

The Brooklyn Follies

by Paul Auster

About the Book

Nathan Glass has come to Brooklyn to die. Divorced, retired, estranged from his only daughter, the former life insurance salesman seeks only solitude and anonymity. Then Glass encounters his long-lost nephew, Tom Wood, who is working in a local bookstore--a far cry from the brilliant academic career Tom had begun when Nathan saw him last. Tom's boss is the colorful and charismatic Harry Brightman--a.k.a. Harry Dunkel--once the owner of a Chicago art gallery, whom fate has also brought to the "ancient kingdom of Brooklyn, New York." Through Tom and Harry, Nathan's world gradually broadens to include a new circle of acquaintances. He soon finds himself drawn into a scam involving a forged page of *The Scarlet Letter*, and begins to undertake his own literary venture, *The Book of Human Folly*, an account of "every blunder, every pratfall, every embarrassment, every idiocy, every foible, and every inane act I have committed during my long and checkered career as a man."

Praise for the Book

"As fate has its way with his irresistible characters, the sorcerer-like Auster rhapsodizes about nature, orchestrates unlikely love affairs and hilarious conversations, and considers such extreme experiences as a life in pornography and marriage to a tyrannical religious fanatic. . . . This addition to his increasingly tender cycle of love songs to Brooklyn is his most down-to-earth, sensuous, and socially conscious novel to date."

—*Booklist*

"Probably the first authentic attempt to deal with the post-September 11 world . . . It is a multilayered tapestry, with whimsical chapter headings and Dickensian depth."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Is there a contemporary American novelist who believes more in the transporting, transformative power of story? No way."

—*Detroit Free Press*

"*The Brooklyn Follies* is Auster at the top of his game. . . . His words are slinky and supple; his characters sing off the page. . . . Auster's meditation on happiness and encroaching age ripens each page into mellow fruitfulness. This superb novel about human folly turns out to be tremendously wise."

—*New Statesman*

Courtesy of Macmillan

About the Author

Title: Paul Auster

American Writer (1947 -)

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Personal Information:

Born February 3, 1947, in Newark, NJ; son of Samuel and Queenie Auster; married Lydia Davis (a writer), October 6, 1974 (divorced, 1979); married Siri Hustvedt (a writer), June 16, 1981; children: (first marriage) Daniel; (second marriage) Sophie. Education: Columbia University, B.A., 1969, M.A., 1970. Memberships: PEN, American Academy of Arts and Letters. Addresses: Home: Brooklyn, NY. Agent: Carol Mann Agency, 55 5th Ave., New York, NY 10003-4301.

Career:

Poet, novelist, translator, and critic. Worked variously as a merchant seaman, census taker, tutor, telephone operator for Paris bureau of *New York Times*, and caretaker of farmhouse in Provence, France. Teacher in creative writing, Princeton University, 1986-90. Director of short film *Blue in the Face*, Miramax, 1994.

Awards:

Poetry grant, Ingram Merrill Foundation, 1975 and 1982; PEN Translation Center grant, 1977; National Endowment for the Arts fellowship for poetry, 1979, and for creative writing, 1985; Morton Dauwen Zabel Award, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, 1990; PEN/ Faulkner Award nomination, 1991, for *The Music of Chance*; Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, 1993; Prix Medicis for foreign literature, 1993, for *Leviathan*; Independent Spirit Award, 1996; Prince of Asturias Award for Letters (Spain), 2006.

Writings:

"THE NEW YORK TRILOGY" NOVELS

- *City of Glass* (also see below), Sun & Moon Press (Los Angeles, CA), 1985, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Ghosts* (also see below), Sun & Moon Press (Los Angeles, CA), 1986.
- *The Locked Room* (also see below), Sun & Moon Press (Los Angeles, CA), 1987.
- *The New York Trilogy* (contains *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room*), Penguin (New York, NY), 1990.

