

Author breathes humor into jumbled letters

By KEVIN HARDEN
Of the Emerald

John Barth waved another flash card in the air. "Reset," he said, drawing laughter from the audience. He continued his soliloquy on "Letters", his latest venture in fiction.

It is a sad, strange and confusing story of a young man whose suspected lineage goes back to Napoleon Bonaparte's brother. He is trying to program an obsolete computer (of the vacuum-tube type, Barth ex-

plained) to write the great American novel. The five-year project, appropriately called NOVEL, has fizzled in the third, or "V" year. Instead of an historic novel, the ancient computer has printed a jumble of numbers, throwing the young Bonaparte descendant into a state of confusion and wonder at the meaning of it all.

Somehow, through some twist of fictional fate supplied by the author, this bewildered character, in his efforts to decode the suspected message, begins to think of himself as nothing more

than a giant insect. "If nature were to evolve us all into insects," Barth humorously pointed out in his explanation of the story, "we would probably resemble some sort of realistic literature, probably of the epistolary style." Another plug for this forthcoming book.

Barth, speaking on campus Wednesday night as the annual Henry Failing guest lecturer, is a respected author-educator and currently professor of English and creative writing at the Johns Hopkins University of Baltimore, Md.

Considered by some literary critics to be a brilliantly inventive writer of contemporary American seriocomic fiction, Barth has been compared to such writers as Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding and James Joyce. Some have placed him in the "black humorist" category, but he rejects that, saying those writers dramatize while he muses.

Barth's writing has been called "pure folly" and "blitheringly sophomoric." Book World Magazine, reviewing his 1968 novel, "Lost in the Funhouse", said it contained "bushels of junk...but pinnacles of wit."

He has written six novels, from "The Floating Opera" (1956), inspired by a river boat that operated near his childhood home in Maryland, to "Chimera" (1972), a collection of three novellas based loosely on Arabic and Greco-Roman lore and intertwined with such modern topics as women's liberation, ecology and hallucinogenic drugs. He received the National Book Award in fiction in 1973.

Barth's first aspiration was to music. He played the drums in his Maryland High School band and went on to enroll in the Juilliard School of Music in New

York. Leaving Juilliard, he went to Johns Hopkins University to study journalism. He served on the faculties at Pennsylvania State University and at the State University of New York, Buffalo, before returning to Johns Hopkins to teach in 1973.

"I don't see myself with a Doctorate of Letters," Barth said, opening his presentation. "I like to think of myself as more of a doctor of letters."

Reading from the manuscript of his latest work, a book-length fiction in the form of letters, Barth explained that the form of his new novel has been considered dead since it gained fame and then faded in the 18th Century. "But I shall take it in my province as a doctor of letters to breathe life into the phenomenon once again," he said.

The number seven plays an important part in the novel. There are seven correspondents writing seven letters each, the action spans seven months and takes place in 1969 and contains references to the Bicentennial, seven years in the future. It also concerns three wars, the Vietnam war, the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.

While Barth admitted to being preoccupied with ancient Greek heroes, "Letters" is relatively modern and deals with "the role of letters in the history of history." "Novels, god help us, practice an impure art and we should practice it to the fullest," he said.

The characters of "Letters", Barth explained, are "fictitious and without any life at all." "I've never drawn any characters from real life," he says. "As a writer of fiction I see it as a medieval cruelty to those poor characters to take them from real life."

Barth continued to read from his manuscript and occasionally held a flash card in the air with the word "marganayfael", unfortunately the only word poor Bonaparte's computer can spell. "A beefy anagram of monstrous proportion," exclaimed one character to the insect-man trying to decipher the message. More reading and more flash cards bore symbols to enhance the narrative.

Finally, the end was near. The characters began to tire of the computer's silly game and quietly slipped away exclaiming, "Leave him alone with his jumbled letters."



John Barth

Farmers seek legality for aliens

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Western farmers say the way to solve the illegal alien problem is to make it legal for foreign labor to come into this country.

But labor leaders oppose it, especially a return to the so-called Bracero program of World War II, when the war effort dried up the U.S. labor pool. An estimated five million Mexican nationals came into the United States under the Bracero program before it was scrapped in 1964. Most were employed on California farms.

