



Sixty Stories

Donald Barthelme

Download now

Read Online ➔

Sixty Stories

Donald Barthelme

Sixty Stories Donald Barthelme

With these audacious and murderous witty stories, Donald Barthelme threw the preoccupation of our time into the literary equivalent of a Cuisinart and served up a gorgeous salad of American culture, high and low. Here are urban upheavals reimagined as frontier myth; travelogues through countries that might have been created by Kafka; cryptic dialogues that bore down to the bedrock of our longings, dreams, and angsts. Like all of Donald's work, the sixty stories collected in this volume are triumphs of language and perception, at once unsettling and irresistible.

Sixty Stories Details

Date : Published April 7th 2005 by Penguin Books Ltd (first published 1981)

ISBN : 9780141180939

Author : Donald Barthelme

Format : Paperback 451 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Fiction, Literature, American

 [Download Sixty Stories ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Sixty Stories ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Sixty Stories Donald Barthelme

From Reader Review *Sixty Stories* for online ebook

A.J. Howard says

For the past couple of years, I have kept word documents that keep track of the individual short stories or long essays I read. I say to myself I do this so I can keep track of what I read and recognize writers who've I encountered before. While this is true, the main reason I keep these lists is because I am a bit compulsive when it comes to keeping track of unnecessary things. Seriously, I have never been able to get myself to keep up with my check balance book but my music on my external hard drive is organized meticulously.

I relate this because, after finishing *Sixty Stories* I was arranging them in my short stories list, and realized that I recalled most of them a lot more fondly than I would have anticipated. Reading short stories isn't always my cup of tea. I often get frustrated because just when I get acclimated to the structure of the story, right when I really sink into the groove, the story ends. I'm more comfortable in a sprawling morass that I can really sink into. Also, I can't resist trying to constantly ask what the author is trying to convey. These two issues I have are both especially prominent in Donald Barthelme's stories, which often experiment with form and narrative, and never, with a few exceptions, exceed ten pages. So the process of reading *Sixty Stories* was often frustrating. Every now and then, maybe when my mood was just right, one of the stories would just really connect. However, more often it seemed that I enjoyed having read the stories much more than actually reading them. And then there were a handful of stories I flat out didn't like. This final category of stories fell into two camps: a) ones where I recognized what Barthelme was trying to do but felt that he didn't really connect; or b) stories that I felt like I needed to read a 20 page dissertation on to ultimately understand.

Despite these possible missteps, there is definitely more good than bad here. From a historical perspective, Barthelme has to be one of the more significant American writers of the post-war era. While nobody I've encountered writes exactly like him, his influence is easy to spot in the work of George Saunders, Robert Coover, and David Foster Wallace. Barthelme never really manages to be engaging. He struggles with creating authentically human characters and his prose is rarely appealing. However, his inventiveness and his willingness to take risks make up for many of these weaknesses. Like I said before, an absolute pleasure to have read, if not always to read.

Glenn Russell says

Dazzling collection of postmodern blisters and blasters, usually as short as three, four or five pages but some as long as twelve pages, stories written in dialogue or lists or letters or narrative, covering topics from highbrow culture to the lowbrow scuzzy, from the everyday to the sensational and historic, an innovative collection from one of the most perceptive wordsmiths ever to put pen to paper or fingers to typewriter. Many are the stories I found wickedly astute, including these two:

REPORT

Antiwar: The narrator is sent by an antiwar group from New York to Cleveland to persuade hundreds of engineers “not to do what they are going to do.” This 1968 Barthelme flash fiction was written at the peak of the U.S. war in Vietnam. A fiercely anti-U.S., anti-Vietnam War story, but not once is Vietnam mentioned. Similar to Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (Donald Barthelme much admired Beckett), time-bound specific symbols and specific references are absent.

Cartoon Atmosphere: The Cleveland meeting of engineers takes place at a motel, very appropriate since the whole phenomenon of motels, those small, cheap, tacky roadside hotels with a swimming pool out back, were also at their peak in the late 1960s. Hundreds of engineers attend the meeting and as soon as our narrator walks in, he beholds chaos: not only are the engineers making calculations and taking measurements, they are drinking beer, throwing breads and hurling glasses into the fireplace. On top of this, he also sees most of those hundreds of engineers have their arms, legs or other body parts in plaster casts due to various kinds of multiple fractures. This bit of absurdity is truly cartoonish, and to top it off, the narrator tells us the engineers are friendly.

Friendly, Friendly: Of course those beer drinking, bread throwing engineers are friendly - friendly on the surface, that is, since their jolly laughter and all those jovial smiles are effective ways to maintain a lighthearted, uncritical attitude toward the destructive, tragic power and death-dealing consequences of their calculations and measurements.

Love and Information: Yes, yes, yes . . . the narrator tells us directly how the engineers are also full of love and information. As, for instance, when the chief engineer, standing among beer bottles and microphone cable, invites him to eat some of their chicken dinner and asks what they, the engineers, can do for him, their “distinguished guest.” A true stroke of irony bordering on sarcasm: to call such an outsider “distinguished guest,” an outsider who could quite possibly pose a threat to their developing and utilizing invented technologies to win the war.

