

## 50 QUOTATIONS



Donald Barthelme

(1931-1989)

Donald Barthelme was an older flower child in the 1960s who became a disillusioned, cynically humorous Postmodern writer in the intellectual Expressionist tradition of Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Nathanael West, Samuel Beckett, and Thomas Pynchon. His usual mode is a form of abstract collage and may be compared to surrealist painting. He assembles fragments. After he got published in the *New Yorker* he became very influential among readers of the *New Yorker* and the primary model for other story writers who wanted to get published in the *New Yorker*. David Foster Wallace said he was first inspired to become a writer by Barthelme, though eventually he turned against the common pose of cynical ironic detachment characteristic of Barthelme, Pynchon, and Barth. Barthelme embodies many of the typical traits of elite Postmodernism: He writes as a rootless, hip, cosmopolitan, secular liberal in New York--alienated, solipsistic, cerebral and interested primarily in his own style. His brother Frederick Barthelme is a Minimalist with an opposite style.

ORDER OF TOPICS: urbanity, design, art, abstract Expressionism, utopianism, disillusionment, politics, publishing, style, Postmodern writing, mechanical creative process, reading, Postmodernism, Postmodern women, metaphysics, death:

### URBANITY

I don't think I'm a Texas writer in the sense that, say, Larry McMurtry is. I don't write about Texas.... That I've lived in New York for the last ten years (except for a year in Europe) does not mean that I don't also enjoy Texas.

### DESIGN

I enjoy editing and enjoy doing layout—problems of design. I could very cheerfully be a typographer.

### ART

Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art.

The principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century in all media.

New York City is or can be regarded as a collage.

#### ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

The son manque was eight feet tall and wore a serape woven out of two hundred transistor radios, all turned on and turned to different stations.

I was trying to make fiction that was like certain kinds of modern painting [like Gertrude Stein]. You know, tending toward the abstract. But it's really very dicey in fiction because if you get too abstract it just looks like fog, for example.

I am never needlessly obscure—I am needfully obscure, when I am obscure.

You do cut out some readers by idiosyncrasies of form. I regret this.

#### UTOPIANISM

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.

#### DISILLUSIONMENT

There are only individual egos, crazy for love.

#### POLITICS

[Favorite comedian?] The government.

I haven't seen a government I liked yet.

Did you experience a disillusionment-event?

Black folks are damaged more by lousy economic policy than by racism.

I say that government was attempting to conceal its original errors under layers of new errors.

#### PUBLISHING

To say that the publishing world is not interested in literature is to overstate it. They are extremely interested in it, they just don't want to publish it, you see.

I think fewer people are reading. This has something to do with television and much to do, I think, with the fact that publishers are flooding the market with junk novels.

#### STYLE

[Why write the way you do?] Because Samuel Beckett was already writing the way he does.

#### POSTMODERN WRITING

Nothing gives me more pleasure than speaking about that which I do not know.

What I am interested in is the ugly sentence that is also somehow beautiful.

I do a lot of failing and that keeps me interested.

As a raw youth, I was very interested in jazz. Similarly I now listen to rock constantly. In writing I pay a great deal of attention to rhythm, but I suppose everyone else does too. I'm very interested in awkwardness: sentences that are awkward in a particular way. As to "deeper cultural sources," I have taken a certain degree of nourishment (or stolen a lot) from the phenomenologists: Sartre, Erwin Straus, etc.

All I want is just a trace of skeleton—three bones from which the rest may be reasoned out.

I am always working on a novel. But they always seem to fall apart in my hands.

New York, June 24 (A&P)-- Donald Barthelme, 41-year-old writer and well-known pragmatist, said today that he no longer trusted fragments. He added that although he had once been "very fond" of fragments, he had found them to be "finally untrustworthy." The author, looking tense and drawn after "considerable thought," made his dramatic announcement at a Sixth Avenue laundromat press conference, from which the press was excluded. Sources close to the soap machine said, however, that the agonizing reappraisal, which took place before their eyes, required only four minutes. "Fragments fall apart a lot," Barthelme said.... TRUST "MISPLACED," AUTHOR DECLARES.... DISCUSSED DECISION WITH DAUGHTER, SIX.... WILL SEEK "WHOLE" IN THE FUTURE, HE SAYS

The Twentieth Century staggers toward its close in a blizzard of one-liners.

And skepticism, although absolutely necessary, leads to not very much.

Probably I have missed the point of the literature business entirely.

#### MECHANICAL CREATIVE PROCESS

When computers learn how to make jokes, artists will be in serious trouble.

The supply of strange ideas is not endless.

We are all engaged in looting the past.

#### READING

Joyce's book [*Finnegans Wake*] works its radicalizing will upon all men in all countries, even upon those who do not read it and never will read it.... Writers borrow Joyce's myth-patterning or stream-of-consciousness and regard *Wake* as a monument or an obsession, in any case something that does not have to be repeated.

[Favorite writers]: Among the writers of the past, I'd list Rabelais, Rimbaud, Kleist, Kafka, Stein, and Flann O'Brien. Among living writers, Beckett, Gass, Percy, Marquez, Barth, Pynchon, Kenneth Koch, John Asberry, Grace Paley.

I have trouble reading, in these days. I would rather drink, talk, or listen to music.

#### POSTMODERNISM

Difficult nowadays to find a point of view kinky enough to call one's own.

He wouldn't know what to do with a moral if handed one by the archangel Michael on a flaming sword.

The present goal of the individual in group enterprises is to avoid dominance; leadership is felt to be a character disorder.

Self-criticism sessions were held, but these produced more criticism than could usefully be absorbed or accommodated.

## POSTMODERN WOMEN

The affair ran its usual course. Fever, boredom, trapped.

All just to ease this wrinkle in the groin. It seems a high price.

I went to the plain girl fair out Route 22 figuring I could get one if I just put on a kind face.

She set out Ralphward, and I, Maudeward, the glow of hope not yet extinguished.

“Tom,” she said, “you are not Ralph, but you are all that is around at the moment....and that is why I have decided to marry you, temporarily...and when Ralph comes, or Maude nods, then our arrangement will automatically self-destruct, like the tinted bubble that it is.

“And do you, Anne,” the minister said, “promise to make whatever mutually satisfactory accommodations necessary to reduce tensions and arrive at whatever previously agreed-upon goals both parties have harmoniously set in the appropriate planning sessions?”

After the explanation came the divorce.

Who among us is not thinking about divorce, except for a few tiny-minded stick-in-the-muds who don't count?

## METAPHYSICS

God was standing in the basement reading the meters to see how much grace had been used up in the month of June. Grace is electricity, science has found, it is not *like* electricity, it *is* electricity.

God interested only in grace—keeping things humming. Blackouts, brownouts, temporary dimmings of household illumination all portents not of Divine displeasure, but of Divine indifference to executive-development programs at middle-management levels. He likes to get out into the field Himself, she said. With His flashlight. He is doing the best He can.

## DEATH

There was no particular point at which I stopped being promising.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from  
“Donald Barthelme,” interviewed by Jerome Klinkowitz  
*The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*  
Joe David Bellamy (U Illinois, 1974)

Other quotations are excerpted from separate interviews by  
Tracy Daugherty, and by Charles Ruas and Judith Sherman

