

Motel of the Mysteries Study Guide

Motel of the Mysteries by David Macaulay

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Motel of the Mysteries Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 1-19).....	4
Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 20-29).....	6
Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries Pg 30-38.....	8
Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 39-50).....	10
Section 2, The Treasures, (pg 51- 86).....	12
Section 3, Epilogue (pg 87-96).....	14
Characters.....	15
Objects/Places.....	18
Themes.....	21
Style.....	23
Quotes.....	25
Topics for Discussion.....	27



Plot Summary

The Motel of the Mysteries is a satirical look at archeology and history. David Macaulay incorporates his writing and illustration in a look at the convoluted history of twentieth century Americans. It is the year 4022 and all research previously done concerning the North American continent has done little to uncover the secrets of the waste covered overgrown vegetation that is now the USA, Canada and Mexico.

It is guessed that in 1985 a drastic reduction in postal rates caused fliers, mail pieces and brochures to fall down on the Northern Continent and destroy all life. Some historians have ventured to Usa and uncovered a few secrets of the continent. To the people of the future, highway signs are not marketing for various businesses. Instead they are symbols of different religions and religious sects. The higher the sign, the closer the religion was to getting close with their gods.

Macaulay then describes the discovery of the Motel of the Mysteries and Tomb 26. Howard Carson an amateur historian and archaeologist who has dabbled in some experiments. He decides to go on a marathon through Usa. After falling behind the rest of the pack, Carson stumbles upon an excavation site by falling through a weak patch of ground. He recognizes what he finds as a tomb he had seen mentioned in a recent National Geographic. Carson decides to bring back Harriet, his partner, and a group of volunteers to uncover the treasures of Tomb 26.

While excavating, the group finds what would have been a late 1980's hotel room. Instead they mistake it for a burial chamber. They uncover what they believe is a Great Altar (television and TV stand), the Sacred Communicator (remote), the Internal Component Enclosure (ICE container), the Ceremonial Headdress (shower cap), the Sacred Urn (toilet), the Headband (Sanitized for your protection sticker), sarcophagus (bathroom), the Sacred Collar (a toilet seat), the music box (toilet tank), and the ceremonial platform (the bed).

Carson, Harriet, and the volunteers continue to excavate the site until they have uncovered an entire complex of tombs (a motel). After they are finished they decide to display their findings at The Museum. The exhibition is an immediate success and hailed by the population as well as critics. After the exhibit is over, Harriet and Carson decide to open a show at the excavation site. They name it Toot 'n' 'c' mon. Sadly, shortly after the opening both Carson and Harriet face untimely deaths. As more deaths and accidents happen, the entire site and Tomb 26 are closed to the public forever. It is thought that there is a curse on anyone who decides to enter the tomb.



Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 1-19)

Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 1-19) Summary

The Motel of the Mysteries is a satirical look at archeology and history. David Macaulay incorporates his writing and illustration in the convoluted apparent history of twentieth century Americans. It is the year 4022 and all research previously done concerning the North American continent has done little to uncover the secrets of the waste covered overgrown vegetation that is now the USA, Canada and Mexico.

As a the book begins, the reader learns that on November 29, 1985, a cataclysmic event has ended all life on the North American continent. The author further informs the reader that a substance called third and fourth class mail buried the North American continent under tons and tons of fliers, brochures, and containers called "free." Later that afternoon, impurities that had been clinging to the atmosphere, finally gave in to the force of gravity and extinguished what as left of the entire population.

Layers of pollutants have covered the North American continent for over 1,000 years, hardening into rock. Since 3850, little has been uncovered by the lost civilization. Many explorers and historians have tried their hands at venturing to the secretive, complex planet but they had only just began to chip away at the thick, intricate crust. Evidence from several different sites throughout the continent have suggested that the entire continent was covered with a complex network of gray and black stripes. A German scholar, Heinrich Von Hooligan believes that the the strips were designed to help land extraterrestrial crafts. It may have also been used as a way for the inhabitants to send messages from their land to their many powerful gods.

Not long after Heinrich's observations, other researchers discovered Monumental Row. It has been concluded that these various monumental inscriptions were put onto huge poles next to highways. It seems as though the monuments were erected as religious symbols. Different religious sects were identified by different monument inscriptions. The author points out that many of the inscriptions reached over a hundred feet tall! The North Americans believed that the higher they built their monuments, the closer they would become to their respective gods. Heinrich also felt that the very tall monuments prove that the highways were used to land airborne vehicles.

In 3902, researchers discovered a flying machine in the North American area called Usa. This is where the Yanks lived. Because of increasing pollution all over the North American continent, the Yanks had to invent a way to still operate trade. The flying machine offered a way to get from place to place as well as stay clear of the pollutants cluttering the continents surface.



