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This collection of pithy, brilliantly acerbic pieces is a companion to *Sixty Stories*, Barthelme's earlier retrospective volume. Barthelme spotlights the idiosyncratic, haughty, sometimes downright ludicrous behavior of human beings, but it is style rather than content which takes precedence.

Forty Stories Details

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From Reader Review Forty Stories for online ebook

Jennifer Gifford says

Where do I start? The stories are one dimensional, with paper thin characters composing uninteresting snippets of lives of the above mentioned characters. I couldn't even finish the whole book because it was just awful. No real sense of togetherness (which is usually an underlying theme in a collection of work), no real direction, either. The stories are trite, boring, and worse, poorly structured.

Sentimental Surrealist says

Forty Things to Know About Barthelme

1. He had a beard.
2. He had a bad relationship with his father.
3. His father was an architect of some renown
4. He was an experimental writer, considered by many to be among the best of his generation.
5. Taking a sample of ten Barthelme stories, three will be genius, six will be good, one will be crap.
6. His more famous stories include "The Balloon," "Me and Mrs. Mandible," "At the End of the Mechanical Age," "King of Jazz" (none of which are included here), "The Temptation of St. Anthony," and "A Few of Us Had Been Threatening Our Friend Colby" (both included here).
7. On point, Sixty Stories might be a slightly better collection than this.
8. It can take time to sink into Barthelme's rhythm, but his prose will probably hook you sooner or later.
9. Unless you do not particularly enjoy this sort of out-there formalism. Barthelme likes to play with form.
10. He's funny.
11. Many current writers cite him as an influence.
12. He enjoyed jazz.
13. It's hard to put his work into a particular school.
14. A Barthelme story demands to be read on its own terms; it's hard to fit him into any sort of ideology or political movement or cause-stumping. Barthelme's stories celebrate themselves and their own language first and foremost.
15. His pieces run short, and he's often cited as an ancestor of the now-popular flash fiction genre.
16. It's hard to imagine Lydia Davis without Donald Barthelme. Perhaps this is more of an 11a).
17. He writes stories about everything from domestic disputes to types of angels and bodyguards.
18. He dislikes exposition. He tends instead to give the reader just as much information as they need to understand the story. As such, his work might seem difficult at first, but again, rhythms establish themselves.
19. Perhaps as a corollary to 13, it's easy to see why some have labeled him "postmodern." His fiction often comments on the instability of language and uses certain metafictional techniques. Irony is frequent.
20. However, he also favors collages, like "At the Tolstoy Museum."
21. His dialog is terrific.
22. There's either something funky going on in terms of the form or the content of his sto

While the reader was promised 40 aspects of Barthelme, work on this list was not begun until shortly before its deadline, thus allowing our writer to only compile 21 complete reasons. The management apologizes for any inconvenience this might have caused

Furthermore, on account of the deadline pressures, it has come to our attention that a few of these reasons were rather disappointing, non-descriptive, and/or apropos of absolutely nothing. The management

apologizes for any inconvenience this might have caused, too.

"So, Don, I like you a lot on a whole. I think you were a remarkably original, funny, and warm writer. But when you bounce around from topic to topic like crazy, which I get comes from your interest in jazz, it sometimes results in half-baked stories like 'Sinbad.'"

"'Sinbad' was written to reflect my interest in fairy tales and legends. You can also see this in pieces like 'Bluebeard' and 'the Glass Mountain.'"

"Bluebeard was also a novel by Kurt Vonnegut."

"Kurt Vonnegut wrote many novels. They were also known to bounce around from topic to topic, most notably *Breakfast of Champions*."

"I mean, don't get me wrong, Don. Sometimes it was beautiful, like with 'Departure.' But when it didn't work, it really didn't work."

"Would you like to see my pet elephant?"

"Your pet elephant?"

"Yes, I bought it from the maharaja during my trip to India. I went there with the Beatles, you know."

Consider the experimental writer. Does the experimental writer sit down at a typewriter, or a word processor, or in this modern age a computer, with the idea to write an experimental piece in their head? Or do their pieces only reveal themselves as experiments as they write? How conscious is the experimental writer of the fact that they are experimental?

When an experimental writer's experiment fails, is it to be praised for being an experiment, or to be condemned for being a failure?

Is the experimental writer an artist or a scientist? A politician? An assassin? All? None?

