

ALSO BY WALKER PERCY

NOVELS

THE MOVIEGOER (1961)

THE LAST GENTLEMAN (1966)

LOVE IN THE RUINS (1971)

LANCELOT (1977)

THE SECOND COMING (1980)

THE THANATOS SYNDROME (1987)

NONFICTION

THE MESSAGE IN THE BOTTLE (1975)

SIGNPOSTS IN A STRANGE LAND (1991)

LOST IN THE COSMOS

THE LAST SELF-HELP BOOK

WALKER
PERCY

PICADOR USA
FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
NEW YORK

Imagine that you are reading a book about the Cosmos. You find it so interesting that you go out and buy a telescope. One fine clear moonless night you set up your telescope and focus on the brightest star in the sky. It is a planet, not a star, with a reddish spot and several moons. Excited, you look up the planets in your book about the Cosmos. You read a description of the planets. You read a sentence about a large yellowish planet with a red spot and several moons. You recognize both the description and the picture. Clearly, you have been looking at Jupiter.

You have no difficulty at all in saying that it is Jupiter, not Mars or Saturn, even though the object you are looking at is something you have never seen before and is hundreds of millions of miles distant.

Now imagine that you are reading the newspaper. You come to the astrology column. You may or may not believe in astrology, but to judge from the popularity of astrology these days, you will probably read your horoscope. According to a recent poll, more Americans set store in astrology than in science or God.

You are an Aries. You open your newspaper to the astrology column and read an analysis of the Aries personality. It says, among other things:

You have the knack of creating an atmosphere of thought and movement, unhampered by petty jealousies. But you have the tendency to scatter your talents to the four winds.

Hm, you say, quite true. I'm like that.

Suddenly you realize you've made a mistake. You've read the Gemini column. So you go back to Aries:

Nothing hurts you more than to be unjustly mistreated or suspected. But you have a way about you, a gift for seeing things through despite all obstacles and distractions. You also have a desperate need to be liked. So you have been wounded more often than you will admit.

Hm, you say, quite true. I'm like that.

The first question is: Why is it that both descriptions seem to fit you—or, for that matter, why do you seem to recognize yourself in the self-analysis of all twelve astrological signs? Or, to put it another way, why is it that you can recognize and identify the planets Jupiter and Venus so readily after reading a bit and taking one look, yet have so much trouble identifying yourself from twelve descriptions when, presumably, you know yourself much better than you know Jupiter and Venus?

(2) Can you explain why it is that there are, at last count, sixteen schools of psychotherapy with sixteen theories of the personality and its disorders and that patients treated in one school seem to do as well or as badly as patients treated in any other—while there is only one generally accepted theory of the cause and cure of pneumococcal pneumonia and only one generally accepted theory of the orbits of the planets and the gravitational attraction of our galaxy and the galaxy M31

in Andromeda? (Hint: If you answer that the human psyche is more complicated than the pneumococcus and the human white-cell response or the galaxies or Einstein's general theory of relativity, keep in mind that the burden of proof is on you. Or if you answer that the study of the human psyche is in its infancy, remember then this infancy has lasted 2,500 years and, unlike physics, we don't seem to know much more about the psyche than Plato did.)

(3) How do you explain these odd little everyday phenomena with which everyone is familiar:

You have seen yourself a thousand times in the mirror, face to face. No sight is more familiar. Yet why is it that the first time you see yourself in a clothier's triple mirror—from the side, so to speak—it comes as a shock? Or the first time you saw yourself in a home movie: were you embarrassed? What about the first time you heard your recorded voice—did you recognize it? Clearly, you should, since you've been hearing it all your life.

Why is it that, when you are shown a group photograph in which you are present, you always (and probably covertly) seek yourself out? To see what you look like? Don't you know what you look like?

Has this ever happened to you? You are walking along a street of stores. There are other people walking. You catch a glimpse in a store window of a reflection of a person. For a second or so you do not recognize the person. He, she, seems a total stranger. Then you realize it is your own reflection. Then in a kind of transformation, the reflection does in fact become your familiar self.

