

The National Memorial

John Barth Jr.

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This poignant literary thriller explores the issue of mob mentality in the modern age.

The word “orphan” calls to mind urchins from Victorian English novels or, more recently, little orphan Annie. It seems an outdated term, but John Barth Jr.’s epic novel, *The National Memorial*, makes the subject of parentless children compellingly and discomfortingly contemporary. This poignant literary thriller explores such themes as the humane treatment of people, the mob mentality, the escalation of conflict, and the duration of love.

When idealistic Henry, with his views of justice and humanitarianism, sets out to turn some disused college buildings in small-town Maine into a children’s home, he encounters aid from a local teacher named Susan and her son Justin. Most of the working-class locals, however, dislike outsiders and change. Buoyed by shoddy reporting and rumors, they begin a campaign to drive the do-gooder out. Will they succeed or will brotherly love prevail?

Henry, as well as Susan and her children, are well-rounded characters with complex motives. While they all wish to give people the benefit of the doubt, they recognize that not everyone shares their altruism. Even so, they persevere in the construction of the children’s home despite repeated harassment from suspicious townspeople.

The antagonists associate anything new with tragedies that occurred in the past, whether these connections are warranted or not. In his characterization of the opposition, Barth brilliantly depicts the tendency of the human mind to make such linkages. One of Susan’s friends avers, “Hypocrisy and ignorance *do* facilitate ... selfishness ... and malice.” Although the author pits the insincerity of the masses starkly against the goodwill of the protagonists, one can feel the antagonists’ fear as it motivates their increasingly harmful actions. While their terror does not make the resisters likable, it humanizes them, thereby making them hard to completely hate.

The book’s sentences are quite long and some come across a trifle maudlin, such as this concluding sentence to a paragraph about the hard lives of parentless children: “Who could not see this [unfortunate situation] and cry out: Let us now have justice for the little ones!” Fortunately, though, the author’s poetic word choice and accurate descriptors of everything from trains to the minds of working-class men make this prose worthwhile.

The cyclical nature of the locals’ mounting resistance and Henry persevering despite it builds suspense and adds a certain rhythm to the book, similar to the way Barth describes the comings and goings of the seasons. This ambitious novel will find its home on bookshelves of history lovers and anyone who enjoys reading about the larger repercussions of scandal.

JILL ALLEN (July 29, 2015)

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