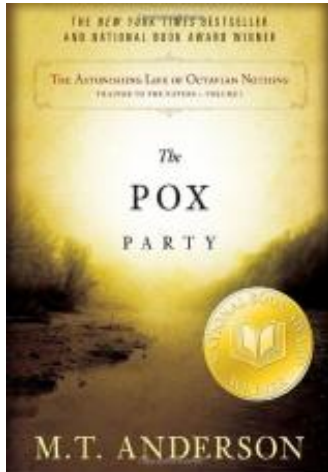


# The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Volume One: The Pox Party

by M. T. Anderson

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## About the Book

Set against the disquiet of Revolutionary Boston, as American Patriots riot and battle for liberty, this deeply provocative novel places an African slave at the center of the war for independence. The first of two parts, M. T. Anderson's breathtaking narrative views the past through a startlingly fresh lens that has powerful resonance for readers today.

## Discussion Guide

- 1. The Pox Party** presents a unique treatment of the Revolution, the Patriots, and the Loyalists. How does this treatment challenge our perceptions about this time period and differ from other literary portrayals of the period?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- How much of Cassiopeia's pre-slavery background do you believe she fabricated? Was she really a princess?
- If you had been 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?

7. 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. 340) How do you see Sharpe's prediction relating to government today? To what extent do we live in that "brave new day"?

8. What do you think becomes of Octavian and Trefusis after they get "across the Bay towards the lights of the beleaguered city" (p. 353)? To whom, if anyone, will they be loyal? Knowing what you do of Pro 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. 309) What do you think of this quote? How does it relate to the book?

10. Today it is possible, theoretically, for an American child of any background to attend the most prestigious educational institutions. But does race still play a role in the ability of America's children to succeed? How so?

11. 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 novel.

12. Discuss the contradictions 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?

## Author Bio

M. T. Anderson has written a wide variety of titles, including works of fantasy and satire for a range of ages. Anderson grew up outside of Boston, Massachusetts. He was educated in English literature at Harvard University and Cambridge University, and went on to receive his MFA in Creative Writing from Syracuse University.

M. T. Anderson is the author of a number of celebrated books, including the *Thrilling Tales* series, as well as *THE POX PARTY: The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Volume 1*, which won the National Book Award and a Printz Honor, and *THE KINGDOM ON THE WAVES: The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Volume II*, which also won a Printz Honor. *FEED* was a finalist for the National Book Award and won the *LA Times* Book Award for YA fiction in 2003 and was a finalist for the *Boston Globe/Horn Book* Award.

M. T. Anderson currently lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

## Critical Praise

"Gripping, thought-provoking, and occasionally horrifying."

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**Volume One: The Pox Party**

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