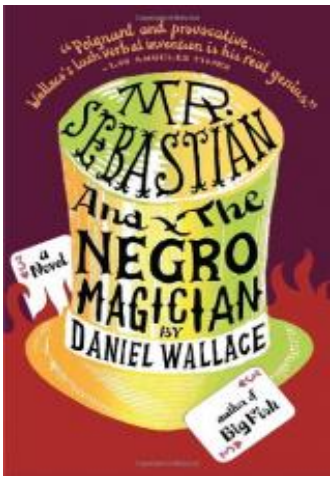
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Mr. Sebastian and the Negro Magician

by Daniel Wallace



About the Book

From one of the most imaginative novelists of his generation comes the tale of Henry Walker, a magician with extraordinary powers, extraordinary heartache, and a lifetime of illusions so remarkable you?ll not believe your eyes.

It?s 1954 when we first meet Henry. Once a world-famous magician, he seems to have lost his touch. As he travels through the South with Jeremiah Musgrove?s Chinese Circus, his act draws more laughs than awe. He?s a far cry from the spellbinding illusionist he once was, having learned magic from a mysterious gentleman named Mr. Sebastian --- surely the disguised devil himself. After inducting ten-year-old Henry into the world of dark arts --- blood oath and all --- Mr. Sebastian and Henry?s beloved sister Hannah suddenly disappear. On these pages you will hear from Henry?s circus friends --- Jenny, the Ossified Girl; Rudy, the Strongest Man in the Entire World; and JJ, the Barker --- who will recount Henry?s greatest feats, leading you on one of the greatest adventures ever told, with a stunning revelation at the end that exposes the truth about a master of trickery.

The story of Henry?s life is not one to read alone. We hope this guide will serve as a pleasant companion while you and your fellow readers travel with him through an intriguing world of love and loss, mystery and magic.

Discussion Guide

1. From the Great Depression to racial segregation, Henry?s tale is set during a tumultuous period in American history. How did history both propel and stifle his career?

2. Discuss the notion of the ?exotic? that Henry?s promoters emphasized. Why were audiences more likely to be drawn to him if he played the role of Hindu prince or native of Congo? People used to go to sideshows to see people like Jenny, and people like her used to have a life --- a family --- with sideshows. But no longer. Why?

3. How was your reading enhanced by the unique structure of this novel, including the tattered Book of Lost Freaks? What variation in the storytelling, if any, did you detect among Henry?s friends?

4. Would you have been able to make the same choices Henry?s father did if you had been in his situation? Was Hannah better off? Was it immoral for Henry?s father to accept money from Tom Hailey in exchange for control over Henry?s career?

5. What made Henry the perfect apprentice? In what way did this also lead to his downfall?

6. What is your perception of why Henry survived WWII? How powerful do you believe a person can become through determination or will power, or faith in illusions? Why did his powers ?fade?? Why was he not able or willing to save himself from Tarp?s racist trio?

7. What accounts for Henry?s intense attraction to Marianne La Fleur? Why did audiences reject her ?trick? of raising from the dead?

8. Who are the contemporary world?s most famous masters of miracles and magic? Who currently are our greatest charlatans? Did the various men Henry thought of as saviors throughout his life actually lead to his doom?

9. Discuss the fine lines that exist between identity and appearance. In what ways is your ancestry evident in your appearance? What illusions must we project in order to succeed? In the end, who was the real Henry Walker?

10. What is your understanding of the scene, narrated by Henry?s mother, in which Mr. Sebastian gives Henry a chance to resurrect the woman he loved most?

11. In your opinion, what is the truth behind Henry?s belief that he killed Mr. Sebastian? How might his life have been different if he had known Hannah was alive?

12. Revisit James Callahan?s letter, which opens the novel. Now that you have read Henry?s story, do you believe everything Callahan says in the letter? Is it true that Henry?s troubles were simply due to bad luck, and that Callahan did nothing wrong?

13. Throughout the book Henry's ?family" evolved from the one he was born into, to the father figures who took him in, to the circus community who embraced him. Explore the role and meaning of ?family? in Henry's life and in your own.

Author Bio

Daniel Wallace is the author of six novels, including BIG FISH, which was adapted and released as a movie and a Broadway musical. His novels have been translated into over three-dozen languages. His essays and interviews have been published in *The Bitter Southerner*, *Garden & Gun*, *Poets & Writers* and *Our State* magazine, where he was, for a short time, the barbecue critic. His short stories have appeared in over 50 magazines and periodicals. He was awarded the Harper Lee Award, given to a nationally recognized Alabama writer who has made a significant lifelong contribution

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