Bluebeard Study Guide

Bluebeard by Kurt Vonnegut

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Bluebeard: A Novel was written in 1987 by Kurt Vonnegut, one of the most famous and prolific American authors of the twentieth century. The novel is presented as an autobiography of Rabo Karabekian, a fictional artist in his senior years. Karabekian first appeared in Vonnegut's hugely successful novel Breakfast of Champions as an abstract expressionist artist.

The title Bluebeard is taken from a French folktale of the same name written by Charles Perreault 290 years prior to the publication of Vonngeut's novel. The original tale tells of a wealthy aristocrat, Bluebeard, who has married many times, yet all of his wives disappear. One day, his current wife enters a room off-limits to her as she is so overtaken with curiosity. In the room, she uncovers the dead bodies of his past wives whom Bluebeard killed for entering the room. Though she does not say anything, Bluebeard learns of her discovery. He is intent on killing his wife, but her brothers appear and kill Bluebeard, leaving his wife the sole heir to Bluebeard's massive fortune.

The connection between this Bluebeard and the original does not lie in the gruesome details but rather in the similarity of having a secret in a locked room that everyone wants to uncover.

Bluebeard is a fictional autobiography and diary of Rabo Karabekian, in which the artist recounts the story of his life, as well as his current thoughts and reflections.

Karabekian was born to immigrant parents in San Ignacio, California, the only Armenians in town. He showed a talent for drawing at an early age, and in his late teens, he headed to New York to apprentice with Dan Gregory, fellow Armenian and world-renowned commercial illustrator. They had a parting of ways when Gregory caught Karabekian at the Museum of Modern Art, rubbish as far as Gregory was concerned. Karabekian was fond of Gregory's mistress, nine years his senior, and they made love before Karabekian moved on.

During the remainder of the Great Depression, Karabekian fell on hard times until he secured a job at an advertising agency through the kindness of another Armenian. When that job came to an end, Karabekian enlisted in the army.

Karabekian was a soldier for eight years. In his eighth year, when he was finally brought to battle, he lost an eye. Upon his return, he got married, worked as an insurance salesman, and had two sons. Soon though, Karabekian was drawn to painting again, this time with a group of other painters who were also interested in exploring a new form- abstract expressionism. Karabekian had more money than the others, so he would loan cash to his friends and he was repaid in paintings. Later in life, these paintings formed the most significant and valuable collection of abstract expressionism in existence.

Karabekian's absorption in painting led to his wife and two sons leaving him. Karabekian did well as an artist, but a few years later, the paint he had used on all of his canvases peeled off. Karabekian had a strong second marriage until his wife Edith died, twenty years later.

Now he lives alone, though during the writing of this autobiography, his houseguest Mrs. Circe Berman, brings Karabekian back to life with her energy and her thoughts on art. Eventually he trusts her to the point where Karabekian reveals his newest top-secret masterpiece.

Chapters 1-5

Chapters 1-5 Summary

The fictional Abstract Expressionist artist Rabo Karabekian kicks off his memoirs saying the document is both his life autobiography and current diary.

At the outset, Karabekian relates the very basics of his life. Both of his parents had come to America to escape a massacre of one million Turkish Armenians. His father had hidden in the trench of a latrine to sidestep death, while his mother had been in a group shooting and endured being at the bottom of a pile of corpses for a day and managed to escape with some jewels. The couple was conned into buying a non-existent house in San Ignacio, California, and they made the journey overseas before discovering they were duped. This is how Rabo Karabekian came to be born in 1916 in San Ignacio.

Before World War II, Karabekian honed his skills as an artist, modeling his work after the established illustrator Dan Gregory. During the war, Karabekian commandeered a platoon as Lieutenant. He lost his left eye in battle. Afterwards he studied to be a businessman, before becoming an established Abstract Expressionist artist.

Karabekian's first wife Dorothy eventually left him and took their two sons, Terry and Henri. His second wife Ethel, to whom he was married for twenty years, died two years ago, leaving him her mansion and property in the Hamptons. It is in here where Karabekian houses his significant art collection.

Karabekian shares that he sold his paintings at outrageous prices. He showered his money on his young artist friends who were not as successful, and in turn they repaid him with their art. Along with some paintings he obtained during the war, this was the beginning of Karabekian's art collection.

Unfortunately Karabekian used a paint called Sateen Dura-Luxe for all of his paintings. Some years later, the paint peeled off the canvases of all of his works. Of course those who had spent a fortune on the art were not pleased.

Now Karabekian finds himself mostly alone. He has alienated his former friends in the art world and his army buddies have fallen by the wayside. He does have one friend, Paul Slazinger, who spends his days at Karabekian's property to write in solitude.

Recently, Karabekian adopted a new friend and house guest, Circe Berman. She is pushy and bossy and Karabekian does what she tells him to. Berman is in her 40s and recently widowed. She is an established writer, hugely successful with adolescents, and she is in the Hamptons researching and writing a rich/poor love story.

