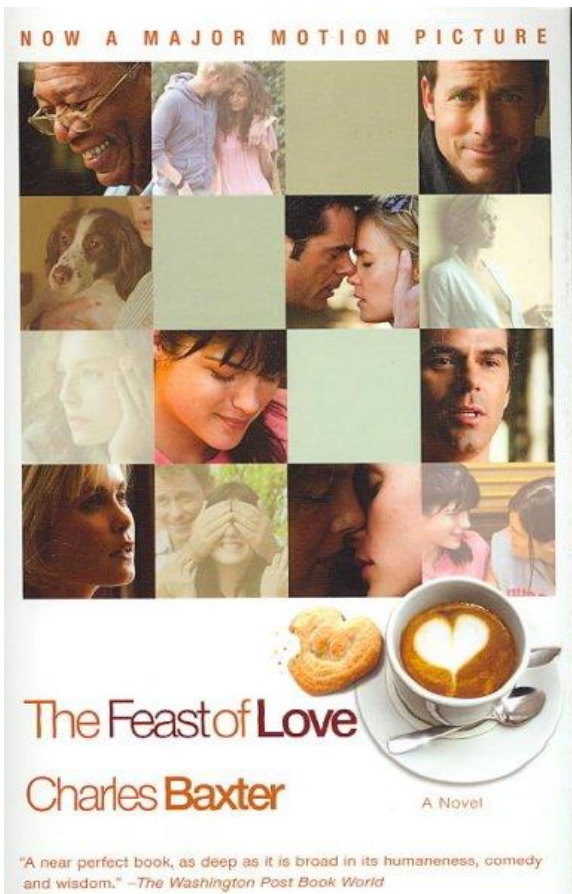


## About the book...



In a re-imagined *Midsummer Night's Dream*, men and women speak of and desire their ideal mates; parents seek out their lost children; adult children try to come to terms with their own parents and, in some cases, find new ones. In vignettes both comic and sexy, the owner of a coffee shop recalls the day his first wife seemed to achieve a moment of simple perfection, while she remembers the women's softball game during which she was stricken by the beauty of the shortstop. A young couple spends hours at the coffee shop fueling the idea of their fierce love. A professor of philosophy, stopping by for a cup of coffee, makes a valiant attempt to explain what he knows to be the inexplicable workings of the human heart.

## About the author



Charles Baxter is the author, most recently, of *The Soul Thief*, published in February, 2008, by Pantheon, and of *Saul and Patsy*, published in 2003 by Pantheon. His previous novel, *The Feast of Love* (Pantheon/Vintage), was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2000 and has been made into a film by Robert Benton, starring Morgan Freeman. Charles Baxter has published two other novels, *First Light* and *Shadow Play*, and four books of stories, most recently *Believers*.

Charles Baxter has also published essays on fiction collected in *Burning Down the House*, and *Beyond Plot*, and has edited or co-edited three books of essays, *The Business of Memory*, *Bringing the Devil to His Knees*, and *A William Maxwell Portrait*. Charles Baxter's book of poems, *Imaginary Paintings*, was published by Paris Review Editions.

Charles Baxter also edited *Best New American Voices 2001* (Harcourt) and was the judge for the Bakeless Prize in Fiction in 2004. He has received the Award of Merit in the Short Story and the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Prix St. Valentine in France, and the Catalan Booksellers' Association Award for book of the year in Spain. He was born in Minneapolis in 1947, graduated from Macalester College with a B.A. degree in 1969, and the State University of New York at Buffalo with a Ph.D. in 1974, and lived for many years in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he taught at the University of Michigan.

Charles Baxter now lives in Minneapolis and is currently the Edelstein-Keller Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Minnesota. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Harper's*, among other journals and magazines. Charles Baxter's fiction has been widely anthologized and translated into many languages.

## **Awards**

New York Times Notable Book, 2000

National Book Award in Fiction finalist, 2000

## **Reviews**

*The New York Times Book Review*

"Extraordinary.... *The Feast of Love* is as precise, as empathetic, as luminous as any of Baxter's past work. It is also rich, juicy, laugh-out-loud funny and completely engrossing....As loose and supple as life itself."

