

Lost in the Funhouse Study Guide

Lost in the Funhouse by John Barth

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Plot Summary

Lost in the Funhouse is a post-modern collection of short stories published in 1963. John Barth is considered one of the premier American post-modern writers and his fiction has been studied extensively over the past 50 years. The title piece is perhaps the most famous and has become synonymous with the post-modern literary canon. In the introduction to the book, John Barth explains all of the pieces can be read separately, but that the order of the book is laid out in a particular way on purpose and the stories are really meant to be read, or performed, in that order. Barth experimented with different styles of writing based on the style with which he intended for it to be read or performed. Certain stories should be read quietly, on an individual basis, while others are meant to be read aloud, listened to from a recording, or performed by several players.

Each piece is independent of the next, though all the stories affect the others in some way. The character of Ambrose Mensch appears in three chapters and each tale covers a different portion of his childhood. The first story about Ambrose discusses his lack of a name for the first few months of his life. His father is a patient in an insane asylum and his mother has no energy or desire to find a suitable name for him, preferring to just call him "Christine" which was going to be his name if he was a girl. Ambrose is eventually named after a swarm of bees hovers over him and his mother and he is not stung. His uncle remarks that event is similar to that of Saint Ambrose and the name sticks.

In the next tale, Ambrose is in fourth grade and bullied by classmates and kids in the neighborhood. His older brother Peter provides very little protection and when Ambrose is waiting for his brother who is in a secret club meeting with other neighborhood boys, Ambrose finds a message in a bottle. The message ends up being nothing more than a greeting and salutation but Ambrose fantasizes what excitement it might hold before opening it. In the third chapter about Ambrose, he is thirteen and heading to Ocean City, Maryland, to spend the 4th of July holiday with his family. He fantasizes about mutual romantic feelings with his brother's girlfriend Magda and ends up alone and lost in the funhouse that is meant for lovers.

Several characters from mythology make appearances in the book, including Echo, Menelaus, Helen, Narcissus and Telemachus. In each piece, traditional stories from mythology are retold in a fresh way that pays homage to the original stories. The author makes connections between the contemporary stories of Ambrose Mensch and the ancient stories of mythology, showing human nature and storytelling have not changed much through the centuries.

Other pieces do not have specific characters but address the audience specifically about the author's feelings as regards contemporary fiction. The author often pauses in mid-thought to point out the literary devices he is employing and how they agree or disagree with conventional fiction writing. Some pieces discuss the meaning and futility of life through the voice of a traveling sperm or a tape recording. As an entire collection, *Lost in the Funhouse* comments on what the author believes to be overused writing

techniques as he gives his own fresh spin on how fiction should be written, read, heard, and performed.

Chapters 1–2

Summary

Chapter 1 – Frame-Tale: The opening chapter, or piece, of the book is simply two pages that contain only one sentence: “Once upon a time there was a story that began.” There are instructions on how to twist the page to make it look like a ring of words, commonly called a Möbius strip. The page is not meant to be simply read and then turned. The author wants the reader to interact with the words and become involved in the material.

Chapter 2 – Night-Sea Journey: According to the author, this piece was written to be read on the printed page or recorded with the author reading it. The text should never be read live or by anyone other than the author. The piece begins with a narrator talking about a “journey.” He discusses the futility of swimming and he often questions the reason why others insist on swimming forward when to him, there seems to be no point. If he is swimming for survival, does he really want to survive? If he is swimming to accomplish something of a higher order, what does that mean for mortal life? All of these questions appear to be an inner monologue that deals with someone questioning the meaning of life. As the piece progresses, however, readers discover the narrator is actually a sperm, swimming toward an egg.

Analysis

The non-conventional way that the collection of stories will be presented is evident from the start with “Frame-Tale.” It becomes clear readers will be required to take an active part in the piece and become their own storyteller to an extent. The author also chooses this opening page to take his first stab at conventional writing by using the opening line “Once upon a time.” The reader should realize any attempt to follow convention will be quickly squashed by satirical writing and attempts to undercut the “accepted” way of writing.

The “Night-Sea Journey” can be interpreted many different ways, and has been by critics over the years. Since many of the following chapters in this collection discuss the character of Ambrose Mensch, a reader could believe the sperm in the tale is the future human Ambrose. It could also be an attempt by John Barth to address his own conception and reflect on the process that begins human life. In broader terms, the piece could be applied to the overall questioning of the meaning of life and how it starts on scientific terms with the fertilization of an egg by a sperm. It is as if the author is trying to show a disconnect between the clinical feeling of actual human life and the complicated emotional connections humans make later on with the simple evolutionary process of being born.

