

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil

by John Berendt



About the Book

The victim is Danny Hansford, a small-time hustler who, early on a Saturday morning in May 1981, was shot dead by his sometime employer Jim Williams in the latter's exquisitely restored house in Savannah, Georgia. As Berendt reconstructs Danny's death--and follows Williams's staggering four murder trials--he also presents us with a lovingly detailed social anthropology of Savannah, whose past is full of murders that have been covered up and cheerfully gossiped about for decades afterwards. The author keeps a discreet distance from his protagonists. His true object is to see how a crime engages the collective imagination of a city that is "as remote as Pitcairn Island" [p. 36] and as decadent as Sodom, and whose citizens are so deliriously self absorbed that it takes a murder to shake them out of their usual preoccupations.

If Hansford and Williams occupy the foreground of **Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil**, the background figures of Berendt's canvas sometimes eclipse them in interest and sheer perversity: a fading belle who packs a pistol in her décolletage; a charming, piano-playing con man who moves like a hermit crab from one empty showplace house to the next, accompanied by his high-living entourage and pursued closely by his creditors; a moneyed dowager who conducts business from a cruising Mercedes limousine; a sour alcoholic inventor who claims to own a vial of poison so powerful that it could kill off the entire city; a voodoo priestess in purple shades; and a foul-mouthed black drag queen who passes so convincingly for a woman that she is able to extort abortion money from the parents of her white boyfriend. And Berendt himself becomes one of the book's characters, an ingenuous expatriate Yankee who, in the process of making himself at home in Savannah, manages to go everywhere, meet everyone, and ferret out every morsel of the city's delicious gossip--except, perhaps, the truth behind Danny Hansford's death.

Discussion Guide

1. **Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil** begins with a portrait of Jim Williams, the man around whom the book's

"plot" revolves. Yet the author sweeps Williams offstage after one chapter and we do not encounter him again until the end of Chapter 11, when we learn that he shot Danny Hansford. What does Berendt accomplish by doing this? Is **Midnight** truly Williams's story, and if not, who is its real protagonist?

2. Do you come away from this book believing that Williams is guilty of murder? How does the evidence that surfaces during his trials reinforce or contradict the impression that Berendt conveys elsewhere in the book? How do Williams's friends view him? Is it possible to believe in Williams's guilt yet still feel sympathy for him? Where else does the author elicit sympathy for characters who are morally flawed and perhaps genuinely evil?

3. In short order it becomes clear that Savannah is full of mysterious characters, from the man with the invisible dog to the salesman who makes up his left eye with purple eyeshadow while leaving the other unadorned for the benefit of his boss. How much do we end up knowing about the people in this book? Is it Berendt's intention to reveal his characters or to draw our attention to their eccentricities, the inconsistencies in the selves that they present to the world? How different would these characters be if they lived in a city like New York or Los Angeles?

4. As elaborate as these façades are, Berendt suggests that they are also transparent. The salesman's boss knows that he wears makeup on one eye, just as none of Lee Adler's old associates buy his altruistic pretensions. Why, then, might the characters in this book maintain their various masquerades? Is Berendt saying anything about the façades that all of us adopt in order to survive?

5. How does the transvestite Chablis embody contradictions that Berendt explores elsewhere in the book? Is Chablis **Midnight**'s most deceitful character or its most honest one? What distinction does the author make between the Lady Chablis's "act" and the social masquerades of Lee Adler, Joe Odom, or Jim Williams?

6. Do you think of Chablis as male or female? Why has she chosen not to undergo sex-change surgery? By what logic can she say that her boyfriend--who knows her true gender--is "straight" [p. 102]? For that matter, can Chablis be said to have a "true" gender? How would you compare Chablis's brand of femininity to Serena Dawes's or Mandy Nichols's? What vision of gender does this book impart to us?

7. Alongside his human characters, Berendt gives us detailed histories and descriptions of several houses. To what extent are his characters defined by the homes they live in and the objects they use to furnish them? Moreover, what role does geography, from the location of Joe Odom's latest apartment to Savannah's position on the Georgia coast, play in this book?

