The Tidewater Tales Short Guide

The Tidewater Tales by John Barth

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Contents

The Tidewater Tales Short Guide....1

Contents....2

Characters....3

Social Concerns....6

Techniques....7

Themes....9

Key Questions....10

Literary Precedents....11

Related Titles....12

Copyright Information....14

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Characters

Peter Sagamore and Katherine Sherritt Sagamore, both thirty-nine years old, are the book's joint protagonists and narrators. Peter is a college professor and a moderately successful writer who began his writing career with a thick novel full of the abundance of life. But he has become "a writer's writer," which in his case means a painstaking minimalist whose meticulously pared down work reaches silence at the book's opening. His hugely pregnant wife (eight and a half months, with at least twins) immediately recognizes the dangerous urgency of this problem: Her husband's entire identity, his life, is dependent upon his being a writer. And the depth of their love means that her life is dependent upon his. Eventually the reader discovers that Peter has been silenced by his knowledge of the world: His ex-student and "CIA friend" Doug Townshend has been passing Peter information about his own and others' clandestine activities, most troublingly those of "the Doomsday Factors," agents who cavalierly trade in the possibility of planetary destruction. In flashback we see that Peter has shown courage in his increasingly complicated dealings with sinister CIA figures, but he is honor bound to keep certain confidences. This is one source of his writer's block, since he cannot use this material in his fiction. He is deeply distressed by what he has learned about his government and the perilous state of the world.

Indeed, on the conscious level he and Katherine have both come to see the world's situation as hopeless. Hopeless people bring neither books nor children into the world. Or do they? Peter and Katherine, happily married and physically healthy, find their life together sweet and satisfying, but neither believes that the world they love and love in will endure. It is their irrational, instinctive impulses that have kept them productive and vital. Now, their visceral vitality is weakening.

Peter is from a lower middle class tidewater family of no ambitions and, except for his books, no distinguished accomplishments. Katherine is from the patrician Sherritt family of private schools, prestigious colleges, public service, historic land holdings, and hefty trust funds. The social synthesis of their blissful marriage, however, is not Barth's main interest. Peter represents one side of the writer's mind: the side devoted to exquisitely finished art, art beyond the contaminating arbitrariness of the world. Katherine, an oral historian who becomes an oral storyteller in her desperation to help her husband regain his voice, represents the writer's other side: the side that wants to include everything, to let artifice take a back seat to life and the joy of creating. "Share-it," her punning maiden name commands her husband, whose "more sagas," is an appellation that remains painfully potential until the book's closing pages. Just as Katherine's huge belly represents the bounty of biological life, her exuberant, often artless oral tale-spinning represents the bounty of the primitive narrative that Peter has lost touch with.

Katherine and Peter embody the novel's core question: How does one go on living (storytelling) in the face of present atrocities and future annihilation?

The answer seems to be found in Peter's grim parable of the caged chickens who live obliviously on the back of a python destined to eat them. It takes Peter 655 pages to

accept that the crucial difference between humans and these chickens is not so much that humans know their days are numbered, but that they can turn even such hopeless situations into enlightening and perhaps entertaining stories. As long as one lives, one will make stories, Peter learns. That is what human consciousness does, whether it writes them down or not. To live a life of health, one must find pleasure in necessity.

Or, as Barth says in Sabbatical (1982), "If life's a journey and the grave its goal, getting there is all the fun."

Peter must re-learn a love of the perilous world through storytelling, must learn how to let the world into stories, rather than meticulously keeping it out; and he does so by sailing for fifteen days apparently aimlessly around the Upper Chesapeake Bay as he and his wife take turns telling the story of their lives to the unborn children in her womb. Peter is constantly in danger of losing heart and falling into a nihilistic silence. But stories keep coming to him, encouraging him.

Katherine is their most important agent, since she is the one who, despite her impending delivery, recklessly proposes that they sail away from the mundane world of solicitous family and concerned friends, competent doctors and safe hospitals. She thus brings Peter into the realm of stories, which is what the varied objects and craft floating on the Bay stand for.

