

Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas Short Guide

Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas by Tom Robbins

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Characters

The two main characters in *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, Gwen Mati and Larry Diamond, are given the roles of student and teacher. Gwen obviously needs to learn. At twenty-nine, she is insecure, class and image conscious, and career-driven. She is ashamed of her friend Q-Jo's weight, her Filipino father's lifestyle, and her mother's suicide. Her relationship with her boyfriend is passionless and dull.

Regrettably, Gwen values only money and what it can buy. The ticking of her biological clock does not make her long for motherhood. Robbins writes, "it is not babies you want to make, it's cash.

You long to swell up with a pregnancy of moola and expel silver dollars like a slot machine." Gwen does not appreciate relationships; instead, she concentrates her attention on designer suits, luxury cars, and large portfolios of stocks, bonds, and real estate holdings.

With the collapse of the stock market, everything Gwen values — her professional and personal fortunes — looks to be destroyed. Fortunately, abrasive Larry Diamond has arrived to change her life.

Larry Diamond is a legend in the Seattle financial district. Until the stock market crash of 1987 in which he lost his job and his fortune, Larry was the most savvy of stockbrokers. Now to Gwen, he looks like a derelict, not a guru who will realign her value system. Larry describes himself as being "on the pad," by which he means he is in tune with the amphibian world, the earthly representatives of extraterrestrial beings and the natural link to the universal overmind. While he is spiritually developed and sexually adept, his physical health is deteriorating rapidly. In almost constant pain from his cancer, Larry's only hope for survival rests with Dr. Yamiguchi and his emetic cures.

In addition to these two main characters, Robbins peoples his novel with a number of outlandish figures. Q-Jo Huffinton, Gwen's only friend, works as a psychic, specializing in tarot card readings. She supplements her income by listening to people talk about their vacations. A chain smoker and grossly overweight, Q-Jo's disappearance serves as one of the major plot lines in the novel. Also missing is Andre, Belford's pet monkey, infamous in France for his record of burglary. Gwen and Belford fear that the monkey may have returned to a life of crime. Everyone in the novel is idiosyncratic, even Larry Diamond's friend and landlord, the American Indian, Tornado Warning, who purchases a bowling alley because the sound of falling pins reminds him of thunderstorms in his native Oklahoma. Robbins delights in presenting these strange figures for his readers' amusement.

Social Concerns

In each of his previous five novels, Tom Robbins has been concerned with redefining the individual's relationship to society in an attempt to correct a society that limits its members' spiritual development. This novel proves to be no exception. *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* presents Robbins's critique of the business world, specifically stockbrokers whose commitment to making money distorts their characters and prevents them from achieving self-awareness and spiritual fulfillment.

Gwendolyn Mati, a twenty-nine-year old stockbroker for the Seattle brokerage house of Posner Lampard McEvoy and Jacobsen, serves as the focus for Robbins's investigation of misplaced American values.

Virtually all of Gwen's decisions have been motivated by greed, and as the novel opens, she sees the end of her career approaching, brought about by the collapse of the New York stock market. Her questionable deals will result in the loss of huge sums by her clients; she will lose her job. Her only hope lies in the uncertain strength of the Tokyo markets. Gwen cannot see her faults: her greed, status consciousness, and consumerism. Robbins's novel introduces Larry Diamond, a former wizard among stockbrokers, who will attempt to clarify Gwen's vision and relocate her misplaced values.

Techniques

Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas is a highly structured novel: It begins on Thursday, April 5, at 4 p.m. and ends on Monday, April 9, at 5:50 a.m. Each full day is divided into three chapters recounting events of the morning, afternoon, and night. Within each of the chapters, Robbins includes a number of brief episodes each identified by the precise time the events take place.

While the design of the novel shows Robbins constraining himself to a fixed pattern, the style of the work reveals Robbins's continuing interest in language. Robbins plays with words throughout the novel, crafting many fresh and unusual similes and metaphors. Pea pods for Robbins are "the detached spines of elves" while sweet pepper slices become "vaulted and naved, like cross sections of Caribbean cathedrals." When Gwen hurries down the hall, she runs "like Jackie JoynerKersey with a wasp in her shorts."

Robbins may be making a serious point about western society's spiritual development, but he never appears to take himself or his language seriously. His light, seemingly effortless prose, is the result of hard work and thoughtful revision of the single draft he writes of each novel.

Themes

Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas opens on Holy Thursday evening, the beginning of the long Easter weekend for the American financial and commodity markets. Robbins's choice of date is significant, as he intends to resurrect two of his characters from death, one from a spiritual death and the other from immanent physical death. Gwen Mati meets Larry Diamond in the Bull & Bear bar as she awaits the opening of the Japanese markets which will determine whether she will have destroyed her career and bankrupted her customers. Larry is largely unconcerned by the movement of the stock market and more concerned with developing a relationship with Gwen who initially rebuffs him. During the course of the novel, Larry begins the process of teaching Gwen that her greedy and class-conscious behavior lies directly in the way of her spiritual development.

