

THE ASTONISHING LIFE OF
**OCTAVIAN
NOTHING**

TRAITOR *to the* NATION



VOLUME I * THE POX PARTY

M.T.ANDERSON

SYNOPSIS

NOTE TO READERS: This synopsis reveals key plot twists and may best be reviewed after reading *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Traitor to the Nation*, Volume I.

The setting is pre-Revolutionary Boston, where a boy named Octavian and his mother, Cassiopeia, live in a house run by “rational philosophers”—a group of scientists known only by numbers. For the first years of his life, Octavian, clothed in silks and given the finest of classical tutoring, believes only that his mother is a princess from a faraway land. Gradually he realizes, to his horror, that he and his mother are subjects of a clinical experiment—a trial in which the researchers seek to determine whether a child from Africa, offered the same influences as a privileged white child, can be educated with equal success. Octavian is a quiet boy who has grown up with an extraordinary vocabulary, is fluent in Latin and Greek, has learned to observe intently, and has exceptional musical talent. And yet, over time, it becomes clear to Octavian that his captors’ hope is that he will ultimately fail.

The institution of which Octavian is the focus — the Novanglian College of Lucidity — has been funded by one Lord Cheldthorpe, a wealthy noble in Britain, and when this benefactor dies, the entire operation is jeopardized. A nephew, appointed the title by the monarchy, visits the Colonies, but when Octavian’s mother rudely refuses an improper offer by him, the experiment and the household teeter on the verge of bankruptcy. Eventually Mr. Sharpe, the College’s new director, appears, takes charge, and directs that the College must begin to undertake profitable pursuits.

With tensions rapidly escalating in Boston between colonists and Britain, the scientists flee to the countryside with Octavian and Cassiopeia. Soon after, they organize a pox party, in which participants are confined to a country house and inoculated with live smallpox. Although Octavian suffers only a mild reaction, three other participants, including Cassiopeia, die of the disease. When Octavian discovers the scientists dissecting his mother’s body, he flees in despair.

After a period of hiding, Octavian decides to join the Patriots. He is befriended by a soldier who inadvertently betrays him, causing Octavian’s brutal recapture. Octavian is bound and confined, until a sympathetic researcher drugs his co-conspirators. He spirits Octavian away, and together they cross the Bay, heading for British-held Boston.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. How does M. T. Anderson’s treatment of the Revolution, the Patriots, and the Loyalists differ from some other literary portrayals of the period?
2. Today it is possible, theoretically, for an American child of any background to grow up and attend the most prestigious of institutions. But does race still play a role in the ability of America’s children to succeed?
3. Evidence Goring is, in one sense, one of the most moral characters in the book—believing fervently, for example, in the emancipation of slaves. What does it mean, then, that he is the one who betrays Octavian?
4. Pro Bono’s attitude toward Octavian is often hard to understand, bordering on brutality. How do you think he feels about the boy? What is his attitude toward the experiment?
5. Beyond the issue of slavery, what are the moral implications of Octavian’s experimental upbringing? Is there a line that divides moral from immoral conduct on the part of Octavian’s caretaker-owners? Where do you see that line?
6. Consider Mr. Sharpe’s comment that “We shall see a brave new day, Octavian, when the rights of liberty and property are exercised, and when all men are free to operate in their own self-interest.” (p. 338) How do you see Sharpe’s prediction relating to government today? To what extent do we live in that brave new world?
7. How much of Cassiopeia’s pre-slavery background do you believe she fabricated? Was she really a princess?
8. What do you think becomes of Octavian and Trefusis after they get “across the Bay to the lights of the beleaguered city” (p. 351)? To whom, if anyone, will they be loyal? Knowing what you do of Bono, what do you believe might have become of him?
9. M. T. Anderson begins the final section with a quotation from Voltaire: “In this world we are condemned to be an anvil or a hammer.” (p. 307) What do you think of this quote? How does it relate to the book?
10. Dr. Samuel Johnson is said to have asked, “How is it that the loudest yelps for liberty come from the drivers of slaves?” Discuss Johnson’s comment in light of the story.
11. Discuss the contradiction between the colonists’ propaganda decrying what they called their enslavement by the British government and the colonists’ ownership of slaves, some of whom they sent in their stead to fight the British. Do the colonists’ fears of slave uprisings suggest that they knew slavery was wrong?

12. The author has written that the book is “gothic and fantastic in mood.” (p.351) How does he incorporate conventions of gothic fantasy in the novel? Why might he have utilized them?
13. If you had been living in Boston in 1775 and had the opportunity to participate in the pox party, would you have done so and been inoculated or would you have taken your chances on contracting the disease?