Barth uses a detailed knowledge of the Bay to move his characters and his reader gradually from the plausible world of identifiable contemporary experience (the year is 1980) to the world of adventure and wonder. In fact, by having the "realistic" characters tell one another tall and taller tales, Barth fuses the two worlds, thus overcoming the traditional barrier between the "realistic" and the "fantastic" in fiction. At crucial moments when despair threatens to overwhelm Peter and Katherine, chance floats a story to them, sometimes literally, as when they open a distress-flare canister to find a mysterious manuscript. At other times they encounter figures out of legend and literature: Odysseus and Nausicca from The Odyssey (1050-850 B.C., Theodoros and Diana Dmitrikakis are the names they go by now), Don Quixote turned mariner (Donald Quicksoat, these days). Everyone they encounter has a story. The characters in the main narrative frequently tell their stories over an elegant shipboard dinner and at-least satisfactory wine. The stories are filled with details and mar vels, mixing past and present, fiction and fact in the way that Peter must learn to do again. Despite a psychologically unconvincing but dramatically necessary quarrel on days eight and nine, Peter and Katherine remain as close as a couple can be. In the course of the narrative, both have been sexually attracted to storytellers of the opposite sex — in particular "Odysseus and Nausicca" and Frank and Leah Talbott — but despite opportunities to act on these attractions, each has remained not only faithful but completely candid with his/her mate.

From time to time the protagonists make new friends on shore or boat to boat, new friends who sometimes turn out to have connections with the CIA and thus bring the specter of destruction and meaninglessness back into their story. Trips ashore for provisions bring Peter and Katherine into contact with family and old friends who believe

the couple is behaving irresponsibly in sailing a motorless boat in all weathers with Katherine's due date so near. And family and friends also come to Peter/Katherine in their own boats, finally lashing an assortment of craft together into a motley flotilla whose rich community of diverse characters provides story after story of the wonders and trials of the "real world," as well those from the imaginations of these tale-intoxicated people.

By the end of the book, inevitable death has receded for a time. Through hubris or conspiracy the most sinister and loathsome characters have destroyed themselves, Katherine has delivered healthy twins, and Peter has begun the book we have just finished reading. Lest he be charged with sentimentalism (as he was by some reviewers of Sabbatical), Barth hints throughout The Tidewater Tales that perhaps the best storytellers are those in the CIA, whose fictions — like Peter Sagamore's, constituted of facts, half-lies, and outright falsehoods — lead to annihilation.

Barth is engaged in a celebration, however; and those ugly stories, like the bloody corpses of all the virgins before Scheherazade, are not allowed center stage.

Social Concerns

Like Sabbatical (1982), the Barth novel that immediately preceded it, The Tidewater Tales is more topical than Barth's earlier works, which tend to view social and political activism in ironic ways. This novel deplores in uncharacteristically tmironic terms CIA "dirty tricks" and greedy business's toxic waste dumping, not to mention the U.S. government's nuclear brinkmanship that Barth implies is doomed to lose its balance eventually. Barth's setting is the Chesapeake Bay, only a few miles down the Potomac River from the nation's capital and site of CIA headquarters, numerous espionage "safe houses," a variety of military installations, and an increasing number of toxic "minidumps." From time to time the characters catch glimpses of chilling clandestine operations, most memorably symbolized by the floating corpse of J. A. Paisley, a CIA operative who has died under mysterious circumstances. The still-lovely Chesapeake Bay is the location of the characters' childhoods as well as their current waterside residences. It is also, as Barth makes clear, Ground Zero for perhaps inevitable nuclear war. Barth and his most sympathetic characters are angered, horrified, and saddened that this historical and ecologically significant estuary should be so corrupted and imperiled.

The female characters in The Tidewater Tales, like those in Sabbatical, represent another change in Barth's work from his earlier to his later career. Here is a new respect on the novelist's part for what are frequently called "women's issues." Barth's Katherine Sagamore is not only narrator but protagonist, and like Tidewater Tales's less-central characters, the robust May Jump and the clairvoyant Carla Silver, for example, she is intelligent and resourceful, a fuller and more dynamic figure than the passive women typical of earlier Barth fictions. Barth drives home his concern to represent female experience more completely by devoting a significant portion of the novel to matters of rape, abortion, and pregnancy, and to Frank Talbott's feminist TV drama entitled Sex Education. It is true that Barth treats Frank's clumsy play with some irony, but it is gentle irony that reveals sympathy for Frank's and his wife Leah's loss.