What is the intended end result of the experimental writer's experiments?

Has the experimental writer ever considered telling the story in a conventional fashion? How many stories that begin conventionally are then made experimental by a flash of inspiration? How many forms is the experimental writer allowed to experiment with before the stories cease to be stories? Is the experimental writer necessarily postmodern? Metamodern?

When is the experimental writer pretentious? Is it possible for any art to be pretentious? Is all art pretentious by definition?

You have fifteen minutes to answer. Go!

Allan MacDonell says

When I was a child, barely a teen, two of my suburban high school's advanced-placement word nerds were fond of flashing a shared Donald Barthelme paperback that had a sexually suggestive cover illustration, perhaps featuring a woman's bare breasts. These guys, the type of guys who could recite swatches of dialogue from *200 Motels*, cornered you at lunch while you were trying to get high like a normal person and read concise sections of Barthelme, then lurked in smug silence as if they had just dropped a heavy profundity, although clearly none of us understood, from sentence to sentence, any depth of meaning the writer was likely to have intended. *One day, I promised myself, I will own books with sordid cover illustrations, and I will comprehend the word of Barthelme.* Over the intervening years, beginning with *The Dead Father*, my grasp of what Donald Barthelme is digging at has strengthened, and his stories have

become pleasures of identification and illumination, rather than slightly irritating cultural requirements, similar to feeling obligated to enjoy *Lumpy Gravy*. The short excursions of *40 Stories* expose Donald Barthelme to be nothing less than a 40-trick pony, sly, smirking, sad and celebrating our universal irritants, joys and failures in epic fictional constructs that never seem to stretch beyond six pages. The author's most masterly revelation, saved for last, is that he is not a tricky little horse at all.

Glenn Russell says

I openly admit my tastes tends to be a bit quirky, even oddball, which probably accounts for the fact that I really, really, really enjoyed two stories in this collection, two stories not given so much as a mention in other reviews, at least the ones I've read on this thread. And what, you may ask, are those two Donald Barthelme stories? Answer: *Chablis* and *The New Owner*. And I really, really, really had a blast doing the write-up of each of these yummy chocolate snappers. After sampling as per below, you might even consider picking up the entire box of forty:

CHABLIS

Domestic Impasse: Our first-person narrator lets it be known quite emphatically he is happy remaining a husband and father (he has an almost 2-year-old baby girl), rather than becoming a husband, father and dog-owner. But, damn, his wife says not only does she want a dog but now the baby wants a dog. Sidebar: One way to read this Barthelme shorty is as Raymond Carver parody.

Bah, Bah, Black Sheep: His wife tells him the kind of dog the baby wants is a Carin terrier since a Carin terrier is a good Presbyterian just like herself and the baby. Meanwhile, he reflects: "I didn't go to church because I was the black sheep. There were five children in my family and the males rotated the position of black sheep among us, the oldest one being the black sheep for a while while he was in his DWI period or whatever and then getting grayer as he maybe got a job or was in the service and then finally becoming a white sheep when he got married and had a grandchild. My sister was never a black sheep because she was a girl." Stark, mostly staccato sentences and deadpan narrative voice – oh yeah, Donald Barthelme, you sly Texas dog, clicking into that Raymond Carver rhythm.

Baby, Baby: Although he told his wife a baby was too expensive, those women will wear a man down, even if it takes years, and this is exactly what happened to him. So, he hangs around and hugs the baby named Joanna, every chance he gets. But when Joanna watches television she just looks dumb and forgets you're there. Oh, Joanna - welcome to Carver country, even parody Carver country, where you sit around all day watching television. In another few years you'll have a chance to partake of that other Carver country preoccupation – heavy drinking.

Dog, Redux: Back on the dog. We sense our narrator on the cusp of a little Carver country male rage when he reflects how he can see himself walking all over their subdivision hunting down his damn runaway terrier, a little brown dog named Michael, a possibly rabid dog, a dog that might even have bitten someone in the subdivision. "It's enough to make you think about divorce." Sounds like our male narrator needs to have a serious talk with his wife before things really get out of hand.