Vocabulary

plausible, engendered, mood, length, absurdity, paradox, inconsolable, conspicuous, tautological, haphazardous, cataract, transfigured, penultimate, immortality, demise, hypothetical, vulgar, blasphemies, contemptible, summon, nay-sayers, forswear

Chapters 3–7

Summary

Chapter 3 – Ambrose His Mark: The character of Ambrose is introduced in this chapter and his childhood is explored over the next five chapters. Speaking in a first-person narrative, Ambrose explains for the first few months of his life, he did not have a name. He says his mother had her heart set on the name “Christine” and made no effort to come up with a boy’s name after his birth. His father was committed to an insane asylum for several months, adding to the indecisiveness regarding a name. As a result of his father’s absence, Ambrose’s immediate family unit lived with his father’s parents, brother and sister-in-law. Ambrose’s mother, Andrea, nursed him openly and made a big fuss about how hungry the baby was for her milk, much to the delight of Ambrose’s grandfather Poppa Tom and often to the discomfort of his Aunt Rosa.

Poppa Tom was in the bee-keeping business and so was his neighbor, Will Erdman. The two had an ongoing feud about the bees. One Sunday morning, a swarm of thousands of bees surround Andrea and baby Ambrose as they lie in a hammock outside. The entire family and Willy Erdman try numerous tactics to move the swarm and Poppa Tom is eventually successful. Will accuses Tom of stealing some of his bees and Aunt Rosa is afraid one will murder the other, so she interrupts a local church service and asks for help. The congregation arrives at the yard of Ambrose’s family and watches the spectacle. No one is stung until Andrea flees inside and one bee stuck in her blouse stings her breast, causing swelling and infection that effectively end the breastfeeding of Ambrose. The family discusses how the swarm of bees and the birth mark resembling a bee on the baby’s face are signs of good luck. They begin brainstorming names of other people who have tales about bees in their history, and one is Saint Ambrose who had a swarm of bees hover over his lips and then became a great speaker as an adult. Andrea agrees the name is not an “unpleasant sound” and the matter of Ambrose’s name is settled.

Chapter 4 – Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction: This piece is the actual text speaking to the reader. It addresses itself as a “child” whose mother is a tape recorder and father is the author. The text talks about its futility in existence and all the reader would have to do is stop reading or listening for it to be terminated. Issues of creation are discussed as the recording repeatedly wonders at the point of it all, only to come to the conclusion it cannot control its existence, or non-existence, and will just need to continue on.

Chapter 5 – Water-Message: The narrative returns to Ambrose Mensch, as he describes his surroundings in fourth grade. Ambrose is tormented by school bullies, including one girl who is only in third grade. Ambrose’s older brother Peter is part of a secret club with other older boys and Ambrose goes along, but is required to babysit Perse Goltz, another little brother, instead of participating in club activities. When all of the boys arrive at their makeshift clubhouse, called “The Den,” they find the

neighborhood beauty Peggy Robbins making out with a young Navy sailor on leave named Tommy James. Ambrose has a crush on Peggy Robbins and fantasizes about her being his wife one day and apologizing for the incident with Tommy James.

Ambrose and Perse pass the time by throwing lumber into the water and seeing who can make it float underwater the farthest. They come across a glass bottle on the riverbank with a note inside. Ambrose imagines what the note might say and chases Perse away to read it. When he unfolds it, Ambrose sees it says only "To whom it may concern" and has the words "Yours truly" on the bottom.

Chapter 6 – Petition: Though the note Ambrose holds is not an actual letter, the next chapter is a letter, leaving readers to believe it could be imagined by Ambrose or simply be its own individual piece unrelated to Ambrose's story. Addressed to a Middle Eastern dignitary, the letter is from one half of conjoined adult twins who seeks help from the influential man in finding a surgeon who can separate them. The letter writer is never named, but he says he sought out this particular diplomat because he knows he is having his own surgery and could mention the conjoined twins to the surgeons.

The letter writer discusses the miseries of his life that include putting up with a gruff and vicious brother and having to watch his brother have sex with the woman the letter writer loves. His brother and the beautiful young contortionist have decided to get married and the smaller of the twins is scared his brother will try to kill him in order to have his wife all to himself. He begs the letter reader to intercede on his behalf or else he would rather face death than remain attached to his brother any longer.

Chapter 7 – Lost in the Funhouse: In the title piece of the book, readers again see Ambrose and his family, this time making a 4th of July trip to Ocean City. Making the trip is Ambrose, his mother, his father, his Uncle Karl, his brother and his brother's girlfriend Magda. On the car ride, Ambrose considers putting his hand in such a way that Magda will accidentally sit on it when she leans back. He also notices that her hand rests very close to his leg. Once the family arrives at Ocean City, they participate in the normal activities like walking the boardwalk and swimming in the ocean. Ambrose goes beneath the boardwalk to look for matchbox covers, and sees a man and woman having sex – a scene he views as grotesque and describes in terms of a vicious crime.

Ambrose asks Magda to walk through the funhouse with him and then follows up by asking his brother to go too. Ambrose quickly discovers the funhouse is built for lovers and he then becomes separated from the group. Several different scenarios of Ambrose's fate play out in the narration, including one where he dies inside and his skeleton is discovered years later and mistaken for a prop. The journey and confusion in the funhouse is not meant to be a literal plotline by the author. Instead it is a look at Ambrose's sexual confusion and the emotions he feels as an adolescent.

