

Factotum Study Guide

Factotum by Charles Bukowski

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Plot Summary

Factotum by Charles Bukowski has Henry Chinaski telling the story of how, in a perennial alcoholic fog, he drifts from city to city, trying and discarding jobs and women.

Henry Chinaski arrives in New Orleans, depressed, hoping a new city will make a difference. This is unlikely, as Henry likes his wine, dislikes the humdrum existence of a paying job and drifts along mildly suicidal and solitary. He quickly goes through a job and catches a westbound train as part of a section gang. He abandons that job during a stopover in his hometown, Los Angeles. Life with his parents instantly goes bad as he goes drinking and lands in jail. Henry moves to a rooming house, where a prostitute viciously rapes him. Henry escapes to New York City, which he hates intensely. He quits one job and another that exhausts him physically, and moves to Philadelphia. There, in a crowded bar, Henry washes Venetian blinds, unexpectedly makes friends, and demonstrates generosity with his modest earnings. Henry reaches St. Louis in the dead of winter, feeling depressed, but again finds relative happiness among friendly people. While there, he achieves his first literary triumph, selling a short story to a prestigious magazine.

Henry returns to Los Angeles and Fate introduces him to an eccentric millionaire who needs the services of a librettist. Life becomes a round of food, liquor, and sex until the benefactor dies. Henry seems sad to part with Laura, but soon meets Jan, a prettier version of Laura, although oversexed, argumentative, and compulsively unfaithful. Henry gets a raise from his boss in a bicycle warehouse when he shows he can keep quiet about petty larceny. As a bookie, Jan finds him less desirable. Long lunches and leaving early for the track loses another job for Henry, and with World War II over, jobs become scarcer. Henry and Jan live on the betting bankroll, have sex, drink prodigiously and bail each other out of jail.

When Henry dreams that he has killed a man at the racetrack for taking their seats and flirting with Jan, he decides he must get away to Miami. Acrophobia and distaste for manual labor again cost him jobs, and he returns to Los Angeles, where he reunites with Jan. After catching crabs from her, Henry doubles the time prescribed for the cure, badly burning his abdomen, legs and genitals. Having found a janitorial job that starts that night, he lets Jan playfully bandage him to where he can endure clothing. Henry humanely makes sure the bathrooms have enough toilet paper but otherwise shows no penchant for mopping, washing and polishing. He is fired for sleeping on the job and resumes his reluctant quest for employment. The only job he has enjoyed in life is driving for the Red Cross during the war. He is gaining enthusiasm about driving for Yellow Cab when his criminal record disqualifies him. On the next job, he seduces another secretary, talks with a Frenchman who has met Picasso, and is fired for having sex in the warehouse with a newly hired Japanese woman. It happens that throughout his life Japanese women have held an almost mystical place in his heart. Henry goes through a few more jobs, is evicted, splits with Jan, and uses most of his remaining money to watch an aging stripper whose act cannot get him up.



Chapters 1-7

Chapters 1-7 Summary

Henry Chinaski arrives depressed in New Orleans with a cardboard suitcase, hoping for luck in a new town. He takes a room across from the Gangplank Café and eats once a day in a dirty café. Henry turns down a job shucking clams, and then applies for a no-experience-necessary, work-up delivery job, saying he has not shaved in order to win a bet that he can land a job looking this way. Alone in his room, Henry contemplates shooting himself, but learns he has the job. Hearing that a veteran truck driver receives a \$2 raise, Henry demands the same, is turned down, and quits his \$17 a week job, only to show up Monday, hung over and cleanshaven, at a newspaper for a \$12 a week job. Henry fetches zinc engravings for ads.

Fired for being away too often drinking, he collects five days' pay and catches a train for Texas. At every stop, a few men jump off and are removed from the foreman's list. Henry remains, because he needs a job. At El Paso, where they switch trains, the men receive tickets for one night in a hotel and meals in the café. Henry waits until his angry companions finish, gives his hotel ticket to a bum, and sleeps in the park. Henry sees a girl and two young men who have slept in the park. With a nickel among them, they walk off into the city.

Chapters 1-7 Analysis

The first section establishes that the narrator, Henry Chinaski, likes his wine and dislikes paying jobs. He is a drifter, apparently a former Angelino with a workaholic father. He appears to have been on the road for a while, is crazed-looking, and mildly suicidal. He quickly goes through a job in New Orleans and catches a westbound train.



Chapters 8-16

Chapters 8-16 Summary

When the train stops in Los Angeles, the men again receive hotel and meal tickets. Henry catches a streetcar to his parents' home. His mother is overjoyed, but the big man charges Henry room, board and laundry. Mother has started a new job, leaving Henry alone in the house. He masturbates, draws obscene pictures, grouses about his father's cheapness, listens to symphony music, smokes and watches the girl across the street. Father denounces his get-up-and-go for not finding a job yet and complains about the smoke. Next day, finding the housewife in a sexier dress, Henry masturbates slowly, cashes in empty bottles and goes to a bar. Beers keep appearing, and Henry drinks them. At 5 am, he cleans up and lets himself out. A police car pulls up and drives him home, where Father screams at him for being a no-good drunk. When Henry vomits on their Persian Tree of Life rug, Mother screams, Father rubs Henry's nose in it, and Henry flattens the old man. Mother rips Henry's face with her nails.

Henry runs into an old friend from Los Angeles City College days, Timmy Hunter, who is living with his mother and attending Southern Cal. They go to a crowded bar, and a young blonde flirts with Henry. By 10 pm, they can barely stand. Henry awakens in a Malibu jail cell, pleads guilty to "blocking traffic", which he later learns means creating the worst traffic jam in the history of Inglewood. Father bails him out, criticizes him for not serving in the Army, and warns not to mention the arrest to his mother.

Henry takes a job in an auto parts warehouse, working for a tall, ugly man who incessantly evaluates sex with his wife. Once he pays off his parents (several paychecks), Henry moves to cheaper quarters in a rooming house. The landlady, Mama Strader, a dyed redhead with a good figure, gold teeth, and an aged boyfriend, gives Henry whiskey for feeding the chickens, making him late for work. The next night, a fellow border, Martha, drops in with a bottle of wine. In her forties, Martha wears a loose green smock, tells about being a whore, turns on loud music, begins stripping, and pounces on Henry. As he stiffens, Martha bites Henry's penis. He screams in terror and pulls her off. In a mad fury, she forces Henry to ejaculate against his will. She dresses with a song, accepts \$5, grabs his balls playfully, and waltzes out.

Chapters 8-16 Analysis

The chapters show Henry back in his hometown. Life with his straight-laced parents is impossible from the start. Clearly, they take up the conflict where they had left it off at some point in the past. Henry falls back into old drinking patterns with his college pal and ends up in jail. Henry's powerful sexual appetites are introduced, making the scene in which Martha rapes him not only shocking but also ironic. Bukowski employs particularly rich and varied metaphors to describe the vicious fellatio, and in later chapters is particularly delicious when dealing with sex.



Chapters 17-22

Chapters 17-22 Summary

Henry quits and heads for New York. At Times Square, people swarm from the subways like insects, pushing and elbowing him to Third Avenue, where he finds a vacancy. The old Jewish manager takes him to her husband's shop to try on a used suit that Henry cannot afford. When he tries on the suit, both jacket and pants split. Henry goes on a two-day drunk, moves to Greenwich Village, and is refused service in a writers' bar O. Henry is said to have frequented.

The store looks deserted but has a Help Wanted sign. Two old guys hand Henry an armful of cardboard posters and a metal instrument that looks like a can opener. One jumps up on the subway seats and rips out old posters. Henry cannot budge them and bloodies his hands. Putting in new posters takes forever and their number is endless. The coworkers yell at Henry to hurry. They warn him to avoid the third rail on his way to the exit, and Henry steps high over it. Henry next works in a dog biscuit factory 4:30 pm to 1 am, wearing a dirty white apron and heavy canvas gloves with burn holes. A toothless elf with one good eye, on the job for nineteen years, explains his task. Henry begins talking to himself, laughing and singing. He stays on the job nobody wants for several weeks, drinking every night. One night, drunker than usual, Henry refuses to punch in and assaults the Elf when he tries to talk him out of leaving.

Henry moves to Philadelphia and pays for a week in a rooming house. The nearest bar smells like an outhouse, but every seat is taken. Helen disappears with men for five minutes at a time. Henry volunteers to fetch a sandwich for some fat guy, keeps the change, and drinks a shot of whiskey that appears. Billy-Boy, husband of the bar owner, hires Henry to wash the grimy and sharp venetian blinds for \$5. The bartender offers free drinks for as long as Henry is working. Henry offers Helen \$5 when he is through, and she says if he can still get it up when he is done, it is free. Henry is proud when all three sets in the bar are back up and gleaming, but is then shown three more in the party room. Jim and the others take over washing so Henry can win his bets and prevent Billy-Boy from reneging. Henry starts a tab to cover drinks for all and curses Helen for slipping out.

Chapters 17-22 Analysis

Nothing about New York pleases Henry. The denizens are insect-like and offspring of the Devil. One job shows he suffers terrible acrophobia, which recurs later in the book, and another exhausts him physically. He has a standard treatment for any problem: flee and drink. Moving to Philadelphia, he happens upon a small job, washing filthy, sharp-edged blinds, but unexpectedly makes friends and shows his generosity with his modest earnings. In New York, Henry declares himself a dedicated seeker of solitude. Later, in

Los Angeles, he avoids parties like the plague; but here, briefly, he bonds with people who defend him against the boss's fraud.



