

# The Feast of Love

by Charles Baxter

## StoryLines Midwest Discussion Guide No. 13

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### About the author

Charles Baxter was born in Minneapolis in 1947. He received an undergraduate degree from Macalester College (1969), a Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Buffalo (1974), and began teaching English at Wayne State University in Detroit. In 1987, he moved to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where *The Feast of Love* is set. Baxter began his writing career as a poet, then began publishing masterful short stories in literary journals; several were reprinted in the annual *Pushcart Prize* and *Best American Short Story* collections. Baxter has won a number of literary awards, including an O. Henry Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a *Reader's Digest* Foundation Fellowship. He is also a highly respected reviewer and essayist on literature.

### Discussion questions

The novel contains numerous depictions of "Midwesternness." For instance, Diana says of Bradley, "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." Does Baxter mean what his characters say, or is he having fun with stereotypes about the region? Or both?

When Bradley recounts his second wedding, he remembers that Diana was surprised when he kissed her at the end of the ceremony. This is their relationship *in a nutshell*. Why are small things, momentary gestures, so revealing? What other examples of this do you find in the novel and how do they affect you?

Bradley has a unique approach to being in business that is, in many ways, not typical. How is his café, Jitters, different from chain cafés found throughout the U.S.? What perspective does the novel have on American consumer culture?

"Our time here is short," Kathryn says early on. Baxter brings this idea back at other points throughout the novel. What are they and what is their significance?

### Additional reading

Charles Baxter. *The Harmony of the World*, 1984.  
*First Light*, 1987.  
*A Relative Stranger*, 1990.  
*Shadow Play*, 1993.  
*Believers*, 1997.  
*Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*, 1997.  
Alice McDermott. *At Wakes and Weddings*, 1992.  
Stewart O'Nan. *Everyday People*, 2001.  
Anne Tyler. *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, 1982.

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A man wakes in fright—he can't remember who he is, he's trapped in a limbo he calls "night amnesia." His wife stirs, she says his name, touches him, tells him it's only bad dreams. His identity gradually seeps back, but sleep is out of the question; he dresses and begins to walk in his neighborhood, which is the environs of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

The man is "Charlie Baxter," insomniac, novelist stuck between books. On this midsummer's night, he meets up with a man he knows, Bradley W. Smith, coffee-shop owner and fellow insomniac. They sit and talk, and before long Bradley is offering to jump start the novelist's next project, the title of which, he says, should be *The Feast of Love*. He even offers to send "actual people" who will tell Charlie their stories. Charlie puts up token resistance, but Bradley bulls ahead. "Okay," he says, "Chapter One. Every relationship has at least one really good day. . ."

So begins *The Feast of Love*.

Charlie Baxter quickly steps aside, and the other characters begin giving testimony in their own voices. We hear from Bradley himself; from his first wife Kathryn; from acerbic straight-to-the-point Diana, with whom Bradley had a brief, doomed second marriage; from David, Diana's lover; from the sexy, irrepressible Chloé (who works at Bradley's coffee shop along with husband Oscar); and from Bradley's neighbor Harry Ginsberg, professor of philosophy, husband of Esther, and father of troubled son Aaron.

In shaping his characters, Baxter makes various comments about Midwestern identity. For instance, Diana says, "Because it's the Midwest, no one really glitters because no one has to, it's more a dull shine, like frequently used silverware. We were all presentable enough, but almost no one was making any kind of *statement*.

Out here in Michigan, real style is too difficult to maintain; the styles are all convenient and secondhand. We're all hand-me-down personalities. But that's liberating: it frees you up for other matters of greater importance, the great themes, the sordid passions." Writer Lorrie Moore's remarks on Baxter's second novel, *Shadow Play*, could easily apply to *The Feast of Love*: "One of Mr. Baxter's great strengths as a writer has always been his ability to capture the stranded inner lives of the Middle West's repressed eccentrics."

The many narrators in this novel make for a book rich in spoken language—we're asked to *listen*. This approach lets the author play one character's version of things off the others' and lets us accumulate a grab bag of answers to the book's central question—"What is the nature of love?" "I like novels that stop to tell individual stories," Baxter says in a recent interview, "Novels that slow down, novels that can pause long enough in the middle to give you, for example, a cure for dandruff or a recipe for beef burgundy. I don't like to be rushed." He says he imagined *The Feast of Love* "as a collection of wheels, or gears, turning separately, and then coming together, so that they all mesh at the end. Like a watch *that tells time*."

As the characters talk, we're spun up in a web of different loves—or love in its myriad disguises. There's unrequited, one-sided love (Bradley for Diana); true love and sex in perfect sync (Chloé and Oscar); sex evolving into love (Diana and David); the unconditional love of parent for child (Harry for Aaron); long-married love (Harry and Esther); unexpected, blindsiding love (Kathryn for Jenny); love of man's best friend (Bradley for his dog, also named Bradley); the love of ideas (Harry for the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard); love that survives beyond the grave (Chloé for Oscar); and the love of love itself (Bradley).

"The Feast of Love" is also the title of a painting Bradley Smith has made. Here it's described by Harry Ginsberg:

*. . . this feast of love, consisted of color. A sunlit table—on which had been set dishes and cups and glasses—appeared to be overflowing with light. . . . In the glasses was not wine but light. . . . Visionary magic flowed from one end of the table to the other, all the suggestions of food having been abstracted into too-bright shapes, as if one had stepped out of a movie theater into a bright afternoon summer downtown where all the objects were so overcrowded with light that the eye couldn't process any of it.*

Though Bradley Smith resides at the center of the cast, it's Chloé (pronounced *Clow-ay*, we learn) who steals the show. She is the book's heart. She's young, punkish, high-spirited, and carnal. "Sweet girl that she is," Bradley tells us,

*Chloé gives my nerves a good shaking every day. Sometimes she comes in so yeasty with sex she's just had with her boyfriend that I feel like applauding. She gives off sexual odors like a flower out in the front yard trying to make a statement about gardens, which of course flowers don't need to do. Her shirt says RAGING HORMONES across the front.*

She's also hopeful and undaunted, blessed with a remarkable interest in life. Clearly, the chapters Chloé narrates were a treat for Baxter. "One day I sat down at the word-processor and her voice came to me. . . fully formed," he says, "and I started laughing. . . . She'll tell you anything, absolutely anything about herself. She has no shame, she's shameless. She's proud of her shamelessness. I love shameless people."

"A writer is a reader moved to emulation," Saul Bellow once observed. It's no surprise, then, that writers occasionally use earlier literary works as their taking-off point. *Romeo and Juliet* becomes "West Side Story"; *King Lear* becomes Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*; *The Odyssey* becomes *Ulysses*, James Joyce's day in the life of Leopold Blum. Sometimes the correlation is direct and explicit; often it's more oblique. Baxter makes several nods to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—there's even a brief quote ("I fear we shall out-sleep the coming morn . . ."), but here it's more a case of the play's mood, the spell of nighttime enchantment, triggering the novel. *The Feast of Love* has its own agenda, and, as reviewers have noted, contains a darker streak than Shakespeare's comedy.

"Every magical promise implicit in this night is kept," Jacqueline Carey wrote in *The New York Times Book Review*. "*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." With this novel, Baxter achieved a new degree of popularity and critical attention—including a National Book Award nomination—but the book is very much in keeping with his prior work, known for its craftsmanship and the compassion he bestowed on his characters. "Baxter's fiction exists to give name to the great underlying questions of life," an earlier critic commented. "It is a fiction of solitude and love, of impulses and choices."