8. Danny Hansford is only one of the many people whose violent deaths we learn about in the course of **Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil**. Judging by their stories, what does Savannah (or Savannah society) deem grounds for murder? Why are so few of Jim Williams's friends disturbed by the charges against him? Given the casualness with which Savannahians greet the Hansford case, why are they so shocked by the news [p. 333] that their city has been declared the murder capital of the United States?

9. Although Williams behaves as though he were innocent of any wrongdoing, he also goes to elaborate lengths to conceal the fact of his imprisonment from his clients. How do you account for this? In what ways are the contradictions in his conduct typical of his city?

10. It is almost immediately obvious that Jim Williams is gay and that Danny is his gigolo, but no one comments on this until the first murder trial. Williams's greatest fear seems to be that his mother will learn the truth about his sexual orientation. Chablis claims that "the South is one big drag show" [p. 101], but if so, it is one where four men can be acquitted of a brutal killing when the victim turns out to be homosexual [p. 205]. What roles do homosexuality and homophobia play in this book? How do Berendt's Savannahians--both gay and straight--variously conceal, deny, or accommodate their sexuality?

11. "We don't do black-on-white in Savannah," Joe Odom tells Berendt. "A lot may have changed here in the last twenty years, but not that" [p. 54]. What role does race--and the elaborate restrictions that surround it--play in this book? How would you characterize the relations between Berendt's white and black characters? What artifices have various Savannahians devised to cross the color line--or tunnel under it? What institutions have black Savannahians evolved on their side of that line?

12. Early in the book, Joe Odom gives the author three rules for surviving in Savannah [p. 48]. What are these rules and how reliable do they turn out to be? What does Berendt accomplish by making his (and the reader's) principal guide turn out to be a professional con man?

13. The "Garden of Good and Evil" is Bonaventure cemetery, which the author visits at the book's beginning and end. What role do the dead play in Berendt's narrative? How do they influence its action and haunt the living characters? In what way does Savannah's attitude toward its dead seem more pagan than Christian?

14. Frustrated by his attorneys' failure to win an acquittal, Williams hires a conjure woman to work on his behalf. How successful are Minerva's efforts compared to those of more conventional specialists? What beliefs underlie her magic? In what way can the belief systems of the book's other characters be described as magical?

15. How do we end up feeling about the character of "John Berendt"? What does the author accomplish by making himself a character in his book--or, rather, by creating a character who happens to have his name and profession?

16. Was Danny Hansford responsible for his own death? Do you come away from this book believing that he was about to kill Williams or that he was merely what Spencer Lawton says he was: "a pawn in a sick little game of manipulation and exploitation" [p. 229]? How do you feel on learning that commentators regard Danny as merely "a good time not yet had by all" [p. 178]? How did Danny fit into Savannah's rigidly stratified society? Why--and at whom--might he be laughing at the book's climax?

Author Bio

The son of two writers, John Berendt grew up in Syracuse, New York. He earned a B.A. in English from Harvard University, where he worked on the staff of *The Harvard Lampoon*. After graduating in 1961, he moved to New York City to pursue a career in publishing. Berendt has written for David Frost and Dick Cavett, was editor of **New York** magazine from 1977 to 1979, and wrote a monthly column for **Esquire** from 1982 to 1994.

Berendt first traveled to Savannah in the early 1980s, when he realized that he could fly there for a three-day weekend for the price of "a paillard of veal served on a bed of wilted radicchio" [p. 24] in one of New York's trendier restaurants.

Over the ensuing eight years his visits became more frequent and extended, until he was spending more time in Savannah than in New York.

Part of the appeal, Berendt says, lay in the city's penchant for morbid gossip: "People in Savannah don't say, 'Before leaving the room, Mrs. Jones put on her coat.' Instead, they say, 'Before leaving the room, Mrs. Jones put on the coat that her third husband gave her before he shot himself in the head.'"1

Since the publication and unprecedented success of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, Berendt has become a Savannah celebrity and was even presented with the key to the city. "I took it down to City Hall one night to see if it would work, but it didn't."2

1 **Entertainment Weekly**, 3/11/94, p. 52.

2 **Syracuse Post Standard**, 4/5/1994.

Critical Praise

"I got to get Mr. John's address. I want him to do my obituary before I die. "

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil

by John Berendt

Publication Date: June 28, 1999

Paperback: 416 pages

Publisher: Vintage

ISBN-10: 0679751521

ISBN-13: 9780679751526