In Babylon Study Guide

In Babylon by Marcel Moring

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Paul Binding, in his review of *In Babylon* for the *Times Literary Supplement*, calls Marcel Möring □one of the most important Dutch writers of his generation.□ After the publication of *In Babylon* and its eventual translation into seven languages, readers all over the world were able to confirm Binding's assessment.

In Babylon focuses on sixty-year-old Nathan Hollander during the four days he spends with his niece in the family's old hunting lodge in a forest outside Rotterdam, Holland, cut off from the world by a raging blizzard. As the two struggle to stay warm, Nathan tells Nina the story of their family, tracing it back four hundred years to his great-great-grand-uncle Chaim Levi and up through the recent death of their uncle Herman, who collapsed after having sex with a prostitute. Nathan's story is occasionally interrupted by strange voices, booby trapped doors, and ghostly visits from family ancestors.

The two come to believe that the house may be haunted by the ghost of Nathan's brother Zeno, who is also Nina's father. By the end of the four days, Nathan and Nina question their connection to their family as well as their knowledge of themselves. As Möring expertly interweaves ghost stories, fairy tales, myths, and family history, he explores the tensions between past and present, fantasy and reality, and the compelling need to discover a clear sense of self and place.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Dutch

Birthdate: 1957

Marcel Möring was born in 1957 in Enschede, Holland, near the Dutch-German border to a Dutch Reformed father and a Jewish mother. A decade later, the family moved north to Assen, Holland. While still a child, Marcel received a Bible from his father and thus began the author's lifelong interest in religion. Möring decided against going to college, having concluded early on that he only wanted to be a writer. He noted in an interview with HarperCollins, □I decided to become a writer when I was thirteen. . . . I had written a poem . . . and whilst reading it the next day, thought: I like this, I want to do this the rest of my life.□

In the 1980s, Möring worked as a correspondent for local newspapers, and in the 1990s, he had several reviews and essays published by Dutch, German, and American journals and magazines, including *Esquire*. Möring also wrote several plays that were produced in Holland. His novels, however, brought him to the attention of the literary world. In 1990, his first novel, *Mendels Erfenis*, was published in Holland and became a critical and popular success. His second novel, *Het Grote Verlangen* (The Great Longing) appeared in 1993 and was eventually published in over ten countries and won the AKO Prize, the Dutch equivalent of the Booker Prize. *In Babylon* (1997), his third novel, won two Golden Owl awards the year after it appeared in print. Due to the great success of his novels, Möring is considered to be one of the most important twentieth-century Dutch writers.

Plot Summary

Part One

Nathan Hollander, the first-person narrator of *In Babylon*, begins his story with his memory of finding his uncle Herman dead in a hotel in Rotterdam, Holland, after the uncle had sex with a young prostitute. Nathan observes that Herman would most likely □have enjoyed dying that way.□ This incident prompted Nathan to think about his past and his future, acknowledging that he feels □old and worn,□ and to see himself as □an eyewitness, a stowaway in time.□

The scene shifts to the present, Herman's hunting lodge in Holland in 1995 outside Rotterdam, where sixty-year-old Nathan and Nina, his niece, are snowed in. Nina has been successfully working as Nathan's European agent for the fairy tales Nathan has written. She had given him a ride to the lodge, but the car got stuck in the snow, and she could not leave. To pass the time, Nina reads the biography Nathan has written about Herman, enhanced by additional stories that Nathan tells her about their family, whom Nina considers □a bunch of loonies.□ They discover the cellar is fully stocked with food and wonder who put it all there, along with the barricade formed at the top of the stairs out of the house's furniture, including a piano, hanging precariously above them. Nina half seriously declares the house to be haunted. To keep warm, they chop and burn pieces of the barricade.

Nathan admits that his uncle gave him the lodge under the condition that Nathan would write Herman's biography. During the drive there, Nathan thinks he sees the ghosts of his relatives: Uncle Chaim, Magnus, Herman, Manny, and Zeno. He remembers a happy time five years earlier when the family was together at the lodge, the day that Herman announced that he was giving it up, and they all celebrated Zoe's engagement.

Back in the present, Nina is getting spooked by the house and so leaves without telling Nathan. When he goes out to look for her, he sees a little man running in the snow. Freezing and unable to find her, he returns to the lodge where he chops up pieces of the barricade and throws them on the fire. A few hours later, he hears Nina banging on the front door. After she stumbles in, half frozen, Nathan takes off her wet clothes in an effort to warm her, but the act becomes charged with sexual tension. Nina explains that she drove the car into a snow bank and had to walk back to the lodge.

Later, they hear a faint rustling noise, and then a lantern crashes down the stairs. They hear □a voice from the depths of something dark and far away.□ They soon realize that what they are hearing is a tape recording. Nina is convinced that it is Zeno's voice on the tape. In an effort to distract her fears, Nina asks Nathan about the biography.

Nathan tells the story in pieces. It begins in the seventeenth century with his great-great-grand-uncle Chaim Levi, who lived from 1603 to 1648 on the border of Poland and Lithuania. He and his nephew Magnus, both clockmakers, are Nathan's most distant

ancestors. After Chaim died, Magnus roamed over Europe for twenty-one years until he settled in Holland. Generations later, Nathan's father Manny and his uncle Herman moved Nathan, his mother, two sisters, and a brother to the United States.

Nathan insists that he has been visited frequently over the years by the ghosts of Chaim and Magnus who help fill in the history of the family. The first time they appeared was when he was ten and living with his family in New Mexico where he witnessed the first test explosion of the atom bomb.

Nathan continues the story with more specific details of Chaim's and Magnus's lives. Chaim invented the pendulum clock and was devastated when a group of marauding Cossacks during the Chmielnitzki Massacres of 1648 killed his wife. The Cossacks murdered over one hundred thousand Jews during this period. The same year, after Chaim died and the Cossacks burned down his house, Magnus began his European wanderings. He decided to stay in Holland, known as the Lowlands, because he found a contented community that welcomed him, including a young woman with whom he fell in love and soon married. Magnus and his bride moved to Rotterdam on the west coast of Holland where he changed his name from Levi to Hollander in honor of his new home. Eight generations of Hollanders were born there. The next two generations left before the outbreak of World War II.