The Irony Thickens; The Sarcasm Thickens: When the narrator states his line is software and how he wants to know what they are doing, the chief engineer begins his reply: “Ask us anything about our thing, which seems to be working. We will open our hearts and heads to you, Software Man, because we want to be understood and loved by the great lay public, and have our marvels appreciated by that public, for which we daily unsung produce tons of new marvels each more life-enhancing than the last.” Although the engineers are creating military weapons and chemicals to be used in war, the chief engineer refers to their creations as “life-enhancing.” Yet again another Donald Barthelme tale where language is distorted and twisted by the power people in order to maintain and expand their power.

A Sucker is Born Every Day: The Software Man states his concerns; the head engineer bombards him with a thick fog of words, including making a personal accusation of Software Man’s hatred and jealousy (ah, when it doubt, attack the person not the argument!). The fog of words is so thick he gets Software Man to leave with a smile on his face. Back among his antiwar group, the narrator stresses the friendliness of the engineers and how everything is all right, how “We have a moral sense.” and “We are not going to do it.” Oh, my - not only swallowing the head engineer’s lies but taking on the identity of the entire room of friendly, beer drinking warmongers. Talk about gullible!

THE INDIAN UPRISING

One of the most popular Donald Barthelme’s stories. Here are a number of themes I see contained in its mere seven pages:

America, land of genocide

Why are Indians attacking an American city in the 20th century? Why are the narrator's people defending the city? Is this a mental defending of past history, a defending or justifying the genocide of the Native Americans in previous centuries? Back in high school history class during the late 1960s, the time this story was written, there wasn't too much said about the brutal treatment of Native Americans and the destruction of their populations and cultures. Ironically, my high school mascot was and still is "The Indians."

America the superficial

"There were earthworks along the Boulevard Mark Clark and the hedges had been laced with sparkling wire." Nice contrast, Donald: the Indians and their primitive crafts (earthworks) on one side and the barbed wire (sparkling wire) on the other. Donald Barthelme doesn't miss an opportunity to make his story's details, telling details – case in point, barbed wire played a pivotal role in transforming the open land west of the Mississippi River into domesticated ranchland. Meanwhile, the narrator, let's call him Bob, asks his girlfriend Silvia if this is a good life. She tell him "No." Are the apples, books and long-playing records laid out on a table (perhaps symbols of American, the land of plenty), Bob's idea of a good life, even if his city is under attack? If so, Bob's idea of the good life sounds rather superficial.

America the hyper-violent

Bob and others torture a Comanche but Bob doesn't give this cruel act any more emotional weight than if he and a couple men were cleaning up a grimy picnic table. I don't know about you, but such insensitivity and sadism sends shivers up my spine. In the late 1960s, the time when this story was first published, photographs of Americans torturing Vietnamese first began appearing fairly regularly in magazines and newspapers. Additionally, I recall how during the late 1960s, Saturday morning cartoons switched from funny to hyper-violent, which caused outrage among some to ask: "Are we becoming a country of extreme violence and nothing but extreme violence?"

America, land of postmodern leveling

Bob asks Silvia if she is familiar with the classical composer Gabriel Fauré. This question quickly shifts to Bob's reflections on the details of a smut scene and then to the tables he made for four different women. This mental jumping from the beautiful to the repugnant, from people to objects, treating everything, irrespective of content, with the same emotional neutrality sounds like a grotesque form of postmodern leveling. Personally, this is one big reason have always refused to watch commercial television: the non-stop switching from one image to the next, from tragedy on the nightly news to selling candy bars to the latest insurance deal I find unsettling in the extreme.

America, land of the racist

Bob tells us: "Red men in waves like people, scattering in a square startled by something tragic or a sudden, loud noise accumulated against the barricade we had made of window dummies, silk, thoughtfully planned job descriptions (including scales for the orderly progress of other colors), wine in demijohns, and robes." Red men in waves like people? They are people! Stupid to the core, Bob blithely dehumanizes others by his racism and barely realizes he is doing so. Donald Barthelme wrote this with a light touch, but I couldn't imagine an author damning his own society and culture with more vitriol and scorn. John Gardner wrote how Barthelme lacked a moral sense. What the hell were you thinking, John?!

America, the land of hard drugs

To combat the uprising, Bob notes: "We sent more heroin into the ghetto." And the emphasis is on "more" since it is well documented how the U.S. government permitted and even encouraged the influx of hard drugs into poor black neighborhoods. Ironically, the outrage over the widespread use of hard drugs began once drug usage and addiction entered the fabric of middle class suburbia. I don't think I'm alone in

detecting a direct link between the use of drugs -- hard drugs, prescription drugs, recreational drugs - and the emotional numbness people have to the ocean of detritus overwhelming their lives.

America, the land of booze and passion

Bob actively participates in more extreme torture. Doesn't bother Bob in the least. Bob simply gets more and more drunk and falls more and more in love. Even when he hears children have been killed in masses, Bob barely reacts. Have some more booze, Bob, as that will solve all your problems. All this Bob stuff occurring in a world where, "The officer commanding the garbage dump reported by radio that the garbage had begun to move." Also, "Strings of language extend in every direction to bind the world into a rushing, ribald whole." Have another drink, Bob, and convince yourself you are falling more and more in love.