There is a potato barn on the premises that Karabekian used to use as a studio. It is sealed shut and he will only allow it to be opened upon his death. Slazinger, Berman and the art world in general are all curious as to what is inside.

Chapters 1-5 Analysis

Readers quickly learn that Karabekian is neither formal nor polite. He speaks (writes) his mind.

When Karabekian meets Berman for the first time on the beach, the very first thing she utters is a question- she asks how his parents died. Not only does this immediately give an indication of Berman's character, but it also hones in on a key factor in Karabekian's life- his parents. What is significant in the evolution of his family is not how his parents died but how they managed not to die in the massacre of the Armenian community in Turkey, and how that affected them. Berman's mother saw the worst of it, and in America she left her past behind. Her husband, however, suffered from what Berman identifies as Survivor's Syndrome, and never really moved on from the tragedy.

As important as what is said is what Karabekian chooses not to say. He mentions that his first wife and sons left him, but he doesn't say why. He says the art community keeps their distance from him, but here again the full story is not revealed. This keeps the suspense going. The questions in readers' minds keep mounting with every new partially-revealed fact.

Karabekian seems to take the Dura-Luxe paint incident in stride. He almost sees the humor in it. This may be a function of his distance from the events, as he is now 71 years old, or he may himself find it amusing that his very expensive paintings were not to be his lasting legacy to the world.

Though the artist seems somewhat grumpy and stodgy, there are some signs that he is in fact a gentle and kind person. The strongest example of this is when Slazinger speaks to Circe Berman about writing as if he were a professional speaking to an undeserving amateur. When Karabekian learns the truth- that Berman, under a pseudonym, has earned far greater fame (and fortune) than Slazinger, Karabekian does not reveal this fact to his friend. He understands the delicate nature of ego and the ego of an artist in particular.

It is worth pointing out that the character of Slazinger is an overt tribute to J.D. Salinger, who wrote The Catcher in The Rye. Salinger became a recluse as Slazinger is in this tale.

Chapters 6-10

Chapters 6-10 Summary

This section of Karabekian's memoirs traces the roots of his art and the path that led him to New York City. During the telling, Karabekian jumps around in time, so the story of his past is interjected with observations about Mrs. Berman's constant interruptions.

Early in life, Karabekian received encouragement from teachers to pursue his talent in drawing. At first, his parents didn't want him entering an artist's life as he was surely destined for poverty. Karabekian's mother changed her tune when she discovered that Dan Gregory, an Armenian artist living in the United States, was making a lot of money.

On his mother's urging, Karabekian relates that he sent a letter to Gregory. The reply came not from Gregory himself but from his mistress Marilee Kemp. Kemp took up a correspondence with Karabekian over the span of five years. During this time, Karabekian was a political cartoonist for the local paper. He thought Kemp was showing his work to Gregory, but this was not the case. Kemp was lonely and isolated and enjoyed having a captive audience for her letters. She also sent Karabekian top-end paint supplies from Gregory's stash.

When Dan Gregory found out Kemp was taking his supplies to send to Karabekian, he threw her down the stairs and she ended up in the hospital. Trying to make amends with Kemp, Gregory then invited Karabekian (who is unaware of the incident) to be his apprentice.

Karabekian left home and made the long journey to New York City. He is greeted coldly by Dan Gregory and his assistant, though the bedroom they give Karabekian is incredibly lavish. Everyone and everything he sees is already familiar as they have all been drawn by Gregory in published illustrations.

Chapters 6-10 Analysis

Karabekian's parents are not unusual in their desire for their son to choose a path other than becoming an artist. His mother's concerns, however, fall away when she learns of Dan Gregory's wealth. Karabekian speaks of his mother's adeptness at understanding the ways of the new world, and it is this that pushes Karabekian to write a letter.

Marilee was a lonely mistress of an artist who did not pay her much attention, and when he did, it was often violent. The Karabekian family is not surprised then, that she would adopt a pen-pal, even if he is a youngster on the other side of the country. Mrs. Berman points out that Marilee loved having a readership, even if it was only a readership of one. One reader is really all that is required.

The difference between being a draftsman and being an artist is highlighted several times during Karabekian's reminiscence. He acknowledges that despite their excellent abilities to recreate images on paper, neither he nor Dan Gregory were ever able to produce great art. Karabekian understands that one can capture the truth and motion of life even in an abstract expressionist painting.

Karabekian speaks of his journey to New York from California as a rebirth, and the train tunnel into Grand Central as the birthing canal. He feels he transformed, started again from a blank slate, when he arrived.

Chapters 11-16

Chapters 11-16 Summary

In this section, Karabekian describes meeting Dan Gregory. Gregory had purchased three adjacent brownstones and had made one large room encompassing the floors of all 3 dwellings. This was his studio. Karabekian recalls the unique nature of the room with six freestanding fireplaces with chimneys. Gregory had all sorts of paraphernalia in his studio, items he would study.