Self-Examination: He finally reaches the point of critical self-appraisal, wondering why he himself isn't a more natural person like his wife wants him to be. He sits in his second-floor den at his desk at five-thirty in

the morning, looking out the window at the joggers, worrying, worrying about Joanna jamming a kitchen knife into an electric socket or worrying about Joanna eating her crayons, all the time smoking and drinking Gallo Chablis. Ha! Gallo Chablis – at least Donald Barthelme lets his narrator drink a glass of Chablis instead of beer. Now that's a step up! Maybe our narrator is even a regular reader of the New Yorker.

Congratulations: His memory travels back to a time when he was the family black sheep, when he was driving his friend's Buick and swerved into a cornfield to avoid a head-on collision. Well that was one time when he did something right for a change. He pats himself on the back and goes to check on the baby. The story ends here on an upbeat (one of the advantages of drinking Chablis instead of beer, perhaps?), a real honest-to-goodness escape from the usual fare in Carver country.

THE NEW OWNER

Not-So-Good Vibrations: "When he came to look at the building, with a real estate man hissing and oozing beside him, we lowered the blinds, muted or extinguished lights, threw newspapers and dirty clothes on the floor in piles, burned rubber bands in ashtrays, and played Buxtehude on the hi-fi – shaking organ chords whose vibrations made the plaster falling from the ceiling fall faster." So begins the dreaded nightmare come true for any long-standing apartment renter: the new landlord is the landlord from hell.

Immediate Changes: Oh, no, little rent bills start appearing in the mailboxes, the rent goes up and the heat goes down. Bicycles must be removed from the halls; shopping carts must be removed from the halls. Sure, you've lived in your apartment for decades with your friends and neighbors, everything going along smoothly, but guess what – you can be replaced tomorrow; actually, it would be better all round (at least according to the new landlord) if you moved out. Oh, Donald Barthelme, you have touched on one very raw nerve here.

The Old Super: Your old super is great; he takes out the garbage, keeps the halls mopped and fixes all the things needing fixing. Now he's a goner. Was that him arguing with the new landlord at 10:00 last night? So it goes. Now you have a new super you never see – garbage piles up, halls are a mess and because the new landlord stopped the extermination service, the roaches begin taking over. No doubt about it – the new landlord wants you out.

Giving and Taking: The new landlord gives you and your neighbors a new month-to-month lease. He places a clear plastic cover, locked, over the thermostat. He holds a manila folder with new floor plans for your apartment building (no, that's quite not accurate; you quickly revise your last thought to 'his apartment building'). You are still young and working but how about Levon and Priscilla, the old couple upstairs? Lots of fear and trembling, to be sure.

Not-So-Well Wishes: I suspect nearly everybody reading these words can relate with the narrator's sentiments, "The new owner stands on the roof, where the tomato plants are, owning the roof. May a good wind blow him to hell."

Coda: For me, this story of an evil landlord is the bare bones many other writers could use to write their own ten to twenty page stories. Donald Barthelme captures some real magic by compressing the drama into less than three pages. No wonder William H. Gass said he set the ground for an entire genre of flash fiction.

Sus says

not so impressed:

chablis

jaws

the new owner (yes, i know you're published in the new yorker, i know new yorkers have their heads up their own asses, but stop whining, dude, stop whining)

departures (see complaint 1, below)

the wound (can you be 'too surreal'? i don't know the answer to that. but can you be 'surreal without sufficient development and/or meaning', and therefore unsatisfying? to that i say yes. (call this complaint number 3.))

sentence (is one allowed to complain of gimmickry when you read a donald barthelme collection? anyway, what i learned from this is that the first three or four pages of this were so annoying that i would have stopped reading if i hadn't been jaw-clenchedly determined to get through this. so, no, the runon sentence gag doesn't work. at least not well. and FUCK YOU dude.)

porcupines at the university

sakrete (see unnumbered complaint involving the new yorker, above)

paul and eugenie (see complaints #2 and unnumbered -- AGAIN)

okay:

the genius

affection

the educational experience (*complaint 1: i feel like this is one of a number of examples of a good idea that is shown, but not developed, and i -want- it to be developed; sometimes shown is enough, but not always, and not here.)

visitors (see complaint 1; also, what makes this work, insofar as it does work, is not barthelme's "being barthelme" at all, but is rather conventional literary short-story style & stuff, and for whatever reason i find that disappointing and irritating (call this complaint 2))

a few moments of sleeping and waking (see complaint 2, above)

pepperoni

the catechist

the film (see complaints number 2 and 3. also, i find it boring)

interesting:

sindbad

the explanation [black square!]

