After all, what does everything in the everyday world actually mean? The terms again add depth and strangeness to the author's creation, but the reader is unsurprised by now to realize they cast no strong light on the mysteries that Marcus originally promised to unveil. At the book's outset, he declared that the concerns of society could be disclosed, but its mysteries would not be destroyed. In completely unpredictable fashion, he seems to have followed that line of thought.

Characters

Jason Marcusappears in Food, Weather, Persons

Jason Marcus, also called Jase, is the author's brother. This fact emerges only gradually and obliquely through the course of the book. It also slowly becomes apparent that something happened to Jason. The initial clue given is that Jason is no longer present. Toward the end of the book, the author states that Jason died, although he gives no information about how or when this happened. Only in the most indirect ways, when the author alludes to guilt or blame concerning the death of family members, is it possible to infer that unhappy conditions at home might have contributed to Jason's death. This is simply a guess on the part of the reader, however, because so much of the language in the book is symbolic and inaccessible on a rational level. Jason seems to have been an ingenious boy, because the author credits him with inventing a method of correlating food parts with people, which apparently was a wonderful achievement. At one point, the author implies that Ben Marcus, rather than Jason Marcus, should have been the son who died, although no clue is given whether this is because Ben feels in some way responsible for Jason's death, or simply feels inadequate compared to Jason. In one scene, the author describes a "roarer" that can be swung to simulate the sound of a dead brother's speech, and the reader learns that the roarer is made of the dead brother's leg. The living brother even tries to allow the dead brother to stand in for him. Toward the end of the book, the narrator admits that Jason was his first love. What happened to Jason is a central, mostly unresolved mystery in the book.

Fatherappears in Sleep, God, Animal, Weather, Persons, The Society

Father, also known as Michael Marcus, is the narrator's father. Sometimes called the patriarchal figure, the father apparently was "constructed" during a time known as the Age of Wire and String, when a particular type of conversation was invented involving wire and string placed over the mouth. Michael seems to be capable of rages, and will hit the family pets. He sometimes goes away in the course of the book, but he usually seems to be near his son, Ben Marcus. Sometimes, the father appears to be a generic figure rather than Michael Marcus, as when the author discusses a method of communing with a dead father in his grave, or "western worship box." The author writes that the term "Michael" also may be used generically, as the name for any man one wishes were the father, or in a system of patriarchal rendering. In this book, which uses a few names but does not create conventional characterizations, the father is probably the most fleshed-out figure, because he is mentioned in different contexts throughout the book, giving the author the opportunity to add more information about him each time. One thing that emerges about the father, and Michael Marcus, is that he holds major symbolic significance for the narrator, but the relationship appears to be one of love-hate, or at least of strongly mixed emotions on the narrator's part.

Motherappears in Animal, Weather, Persons

Mother, also occasionally called "our mother" and referred to one time as "Mrs. Marcus," is usually the narrator's mother, although sometimes the term refers to a generic mother, similar to the case of "father" in the book. The mother, associated with the house, is characterized as warm, soft, and sweet-smelling. At home, people vie to cuddle with her. This characterization seems deliberately cliché and lacking in detail, as if the author's intention is to caricature the mother. Eventually, the reader realizes that the narrator's mother has died, just as Jason did, although no connection is drawn in the text between these two deaths. At one point, the narrator is digging with a shovel and he promises his mother that he will not dig near her, which suggests not only her death, but perhaps also the narrator's unwillingness to probe too deeply into his fond remembrances of his mother.

Ben Marcusappears in Animal

Ben Marcus is the author and the narrator, as well as a false map, scroll, caul, or parchment, a garment, and the "antiperson." In other words, Ben Marcus is a decidedly elusive and changeable character in this book. At one point, the author describes "The Ben Marcus" as, "a fitful chart in the darkness," which, when properly decoded, indicates only that we should destroy it and look elsewhere for instruction.

Grandfatherappears in Persons

Grandfather, also sometimes called Grandover, is the narrator's grandfather. He is mentioned a number of times, but much of these mentions are in passing, and merely identify him as someone in the house during a particular scene in the book. As a character, the grandfather is faceless and almost devoid of personality. Once, the author suggests that the grandfather has some influence over the father in a conversation, but beyond that, the grandfather seems to be nothing more than a benign, occasional presence.

