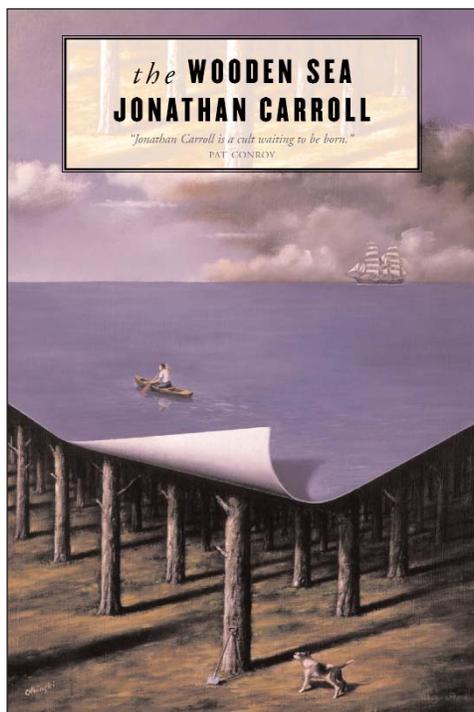




Jonathan Carroll

The Wooden Sea



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“Jonathan Carroll is as scary as Hitchcock, when he isn't being as funny as Jim Carrey. If you've never read this wonderful fantasist, buy this book. You'll stay up all night and thank me in the morning.”

—STEPHEN KING

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ROBERT LAVINE-DYER

Jonathan Carroll is a past winner of the World Fantasy Award, and the author of the acclaimed novels *The Wooden Sea*, *The Land of Laughs*, *The Marriage of Sticks*, *Black Cocktail*, *From the Teeth of Angels*, *After Silence*, *Outside the Dog Museum*, *A Child Across Sky*, *Bones of the Moon*, and *Voice of Our Shadow*. He lives in Vienna, Austria.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Wooden Sea, like all the superb novels of Jonathan Carroll, defies easy categorization. Blending elements of fantasy, spiritualism, comedy, and science fiction, all delivered with the punch of a good detective story, *The Wooden Sea* offers a glimpse into a world where time is fluid, watch-stealing aliens wear three-piece suits, and, no matter how hard you try, you just can't let dead dogs lie.

For Frannie McCabe, the former juvenile delinquent turned police chief of the quiet Hudson Valley town of Crane's View, New York, the trouble starts with a one-eyed, three-legged dog. Carrying the weight of the world on his grizzled shoulders and a tag that reads “Old Vertue,” the dog gives Frannie a knowing wink before falling over dead. Only this canine cadaver won't stay buried. And when a mysterious feather repeatedly turns up in the most unlikely of places, Frannie knows something very, very odd is about to happen. However, even he cannot imagine an adventure that includes coming face-to-face with himself at the age of seventeen, conversations with a dead schoolgirl, head-spinning time travel, a singing rottweiler, the machinations of a mad, multi-billionaire Dutchman, and a well-dressed, black gentleman who just might be God...or the devil.

Part dream, part nightmare, and all completely fascinating, *The Wooden Sea* is Jonathan Carroll's most exciting work to date, a novel of constant wonder which entices readers with unique twists on the commonplace, and which challenges our preconceived notions of what fiction can be.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. One of the major themes of *The Wooden Sea* is that of confronting one's perceptions—about life, about who we really are, and about what is “real.” After reading the book, what have you discovered about the author's beliefs about these perceptions? Have your own perceptions been challenged by this book?
2. Discuss what the author seems to be saying about the role of humanity in respect to the universe as a whole. Are we part of some inscrutable cosmic plan, or simply the butt of a vast cosmic joke? And does it really matter if we know for sure? What clues does the author give for his opinions?
3. In describing how the adult Frannie can coexist at the same time as the young Frannie, the younger McCabe says, “Where do you go when you take a nap? Or sleep at night? Someplace like that.... All of who we are and were is always around. Just not in the same room anymore; the same house, but not the same room.” Discuss this concept, both literally and figuratively. Is who we were the same as who we are now? Does time really pass, or is it merely our own perception of time that changes?
4. Frannie has the opportunity to view himself during different points in his life, and to regard his teen self from his middle-aged self, and vice versa. What does he learn from this? If given the chance, would you want to see yourself as you once were? As you will become? Why or why not?
5. Other authors have used time travel to illustrate the illusory nature of life, history, and memory, including Kurt Vonnegut in his masterpiece, *Slaughterhouse Five*. What effect does Frannie's experience with time travel have upon his view on his own life and that of his family, especially his father?
6. Frannie's friend George Dalemwood is described as “having no preconceived notions about anything.” How does this help him deal with the amazing things that seem to be happening? Is this a good philosophy for daily living? How might it be a negative?

