

Skinny Legs and All Study Guide

Skinny Legs and All by Tom Robbins

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Contents

[Skinny Legs and All Study Guide.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Plot Summary.....4](#)

[The First Veil \(pgs. 1-22\).....6](#)

[The First Veil \(pgs. 22-48\).....7](#)

[The Second Veil \(pgs. 49-77\).....8](#)

[The Third Veil \(pgs. 78-100\).....10](#)

[The Third Veil \(pgs. 101-119\).....12](#)

[The Fourth Veil \(pgs. 120-138\).....14](#)

[The Fourth Veil \(pgs. 139-169\).....16](#)

[The Fifth Veil \(pgs. 170-204\).....18](#)

[The Fifth Veil \(pgs. 205-233\).....20](#)

[The Sixth Veil \(pages 234-259\).....22](#)

[The Sixth Veil \(pgs. 260-276\).....24](#)

[The Sixth Veil \(pgs. 277-291\).....26](#)

[The Sixth Veil \(pgs. 292-307\).....27](#)

[The Seventh Veil \(pgs. 308-337\).....28](#)

[The Seventh Veil \(pgs. 338-353\).....30](#)

[The Seventh Veil \(pgs. 354-374\).....31](#)

[The Seventh Veil \(pages 375-394\).....32](#)

[The Seventh Veil \(pages 395-422\).....33](#)

[Characters.....35](#)

[Objects/Places.....41](#)

[Social Concerns And Themes.....43](#)

[Techniques.....44](#)



Themes..... 45

Style..... 47

Quotes..... 49

Topics for Discussion..... 51

Literary Precedents..... 52

Related Titles..... 53

Copyright Information..... 54



Plot Summary

Part history lesson, part social satire, and part self-help book, Tom Robbins's *Skinny Legs and All* takes the reader on a wild, humorous, and enlightening ride. The story begins with a couple of newlyweds taking a ride in a "turkey." From that point, it is clear that Robbins's work isn't your standard novel. The book is broken up into seven sections, or veils, inspired by the ancient Dance of the Seven Veils. In *Skinny Legs and All*, the veils mask the keys to happiness. Through his characters and commentaries, Robbins reveals what these veils are.

The main characters are Ellen Cherry Charles, an artist, and her husband, a beer-drinking, regular guy named Randolph "Boomer" Petway. With Boomer in the middle, Ellen Cherry is on the side of art and beauty, with the Reverend Buddy Winkler, her father's cousin, on the other. Buddy is a fiery Southern preacher scarred by red pustules, telling his Colonial Pines, Virginia, congregation about the end of the world and finding the devil in everything from dancing to art.

It's Buddy's influence that convinces Ellen Cherry's father, Verlin, to accompany Buddy to Ellen Cherry's college art class, where they are painting nude portraits. They physically remove her from class and college, violently scrubbing the makeup off her face and calling her Jezebel. She runs away to Seattle, where Boomer gets her to marry him with an altered Airstream RV, made up to look like a turkey.

On a trip from Seattle to New York, the couple awakens an ancient painted stick and conch shell while having sex in a cave. Joined by a dirty sock, silver spoon, and can of pork and beans, left behind by the couple, the five objects become main characters in the novel. The stick and shell think they have been awakened in time for the Third Temple to be built, which will signal the Second Coming. On their journey to Jerusalem, their history, which mirrors the ancient history of Jerusalem, is told through Can o' Beans. Only a keen student of ancient life will fail to learn something new.

When they reach New York, Robbins skewers the modern art scene, as Boomer, the guy who dresses in Hawaiian shirts and jeans, is considered an artist, while Ellen Cherry is ignored. During their breakup that follows, Ellen Cherry takes a job at the *I and I*, a restaurant started by a Jew and an Arab that they hope will inspire peace in the Middle East. The restaurant is bombed a few weeks after it opens. The owners rebuild, and, in an effort to drum up business, hire a Middle Eastern band, soon to be joined by a beautiful, young belly dancer.

Meanwhile, Reverend Buddy is working on his plans for a world war. At sleep at his cousin's house, he claims that he has received a message from God. The message is to build the Third Temple, the same one the painted stick and conch shell believe they have been awakened to return to. Buddy doesn't want to wait for the Second Coming; he wants to force it to happen. His plan involves destroying a holy Muslim shrine with the help of radical Jews that will start a war. With the shrine out of the way, the Third Temple will be built and Jesus will return.



