

PICADOR

Reading Group Gold

4 3 2 1: A Novel

Paul Auster

ABOUT THE BOOK

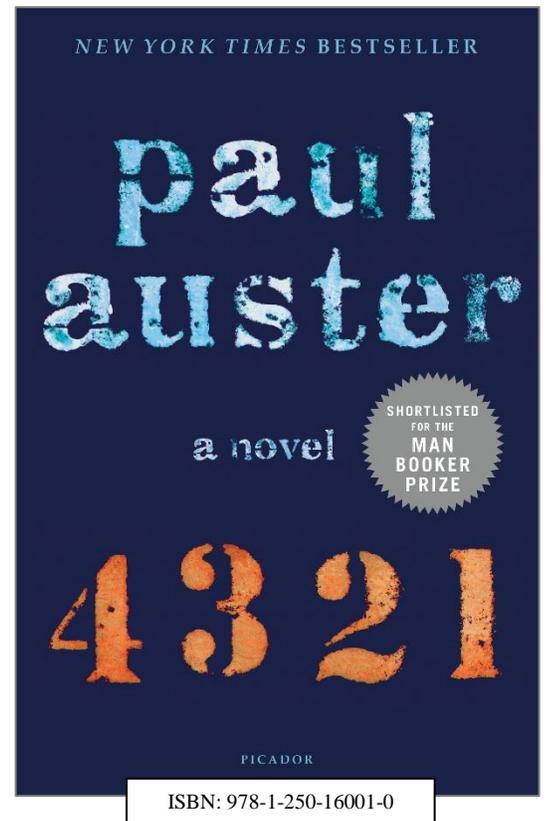
Paul Auster’s greatest, most heartbreaking and satisfying novel—a sweeping and surprising story of birthright and possibility, of love and of life itself.

Nearly two weeks early, on March 3, 1947, in the maternity ward of Beth Israel Hospital in Newark, New Jersey, Archibald Isaac Ferguson, the one and only child of Rose and Stanley Ferguson, is born. From that single beginning, Ferguson’s life will take four simultaneous and independent fictional paths. Four identical Fergusons made of the same DNA, four boys who are the same boy, go on to lead four parallel and entirely different lives. Family fortunes diverge. Athletic skills and sex lives and friendships and intellectual passions contrast. Each Ferguson falls under the spell of the magnificent Amy Schneiderman, yet each Amy and each Ferguson have a relationship like no other. Meanwhile, readers will take in each Ferguson’s pleasures and ache from each Ferguson’s pains, as the mortal plot of each Ferguson’s life rushes on.

As inventive and dexterously constructed as anything Paul Auster has ever written, yet with a passion for realism and a great tenderness and fierce attachment to history and to life itself that readers have never seen from Auster before. *4 3 2 1* is a marvelous and unforgettably affecting tour de force.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel opens with a scene of Ferguson’s grandfather at Ellis Island, giving his name to an immigration official and becoming Ichabod Ferguson. What do you think is the significance of this moment and why does Paul Auster begin with it? Who does he return to it later in the novel?
2. Auster announces Ferguson’s birth by declaring, “Thus Ferguson was born, and for several seconds after he emerged from his mother’s body, he was the youngest human being on the face of the earth.” What do you think Auster is attempting to achieve with this statement?
3. The novel is told through the shifting perspective of four different Fergusons. Did you have trouble following the divergent storylines as the novel progressed? Was it important to you to keep all of the details in order as you read? Why or why not?



4. When 3 Brothers Home World burns down in one of the storylines, Ferguson reflects that he feels frightened because he “learn[ed] that his mother was no stronger than he was, that the blows of the world would hurt her as much as they hurt him...” Why is it so alarming when a child comes to this understanding? Do you remember a similar moment in your own life?
5. Anne-Marie is one of Ferguson’s first love interests and Auster describes her as highly emotional, dramatic, and unhappy. However, it is precisely these characteristics that young Ferguson finds attractive. What does Ferguson’s attraction to Anne-Marie tell us about boyhood and adolescence in a general sense? Do you think the other Fergusons would have fallen for Anne-Marie?
6. At several points in the novel, Auster shows his hand and tells us information some writers might opt to show in scene. For example, when one of the Fergusons is killed in a thunderstorm, he writes “The last day of Ferguson’s life, August 10, 1960, began with a brief rain shower...” Why do you think Auster reveals this important event in such a direct, matter-of-fact way?
7. When Rose publishes the *Jewish Wedding* photos in *Aperture*, her cousin is incredibly angry with her for doing so against her wishes. Later in the novel, Ferguson decides to remove the unflattering descriptions of his mother from his own novel. What do these two instances say about the balance between creating art and maintaining relationships? Was Rose right to publish her photos? Was Ferguson right to edit his novel? Why or why not?
8. Amy Schneiderman appears as a significant character in multiple storylines. What is it about Amy that makes her such an important figure and why do you think Auster chose to make her reappear in so many instances?
9. After Ferguson loses two of his fingers in a car accident, he confesses that he will never forgive his cousin, Francie. Do you think Ferguson is in the right for blaming her?
10. In all of his lives, Ferguson manages to avoid the draft. Do you think this is meaningful? Why or why not? What does it tell you about those who *were* drafted?
11. Auster does an excellent job of incorporating the political and social events of the time into the novel. In all of his lives, Ferguson is sympathetic to the anti-war movement, but largely remains detached from it. What does this tell you about Ferguson? What do you think Auster is trying to show us by giving Ferguson some fixed characteristics throughout the various storylines?
12. New York City is an important character in all of Ferguson’s lives. Why is the city so significant and how does Auster create and establish a sense of the city throughout the novel?
13. In one of Ferguson’s lives, he is bi-sexual. While we live in a time that recognizes the rights of LGBTQ individuals, Ferguson was not as fortunate. What are some of the challenges that he faces and do you think his life would have been different if he had lived in more tolerant times?
14. Why does Vivian take such an interest in Ferguson?
15. When Ferguson is struck by lightning and killed, Auster states that “the gods were silent,” and when another Ferguson is struck by a car in London and killed Auster writes, “The gods looked down from their mountain and shrugged.” What is Auster trying to say here by making the “gods” so indifferent to Ferguson’s deaths?
16. What do you make of the ending of the novel when Nelson Rockefeller is being sworn into office as vice president in 1974? Why do you think Auster chose, “He was married to a woman named Happy,” as the final line of the novel?

Guide written by Kianoosh Hashemzadeh



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