

Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates Short Guide

Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates by Tom Robbins

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Characters

Switters considers himself to be a "free man," as in the Hindu quotation that opens the first part of the book. When Maestra accuses him of not liking animals, he denies it, saying, "It's cages I dislike. Cages and leashes and hobbles and halters. It's the taming I dislike . . . domesticity shrinks the soul of the beast." To Switters, dogmatism is the same as cages, leashes, hobbles, and halters. He refuses to be bogged down in absolutes. Robbins uses Switters, a self-styled "absurdist," to illustrate both the conflict between good and evil and the quest for enlightenment central to the book.

When approached from a dogmatic perspective, Switters easily could be viewed as a drug-using pederast who disrespects the sanctity of a nun's vocation. But Switters has rules about drug use, and in a confused manner, about women as well.

First, he sees there are drugs that expand one's ego and drugs that cause revelations.

He limits his use to the revelatory kinds, because he favors "awe over swagger." So, his rules about drug use are fairly clear; his pursuit of girls, rather than women, is not so clear.

Without any doubt, Switters breaks a taboo of Western culture by lusting after girls, rather than women. Indeed he is obsessed with the idea of femininity: one of his points of pride is that he knows "the word for vagina in seventy-one separate languages." However, he ponders the reasons why in particular he prefers the young ones, at one point hypothesizing that it is because "they [give] off the organic equivalent, the biological equivalent . . . of new-car smell." Yet, when presented with an opportunity to consummate his urges for stepsister Suzy, he cannot. He desires youth not as much as he desires innocence and purity.

His pursuits, then, of both Suzy and of Sister Domino Thiry, represent a quest for innocence. Bobby Case, who shares his predilection for girls, warns him against his longing for Suzy, reminding him of the cultural taboo. "Our girls are culturally unprepared for . . . emotional intricacies . . .

I know you wouldn't want to muddy her sweet waters." Switters reluctantly agrees.

Yet when faced with someone his own age, like the Peruvian Gloria, he thinks she is "a tad old for his specialized taste."

Switters flashes back to time he spent in Bangkok (a city notorious for child prostitution) "in the company of an actual adolescent." It is unclear what happens between the two, but it is clear that Switters understands his own cultural taboos about the young girl, even if they are not shared by her culture. "He bought her a new silk dress, jeans, and a compact disk player.



Then he put her on a bus back to her native village with six thousand dollars . . . her brief career as a whore over." He goes on to explain that she will experience no shame, since sexual shame in the way that Westerners experience it does not exist in Thailand. "Not much given to self-analysis," Switters does not stop to consider the contradictions in his own beliefs and behaviors. Switters says, "I think sex is filthy and nasty—and I can't get enough of it." Bobby Case responds, "Paradox! . . . or we could say that innocence and nastiness enjoy a symbiotic relationship." "It is a matter of cultural context," they conclude.

No matter how the reader may feel about this taboo, Robbins, via Switters, does his best to justify it. He reasons that "Ancient Greeks had a concept they called 'eating the taboo,'" in which men would "deliberately break any and all of their culture's prevailing taboos in order to loosen their hold, destroy their power . . . a casting out of demons." Bobby Case is not convinced. "I sure hope Hell has wheelchair access," he tells Switters.

However, Switters's conversations with Masked Beauty and Sister Domino Thiry expand his views of what is beautiful and pure. When Switters finds himself to be attracted to Sister Domino, who is his own age, he surprises himself. At first, though, Sister Domino does not appear to reciprocate and suggests that he might want to be with Fannie, the randy nun. "She's not so bad," he says, "for a woman her age." But when, almost by accident, he becomes involved with Sister Domino Thiry, he notices only her beauty.