concerning the bodyguard

the palace at 4 a.m.

terminus

bluebeard (a -lot- of other takes i've read on this have been a -lot- more interesting; i give you angela carter to start, francesca lia block to continue, anne sexton for a third, sylvia plath... **)

the tolstoy museum (I LOVE COLLAGE!)

some of us had been threatening our friend colby

lightning (well, not really interesting qua interesting, but i enjoyed it)

overnight to many distant cities

construction

letters to the editore (actually, it relies for its humor value almost entirely on the funniness of english that sounds like it's been translated from italian. but okay anyway)

great days (puzzling)

the baby (i liked its initial creepiness but found the ending a letdown)

very interesting:

rif (?? title's meaning?)

engineer-private paul klee...

the temptations of saint anthony (-- i'm trying to remember who wrote something else like this, recently, but,

i thought, more fully developed and more humanized and interesting; his saint was a jazz collector...)
captain blood
january (again, i like theology, and false documents, and, and, the exploration of saints.)

i love this:

conversations with goethe (this is hilarious, if & though not deep)
the flight of pigeons from the palace (*** I LOVE THIS SO MUCH *** !! i want to do a whole series on this!)

Margarida says

Que mais comentar senão a genialidade das histórias, a inteligência, o humor, o absurdo, a sátira, e ler, ler com um sorriso do princípio ao fim, e claro, uma excelente tradução, 40 histórias do melhor de DB (a que se seguem as outras 60 no livro seguinte - por acaso lidos pela ordem inversa).

Jason says

This is the funniest book I have read in a long time. I can't remember the last book that made me laugh out loud as much as this one. Barthelme has to be one of the most underrated writers of the last century.

The stories in this collection are very short, usually 3-5 pages, and all are fairly fragmented, oblique works of art. I'd recommend Barthelme to any fan of the post-moderns or experimental fiction in general. You know you are in for a good story that opens with lines like:

"Some of us had been threatening our friend Colby for a long time, because of the way he had been behaving. And now he'd gone too far, so we decided to hang him."

Or:

"Yes, the saint was underrated quite a bit, then, mostly by people who didn't like things that were ineffable."

And each of these stories just gets better as you go along. I'm still laughing.

Jesse Cooley says

Donald Barthelme is the first and foremost of a slew of sixties and seventies authors to first bend and shape fiction into what we know of as "metafiction". Metafiction deals with writing about writing, self-conscious writing, or writing that merely draws attention to the act of written construction. Barthelme does this best (in my humble opinion) with *Forty Stories*, a lofty collection of stories of various lengths and dimensions. Barthelme here pioneers the micro-story (story which is vehemently short). One such famous piece is Barthelme's *Sentence* which is, of course, but one sentence that is neither capitalized at the beginning or punctuated at the end. In fact, the piece is contained within ellipses so as to suggest the cyclical/infinitesimal nature of the subject matter that the single sentence deals with. Another exemplary story is Barthelme's *Some of us had been Threatening our Friend Colby*, a kind of parable about ideological control told through a

small-scale, humdrum lens. The story is a kind of fabulation, a form of metafiction centered in the retelling of folklore/mythopoeia. There is also *The Baby*. *The Baby*, I believe, is one of the most important pieces of literature today. The occlusive viewpoint and maniacally strange but keenly metaphorical subject matter of this story cause an inevitable double-take in a casual reading.

For all his genius, it can be said of Barthelme that his work is obscene in its demands on readers. *Forty Stories* is not an easy book to get through reading lightly. It requires a willingness to delve, to research, and to try understanding the seemingly apocryphal. In this way, Barthelme defeats himself in his noble attempt to deconstruct literature's infamous "fourth wall": by forcing readers into presupposed knowledge (aforementioned seeming apocrypha) *Forty Stories* sidesteps the notion of a fourth wall, and therefore does not engage its deconstruction. This is in part due to the very compact nature of the book, and Barthelme has demonstrated his ability to engage the "fourth wall" narrative in other works (see *The Dead Father*, *The King*).

Reading *Forty Stories* all the way through is a woozy feeling, the mind afterward feels distorted, the lens of brilliant literary insight playing haunting games with one's perception. With calculated precision, Barthelme dishes out knowledge like a furious storm, *Forty Stories* the wake of this tempest.

