

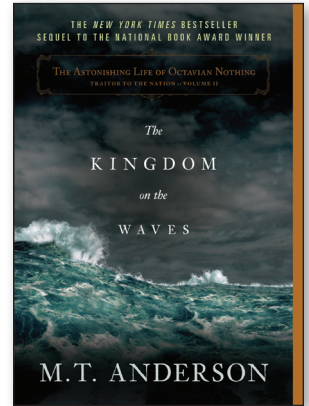
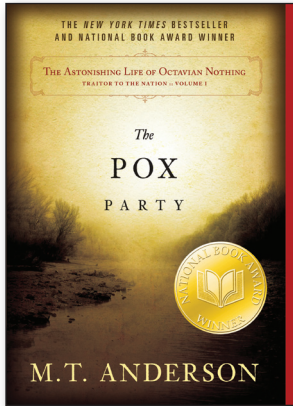


CANDLEWICK PRESS

READERS' GUIDE

THE ASTONISHING LIFE OF  
OCTAVIAN NOTHING  
VOLUMES I AND II

by *M. T. Anderson*



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AN AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

I grew up in Stow, Massachusetts, one of the littlest of the little New England villages that first opposed the British troops when they marched out to Lexington and Concord that spring morning in 1775. Some of my earliest memories are of the Bicentennial celebrations in 1975 — Minutemen marching on the green, President Ford delivering a speech from Old North Bridge, and a hippie in striped pants, a metallic hat, and bug wings who claimed that he was a refugee from the coming Tricentennial and that we should watch out for aerosol.

Growing up in the Boston exurbs, we all took the history around us for granted. I got my hair cut in the town that sent the first detachment of militiamen over the hill against the British at the bridge. My orthodontist worked in a faux-Colonial building in the town where Paul Revere was captured by the Redcoats. He inserted my headgear there.

The whole stretch of early American history — from the age before the invasion of the Europeans to the settlements of the Puritans, the villages of the Revolution, the flourishing of towns, the rise of the mills in the new Republic — all these things seemed incredibly intimate, because the traces of them were all around us. We lived casually in that past. Eighteenth-century houses were given two-car garages. Old textile mills, half run-down, were revived in my childhood and turned into industrial parks. Walden Pond, which Thoreau had written about with such rapture, was just another place to go swimming. We were used to the distant echoes of history.

Something about that struck me at the 225th anniversary celebration of the Battle of Old North Bridge. It was a huge event: hundreds of reenactors, Patriots and Redcoats, gathered

at the site to run through the battles, and one of General Gage's great-great-great-etc.-grandsons was there in a Barbour jacket, reading a moving elegy for the British soldiers who died on that morning 225 years before (though tourists with more sense of history than hospitality were yelling at him to "Go back home to Britain, you bloody Limey").

I went to several of the battles that day. I was standing in a field, watching several hundred Redcoats approach in neat, cruel lines — and like an inevitable machine, drop rank after rank and fire right at me. Then, finally, they rose, screamed, and charged, bayonets out. The effect was terrifying.

I started to think: What would it be like to be standing here — untrained — facing them with a gun I usually used to shoot turkeys? What would it be like to be standing here, not knowing that we would win? Not knowing that we would — or that we should! — separate from England at all? What would it be like to face that army, thinking of myself as British and them as my own country's army? What would it be like to be uncertain again? What would it be like to live through this without the victory preordained?

This thought stuck with me. So a couple of years later, I decided to write a book from the point of view of someone who wouldn't know the outcome of the war and who had to make a hard choice between sides. I wanted to recapture the feeling of the unknown, the unclarity of that decision. And that's where the idea for the book came from.

*M. T. Anderson*

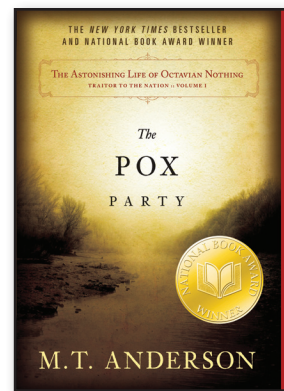
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THE ASTONISHING LIFE OF  
**OCTAVIAN NOTHING**  
TRAITOR TO THE NATION  
VOLUME I  
**THE POX PARTY**

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

Set against the disquiet of Revolutionary Boston, where American Patriots riot and battle for liberty, this deeply provocative novel places an African slave at the center of the war for independence. The first of two parts, M. T. Anderson's breathtaking narrative views the past through a startlingly fresh lens that has powerful resonance for readers today.