Analysis

This five-chapter section of the book features three chapters about Ambrose Mensch, with two related chapters that do not feature Ambrose's character specifically. From the start, readers are aware of Ambrose's perceived insignificance as he tells the story of no one bothering to give him a name for the first few months of his life. With no name, Ambrose had no identity. The fact that his own mother did not see the point in naming him is a forecast of how Ambrose would later perceive his role in his family and community. When he is later bullied and lacks confidence in securing the affection of the beautiful Magda, readers can trace his pattern of low self-esteem back to his days as an infant.

While Ambrose is a sympathetic character, readers should not feel overwhelmed with sympathy because many of his struggles are relatable. Learning to live with a popular, good-looking older sibling and dealing with resentment from parents are issues many people face in their childhoods. Wondering if someone returns feelings of affection is another common issue everyone feels at some point growing up and even into adulthood. Ambrose Mensch has specific struggles but many of them resonate with other people.

The piece "Lost in the Funhouse" has been analyzed in many different ways. The general consensus is the piece deals with Ambrose and sexual angst, possibly even his feelings towards his first sexual experience. Readers can choose to read the text literally and make comparisons between the trip to Ocean City and what is going on in Ambrose's personal life. Readers can also look at the entire piece as strictly metaphoric in nature and any mention of actual things is really representative of something intangible. Reading the text either way works and each reader can decide which way best fits the ideals for him or her.

The inclusion of "Autobiography" between the first and second pieces about Ambrose strengthens the connection between them. In it, a recording laments its lot in life and how it is only a creation of its mother and father and can be ignored by listeners. In the same way, Ambrose must be thankful to his parents for his creation but feels irrelevant to their lives and the lives of other people around him. The recording is not sure if it is better to exist or not, and Ambrose faces these same feelings.

"The Petition" provides extra commentary on Ambrose's relationship with his brother and is sandwiched between a piece where Ambrose follows his brother around and one when he covets his brother's girlfriend. Both of these issues are discussed in the letter written by one half of a set of conjoined twins. As the "smaller twin" forced to follow the larger around on his back, the letter writer can be assumed to represent Ambrose. Though the reader has not yet read about Ambrose's romantic feelings towards his brother's girlfriend, the letter-writer foreshadows this plot development by being in love with his brother's future wife. The letter writer hopes to be physically separated from the burden of his brother, just as Ambrose wishes to be his own person outside of the constraints of being "younger brother" to Peter.

Vocabulary

forward, furtively, holly-hocks, Plato, Sophocles, Xenophon, denunciation, swooned, insinuation, apostasy, surrogate, heterodoxical, ardently, solipsism, truculence, caricature, fabricator, gibbeted, austere, tympani, occult, pestiferous, voluptuous, disgorged, labyrinth, fibrous, coarseness, benighted, efficacy, benighted, combatants, athwart, irresolute, intractability, gregarious, verisimilitude, interspersed, languished

Chapters 8–10

Summary

Chapter 8 – Echo: This piece was written to be recorded and takes on the persona of the mythological creature Echo. She was cursed by Zeus' wife Hera and could no longer speak on her own. She could only repeat what others said and in this part of the book, she is repeating the stories she has heard from Tiresias and Narcissus. Since she is repeating the tales, the reader must decide if the words are accurately duplicated or are being told in a way favorable to Echo.

Chapter 9 – Two Meditations: This short piece is only two paragraphs long and the first is labeled 'Niagara Falls.' It discusses the end of a relationship between a husband and wife in metaphoric terms. The author asks "Which snowflake triggers the avalanche?" and writes about how one slight thing can be the catalyst that topples all of the built-up negativity in a relationship, sending everything flowing headlong over the edge, like Niagara Falls. The second paragraph is labeled 'Lake Erie' is also metaphoric and discusses the story of Oedipus and relates it to the way humans treat each other and the earth – murdering and fornicating until it is too late to resolve the issues.

Chapter 10 – Title: This piece is a narrative that pokes fun at the standard way of writing while using it at the same time. The narrator, presumed to be John Barth himself, does not speak in a straightforward manner but meanders and goes off track several times. The author implies nothing new can be created in literature and the genre needs to cease to exist or be rejuvenated. To underscore the "automatic" nature of writers of the time period, the author randomly inserts parts of speech instead of the actual words, as if writing in the formula is just as good as whatever else could be written. He ends the piece by hoping the denouement, or resolution, comes quickly.

Analysis

This section of the book emphasizes the way John Barth believes contemporary fiction lacks the ability to create anything new. The story of Echo and the way she can no longer speak for herself but must only repeat what others say represents the state of fiction in John Barth's heyday. Echo provides stories that belong to someone else, though she presents them in her own way. This is reflective of how Barth sees contemporary storytelling.

Barth takes direct aim at the accepted standards of writing in "Title" where he often replaces specific words with the category that should belong there instead. So instead of actually giving a title to the piece, he just calls it "Title." Other times, he inserts a part of speech instead of an individual word. This technique is used to show there is no difference between a generic word or a specific word if the writing is unoriginal. In "Two

Meditations” he shows the name of a location or setting does not always have bearing on the text and some subjects can be set anywhere and have the same impact.