Chapters 23-30

Chapters 23-30 Summary

St. Louis is cold and ready to snow when Henry, suffering depressive fits, rents a nice clean place. When he suffers a fit of loud vomiting, someone knocks at the door to check if he is all right. Gertrude is scrubbed, kind-faced, dark-haired, with a cute nose, and perfect legs. Hilda, also pink and scrubbed, blushes as she is introduced. Mrs. Downing is, as Henry imagines, a widow and very religious. Gertrude wonders why Henry spends so much time alone and what ails him. He claims not to like people, but promises to try to take her to a movie. Gertrude's eyes look through Henry, making him feel helpless. She shows him her perfumed bedroom full of stuffed animals and warns him never to tell Mrs. Downing. One night, he takes Gertrude to a bar, but they fight.

Henry finds work in a ladies' dress wear shop. He tells the interviewer he is a "writer temporarily down on my inspirations". Henry works in a yellow cellar full of dress boxes that must be properly filled according to written instructions. After pawning several typewriters, Henry has been hand-printing his stories and sending them to magazines at a rate of three to four a week. He sends most to Clay Gladmore of Frontfire, because Gladmore discovers Saroyan and others. Henry works eleven to twelve hour days, sneaking smokes, avoiding intrigue, and drinking during off hours. The war is over, but ladies are buying dresses. At the end of one long shift, the boss calls Henry in to meet his friend, Carson Gentry, a fellow writer. They smugly smoke expensive cigars. As he walks home, Henry realizes that only the desire to accumulate money sets them apart from him.

Henry vows to be wealthy, have a gorgeous wife to cheat on, will fire men to see their dismay and women who do not deserve to be fired. Only lack of hope discourages a person. Back in his room, Henry finds an envelope from Gladmore containing four rejections but accepting a fifth submission. Henry reads and rereads his first acceptance letter.

Although he sees her often, Henry never again asks Gertrude out. One Sunday morning, he joins her and Hilda in a delightful snowball fight and is sure that men returning from the war will marry them. It is time to return to Los Angeles. When Henry tells Gertrude that he is sorry to leave such good people, she introduces him to her vacant-eyed boyfriend, Joey. They shake hands, and Henry enjoys packing.

Chapters 23-30 Analysis

This section shows Henry in St. Louis, living relatively happily amidst nice people. He achieves his first literary triumph, selling a story to a prestigious magazine. Just before, he realizes that one must be cutthroat to make it big and vows unconvincingly to do so.



Gertrude, having a boyfriend, offers an unexpected twist, deflating Henry, and giving him further impetus to go.



Chapters 31-35

Chapters 31-35 Summary

Back in LA, Henry finds a cheap motel to drink and sleep for three to four days. One night he walks uptown and drops into an inviting bar, where he sits beside a blonde, once a beauty, who retains long, lovely legs and a firm body, but is clearly an alcoholic. When Henry goes broke, she takes him in tow to a liquor store and charges the purchases to Wilbur Oxnard's account. They drive Henry's \$35 car to his apartment and enjoy the purchases. Listening to Debussy, they get into bed, and Henry is inside her before he learns that her name is Laura.

Henry packs and follows Laura to a peeling, two-story, white house on Alvarado St. He hides until she is buzzed in. "Willie" Oxnard is gray-haired and one-armed. Coins are strewn on the floor and an electric organ dominates the room. In the kitchen, Henry meets Grace and Jerry, both in their mid-thirties, sexy, and aware of it, and drinking whiskey with beer chasers. Henry joins as Laura explains he is a writer, which Willie applauds, needing a librettist for his opera, *The Emperor of San Francisco*. Willie senses that Henry has been around and has class. Laura explains that Willie throws coins at them every time he gets drunk.

Willie is a millionaire, and Grace is his main girl. He provides food and a bed but no money. He allows drinking only when he is drinking. Jerry receives \$50 a month for life, extorted from Willie one night when he is drunk and horny. Willie puts on his captain's cap, and they jump into a car old enough to have a rumble seat, which Henry and Laura share. They sneak drinks between Willie's checking the rear view mirror, and the flask is empty by the time they reach The Oxwill. Willie insists on showing Henry how to start the auxiliary motor, pull the anchor, and unmoor. Henry follows Laura to the luxury suite with wall-mounted bunks. The refrigerator is well stocked, and they begin drinking. They are kissing when the engine stops and Willie announces they are going back in, since Grace is in a mood, like every time they go to Catalina. Laura advises him to give her \$10. Jerry reports Grace is sore over the \$50 she gets for letting Willie pump her. She wishes she had stayed at Sears Roebuck.

Grace joins them, still not talking. Henry climbs into a warm bunk and falls asleep. It is evening when he awakens, alone with three women. Small, very round Jerry crawls into the bunk as Laura warns them not to go too far. Laura repeats her message as they have sex. Over sandwiches, Jerry comments that Henry is a good heating pad, and Grace asks Laura if it is okay to climb in with Henry. Henry has never been to bed with a woman as tall as Grace. He considers women magic and marvelous. Grace objects that she is Wilbur's woman and Laura's friend, but quits resisting. Delighting in her reaction to the dirty word, Henry repeats that he is only fucking her. When he comes, she whispers it is rape and threatens to tell Laura, but Henry doubts Laura would believe her. He is teaching them to shoot dice for money when Willie appears, angry. Grace rushes to appease him. and he joins them for drinks.



Jerry comes in and reports Willie has been drinking one hundred-proof vodka and asking after Grace. To slow him down, Jerry waters down the vodka and tries to lure him to bed, but when he freaks out, she leaves him in his chair. In the morning, his brother, a dope-taking doctor, cannot revive him. Jerry's only consolation is her \$50 a month in perpetuity—and a good ass. The others know they are finished. Henry hears that Grace has to be hauled away from the brother's door by the police, whom she assaults during the arrest. None of them sees one another again.

Chapters 31-35 Analysis

These chapters bring Henry back to Los Angeles, despairing at the idea of finding a job. Fate introduces him to an eccentric millionaire in need of a librettist, and life becomes a round of food, liquor, and sex until Willie expires. Note how greatly Henry's two seductions aboard the yacht vary in detail and mood and how facilely he finds the words to deceive Laura without technically lying.



Chapters 36-43

Chapters 36-43 Summary

Henry works in a bicycle shop and spends his lunch hour sleeping beneath the hanging stock, fight down the fear of being crushed. The manager's secretary, Carmen, is blonde and beautiful, and Henry gets her into a boxcar for sex. The system makes it impossible to pass the buck on errors, so everyone assumes they will soon be fired. Hector Gonzalves, the petty thief George ("Alabam") Fellows, and Henry hit it off, although Henry kisses Hector's beautiful Mexican wife, and Alabam has a nasty habit, when drunk, of attacking Henry, who always pounds him. The somber, red-faced manager, Mr. Hansen, once asks Henry about his coworkers' intelligence and rumors that Alabam steals. When Hansen gives Henry a \$10 a week raise, Henry realizes they are in the thefts together.

Henry meets Jan at a lunch counter and moves in with her in three days. Her meanness and hostility excite him sexually. Jan looks like Laura but is leaner and prettier. She is hot in the morning when hung-over, while Henry prefers night sex. He gives it to her one morning, hiding his disinterest and complaining he is fifteen minutes late, but she demands a second romp kissing and licking, and making a little paper hat for his penis. Declaring "him" cute, she removes the hat and resumes sucking. When Mr. Hansen calls Henry in, he knows he has had it. Henry's claim he is on his honeymoon fails, but his promise that he has never made it with Carmen gets him a full week's pay.

Although neither knows anything about horses, Henry and Jan develop a magic formula for winning at the track. They are too hung over most mornings to get out of bed, drink for an hour or two in the afternoon, and then head to the track on days they feel lucky. When the winning streak ends, they live on port and muscatel. They have nothing to do but drink wine, make love, and steal cigarettes from parked cars during evening walks. As Jan makes pancakes, Henry sneaks out and is caught stealing a cucumber. He returns and runs in his mind scenes of riding a camel towards a virginal fourteen-year-old. When World War II ends, jobs grow scarcer, and Henry finds occasional work unloading boxcars through a private agency that keeps a third of his pay. They fall farther behind in their rent. When they can afford it, they make beef stew. They sing songs in bed, which the tenants seem not to mind. One morning, they hear firemen swarming the building, but return to bed.

Chapters 36-43 Analysis

In these chapters, Henry has a fling with the secretary in a bicycle warehouse and profits from his ability to keep quiet about the boss's larceny. As the war ends, jobs become scarcer, so Henry and Jan can do little but enjoy sex, drink, fight, sing, and play the horses. Bukowski frequently uses lists of nouns or adjectives to help the reader envision an environment. At the end of chapter forty-two, he lists all of the 1940s-era

songs that Henry and Jan sing. Writing in 1975, he must know that most will mean little to younger readers, but the treatment is, nonetheless, effective.



Chapters 44-52

Chapters 44-52 Summary

Henry is hired at an auto parts warehouse, claiming he thinks of it as a second home. One day at lunchtime, he meets Manny, an intense, intelligent-looking Chicano coworker studying the racing news and predicting My Boy Bobby will win in the eighth, paying 9:2. They cut out of work at 4:55 and race to Hollywood Park. Manny, a former track star, beats Henry to the car. Henry is sure that if Manny bets like he drives, he is a winner. Manny reaches the betting window five lengths ahead of Henry. Both place \$5 bets and Bobby wins, paying \$10.40. The next day, other guys insist they take bets out for them. They doubt they will win two days in a row, but do. Men in other warehouses where Henry picks up parts want in on the action and rarely win. Henry buys good clothes. Every afternoon the crowd cheers their dash to the window. This new life does not sit well with Jan, who wants sex four times a day. She mocks him as "Mr. Big Horseplayer". Jan likes to get him mad and storms off to bars. Henry sits helpless, drinking at home and listening to classical music. One evening, he finds her on a barstool, calls her a whore, and backhands her onto the floor. He finishes her drink and goes home.