Novels

- *In the Country of Last Things*, Viking (New York, NY), 1987.
- *Moon Palace*, Viking (New York, NY), 1989.
- *The Music of Chance*, Viking (New York, NY), 1990.
- *Leviathan*, Viking (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Mr. Vertigo*, Viking (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Timbuktu*, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 1999.
- (With Sophie Calle) *Double Game*, Violette (London, England), 2000.
- *The Book of Illusions*, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Oracle Night*, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Auggie Wren's Christmas Story*, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2004.
- *The Brooklyn Follies*, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Faber and Faber (New York, NY), 2006.
- *The Man in Dark*, Henry Holt & Company (New York, NY), 2008.

Poems

- *Unearth: Poems, 1970-1972*, Living Hand (Stanfordville, NY), 1974.
- *Wall Writing: Poems, 1971-1975*, Figures (Berkeley, CA), 1976.
- *Fragments from Cold*, Parenthese (Brewster, NY), 1977.
- *Facing the Music*, Station Hill (Barrytown, NY), 1980.
- *Disappearances: Selected Poems*, Overlook Press (Woodstock, NY), 1988.
- *Collected Poems*, Overlook Press (Woodstock, NY), 2004.

Screenplays

- *Smoke and Blue in the Face: Two Screenplays* (both produced by Miramax, 1995; also see below), Hyperion/Miramax Books (New York, NY), 1995.
- (And director) *Lulu on the Bridge: A Film* (also see below), Henry Holt (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Three Films: Smoke, Blue in the Face, and Lulu on the Bridge*, Picador (New York, NY), 2004.
- *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*, 2007.

Plays

- *Eclipse*, produced in New York, NY, 1977.

Nonfiction

- *White Spaces*, Station Hill (Barrytown, NY), 1980.
- *The Invention of Solitude* (memoir), SUN (New York, NY), 1982.
- *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews*, Sun & Moon Press (Los Angeles, CA), 1991.
- *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Faber (London, England), 1995, published as *The Red Notebook: True Stories*, New Directions (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Why Write?*, Burning Deck (Providence, RI), 1996.
- *Paul Auster's New York*, foreword by Luc Sante, photographs by Frieder Blickle, Holt (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure*, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 1997.
- (And author of introduction) *I Thought My Father Was God and Other True Stories*, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2001.
- *The Story of My Typewriter*, illustrated by Sam Messer, D.A.P. (New York, NY), 2002.
- (Author of introduction) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twenty Days with Julian and Little Bunny by Papa*, New York Review Books (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Collected Prose: Autobiographical Writings, True Stories, Critical Essays, Prefaces, and Collaborations with Artists*, Faber and Faber (London, England), 2003.
- (With John Baldesarri) *Yours in Food, John Baldessari*, Princeton Architectural Press (New York, NY), 2004.
- *The Intervention of Solitude*, Penguin (New York, NY), 2007.

Translator

- *A Little Anthology of Surrealist Poems*, Siamese Banana Press (New York, NY), 1972.
- Jacques Dupin, *Fits and Starts: Selected Poems*, Living Hand (Stanfordville, NY), 1974.
- (With Lydia Davis) Saul Friedlander and Mahmoud Hussein, *Arabs and Israelis: A Dialogue*, Holmes & Meier (New York, NY), 1975.
- Andre de Bouchet, *The Uninhabited: Selected Poems*, Living Hand (Stanfordville, NY), 1976.
- (With Lydia Davis) Jean-Paul Sartre, *Life Situations*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 1978.
- (With Lydia Davis) Jean Chesneaux, *China: The People's Republic*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 1979.
- (With Lydia Davis) Jean Chesneaux and others, *China from the 1911 Revolution to Liberation*, Pantheon (New York, NY), 1979.

- Stephane Mallarme, *A Tomb for Anatole*, North Point Press (New York, NY), 1983, New Directions (New York, NY), 2005.
- Maurice Blanchot, *Vicious Circles*, Station Hill (Barrytown, NY), 1985.
- Philippe Petit, *On the High Wire*, Random House (New York, NY), 1985.
- (With Margit Rowell) Joan Miro, *Selected Writings*, G.K. Hall (Boston, MA), 1986.
- (With Stephen Romer and David Shapiro) Jacques Dupin, *Jacques Dupin: Selected Poems*, Wake Forest University Press (Winston-Salem, NC), 1992.
- (With Lydia Davis and Robert Lambertson) Maurice Blanchot, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, edited by George Quasha, Station Hill/ Barrytown (Barrytown, NY), 1999.
- *The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert: A Selection*, New York Review Books (New York, NY), 2005.