AN INTERVIEW WITH M. T. ANDERSON

Q. *What gave you the idea for this book?*

A. I grew up in Stow, Massachusetts, one of the littlest of the little New England villages that first opposed the British troops when they marched out to Lexington and Concord that spring morning in 1775. Some of my earliest memories are of the Bicentennial celebrations in 1975—Minutemen marching on the green, President Ford delivering a speech from Old North Bridge, and a hippie in striped pants, a metallic hat, and bug wings who claimed that he was a refugee from the coming Tricentennial and that we should watch out for aerosol.

Growing up in the Boston ex-urbs, we all took the history around us for granted. I got my hair cut in the town that sent the first detachment of militiamen over the hill against the British at the bridge. My orthodontist worked in a faux-Colonial building in the town where Paul Revere was captured by the Redcoats. He inserted my headgear there. The whole stretch of early American history—from the age before the invasion of the Europeans to the settlements of the Puritans, the villages of the Revolution, the flourishing of towns, the rise of the mills in the new Republic—all these things seemed incredibly intimate, because the traces of them were all around us. We lived casually in that past. Eighteenth-century houses were given two-car garages. Old textile mills, half run-down, were revived in my childhood and turned into industrial parks. Walden Pond, which Thoreau had written about with such rapture, was just another place to go swimming. We were used to the distant echoes of history.

Something about that struck me at the 225th anniversary celebration of the Battle of Old North Bridge. It was a huge event: hundreds of reenactors, Patriots and Redcoats, gathered at the site to run through the battles, and one of General Gage’s great-great-great-etc.-grandsons was there in a Barbour jacket, reading a moving elegy for the British soldiers who died on that morning 225 years before (though tourists with more sense of history than hospitality were yelling at him to “Go back home to Britain, you bloody Limey”).

I went to several of the battles that day. I was standing in a field, watching several hundred Redcoats approach in neat, cruel lines—and like an inevitable machine, drop rank after rank and fire right at me. Then, finally, they rose, screamed, and charged, bayonets out. The effect was terrifying.

I started to think: *What would it be like to be standing here—untrained—facing them with a gun I usually used to shoot turkeys? What would it be like to be standing here, not knowing that we would win? Not knowing that we would—or that we should!—separate from England at all? What would it be like to face that army, thinking of myself as British and them as my own country’s army? What would it be like to be uncertain again? What would it be like to live through this without the victory preordained?*

This thought stuck with me. So a couple of years later, I decided to write a book from the point of view of someone who wouldn’t know the outcome of the war and who had to make a hard choice between sides. I wanted to recapture the feeling of the unknown, the unclarity of that decision. And that’s where the idea for the book came from.

Q. *Did you find any information about eighteenth-century pox parties really having taken place?*

A. Yes—in fact, coming across a description of a pox party was another one of the first germs (so to speak) of the book, one of the things that first gave me the idea for the story.

During the Revolution, America was wracked by a smallpox epidemic, and the progress of the disease in fact deeply affected the strategies and outcomes of the war. Smallpox was an incredibly destructive and virulent killer in the eighteenth century. It was estimated around 1700 that one death out of every twelve could be chalked up to the disease; in the military, that figure was as high as one death in every four.

Boston was the center of a prolonged debate about inoculation. People were often frightened of the process, which was very imperfect in its execution. Some people in the city feared that inoculation interfered with the will of God, who supposedly used smallpox as a tool for chastisement, and others were against inoculation because they saw that when people were variolated, they still got the disease in a mild form and so could end up giving a full-blown case to those—such as people from the poorer segments of the population—who could not afford inoculation.

When the Puritan preacher Cotton Mather set about, at the earliest American “pox party,” to inoculate his child and servants, someone threw a firebomb through his window. It didn’t explode; a note on it read, “COTTON MATHER, *You Dog, Dam you, I’ll inoculate you with this, with a Pox to you.*”

Q. *How do you relate your young adult novel **Feed**, which chronicles the disintegration of the English language, to the rich vocabulary of **Octavian Nothing**?*

A. I love eighteenth-century prose (and poetry)—both for its clarity and, at other times, for its Baroque complexity and little weird turns. Literate people in the period took an obvious pleasure in the extent of their vocabulary. You can feel them bringing out special words and usages in the same way that they took out the good pewter spoons for guests. It’s incredibly exciting, that widespread love of language.