The warehouse owner, Mr. Mantz, notices Henry is doing less work. Henry collects paychecks for two more weeks before calmly accepting severance. When Henry charges that he has been giving Mantz the only thing he has—his time—for \$1.25 an hour so Mantz can have a big house, Mantz does not argue and promises not to block Henry's getting unemployment insurance. Henry stands in line once a week at the California State Department of Employment and answers three simple questions, supplying the names of businesses he has applied to, taken from the phone book. Henry and Jan's heavy drinking shrinks the bankroll, as does bailing both of them out and paying court costs and fines. One night their car stalls outside MacArthur Park, and they are rear-ended by someone. Henry takes and fails the breath test, figuring the other guy is obviously at fault, but is taken in. Their lives are falling apart.

Henry and Jan go to Los Alamitos for quarter horse racing, which Henry hates. They spread newspapers in the grandstands to claim their seats while they visit the bar. Returning for the fourth race, \$18 ahead, they find a small gray-haired old man sitting in their place. He insists that seats are not reserved and common courtesy does not apply. The man gives Jan room to sit, grudgingly. Back in the bar, Jan points out that he is calling Henry's card because he is old. They return, Jan presses against the old man's thigh and asks what he does for a living. Introducing himself as Tony Endicot, he claims to make \$60,000 in real estate. When Jan begins flirting, Henry picks Endicot up by the collar and threatens to push him through the bleachers. Endicot sinks his teeth into Henry's ear, and Henry grabs Endicot's throat. Henry pries Endicot's fingers loose and watches him plunge. Everyone studies their racing forms as Henry and Jan hurriedly leave.



Henry awakens, sweating, and has diarrhea and vomits. He lights a cigarette and then fetches a beer. When Jan wakes up, Henry recalls first learning he is an idiot. It is in school, but unlike the two to three other idiots, bullies do not terrify him, so they get beaten up instead. Jan does not understand. Henry goes out for a paper. Finding no mention of a murder at Los Alamitos, he buys a pint of Grand Dad and declares he is crazy. He sees in the paper the results of the fifth race—precisely as he remembers. Henry tells Jan to keep the car and half the money (\$150). He denies there is another woman and refuses to reconsider as he packs. Jan barely gives him time to get out of the car at the Greyhound station before she is gone.

Chapters 44-52 Analysis

Henry's second sojourn in Los Angeles concludes with him and new girlfriend Jan playing the horses, briefly becoming affluent, and losing the relationship. Why they split up is unclear and that they might get back together seems unlikely. Chapter fifty-one is printed in italics. That it is a long dream sequence is made clear only in the next chapter, where the results of the race are as Henry remembers. Bukowski shows an anal complex that he develops further later in the novel.



Chapters 53-58

Chapters 53-58 Summary

Miami is as far away as Henry can get without leaving the US. He reads Henry Miller and drinks during the four-day, five-night trip. He rents a room for \$6.50 a week from forty-five-year-old Mrs. Adams, who makes him consider how much he needs a nice lady to take care of him. He claims to be a developing magazine writer. Mr. Adams's struggle to breathe means Death. Henry buys peanut butter and moldy bread, then lies on his bed. In the morning, quiet means Mr. Adams is in the hospital or the morgue. A lady dressed in green, the outfit low-cut and tight, knocks to inform Henry of the overnight death and announce the tenants are collecting for flowers. Henry admits that talk of writing is meant only to impress Mrs. Adams, declines to donate 25¢, but offers to make love with the collector. He never sees her again.

The Florida State Department of Employment is nicer than the one in Los Angeles, but Henry cannot imagine making money for somebody else, and being expected to be grateful for the opportunity. Henry shudders at a job in sanitation and believes two years of college ought to make him capable for more than garbage pick-up. The clerk says to come back in seven days. Henry finds a job through an ad, in a clothing store in Miami Beach. He must conquer the fear of riding the bus along a narrow strip of cement high above the ocean.

Henry is the store's "extra ball-bearing", the person who has no specific duties but is to intuit how to keep things running smoothly. They must anticipate needs, smile, recall names, keep toilet paper plentiful and furniture repaired. Knowing he will soon be fired or will quit, he avoids the boss and stoolies. The store is self-contained and self-sufficient, handling manufacturing upstairs and sales downstairs. Henry has worked in a factory like this in New York City, with workers bent over their machines, silent, and never glancing up. There, the workers are mostly Jewish ladies, but here they are black. Henry watches a tiny black man, Brad, with a pleasant face, doing close work, and offers him a drink. The man accepts and offers a cigarette. He cautions that Henry should not talk to the help. Brad looks like a graceful monkey and is considered one downstairs. The others do not want the white boy to come down on them, so Henry goes to hose down the sidewalk.

Henry works there about six weeks. Clothes bore Henry until one day he discovers electricity in the fabric of a pair of pants. He takes the magical garment to the bathroom, puts it on beneath his own pants, and, rather than walking around looking nervous for an hour and a half until closing time, tells Mr. Silverstein to dock him. In his room, Henry admires his glowing, rich brown pants and notes that several taxi drivers offer him a ride as he goes for a bottle of port. Henry writes a short story about a poor clerk meeting a rich girl on the beach. In the morning, Silverstein fires Henry.

Chapters 53-58 Analysis

These chapters examine the few weeks that Henry spends in Miami, as far away from Los Angeles as he can get. It develops his philosophy of employment and reinforces his acrophobia. The esoteric quip about Schumann and Shostakovich reinforces Henry's love of classical music (recall Mahler plays earlier while Martha ravishes Henry and returns later).



Chapters 59-67

Chapters 59-67 Summary

During the trip back to Los Angeles, Henry neither sleeps nor defecates. Vera gets on in Louisiana, and sells herself for \$2 to every man and one woman, calling Henry a fag for declining. In LA, Henry learns that Jan is a chambermaid in the Durham Hotel. She looks good, if astonished, and offers to hide him, saying she loves him. Henry returns to Jan, because he must. He is hired for an easy job in shipping at a fluorescent light fixture company. The boss, Mannie Feldman, is trying to collect on insurance and go bankrupt at the same time, but a dignified banker, Curtis Jennings, takes over management. When he gets his first paycheck, Henry moves out of Jan's place, but she quickly follows him. A huge fight launches Henry on a three-day drunk that costs him his job. He cleans the apartment so thoroughly that he believes he is turning fag, and makes Jan believe he has another woman. Henry cannot figure out why he does not get rid of Jan.

Henry goes to the Times Building for a reporting job, fills out the standard form, knowing they hire only the famous and those who know someone, and discovers his crotch is itching unbearably. The pharmacist looks disgusted as he sells him a cure, taking care not to touch him. Henry strips down, applies the ointment as instructed, and after forty-five minutes, he begins burning. Emerging from the bathtub, Henry can barely walk and looks like an orangutan, but happily watches the dead crabs go down the drain. When she returns, Henry shows Jan what she has done to him, calls her a slut, sends her out for alcohol, and listens to Mahler. In the morning, Henry vomits and notices Jan's hair has gone "mousey" gray, and she is getting jowls and a belly. She is still a "marvelous fuck". The Times calls, offering Henry a job in maintenance, to start at 9 pm. Unable to put on clothing, Henry sends out for gauze, tape and muscatel. She gets playful, bandaging him "around and around", and wrapping his big, red, Christmas balls in a cocoon. He can walk, but feels like a eunuch. He thinks he will live.

Superintendent Herman Barnes sets Henry to shining brass railings, the dullest job of his life. Knowing that he ought to be inside writing editorials but could be in a Chinese rice paddy, Henry polishes just twenty-five feet before going for a bar. When Barnes finds him, Henry offers him a beer, and the Superintendent offers Henry another chance, upstairs, changing fluorescent lights from a thirty-six-foot ladder. His fear of heights cuts in, but Henry climbs. At the top, he suffers a dizzy spell. After changing one bulb, he wanders around, reading things left on tables. Barnes catches him but gives him one last chance the next night. On the way out, Henry tells Barnes he walks funny because of a grease fire while frying chicken, not from a war wound.

Barnes introduces Henry to his new supervisor, Jacob Christensen. Henry has been a night janitor before, in San Francisco, and knows one can drink all night once everyone leaves. An old janitor, Hugh, screams in Henry's ear. Jacob orders Hugh to roll and explains he is his best janitor. Henry is responsible for two floors. Restrooms are top



priority, then the offices, and finally, waxing the floors. Henry finishes the two bathrooms, dusts, and returns to the ladies room for a four-hour nap on the couch. Hugh is still complaining when Henry wakes up, just before punch-out time. As they wait, the "ancient warrior" rises and goes for Henry's throat. Henry has no choice but to knee him.

The next night, Henry works four hours before going to sleep. When Barnes and Christensen discover him, he pretends to still be asleep. He brags to Jan about not being fired, figuring it means that they appreciate his courage to stand up to Hugh. They are beginning their usual argument when Western Union delivers Henry's termination notice. Having gotten rid of the car, they walk to the Times Building to collect Henry's final check. The check is not ready but should be in the morning. Jan, who has a hankering for stew, is not pleased. They eat, drink, argue, make love, and sleep, and then at noon, head back to find the check still not ready. Mr. John Handler orders the check delivered within five minutes. Henry tells John of his journalism background, but the Times is overstaffed. They chat, the check arrives, and Henry and Jan enjoy beef stew and French wine.