Nathan's parents met in a Rotterdam park in 1929. Manny instantly fell in love with Sophie, but Uncle Herman □felt the earth move under his feet□ when he met her. His arrogance, however, clashed with her sense of independence, and she married Manny because she respected his passion for creation. A year later, Nathan's sister Zoe was born followed in quick succession by Zelda and Nathan, and nine years later by Zeno.

In the early years of their marriage, Manny worked as a mechanical engineer for a crane factory and had little time for inventing things, and Sophie was worn out with domestic duties. In 1938, their lives were complicated by the growing tension in Europe over German aggression. After Germany invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939, Uncle Herman determined that they were not safe in Holland and should immigrate to the United States. When Nathan's grandparents refused to go, Herman tried to convince Manny that as Jews, they were not safe anywhere in Europe. A visit from German refugees convinced them to go, and the clan continued its journey west.

On the trip to the United States, five-year-old Nathan fell in love with Reisele Minsky, a girl on the same ship. While they were crossing the ocean, Germany invaded Poland, which changed the relaxed atmosphere on board. Soon after they arrived in the United States, Manny ran into Enrico Fermi, a famous physicist and a close friend of Nathan's grandparents, at Columbia University. Fermi set Manny up with a job as an instrument maker.

One night in 1943, Manny came home and announced to his family that they were moving to Los Alamos, New Mexico, to work on secret government business. This business turned out to be the Manhattan Project, which involved the development of the

atomic bomb. Back in the present, Zeno's ghost appears to Nathan, but he does not welcome it as he does Chaim and Magnus. Nathan insists that Zeno is merely a dream.

Part Two

On the second day at the lodge, Nathan and Nina are frightened by what they think is an apparition peering out from a cupboard, but it turns out to be a portrait that someone had hung there apparently to frighten them.

Later, Nathan's story continues with the separation of his parents in 1948. The family had returned to New York from Los Alamos the year before. Over the years, Manny and the children had adapted to and embraced American culture, but Sophie hated it, □the bigness, the muchness, the filled to burstingness . . . the absence of discretion.□ She had also been frustrated by the never-ending tasks of motherhood, leaving her no time to paint, which had become her obsession. Nathan notes that Manny had already left the marriage in spirit, not knowing what to do to make Sophie happy.

Seeing no way out of her predicament, Sophie convinced Manny to return to Holland. A year later, he came back to New York alone where he made a fortune with his mattress invention. The couple's separation and subsequent divorce started Nathan on his writing career. He wrote long, detailed letters to his father, whom he would see only once a year, in an effort to tell him □everything . . . he needed to know□ so that he would come back to them. Nathan claims that the correspondence turned him into □the family's emotional switchboard□ as everyone wanted to know what was in the letters. Unfortunately, Manny's only responses to his son's letters were postcards with a terse □*Regards, Papa,*□ written on them. Nathan could not understand his father's apparent lack of interest in the family.

A year later, Nathan received a long letter from Uncle Herman, who was living with Manny in New York. The letter began a correspondence that would last until Herman's death, and it motivated Nathan to continue to write. That first letter also inspired five-year-old Zeno to speak for the first time. Looking over Nathan's shoulder, Zeno began to read the letter. No one knew he could talk, much less read.

Zeno's childhood was relatively ordinary, although he was reticent. When he was ten, he had some sort of spell and spent the next year in bed. He later explained the cause of his spell as his acknowledgement of his own mortality. For the first few weeks he slept for most of the time, but after that, he began to read everything he could get his hands on. His personality changed after that year from being a quiet child to being an annoying know-it-all who devoured books and newspapers and never seemed to forget what he read.

Initially, Nathan was his teacher, but Zeno soon surpassed him intellectually. Zeno developed an extensive library bought by money he earned washing cars and finding and selling rare books. He soon began to supplement his income by working as a magician's assistant. His penchant for theatrics caused him to steal the show one night

when he made his brother and sister disappear. Foreshadowing Zeno's future as a cult leader, Nathan noted after the performance, □Zeno would make a good prophet of doom.□

Years later in 1965, Zeno became the □silent prophet□ of a group of fifty young people that eventually grew to several hundred. He soon became famous; newspaper articles and scholarly articles were written about him, and he gave speeches on religion and contemporary youth. Zelda became his champion and protector, while Nathan blamed her for encouraging what he considered to be Zeno's □madness.□

As his status grew, he became the leader of a cult of those searching for truth. The political left embraced him while the right condemned him, and his relationship with his family, except Zelda, grew more strained and distant. Zeno disappeared in 1968 and was never heard from again.

Back in the present, Nathan explains how much he loves the lodge because in the past he spent happy times there with his family. This visit was his first in five years. He notes that he spent his life traveling and that the lodge has been his only real home. He wants to die there.

He thinks about an argument that he had with Herman when the two went on a trip to Israel, focusing on Nathan's refusal to consider the country his homeland as Herman did. As the two discussed the remaining family members, Herman noted that no one was sure Zeno was Nina's father and therefore that she was a Hollander. After she was born, Sophie grew tired of the speculation and decided that they should all accept her as part of the family regardless of whether they had any proof. During a conversation on the day that he died, Herman warned Nathan about the loneliness he would experience if he continued to refuse to allow anyone to get close to him.

Nina tells Nathan that in the past, she did not want to be a part of the family, but now she does because she wants to understand her history. Nathan explains that he has a photographic memory for events and so is qualified to record the family's history. Later, she asks him to read one of his fairy tales called □The Tower□ about the Tower of Babel, a biblical story about a group of proud people who build a tower to reach heaven, but their efforts are confounded by divine interference, which causes them to speak in different, mutually unintelligible languages. The moral of the tale is that □when men have no common goal and no longer speak the same language, the foundations will crumble.□

Nathan insists that it is time for Nina to □make peace□ with Zeno, but she resists, arguing, □How . . . can I make peace with someone . . . who would have nothing to do with me?□ Nathan insists that since he has told her details about the family and about himself, she must tell him about herself, □quid pro quo,□ but Nina does not respond.

