



The School

Donald Barthelme , Steven Polansky (Foreword)

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When I knew him, Barthelme was in his early forties. He died in 1989, at the age of 58. "The School," which appeared first in the 1976 collection, *Amateurs*, is one of Barthelme's more accessible stories. To describe it is to sound ridiculous: a very funny story about death and the negation of meaning, and the only story ever written, by anyone, in which a resurrected gerbil is the bringer of hope. - Steven Polansky, Author of *Dating Miss Universe: Nine Stories*

About the Author: Donald Barthelme published seventeen books, including four novels and a prize-winning children's book. He was a longtime contributor to *The New Yorker*, winner of the National Book Award, a director of PEN and the Authors Guild, and a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He died in July of 1989.

About the Guest Editor: Steven Polansky was born in New York City. He was educated at Wesleyan, Hollins, and Princeton. He has taught at St. Olaf College, Macalester, and the University of Minnesota. His short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Glimmer Train*, *Best American Short Stories*, *New England Review*, and *Minnesota Monthly*. He has published two books: *The Bradbury Report*, a novel, and a book of short stories, *Dating Miss Universe*, which won the Sandstone Prize and the Minnesota Book Award. He has a wife, two sons, and a daughter. He lives in Wisconsin.

About the Publisher: Electric Literature is an independent publisher amplifying the power of storytelling through digital innovation. Electric Literature's weekly fiction magazine, *Recommended Reading*, invites established authors, indie presses, and literary magazines to recommend great fiction. Once a month we feature our own recommendation of original, previously unpublished fiction.

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From Reader Review The School for online ebook

Glenn Russell says

The School by Donald Barthelme is one of the most loved of all pieces of postmodern short fiction. I certainly enjoyed reading and composing my write-up. Here goes:

Bad News in the Land of Plenty: Edgar the elementary school teacher starts by informing us, "Well, we had all these children out planting trees, see, because we figured that . . . that was part of their education, to see how, you know, the root systems . . . and also the sense of responsibility taking care of things, being individually responsible. You know what I mean. And the trees all died." Sounds like Edgar is a well-meaning and sweet sort of guy but all that hesitation and "you know" speaks to how Edgar has a basic lack of self-confidence, especially when things begin to go wrong.

More Bad News: Edgar goes on to tell us how, before the trees, the children's snakes died, probably because the school boiler was shut off during a teacher's strike. And then the herb gardens all died, probably because of overwatering by overly conscientious kids or maybe because of sabotage. Sabotage! So now Edgar and the school have to deal with the prospect of death caused deliberately and maybe even by one or some of the children. In this way, the stakes are raised. Poor sweet, well-meaning Edgar. I bet he never expected to deal with this kind of nasty issue when he decided to become an elementary school teacher.

The Wheel of Life and Death: After the gerbils die, the mice die, the salamander dies, the tropical fish dies, even the puppy one of the children found under a truck on day dies after the children keep it for two weeks, Edgar and his class are face to face with the reality of death. Not easy, particularly in a culture where the subject of death is taboo. The Buddha suggested the practice of going down to the river to watch corpses of the dead burn on the fires for a week, repeating: "One day that will be me; one day that will be me." By such practice, a person directly experiences the ever-present reality of death and comes to appreciate the wisdom in the aphorism: "Life without death isn't life but self-preservation." Unfortunately, in modern society where death is a taboo, death and dying happen at a remove from the eyes of the living, so, when people are directly confronted by death and forced to respond, the experience can come as something of a shock.

Kim from Korea: Through the "Help the Children" program, Edgar's class adopts a Korean orphan named Kim. Shortly thereafter, the class receives a letter explaining how Kim died but the cause of Kim's death is not stated. This is the first human death the class has to deal with. No question, the grim reaper is moving in even closer. But, for me, the tone of Edgar's language here gives the impression that Kim's death, since he is both an orphan and from Korea, isn't quite as tragic had Kim been, like the children in class, American and had a family. Perhaps Donald Barthelme is making the tacit observation that for Americans, people in Third World countries simply don't count as much.

Bad Luck: Edgar thinks the school simply is having a run of bad luck. And the bad luck continues with the deaths of many parents by heart attack, drowning, car crashes and two suicides. Two suicides! No comment from Edgar on the cause or circumstances involving the suicides or the children's reaction to a parent's suicide. This strikes me as quite strange, glossing over the suicides of children's parents and then immediately moving on to note how grandparents have been dropped like flies. Actually, in terms of grandparents, as we all know, this is the predictable turning of the wheel. But remaining silent on the details of those two suicides. Goodness!