Another interesting discovery was that of the triumphal arch. Located in the center of Usa, the arch must have been a gateway between the east and west. Today, kissing the underside of the arch is said to be good luck. The Temples of the Bigapple are another interesting find. Found on the east coast of Usa, the large, beautiful structures signify the "temporary religious stability" found by the North Americans. The temples display the technical genesis and style of the Yanks.

Despite these discoveries, much is still unknown of the Yanks and North Americans. Luckily, due to Howard Carson's discovery of the Motel of the Mysteries the current world has a better view of what the Yanks world looked like so many years ago.

Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 1-19) Analysis

In the first section of the book, two very important themes are immediately introduced. The first being the misinterpretation of history and the second being illustration as a narrative. As the book begins Macaulay describes that little is actually known about the North American continent and because of this many historians have made their own conclusions as to what has happened to the North Americans and their home. Simple things like highways signs have been misconstrued to be large religious symbols of devotion to different gods.

In this same example, it is seen how illustration works as a narrative in this book. The reader understands Macaulay's narration, but through the book's illustrations, the reader can truly see what Macaulay's point is. The signs that the readers see are obviously those of highway marketing signs, not ways to communicate with different Gods.



Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 20-29)

Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 20-29) Summary

Howard Carson was not an historian or archaeologist. He spent most of his life burning through a trust fund, instead of doing anything interesting with himself. Carson dabbled in some collecting space shuttles and studied camel hump production. In 4022, after another failed experiment, Carson decided it was time for a change. He enters the 116th annual Cross Continental North American Catastrophe Memorial Marathon. After setting sail for East Usa, Carson found himself lost and behind the rest of his fellow marathon goers. He gets lost and stumbles across great heaps of rubble on excavation site.

Suddenly, the ground broke beneath him. Carson finds himself at the bottom of an ancient shaft that faces what appears to be a tomb. At first Carson, was more annoyed than thrilled with his discovery. As he was about to call for help, he notices that the door of the tomb had been adorned with a sacred seal. Carson remembers that National Geographic had done a feature on other tombs of this sort. Finally the burial secrets of the Yanks could be revealed to the world!

Less than a month later, Carson returns to the site with his long time partner Harriett Burton and a group of volunteers to begin an excavation that will take seven years to complete. They name the Tomb "Room 26" after the inscription on the door. While Carson attempted to figure out how to actually begin an excavation, Harriet numbered and sketched all of the items surrounding the entrance in her diary.

Number 21 was described as the Sacred Seal (Do Not Disturb sign) which was placed on the tomb door to protect the tomb for all eternity. Number 28 the Sacred Eye (peep hole) was thought to ward off evil spirits from disturbing the chamber. Number 18, The Plant That Would Not Die (a plastic plant) was grown in separate pieces and then bound together. Numbers 19 and 20, the containers for the sacrificial meal (room service trays), were left outside the tomb. The meal was to be offered to the eternal gods.

After everything had been labeled, drawn and cataloged, Carson decides to open the door. While pushing the tomb open, the door suddenly stops. Peering behind the door, Carson realizes that a small delicate gold chain that linked the door to the door frame. Carson's workers sawed through the chain in an attempt to open the door. Once the chain was broken, Carson and his volunteers make their way inside. Upon entering the room, the excavators found many wonderful things inside the tomb.



Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 20-29) Analysis

It is here that Macaulay's humorous voice is clearly seen. Instead of being a non-biased future historian, he consistently makes fun of Carson, his experiments, and his actions while at the excavation site. Carson is obviously not qualified enough to be handling a project of this magnitude. His lack of education is what causes him to make his theories and absurd conclusions. Perhaps if a better trained researcher or historian has been present, the conclusions of the artifacts may have been closer to the truth.

Furthermore, through Harriett's drawings, cataloging and journal, the theme of Illustration as narrative is furthered. The reader actually sees that the sacred seal is in fact a Do Not Disturb sign and nothing more. This is done without any narration from Macaulay, because it is not needed.



Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries Pg 30-38

Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries Pg 30-38 Summary

Harriet continues to draw and label the Outer Chamber (hotel room) of the tomb. Everything in the Outer Chamber is facing the ceremonial altar (television stand). The body was laid on the Ceremonial Platform (bed) and still held the Sacred Communicator (television remote) and wore a golden band around his wrist. Scattered around the room were various other important objects such as the ceremonial chest plate (bra), shoes designed to hold coins, a large pieces of beautiful furniture. Perhaps the most important part of the room was the ICE, Internal Component Enclosure which was used to preserve the internal organs of the deceased.