Without a doubt, Switters inherits his irreverence from his very modern grandmother who, before he is two, insists that he call her, "Maestra," lest she be known by "one of those declassé G words, like granny or grams or grandma." Maestra, as "tough as a plastic steak," very obviously influences the way Switters speaks, which Robbins calls "overly flowery, formal speech but always done tongue-in-cheek." Maestra is instrumental in one of the critical coincidences of the story. She tells Switters, "I did intercept an e-mail message in which you promised little Suzy you were gonna take her 'all the way to grandma's house.'" By blackmailing him, Maestra coerces Switters to take her parrot, Sailor Boy, to Peru with him, thus beginning the chain of coincidences that lead Switters to his starship and on to Syria and the Vatican.

Maestra, whose name, she tells Switters, in Italian means "teacher," or "master," acts as a guide for Switters, the external superego to Switters's lustful id. Her not so-gentle reminders cause him to learn to balance good and evil, to distinguish for himself between freedom and license. Maestra serves, perhaps, as a spirited representative of the mainstream American opinion. "This business with little Suzy is not funny," she warns him. "It's sick. What's more, it's criminally prosecutable." Unfortunately, it turns out that Maestra's hacking has gotten her in trouble. Such technology expertise might be considered unusual for a senior citizen, but as she tells Switters, it is "easy as pie. Child's play." As a result of the stress related to her conviction in a hacking case, Maestra has a stroke, and although she is not paralyzed, her speech becomes slurred. Thus, she won't see Switters until she recovers, because he would "try to take advantage of my vocal impediment to win his first argument with me in thirty years."



Switters learns from her attorneys, before he departs for Syria and meets the real blue nude, that she is bankrupt. He agrees that she should sell Matisse's blue nude (which she owns and has willed to him), in order to finance her recovery. His agreement to sell one thing he considers beautiful helps him to reconsider his entire concept of beauty.

Switters's one "bosom buddy" and meditation teacher is "no Thai monk or Himalayan sage . . . [but] a CIA pilot from Hondo, Texas, by the name of Bobby Case, known to some as Bad Bobby and to others as Nut Case." Since Switters keeps in touch with him by e-mail during all of his journeys and detours, Bobby Case as a character acts to further the plot. His advice to Switters, and Switters's responses, ties together Seattle, Syria, and Peru. In the end, information he learns about Switters's trip to Peru and the resulting shaman's spell is enough to propel Case down to Peru to rescue Switters from the sentence of a permanent ride in the "starship." Case understands how to help Switters because the two have in common "a cynical suspicion of politico-economic systems and a disdain for what passed for 'patriotism' in the numbed noodles of the manipulated masses . . . and that they actually believed in freedom." Like Switters, Bobby Case embraces all the contradictions of the true free men.

Thanks to R. Potney Smithe, Switters survives the shaman's curse. A cultural ethnographer who is studying the Kandakandero Indians, Smithe claims to be an objective observer and documenter of behavior who longs for a second audience with the shaman, End of Time. Switters disapproves of Smithe's science, claiming that it exploits the natives and that his objectivity is "as big a hoax in science as it is in journalism." But he is impressed with Smithe's vocabulary and his entreaty. When the Indians hear the parrot Sailor Boy repeat his stock phrase, "People of zee wurl, relax," Smithe translates it, and having heard of the bird, End of Time summons Switters.

At first, Switters is reluctant to go, wanting just to release the bird and get out of "South too-goddamned-vivid America." Thus, Smithe entreats Switters, "I've boiled my pudding in this bleeding hole for five bleeding months, petitioning, pleading, flattering, bribing, doing everything short of dropping on all fours . . . to win another interview with End of Time, and you come along . . .

oblivious . . . and fall into it." So Switters makes his fateful journey, agreeing to take notes for Smithe. But when Smithe comes back the next day to retrieve him, eagerly awaiting details about End of Time, he meets his end. Since End of Time placed a curse on Smithe as well, Switters asks him to test it, to see if the curse is "for real."

When Smithe tests it, he finds that indeed it is. Thus, as the Kandakandero says, "this mister is very, very dead." Smithe represents the kind of dogmatic rule-follower that Switters (and evidently Robbins) dislikes. He meets his just end in service of the principal theme of the book.