When they go upstairs to try to gain access to Nathan's bedroom, they find that the door is locked and that a cabinet has been nailed to it. Nathan wrenches the cabinet free enough for them to slip into the room where they see what they initially believe is a man

nailed to the wall. When they calm down, they realize that it is a dummy dressed in Nathan's clothes with a face that resembles his. They both assume that Zeno put it there, which makes Nina furious and determined to leave and makes Nathan cry. She tells Nathan, □I hope he burns in Hell.□ But he insists: □Don't hate him. Don't fall into his trap.□ He silently determines not to let Zeno's tricks get to him and vows to protect Nina. He does acknowledge, though, that the experience has changed him from a man who could never settle down to one who longs for a home, marriage, and peace.

Later, Nathan tells Nina about his first wife, Molly, an American who sang in the chorus in London musicals. He left her less than a year after they were married when he became afraid that he was losing himself in the relationship. As Nina sleeps, Nathan thinks of a trip he took to Frankfurt, Germany, with Herman. There he learned that Herman had been to Bergen-Belsen, a World War II Nazi concentration camp, after the war as a researcher and had seen there evidence of the Holocaust. He came back later to Germany to help the Germans face their guilt.

He then thinks about his second wife, Eve, an English travel agent, admitting, □with Eve, I came very close to finding the peace that I had been searching for all my life.□ Yet, he had soon grown cold and withdrawn.

Part Three and Part Four

The next morning, Nina seduces Nathan. Afterwards, she asks Nathan to tell her another fairy tale. This one, which is unnamed, is about a boy named Berg whose father, a forester, had disappeared. Block, the new forester, was cruel to Berg and his mother until Berg stood up to him. The next morning Berg's father reappeared. After he finishes the story, Nina tells him that she is going to marry him over his protestations that he is too old for her.

Later that day, they decide to search another bedroom, but the door is blocked from within. As Nathan kicks it open, a sandbag slams into him knocking him out. While he is unconscious, he envisions that Magnus comes to him and tells him a parable of a man who was searching for order and learned how to accept chaos. At the end of the story, the man becomes Nathan. When Nathan awakens, Nina rails against Zeno whom she blames for all of the booby traps in the house. Nathan admits to himself that he loves her and would spend his life with her □if it weren't so wrong.□

The narrative shifts to the night Herman died. Nathan took the prostitute, Rolinda, home and stayed with her for a while to help calm her. He agreed to meet her the next night when they went to the stable where she kept her horse. As they talked, Rolinda noted similarities between Nathan and Herman, providing the first clue that the two may be father and son. After a frustrating night trying to capture Rolinda's horse, Nathan left before she got a chance to tell him something. Nina was waiting for him when he got back to the hotel. She asked him questions about the family's medical history that caused Nathan to think about the similarities between him and Herman and to conclude that Herman is his father.

While Nathan daydreams about his past, Nina disappears. After Chaim and Magnus appear, the latter tells about how he became a follower of Shabbetai Zevi, who declared himself the messiah approximately twenty years after the Chmielnitzki Massacres and engaged in sexual adventures with the woman who would become his bride. As Magnus finishes his story, Chaim begins to fade until he disappears, insisting that he has told everything.

Nathan admits to Magnus that he feels like the American legendary Rip Van Winkle who woke up after a twenty-year nap and found the world a changed place. Then he suddenly determines that the person who set all of the traps must be up in the attic.

Part Five

The last chapter mixes fragments of the future, when Nathan lies dying in an Israeli hospital, with the present, when he has a final confrontation with Nina, and the past stories about the family. In the hospital, he confuses the nurse with Reisel, the girl he fell in love with on the ship to the United States. In the present, Nathan appears to find Nina half frozen in the attic. However, this may be a dream, since when he continues the story, it is he who almost freezes in the attic.

Nina nurses him back to health in the present at her house in Amsterdam. Nathan accuses her of setting the traps in the lodge, insisting that it could not have been Zeno because even if he were alive, he did not hate Nathan. When she denies it, he wonders if he imagined seeing her in the attic.

Nathan asks her if she thinks that he drove Zeno away and insists that he is dead, which makes Nina fly into a rage and attack him. When he pushes her away, she hits her head and is knocked unconscious. The novel ends as he leaves Amsterdam, noting that he does not have any answers to the questions that he has raised about his family.

Characters

Eve Hollander

Eve Hollander, Nathan's second wife, was an English travel agent. She had more influence on Nathan than Molly did. Her positive nature eventually prompted Nathan to alter his pessimistic attitude, at least for a while. He admits, "with Eve, I came very close to finding the peace that I had been searching for all my life." Her patience and determination eventually caused him to see through her eyes and discover that "the world was worth seeing." Ultimately, though, this marriage fell apart as Eve recognized that Nathan did not "want to be known."

Herman Hollander

Nathan's uncle, Herman Hollander, became a famous sociologist after the family immigrated to the United States. His death after having sex with a prostitute, which is the first incident of the novel, conjures an image to Nathan of "a warrior fallen in battle and laid in state . . . on this disheveled altar." He was a short man yet sometimes "gave the impression of being twice his size." Nathan insists that he was a demagogue, always giving a lecture, and had "a severe case of megalomania," as, Nathan claims, all socialists do since Herman assumed "he [knew] what's best for the world."

His arrogance and inability to listen to another's point of view, coupled with his pessimistic view of mankind, made him clash with Sophie, the woman he never stopped loving. As a result, Sophie married Manny instead of Herman. Yet, in his later years when he became "an ageing Casanova," he softened his views on the world and so could be "finally at peace in the company of the woman [Sophie] with whom he would spend his last years." His pessimistic view of human nature did have a positive effect on the family when he recognized the Nazi threat early enough to convince them to leave Holland for the United States.

He retained his need for control to the end of his life as evident in his declaration that he would give the lodge to Nathan only under the condition that the latter write a biography about him. Although he was one of the first in the family to take Nathan's profession seriously, he hoped that the biography would steer his nephew in another direction.