Having seen two pairs of shoes in the room, the excavators began to look for another body. Before Carson realized what was happening, Harriet had already begun to catalogue and draw the Inner Chamber (a bathroom). The second body was buried with more ceremony than the first. The body had been placed in a nicely polished sarcophagus (bathtub) with the Ceremonial Head Dress (a shower cap). The beautiful sarcophagus had been sealed by a translucent curtain (shower curtain). Although a bit plain on the outside the sarcophagus is actually decorated with ribbed discs and two water trumpets. The trumpets provided music during the final ceremony by producing water that eventually drained through a hole at the bottom of the sarcophagus. The body in the sarcophagus was positioned just like the body in the Outer Chamber, with the chin sitting on the chest.

More music was also made by the music box (toilet tank) which sat on top of the Sacred Urn (toilet). Articles 1 (shampoo) and 2 (soap) were used to prepare the body for the final burial ceremony. The Sacred Parchment (toilet paper) was placed in the Urn prior to the ceremony. Also found in the Inner Chamber were the Sacred Collar (toilet seat) and The Headband (sanitation seat).

Like with all projects, eventually the original enthusiasm waned. Harriet continues to draw and catalogue, while pieces of the tomb that were not too heavy were moved to labs. With so much to be done, Carson's usually light schedule increased to an eight hour work day! Although not professionally trained in the fields of excavation or archeology, Carson threw himself into his work. None of his group doubted his devotion to the project. One day while eating his lunch he brushed and flossed both of the teeth of the deceased.

Harriet also began to feel the strain of the tasks at hand. Apparently she kicked in the door of the lab and demanded to wear the Sacred Collar and matching Headband. After Harriet's outburst, Carson realized that much of the crew was on the brink of mutiny. He



decided to close the site for a season and give all of the volunteers a nice long vacation. Carson swore that when the site reopened he would triple the number of volunteers. Luckily for him he was right. The news of the find at Tomb 26, was celebrated by many. Volunteers came out of the woodwork to work at the site. By the end of the seventh season on the site, Carson had 19 volunteers working at any given time.

Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries Pg 30-38 Analysis

In this part of Section I, the perception of the culture by what was left behind is one that centered around the Great Altar, also known as the television stand. It is quite humorous that Macaulay makes this statement, but it is also very true. From what we leave behind for our ancestors, what will they think was important to us? Obviously the discoverers of the tomb could see that everything in the hotel room was centered around the television. Today, many homes are centered around the television or computer. It is integrated into people's lives and is extremely important. Carson and his volunteers could see the importance of the television, but did not exactly understand the use it was to "ancient" Americans.



Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 39-50)

Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 39-50) Summary

As the teams continued to dig, they slowly uncovered that Tomb 26 was apart of a complex of tombs. Unfortunately, Tomb 26 was the only room that was not destroyed. The tombs were set up around elaborate passageways. At the end of the passages were metal containers marked beverages. Coins were kept in these containers as were a few communal ICE containers. The floor plan of the tombs made a "U" shape. The largest and grandest rooms were decorated with large sheets of Formica. They also had larger altars and beautifully crafted units on the wall.

Outside of the tomb units, was a room where sacrificial meals were prepared. After this area was a great courtyard. At the center of the courtyard was a ceremonial pool. It is believed that bodies were washed in the pool prior to the ceremony that occurred in the tomb. There were also gaming areas located outside of the pool. Each tomb was connected to the area by a sliding door. It is also believed that spirits could play in these fields for all eternity. Surrounding the entire excavation site was a flat gray area with white stripes. As the volunteers continued to dig, they discovered rusting metal sculptures. Each of the sculptures had inscriptions reading "Thunderbird," "Cougar," and "Skylark." It is unclear as to why the Yanks enjoyed making metal sculptures. Past the buried metal sculptures, other volunteers began to excavate the Great Sign which was located at the entrance of the tomb. The sign was needed because many burial grounds were located on the ceremonial highway. It was very important to clearly indicate one burial ground from another so that people were not buried in the wrong place.

Harriet continued to work side by side with Carson and remained completely devoted to him. After years of being involved in every aspect of the project, Harriet continued to oversee the movement of the Treasures from the Motel of the Mysteries to The Museum. Both Carson and Harriet traveled in separate crates with the Treasures in order to safe guard them. As the opening of the exhibit drew nearer, thousands of excited people lined up around the outside of the museum. The curator of the Yankology section of the museum arranged the entire exhibit on a sloping floor. Upon entrance to the exhibit, visitors were given a pair of roller skates to keep them moving through the exhibit. On opening day, Carson was so overwhelmed by the crowds that he grabbed the Sacred Collar and Headband and put them on. He then performed the ritual chant over the Sacred Urn. The crowd went wild with enthusiasm.

After the end of the exhibit, Harriet and Carson traveled back to Usa. They strolled around the quiet excavation site, content with their success and discoveries. As they surveyed the land they decided that there should be a better way to display the



Treasures of the Motel. Why not create a dramatic living spectacle of the Motel of the Mysteries?

