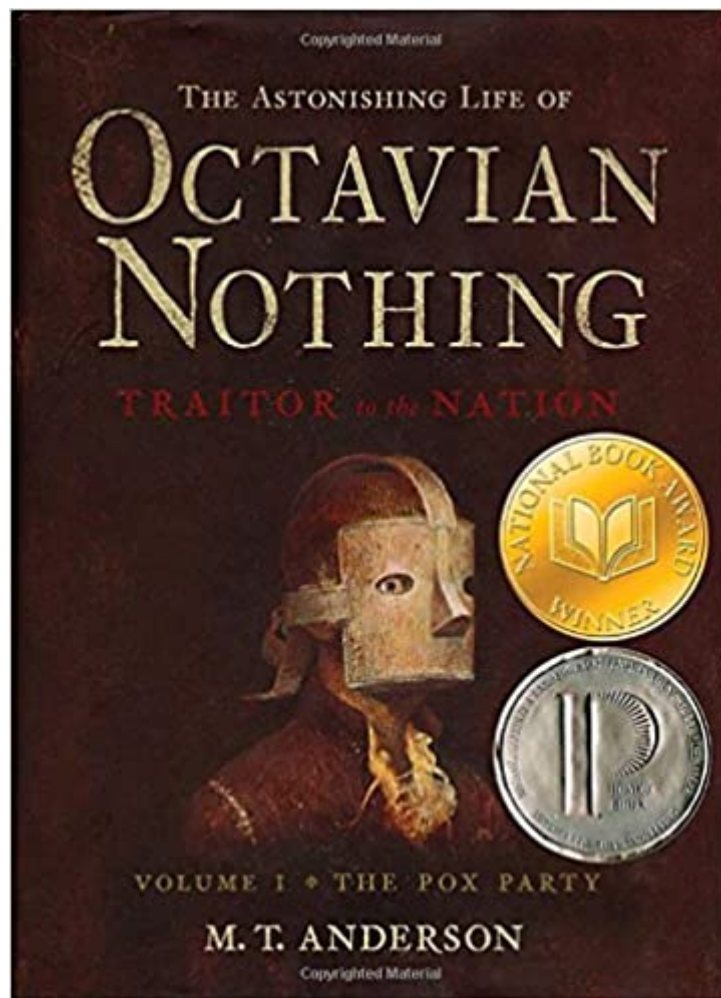




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# The Astonishing Life Of Octavian Nothing, Traitor To The Nation, Vol. 1: The Pox Party



## Synopsis

A gothic tale becomes all too shockingly real in this mesmerizing magnum opus by the acclaimed author of FEED. It sounds like a fairy tale. He is a boy dressed in silks and white wigs and given the finest of classical educations. Raised by a group of rational philosophers known only by numbers, the boy and his mother — a princess in exile from a faraway land — are the only persons in their household assigned names. As the boy's regal mother, Cassiopeia, entertains the house scholars with her beauty and wit, young Octavian begins to question the purpose behind his guardians' fanatical studies. Only after he dares to open a forbidden door does he learn the hideous nature of their experiments — and his own chilling role in them. Set against the disquiet of Revolutionary Boston, M. T. Anderson's extraordinary novel takes place at a time when American Patriots rioted and battled to win liberty while African slaves were entreated to risk their lives for a freedom they would never claim. The first of two parts, this deeply provocative novel reimagines the past as an eerie place that has startling resonance for readers today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Grade 9 Up — "In this fascinating and eye-opening Revolution-era novel, Octavian, a black youth raised in a Boston household of radical philosophers, is given an excellent classical education. He and his mother, an African princess, are kept isolated on the estate, and only as he grows older does he realize that while he is well dressed and well fed, he is indeed a captive being used by his guardians as part of an experiment to determine the intellectual acuity of Africans. As

the fortunes of the Novanglian College of Lucidity change, so do the nature and conduct of their experiments. [...] Readers will have to wait for the second volume to find out the protagonist's fate. The novel is written in 18th-century language from Octavian's point of view and in letters written by a soldier who befriends him. Despite the challenging style, this powerful novel will resonate with contemporary readers. The issues of slavery and human rights, racism, free will, the causes of war, and one person's struggle to define himself are just as relevant today. Anderson's use of factual information to convey the time and place is powerfully done.â "Sharon Rawlins, NJ Library for the Blind and Handicapped, Trenton Copyright Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**\*Starred Review\*** M. T. Anderson's books for young people reflect a remarkably broad mastery of genres, even as they defy neat classification. Any labeling requires lots of hyphens: space-travel satire (*Feed*, 2002), retro-comic fantasy-adventure (*Whales on Stilts*, 2005). This genre-labeling game seems particularly pointless with Anderson's latest novel, *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation* (2006), an episodic, highly ambitious story, deeply rooted in eighteenth-century literary traditions, which examines, among many other things, pre-Revolutionary slavery in New England. The plot focuses on Octavian, a young black boy who recounts his youth in a Boston household of scientists and philosophers (The Novanglian College of Lucidity). The Collegians believe so thoroughly in the Age of Reason's principles that they address one another as numbers. Octavian soon learns that he and his mother are objects of one of the Collegians' experiments to learn whether Africans are "a separate and distinct species." Octavian receives an education "equal to any of the princes in Europe," until financial strains shatter Octavian's sheltered life of intellectual pursuits and the illusion that he is a free member of a utopian society. As political unrest in the colonies grows, Octavian experiences the increasing horrors of what it means to be a slave. The story's scope is immense, in both its technical challenges and underlying intellectual and moral questions--perhaps too immense to be contained in a traditional narrative (and, indeed, Anderson has already promised a second volume to continue the story). As in Meg Rosoff's Printz Award Book *How I Live Now* (2004), in which a large black circle replaces text to represent the indescribable, Anderson's novel substitutes visuals for words. Several pages show furious black quill-pen cross-hatchings, through which only a few words are visible, perhaps indicating that even with his scholarly vocabulary, Octavian can't find words to describe the vast evil that he has witnessed. Likewise, Anderson employs multiple viewpoints and formats--letters, newspaper clippings, scientific papers--pick up the story that Octavian is periodically unable to tell. Once