Editor

- *Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry*, Random House (New York, NY), 1982.
- (And translator) Joseph Joubert, *The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert: A Selection*, North Point Press (Berkeley, CA), 1983.
- (With J. Legueil) *Und Jabes: Hommage*, Legueil (Paris, France), 1994.
- (With Gerard de Cortanze) *La Solitude du labyrinthe: Essais et entretiens* (title means "The Solitude of the Labyrinth: Essays and Conversations"), Actes Sud (Paris, France), 1997.
- Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition, Grove Press (New York, NY), 2006.

Other

- Contributor of articles and translations of poetry to magazines, including *New York Times Book Review*, *Art News*, *Poetry*, *New York Review of Books*, *Harper's*, and *Saturday Review*.

Media Adaptations:

The Music of Chance was made into the 1993 film of the same title, directed by Philip Haas and starring James Spader and Mandy Patinkin; the film rights to *Mr. Vertigo* were purchased by Miramax, 1994; *In the Country of Last Things* was adapted for a feature film, 2007; *City of Glass* was adapted into a comic book by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, Avon Books, 1993.

Sidelights

"Paul Auster's books are dominated by the twin themes of chance and mortality and revolve around writers, even drawing on himself," as London *Guardian* contributor James Campbell noted. "Writing is a potent strength in the world created by Auster. His characters constantly stress the force of the word set free." The author of over a dozen critically-acclaimed works of fiction, numerous nonfiction books, and a translator, editor, screenplay writer, and poet of note, Auster is a contemporary American Renaissance man, though his work is often more valued abroad than in his native country. Winner of Spain's Prince of Asturias Award for Letters in 2006, Auster won high praise from Victor Garcia de la Concha, president of the prize organizer's committee, as reported in *CBC Arts Online*: "With his exploration of new areas of reality, Auster has been able to attract young readers by giving an aesthetically valuable testimony of the individual and collective problems of our times." In works from his postmodern noir series, "The New York Trilogy," to later works including *The Music of Chance*, *The Book of Illusions*, *Oracle Night*, and the 2006 title *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Auster has continued to explore inner realities and outer truths, as well as the role of chance in modern life, while employing his major trope of a protagonist-writer--many times Auster himself--whose created fictions bleed out into reality.

Auster "is one of our most intellectually stimulating fiction writers," observed reviewer Joseph Coates in the *Chicago Tribune*. Coates went on to note, however, that initially Auster's "reputation outside a small cult is based on a fuzzy perception that he is some sort of genre writer (mysteries? science fiction?) with cryptic pretensions." The perception of Auster as a genre writer has been due in part to the manner in which he entered the publishing world. For years he labored in relative obscurity as a poet, essayist, and translator of French literature; many of those years he lived in France. Then, in the mid-1980s, he began to attract serious critical attention with "The New York Trilogy," a trio of postmodern detective novels. Appreciation for Auster's mysteries built slowly at first. A grim and intellectually puzzling mystery, *The City of Glass*, the first book in the trilogy, was rejected by seventeen different publishers. Nevertheless, when Sun & Moon Press finally issued the novel in 1985, it attracted far more notice than Auster's earlier work and generated considerable interest in the remaining two projected volumes. Completed in 1987, the trilogy raised Auster's visibility and marked him as a talent to watch. From critics such as Toronto *Globe and Mail* contributor Margaret Cannon, he began to draw the highest praise: "As a novelist, Paul Auster has gone beyond excellence and given the phrase 'experimental fiction' a good name," Cannon wrote, adding that the novelist "has created bona fide literary works, with all the rigor and intellect demanded of contemporary literature."