Herman did not appreciate Nathan's fairy tales because he "didn't like obscurity. He had worked all his life towards the clarification of things that were uncommonly vague and in the wake of that pursuit he regarded every form of art . . . as an ideal way of gaining insight." Herman wanted to deal only with facts, dissecting and analyzing information until he understood it completely.

Magnus Hollander

Magnus Hollander, Chaim's nephew, visits Nathan along with Chaim to tell Nathan about the past as well as occasionally offer his advice for the present. Like his uncle, he becomes a figurehead in the sense that he was a wanderer, the Hollander family's second dominant trait. Nathan sees him as an iconic □Wandering Jew,□ traveling for twenty-one years before reaching the Lowlands in Holland. Nathan projects his own restlessness onto Magnus when he describes him as always □roaming, searching,□ displaying a □continual uncertainty about where he was and when.□

Manny Hollander

Manny, born Emmanuel, is Nathan's father. Manny □didn't have much of a knack for social intercourse,□ especially since he was often lost in his own □musings about new, smaller, better machines,□ which eventually made him quite successful. What attracted Sophie to him was his □passion of creation.□ She respected his ability to □start out with nothing and to make something out of it.□ Yet this passion pulled him away from his family. He had chosen Sophie because she was independent and so □thought she would leave him in peace, just as he would her.□ He became estranged from his children after Sophie took them back to Holland, which was exacerbated by his inability to communicate with them.

Molly Hollander

Molly Hollander, Nathan's first wife, was born in Brooklyn. She was twenty-three when he met and soon after married her. She serves, like his second wife, Eve, to highlight aspects of Nathan's character, especially his inability to allow someone to get close to him. He leaves her abruptly one day, which devastates her.

Nathan Hollander

Nathan Hollander, referred to as □Nuncle□ by Nina and □N□ by the rest of the family, considers himself to be a respectable man who follows the rules. He admits to Nina that he never indulged in the hedonistic behaviors of the 1960s and so is shocked when she seduces him. Herman refers to him as a □Calvinistic bastard□ because of his strong work ethic. Nathan reveals his sentimental nature in his ambition to freeze his good memories of the family at the lodge by detailing them in the family history.

Nathan is a loner who has never established a sense of place for himself. As a result, he has become a wanderer, moving from place to place, living in hotels. At this point in his life, he regrets this status and longs for a home and for a sense of connection to his family. Nina explains his solitary life when she insists, □you've lived the life of a fugitive. When the going gets tough, you run away.□ His second wife, Eve, clarified the motive for this tendency when, after he insisted that he loved her, she replied, □for love you

need submission, and that's something you know nothing about.□ His inability to love someone completely and to constantly be in control of his emotions has ruined his two marriages and left him alone. By the end of the novel, he still has not found a clear understanding of himself or his place in his family, but he accepts the little knowledge that he has gained.

Nina Hollander

Nina Hollander, Nathan's niece, is an attractive, intelligent young woman who is stranded with her uncle for four days in the lodge. Nathan thinks that he has a clear understanding of her, but his judgment gets clouded by her actions at the end of the novel. Initially, she appears to be self-sufficient and confident, which becomes evident when she seduces him, although she is spooked by the strange occurrences in the lodge. Nathan finds her □rebellious and sharp, a combination of Zeno's agile mind, Zoe's sense of beauty, and Zelda's seriousness.□ She also appears to be bitter about her father, which has caused her to be estranged from the family.

Nathan is unable to explain her behavior at the end of their stay in the lodge when she suddenly, with no warning, disappears. Her feelings toward Zeno become hazy after she attacks Nathan during a conversation about who might have booby trapped the lodge. Her incomplete characterization reflects Nathan's lack of knowledge about the motives of any of the women that he knows.

Sophie Hollander

Sophie Hollander, Nathan's mother, was a woman with a strong independent streak □who had life figured out long before life understood her.□ She was certain of her convictions, declaring herself a socialist from a young age. Sophie soon □learned to dispense with bourgeois formalities□ and had such □a directness that made most people blush.□ She chose Manny because he □could appreciate her independence and willfulness.□

Sophie was committed to socialism □because she couldn't see how the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac was making the world any better,□ and so it became her religion. As set in her convictions as Herman was in his, she became critical of traditional Judaism, claiming that God was □not doing his job.□ She was as passionate about socialism as Zelda was about Zeno's prophesies. Like her daughter, Sophie was also idealistic in the sense that she hoped the practice of socialism would make the world a better place.

Zelda Hollander

Zelda Hollander, Nathan's sister, gave her fervent support to Zeno and his prophetic visions. She never married, devoting herself solely to her brother and his mission.

Nathan notes her monomaniacal devotion to her brother when he claims, □Zelda's great tragedy was that she had been born a nun in a Jewish family.□

Zeno Hollander

Zeno Hollander, Nathan's brother and New Age prophet, disappeared thirty years earlier. In the HarperCollins interview, Möring claims, □I was fascinated by Zeno's darkness, the way he allowed himself to submerge in his own myth, his barely hidden self-hate.□ Until the age of five, he seemed to be an ordinary child, but at ten he begins to change to the extent that Nathan claims, □he was living in a totally different world than the rest of us.□ Zeno showed his extreme sensitivity at this age when he recognized his own mortality and believed that happiness was unobtainable.

Zeno appears calculating as he engineers his emergence as a cult leader, testing out ideas on Nathan to □find out how far and how fast he could go.□ He used his sister □as his mouth and eyes and ears,□ letting her think that she was guiding him. It is not clear whether he turns vindictive toward Nathan, since the latter never discovers who booby trapped the lodge.

Chaim Levi

Chaim Levi, Nathan's great-great-grand-uncle, is the first ancestor to be chronicled in the family history. Born in 1603 in the area that in the early 2000s borders Poland and Lithuania, Chaim □died of woe□ forty-five years after his wife was brutally killed by invading Cossacks. He, along with his nephew Magnus, has been visiting Nathan for fifty years, relating his memories of the past, in which he continues to live. Nathan provides few other details about his personality, employing Chaim more as a figurehead, the initial clockmaker who began the family's interest in time.