One of the peculiar ironies of being a human self in the Cosmos: A stranger approaching you in the street will in a second's glance see you whole, size you up, place you in a way in which you cannot and never will, even though you

have spent a lifetime with yourself, live in the Century of the Self, and therefore ought to know yourself best of all.

The question is: Why is it that in your entire lifetime you will never be able to size yourself up as you can size up somebody else—or size up Saturn—in a ten-second look?

Why is it that the look of another person looking at you is different from everything else in the Cosmos? That is to say, looking at lions or tigers or Saturn or the Ring Nebula or at an owl or at another person from the side is one thing, but finding yourself looking into the eyes of another person looking at you is something else. And why is it that one can look at a lion or a planet or an owl or at someone's finger as long as one pleases, but looking into the eyes of another person is, if prolonged past a second, a perilous affair?

(4) The following experiment was performed on a group of ten subjects. See how you would answer the questions.

Think of five acquaintances, not close friends, not lovers, not family members.

Describe each by three adjectives (in the experiment, a "personality characteristic chart" was provided on which one could score an acquaintance on a scale of "good" and "bad" qualities, e.g., more or less trustworthy, attractive, boring, intelligent, selfish, flighty, outgoing, introspective, and so on). Thus, you might describe an acquaintance named Gary McPherson as fairly good company, moderately trustworthy, funny but a little malicious, and so on. Or Linda Ellison: fairly good-looking (a 7 or $7\frac{1}{2}$), more intelligent than she lets on, a good listener. And so on.

Note that most if not all of your adjectives could be placed on a finite scale, say from a plus ten to a minus ten.

Now, having described five acquaintances, do the following. Read these two sentences carefully:

- (a) You are extraordinarily generous, ecstatically loving of the right person, supremely knowledgeable about what is wrong with the country, about people, capable of moments of insight unsurpassed by any scientist or artist or writer in the country. You possess an infinite potentiality.
- (b) You are of all people in the world probably the most selfish, hateful, envious (e.g., you take pleasure in reading death notices in the newspaper and in hearing of an acquaintance's heart attack), the most treacherous, the most frightened, and above all the phoniest.

Now answer this question as honestly as you can: Which of these two sentences more nearly describes you? CHECK (a), (b), (neither), (both).

If you checked (both)—60 percent of respondents did—how can that be?

(5) Do you understand sexuality?

That is to say, are you happy with either of the two standard versions of sexuality:

One, the biological—that the sex drive is one among several needs and drives evolved through natural selection as a means of sustaining the life of the organism and ensuring the survival of the species. Thus, sexual desire is one item on a list which includes other such items as hunger, thirst, needs of shelter, nest-building, migration, and so on.

The other, the religious-humanistic—sex is an expression, perhaps the ultimate expression, of love and communication between a man and a woman, and is best exemplified in marriage, raising children, the sharing of a life, family, home, and fireside.

Or do you see sexuality as a unique trait of the present-day self (which is the only self we know), occupying an absolutely central locus in the consciousness particularly as it relates to other sexual beings, of an order and magnitude of power incommensurate with other "drives" and also specified by the very structure of the present-day self as its very core and as its prime avenue of intercourse with others?

If the sexual drive is but one of several biological needs, why are we living in the most eroticized society in history? Why don't TV, films, billboards, magazines feature culinary delights, e.g., huge chocolate cakes, hams, roasts, strawberries, instead of women's bodies?

Or are you more confused about sexuality than any other phenomenon in the Cosmos?

Do you know why it is that men and women exhibit sexual behavior undreamed of among the other several million species, with every conceivable sexual relation between persons, or with only one person, or between a male and female, or between two male persons, or two female persons, or two males and one female, or two females and one male; relationships moreover which can implicate every orifice and appendage of the human body and which bear no relation to the reproduction and survival of the species?

Is the following statement true or false:

Pornography is not an aberration of a few sexually frustrated middle-aged men in gray raincoats; it is rather a salient and prime property of modern consciousness, of three hundred years of technology and the industrial revolution, and is symptomatic of a radical disorder in the relation of the self to other selves which generally manifests itself in the abstracted state of one self (male) and the degradation of another self (female) to an abstract object of satisfaction.

