



About the Author

Ken Butcher was born in Washington, D.C., and grew up in Ohio. His father was an avid reader of science fiction. Butcher remembers the stacks of *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* magazines in the cupboards. Early on, his father would sift out the best of the stories and pass them on to him.

Butcher graduated with a B.S. in ceramic engineering from Ohio State University, married his high school girlfriend, and began work in a research lab in Kent, Ohio.

In 1981, he was recruited to Hendersonville, N.C., to start a research lab for a small company. His job took him all over the world on various research-and-development and business projects.

He currently runs his own engineering and development company, Shining Rock Technologies, and holds 15 U.S. patents. Butcher has three adult sons with his wife, Jen, who runs a chocolate and ice-cream shop in Hendersonville.

Over the years, his family has been involved in many community projects, including baking the world's largest cookie and hosting the Olympic swim team from New Zealand for the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta.

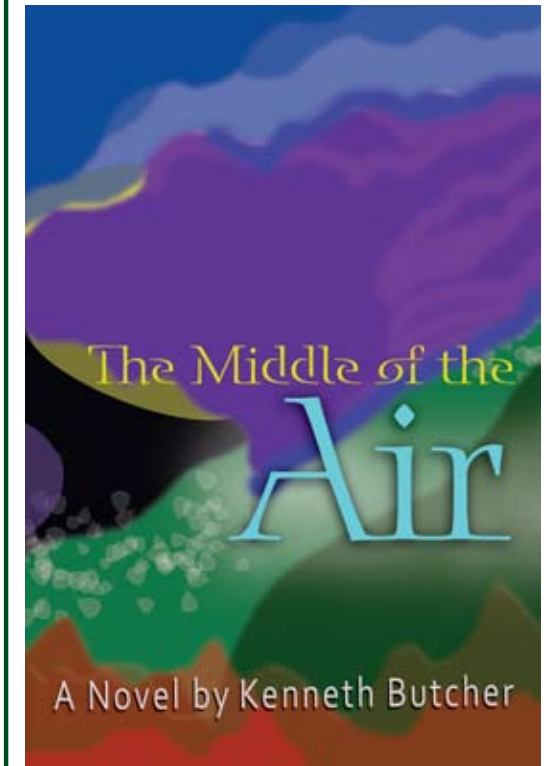
Questions for Discussion

1. Were you surprised at all by the ending of the book? Looking back, what clues were there all along?
2. How did you feel about the footnotes on Henrico Carr? Did they add to or detract from the book? Do you want to know more about him? Were you surprised when he showed up at the end of the book?
3. Which member of the Colebrook family stood out to you the most? The least? Dysfunctional families have become the norm in contemporary fiction. Did you like how the Colebrook family was depicted?
4. Many authors try to use humor to break up tension and maintain anticipation. Do you think humor was used well in *The Middle of the Air*? What struck you as particularly funny or absurd? Did humor help with the pace of the book?
5. How do you think the setting influenced the plot? Did you get a feel for the community as a whole? Were Pipo's paintings helpful in introducing the community members? What did you learn about the Colebrook family through members of the community?
6. Lily Colebrook is enrolled in a Body Language 101 class. A favorite pastime of the class is to watch politicians on television and decipher the truth by reading their body language. Do you think this ability is realistic? Could it be used today? What are some tell-tale body language signs that draw your attention?
7. *The Middle of the Air* has a strong environmental theme. How do you feel about nuclear energy? Did this book change your opinion on the matter?
8. How are the U.S. government and law authorities portrayed in *The Middle of the Air*? Can you draw comparisons in real life? Do you feel the author intended for you to draw these comparisons?
9. What did the corporate takeover of Athenaeum and the government subterfuge have in common?
10. What secrets should the government be allowed to keep? Have there been instances in our history when theft was justified to inform the public of something the government was doing?



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THE MIDDLE OF THE AIR
BY
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The Title

“The middle of the air” is a phrase I first heard years ago in an old spiritual. For some reason, it just stuck in my head.

A long time after that, I was asked to speak to a class at one of the local schools on the subject of creativity. I was invited because I was leading a research group at a local company that was getting a lot of grants and patents and so forth, and also because of some of the projects I was involved with in the local community.

