

# The Origin of the Brunists Short Guide

## The Origin of the Brunists by Robert Coover

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Origin of the Brunists Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns/Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>



# Characters

Because it is concerned with the origins of a mass movement, *The Origin of the Brunists* has a large, panoramic cast of characters, from hell-fire preachers in fundamentalist sects through cynical journalists and embarrassed townspeople and bereaved widows and orphans, to believers in the new dispensation many think Bruno announces. Although many minor characters are deftly drawn embodiments of an idea or obsession gone to excess, a brief survey of the principal opponents in the conflict over Bruno's new creed may suggest the subtlety with which Coover develops this conflict.

One explanation for the popularity of the Brunist doctrine's apocalyptic fervor is that characters in West Condon need something to illuminate their lives. This is particularly true of Bruno's two closest disciples, Eleanor Norton and Bruno's sister Marcella. In a sense, the cult is the creation of these two women and Giovanni is merely a figurehead. This interpretation is particularly appropriate in Mrs. Norton's case.

Eleanor Norton is a high-school teacher, a visionary, and a madwoman.

She has been fired from many positions, and loses her job at West Condon High, because she cannot resist proselytizing the brightest and most susceptible among her students, especially the boys. She and her husband Wylie, a veterinarian, have been forced to leave many towns in which he has established a practice because the community resents her interference with young men. Still, she recruits two of her current students to the Brunists. She practices automatic writing, in which the spirit "Domiron" (a garbling of *dominus irae*, or 'wrath of God?') communicates cryptic messages through her trance writing. She has a private mythology, in which initiates have code names given by Domiron: she is "Elan," Wylie is "Womwom," a statistically-oriented lawyer named Himebaugh is "Rahim."

When she hears about Giovanni's survival, she rushes to his side, asks him leading questions about his role as "the One to come," and stations herself authoritatively at his bedside. Although Eleanor must contend briefly for ascendancy in the cult with Clara Collins, the widow of a fundamentalist preacher killed in the mine, she is clearly the dominant force in the group, as symbolized by the special embroidery on her tunic. The Brunists are a visible projection of Elan's neurotic spiritual yearnings.

Among the many victims of Mrs. Norton's desire for power are the lawyer Himebaugh, who is attracted to the Brunists because of his fascination with numerology and who starves himself to death when the world fails to end on the anticipated date. Marcella, Giovanni's young, beautiful, Roman Catholic sister, meditates on the mystery of Giovanni's escape from death, and eventually concludes, with some prompting from Mrs. Norton, that her brother may have died in the mine and his body may have been possessed by a divine spirit. Marcella becomes a fervent disciple and falls in love with the cynical journalist who has infiltrated the cult. When he exposes the group and tries to rescue Marcella from them, she internalizes all her conflicts, is on the verge of



starving herself to death, and is killed by an automobile when the group gathers for the end of the world. Her death becomes, in the Brunists' lore, a sacrifice. Whether it is an accident or a suicide is left to the reader's interpretation.

Tiger Miller, described by some critics as the scribe of the Brunist gospel, is actually a more complicated character than that. In part he combines the cliches of the jaded journalist and the returned prodigal, for he was once a high-school sports star at West Condon who has returned to rejuvenate the town's moribund newspaper.

Tiger is a hero to town youths, and his interest in the Brunists is professional — he infiltrates the group to get the facts out — until he meets Marcella.

Although romantically involved with a nurse who writes marvelous parodies of the Brunists' apocalyptic prophesies, Miller falls in love with Marcella and his efforts to rescue her from the cult result in her despair and possible suicide. Miller is certainly no chronicler in the manner of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. He never for a moment believes in the Brunist creed, and at novel's end he and his pagan nurse are about to found their own cult of phallic worship.

Many West Condoners are embarrassed by the doings of the Brunists, especially when Miller's expose hits the national press. Among these are Mayor Whimple and banker Ted Cavanaugh, who unite with ex-miner Vince Bonali to form the "Common Sense Committee." Coover's irony is never more sure than in naming this group after one of Thomas Paine's pleas for individual liberty; under Bonali's leadership, with Cavanaugh and Whimple in the background, the committee "visits" members of the Brunists, using techniques of bullying and intimidation to bring some "common sense" into these embarrassing members of the community.

The brutality of the Common Sense Committee is as much an attempt to make sense of the incongruity of the Brunist creed's popularity as the creed is itself an effort to make the survival of a miner a proof of divine intervention.



## Social Concerns/Themes

As the title implies, *The Origin of the Brunists* treats "the origin" of a religious-apocalyptic cult named after coal mine survivor Giovanni Bruno.

Coover emphasizes the evolution, from a mining disaster in which ninetyseven miners died, of a religious faction finding its inspiration and figurehead in the taciturn survivor and his family. Thus primary social concerns addressed in *The Origin of the Brunists* include how hysterical and apocalyptic movements originate, and what momentum, whether social, philosophical, or psychological, propels these movements to capture a public's imagination.

