

COMMENTARY

“Lost in the Funhouse” (1967)



John Barth

(1930-)

For my first ten years as a published writer I found the short story an uncongenial, constipative genre, and did not work in it. But at about age thirty-five, having written a pair of short novels (*The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*) and a pair of very long ones (*The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*), I commenced what was to turn out to be a seven-year exploration of alternatives to long printed narratives. The issue was another pair of books: *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), a series of fourteen short fictions for print, tape, and live voice; and *Chimera* (1972), a series of three novellas. My interest in electronic tape was a passing one, but my conversion to the shorter forms was so complete that I have come to find it almost impossible to read any new fiction longer than fifty pages. If I am in fact just now writing another “novel” it is out of a kind of perversity, so quixotic does that enterprise seem to me at this hour of the world....

The story “Lost in the Funhouse” was written for print, and occurs midway through the series of which it is the title story. I meant it to look back--at the narrator Ambrose’s earlier youth, at the earlier “Ambrose” stories in the series, and at some classical manners and concerns of the conventional realist-illusionist short story--and also “forward,” to some less conventional narrative matters and concerns as well as to some future, more mythic avatars of the narrator. Finally, I meant it to be accessible, entertaining, perhaps moving; for I have no use for merely cerebral inventions, merely formalistic tours de force, and the place and time--tidewater Maryland, World War Two time--are pungent in my memory. In short, my choice for this anthology, like the story itself, is partly sentimental.

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