Dan Gregory spoke to Karabekian of his upbringing. As a child in Moscow, Gregory had an abusive father. A woman saved him from his home. Her husband was the chief engraver for paper currency, and he brought Gregory on as an apprentice when he was ten years old.

At fifteen years old, Gregory was challenged to draw a one-ruble note so good that it could pass in the marketplace as real. The intricacies of the paper currency of the time made this a near-impossible challenge. The engraver did not approve of Gregory's first two attempts, which he worked on for six months each.

Gregory spent a year old his third attempt. He then presented the engraver with a genuine one-ruble note as his counterfeit, but still the engraver scoffed at its imperfections. To the engraver's horror, Gregory went to the marketplace and spent the ruble, which the engraver thought was fake. Gregory then presented him with the counterfeit bill, and thinking it was real, the engraver went to the market and swapped the counterfeit for the genuine note.

It was then that Gregory felt he had learned all he could from the engraver. He left his apprenticeship behind and found another position with an engraver and poster maker.

Gregory brought this past experience to his dealings with Karabekian. He wanted to give Karabekian an equally challenging task, and found one in assigning Karabekian to paint his studio as accurately as a photograph would capture it.

Back in the present, Karabekian has headed to New York City, at Mrs. Berman's urging. He walks by the three brownstones- that have been restored to three individual dwellings. The city reinvigorates him. At breakfast one day, he meets a man who offers to take him back to his home in a limousine.

When Karabekian married Edith, she decorated their home home with white walls to allow for the art collection. The house was featured in magazines. So when Karabekian now returns from New York to find his foyer covered in floral wallpaper, modern art removed and replaced with a scene of two girls, he is furious and goes into a rage.

Karabekian now understands Berman's motive for sending him to New York. He is enraged with everyone- Berman for doing it but Slazinger, the cook and her daughter

Celeste for letting it happen. Slazinger, it turns out, did try to put a stop to it, until Berman revealed to him that she is Polly Madison. This made him so angry that he had then encouraged Berman in her endeavor. Berman defends her paintings as having deeper meaning, as the Victorians would look at these girls thinking about their fate- there was so much disease at that time that they knew most of these girls would not make it.

Karabekian kicks out Berman and Slazinger. The cook then tells him she and her daughter will leave too, as the only thing keeping her there was Mrs. Berman.

At the conclusion of chapter 16, Berman returns to the house and convinces the cook to stay as well.

Chapters 11-16 Analysis

Karabekian continues to throw in his thoughts and reflections, so the story is not told in a straight line. His description of an autobiography/diary becomes quite accurate as he flips between the telling of his story and his current emotions regarding current events.

Gregory feels Karabekian should feel unwelcome, as after all, Gregory grew up feeling unwelcome and, he reasons, look how he turned out. Gregory does not speak with anger about the past, but he rather sees all of his former hardships and challenges as experiences which shaped the present man. He feels so strongly about this that he wants to put Karabekian through similar hardships. That is not, however, the only reason Gregory is cool towards Karabekian. He felt compelled to invite the apprentice to appease his mistress, and it seems he finds the whole ordeal of having an apprentice a nuisance.

When Karabekian returns to his home to find his foyer so drastically changed, he feels slighted on several fronts. For one, Edith decorated the house. Karabekian feels that altering his dead wife's work is an insult to her memory. Next, the floorboards are painted what he terms "babyshit brown," the color chosen at Slazinger's suggestion. This color has always been particularly horrid for Karabekian, not only for the ugliness of the color but for its association with Terry Kitchen's old car and even further back in the past, Karabekian's first suit. Add to this the abandonment of stark white for a floral pattern, which is not to Karabekian's taste.

Most damaging, however, is that the foyer is no longer a place where one can hang modern art. Instead, Berman has hung paintings of little girls. Karabekian does not see greatness in this sort of painting. He wants to be enveloped in his world of modern abstract art, paintings that may not act as snapshots of moments in life but rather encompass the entirety of life.

After this incident, Berman and Karabekian develop a silent mutual understanding. She wants to continue to live on the premises and he wants her there to bring him to life.

Chapters 17-22

Chapters 17-22 Summary

Karabekian continues his description of his time with Dan Gregory. Gregory insisted that modern art was a sham. His shared this view with his hero Mussolini. He also railed about women.

Gregory encouraged Karabekian to learn the names of every part of the guns, ships, and everything else he would draw. Gregory had no use for an apprentice, so he had Karabekian do his errands for him.

When Marilee came home from the hospital, she greeted Karabekian with a formality he did not expect, but over time, the two struck up a friendship. They frequented the Museum of Modern Art, even though it was against Gregory's express wishes.

When Karabekian showed Dan Gregory his painting of his studio, Gregory burned it in the fireplace, dismissing it as having no soul. Karabekian would have liked to have left Gregory's service at that point but this was during the Great Depression, and Gregory gave him food to eat and a roof over his head.

