



Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme

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When Donald Barthelme died at the age of 58, he was perhaps the most imitated (if not emulated) practitioner of American literature. Caustic, slyly observant, transgressive, verbally scintillating, Barthelme's essays, stories, and novels redefined a generation of American letters and remain unparalleled for the way they capture our national pastimes and obsessions, but most of all for the way they capture the strangeness of life.

Not-Knowing amounts to the posthumous manifesto of one of our premier literary modernists. Here are Barthelme's thoughts on writing (his own and others); his observations on art, architecture, film, and city life; interviews, including two never previously published; and meditations on everything from Superman III to the art of rendering "Melancholy Baby" on jazz banjolele. This is a rich and eclectic selection of work by the man Robert Coover has called "one of the great citizens of contemporary world letters."

Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme Details

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Erik says

Excellent for anyone interested in the creative process. What it is and what it isn't.

Steve Juras says

Title essay is worth price of admission.

Mark says

David Lynch, my favorite film director, has this irritating (to me) habit--especially these days--of refusing to discuss his creative process. As a man whose films have crept farther and farther into the left field of cinema, it's certainly not necessary, but would certainly be appreciated (again, by me), if Lynch would be more forthcoming about what it means to him to make a movie. I'm not saying I want him to tell us what his films "mean," and I agree with his reluctance to ascribe meaning of any sort to even one scene in, say, *Inland Empire*, because to do so could easily damage the fragile, magical atmosphere in which his films exist. But an earnest discussion of the filmmaking process itself would not be unappreciated, dammit.

Which brings me to Donald Barthelme and, more specifically, this book. Barthelme's fiction is among the strangest I've read, and although I wouldn't necessarily put his work in the same storytelling category as Lynch's, there are similarities (the apparent non sequitur, the incident that could be interpreted as either funny or horrifying [or both], the wicked satire of "normal" American life, the startlingly original use of language, the influence of jazz, etc.). Yet, unlike Lynch, Barthelme was entirely willing to discuss his work, often in detail.

No doubt this willingness is linked to Barthelme's work as a professor of creative writing. The process of creation interested him, and his serious engagement with the work of his students provided him with a rich vocabulary for discussing the nuts and bolts of storytelling.

The two most important pieces in this collection are "After Joyce" (1963), written near the beginning of Barthelme's writing career, and "Not-Knowing" (1982), written five years before he died. Together they frame Barthelme's aesthetic approach to fiction. And the interviews, which take up the last third of the book, provide fascinating insights into Barthelme's process of writing as well as his literary intentions. They also present a man deeply informed in literature, politics, and culture to an almost intimidating degree. He was not unlike Nabokov in this way (whose own interviews were often as much informal discourses on a wide range of subjects as they were a discussion of his work).

The reason I give this book three stars, however, is for the other two-thirds of the book, which contains many of Barthelme's "Notes and Comment" articles for the *New Yorker*, a few of his movie reviews, his essays on art, and other miscellaneous nonfiction pieces. None of them are bad, of course (this is Barthelme, after all), but few of them really grabbed me. Perhaps some of this has to do with the venue, and with timing. Had I encountered them in their original form in magazines, at the time in which they were published, I am certain

I would have considered them to be the best things I read in those magazines. Now, however, they are chiefly interesting as archival pieces.

Keith says

The interviews are almost maddeningly unedited. The reviews of then-current movies are frustrating in their lack of topicality. But the early and uncollected nonfiction and fiction in this make the whole thing worthwhile.

Miguel says

to-read

Jonathan says

The two-essay opening salvo alone is worth the price of admission, a kind of career-bookending manifesto that encapsulates as much of the Barthelme aesthetic -- if there was such a thing -- in its gentle shifts and contradictions as it does in its consistencies.

But something tells me the interviews'll be what I go back to again and again. The loosely chronological sequencing provides a type of time-capsule evidence that above all else Barthelme was an enthusiast: his zest for art, philosophy, literature, life seems only to grow as the decades pass.

Dan says

Brings much of Barthelme's non-fiction work together in one book. Includes short essays written for the New Yorker about living in New York City, film reviews, commentaries on contemporary politics, discussions of architecture and art (including Barthelme's contributions to catalogs produced for exhibitions of work by visual artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Sherrie Levine). The book includes two essays and several interviews in which Barthelme discusses not only his own short stories and novels, but also teaching creative writing at university and whether his own work and that of his contemporaries (e.g. William Gass, Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon) should be termed "postmodernism" or "metafiction."

