

Even Cowgirls Get the Blues Study Guide

Even Cowgirls Get the Blues by Tom Robbins

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Plot Summary

Even Cowgirls Get the Blues is an exploration of freedom and a journey of self discovery. Tim Robbins introduces the reader to Sissy Hankshaw a beautiful woman with abnormally large thumbs. As she hitchhikes across the United States, Sissy learns valuable life lessons that inform her of the person she is destined to become. Robbins tells Sissy's story through a mixture of love, humor, and descriptive language.

Sissy Hankshaw's life begins in South Richmond, VA. There, she is considered to be somewhat of a spectacle. At first her parents and friends cannot get over the size of Sissy's thumbs. They feel sorry for her because they believe she has been dealt a hard hand in life. Sissy, on the other hand, accepts her thumbs. They are what set her apart from everyone else in town. They make her feel alive and vibrant. As Sissy grows, her thumbs grow and yearn to be exercised. This leads Sissy to hitchhike. which, although dangerous, becomes Sissy way out of her small town.

Sissy's thumbs take her all over the United States and she becomes somewhat of a legend along the way. When Sissy finds herself in the Big Apple, she also finds herself under the employ of a gay male billionaire named the Countess. The Countess' business is women - more specifically women's hygiene products. Sissy begins to model for him and is the star of one of his campaigns. The Countess insists upon introducing Sissy to Julian, a full blooded Mohawk Native American artist. Julian and Sissy meet and instantly discover a they have a connection. The two quickly marry.

Unfortunately, Julian does not understand Sissy's love of her thumbs or their need to be exercised. He also refuses to acknowledge his heritage, which Sissy wishes he would embrace. The marriage quickly becomes rocky, so Sissy decides to leave for the Dakotas on a business trip. The Countess has asked Sissy to go to the Rubber Rose Ranch to check on the cowgirls that are overtaking it.

Once Sissy arrives, she is thrust into a conflict between the cowgirls and the leaders of the ranch. The cowgirls are fighting for their rights to be cowgirls and also to end the oppression of women. Sissy quickly falls in lust with the leader, Bonanza Jelly Bean. The two women connect in a way Sissy never expected. Before they can get to know each other any better, chaos breaks out on the ranch and Sissy flees to the hills. It is there that she meets the Chink, a Japanese man. Sissy spends a couple a weeks with the Chink during which she learns much about herself and the world around her. When Sissy returns home, Julian is not happy that his wife has changed. He sends her to a mental clinic to be "fixed."

Upon leaving the clinic, Sissy decides to return to the ranch because she cannot stand to be with her husband. She is also conflicted over her relationships with Jelly Bean and the Chink. When Sissy returns, the cowgirls are at war with the FBI for kidnapping the endangered Whooping Cranes. As a result, the FBI shoots down the ranch, thus causing the death of Jelly Bean. Once all the smoke has settled, Sissy is renamed the

caretaker of the ranch. She and the cowgirls finally have a place where they can be themselves.



Part One: Chapters 1-10 (pg 1 - 29)

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Even Cowgirls Get the Blues is an exploration of freedom and a journey of self discovery. Tim Robbins introduces the reader to Sissy Hankshaw, a beautiful woman with abnormally large thumbs. As she hitchhikes across the United States, Sissy learns valuable life lessons that inform her of the person she is destined to become. Robbins tells Sissy's story through a mixture of love, humor, and descriptive language.

In chapters 1-10, Sissy Hankshaw would be just another ordinary girl if it was not for her large, distracting thumbs. Luckily, instead of shutting her out from many places, Sissy's thumbs take her to far away places. For example, those magical thumbs will take Sissy to places like New York City where a man, Julian, becomes obsessed with her thumbs. The author explains that he did not pick Sissy specifically for her thumbs, but for where her thumbs take her.

Sissy's earliest memory is that of her uncle and father complaining about her thumbs. At the time, she was only three or four. While her relatives thought she was sleeping, she heard every word of their tirade. Her uncle insists that if Sissy were a boy, she would make an excellent hitch hiker. So, while the other kids played hop scotch, Sissy hitchhiked.

The author insists that thumbs are what separate us from animals, but when your thumbs are too big, too immense, you do not feel normal. The first time Sissy hitchhiked, she felt free and important. The thrill and terror were a great feeling. After the first time, Sissy never walks anywhere. As Sissy ages, her thumbs continue to grow. She becomes fearful that her thumbs will continue to grow to an extent where she cannot handle them. But as her thumbs grew, so did the rest of her, into a very attractive young lady. Sissy's brothers, while amazed at the growth of their sister's fingers and personality, refused to grow. Because of Junior and Jerry's jealousy, they attempt at stretching their own fingers. The attempt fails and leave others questioning the boys' bloodied fingers.

While Richmond, Virginia is not a populous city, Sissy ran into many "characters" by hitchhiking. Sissy only has one rule: As long as the car continues forward, the driver can do whatever they wish to Sissy. While Sissy eats fast food in the passenger seat, male drivers let their hands freely wander over Sissy's body. If a man tried to rape her, Sissy simply placed her thumbs between her legs. After trying to remove them for some time, the men usually get tired and leave her alone.

Sissy is brought to a plastic surgeon named Dr Dreyfus by her parents. He confirms that Sissy's thumbs are perfect in all aspects but size. Because Sissy's fingers are causing no danger to her, he recommends they be left alone. While Dr Dreyfus feels Sissy's thumbs are fine, her parents insist that Sissy is being punished for something. Sissy's



mother is not satisfied with the doctor's diagnosis, so she decides to take Sissy to see a fortune teller, Madame Zoe even though Sissy's father forbade the visit.

Sissy is apprehensive about going to Madame Zoe. As the fortune teller begins her usual speech, she is distracted and startled by Sissy's thumbs. She quickly grabs Sissy's thumbs. Madame Zoe predicts that Sissy will have a strong will, determination, logic, and reason. Sissy's mother is not concerned with these traits. She only wants to know if Sissy will be able to find a husband. Madame Zoe is thoughtful. She honestly responds that there will be men in Sissy's life, but there will also be many women. There will be a husband and possibly 4 or 6 children.

Part One: Chapters 1-10 (pg 1 - 29) Analysis

In these beginning chapters, Sissy Hankshaw is introduced to the reader. At first the description of Sissy thumbs can be a little confusing. The reader may not completely understand what Robbins is describing. Right from the beginning, Sissy is described as a normal-looking young girl who yearns for more than her life in Richmond, VA. This is most likely because Sissy is blessed with abnormally large thumbs. As a child, Sissy is not interested in changing her thumbs. Her parents seem more concerned with consulting doctors, teachers, and psychics than Sissy is. Other people around Sissy realize that her thumbs are something special. Her brothers can see that their sister's thumbs set her apart from the dreary people in town.

The theme of freedom is introduced in the first couple chapters. Sissy understands her thumbs can be her ticket out of her boring hometown. Through hitchhiking on day trips she literally escapes from it all. Sissy is struggling to discover her freedom and ability to choose her own life. Other small-minded people in her town do not understand the true meaning of being free in the way Sissy does. They believe she is acting out and should be punished for her actions.



Part One: Chapters 11-16 (pg 30- 52)

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In chapters 11 -16 Sissy tries to be a normal young girl who does normal high school things. Although she is not a part of the popular crowd, Sissy excitedly attends Betty Steward's costume party. Unfortunately for Sissy, one of the local boys decides it would be a good idea to dress up as her. He comes to the party with home made thumbs.

The hot lazy Virginia summer does not stop Sissy from hitchhiking. As the sun blazes down on her, Sissy tries to hale a ride. Unfortunately for Sissy, an ambulance passes her. The driver turns her into the local police, and Sissy finds herself arrested. Sissy's crime was very hard to classify. She was lectured and let go, only to be arrested again. From there on out, Sissy learns of her ability in her small section of Richmond, Virginia. On a warm summer evening, instead of enjoying the parades, street fairs, and dining that other children her age enjoyed, Sissy stands in front of a mirror naked. Sissy is getting a taste of her freedom, as the assistant district attorney pressures the city to condemn Sissy to juvenile hall because she is a social child deviant who hitchhikes. A social worker convinces the court that Sissy's hitchhiking is just a phase.

After assessing herself in the mirror, Sissy squeezes herself into an ill-fitting, formal dress. Ms. Leonard, the social worker, has forced Sissy to go to a function called the Goodwill Industries Ball. When Sissy discovers the name of the soiree, she realizes it was a grave mistake to attend. Ms. Leonard tells Sissy not to fret about being at the gathering. She realizes how it is with "you people." People with different disabilities don't always like one another. Sissy is outraged. She screams that she is not handicapped and runs from the room. After this episode, Sissy again finds herself in front of her mirror, naked. In the next room, she can hear her mother and father arguing. Her father has gotten another offer from the Colonel to be Sissy's agent. While Sissy's father usually ignores the offers, Sissy has been acting out so much that Sissy's father has been seriously considering the Colonel's advances.

Luckily for Sissy, at seventeen she is turning into a pretty young woman. While others may think her thumbs are a handicap, she sees them as a way to freedom. While it was very popular for people to hitchhike in the seventies, Sissy did not do it for the glamor.