*Washington Post Book World*

"I had scarcely read twenty pages of Charles Baxter's superb new novel — a near perfect book, as deep as it is broad in its humaneness, comedy and wisdom — when I began to worry I couldn't do it justice in a review....If there is any justice, this new novel will win him the wider fame and readership he deserves."

*Publishers Weekly*

"[A] buoyant, eloquent and touching narrative....Some magical things seem to happen...but the true magic in this luminous book is the seemingly effortless ebb and flow of the author's clear-sighted yet deeply poetic vision."

*Booklist*

Late one midsummer night, insomniac Charlie roams his neighborhood near the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He encounters his neighbor Bradley out walking his dog, also named Bradley. Bradley insists that Charlie's latest book should consist of people's stories, actual people who have stories and need somebody to listen. "Everybody's got a story, and we'll just start telling you the stories we have." And so the book (within the book), a collection of raucous and entertaining stories, begins with Bradley's tale

of a nearly perfect day with his former wife Kathryn, who found her fulfillment not with Bradley but with a shortstop on the women's softball team. Kathryn tells her story, as does Bradley's second wife, Diana, who left him to go back to her once-secret lover, David. For Cloe and Oscar, teenage employees at Bradley's coffee shop, there seems to be only boundless, energetic, transforming love for each other. Baxter, author of six previous works of fiction, does a great job writing in the voices of both genders and various ages.

## **Literary Criticism**

Title: THE FEAST OF LOVE

Source: *Publishers Weekly*. 247.10 (Mar. 6, 2000): p79. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Book review, Brief article

CHARLES BAXTER. Pantheon, \$24 (320p) ISBN 0-375-41019-8

Baxter (First Light, Harmony of the World, Believers) has for too long been a writer's writer whose books have enjoyed more admirers than sales. Pantheon appears confident that his new novel can be his breakout work. It certainly deserves to be. In a buoyant, eloquent and touching narrative, Baxter breaks rules blithely as he goes along, and the reader's only possible response is to realize how absurd rules can be, Baxter begins, for example, as himself, the author, waking in the middle of the night and going

out onto the predawn streets of Ann Arbor (where Baxter in fact lives). Meeting a neighbor, Bradley Smith, with his dog, also called Bradley, he is told the first of the spellbinding stories of love--erotic, wistful, anxious, settled, ecstatic and perverse--that make up the book, woven seamlessly together so they form a virtuosic ensemble performance. The small cast includes Bradley, who runs the local coffee shop called Jitters; Diana, a tough-minded lawyer and customer he unwisely marries after the breakup of his first marriage to dog-phobic Kathryn; Diana's dangerous lover, David; Chloe and Oscar, two much-pierced punksters who are also Jitters people and who enjoy the kind of sensual passion older people warn will never last, but that for them lasts beyond the grave; Oscar's evil and lustful dad; philosophy professor Ginsberg, who pines for his missing and beloved son, Aaron; and Margaret, the black emergency room doctor with whom Bradley eventually finds a kind of peace. The action takes place over an extended period, but such is the magic of Baxter's telling that it seems to be occurring in the author's mind on that one heady midsummer night. His special gift is to catch the exact pitch of a dozen voices in an astutely observed group of contemporary men and women, yet retain an authorial presence capable of the most exquisite shadings of emotion and passion, longing and regret. Some magical things

seem to happen, even in Ann Arbor, but the true magic in this luminous book is the seemingly effortless eb and flow of the author's clear-sighted yet deeply poetic vision. 30,000 first printing; 10-city author tour. (May)

### **Source Citation**

"THE FEAST OF LOVE." *Publishers Weekly* 247.10 (2000): 79. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 18 July 2011.

