



Forty Stories

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Ever since Donald Barthelme's first story appeared in THE NEW YORKER in 1963, he has been in the forefront of the so-called postmodernist movement in fiction, especially as it affects short fiction. Readers accustomed to more traditional short stories, however, will find the brief antiplot, anticharacter, antidenouement pieces of Barthelme tough going indeed, maybe even not worth the effort.

Barthelme's primary method is satire of the contemporary cultural scene. Because so much of that scene centers on the language of commercial media, much of Barthelme's satire focuses on how language has been used up and become trash or dreck. An author who once had a character say, "Fragments are the only forms I trust," Barthelme in this collection presents forty such fragments, many of which are only two or three pages long. The subjects of his satire include modern advertising, big business, politics, religion, popular culture, cinema, education, and family life. His characters include a pirate named Captain Blood, a beautiful woman who has been struck by lightning, Sinbad, Johann von Goethe, Bluebeard, Lev Tolstoy, and a wrangler wrangling porcupines toward the university. His plots, because they are nonexistent, at least in any traditional sense, are not so easy to summarize.

For Barthelme, human reality is made up of the various signs with which we communicate; thus there is nothing for him to write about but this one central subject, and there is no tone possible to take toward it but an ironic and satiric one. Many readers may feel that Barthelme's tone has become a monotone, however, for without a sense of story to involve the reader or a sense of character with which to identify, his pieces all begin to blend together in an indistinguishable mass. Increasingly, Barthelme's fiction seems self-parody, with nothing to feed upon but itself.

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