Harriet and Carson's dream did come true. Every summer for the past 32 years, people have flocked to the Motel of the Mysteries. Harriet and Carson named the show "Toot 'n' c'mon." Every night, at the end of the performance, the Great Sign in the front of the hotel fades as an orchestra plays the scared chant and light a torch in remembrance.

Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries (pg 39-50) Analysis

The idea to capitalize on the interest of the Motel of the Mysteries is not a new one, it is in fact the cornerstone of capitalism. Perhaps Unbeknown to Harriet and Carson, many Yanks were taking advantage of their own historical discoveries. This is why it is interesting that they decide to name their show

Toot 'n' 'c' mon. Americans discovered King Tut's tomb and brought it back to the United States. The exhibits for King Tut gained a lot of money for its excavators. Macaulay is obviously making a play on that discovery with the discovery of Carson and his volunteers.

Section 2, The Treasures, (pg 51- 86)

Section 2, The Treasures, (pg 51- 86) Summary

The Treasures from the Motel of Mysteries are precious artifacts from a past world. To know the pieces that were found at the Motel of the Mysteries is important. The Three Fragments from The Past That Would Not Die (fake plants) were developed by our ancestors. They were grown separately, but the biological processes undertaken by the ancients are unknown. Many of these plants were found throughout the entire complex.

The Sacred Seal (Do Not Disturb Sign) was another very important discovery. It was placed on every tomb door. The Great Altar (TV and TV stand) was quite a compelling structure. Everything in the Outer Chamber was directed at the Great Altar. That altar was used to communicate with many of the North American's Gods. Gods named Movie A and Movie B were often prayed to. It also seems like the altar would only work if it was pounded upon. This has been concluded because of impact marks found on the surface of the altar. The communicator box (remote) was placed in the hands of the deceased so that he could communicate with the gods throughout eternity.

Fragments of Plasticus Petrificus, called Formica by the ancient North Americans, display the superior technical proficiency and use of colors by the ancients. The "mica" in Formica comes from MICA the ancient god of craftsmanship. The Bell System (telephone) was also another type of communicator to the gods. The user operated it by holding the two pieces (attached together by a coiling cord) in both hands and banging them together in a rhythmic pattern. The impact caused a small bell inside the object to ring.

The Internal Component Enclosure, also called ICE (an ice bucket), was an exquisite container. It is believed that the Internal Component Enclosure was symbolically a Canopic jar because the remains of internal organs were never found inside the container. The jar was beautifully crafted out of metal. The Small Relief (a credit card) was quite a fine piece of workmanship. It was used by the ancients as a miniature, portable shrine to their gods. The surface of the shrine had many small inscriptions. The inscriptions were used to identify an individual's religious preferences and were also found on the door of the tomb.

The Mosaic Tile (ceiling) is another beautiful work of art. It was covered with tiny perforated holes and artistically placed water markings. Ceilings nowadays do not have this much detail. The musical instruments found in the Inner Chamber are also very interesting. The instruments were covered with a silver substance similar to the material found on the metal animals. Music was made by shoving the instrument into the Sacred Urn repeatedly. The Sacred Pendant (drain plug), a very fine piece of jewelry, was lodged into the hole at the bottom of the sarcophagus. It was made out of a beautifully crafted silver chain and round rubber pendant. The symbolism of this piece is still unknown.

The Ceremonial Burial Cap (shower cap) is a prime example of great work with the material plasticus. The patterns on the cap were designed and all applied by hand. The Sacred Urn is carved from porcelain. The Urn was the center of the entire ceremony in which the honored individual would lean into the Urn and chant. While chanting, the ranking participant would wear the Sacred Collar. When not being worn by the deceased, the Collar was secured back to the Urn. The Sacred Music Box, which sat on top of the Sacred Urn, was used to make music and begin the flow of water into the Sacred Urn. Lastly, the Sacred Headband was worn to hold the Sacred Collar in place. The words "Sanitized for your protection" was printed on the headband.

Section 2, The Treasures, (pg 51- 86) Analysis

In this section, Macaulay further explains each of the items discovered in Tomb 26. While this is helpful to make sure the reader has seen all of the illustrations and not missed any of the items true use, it seems somewhat unnecessary. While it appears that Macaulay wanted to develop more description for each item, it is hardly done. The same information given in section one is also given in section two. The Illustrations, again, help to portray what each item actually is.



Section 3, Epilogue (pg 87-96)

Section 3, Epilogue (pg 87-96) Summary

Tragically, both Harriet and Carson died untimely deaths. Harriet fell off of a scaffolding while attempting to fix the sound system for the show at the Motel of the Mysteries. Howard was attacked by a deranged lab assistant. Since their deaths, the excavation site has been permanently closed in the year 4046. Because of other deaths that occurred in both the Inner and Outer Chambers of Tomb 26, it is believed to be haunted by the souls that were buried in the tombs.