In New York, Ellen Cherry is despondent over her disappointment with the New York art scene, and the *I and I* is thriving. The restaurant gains national prominence thanks to the popularity of their "young Salome," the nickname given to the belly dancer and a reference to the biblical performer of the Dance of the Seven Veils. It is only after becoming inspired by a mural painted by Ellen Cherry that the young girl agrees to her own Dance of the Seven Veils. There's a catch: She'll perform the dance on the same day as the Super Bowl. When the dance is performed, half the restaurant is watching her; the other half watches the game. The half that watches the dance gains knowledge from an inner voice that broadcasts a different lesson for every veil that is dropped. It's also a final opportunity for Robbins to sum up the "veils" that are keeping people from finding true happiness. These range from religion and money, to governments and fear of sexuality.

The dance also provides the end for Reverend Buddy, who after having his plans stopped by a sympathetic Vice President, is shot while attacking the young dancer. In Robbins's novel, art and beauty win out over fear and hatred, as Buddy dies and Ellen Cherry and Boomer reunite, with a happy life seemingly ahead of them.



The First Veil (pgs. 1-22)

The First Veil (pgs. 1-22) Summary

The novel opens with newlyweds Ellen Cherry Charles and Boomer Petway motoring down the highway, riding in a "turkey" while traveling through the West. It's only been a week, but Ellen Cherry Charles is already having second thoughts. She thinks to herself that Boomer tricked her into marrying him. Back in Colonial Pines, Virginia, the congregation, which includes Patsy (Ellen's mother) and Verlin (Ellen's father) Charles, meets in a small white church, listening to a fiery sermon by Buddy Winkler about the end of the world. The sermon is also being broadcast on the radio.

Riding in the turkey, Ellen Cherry hears the sermon and is shocked to hear Reverend Buddy all the way out in the West. A passing truck nearly hits the turkey, almost taking off "a leg." Later, the turkey stops in Idaho and a crowd gathers around it. Boomer insults some locals and they chase the turkey across the state line.

Right before the escape, Ellen Cherry was talking to her mother, a former local beauty contest winner from Okaloosa County in Florida. It was on those trips that Ellen Cherry developed her artistic skills. Suffering from carsickness, Ellen Cherry would lie down in the back seat and look at the world upside down, gaining a different perspective on things. Ellen Cherry became her school's best artist, and her paintings became more abstract as she got older. Ellen Cherry, who possessed her mother's attractive figure, was bored in Colonial Pines and when she left for college, she assumed she left Boomer behind as well.

Boomer Petway's personality is then highlighted. He is seven-years-older than Ellen Cherry, and a handsome, muscular, regular-type guy who drinks beer and likes to dance. He is a welder that has suffered a work accident that leaves him with a limp. He didn't know anything about art, but Ellen Cherry liked him because he was fun. The couple kept dating and she visited home on weekends until one life-changing event. Upset that she was drawing nude portraits at school, Verlin and Buddy, Verlin's cousin, burst into her college class. They physically removed her, and, using dry cloths, scrubbed the makeup off her face, causing cuts and scrapes. All the while, they called her Jezebel.

The First Veil (pgs. 1-22) Analysis

The main characters are introduced and the connections and differences are apparent: Ellen Cherry and the arts versus Reverend Buddy and his extreme religious views. Structurally, the reader is introduced to a style that will continue throughout the novel. The couple are said to be riding in a turkey, which, of course, doesn't make sense. It's a device that challenges the reader's patience; everything will be explained, but not right away.



The First Veil (pgs. 22-48)

The First Veil (pgs. 22-48) Summary

Back at home after the violent incident at college, Ellen Cherry stays in her room for days. She overhears her mother, who supports Ellen's art and attendance at college, tells her father that Ellen Cherry is "free, white, and 18." Inspired by those words, Ellen Cherry sneaks out, borrows \$500 from Boomer, and takes a bus to Cincinnati on her way to Seattle. She takes a job as a waitress and graduates from art school. She enjoys some moderate success locally and is generally happy with her life, although she hasn't met a man that satisfies her sexually like Boomer had.