Larry is suffering from colon cancer and has recently returned to Seattle from Timbuktu hoping to meet Dr.

Yamaguchi who has announced a cure for cancer. While waiting to meet Dr.

Yamaguchi, Larry attempts to prove to Gwen that her value system is skewed; that extraterrestrial beings from Sirius, the Nonno, have communicated with African tribes telepathically; that frogs, especially those that secrete a psychedelic substance, have the potential to connect humans to an overmind; and that the decrease in the number of amphibians may be somehow related to the dawning of a new age. These bizarre assertions serve to support themes that Robbins has presented in his earlier novels. Robbins believes that the western Christian tradition distorts and damages the individual, that it is largely responsible for making Gwen greedy and self-centered, and that it promotes individual guilt. A nonwestern value system, argues Robbins, allows the individual greater opportunity for spiritual development as well as happiness.

Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas is also a love story. By the end of the novel, Gwen is ready to end her relationship with her fiancé, Belford Dunn, and to rejoin Larry in Timbuktu. For Robbins, love, with both its physical and emotional components, comes first. It is more important than social activism, than career, than political institutions.

Lovers lead each other to higher levels of spiritual development and insight.

Gwen has been living her life half asleep; her love for Larry will open both her eyes and her mind.



Key Questions

In *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, many of the same issues and interests that Robbins has presented in his first five novels are discussed once again. Robbins moves his focus in this novel to a criticism of the values of the 1980s, the selfishness and greed that came to be seen as a motivation for the leveraged buyouts and takeovers characteristic of the decade. In this novel too, Robbins offers love as the antidote to greed and self-interest and as the first step in the process of self-discovery and spiritual development. Discussion groups might be interested in considering the authenticity of Robbins's view of the decade. Are the people he creates to fill the Bull & Bear bar genuine representatives of the stockbrokers and analysts of the 1980's? Additionally, are the kinds of relationships that he suggests lead to personal freedom and happiness possible? Do real men and women fall in love the way they do in *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*?

Robbins's prose style is characterized by wit and wordplay. Discussion members should be eager to point out particularly amusing passages. Does the author ever lose control and simply show off? Is Robbins's prose style ever a barrier in communicating his themes?

Readers who are familiar with a number of Robbins's novels may find it productive to compare *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* with his earlier work. Is Robbins moving in a new direction? Is he developing as a writer? Is he in the process of becoming a formula writer?

1. Robbins is clearly critical of Gwen Mati's attitudes toward social class and personal finance. What system of values would he like to see replace Gwen's conventional ones?
2. Larry Diamond and Belford Dunn are both in competition for Gwen Mati's affection. What makes Larry the more attractive candidate?
3. What is the significance of the novel's title, *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*?
4. Is Belford Dunn's missing monkey, Andre, part of the novel's theme or thrown in for effect? Does this subplot add to or detract from the novel?
5. Are Gwen Mati and Q-Jo Huffinton, the two significant women characters, objectified or treated as individuals?
6. A theme of magic runs through Robbins's novels? Where is the magic located in *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*?

Who believes in magic and who does not? What does the acceptance of magic say about some characters?

7. Robbins is interested in individuals raising the level of their consciousness. How do they go about doing this?



Are drugs useful for expanding consciousness? If so, what else can have this effect?

8. Larry Diamond talks about the "overmind." What exactly does he mean by it? According to the novel, how might the overmind communicate with humans?

9. Robbins enjoys playing with language. Identify several of his striking metaphors. How does his use of figurative language add to the enjoyment of the novel?

10. What is there for Larry Diamond, Gwen Mati, and Q-Jo Huffington to learn in Timbuktu?

Literary Precedents

In his Author's Note at the end of the novel, Robbins directs interested readers to several scholarly works on ethnoastronomy and African culture.

Actually, Robbins earliest literary precursors may include John Lily's *Euphues* and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. He has acknowledged his appreciation of E. L. Doctorow, Giinter Grass, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker. In terms of style, he may owe a debt to both Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller. In subject matter, *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* has been compared to Thomas Wolfe's novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1984-1985) and the film *Wall Street*.

Related Titles

Gwen Mati engages in a quest for identity and personal growth which aligns her with the female protagonists of a number of Robbins's works: Sissy Hankshaw in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976), Princess Leigh-Cheri Fursenberg-Barcelona in *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980), and Ellen Cherry Charles in *Skinny Legs and All* (1990).

Each of these young women learns that her energies have been misplaced, and each comes to realize that love is more important than social activism, art, or money. Robbins once again introduces psychedelic drugs — this time in the shape of African frogs — as a tool for individuals to reach a higher level of consciousness, a theme that connects this work with both *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971) and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* in which psychedelic mushrooms perform the same consciousness-expanding task. Robbins's use of Larry Diamond as Gwen's mentor parallels his use of the Chink in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, in both cases, the characters teach the misguided women and become their lovers.

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