Justin Evans says

Formally interesting, but the intentional shallowness irritated me after a while. When the pieces actually did something, they were wonderful.

Oriana says

Usually when I find a pile of books in a box on the sidewalk it's filled with junk books, like self-help finance twaddle and new-age crap about death and terrible pop fiction. So imagine my surprise when, underneath *The Artist's Way* and *Lovely Bones*, I found this book! Yay!!

Anyway, this was both better and worse than I expected. As a collection, it's *really* uneven; some stories I could only read a paragraph or two before frantically paging through to the next one, whereas others I actually re-read as soon as I finished them.

So I can't exactly endorse this book as a whole, though it certainly demonstrates good range and gives an idea of what Barthelme is capable of. I'd previously only attempted his novels now and again, and usually found them too absurd and strange to get through. And here too, some of the stories are just ridiculous, so self-consciously crazy that you can't ever get a foothold on what's even *happening*. (Ex: in "Sindbad," Sindbad teaches a math class, but also kind of a cocktail party, and his jacket is too big, and all the students hate him??) This sort of things makes me very cranky.

But then some stories were total realism, and had interesting characters and fun things to say and cool points to make. (Ex: in "Jaws," a grocery store worker listens to and advises all his regular customers, including Natasha, who bites her husband on the back of the leg, severing a tendon, because he had an affair.) Those I loved.

I guess if I wanted to be totally pretentious, I might classify him as pre-neo-quirk (yeah, that's gross), but so it's fitting that Dave Eggers introduces this collection. (His intro is *great*, btw—fuck off, Eggers-haters.)

So the point is, Barthelme does a lot of the same stuff that all those "weird" writers are doing now, and

sometimes it comes off as just as forced, but when it works it's really great. The best story in the collection is "Departures," which details several snapshot cases of leaving, including one where the narrator's father, a lumberjack, falls in love with a dryad who is protecting the trees he wants to cut down. Very beautiful, and very funny. So the good ones do mostly overshadow the bad.

Moonglum says

I loved the Carrollian language in these stories. The language jangled my brain in a good way, the way Shakespeare or jazz might, and whenever I put the book down, there would be a smile, or at the least an evil grin, on my face.

Some of my favorite stories were:

The Genius: because the character of the genius presented a good comic schtick for the D&D wizard. The wizard could have a medal for future accomplishments in the field of transtemporal teleportation.

Sinbad: One of his fun fairy tale bleed over stories. One of this fantasy adventuring seafarer stories.

Concerning the Bodyguard: Who is the narrator who has all of these questions about the bodyguard? For what reason was all of that champagne consumed?

Bluebeard: Another fairy tale bleed over story, this one with kind of a silly, campfire ending.

Sentence: It's just fun to see the accomplishment of this massive sentence that is a fun joke with a punchline that is less than 1 character in length.

Some of Us have been Threatening Our Friend Colby: They have been and they are all mean hypocrites! Poor Colby.

Captain Blood: Another seafaring adventurer story. Silly pirates! This story would make a good Monty Python sketch.

Alika Yarnell says

I was very intrigued with this book. I like how the stories are all short and can be read easily in one sitting. They all are so different, and yet have a similar tone. I like how they take me to a unique place every time, a world which I might have never been exposed to. I don't feel I can honestly say that I understand any of these stories, but there are some of them that definitely strike me as being more meaningful than others and some which I feel just depend on personal preference. Regardless, many of them made me want to write some stories using his techniques or thoughts I had that were sprouted from reading his work. I was about to say that this was my favorite short story collection of all time, but toward the end, I started getting tired of them. His non-sequiters became a little frustrating after awhile and I shrugged my shoulders more often. So while I liked the experience of reading most of these stories, I'm not sure about them as a whole. Each story feels a bit like it's an experiment for an experiment's sake and they don't have enough real connection to the reader or a real human kind of existence sort of thing. I guess it depends on what kind of mood you're in and how

much you read at a time. Maybe a few stories scattered here and there would be better than reading a whole collection at once. But then again, that's how I feel about stories in general. Sometimes they have more power in isolation.