Rolinda

Rolinda, a young prostitute, inadvertently causes Herman's death during sexual intercourse with him. Her inexperience and youth are revealed in her response to his death as she talks Nathan into coming home with her. She is persuasive with him, perhaps because she is quite attractive and also because she insists that she wants to tell him something, most likely that Herman is his real father.

Themes

Time and Regret

The Hollanders have been associated with time since Chaim Levi began making clocks and passed on his skills to his descendants. Nathan continues that association when he tries to condense time in a history of the family. Möring, in his interview for HarperCollins online, explains the connection between time and regret, noting, □sometimes I have the feeling that life is all about time and us trying to get a hold on it. And we always fail. In the end time defeats us.□ Nathan expresses the same sentiment when he tells Nina, □just before your time runs out you realize that you should have been better prepared, that you could have made more out of it if only you'd started sooner and now it's too late.□ The regret that Nathan feels at his age prompts him to try and find a stronger connection between himself and his family, including Nina, with whom he hopes, at one point, to establish a sense of home.

Zeno had recognized the destructive consequences of regret, insisting that one feels it only □when it's too late.□ To him, regret □is mourning for the irreversibility of things,□ like the damage that has been done to his relationship with his family. Nathan notes the sense of regret and of irreversibility for all in his family. He recalls Herman claiming, □If I hadn't been such an arrogant know-it-all, who had to blurt out everything that popped into his mind, I'd have won□ Sophie. Zelda insists that if only she had taken care of Zeno better, he would not have disappeared. The point seems to be that after time passes one begins to reflect and evaluate ones earlier choices, an assessment which is necessarily after the fact and ineffectual because what has been done is done.

Religion and the Search for Meaning

Religion had an impact on Nathan on board the ship that took him and his family to the United States as they were escaping the Nazi occupation in Europe. As he listened to a playmate's father telling tales from the Talmud and Midrash, holy Jewish books, he claimed □a whole new world opened up for me.□ As a result, he notes, □a stowaway began growing inside me and he looked like a hunched Talmud and Torah Jew.□ While he remembered the stories he discovered in these books, they gave him little comfort in his search for his place in the world. As an adult, he determined that there was no God. He also rejected Israel as his homeland, in the face of great protest by Herman, feeling no connection to the nation until the end of his life, when, finding solace no where else, he decided to live out his last days among people he could regard as family.

Other members of the family created their own religions. Sophie's socialism became hers as she determined that only this system could save the world. Zeno reinvented himself as a New Age prophet, insisting that he gave his followers insight into themselves and the world. Nathan, however, found his claim to be a lie and argues that Zeno □merely guided their uncertainty and discontent towards the path of

discipledom.□ He considers his brother's prophecies to be a □dangerous combination of sixties optimism, a passion for mysticism and blind faith in one's own morality.□ Nathan's claims appear to be justified when, soon after Zeno's disappearance, three people commit suicide. A note found on one of the bodies read, □We have found eternal silence,□ which was the ultimate goal of Zeno's followers. Zeno's devotion to his role as cult leader causes a split between him and Nathan that is never healed. All of the characters fail to find fulfillment in their pursuit of religion; in fact, it often causes them to be isolated from others, especially family members. Möring suggests that no matter how complex and often painful family connections can be, they can provide more sense of belonging and peace, if only for brief moments.

Style

Setting

Möring handles setting details symbolically in an effort to create a supernatural atmosphere in this ghost story. As Nathan and Nina approach, the □house looked like the head of a giant,□ sitting □on top of a densely wooded hill in the middle of the countryside, a hill straight out of some dark fairy tale.□ While Nathan tells her the story of their family, weaving in fairy tales and ghost stories, he claims, □Around us the darkness bowed over the glow of the flames and it was as if we were sitting in a cave: the storyteller and the last member of his tribe, waiting until the fire, and finally they, too, turned to ashes.□ In this way, Nathan links the ghost stories of the past to the one they are living in the present.

The sense of danger the two feel in the house is heightened by Möring's use of personification as the blizzard rages: □the horizonless white world was forming outside,□ as □the blizzard snarled and shrieked.□ Nathan notes the extreme threat they face, insisting, □this isn't just another snowstorm, this is a national disaster. Entire villages are cut off from the civilized world.□

The danger does not abate inside the lodge: □the wind grabbed hold of the shutters and ran its hands along the house looking for chinks, holes, some way to get in. It wailed and moaned like a restless spirit.□ Their fears, caused by the relentless cold gripping the house, are heightened by the booby traps they find. When they discover the barricade someone has formed with pieces of furniture, Nathan insists, □it looked as if that huge stockpile was there in preparation for something that was yet to happen.□ In the library, he imagines whispers that declare, □You're all ours now. It's you and us and the house. We'll never let you go.□ Möring's use of personification, exaggeration, and imaginative visions also illustrates the tension between reality and fantasy that Nathan will struggle with as he tries to define his place within his family.

Significance of the Title

The word, Babylon, is most often used to suggest an atmosphere of vice and luxury. When the ancient city was destroyed in 689 B.C., many saw it as a sign of divine vengeance. The use of the word in the title of the novel most likely applies to Nathan's relationship with his niece, which develops throughout. Nathan is troubled by his sexual relationship with her, considering it to be a form of incest, but not enough to resist it. Yet there is no divine vengeance that destroys the relationship, for Nathan does not believe in God. The relationship ends because of the confused nature of Nathan's and Nina's parentage and their family conflicts. Perhaps Möring is using the term, along with Nathan's and Nina's sexual relationship, as a symbol of the betrayals that have generated those conflicts and which eventually destroy the bonds they have established with each other.

The title could also be a reference to the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, constructed in a city that is now thought to be Babylon. Nathan tells a version of this story to Nina, focusing on the process of building the tower and the problems that arise when the builders who speak different languages cannot communicate with each other, and as a result cause the foundation to collapse. This reference suggests the miscommunication that existed in Nathan's family, and his attempts to shore up its foundation by writing a family history.