??? says

?????????? ?????? ?? ????? ?? ?????.

?????? ????? ?? ?????????? ????? ? ?? ????? ????? ? ?????? ????? ?????? ?????????????? ?? ??? ?????? ?? ?????
????????? ?????????????? ?? ??? ?????????????? ? ?????? ????? ? ????? ? ?????? ?? ?????? ?? ?? ?????? ?? ??????!

???? ?? ?????????????? ?????? ?????? ?????????????? ?????? ? ?? ??? ??? ? ?????? ??????. ??? ?????? ?????????????? ?? ???
????? ? ?????? ?????? ?? ?????? ???.

????? ?? ?????? ??? ??? ?????? ??? ??????. ??? ??????

????????? ????? ?? ?????????????? ?? ??? ?????? ?????? ?????? ??? ?????? ? ??? ?????? ?????? ?? ??? ?????? ? ??????
????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?? ??? ?????? ? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ?????? ?? ??? ?????????? ??? ? ?????? ?????? ?? ?????
????? ??????

Hadrian says

I've been reading through these for the past couple weeks, picking out good ones like berries.

About a third of these are too rambling or incoherent to understand, but the rest, as a general rule, are brilliant. My favorites are the Balloon, Robert Kennedy, the Captured Woman, On Angels, Cortes and Montezuma, and The Death of Edward Lear.

Tim says

The first thing I ever read from the field of cognitive linguistics, which has stayed with me till the present moment, was Mark Turner's notion that "one reads Shakespeare in order to have a brain that has read Shakespeare." The original context was something about Hirsch's crap about cultural literacy and a rebuttal of the notion that we read Shakespeare simply to attain a few cultural benchmarks (blech), as if cocktail party conversation were the final arbiter of literary merit and purpose. Anyway, I liked Turner's point, and I really like what Barthelme is doing to my brain this week. I wouldn't say he's altering it so much as bringing forth latent tendencies...sort of like applying cognitive makeup to enhance what's already there. And truly, is there

a better, more consummate ending to a short story than this: "Then we shook hands, Mrs. Davis and I, and she set out Ralphward, and I, Maudeward, the glow of hope not yet extinguished, the fear of pall not yet triumphant, standby generators ensuring the flow of grace to all of God's creatures at the end of the mechanical age." ?

James says

They sit down together. The pork with red cabbage steams before them. They speak quietly about the McKinley Administration, which is being revised by revisionist historians. The story ends. It was written for several reasons. Nine of them are secrets. The tenth is that one should never cease considering human love, which remains as grisly and golden as ever, no matter what is tattooed upon the warm tympanic page (so ends the story Rebecca, page 279).

The above passage is the rarest of examples of Barthelme explicitly stating the theme of any of his stories. Typically, he builds his bewildering stories using an elliptical approach to his prose, often stripping it down to mere dialogue or a single character engaged in monologue. More often than not I found myself shaking my head at the end of the story because my grasp of the overall theme was shaky at best. As I continued to read these stories something interesting began to happen. I got stronger as a reader, and so did the stories. For instance, I found the story of a grown man stuck in the third grade due to a bureaucratic mistake in *Me and Miss Mandible* a little uncomfortable, but by the end of the book the story about human longing illustrated by a witch giving birth to a sentient seven thousand and thirty five carat emerald after being impregnated by the man in the moon didn't faze me at all.

Barthelme is an unmistakable stylist. As such, most readers will react strongly one way or the other to the absurdist elements of *Sixty Stories*. Since most of these stories were short to the point of bordering on flash fiction, I thought I would occasionally pick the book up and read a story during my lunch breaks as time permitted. I found that this strategy did not work with my reading style, even though the length of the stories are perfect for getting in and out with no one getting hurt. Barthelme writes for the quick of mind, and I'm a plodder. The idea of a long hard slog through a big square thing isn't particularly daunting, but I found that too often with sixty stories I would be left shaking my head at the end of lunch and not looking to get back into the book. I found a lot more enjoyment when I sat down with the book for long periods of time. By the time I worked through three or four stories in a row on a nightly basis my head was in the proper space for enjoying what Barthelme had to offer. My advice to readers would be to read at least three of the stories (perhaps at random) before deciding that Barthelme isn't your thing.

Highlights for me:

The Balloon, Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning, The Indian Uprising, The Policeman's Ball, Daumier, Eugenie Grandet, Nothing: A Preliminary Account, A Manual for Sons, Cortes and Montezuma, The King of Jazz, On the Steps of the Conservatory (in conjunction with the companion piece *The Farewell*), The Leap, How I Write My Songs (Ride the Snake to the Lake).

Guttersnipe Das says

Donald Barthelme, *Sixty Stories*

Penguin, 1982
introduction by David Gates (2003)

When I was 20 I tried to read Nabokov, and couldn't, and knew it was my problem, not his. When I was 25 I could read Nabokov. I couldn't read Barthelme until I was 40. (There are real benefits, it turns out, to not dying young.) Maybe it helped that I had read Beckett, Lispector, Lydia Davis in the meantime. Probably it helped even more that I had suffered serious disappointments and intermittently drank too much. I had finally arrived on the wave-length.