Jumping to the present, Karabekian relates a recent visit from foreigners to see his art collection. They loved the abstract art, but they were confounded by the girls in the foyer. Karabekian explains Berman's reasoning, and this creates a strong, tearful, emotional response from the visitors. They hug Karabekian upon leaving.

One day, Gregory caught Marilee and Karabekian emerging from the Museum of Modern Art. Gregory wanted both of them out of his house for this act of betrayal. He'd stay on his yacht until they left. When Marilee and Karabekian returned home, they found themselves kissing as they entered the house, and Karabekian has his first experience making love.

At first, Karabekian thinks this is a beginning of their life together, but soon Marilee sets him straight, that he must leave and she will stay with Gregory.

Karabekian jumps to a time in his life when he had money, when he, Terry Kitchen and Jackson Pollock would hang out together, soon to be known as the three musketeers. He speaks of this period in his life fondly.

Karabekian jumps back to his tale, when he left Gregory's house for good. He fell victim to the Depression, staying warm in libraries and studying by day, sleeping at shelters by night.

Karabekian had no contact with Marilee again for fourteen years, before seeing each other in Florence. Marilee had married an Italian count. Marilee and Esther died within a week of each other.

Chapters 17-22 Analysis

These chapters examine modern art vs. traditional art. They also speak to the power people can have over each other.

In a discussion about Ibsen's A Doll's House, Marilee believes that Nora kills herself at the end of the story, and that Ibsen only showed her leaving to go out into the world to appease his audience. Marilee believes though that Nora should have just made the best of things. Marilee relates to Nora, and Karabekian now sees he was also imprisoned. Even Gregory's assistant Fred Jones was trapped in a life not his own.

Marilee has her own power over Karabekian. Aside from a sexual power, she also holds authority, and after they sleep together, she has him leave for good.

Gregory's aversion to modern art is great. He believes that the growing acceptance of such art is a symptom of the madness of the world. He has such disdain for it that he forbids Marilee and Karabekian from visiting a museum dedicated to such art. His action of forbidding is also a reminder that he holds the ultimate control over the household.

The present-day visit to Karabekian's house is the first hint in the book that perhaps there is merit to art other than modern. Karabekian finds that the foyer pictures move the guests once they know the heartbreak of it. They also transfer this powerful emotion to their feelings for Karabekian, hugging him and showing him affection. He points out that he has never received such a response before.

Chapters 23-28

Chapters 23-28 Summary

Karabekian describes how he finally procures a job during the Depression. An Armenian living in Paris brought him to a New York ad agency and said he would give them his tourism business account on condition that the hire Karabekian as an artist.

Equipped with a job and modestly comfortable, Karabekian applied to take a painting class. The professor looked through his portfolio and declined to have him in class, for though the illustrations were perfect, there was no passion. He said he did not want to teach someone to paint if they had nothing to say.

Karabekian then took a creative writing course, but that too resulted in a similar standoff with the teacher.

Jumping to the present, Karabekian relates that Paul Slazinger is back at the house. Slazinger had lost his mind, and not for the first time. He was being trucked of to a hospital when Slazinger convinced the rescue squad to bring him to Karabekian's place instead. Surprisingly, Mrs. Berman is upset by - or as Karabekian sees it, petrified by - Slazinger's insanity. It is at this time that Karabekian finds himself in Mrs. Berman's bathroom and discovers her many, many pills- presumably samples given to her late husband the doctor.

Slazinger has developed a theory about what one needs for change to happen. He identifies three key people in combination for success- a genius, a fine upstanding member of the community, and someone who can express any idea clearly to the public.

Karabekian jumps back in time. The war in Europe started. Karabekian enlisted in the army, though the United States was not involved in the war just yet. Karabekian excelled and rose in the ranks. By the time the United States joined the war, he had risen to the rank of Lieutenant.

Karabekian managed to sidestep the fighting until he reached Germany, where he lost his eye in battle. He met his first wife when she was his nurse upon his return to America. But soon, Karabekian quit his job as an insurance salesman in order to pursue painting. He spent more and more time at the rented studio he shared with Terry Kitchen.

During this time, Karabekian was summoned to Italy to be a witness in a case involving stolen art from the war. While he was there, he received a note- from Marilee! She invited him over for tea. He was thrilled.

When Karabekian arrived, he was sorely disappointed, as Marilee was angry at him. She was upset that he had never tried to contact her after they made love, even though

she had told him not to. She also displays much hostility towards men. She speaks of all of the men who abused her, men who are, collectively, the cause of war.

Karabekian feels belittled and wants to leave, but Marilee asks him to stay for tea.

Chapters 23-28 Analysis

As the novel progresses, the particular absence in Karabekian's work becomes evident. The professor says he lacks passion. He has nothing to say. Though Karabekian understands the criticism, it does not seem to slow him down or put a damper in his pursuit of being an artist.

