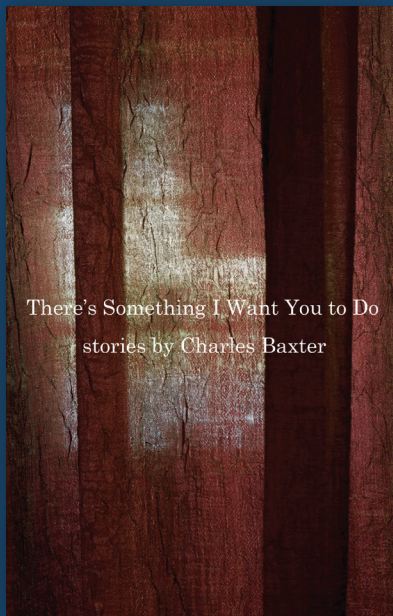




## NOVEL & SHORT STORY WINNER

Category sponsored by  
Education Minnesota



## *There's Something I Want You to Do* by Charles Baxter

PANTHEON BOOKS/RANDOM HOUSE



The Friends, as the Library of Congress-designated Minnesota center for the book, organizes the year-round, statewide activities of the Minnesota book awards.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

From one of the great masters of the contemporary short story, this outstanding collection showcases Charles Baxter's unique ability to unveil the remarkable in the seemingly inconsequential moments of everyday life. Penetrating and prophetic, the ten interrelated stories are held together by an intricate web of cause and effect – one that slowly ensnares both fictional bystanders and enraptured readers. Benny, an architect and hopeless romantic, is mugged on his nightly walk along the Mississippi River. A drug dealer named Black Bird reads *Othello* while waiting for customers in a bar. Elijah, a pediatrician and the father of two, is visited by visions of Alfred Hitchcock. As the collection progresses, we delve more deeply into the private lives of these characters, exploring their fears, fantasies, and obsessions. The result is a portrait of human nature as seen from the tightrope that spans the distance between dreams and waking life.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Charles Baxter** is the author of five novels, including *The Feast of Love* (nominated for the National Book Award in 2000); five collections of short stories; three collections of poems; and two collections of essays on fiction, including *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot* (winner of the 2008 Minnesota Book Award in General Nonfiction). His stories "Bravery" and "Charity," which appear in *There's Something I Want You to Do*, were included in Best American Short Stories in 2013 and 2014, respectively. Baxter was born in Minneapolis and graduated from Macalester College in Saint Paul. After completing graduate work in English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, he taught for several years at Wayne State University in Detroit and later moved to the Department of English at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He now lives in Minneapolis and teaches at the University of Minnesota. Visit [www.charlesbaxter.com](http://www.charlesbaxter.com).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The characters in this collection slip into and out of each other's stories, eventually becoming part of a larger pattern of interconnections. What is Baxter trying to demonstrate with this multiplicity of perspectives? What were some of your favorite discovered connections?
2. Most of the stories touch down at some point in Minneapolis and several of them—specifically "Chastity," "Charity," and "Sloth"—find the characters gravitating toward the Mississippi River. What role does the setting play? What sort of language does Baxter use to describe the river?
3. Baxter makes use of dreams and visitations throughout the stories, most notably for the characters of Amelia and Elijah. Why is the space between the waking world and the spirit world so permeable within the landscape of this collection? Do you believe Elijah's experience is wholly imagined, or could a visitation such as his be possible?
4. One reviewer called Baxter "a master at describing uncomfortable situations hovering between comedy and pain." Which scenes fit this description and what about the language or style makes them so effective?
5. Consider the titles of the stories. The moral implications are clear, but the themes are seldom expressed directly. Discuss how each title appears thematically in its story and what it means in the context of the narrative.
6. Dr. Elijah Jones is the central figure in three of the stories and makes brief appearances in several others. How did your opinion of him change throughout the collection? Do you believe the story he told Susan about being a hero at the end of "Bravery"? What do think will happen to him after the critical conclusion of "Gluttony"?
7. Another character, Benny, is the central figure in more than one story. How would you describe him? Do you think he would have fallen in love with Sarah had he met her under different circumstances?
8. Why do you think Baxter chose to re-introduce Dolores in the second half of the collection? How does reading "Avarice" change your understanding of the Dolores we initially met through Wesley's eyes in "Loyalty"?
9. Baxter has said that the idea for centering these stories around "request moments" initially came to him while attending a production of *Hamlet*. He realized that many of Shakespeare's plays begin with an important request that sets the story in motion. How do the fictional situations created by request moments mirror what we experience in our daily lives? How much of what we do every day is bound by social obligation? Are there specific examples of request moments in your own life that have forced you down an unexpected path?



# 28TH ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

The Minnesota Book Awards is a statewide, year-round outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Saint Paul Public Library and the City of Saint Paul.