Vocabulary

theophany, virility, nymph, coitus, espy, obscurity, suiscience, gnostic, engendered, fetus, trifling, sapped, fornicated, abstraction, participial, belied, expedient, refutation, denouement

Chapters 11–12

Summary

Chapter 11 – Glossalalia: Six separate paragraphs are spoken from six different speakers, all from different oral and written traditions through history. The stories are varied but each paragraph is identical in metrics and literary critics have pointed out the metrics match “The Lord’s Prayer” from the New Testament, which can be considered the unwritten seventh paragraph. Each paragraph is written in a first-person format giving several clues about the writer’s identity without actually naming him or her.

Chapter 12 – Life Story: This piece is similar to ‘Title’ in that the narrator consistently complains there is nothing new in fiction that can be written. The piece may seem redundant in places, especially only two chapters after the same sort of message, but that is the point. The author’s argument is there is nothing new or exciting that can be written and in fact, twice in the same collection of stories, he presents the same theme using different words with the same meaning. He writes about a writer who is writing something and puts in the date and time in several locations. It is assumed John Barth is the writer and at the end of the piece, readers discover it is his birthday.

The author lists several authors when making his points, either in support of the authors or in criticism. These include Samuel Beckett, Marian Cutler, Jorge Borges, John Updike, and George Simenon. He also makes use again of a “formulaic” style of writing by discussing characters using letters of the alphabet instead of names. In the third section of the piece, the narrator addresses the reader directly and questions why he or she is still reading and not off doing something else. The piece ends with a view of the writer, most likely John Barth, capping his pen and going off with his wife.

Analysis

These two pieces are written to show the way original storytelling is nearly impossible to achieve. In “Glossalalia,” Barth writes six very different paragraphs from a variety of speakers but the metrics and length are identical. This is to show although the details of stories may vary, the general conventions remain the same. The fact that one of the most famous Scripture passages is also the same length metrically further emphasizes Barth’s point that for every story, there is another one out there identical in construction.

“Life Story” takes this theory one step further by mimicking the arguments of “Title” from earlier in the book. The difference this time is that John Barth openly makes himself the narrator and adds specifics, like the date and time, to the piece. He also makes use of a frame story by writing about a writer who is writing something. This technique references the first piece in the book and also shows the commonality of the concept in fiction writing.

Vocabulary

maledictions, guileful, atrocious, laureled, dissonance, vertiginously, solipsistic, avant-garde, allegory, meretriciously, allegory, meretriciously, grundlage, eschewal, squalor, vicarious, satiety, Bildungsroman, dogged, felicitous, syllogism, ancillary

Chapters 13–14

Summary

Chapter 13 – Menelaiad: In the longest piece of the book, Menelaiad retells the ancient mythological story of the soldier Menelaus. It chooses to focus on Menelaus' relationship with Helen of Troy, more specifically their marriage. As Helen and Menelaus tell their stories, he questions the union several times. He rightly believes Helen could have married anyone and yet she chose to marry him and it is not logical, as he is not as strong, powerful, or attractive as her other suitors. Helen reassures him of her devotion and he continues to question it openly to his friends after she has retired to bed.

The piece is an interesting choice for Barth who has spent much of the book lamenting the fact that there are no original stories left to be told. By retelling an ancient story in his own unique way, Barth is re-creating it and telling it in a fresh light. He makes reference to the fact the story is being retold for the thousandth time by employing the use of several sets of quotation marks throughout the piece. This leaves the impression the author is simply repeating things that have already been repeated.

Chapter 14 – Anonymiad: The final piece in the book features a nameless minstrel who finds himself isolated and unable to be rescued from an island. He begins to write stories and messages, placing them in bottles and tossing them into the sea. He experiments with different literary techniques and uses them on tales of ancient mythology. The minstrel becomes depressed when he believes he has run out of new ways to write the same tales but then receives a message in a bottle himself. This gives him new hope that his work is not in vain and that there are others who want to find new ways to communicate. Furthermore, he realizes even if his writing is never reciprocated, it is enough to have written it anyway and contribute it to the world.

Analysis

John Barth takes a stab at doing what he has suggested others do throughout the book – give old tales new life through creativity. He goes after some of the most well-known stories in history and provides different angles and storylines while staying true to the original facts and meaning. The romance of Menelaus and Helen is known on epic levels and Barth decides to take a different approach by exploring the domestic setting of their old age. This is less glamorous than the famous stories they are famous for but provides a new outlook that is perhaps more realistic than the life Greek mythology portrays.

In the final piece, the minstrel who is alone on a deserted island can be presumed to represent Barth, who feels alone in his literary pursuits. Like the character on the island, Barth has experimented with writing in different formats and styles and sent those ideas

into the world with no way of knowing their effects. If Barth's messages have had even the smallest impact, then he concludes his work is worth the effort. He takes it a step further by saying he should continue to write and experiment, even if he never makes an impact, because it is simply enough to say that he did it.