Historical Context

The Onset of World War II

The world experienced a decade of aggression in the 1930s that culminated in World War II. This second world war resulted from the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany, Italy, and Japan. These militaristic regimes gained control, partly as a result of the Great Depression experienced by most of the world in the early 1930s and from the conditions created by the peace settlements following World War I. The dictatorships established in each of these three countries encouraged expansion into neighboring countries.

In Germany, Adolf Hitler strengthened the army during the 1930s. In 1936, Benito Mussolini's Italian troops took Ethiopia. From 1936 to 1939, Spain was engaged in civil war involving Francisco Franco's fascist army, aided by Germany and Italy. In March 1938, Germany annexed Austria, and in March 1939, it occupied Czechoslovakia. Italy took Albania in April 1939.

One week after Nazi Germany and the U.S.S.R. signed the Treaty of Nonaggression, on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. On September 3, 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany after a German U-boat sank the British ship *Athenia* off the coast of Ireland. Another British ship, *Courageous*, was sunk on September 19. All the members of the British Commonwealth, except Ireland, soon joined Britain and France in their declaration of war.

The Holocaust

The Holocaust is the name given to the Nazi persecution and extermination of European Jews. By the end of World War II, six million Jews had died, along with millions of other so-called objectionable people, such as handicapped persons, Gypsies, intellectuals, and homosexuals. The impetus for this persecution came before the war, in the early 1930s when Adolf Hitler came into power in Germany. Hitler gained support for his persecution of the Jews by blaming them for Germany's economic and social problems and claiming that the country lost World War I because of a Jewish conspiracy. Wealthy Jews who recognized the impending danger fled Nazi Germany, but others who could not afford to relocate or who hesitated too long were destined to die.

In 1933, Germans classified the Jews as *Untermenschen*, meaning subhuman. A year later, more discrimination was legislated. The yellow Star of David was marked on the windows of Jewish shops, which were forbidden to Christian Germans. Jews were relegated to special areas on buses, trains, and park benches and were openly ridiculed and bullied. The Nuremberg Laws, passed in 1935, took away German citizenship from any person who had one Jewish grandparent, denying these people the right to marry

non-Jews. It became increasingly difficult for Jews to find shops that would sell them food and medicine.

Violence against the Jews became an accepted practice beginning on November 10, 1938, after Krystalnacht, the Night of the Broken Glass. This was the first night of a week-long terror campaign, ordered by Hitler after a Jew killed a Nazi in Paris. Ten thousand Jewish shops in Germany and the occupied territories of Austria and Sudetenland were destroyed and looted while Jewish homes and synagogues were burned. Ninety-six Jews lost their lives while over one thousand were injured. Thirty thousand were arrested and sent to concentration camps. This night marked a crucial turning point in Germany's treatment of the Jews, the commencement of Hitler's Final Solution, the extermination of European Jewry in every occupied country.

Approximately 140,000 Jews lived in the Netherlands in 1939, including 25,000 German-Jewish refugees who had fled during the prewar years. The majority lived in Amsterdam. By the end of the war, 75 percent had died. While many citizens collaborated with the Nazis, the Dutch underground helped hide and eventually saved thousands. Because of the survival of her diary, Anne Frank is a well-known Dutch Jew who hid during the war years but was eventually discovered. She and her family were sent to Bergen-Belsen, where all of them but her father died.

The Development of the Atomic Bomb

In 1939, several prominent scientists, including Albert Einstein, informed President Franklin D. Roosevelt of German efforts to build an atomic bomb. Soon after, Roosevelt authorized the Manhattan Project, which began work on creating the bomb, in the hopes that it would be completed before the Germans developed theirs.

During the next six years, more than two billion dollars were spent on the Manhattan Project, which was supervised from start to finish by J. Robert Oppenheimer. The first bomb was tested near Los Alamos, New Mexico, on the morning of July 16, 1945. The incredible explosion that could be seen over one hundred miles away heralded the start of the Atomic Age. After the blast, most who worked on the bomb were shocked by its power and capacity for destruction. Several of them subsequently signed a petition against its use, which was ignored by the government.

The atomic bomb has been used twice: first, the United States detonated it over Hiroshima, and second, the United States dropped it over Nagasaki, both cities in Japan. The explosion in Hiroshima, which vaporized or burnt everything in an area of three miles, immediately killed an estimated 66,000 people and injured another 69,000. Nagasaki lost 39,000 in the initial blast and over 25,000 people were injured. Both cities were practically completely destroyed.

Critical Overview

In Babylon received enthusiastic reviews, especially in Holland where it became a bestseller. Paul Binding, writing for the *Times Literary Supplement*, praises the novel's themes, writing that it □evokes a deep sense of loss and impermanence, together with a courageous facing up to restlessness.□ Binding declares it to be □a moving and convincing testimony to the continuing tension between the desire for assimilation and the awareness of separateness.□

Noting the novel's interplay between past and present, Binding argues that the novel has □all the penetration we expect.□ He finds its theme carried out until the end of the novel, which, he claims □is both moving and disturbing.□ He asserts, □Confrontation with the past isn't quite enough, its thoughtful pages seem to be suggesting; there will always remain the intractable world.□

Binding, however, finds fault with some of the novel's techniques. He claims that □its concern with the weight of history has led the author away from territory he knows personally . . . to what he knows only from research.□ This shift □has led Möring to make use of the techniques of magic realism,□ which, Binding insists, is too conventional. He also finds fault with Möring's use of historical figures, writing that □In order to give the Hollanders paradigmatic stature, many noteworthy worldly attainments and friendships with the great are accorded them.□ He concludes that this is an unsatisfactory substitution □for the more difficult business of making ideas and theories palpable□ since it □encourages a sort of vicarious snobbery in the reader, putting an easy relationship with the famous in place of a reappraisal of ordinary human beings.□

Marc A. Kloszewski, in his review for the *Library Journal*, offers a mixed assessment of the technique of this □imperfect but amiable enough novel,□ writing that it □wears its 'epic' garments lightly, with many appealing personalities and much humorous dialog nicely captured through Knecht's translation.□ However, he finds □too much territory to be covered□ and fears that □the reader will be left wondering how exactly all of this ties together.□