Section 3, Epilogue (pg 87-96) Analysis

The "curse" of Tomb 26 is also like that of the curse of King Tut's tomb. It is believed that anyone who entered the Tomb would be cursed forever. It is a nice way to end the story of the Motel of the Mysteries. Macaulay has made the connection that while more seasoned historians and archaeologists have uncovered great finds, it does not mean that our theories about ancient civilizations are correct. The conclusions of King Tut's time and tomb were once someone's speculations that are now history. Macaulay's book proves that sometime in the distant future, a society could completely misinterpret our life styles of today.



Characters

Howard Carson

Howard Carson is an amateur historian and archaeologist as well as the discoverer of the Motel of Mysteries. Carson is by no means a highly educated man. Money and a trust fund allowed him to conduct several experiments before finding the Motel of Mysteries, which he found completely by accident.

While completing the 116th annual Cross Continental North American Catastrophe Memorial Marathon, Carson falls behind the pack and stumbles upon an old excavation site which happens to be the Motel of Mysteries.

The character of Carson is completely comical. Aside from the fact that he has almost no experience in archeology, he acts in very comical ways and has little to no common sense. While on the excavation site, he has no idea how to open the tomb door, insists on making shadow puppets while others work and invents a comical ritual that the Yanks supposedly followed.

Carson's character is certainly a caricature of historians and archaeologists, who draw conclusions based on artifacts they find. While Carson and his volunteers do a good job of uncovering the Motel, they should have probably left the excavation up to the experts. Carson's misinterpretation of the past, shapes the way an entire future generation views the past. This clearly ties in with the theme of the book, the misinterpretation of the past. He is an example of many of the early historians who developed their own theories and then proved them with convoluted pieces of evidence.

Harriet Burton

Harriet Burton is Howard Carson's longtime partner. After Carson finds the site, she ventures back with him to begin uncovering the mysteries of Tomb 26. Thanks to Harriet's countless drawings and endless numbering of the outer tomb, outer chamber, and inner chamber, much is learned about the findings at Tomb 26. Harriet is completely dedicated to Carson and his project. The only time she threatens mutiny is after working on the site without reaping any of the benefits. She demands to have the Sacred Collar and Sacred Headband.

Harriet is related to the illustrations in this book, because she is supposedly the person who drew them. The illustrations play a very large role in the book because they serve as their own narrative. While the narrator explains what Harriet and Carson discover in future terms, the visuals allow the reader to see what things like the "Sacred Urn" and "Great Altar" are (a toilet and television stand).



Heinrich Von Hooligan

Heinrich Von Hooligan is a German scholar who theorized that twentieth century highways were actually landing zones for extraterrestrial crafts. VonHooligan felt his conclusions were further proved by the 100 feet tall signs found near the highways. These must have been lit to show the airborne crafts were to land.

Curator of Yankologoy

The Curator of Yankology at The Museum where the Motel of the Mysteries Treasures were put on display decided to make the exhibit with a slanted floor. He did this in anticipation of the large crowds that would want to visit the exhibit. By giving each visitor a pair of roller blades, he was able to have them quickly go through the exhibit.

Yanks

Yanks refers to the inhabitants of the Usa section of the North American continent. "Usa" actually means United States of America, but the acronym has yet to be uncovered by future historians. The Yanks were believed to be very religious, industrial, and artistic. From what has been uncovered it seems as though much of their lives centered around pleasing their gods and preparing others for the rewards of the afterlife. While the future's conclusions about the ancient Yanks are wrong, it gives insight to what future people might think was actually important to Americans by what they leave behind.

The Volunteers

After finding the Motel of the Mysteries, Howard Carson assembles a group of volunteers to help him excavate the site.

The North Americans

This refers to twentieth century people who lived on the North American continent in the areas of Canada, the United States of America and Mexico.

Guido Michelin

Guido Michelin was a late twentieth century Franco-Italian traveler.

Currant Bunliffe

Currant Bunliffe was an ambitious archaeologist who discovered that the North American continent was covered with "literary pollution." He traveled to North American continent to research the surface of the land, but was never heard from again.

The Visitors to the Museum

The visitors who decided to see the exhibit at the museum were forced to wear rollerblades to ensure their quick travel through the exhibit.



Objects/Places

The Motel of the Mysteries

The Motel of the Mysteries is located on the North American continent in the country of Usa. It was one of the greatest discovery of modern times. The Motel was discovered by Howard Carson in the year 4022. Carson, with the help of his partner Harriet and many volunteers, excavated the entire motel to uncover many treasures of the late twentieth century.