Membersappears in Throughout the book

Members are people, but the author never explains their membership. In his roundabout, stilted style of expression, he refers regularly to members but never identifies the group or groups to which they belong. They could be members of society, of families, or perhaps members of some special organization that has gone unnamed throughout the book. It is quite likely that they are simply members of humanity, or people. Calling them members makes them seem special and a little mysterious, which is certainly true of people.

Thompsonappears in Sleep, God, The House, Weather

Thompson is a supreme leader, who might be God or a human being, or perhaps either one, depending on the context. Thompson also seems to be a power or a quality invested within whoever Thompson is. "Perkins" is a related term that is used to describe the body of Thompson, so that the name "Thompson" does not have to be used. In that context, Thompson sounds like God. Elsewhere in the book, "thompson" with a small "t" is called the supreme leader, which makes him sound like a human being.

Perkinsappears in God, The House

Perkins is the term used to describe the body of Thompson, but he is also defined in the text as the first god of territory, and the head of a "shelter cult." His disciplines forbade sleeping near, in, or on their houses, because they believed the sleeper was the first to be attacked by "the fiend," who fossilized sleepers and ate them.

Johnappears in The House, Persons

John developed the first shirt shelter, or garment hovel. He made these shelters by zipping cloth onto a room or snapping hoods onto windows or dog doors. The narrator refers to John as a "house/garment correlationist." Also, "John" is a term that means to steal.

Monkappears in Persons

Monk is a dog that was the Marcus family pet. He was smashed, and young Ben's father said Monk had to go to the other side of the bird (which is the sky) to get fixed. The boy kept Monk's hair in the bottom of his blanket. He wanted to stitch the hair back on the dog, and did not get to say good-bye to Monk.

Cheeserappears in Humans

Cheeser appears to be a pet, probably a dog, that the narrator had when he was a boy. The narrator's father kept smashing Cheeser, trying to get at something valuable inside him, and instructed the narrator to smash him as well. Cheeser had no hair left, and the boy fed him instead of smashing him, in the belief that because Cheeser was hairless, he would protect the boy.

Albertappears in Sleep, God

Albert is a darkness person, who nightly kills persons of light. He can change positions under different degrees of darkness. Albert eventually was killed by Mark Parker, a so-

called body king, but then a winter Albert arose who Mark Parker had to fight. Mark killed the winter Albert, but Mark also died in the battle.

Objects/Places

Ohioappears in Sleep, The House, Animal, Weather, Persons

Ohio is the author's word for the house, which he admits will never be clearly defined, even when the house is cleaned and shined. The problem with Ohio is that it is more than just a building. It is also a concept, a set of emotions, and a receptacle for memory.

The Age of Wire and Stringappears in Argument, The Society

The Age of Wire and String is a time when English scientists created a method of conversation based on the pattern of flutters that emerges when string and wire are used to cover the mouth during speech.

Western Worship Boxesappears in Sleep

Western Worship Boxes apparently are coffins.

Land Scarfappears in The House

A land scarf is a garment that also can be used as a landmark, for physical protection from the elements, or as means of conveyance. The garment must not be seen, and it must be soft, to avoid damaging the skin.

The Food Map of Yvonneappears in Food

The Food Map of Yvonne is a parchment upon which the location of specialized foods for women can be found. It also is any location where food has been ingested, produced, or discussed, and a scroll made of grains and skins that someone named "the third Yvonne" apparently ate.

The Golden Monicaappears in The House

The Golden Monica is phenomenon in which an intruder ties up the occupants of a house and forces them to watch him commit suicide. Afterward, one family member always manages to escape, goes to the authorities, is accused of the crime, and confesses. The act is called a monica, because people are forced to watch it.

The Call of Walterappears in Persons

The Call of Walter is a sound that issues a compulsory command to those in the so-called animal forces. It induces young men to become animal helpers, joining dogs in battle. Mass armies, raised at little cost through the use of Walter, led to major warfare in the 1980s, and during the next decade, Walter was used to cause mass suicides among on battlefields in America.

Montanaappears in Food, Persons

Montana is apparently the state of Montana in the USA. It is identified as the site where costumes made of rice, taffy, and many other foods were fitted on people over the course of a day. Montana also is a place where young men were summoned by the Call of Walter to join animal forces for battles in the 1980s.