Auster's dark vision emerged in "The New York Trilogy's" first novel, *City of Glass*. On the surface, it appears to exploit the conventions of the detective genre. "The real mystery, however, is one of confused character identity," suggested *New York Times Book Review* contributor Toby Olson, "the descent of a writer into a labyrinth in which fact and fiction become increasingly difficult to separate." The novel opens when Quinn, a pseudonymous detective novelist, receives a phone call intended for a real detective (whose name we will later learn is Paul Auster). Lonely and bored, Quinn takes on

Auster's identity and accepts the case. His job is to trail a newly-released mental patient and once-brilliant linguist named Stillman, who had been committed for isolating his son in a locked room for nine years. Now Stillman's son's life is in danger, and so "Auster" is hired.

Critical response to *City of Glass* was highly enthusiastic. "*City of Glass* is about the degeneration of language, the shiftings of identity, the struggle to remain human in a great metropolis, when the city itself is cranking on its own falling-apart mechanical life that completely overrides any and every individual," noted *Los Angeles Times Book Review* critic Carolyn See. She deemed the book "an experimental novel that wanders and digresses and loses its own narrative thread, but with all that ... thoughtfully and cleverly draws our attention to these questions of self." The way the novel subtly shifts from a standard mystery story to an existential quest for identity also captured Olson's attention in the *New York Times Book Review*: "Each detail, each small revelation must be attended to as significant. And such attention brings ambiguity, confusion, and paranoia. Is it important that Quinn's dead son has the same name as Stillman? What can it mean that 'Quinn' rhymes with 'twin' and 'sin'?" As Canon put it, "This is a novel that's full of intellectual puzzles, not all of them resolved." Despite its challenges, Olson believed that "the book is a pleasure to read, full of suspense and action."

In *Ghosts*, the second volume of the trilogy, Auster continues his investigation of lost identity on a more abstract plane. "A client named White hires a detective named Blue to follow a man named Black," Dennis Drabelle explained in *Washington Post Book World*. "Gradually Blue realizes he's been ruined. All he can do is stare at Black, eternally writing a book in the rented room across the street, and draw a weekly paycheck." Auster's choice of names for his protagonists coupled with his coy and knowing tone throughout the book suggest that he is playing mind games with the reader. The real mystery, he implies, is not within the story but "on some higher level," as Rebecca Goldstein observed in the *New York Times Book Review*, acknowledging that *Ghosts* solves the internal mystery, but leaves the larger questions unanswered. Nonetheless, she judged the work "nearly perfect." Others were less impressed. Cannon, citing problems with continuity, concluded that *Ghosts* has "as much weight as any middle-of-three work can have. It provides the history and heft for the next book, but it cannot really stand alone as a mystery with a beginning, a middle, and an end."

The trilogy's concluding volume, *The Locked Room*, was widely judged to be the richest and by far the most compelling volume in the trilogy. Less abstract and more accessible, this story features flesh-and-blood characters with whom readers can easily identify. Several reviewers suggested that Auster's use of a first-person narrator enhances the book. "When Auster finally allows himself the luxury of character, what a delicious treat he serves up for the reader!" Carolyn See wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*. Though *The Locked Room* is a mystery like the first two installments, this "story is told in the first person by a genuine character who feels love and pain and envy." Because of the first-person narration "Mr. Auster's philosophical asides now sound heartfelt instead of stentorian and his descents into semiological *Angst* feel genuinely anguished and near," Steven Schiff suggested in the *New York Times Book Review*. He and other critics hypothesized that the nameless narrator represents Auster himself.

The story begins when the narrator is summoned by the wife of an old friend from childhood with whom he has lost touch. Fanshawe, as the friend is called, has disappeared and is presumed dead. A fantastically gifted writer, Fanshawe has left behind some unpublished writings as well as instructions for his friend to see them into print. As time passes, the narrator easily moves into Fanshawe's existence, marrying his wife, publishing his work, and eventually engendering rumors that he is actually Fanshawe or, at least, the man who created the works.

In the same year that *The Locked Room* appeared, Auster published another novel, *In the Country of Last Things*. At first glance, this novel seems a science fiction tale about a future apocalypse. Anna Blume travels from one continent to a large metropolis on another, where she hopes to find her missing brother. She finds instead a city in chaos filled with ruined buildings, ruined lives, criminals ruling and exploiting the desperate and homeless, "Runners" running themselves to death, and "Leapers" jumping to their deaths from the city's crumbling skyscrapers. Anna relates her search through this hellish environment in a letter to someone left behind on the other continent.