The Sacred Urn

The Sacred Urn (a toilet) was located in the Inner Chamber of the Motel. It served as the focal point of the burial ceremony. This is where the deceased would say their final chant before death and burial.

The Sacred Collar

Usually anchored to the Sacred Urn, the Sacred Collar was worn by the deceased during the final ceremony. It was made of two spiral pieces of plastic. The collar found at the motel were is believed to be from 1979.

The Sacred Headband

The Sacred headband was used to secure the Sacred Collar to the wearer's head. It read "Sanitized for your protection."

The Music Box

The Music Box (the tank) was placed on top of the Sacred Urn. By pulling the handle of the Music Box, water was forced from the box into the urn, creating music during the ceremony.

The Ceremonial Burial Cap

The Ceremonial Burial Cap (shower cap) was worn after the body was placed into the sarcophagus. It was handcrafted with extremely flexible plasticus.



The Sacred Pendant

The Sacred Pendant (a bathtub plug) was found lodged in the sarcophagus on accident. It was a fine piece of jewelry made from a metal chain and rubber pendant.

Musical Instruments

The musical instruments (plungers) were found in the inner chamber of the tomb. They were coated in a silver metal substance. Music was made by plunging the instruments into the water held in the Sacred Urn.

Mosaic Tile

The North Americans cover their ceilings with mosaic tile. The tiles have tiny perforated holes as well as watermarks.

Small Relief

The Small Relief (credit card) was a portable shrine with small inscriptions. The inscriptions were important because they indicated the religious beliefs and tomb complex that the deceased was to be buried.

The Internal Component Enclosure

The Internal Component Enclosure (ice bucket) is a symbolic Canopic jar. Made from fine plastic, the interior was lined with a translucent material. No internal organs were ever found in these jars.

The Bell System

The Bell System (phone) was comprised of two separate pieces attached with a cord. The user had to bang the two pieces together in order for a small bell to ring. This served as another way for the deceased to communicate with the gods.

Fragments of Plasticus Petrificus

Fragments of Plasticus Petrificus also known as Formica was found on the great altar in the Outer Chamber.



The Great Altar

Everything in the Outer Chamber was faced to the Great Altar (television and TV stand). The North Americans used the Altar as a way to contact the gods. The communicator box was placed in the hands of the deceased to symbolize the constant communication between the dead and the gods well into the afterlife.

The Sacred Seal

The Sacred Seal (Do Not Disturb Sign) was found outside of the tomb. It was placed on the doorknob by the sealers of the tomb.

The Plant That Would Not Die

Pieces of the Plant That Would Not Die (fake plant) were grown separately in a now lost process. Many of these plants were found throughout the entire complex.

Usa

Located on the North American Continent, Usa was the home of the Yanks. It is also where the Motel of the Mysteries was discovered.

Inner Chamber and Outer Chamber

The Inner Chamber (a hotel room) of the tomb was where many of the treasures were found. The greater treasures, however, are considered to be in the Inner Chamber (the bathroom).

Themes

Misinterpretation of History

The Motel of the Mysteries is an example of how history can be misinterpreted by its finders. Macaulay weaves a tale of discovery of what would happen if the North America continent was suddenly destroyed. Although it seems like the rest of the world has been left to continue civilization, North America has been buried under its own waste and products of consumerism. Macaulay takes the reader on a journey in which an under qualified, uneducated archaeologist, Howard Carson, stumbles upon a new discovery in Usa, which is in fact the United States. While Carson is definitely under qualified, other qualified archaeologists have also greatly misinterpreted the remnants of the supposedly long lost civilization.

After the great catastrophe, it seemed as though the North American continent had been crushed by mail and containers labeled "free." Because these are the pieces found of the lost civilization, to future archaeologists they must likely be the cause of the end of the North Americans. When others like Carson began to piece together what had happened to the lost civilization, they make conclusions that seem outrageous to us now. For example, that all highways signs were the North Americans attempt to get closer and closer to God. While it is known to us that they are simply a marketing tool for various businesses and hotels, the elaborate signs the were found become linked to a theory concerning religion and rituals.

When Carson discovers the Motel of the Mysteries, he quickly begins making assumptions about the artifacts he and his team uncover. One discover is linked to another to create the meaning of Tomb 26. Going off of another discovery of a tomb from the National Geographic, Carson begins to make his own conclusions. From the Do not disturb sign on the front of the tomb, to the television stand, remote, bathroom, toilet, and bathtub, Carson pieces together the evidence to conveniently make sense with his theme of the tomb.

Although we currently like to assume that our archaeological and historical procedures are correct, many times our theories on ancient civilizations are just that - theories. We find pieces of evidence and string them together with our own research and conclusions. Although many discoveries have in fact been done by educated professionals, much of what has become history is based on someone's interpretation.