New to Barthelme? Read this one first. I've heard a few people say that *Forty Stories* is easier. I don't see the truth in that. Some stories will grab you instantly, others will seem incomprehensible or opaque. (My favorites; "Me and Miss Mandible", "City Life", "A Manual for Sons", above all: "At the End of the Mechanical Age".) If you get stuck, bounce around. Read the stories out of sequence. Open the book at random and read sentences like fortunes: "There are twenty-two kinds of fathers, of which only nineteen are important."

Franco Santos says

Espectacular antología de Donald Barthelme. Historias muy experimentales, fragmentadas, simbólicas, reales, que resaltan las verdaderas relaciones humanas. Después de leer *Sixty Stories* ya no me quedan dudas de que Barthelme es uno de mis cuentistas favoritos.

Relatos inolvidables: "A Shower of Gold", "Me and Miss Mandible", "Game", "The Balloon", "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning", "Report", "Views of My Father Weeping", "On Angels", "The Sandman", "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel", "Daumier", "The Party", "A Manual for Sons", "I Bought a Little City", "Rebecca", "The School", "The Leap", "How I Write My Songs" y "Heroes".

Ben Winch says

How can I justify my indifference to Donald Barthelme? I'm not sure I can. No doubt these stories are/were innovative, unique, at times wildly inventive. They're also, for the most part, easy to read, not daunting, but on the other hand not inviting?not to me anyway. For a few weeks I dipped into *60 Stories* with moderate enjoyment, but soon noticed it was my "go to" books in times of distraction, when something more demanding would have tested my fractured concentration. Don't get me wrong, he's charming, clever; some of his ideas, and his ways of approaching them, are great, for what they are. But what are they? To my mind, magazine stories, little pop-art bursts of colour to spice up the lifestyle supplement, things you read over coffee with a shrug and a chuckle and put aside. Nothing wrong with that I suppose, and his influence is certainly widespread (in Australia in the 70s this style was "it" among "experimental" authors, which may account partly for my lack of enthusiasm), but I'd just as soon my *heart* get a workout as well as my mind. Same old criticism from me, I guess, so I'll leave it at that. Absurdist cartoonist par excellence, just nothing to set me on fire.

s.penkevich says

I spent this past summer with Barthelme's Sixty Stories never far from my side as my most recent 'dashboard book'. The stories contained in this hilarious and bizarre collection are rarely more than 5-10pgs in length, making them a perfect companion to turn to whenever you find a few spare moments where you want to simply get-in-and-get-out while still walking away with a headful of ideas to chew on. The stories are as varied as the horizon viewed through a travelling car, often as pretty as the sunset or as gloomy as pouring rain. With strong influences of Samuel Beckett (of whom Barthelme was quick to admit in interviews, saying '*I'm enormously impressed by Beckett. I'm just overwhelmed by Beckett, as Beckett was, I speculate, by Joyce.*' in an interview with Jerome Klinkowitz), Jean-Paul Sartre, Thomas Pynchon and Franz Kafka, Barthelme creates powerful scenes of absurdist black-comedy that both challenge the intellect and tug the heartstrings as his characters play out their sad fates upon the page.

Each story is a breath of fresh air, even from one another. The styles, themes and lexicon of each story vary, often dramatically, illustrating Barthelme's wide linguistic and narrative aptitudes. It would be hard for a reader to not find at least a few stories that seem geared to them, making this collection rather accessible to a large audience. While I greatly enjoyed most of these stories, finding a few filler tales along the way, I feel that some of the ones I disliked aren't necessarily 'bad', but just not for me, whereas another reader might particularly enjoy the ones I did not. Much of the enjoyment comes from being able to deduce what Barthelme is trying to get across; these stories read like an elaborate joke and sometimes a reader won't 'get it' on the first attempt (there were a few that I finished, thought 'what the hell?' and had to carefully go back through). Some of the language and stylistic choices are bewildering, but often they were just the sort of unique postmodernist obfuscation or structure that I really love.

The stories are often strange, surrealistic, and absurd, yet done with just the right amount of flair and subtlety. Barthelme's surrealist narratives seem to be a precursor to more modern types of bizarre fiction, however, Barthelme is never 'weird for the sake of weirdness' and the absurdist qualities of Barthelme feel more dreamlike, where each aberration of normalcy seems to fit right in and it isn't until the dreamer awakes that they notice anything was amiss. Everything is grounded in the theme and overall message of the story, and you will find King Kong as a history professor socializing at a party, an adult stuck in middle school to do a clerical error, a reptilian lesbian confronting the infidelities of her human lover, a city wide balloon and an extraterrestrial president with possible mind-control all read with surprising normalcy.