### **Discussion questions**

1. As the book opens, the character Charles Baxter leaves his house for a walk in the middle of the night. As he passes an antique mirror at the foot of the stairs, he describes the mirror as "glimmerless," a word he has used to describe himself [p. 4]. What does he mean by this? At the end of the novel, as dawn arrives, he tells us that "all the voices have died out in my head. I've been emptied out. . . . My glimmerlessness has abated, it seems, at least for the moment" [p. 307]. What is the real Charles Baxter suggesting about the role of the author in *The Feast of Love*?
2. Does Baxter's decision to give the job of narration over to the characters themselves create a stronger sense of realism in the novel? Does it offer a greater possibility for revelation from the characters? What is the effect of this narrative technique on the reading experience?
3. Does Bradley become more interesting as the novel

unfolds? Kathryn says of him, "He turned himself into the greatest abstraction" [p. 34]. His neighbor Harry Ginsberg says, "He seemed to be living far down inside himself, perhaps in a secret passageway connected to his heart" [p. 75], while Diana says, "What a midwesterner he was, a thoroughly unhip guy with his heart in the usual place, on the sleeve, in plain sight. He was uninteresting and genuine, sweet-tempered and dependable, the sort of man who will stabilize your pulse rather than make it race" [p. 140]. Which, if any, of these insights is closest to the truth?

4. The novel takes its title from a beautiful, light-filled painting that Bradley has made and hidden in his basement. When Esther Ginsberg asks him why there are no people in the painting, Bradley answers, "Because . . . no one's ever allowed to go there. You can see it but you can't reach it" [p. 81]. Does the fact that Bradley has been able to paint such a powerful image suggest that he is closer to attaining it than he thinks?

5. Why does Chloé go to see Mrs. Maggaroulian, the psychic? Is the fortune-teller's presence in the novel related to Harry Ginsberg's belief that "the unexpected is always upon us" [pp. 290, 302]? How might this belief change the way one chooses to live?

6. What are Diana's motivations for marrying Bradley? Does her reasoning process [p. 138] seem plausible, or is it the result of desperation and self-deception? Is Diana, at the outset, the least likable character in the novel? How does she manage to work her way into the reader's

affections?

7. Bradley is a person who baffles himself. He says, "I need a detective who could snoop around in my life and then tell me the solution to the mystery that I have yet to define, and the crime that created it" [p. 106]. Why, if his first wife Kathryn has a profound fear of dogs, does he take her to visit a dog pound? Why, if his second wife Diana is afraid of open spaces, does he take her to the wide skies and watery horizons of Michigan's Upper Peninsula? Why does he often act in ways that will compromise his happiness? Is Bradley like most people in this unfortunate tendency?

8. The characters often define themselves in strikingly economical statements. For instance, Diana says, "I lack usable tenderness and I don't have a shred of kindness, but I'm not a villain and never have been" [p. 258]; and Bradley says, "My inner life lacks dignity" [p. 58]. Do the characters in this novel display an unusual degree of insight and self-knowledge? Are some more perceptive about themselves than others?

9. In his description of the shopping mall in which Jitters is located, Bradley remarks, "The ion content in the oxygen has been tampered with by people trying to save money by giving you less oxygen to breathe. You get light-headed and desperate to shop. . . . Don't get me wrong: I believe in business and profit" [p. 110]. In what ways is Bradley not a typical businessman? How does Jitters differ from a



café such as Starbucks? What observations does the novel make about America's consumer-driven culture?

10. Throughout literature (for example, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*), the traditional boy-meets-girl plot is complicated by the presence of a father or parents who refuse to sanction the union of the lovers. Can Oscar's father be seen in this traditional role--as a potential threat to the happiness of Chloé and Oscar? Or does he represent something far more threatening and evil? What is his effect on the latter part of the novel?

11. Harry Ginsberg tells Bradley about a poem his mother used to recite, about a dragon with a rubber nose. "This dragon would erase all the signs in town at night. During the day, no one would know where to go or what to buy. No signs anywhere. Posters gone, information gone. . . . A world without signs of any kind. . . . Very curious. I often think about that poem" [p. 88]. Bradley takes up the idea, and begins to draw pictures of the dragon. How does the parable of the dragon resonate with some of the larger questions and ideas in the novel?

12. Speaking of Oscar, Chloé says, "Words violate him. And me, Chloé, I'm even more that way. There's almost no point in me saying anything about myself because the words will all be inhuman and brutally inaccurate. So no matter what I say, there's no profit in it" [p. 63]. Does Chloé underestimate her own talent for self-expression? Do her sections of the narrative belie her opinion about the uselessness of words?