"We vehemently oppose any reimposition of the Bracero program," said Marc Warren, press spokesman for United Farm Workers president Cesar Chavez.

"The Bracero program was a synonym for slave labor," says the Chavez spokesman. "It was just one incident of abuse, mistreatment and broken promises after another."

Organized labor leaders feel the same way.

"We worked for about 10 years to get rid of the old one and we're not anxious to get it reinstated," said Kenneth Meiklejohn. He's an AFL-CIO lobbyist who represents organized labor on Capitol Hill.

Another key issue in the alien problem is criminal or civil sanctions against farmers who use illegal aliens, the Idaho Statesman said.

Vernon Clinton, chairer of a committee of the Sprinkler Irrigators of Idaho Association, said a new Bracero program is the only answer to the Idaho farm Oregon Daily Emerald

labor problem.

"What we should do to solve the problem is first of all recognize we have certain areas of work that our own citizens will not do," said Clinton.

One is moving sprinkler pipe. Thousands of illegal Mexican aliens are employed for that task

in Idaho, Clinton said.

His group spent \$12,000 trying to enlist sprinkler pipe movers.

"We proved to our satisfaction that we could not get Americans to do this job," he said. But labor leaders say the problem isn't people to do the job; it's what they get for it.

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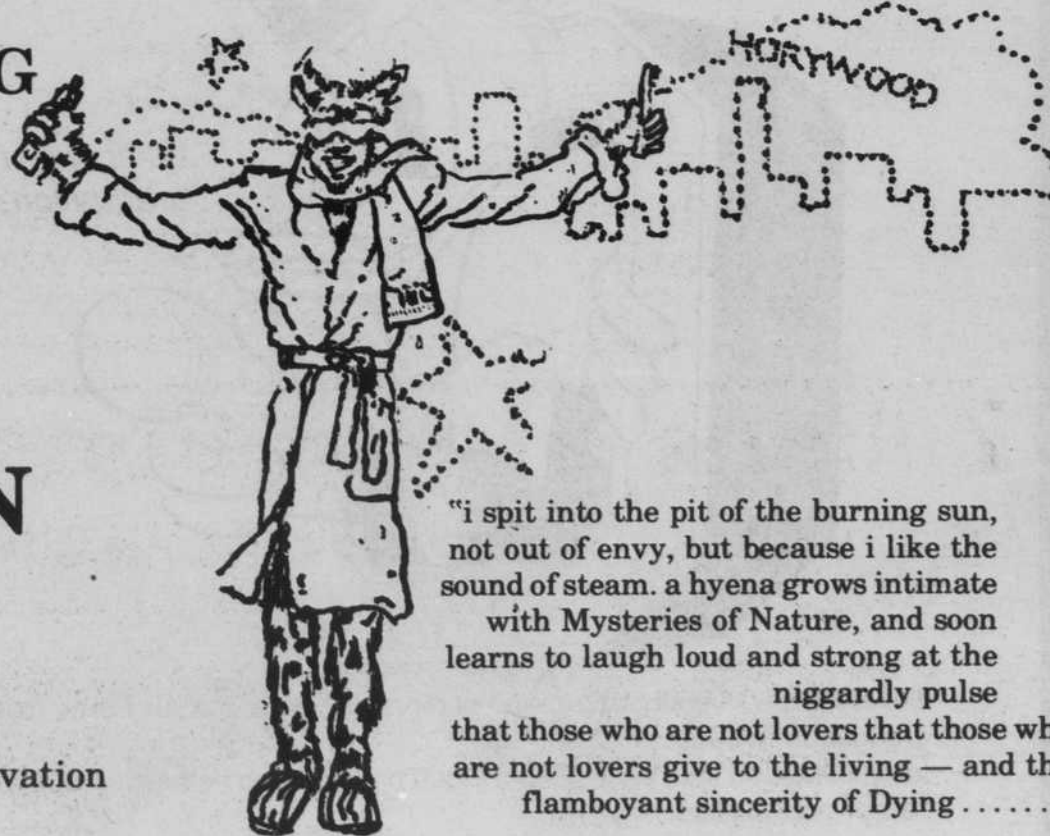
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