

# Dorothea Dreams Short Guide

## Dorothea Dreams by Suzy McKee Charnas

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## Characters

Charnas has an unusual talent for portraying characters in late middle-age. Katja, the heroine of the first part of *The Vampire Tapestry* (1980) is memorable and Dorothea, a woman in perhaps her early sixties, is equally so.

Charnas's older characters have invariably lived full lives and, although they may be weather beaten and crotchety, have usually learned from their past mistakes. Her portrait of Ricky, a lifelong globe trotter and travel writer, a grasshopper who must finally come to terms with his responsibilities, is utterly believable, as is the tenderness of his developing relationship with Dorothea. Roberta and Blanca, the angry young Latinos who help shatter Dorothea's retreat, are also well developed, though some may find it difficult to share Dorothea's willingness to forgive them.



## Social Concerns/Themes

In *Dorothea Dreams*, Charnas explores an issue which is probably of considerable importance to her personally, the relationship between the successful artist and society and, more specifically, that between the successful female artist and social justice. The title character is a talented painter who, just as her career was beginning to take off, chose to flee the New York art world and live a hermitlike existence near Taos, New Mexico. For the last two years, unknown to anyone, she has been creating her masterpiece, a mixedmedia work literally glued to the face of a cliff. Dorothea has totally rejected the demands put upon her by both the artistic community and her daughter, who is active in feminist politics.

Meanwhile, in nearby Albuquerque, trouble is brewing in the barrio. Unprincipled land developers, with the local police in their pocket, are using underhanded tactics to buy up a neighborhood which they plan to gentrify at an enormous profit. When the people of Pinto Street protest, a police-instigated riot occurs and one young hothead, Roberto, ends up on the run, his asthmatic little sister in tow. They hijack a bus and end up at Dorothea's, holding her, her friend Ricky (who is dying of cancer), and the busload of art students as hostages.

Dorothea is a woman who is totally wrapped up in herself and her art.

Charnas uses the appearances, first of a ghost, then of Ricky, then of Roberto and his hostages, to force Dorothea to confront the problem of her relationship with the outside world. Charnas's conclusions are twofold: first, that no artist can truly cut herself off, that the connection will exist whether the artist acknowledges it or not; second, that such a connection is actually necessary, that the artist needs something to tie her to humanity in order to give her art meaning. As the novel ends, Ricky's visit and impending death, along with her experience with Roberto, have convinced Dorothea that she must take some part in society, both as an artist and as a feminist. She recognizes, however, the importance to any artist of moderation. Dorothea therefore decides to avoid both the extreme seclusion of her former life and the utterly public, totally political life which her daughter wants her to live.

## Techniques

Although *Dorothea Dreams* may well be Charnas's best novel, it is unlikely to reach so large a public as did *Walk to the End of the World* (1974), *Motherlines* (1980), or *The Vampire Tapestry*. Between feminists, science-fiction fans, and devotees of horror fiction, these three novels had fairly large built-in audiences. *Dorothea Dreams*, however, although it contains elements of both feminist thought and fantasy, uses them with considerable restraint. Indeed, it is not until the novel's last chapter that there is proof that the ghost who has been haunting Dorothea is real and not simply a figment of what might be an overactive artistic imagination.



## Key Questions

Central to any discussion of *Dorothea Dreams* is the dichotomy between the artist's desire to retreat from the world and the need to be a part of it, the conflict between the concept of "art for art's sake" and the belief that the true value of art lies in its ability to change the world. Actually, this argument goes back to the ancient Greeks. A discussion of this novel could well be centered on the question of whether or not art can and has changed the world.

1. Dorothea and her daughter debate the issue of whether or not the artist owes it to the world to work for social change throughout the novel. What conclusions do they reach? Do you agree or disagree?
2. A quick examination of Charnas's own biography will turn up many similarities between the author and her protagonist in *Dorothea Dreams*. What implications can be drawn from this?
3. Creative artists frequently find themselves attacked when their art or their personal lives deviate from that which is deemed to be politically correct. Within the community of science fiction writers, Ursula K. Le Guin, Harlan Ellison, Norman Spinrad, Pamela Sargent, and Orson Scott Card, among others, have all been criticized for this supposed failure. To what extent do creative artists owe it to their public to live up to concepts of political correctness?
4. Dorothea is in retreat from the world, immersed in the creative process, but Charnas intentionally sends a series of people to her door, each of whom disrupts her privacy and challenges her to once again become engaged with the world. Consider Dorothea's daughter, Ricky, and Roberto: What challenge does each of these characters offer? How does Dorothea respond to these challenges?
5. What is the role of the ghost in *Dorothea Dreams*? Why does it play such a minor role in the story?
6. How relevant is Dorothea's gender to the action of the story? Does she face problems as a woman and as a female artist that differ from those faced by male artists? If Dorothea were Donald, how would the book be different?
7. To what extent does Charnas attempt to attract our sympathy for Roberto? To what extent does she ask us to excuse his crimes?
8. Read Virginia Woolf's short book *A Room of One's Own*. What relevance does it have to *Dorothea Dreams*?

## Literary Precedents

The proper relationship between the artist and society has been an important theme in the work of any number of major authors, and, as one would expect, has been of particular interest to women writers, many of whom feel estranged from the dominant patriarchal culture. The problem is discussed in great depth by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Among the contemporary women writers who have dealt with the issue are Joyce Carol Oates, Eudora Welty, Doris Lessing, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich.

In science fiction the role of the artist in society has not been discussed very often because so few science-fiction writers have tended to think of themselves as artists *per se*. Writers who have raised the question include Samuel R. Delany, Anne McCaffrey, Kim Stanley Robinson, Barry Malzberg, Joanna Russ, and, especially, Ursula K. Le Guin in her collection of essays *The Language of the Night* (1979).



## Related Titles

After publishing *Walk to the End of the World* and *Motherlines*, two very angry works of feminist science fiction, Charnas intended to produce a third novel in the series, but found herself unable to do so because, as she later admitted, she had not yet come to terms with her own anger. Instead she turned to supernatural fiction with *The Vampire Tapestry* (1980) and children's fantasy with *The Bronze King* (1985).

Although these are both accomplished books, Charnas may well have seen them as in some sense a withdrawal from her responsibilities as a politically committed novelist and thus as a sort of failure. *Dorothea Dreams*, as mentioned above, spends considerable time on the issue of the artist's responsibility to the world. Dorothea, who has withdrawn from society, is forced by circumstance and her own conscience to return to the public forum.

Thus Charnas's next adult novel, *The Furies* (1994) which continues the series begun with *Walk to the End of the World* and which tackles a number of very difficult gender and social justice issues, may be seen as the author's own return to social responsibility.





# Copyright Information

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