End of Time, or (depending on the translator) Today is Tomorrow, plays a relatively small part, but his role is critical in the formulation of the plot. This leader with a head in the



shape of a pyramid analyzes the superiority of white men and thinks he has found their mysterious power in laughter. Since his fellow Indians "don't know from funny," he decides that his people must "fashion shields out of laughter" to "withstand the assault of the white man."

But although he may be deficient in regard to humor, End of Time knows secrets about the universe to reveal to Switters. These revelations are so startling that Switters cannot put all of them into words. And the cost of these revelations, according to Switters, is "henceforth I must never allow my feet to touch the ground . . . and if I ever do . . . I will instantly fall over dead." End of Time's curse leads Switters to contemplate the meaning of enlightenment. Much later, he remembers a guru who likens the state of enlightenment to "orbiting the earth from a height of two inches," which for practical reasons is what he must do on his stilts or in his wheelchair. Furthermore, when Switters considers the third prophecy of Fatima—that the salvation of mankind will come from somewhere other than the church—together with the secrets revealed by End of Time, he is able to hypothesize that mankind's salvation will come from the Amazonian Indians. Thus, End of Time serves to lead Switters to enlightenment.

Suzy is the daughter of Switters's stepfather, not a biological sister, but closely enough related and young enough to be off limits, or taboo. Switters views her as "a freshly budded embodiment of the feminine archetype . . . a glimmer of primal Eve." Suzy's fascination with the Virgin Mary and the prophecy of Fatima leads Switters to assist her in the research she needs for a term paper. Coincidentally, this research proves extremely helpful to Switters later at the convent. He ponders the nature of "Marian fantasies of healthy girls," observing that like the love of horses, those fantasies, "tend to wane . . . once they become sexually active." He attributes Suzy's fascination with Mary to her "status as Super Virgin," despairing that this "casts a monstrously mixed message—motherhood is divine, sex a sin." Switters tries to urge Suzy toward writing a daring thesis, but she just wants to "write [the story] down for everybody." Switters lies and says he is not disappointed. Suzy's lack of sophistication makes her an unchallenging conversationalist. Switters wonders, before she walks in and discovers that he has lied to her and that he can really walk, what right he has "to teach her anything?" Suzy as a character exists in order for Switters to learn the difference between being innocent and too innocent. At the end, Switters must decide between Sister Domino Thiry or Suzy. "He loved them both. He wanted them both. It was only natural. He was Switters." Although the narrator does not reveal the answer, Switters's greater sophistication and his deeper understanding of what is pure and beautiful make it unlikely that he chooses Suzy.

Switters's first words to Sister Domino Thiry are "I love you." A French nun who grew up in the United States, Sister Domino provides the very combination of innocence and experience that Switters seems to crave, "a woman who would stick to your ribs."

After she rescues him from heat stroke in the Syrian Desert, he observes that "she was older than her voice and mannerisms had led him to believe. Older, but no less sparkling of eye." When he compliments her "I am most taken with . . . your eyes," he finds her response "refreshing" since she does not protest at all. "Tonight they are



ruined. But as a rule, they are my nicest feature." In their discussions about the origins of the convent, she asks him about his knowledge of nuns, and his response to her is a clue to the reader about the advancement of theme involving the pursuit of innocence. "Nun . . . is an old Coptic Christian word meaning pure." Switters is charmed by her near-grasp of the English language.

"Don't try to butter me off," she tells him.

Another time she explains that her English vocabulary is coming back "like the swallows to San Juan Cappuccino." Further, Sister Domino's name explains one of the book's mysteries: When the name John Foster Dulles is mentioned—which occurs frequently in the text—Switters and Bobby Case spit on the ground. Coincidentally, the nun got the nickname while she lived in the United States during the Cold War.

Dulles used the term "Domino Theory," according to Switters, "to hoodwink the American public into supporting our criminal war against Vietnam." Switters says "don't remind me" when she asks if he understands the origin. Sister Domino sets in motion Switters's domino effect of a deeper understanding and appreciation of innocence and beauty.