The story behind the turkey is finally revealed. Boomer's father had bought an Airstream RV for retirement, but after he died, he left it for Boomer. After getting the idea in his head, Boomer attaches steel wings and legs to the Airstream to make it look like a turkey. After it is finished, he heads straight for Seattle where he finds Ellen Cherry. Ellen Cherry can't resist and is swept up by Boomer.

Driving through the West on their way to New York City, where the couple is going to start their married lives, the couple stops to have sex. They choose a small cave on the side of a rock formation. During sex, Ellen Cherry asks Boomer to shout "Jezebel" over and over again. Afterward, they hear a noise in the cave and they run out, leaving behind a dirty sock, a can of beans, and a silver spoon.

The narrator then details the "true" story of Jezebel. She wasn't just a biblical "whore" who deserved to die, as Buddy proclaimed. She was simply a worshipper of Astarte, a female goddess. It was Jezebel's worship of Astarte that led to her death, and the fear of women and their sexuality was the "first veil."

The First Veil (pgs. 22-48) Analysis

The section ends with an explanation of the first veil, a theme that runs throughout the section. The fear of sex is clear with Buddy and Verlin's reaction to Ellen Cherry painting nude portraits. Another significant name is reintroduced: Jezebel. Ellen Cherry's connection to the biblical character is more than just with the accusations leveled against her. Apparently, the emotional impact was enough to for her to ask Boomer to call out the name during sex, which awakens some kind of being in the cave. Ellen Cherry isn't ashamed of the name; she actually seems turned on by it. It's part of her identity.

During the section on Ellen Cherry's time in Seattle, the author's criticism of modern art is also touched upon. Robbins calls the depressing, tragic work that most people prefer ugly.



The Second Veil (pgs. 49-77)

The Second Veil (pgs. 49-77) Summary

Boomer finds himself in a western bar and starts a fight after a man ignores him. Ellen Cherry walks in and repeats the line about her husband being an idiot, but lots of fun. After the fight, one of the bar patrons admits that Boomer's claim that alcohol effects people differently during the day is correct. The patron says that his sister, after drinking two beers, could have sworn she saw a stick, fork or spoon, and a sock walking along the road.

The noise in the cave is explained. First, a conch shell with a bright pink center falls out of the opening, followed by a painted stick. Dirty Sock is instantly attracted to the shell's feminine features. They ask about the people whose sexual act awakened them. Those people are probably the ones to help them on their journey to Jerusalem, they say. When they learn they have left, Painted Stick and Conch Shell (the objects are given proper names by the author) ask the other objects to come along. Painted Stick and Conch Shell then produce an energy boost that speeds up the objects' molecular composition, allowing them to walk.

The section then details Painted Stick and Conch Shell's background and meaning. Conch Shell's physical resemblance to the female anatomy makes her a religious symbol of Astarte, the female goddess. Painted Stick says that he is a navigational device, which is only partly true. He was used by astrologers to point to the stars and used in other religious ceremonies.

After first traveling in the day, and being spotted several times by humans, the groups decides to travel at night. While asleep, Dirty Sock is attacked by a porcupine. This leads to a series of dangerous incidents. Painted Stick pokes the porcupine, only for the sock to be washed away down a stream. The objects find him, but not before Can o' Beans is tossed against a rock by a camper.

While Dirty Sock and Can o' Beans are recuperating, Painted Stick and Conch Shell reveal their purpose. They are traveling to Jerusalem to take their place in the Third Temple, a shrine whose building signifies the Second Coming. The religious objects maintain that after the Second Coming, objects and animals would resume their place in the world. If that happens, it will be the dropping of the second veil.

The Second Veil (pgs. 49-77) Analysis

The reader is introduced to the world of inanimate objects. Robbins gives each of them a unique, human personality, and after a few pages, it's easy to forget the characters are random objects. While all of them are clear personalities, Can o' Beans is not assigned a gender. It seems that Robbins is saying that intellect, which Can o' Beans displays more than any other object, is not gender specific.



As far as the second veil, Robbins does not go into a long, detailed explanation of this veil. He only hints at it during the section. However, as the random objects move about in their secret world, Robbins seems to be saying something about the relationship between humans and the things they perceive to be non-living, such as nature and inanimate objects.