Part One: Chapters 11-16 (pg 30- 52) Analysis

In this chapter, the reader gains an understanding of the author's growing affection for Sissy Hankshaw. His tone is overly sympathetic and caring. As a third person narrator he knows what all the characters are feeling but also lets his own feelings be known to the reader through interludes and breaks in his narrative and storytelling. Robbin's tone may be distracting to the reader or can help to facilitate a relationship between the

readers and the illusive Sissy. The tone of the book acts as a foreshadowing about a character that will appear later in the book.

This chapter is also interesting because the reader comes to further understand Sissy's love for her thumbs. She has never seen them as a hindrance. As her face and body become beautiful, many people feel badly that Sissy has to live with a "deformity." Often people assume that anything out of the norm is undesirable. What sets a person apart should be a talent, their looks, or their brains. Sissy's thumbs are not seen as an asset by other people. Luckily for Sissy, she does not see her thumbs as a problem. For her, they are a solution! They will get her out of a no-name town and propel her into the leagues of legends.



Part Two : Chapters 17-26 (pg 53 - 84)

Part Two : Chapters 17-26 (pg 53 - 84) Summary

As Chapter 17 begins, ten years have passed since Sissy decided to leave Richmond. Since then, she has hitchhiked around the country, visiting places such as New Mexico, South Dakota, North Carolina, Maine, and New York. Being a legend allowed Sissy to get out of Richmond, but it doesn't pay the bills. While she is generally unreachable to others, she always makes herself accessible to the Countess. So while in Washington, she checks the Post Office and discovers she has a message. The countess is begging her to return to New York City for Sissy to meet a man. Sissy is at first not excited. After she reads the note, she is accosted by a couple on Native American boys and in her words "freaks out." She hitchhikes all the way to New York City.

In the next chapter, Sissy finds herself in New York City meeting with the Countess. The Countess is a rich, successful, man who made his fortune by selling feminine products. Sissy was his model for several of his ad campaigns for Yoni Yum and Dew. The Countess spared no expense creating the ads, so he flew photographers as far away as the Taj Mahal. Although the Countess claims that Sissy is her favorite model, he never allows for her thumbs to be photographed. Over time, many people begin to make up rumors about Sissy's hands. They believe Sissy's hands are horribly scared or disfigured. Sissy never opposes to the censorship of her hands.

Sissy is very intrigued as to why the Countess wants to see her. She admits she has decided to see him because she is very tired. He quickly explains that he has invited her to New York City to meet his new watercolor painter. The Countess will no longer be doing ads for Dew and Yoni Yum. He feels his success was too immense to overcome. So he has decided to do a new campaign featuring watercolors. The Countess continues to pressure Sissy about her sex life. Sissy admits that she is still a virgin. Sissy agrees to accompany the Countess to the East Hamptons to meet the painter and rest.

The first night they arrive, the Countess dresses Sissy in a dress that buttons and leaves her. To Sissy's dismay, Julian, the watercolor painter, calls to tell her he will not be able to meet up until Saturday night. While excited, Sissy does not know what to do. There is no way she can get out of the dress by herself. She also does not want the dress to get wrinkled. So, she decides to stay awake for three days. At first, Sissy does not think this is difficult, but by the third day she is delirious but still looks fantastic.

Sissy goes downstairs to meet Julian. At the sight of her, he has an asthma attack. Julian's friends have to stab him with an EpiPen to revive him. Rubert, Howard, Carla and Marie seem like nice people and good friends. The men carry Julian to his apartment while the women begin to befriend Sissy. At first Sissy is concerned that Julian reacted to her thumbs; he later reveals that he was simply taken with her.



Once back at Julian's apartment, Sissy decides to stay while he recovers. She stays with him for three days. The two talk and begin to get to know each other. Later on, they sleep together. While Sissy enjoys being with him her thumbs begin to itch. She feels like she needs to hitchhike. So without a complete explanation, she leaves Julian to go and hitchhike.

Part Two : Chapters 17-26 (pg 53 - 84) Analysis

The character of the Countess is introduced in this chapter. The Countess becomes a close friend of Sissy's. Interestingly, the Countess seems to hate women. Although he creates feminine hygiene products for women and has a weight loss ranch for them, he seems to do this because he feels women should be controlled or changed. This becomes even more interesting when it is revealed that the Countess is a gay man. As a person of society that is constantly placed under oppression, one might think the Countess would want to support the rights, beauty, and ideas of females. Instead, the Countess wishes to mask "disgusting" feminine odors and embellish gender roles and myths.

Julian is also introduced in this section. It is interesting that he becomes taken with Sissy so immediately and wholeheartedly. It seems Julian falls in love with the idea of a beautiful, willful, silent woman. This foreshadows the true nature of Julian's character that will be revealed in later chapters of the book.



Part Two: Chapters 27-31 (pg 85 - 102)

Part Two: Chapters 27-31 (pg 85 - 102) Summary

In chapters 27 -31 the Countess is delighted that Julian and Sissy get along. He explains that yes, Sissy is extraordinary, and yes it is common for her to skip town. Julian admits he is completely taken with Sissy. The Countess says Julian must get his head straight. In order to do so, Julian attempts to find Sissy. Julian writes Sissy a letter which she gets while she is in North Carolina. After reading it, she decides to call Julian. He admits that he loves her. While Sissy thinks it's too soon and tells him he is a fool, she feels a pull to him also. As soon as Sissy returns to New York, she and Julian get married.

Julian and Sissy's marriage is certainly one of compromise. Sissy finds herself closed off in Julian's New York City apartment while Julian works. To appease her thumbs, she pretends she is hitchhiking while she sits on Julian's couch. Julian, on the other hand, turns down dinner invitations and social gatherings because his wife's thumbs are clumsy around fine china and become a spectacle at large gatherings. Sissy is a ratty housekeeper (obviously), so after a full day of working, Julian cleans the apartment and makes dinner. Julian is embarrassed about Sissy's hitchhiking and modeling and frequently lies about her past. Although the two lead separate lives, they unite during the intimate moments of their marriage. The tension of the day is generally dissolved by their passion for one another.

Although the Countess arranged for Julian and Sissy to meet, he enjoys stirring things up in their marriage by constantly mocking the couple. On one evening, the Countess arrives with a proposition for Sissy. The Countess owns a ranch out west. The ranch caters to women looking to loose weight. At the ranch is Siwash Lake, and apparently the lake is one of the mating grounds for the last flock of whopping cranes, and the Countess would like the mating ritual to be filmed. In the foreground, Sissy would be featured in a red cloak. She would dance while the whopping cranes mate and then gingerly pick up a can of Dew or Yum Yin.

The Countess would like Sissy to go to the Rubber Rose Ranch before he arrives so she can scout out the scene. Apparently, he is having some trouble with the cow girls. They have taken to running amuck by taking Miss Adrian (the manager) hostage, demanding that the cow girls act like cow girls, and kicking all the male workers off the ranch. The Countess does not know the status of the ranch, so he would like Sissy to check out the scene before he arrives. Sissy and Julian decide that Sissy should go, but Julian is enraged when he learns that Sissy will hitchhike to Dakota. Sissy ignores Julian's protests and sets out for the Rubber Rose Ranch.



Part Two: Chapters 27-31 (pg 85 - 102) Analysis

As Sissy and Julian begin living with one another, they discover that they are not the most compatible of couples. Julian cannot come to terms with Sissy's love for her thumbs. He does not understand her need to set them free and exercise them. He is concerned with having a respectful, silent wife who will stay at home while he goes out into the New York City scene to socialize.

In this chapter the theme of Self Identity is explored. Julian is a full-blooded Mohawk Native American. This is what first attracts Sissy to Julian, but instead of realizing this, Julian continuously rejects his heritage. He feels as though rejecting his heritage is the only way he can succeed as an artist. Instead of assimilating his culture into mainstream New York society, Julian refuses to speak of his family or his people. This saddens Sissy. She feels it is her duty to bring to life the part of Julian that is screaming to get out. While Julian assumes he is the enlightened intellectual, it is really Sissy that understands that one must accept their physical appearance and heritage to truly be happy.



Part Three: Chapters 32- 43 (pg 103 - 133)

Part Three: Chapters 32- 43 (pg 103 - 133) Summary

As Chapter 32 begins, Sissy arrives in the Dakotas in September of 1973. As she gets to her destination, her thumbs are tingling with pleasure. While trying to find the ranch, Sissy meets Mrs. Schrieber, a nosy old woman who is obsessed with Sissy's thumbs. Although Mrs. Schrieber can barely tear her eyes away from the magnificent digits, she manages to give Sissy the history of the area. The ranch used to be owned by the Siwash Tribe, but after World War II, the tribe sold their land off to white farmers. One of the last remaining members was the "Chink" also known as the official Siwash medicine man.

Sissy leaves Mrs Schrieber and continues walking on a dirt road towards the ranch. An angry couple drives past her telling her to avoid visiting the Chink. The couple had made a pilgrimage to study with the Chink, but were rudely sent away when he began pelting them with rocks and waving his private parts at them. Sissy is highly amused by the story and moves along.