It astounds Switters to learn that Masked Beauty, the abbess of the Syrian convent, was the model for Matisse's blue nude, the very painting that hangs in Maestra's living room. His fascination with the blue nude foreshadows Switters's auspicious arrival at the convent. He describes the painting this way: "Matisse's nude was nude but not really naked . . . she was far from brazen. . . . In her way, she was more innocent than Suzy, wiser than Maestra; a woman such as Switters had never known nor would ever know—or so he thought." The blue nude becomes symbolic to Switters of the perfect woman, innocent, yet wise, naked, but not ashamed. When he meets Masked Beauty, he debates the nature of beauty with her, and he assists her in her research project about birth control, Fatima, and the world's religions. Masked Beauty argues "much of the poverty, violence, addiction, ignorance, mental illness, pollution, and climate changes plaguing human kind in general" has "roots in careless or coerced reproduction." As a result of his debates with Masked Beauty (and her niece, Domino Thiry), he no longer finds it so easy to consider wisdom and purity to be exclusionary. Thus, Switters gains a deeper understanding of the nature of beauty and of innocence.



Social Concerns

At the beginning of his picaresque novel, *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*, Tom Robbins quotes a Hindu verse, "Sometimes naked / Sometimes mad / Now the scholar / Now the fool / Thus they appear on earth: / The free men." Thus, Robbins reveals the crux of his story—the world and its people are full of contradictions; the ones who understand this are the free men, or in the words of the protagonist, "enlightened and endarkened."

The protagonist embodies some of the contradictions Robbins wishes to illuminate. Switters is an unorthodox CIA agent who takes the designer-drug, XTC, for enlightenment, a vegetarian who eats red-eye gravy, a hacker who hates computers, a tough guy who is squeamish about bodily functions, a lover of innocence and purity who lusts after his teenage stepsister and has sex with a nun. Even Switters cannot decide whether he is a hero or a rogue, or in his words, a "cowboy" or an "angel."

Although extreme, such strong contrasts mirror those evident in the popular culture of America at the turn of the century, a time of simultaneous "politically correct" and "anything-goes" mentalities.

As he is not known for his realism, Robbins can begin with these contrasts, mix them with several outlandish coincidences, and end up with an entertaining story.

Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates tells of a CIA operative who is in love, or at least in lust, with his teen-aged stepsister. On a CIA mission, he embarks on a trip to Peru, bringing along, at his grandmother's request, her aging parrot, Sailor Boy. The parrot knows only one phrase: "People of zee wurl, relax." Because the parrot's statement so aptly describes their religion (one based on humor), the native Kandakandero Indians become enamored with the bird, leading Switters to confer with their shaman, "End of Time." As a result of their conference, Switters ends up in a wheelchair, or what he calls his "starship." From there—by way of numerous coincidences—Switters almost has an affair with his stepsister while helping her to research the prophecies of Our Lady of Fatima, gets fired from the CIA (a result of his honest explanation about his wheelchair), races paper boats with art students, and finally winds up in a convent in the middle of the Syrian desert, having everything-but-sex (according to the late 1990s meaning) with a nun called Sister Domino Thiry (pun intended). Here, he meets the abbess, or Masked Beauty, who was the model for Matisse's *Blue Nude* (the very painting that hangs in his grandmother, Maestra's living room). Masked Beauty, adding coincidence to coincidence, knows the third prophecy of Fatima. Customarily, fiction writers refrain from relying so heavily on coincidence and fantastical chains of events, but Robbins embraces coincidence, using it, together with the contrasts, as a literary device in the story.

Along with the stark contrasts he shows among truths of the late 1990s world, Robbins documents a number of signs-of-the-times.



For example, suspicious of authority, Switters is alarmed by what he terms to be world control by corporations and "governments— and the armed agencies that [serve] them."