The Universal Storm Calendarappears in Weather

The Universal Storm Calendar is way to influence air that the author says cannot be explained. It also is a system through which past weather can be recorded and future storms predicted. The calendar regulates the spread, locale, and demise of all rain and wind systems.

Carlappears in Food

Carl is artificial food made of fabric, which often disguises the presence of real food.

Farmappears in The Society

The Farm is the first place where grains and liquids were used to regulate behavior. The sun shines upon the farm as people thresh and converse in the high grass.

The Yardappears in The House

The Yard is where wind is buried, houses are talked about, and people settle down.

Themes

Secrets and Mysteries

This theme is fundamental to a book in which almost nothing makes sense from a traditional or conventional standpoint. The author establishes from the start that his objective will be to make a foray into the mysteries of culture, which will be disclosed but not destroyed. In other words, he expects to examine the central mysteries of every culture, but he does not propose to dissect or explode these mysteries, thus destroying them. He wants cultures to look at themselves in a new light, and it is this new light that he is presenting. The author's early statement of intent makes it easier for the reader to accept the descriptions of the world that follow it, in all their strangeness and obscurity. One of his points is that we are hidden even from ourselves, because so much of life is mysterious. Another is that new ways of looking must be devised if we are to see ourselves and our world more clearly, but at the same time, he suggests that these new ways of looking also will hide us more effectively. Again, he is not seeking explication or clarity. He is trying to get at the essence of secrets and mysteries in life, and the essence of them is secretive and mysterious. The book is a catalog of such mysteries, not a compendium of solutions to them. Ultimately, our best response to secrets and mysteries might be to honor and revere them, and certainly not to ignore, misrepresent, trivialize, or even try to explain them. Creating a world that operates on principles quite different from those that one knows is an inventive way to highlight secrets and mysteries of our everyday world which, too often, one is likely to take for granted. When the book is read in this light, what might otherwise seem to be its frustrating strangeness can be accepted as a celebration of life's wonders.

The Power of Family

Even in a book that dispassionately presents most human interactions, the power of the family to change, trouble, and inspire the individual remains an important theme. It also seems as if family influences creep into this book despite the narrator's attempts to remain aloof and "scientific" in his descriptions. He keeps drifting away from examinations of fathers as a group, or houses in general, to his father and his boyhood house. Sifting down through this aloof tone are mists of nostalgia, sadness, guilt, and longing. The narrator drops hints about the absence of his brother until he finally admits that his brother died. Similarly, his mother is given a cursive, rather cliché characterization until the narrator reveals, in almost offhand way, that she, too, died. The narrator's father is a regular presence throughout the book, at first as a kind of patriarchal symbol, but gradually he takes on characteristics that make him not only the most fleshed-out personality in the book, but also the most influential one. The author shows no interest in exploring the relationship between father and son, probably because that would be too conventional in this experimental fiction. Instead, without giving details, constructing dialogue, or even showing interactions, he manages to convey a web of respect, power, guilt, and mystery in which father and son are

enmeshed. In attempting to avoid examination of his family, the narrator focuses intense light on it. The author recognizes that the reluctance of his character to explore his own family is one of the most eloquent statements he could make about the importance of family.

The State of Fiction

Fiction writers are always interested in questions concerning new directions that novels and short stories might be taking, and sometimes, such issues become central to the fiction itself. That is the case with this book, which turns conventional fiction inside out, thereby offering support for the value of experimental writing. In taking the stance that "professional observers" leach the color out of life and repaint it in banal hues of their own making, the author indirectly suggests that fiction writers, who are among those professional observers, need to escape their strait jacket of conformity and portray the world in fresh ways. His book does just that, with such verve and commitment that his theme is inescapable of the dullness (as he apparently sees it) of much contemporary fiction and the need for inventive new writing. This is not merely a professional dispute. Fiction is one of the most important portrayals of our lives that one has, and it can teach us much about ourselves. Fiction, therefore, is central to the culture's self-image. If its techniques and storylines become hackneyed or predictable, the ways that the populace regards itself and its surroundings are likewise in danger of becoming dull and uninspired. Fresh fiction can spawn fresh vision in a culture, which, in turn, can exert many other positive and inventive influences on society. This is clearly an ulterior motive of The Age of Wire and String. In that sense, the book is revolutionary. While not necessarily arguing that the old order must be replaced, it definitely takes the position that the old order must be supplemented with a new one. This is a book about how to regard the world, how to observe it, how to appreciate its mysteries, and the answer to those "hows" is to create groundbreaking fiction. By its very existence, the book argues for new ways of perceiving, and of writing down what is perceived.