Vocabulary

pleasantries, mainsail, ambrosia, respite, refracted, vouchsafe, salvaged, fraught, incoherent, lampreys, minstrel, marooned, amphorae, beneficence, jettisoned, perforce, revelry, ensconced, opulent, heralded, quid pro quo, splended, privy, vindication, amphora

Characters

Ambrose Mensch

Ambrose can be considered the protagonist of many chapters in the book. The first time readers meet Ambrose is when he is explaining how he did not have a name for the first few months of his life. When a swarm of bees hovered over his face when he was nursing against his mother's chest, he was not stung. This phenomenon, accompanied by a birthmark on his face that resembled a bee, earned him his name – after Saint Ambrose who was also swarmed by bees as a youngster but not stung. Readers see Ambrose again around the age of ten when he deals with older bullies in his neighborhood and once again at the age of thirteen when he visits Ocean City, Maryland.

Ambrose deals with several universal issues that accompany growing up, such as envying his older brother and grappling to make sense of his developing feelings about sexuality. He is a sympathetic character, as many readers can relate to his struggles and almost see him as an underdog who could use some cheering. Some critics have claimed the short story “Lost in the Funhouse” is not actually about a physical visit to Ocean City, but rather a metaphor for Ambrose's first sexual experience.

Andrea Mensch

Andrea Mensch is Ambrose's mother and is described as being “pretty.” She struggles with bonding with Ambrose in the first few months of his life, especially since his birth sent her husband to the insane asylum. She likes attention and seeks it out by breastfeeding openly in the home and out in the yard. She smokes cigarettes and in the section when Ambrose is thirteen, she teases both of her boys about girls and issues of sexuality.

Peter Mensch

Peter is Ambrose's older brother by three years. Peter is popular with neighborhood boys and has a beautiful girlfriend which makes Ambrose envious. Peter takes his younger brother along when he goes to secret club meetings but does not go out of his way to include him. Whereas Ambrose is awkward around his peers and even his family, Peter is charming and fits in wherever he goes. Peter has no problem leaving Ambrose alone with his girlfriend because he knows there is no threat there.

Hector Mensch

Hector Mensch is Ambrose's father and spends some time in an insane asylum after Ambrose is born. He is a school administrator and when he appears later in the book,



he comes off as being very sane and intelligent. Hector used to travel to Ocean City with his parents by bus when he was a kid, and does not like the fact that families now make the trip in their own cars instead.

Poppa Tom

Poppa Tom is Ambrose's paternal grandfather. He takes Ambrose, Peter and their mother in when their father is sent off to an insane asylum. He takes an interest in Andrea when she breastfeeds and is not shy about it. Poppa Tom decides to start raising bees and feuds with his neighbor who also has his own hives.

Uncle Konrad

Uncle Konrad is Hector Mensch's brother who lives at the family home with his wife Rosa when Ambrose is a baby. He appears as an intellectual character that is always pondering what to name the baby. It is Konrad who finds a list of famous philosophers and saints that have bees in their childhood stories. The name "Ambrose" was suggested by Konrad and acceptable by Andrea.

Aunt Rosa

Aunt Rosa is Konrad's wife who helps take care of Ambrose when he is an infant. She does not have her own children and Andrea likes to rub in that fact by nursing Ambrose openly and commenting on how her sons are like the men in the family. Aunt Rosa is portrayed as being much more nurturing than Andrea and Ambrose and Peter respond to her kindness and care.

Uncle Karl

Uncle Karl is Hector's other brother who moved to Baltimore to lay bricks a few years before Ambrose was born. He appears in the story on the family trip to Ocean City and has a good relationship with both Hector and Andrea.

Willy Erdmann

Willy Erdmann is Poppa Tom's neighbor who also raises bees. He accuses Tom of stealing his bees and the two end up in a fist fight over the argument. Willy acts disgusted at the way Andrea acts in regards to her public breastfeeding, but he can also be seen watching her.



The Arnie Twins

The Arnie twins are in fourth grade with Ambrose who appear to be orphaned and homeless. They are tough, big kids who have been hardened by scavenging food from garbage cans and living on the streets. Ambrose describes them as having pale, light eyes that are lined with red, suggesting albinism.

Peggy Robbins

Peggy Robbins is a pretty neighborhood girl who Ambrose fantasizes about marrying. She is in nursing school when Ambrose is in fourth grade and she always takes the time to talk to him and show him kindness, despite the fact the other kids bully Ambrose. Peter and his friends find Peggy making out with Tommy James, a guy just back from a tour with the Navy and talk about how she will get kicked out of nursing school.

Magda

Magda is the fourteen-year-old girlfriend of Peter Mensch who makes the trip to Ocean City with the family. The author describes her several times as being very well developed for her age. The author describes Magda as having good manners and doing well in school. She is flirtatious with thirteen-year-old Ambrose and he is unsure how to feel sexually towards her.

Perse Goltz

Perse Goltz is the younger brother of one of Peter's friends who Ambrose was forced to "babysit" during the older boys' secret club meetings. Perse is scrappy with a smart mouth and holds his own against Ambrose and the other boys. Perse is with Ambrose when they discover a glass bottle with a message in it.