Although it is a highly successful religious organization, eventually branching out into diverse districts with bishoprics and hierarchies, the Brunist movement does not originate in Giovanni's charisma or visionary skills.

The leader's only qualification is that he survived in a mine chamber in which six other men suffocated. Actually, Coover's description of the explosion in Deepwater Number Nine suggests that Bruno was usually isolated because of his habitually not fitting in with the miners and his cowardice when the disaster struck. Once rescued, Giovanni seems a semi-catatonic invalid who occasionally utters cryptic phrases like "Mount of Redemption!"

and mentions having seen the Virgin Mary while trapped in the mine (seeing holy figures is a phenomenon frequently reported by rescued victims of cave-ins, especially those whose oxygen supply is dangerously low and who fear imminent death). Bruno's main qualification for cult leadership is his nodding assent to leading questions by townswomen hungry for new and vital religious experiences. To Eleanor Norton's question about whether he is "the One who is to come," Giovanni nods; to his sister's assumption that he has been transformed, perhaps possessed by a divine spirit while trapped in the mine, he gives tacit consent.

Therefore, one of Coover's main themes in *The Origin of the Brunists* is the degree to which charismatic movements result not from the force of the leader but from the hunger of potential cult members for revelation.

A corollary of this theme is the degree to which the cult members' need for revelation and their consequent imposition of "redeemer-status" on Bruno result from their limited and frustrated lifestyles. Coover's persuasive descriptions of the tedium and viciousness of the daily existence of the miners' and merchants' families in the small midwestern town where the disaster occurs lend credibility to the willingness among potential Brunists to believe in anything that promises to make their lives special. When the characters' happiness depends on chatting with one another in a lunchroom, watching high school basketball games, making out in parking lots, and submitting to the mine for



economic survival, it is little wonder that any movement that offers wonder and specialness, especially with hints of an end to creation and exclusive salvation for those who make up the Brunists, will gain a following.

Moreover, the Brunists' widespread popularity is a creation of the media. A spectacular event in an insignificant place like West Condon motivates the media to transform a collection of religious compensators into a cult with international importance. Every public event involving the Brunists, including their awaiting the end of the world, is covered by television and national newspapers. A local journalist and philanderer, Tiger Miller, poses as a convert to get the scoop on the doings of the Brunists and to sell exclusives to national news services. It is the selfserving competition among members of the press that transforms the activities of a cult of local misfits and zanies into an international movement.



# Techniques

Although *The Origin of the Brunists* is not as technically daring as *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968) or *Gerald's Party* (1986), Coover's irony is controlled and effective in inquiring into both the zeal with which the Brunists await the end of the world (which the Prologue indicates did not come off on the anticipated date, thus adding an important dimension to the book's fundamental irony in that the failure of this prophesy does not adversely affect the cult's growth) and the gestapo zeal with which the conservative faction in West Condon persecutes the Brunists.

The chief innovations of this text include the manipulation of the point of view and Coover's characteristic concerns with epistemology, or the degree to which we can trust the "reality" the fictionalist, or the world, presents to us.

The novel begins in medias res, with a "prologue" describing the Brunists' preparation for the end of the world on an April weekend. The point of view is limited omniscient; events are described as they are witnessed by Hiram and Emma Clegg, new initiates into the movement. Hiram later becomes a bishop, so his, and by extension the narrator's and the reader's, uncertainty about key events, especially Marcella's Bruno's death (the Prologue is subtitled "The Sacrifice") becomes a functional comment on Coover's concern with the evolution of religious belief.

Coover's most effective realistic writing comes in the section "The White Bird," which describes the mine disaster itself. Here, the book alternates points of view for short episodes: one is told from the point of view of someone above ground, perhaps a relative or friend of a trapped miner; the next episode is told from the point of view of someone trapped in the mine. This technique effectively contrasts the growing anxiety and uncertainty of the survivors with the increasing awareness and despair of the victims. A particularly evocative series of scenes involves the miners' cutting off the leg of preacher-miner Ely Collins to rescue him from being pinned beneath tons of rockslide.

The scene that most efficiently represents Coover's mature technique of calling into question the truth of the events the novelist describes occurs when the Brunists gather for the world's end and suddenly, at Eleanor Norton's direction, turn on Tiger Miller, whom they blame for the public attention the movement has attracted and the despair of Marcella. They beat, kick, and apparently kill him: "Miller departed from this world, passing on to his reward." Yet Miller is alive at the end of the novel, reunited with his pagan nurse to start a cult of their own based on sexuality. Coover's diction compounds the mystery of Miller's escape: "The West Condon Tiger rose from the dead. . . ." This may be an ironic commentary on the Brunists' interpreting Giovanni's survival as a purposive miracle — he too "rose from the dead" — or it may be a literal suggestion that Miller's deliverance is miraculous, that from his cynical spirit's death he will found a meaningful order based on personal commitment rather than revelation. While the text is not definitive on the nature of Miller's revival, either option suggests rich epistemological possibilities.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994