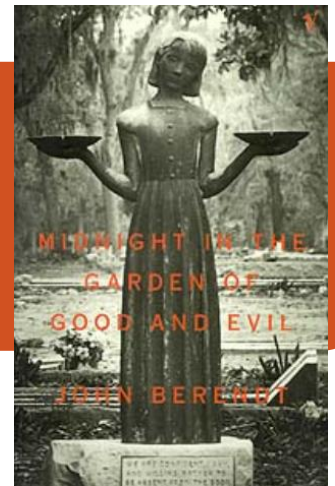




Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil

John Berendt



Author Background

John Berendt grew up in Syracuse, New York. He earned a BA in English from Harvard University and graduated in 1961. He was editor of *New York* magazine from 1977 to 1979 and wrote a monthly column for *Esquire* from 1982 to 1994.

For eight years during the 1980s Berendt travelled from New York City to Savannah collecting material for *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.

Due to the success of the book, Berendt became a Savannah celebrity and was presented with the keys to the city.

Berendt also published *The City of Fallen Angels* in 2005.

When asked in an interview what he thought attracts people to his work, Berendt replied:

“Time magazine said I had become “a state-of-the-art weirdo magnet”. What they meant was that the people I write about tend to be very strange. They are, in fact, eccentrics. I love eccentrics. I see them as artists. Their masterpieces are their own lives.”

Book Summary

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil is John Berendt’s first book, published in 1994. The plot is based on real-life events that occurred in the 1980s and is classified as non-fiction. The title alludes to the hoodoo notion of ‘midnight,’ the period between the time for good magic (11:30pm to midnight) and the time for evil magic (midnight to 12:30am). It also refers to the Bonaventure Cemetery in Beaufort, South Carolina.

It follows the story of Gatsby-like antiques dealer, Jim Williams, on trial for the murder of Danny Hansford, a male prostitute. It is set in the city of Savannah, Georgia, famous for its evergreen Live Oaks with their drooping, curvaceous branches, draped in Spanish moss which create an atmospheric quality to Savannah's streets and public squares.

The book highlights notable residents such as The Lady Chablis, a local transgender woman who is a club performer and entertainer; a young redneck gigolo; a hapless recluse; an ageing and profane Southern belle and more.

The imprisonment and trial of Williams, and his surprising fate, form the narrative thread that stitches together this crazy quilt of oddballs, poseurs, snobs, sorceresses, and outlaws.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ Do you come away from this book believing that Williams is guilty of murder? How do Williams's friends view him? Is it possible to believe in Williams's guilt yet still feel sympathy for him? Where else does the author elicit sympathy for characters who are morally flawed and perhaps genuinely evil?
- ❖ Is it Berendt's intention to draw our attention to his characters' eccentricities, the inconsistencies in the selves that they present to the world? How different would these characters be if they lived in a city like New York or Los Angeles?
- ❖ How does the transvestite, Lady Chablis, embody contradictions that Berendt explores elsewhere in the book? Is Chablis *Midnight's* most deceitful character or its most honest one? What distinction does the author make between the Lady Chablis's "act" and the social masquerades of Lee Adler, Joe Odom, or Jim Williams?
- ❖ Alongside his human characters, Berendt gives us detailed histories and descriptions of several houses. To what extent are his characters defined by the homes they live in and the objects they use to furnish them? Moreover, what role does geography, from the location of Joe Odom's latest apartment to Savannah's position on the Georgia coast, play in this book?
- ❖ What roles do homosexuality and homophobia play in this book? How do Berendt's Savannahians - both gay and straight - variously conceal, deny, or accommodate their sexuality?

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