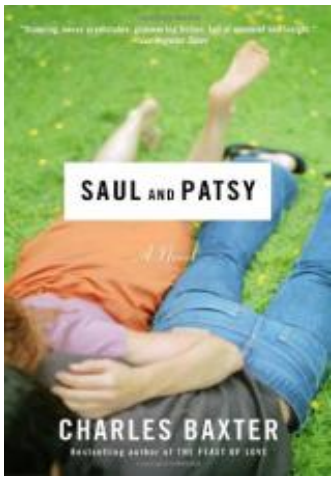
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Saul and Patsy

by Charles Baxter



About the Book

Five Oaks, Michigan is not exactly where Saul and Patsy meant to end up. Both from the East Coast, they met in college, fell in love, and settled down to married life in the Midwest. Saul is Jewish and a compulsively inventive worrier; Patsy is gentile and cheerfully pragmatic. On Saul's initiative (and to his continual dismay) they have moved to this small town-a place so devoid of irony as to be virtually "a museum of earlier American feelings"-where he has taken a job teaching high school.

Soon this brainy and guiltily happy couple will find children have become a part of their lives, first their own baby daughter and then an unloved, unlovable boy named Gordy Himmelman. It is Gordy who will throw Saul and Patsy's lives into disarray with an inscrutable act of violence. As timely as a news flash yet informed by an immemorial understanding of human character, **Saul and Patsy** is a genuine miracle.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel opens with Saul and Patsy playing Scrabble in their rented house. What does this scene tell us about them? What is unusual or interesting about the ways in which Baxter introduces his characters in the opening chapter? What details make this chapter so effective as an entry point into the novel?

2. Saul decides to become a high school history teacher so that he can undertake "the great project of undoing the dumbness that's been done" [p. 8]. Does his experience as a teacher show him that he can have a positive effect on this widespread cultural "dumbness"? What makes him come to the realization that "some things you can't help; some things you can't save, and you're better off not trying" [p. 91], and is his frustration justified?

3. Saul's mother warns him that life in Michigan is "*nothing* . . . you're living in nothingness" [pp. 26-27]. Why is Five Oaks both frightening and interesting to Saul, and how does his Jewishness shape his perception of the place? One thing

that intrigues Saul about the Midwest is its indifference. How does he experience this indifference? Does this include moral indifference? Is the anti-Semitism he perceives everywhere just a result of paranoia?

4. Saul lives in "the lagoon of self-consciousness and irony," while his ex-student Emory lives "in the real" [p. 40]. What, for Saul, is the difference between these two states? Does Patsy also live "in the real"? Is Saul self-conscious because he is overly educated and highly neurotic? Or does he perceive something about himself and the people around him that is actually quite accurate? Is Saul suffering from what Freud called "ordinary unhappiness" --- the most common human lot --- or something worse?

5. What happens to Saul in the episode on pages 55-61? How does he arrive at the desire to have a child? What is the significance of the albino deer [pp. 57-58, 67]? Is the deer symbolic? Why does Gordy shoot it with an arrow [p. 79]? In his essay collection **Burning Down the House**, Baxter writes, "Bewilderment, in the moment before insight arrives --- if it arrives --- has at least two very attractive features. One is its relation to comedy. The other is its solitary stubbornness." Does this statement help to explain what Saul experiences in this episode?

6. What makes Patsy so solid a character and so able to deal with Saul's anxieties? Why is she able to be happy in Five Oaks?

7. To what degree does Saul's inner drama dominate the novel? After the birth of Mary Esther he realizes, "It was himself he had a problem with. He just didn't know what the problem was, although his therapist in Chicago had once told him that he suffered from ?pointless remorse' and ?inappropriate longings.'" Saul suspects that being a parent will make his "typical despairs . . . look like luxuries to him" [p. 69]. Does this in fact happen? Does Saul learn to turn down the noise of his own consciousness?