Tragedy: As Aristotle observed, we feel deeply and profoundly the tragedy of an individual's life cut short when we know that person personally. Two boys from his class, Matthew Wein and Tony Mavrogordo, are crushed under wooden beams that collapsed at a local construction site. Yet Edgar rather breezily remarks how the parents are investigating negligence and "It's been a strange year." For me, I sense Edgar is a rather decent chap but when it comes down to it, the guy lacks depth of emotion and feeling. Again, Donald Barthelme might be making a general statement about late twentieth century American society, how we are so cut off from our emotions and feelings that even when confronted by the tragic death of two children we know personally, we simply shrug our shoulders and carry on. And, if these tragedies aren't enough, the kicker is Edgar's off-the-hand remark about how Billy Brandt's father was killed, knifed by a masked intruder in his own home. Again, the perplexing tone of Edgar's words, as if such an event is really nothing special, just another bit of bad luck.

The Showdown: The children come to class. They demand answers. What happened to all the animals? To Kim? To parents and grandparents? Teacher Edgar is placed on the spot. A philosophical discussion ensues followed by a plea that Edgar make love to Helen, the assistant teacher in the room. Helen walks up to Edgar and embraces him. Edgar, in turn, kisses her a few times on the brow. The children become excited. There's a knock on the door. Edgar opens the door and the new gerbil walks in. The children cheer wildly.

An entire essay could be written about the concluding short paragraph of this story, however my observation here is simply to mention how absolutely rare it is to have such a public display of affection and intimacy, two teachers embracing and tender kisses on the forehead. Such is the reality of school: all the necessary skills taught, skills like reading, writing and arithmetic but very little, if anything, on those dimensions that give real depth to our lives, things like coming to grips with the reality of death and the yearning we all have for affection, tenderness and intimacy with others.

Coda: Some years ago I was part of *Group Motion*, a Friday night Philadelphia dance improv group wherein we would always dance for two hours with gentle, affectionate touching, occasional tender embracing and much heartfelt eye contact. At the conclusion we'd all sit in a circle and share our experience. I recall one dancer commenting: "It's amazing how we can actually get away with these Friday nights." Of course this comment is spot-on since the *Group Motion* experience is so contrary to the general way people interact in public. Truly ironic, even tragic, since we all yearn for tenderness, affection and making more than a superficial contact with others. I suspect the absence of such tenderness and affection is a major reason why people turn to heavy drinking and other numbing remedies.

Link to full text of *The School* by Donald Barthelme: <http://www.npr.org/programs/death/rea...>

Ilse says

[I did read a review of someone

Hannah Brooks says

Disturbing, interesting and funny. This is the first short story I've read by Barthelme and I think I will seek out more of his work. for a 3 page story this was simply delightful.

Lafcadio says

A new gerbil. Just in time.

Maryam ElHawary says

And they said, is death that which gives meaning to life? And I said no, life is that which gives meaning to life.

Emer says

A peculiar little short that left me with a lot of questions yet a weird sense of contentment too...

Can be read [HERE](#)

three stars

Rainey says

I don't think I particularly care for Barthelme. There were so many opportunities for this story to conclude in a spectacular way. Instead, it concluded with a confusing implication of doubt. I've never been very good with postmodernity...

Alisa Cupcakeland says

I liked the easy-going style of the story at the beginning of the story, it felt casual. Sadly, this all changes when little kids start talking not only like adults, but as pretentious adults trying too hard to sound all deep and philosophical until the point they suggest to their teacher a sex demonstration. What started as a sad yet intriguing story ended up becoming something quite disturbing.

◆ Kati ◆ says

Well that was delightfully dark and peculiar little read.

Thomas says

When you review a three page story, saying anything about the plot would spoil it. "The School" centers on the deaths and lives that take place within a single classroom, and Donald Barthelme uses magical realism and absurdity to make us think about the greater implications of his humorous and off-putting plot. Every word within this piece propels it forward toward its confusing yet fitting conclusion. Would recommend to those interested in thinking about why every word or phrase within a story matters and to those who enjoy a little bit of weirdness in their fiction.

Mia (Parentheses Enthusiast) says

This tiny little story has a lovely, optimistic theme, and the laid-back writing style really works in small doses, reading like a transcribed excerpt from a casual conversation. However, as pleasant as the rest was, the ending came far too abruptly and the children suddenly started speaking like computers or eighty-year-old philosophy professors. I don't much like surrealism.

Then again, I'm not quite convinced that anybody *really* likes surrealism.

Read it here.

(And, if you were left baffled, as I was, at whatever the ending was supposed to represent, this short analysis might help you make sense of it.)

Toka says

[illegible]

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Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Ivana de B. says

Quite good!

Yoda says

Disturbing but yet interesting, I enjoyed the writing style.