Brian says

I am so glad that I came to Donald Barthelme by way of Charles Baxter. And after reading Barthelme's short fiction, I understand more fully why Dave Eggers felt like a thief after reading Barthelme following the publication of his fiction. He's an original, a genre defining giant, and his writing just doesn't give a shit whether or not you get it (admittedly several stories, I didn't) - he's plowing forward without you.

"Some of us had been threatening our friend Colby" (found here for free <http://www.jessamyn.com/barth/colby.html>) is genius. The opening line to "Bluebeard" is so great - I don't want to ruin it by typing it here. I agree with other people that Barthelme isn't for everyone; but if you are a fan of the short fiction genre, and you want to experience one of the godfathers of the craft in the late 20th century, I highly recommend this book.

Hakan says

tuhaf ve zor öyküler. daha do?rusu, zorlay?c?. okuru ne diline ne içeri?ine al??t?r?yor barthelme. kitab? sevdi?inizi dü?ündükten dakikalar sonra b?rakma iste?i duyabilirsiniz. barthelme'nin özellikle istedi?i bu: çok keyif verebilirim size, beni çok sevebilirsiniz ama hay?r!..devam etmek istiyorsan?z zorlan?n, yorulun, birlikte arayal?m, sorgulayal?m. sonunda bir bütüne, bir anlama ula?mak da yok üstelik. böyle bir kat?l?ma ikna edecek ne var dersiniz: görkemli, ???l ???l bir zeka, yarat?c?l???n gücü ve bitmek tükenmek bilmeyen ironi ve mizah.

Margaret Adams says

Read for a writing friend who told me "[Barthelme's] stories are so funny you can read them aloud at parties," and then refused to invite me to the kinds of parties where people read Barthelme out loud; he later covered by saying something about how he'd only said you *can* read them aloud at parties but that didn't mean he actually *went* to parties where people read Barthelme out loud. After having read forty of Barthelme's stories now, I think that willfully fixating on this syntactical misconstruction is an appropriate authorial tribute. I want Barthelme read out loud at social functions and I feel robbed!

With less Barthelme-themed-petulance: this book had also just popped up on another friend's syllabus for a flash fiction class he was teaching, in the same pile as Atwood's *The Tent* and Saunder's *Tenth of December*, the kind of company that recommends any book, in my opinion.

I couldn't read too many of these stories in a row without feeling worn out--Barthelme is exhausting as only the rambunctiously intelligent can be (the urge to get the author a Labrador so he'll stop writing and run around outside is as strong as it is to read his stories out loud at parties). Still. My favorites were "Chablis" ("*My wife wants a dog. She already has a baby. The baby's almost two. My wife says that the baby wants the dog.*") and "Jaws," about a wife who bites her husband when conflict arises. From "Jaws":

"Verbal presentations, with William and Natasha, are no good. So many terrible sentences drift in the poisoned air between them, sentences about who is right and sentences about who works hardest and sentences about money and even sentences about physical appearance--the most ghastly of known sentences. That's why Natasha bites, I'm convinced of it. She's trying to say something. She opens her mouth, then closes it (futility) on William's arm (sudden eloquence). I like them both, so they both tell me about these incidences and I rationalize it and say, well, that's not so terrible, maybe she's under stress, or maybe he's under stress. I neglect to mention that most people in New York are under some degree of stress and few of them, to my knowledge, bite each other."

Barthelme has the ability to nail humor, absurdity, and truthfulness in one go. It's like he's just waiting for these three things to line up in a row like an eclipse, and then BAM, he's got another killer flash fictions.

Other favorites: "Engineer-Private Paul Klee Misplaces and Aircraft Between Milbertshofen and Cambrai, March 1916," "Bluebeard," "Sakrete," and "The Baby."

Doug Campbell says

Donald Barthelme is an experimental and postmodern writer who employs a wide range of strange devices that helped him create emotion and feeling in the reader. In his short story collection, *40 Stories*, he constructs an entire story through a question and answer session, he juxtaposes pictures with text to create greater effect, and one story is several letters to an editor. I have chosen to focus on one story in the collection in order to fully explain what is at play in Barthelme's writing so as to give a thorough review. I must say that Barthelme is a magnificent writer with the ability to transform the uses of the written form in narratives.