The comparisons to other great authors, especially the postmodernists like Pynchon, is difficult to avoid in a collection with such a wide range of styles as this one. There are straightforward, 3rd person tales, claustrophobic first person rants, 3rd person rants (occasionally in one, long multi-paged sentence) stories done entirely through dialogue which calls to mind William Gaddis, and a few stories that are more an exploration of an idea, such as the essay-like qualities of *On Angels* that recalls Borges. I've wondered how much of Barthelme that David Foster Wallace read, as the story *Robert Kennedy, Saved From Drowning* read as if it was an early version of DFW's own *Lyndon*. Barthelme's *Mr. Sandman*, in which a man writes a letter to his girlfriend's therapist in a highly self-conscious manner arguing that it is her faults and flaws that he is in love with and of which he does not want tampered with (it is a rather touching story), is another story where DFW was immediately brought to mind. For anyone with a burning love for Wallace as I have, this collection has many examples that will satisfy that particular thirst. There are a surprisingly large amount of touching stories, and an equal amount of comically cynical stories of adultery, failures and frustration with the social structure. It is his cynical side that really gets me, such as the story mocking the Phantom of the Opera, having him an old, pathetic man who's theatrics of appearing and disappearing in a flash annoy his only friend, his constant longings for lost love reduced to mere whines, and the wonderful concluding

sentence of *'until the hot meat of romance is cooled by the dull gravy of common sense'*. Compare that to the way he is able to move from an intellectual inquiry of signs and symbols in *The Balloon* to an extremely moving and romantic final paragraph. Simply put, this guy works pure magic.

For anyone who loves the postmodernists and would like to be moved or posed with an intellectual puzzle in small, bite-sized doses, then this collection is just begging to be added to your bookshelf. The philosophic, emotional and societal investigations are sharp and witty, the humor dark, and the settings surreal. This collection will reinstate your beliefs in the powers of language and literature and you will be pleasantly surprised with what he can do in a short amount of space.

4.5/5 (rounded up)

If you would like to wet your whistle with Barthelme's wit, here are a few stories to try:

The School (often considered one of his best)

Game (for LOST fans, try not to think of the Hatch)

The Balloon

Also, here is an insightful article on 60 Stories from The New York Times: Working Like A Stand-Up Comic

Michael says

I was half way through the book when I realized that these stories serve as a kind of Rorschach Test, always in movement, always mind-boggling, and forever inspiring. Some of the "dialogues" can seem overly long and pedantic, but when it comes to Barthelme, can there be such terms? They seem to be much of the point. As an earlier review mentioned, these short pieces have the tendency to rip your mind to shreds, without any hope for recovery throughout. Many stories in this collection bear the mark of absolute classics, like "The Great Hug", "Me and Miss Mandible", "Views of My Father Weeping" and "Cortes and Montezuma", among a half dozen or so others. Eccentric, horrifying, funny, and highly intelligent, this collection illustrates what an organized madman with an overgrown inner child can achieve with a typewriter.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

The Indeterminacy of the Quotidian

*"Whereof one cannot speak with clarity,
Thereof might one speak with obliquity."*

D. J. Wittgenstein

All is Not Right in Barthelmeland

By the time I'd read the first couple of these 60 stories, I had started to wonder whether something in Barthelmeland was askew, whether something was not quite *"right"*. So the purpose of much of my subsequent reading was to work out the cause. Here is the hypothesis that emerged:

Human beings communicate primarily by language. Language is designed to illuminate the world, so that we can see it, understand it, interact with it, and discuss it with others.

Language consists of words, signs and symbols (including metaphors).

In a semiotic sense, words derive meaning from a social compact about what each word means or signifies: *"We read signs as promises,"* Barthelme writes.

A Single Random Balloon

The arbitrarily chosen word *"balloon"* is supposed to signify a balloon, whatever the specific type or colour of balloon. When somebody uses the word, the listener or reader imagines a balloon (whether or not it is identical to the type or colour of balloon it signifies for the speaker or writer):

"As a single balloon must stand for a lifetime of thinking about balloons, so each citizen expressed, in the attitude he chose, a complex of attitudes." (48)

"The balloon, for the twenty-two days of its existence, offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet." (50)

The difference in signification reflects a degree of tolerance in what society will allow to facilitate clear communication:

"We have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena. It was agreed that since the meaning of balloon could never be known absolutely, extended discussion was pointless..." (47)

Mystery and Darkness

Even within this level of tolerance, there is still scope for lack of clarity, obliquity, misunderstanding, disagreement, mystery and darkness: *"arrangements sometimes slip,...errors are made,...signs are misread..."* There is therefore mystery and darkness in the space or gap or gulf between words, and also between people (cross-eyed, we talk at cross-purposes):

"I'm communicating with you across a vast gulf of ignorance and darkness." (1)

"He had, in point of fact, created a gentle, genial misunderstanding." (362)

Notwithstanding the gulf, people convince themselves that *"[they] have confidence in their ability to take the right steps and to obtain correct answers."* (27)

A Wonderful Sea in Which We Can Swim, Leap or Stumble

Like language, Barthelme writes of behaviour:

"Behaviour in general is a wonderful sea, in which we can swim, or leap, or stumble." (355)

Even though Barthelme writes with the precision of realism, he's fascinated by this gulf, and what happens when people detect it. They don't always take the right steps. Does it make people feel uneasy or

uncomfortable? Is it the source of absurdity, of alienation, of dispute, of aggression, of mental illness?