Chapters 59-67 Analysis

These chapters find Henry reuniting brittlely with Jan and getting from her a case of the *Phthirus pubis*, crab lice. Henry's stoic treatment of the infection shows amazing ignorance in a generally intelligent man, while Jan's help in easing his discomfort shows both delightful humor on her side and forbearance on his. Henry's thoughts on being a night janitor show sociological insight, culminating in his reflections on the inalienable right to wipe after defecating, reinforcing the author's penchant for anal humor.



Chapters 68-80

Chapters 68-80 Summary

The State sends Henry to an automobile brake parts company near skid row, where he makes himself look good on the application, believing firms rarely check references. George Henley glances at the form and asks two women if they think Henry can stand them. Henley starts Henry sorting identical brake shoes into three cartons by type. Ordered not to smoke, Henry's first act when alone is to crack the window and light up. He loses the job quickly. The only job he has hated to lose is driving Red Cross nurses around San Francisco collecting blood during the war. He loses it by taking the wrong bridge out of town, getting lost in skid row, and nearly getting them all raped.

Yellow Cab Company requires fingerprinting as part of the application process. The girl is impressed with Henry's expertise. Janeway Smithson is in charge of testing five to six rookie drivers' ability to stop in the dry LA River bed. The trainees take turns getting the cab up to forty-five mph and when Smithson fires the pistol, jamming on the brakes. He sings to lull them. After the others have burned brakes and rubber, Henry takes his turn, boasting he will break Pop's record. Henry guesses the instant the gun will go off, hits the brake, and sets a world record by fifteen feet and nine-tenths of a second. Smithson claims he cheats.

Moving to a classroom with desks like in biology or chemistry, Smithson declares that he will not preach on how to live, but will teach how to drive, to keep insurance rates down, and to get them home alive. He asks under what conditions a man can lose control of his cab and not be able to help it. Henry has the answer: when one sneezes. Before he can answer, he is pulled out of class and told that failure to reveal eighteen common drunks and one drunk driving disqualifies his application. Henry walks home and goes to bed.

Henry next gets a job at Graphic Cherub Art Supply as a shipping clerk. Business does not seem good, and Bud the manager tells Henry he may get a cup of coffee around the corner at Montie's Café when things are slow. The waitress is worth seeing, and the pie fresh. Mary Lou in the front office has style. She drives a three-year-old Cadillac, lives with her mother, and entertains important people. Now and then, she has sex with Bud in the ladies room, is religious, and plays the horses at Santa Anita. She is beautiful, but not as beautiful as she imagines. One of Mary Lou's jobs is to bring typed orders to Henry for matching. She says there are interesting people working here, like old Maurice the janitor, a painter from France; he never speaks. When she walks away, Mary Lou is magic to watch.

After packing a few orders, Henry meets Maurice with his droopy mustache, dressed in black, with a red scarf, blue beret, and long, uncombed gray hair. In unaccented English, Maurice tells Henry he would not "piss on a fly" for the people that work here. He enjoys looking at Mary Lou, then goes to the women's room to masturbate. He is



currently painting a large canvas about the years of a man's life from vagina to grave. He has met Picasso in France and finds him okay.

Paul is a clerk, about twenty-eight, fat, bulgy-eyed, and taking all sorts of pills. Henry. Paul invites Henry to his place to see the reducing machine his girlfriend has bought him; it takes all the effort out of sex. Henry says he will have to think about the offer to have sex, top or bottom. Henry declares he is straight, but Paul invites him over to see his pills. Bud is grinning with Mary Lou when they leave. Paul turns on the machine that sounds like a washing machine, and then his thousands of pills. Henry takes a rain check on the machine, and Paul declares he will take care of himself.

Mr. Manders watches Henry pack a large paint order. Drinking after his wife leaves him forces Manders to sell the business and now he is just an employee. Bud runs back, yelling for six-foot squeegees. None are ready, so Henry begins building them. Bud returns several times before announcing the customer has left. The store is going broke. Henry discovers a box of twenty-four large camel hair brushes, which sell for \$10 apiece. He hides it in a trashcan in the alley and leaves as late as possible, stopping at the café, and then returning to the alley. Bud and Mary Lou are there. He stops for beers and returns to retrieve the box.

Graphic Cherub hires a Japanese girl, sparking Henry's dream of one day living happily ever after with a woman who will age beautifully and who he understands will have staying power. Henry is taken with the new girl and asks to kiss and touch her. She does not understand his craziness and enchants him further. One day, while she is looking for a carton of glue, Henry puts his arms around her and says they are meant for one another. Henry lifts her gently onto the cartons, kisses her, and begins pulling up her dress when Danny the Virgin, a clerk, walks in and is shocked. The boss fires them both. Henry threatens to turn them into the Better Business Bureau for what they sell to City College. Henry leaves with an extra day's pay.

Chapters 68-80 Analysis

Henry recalls one job he has liked and is sorry to have lost and is feeling good about working for the cab company when his criminal record disqualifies him from that job. Another sexy secretary misunderstands an aloof French artist turned janitor, who talks about Picasso and the aura of fame and need to develop one's own talent. Henry gets away with boosting some brushes, but gets caught trying to have sex in the warehouse. Japanese women, it turns out, hold a special, almost mystical place in his heart. Henry is caught in the first of several situations where he insists he is not homosexual.



Chapters 81-87

Chapters 81-87 Summary

Henry's next job is making Christmas items up until Thanksgiving; then they are laid off. They mostly stand around smoking. Henry suggests they all go to a bar every day for lunch. One afternoon they do not return and are fired in the morning.

Henry deals again with fluorescent lights, putting in ten-hour days packing the heavy units for Honeybeam Company. Most of his coworkers are Mexicans or black. The blacks, led by Monty, battle with Henry every day. Henry claims he gets beaten only because he is hung over—and vows not to show up sober to see what they will do to him. The foreman, Morris, seems like he is made of wood, and Henry avoids talking with him. He is the owner's son and a failed outside salesman. The young Mexican girls are beautiful and wear tight clothing. At any rate, in fifteen years, they will weight 185 pounds and their daughters will be beautiful. Henry buys an eight-year-old car and stays on through December. Henry skips the Christmas party. After Christmas, Eddie tells him that cute Christine cries when he does not show up. Christine gets drunk, dances with Eddie, throws up, gets drunker, and dances with the black guys. She is very sexy. She goes home with Big Angel. The day before New Year's, Morris takes Henry aside and fires him.

National Bakery Goods is nearby. They make cookies, biscuits, cupcakes, and more. Henry becomes their Coconut Man, perched in a white smock, dumping scoops of shredded coconut into a machine to be spit out on whatever passes below it. It is easy and dignified work and leaves Henry free to watch girls across the room. On the second night, the girls begin singing about how Henry can love, but their supervisors tells them to shut up. After two to three weeks, the male employees are summoned to hear that this is the slack period and their services are not needed.

The Hotel Sans is LA's best, old, classy, charming, and across from the park downtown. It is renowned for conventions and expensive hookers who cut well-endowed bellboys into the action servicing rich, elderly guests. Some become millionaires. Lobster is the center of life here. Henry works on the loading dock, where ten do the work of two. Henry wears his best clothes and does nothing. Henry is assigned to manage the employment office on Sundays, answering the phone and hiring Sunday dishwashers. Forty bums show up for five dishwashing spots. Henry throws pennies into the air and hires those who emerge from the fistfights with them.

Henry begins taking whiskey to work on Sundays and blacks out after a hard night's drinking. Henry corners Mr. Pelvinton, the Assistant Manager, and holds him captive for thirty minutes, lecturing him on how to run the hotel, and registering prostitutes on the first floor and giving them regular physical examinations. He also recommends cutting down on workers on the loading dock and giving each man one lobster per night



in a special cage to cut down on theft. The police are called in. Henry presumes correctly that he is fired.

The day before Henry starts at the Farm Labor Market, he moves Jan in with a fat real estate operator on Kingsley Drive. Jan says she will wait for his luck to change and that she hates sex with rich Jim Bemis. Henry knows she is probably saying the same thing about sex with him. Henry's unemployment insurance is exhausted. Henry gets in line at the state employment office and sees an announcement for tomato pickers in Bakersfield. The quota is met and the truck full of pickers rolls off, leaving Henry behind.

Workmen For Industry (WFI) is located on the edge of skid row, where bums drink free black coffee and wait. Henry fills out a card and sits beside an old black man with an interesting face. He seems to be trying not to laugh at himself and the rest of the men. He tells Henry that the guy who runs this place specializes in cheap part-time workers and takes fifty percent of the money. He offers Henry port from his bagged bottle. When the bottle is empty, Henry gets directions to the nearest liquor store. Back at WFI, wine gnats circle around them, attracting the manager, who throws them out. When Henry moves too slowly, the manager punches him, drawing blood with his big ring.

Henry walks to the Roxie and buys a ticket. He has 38¢ left. The first stripper, Darlene, is an old-timer. Henry is on her side as she works her zippers and shows more flesh. Darlene makes love to the torn, dusty stage curtain, appears to climax, then straightens and returns to center stage. She rips off her bra and begins to grind slowly. Henry cannot get it up.

Chapters 81-87 Analysis

Henry goes through a few more jobs, splits with Jan when they are evicted, and uses most of his remaining money to watch an aging stripper. The final words sum up Henry's life: he cannot get it up.



Characters

Henry Chinaski

The narrator and chief character in *Factotum*, Henry Chinaski is a classic antihero. He is green-eyed, the son of a workaholic veteran of World War I who is critical of his son's 4F status during World War II for psychological reasons, addicted to alcohol and sex, and has drunk his way through two years at Los Angeles City College while studying journalism. Before the action of the novel begins, Henry has left home and spent time in at least San Francisco and New York City. Everything he owns fits in a yellow cardboard suitcase, which he has painted black with shoe polish. He works when he must, flops in the cheapest places he can find, eats when he can, and drinks constantly. When he is down on his luck and has to drink port, he pictures movies in his head to fight revulsion at the taste. When he travels, he cannot sleep or defecate, leaving him miserable and cranky. He is acutely acrophobic and hates people.