Style

Point of View

This book is told from the viewpoint of a narrator, who is explaining aspects of life that he believes are not well-understood by most professional observers, who he thinks take the color and mystery of life and paint it in their own, banal hues. The narrator believes that because looking at a thing alters it, the thing must be trained to look at itself. From a distant, almost distracted point of view, he presents what he calls a catalog of the secret motions of life. He never attempts to enter into the thoughts of any other character, and only in rare instances does he reveal anything of his own emotions. For example, he admits at one point, late in the book, that he loved his brother, and he expresses longing as a child that his injured, pet dog would be mended. In most stories, such sentiments would hardly be revelations, but they are in this book, because the narrator comes very close to a point of view that is entirely dramatic, which is to say he hardly goes into his own thoughts, much less into those of anyone else. By almost totally eliminating characterization in the book, the author also greatly reduces the need to explain how anyone feels or what they think. Even his own character, the narrator, moves through the book almost disembodied and devoid of emotion. The wonder of this technique is that, even with such a distracted point of view, the book remains funny and sad, albeit in a bleak and confusing way. The heart may be well-hidden, but this book is far from heartless.

Setting

This book is not set in a named place, or, more accurately, the only place in which it appears to be set is Ohio, but that does not appear to be the state of Ohio. Instead, Ohio is the narrator's term for "house." Most of the descriptions in the book do not refer to a specific family in a specific house. Instead, the book contains a series of generic observations about people in houses. Sometimes, the author focuses on events within the narrator's own house during his childhood, but the location of this house is never disclosed. Indeed, the rare place names that are given usually are in connection with historical-type information, such as details about wars that took place in Montana and Ohio during the 1980s. In those instances, Ohio does seem to be the actual state, but the author never actually sets any action of the book within a named location. As in the case of other conventional aspects of novels and storytelling, the author has essentially thrown setting out the window. This tactic leads the reader to assume that the writer's goal is to construct a new view of reality by creating fiction that does not rely principally on imitating life as we know it. Without setting, characters have no anchor. Their history is disembodied. In a sense, they float. Plot can exist without setting, but details of setting can add richness and depth to a story, and can even affect the plot itself. None of this matters in Marcus' book, because there is no discernable plot. It does not appear that Marcus eliminated setting because he wanted to diminish the prominence of his characters and plot. Rather, he eliminated setting along with characterizations and plot.

The challenge for him must have been to make the book seem real without these devices, and the determination of whether or not he successfully met that challenge is for each individual reader to make.

Language and Meaning

This book is all about language and meaning. Indeed, it could be argued that because so many conventional aspects of a novel have been stripped away from this book, all that remains is language. The very act of reducing character, plot, dialogue, and psychological motivations to near-nonexistence virtually ensures that the language itself will be hard to understand. Much of the writing in this book seems incomprehensible, especially at first, before the reader begins to notice repetitions of words and themes that give clues to emerging meaning. Even so, what the book means is never entirely clear, which is perhaps understandable in a text that purports to be about the mysteries of life. The author chooses to describe the world and its inhabitants in stilted and strangely constructed language reminiscent of particularly bad techno-jargon. He claims to be cataloguing the culture, and he sometimes leaves out articles such as "the" and "a," in the abbreviated way of certain technical or business prose. He also creates neologisms, such as "gevorts" and "pooter," inserting them in sentences without explanation, as if they were common words. Other terms sound real, but are not, such as "gesturation" and "dispensement." He gives people's names to events or phenomena, such as "Carl" for artificial food or "Jennifer" for blindness. These devices, however, are minor compared to the description of the functioning of Nature, people, and the human-built world that he provides, which is so utterly different from the everyday world that it seems like another place. His language is often impossible to follow, just as the ravings of a psychotic person make no sense to the lay listener. To a psychiatrist, some of what a crazy person says might be intelligible, and in the same way, some of what Marcus writes in this book begins to attain a kind of logic as the reader proceeds. The core of the book subsists in this struggle by the reader to grasp the meaning of the writer's language. Whatever the individual reader can bring away from the experience is the truest measure of the book's success for that audience of one.