Thalia

Thalia is a beautiful contortionist who is discussed in the letter written by one half of conjoined twins. She is the lover of the larger of the twins, but shows interest in the smaller twin too.

Echo

→ Echo is the title character of a short story in the book and a nymph from Greek mythology who was cursed by Zeus' angry wife and never able to speak again on her own. In the book, Echo does not tell her own tales, but repeats ones she has heard from the prophet Tiresias and Narcissus.

Narcissus

Narcissus was a figure from Greek mythology in love with himself. He always rejected women in an attempt to forsake the love of others, as he only loved himself. Echo was one of the many females who made advances on Narcissus, only to be rejected.

Menelaus

Menelaus was a famous king of Sparta in Greek mythology that played a vital role in the Trojan War. He was also known for being married to the beautiful Helen of Troy and in the book, his domestic and love life with Helen are discussed. In the story “Menelaiad,” he repeatedly doubts his worthiness to be married to Helen, despite her reassurances that she loves him.

Helen of Troy

Helen of Troy, also known as Helen of Sparta, is a beautiful figure in Greek mythology who was the daughter of Zeus. When she was kidnapped by Paris, the Trojan War began. In the book, her marriage to and history with Menelaus is discussed at length and she is even portrayed as a less-sexy grandma, knitting something for her unborn grandchild.

The sperm

In “Night-Sea Journey,” the futile nature of life is explored through the voice of a sperm. He debates the purpose of swimming but decides ultimately he must keep going. Readers do not realize the speaker is a sperm until close to the end of the piece.

Objects/Places

East Dorset, Maryland

East Dorset, Maryland is a fictional town where Ambrose Mensch and his family reside. There is a “small town” feel to East Dorset and it is located near an unnamed river.

Ocean City, Maryland

Ocean City, Maryland is a real-life tourist destination the Mensch family visits every July 4th. During the World War II era, there was a boardwalk, rides, ocean access and a funhouse.

Sparta

Sparta was an important city-state of Ancient Greece and plays a role in the story “Menelaiad.” Menelaus was the fictional king of Sparta and his wife Helen was also associated with the location. The Trojan War is discussed in terms of its effect on Sparta and the relationship/marriage between Menelaus and Helen.

The Jungle

The Jungle is an area above the riverbank near Ambrose’s home where the boys have secret meetings. It is actually a grove of honey locusts that is no larger than a schoolyard. Ambrose describes it as having a “queer smell” and it is full of trees and vines.

The Funhouse

The Funhouse in Ocean City is described as a “place for lovers” by the narrator. It is a confusing series of mirrors and dark tunnels. The idea of getting lost in the funhouse is a metaphor in the book for Ambrose’s sexual confusion.

Bees

Bees are raised by Poppa Tom and his neighbor and become a point of contention between the men. A swarm of bees cover the infant Ambrose and his mother. Ambrose escapes without being stung, and it leads to his name. Andrea is not stung by the swarm but by a single bee that gets trapped inside her blouse.

Glass Bottle

Ambrose and Perse Goltz find a glass bottle floating in the water near the Jungle that has a note inside. Before opening it, Ambrose imagines all of the possibilities of what the note may say. It only ends up having a greeting and a closing, with no body of the letter.

The Letter

The desperate letter written from one-half of a set of conjoined twins to a middle-eastern king provides insight into the relationship Ambrose has with his own brother. The letter describes the larger, more aggressive of the conjoined twins being engaged to the woman that the smaller twin loved, though he was convinced she had feelings for him instead. This is similar to Ambrose's belief that Magda is attracted to him on some level, though she is dating his older brother Peter.

Cigarettes/Cigars

The adults in Ambrose's family all smoke cigarettes or cigars, with the exception of Aunt Rosa who is never described smoking. Smoking was much more common the 1940s but this also serves as a distinguishing feature between the children of the story and the adults.

Diving Board

The author actually points out the diving board at Ocean City "would make a suitable literary symbol." The many different ways youths approach diving off the diving board represents the way teenagers approach growing up and sexuality.

Freytag's Triangle

Developed by a German literary critic in 1863, Freytag's Triangle explains the standard way to develop the plot of a story. John Barth describes a variation of the triangle that better fits his own purposes and he laments the fact that most writers stick to the same, boring formula.

Themes

The Staleness of Conventional Writing

The entire book is an examination of the established ways of writing fiction that had become boring and repetitive to John Barth by the 1960s. He concluded nothing new was being written and authors simply wrote automatically to a formula that had been established for a century, at least. Barth consistently pokes fun at this fact and puts his own twists on traditional writing techniques in order to prove his point. Many times he addresses the reader directly and points out how he or she must be getting frustrated since the stories in the book appear to be going nowhere. Several pages into the piece and long before the Mensch family arrives at Ocean City, Barth pauses in the action to say “a long time has gone by already without anything happening; it makes a person wonder. We haven’t even reached Ocean City yet: we will never get out of the funhouse.”