8. "Politically and socially and ideologically, Saul had once felt pity and compassion and generosity toward the wretched of the earth. He still did, when he considered them as a class, and only when they appeared as individuals did they sometimes alarm him" [p. 72]. How does the novel illuminate this ethical dilemma? Does self-interest and the need to protect his family put an end to Saul's brief commitment to people like Gordy? What should Saul have done about Gordy?

9. While Saul is ultra-articulate and has a kinship with words, Gordy is illiterate and often mute. Why is Baxter interested in this struggle between two characters with such different communication skills? Does this communication gap reflect a problem in American cultural life?

10. Gordy's last name, Himmelman, means "heaven man." Does Gordy become, in his undead state, an angel of sorts? Might we interpret his position of watcher as angel-like? Is he Saul's conscience? Or is he a malevolent, angry ghost? Why do the high school kids react with hysteria to Gordy's death? What is the nature of the "sightings" of Gordy?

11. Discuss Saul's feeling that "Gordy was like Dr. Victor Frankenstein's orphaned creature, made out of spare human parts, wandering around looking for love and wanting someone to notice him grunting and groaning, threatening to become a monster and then becoming an actual monster" [pp. 142-43]. Because Gordy is only able to express himself through violence, does he remain unknowable and unexplained? How does the Gordy plot reflect contemporary American teenaged culture?

12. As Howie leaves Saul's house, he thinks disparagingly of Saul's family as people who "would just trudge to work, to school, to day care, to the job, to retirement, to the cemetery, like little imaginary people on a little imaginary stage" [p. 265]. Is Howie a sociopath? Is he a benign and comic figure, or a disturbing one? Why does he enjoy telling stories (or lies) about himself and his life?

13. What insight does Gina provide into the mindset of the kids who decide to attack Saul? What are they thinking, what do they want, and what do they hope to achieve? Is it surprising that Saul's way of dealing with their potential violence is to "adopt them as his own, such as they were, monsters of neglect and loneliness" [p. 285]? Saul provides a ritual --- the burial and blessing of Gordy's ashes; how do the kids react to this?

14. Discuss the idea of Gordy as something (or someone) to be deciphered. He is "mad in the USA" [p. 88], and his scribbled notes from class are difficult to interpret. Why does the picture of Mary Esther, and the assignment to "give her some words" provoke Gordy's intrusion into Saul's life [p. 89]? What is he looking for from Saul? Is his intention frightening, benign, or simply unknowable?

15. What are the distinguishing features of Baxter's prose style? Choose a favorite passage or two to discuss, or consider the following sentences: "The sky was habitually overcast, like a patient in need of therapy" [p. 68]. "Thinking of this, Saul sometimes imagined his father's coronary thrombosis producing a traffic thrombosis, blocking the flow of vehicles for hours. His self-effacing father would have hated his own death for its public-nuisance value" [p. 23]. "Resignation was the great local spiritual specialty, resignation and a fleeting recklessness, a feverishly hypnotic and prideful death-in-life" [p. 232].

16. Which passages in the novel are the most humorous? What kinds of situations, comments, conversations or descriptions are funny? Is the comedy in the novel produced by characters, by the narrative voice, or by the plot?

17. As the novel ends, Saul and Patsy have another child, and Saul has a new career as "The Bloviator" in the local newspaper. Why does the story end with Saul's meeting with the little girl selling lemonade?

Author Bio

Charles Baxter is the author of the novels THE FEAST OF LOVE (nominated for the National Book Award), FIRST LIGHT, SAUL AND PATSY, SHADOW PLAY, THE SOUL THIEF, THE SUN COLLECTIVE and BLOOD TEST, and the story collections BELIEVERS, GRYPHON, HARMONY OF THE WORLD, A RELATIVE STRANGER, THERE'S SOMETHING I WANT YOU TO DO and THROUGH THE SAFETY NET. His stories have appeared in several anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Pushcart Prize Anthology* and *The O. Henry Prize Story Anthology*. He has won the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story. Baxter lives in Minneapolis.

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