Techniques

From the very beginning of his career innovative techniques have been as important to Barth as action and character. Although some of Barth's techniques are almost excruciatingly obvious in The Tidewater Tales (such as naming Peter and Katherine's boat Story), in this novel Barth brings the self-conscious narrative to a new level of complexity at the same time he renders it less obscure and more pleasurable to the general reader. To such conventional suspense questions as Will the CIA harm Peter or his family?

Barth adds such questions as How will Peter and Katherine create the suspense required to make the CIA plot properly chilling to the reader? As readers we move forward not only to find out, for example, who this "Odysseus" character is but also how Peter/Katherine are going to handle this violation of verisimilitude.

Barth uses practically every device imaginable to draw attention to the fact that Peter and Katherine are struggling to contrive the novel as we are reading it, and Barth ups the ante considerably by making us wonder how, if Peter has "writer's block," he can be doing any of this writing at all? From time to time Barth has Peter catch up with the narrative; that is, Peter reports that he has now written the notes in Story's log that catch up to the "now" of the notetaking. That we continue to be pleasurably mystified as to how this "writing" is proceeding is part of Barth's strategy to dramatize the very action of selection and invention, to let us realize that planning a book is not writing it, that jotting notes about what one is going to write is not the same as writing the actual sentences. We witness, in other words, the continuous process of conceiving and drafting — but not finishing and polishing — a complex novel about contemporary issues and experiences and how the human consciousness registers, evaluates, and sorts those issues and experiences. The fluid nature of some of the novel's "facts" may well suggest a philosophical position about the indeterminate nature of truth — but it is first and foremost a demonstration of how writers change things as they go along. That Katherine's fetuses begin as several and end up as only two owes less to mysterious biological processes than it does to the fact of novelistic revision. The pattern of twos gradually becomes more insistent in the joint author's mind — or in Peter's after he has redrafted the work of the joint author. (We are never sure how many drafts stand between the words we are reading and the actual moment of "first draft.") Peter will flesh out the detailed written form of the mainly oral narrative of Peter/ Katherine. The elaborate table of contents and bewildering array of chapter headings and subheadings turn out to be the notes Peter has jotted in their boat's log. The last page of Barth's book is the title page of Peter's, reading, apparently as Peter drafts it, "The Tidewater Tales: A Novel." That we encountered it as the first page when we began reading Barth's novel simply means that we have been through the drama of its composition, a drama of experiencing the world as well as of casting that experience into words.

"Now" the official version of Peter's return to literary "maximalism" will be written.

Barth's technique in Tidewater Tales is designed to show that this novel is not only a book about love's endurance in an evil world and not only a primer on how to turn one's experience into a novel, but also a drama of how even the nonnovelist's mind works to receive, evaluate, and find words for the experiences and fantasies that we all have as we go about our daily business. Ultimately, writing is thinking, Barth relentlessly implies, and thinking is, in some fundamental sense, writing, since we all make narratives of our lives, if only in our heads.

Themes

Although The Tidewater Tales and Sabbatical are more obviously conscious of current social issues than Barth's earlier novels, Barth's central theme remains constant throughout the fiction of his later career: the importance of narratives in our lives, how we use stories to make sense of ourselves and our world. The Tidewater Tales seems to approve of Katherine's and her lesbian friend May's good-hearted social activism, but it is not their arguable political logic that Barth endorses so much as their nurturing of the storytelling impulse. Katherine and May are members of HOSCA (Hands Off South and Central America), an activist organization dedicated to obstructing what they see as the American government's imperialistic meddling in other nations' affairs. But it is the fact that they are founding members of ASPS (The American Society for the Preservation of Storytelling) which seems most significant to Barth, and during the course of the novel each validates her right to claim membership in that organization.

Katherine saves her husband and her marriage with loving storytelling. May Jump, through Carla Silver, who acts as her mouthpiece, tells the story of "Scheherazade's First Second Menstruation" and of that legendary Arab storyteller's visit to the twentieth century, "tell-along" narratives that make explicit for the reader and for the characters the life-or-death nature of goodfaith communication with one's fellow humans. And of course the novel before us, drafted, Barth's fiction has it, jointly by a loving couple and "now" to be finished by the rejuvenated writer Peter Sagamore, is testimony to the saving power of narrative. The characters live for us because we can read about them; and within the novel itself, Peter finishes a grateful Frank Talbott's Sex Education play, a work which itself concludes with happy male/female relations and which makes it possible for the beginning writer Talbott to continue to live a productive life, now that his vocation as a writer has been affirmed.

Barth is often described as a bawdy writer, and it's true that, especially in his earlier books, his high-spirited characters often engage in sexual adventure. But sex is never present in Barth's work for merely sensational or commercial reasons. Although it is abused by evil characters like Katherine's ex-husband, the sadistic rapist Pooney Baldwin, in The Tidewater Tales sexual intercourse is most significantly a Barth metaphor for the Self's tender communion with Another — which to Barth's novelistic mind means narrative. "Sex and stories, stories and sex.

Teller and listener changing positions and coming together until they're unanimous," writes Barth. Katherine and Peter's decision to write a novel about their lives and sailing experiences is not less significant to them than their decision to bring children into a world constantly threatened with evil and death. In the course of their long fortnight of sailing, Barth has his protagonists discuss at length (and demonstrate) the parallels between composing and copulating and between giving literary and literal birth. It is a theme in American literature as old as Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass (1855).

Key Questions

1. What differences are implied in The Tidewater Tales between written and spoken stories? Between those who invent stories and those who merely tell them? Do these differences have any bearing on the novel's themes?

2. Is the quarrel between Peter and Katherine believable? How important is it that the reader feel that a serious rupture — perhaps even a breakup of the marriage — is possible?

3. How is the relationship of the Sagamores similar to and different from that of the Talbotts? Why does Barth create such similarities and differences?

4. Is Doug Townshend a force for good or for evil in the other characters' lives? To what extent can we determine the truth of his statements to Peter?

What is the significance of Frank Talbott's Kubark, his nonfiction expose of the CIA?

5. How are we to take the convenient helicopter crash that eliminates Pooney Baldwin and Willy Sherritt? Does Barth expect us to attribute this event to Peter's and Katherine's fiction-writing or to other forces and causes? Can such questions be asked about other crucial events?

Literary Precedents

The overarching structure of The Tidewater Tales takes its inspiration from the tradition of the sailing narrative, in Western literature most notably found in Homer's Odyssey and in American literature in Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), books referred to often in The Tidewater Tales. Barth's novel is an homage to these books as well as an addition to the venerable tradition of the sea adventure.

Probably the most striking aspect of The Tidewater Tales' structure, however, is its tale-within-a-tale motif, a device Barth borrows from his most constant muse, Scheherazade of The Thousand and One Nights, who had to tell her king story after interlocked story in order to save her life. Just as John Barth corresponds to the anonymous narrator of this Arab classic, Peter and Katherine Sagamore correspond to Scheherazade, warding off the death of Peter's art and of their marriage by telling under pressure the stories of their childhoods, their earlier sexual affairs, their first meeting, their courtship and marriage, Peter's encounter's with the CIA, and especially the unfinished story of their two-week sail on the Chesapeake Bay. Barth has elsewhere referred to the Scheherazade frame tale as "the primary tale" of The Thousand and One Nights, and has estimated that the book "contains 169 secondary tales . . . told by Scheherazade . . . 87 third-level tales told by the characters in Scheherazade's secondlevel tales, and 11 fourth-level tales told by the characters in those thirdlevel tales told by the characters in the second-level tales told by Scheherazade, the heroine of the nameless author's primary tale: some 268 tales in all." (The Friday Book, 1984).

Barth's Tidewater Tales aims to exceed even this level of exuberant complexity as it gives us, for example, Barth's telling us of Peter and Katherine's telling their unborn children of Carla Silver's telling the assembled friends and family on the flotilla of May Jump's telling Carla of Scheherazade's telling May of John Barth's telling Scheherazade of Barth's writing a story about Scheherazade. The finest of Tidewater Tales' multitude of stories is perhaps the long "third-level" tale of Odysseus's last voyage (told by Theodoros and Diana Dmitrikakis).

Barth's foregrounding of the process of composition — that is the dramatization of the writing and revision process itself as a part of the daily life of his characters — can also be seen in such works as Joyce's Ulysses (itself a reworking of Homer's Odyssey). In Ulysses (1922), like Barth in Tidewater Tales, Joyce gives us characters who are aspiring and practicing writers. Joyce's Leopold Bloom and Gerty McDowell, like Barth's Frank Talbott, are inexperienced writers seen planning and drafting literature of poor quality. Frank Talbott is working on the sophomoric television drama Sex Education; Bloom and Gerty work out some of the details of mildly pornographic fiction. The attempts by Ulysses' Stephen Dedalus to produce more refined literature can be seen to correspond to some of Peter Sagamore's more serious work.

Related Titles

Every book-length fiction in the Barth canon features writing about writing and tales within tales, and several employ time travel across the fiction/history barrier, a device Barth uses more thoroughgoingly in recent works. Of course, every writer repeats broad themes, certain character types, and basic plot patterns. Barth is unusually fond, though, of recycling not merely general features of his works, but details and devices of every kind.

The corpse of J. A. Paisley made its first appearance in Barth's LETTERS (1979). Frank Talbott's Sex Education play, whose protagonist is an ovum, is a companion piece of and a feminist reply to Barth's "Night-Sea Journey" in Lost in the Funhouse (1968), where a sperm cell is the narrator and protagonist.

But the Barth book The Tidewater Tales has the strongest connection to is Sabbatical. Indeed, some critics have said that in these books Barth has finally returned to the realistic settings of his first two books, The Floating Opera (1956) and The End of the Road (1958), this time, however, to describe in great detail the geography and customs of tidewater Maryland, thus implying that Barth is truly a Southern writer, one of those for whom "place" is essential.

While it is true that these books share an "un-Barthian" interest in local color, the similarities between them go far beyond affectionate reportage.

Sabbatical and The Tidewater Tales are not only set on the Chesapeake Bay, they are set there during the summer of 1980. Sabbatical also has joint narrators who are also married and drafting before our eyes the story of their relationship and the present voyage.

Barth subtitles the books "A Romance" and "A Novel," respectively, following Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous distinction between works that present the "possible" (and even the "impossible") and those that confine themselves to the "probable." Hawthorne sees the Romance, his artistic preference, as offering the author more freedom to shape his material. These are rough designations of the popularly accepted categories of fantasy (or "imagination" or "art") and realism (or "fact" or "life"). Sabbatical: A Romance features preposterous coincidences (the miraculous return of a boina, a type of beret) and legendary creatures (Chessie, the Chesapeake Bay's version of the Loch Ness Monster); and The Tidewater Tales: A Novel tends to avoid these sorts of things, at least on its "primary" and "secondary" levels.

But the most astounding connection between these two Earth books can be found in the fact that the latter has, in effect, swallowed the former — that is, Tidewater Tales' Frank and Leah Talbott are the "real life" versions of Sabbatical's protagonists Fenn and Susan Turner, and their "real life" adventures related there are shown in Tidewater Tales to be the amalgam of fiction and fact that every novel creates. Frank spells out to Peter and Katherine precisely how and why he fictionalized his and Leah's lives in the book

Barth's readers will have just finished, if they have read his books in the order of their publication. The abortion we saw dramatized in the earlier book is a trauma Frank and Leah Talbott continue to face in The Tidewater Tales. The miraculously returning boina and the appearance of Chessie the sea monster, on the other hand, are things Frank made up to give their lives structure, "magic," and a more conclusive meaning than they in fact have. Barth (creating the fictional version of the "real" version of Sabbatical's fictional characters) names their boat Reprise in Tidewater Tales (it was Pokey in Sabbatical) to signal the continuation of the action of the previous novel. It is one of Barth's especially delicious ironies that Leah Talbott's mother, Carla Silver, in Tidewater Tales is more colorful than her "fictionalized" portrait in Sabbatical.

Frank Talbott is, after all, a beginning novelist.

Barth's inclusion of his "Romance" inside his "Novel" demonstrates that Hawthorne's traditionally accepted distinction is a false one, both in literature and in life. We fictionalize our real lives in our own heads, just as novelists turn "facts" into fiction in their books. The greatest writers, Barth has often said, aim for the marvelous and the real. Therefore, realism — the "Novel" — swallows fantasy — the "Romance" — and digests it into a book that is both, rendering its subtitle highly ironic.

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