The Third Veil (pgs. 78-100)

The Third Veil (pgs. 78-100) Summary

Boomer and Ellen Cherry celebrate their one-week wedding anniversary at a drive-in in Livingston, Montana. Boomer has bought a bottle of champagne for the occasion, and while looking for glasses, Ellen Cherry realizes she has left her silver spoon in the cave. Instead of making love or watching the movie together, Ellen Cherry excuses herself to work on her art. She feels guilty about ignoring Boomer after sensing his hurt feelings. She wonders if the marriage is a mistake and admits that her art is more important than her husband.

Back in Colonial Pines, Buddy is over at Verlin and Patsy's for dinner. He falls asleep at in a chair and it's clear he's dreaming. When Patsy turns on a lamp, he snaps awake. He says that he has received a message from God. The message isn't clear, but it has something to do with rebuilding the temple. Buddy says that first thing in the morning, he's going to "get him a Jew on the phone."

Still recovering, Can o' Beans is told the story of how Painted Stick and Conch Shell met. Painted Stick was carved by a priest and painted by a priestess, both followers of Astarte, and used by a Phoenician astronomer. Conch Shell was brought to the observatory by a Phoenician sailor. Both objects were admired by Jezebel when she visited the observatory.

Can o' Beans goes on to retell the story Conch Shell told him about the first temple, built by Solomon and the years of unrest in Jerusalem. Starting about 1,000 B.C. he says, power changed between followers of Astarte and those of God. This led to Painted Stick and Conch Shell spending time in shrines and temples, and being hidden and forgotten about.

Meanwhile, Boomer and Ellen Cherry have a poignant exchange in the RV. Feeling guilty about abandoning him the night before, Ellen Cherry gets up early and makes a breakfast consisting of fried egg sandwiches, doughnuts, and beer. It's Boomer's favorite. Boomer tells her that he's not afraid of anything, except for one thing: Ellen Cherry. He's not convinced her heart is big enough for her art, and for him.

The Third Veil (pgs. 78-100) Analysis

The first part of this section spends a lot of time explaining ancient history and the story of Jezebel. While it might not seem to move the action along, it's important in understanding the complexity of Jerusalem's history. The manner in which the history is told is unique. Instead of narrative text, Robbins uses Can o' Beans as a memory device he has developed for himself, retelling things he is trying to learn from his own words. This conversational and sometimes humorous tone makes it easier for the reader.

For the humans, two key developments occur. Buddy reveals his message from God about a temple. This comes shortly after Painted Stick and Conch Shell reveal their plans to wait for the Second Coming in the Third Temple. For Boomer and Ellen Cherry, the first hints that serious trouble is on the way occurs when Boomer admits that he is scared about Ellen Cherry's feelings. It seems that her guilt and fears are true.



The Third Veil (pgs. 101-119)

The Third Veil (pgs. 101-119) Summary

On the way home from his cousin's house, Buddy is stopped by the police for speeding. Buddy tells the officer about the message from God, and that he can't be worried about his speed after hearing something like that. The officer not only believes him, he gives Buddy \$5 for his church.

Can o' Beans is not done retelling himself the story of Painted Stick and Conch Shell. While the followers of Astarte were back in power in Jerusalem, Painted Stick was pointed at a red glow in the distance. It turns out to be the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian leader led a raid on Jerusalem that wiped out the Astarte worshippers and left Painted Stick abandoned on a rooftop of the First Temple. He would escape with Conch Shell, as the armies of Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple.

Reverend Buddy is still reveling in the glow of the message he received from God. He admits that he had some doubts about his worthiness, since God gave him those red pustules on his face and bad teeth. Reading a book about Christian wives, he is interrupted by a knock at the door. It's Patsy and Verlin. They come about the miracle, but not Reverend Buddy's. A woman claims that a shadow cast on her freezer looks like Jesus. When all three arrive at the house, Buddy thinks it looks like Willie Nelson and Verlin thinks it looks like Castro.

Boomer and Ellen Cherry's trip across the country is quickly moved along by the author, who says that, "we're going to leave them now." At that point, Boomer and Ellen Cherry are in a North Dakota parking lot, attracting another crowd with their "turkey." They reach New York, but not before more people inquire about the Turkey and its purpose. When Boomer grows frustrated that people can't understand that he constructed the turkey just to see how it would look, Ellen Cherry thinks that maybe, just maybe, he can understand art.