In thinking about the creative process, I realized there was a sort of pattern that I noticed in my own experience and that I picked up in bits and pieces from other researchers and artists and writers.

The process starts by immersion in a problem or opportunity, followed maybe by some reading or exposure to similar things done before. Generally, some preliminary idea surfaces almost right away. Following this stage is disengagement, at least on a conscious level, from the problem. This might happen because of interruption or exhaustion or a feeling of being stuck. But often, it is in this time, when our egos and brains are a little distracted, that the real insight happens and the quality ideas pop up. The feeling when that occurs is that the idea came from somewhere else—like out of the middle of the air.

Now, playing up there in the middle of the air is not necessarily a comfortable place. In fact, most people find it intensely uncomfortable and go to great lengths to avoid situations that require them to go there. Maybe that is a fundamental difference between people who are considered creative and people who are not.

The Writing Process

When I set out to write this book, I had a few of the characters and some of the scenes in my mind. In addition to that, I thought about the things I liked best in my favorite novels. I wanted to write a book that was fun to read, one that had humor and did not take itself too seriously. I wanted the depth and reality that details of

local color would add. I wanted an element of science and technology. I am, after all, an engineer and technical researcher by profession.

When I started down that road, I began to realize how important technological facilities—including Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the Savannah River plant, and the NASA tracking station located high in the mountains just west of my home—have been to the recent history of this area. I think *The Middle of the Air* takes a unique perspective in this respect, because most of the books set in this region focus on the pioneer or Civil War periods.

Our region also has a rich history of writers, most prominently Thomas Wolfe and Carl Sandburg. I can no longer think about the area without thinking of them, nor can I think of them without thinking of the area. It’s no surprise they had to show up in my book.

But back to the writing process. I had these elements and the general tone of the book in mind. I also wanted to have a compelling plot with lots of mystery and suspense and puzzlement to keep readers turning the pages.

I even had this great idea about how I would undertake the writing process. I would completely outline the plot. I would lay out chapters or scenes much as a movie-maker lays out the scenes of the film he is going to shoot. Then, when I had this all figured out, I would start writing in earnest.

This was a really great plan, except that I could not make it work at all. I tried various diagrams and lists and outlines to lay out the entire arc of the story and figure out in advance what everyone was going to do and how other people would react and how every piece of action would fit in with every other piece. I just could not get it off the ground. I was frustrated with the lack of progress. From time to time, I went ahead and wrote a scene because it especially appealed to me, and because I thought I could use it somehow, and because I had to feel I was getting some words onto paper. But I still did not dare plunge ahead with the book. How could I, without a concrete plan? I risked getting halfway through and becom-

ing so stuck with the plot and characters that I could not get out.

My breakthrough came when I read a book called *No Plot, No Problem* by Chris Baty. Baty described a crazy challenge he and some of his friends had undertaken—namely, to write a novel in one month. The book described many interesting aspects of their experience. In some cases, they ended up with books they abandoned. In other cases, their efforts after one month were good enough to deserve further work and expansion into proper novels. I was not interested in writing a book in a month. The main point for my particular situation was this: Part of their regimen was to sit down and write a certain number of words every day. They had to do this no matter what. They had to trust their intuition and imaginations that they could weave a story together out of the parts they were creating day by day.

If you haven’t spotted it already, this brought to light an irony in my writing process. Here I was writing a book called *The Middle of the Air* while doing everything I could to keep my feet on solid ground. I wanted to build a solid framework without taking any risks, to use a step-by-step approach to eliminate the possibility that I might fail.

It doesn’t work that way. At least for me it doesn’t. Realizing that was my personal breakthrough. For example, when I started writing my story, Pipo and Audrey, the youngest and oldest members of the family, were intended to be minor characters. But as the writing progressed, they kept doing some of the most interesting things, and their roles grew accordingly. The other family members drew frequently from the middle of the air, but Audrey and Pipo pretty much lived there full time, and their paintings and drawings showed it.

When I let go of my preconceived ideas and resolved that I would just keep writing, keep working on the plot as I went, and keep trusting that I could make it work out, I made progress. I can’t say that it became easy. I had up days and down days, but I did make it work.