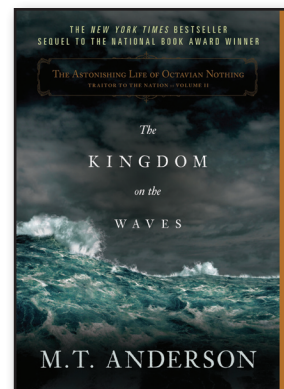
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *The Pox Party* presents a unique treatment of the Revolution, the Patriots, and the Loyalists. How does this treatment challenge our perceptions about this time period and differ from other literary portrayals of the period?
2. Evidence Goring is, in one sense, one of the most moral characters in the book—believing fervently, for example, in the emancipation of slaves. What does it mean, then, that he is the one who betrays Octavian?
3. Pro Bono's attitude toward Octavian is often hard to understand, bordering on brutality. How do you think he feels about the boy? What is his attitude toward the experiment?
4. Beyond the issue of slavery, what are the moral implications of Octavian's experimental upbringing? Is there a line that divides moral from immoral conduct on the part of Octavian's caretaker- owners? Where do you see that line?
5. How much of Cassiopeia's pre-slavery background do you believe she fabricated? Was she really a princess?
6. If you had been in Boston in 1775 and had the opportunity to participate in the pox party, would you have done so and been inoculated or would you have taken your chances on contracting the disease?
7. Consider Mr. Sharpe's comment that "We shall see a brave new day, Octavian, when the rights of liberty and property are exercised, and when all men are free to operate in their own self-interest." (p. 340) How do you see Sharpe's prediction relating to government today? To what extent do we live in that "brave new day"?
8. What do you think becomes of Octavian and Trefusis after they get "across the Bay towards the lights of the beleaguered city" (p. 353)? To whom, if anyone, will they be loyal? Knowing what you do of Pro Bono, what do you believe might have become of him?
9. M. T. Anderson begins the final section with a quotation from Voltaire: "In this world we are condemned to be an anvil or a hammer." (p. 309) What do you think of this quote? How does it relate to the book?
10. Today it is possible, theoretically, for an American child of any background to attend the most prestigious educational institutions. But does race still play a role in the ability of America's children to succeed? How so?
11. Dr. Samuel Johnson is said to have asked, "How is it that the loudest yelps for liberty come from the drivers of slaves?" Discuss Johnson's comment in light of the novel.
12. Discuss the contradictions between the colonists' propaganda decrying what they called their enslavement by the British government and the colonists' ownership of slaves, some of whom they sent in their stead to fight the British. Do the colonists' fears of slave uprisings suggest that they knew slavery was wrong?

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VOLUME II  
**THE KINGDOM  
ON THE WAVES**

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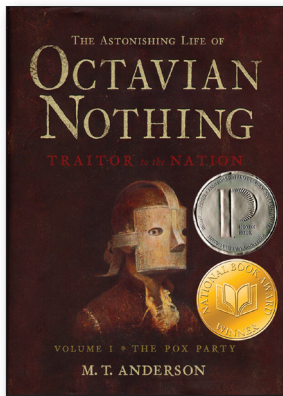
## ABOUT THE BOOK

In volume 2 of his acclaimed masterwork, M. T. Anderson recounts Octavian's experiences as the Revolutionary War explodes around him, thrusting him into intense battles and tantalizing him with elusive visions of liberty.

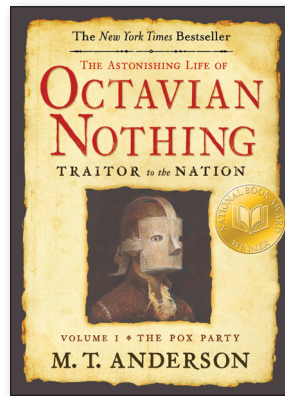
Escalating to a deeply satisfying climax, this celebrated novel examines our national origins in a singularly provocative light.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

