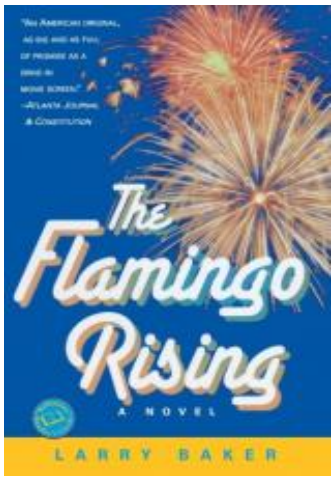
The Flamingo Rising

by Larry Baker



About the Book

In this touching, hilarious novel of the heart and mind, of dreams and memory, of desire and first love, Abe Lee comes of age in the 1960s, living with his unforgettable family at the Flamingo Drive-In Theatre on a scrubby patch of coast between Jacksonville and St. Augustine, Florida. There, some of America's last sweet moments of innocence are unfolding.

For Abe's father, Hubert, there's nothing better than presenting larger-than-life Hollywood fantasies on his vast silver screen. Nothing, that is, except gleefully sparring with Turner West-a funeral home operator who doesn't much appreciate the noise and merriment from the drive-in next door. Within the lively orbit of this ongoing feud is Abe's mother, Edna Marie, whose calm radiance conceals deep secrets; his sister, Louise, who blossoms almost too quickly into a stunning, willful young woman; and Judge Lester, a clumsy man on the ground who turns graceful when he takes to the sky, towing the Flamingo banner behind his small plane. Then Abe falls for Turner's beautiful daughter Grace. That's when, long before the Fourth of July festivities, the fireworks really begin. . . .

Discussion Guide

1. Abraham's father lost his faith in God at age seventeen when his parents died. Have you ever had your faith in God seriously challenged because of a personal tragedy? If so, how do you maintain that faith in the face of such a challenge?

2. How would you describe Hubert Lee's motivation for building his drive-in theater?

3. The narrator describes the first time he began to understand his father better and see him as a multidimensional individual. Describe that turning point in your own life.

4. Why is Louise so rebellious and secretive? Is it simply because of her age and stage in life or is there something

deeper at work?

5. Larry Baker's first draft of this story used the father as the narrator but the story didn't work; Baker put it aside for ten years before finally figuring out he needed the son, Abraham, as the narrator. Why do you think this story failed with the father as narrator? What would have been missing if Hubert had remained the narrator? What is gained by having Abraham tell the story instead of his dad?

6. Do you see any similarities between **The Flamingo Rising**'s main character, Hubert Lee, and Captain Ahab, the central character from the Melville classic **Moby Dick**? Are there other similarities beyond these two characters or these two novels?

7. What aspects of Abraham Isaac's personality come from his mother? What aspects come from his father? Do you think it is nurture or nature that dictates the development of our children?

8. North Florida, in the 1960s, simmered with racial, class, and economic tensions that receive little attention in this book. Baker has said he wanted to underscore the fact that the Flamingo is protected from the outside world. Why does the author want to create this protected environment?

9. One of the last movies shown at the Flamingo Drive-In is *The Green Berets*. Afterward, people start asking Abraham and Louise if they're from Vietnam. Does this mean the outside world is starting to encroach on the Flamingo? Is the author's message simply "you can't protect your children forever"?

10. Why is Hubert unable to accept the fact that his wife has been faithful to him? Do you think Hubert is crazy? If so, why does Edna marry him? Does this make her crazy as well?

11. Abraham--an adopted child--talks about being asked, in school, who his real parents are. He says, "I know that it is politically correct today to differentiate between biological and adoptive parents. Even to this day, however, my father rejects that distinction." Do you think there should be a distinction between biological and adoptive parents? Should adopted kids be told they're adopted? If your answer is yes, at what age should they be told? Hubert Lee says biology has nothing to do with parenthood. Do you agree?

12. In describing Louise, Abraham says, "From that first day of class until her graduation, Louise slowly, but inexorably, separated herself from my father's vision of our future." Why did Louise feel the need to separate herself in this way?

13. Why do you think Hubert agrees to honor Grace's request not to show *The Loved One*

14. What do you think of the character Alice Kite? Why does she take such an interest in Abraham's sexual development?

15. Abraham says, "The Sunday after the Fourth [of July] of 1967 was one of those pivotal days in my life, and I was not paying attention. I should have seen the distant look on my father's face, seen the tightness around my mother's eyes, heard the rip in the fabric they had wrapped around themselves." To what is Abraham referring? Why was the Sunday after the Fourth of July so pivotal for him?

16. Why do you think Abraham has set up a private gallery? What purpose does it serve for him? Why does he keep it

secret from his family?

17. Baker has two chapters--one of them titled "My First Twelve Pictures" and the other "Six Pictures Taken 7/4/68, Before the Box Office Opened"--in which Abraham describes photographs that he's taken. Why do you think Baker has inserted these chapters? Why is it important to give us Abraham's description of these photographs? What do the pictures represent?

18. Why do you think the family decides to hold on to the dog, Frank, despite the fact that he attacked Louise and almost killed her?

19. Why does Hubert decide to burn down the Flamingo? And why does Abraham leave Frank in the tower to burn to death? Of that decision, Abraham says, "Of all the people there, gaping at me, only Alice understood. I think she did." What is it that Alice understands?

20. How does **The Flamingo Rising** compare to other "coming-of-age" stories that you've read?

Author Bio

Larry Baker was raised an air force brat and spent much of his childhood traveling with his family all over the country and then overseas. He started elementary school in Louisiana, went to junior high in the Azores, and graduated from high school in Texas.

Baker, who holds degrees in English from the University of Oklahoma and a doctorate from the University of Iowa, put himself through college by managing movie theaters. He once ran the Admiral Drive-In in Tulsa, Oklahoma, one of the world's largest outdoor theaters and the inspiration for the Flamingo Drive-In Theatre in his book. During his "movie" career Baker was robbed four times, shot at once, stabbed once, beat up by a motorcycle gang, sold sex education books at intermission, found a dead woman sitting on a toilet at his drive-in, and caused a thirteen-car pileup on an interstate highway nearby with windblown fireworks.

Baker's other jobs have included time as a sportswriter, hotel clerk and house detective, pizza restaurant manager, Pinkerton security guard, ad agency writer, twice-elected and twice-defeated politician, standardized test writer and grader, and a short stint as master-of-ceremonies at a burlesque/strip club.

Baker lives with his wife and two children in Iowa City, Iowa, where he teaches history. He is currently working on his second novel, tentatively titled **The Education of Nancy Flynn**, the story of a thirty-eight-year-old widow who gets her first job as a teacher at the high school from which she graduated twenty years earlier.

Critical Praise

"[Baker's] own sense of theatre is so grand that only after three hundred pages does everything come joltingly into focus....Larry Baker is writing for grownups but he remembers how it felt not to be one, and renders the experiences in

unforced, unshowy prose, neither folksy nor formal. The result is a novel that's both modest and surprisingly seductive. "

The Flamingo Rising

by Larry Baker

Publication Date: June 23, 1998
Paperback: 309 pages
Publisher: Ballantine Books
ISBN-10: 0345427025
ISBN-13: 9780345427021