The novel follows Henry's misadventures getting and losing jobs in New Orleans, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Los Angeles again, Miami, and Los Angeles a third time. Despite not being a ladies' man, he has a way with sexy secretaries whom he denies stealing from their lecherous bosses. In Los Angeles, Henry has two girlfriends, both of whom he meets in a bar. Laura introduces him to the good life in the decrepit mansion of millionaire Wilbur Oxnard, whose sudden death disbands the group. Jan Meadows is his sexually ravenous and compulsively unfaithful lover before and after his escape to Miami. With her he bets successfully at the race track, but then angers her by becoming good at handicapping with a fellow worker, Manny. Jan claims Henry needs to be destitute to be a good lover.

After years of writing and submitting short stories to magazines, usually *Frontfire* magazine, America's premier literary magazine, Henry, while in St. Louis, receives his first acceptance letter for "My Beerdrunk Soul is Sadder Than All the Dead Christmas Trees of the World". Clay Gladmore pays \$25 per story, but has discovered, among others, William Saroyan. After pawning several typewriters to make ends meet, Henry hand prints his stories, which he cranks out at a rate of several a week. His attempts to parlay his two years of journalism into an editorial job at the *Los Angeles Times* fails, and he does a miserable job as a janitor. He also fails at an automobile brake parts company, the Yellow Cab Company, the Graphic Cherub Art Supply Company, and the Honeybeam Company. Laid off as the National Bakery Goods' Coconut Man, he does well at the Hotel Sans, until he begins drinking on the job. Henry and Jan are evicted and split up. He misses an opportunity to pick tomatoes in Bakersfield, gets tossed out of Workmen For Industry for drinking, and in the end finds he cannot even get an erection watching a stripper in the Roxie Theater.



Jan Meadows

Jan becomes Henry Chinaski's most steady girlfriend in Los Angeles, on the rebound from Laura. They move in together three days after meeting in a bar. Jan's meanness and hostility excite Henry sexually. She is hot in the morning when hung-over, while Henry likes sex at night. She can be playful in bed, making a little paper hat for Henry's penis before devouring him. They spend a lot of time at the racetrack and otherwise do little but drink wine, make love, and steal cigarettes from parked cars during evening walks. When Henry and Manny begin making money at the track, Jan mocks Henry as "Mr. Big Horseplayer" and demands sex. Their arguments are always the same: bums are greater lovers than clock-punchers. Jan tries to get him mad and then storms off to the bars, accepting any drinks offers her. One evening, Henry seeks her out, calls her a whore, and backhands her onto the floor. He often has to bail her out and pay court costs and fines. Their worst fight sets Henry on a three-day drunk, which costs him his job. He cleans the apartment so thoroughly that when Jan returns a week later, she accuses him of having another woman. Henry cannot figure out why he does not get rid of Jan. She is compulsively unfaithful, the dirtier the better, and arguing constantly to justify herself. Henry reminds himself not all women are whores—just his.

One day, after suffering a bad dream in which he murders someone at the track, Henry declares that Jan can keep the car and half the money, and has her drop him at the bus station. Jan barely gives him time to get out of the car before she is gone. After six weeks in Miami, Henry returns and finds Jan working as a chambermaid at the Durham Hotel. They are quickly back together, but little things about her annoy him: her snoring like a small hog, her hair gone "mousey" gray, and her growing jowls and belly. Her legs and ass still look good and she remains a "marvelous fuck", one who gives Henry the crabs and laughingly helps treat his discomfort. When they are evicted from their apartment, Henry helps Jan move in with rich Jim Bemis, a fat real estate man with whom she claims to hate having sex. Jan promise to wait for Henry's luck to change.

Laura

A once beautiful blonde whom Henry Chinaski meets in a Los Angeles bar, Laura has retained long, lovely legs and a firm body, but is obviously an alcoholic. She accepts drinks from Henry until he goes broke, and then takes him to a store to stock his room with liquor, beer, cigarettes, chips, nuts, alka-seltzer, and a good cigar, all charged to Wilbur Oxnard's account. As they lie in bed, Laura worries about crazy men who dismember or disfigure girls they pick up. Henry is inside her before he gets around to asking her name. Laura takes Henry to the peeling, two-story, white house of millionaire "Willie" Oxnard, and introduces him to the affluent, hard-drinking rich set. She naively warns Henry not to go too far as he is "warming" her friends aboard Willie's yacht. The good times end when Willie dies.



Herman Barnes

The maintenance superintendent at the Times Building in Los Angeles, Barnes assigns Henry to polish brass, only to find him in a bar across the street having a beer. He gives Henry a second chance, replacing burnt out fluorescent tubes, and accepts Henry's fear of heights as an excuse for doing nothing. Finally, he puts Henry under Jacob Christensen as a night janitor. When the two men discover Henry asleep in the ladies room, he is fired.

Mr. and Mrs. Chinaski

Henry's parents, the unnamed Chinaskis, still live in Los Angeles. He is brown-haired and taller than Henry, a proud veteran of World War I, and intolerant of Henry's 4-F draft status. Mother is easily upset. Both are still working, with Mother having just taken a new job. Father insists that Henry find a job immediately and pay room, board, and laundry. When Henry shows up drunk on the doorstep, parents and son assault one another viciously. When he bails Henry out of jail, he adds legal costs. Henry moves out as soon as he is paid up. Jan later declares that his hatred for his parents warps Henry.

Jacob Christensen

Henry Chinaski's supervisor as a night janitor in the Times Building in Los Angeles, Christensen is concerned that Henry not tangle with his best janitor, scrappy Old Huge. Christensen and his boss Herman Barnes discover Henry asleep in the ladies' room and he is fired.

Darlene

An aging stripper at the Roxie in Los Angeles, Darlene appears to be looking for a comeback and Henry is on her side, but even when her bra and G-string are discarded, Henry cannot get an erection.

Mrs. Downing

Henry's kind landlady in St. Louis, Mrs. Downing, makes him soup when she hears he is ill. She is, just as Henry imagines, a widow and very religious.

Tony Endicott

A gray-haired old man who takes over Henry Chinaski and Jan's seats in the grandstands at the Los Alamitos Racetrack, Endicott boasts to Jan that he makes \$60,000 after taxes in real estate. When Jan begins flirting, Henry picks Endicott up by his shirt collar and threatens to push him through the bleachers, thirty-five feet to the



ground. Endicott bites Henry's ear and Henry grabs his throat. When Henry pries Endicott's fingers off the bench and watches him plunge, others bury their noses in the racing form. It turns out the murder is a nightmare, although the results of the race are as Henry remembers.

Mannie Feldman

The owner of a Los Angeles fluorescent light fixture company on Alameda Street, Feldman hires Henry as a shipping clerk. Feldman is busy trying to collect on insurance and go bankrupt at the same time, but a dignified banker, Curtis Jennings, is assigned by Bank of America to take over management and get back the institution's investments.

George Fellows

A petty thief with whom Henry Chinaski works at a Los Angeles auto parts warehouse, "Alabam", when drunk, has a nasty habit of attacking Henry, who always pounds him. Alabam is splitting profits from stolen parts with the manager, Mr. Hansen.

Gertrude and Hilda

Two pink, scrubbed boarders in Mrs. Downing's boarding house in St. Louis, Gertrude and Hilda check on Henry Chinaski after they hear him vomiting. Henry takes a liking to Gertrude, kind-faced, dark-haired, and cute, with perfect legs and wearing a low-cut blouse. Hilda blushes a lot. Henry finds that Gertrude drips of sexuality, despite her girlish, perfumed room he visits once for a moment. They go out once for drinks and return angry. Henry is sure neither will have trouble attracting a husband when the troops come home. When Henry announces he is moving back to Los Angeles, Gertrude introduces him to her boyfriend Joey.

Clay Gladmore

The editor of Frontfire magazine, America's premier literary magazine, and discoverer of William Saroyan and others, Gladmore receives most of Henry Chiaski's hand-printed stories, and rejects them all until he reads "My Beeerdrunk Soul is Sadder Than All the Dead Christmas Trees of the World". Gladmore pays \$25 per story.

Grace and Jerry

Millionaire Willie Oxnard's girlfriends, whom he gives food, alcohol, and a place to live, along with Laura, whom Henry Chinaski meets in a Los Angeles bar. Grace is tall, Jerry is curvy, and both are in their mid-thirties, sexy, and aware of it. Grace is Willie's main girl but gives him a hard time. On his yacht, she goes into one of her moods and threatens to jump overboard, but is actually afraid of water. Laura advises Willie to give



her \$10. While they wait, Jerry and Grace have sex with Henry in the bunk, while Laura innocently tells them not to go too far. When Willie dies after drinking diluted vodka, Grace has to be hauled away from the brother's door by the police, whom she assaults during the arrest. None of the friends sees one another again.

Mr. Hansen

Henry Chinaski's boss at a Los Angeles auto parts warehouse, somber, red-faced Hansen once calls Henry in to ask about two coworkers' intelligence, as a test to see if Henry knows Alabam is boosting pedals. For playing dumb, Henry gets a \$10 a week raise. When Hansen calls Henry in to fire him for showing up late every day, Hansen agrees to pay a full week's severance. Henry assures him that he has never made it with Hansen's secretary, Carmen, whom everyone knows has been having sex with the boss on the sly.