He views advertising to be symptomatic of many American cultural ills. "Human societies have always defined themselves through narration, but nowadays corporations are telling man's stories for him." In talking about members of sixteen-year-old stepsister Suzy's generation, he says they are "rather blissfully unaware" of "being lied to by corporate America—through the movies, TV shows, and magazines . . . a hundred times a day." Opining about action-adventures, or what he calls "boomboom movies," Switters tells a disinterested seat mate on the plane: "Subconsciously, people feel trapped by our culture's confining buildings and its relentless avalanche of consumer goods. So when they watch all this shit being demolished in a totally irreverent and devil-may-care fashion, they experience the kind of release the Greeks used to get from their tragedies. The ecstasy of psychic liberation." Thus Switters expresses a late 1990s angst about the conquest of the world, or at least the culture, by commercialism.

Another conflict indicative of the times is the factor of excessive "political correctness," the confusion around the proper or most respectful term for, as example, AfricanAmericans. Switters has a discussion with an African-American fellow-rogue spy, who tells him that he cannot detect "a hell of a lot of difference between the terms 'colored people' and 'people of color.'" Switters agrees. "The distinctions are subtle all right . . . [t]oo subtle for the rational mind. Only the political mind can grasp them." Switters cannot conceive of the extreme liberal view, calling its adherents "new-age fluff heads."

Nor can he conceive of the extremely conservative "dour-faced, stiff-minded, suckbutt, kick-butt, buzz-cut, macho dickheads" view, either. Switters's reaction to both extremes mirrors that same end-of-twentiethcentury tension between extreme liberalism and conservatism.

Also indicative of the times, is the characters' use of the Internet for communication. From Switters's sending pornographic e-mails to his stepsister out of state, to his researching Our Lady of Fatima, to cross-the-wdrld communications with Bobby Case, the Internet plays an important role in the plot. Even cybersex is discussed, disdained by Switters, who says, "I'm not gonna sit around for hours every day having nonorgasmic sex with a computer or TV set." Yet Switters is not afraid of technology. He tells Suzy, "virtual reality is nothing new . . . books . . . have always generated virtual reality." Ultimately, the Internet plays a positive role; because, using a battery-powered laptop computer and wireless connection, Switters is able to e-mail the Vatican on behalf of the nuns and negotiate a visit to the Vatican.

Switters's contacting the Catholic Church by e-mail is one very modern means of communication. Even more modern is the message he sends on behalf of the nuns.

They ask the Vatican—in return for keeping secret the third prophecy of Our Lady of Fatima—for an "unabashed appeal for papal, sanction of birth control." Switters agrees, saying, "too damn many people [are] using the roads, using energy . . . using everything

except good taste and birth control. I mean, did you get a look at the parents of the American septuplets . . . That one couple's one tasteless test-tube tumble could dork down the entire gene pool."

With this subplot, Robbins not only makes a statement about the necessity of the church's control of its members' lives, but also he makes a statement about those people who choose to play God in their own lives.

So, the nuns have the secret third prophesy of Fatima. Here the story follows the truth closely. The Catholic Church did in fact keep the third prophecy of Our Lady of Fatima a guarded secret for almost a century, until ten days after the release of Robbins's book. On a trip to Portugal in spring 2000, the Pope revealed the third prophecy. According to Time magazine, Robbins suggested that the Vatican's release of the statement was more than a coincidence, that the prophecy from his book—that the salvation of mankind will come from somewhere other than the church—was more accurate than the Catholic Church is comfortable admitting.

Robbins is not afraid to satirize or challenge the authenticity of the Catholic Church.

Such irreverence is a rule, rather than an exception, in his work. In fact, it should be noted that in depicting turn-of-the-century American culture, humorist Robbins takes serious issues such as incest, casual drug use, and organized religion in general about as seriously as he takes himself. Those easily offended by such humor and/or deliberate irreverence may want to avoid this book, or at the very least, take the advice of the parrot, Sailor Boy: "People of zee wurl, relax."