A review in *Publishers Weekly* gives mostly praises in its assessment of this □grand, engrossing novel.□ The reviewer insists that □only occasionally does the narrative linger too long in the past or a philosophical discussion . . . [and so] impede the flow of the text.□ Yet overall, its □prose is fluid and erudite, and the transitions between the many eras masterfully achieved.□ The review concludes that □as historically instructive as it is suspenseful, this is an impressive, accomplished tale.□

Brian Kenney in a review for *Booklist* declares the novel's setting to be □absolutely beguiling.□ He finds more careful construction in the novel, claiming that □as much fun as the magical and mythical can be, Möring wisely keeps returning us to the tense reality of uncle and niece and the questions their situation poses.□ Noting a smooth link between the thematic and structural elements of the novel, Kenney argues that □miraculously, as the past and the present begin to converge, Möring largely succeeds

in keeping this unwieldy fictional package tied together.□ Kenney concludes, □it's worth it to be reminded that fiction can be both emotionally moving and artistically inventive.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, she examines the novel's intricate narrative structure and its relationship to Nathan's search for self.

Prior to the twentieth century, authors traditionally structured their novels to reflect their belief in the stability of character and the intelligibility of experience. By the end of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), for example, Elizabeth Bennet has discovered and acknowledged her true self while proving the novel's ultimate affirmation that young people get the marital partners they deserve. Novelists in the twentieth century, however, have challenged these assumptions about stability and intelligibility as they expanded the genre's traditional form to accommodate their characters' questions about the nature of truth. Modernists of the first several decades and postmodernists later in the century structured their narratives to trace their characters' internal quest for an authentic self and to illuminate the problems that can arise in such a search. Their innovative constructions frustrate readers' expectations about closure and thus force readers to recognize that the process of gaining knowledge of oneself and one's world can be problematic. Marcel Möring, a postmodernist, structured the narrative of his novel *In Babylon* (1997) to reflect this late-twentieth century sensibility.

Modernists such as Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and William Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) experimented with shifts in narrative voice and subjective, internal dialogue to suggest the difficulty in discovering concrete truths regarding the complexity of human experience. Postmodern authors such as Donald Barthelme in *Snow White* (1967) and John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) deconstructed traditional narratives by providing alternate endings and mixed genres in order to reflect the same sense of complexity. Marcel Möring's *In Babylon* also illustrates the intricacies of postmodern experimentation in its juxtaposition of various genres, including ghost stories, fairy tales, and historical and personal narratives. As Möring constructs his story of sixty-year-old Nathan Hollander and his attempts to come to a clear understanding of his family and his position in it, the author incorporates all of these genres, revealing the difficulties inherent in the search for self.

Nathan's biography of his uncle Herman, which he was commissioned to write in exchange for ownership of Herman's lodge, has become a family chronicle. Nathan feels compelled to □tell everything□ from the life of his great-great-grand-uncle Chaim Levi down to the present because he feels □the weight of their stories□ on him. Herman's extensive library has become his □ship to the other world□ of his family's history.

Nathan introduces the first genre shift into his biography when he admits: □our family is obsessed by the origin of things. Everything has to be told in the form of a creation myth.□ He, too, feels compelled to tell the story of the creation of his family in an effort to clarify his own story, but his recognition of the mythic quality of the chronicle suggests that he will have a difficult time separating truth from fiction.

Nathan's history juxtaposes his and his ancestors' memories of their lives with historical details, an arrangement that accentuates the novel's mythic elements as his family claims that they have been involved with important events and people. He was told that his father worked with physicist Enrico Fermi, who had been a close friend of Nathan's grandparents and later participated in the Manhattan Project, while his mother danced in the chorus of the Ziegfeld Follies, a famous review on Broadway in the 1930s and 1940s, and became friends with famous dancer/actor, Gene Kelly. Nathan's task is enlivened yet complicated by this mix of fact and probable myth.

Yet he claims, □we Hollanders regarded ourselves . . . as a family of guides,□ and so he counts on them to help him in his journey of self discovery. Möring explains in an interview in HarperCollins online, that □family . . . is the only concept of belonging that makes any sense.□ He concludes that □what counts is that your identity is formed by your siblings and your own personal history; your memory, that is. That is who you are and what you are. It is what will guide you through life.□ Nathan, though, has a difficult time getting a firm grasp on his family's history, including his own. He is not sure who his or Nina's father is or whether his brother Zeno hated him enough to try to torment or even kill him by setting up booby traps in the lodge. By the end of the novel, he is also not sure of Nina's involvement in the events of the past four days.

Nathan notes his feelings of separation from his family, which started during his adolescence in New York when his father worked all day, his mother was wrapped up in her painting, and his sisters were preoccupied with their approaching womanhood. He admits to Nina, □so I kept silent and I listened and as I listened I lost the distinction between then and now, here and there, reality and fantasy.□ As he discusses this sense of separateness, he claims, □I don't really play a part in the story of my family. I was there, that's all. That's my second talent: I'm always there.□

His first talent, which sprang from his ability to blur the line between reality and fantasy, is storytelling, specifically writing fairy tales. He started to write them down after Chaim and Magnus began their nightly visits when he was fifteen. □Hand-in-hand,□ he explains, □we traveled through the forest of stories,□ for □the only way to understand the world . . . is by telling a story.□

Nathan tries to understand and explain his world by incorporating fairy tales into his family narrative. One such story focuses on two rivals who find a way to resolve their differences after the daughter of one and the son of the other fall in love. The spiritual leader of the community tells them □not to smell, not to hear, and not to see, and then, when all roads to the mind are closed, to open the heart and make the world anew, to see it anew, hear it anew, smell it anew.□ This tale becomes symbolic of Nathan's struggle to see his family and his place in it in new ways in an effort to define himself.

