

Catch-22

Joseph Heller
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I don't know what makes me pick up a book to read next like this one. John and Viannah had read it and done reports on it in high school. They thought I should read it too. Viann had not been allowed to read it by her father, a World War II veteran. I don't think she has, but she does remember him sitting and laughing while he was reading it.

Heller's descriptive style is intricate and he shifts between sections of hilarity, horror, and eroticism with facility. *Catch-22* is the masterpiece, however, of sarcasm.

We first meet the book's main character, Yossarian, in the hospital, faking a liver ailment in an attempt to stay grounded so he can get out of flying more missions. We leave him at the end fleeing from Nately's whore, who has been out to kill him since Nately's death in combat. Yossarian and his comrades are stationed in an island off Italy from which they fly bombing runs over the mainland. When they were first stationed there the rule was that they could rotate off after they had flown something like fifty missions, but every time Yossarian or anyone else got close, the number of missions was raised. No one was ever going home. Of course, the missions were dangerous, they had something like a five to ten percent chance of not returning alive from just one of these combat missions.

So Yossarian is off in the infirmary trying to talk the doctor into letting him go home on a diagnoses of insanity. What is he insane for? He doesn't want to fly any more missions. That's not insane. And that's the catch. If he wants to fly more missions, they will let him. If he doesn't, he's not insane so he can't get off for being crazy. Either way he does more missions. *Catch-22*.

Each chapter develops a new character, or an old one in a new way. There's Milo, who is conquering the world by and for Capitalism. He ends up being mayor of several Axis cities and selling competing military raids and protections to both sides. There's Colonel Cathcart, the one who keeps raising the number of required missions, it seems due to his own irrationality and cluelessness and not any pressure from above. There's the chaplain, an Anabaptist, who is out of place in this setting but does resist sending out form letters to families of the deceased. There's Scheisskopf, for whom it is all about marching drills, general Dreedle, for whom it's all politics and territory, not for the Allies, but for himself, and, best all, Major Major Major Major, whose name caused his own mother's untimely demise, but who's promotion to the rank of Major by a software error was essentially assured.

There are many more colorful characters with their own idiosyncrasies than could even be listed here. They are all entertaining, tragic, and out of touch with each other and some own individual different part of reality.

Yossarian is a master of self-preservation and in one of the defining scenes of the book, we find him trying to give first aid to an airman who has been injured in a flak explosion in his very first mission. In fact, he hasn't even moved into Yossarian's tent where he was assigned, he went straight to the airplane for this mission and now he's bleeding and gasping. Yossarian goes for the morphine and finds a note from Milo that it has been sold for shares in The Syndicate (part of conquering the world for capitalism), so he just tries to dress some minor wounds and keep him warm and comfortable for the flight back to base. He then discovers that the young airman's other side has been blown open and his guts are hanging out.

Yossarian attends the funeral out of uniform, indeed, out of any clothing at all, by sitting in a nearby tree. This leads to consternation when general Dreedle can't figure out where or how to pin a medal on him. Cathcart tries to explain, unsatisfactorily, in one of those moments where reality doesn't really meet insistent military expectations, that all of Yossarian's clothes are in the laundry.

So Yossarian really is insane, and understandably so.

The trips into town on leave are as explicitly erotic as are the horrors of the war in damaged bombers. Relationships form with natives, mostly the young women, and misunderstandings abound. There's also an affair with one of the nurses on the base that plays itself out on the beach, in the tent, in closets in the hospital, and anywhere else convenient.

Yossarian would be familiar with the medical staff. He is always looking for symptoms.

One day at the beach there is an incident where one of the pilots who likes to buzz the diving platform buzzes just a shade low and demolishes one of the divers standing there ready to dive. Everybody runs away while the victim's legs wash up on the beach and the rest of him is splattered everywhere. The pilot understands his error and the plane climbs and climbs until at high altitude a parachute appears just before the plane crashes into a mountain. The pilot has killed himself but the passenger was saved.

A second passenger was on the manifest for that flight, Doc Daneeka, and although he was not aboard and watched the whole thing from the ground, he is listed as a casualty and his family informed of his demise. Despite his repeated, in-person protests, and his attempts to re-instate himself among the living through the chain of command and through the mails, the bureaucracy finally tells him they don't want to be bothered with his complaints anymore and to leave them alone about it.

Catch-22 is 463 pages of one thing like that after another. Perfect bombing patterns in water, violating orders in order to not bomb a city where there was no enemy (we were just there on leave), bombing a place twice just because of a paperwork mixup. This would be funny if it weren't exactly the way things actually go in real life all the time.

Because I was reading this during a time in life when I was in the midst of the insanity of a big structured project that had some alarming parallels with the irrational way in which the personnel and resources are handled in a major war, I did not find Catch-22 as entertaining as I would have if I had been a soldier in World War Two but was now retired so that it was all in the past and a potentially humorous memory.

But, in the unlikely event that she ever has time, I'll allow Viann to read it. Now that her dad is gone, I'm in charge of her now, to the extent that anyone can be. But I wouldn't let my kids read it. Oh wait, they already did reports on Catch-22 in high school.