Techniques

At the beginning of *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*, the narrator takes a break from narration to comment on technique, saying, "[n]ow, it appears that this prose account has unintentionally begun in partial mimicry of the mind." Here Robbins reveals a technique he has used in every novel, a stream-of-conscious narrative. Almost every one of his novels is told in the third person, using what one reviewer has called a "single omniscient meta-narrator . . . a device [that] allows him to take the reader on a spiritual journey." This narrator-asguru helps Robbins to develop a theme common to all his novels: the quest for enlightenment.

If, according to the narrator in *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*, the mark of enlightenment is laughter, then another technique Robbins uses might also develop this idea. Figurative language and wordplay in general decorate Robbins's prose. Strong (if unorthodox) images abound from similes and metaphors. The reader pictures the gelatinous "cool as clam aspic" air of Seattle, or sees Maestra's eyes "like the apertures through which Tabasco droplets enter the world." He speaks of turtles that weigh "as much as a wheelbarrow load of cabbages" and describes "heavy-lidded caimans [that] did Robert Mitchum imitations, seeming at once slow and sinister and stoned." Robbins can take a common word apart and make a joke of it, as in, "a view that was all pan and no orama." Switters orders food from a Thai restaurant, remarking that the names of the dishes sound like "a harelip pleading for a package of thumbtacks." Another time, a group of clouds is compared to "a herd of white-trash shoppers just crawled out of shacks and sheds and trailer homes for the end-of-winter sale at Wal-Mart." Although some of the word play is extreme, even scatological ("If innocence was toilet tissue, Godzilla could have wiped his butt with Switters's smile"), the effect is usually humorous, keeping the reader on the brink of enlightenment throughout the story.

Also at the beginning of this novel, the narrator hints at plot, saying this, "is probably not the way in which an effective narrative ought properly to unfold—not even in these days when the world is showing signs of awakening from its linear trance." *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* is one of Robbins's most carefully plotted novels, but even a somewhat linear progression of events does not cause Robbins to shy away from tangents. On a discourse about bats, he discusses the winged creatures, explaining that women are afraid of bats because the creatures can become entangled in their hair. From the topic of bats, he further deviates to the notion that St.

Paul decreed that women's heads must be covered in church "because of the angels," which, like bats, have wings. He explains, "In Paul's era, words for angel and demon were interchangeable." From here he continues his discourse of the "line between cowboy and angel," which, he says, is "no wider than an alfalfa sprout." So Robbins connects these tangents thematically with the rest of the story. His willingness to deviate from the Western, linear notion of the progression of a story is proof of Robbins's own study of and appreciation for Eastern literary techniques, which tend to be more circuitous.



Themes

Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates has as its core the universal theme of good versus evil; however in this book, neither good nor evil wins; it is a draw. The central point of the text is that in order for good to exist, evil must exist in tandem. The idea of the co-existence of good and evil in all things answers some of the difficult questions raised in this book: How is it that a holy institution like the Roman Catholic Church can be corrupt? How should one view the modern fascination with the Virgin Mary, when she appears only a few times, in passing, in the Bible? Why would a CIA agent take drugs and lust after his stepsister? Switters sees no conflict in these questions; he sees the good and evil in things simultaneously. Rather than fearing or fighting evil, he embraces the inherent good and bad in all that he does. He finds that "no matter how valid, how vital, one's belief system might be, one undermines that system and ultimately negates it when one gets rigid and dogmatic in one's adherence to it." So the danger is dogmatism, not evil.

This contrast, at least according to Switters, illuminates a related theme, the pursuit of enlightenment. Laughter is a mark of enlightenment—to see the contradictions and find joy in them causes one to be enlightened, or as Switters says, "enlightened and endarkened." Switters discusses the feeling of enlightenment, saying, "you strip the layers away, one by one, until the images grow fainter and fainter and the noise grows quieter and quieter, and bing! you arrive at the core, which is naked emptiness, a kind of exhilarating vacuum . . . each layer is a separate dimension, a new world." Later, Sister Domino Thiry asks Switters whether anything is making him "glad to be alive."