Sissy continues on the dirt road, thinking of Julian as she sees the sun set. Out of nowhere, a Cadillac speeds to her side and abruptly stops. To Sissy's surprise, the woman in the car introduces herself as Miss Adrian. She is very upset with Sissy for not phoning for a proper ride and insists that she get into the car immediately. Miss Adrian explains that she has just returned from the train station. Because of the ill-behaved cowgirls, another three guests have decided to leave the ranch ahead of schedule. She further explains that one of the cowgirls, JellyBean, has managed to infiltrate the entire program, allowing another cowgirl, Delores, to interfere with the diet and exercise of the guests. Furthermore, Miss Adrian is extremely proud of the program she has created at Rubber Rose. Not only can women loose weight, they can also learn about feminine hygiene and ways to please the opposite sex so they can seduce and trap a man. Thanks to the cowgirls, Miss Adrain's program is being destroyed. Only last week, they interrupted the Sexual Reconditioning session with talk she can't bring herself to describe.

As the car pulls up to the ranch, the women hear gunshots. To Miss Adrian's horror the cow girls have slaughtered all the cows. Jellybean and Delores explain they will replace the cows with goats. Amid the chaos, Miss Adrian notices that all guests are accounted for. The film crew has also arrived and are watching the spectacle. The crew is very upset with the Countess. He did not explain in his letter that he wanted them to shoot the whopping crane mating dance. He had also not realized that birds only mate in the spring. Miss Adrian refuses to address the problem and shows Sissy to her guest room.



A couple of uneventful days pass at the ranch. On the fifth morning, Sissy is awakened by a delicious breakfast, courtesy of Jellybean. No sooner than she finishes the breakfast, Jellybean enters the room to introduce herself. Jellybean is wearing a leather skirt, vest, a Stetson hat, and cowboy boots. Sissy is taken with Jellybean's lovely face and imbalance of "baby fat" and toned flesh. Jellybean explains that she has known about Sissy for some time. While hitchhiking was never her main love, she experimented with it. So while in detention halls, jail, and juvenile holding cells, Jellybean learned of Sissy. Sissy's legend inspired Jellybean to continue her struggle to become a cowgirl.

At the conclusion of Chapter 43, Jellybean explains to Sissy that when she was younger, she loved everything involving being a cowgirl, so her parents indulged her. But when she became a teenager, her parents told her it was time to give up childish games. Jellybean did not think being a cowgirl was childish. Why are girls forced to choose tea parties and dolls over horses and bikes? Why do people look at girls weirdly if they don't have dreams of being homemakers. Boys' dreams are indulged, while girls' dreams are crushed. Jellybean is determined to be a cowgirl so she can help other girls realize their dreams. Jellybean insists she does not have a political agenda. Whether another girl becomes a cowgirl or not is not Jellybean's concern. She is not trying to create a movement. Jellybean mentions that many people outside the ranch think the cowgirls are lesbians, but they are trying to fight that myth. As Jelly sits on Sissy's bed informing her of the ways of the ranch, the two women share a moment. They feel a wave of understanding pass through them. Jelly ends the meeting by blowing a kiss to Sissy and exiting the room.

Part Three: Chapters 32- 43 (pg 103 - 133) Analysis

Sissy feels the excitement mounting in her soul as she travels to the ranch. It is the first time she has been able to hitchhike anywhere in a while. Julian has suppressed her chances to exercise her thumbs. The itching in her thumbs symbolizes the truth that they constantly try to find. They never lead Sissy astray, and they help her decide what she really wants in her life. Not many people are fortunate enough to have a friend or confidant lead them in the same way that Sissy's thumbs do.

This chapter is important because Sissy meets JellyBean. Jelly's character symbolizes one of the most important themes throughout the book: the destruction of gender roles. Jelly is not trying to make a political statement; she just wants what is right for her and the other cowgirls. As women, they should be allowed to dream and aspire to be whatever they wish. Men and society should not dictate the role of women. Society's perpetuation of gender roles will only cease once its members decide to stand up for themselves and make a change. This is what Jelly and her cowgirls are aiming to do. By fighting back against the Countess' exploitation of women, they are claiming the right for themselves to live as they please. The cowgirls are also clearing the way for other women to live up to their dreams and aspirations. Young girls do not need to become cowgirls, but they should have the right to do so if they would like.



Part Three: Chapters 44- 51 (pg 134-166)

Part Three: Chapters 44- 51 (pg 134-166) Summary

In Chapters 44-51, Sissy gets out of bed to see what is going on at the ranch. It seems as though the goats have arrived. Heather, Gloria, Debbie, Jellybean and Kym stand outside petting and admiring the goats. Jelly sees Sissy observing them from the sidelines and invites her to the Sexual Reconditioning class they are about to crash. The cowgirls walk into the room and immediately begin telling the guests that it is time to stop using the Countess' products. Women are supposed to smell a certain way. If these women want to attract a man, they should use their natural feminine odors to do so. Jelly insists that the women should place the odors they make all over their body to further attract men. Jelly begins to demonstrate how women should do this when Miss Adrian has a panic attack and lunges for Jelly's gun. Jelly is, luckily, too quick for her. The cowgirls continue to the stables where they find the goats have gotten loose and begun to eat everything. They begin to think goats were a bad idea.

Sissy continues to try to get to know the cowgirls but feels excluded especially by Delores who claims that her Dew girl days have set women back fifty years. The rest of the cowgirls tell Sissy not to mind Delores. The conversation turns to the subject of the Chink, who has imparted a lot of information to Jelly. The girls also explain that the Chink only became popular when Delores wrote to her friends about him. Debbie explains that she feels that his quiet presence and his ability to be invisible is one of the best factors of his being a wise medicine man. Big Red isn't convinced; she thinks the Chink is a crazy old man. The girls quickly break up their pow wow when Jelly informs them that Delores is demanding a drill.

Sissy asks Jellybean about about the other girls, and Jelly explains that they are from all over. Kym and Debbie came from middle-class suburbia; Big Red was a working cowgirl, and a lot of the other girls worked as ranch hands in different locations. No one knows where Delores came from, but she can certainly rope in the cattle. Always interested in Sissy, Jellybean asks about her marriage and expresses surprise that Sissy is married. Sissy explains that, strangely enough, Julian completes a part of her that she didn't know needed completing. She had been alone for so long that it was nice to be settled with some one. Sissy explains that Julian needs to get in touch with his Indian side and she helps him do that. He needed someone who would love the part of him that he completely neglects. Jelly understands Sissy's reasoning but insists that you can't force feed someone love.

Sissy calls home to speak with Julian and all he can talk about are the ultra stylish, artistic, and privileged things he gets to do. He cares not for the sadness in Sissy's voice that he cannot connect with her. Thus, Sissy decides to continue her association with Jelly. One afternoon as the girls stare lazily at the sky while lying in a hay stack they begin to talk and touch one another. All of the touching leads to the two women having sex. As they finish, the whooping cranes come flying across the sky. Afterward,



Jelly asks Sissy if she feels sorry for what she has done. Jelly admits she had not had sex with girls until coming to the ranch. None of the girls are lesbians, but they enjoy the company of other girls and have fun. Jelly promises to visit Sissy later tonight for another rendezvous.

When the two girls join the rest of the ranch, they hear the news that the Countess has returned. Jelly is ready for war. She calls on all the cowgirls to come out. The Countess is unbelievably smug as the cowgirls charge him. They declare that they deserve the ranch for all of the Countess' oppression. He agrees to give the girls the ranch which surprises them. Instead of calming down, the girls go wild. They begin burning down the entire ranch. Sissy is confused at what she should do. The Countess has been her source of income for so long she does not want to upset him but she also feels an allegiance to Jellybean.

Sissy flees and goes to the mountains and begins to climb. Finally, she gets so tired that she rests. Sissy feels as though someone is watching her from below. When she glances down, the Chink is staring up at her. She marvels at his demeanor. As he turns to run, Sissy calls him back and he smiles. She shows him her thumbs and he is intrigued by them.

Part Three: Chapters 44- 51 (pg 134-166) Analysis

In this section Sissy begins to learn new things about herself. As she gets to know Jelly, she realizes just how beautiful and sensual the cowgirl is. Sissy feels very conflicted about her attraction to Jelly. Does the fact that she is attracted to another woman make her a lesbian? Or does she just appreciate a fun-loving, good-looking person and simply recognizes how great Jelly is? Jelly does not seem to be bothered by the feelings she has for Sissy. She appreciates Sissy's company and is happy being with her. Sissy's confusion is an exploration of her own self identity. Until now, Sissy has been sure of who she is as a person. Once she meets Jelly, her knowledge of what is right has been changed. Is sleeping with a woman the same as cheating with a man? Would Julian care? More importantly, is Sissy in love with Jelly? Sissy will continue to struggle with these feelings for the rest of the book.

Finally, the cowgirls take over the ranch. The Countess is at a loss for what to do about them. The cowgirls' defeat of the Countess and his ideas for the ranch symbolize the deconstruction of gender roles at the ranch. The girls will not stand to be party to the myths and lies taught at the ranch. They have rallied their voices as women and as people for what is right for all.