Even though Auster seemed to have shifted from mystery to science fiction in *In the Country of Last Things*, the novel shares stylistic and thematic concerns with "The New York Trilogy." "Once more, as in the three volumes of "The New York Trilogy," it's all done with mirrors," commented Katharine Washburn in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. "This time, the game is played with, if anything, greater cunning and obliqueness behind the same screen of lucid and uncompromising prose." Washburn also challenged the initial impression that this novel is a typical science-fiction piece. "*In the Country of Last Things* is occupied not with a future dystopia but with a hellish present," she contended. "Its citizens are no more inhabitants of the future than Swift's Houyhnhnms are native to some unmapped mid-Atlantic island. They belong to the here and now, to its ethical, spiritual, and cultural chaos." She concluded: "Auster has succeeded with Swiftian guile and ferocity in constructing a world of demolished things which we are forced, immediately and painfully to recognize as our own."

"*The Music of Chance* is an accessible, readable story that can be enjoyed by readers of all levels," Digby Diehl commented in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. "It is an exceptional novel about the interplay of freedom and chance which takes you on an engrossing tour of a man's inner life." On its surface, this novel begins as an "odyssey of self-invention," as *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani put it, bringing to mind such fictional characters as Mark Twain's Huck Finn, John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom, and Jack Kerouac's Dean Moriarty. Jim Nashe hits the road in search of himself after his wife leaves him and he receives an inheritance from his deceased father. His tour of the country winds down at about the same time as his money runs out. He then meets a young gambler, Pozzi, who entices him into a poker game with two eccentric lottery winners from Pennsylvania. The two lose what they have and fall further into debt. In order to pay off the debt, Nashe and Pozzi are forced to build a stone wall for the eccentrics.

"Writing in brisk, precise prose," commented Kakutani in the *New York Times*, "Mr. Auster lends these events all the suspense and pace of a best-selling thriller." Yet, as the reviewer added, the novel is more than a thriller. Auster "gives Nashe's adventures a

brooding philosophical subtext that enables him to explore some of his favorite preoccupations: the roles of randomness and causality, the consequences of solitude, and the limitations of freedom, language and free will in an indifferent world." "The result," found Kakutani, "[is] a chilling little story that's entertaining and provocative, resonant without being overly derivative."

In *The Book of Illusions*, David Zimmer's wife and two sons are killed in a car crash, but the resulting insurance settlement leaves him a very rich man. Driven to a nervous breakdown by grief, Zimmer quits his job as an academic and descends into alcoholism, loneliness, and rage. In an attempt to save himself by finding something to occupy his time, he writes a book about Hector Mann, a silent-movie star who mysteriously disappeared in 1929. As a result, someone claiming to be Mann's wife writes Zimmer, saying that Mann is actually alive. Zimmer is drawn into the lost story of Zimmer's life, which is eerily reminiscent of his own. In the *New Statesman*, Toby Mundy remarked that more than any of Auster's previous works, "this novel is propelled along by synchronicity and chance. Random cataclysms tear through his characters' lives, showing us over and over that the membrane separating madness from sanity and life from death is gossamer-thin and can shred at any moment." In the *Houston Chronicle*, Steven E. Alford remarked: "This is Auster's best book in years," and noted: "Is there an order beneath the seeming randomness of the world that is responsible for the direction of our lives? Auster's 'oeuvre' is a continual meditation on this one question."

I Thought My Father Was God and Other True Stories is a compilation of stories Auster solicited from ordinary Americans on National Public Radio. The stories had to be short, and they had to be true. The result, according to a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, is "worthy of Pulitzer consideration." In the London *Guardian*, Ian Sansom observed: "What's remarkable about the stories ... is how thoroughly accomplished they all are, how much they resemble true works of art; they are not mere effusions or anecdotes." He wrote: "It is difficult to think of another book ... that is so simple and so obvious, so excellent in intention and so elegant in its execution, and which displays such wisdom and such knowledge of human life in all its varieties."

