

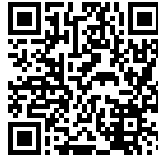
SCOTT J. BLOCH



Mount Wonder

MOUNT WONDER: AN EXCERPT

Posted on November 1, 2022 by Scott J. Bloch



This is a selection from the recently published novel, *Mount Wonder*, by Scott J. Bloch, based on the radical experiment in liberal arts education at the University of Kansas in the 1970s, the Integrated Humanities Program, taught by noted Catholic educator and writer, John Senior, and his colleagues, Dennis Quinn and Frank Nelick. They took radicals from the 1960s and early 1970s and exposed them to delight in education, in poetry, star gazing, and the ideas in the great books, as if truth were possible. They focused on drawing out students' innate sense of wonder and awe. The narrator is an agnostic student who encounters these three controversial professors who challenge his understanding of the purposes of education and his own life.

Mr. Bloch grew up in Woodland Hills, California, and his parents were active in Hollywood. His grandfather was Albert Bloch, who was a member of *Der Blaue Reiter* (the Blue Rider) association of German expressionist artists. Mr. Bloch wrote and produced [a documentary film](#) about his grandfather, AB. He is also the author of [*The Essential Belloc: A Prophet for Our Times*](#).

[*Mount Wonder*](#) is a wonderfully engaging novel, and we strongly encourage our readers to buy a copy and support Mr. Bloch's excellent talent.



Metaphysical Streaking

"Is the Good being able to do whatever you please, whenever you please?" asked Courtney. "Rousseau says that men were born free, but 'everywhere I see them in chains.' He thinks that the Good is returning to a state of being where laws are made to fit our pursuit of nature, of the savage pursuit of happiness. Certainly, that is what Lucretius saw. But what does Plato say about that?"

We were intently participating in the conversation even though we said nothing, silent acolytes to the sacrament of pure reason.

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"Why is it you are unhappy, when you spend so much time pursuing happiness?" asked Marin. I leaned forward. "Is it because of civilization and its discontents? Are you simply Freudian fruits, destined to be unhappy? Or is it your way of looking at happiness that sows your discontent? Instead of looking inward for the good of your own navel, how about the common good? What ever became of virtue? Ordering yourself to what is good. Or have you forgotten about that? There was a time when it was a betrayal of your country to protest in favor of your country's enemy."

"O, Fred, don't attack their war protests," said Whelan. "They're primed for betrayal of the West. They have already determined that Judas was just a guy who needed therapy. Just a higher dose of Thorazine."

Marin stood, bellicose, ready to pounce: "Is there anything . . . or anyone . . . you atomists would not betray?" Courtney came back in, rescued us, and drew us back to Plato.

"Plato has a rhetoric. It is the pursuit of Truth through the appeal to knowledge, empathy, and emotions. This is an order of Truth, you see. So Plato's answer is to ask about the common good. What is justice?"

"Well, what is it?" asked Marin. He turned to Courtney and sneered, "They didn't read the text, did they? All of you are little Thrasymachuses from the Republic. Socrates tells you, mind your own business. That's justice. Every person doing his own business. Know thyself, all you Greeks. Are you minding your own business, or are you poking in the business of others?"

I was supposed to be pursuing business all right, but it wasn't my business. It was the Floor King's business, and the university wanted to make my business the business of everyone else.

"We're asking you to take Plato and Western civilization seriously," said Whelan. "We're asking you to do something your generation does not like to do. It does not like to look at the past and ask, What did these people think? and take what they say on their own terms."

"To think presupposes that there is a form for thought," interjected a quiet Courtney, rescuing us from Marin's diatribe, "that there is a human nature to think about. That is, you are constantly under a barrage of democratic talk, such as 'That's all a matter of opinion.' 'One man's ceiling is another man's floor.' And while these things have some application to our emotions and the way in which we choose houses and clothes, they have no real application to reality and the ethical choices we make in our lives."

Courtney stopped and stared at the ground, just warming up.

"That is," he resumed with greater excitement, "when we make these choices, we act as if there is Truth. When you leave this lecture hall, you're going to open the door—aren't you?—and walk through it."

"You're all either agnostics or Gnostics," said Marin. "Chester, I don't think they understand the words." He smiled sarcastically and looked at the class. "You think it's all in your head—reality—don't you? You're all a bunch of damn angels. But when you drive your car, all of you follow Newton's laws to a tee. You don't jump off buildings, do you?" Marin spat the words out contemptuously.

"You see," said Whelan, "either this is a room or it is not. It is not both true for me and untrue for you that I am speaking right now. And when you say 'There is no Truth' you have uttered Truth, a categorical imperative."

"The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other side," said Courtney.

"You could not get up in the morning if you questioned that," Marin said. "You think Pythagoras is math? It's Beauty. only Euclid has looked on Beauty bare. They're blushing, Paul."

"Plato wants us to examine Beauty," said Courtney, "and he shows us Aphrodite, the goddess of love, both of spiritual and physical beauty."

Aphrodite was the Greek name for Venus.

"Consider what Plato said, that the unexamined life is not worth living." Courtney was looking out at us now, not looking down in his usual detached way. "You read in Herodotus about Croesus. He is you. You look out on your life and wonder, 'How will I live my life? will I be successful, rich, liked by people? Will I marry, will I be a good husband or wife, a good parent?' Does leading a life dedicated to the pursuit of wealth bring happiness? Herodotus asked that question. Croesus had it all. But was he happy? Remember what Herodotus said: until a man is dead, reserve the question of whether he is happy."

"Socrates says that all philosophy is a meditation on death," said Whelan. "And that meditation is about life and happiness in light of the end of man. We dare to ask these questions. We have not given up on the examined life or on the pursuit of the Good—of real happiness, contentment, and even something the Greek and Roman culture saw as transcendent. Here's the real question: Is the West worth preserving?"

Then the whistle screeched on campus, upsetting a lacuna of silence.

"At least go to the world of poetry," said Marin. "Don't you know, your love really is like a red, red rose, and her enduring young charms are fairy-gifts fading away? Wake up, damn it, youth's a stuff 'twill not endure."

Not a body moved.

"What does Plato say about Beauty?" asked Courtney. He pulled out his Plato and read to us: "When a man has been thus far tutored in the love of love, passing from view to view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly he will have revealed to him, as he draws to the close of his dealings with love, a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature." Courtney looked up: "What is he talking about? Isn't it the state of wonder, awe? And when in that state, you will begin to see beyond passion or emotion—to something more beautiful and delightful—you begin to see the Truth."

"Oh, Paul . . . you shouldn't say that word—Truth—without qualifiers." Whelan had a mocking, sarcastic tone. "I mean, it's not right—no parenthesis, no quote marks, just naked Truth. My God, it's metaphysical streaking."

The class erupted at the mention of what so typified this generation. The emperor may have had no clothes, but now, neither did his pupils.

"It catches up with you," said Courtney. "You will want the Good even as you realize you lack the virtue to achieve the Good. And then your life will really start. After you really read Plato, you will never be the same again."