There are several examples of Armenian strangers helping each other in the novel, first Dan Gregory and then the Armenian Parisian. Karabekian speaks of family. His parents' family, he says, was connected by biology, in the old country. Here, Karabekian makes his own families- first with soldiers, and then with artists.

Karabekian speaks of the feeling of being completely immersed in his work during the act of creating art. He says this cost him his marriage, yet he does not sound particularly regretful. He also reveals his tendency towards the abstract. He describes an idea that grew in his mind, to add lines of tape to his canvas over the paint, and each piece of tape represents a person or role. He describes seeing people as tubes of light, and this is insight into the mind of an Abstract artist.

Karabekian learns a costly lesson when he again meets Marilee- that people don't always say what they mean. He was so sure she had cast him aside, yet he had been tragically wrong.

Chapters 29-32

Chapters 29-32 Summary

Over tea, Marilee tells the story of how she and Fred Jones had followed Dan Gregory to Italy, before America was involved in the war. Mussolini treated them as celebrities.

With permission, Dan and Fred had donned Italian uniforms so they could accompany the soldiers in order to draw them. Unfortunately, both Dan and Fred died along with the soldiers during battle. They were then known as heroes in Italy.

Marilee kept her celebrity status and started spending time with Count Portomaggiore. He was secretly homosexual- an offense punishable by death. He was also the head of British Intelligence in Italy. He proposed to Marilee on orders from Mussolini. At first Marilee said no but an American spy approached her and asked her to accept, so she can alert the United States should she come across any key information. Marilee consented and stayed married until her husband was shot for being a British spy. By that point, Marilee felt Italy was her home.

Karabekian tells Marilee some wartime stories, and then he speaks of his art, "painting such such as the world has never seen before." Not just his art, but his friends' art too, painting that were only about the paintings themselves. Marilee orders ten of these paintings at $1000 each.

Karabekian provides a quick update from the present- that Paul Slazinger has taken the step of committing himself to the psychiatric ward at the Veteran's Hospital.

Back in the past, Karabekian's marriage fell further apart when he returned from Italy. His wife Dorothy had not signed on to be the wife of an artist.

One night at the bar with the other painters, the group realized that despite their critical success, they weren't making enough to support themselves. They decided this was because of their unserious clothing, so they went upstairs to the tailor shop above the bar and got measured to have suits made.

Back downstairs, an elderly stranger joined the table and asked Terry Kitchen many questions. Later, when Karabekian was alone with Kitchen, he asked who he thought the man might be. Kitchen identified him as his father, who had cut him off from money for now with the idea that it would push Kitchen to adopt a worthy career. Some years later, Kitchen took a shot at his father, and seeing what he had done, then turned the gun on himself.

Back in the present, Karabekian writes that Mrs. Berman finished her novel and left the Hamptons two weeks ago. But before she went, Karabekian shows her what is in the potato barn.

Chapters 29-32 Analysis

Karabekian had spent eight years as a soldier, the last three during the war. This took a toll that Karabekian rarely addresses. His first wife Dorothy once told him that the war is over, that he need not fight anymore. She saw that he and his friends needed to strive for something grand. But it is no longer wartime and to doing something larger than life is no longer necessary.

Meeting Marilee again was a surreal experience for Karabekian and it knocked him off-balance. Marilee had changed, had strengthened since he last knew her. In Italy, Marilee had enjoyed the kind of celebrity status she had never received in America. She enjoyed this and resisted letting it go. But now, after the war, all of the servants at her estate in Florence are women who had been injured at the hands of men and during the war. Not only does Marilee blame the guilty parties, but she actively helps the victims.

When Karabekian tells Marilee of the painting he and his friends are working on, Marilee is excited- her interest is in art that comments on the state of the world. She wants the art to clearly mean "the end." Once she receives the paintings, she contacts Karabekian to tell him that these modern abstract expressionist works do not denote nothing at all; they denote chaos. This is now a common view of the works of many abstract expressionist artists of the time. Jackson Pollock, who is not fictional, spattered paint all over his canvases. Many believe this represents the chaos of war or the chaos of the world as a result of the war.

Chapters 33-37

Chapters 33-37 Summary

Karabekian relates the events of his final evening with Circe Berman. She pushes him to prove to her that he can draw, but he has nothing to prove. He talks of the first time he drew for Dorothy and how shocked she was that he was so talented. He talks of Dorothy leaving him and taking the kids, not long after Pollock and Kitchen both killed themselves. This led him to feel truly alone. But now, he holds firm that he won't draw for Mrs. Berman.

Karabekian does, however, tell Mrs. Berman that there are canvases of 8'x8' held together in the potato barn to make one 64'x8' wall. These panels were once the most famous of Karabekian's art, a piece called Windsor Blue #17. But the Sateen Dura-luxe had peeled off, and a few years ago, Karabekian was offered the once-again-blank panels.