acclimated to the novel's style, readers will marvel at Anderson's ability to maintain this high-wire act of elegant, archaic language and shifting voices, and they will appreciate the satiric scenes that gleefully lampoon the Collegians' more buffoonish experiments. Anderson's impressive historical research fixes the imagined College firmly within the facts of our country's own troubled history. The fluctuations between satire and somber realism, gothic fantasy and factual history will jar and disturb readers, creating a mood that echoes Octavian's unsettled time as well as our own. Anderson's book is both chaotic and highly accomplished, and, like Aidan Chambers' recent *This Is All* (2006), it demands rereading. Teens need not understand all the historical and literary allusions to connect with Octavian's torment or to debate the novel's questions, present in our country's founding documents, which move into today's urgent arguments about intellectual life; individual action; the influence of power and money, racism and privilege; and what patriotism, freedom, and citizenship mean. Gillian Engberg

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...then perhaps, you are nothing. M. T. Anderson's fine novel, "The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing" allows the reader to explore this premise through the eyes of Octavian Gitney, a young boy who has not yet come to the realization that he is a slave. Set in pre-Revolutionary Boston, "The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing" highlights the often ignored fact that slavery existed not only in the southern colonies, but also throughout the northern colonies. While these individuals may have been referred to as "servants," the fact is they were slaves, owned by those who had purchased them. The story is narrated by Octavian, personalizing the work and making the events occurring throughout the text intimate and very intense, much more so than a third person narrative would have done. Octavian and his mother are the subjects of an experiment being conducted by the Novanglian College of Lucidity, a group of scholars. The experiment seeks to determine whether individuals of African descent are able to be taught and accomplish the same niceties as individuals of European ancestry. Ironically, in treating Cassiopeia and Octavian as experimental "animals," the College negates the possibility of proving whether the premise is valid or not. Further, Octavian, his mother, and the other servants are the only individuals, initially, who are referred to by name. Members of the college have been assigned numbers, which dehumanizes those individuals in the same way they have attempted to dehumanize others. It is only as the novel proceeds and individuals begin to show some sympathy for Octavian that a name is given the particular individual within the story's context. This is an extraordinary novel. The provocative themes which run throughout the book cause the reader to pause and consider what might have been had slavery not existed for nearly 100 years following the American Revolution. Written partly as a personal

narrative, but also incorporating fictionalized examples of newspaper clippings and postings, the era in which the novel is set is reinforced in both its tone and attitude. While the novel is purported to be geared toward readers from ninth grade and beyond, it is really a novel for any reader who seeks literature that is thought-provoking and intelligently written. I recommend "The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing" for anyone who loves to read. This is a novel that will stay with you long after you have placed it on the shelf.

I read "Feed," by M.T. Anderson years ago and loved it. I hadn't read anything else of his until "The Pox Party," so I was very excited. I loved the story, the plot, and the characters. My only complaint is that the second part of the book, told from multiple points of view via letter, moves a bit slowly, especially after the first part. It's a good idea and it got better as it went along, but I found myself scanning and moving forward without actually reading. It felt a bit sluggish, although, as I said, I appreciate the artistry in the approach. I enjoy well done historical fiction, and this is certainly well done. I'm looking forward to the next book in the series.

I gave as a gift but have read it myself. It's by an author who really knows how to write a great story...and there's so much knowledgeable information contained between the pages.

The book arrived on time and as promised. I ordered it for my son's 9th grade Literature class. He is in 8th grade. I was a little surprised at the content of this book...it call me a prude, but my son is not accustomed to reading or discussing a lot of what this book is about, specifically the "experiments" and data collection details, or the waywardness of the mother. I am disappointed that this is one of the books that the teacher thought to be a good one for her class.

This is really a good book....about the Black American Slaves and those who were free during the 1770's and the Revolutionary War and their participation in the Black Brigades. But it there is mor;, Octavain and his experimental upbringing and the consequences thereof...really interesting! I am now reading Volume II and went directly from Volume I to continue Octavian's life adventures and where it will lead him. Fascinating! I will read more of M.T. Anderson's books if they are of the same quality.

Interesting read. I love how the story is told through the eyes of an African child as he grows, protected from the ravages of slavery under the guise of kindness and experimentation. This book

explores a certain depth of a civil depravity, the belief that humans are chattel and how completely vulnerable children are. Octavian was not a traitor to the nation, he was simply a child trying to understand his role in America...and escape it.

I loved reading Octavian Nothing. It reveals the Revolutionary War from the point of view of a slave who had been given a classical education as an experiment. What a brilliant idea! The characters are extraordinarily complex -- some truly lovable. The book is really two books -- you cannot stop after reading volume one as nothing is resolved until the end of volume two.

The author's mastery of eighteenth century diction, grammar, and vocabulary is something I've not seen from others, which makes this a unique and interesting read among other reasons. Overall very impressed.

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