??x Nestelieiev says

His interviews - amazing;
After Joyce and Not-Knowing - great;
Here in the Village - funny;
Reviews, comments, and observations - dreck;
On art - same dreck but shorter :)

Kevin says

The essays "After Joyce" and "Not-Knowing" that kick-off this collection are a delight. Also delightful are the collection of Barthelme *New Yorker* excerpts from what I assume was the era's equivalent of the "Shouts and Murmurs" section. I particularly enjoyed the interviews at the end, some of which were a bit inartfully conducted, but most provided great insight into Barthelme's conversational style and thoughts on writing and his own work. I'm a huge fan of Barthelme's short stories, and I found him pretty charming and brilliant. Most of the reviews in this collection were not of interest--I did not know their source material. There's a pretty funny review of Superman III ("Earth Angel") written as a Barthelme dialogue. It's odd to read reviews from a man who's been dead for most of life, who I sometimes think about as having died in the 60s or 70s instead of 1989, talking about young actors who are still working today (a fault of the reader, to be sure). There is one unfortunate incidence of jive-talk in a *New Yorker* piece, but otherwise I didn't find anything repellent.

The essays and interviews really are precious for any fan and anyone who thinks about the world of literature. Barthelme laments the trend in publishing houses (more alive today than it was then) of trying to make bank rather than art. He also celebrates throughout the notion of human artistic achievement, claiming that if a computer were to ever crack the code and create art palatable to humans, humans would move the goalposts and make art *more* challenging or inaccessible. One of Barthelme's central arguments is that there's great pleasure to be had in not knowing, and there's a precision in art's ability to evade being known and yet still be compelling. There's no way I could do him justice. If you are a fan, you'll love this. The reviews are a novelty, but perhaps too dated to really enjoy.

Tom says

Not the most amazing book of essays and interviews or anything, but it gets four stars from me on the strength of the titular essay alone. Something that continually gets me charged up about the seemingly ossified possibilities of fiction every time I read it.

Lobstergirl says

I always got Donald Barthelme confused with his brother, Frederick Barthelme, and Donald Antrim (no relation). It didn't help that they all wrote for the *New Yorker*, which also has about five hundred writers named Ian writing for them (none of them any relation to Donald, Frederick, or Donald, that I know of).

So when I picked up this book of nonfiction work, I had no idea whether I had read any of Donald's fiction (no). Regardless, it's almost always irresistible when writers discuss the nuts and bolts of writing. For example, "Rhythm is important, and it's one of the things you notice about student work. Very often students don't, in the beginning, understand that their sentences are supposed to have certain rhythms and that the rhythms are part of the texture of the story. It's hard to teach, something that's more a knack than directly teachable. But it's central, it's a factor in every sentence, and you have to insist on it, remember to insist on it."

That's from an interview, of which there are several printed here.

Roe: Is the new generation of writers more concerned than their predecessors with politics, economics, and social class? [The question is being asked in 1988.]

Barthelme: I think there are lowered expectations, not aesthetic expectations for the work, but lowered expectations in terms of life. My generation, perhaps foolishly, expected, even demanded, that life be wonderful and magical and then tried to make it so by writing in a rather complex way. It seems now quite an eccentric demand.

There are also many short pieces from the *New Yorker* and a few other publications: book reviews, film reviews, thoughts. In spite of directing the Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston for two years, Barthelme's art criticism isn't all that interesting or insightful. (I found this to be the case with Susan Sontag's writing about painting, too.) I liked his film criticism (he filled in at the *New Yorker* for six weeks for a portion of Pauline Kael's sabbatical) and his book reviews. There's a witty takedown of a John Kenneth Galbraith novel. His summary of *Love and Bullets* sent me rushing to the Youtube, where I was not disappointed in this Charles Bronson, Rod Steiger, and Jill Ireland thriller, though Ireland's series of platinum wigs, and then her real hair, if that's what it was, affronted.

Kate says

"He had seen people smile and thought he knew how it was done."

"The not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made."

"We cannot dwell in the done-for."

"What is Nondiscernible today may be Painfully Obvious tomorrow."

"Charm, as Goethe said, is the dead green bug on the golden leaf of occasion."

Jake Regan says

There's an amazing 30+ page transcription of a conversation between Barthelme, William H. Gass, Grace Paley, and Walker Percy. 'Nuff said.