When he first brought them back to the potato barn, he had the panels primed and clamped together, with brilliant white light in the room. Karabekian's intention was to leave the canvas white, for Edith to reveal after his death, along with the title I Tried and Failed and Cleaned Up Afterwards, so it's Your Turn Now. But as it turns out, Edith died a few months later, and before Karabekian.

Edith's death had Karabekian rethink, got some painting supplies, and practically lived at the potato barn. Six months later, the work was complete and Karabekian barricaded it inside.

Karabekian says that he'd rather not hear if people like the painting or not, that he'd rather people only see it upon his death, but Berman calls him a coward for doing so, and with that, she convinces him to show her the work.

When they first enter the barn, the perspective leads Mrs. Berman to see a never-ending fence. But when Karabekian brings her to the center and has her look again, she sees the view as Karabekian saw it on the day the Second World War ended, with thousands of survivors. When Karabekian painted it, he created a war story in his mind for each of the five thousand people in the picture.

Now, Mrs. Berman is gone, but people stream in to see the work in the potato barn. Karabekian encourages the viewers to make up their own war stories for the people on the canvas. The title? Now It's the Women's Turn.

Chapters 33-37 Analysis

After a lifetime of avoiding his skills as an illustrator, Karabekian has finally used his greatest strength in making this masterpiece. This is not abstract neon glowing bulbs,

pieces of tape, or swatches of paint. This work is comprised of painstaking drawing over six months. Karabekian has filled every inch of his canvases with incredibly detailed artwork of people, and he has done what Mrs. Berman has been encouraging in him for so long to do. He has given these characters stories and he has infused his painting with meaning.

Seeing the destruction caused by men's war, combined with Marilee's reflections on men and her horrible experiences with men, along with Karabekian's own evaluation of how he treated his first wife, Karabekian is convinced that men have made an utter mess and perhaps it is time to make room for the women who may just do better.

Characters

Rabo Karabekian

Rabo Karabekian is in his seventies as he looks back on his life in this fictional autobiography. He was always confident about his ability to draw, but with time he realizes that he doesn't have anything to say in his art- until he paints Now It's the Women's Turn.

Karabekian is self-educated, having spent his days in libraries while he was homeless during the Great Depression. He is an able draftsman and he is also recognized as a good soldier. When his first wife once asked him why he doesn't use his drawing skills in his art, he said it was just too easy. He wanted to work for his art.

Married twice with two children that do not speak to him, Karabekian now finds himself alone and isolated. His friend Paul Slazinger hangs around on his property, but it is only when Circe Berman moves in that Karabekian is brought into engaging again with society.

Marilee Kemp

Marilee is the mistress of Dan Gregory. When Karabekian writes to Dan Gregory as a young teenager, it is Marilee who responds to his letters. She does not inform Karabekian that Dan Gregory is not looking at the pictures he sends. She starts a correspondence with the boy. Eventually, when Gregory's abuse lands her in the hospital, he makes amends by bringing Karabekian on as an apprentice.

Marilee at that time sees her life as parallel to Nora's life in Ibsen's A Doll's House, beyond her control. Marilee is in an abusive relationship with Gregory, following a long line of men who abused her. Her love for Gregory leads her to follow him to Italy. It is only after he dies that Marilee grows into her own. She marries a count and is entrusted to pass on to the Allies any sensitive information she comes across while living in Florence. Her husband is shot by a firing squad for being a British spy.

After the war, Marilee populates her house with female servants who have been injured at the hands of men.

Paul Slazinger

The character of Paul Slazinger is the author's tip of the hat to J.D. Salinger, who was well-known as a hermit. While Paul likes his privacy and prefers to be away from people, he does not share all attributes with Salinger. He is mildly successful as a writer.

Paul and Karabekian have a falling-out, but when he breaks with reality and the rescue squad wants to have him committed, he pleads to be taken to Karabekian's home. Karabekian cares for him as long as he can and eventually Paul commits himself to the psychiatric ward of the Veteran's hospital.

Circe Berman

Circe Berman is a recent widow in her forties. She is an immensely successful author under the pseudonym Polly Madison, writing books for young adults. Circe is bold and brash and loud and lively. At the end of her stay at Karabekian's home, she reveals that this attitude helps her manage her grief. She is also unusual. Her first greeting to Karabekian was "Tell me how your parents died."

Circe is bossy, and Karabekian both likes and hates this. He rises to the challenge Circe throws at him such as a trip to New York, writing a memoir, and ultimately revealing his secret in the potato barn.

Dan Gregory

Dan Gregory is an Armenian from Russia, who Americanized his name when he arrived in the United States. He is a world-famous commercial artist and the description of his art is very likely modeled after Norman Rockwell, who was one of the best known American artists at that time.

Dan Gregory had a difficult upbringing in Moscow. His father abused him until he was rescued. He eventually apprenticed with an engraver until he had learned all he could from him, before moving on to become the apprentice of another artist. Gregory believes that this is what produced his success, and so he tries to recreate his experience for Karabekian.