7. The aliens explain to Frannie that after creating the heavens and the earth, God went to sleep, and now it is the responsibility of his creations to each create a part of the machine they need to reawaken him. How does this square with the basic tenets of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic theology, especially the idea that God is always watching us? If God is actually asleep, as the author has hypothesized for the purposes of this tale, how would that affect the consequences of our behavior? Discuss this from the perspective of Frannie, Gee-Gee, and Floon, interpreting their behavior in this new light.

8. What personality traits allow Frannie to cope with the bizarre events that occur? What roles have Magda, Pauline, and Johnny Pentangles played in his personal transformation from a wild youth to a (mostly) responsible adult?

9. At one point in the story, the alien known as “Barry” summons the Beatles to perform for Frannie, demonstrating his godlike abilities. Yet, in the end, it turns out that it is the all-too-flawed Frannie who has a critical part to play in the building of the “world machine.” Do you see any religious parallels to some of the ideals of the major religions? Discuss, including whether you believe this was the author's intent.

10. After Frannie's funeral, Astopel and Gee-Gee are using marbles to illustrate the events of the elder McCabe's life. Astopel throws the marbles into the air, and says, “I could throw them all afternoon and each time they would freeze in a different pattern. The marbles are the events and the people in your life.” Discuss the idea of life as a random pattern of events. Are we doomed to re-live the mistakes of our lives until we get it “right”?

11. At the end of the book, as Frannie dies, he has his epiphany, in which he finally realizes what Astopel and his colleagues were trying to tell him:

“That nothing is more important than keeping every one of our individual selves alive. We must listen, and be guided by them.

Not know thyself, know thy selves. All of the yours, all of the years.... ”

While, admittedly, we are unlikely to come face-to-face with a younger or older version of ourselves the way Frannie does, can we train ourselves to retain the vivid memories of the “selves” we have been throughout our lives? What tools might be useful for achieving this? What might hinder us from this goal? Is this even good advice to attempt to follow? Why or why not?

PRAISE FOR JONATHAN CARROLL AND *THE WOODEN SEA*:

“Jonathan Carroll is a cult waiting to be born.”

—PAT CONROY

“Carroll is such an intellectually diverting writer that it must be only a matter of time before his readership swells, before the cult becomes the convention.”

—*THE NEW YORK TIMES*

“*The Wooden Sea* never ceases to entertain.... A reading experience as smooth and comfortable as a conversation with an old friend.” —*DENVER POST*

“This wonderfully offbeat novel will further augment Carroll’s growing reputation as the pop writer’s pop writer.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*

“A quirky piece of intelligent pop that is also surprisingly moving.” —*THE NEW YORKER*

“Carroll’s prose is so closely akin to poetry that you may want to read occasional passages more than once just to savor them.” —*ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS*

“Jonathan Carroll is a true original, possessing both a distinctive vision and the talent to make that vision come fully to life.” —*SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE*

“Carroll is a master of sunlit surrealism—his beguiling, impossible novels are like Frank Capra films torn open to reveal Philip K. Dick or Julio Cortazar mechanisms ticking away at their cores. *The Wooden Sea* is one of his funniest, strangest, and most melancholy offerings.”

—JONATHAN LETHEM

“A new book by Jonathan Carroll is still... a cause for celebration. He has the magic. He’ll lend you his eyes, and you will never see the world in quite the same way ever again.” —*NEIL GAIMAN*

“Fete him, read his books. See him for what he is—one of our most gifted and intelligent entertainers....I thank the gods that he’s chosen the best art I think we have—the novel—to make his vision large.” —*WASHINGTON POST*

“Imagine Raymond Carver putting pen to paper after a generous hit of LSD and you’re close to imagining the tenor of Carroll’s fantastical novels, which manage to be poignant, wise, and wildly weird.... [*The Wooden Sea*] thrives on Carroll’s carefully calibrated cynicism, utterly engaging characters, and serious sense of fun.”

—*ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY*

“This is almost certainly going to be on the short list of top fantasy novels.” —*SCIENCE FICTION CHRONICLE*

“[Carroll’s] prose is lean, fluid, electrically witty. His characters have a seen-on-the-street immediacy; they endear themselves, disconcert, and threaten with equal speed.”

—*PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER*