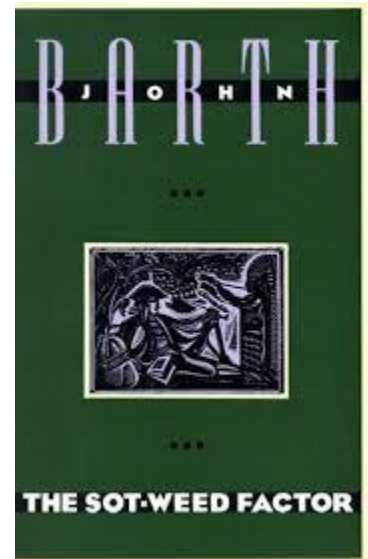


## Reading Guide:

### *The Sot-Weed Factor*

John Barth



#### Thought Questions:

1. *The Sot-weed Factor* is a sprawling epic of 750 pages, encompassing dozens of characters, plot devices, and set-pieces. Who or what stayed with you out of all this detail, and why do you think that was?
2. John Barth says that when he began the novel, he didn't realize that its theme was "innocence." Do you agree? Do you think the novel makes an argument about innocence and experience, and if so, what?
3. Barth was in his twenties when he wrote this novel in the late 1950s. How do you think his age and the era in which he was writing affected the book? Does the book still work for 21<sup>st</sup> century readers?
4. Scholars consider this book an early expression of 20<sup>th</sup>-century post-modernism, defined by Barth as "... *tying your necktie while simultaneously explaining the step-by-step procedure of necktie-tying and chatting about the history of male neckwear — and managing a perfect full windsor anyhow.*" How well do you think the historic subject material and the very modern writing technique work together?
5. Barth deleted 60 pages, which he described as "excess verbal calories," from *The Sot-weed Factor* when it was reissued in 1967. Could he have gone farther? If you were his editor, what would you advise him to keep or remove?
6. How did your knowledge of early America affect your reading of *The Sot-weed Factor*? What did you wonder about as you read it? What would you have liked to know more about?
7. How would you describe this book to a friend? To what kind of person would you recommend it, if any?

**Author Biography (adapted from *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select* database)**

John Simmons Barth and his twin sister, Jill, were born on May 27, 1930, in Cambridge, Maryland. As a young man, he played drums and wrote for the newspaper at Cambridge High School. After graduating in 1947, Barth briefly studied orchestration and harmony at the Juilliard School of Music before accepting an academic scholarship to pursue creative writing and journalism at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. While working in the library at Johns Hopkins, Barth filed books in the Oriental Seminary collection. This position exposed him to such seminal works as *The Arabian Nights*, prompting a lifelong interest in the possibilities of intricate plot construction and narrative framing. Barth was a professor at Pennsylvania State University from 1953 to 1965. He also taught at Boston University (visiting professor, 1972–73) and Johns Hopkins University (1973–95) before retiring in 1995. In 1997 he received the F. Scott Fitzgerald Award for outstanding achievement in American literature.

***If you liked The Sot-weed Factor, you may enjoy the following books recommended by staff in the Kitty King Powell Library at Bayou Bend:***

*Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake* by James Horn (1996)

Until the end of the seventeenth century, most settlers in Virginia and Maryland were born and raised in England. This book works to chart the enduring influence of English attitudes, values, and behavior on the social and cultural evolution of the early Chesapeake. Using detailed local and regional studies to compare everyday life in English provincial society and the emergent societies of the Chesapeake Bay, Horn provides a richly textured picture of the immigrants' Old World backgrounds and their adjustment to life in America.

*Everyday Life in Early America* by David Freeman Hawke (1989)

In this clearly written volume, Hawke provides enlightening and colorful descriptions of early Colonial Americans and debunks many widely held assumptions about 17th century settlers. Hawke includes entertaining discussions of what the first white Americans ate (for example, raccoon was served in New York). He also discusses how colonial Americans were punished for crimes and how they treated enslaved blacks and indentured servants.

*Life in the Southern Colonies: Jamestown, Williamsburg, St. Mary's City and Beyond* by Jeanne Munn Bracken (1970)

An anthology of sources relating to the earliest southern towns and colonies through selected documents of colonial founders, indentured servants, and slaves.

*A Durable Fire* by Virginia Bernhard (1991)

A work of historical fiction by University of St. Thomas professor (and author of several non-fiction books on Southern and American history and culture), Virginia Bernhard. The book is a fictional telling of the settlement of Jamestown as told from the perspective of several women who traveled from England to America in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, weaving historical facts and events with her characters' personal stories. Virginia Bernhard is also the author of a popular biography of Ima Hogg, *The Governor's Daughter*.