Part Four: Chapters 52-62 (pg 167 - 195)

Part Four: Chapters 52-62 (pg 167 - 195) Summary

Sissy finally returns from the mountain to find the camp in disarray three days after the cowgirl takeover. Chapters 52-62 describe Sissy's time away from the camp. Working parties of cowgirls are being organized by Big Red and Delores. Sissy is not sure if she should stick around. She wishes to say goodbye to Jelly, but after taking her time to pack, Jelly is nowhere to be found. Sissy makes her way to the main road and is finally offered a ride by one of the cowgirls, Kym, who tells Sissy she is welcome to visit anytime she wishes.

Sissy returns home on October 8th. Upon her return to New York City both the Countess and Julian are enraged with Sissy. Why hadn't she called? Did she help the cowgirls burn down the ranch? Sissy refuses to answer the questions and even threatens to leave. Julian is a tad concerned about Sissy's new quest for knowledge. Before, she never really inquired about things. Now, her thirst for knowledge is unquenchable. Julian misses the simple Sissy.

Julian is also bothered by Sissy's constant urge to hitchhike. He is so consumed with worry that he contacts a doctor. Dr. Goldman insists that there is nothing wrong with Sissy. She, like other social deviants, has created her own world in which to live. Sissy's world is a world of one. The good doctor also points out that Sissy is attempting to be the best wife she can within the means of her handicap. Julian decides that he would like to check Sissy into a mental clinic against the doctor's advice. Julian promises Sissy that he will take her to meet his parents if she goes to the clinic for 30 days. Sissy is ecstatic. She wants to meet Julian's family and learn more about his culture.

Upon meeting and evaluating Sissy, Dr. Goldman decides that Sissy has decided to become crazy. Because Sissy cannot cope with the rest of the world she acts crazy so she can deal with the craziness around her. Dr. Goldman is frightened of Sissy, so he passes the case off to Dr. Robbins, a new med school graduate. Dr. Robbins is very intrigued by Sissy. She explains to him that freedom is more important than happiness. The Chink told Sissy this. Dr. Robbins wishes to learn more about who the Chink is.

Contrary to his name, the Chink is Japanese. The Chink moved to the United States when he was eight to live with his uncle who was a gardener. From his uncle, the Chink learns how to garden and gets a job at UC Berkley. Because his landscaping work is so superb, he is allowed to take as many classes as he wishes. The Chink learns many things while at UC Berkley. In the 1940's the Chink was gathered up with other Japanese Americans who were suspected of being disloyal Americans. Thought to be disloyal, the Chink was sent to a detainment camp. The Chink tried to get moved out of the camp several times and finally decided to tunnel out of the camp.



Sissy further explains that the Chink was not unhappy at the camp. He began cultivating and working the land, which enlivened him. He busted out because during the war, Japanese people were set into three places: detainment camps, work camps, and the US military. All three areas were heavily supervised. The Chink wanted to be the exception to the rule, so he broke out to be different. On his journey, the Chink made his way east and along the way ran into a storm. He was saved by the Clock People who took him in and nurtured him back to health. The Clock People are of America Indian descent. However, they are not a tribe; they are a collection of Indians from different tribes. The Chink admits to them that he is a runaway from a detention camp, but the Clock People decide to harbor him.

Part Four: Chapters 52-62 (pg 167 - 195) Analysis

After Sissy returns to New York City, Julian cannot understand the woman who has come back to him. Suddenly she is inquisitive and questions everything. Her urges to hitchhike have only increased and this frightens Julian. A part of him is scared that Sissy will outgrow him. To control Sissy, Julian sends her to a clinic where she can be "fixed." Julian is not unlike many husbands who cannot understand when their wives become unhappy with their lives. Julian wants someone to keep his bed, raise his children, and clean his home. While he knows Sissy is not the best at doing those things, he likes that she did not previously question her surroundings. She would be there no matter what because he needed her. Because Sissy's eyes have been opened by the cowgirls, this is not enough. Julian is losing his grip and control over Sissy so he takes extreme measures to solidify their marriage. Julian has become an oppressive, controlling husband instead of the loving companion that Sissy needs.

Finally the mysterious Chink is discussed. Sissy feels comfortable enough to discuss him with Dr. Robbins. The Chink's story is central to Sissy's because the Chink helps her discover who she is as a person. The Chink is an extremely confusing person, but he also helps Sissy think about new ideas and feelings she never realized she had. The Chink is turning out to be the root of Julian's problem because the Chink accepts his cultural heritage while still continuing to question and discover all around him. He does not want to fit in. He wants to mess up the order of things. Sissy is fascinated by this.



Part Four: Chapters 63-71 (pg 196-226)

Part Four: Chapters 63-71 (pg 196-226) Summary

In Chapters 63 -71, the Chink dwells with the Clock People for twenty-six years. At one point he is actually considered one of the Clock People by living with the 12th tribe. Eventually, the Chink chooses to live alone but in connection to the Clock People. He keeps them in contact with other Indian tribes and also informs them of what is happening in the outside world. The Clock People are very adamant about keeping their lives a secret so they kill trespassers that the Chink cannot scare away.

The Chink expresses to Sissy that he eventually realized that the Clock People waiting for the Eternity of Joy was like the Christians waiting for the Second Coming. But the Chink insists that history is never going to end happily or unhappily. As Sissy talks, she cannot help flexing her thumbs. Dr. Robbins is mesmerized by their agility and strength and cannot get over the spectacle they cause. He begs Sissy to continue her story. The Chink realizes that there is an order in nature. It is a delicate balance between natural order and disorder that creates stability. Dr. Robbins and Sissy conclude their session for the day. Sissy enjoys speaking with very intellectual men like Julian, the Chink, and Dr. Robbins.

The next day, Dr. Robbins goes to see Sissy before he can be stopped by Dr. Goldman. Sissy asks Dr. Robbins why they aren't talking about her personal problems. Dr. Robbins explains that Sissy's stories are some of the most interesting tales he has heard since working at the clinic. He insists that Sissy shouldn't undergo psychotherapy.

Sissy explains that she meets the Chink during her climb up the mountain. He claims he knows who she is and invites her in for dinner. After dinner, the two listen to music and the Chink begins to dance. He invites Sissy to join him and they dance for a while. The Chink then lays Sissy down in a dark corner. Instead of embracing her, he grabs her thumbs, kisses, and caresses them. She is so shocked and happy with the attention and love he gives her thumbs that she gives the rest of herself willingly to the Chink. Sissy explains that sex with Julian was needy and fast. But with the Chink it was wonderful because he loved her thumbs. While she misses it, she misses it no more than her time with Jelly.

Sissy further presses the Chink for the reason that he pushes all the visitors away. He tells her that he is not a prophet or oracle. Sissy does not understand why the Chink refuses to impart any of his knowledge to his followers. He says that by sending them away he is helping them. Life is not simple. Answers cannot be given freely because people need to answer their problems on their own. He insists that a real spiritual therapist would send people away so they can learn from their own experiences and not those of his or her master. He explains that he is freeing his pilgrims before they come to him. He urges all to be their own master.



Part Four: Chapters 63-71 (pg 196-226) Analysis

The Chink is a very interesting character. Many people search for a purpose in life. Often they cannot discover it or are too lazy to even start down the path of self discovery. Through his different experiences, the Chink has lived life. He has found his own answers. The Chink refuses to be other's shaman or prophet because he knows it will make them a slave to his teachings. The only way for people to become self sufficient is to live their own lives and make their own discoveries. In a way, the Chink is a true prophet. He really does want to help people but knows that he must stand back so they can help themselves.

Dr. Robbins is slowly falling in love with Sissy. She opens his mind to all her experiences. It invigorates the young doctor, who feels stifled by Dr. Goldman and his policies. In a way, Sissy is Dr. Robbins' Chink. While Sissy didn't even complete high school, she has so much life experience to teach other people. Dr. Robbins realizes this and begins to soak up all the knowledge Sissy offers him.



Part Four: Chapters 72-78 (pg 227-246)

Part Four: Chapters 72-78 (pg 227-246) Summary

During chapters 72-78, Sissy is not exactly sure why the Chink refuses to see the cowgirls. The Chink confesses that he watches over the cowgirls. He appreciates the world Jelly Bean has created for them. In his eyes, she has allowed these girls to stay in their girlish fantasy world. He also cannot help the cowgirls because it is up to them to help themselves. The Chink also insists that his spirituality is rich because of his Eastern (Asian) ancestry. Western spirituality on the other hand is extremely impoverished, specifically Christianity. If Westerners pulled back the guise of Christianity they would discover women and nature.

Long before the creation of Christianity, women were the closest servants of God. There were priestesses, midwives, graces, nurses, and nurturers. Sissy insists people cannot live in the past and the Chink agrees, but he believes by looking into our pasts we can discover things about ourselves and our future. For this reason, Sissy wants to look into her Siwash background. She would love to know the reason for her lovely thumbs. The Chink and Sissy spend their last night together. Sissy feels it is time for her to return to her husband. Before she wakes the next morning the Chink has written her a message on the wall: "I Believe in Everything: Nothing is Sacred; I Believe in Nothing; Everything is Scared."