Barth has an ironic way of proving his point that no new story exists. This is especially evident in the last two pieces of the book when Barth uses characters and well-known stories from Greek mythology. These are some of the most repeated tales in the history of the world and yet Barth includes them in his post-modern book that is criticizing the lack of creativity in storytelling. By using these stories but examining different angles, such as the domestic relationship between Menelaus and Helen in their old age, Barth finds a new way to tell an old story. His use of several sets of quotation marks is a silent way of admitting parts of his story have already been told by many different people before him. This is Barth’s way of showing that even “old” stories can be made new with the right creativity of the author.

Sexual Relationships

The tension sex presents in relationships is explored between many characters in the book. The most obvious example is in the life of Ambrose, specifically when he is thirteen and on the trip to Ocean City with his family. On the car ride, Ambrose is distracted by Magda’s presence as she sits in between Ambrose and his older brother Peter. Though Magda is on the trip as Peter’s girlfriend, Ambrose imagines she is really in love with him. He debates putting his hand on her seat in such a way that she would have to lean back on it and asks her to walk through the funhouse with him. He also thinks back to a game the two played three years earlier that included Magda on her knees and begging for mercy from Ambrose. He is aroused by Magda but confused about her true feelings for him and what he should do about it all. Critics have written the piece “Lost in the Funhouse” is not actually about a literal family trip to Ocean City but is about Ambrose and his first sexual experience.

The role of sex in relationships is also apparent in other parts of the book and the first full-length piece, “Night-Sea Journey” is actually commentary on the conception

process. This is a scientific approach to sex that is then made emotional by characters later in the book. The letter written by a conjoined twin describes the sexual escapades of his twin and his role during the act. Though he is not involved in the physical sex, the twin imagines himself to be in a sexual relationship with the beautiful Thalia just the same. The Oedipus complex is also mentioned a few times and is used once to explain the murderous and unhealthy relationship human beings have with the earth and each other. Sexual tension underlies much of the book, sometimes overtly and other times in subtle ways.

Mythology and Its Influence on Modern Writing

While the first several pieces in the book deal with contemporary ideas and have been said to be somewhat autobiographical, John Barth gives some thought and analysis to the classic stories of mythology in the later pieces. Though he does poke fun at the way other writers of his time lack creativity, Barth seems to have respect for mythology and the core foundations of modern storytelling. This is most obvious in the pieces “Menelaiad” and “Anonymiad” when Barth use characters from Greek mythology and tells their stories. He adds his own creative angle but remains true to the established elements of the story lines.

In less obvious ways, however, Barth implements mythology in the 20th century stories too. Ambrose deals with issues of jealousy and covetousness in regards to his brother, much like the story of Romulus and Remus from Roman mythology. The Oedipus complex is shown in Ambrose’s infant relationship with his mother; His birth has driven his father away and as a result, Ambrose is the sole recipient of his mother’s attention and suckling. Menelaus’ disbelief Helen can truly love him when there are so many others more worthy than he is reflected in Ambrose’s own confusion about the interest Magda seems to show in him. Ambrose knows his brother is the more logical choice for her affections but still senses she may actually be interested in him. Barth uses mythology in a savvy way to show although technology has advanced in writing and people have evolved, many of the same general principles of storytelling and human nature exist.

Style

Point of View

The story is written from several points of view, including first-person, third-person and omniscient. The first piece written about Ambrose is written in a first-person narrative and told as a reflection on the past. When Ambrose appears in later chapters, however, the narrator is separate from the character and is telling the story as if looking in on the boy. Twice the point of view is given from a non-human form, as in the sperm in “Night-Sea Journey” and the tape recording in “Autobiography,” and other times it is apparent John Barth is speaking directly to the audience.

Each point of view and suggested type of delivery (live voice, print reading, tape recording) add to the theme of the piece. Hearing an old story through Ambrose’s voice gives readers an idea of how the character perceives the events that shaped his life. Readers do not know at what age Ambrose is discussing the facts of his childhood but the straightforward delivery gives the impression it is an adult Ambrose. When the tale of his neighborhood encounters with bullies is told, Ambrose becomes a more sympathetic character simply because the narration allows it.

Setting

Each piece in the book has a separate setting and some have no specific setting at all. In the tales about Ambrose Mensch, the basic setting is the fictional town of East Dorset, Maryland. Areas within the East Dorset community are also explored, like “The Jungle” and areas along an unnamed riverbank. The family travels to Ocean City, Maryland for a 4th of July celebration and the way that the real-life tourist attraction looked in the 1940s is described.

Ancient Greece is also a setting for the last two pieces of the book, specifically in Sparta. Other ancient Greek locations are mentioned as tales from the Trojan War and Helen’s abduction by Paris are described. Some pieces in the book do not have a traditional setting, as in “Night-Sea Journey” where the setting is the inside of a woman’s body. Other pieces like “Two Meditations” have locations listed but it is unclear if the action takes place there, or if the addition of the locations is simply meant to add to the metaphorical meaning.