Gregory is in his fifties. He is abusive towards his 29-year old mistress. He holds Mussolini in such high regard that eventually leads to his death.

Edith

Edith was Karabekian's second wife. They were married for 20 years, right until she died. The mansion where Karabekian lives was in her family for generations, and Edith left it to Karabekian.

Edith discovered a talent for decorating when Karabekian came to live with her. Together they created a home that perfectly housed Karabekian's extensive collection of abstract expressionism.

Dorothy

Dorothy was Karabekian's first wife. Eventually the instability of his artistic career and the lack of his presence drove her to leave with their two young boys, Terry and Henri.

Celeste

Celeste is the daughter of Karabekian's current cook. She is a teenager, and Karabekian is always amazed at how littel she and her friends know about history, and how little they care to learn.

Allison

Allison is Karabekian's cook. She is prepared to leave when she thinks Mrs. Berman won't be living there anymore but Berman convinces her to stay.

Objects/Places

San Ignacio, California

When Karabekian's parents escaped the Armenian massacre in Turkey, they planned to go to Paris, but along the way they were swindled into buying a house that did not exist, in San Ignacio. They took the voyage to North America, and even though they didn't find the house or an Armenian community in San Ignacio, they stayed and raised Rabo there.

Paintings

This tale is filled with paintings, from Dan Gregory's traditional works to Karabekian's modern canvases with nothing but a single color. The works of artists Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock are mentioned. Karabekian's life is inextricably linked to paintings.

Books

Both Paul Slazinger and Circe Berman are writers, though each of their own variety. Celeste, the cook's daughter, owns all of Berman's books under the pen name of Polly Madison.

Potato Barn

There is a potato barn on Karabekian's estate. He first came to the Hamptons to rent out this potato barn, and he used it as a studio for years, before the Sateen Dura-Luxe fell off and he stopped painting.

After Edith's death, the barn was once again full of artistic activity. When Karabekian was done his masterpiece, he barricaded the doors of the potato barn. This is where he eventually reveals his work Now It's the Women's Turn.

East Hampton, Long Island

Karabekian was raised in California but he was sent to New York to apprentice with Dan Gregory. Eventually Karabekian needed a big studio in which he could create his massive works, and he found the space in East Hampton, along with many other artists.

Sateen Dura Luxe

Karabekian used Sateen Dura-Luxe on all of his abstract expressionist paintings. It was touted as a paint that would outlast the Mona Lisa, but in only a few years, the paint

peeled off all of Karabekian's canvases, leaving museums and art collectors with blank canvases instead of the paintings they'd purchased.

Italy

Marilee follows Gregory to Italy, where he is eventually killed. When Karabekian is in Florence to be a witness in a court case, he discovers that Marilee now lives there.

Themes

Women and Men

There is a clear pattern in the tale of Karabekian's life where he exposes the evils committed by men against each other and against women - both large and small-scale.

Dan Gregory's father abused him. He, in turn, abused Marilee. Terry Kitchen shoots his father and then turns the gun on himself. Marilee was exposed to much abuse in her youth, and in Italy she recruits servants who have been damaged by men, including someone whose husband plunged her hands into boiling water. And while Karabekian was not physically abusive, he was an absent father and an absent husband to Dorothy.

Larger-scale, Karabekian recognizes that after World War One, America had turned against war and strived for peace. In no time at all, however, Pearl Harbor brought them back into the fray of World War Two. The fighting killed many, physically maimed others, and psychologically damaged civilians and soldiers alike.

Marilee points out in words what Karabekian does in his final painting, which is to offer a new approach since men have left the world in a horrible mess.

Meaning in Art

At the conclusion of the book, it seems that Karabekian recognizes that all styles of painting have merit as long as they have truth. "...In the paintings which have greatness," Karabekian writes, "birth and death are always there."

For the bulk of his life, Karabekian thought of traditional art with disdain, while he held modern art in high esteem. There is discussion between Circe Berman and Karabekian about meaning in art. She sees no meaning in abstract canvases. She would rather see something with a story.

When Karabekian finally unveils his masterpiece, it is clear that he has now learned the value of meaning in art and he has further equipped each person painted onto the canvas with a story unique to each individual.

Style

Point of View

Bluebeard: A Novel is written entirely as an autobiography of fictional character Rabo Karabekian. There is even a dedication at the beginning of the book that is not from Vonnegut, but from the fictional Karabekian to another character in the book, Circe Berman.

The book is written in the first-person singular point of view and offers insights into the mind of Karabekian. It also reveals a subjective account of his life, rather than hearing the tale from an objective source.

Setting

Bluebeard is set in a sprawling mansion on the ocean in East Hampton, Long Island. This is Karabekian's home, which is left to him by his late wife Edith. The grounds around the property are immense, and this allows for Karabekian to go on long walks without leaving the property, which extends to the shore where Karabekian meets Circe Berman.