Helen

A woman in the Philadelphia bar where Henry Chinaski washes Venetian blinds, Helen disappears with men for five minutes at a time and is said to be a regular vacuum cleaner, sexually. A veteran of Teddy Roosevelt's rough ride takes ten minutes. Helen disappears before Henry can collect on his bet.

Timmy Hunter

An old friend from Los Angeles City College days, Hunter picks up Henry Chinaski as he is hitchhiking. As they have in college, they get too drunk to stand up, nap on the steps of a funeral parlor, and are arrested for causing the biggest traffic jam in Inglewood history.

Manny

An intense, intelligent-looking Chicano whom Henry Chinaski meets while working at an auto parts warehouse in Los Angeles, Manny is a former high school track star with a knack for picking winners at Hollywood Park. Soon they make serious money on bets and are accepting money to place bets for coworkers—while simply pocketing the cash. Manny could be a success if he had any ambition.

Mr. Mantz

The Los Angeles warehouse owner who hires Henry Chinaski when he says work is like a second home to him, Mantz notices Henry doing less and less and fires him. Henry lashes out: he has been giving Mantz the only thing he has—his time—for \$1.25 an hour so Mantz can have a big house and everything else he wants. Mantz does not



argue. When Henry demands unemployment insurance—assuming he will be cheated like all working men—Mantz promises he will have it and tells him to get the hell out.

Martha

A fellow border with Henry Chinaski at Mama Strader's boarding house in Los Angeles, Martha is a fat prostitute in her forties. She shows up in Henry's room wearing a loose green smock, quickly strips, and begins fellating Henry against his will, nearly biting off his penis. Henry pays her \$5 to be rid of her.

Maurice

A taciturn French painter whom Henry Chinaski meets working at Graphic Cherub Art Supply in Los Angeles, Maurice will not "piss on a fly" for those who work here, although he does enjoy looking at secretary Mary Lou, masturbating in the women's room, and then mopping up. Maurice is distinctive with a droopy mustache, black clothing, red scarf, blue beret, long, uncombed gray hair, green eyes, and bushy eyebrows. In unaccented English, he tells Henry that he is working on a large canvas about the years of a man's life from vagina to grave. He has met Picasso in France and finds him OK. Picasso cannot tell him how to improve; he must do it himself. Maurice's brother is rich but has disowned him for drinking and painting.

Wilbur Oxnard

An elderly gray-haired man with one arm, Willie is an eccentric millionaire living in his father's crumbling mansion on Alvarado St., Los Angeles. He provides three women, Laura, Jerry, and Grace, food, a bed, but no money, and allows drinking only when he is drinking. Willie can be nasty when drunk. He gives Jerry \$50 a month for life, extorted from him one night when he is drunk and horny. Believing that he is dying, he wants to get in as much sex as he can beforehand. Willie needs a librettist for his unfinished opera, *The Emperor of San Francisco*, and is happy to welcome Henry Chinaski into the group through Laura, whom Henry picks up in a bar. Henry notes that Willie's living room is strewn with coins and dominated by an electric organ. When Willie wears his captain's cap it, means they are going out on his enormous yacht, *The Oxwill*, moored in San Pedro. Willie drives a car so old it has a rumble seat. Aboard the yacht, Willie gets angry at Grace's moodiness and himself wanders off. They get him back in a good humor, but days later he dies while drinking diluted vodka in his home.

Janeway Smithson

An insane bantam rooster of a man, Smithson is an instructor for the Yellow Cab Company in Lost Angeles. He holds the record for braking in the dry LA River bed and is angry when Henry Chinaski breaks it. Smithson has been on the job for twenty-five years and is dumb enough to be proud of it.

Mama Strader

Henry Chinaski's Los Angeles landlady after he flees his parents' exorbitant room and board, Mama Strader is a dyed redhead with a good figure, gold teeth, and an aged boyfriend. She gives Henry whiskey for feeding the chickens, which causes him to be late for work.

Objects/Places

Los Angeles, CA

Henry Chinaski's hometown, Los Angeles, provides the background for most of the novel. Henry's parents still live there, and he moves in briefly after the long train ride from New Orleans. They clash instantly, and he flees to New York. After a while there and in Philadelphia and St. Louis, Henry returns to LA and takes a cheap room on Alvarado St. In a nearby bar, he meets Laura, who hooks him up with millionaire Wilbur Oxnard, whose crumbling mansion is also on Alvarado. Henry works for a bicycle shop until he is fired for goofing off. He then meets the sexually insatiable Jan at a lunch counter and moves in with her three days later. While working for an auto parts warehouse on Flower St., Henry he meets Manny, an ace handicapper, with whom he grows moderately wealthy betting at Hollywood Park. Fired again, Henry puts in time each week in line at the California State Department of Employment, and with Jan, subsists on wine. After dreaming he has murdered a man at the Los Alamitos Racetrack in Orange County, Henry leaves Jan to head for a couple of months in Miami.

When Henry returns to LA, he finds Jan and they move in together. Henry works for a fluorescent light fixture company on Alameda St., as a janitor in the Times Building, and in an automobile brake parts company near skid row. He applies to the Yellow Cab Company, but fails to report arrests and is rejected. He works for the Graphic Cherub Art Supply, then briefly making Christmas for a seasonal company, and returns to dealing with fluorescent lights at the Honeybeam Company. He next becomes National Bakery Goods' Coconut Man, and hires Sunday dishwashers for the Hotel Sans, Los Angeles' classy, charming hotel across from the park downtown. When he loses this job, Henry and Jan are evicted and split up. Henry misses an opportunity to pick tomatoes in Bakersfield for the Farm Labor Market, gets tossed out of Workmen For Industry (WFI) on the edge of skid row for drinking, and finds he cannot get an erection watching a stripper in the Roxie Theater.

El Paso, TX

Henry Chinaski joins a track gang westward bound from New Orleans, and it has a layover and change in El Paso. The men on the train hate Henry for no apparent reason. Preferring to sleep in the park, Chinaski gives his hotel ticket to a bum. During the night, he is surprised to see a drunken sailor wrestle an alligator.

Hollywood Park

The Los Angeles racetrack that Henry Chinaski and co-worker Manny frequent for the eighth race every day, cutting out of work early and racing there in Manny's car. Hollywood Park offers free parking and admission after the seventh race. The crowd grows used to seeing Manny race ahead to the betting window, just before it closes.



Other guys at work insist Henry and Manny take bets out for them, and other shops that Henry visits want in on the action. Henry and Manny pocket their money.

Los Alamitos Racetrack

The home of quarter horse racing in Orange County, CA, Los Alamitos is where Henry Chinaski dreams he murders an annoying old man, Tony Endicot, who takes Henry and Jan's seats in the grandstands, claims to make \$60,000 after taxes in real estate, and flirts with Jan. Henry picks him up by his shirt collar and threatens to push him through the bleachers, thirty-five feet to the ground. Tony sinks his teeth into Henry's ear and Henry grabs his throat and pries his fingers off the bench. After Endicot falls, the sports fans around them study their racing forms and Henry and Jan hurriedly leave. The newspaper reports no murders and Jan assures Henry they do not leave the apartment that day, but the results of the race are as Henry remembers.

Miami, FL

Miami is as far as Henry can go without leaving the US when he flees Los Angeles a second time. He reads Henry Miller en route and drinks on the four-day, five-night trip. He arrives early evening, barely able to walk, but it feels good to be on the streets again. He rents a room for \$6.50 a week from forty-five-year-old Mrs. Adams, whose husband dies the first night Henry is there. The Florida State Department of Employment is pleasant but can offer him nothing but a job in sanitation. Henry, however, finds a job through the newspaper, in a clothing store in Miami Beach as an "extra ball-bearing". He lasts perhaps six weeks before stealing a pair of pants in which he feels electricity, and is fired. He heads back to Los Angeles.

New Orleans, LA

New Orleans provides the novel's first locale, as Henry Chinaski arrives by train with just a cardboard suitcase, takes a room opposite the Gangplank Café, is hired by magazine distributor R. M. Heathercliff, but quits when he demands a raise. He takes a lower-paying job in a newspaper ad department but is let go because he takes too many beer breaks and is not a college student, which the fat department chief seems to think is imperative. Henry then catches a train bound for Texas.

New York, NY

Henry Chinaski's destination after fleeing his parents' home in Los Angeles, New York is filled with ugly, insect-like people. He settles first near Time Square, then in Greenwich Village, takes two terrible jobs, increases his rate of drinking, and flees to Philadelphia.



Philadelphia, PA

Henry Chinaski's refuge after New York City, Philadelphia is a short stopover. Henry pays for a week in advance in a rooming house, and finds work—and surprisingly, friendship—one night in the nearest bar, which smells like an outhouse.

San Francisco, CA

Henry Chinaski recalls driving a Red Cross truck collecting blood donations in San Francisco as the one job he is sorry to have lost. He also works briefly as a night janitor there.

St. Louis, MO

Cold and ready to snow when Henry Chinaski arrives from Philadelphia, St. Louis offers him refuge in Mrs. Downing's nice, clean boarding house. Henry arrives suffering depressive fits and nausea. Worried at the noises coming from the bathroom, neighbors Gertrude and Hilda check on him and the landlady brings him soup. Henry takes a twelve-hour a day job as a shipping clerk in a ladies' dress wear shop. While in St. Louis, Henry receives his first acceptance letter from Clay Gladmore and Frontfire magazine.



