INTRODUCTION

John Barth

(1930-)

John Barth, one of the most influential American writers of the so-called postmodernist era, was born on May 27, 1930, in Cambridge, Maryland, to John Jacob and Georgia Simmons Barth. After finishing high school, he attended the Juilliard School of Music and then enrolled in The Johns Hopkins University in 1947, pursuing a degree in journalism. By the time he was a junior, however, because of the influence of one of his professors, he decided to become a teacher and a fiction writer instead. Barth was married to Harriette Anne Strickland in 1950 and received his bachelor's degree in creative writing the following year. By 1952, he had completed his master's degree at Johns Hopkins and had begun his doctoral work there. In 1953, he left Johns Hopkins because of lack of funds and took a teaching position in the English department at The Pennsylvania State University.

The years from 1955 to 1960 are perhaps the most important ones in John Barth's career, for during that time he published *The Floating Opera* (which was nominated for the National Book Award in 1956), *The End of the Road,* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and he began work on *Giles Goat-Boy*. Although Barth's first two novels are basically realistic works, they contain the seeds of the satiric element that began to dominate his writing with the publication of his second two novels. Both *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy* are broad, picaresque works that seem more within the tradition of the eighteenth century novels of Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, and Henry Fielding than the modern tradition. Yet what makes these sprawling satires distinctly modern is their self-conscious erudition and concern with the processes of fiction.

In 1967 and 1968, Barth made his alignment with the postmodernist focus on fiction as a self-reflexive art form more explicit. First, he published a controversial essay in *The Atlantic Monthly* titled "The Literature of Exhaustion," which urged more of the kind of self-conscious experimentation being practiced by the South American writer Jorge Luis Borges. (Many misinterpreted the essay, insisting that Barth argues that fiction writers have "run out" of subjects for their work.) Second, Barth turned from the novel to the short story, publishing *Lost in the Funhouse*, an experimental collection whose stories do not adhere to their so-called proper subject--the external world--and instead continually turn the reader's attention back to what Barth considered their real subject: the process of fiction-making. The four fictional works published after *Lost in the Funhouse* are similarly focused on their own narrative structure and methods.

Barth's approach to fiction has been summarized quite pointedly in the essays that appear in his collection of occasional pieces entitled *The Friday Book*; there he asserts that the novelist is like God and

God is like a novelist, for the universe itself is like a novel. This notion that the novel is not simply a view of a world but rather a world itself is a common theme of postmodern fiction, for which Barth is now the best-known practitioner and advocate.

Barth's most admired storyteller is the heroine of *A Thousand and One Nights* (c.1450), Scheherazade, to whom he pays homage most directly in a novella in his work *Chimera*. Yet Barth has been fascinated with mythical figures at least since 1964, when, while he was working on *Giles Goat-Boy*, he discovered such studies of myth as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Since that time, Barth's fiction has been self-consciously concerned with the primal elements that makeup the universe of story.

Barth insists that the prosaic in fiction is there only to be transformed into fabulation. For Barth, the artist's ostensible subject is not the main point, rather, it is only an excuse or raw material for focusing on the nature of the fiction-making process. Great literature, says Barth, is almost always, regardless of how it appears, about itself. Barth is one of the most important writers in the late twentieth century. Perhaps more than any other American writer since World War II, he has made fiction intensely conscious of itself, aware of its traditions and aware of the conventions that make it possible. If, as the main currents of modern thought suggest, reality itself is the result of fiction-making processes, then John Barth is truly a writer concerned with the essential nature of *what is real*. [And yet his fiction is so artificial it is *very unreal*. Italics added. M.H.]

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