Unfortunately, side by side with a tradition of American learning and self-improvement—the drive that made us the first nation on earth, for example, to demand universal public education—there is also an incredibly powerful tradition of American anti-intellectualism, a distrust of knowledge. This is a bizarre attitude for us to take, considering how dependent we are, for example, on technology that is so complex it amounts almost to wizardry.

But just as we’re content to surround ourselves with technological devices without really understanding their operating principles, we are often content to let our language lapse, despite its incredible wealth and variety. English has the largest potential vocabulary of any human language. Other tongues have other things going for them—Chinese, for example, has its idiomatic allusiveness, and French has its Classical clarity—but our gift is a big, stinking jungle of synonyms and shades of meaning and all kinds of funny little grottos and ruins and backwaters to explore. We’re neglecting all that out of laziness. Need I say, I think corporate narrative—movies, television, advertisements, and so on—is partially responsible, both directly and indirectly, for promoting a culture of receptive and self-congratulatory idiocy, but their efforts wouldn’t be successful if we weren’t so hungry for ease, reassurance, and a pat on the back to burp us. We want to be infantilized—we actually pay for it—whereas in the eighteenth century, when we had to fight for an education, when an education was something to be proud of, we approached our language with more determination and more joy.

Q. *You have said that during the writing of **Octavian**, there were times when you felt you might have bitten off more than you could chew. How do you feel after completing the book?*

A. There is no way of getting around it: This book was difficult to write, technically. Every time I started a stint of work on it, it took me days to get back into the language. Sometimes I felt exhausted. I’ve had to keep my reading “diet” incredibly pure over the last four years—the time it took me to write the novel—confining myself usually to books from or about the eighteenth century or things that would have been read then (such as Livy or Ovid). There were at least two periods during the writing of the novel when I seriously decided that it couldn’t be completed, that I just wasn’t up to it, that it was an incredible mess and it was beyond me to fix. Eventually, I had to cut out my favorite character and alter the plot to avoid him, which wasn’t easy—but which improved the project immensely.

I am somewhat more secure about it now, but I’m still very cautious about how readers will react to it. It won’t be to everyone’s taste—but I at least feel that I did my best and stuck with it. I am happy with the outcome, and hope others are moved by it.

OTHER BOOKS TO COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Countdown to Independence: A Revolution of Ideas in England and

Her American Colonies: 1760–1776 by Natalie S. Bober (Atheneum, 2001)

Bober provides a detailed look at the social, intellectual, and political events transpiring on both sides of the Atlantic in the years preceding the American Revolution.

The Land by Mildred Taylor (Phyllis Fogelman Books, 2001)

Paul Edward Logan, son of a white plantation-owning father and former enslaved mother, grows up overcoming difficulties with both white and black societies.

The Real Revolution: The Global Story of American Independence

by Marc Aronson (Clarion, 2005)

A fascinating examination of the events and ideas in different parts of the world that led to the Revolutionary War.

Witch Child by Celia Rees (Candlewick Press, 2001)

Colonists are suspicious of Mary Newbery when she arrives in colonial Massachusetts from England, where her grandmother was killed for being a witch.

The Year of the Hangman by Gary Blackwood (Dutton, 2002)

When fifteen-year-old Creighton arrives in America in 1777, the British have won the Revolutionary War, George Washington is awaiting the gallows for treason, and Ben Franklin is hiding out with Thomas Jefferson in Spanish-controlled New Orleans.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Writing the celebrated satire *Feed* (a National Book Award Finalist and winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize), says **M. T. ANDERSON**, was a process that demanded a fair share of field research. “I read a huge number of magazines like *Seventeen* and *Stuff*,” he confesses. “I listened to cell phone conversations in malls. Where else could you get lines like ‘Dude, I think the truffle is totally undervalued?’” The research undertaken to write *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Traitor to the Nation* was on a wholly different magnitude, requiring visits to battlefields in Lexington, Massachusetts, and hours spent in libraries, poring over 250-year-old documents.

In addition to writing for young adults, M. T. Anderson also writes for younger readers. His book *Handel, Who Knew What He Liked*, a picture book biography of the eighteenth-century composer George Frideric Handel, was a *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Honor Winner.

M. T. Anderson studied English literature at Harvard and Cambridge Universities and received an MFA in creative writing from Syracuse University. He has served on the faculty of Vermont College’s MFA in Writing for Children Program and lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

M. T. Anderson’s books are available wherever books are sold and through educational distributors nationwide.

Discussion Guide written by Shari and Richie Partington. Shari is a teacher, and Richie is a book reviewer and a frequent presenter at conferences.

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