Language and Meaning

The book is written in contemporary language, for the most part. Even the stories about ancient Greece have characters speaking in much the way a 20th century American would have spoken. The complexity of the language varies and can be very difficult to sort out at some points in the book. Barth allows himself to go on literary tangents that resemble word association that take the reader away from the original point. Many

times, Barth does not return to summarize his original thought and readers are left with an unresolved feeling.

Barth is deliberately vague and non-conclusive in his writing. There is no answer to what happens to Ambrose in the funhouse – does he find his way out? Does he die? Was he really lost in the first place? This is Barth's way of shirking the common, convenient ways authors resolve plotlines and putting the responsibility on the readers instead. Since much of the stories in the book are meant to be metaphoric anyway, Barth does not feel the need to "sum it all up" like a writer of plot-driven fiction would.

Structure

The book is structured in fourteen separate sections that can be read alone or considered one part of a larger collection. Barth suggests in his introduction the stories be read together, and in the order and format he designed, to be fully comprehended. Many of the pieces appeared alone, however, before inclusion in the book. The pieces range from less than one page in length to over thirty and there is no logical plot-driven order to the writings.

The main plot, if there can be considered one, is the childhood experiences of Ambrose Mensch. The relationship Ambrose has with his family, peers and budding sexuality are explored in the three pieces, or chapters, where he appears though there is no resolution in the latter two. Subplots include the role of Echo in retelling the stories of Narcissus and Tiresias, the domestic life of Menelaus and Helen and the struggles of the unnamed conjoined twins. Each piece comments in subtle or overt ways on the others pieces in the book.

Quotes

I continue to swim – but only because blind habit, blind instinct, blind fear of drowning are still more strong than the horror of our journey. (Chapter 2)

Chance drowns the worthy with the unworthy, bears up the unfit with the fit by whatever definition, and makes the night-sea journey essentially haphazard as well as murderous and unjustified. (Chapter 2)

God served us on our terms and in our house... for better or worse it was not in our make-up to serve Him in His. (Chapter 3)

Vanity frets about his name, Pride vaunts it, Knowledge retches at its sound, Understanding sighs; all live outside it, knowing well that I and my sign are neither one nor quite two. (Chapter 3)

Where there's a voice there's a speaker. (Chapter 4)

A child is not its parents, but sum of their conjoined shames. (Chapter 4)

Not every kid thrown to the wolves ends a hero: for each survivor, a mountain of beast-baits; for every Oedipus, a city of feebs. (Chapter 4)

Only his children, he supposed, might miss the winding paths and secret places – but of course you didn't miss what you'd never had or known of. (Chapter 5)

In a perfect funhouse you'd be able to go only one way, like the divers off the high-board; getting lost would be impossible; the doors and halls would work like minnow traps or the valves in veins. (Chapter 7)

Ambrose understood not only that they were all so relieved to be rid of his burdensome company that they didn't even notice his absence, but that he himself shared their relief. (Chapter 7)

You've read me this far, then? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? How is it you don't go to a movie, watch TV, stare at a wall, play tennis with a friend, make amorous advances to the person who comes to your mind when I speak of amorous advances? (Chapter 10)

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What is post-modernism? Who were some of the major influences on post-modern writing in the 1950s and 1960s? How is the writing in this book reflective of post-modern aesthetic? Find examples of post-modernism in categories other than literature (art, music, theater, etc.). Who are some of the other authors that John Barth admires? What societal influences impacted post-modernism and its popularity?

Topic 2

Who is Ambrose Mensch? How did Ambrose get his name? Describe the way Ambrose's mother approached breastfeeding her son. Where was Ambrose's father when he was an infant? Who are some of the other family members in Ambrose's life? Explain the relationship that Ambrose has with his older brother. Who is Peggy Robbins? Who is Magda? The author says that the "funhouse is for lovers" but for Ambrose, it is what? What does Ambrose find when he walks along the riverbanks near his home?

Topic 3

Who is the letter-writer in "Petition"? To whom is the letter addressed? Why has the letter writer chosen to ask for the recipient's help? Compare and contrast the personalities between the letter writer (the smaller twin) and his larger twin brother. Who is the beautiful woman that both men love? What is her profession? How does the letter writer feel about her? Do you think that the smaller twin imagines the feelings from the beautiful woman or is he right in his intuition?

Topic 4

If directions are followed, what shape is formed with "Frame-Tale"? How is this shape significant to the rest of the book? Describe "Night-Sea Journey." Who is the speaker? Why does the speaker say he keeps on swimming, despite his questioning of it? What does the speaker say about his/her "mother" and "father" in "Autobiography"? Explain what is going on the first part of "Two Meditations." How do the first and second meditations relate to each other and prove a point together?

Topic 5

Who is Echo? Whose stories does Echo repeat in the book? Why can Echo no longer speak for herself? Who is Menelaus? Where was he the king? How many years was

Menelaus separated from his wife, Helen? What is Helen knitting in the book? Who kidnapped Helen? According to oral tradition, Helen's face did what? Who is Proteus? What role does Proteus play in the book? Who is Telemachus?