

# The Floating Opera Short Guide

## The Floating Opera by John Barth

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# Characters

Although Todd Andrews, the firstperson narrator and protagonist of *The Floating Opera*, is fifty-four years old in 1954, when the novel takes place, the narrative relates the events leading up to his fateful decision on June 21 or 22, 1937. Todd lives with the possibility that he may die at any moment from a chronic heart condition, first diagnosed when he was released from the army at the end of World War I. The unpredictable nature of his existence prompts Todd to recognize his inability to order and control his own experience, but this alone does not lead to his attempted suicide. As a result of his conviction that sexuality is simply hilarious and his experience of killing a German soldier who had befriended him during World War I, Todd becomes convinced that there is no rational basis for human values and actions. In his opinion, humans are merely animals, and there is no justification for action. Any line of questioning, he argues, maintained long enough eventually ends in an unanswerable question revealing that there is no ultimate reason for people's opinions and values.

Despite these assertions of indeterminacy, Todd persists in attempting to impose a rational order on his own existence and to find a logical basis for any single human action. This latter endeavor is represented by his Inquiry into the causes of his father's own suicide, the result of his financial ruin in the stock market crash of 1929. In the same spirit, he breaks habits as a matter of principle and maintains others for their sheer absurdity. Todd also adopts a series of masks to govern his own life, but when his apparently final mask, cynicism, collapses, his awareness of the absence of any ultimate rational justification for moral actions and values presses in on him, and he decides to commit suicide.

Todd's original plan is to blow up a visiting showboat, Captain Adam's Original and Unparalleled Floating Opera, with its entire cast and audience aboard. Ironically, it is only through a rigorous application of his philosophical insight that Todd is able subsequently to reject suicide. He does not immediately reject it, however; his attempt is thwarted for reasons he never discovers, but he marks this failed attempt as a provisional turning point. After this event, Todd suggests that in the absence of absolutes of any kind, relative values might be lived by, and the novel closes with this tentative assertion.



## Social Concerns

In his 1987 introduction to the Anchor Literary Library edition of his early novels, Barth remarks that his first novel, *The Floating Opera*, reflects the influence of French existentialist thought in post-World War II America.

Most conspicuous in Barth's assimilation of existentialism is the notion of the world's absurdity. Barth describes this as the ultimately arbitrary nature of existence and the accompanying recognition that this absurd existence is the basis of human experience.

In Barth's first published novel, his protagonist, Todd Andrews, is able to avoid suicide in part by his own incompetence; however, his subsequent rationalized rejection of suicide is more significant. Reasoning that nothing has intrinsic value, Todd concludes that all decisions based upon value judgments are ultimately matters of opinion, including the decision to take his own life. Each of Barth's subsequent protagonists confronts this dilemma in some form. While his novels are often ribald and extravagantly humorous, Barth finally endorses what he describes as a "tragic view" in his work. This view is based on the conviction that existence's ultimate boundary is fragmentation and death; it also entails an acknowledgement of the absence of any final answers to the questions that Barth poses, together with a refusal to give in to resignation in the face of uncertainty.

## Techniques/Literary Precedents

The Floating Opera reflects two notable influences: Albert Camus and Machado de Assis. Barth's preoccupation with suicide reflects the influential intellectual climate that inspired Camus's speculations on the same subject. His protagonist — self-conscious and somewhat unreliable — participates in a narrative tradition that stretches back to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767). For example, the chapter entitled "Calliope Music" begins with two columns of print placed side by side on the page.

The left column comments upon the absurd law case that Todd is currently considering, while the right column reveals a rational justification for suicide. Though Todd excuses his device as a symptom of authorial ineptitude, this typographical arrangement demonstrates that when all of the facts relevant to an experience are considered, no single account can be seen as definitive. Barth's immediate source for these narrative devices is to be found in the work of the Brazilian novelist, Machado de Assis, who wrote a series of highly self-conscious novels at the turn of the century. Of particular interest are his *Dom Casmurro* (1900) and *Epitaph of a Small Winner*.

# Key Questions

1. Is Todd Andrews's decision to kill essentially everyone in the town a believable one, or does it seem contrived by the author to make a point?

Would readers find a more compassionate decision more consistent with Todd's character?

2. If Todd's father had not committed suicide, is it likely that Todd would have developed a more positive view of life?

3. Do the attitudes expressed about sex in this novel have anything to do with love?

4. How are we to take the suicide attempt of Mr. Haecker at the end of the story? Is it a surprise? What is the dramatic function of such an act at the end of a novel in which a carefully planned mass murder has just been averted?

5. Can one argue that *The Floating Opera* would be more meaningful or more enjoyable if Todd Andrews commented less often on how he is telling the story and simply told it?

## Related Titles

The formal ingenuity in *The Floating Opera* and its mixture of bawdiness, low comedy, and intellectual seriousness are typical of Barth's novels. Although less extravagant than his subsequent fiction, and less involved technically than *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), *The Floating Opera* is essential to an understanding of Barth's development, and it is perhaps the most concise presentation of the ideas that form the dramatic and formal motivation for much of his work. Barth's 1979 novel, *LETTERS*, returns to the characters in *The Floating Opera*, and some of the events in the later narrative serve as sequels to episodes that Todd describes in Barth's first published novel.



# Copyright Information

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