

READERS' GUIDE TO *MOUNT WONDER*

SCOTT J. BLOCH



# Mount Wonder

## Mount Wonder - Readers' Guide

### ABOUT THE NOVEL

Memories of college have intruded on Bernard Kennisbaum's mind with increasing regularity. It is his junior year, and Bernard declares himself free of his father's financial claws, free to follow his Muse. A beguiling beauty, Apryl, has caught his eye, and her scent leads him into a lecture hall that will change his life. His unwitting arrival in a Great Books class—The Humanities Integration Program—devolves into a wild west showdown with a trigger-happy prof, ambitious administrators, jealous colleagues, vengeful state officials, hoodlums, and hangover hippies.

Lured in by poetry, Plato, and female pheromones, Bernard discovers an unlikely collegiate underworld dedicated to rescuing Western civilization from soulless purveyors of the bottom line. The trouble is, Bernard doesn't know which side he is on, and he soon learns he may not know everything about his family or himself. In *Mount Wonder*, two cultures collide and roll into one rip-roaring adventure of love and learning. Based on true events at a major university, this novel will make you question your world and the world of higher education.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**SCOTT J. BLOCH** grew up in Woodland Hills, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. His father was an actor in New York, and then a writer of plays and then television for Ford Philco Television Playhouse, and later in Hollywood for such shows as “The Flintstones,” “The Jetsons,” “High Chaparral,” “Bonanza,” and “Hawaii Five-O.” He created a show for NBC called “My Son Jeep,” and Scott was named after the show’s main character. His mother was a singer and actress on Broadway, and on television, and an artist. His mother saw his father acting on Broadway in the hit, *Command Decision*, and she decided she was going to marry him. Scott’s grandfather was Albert Bloch, the only American member of the expressionist artist group, The Blue Rider. Scott produced and co-wrote a documentary called “AB” about [Albert Bloch](#), his art, and his involvement with the Blue Rider.

He was born in New York City and lived in Levittown, and then New Canaan, Connecticut, but when television went to Hollywood, he moved with his family to California. He left California to attend college at the University of Kansas, in part to find out more about his grandfather and his art, in part to find another life outside of Hollywood. Ever since his year in a boarding school in Sussex, England, he had desired a classical type of education in a four-seasons setting. He found this in a controversial humanities core curriculum program that underlies the events in Mount Wonder. This experience profoundly affected him, instilling a lifelong openness to experiencing things as fresh and new.

This education led him to help found a classical school, and later, to help found a liberal arts college in Wyoming that combines great books with the great outdoors. After college, he began writing fiction and screenplays. He eventually married a girl from Hutchinson, Kansas, whom he met in college. He earned a law degree at the University of Kansas, started a family (a big one), and became a partner in a law firm. He could not get the events at the University of Kansas and the humanities program out of his head, and he eventually began conceiving a novel.

Later, he felt the call to public service and went to Washington, D.C., where he was appointed to a Senate Confirmed position as head of a nonpartisan federal enforcement agency for five years in national government, and today practices law and lives in Virginia. He and his wife (the one and only) have 7 children, and 14 grandchildren at last count.

After government, Scott continued working on his novel about college, and the result is Mount Wonder. He is at work on another novel set in England. He is also an editor of a book on the writings of Hilaire Belloc, an Edwardian poet, novelist and essayist, *The Essential Belloc* (Tan Books 2010). He has appeared in national media including The Wall Street Journal, National Catholic Register, the Washington Times, the New York Times, Newsweek, NPR, CNN, and NBC.

When he’s not writing and practicing law, Scott can be found with his grandkids, on the beach, or by the pool sipping wine with his Kansas sweetheart.

## INSPIRATION FOR THE NOVEL

*Mount Wonder* is based on actual events at the University of Kansas. The early 1970s was a time of upheaval, protest, and searching. Along came the Pearson Integrated Humanities Program, funded by an NEH grant, to provide an integrated course of studies in the great books, art, literature, history and philosophy. A four-year course, it satisfied course requirements in English, Humanities, History, and Western Civilization. It was part of a new “college within the college” idea at the University of Kansas, an attempt to offer greater variety and relevance to what interested the student body.

The Integrated Humanities Program, or IHP as it became known, was popular. Students not only read and considered great authors of the past, but also memorized poetry, and did hands or eyes on activities like star gazing, waltzing, calligraphy, horseback riding, travel to Ireland, France, Greece, and Italy, and had an annual country fair. The students felt that they were reconnecting with their traditions and heritage and finding delight in learning.

The three professors who taught the IHP, John Senior, Dennis Quinn, and Frank Nelick, were brilliant and had a following of their own when they teamed up. Students enjoyed their lectures that were really a conversation about great ideas and books, and life itself. Tradition was not a dirty word, but a wonderful tapestry to be studied and loved.