Dread, Estrangement, Finitude

Barthelme describes the consequences for modern society:

“People today...are hidden away inside themselves, alienated, desperate, living in anguish, despair and bad faith...Man stands alone in a featureless, anonymous landscape, in fear and trembling and sickness unto death. God is dead. Nothingness everywhere. Dread. Estrangement. Finitude.” (8)

He attributes part of the problem to living and working under capitalism (and the social/cultural conditions it engenders):

“Authentic self-determination by individuals is thwarted. The false consciousness created and catered to by mass culture perpetuates ignorance and powerlessness...Bad faith.” (201)

“The thing is you got to go to school, son, and get socialised.” (249)

Authenticity and Irony, Estrangement and Poetry

This is Barthelme's subject matter, but short fiction isn't just his way of diagnosing the problem, it's his way of treating it. He wants to find a way to achieve “*authentic selfhood*” and “*authentic self-determination*”.

Barthelme's interest in authenticity leads him towards the use of irony (which is based on his reading of Kierkegaard):

“Irony deprives the object of its reality when the ironist says something about the object that is not what he means. The object is deprived of its reality by what I've said about it. Irony is thus destructive and what Kierkegaard worries about a lot is that irony has nothing to put in place of what it has destroyed...An irony directed against the whole of existence [rather than a given object] produces, according to Kierkegaard, estrangement and poetry....Irony becomes an infinite absolute negativity. Quote the whole of existence has become alien to the ironic subject unquote.” (158)

Broken Faith

Bad faith can equally be “*broken faith*”. Alienation splits people, and pits one part against another. We end up a vestige of what we once were, even if we weren't wholly known or appreciated by another (or an other):

“I looked at her then to see if I could discover traces of what I had seen in the beginning. There were traces but only traces. Vestiges. Hints of a formerly intact mystery never to be returned to its original wholeness.” (184)

These Minimalist stories reflect the concerns of Post-Modernism, only they never fall victim to the superficial depth of Maximalism, where mere name-dropping of philosophers is supposed to be enough to impress the reader.

B-SIDES & RARITIES

Bad Zombie

[In the Words of Donald Barthelme]

Oh what a pretty lady!
I would be nice to her!
Yes I would! I think so!

Mother/Love

[In the Words of Donald Barthelme]

I went to my
Mother and said,
Mother, I want
To be in love.
And she replied?
She said, me too.

What Did You Just Say?

I do hate fucking
Lawyers, but, you know,
Occasionally,
I have to make a
One-off exception.

I Can't Believe You Were There

[Apologies to Robyn Hitchcock]

I'm friends with a bimbo,
My arms are akimbo,
My mind is in limbo.

But She's a Stranger

[In the Words of Donald Barthelme]

Naked woman
In the next room.
On a couch.
Reclining.
Flowers in her hair.
I've seen one.
In a magazine.

That's Just The Way I Do It! [The Male Gaze]

If both my eyes were open,
I'd perve at all your naughty bits.
With only one eye closed,
I'd focus on your perfect tits.

SOUNDTRACK:

(view spoiler)

Mala says

This collection of stories came highly recommended from a reliable source, but I'm sorry to say, I could only make it through about 10%. Maybe I'm overly traditional, but Barthelme's gimmicks (improper punctuation, garish non-sequiturs, smarty-pants diction) didn't impress me much. Too clever by half. That being said, I know a number of people who would really enjoy his work (i.e. I know a number of people who are better at having fun than me.) The stories are short. Give them a try if you like cotton candy and black coffee and picking off scabs.

MJ Nicholls says

Barthelme is the short story writer for me. I loved these mad, witty, clever but not clever-clever, surreal and speculative stories. Barthelme has a style and range utterly unique to him and uses a fragmented, avant-garde approach to tell his cryptic and weirdly moving stories.

I can't pick a favourite from these. They were dazzling, one and all. Hooray for discovering new writers!

Christopher says

I refuse to review this until you read it or I re-read it. Suffice to say, for now, that this guy knows what's the

story. There are, surprise, 60 stories here. And I thought 3 maybe 4 were misses or fouls. That leaves 56 maybe 57 homers. Some of them barely left the yard but many of them were way, way gone. Why am I continuing with this trite analogy? Perhaps it's because I can't play with the jacks. I am not well.

At the sentence level, Barthelme's ear is phenomenal. At the idea level, he's both accessibly philosophical and very funny.

I could see someone claiming that some of his stuff is just gimmicky and I could see myself telling that someone to go away.

These (mostly) micro-fictions are quality of the first order. Read this thing. Change your life maybe.

(cf. http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_...)