After Dr. Robbins is finished speaking with Sissy, Dr. Goldman confronts him. Dr. Goldman believes Sissy is in dire need of help. How can a beautiful woman with a weird deformity not find a way to overcome it. Why does she choose to live in a fantasy world of hitchhiking. She does not even have the desire to travel- just to hitchhike. Dr. Robbins explains that Sissy needs no reprogramming. She has found an activity that truly works for her. In Dr. Robbins report, he has recommends that Sissy divorce her husband. Dr. Goldman will not allow it. His practice is in the business of keeping couples together, not separating them. Dr. Robbins thinks Sissy's spirit needs to be freed. He says the only thing Sissy is confused about is being in love with an old hermit and a cowgirl. The next day Dr. Robbins refuses to go to work. Instead he walks around New York City thinking of Sissy. He feels as though he is in love.

Part Four: Chapters 72-78 (pg 227-246) Analysis

The Chink's comments concerning the place of women in other past religions is very interesting. Long ago, women were considered very important parts of religious practices. They held the keys to faith and life. When men realized the power that was available to women, they were frightened by it. Thus, they attempted to place women into positions of frailty and insignificance. In many ways, this is what Julian is attempting to do to Sissy. He realizes that his wife was made for something greater, even greater

than the artist he will ever be. So in many ways Julian is the same as other men and husbands before him.



Part Five: Chapters 77-93 (pg 249 - 288)

Part Five: Chapters 77-93 (pg 249 - 288) Summary

In Chapters 77-93, Sissy returns home from the mental clinic. She spends most of her time at home thinking. Dr. Robbins calls her often to do different activities, but she thinks he only wants to sleep with her. Julian has learned to leave Sissy alone. Sissy thinks she might be content to stay with Julian. Maybe even one day she will have his child. An affair with Dr. Robbins would be fun but not really the road she wants to go down. She feels depressed. Her thumbs have lost their luster.

The Countess visits after he has been away for a while. He expresses his agitation with Sissy for not speaking up about the whopping cranes. Sissy is confused and claims she does not know what is going on. Apparently, the cranes did not complete their migration. The Countess accuses the cowgirls of stunting the migration. The Countess begins a tirade against the cowgirls and Sissy. Suddenly, one of Sissy's thumbs juts out and hits the Countess in the eye. The thumbs don't stop there. Julian is shocked and does nothing to stop Sissy. The Countess is unable to move once Sissy is done, and an ambulance is called.

At the hospital, the doctors say that the Countess will never be the same again. He has suffered massive trauma to the frontal lobe. The doctors tell Sissy and Julian that they will have to report the incident to the authorities. A warrant for her arrest has already been drawn up. Sissy is ready to go to the police station, but Julian thinks she should try to fix herself up a bit. He insists that she should use her looks to her advantage. Julian takes her home, but Sissy decides to leave and assess her other options. She decides to hitchhike to New Jersey.

A blue van picks up Sissy. The driver is seriously disturbed. He pulls out his penis and demands that Sissy perform oral sex on him. Sissy's thumb goes into action. It stabs him in the eyes three times. Sissy quickly hops out of the van and gets a bus ticket. The bus surprisingly takes Sissy to Richmond. Sissy arrives at Dr. Dreyfus' office and demands to see him. Sadly, he retired the week prior. Sissy decides to go see Dr. Dreyfus at his house. He tells Sissy that he can no longer practice medicine because of a nose job he performed. He changed a young boy's nose to have six nostrils. Sissy is not deterred. She has decided he is the only one that can take away her gift. She begs him to help her be normal. He agrees to help his brother, who is also a surgeon, do the surgery under another name.

The surgery goes according to plan and one of Sissy's thumbs is removed. Then Dreyfus' allow Sissy to stay with them while she is recovering. She acts as if she has lost a part of her and is a scared child. Sissy phones Marie to learn about the Countess who is doing better. As long as Sissy stays away from New York she will not go to jail. Sissy is in a sleepy recovery until she learns that the whopping cranes have returned.



Part Five: Chapters 77-93 (pg 249 - 288) Analysis

Sissy's beating of the Countess is her subliminal fight against the oppression of women at the ranch. She is silently fed up with the way that the Countess exploits women. Her thumbs act out on her behalf because they are fighting for the freedom that she and other women deserve. At first, Sissy does not understand this so she thinks it is time to fix her thumbs. Sissy's thumbs are speaking for her subconscious which is yearning to be heard. Sissy flees so she can also get out of Julian's reach. Julian only cares about appearances. He wants Sissy to look good before she turns herself into the police. He should be more concerned with his wife's welfare rather than her looks.

Sissy chooses to remove her thumbs because she is (for the first time) nervous about the truth she is finding out from them. The author interjects and begs Sissy to keep her thumbs. He is incredibly saddened by the fact that she could lose the prodigious digits.



Part Five: Chapters 94 - 103 (pg 289-312)

Part Five: Chapters 94 - 103 (pg 289- 312) Summary

During Chapters 94-103, Sissy learns from the media that the whooping cranes have returned to the Rubber Rose Ranch and the cowgirls are "taking care" of them. They refuse to let the government or scientists onto the ranch by threatening visitors with guns unless they send a qualified female who cares about the birds. The government complies and sends Professor Nelson. Nelson decides that the cowgirls have not harmed the cranes. They feed the birds and maintain the ranch. At first, the visit goes well, but then Professor Nelson asks if she may kill a crane. She thinks the birds are being drugged and would like to do an autopsy on them. The cowgirls go berserk. They refuse to let it happen and threaten the Professor. The government begins to look into the cowgirls' background and discover that they are not the title holders to the land. They also have been illegally selling milk to a cheese production plant. The government continues their attempt to push the girls off the land.

Sissy prepares for her next surgery. The author interjects to beg Sissy not to remove her last thumb. She briefly speaks with Dr. Robbins on the phone. Just as the doctors are going to remove the finger, Sissy claims she still wants her thumb. This infuriates most of the doctors, but Dr. Dreyfus understands. They doctors remove Sissy's right index finger, trim it down and then replace it where her thumb used to be. She is excited that she can bake and work around the house, but show off her other thumb.

Back at the ranch, the media hunkers down to observe the cowgirls. They watch for dissension within the camp. Jelly decides the girls will construct a dome for the whooping cranes. They will need somewhere to stay for the winter. Professor Nelson is outraged. The girls insist the cranes will be happy to live in the dome with the girls. Nature is most happy when nurtured by women and vice versa. Men have messed with the stability of both and nature must be renewed. The Professor rushes back and immediately contacts the government. The government issues a warning to the girls.

Sissy decides it is time to return to Rubber Rose. She needs to be with the girls in this time of crisis, and with a healing thumb, Sissy decides to hitchhike. She arrives at the Rubber Rose just in time to see Delores being arrested by the FBI and the ranch being attacked by the government.

Part Five: Chapters 94 - 103 (pg 289- 312) Analysis

By choosing to keep her second thumb, Sissy comes to terms with what she has done to the Countess. She realizes that while it may have been wrong to beat him up, the truth was surging from her digits. Justice had to be served.



The capture of the whooping cranes symbolizes the trapped women of the Rubber Rose Ranch. Just as the FBI agents hold the cowgirls hostage, the cowgirls trap the whooping cranes. These situations can be likened to the role of women in the larger American society.

As Sissy returns to the ranch, she feels conflicted between her sexual feelings for the Chink and for Jelly. According to society's standards, she should be with neither person. She cannot be with the Chink because he is a different race than she and Jelly because she is a woman. Both relationships would be seen as sexually deviant. Besides society's standards Sissy does not know if she could handle being with either person.



Part Five: Chpaters 104- 121 (pg 313 - 365)

Part Five: Chpaters 104- 121 (pg 313 - 365) Summary

In the final chapters 104-121, Sissy returns to the ranch and is warmly welcomed by all the cowgirls, especially Jelly Bean, who kisses Sissy as soon as she sees her. They notice that a thumb is missing but are happy she has returned. They plan a party to celebrate Sissy's return

Sissy is happy to be back, but shocked at the presence of so many guns. Jelly explains that she is not prepared to die for the cranes, but she is ready to die for the meaning. She does not want the cowgirls to be another group that is compromised. Delores comes to sit next to Sissy holding a package of Peyote. Sissy realizes that the birds have been drugged with the Peyote and expresses her concern. The cowgirls insist that it is natural. The birds lead the same lives; they just won't migrate. Suddenly they hear helicopters descending onto the ranch. Jelly instructs the girls not to fire. Her friend Billy brings over some ammo for the girls to prepare for a fight.

Sissy decides she needs to see the Chink. Although Jelly Bean insists she loves her, she understands Sissy's needs to see him. Sissy sees the Chink and sleeps with him. He comments that he is happy with the change in her thumbs. Delores returns from jail ready to fight for the ranch. Sissy attempts to return to the ranch after her visit with the Chink but is waylaid by the FBI. She returns to the Chink and the two make love while hell breaks loose around them. Back at the camp, the girls decide to go to the lake and eat Peyote. They begin to talk and dance and suddenly are attacked by the FBI. Delores escapes, but the rest of the girls, including Jelly are shot down. The Chink senses something is wrong and when he discovers Jelly dead, he attempts to attack the FBI and is also gunned down.