Themes

Sex

Factotum is filled with sex. Henry Chinaski is introduced eying a prostitute and then demonstrating an immature personality by masturbating and drawing obscene pictures in his parents' house. His father's shock when Henry asks nonchalantly to stop for a drink and a hooker en route home from jail leads to Henry's moving to rented quarters. There a fellow boarder turns out to be a whore who pounces on him, repulsing him with the thought of the sperm of four hundred men in her mouth, eats him alive, and forces him to ejaculate against his will. Henry meets a few other prostitutes, including Helen in a Philadelphia bar, who disappears with men for five minutes at a time (an old guy who rides with Teddy Roosevelt requires ten). On a train home from Louisiana, a whore sells herself for \$2 to every man and one woman aboard, and calls Henry a fag for declining. Several times in the novel Henry objects to being called a fag, but seems not to object to homosexuality in others.

Usually, normal women arouse Henry, like buxom Gertrude in St. Louis, who drips of sexuality although their one date goes badly, or alcoholic Laura, whom he meets in Los Angeles and who introduces him to an eccentric millionaire and his three beautiful ladies. Jerry has extorted \$50 a month for life for letting Willie "pump" her. Alone on a yacht, Henry quietly has sex with Jerry while girlfriend Laura warns them not to go too far, and Grace, who afterwards whispers he has raped her. Several times, Henry endangers his employment by dallying with beautiful secretaries. Although Henry has never been good at sweet talk, he gets Carmen alone in a boxcar and pursues Mary Lou while turning down a male employee's proposition. Henry chases a lifelong dream of having a Japanese girl, becomes a "horny redneck", but, caught fondling her, is fired.

Henry's most significant relationship is with Jan, whose meanness and hostility excite him sexually. Jan is hot in the morning when hung-over, while Henry prefers night sex. He gets fired for showing up late too often after playful morning romps. Henry cannot figure out why he does not get rid of Jan, who is so compulsively unfaithful and argumentative. He reminds himself that not all women are whores—just his. She gives him a painful case of the crabs. Henry gets a good job in the classy, charming Hotel Sans, renowned for its expensive hookers, but is fired for getting drunk and telling the manager to get them medical check-ups. The novel ends with Henry watching Darlene, an old-timer stripper looking for a comeback. Henry cannot get an erection.

Writing

Henry Chinaski wants to be a writer. He takes two years of journalism in Los Angeles City College before beginning his life of wandering, during which he writes three to four stories a week and sends them to magazines. He imagines the editors of *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's* saying: "Hey, here's another one of those things by that nut".



Poverty has several times forced Henry to pawn typewriters, and Henry gives up on owning one. Instead he learns to hand print stories faster than he can write them. Most of his submissions are to Clay Gladmore, editor of *Frontfire*, America's foremost literary magazine. Gladmore has discovered William Saroyan and other writers. Henry remembers living in New Orleans on two 25¢ candy bars a day in order not to have a regular job but rather the leisure to write. He discovers that starvation, in fact, hinders art. The myth of the starving artist is a hoax. One must rather bleed and burn one's fellow man, and build an empire atop broken bodies. In such a bleak mood, Henry finds an envelope from Gladmore containing four rejections, but accepting a fifth story, "My Beerdrunk Soul is Sadder Than All the Dead Christmas Trees of the World".

During job interviews, Henry claims to be a writer "temporarily down on my inspiration". He claims to write mostly short stories, but is halfway through a novel about everything, entitled, *The Leaky Faucet of My Doom*. In Los Angeles, Henry falls into the circle of the eccentric millionaire Willie Oxnard, who needs a libretto for his unfinished opera, *The Emperor of San Francisco*. Willie senses that Henry has been around and has class; Henry allows only that he has been around. Henry has been around and pays close attention to the people he meets. En route to Miami, he reads Henry Miller and drinks. When he shoplifts a pair of glowing, rich brown pants (which gets him fired), Henry writes a short story about a poor clerk meeting a rich girl on the beach. Back in Los Angeles, Henry goes to the Times Building to seek a reporting job, knowing they hire only the famous and those who know someone. He is given instead the dullest job of his life, shining brass railings, rather than writing editorials, as he believes he should be. When fired and given his severance check, Henry tells the manager of his journalism background. Unfortunately, the Times is overstaffed.

Employment

Factotum bounces around America, following Henry Chinaski getting and losing jobs. He first turns down a job shucking clams in New Orleans, remembering how his father's job dominates his childhood home. Henry is repulsed by the idea of working so employers can enjoy good cigars, clothes, steaks, beautiful homes, ease, vacations, and women, and realizes only the desire to accumulate money sets them apart from him. He vows to save his pennies, get an idea, and become a class oppressor. Only lack of hope discourages a person. The thought of interviewing is too much, and he cannot imagine waking up at 6:30, getting ready, fighting traffic, making money for somebody else, and being expected to be grateful for the opportunity. He shudders at a job in sanitation and believes two years of college ought to make him capable for more than garbage pick-up.

Several times acrophobia costs Henry a second job, but more often it is coming in late or leaving early, dallying with beautiful coworkers, or simply sloughing off. Henry knows the end is inevitable every time he takes a job. The only job Henry has hated to lose is driving Red Cross nurses around San Francisco collecting blood during the war. He loses it by taking the wrong bridge out of town, getting lost in skid row, and nearly getting them all raped. He does well and enjoys his first day at the Yellow Cab



Company, but is disqualified because of his criminal record. Few places bother to check references, bond, or fingerprint. He is particularly ill-suited to be one store's "extra ball-bearing", which requires smiles, name recollection, and obeisance. He is dutiful only about keeping toilet paper supplied because he identifies with the human need to wipe well after one relieves oneself. He works briefly as a janitor in the Times Building, to which he applies for a reporting job. Sleeping on the job does him in. Henry wonders what gas men have that he lacks, having been turned down by Southern California Gas Company, despite its advertising of secure jobs and good pay. He does well at the classy Hotel Sans, managing the employment office on Sundays, lording it over temporary dishwashers, but gets drunk and assaults the Assistant Manager, lecturing him on how to run the hotel. Henry misses the quota for picking tomatoes through the Farm Labor Market, is thrown out of Workmen For Industry, which specializes in cheap part-time workers and takes fifty percent of the money, and spends his last money on a strip joint, where he finds he cannot get an erection. It seems a fitting ending to his saga.

Style

Point of View

In *Factotum*, Charles Bukowski tells a vaguely autobiographical story in the first person past tense through narrator Henry Chinaski. Henry knows that little of what he does is considered noble by society and makes no excuses for his actions. He drinks because it relieves the pain of consciousness. He avoids people because he dislikes if not hates them. Henry talks matter-of-factly about masturbating in his parents' house and accepts whatever heterosexual activity he can find. When seducing a girlfriend's two female companions, he finds plays on words that allow him to have his cake and eat it too.

When he wants to move on to another city, Henry packs his cardboard suitcase with his few possessions and enough whiskey to enable him to endure chatty companions. Traveling leaves him sleep-deprived and constipated, but he travels when he must. When he settles, Henry knows his way around the interviewing and unemployment processes, answering questions as expected, embellishing creatively however he feels will work best, and omitting his college experience when it seems to get in the way. He sees no virtue in taking part in the rat race of regular employment just to make someone else rich—and appear to be thankful for the opportunity to work one's ass off. Henry does the minimum (or less) and accepts firing gracefully. Bosses, he says, are not hard to fathom. It seems little is hard to fathom for this intelligent, perceptive wanderer.

The only thing Henry appears to care about is his writing career. He is sincerely impressed when he receives his first acceptance notice. He believes it false that anyone can be a writer. He also believes it the myth of the starving artist. Experience has taught Henry that food and whiskey in the stomach make for creativity.

Setting

Factotum is set during the closing months of World War II, chiefly in Los Angeles, California. It opens in New Orleans, as drifter Henry Chinaski steps off a bus with a cardboard suitcase in hand, depressed and hoping a new city will make a difference. It does not, as he gets and loses two jobs in New Orleans, catches a westbound train as part of a section gang, stopping for a curious night in an El Paso, Texas, park, and off in his hometown, Los Angeles. Life with his straight-laced parents sends him quickly to New York City, which he hates intensely, so then proceeds to Philadelphia. There, in a crowded bar, Henry unexpectedly makes friends, but without explanation continues to St. Louis, where he arrives in the dead of winter, feeling depressed. There he finds relative happiness among friendly people and achieves his first literary triumph, selling a short story to a prestigious magazine.

The endnote about the author points out that Charles Bukowski is raised in Los Angeles and lives there for fifty years. He publishes his first short story in 1944 at age forty-four.



This parallels fictional Henry Chinaski who, after getting his first acceptance notice, heads to Los Angeles, hoping to be a writer. He hooks up briefly with an eccentric millionaire and his three alcohol- and sex-addicted female companions. When the benefactor suddenly dies, Henry moves in with another woman who resembles his lost girlfriend, but is far more volatile. Various locales on the edges of the Los Angeles skid row are depicted, as are the Los Alamitos and Hollywood Park racetracks. Henry and Jan break up, sending Henry briefly to Miami, FL, before they reconcile and fight until, evicted and destitute, they part. The novel ends with Henry sitting in the Roxie Theater, watching a stripper.

Language and Meaning

The narrator of Charles Bukowski's novel, *Factotum*, an alcoholic, psychologically depressed, unambitious drifter, Henry Chinaski, who every week writes short stories, which he hand-prints (having pawned a number of typewriters), and sends to magazine editors, knowing they think he is a nut. Perceptive and blunt, Henry works when he must to support himself, but sees little value in making someone else wealthy—and having to appear thankful for the opportunity. Henry is out to impress no one, himself included, as he reminisces about his life on the road to a hearer or audience that cannot be readily characterized.