In 2002 Auster published *The Story of My Typewriter*, a collaboration with artist Sam Messer in which Auster's manual Olympia typewriter, which he has used to type his manuscripts since 1974, is featured in pictures with different backdrops: the Brooklyn Bridge, the erect Twin Towers, a shelf of Auster's books, and with the writer himself. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called the work an "elegant ... collaboration" and a "detailed perspective on the old-fashioned machine Auster uses to get the words out of his head."

Like *The Book of Illusions*, Auster's 2004 novel, *Oracle Night*, again features a novelist writing a work that parallels his own life. Sidney Orr decides to return to writing after recovering from an illness that came close to taking his life. He enters a new Brooklyn store and purchases a blue Portuguese notebook, after which he begins to write as he never has before. Orr's book, about a man who walks away from his life after a near-death experience, is also titled *Oracle Night*. Reviewer Troy Patterson pointed out in *Entertainment Weekly* that "anyone familiar with Auster's old books ... can guess that Sidney's fiction will bleed into his reality." Patterson, a fan of Auster's other books, was not as fond of *Oracle Night*. He continued: "His chilling ghostliness, however, has been

supplanted by insulting mystic hoo-ha and his smooth plot work replaced by garish leaps and twists." Patterson's opinion, however, is the minority, as *Oracle Night* received rave reviews. While a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer admitted that "the plot of this bizarrely fascinating novel strains credibility," the reviewer remarked that "Auster's unique genius is to make the absurd coherent," and ultimately called the novel "a darkly suspenseful drama and a moving meditation on chance and loss." In a review for *Booklist*, Donna Seaman wrote of *Oracle Night*: "As one spellbinding and provocative storyline leads into another, characters and readers alike are lured deep into the maze of the psyche until Auster orchestrates a terrifying denouement that burns away all ambiguity, leaving his hero enraptured by the radiance of what matters most: love."

Auster has also explored the role of chance in life in both his poetry and nonfiction. While his fiction has received most critical attention, Auster has also produced numerous volumes of poetry, much of which was gathered in the 2004 *Collected Poems*, the "source of the elegant metaphysics that shape Auster's distinctive fiction," according to *Booklist* reviewer Donna Seaman. For the same critic, Auster's "exquisitely balanced poems are theorems postulating the nature of being." Similarly, Mirela Roncevic, writing in *Library Journal*, observed that "Auster's stubbornly self-contained poems are really 'photographic' versions of his novels." Likewise, a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* termed the collection "a tantalizing look at the work of a poet whose breakthrough led him away from line breaks and into the actions of prose."

A sampling of Auster's nonfiction prose was also assembled in the 2005 *Collected Prose: Autobiographical Writings, True Stories, Critical Essays, Prefaces, and Collaborations with Artists*, which provides "clues" to the author's fiction, as Seaman noted in *Booklist*. This work, Seaman went on to comment, "traces the evolution of his imagination," with excerpts from some of his better-known book-length fiction, such as *The Invention of Solitude*, *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews*, and *Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure*. Seaman found the prose collection "delectable and invaluable," and *Library Journal* writer Anthony Pucci also had praise, calling it a "solid collection," and one "exhibiting keen insight, intelligence, and clarity."

However, it is fiction for which Auster is best known. In the 2004 title *Auggie Wren's Christmas Story*, Auster reprises a character from his 1995 movie, *Smoke*. Auggie is the owner of a cigar store in Brooklyn who comes to the aid of the fictional Paul Auster, who has been commissioned to write a Christmas tale and has no idea where to begin. Auggie makes a deal with Auster: he will tell him an inspiring story for the price of lunch. The bargain sealed, Auggie proceeds to spin his story of a blind woman and a shoplifter on Christmas. Seaman, again writing in *Booklist*, praised Auster as a "dazzling and canny storyteller," and termed his book "a jewel."