Out of the scrimmage, Jelly and Billy die. The rest of the girls are placed in jail and the Chink is recuperating in the hospital. The girls are declared the owners of the ranch and Sissy is made the manager. Delores and Sissy bring the Chink back to the camp. Shortly after they discover Sissy is pregnant, and Sissy and Delores become lovers. The two women live together happily but realize that they cannot be compete with each other. Delores is going to leave after the baby is born. Luckily for Sissy, Dr Robbins is on his way, ready to prove his love and desire to Sissy. He finally reveals that he is the author of the book.

Part Five: Chpaters 104- 121 (pg 313 - 365) Analysis

At the end of the novel, the author reveals himself to be Dr Robbins, who has now fallen deeply in love with Sissy. He leaves his home in NYC to see Sissy at the Rubber Rose



Ranch. He is on a quest to marry her. The author being Dr. Robbins makes sense because all along the reader could tell that the author greatly favored Sissy. He could not refrain from being biased. Dr. Robbins has changed a lot over the course of the book. While he was sure his practice was not for him, his meeting with Sissy helped him discover himself.

Julian is punished by not getting to be with Sissy. His controlling and idiotic ways causes his wife to not go back to him.

Sissy never has to choose between the Chink and Jelly, but she did get to experience both people, who in return teach her a lot about herself. Because Sissy feels confident in herself she continues to be the caretaker of the Rubber Rose Ranch. Her thumbs have taken her on a wild adventure of self discovery, truth, and leave her thirsty for more knowledge and experiences as she continues to age.



Characters

Sissy Hankshaw

Sissy Hankshaw is the beautiful and headstrong protagonist of Tom Robbins' novel. Sissy is born with abnormally large thumbs. While her family frets about the genetic source of the thumbs, Sissy takes it in stride and loves her thumbs. Throughout her childhood, the thumbs set her apart from the other girls in South Richmond, VA. The thumbs make the girl from the trailer park stand out. Sissy quickly discovers the power of her thumbs. They allow her the freedom to come and go as she pleases. She embraces this freedom through hitchhiking, which causes a lot of trouble. She is constantly arrested but also envied by others. Sissy finally uses hitchhiking to get her out of Richmond and travels throughout the United States. Once in New York, she meets both her husband, Julian, and the Countess. Sissy becomes a model for the Countess who insists she go to the Rubber Rose Ranch to pose for a new ad campaign.

Sissy's journey to the Rubber Rose Ranch teaches her a lot about herself. She discovers the importance of standing up for what one believes. She also learns much more about herself by becoming friends with the Chink and Jelly Bean who help her explore her sexuality. Through the empowerment of these characters, she is able to explore herself. While they offer clarity, she is faced with the confusion of her feelings.

It is important to note that Sissy refuses to believe her thumbs are a deformity. Instead, they are a testimony to human perseverance. Instead of wallowing in self pity, Sissy turns her thumbs into a means of escape.

The Countess

The Countess is Sissy's boss and friend. He discovers her during one of her trips to New York City and asks her to be a model for his line of feminine products. The Countess is demanding, bossy, and incredibly rich. He enjoys tempering with Sissy and Julian's relationship even though he introduced the couple to one another. The Countess also owns a weight loss retreat for women called the Rubber Rose Ranch. The Countess has been away from the camp for some time dealing with other business ventures. He decides to send Sissy to the ranch to get ready for a photo shoot that will feature his newest feminine product as well as the endangered whooping cranes. The Countess's camp has been over run by renegade cowgirls who wish to take over the ranch.

The Countess is an interesting character because he is a gay male who attempts to suppress women. He has a very flamboyant lifestyle but is not very understanding of others. He does not understand why Jelly Bean and the other cow girls would be so intent on ending the activities of the ranch. He detests the scent of women and what



makes them change themselves to fit into a man's society. As a member of a group that is discriminated by others, it would not make sense to hate women, but the Countess strongly does so. He enjoys Sissy for her novelty.

Julian Gitche

Julian Gitche is Sissy's husband. He is a watercolor painter who has been commissioned by the Countess to paint new ads. Julian meets Sissy and falls completely in love with her. He is so excited about their first date that he has an asthma attack. He convinces her to marry him after deciding that he cannot live without her. Julian and Sissy live apart from each other for a large portion of their marriage. Julian is a full-blooded Mohwak Indian. While Sissy is attracted to his intelligence, she is mostly attracted to his heritage. Julian sadly rejects his roots as he strives for acceptance into the mainstream white world. He does not understand how to be a successful artist that is accepted by all and also be an Indian. Sissy strives to make him understand the beauty of his heritage, but Julian refuses to acknowledge it. Instead, he attempts to change Sissy. He loves everything about her except for her thumbs. It puts her in the spotlight in a way he detests. The thumbs do not allow her to blend in and be accepted into the mainstream. Because he does not love her thumbs, he can never truly love all of Sissy.

Bonanza Jelly Bean

Bonanza Jelly Bean is the leader of the cowgirls at the Rubber Rose Ranch. Jelly Bean is headstrong, independent, and very smart for her young years. She is vivacious and a real beauty in Sissy's opinion. Since her childhood, Jelly has dreamed of being a cow girl. She was extremely upset when her parents informed her that she could not actually be a cow girl. Jelly Bean refuses to accept this and since running away at a young age, has striven to create a place where women can be cowgirls. Jelly Bean spends a lot of time with the Chink. He imparts information to her and the two share a nonexclusive romantic relationship.

Jelly Bean teaches Sissy about her sexuality. She explains to her that women can experiment with other women and not be lesbians. They are simply curious about what else is out there. Jelly Bean also makes Sissy understand that nothing is more important than being who you want to be. She has spent her entire life fighting for women's rights and their freedom to be whatever they want to be just as men get the opportunity to be whatever they wish to be.

Dr. Robbins

Dr. Robbins is a young psychiatrist who becomes infatuated with Sissy. He is not supposed to work on the case, but it is passed onto him when Dr. Goldman does not wish to work with Sissy. Dr. Robbins becomes infatuated with Sissy and her stories about the Rubber Rose Ranch, the Chink, and Jelly Bean. Sissy's stories cause Dr



Robbins to search inside himself and discover what truths are important to him. It is revealed at the end of the book that Dr. Robbins is Tim Robbins, the author.

Dr. Goldman

Dr. Goldman is a renowned psychiatrist that owns the clinic to which Sissy is sent. He is frightened by Sissy because he thinks she is pretending she is crazy. Dr. Goldman becomes increasingly more worried about Dr. Robbins' relationship with Sissy.

Delores

Delores is a cowgirl that works on the ranch and is extremely loud and bossy. Delores has visions when she is high on peyote. She develops a relationship with Sissy during Sissy's pregnancy.

Big Red

Big Red is the only former working cowgirl. She joins the camp to work as a cowgirl.

Debbie

Debbie is one of the less abrasive cowgirls. She is a vegetarian who refuses to hurt or kill other animals. She was not a part of the slaughtering of the cowgirls.

Miss Adrian

Miss Adrian is the event coordinator at the Rubber Rose. She maintains the ranch while the Countess is away. She has not been able to do a good job because the cowgirls keeps causing trouble. Miss Adrian believes in the Countess' values for the ranch.

Marie

Marie is one of Julian's friends and is Howard's wife. She is very interested in Sissy.

Howard

Howard is Marie's husband and also a friend of Julian.



Dr. Dreyfus

Dr. Dreyfus is a friendly and honest plastic surgeon. Sissy is taken to see Dr. Dreyfus when she is young girl. He tells her mother that her thumbs do not need surgery. Later on, when Sissy feels like she must have her thumbs corrected, she begs Dr. Dreyfus to do the surgery. He agrees to help her and even lets Sissy stay with him while she is resting.

The Chink

The Chink is a Japanese American who enters Sissy's life and changes it. He resides in the mountains close to the Rubber Rose Ranch. The Chink is considered to be a wise man and because of this, people travel from all around the country to speak to him. He scares away potential followers because he wants them to lead their own lives and discover their own answers. The Chink develops an intellectual and sexual relationship with Sissy. The Chink educates Sissy on many things and she is grateful for what she learns from him.



Objects/Places

Whooping Cranes

Whooping Cranes are birds that migrate every year to a lake near the Rubber Rose Ranch. They are also near extinction. The cranes are held hostage by the cowgirls.

Rubber Rose Ranch

The Rubber Rose Ranch is owned by the Countess. The cowgirls are attempting to take over the ranch.

Sissy's thumbs

Sissy's thumbs are what make her unique. To her they are magical. They allow her to break free from her ordinary life.

South Richmond, VA

Richmond is where Sissy grows up.

New York City

Sissy lives in New York City with Julian after they get married.

The Dakotas

Rubber Rose Ranch is located in the Dakotas.