He tells her yes, because "I'm in a foreign country, illegally, in a mysterious convent, inappropriately, and in conversation with the blue nude's niece, improbably. What's not to enjoy?" This statement captures the very spirit of enlightenment for Switters.

A third theme Robbins toys with is a question about the nature of innocence, or purity. At the outset, Switters is seen to be lusting for his stepsister. He and Bobby Case find older women less appealing, but Case sees a difference in their reasons. He says, "I chase after jailbait. I'm a midlife adolescent, I can't make commitments, I'm scared of intimacy . . . but with you, Swit, it's something different. I get the feeling you're attracted to . . . innocence." Switters's pursuit of innocence does not change as a result of the action in the story, but his definition of it does.

Switters's considerations about beauty help to alter his definition of innocence.

Early in the story, Maestra explains "the six qualities that distinguish the human from the subhuman." Those are "humor, imagination, eroticism . . . spirituality, rebelliousness, and Aesthetics, an appreciation of beauty for its own sake." She goes on to observe, however, that many so-called humans are subhuman in their lack of one or more of the qualities. Switters, who shares her high standards, considers the innocent and the pure to be beautiful. However, until he meets Masked Beauty, he misses some of the subtler implications of beauty.



He explains to her that beginning in the late 1980s, "socio-political dullards had chopped up beauty and fed it to the dogs . . . on grounds ranging from its lack of pragmatic social application to the notion that it was somehow unfair to that and those who were by beauty's standards, ugly." The abbess argues that beauty is purposeless and indeed it does oppress the plain and give the beautiful "a false sense of superiority." Switters disagrees with her, but when she removes her veil, and he sees her septuagenarian's face is beautiful, yet marked with an ugly wart, he considers her point of view. Once a beautiful young woman, she had prayed for the mar on her beauty because her beauty was "a distraction for others and an onus" for herself. By the time Masked Beauty, much later in the story, allows that perhaps she should have accepted her beauty as a gift from God, Switters has developed a more sophisticated and encompassing view about beauty.

What he had once thought of as beautiful might be "just too goddamn vivid."

Key Questions

Because of its concern with good and evil, *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* lends itself well to discussions about morality. Since Switters can be viewed as parthero and part-rogue, debate about the nature of the change he undergoes in the story may ensue.

1. The principal theme of *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* is good versus evil, or in this case that good is the same thing as evil. Since the singular notions of good and evil govern the popular idea of morality, can Switters (who believes in this duality) have a moral sense? Identify specific ways this sense is shown in his behavior.
2. Critics have complained that Switters's views show "contempt for the citizens and institutions of modern democracies." What evidence supports or contradicts this statement?
3. Switters thinks that "[t]he stiff-witted and academic seem not to comprehend that it is entirely possible to be ironic and sincere at the same instant; that a knowing tongue in cheek does not necessarily preclude an affectionate glow in the heart." Is he correct? Are there times when it is not appropriate to be "tongue-in-cheek" or ironic? If so, what set of rules should one use to decide?
4. If enlightenment comes from recognizing the contradictions in life and finding joy in them, which characters in the novel are enlightened or become enlightened, and which do not? What process enlightens them?

Literary Precedents

The title of *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* comes from Arthur Rimbaud's farewell-to-literature poem, "A Season in Hell" (1872). In addition, other relationships to Rimbaud's work and his life exist in Robbins's novel. One critic cited lines from "The Drunken Boat": "If there is one water in Europe I want, / it is the black cold pool / where into the scented twilight / a child squatting full of sadness / launches a boat frail as a butterfly in May." This verse is evocative of Switters's paper boat races with the "art girls." Further, the notion of the main character whose feet cannot touch the ground may relate to Rimbaud's life story. Rimbaud's leg cancer and Switters's curse from the shaman, End of Time, both cause them to be carried around, "two inches off the ground." Judging from the book's title, the possible relationship to "the Drunken Boat" and the resemblance between Switters's and Rimbaud's plights, one may, at the very least, assume that Robbins was reading Rimbaud at the time he wrote his novel.