NOVEL & SHORT STORY CATEGORY SPONSORED BY:



The 28th Annual Minnesota Book Awards was supported by the following partners and sponsors:

Brainfuse; Books For Africa; The Creative Writing Programs at Hamline University; Education Minnesota; Macalester College; Saint Mary's University of Minnesota; The Waterbury Group at Morgan Stanley; Kevin and Greta Warren; and Wellington Management.

The publication of outreach materials is supported by the Council of Regional Public Library System Administrators (CRPLSA), through Minnesota's Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

## A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLES BAXTER

**You explore a wide range of request moments in this collection. What inspired you to structure the stories around requests? Where does the phrase “there’s something I want you to do” come from?**

I had noticed that many of Shakespeare's plays, including Hamlet, begin with request moments that sets the plot into motion. Such requests put someone in a really interesting position, especially if the person who issues the request says something like, “If you love me, you'll do this for me.” Requests can define relationships, I think. A request is often at the heart of a social obligation, especially if the clock is ticking and time may run out. As for the phrase itself, it was something that my mother often said to me whenever I came home from school and walked through the front door.

**How did you come to conceive of this book as a collection of linked stories with recurring characters?**

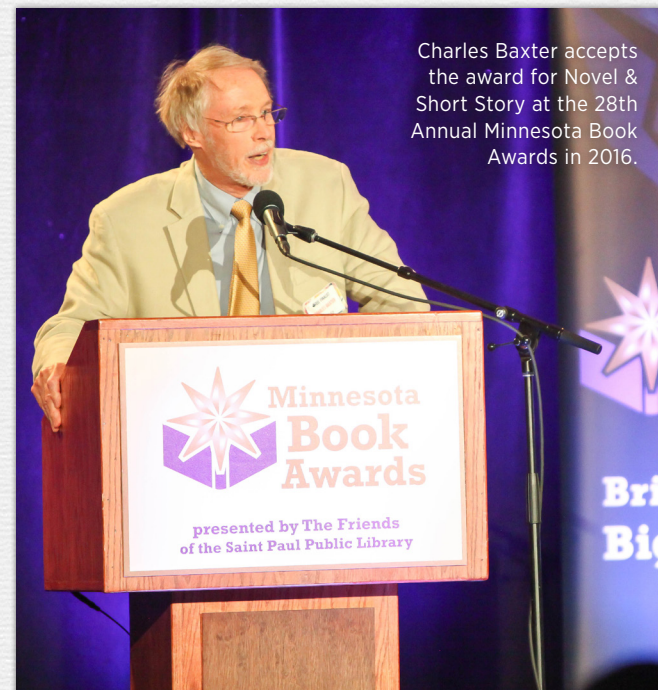
The first two stories more or less wrote themselves, and I noticed that they both had titles with the names of virtues--bravery and loyalty--and I thought: “That’s very interesting. I guess I’m writing a book about the virtues.” But I didn’t want to write a book about virtues because who would read it? Virtues can be a little dull. And safe. So I thought I’d write a kind of decalogue, a book with five virtues and five vices, and someone suggested to me that the characters who show up in the virtues should also show up in the vices, and I thought that was a great idea, so I did it.

**What is the role of dreams and visitations in the otherwise realistic landscape of the book?**

I think dreams are part of our daily (or nightly) lives, so dreams aren’t really distinct from realism or inimical to it. Our dreams haunt us, which makes them a good source for stories. As for the visitation, especially the one in “Sloth,” I simply believed it was possible and that people do sometimes experience such things, especially when they’re under great stress, as Dr. Jones is in that story.

**What do you hope readers will take away from this collection? Have there been any surprising reactions to the work?**

I hope readers will enjoy the stories and take pleasure from reading them. That’s first and foremost. So far I haven’t had any surprising reactions, except that a couple of people have told me that they were haunted by the stories (which is good).



Charles Baxter accepts the award for Novel & Short Story at the 28th Annual Minnesota Book Awards in 2016.

**Could you share a bit about your path to becoming a published author?**

It helps to have been struck by lightning early. A few works of literature hit me right between the eyes in high school, and I thought, “I really want to write a book that will do that to other people.” I had many discouragements, many nasty letters from editors, when I was starting out, but I was stubborn and obstinate and began to get my stuff published by the time I was in my late thirties. I must have been a slow learner.

**What challenges you most in your writing?**

I think the greatest challenge is to find a story that’s both entertaining and meaningful. I like to have material that gives off a comic quality, if I can, but that doesn’t always work. Both comedy and suspense (urgency and momentum) are terribly hard to build into a story. The greatest challenge of all is not to bore the reader--to keep things moving, lively, truthful.

**What are you working on now?**

A novel. It was called *The Mall of America* and then it was called *The Sun Collective*, and by the time I finish it, I don’t know what it’ll be called.