Structure

The book is divided into eight major sections, each of which is given a title. These eight sections are preceded by a shorter section titled "Argument," in which the author sets out his reasons for writing the book. The titles of the eight main sections are: Sleep, God, Food, The House, Animal, Weather, Persons, and The Society. There are no chapter numbers in the sections, but each is subdivided into a half-dozen parts that also have titles. The last part of each section is titled, "Terms," and in each case, it consists of a list of terms and their definitions. Some of the terms have appeared elsewhere in the book and others have not. This structure suits the author's stated intention of creating a catalogue of the culture. His sections canvass major aspects of the culture. There appear to be notable omissions, among them health, science, the arts, and

language, but the author insists that the topics he has chosen represent the most important one in any culture worldwide. In any case, the strangeness of the writing quickly makes irrelevant the question of whether his choice of categories is comprehensive. Actually, the book's structure is the most straightforward and unremarkable thing about it. Virtually every other aspect of the book is completely odd, but the progression of argument through the eight chosen topics and the use of conventional typography seem to be almost a concession by the author to normalcy. Perhaps a structure that made no sense in such a determinedly experimental book would be asking too much of the reader.

Quotes

"This book is a catalog of the life project as prosecuted in the Age of Wire and String and beyond, into the arrangements of states, sites, and cities and, further, within the small houses that have been granted erection or temporary placement on the perimeters of districts and river colonies."
Argument, p. 3

"Snoring, language disturbance caused by accidental sleeping, in which a person speaks in compressed syllables and bulleted syntax, often stacking several words over one another in a distemporal deliverance of a sentence."
Sleep, p. 8

"Landing on floating island of the gods without invitation, form of deafness exemplified by reckless flying."
God, p. 22

"In the morning in Montana the leg was bound from the ankle to the knee with bacon or hair and then cross-gartered with thongs or strips of uncut rice; later a slack taffy, bound at the ankle, was worn."
Food, p. 31

"Women's food, although hidden until midnight by their skirts, has always been an important part of their costume."
Food, p. 32

"Gevortsing has subsequently become known as any act, intention, or technique that uses negative house imagery during the dream experience as a device to instruct inhabitants to sleep-kill or otherwise destroy themselves, their walls, windows, doors, or roofs upon waking, until a chosen version of the culture has been sufficiently driven from their home."
The House, p. 51

"Experts believe that our bodies grow heavier after being noticed, lighter when touched, and remain the same when left alone."
The House, pp. 55-56

"As the messages accumulate, denied entry by the sealed, concentrated head of the pedestrian, low-frequency bird speech rises to the fore and nags at the walker with squawks, chirps, and peeps until its knees buckle under the weight of unheeded instructions."
Animal, p. 71

"A woman begged to be put to death, wrote her request on a piece of cloth for a child to consider."
Weather, p. 84

"Current meters such as the burnable girl (equipped with help message) are calibrated in reference to a drowning balance that actually measures the speed of a river in which X amount of girls have burned while conducting religious transmissions along a wire."
Weather, p. 89

"In this house, the dogs don't look at me, which means I am alive."
Persons, p. 109

"When the rest of the society emerged after the sun's noise subsided, those who had remained could not discern forms, folded in agony when touched, and stayed mainly submerged to the eyes in water."
The Society, p. 137

Topics for Discussion

The writing in this book often seems to make no sense at all. Why do you think the author would risk writing a book so hard to understand that readers might not even finish it? What does he hope to accomplish with such a dangerous approach?

The world described in the book bears little resemblance to the Earth we know. What is happening? Are we on a different plane of experience, is the narrator insane, or is there some other reason that very little in this book is the way we perceive it with out everyday senses?

How would characterize the tone and substance of this book? Do you think it is sad, or funny, or stupid, or intelligent? What emotions do you think are at the core of it, if any?

What do you think happened to the narrator's brother, Jason Marcus, and to their mother? Do you think their fates were related in some way, or not? Why do you think the author does not give us details of what happened?

The narrator's relationship to his father seems to be complex and unclear. Based on the clues in the book, what is your impression of how the feel about and interact with each other?

What is the point of the weird explanations in the book about how Nature works? For example, dogs eat the weather, and birds create ocean currents by flapping their wings. What is the author trying to accomplish with such descriptions?

If you decided to write a highly experimental novel, what lessons or ideas could you take away from this book concerning how to go about making your novel completely original?