Perception of a Civilization Based on Items from the Century

Another interesting theme is the way that American society in the late 20th century is perceived by future people. From what they have left behind, the archaeologists make wrong conclusions, but have astute observations about what was important to the



twentieth century person. A prime example is the great altar, also known as a television set. When Carson finds the tomb and sees the Outer Chamber, he notices that everything is facing towards the television and its stand. While his conclusion is wrong, he is right in his observation that everything in the room is centered towards the television. Today, the media, celebrities, and television shows shape people's lives. They are guided by their desire to watch television and a lot of people's lives revolve around their favorite TV shows and celebrities.

The theme is further explored by the general belief that the North American continent was destroyed by an explosion of mail. The mail is obviously a product of whatever catastrophe actually ended all life on the continent, but it is still significant. It represents the waste, litter, and clutter that is present in people's lives today. From the descriptions of what the world is like today, trash is everywhere. It has hardened to cover the entire continent. A society that wastes paper, materials, and product is clearly evident by the findings of the future historians.

Illustrations as Narrative

The book uses illustrations in a very interesting way. The illustrations are their own narrative. Macaulay's story of the discovery of the Motel of the Mysteries is told from the conclusions made by Howard Carson as he excavated the site. While Carson uncovers pieces of evidence he begins to draw theories on what the items were used for. His theories begin with the recent National Geographic report stating that other archaeologists had found a similar Tomb some months ago.

While the narrative is primarily Howard's findings, Harriet's illustrations are what allow the reader to learn what different objects are. As Carson and the volunteers begin to examine the treasures, Harriet takes the time to actually draw and document what is what. It is here that the discoveries become not so amazing and somewhat comical. For instance, items like plungers are seen as musical instruments, while an ICE container, is thought to be a Canopic jar that was meant to hold the deceased's organs. Macaulay does not have to explain anything because the illustrations explain themselves to today's readers/viewers.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of the book is told from the third person perspective. It is not an omniscient third person, because the author does not know everything. For example he does not know the truth behind what the great catastrophe was. He is simply reporting what is known in his time's collective knowledge of history. Because this is supposed to be a history book, the third person point of view works very well for Macaulay. He is a researcher who has done his homework on the Motel of the Mysteries and compiled different sources to write about the discovery of the site and what it tells future people about that past.

Setting

The book takes place on the United States Continent (Usa) in the year 4022. Much has changed since the twentieth century. For some unknown reason all life on the North American continent as been completely destroyed. For over two thousand years the continent has been left to rot under the pollution and waste what was left behind. In the beginning of the book, Macaulay takes us through several of the most important sites in North America. Now places like New York City and the Arch in St Louis, are seen as religious relics. Litter and overgrown vegetation cover much of the Bigapple Temple as well as triumphal arch.

The rest of the book takes place at the excavation site of the Motel of the Mysteries. It is believed that the site is somewhere on the east coast of Usa. It is at the site that Howard Carson discovers the treasures of the motel. In the motel the excavators discover Tomb 26. Inside they notice that the burial chamber is divided into two separate chambers, the Outer and Inner Chambers (bedroom and bathroom of a hotel room). After the site has been excavated, Howard and Harriet bring the relics to a Museum to be displayed. Macaulay never specifies where this museum is. It is also unclear throughout the rest of the book what continents remain, or where Howard Carson originates.

Language and Meaning

The tone of the book is an informational, yet satire ridden voice. While Macaulay attempts to have the book read like a history book, it is a history book with an opinion and humor. He gives a very descriptive explanation of the facts and evidence that Carson finds but also pokes fun of Carson throughout the narrative. Most objective non biased history books would not do this. Supposedly, these texts are not to place judgment subjects of the past.



Other bits of humor are also found in the Macaulay's language. As he is describing the arch found in central "Usa" he compare the relic to that of the blarney stone that is in Ireland. As it is now considered good luck to kiss the stone, in the future the arch is rumored to have the same good luck powers to give to people who attempt to kiss its underside. Macaulay's obvious humor in this statement, refers back to one of the main themes in the book. The theme if misinterpretation. Today, people have attached a meaning to the blarney stone that may be completely false. How far off is it then to place this same meaning on another relic of the past.

The illustrations of the book present their own language and meaning. Through visuals, we are informed of what the objects the have been found by Carson really are. Present day readers know the Sacred Urn is actually a toilet. This becomes humorous because the future has misinterpreted a toilet as having a large purpose and meaning in our everyday lives. While a toilet is in fact necessary to all of us, it does not hold the importance of ritual.

Structure

The book is structured into three parts. The first section of the book gives the background on what future historians know of Usa and the ancient Yanks. Macaulay then begins to describe the discovery of the tomb, beginning with background information on Howard Carson. As the story of the discovery unfolds, Harriet's illustrations become more and more important to the reader. Macaulay describes what Howard is finding and making conclusions about, while the illustrations prove to the twentieth century reader what the item's real function is. This section ends with the exhibit at the Museum and the eventual opening of the Toot 'n' 'c' mon show at the old excavation site.