With *The Brooklyn Follies*, Auster presents his "most down-to-earth, sensuous, and socially conscious novel to date," according to *Booklist* reviewer Seaman. Set during the time of the 2000 U.S. elections and the dramatic events of September 11, 2001, the novel is narrated by a survivor of lung cancer, Nathan Glass, who has come back to Brooklyn to die. Instead, however, and quite by chance, he reconnects with an estranged nephew in Brooklyn. Said nephew, Tom, works at a bookstore owned by a one-time forger. Chance forges more connections in the novel, as Tom's own niece, the daughter of his missing

sister, makes an unexpected appearance. Suddenly Nathan is presented with a reason to live in this "uncharacteristically upbeat" novel, as a *Kirkus Reviews* critic termed it. However, the same critic found the novel as a whole an "egregious misstep in an otherwise estimable career," for it tries to be "ironic and warm and fuzzy simultaneously." Other critics had a more favorable assessment. Seaman found this tale "mesmerizing." Further praise came from *New Statesman* reviewer Alastair Sooke, who called *The Brooklyn Follies* a "superb novel about human folly [that] turns out to be tremendously wise."

Auster returns to more familiar ground with his *Travels in the Scriptorium*, which blends "a Kafkaesque protagonist in an M.C. Escher plot," according to a *Kirkus Reviews* critic. Here Auster deals with his usual themes of "identity, memory, illusion and creativity," as the same critic noted. Seaman, writing in *Booklist*, found this story of Mr. Blank a "a spare, metaphysical fable." Confined to a Spartan-like room, Mr. Blank, who has no memory, reads a manuscript seemingly left there by the previous occupant: tales of the Confederation which make him wonder at the violence and sense of loss therein. The reader slowly discovers that this locked room is actually Auster's; the author reprises characters from his earlier fiction, including Fanshawe and Quinn from "The New York Trilogy." For *New Statesman* critic Steven Poole, this novel "walks a fine line between ludic intertextuality and smug in-joke." *A Publishers Weekly* contributor similarly noted: "While Auster's lean, poker-faced prose creates a satisfyingly claustrophobic allegory, the tidy, self-referential ending lends a writing-exercise patina to the work." Seaman, however, had no such reservations, terming the novel an "archly playful and shrewdly philosophical tribute to the transcendence of stories."

In *Europe Intelligence Wire* Auster told Hadley Freeman that despite the fact that he is viewed as an experimental writer, he has a very traditional view of how narrative should work and how stories should be told: "When I write, the story is always uppermost in my mind, and I feel that everything must be sacrificed to it. All elegant passages, all the curious details, all the so-called beautiful writing--if they are not truly relevant to what I am trying to say, then they have to go." And in *Publishers Weekly*, he told Tim Peters, "I feel that as I get older, time isn't as limitless as it once seemed, so I'm bearing down and writing for the time being. There's a compulsion to keep making stories, to keep sitting at my desk every day writing away at fictitious works." This is fortunate for Auster's fans, especially since, as Seaman wrote, "Auster's approach to storytelling becomes more mystical, more intense, more labyrinthine, and more noir with each novel."

Further Readings About the Author:

Books

- Auster, Paul, *The Invention of Solitude*, SUN (New York, NY), 1982.
- Barone, Dennis, editor, *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, University of Pennsylvania Press (Philadelphia, PA), 1995.
- *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Volume 47, Thomson Gale (Detroit, MI), 1988.
- *Contemporary Novelists*, 7th edition, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 2001.
- *Contemporary Theatre, Film, and Television*, Volume 23, Thomson Gale (Detroit, MI), 1999.
- *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 227: *American Novelists since World War II*, Thomson Gale (Detroit, MI), 2000.
- Handler, Nina, *Drawn into the Circle of Its Repetitions: Paul Auster's New York Trilogy*, edited by Dal Salwak, Borgo Press (San Bernardino, CA), 1996.
- Holzapfel, Anne M., *The New York Trilogy: Whodunit?: Tracking the Structure of Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Novels*, Peter Lang (New York, NY), 1996.
- *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers*, 4th edition, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1996.

