

A Reading and Discussion Guide

General Nonfiction Winner – 20th Annual Minnesota Book Awards

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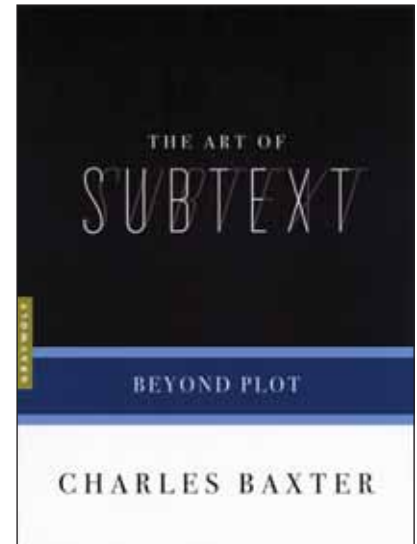
The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot by Charles Baxter

Graywolf Press

Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards/The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library.

SUMMARY:

Fiction writer and essayist Charles Baxter discusses and illustrates the hidden subtextual overtones and undertones in fictional works which are haunted by the unspoken, the suppressed, and the secreted. In one essay the author explains, “A novel is not a summary of its plot, but a collection of instances, of luminous specific details that take us in the direction of the unsaid and unseen.” Baxter’s book explores how fiction writers create those visible and invisible details, how what is displayed evokes what is not displayed.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What was your understanding of subtext before reading the book? How did your understanding change or shift in reading it?
 2. Who is the author’s target audience?
 3. Can you get a sense of a person’s character or personality from his or her face? Under what circumstances is this more challenging?
 4. Is it good or bad for a character in a story to avoid conflict?
 5. How is it possible for a person to say what he or she means by saying the opposite of what is meant?
 6. Many people harbor what the book calls “unthinkable thoughts.” What is the nature of an unthinkable thought? What happens when you think such a thought?
 7. In what ways do our gestures betray our inmost thoughts?
 8. Is it important for a fictional character to be likeable?
 9. What topics in our current society are Americans expert at avoiding? What makes a topic “too dangerous” to talk about?
 10. Has this book changed the way you approach your reading of fiction? Can you identify uses of subtext in a recent book you’ve read?
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A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLES BAXTER:

Q. What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

These days, literature is usually discussed in a weirdly esoteric manner, as if it had nothing to do with the way people actually gossip and tell stories and anecdotes. My book is about the way the unstated, the things you can't talk about directly, are described and dramatized in life and in writing. It's an important topic; anything you can't talk about has meaning, because it has acquired some destructive power. Americans, especially Midwesterners, are expert at avoiding topics of conversation that they consider dangerous. Notice how the war in Iraq is rarely discussed anymore.

Q. What research did you undertake in writing *The Art of Subtext*?

My book is not esoteric. It is about commonly-read books and ordinary experiences, so research didn't play a major part in its writing.

Q. What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing this book?

I had to think through several problems that no one else ever seemed to have been bothered about: why, for example, are faces almost never described in writing anymore? What's gone wrong in the way that we think about faces? Why are young writers so reluctant to create scenes in their fiction? Why do they wish to avoid conflict? How is it possible to present in a dramatic medium a character who doesn't listen to anyone else? How do you talk about the unspoken? For that matter, why have great numbers of people stopped listening carefully to others? I wanted to present these complex matters as clearly and as straightforwardly as I could.

Q. What do you hope readers take away from your book?

An appreciation for the power of what people cannot or will not say, and for the ways they avoid saying it.

Q. How and when did you first decide you wanted to be a writer?

Like most writers, I always liked to read, especially from middle school on. By the time I was in ninth or tenth grade, I liked books so much that I wanted to write them myself. In becoming a writer, I made all the usual mistakes and was more than unusually ignorant, but I was also unusually stubborn and pig-headed, which is what saved me and got me through the dark

times. My first book of stories was published in 1984, when I was already 37 years old.

Q. What other authors do you recommend to readers who enjoy your work?

I always recommend the work of William Maxwell, an uncommonly gifted writer whose beautiful work is simply not well enough known. You should start with his short novel, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*.

Q. How do you most enjoy spending your time when you're not writing?

We have a cabin on the north shore of Lake Superior. I enjoy hiking up there on the Superior Hiking Trail.

ABOUT CHARLES BAXTER:

In addition to his nonfiction work, Charles Baxter is the author of several novels, collections of short stories, and poetry collections. He was born in Minneapolis and graduated from Macalester College. After completing graduate work in English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, Baxter taught for several years in the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor's MFA program. He now teaches at the University of Minnesota. Baxter's recent published work includes these novels:

The Soul Thief, 2008

Saul and Patsy, 2003

The Feast of Love, 2000 (nominated for a National Book Award)



For additional information about the author and his work, visit www.charlesbaxter.com/.



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