The story "On the Deck" represents Barthelme's experimental approach to point of view, both spatially and cognitively, and although the story does not easily reveal itself to the reader, a string of interconnected sights weaves together a collage that can be seen as informing the story's last two paragraphs, which seem to be entirely separated from the story's previous images other than as a creation in the narrator's mind serving to reflect his distant and confused thoughts as he sits with a woman who he seems to care for. The story begins with a description of a lion in a cage, moves forward to describe a group of Christian bikers, a girl in leg braces, a red Camry, a scandalous yellow dress, and so on. What makes Barthelme's description of these people and items fascinating is not their varied and eccentric assembly but the way they seem to line up in a row as if you are looking at the boat's profile and seeing each image lined up exactly as if they were positioned in the same location on the boat as their mention on the pages. Each person or thing is connected to something in its proximity. The bikers look after the girl; the car's exhaust disturbs the lion; the captain touches the hem of the girl in the yellow dress. About half-way through the story, the progressing linear structure breaks down and draws back on itself rewalking its previous steps but with a new series of people and things populating the previously straightforward assembly—clogging it and giving it the appeal of a crowd instead of a line, a newly formed three-dimensional scene. The captain's dog is now bothered by the lion on the opposite side of him; the scene is no longer two end points joined by a line but a single point of activity and emotions. Before the final paragraphs all the people on the boat share in the reception of mail from the mail carrier and Christmas music and falling snow—they all share a mutual connection now despite their physical or mental differences: "Winter on deck. All of the above covered with snow. Christmas music." The boat scene fades and is replaced with a spring day—"Then, spring. A weak sun, then a stronger sun"—and a pair of people. These two people may soon be lovers because they have just touched for the first time, she falling into his lap and becoming one point.

These two disparate scenes—the winter boat trip and the spring lounging—shows Barthelme's astounding ability to create two scenes with near-identical emotions and expressing the same spatial point of view. Both

scenes had two ends or two bodies and both ended with a convergence of the two. Furthermore, the two scenes seem connected by more than just a spatial point of view. It seems that the first scene's narrator who is ostensibly third-person omniscient is also the first-person "I" in the second scene because the seamless connection of the spatial point of view seems to suggest a seamlessly cognizant narrator. Barthelme's ability to construct a scene of postmodern ambiguity in a decipherable structure shows his ability to convey complex thoughts, such as the melding of disparate people and emotions, in the form of a puzzle. And, "On the Deck" is not alone in its puzzle like qualities. Stories such as "The Genius" and "The Explanation" require similar puzzle solving to open up. The question and answer format and the several large black boxes used throughout "The Explanation" ask the reader to look into the spaces in between the questions, and into the black boxes, to get a feeling of who the characters are and what their priorities are. Barthelme's 40 Stories is a great read and a great start to the stranger type of experimental fiction, later postmodern writing.

MJ Nicholls says

I don't know what happened. There I was, excited to cadge a library copy of a Barthelme book, a rarity on these shores, having stored up eight months of warm feelings for *Sixty Stories*. But no. It all came crashing down with this insufferable series of self-ironising experiments, non sequiturs, intellectual masturbations and opaque parodies.

What happened? Well, it is entirely possible *Sixty Stories* exhausted the capabilities of Mr. B, so widely adored among the McSweeney's generation, serving up an inferior batch of stories. Nothing here took off in the same insanely original, witty and definitively weird way as the previous collection. There wasn't a story in here I'd want to have repeated intercourse with for months on end before lovingly slicing the warts off my cock.

And that's a shame. That is grand old shame.

Paul Bryant says

From "Engineer-Private Paul Klee misplaces an Aircraft between Milbertshofen and Cambral, March 1916" :

"We do not have your secrets and that is what we are after, your secrets. Our first secret is where we are. No one knows. Our second secret is how many of us there are. No one knows. Omnipresence is our goal. We do not even need real omnipresence. The theory of omnipresence is enough. With omnipresence, hand-in-hand as it were, goes omniscience. And with omniscience and omnipresence, hand-in-hand-in-hand as it were, goes omnipotence. We are a three-sided waltz. However our mood is melancholy. There is a secret sigh that we sigh, secretly. We yearn to be known, acknowledged, admired even. What is the good of omnipotence if nobody knows? However that is a secret."

Monty Python:

"NOBODY expects the Spanish Inquisition! Our chief weapon is surprise...surprise and fear...fear and surprise.... Our two weapons are fear and surprise...and ruthless efficiency.... Our THREE weapons are fear, surprise, and ruthless efficiency...and an almost fanatical devotion to the Pope.... Our FOUR...no... AMONGST our weapons.... Amongst our weaponry...are such elements as fear, surprise.... I'll come in

again."