This clashed with the dominant ideology and pedagogy of the University at large and some prominent parents of students, and they sought to suppress the IHP. People accused the professors of brainwashing students to be critical of the modern tradition and its relativistic, materialistic, and instrumental approach to learning and knowledge. They were accused of trying to convert students to Catholicism. A couple of students were kidnapped and taken to deprogramming. The charge that was true was that they taught that Truth as seen in Plato, Homer, and all of the great books, was real and knowable, that a person was a knowing, sentient being who could know Truth. For that, the University sought to do away with the IHP and ultimately succeeded after hearings to take away IHP’s funding and credits, which had the effect of slowly euthanizing it.

The history and reputation of the IHP continue to fascinate and inspire many intellectual and teaching pursuits. John Senior is known internationally for his philosophy of schooling that has inspired many schools and one college. Books have been written about them, and one Spanish international novel was inspired by the thought of John Senior.

## CHARACTERS IN MOUNT WONDER

### PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

**Bernard Kennisbaum** – Junior English major who seeks to break free from a career in business at his father's carpet stores

**Apryl Jovey** – a beauty who captivates Bernard and leads him into a new world

### THE GENTS OF 1132 OHIO STREET

**Richard Chalmers** – a radical who leads counter operations and pranks against the university

**Karl Hess** – he shows students how to farm for what he says are the upcoming dark ages

**Tom Hogg** – student who reads St. Thomas and drives a hearse, smokes a lot and has visions

**Bob McDarby** – impetuous and savvy suitor of Apryl who regards Bernard with suspicion

**Peter Swensen** – he shares a love of Chaucer with Bernard, and a desire to win Apryl's love

**Patrick Winston** – he and Bernard share a bond in writing and literature

**Clark Zorn** – ebullient conspiratorialist student from the Northwest with a family brew of beer that has the university coming back for more

**Ted Ross** – loves music and Bishop Sheen, quotes him and plays his tapes

### THE PROFESSORS OF THE HIP PROGRAM

**Paul Courtney** – charismatic but contemplative professor of classics; Bernard is most drawn to him

**Chester Whalen** – feisty head of program who keeps students on a more scholarly track

**Fred Marin** – storied drunk and poet professor who has allegedly had affairs with most of the English department wives; handsome and fearsome, Bernard is attracted and repelled by him

### UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS

**Chancellor Nation Barrows** – the ambitious head of the university who enlists Bernard secretly in his plans to upend HIP and its leading gadfly, Richard Chalmers

**Vice Chancellor Albert Holloway** – he runs Bernard in his spying and has an unusual interest in the women of HIP

**Duane Schmead** – university Regent, construction mogul, crusader against HIP program

**Charles Finley** – promiscuous professor, head of Western Civilization Program, a HIP program rival, and head of committee investigating HIP, leads hearings into alleged HIP problems

### **LADIES OF OLE MISS**

**Laura Hull, Trish Allworthy, Martha Flink, Diana Dietz** – they are in one way or another pairing off with the gents of 1132 when they aren't doing Apryl's bidding

**Maggie Longine** – from Quebec, she leaves the life of a call girl, and joins the HIP students in their quest

### **OTHER SIGNIFICANT CHARACTER**

**Dom Angelo Broglio** – wealthy Maltese priest, canon and civil lawyer, who rouses HIP to a crusade, and acts as attorney for HIP defending the three professors at the hearings

**Perry Hudson** – a scholarship student who used to be at the fraternity with Bernard and appears to know more than he should

## *Mount Wonder* - Readers' Guide Discussion Questions

### **The Structure of the Novel**

Bernard narrates his own journal essentially, telling us what he wants us to know, holding back things that he wants to hold back. He thinks that reality is only real if it is written down in his journal. Is he a reliable narrator?

We keep coming back to the present as Bernard reflects back on college. How does doing this help to move the narrative forward and reveal more of the character than he himself even can reveal? Or is it an impediment to hearing the truth about him?

Bernard tells us that youth is a mask we put on to help us see ourselves and others, and then to look back on it later. Has the mask come off for him? Or is narration another mask?

Why does Bernard choose to go for the scholarship at the beginning? Does his intention to work for the university change? Is he being real with others? With himself?

When we first meet Bernard as a youth, he is self-assured, sarcastic, and full of his own mind and wit. Does he discover that there is a better him underneath that? How does he discover that? Does Apryl help him to see his real self, or does she only complicate his journey? What kind of growth does Bernard have over the course of the novel?

Why does Bernard tell his story through a journal? Is this a device for him to be able to hold up a mirror, or is it something else?

We learn early that Bernard considers himself something of an outsider, looking in on other's lives, and holding himself aloof from events. Why, then, is he so willing to throw in with a group of people and a girl who are decidedly in the thick of controversy?

Central to the story and the narration of the novel is who the main character really is. Does Bernard present as knowing who he is when he is in college? What about as an adult looking back on himself in college?