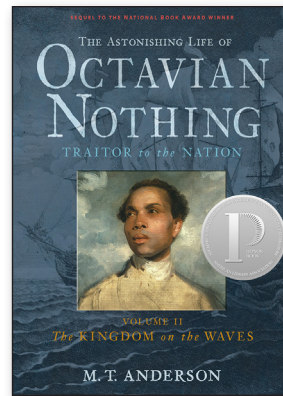
1. Many American stories follow the rags-to-riches format made famous by Horatio Alger Jr., in which the main character, living in poverty, works hard and sacrifices to achieve the American dream. By contrast, at the beginning of his story, Octavian appears to have everything—his mother, his health, fine clothes, and a superior education—but at the end, he has little or nothing left. Do you agree? Is this a riches-to-rags story?
2. When Mr. Sharpe takes over the Novanglian College of Lucidity, Octavian is no longer given stories and whole manuscripts to learn from, but rather fragments in isolation, on which he is tested. Might Anderson be making a comment about the current practice of standardized testing in education today? Would you agree with him?
3. When Octavian joins Lord Dunmore's Royal Ethiopian Regiment, he hears the many stories of his fellow Africans and records them in his journal. How does this informal education on the condition of his fellow man compare with the formal classical education he received at the College of Lucidity? Which had more influence on the man that Octavian becomes by the story's end?
4. Late in the story, Dr. Trefusis declares that "*Only the dead hath seen the end of war.*" (p. 511). Is a nation that chooses peace and puts down its weapons forever at risk of invasion by another seeking dominion? Or do you believe that Octavian is right in his hope that there must be "some place one could go and begin again. This time, untainted"?
5. A rumination in Josiah Gitney's diary (p. 545) questions "whether Man is a Reasonable Creature hamper'd by Passions, or a Passionate Creature hamper'd by Reason." Which side are you on?
6. For such a serious story, which includes an abundance of grim events, the text is also peppered with humor. Is there a humorous moment or line that stuck out for you? Which character do you find the most humorous?
7. In a story that focuses so intently on identity, names are very important. Cassiopeia is named after a constellation, and astronomy permeates the novels. Some characters are given only numbers for names. Pro Bono takes on many names throughout the books to escape from trouble, and Octavian chooses to take the surname of Nothing. Discuss the implications of these names as they relate to the characters and to the plot.
8. This work was originally published for a teen audience. Some adults think it is too sophisticated for teens to understand. What books were you reading as a teen that adults might suggest were too complicated for you? Were there any that you reread as an adult in order to gain new understanding? Do you think we underestimate teens today?
9. Bravery in the face of uncertainty is a theme throughout the narrative. The rebels rose up against their own powerful British government at great risk and with unknown outcome. What acts of bravery are committed by the book's individual main characters? Octavian? Cassiopeia? Pro Bono? Mr. Trefusis? Mr. Gitney?
10. In his author's note, Anderson says that while researching and writing *Octavian Nothing*, he encountered this paradox of the Revolutionary War era: that "Liberty was at once a quality so abstract so as to be insubstantial—and yet so real in its manifestations that it was worth dying for." What does liberty mean to you? What hypocrisies are at work in our current time for which we may be held accountable in the years to come?



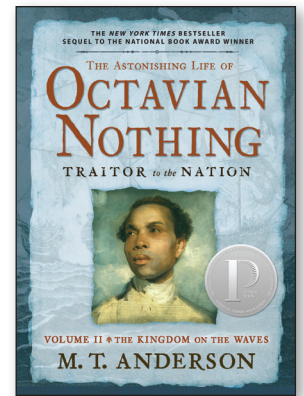
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**Praise for The Pox Party**

“An imaginative and highly intelligent exploration of the horrors of human experimentation and the ambiguous history of America’s origins.”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Imaginative and important.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Gripping, thought-provoking, and occasionally horrifying.”

—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“Rendered in erudite English of the time, the sinister plot lays bare the irony of violence used to pursue freedoms and preserve slavery.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

A National Book Award Winner

A Michael L. Printz Honor Book

A *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize Finalist

A *New York Times* Bestseller

A *New York Times Book Review*

Notable Book of the Year

Four starred reviews

**Praise for The Kingdom on the Waves**

“A tale that is ultimately about the melancholy predicament of a brilliantly educated and appealing black man in a world that has no place for him.”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Anderson’s powerful and unforgettable novel is a vital contribution to the ongoing national conversation on the subject [of slavery] and its effects on into the present day.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Will someday be recognized as a novel of the first rank, the kind of monumental work Italo Calvino called ‘encyclopedic’ in the way it sweeps up history into a comprehensive and deeply textured pattern.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A singular achievement, a work of historical fiction that feels truly original and seems destined to endure.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

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