The second section of the book is a closer examination of the Treasures that were found at the site. In this section, one page is devoted to the written description of the an item, while the next is an illustration taken from Harriet's journal. This section is useful to the reader, but could have been left out of the book. The same description and illustrations were found in the previous section. Macaulay must have wished to develop the descriptions a little more than what was done in the first section, but he does not give much more description than he has already given.

The final section of the book is the Epilogue and a description of some of the items that were for sale at the Museum while the exhibit was taking place. The last section also explains that both Carson and Harriet came to untimely deaths while working on the Toot 'n' 'c' mon show. Overall the structure of the book works well to achieve Macaulay's aim for the story. The reader learns of what has happened to the ancient civilization of the North Americans in Macaulay's future.



Quotes

"In 1985 a cataclysmic coincidence of previously unknown proportion extinguished virtually all forms of life on the North American Continent." (Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries, p. 1)

"Since 3850 hundreds of scholars and souvenir-hunters have chipped at the continent's alluring crust. Although North America has not given up her secrets easily, a number of significant discoveries have been made." (Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries, p. 10)

"The clustering of hundreds of monumental inscriptions mounted on huge poles along both sides of a highway was quite common. Each inscription represented a different religious sect or point of view and was placed as near as possible to heaven." (Section 1, The Motel of the Mysteries, p. 12)

"While preoccupation with religion was consuming the North Americans and particularly the Yanks, who lived in the area called Usa, a number of scientists in Europe had begun to monitor the dramatic increase in pollutant gravitas above the troubled continent." (Section 1, The Motel of the Mysteries, p. 15)

"In spite of the number of significant clues, however, the picture of these fascinating people remained disturbingly incomplete until forty years ago, when word leaked out of Howard Carson's startling discovery at the Motel of the Mysteries." (Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries, p. 19)

"during his early forties, while rapidly consuming the remnants of a trust fund, Carson's interests were divided between his collection of antique space shuttles and a number of questionable, albeit visionary, experiments relating to increased camel hump productivity. (Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries, p. 21)

"At first, everything was dark. Carson lit a match. Still everything was dark. Carson lit two matches. Still, everything was dark. Attempting to avoid a rather protracted delay, Harriet eased the large spotlight toward the entrance with her foot. As the blanket of darkness was stripped away from the treasures within the tomb, Carson's mouth fell open. Everywhere was the glint of plastic." (Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries, p. 26).

"Quivering with excitement, Carson removed his shirt and began the delicate operation of dismantling the door. Even at the height of his enthusiasm, however, Carson was never too busy to entertain his helpers." (Section I, the Motel of the Mysteries, p. 30)

"Caron was so overwhelmed by the enthusiastic response to the objects on display, that he spontaneously removed the Sacred Collar and Ceremonial Headband from their respective cases, put them on, and performed the ritual chant of the ranking celebrant into the Sacred Urn." (Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries, p. 46)



"Swept up in the Euphoria of the moment, Carson placed the collar over a delighted Harriet's head, moved in front of the largest spotlight in the gallery, and did what is still believed to be his very best shadow rabbit ever." (Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries, p. 46)

"While Harriet proofread each of the labels, inserting new words or numbers where she felt them appropriate, Carson inspected all of the reproductions that had been manufactured from Harriet's sketches for The Museum Shop. At one point, in order to check the coloring more accurately, he took one of the hand painted plaster casts of the ceremonial highway outside into the sunlight. This particular fragment had been selected by the Trustees of the Museum because of its uncanny resemblance to an even more ancient treasure called the Rosetta Stone." (Section I, The Motel of the Mysteries, p. 44)

"Both Howard Carson and Harriet Burton died tragically shortly after the first performance of he Toot 'n' 'c' mon Sou et Lumiere. Carson was savagely attacked by a rabid dromedary lab assistant when he returned with new hope to his early experiments. He passed away just before the birth of the world's first three humper." (Section 3, Epilogue, p. 96)



Topics for Discussion

Do you think that Macaulay is poking fun at history with the subject matter of this book?

From the book, give three examples of satire of American society in the late twentieth century.

Is the character of Howard Carson actually a caricature of archaeologists and historians?

Discuss the theme of Illustration as narrative from the book? Do you believe that Macaulay uses his illustrations as a separate narrative than that of his text? If so, please give examples.

Do you think that future civilizations will judge us on the materials we leave behind?

Although Carson's conclusions about objects from the twentieth century were wrong, do you think that he grasped what was important to people of the times?

Is history simply a theory that has been made into a fact by evidence from a particular era? Explain why or why not.