What are the themes of self-knowledge, pretense, and illusions of self in *Mount Wonder*? How does the action serve to bring out self identity, or thwart it?

### **Attitudes about Sex and Women in the Novel**

Bernard thinks he does not need women anymore, that he just needs to declare his independence, write it down, and so be it, until he sees her – the most amazing beauty he's ever encountered, coming right across his field of vision.

He puts her on a pedestal immediately, seeing her a Aphrodite from Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. He follows her as if he is following the goddess Aphrodite, and he is willing to throw caution to the wind. Is this a typical male response to female beauty? What attitudes is he bringing to his assessment of her beauty? Is it common or uncommon beauty? Is it something in his ego? He

likens her to a piece of art, a Botticelli? Is this a common way for a college student to view a young woman? How does Apryl react?

Bernard has a strong relationship with his Aunt Teresa. He takes us to meet her deep into the novel as a kind of oracle, who lives a singular life as a single woman with money on the Country Club Plaza of Kansas City. Is he putting his Aunt on a pedestal? Is it deserved? How does Teresa react? Does she like his position as a female with power over Bernard?

We learn later about Teresa and the complicated relationships with Bernard's father, the inheritance, and a romance with a key professor. Does this change your view of Teresa? Should she have been more honest with Bernard? Is this a depiction of women in a way that is realistic or perhaps male-oriented? What myths or rituals are played out in this relationship between Teresa and Bernard?

Much of the novel revolves around youthful gallivanting for favors of the other sex, and the search for truth – from poem and songs to works of classic and modern literature, philosophy and history. Is this a usual pursuit of students at that age then? Now? How has youthful searching in these regards changed over the years since the 1970s?

A fair portion of the narrative concerns love, real and feigned, hoped for and unrequited, and everything in between. Is love rejected by Bernard? By Apryl?

Do you agree or disagree with Apryl's statements about men and the reason why they pursue her?

Bernard sees Apryl as some kind of goddess in many parts of the novel. How does he regard her in the end? Why?

Do you believe the narrator's version of what he has learned in the end about Apryl, friendship, truth, and love?

By the end, has Bernard outgrown his youthful love? Or is he trapped forever in an obsession from college? Do you agree with the outcome of the novel? Do you think Bernard and Apryl belong together, and could they have made it work?

### **Clashing Views on the Purpose of Higher Education**

The novel poses a difference of viewpoints between the HIP professors and other professors and departments in the university, breaking down along the lines of traditional and humanistic education versus modern materialistic and utilitarian. What is Bernard's view of this clash of viewpoints?

Should we only read what we are told to read? Who decides what you should read? Who decides what books get to your shelf in the bookstore, Amazon, or the grocery stores? Is that a measure of what is best to read?

Professor Courtney advocates for 1000 good books, or those books that have been read by all



kinds of people, highly educated and not as educated, for generations. Is this broad enough? Is it too restrictive or elite?

The Chancellor, Nation Barrows, has a view of the purpose of the university is to provide the best education for students, but he also believes that higher education has to give in to stakeholders, including complaining students, parents, alumni, and legislators who provide the funding for the state university. Was it inevitable that the university would do in the HIP program?

Is this a normal viewpoint in the 1970s? How about today? How do administrators respond to pressure from groups and outside interests? Is it worse or better than in *Mount Wonder*?

The university mixes in with stakeholders to have students kidnapped, holds hearings and inquires into the religion of students or professors. Is this appropriate in higher education? What does it say about the precept of academic freedom and free speech? What does this controversy have to say about higher education today in America?

### **Sensibility of *Mount Wonder***

Is the tone of the novel serious or comic? Why? What is the purpose of the comedy in *Mount Wonder*? Does the main character's tendency to crack wise or pun serve a purpose? Is it negative or positive, or something else?

The house, 1132 Ohio, seems to be almost a character in the story; the people who live there or used to live there seems to think the house has some special power. Bernard's obsession with numbers, and the place itself, holds special significance for him. Is place a spiritual element in the novel?

Why does 1132 Ohio have such a power over Bernard while he is a student, and then so many years later? What did he see in the house, or in the people who inhabited it that was so meaningful to him? Is this a usual thing that people carry around a sense of certain places that have magical powers over them?

What is the role of faith in the novel? Do the characters present as having strong faith or do they pose as such?

What is the role of the religious impulse in the novel, and what does it say to the world of the 1970s? To our world?

Why does the main character struggle with faith? What attraction does it hold for him, what negative implications? In the end, where does Bernard come out on the issue of belief or faith?

Tom Hogg seems to have a bag of spiritual tricks unseen by most Americans. Is Tom serious in his approach to faith, or is it some kind of put on, or role?

What do the other characters think of Hogg's alleged spiritual attributes and abilities? What miracles does Bernard think really occurred in the novel? Is it real, remembered, or something else? Were the miracles real, or remembered as possibly real?