He realizes, however, the difficulties in employing the fairy tale genre in his search. The beginning and ending of fairy tales are marked by □'Once upon a time . . . and 'They lived happily ever after.'□ Between this □obscure beginning□ and □obscure end□ falls □our story, and our limitation,□ for □we are always aware that what we have read, or

seen, is that which was already visible or readable, the representation of something obscure.□

Nathan's incorporation of a ghost story into his narrative both illuminates and clouds his knowledge of his family. His and Nina's time in the lodge becomes a classic ghost story with mysterious voices drifting through the rooms, a cellar stocked with food, and booby traps in the bedrooms. Their initial explanation of these phenomena is that Zeno has come back to the house to haunt or possibly harm them, especially Nathan, with whom he had a troubled relationship. Yet after examining the house more closely, Nathan finds it hard to imagine that Zeno had the skill to orchestrate all of the ghostly details.

Elements of the ghost story also exist in the visitations by dead family members who can be seen only by Nathan and who help him clarify details about the family life. Yet, these visitations could be only the product of Nathan's admitted blurring of the real and the fantastic in an effort to justify his own version of those details.

Möring comments on the connection between memory and the past in the HarperCollins interview, noting his fascination with □the way time shapes us, the way we shape time and how memory . . . never fails to determine our lives and actions.□ He explains:

we allow our pasts to exist in the now and we project the now into the future. When we speak, in the past tense, about a powerful experience, we relieve that experience, so in a way the past has become present again.

In this sense, Nathan allows his and his ancestors' memories of the past to shape his present vision of them and of himself. He admits, □the past was always very much alive in our family.□ His memory of his interactions with Zeno affects his present in his belief that Zeno has booby-trapped the house, which becomes symbolic of the complex relationship he had with his brother.

Paul Binding, in a review of the novel for the *Times Literary Supplement*, notes that □confrontation with the past isn't quite enough, its thoughtful pages seem to be suggesting; there will always remain the intractable world.□ Nathan, he claims, will always be □a wanderer . . . never finding a house or a community to call home,□ as Nathan himself admits when he declares, □This century, this life, the history of my family, it has all passed me by and left me . . . in total bewilderment.□

Explaining his intermingling of genres in his history of his family, Nathan notes, □the world is made up of unfinished stories□ that we try to □extrapolate . . . We try to give them a beginning and an end. We try, on the basis of those fragmented stories, to understand the world.□ What we ultimately come to, Nathan suggests at the end of the novel, is only a partial knowledge of ourselves and the world and hopefully a reluctant acceptance of the little that we can understand.

This acceptance is illustrated during Nathan's last day in the lodge when he is visited by Magnus who tells him a story about a man's struggle to find himself. As the man journeys over a plain with an overwhelming feeling of emptiness, he realizes that he cannot find a place where he belongs. After intense contemplation of his predicament,

he eventually is able to acknowledge and accept □the chaos, the self-generating chaos□ of his world and his inability to find his place in it. At the end of the story, Nathan becomes the man as he gives up his quest for ultimate knowledge. Möring echoes this sentiment in the HarperCollins interview when he insists that the novel's task is □to raise questions, to make the reader doubt his own convictions.□

By the end of the novel, Nathan is no longer searching for his place in the world. He has chosen to live out his last days in Israel, □a Jewish sanctuary,□ he claims, where he can find some connection, albeit an incomplete one, to the past. He insists that Israel is □the only place I can be. Only place in the world where a person without family can still feel at home. Land full of Sophies and Mannys and Hermans and Zoes and Zeldas,□ where he can find some peace with his ghosts, his memories, and a fragmented knowledge of himself.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *In Babylon*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

As of 2006, there were no media versions of the novel.

Topics for Further Study

Write a poem or a short story that focuses on the subject of being an outsider of a family, a social group, or a culture.

Read *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and prepare a PowerPoint presentation noting the historical details of Frank's story as well as her response to her harrowing life in hiding.

Research and write a report on the treatment of Jewish refugees in the United States prior to and at the start of World War II.

Zeno's cult following is a reflection of the movement in the 1960s toward alternative forms of spirituality. Research those forms along with the various cults that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s. Be prepared to lead a discussion on how leaders of these cults came to power and were able to have such a great influence on their followers.

What Do I Read Next?

Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, published in 1947, chronicles the courageous life of its author, a gifted Jewish teenager after she and her family go into hiding in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam. Anne was eventually arrested and later died, along with most of her family, in a Nazi concentration camp.

Marcel Möring's second novel, *Het Grote Verlangen* (The Great Longing, 1993), won the AKO Prize, the Dutch equivalent of the Booker Prize. Its narrator, thirty-year-old Sam van Dijk, attempts to remember his past and reestablish ties with his siblings. He lost his memory and was separated from his brother and sister after his parents were killed in an auto accident when he was twelve.

Jeffrey Eugenides's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Middlesex* (2002), focuses on the life of a hermaphrodite and the story of her multigenerational Greek-American family as well as her struggle to establish a clear sense of self. She sets her epic story, which moves from 1922 to 2001, against a changing historical backdrop, including the Turkish invasion of Greece, Prohibition, the Great Depression, World War II, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War.

Night (1958) is Elie Wiesel's autobiographical story of Wiesel's internment in a Nazi concentration camp and his overwhelming feelings of guilt for having survived when so many others, including his father, did not.

Further Study

Groueff, Stephane, *Manhattan Project: The Untold Story of the Making of the Atomic Bomb*, Backinprint.com, 2000.

Groueff explains the process by which this massive project was managed, which necessitated practical as well as creative solutions to the problems faced in the development of the bomb.

House, Wayne, *Charts of Cults, Sects, and Religious Movements*, Zondervan, 2000.

House examines several religious movements in the twentieth century and compares them with Christianity.

Laqueur, Walter, *Generation Exodus: The Fate of Young Jewish Refugees from Nazi Germany*, University Press of New England, 2001.

Laqueur focuses on a generation of Jews who were able to get out of Germany and Austria before and during the war and traces the difficulties this group of refugees faced during the resettlement process.

Martin, Walter Ralston, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Bethany House Publishers, 2003.

This work examines the teachings and effects on followers of New Age cults and of major world religions, including Buddhism, Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormonism.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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