(6) Consider the following short descriptions of different kinds of consciousness of self. Which of the selves, if any, do you identify with?

(a) *The cosmological self.* The self is either unconscious of itself or only conscious of itself insofar as it is identified with a cosmological myth or classificatory system, e.g., totemism. Ask a Bororo tribesman: Who are you? He may reply: I am parakeet. (Ask an L.S.U. fan at a football game: Who are you? He may reply: I am a tiger.)

(b) *The Brahmin-Buddhist self.* Who are you? What is your self? My self in this life is impaled on the wheel of non-being, obscured by the veil of unreality. But it can realize itself by penetrating the veil of *maya* and plumbing the depths of self until it achieves *nirvana*, nothingness, or the *Brahman*, God. The *atman* (self) is the *Brahman* (God).

(c) *The Christian self (and, to a degree, the Judaic and Islamic self).* The self sees itself as a creature, created by God, estranged from God by an aboriginal catastrophe, and now reconciled with him. Before the reconciliation, the self is, as Paul told the Ephesians, a stranger to every covenant, with no promise to hope for, with the world about you and no God. But now the self becomes a son of God, a member of a family of selves, and is conscious of itself as a creature of God embarked upon a pilgrimage in this life and destined for happiness and reunion with God in a later life.

(d) *The role-taking self.* One sociological view of the self is that the self achieves its identity by taking roles and modeling its own role from the roles of others, e.g., one's mother, father, housewife, breadwinner, macho-boy-man, feminine-doll-girl, etc.—and also, as George Meade said, upon how one perceives others' perceptions of oneself.

(e) *The standard American-Jeffersonian high-school-commencement Republican-and-Democratic-platform self.* The self is an individual entity created by God and endowed with certain inalienable rights and the freedom to pursue happiness and fulfill its potential. It achieves itself through work, participation in society, family, the marketplace, the political process, cultural activities, sports, the sciences, and the arts. It follows that in a free and affluent society the self should succeed more often than not in fulfilling itself. Happiness can be pursued and to a degree caught.

(f) *The diverted self.* In a free and affluent society, the self is free to divert itself endlessly from itself. It works in order to enjoy the diversions that the fruit of one's labor can purchase. The pursuit of happiness becomes the pursuit of diversion, and in this society the possibilities of diversion are endless and as readily available as eight hours of television a day: TV, sports, travel, drugs, games, newspapers, magazines, Vegas.

(g) *The lost self.* With the passing of the cosmological myths and the fading of Christianity as a guarantor of the identity of the self, the self becomes dislocated, Jefferson or no Jefferson, is both cut loose and imprisoned by its own freedom, yet imprisoned by a curious and paradoxical bondage like a Chinese handcuff, so that the very attempts to free itself, e.g., by ever more refined techniques for the pursuit of happiness, only tighten the bondage and distance the self ever farther from the very world it wishes to inhabit as its homeland. The rational Jeffersonian pursuit of happiness embarked upon in the American Revolution translates into the flaky euphoria of the late twentieth century. Every advance in an objective understanding of the Cosmos and in its technological control further distances the self from the Cosmos precisely in the degree of the advance—so that in the end the self be-

comes a space-bound ghost which roams the very Cosmos it understands perfectly.

(h) *The scientific and artistic self.* Or that self which is so totally absorbed in the pursuit of art or science as to be selfless. The modern caricature is the "absentminded professor" or the demonic possessed artist, which is to say that as a self he is "absent" from the usual concerns of the self about itself in the world. E.g., Karl von Frisch and his bees, Schubert in a beer hall writing lieder on the tablecloth, Picasso in a restaurant modeling animals from bread.

(i) *The illusory self.* Or the conviction that one's sense of oneself is a psychological or cultural illusion and that with the advance of science, e.g., behaviorism, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, the self will disappear.

(j) *The autonomous self.* The self sees itself as a sovereign and individual consciousness, liberated by education from the traditional bonds of religion, by democracy from the strictures of class, by technology from the drudgery of poverty, and by self-knowledge from the tyranny of the unconscious—and therefore free to pursue its own destiny without God.