Robbins's style of writing, with its plays on words and non-linear storytelling may seem unique to the modern reader. However, stream-of-consciousness narration in this vividly descriptive style—particularly with the picturesque subject matter—is seen in Henry Miller's work. Books such as *The Tropic of Cancer* show similarly non-linear and intensely descriptive storylines. In addition, Robbins's work has been compared—in terms of plot and Eastern influence—with that of J. D. Salinger; both writers create stories that are difficult to summarize, in which the whole is somehow greater than the sum of its parts. In interviews, Robbins has said that among his influences are Thomas Pynchon (specifically, his *Mason & Dixon*), Franz Kafka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Vladimir Nabokov.



Related Titles

Tom Robbins's first novel, *Another Roadside Attraction*, was published in 1971.

Although the hardcover release was not a great success, the book became a cult classic. In fact, one of Elvis Presley's close associates claimed Elvis had been reading it at the time of his death. This novel is the story of two young hippies and their encounters with the more mainstream American culture around them, a contrast revisited in *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*. Similar elements include experimentation with drugs and the irreverent subplot involving the Roman Catholic Church, only the irreverence in *Another Roadside Attraction* involves a botched Second Coming and a corpse at a roadside zoo.

Robbins's second novel, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, published in 1976, is best known for its 1994 film adaptation by director Gus Van Sant. Actress Uma Thurman stars as Sissy Hankshaw, who is born in a small town with an extra-large thumb. Sissy hitchhikes from Virginia to Manhattan then to "the Dakota Badlands," where she meets Bonanza Jellybean, the lesbian cowgirls of the Rubber Rose Ranch, and Dr. Robbins, her reality instructor. The film received poor reviews, but like *Another Roadside Attraction*, the paperback garnered a strong cult following. In *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, Robbins shows his strong tendency for tangential rants, this time about yams, yin & yang, and whooping cranes. Although his attempts to combine the many tangents of the story are similar to his efforts in *Fierce Invalids Home from a Hot Climate*, in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, this effort is less successful. Although the book is humorous and appreciated by real Robbins fans, it is not one of his best.

Still-Life with Woodpecker (1980) is one of the most widely-read of Robbins novels.

This complex love story takes place inside a package of Camel cigarettes. Here also, Robbins begins his fixation on "neoteny," or staying young. The tangents, or "interludes," as they are called in the novel, continue in this book somewhat more successfully, explaining the difference between criminals and outlaws and the problem with redheads. Robbins makes a reference to the woodpecker bomber in *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* when he describes the sounds of *End of Time's* laughter: "Sounds a lot like Woody Woodpecker.

Friend of mine used to cackle like that."

Robbins's fourth novel, *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984) is an epic that begins in ancient times and ends at "nine o'clock tonight, Paris time." The hero, "neotenus" ancient kingturned-janitor and his love, Kudra, travel through time, never aging because they refuse to let age catch up with them. The story continues Robbins's fascination with youth, expanding it to include living forever. Fewer tangents and an exciting storyline (the janitor and his love are in search of an ancient bottle with a priceless fluid that may be leaking out) make this a very readable epic.

In *Skinny Legs and All* (1990), the reader must suspend disbelief long enough to accept the notion of a group of objects (a stick, a shell, a spoon, a sock, and a can of Van De Camp's baked beans) having discovered the secret to movement. They travel to New York, where they find a restaurant run by an Arab and a Jew across from the United Nations. The story is another in the tradition of *Another Roadside Attraction*, offering commentary on the popular culture and the issues of the day by contrasting them with fantastical counterculture elements.

Robbins's *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, released in 1994, chronicles the 1987 crash of the stock market. Told in second person point of view, it is the most traditional of Robbins's novels, if traditional means the protagonist chasing her boyfriend's lost monkey, having a 300-pound Tarot cardreading friend, and finding enlightenment with a terrorist. Robbins's writing style here remains appealingly chatty and metaphoric, but it is more refined than his previous works, leading to the most sophisticated of his novels, *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*.



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