Siwash Lake

Siwash Lake is where the whooping cranes enjoy their yearly migration.

The Clock People

The Clock People are a group of mysterious and secretive Native Americans.



Clockworks

The Clockworks are the way the Clock People explain great occurrences in their lives.

The Hamptons

Sissy often visits the Countess at his vacation home in the Hamptons of New York.

Social Concerns And Themes

Like *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971), *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* expresses its social concern through the theme of personal freedom. One of the main plot lines involves the takeover of the Rubber Rose ranch, a women's health farm owned by a cosmetic and feminine hygiene company. Bonanza Jellybean and a group of cowgirls intend to turn the dude ranch into a working one. Their action is a form of social protest against a society which allows girls to wear cowgirl outfits only until they reach puberty, against a society which limits the roles available to women. In the course of the novel, Sissy Hankshaw arrives at the Rubber Rose. Sissy, who works as a model for the same cosmetic concern, was born with huge thumbs which she uses for hitching rides across the country. Like the dissident cowgirls, Sissy's deviation from the norm has resulted in unhappiness, as she has been pressured by society to conform completely even in her physical features. Robbins further heightens the conflict between individual freedom and social conformity by introducing the last remaining flock of whooping cranes into the plot of the novel. These cranes, like Sissy and Bonanza Jellybean, risk their survival rather than limit their freedom.

At the same time Robbins contrasts personal freedom with social conformity, he presents a satire of militancy.

His targets are all those who sacrifice themselves to their causes, whether they be the militant feminists at the Rubber Rose or militant proponents of counterculture lifestyles. This satire once again reinforces Robbins's belief that the individual is more important than the group and that social action is less important than the perfection of the individual. In addition, he finds fault with religions, both eastern and western, which cannot provide the spiritual direction necessary for individual human fulfillment. Robbins turns to the classical god Pan and fertility goddesses as a more sensible spiritual center to counter the repressive nature of most western religions.

Once again, Robbins investigates the nature of fiction in his novel. Dr. Robbins, the narrator in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, like Marx Marvelous in *Another Roadside Attraction*, undertakes the writing of the novel only after falling in love with the heroine. In the course of his novel, Robbins considers the modern novel in America, alluding to Capote, Barth, Updike, Vonnegut, Oates, Kerouac, and Kesey.

Techniques

Robbins divides his novel in 121 short sections which contain an assortment of jokes, puns, metaphors, and word play, designed to amuse the reader on each page. His ability as a humorist is widely acknowledged. The novel itself is picaresque, Sissy and the whooping cranes serving as the greatest exponents of the freedom of movement Robbins professes. At the end of the novel, Robbins presents a special bonus parable in which Confucius, Buddha, and Christ fail to find sweetness in a jar of vinegar, the emblem of life, but Pan and his fertile woman accomplice find sweetness — offering a final clear example of the failure of both eastern and western religion to bring mankind happiness.



Themes

Destruction of Gender Roles

Destruction of Gender Roles is a central theme of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. The cowgirls' quest to lead independent, unexploited lives on the Rubber Rose Ranch affirms the need for women in the 1960's and 70's to fight for their rights. Jelly Bean explains that she has always desired the lifestyle of a cowgirl. Growing up, girls and boys are encouraged to "play make believe." After a certain age, however, girls are groomed to be wives and mothers, or if they enter the workforce, no position higher than a secretary, receptionist, or telephone operator. Jelly Bean asserts that this is unfair because boys are told they can be anything: pilots, presidents, and astronauts. Their dreams are never crushed - nothing is considered too out of their leagues. They are pushed to achieve while girls are not. Thus, Jelly and the cowgirls are fighting for their opportunity to live freely as cowgirls.

The Rubber Rose Ranch symbolizes old archetypes of womanhood. At the ranch, women are sent to learn how to please men, lose weight, and cover their feminine odors. By teaching women to mask their true scents, the Countess is perpetuating the idea that a woman's menstruation and vaginal odors are vulgar and distasteful. The Countess, a man, is making women feel bad about themselves. The cowgirls want to liberate the women at the camp, teaching them that they should embrace the way they naturally are. They do not need products or men telling them how they should look or smell. Thus, Jelly Bean and the cowgirls are beginning to break down the way the women at the camp think about themselves.

Self Identity

Throughout the novel, important characters struggle to understand their self identity. This is especially seen through the characters of Sissy, Julian, and Dr. Robbins.

Sissy is faced with a "deformity" that could dampen her spirits or excitement when she thinks about her thumbs. Her thumbs are her ticket to freedom. Sissy feels more confused about her relationships with Jelly Bean and the Chink. Both relationships are outside her marriage. This leaves Sissy undefined as far as what she and Julian share with each other. Is she a devoted and respectful wife, or was she, like many other women of her time, forced into a marriage too quickly? Sissy also does not know how to define her relationship with Jelly Bean. Does her sexual interest in Jelly makes her a lesbian or just sexually curious? Sissy does not put a label on herself because socially it is unacceptable. Finally, Sissy finds herself becoming a different person when she is with the Chink. She questions everything and wants explanations so she can understand the world. Sissy becomes awakened but misses her sense of ignorance from the past. Is she the beautiful model or an intellectual?



Julian struggles to find his self identity as a Native American attempting to mainstream into a white world. In order to achieve this, he completely ignores his heritage. Julian cannot find a way to embrace both sides. He thinks the only way to be accepted is to suppress one side of himself. He does not realize he can have both worlds. Julian's identity is compromised because it is confused.

Dr Robbins is a young psychiatrist who is studying with Dr Goldman. While he has had years of schooling and is working with a very well known doctor, he feels torn. He does not agree with the clinic's operations but continues to work there because he feels that it is important to gain experience. When Dr. Robbins meets Sissy, he begins to question his education and past. Her descriptions of the time with the Chink makes him open his mind to new possibilities and discover a new side to himself.

Freedom

The theme of freedom is seen the most through the character of Sissy Hankshaw. Sissy, a normal child stuck in a trailer park in South Richmond, VA, is born with unusually large thumbs. Her parents think it is punishment for something that has occurred in the family's past. What they fail to realize, however, is that Sissy embraces her thumbs. Because she does not fight what has been given to her, Sissy learns that her thumbs are her key to freedom- her chance to escape from the small-minded people that surround her. So, Sissy exercises her thumbs and the story that Robbins weaves tells of the journey on which the magnificent appendages take her.

Sissy "exercises" her thumbs by hitchhiking. When Sissy hitchhikes, she feels free and independent. Sissy constantly searches for a place where she as a woman, person, individual can be free. When Sissy meets her husband, Julian, she feels there is something in him she wants to help. Julian cannot fully understand Sissy, and therefore stifles her freedom. He cannot understand her need to hitchhike. Sissy changes herself to make Julian happy, but quickly sees that she is like a trapped bird that needs to be set free. The itch that pressures her to return to the ranch cannot be quieted by living in a New York City apartment. By leaving, Sissy gains the freedom to decide who she will love, how she will change her body, and how she will behave.



Style

Point of View

The book is told from the point of view of Dr. Robbins. While the Dr. is a character in the book, he does not reveal that he is the author until the last pages unfold. His narrative is told from two different perspectives: third person omniscient and first person. Throughout the novel, the third person omniscient is used by Robbins. By using this point of view, the author is able to tell the reader about the feelings of many characters. Thus the author gives his readers the most intimate details, feelings, and notions of each of the characters. While the reader may not always feel as though the author is reliable, since he often interjects his own thoughts into narrative, he can accurately report on the happenings of Sissy and the cowgirls at the Rubber Rose Ranch.

Throughout the novel, Robbins interjects a first person point of view into the book. He does this through interludes between chapters and pauses between dialogue. The author's interjections allow the reader to learn more about the author's true feelings. Later on, it is discovered why the author is so passionate about Sissy. The author is the love-struck Dr Robbins!

Setting

Even Cowgirls Get The Blues begins in South Richmond, VA where Sissy spends her childhood during the Ford years. In her early years Sissy experiments with hitchhiking around town. As she grows older, she expands her journey to many states including New Mexico, South Dakota, North Carolina, Maine, and New York. When Sissy finds herself in New York City, she becomes a model for the Countess' feminine hygiene products.

Sissy leaves New York but is found by the Countess who begs her to return. Upon her return, the Countess sets up a meeting between Sissy and her future husband, Julian. Sissy is so shaken by her meeting with Julian that she flees to North Carolina. While she is there, she receives a call from Julian. The two decide to marry, and Sissy returns to New York to live with Julian. Once in New York, Sissy feels like a caged bird. The Countess sees this and asks if Sissy would like to go to the Rubber Rose Ranch to speak with the cowgirls and start an ad campaign featuring the migration of the whooping cranes.

Sissy arrives at the ranch and meets Bonanza Jelly Bean and the other cowgirls. She falls in love with Jelly as the cowgirls attempt to take over the ranch. Sissy flees to the mountains as a rebellion mounts. Here, she meets and develops a relationship with the Chink. Sissy decides to return to New York to see her husband. Sissy finds herself a changed woman once she returns, and her husband insists she go to a clinic. Sissy



agrees but soon after ends up back at the ranch where she reunites with Jelly and the Chink.