(k) *The totalitarian self.* The self sees itself as a creature of the state, fascist or communist, and understands its need to be specified by the needs of the state.

(CHECK ONE)

If you can answer Questions (1) through (5) and did not check (6g), you probably do not need to take the Twenty-Question Quiz.



Twenty-Question Multiple-Choice Self-Help Quiz
to test your knowledge of the peculiar status of the self,
your self and other selves, in the Cosmos, and your knowl-
edge of what to do with your self in these, the last years
of the twentieth century

(1) THE AMNESIC SELF: *Why the Self Wants to Get Rid of Itself*

In all soap operas and in many films and novels, a leading character will sooner or later develop amnesia. He will not necessarily develop pneumonia or cancer or schizophrenia, but inevitably he will be overtaken by amnesia. He (or she) finds himself in a strange place, having forgotten his old place, his family, friends, business. He begins a new life in a new place with a new girlfriend, new job. After a while in his new life he begins to receive clues about his old life. A stranger stops him in the street and calls him by a strange name. The best exploitation of the pleasures of amnesia occurred in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* where Gregory Peck had amnesia and Ingrid Bergman was his psychiatrist. For the moviegoer there occurred first the pleasure of the prospect of a new life and the infinite possibilities of the self as represented by Gregory Peck. The second pleasure is the accidental meeting with Ingrid Bergman, who is sensitive to the clues that Gregory misses, and who is a reliable guide, his Beatrice, who can help him recover his old life—for even amnesia, if prolonged, can become as dreary as one's old life.

Here is a nice example of Ingrid picking up clues to his past identity, a search which will allow them to have the best of both worlds, a discovery of oneself and one's past without the encumbrances of the past, and a joining of hands with Ingrid for a new life in the future:

INGRID (*psychoanalyzing him in a hotel room*): I would like to ask you a medical question.

GREGORY: All right.

INGRID: How would you diagnose a pain in the right upper quadrant?

GREGORY: Gall bladder—pneumonia—

INGRID: It is obvious you are a doctor.

Here is an extra dividend for the moviegoer who is identifying with Peck or Bergman. Ingrid is on the track of who he is (who you are). You are a doctor, an identity which seems to interest women more than, say, a banker or an auto dealer.

Question: Is amnesia a favorite device in fiction and especially soap operas because

(a) The character in the soap opera is sick and tired of himself and his life and wants a change.

(b) The writer is sick and tired of his character and wants a change.

(c) The writer is sick and tired of himself and his life and wants a change.

(d) The reader or moviegoer or TV-viewer is sick and tired of himself and his life and wants a change—and the housewife is the sickest and tireddest of all.

(e) The times are such that everyday life for everybody is more or less intolerable and one is better off wiping out the past and starting anew.

(CHECK ONE)

A variant of the amnesic-plot device is the inadvertent return of the amnesiac to home territory, where he is welcomed by a lovely woman, unknown to him, who is evidently his wife. The crucial scene is his being led off to bed.

A non-amnesic equivalent is a twin or look-alike who is mistaken for someone else—by a beautiful woman. Invariably she finds him not merely oddly different but somehow better,

more attractive, than the original. After a love scene, she looks at him wide-eyed and smiling (you were never like this before!).

This version demonstrates that the source of pleasure for the moviegoer is not the amnesia but the certified and risk-free license to leave the old self behind and enter upon a new life, whether by amnesia or mistaken identity.

Thought Experiment: Test your response to vicarious loss of self by imagining amnesia raised to the highest power. Imagine a soap opera in which a character awakens every morning with amnesia, in a strange house with a strange attractive man (or woman), welcomed by the stranger, looking out a strange window with a strange view, having forgotten the past each morning and starting life afresh, seeing the window, the view, himself, herself, in the mirror afresh and for the first time. Does this prospect intrigue you? If it does, what does this say about your non-amnesic self?*

* Some TV series do in fact operate at this level of amnesia, the doctor or cop or private eye falling in love every week, the lover totally forgotten the following week. This quasi-amnesic device is clearly a variant of the earlier Lone Ranger or non-amnesic Western, with the difference that in the latter the lone cowboy moves on after his adventure, whereas in the former it is the lover who moves on.