13. How would you characterize Chloé's unique brand of intelligence? What are her strengths as a person? Is it likely that she will survive the loss of Oscar, and the challenge of single parenting, without any diminishment of her spirit?

14. Chloé believes that she once saw Jesus at a party; she also believes in karma and similar forms of spiritual justice. Harry Ginsberg, a scholar of the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, remarks, "The problem with love and God . . . is how to say anything about them that doesn't annihilate them instantly with wrong words, with untruth. . . . We feel both, but because we cannot speak clearly about them, we end up--wordless, inarticulate--by denying their existence altogether, and pfffffft, they die" [p. 77]. Why do questions of spirituality and the meaning of human existence play such a major role in *The Feast of Love*?

15. In *The Feast of Love*, is sex an accurate gauge of the state of two people's emotional relationship to each other? If sex is an expression of Chloé and Oscar's joy in each other, does it make sense that they attempt to use it to make some sorely needed money? Is it puritanical to assume that they are making a mistake? Why are they ill suited for the pornography business?

16. Based on what happens in *The Feast of Love*, would you assume that the author believes that love is necessary for happiness? Although they begin the novel mismatched, Bradley, Kathryn, and Diana eventually all find themselves with the partners they truly desire. Is it surprising that the

novel offers so many happy endings? How does the tragedy of Oscar's death fit in with the better fortunes of the other characters? Why has Baxter chosen to quote Prokofiev

## **Multimedia**

"Feast of Love" (Film)

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1305946>

## **Read-Alikes** (NoveList and What Do I Read Next?)

*Sister Water* by Nancy Willard

As Jessie Woolman copes with her odd memory lapses during the waning days of her life, her daughters face transitions of their own--including the marriage of Martha's child and the tragic death of Ellen's husband.

*The Thin Place* by Kathryn Davis

Discovering a dead body at a lake near the Canadian border, twelve-year-old Mees Kipp brings the man back to life and realizes that she possesses an extraordinary gift that irrevocably shapes the lives of Mees and her two friends.

*Blue Angel: A Novel* by Francine Prose

An ironic look at modern academia offers the chronicle of the trials and tribulations of Swenson, a frustrated college

professor who finds that Angela Argo, a post-punk, oft-pierced student, has a brilliant writing talent.

*Central Square* by George Packer

When Joe is mistaken for African, rather than African American, he realizes that letting the illusion stand opens up a whole new world.

*The Human Stain* by Philip Roth

A college professor with a sexual indiscretion in his past is hounded from his job by academic enemies who label him a racist.

## **Watch-Alikes:**

*Manhattan*

Unhappy in his career as a variety show comedy writer and newly divorced from a woman who has since come out as a lesbian, Isaac Davis (Woody Allen) affles between two relationships: that with emotionally honest and open, but far too young, Tracy (Mariel Hemingway in an Academy Award nominated performance) and with pseudo-intellectual, neurotic Mary (Diane Keaton). Allen uses these two women to contrast the naiveté and lack of pretension of youth with the growing cynicism of middle age.

*The Spanish Apartment*

Xavier (Romain Duris), a wayward 25-year-old French guy, is encouraged by his father's friend to study Spanish and Economics--these skills will ensure his lucrative future, and since Xavier doesn't have much keeping him in Paris, other

than his hippie mother and possessive girlfriend, he flies to Barcelona to participate in a study abroad program. Upon his arrival, Xavier meets a gregarious Parisian and his laconic but beautiful wife. Initially, Xavier rejects their friendship, but the couple bails him out when he cannot find an apartment, inviting him stay on their couch. Frantic to find his own lodgings, he interviews with an eclectic group of fellow exchange students, whose are from all over Western Europe. They find Xavier to be a suitable roommate, and the fun begins as the apartment becomes a hub of international activity. Xavier begins to shed his waywardness, becoming increasingly comfortable with his passions and pursuits. Set in the magnificence of Barcelona, the film is a nostalgic travelogue through Xavier's youthful and anxious wanderings.

### **Activities**

Out of inspiration of Chloe and Oscar's amusing videotaping experience, use a camcorder to film the reading group meeting. Act natural, as though the camera were not there. Then afterwards rewatch the meeting as a group. This could be either funny or eye opening- it all depends on the group!



*Ann Arbor District Library*