Panagiotis says

Ο Τζ?ναθαν Μπ?ρθελμ τοποθετ?θηκε στον αναγνωστικ? μου δι?βα ως ?να τοτ?μ συγγραφικ?, ?νας ?νθρωπος με εντυπωσιακ?ς ικαν?τητες στην μικρ? φ?ρμα, που ακ?μα μνημονε?εται ως απ? τους μεγάλ?τερους Αμερικ?νους δεξιот?χνες διηγηματογρ?φους. Λ?γο αργ?τερα, ?χοντας στην κατοχ? μου το βιβλ?, ανακ?λυψα πώς ο Μπ?ρθελμ βρ?σκεται σε ?να αφι?ρωμα του Guardian που διαβ?ζω σε δ?σεις εδ? και καιρ? σχετικ? με σημαντικ?ς συγγραφε?ς του διηγ?ματος. Γενικ? ?νιωθα καλ?, ξεκιν?ντας το?τον τον τ?μο που ?πως ξεκ?θαρα λ?ει ο τ?τλος αποτελε?ται απ? εξ?ντα ιστορ?ες. Η εισαγωγ?, ?μως, γρ?γορα με ?βγαλε απ? την πλ?νη μου: τα ιερ? τοτ?μ ?χουν κ?στος, δεν ε?ναι για τους φτωχο?ς σε επιδι?ξεις. Γρ?γορα ?γινε ξεκ?θαρο πώς το βιβλ?ο δεν θα ?ταν περ?πατος.

Οι συγκρ?σεις που τιμο?ν και χαρακτηρ?ζουν τον Μπ?ρθελμ γ?νονται με τον Μπ?κετ, τον Τζ?ις, τον Ναμπ?κοβ - ον?ματα που στο νου μου διαβ?ζουν μ?νο ?ντρες με τραγι?σκα για να πηδ?ξουν νεαρ?ς φοιτ?τριες σε αμερικ?νικα κολλ?για. Ο Μπ?ρθελμ, συνεχ?ζοντας, χαρακτηρ?ζεται ως postmodernist, ?λλοτε ως metafictionist. Γενικ? δημιουργε?ται μια ?ντονη φιλολογ?α γ?ρω απ? το ?φος και τις επιδι?ξεις του Μπ?ρθελμ που αντιστ?κονται σε κ?θε κατηγοριοπο?ηση. Η εισαγωγ? του βιβλ?ου, με ον?ματα και ?ρους που δεν ε?χα ξανακο?σει, με ?ναν αποκαρδιωτικ? γιγ?ντιο αριθμ? στριφν?ν και ?γνωστων λ?ξεων, με ?κανε να νι?θω ηλ?θιος. Σταματο?σα και ξεφ?λλιζα το βιβλ?ου π?ρα πολλ?ς φορ?ς - ?πεφτα π?νω σε παραγρ?φους προσπαθ?ντας να εντοπ?σω τ?χιστα κ?τι που θα με καθησυχ?σει πώς ε?ναι μ?ταιος ο αγ?νας, η μ?χη ?χει χαθε? με το βιβλ?. Δεν μου αρ?σει, ?μως, να αμφιταλαντε?ομαι τ?σο, ?ταν ?χω π?ρει την απ?φαση να δοκιμ?σω ?ναν συγγραφ?. ?λλωστε θεωρε?ται προπ?τορας του Saunders, του οπο?ου οι παλαβι?ρικες και λοξ?ς ιστορ?ες της συλλογ?ς Δεκ?τη Δεκεμβρ?ου με ε?χαν διασκεδ?σει.

Ας μη γελι?μαστε, το βιβλ?ο γρ?γορα αποδε?χτηκε ?τι ε?ναι μια λογοτεχν?α στηριγμ?νη στην παραδοξολογ?α. Οι φων?ς εναλλ?σσονται μεταξ? καθομιλουμ?νης, φαντασιακ?ς και ?λλοτε απρ?σωπης, γραφειοκρατικ?ς. Τα θ?ματ? του δεν ε?ναι ε?κολο να καθοριστο?ν. Η δομ? των ιστορι?ν, οι επιδι?ξεις του - δεν ξ?ρω αν χαρακτηρ?ζονται ιστορ?ες με την συμβατικ? ?ννοια του ?ρου. Δεν γρ?φει καθαρ? μυθοπλασ?α. Ε?ναι σαν ?να κολ?ζ ιστορικ?ν γεγον?των, αποσπασμ?των εγχειριδ?ων. ?λλοτε μπορε? να ε?ναι μια παρ?θεση απ?ψεων π?νω σε θ?ματα δυσερμ?νευτα. ?λλοτε μια κατηγοριοπο?ηση αντικειμ?νων, συνηθει?ν, ?λλοτε ?νας μον?λογος, καμι? φορ? οδηγ?ς εξ?σου παρ?λογες ?σο με την ταυτ?τητα του φανταστικο? παραλ?πτη. Φερ ειπε?ν στο Will You Tell me, ατ?κτως ειρημ?νες παρ?γραφοι με αποπροσανατ?λισαν, σαν χα?δης συρραφ? μιας

δι?γησης. ?νιωσα πως ?πρεπε να ε?μαι προσεκτικ?ς, να διαβ?σω και να β?λω τα κομμ?τια στη σωστ? σειρ?. Δεν φημ?ζομαι για την υπομον? μου, ?μως. Τα The Ballon και The President, με την φων? που περικλε?ει τις αμφιβολ?ες μιας π?λης, μιας χ?ρας, μου θ?μισε π?ρα πολ? Μιλχ?ουζερ.