The mansion is full of art, and people visit to see the collection. Karabekian refers to his home as a museum. There is also a potato barn on the estate, which Karabekian rented as his studio before he married Edith. There is an expansiveness along the ocean and this enormous property that allows for privacy, in contrast to the bustle of New York City. It allows for so much privacy that it is easy to become a hermit in such a place.

Language and Meaning

Karabekian, like his creator Kurt Vonnegut, is blunt and direct with his words. While the character uses imaginative imagery is his descriptions, he is never flowery or poetic. He talks of Slazinger and Berman as skilled writers, but this autobiography is an example of Karabekian's own skill with a pen. Karabekian has cultivated an extensive vocabulary over the years.

The meaning and layers embedded in the novel are not found in the use of language but rather in the content of the story itself. At one point, Karabekian explains to a creative writing professor that describing an image with words is like creating dessert out of broken shards of glass.

Structure

The novel is written by Karabekian in 1987. He was born in 1916 and while he speaks of this as his autobiography, he focuses on a few specific times in his life and glosses over, or simply skips, others.

The book is structured into 37 chapters, and each chapter contains many small snippets of moments. Karabekian often puts down his pen and resumes a short while later, resulting in chopped-up information and an extensive amount of jumping back and forth. The author, Kurt Vonnegut, nevertheless ensures that the flow is preserved.

Quotes

"Paul Slazinger says, incidentally, that the human condition can be summed up in just one word, and this is the word- Embarrassment" (Chapter 2, p. 13).

"Yes, and there were miraculous breakfast foods and would soon be helicopters for every family. There were miraculous new fibers which could be washed in cold water and need no ironing afterwards! Talk about a war well worth fighting" (Chapter 2, p. 19).

"While I was at it, I asked them if they recognized the names of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, or Terry Kitchen, or Tuman Capote, or Nelson Algren, or Irwin Shaw, or James Jones, all of whom had figured not only in the history of arts and letters but in the history of the Hamptons. They did not. So much for achieving immortality via the arts and letters. (ch. 5, p. 46)

"'You were her audience,' she said. 'Writers will kill for an audience.'
'An audience of one?' I said.
'That's all she needed,' she said. 'That's all anybody needs'" (Chapter 7, p. 61).

"He used to be my closest friend. And suddenly he began to paint the pictures which make many people say today that he was the greatest of all the Abstract Expressionists- superior to Pollock, to Rothko. That was fine, I guess, except that when I looked into my best friend's eye, there wasn't anybody home anymore" (Chapter 7, p. 64).

"Birth and death were even on that old piece of beaverboard Terry Kitchen sprayed at seeming random so long ago. I don't know how he got them in there, and neither did he" (Chapter 9, p. 84)

"So what was our bond? Loneliness and wounds from World War Two which were quite grave" (Chapter 21, p. 169).

"Who is to be more pitied, a writer bound and gagged by policemen or one living in perfect freedom who has nothing more to say" (Chapter 22, p. 176).

"If I watch two people on a street corner, I see not only their flesh and clothes, but narrow, vertical bands of color inside them- not so much like tape, actually, but more like low-intensity neon tubes" (Chapter 26, p. 212).

"One would soon go mad if one took such coincidences too seriously. One might be led to suspect that there were all sorts of things going on in the Universe which he or she did not thoroughly understand" (Chapter 27, p. 216).

"I had made her so unhappy that she had developed a sense of humor, which she certainly didn't have when I married her" (Chapter 31, p. 245).

Topics for Discussion

Why did Karabekian's parents leave Turkey? What did they experience before they left? How did each of their experiences differ? Why did the Karabekians make the voyage to America?

Why did the Karabekians stay in San Ignacio when they found out there was no house? What were the after-effects of their experiences once they were in America? What effects, if any, were passed down to Rabo Karabekian?

What is Dan Gregory's relationship with Marilee Kemp? How does it differ from Karabekian's relationship with Marilee? Does Marilee change throughout the story, and if so, in what ways did she change? Is Marilee weak? Is she strong?

How did Karabekian amass such a large and valuable collection of abstract expressionist art? Where does he keep the paintings when he first gets them, and why? What does he do with the art once he moves into the mansion? What does Edith do to create a home in which Karabekian can showcase his art?

Why does Circe Berman want to stay at Karabekian's home? Why does Slazinger spend time there? What do these characters get from Karabekian? What does he get from each of them?

Why does Karabekian refrain from telling Paul Slazinger that Berman is actually Polly Madison?

Why does Circe Berman redo Karabekian's foyer? Why is he so angry about it? What matters to Berman most about art? How does it differ from how Karabekian sees it? What effect does the foyer have on the people who visit the mansion? What do you think of the foyer makeover?

Why does Karabekian intend to only reveal his final work once he is dead? What makes him change his mind?

What is the image in his masterpiece? What does its title mean? What is Karabekian trying to say with this piece? Do you think he could he have said the same thing through abstract expressionism?