Henry talks frankly about sex and excrement. Both fascinate him. Despite the remembered pain, he seems to relish the story of how an overweight prostitute nearly bites off his penis, and in a tongue-in-cheek manner, talks about having sex with his girlfriend's two roommates, finding clever ways of telling the truth about what he is doing without admitting it. He seduces a few secretaries, admitting he is not good at sweet talk and realizing that the locales in which he gets sex are often not romantic. He turns down one female prostitute who labels him a fag, and two males' offers of sex, claiming rather indignantly that he is straight. Henry has a fetish for slightly-stained underwear, the smell of excrement, and, while working as a janitor, excels only in keeping the bathrooms well stocked with toilet paper. He declares human beings deserve the right to wipe properly after a good bowel movement.

When demanding his severance check at the Times Building, Henry admits he will drink the money away and acknowledges that few people will find that noble. Most of Henry's language is shocking (certain in 1975, when the novel is written, and more so in 1945, when the action occurs), but Henry does not seem to intend to shock. He simply tells what he sees and remembers. The one exception is when he is seducing Grace; delighting in her reaction to the dirty word, Henry repeats and repeats that he is only fucking her.

Structure

Charles Bukowski's novel, *Factotum*, consists of eighty-seven chapters, ranging in length from one page to half a dozen pages. In some, the action flows directly from



chapter-to-chapter, while in others there is a distinct break, as when anti-hero Henry Chinaski moves from one city to another.

The novel begins with Henry arriving in New Orleans, Louisiana, depressed and hoping a new city will make a difference. He has obviously been wandering a long time, rather aimlessly. The New Orleans sojourn is brief, serving to establish that Henry is an alcoholic drifter, lackadaisical about employment and unemployment. After he gets and loses two jobs in New Orleans, Henry catches a westbound train and gets off in his hometown, Los Angeles, California. Conflict with his parents sends him quickly to New York City, Philadelphia, and St. Louis, where he finds relative happiness and achieves his first literary triumph. That this sends him back to Los Angeles is not stated but can be implied.

Except for a brief flight to Miami, Florida, to escape a disintegrating relationship with Jan, the rest of the book is set in Los Angeles, and shows Henry getting and losing menial jobs, drinking, getting jailed on misdemeanors, and twice almost finding a way out: as part of millionaire Willie's entourage and as Manny's partner in handicapping horses.

The story moves forward linearly without flashback or foreshadowing, except that twice Henry recalls situations that remind him of his present relativity. He turns down one job because he remembers how work is the center of his childhood home, and when he tells Jan that he hates his parents—as though the physical fight when he is brought home drunk was not proof enough—she suggests this has warped him.



Quotes

"I was so ashamed. To think, my own son in prison.'

"We walked down to his car, got in. He drove off. He was still weeping. 'It's bad enough you don't want to serve your country in time of War...'

"The shrink said I was unfit.'

"My son, if it wasn't for the First World War I never would have met your mother and you never would have been born.'

"Do you have a cigarette?'

"Now you've been jailed. A thing like this could kill your mother.'

"We passed some cheap bars on lower Broadway.

"Let's go in and catch a drink.'

"What? You mean you'd dare drink right after getting out of jail for intoxication?'

"That's when you need a drink the most.'

"Don't you ever tell your mother you wanted a drink right after getting out of jail,' he warned me.

"I need a piece of ass too.'

"He nearly ran a red light. We drove in silence.

"By the way,' he said finally. 'I guess you know that the jail fine will be added to your room, board and laundry bill'" Chap. 14, pp. 33-34

"It was slow work; the dust had caked, turned into embedded grime. I cut my hands several times on the edges of the metal slats. The soapy water burned.

"Shot of whiskey, Tommy.'

"I finished one set of blinds and hung them up. The patrons of the bar turned to look at my work.

"Beautiful!'

"It sure helps the place.'

"They'll probably raise the price of drinks.'

"Shot of whiskey, Tommy,' I said." Chap. 22, p. 49

"After losing several typewriters to pawnbrokers I simply gave up on the idea of owning one. I printed out my stories by hand and sent them out that way. I hand-printed then with a pen. I got to be a very fast hand-printer. I got so that I could hand-print faster than I could write. I wrote three or four short stories a week. I kept things in the mail. I imagined the editors of The Atlantic Monthly and Harper's saying: 'Hey, here's another one of those things by that nut...'" Chap. 27, p. 59

"Then we sat around and talked for a while until one of the guys looked at his watch and said, 'O.K.' and they got up and took Willie off the chair and laid him out on a stretcher. Then they carried him out of there and that was it.

"Shit,' said Grace. 'I'm fucked.'

"You're fucked,' said Jerry. 'I still got my fifty a month.'

"And your round, fat ass,' said Grace.



"And my round, fat ass,' said Jerry.

"Laura and I knew we were fucked. There was no need to say it." Chap. 35, pp. 84-85

"I heard and felt the kisses, then felt little licks. Then I forgot all about the bicycle warehouse. Than I heard her ripping up a newspaper. I felt something being fitted over the tip of my dick. 'Look,' she said.

"I sat up. Jan had fashioned a little paper hat and fitted it over the head of my dick. Around the brim was a little yellow ribbon. The thing stood fairly tall.

"Oh, isn't he cute?' she asked me.

"He? That's me.'

"Oh no, that isn't you, that's him, you have nothing to do with him.'

"I don't?'

"No. Do you mind if I kiss him again?'

"All right, it's all right. Go ahead.'

"Jan lifted the hat off and holding on with one hand she began kissing where the hat had been. Her eyes looked deep into mine. The tip of it entered her mouth. I fell back, damned." Chap. 39, p. 92

"At some point during one of our hellish nights World War II ended. The war had always been at best a vague reality to me, but now it was over. And the jobs that had always been difficult to get became more so. I got up each morning and went to all the public employment agencies starting with the Farm Labor Market. I struggled up at 4:30 a.m., hungover, and was usually back before noon. I walked back and forth between the agencies, endlessly. Sometimes I did get an occasional day's work unloading a boxcar, but this was only after I started going to a private agency which took one third of my wages. Consequently, there was very little money and we fell further and further behind with the rent. But we kept the wine bottles lined up bravely, made love, fought, and waited." Chap. 42, p. 100

"Manny and I took a little longer with our lunches and came back smoking good cigars. But it was still a rough ride every afternoon to make the last race. The crowd got to know us as we came running out of that tunnel, and every afternoon they were waiting. They cheered and waved racing forms, and the cheers seemed to grow louder as we went past them on the dead run to the betting windows." Chap. 46, pp. 107-108

"He struggled and was surprisingly strong. He got his teeth into my left ear; he was biting my ear off. I got my fingers around his throat and choked him. There was one long white hair growing out of his throat. I pushed his other leg through. A picture of Zsa Zsa Gabor flashed in my brain: she was cool, composed, immaculate, wearing pearls, her breasts bulging out of her low cut dress - then the lips that would never be mine said, no. The old man's fingers were clinging to a plank. He was hanging from the underside of the grandstand. I lifted one hand off. Then I lifted the other. He dropped through space. He fell slowly. He hit, bounced once, higher than one would expect, came down, hit again, took a second small bounce, then lay there motionless. There wasn't any



blood. The people about us were very quiet. They bent over their racing forms." Chap. 51, p. 117

"It was true that I didn't have much ambition, but there ought to be a place for people without ambition. I mean a better place than the one usually reserved. How in the hell could a man enjoy being awakened at 6:30 a.m. by an alarm clock, leap out of bed, dress, force-feed, shit, piss, brush teeth and hair, and fight traffic to get to a place where essentially you made lots of money for somebody else and were asked to be grateful for the opportunity to do so?" Chap. 55, p. 127

"I had visited the American Cancer Society earlier, as I had understood it to be free. I had lumps all over my body, dizzy spells, I was spitting blood, and I had gone there only to be given an appointment for three weeks later. Now like every American boy I had always been told: catch cancer early. Then you go down to catch it early and they make you wait three weeks for an appointment. That's the difference between what we're told and actuality.

"After three weeks I went back and they told me they could give me certain tests free, but that I could pass these tests and wouldn't really be sure that I didn't have cancer. However, if I gave them \$25 and passed that test, I could be fairly sure I didn't have cancer. To be absolutely sure, after I had taken the \$25 test, I would have to take the \$75 test, and if I passed that one too, I could relax. It would mean my trouble was alcoholism or nerves or the clap." Chap. 70, pp. 162-163

"Bud came back pushing three one gallon cans of paint on the order wagon. He put them on the packing table. They were labeled crimson. He handed me three labels. The labels said vermilion.

"'We're out of vermilion,' he said. 'Soak off these labels and paste on the vermilion labels.'

"'There's quite a difference between crimson and vermilion,' I said.

"'Just do it.'

"Bud left me some rags and a razor blade. I soaked the rags in water and wrapped them around the cans. Then I scraped off the old labels and glued on the new ones.

"He came back a few minutes later. He had a can of ultramarine and a label for cobalt blue. Well, he was getting closer..." Chap. 76, pp. 175-176

"Darlene fingered her naked breasts, showing them to us, her eyes filled with the dream, her lips moist and parted. Then suddenly she turned and waved her enormous behind at us. The beads leaped and flashed, went crazy, sparkled. The spotlight shook and danced like the sun. The four man band crackled and banged. Darlene spun around. She tore away the beads. I looked, they looked. We could see her cunt hairs through the flesh-colored gauze. The band really spanked her ass.

"And I couldn't get it up." Chap. 87, p. 205

Topics for Discussion

How does Henry Chinaski view women? Are any of the women he meets in the novel good for him?

How does Henry Chinaski relate to minorities? Is he a racist?

How does Henry Chinaski view humanity in general?

What does Henry Chinaski's love of classical music say about him that differs with the rest of his existence?

Which of Henry Chinaski's phobias is most disabling?

Does Henry Chinaski seem to have the makings to be an author?

Could Henry Chinaski have fit in any of the places he lives and works? What would it have taken for him to settle somewhere?