Η τεχνικ? του Μπ?ρθελμ σε μερικ?ς ιστορ?ες ε?ναι μια καταχ?ρηση αδρ? ? συνδεδεμ?νων μεταξ? τους αφηγημ?των, που ?μως με τον τρ?πο τους δ?νουν ?να αποσπασματικ? χρονογρ?φημα των περιστ?σεων. ?πως για παρ?δειγμα η σκιαγρ?φηση του Προ?δρου των ΗΠΑ μ?σα απ? μικρ?ς στιγμ?ς, διαλ?γους, εξιστορ?σεις τρ?των, αντιδρ?σεις του ?διου σε συνεκτικ?ς σκην?ς, πολλ?ς δ?χως φαινομενικ? καμ?α βαρ?τητα. ? η ?λλη ιστορ?α του, The Indian Uprising, που θεωρε?ται απ? τις πιο σημαντικ?ς του. Ο πρωταγωνιστ?ς εν μ?σω μιας πολιορκ?ας απ? ?ναν εχθρ? που το ?νομ? του παραπ?μπει σε Ινδι?νικη φυλ?, ε?ναι ερωτευμ?νος με μια κοπ?λα. Τον προδ?δει εκε?νον και την πλευρ? του πηγα?νοντας με τους αντιπ?λους. Ε?ναι παιχν?δι, αληθιν? σ?γκρουση; Ο αναγν?στης δεν ε?ναι σ?γουρος τι διαβ?ζει. Δεν ξ?ρει γιατ? το διαβ?ζει, τ? ε?ναι αυτ? που περιμ?νει ο συγγραφ?ας απ? τον αναγν?στη. Οι ιστορ?ες του ?χουν ?ναν μαγνητισμ?, σ?γουρα. Για αρκετ?ς σελ?δες ?νιωθα να μου ασκε?ται μια απροσδι?ριστη γοητε?α που δεν ?χω συναντ?σει σε ?λλα γραπτ?. ?σο ?μως προχωρ?ει το βιβλ?ο ε?ναι σαφ?ς πως ο Μπ?ρθελμ δεν κ?νει απολ?τως τ?ποτα για να ανταμε?ψει τον αναγν?στη του. Πεισματωμ?νος, ιστορ?α μετ? την ιστορ?α, παραμ?νει τυλιγμ?νος με ?να μανδ?α, αποσυρμ?νος στις σκι?ς του. Και δεν φα?νεται να ενδιαφ?ρεται ιδια?τερα για τον περ?γυρο που τον ξεφυλλ?ζει.

Π?ρασα αρκετ?ς σελ?δες. ?χι ?μως τ?σες για να μου ταρ?ξουν τη συνε?δησ? μου. Δι?βασα αρκετ? ?στε το βιβλ?ο να επιτελ?σει το σκοπ? του: να καταλ?βω ποιος ε?ναι ο περ?φημος Μπ?ρθελμ. Και επ?σης να π?ρω ?να πολ?τιμο μ?θημα: μετ? απ? τ?σα χρ?νια, με π?μπολλα διαβ?σματα, σε μια προσπ?θεια να βρω την αναγνωστικ? μου ταυτ?τητα, υπ?ρχουν μικρ?ς, αχαρτογρ?φητες περιοχ?ς που δεν τις ξ?ρω. Η λογοτεχν?α μπορε? να επιτελ?σει κι ?λλους σκοπο?ς π?ραν της συμβατικ?ς απ?λαυσης που προσφ?ρει μια ιστορ?α. Και υπ?ρχει κ?σμος που απολαμβ?νει ?ναν πειραματισμ? στην γραφ? που για εμ?να ε?ναι αινιγματικ?ς. Αυτ? η απροσπ?λαστη περιοχ?, για μια μειοψηφ?α γν?ριμος τ?πος, δ?νει βαθ?τερο ν?ημα σε αυτ? που λ?με γο?στο και προτιμ?σεις.

Dan says

Postmodern humor of a sort that might remind readers of the work of writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon or Robert Coover. Barthelme's fictions are formally experimental, employing unconventional methods of storytelling and frequently depicting unreal situations. Narrators in a few of them are unreliable; in others, narration is completely absent, the "stories" consisting entirely of unattributed dialogue.

Along with stories selected from earlier Barthelme collections such as Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts and Sadness, this volume includes several stories uncollected anywhere else. Highlights include a story about a balloon settling down on New York City, another telling of an ascent up a glass mountain, a "Manual for Sons" describing different types of fathers, and a retelling of Balzac's Eugénie Grandet.

Carl says

Here's an odd coincidence: Carl, that's me, finishes reading The Beetle Leg by John Hawkes and then immediately picks up Sixty Stories by Donald Barthelme. The first story contains a character named Carl

who talks about being a fan of The Beetle Leg by John Hawkes.

Sarah Smith says

Sometimes I feel like a huge misfit writing fiction. I have some language-level obsession that doesn't always translate very well into "shit happening," which, let's face it, is crucial to a story. I think I always put more elbow grease into sentences and images, and particular cadences that please me. All of which is my roundabout way of praising Don Barthelme for writing stories that hit the aforementioned balls out of the park. Take heart, poets attempting to write fiction. The stories in this book will show you some fantastic possibilities.

By the way: collected works volumes are heartless, but they are economical. You may as well have it all in one place. Take your fucking vitamins.

Sofia says

Borges for depressed people.