Periodicals

- *Antioch Review*, spring, 1989, review of *Moon Palace*.
- *Artforum International*, November 1, 1997, Wayne Koestenbaum, review of *Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure*, p. 18.
- *Art in America*, June, 2000, "Books for the Collector's Library," p. 64; July, 2000, Maud Lavin, review of *Double Game*, p. 33.
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Discussion Questions:

1. What role does redemption play in the novel? Nathan tells us that he returned to Brooklyn because “I was looking for a quiet place to die,” and yet he manages to build a quirky, vibrant life. What are some other examples of redemption in the book?
2. The need for companionship both causes pain for the characters in *The Brooklyn Follies* and at the same time offers them fulfillment. What alliances and loves develop which demonstrate this need? How do the need for community and the need for love distinguish themselves or blend into one another?
3. Nathan claims that he is not the central character of this story. “The distinction of bearing the title of Hero of this book belongs to my nephew, Tom Wood.” In what ways is this statement misleading? In what ways is it accurate? Why would Nathan make such a claim?
4. Coincidence plays a huge role in *The Brooklyn Follies*: Nathan finding Tom at the book store, for example, or Nathan’s car breaking down in Vermont and leading to The Chowder Inn. How is both the plot and character development driven by chance, or twist of fate, in this novel?
5. When Nathan first encounters his nephew Tom, he sees that his favorite relative has become “a sad sight to behold . . . everything about him suggested defeat.” How do Tom’s failures mirror Nathan’s disappointments about his own life, his own fate at the outset of the novel, prior to the revitalization of his life? How do their respective recoveries also reflect one another?
6. Contemporary American fiction often focuses on the individual; *The Brooklyn Follies* weaves a tapestry of community. In the suburbs, where Nathan felt isolated, he believed his life was “sad and ridiculous.” He comes to Brooklyn seeking solitude and yet finds kinship almost by accident. What do you see in this commentary on city life versus suburban life?
7. In this novel, how does Brooklyn act as a fortress of reason vis-à-vis the rest of the country? What damage do we see wrought outside of the city and corrected as a result of a character’s move to the urban environment?
8. How would you describe Nathan’s style as a narrator? What are the advantages and disadvantages does this style of narration?
9. Look at the passage on pages 154–156 in which Tom delivers the story of Kafka’s doll. “When a person is lucky enough to live inside a story, to live inside an imaginary world, the pains of this world disappear,” he says. How can this statement, as well as the story of Kafka’s doll, serve as parable for Nathan’s life as a whole?

10. The Brooklyn Follies ends forty-six minutes before the attack on the World Trade Center, with Nathan Glass “happy, my friends, as happy as any man who had ever lived,” having just been released from the hospital after his second near-death experience. What do you think Auster is trying to convey to his audience with this reminder of the complicated and dangerous world in which we live? In what ways does the book highlight the differences of pre- and post-9/11 life in America?
11. “Another ex,” says Harry Brightman. “By the time a man gets to be our age, Nathan, he’s little more than a series of exes.” By the time we have reached the end of The Brooklyn Follies, is this statement still applicable to Nathan’s life? Why or why not?
12. In reference to Tom’s discovery of pictures of his sister Aurora in a pornographic magazine, Nathan says, “When you’ve lived as long as I have, you tend to think you’ve heard everything, that there’s nothing left that can shock you anymore . . . then, every once in a while, something comes along that jolts you out of your smug cocoon of superiority, that reminds you all over again that you don’t understand the first thing about life.” What are some other occasions during which Nathan experiences this sort of jolt? Do any other characters find themselves jolted as such?
13. In comparing Poe and Thoreau, Tom Wood has selected two American authors who were very much interested in the idea of sanctuary. How do the spirits of these two authors and the respective sanctuaries they sought infuse Tom and Nathan’s interactions? What other giants of American literature have an influence, direct or indirect, on the characters in The Brooklyn Follies?
14. “You love life,” says Nathan to Tom, “but you don’t believe in it. And neither do I.” This statement quickly becomes untrue as both men cast off their inertia. To what extent does action create belief for both Nathan and Tom? What obstacles to action do they face and overcome?
15. “All men contain several men inside them and most of us bounce from one self to another without ever knowing who we are,” says Nathan. While he is a rather self-aware individual, in what ways does Nathan surprise himself with another self?
16. How is this a book of both happy endings and terrible fates? Cite examples of how Auster intersperses and intertwines these two seemingly irreconcilable states.

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