Donald Barthelme exists in an uneasy limbo somewhere between Dada and stand-up comedy. His best ones are just like the kind of outrageous riffing on a crazy subject some comics like Billy Connolly or the early Woody Allen could get into. Billy tells us about a terrible misprint in the Bible and the Crucifixion really happened in Gallowgate, a rather rough area of Glasgow, not Galilee, and Billy proceeds to tell us what really happened; or Woody starts off "I shot a moose, and I strap him on to the fender of my car, and I'm driving home along the west side highway, but what I didn't realize was, that the bullet did not penetrate the moose, it just creased the scalp, knocking him unconscious". Or "I bought a little city. It was Galveston" (that's Donald) or "Some of us had been threatening our friend Colby for a long time, because of the way he had been behaving. And now he'd gone too far, so we decided to hang him" (Donald too).

Those are the good ones but for me there are far too many which aren't funny, just crazy, full of what appears to be an intense straining after the jarring juxtaposition and the bizarre literary pranking. What kind of sense can we make of stories which aren't supposed to make sense? After a while Donald Barthelme turned out to be a little bit too much like someone telling you about their dreams - can there be a more tedious conversation with anyone? and isn't it really awkward to explain to your partner that her or his dreamlife is colossally boring without detonating the entire relationship ("so...what are you saying about my unconscious? *it's dull??*") - or a yawn-inducing acid trip, an achievement in oxymoronicism if ever there was one. Reading this was strange - at the beginning I thought I was a real big fan and by the middle I had so far fallen out of love with DB that I was beginning to fall into aggressive parental confrontation mode : "Look Donald, would you wipe your non-sequitors on the mat before you come in? Look at this mess! Now go out and come back in properly!" It was going to end in tears, for sure, and with Donald the tears were going to be the size of a blue whale and have Popes and news anchorwomen dressed as camels living inside them.

Josh says

I haven't written any reviews on this thing yet, but this book was really what I've been looking for in fiction for a long time. Ecstatic language that goes on sprawling tangents with wonderful imagery that is woven together into very concise endings. It's also extremely witty and hilarious. All of these qualities make it a very enjoyable read but at the same time it's also intelligent and academic. Barthelme definitely knows exactly what he's doing.

Oscar says

Estos '**40 relatos**' (Forty Stories, 1987) de Donald Barthelme, enganchan desde la primera frase. (Por ejemplo, 'Chablis', el primer cuento: "*Mi mujer quiere un perro, aunque ya tiene una niña. La niña tiene casi dos años. Según ella, es la niña la que quiere el perro*".) Y es que Barthelme sabe cómo llamar la atención del lector. Todos los cuentos son diferentes: algunos humorísticos, otros paródicos, otros absurdos o excéntricos, pero bajo todos ellos subyace algo más profundo, un reflejo del sinsentido de la sociedad consumista occidental. La narrativa de Barthelme es claramente experimental, en clave posmoderna, lo que Pynchon bautizó como *barthelmismo*, y como tantos autores de esta corriente, intenta dar sentido a cosas extrañas, cercanas, cotidianas, dotándolas de una transparencia que no habíamos apreciado hasta ahora.

Las principales armas de Barthelme son la sátira y el lenguaje, con una erudición evidente, y sus temas, la familia, la religión, la cultura popular, la política. Entre los '**40 relatos**' se encuentran algunos memorables: 'El genio', 'Acerca del guardaespaldas', 'Tiburón', 'Conversaciones con Goethe', 'El nuevo propietario', 'El

soldado Paul Klee', 'La experiencia educativa', 'Barba Azul', 'Despedidas', 'Visitas', 'Algunos de nosotros veníamos advirtiéndolo a nuestro amigo Colby' (que empieza magistralmente: *"Algunos de nosotros veníamos advirtiéndolo a nuestro amigo Colby desde hace bastante tiempo, por su manera de comportarse, pero ya había llegado demasiado lejos, de modo que decidimos ahorcarlo"*).), 'El rayo', 'Rocadur', 'La construcción' y 'La niña'.

Unas veces absurdo, otras extravagante, otras genial, sin duda Barthelme no deja indiferente.