Language and Meaning

Robbins uses rich descriptions to tell the tale of Sissy Hankshaw. Through flowery words and long sentences, Sissy comes to life. The language of the novel is informal and comfortable. Because Robbins is actually Dr. Robbins, he can sympathize with Sissy and all her feelings and thoughts. He has been a close confidant and listener and is interested in becoming Sissy's lover; therefore, the narrative and language take on a bias tone. The author informs the reader of his regard for Sissy on many occasions thus influencing the readers' ability to create their own opinions on Sissy's character.

The author strives to create a "chummy" relationship with the readers. He is obviously excited to tell the story of Sissy because he is deeply in love with her and fascinated by the person she has become. At times the author's tone is too comfortable. He begins to assume that the reader will understand every tangent and thought he pens. Instead, his tangent can become confusing and unnecessary.

Structure

Even Cowgirls get the Blues is divided into 6 sections. Within each section are chapters. For the most part, the story is told in chronological order. Every so often the narrative is interrupted by an interlude or comment from the author. The information from the author sometimes takes place in the past or far in the future. This break in the chronology of the book can be confusing for the reader. At one point, the author apologizes for his interludes and acknowledges that the events he speaks of have yet to occur.



Quotes

"When Mr. Hankshaw was informed of the date with the palmist he snorted and cursed and warned his wife that if she wasted five dollars of his hard earned money on a goddamned fortuneteller she'd find herself moving in with Mabel, her plumber and her one good ovary."

Part One: Chap. 10, pp 22

"The Countess didn't give a damn. He wad rich, and not a penny less. You would be rich too if you had invented and manufactured the world;s most popular feminine hygiene products."

Part One: Cap. 18, pp 57

"While her husband painted, Sissy would stare out the window and watch traffic. Or she would leaf through the motoring magazines that she bought regularly at newstsands. Her thumbs ached, and in order to relieve them, she tool to imaginary hitchhiking, the game she'd played as a small child. This return to girlhood beginnings amused her, kept her calm."

Part Two: Chap 30, pp 92

"So they let you dress up as a cowgirl, and when you say, 'I'm gonna be cowgirl when I grow up,' they laugh and say, 'Ain't she cute.' Then one day they tell you, 'Look honey cowgirls are only play. You can't really be one.' And that's when I holler, 'Wait a minute!'"

Part Three: Chap. 43, pp128

"Kissing is man's greatest invention. All animals copulate but only humans kiss. Kissing is the supreme achievement of the Western world. "

Part Three: Chap. 49, pp 152

"In times of widespread chaos and confusion, it has been the duty of more advanced human beings- artists, scientists, clowns, and philosophers- to create order. In times such as ours, however, when there is too much order, too much management, too much programming their favorite monkey wrenches into the machinery. To relieve the repression of the human spirit, they must sow doubt and disruption."

Part Four: Chap 65, pp 200

"Most of the harm inflicted by man upon his environment, his fellows and himself is due to greed."

Part Four: Chap 65, pp 203

"Your thumb disorients us, Sissy, and for the person courageous enough to see it out, disorientation always leads to love."

Part Five: Chap. 95, pp 296

"Be your own master! Be your on Jesus! Be your own flying saucer! Rescue yourself."

Part Four: Chap. 71, pp 227



"You think I'm behaving like a cold-hearted ogre because I turn people away. Quite the contrary. I'm merely setting my pilgrims free before they my disciples. That's the best i can do."

Part Four: Chap. 71, pp 226

"Perhaps the whooping cranes carry a message, bearing it far ans wide. A message from wild to the wild-no-more. Is such a thing possible?"

Part Five: Chap. 120, pp 360

"Hitchhiking is not a sport. It is not an art. It certainly isn't work for it requires no particular ability nor does it produce anything of value. It's an adventure, I suppose, but a shallow, ignoble adventure. Hitchhiking is parasitic, no more than a reckless panhandling as far as I can see."

Part One: Chap 15, pp 45

Adaptations

In 1994, New Line Cinema released a film adaptation of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* written and directed by Gus Van Sant, Jr. The film, with Uma Thurman as Sissy Hankshaw, Rain Phoenix as Bonanza Jellybean, Keanu Reeves as Julian Gitchie, and "Pat" Morita as the Chink, despite heavy media promotion and a star-filled cast, did not receive many positive reviews by critics. Robbins's quirky style, with its elaborate metaphors and verbal play, was not transferred to the screen with much success. Additionally, the complex plot was not translated to film clearly, leading one critic to claim that the film version of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* could only be understood by those who had already read the novel.



Key Questions

Bonanza Jellybean tells Sissy that when she was a little girl each year her parents bought her a cowgirl suit from the Sears catalog until one year they explained that there were no cowgirl suits that would fit her. She had become too grown up to be a cowgirl any more. In this important scene, Robbins presents one of the most important issues of his novel: how individuals lose freedom in a society that limits the range of acceptable behaviors. Discussion groups may find it useful to question how society has limited their freedom of choice in their own lives. In addition to creating a range of characters who are free spirits in conflict with civilized individuals, Robbins has duplicated the pattern in the animal world, with wild whooping cranes and domesticated animals. Discussion groups may have fun identifying the contrasts between the free and wild as opposed to the civilized and domesticated.

Robbins enjoys creating suggestive descriptions of places which convey his attitude toward an area. Readers may find his impressions of places like Richmond, Virginia and New York City amusing. Robbins is certainly not afraid of indicating his likes and dislikes. Discussion groups interested in developing an understanding of the author may discover much by pointing out the likes and dislikes expressed in the novel.

1. Bonanza Jellybean and Sissy Hankshaw value freedom even at the expense of social approval. How do both characters act in ways that express their love of freedom?
2. Robbins frequently employs outlaws and misfits as heroes in his fiction. Identify the heroic outlaws in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*.
3. Why does Robbins include the subplot of the whooping cranes in his novel? How do these birds support one of his main themes?
4. What qualities make *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* a counter-culture novel?
5. Robbins does not believe that Christianity encourages people in their spiritual development. What belief system does he offer as a replacement?
6. What does the Chink know that makes him special?
7. Why does Robbins choose Sissy's thumbs for enlargement? How does it help him present his theme?
8. What is "magic" and why is it so important for Robbins?
9. Robbins employs outlandish metaphors. Identify several and explain how they work.
10. Why is the relationship between Sissy Hankshaw and Julian Gitchie doomed?



11. In the course of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, Robbins offers some passages highly critical of the human brain and analytical thought. Why is he distrustful of the brain, and what does he offer in place of human reason?



Topics for Discussion

What do you think Sissy's thumbs symbolize? Are they the manifestation of her innermost thoughts and feelings? Explain.

Sissy's thumbs take her to many places throughout her life. Choose two places that Sissy hitchhikes to other than The Rubber Rose, Richmond or NYC and describe what Sissy's adventure through that particular town would have been. Be creative!

Do you think that in order to survive as a minority in our society that one has to ignore their ethnic roots and completely assimilate into society?

Do you think Julian is justified in his decision to send Sissy to the clinic? Why or why not?

How is the theme of Self Identity explored through the character of Dr. Robbins? Are there any other characters besides Sissy, Dr. Robbins, and Julian that have to struggle with self identity?

Do you agree with Sissy's assertion that being free is more important than being happy? Can you relate this to a situation in your own life?

Examine the character of Jelly Bean. How does she fight for the rights of women? Is she involving herself in politics without realizing it? Why or Why not?

Literary Precedents

Robbins has repeatedly been described as a counterculture novelist, connecting him, at least in the minds of some critics, with Richard Brautigan, author of *A Confederacy of General from Big Sur* (1964), *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), and *In Watermelon Sugar* (1968).

Like Brautigan, Robbins is a West Coast writer, and like him, Robbins is critical of the commercialism of American society. Both Robbins and Brautigan find spiritual direction outside of Christianity, Robbins in neo-paganism and Brautigan in Zen Buddhism. Ultimately, however, these two authors differ in orientation. Brautigan, in *Trout Fishing in America* reveals what he sees as the phony optimism of the American Dream; Robbins, on the other hand, rejects contemporary American society as sick, but suggests a realignment of values as a cure.

Related Titles

The subordination of love to social causes, the abrogation of personal freedom, and the failure of Christianity to allow for a fulfilling life connect *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976) to other Tom Robbins novels. Each of these themes reappears in other works: for example, Robbins criticizes 1980s greed and its distortion of personal commitment in *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* (1994). In *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980), Princess Leigh-Cheri's environmental activism and Bernard Mickey Wrangle's violent anarchism are proved to be of less merit than their romantic attachment to each other. In *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971), Robbins argues that the western Christian tradition is largely responsible for mankind's disharmonious relationship with nature. This same theme is taken up in *Skinny Legs and All* (1990) which identifies much of society's disharmony and violence with Christian fundamentalism at the same time that it suggests the value of a return to a feminine-centered pre-Christian fertility worship. In each of his novels, Robbins asks his readers to reassess their behavior and recommit themselves to the power of romantic love.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994