Can o' Beans decides to leave the group. He believes that he will slow everyone down. He is left near a church where he hopes a wedding will take place and he might be tied to the bumper of the newlyweds' car. Instead, there is a funeral service at the church. The service is for a young soldier killed overseas. This leads into the third veil, the veil that allows humans to trust governments. This veil, the author argues, leads to men joining armies and dying in conflicts. The section ends with Can o' Beans escaping an army of ants, attracted by the food oozing out of his cut, by jumping into a puddle.

The Third Veil (pgs. 101-119) Analysis

The introduction of characters and the back-story for most of the action to come is complete. Boomer and Ellen Cherry are in New York, Buddy has received his message, and the objects are on their way to Jerusalem. The reader is also taught another history



lesson through the words of Can o' Beans. The author also speaks directly to the reader, stating "we're going to leave them now," when referring to Boomer and Ellen Cherry. This clearly points out that the story is being told through the eyes of a narrator.

The third veil is also revealed, with the definition much clearer than the second veil. Robbins uses this veil to lash out at government, war, and, to some degree, the gullibility of people. In some ways, he blames the dead soldier at the funeral, stating the soldier made three mistakes. Can o' Beans is shown as an example of what an individual can do if he thinks for himself. Instead of falling victim to the ants, he jumps in a puddle, saving himself.



The Fourth Veil (pgs. 120-138)

The Fourth Veil (pgs. 120-138) Summary

It is August and Ellen Cherry is in New York outside her apartment at the Ansonia Hotel waiting for a limousine to take her to work. She tells Raoul, the hotel doorman who is physically attracted to her, that she works in "Jerusalem." Raoul tries to understand what that means, and remembers that Ellen Cherry is an artist and alone since her husband left her a couple of months ago.

It turns out that Ellen Cherry is going to the grand opening of Isaac and Ishmael's, a restaurant that was firebombed two weeks earlier. Several groups had taken responsibility for the bombing, but the police suspect the Third Temple Platoon, Inc., a coalition of ultra orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians. According to police, one of the group's principal spokesmen is Buddy Winkler of Colonial Pines, Virginia.

Isaac and Ishmael's restaurant, known as the *I and I*, is a restaurant run by an Arab and a Jew (Roland Abu Hadee and Spike Cohen), and which is located across the street from the United Nations Building. Spike and Abu explain that Isaac and Ishmael are biblical names, referring to the stepsons of Abraham that started the Arab and Jewish religions, and ultimately, the unrest between the religions.

Spike Cohen is the son of Russian Jews who immigrated to the U.S. after escaping Russia during the winter, a trek, which cost the five members of their family to lose their toes to frostbite. The "crab family" as they are called, led to Spike's fascination/fetish with women's feet, and eventually, shoes. After establishing a line of successful shoe stores, he met Roland.

Roland is the son of a rich Middle Eastern businessman who left for Harvard at eighteen and quickly found himself thrown out of three colleges due to poor grades and too much partying. After getting cast out by his family, he moves to Madison, Wisconsin, where the only relative who will help him offers him a job as a dishwasher. After three years of washing dishes, which teaches him humility, he marries his relative's daughter, starts a falafel stand and joins the anti-war movement during the 60s. Later Abu receives an inheritance from his late father of \$6 million.

The Fourth Veil (pgs. 120-138) Analysis

Once again, the author jumps ahead in the story. Ellen Cherry is now alone and working as a waitress. There is one mention of Boomer by the doorman about him not being around anymore. There is no explanation, however, of why he left. Given the book's first three sections, the reader must realize that everything will be explained in due time.

Another key development is the introduction of Spike and Abu, the idealistic Jew and Arab, respectively. Their restaurant is a symbol of a peace between religions that they



hope is possible, but currently nonexistent. Given their strange backgrounds, it's no wonder they are unique. Abu was apparently a playboy, and Spike developed a foot fetish after his family's feet were disfigured following the trek across Russia to freedom.

For the first time, Reverend Buddy's violent potential is revealed. Instead of radical sermons, it seems like he might be behind a bombing. It seems Buddy's desire to "find a Jew" has something to do with finding someone to carry out the message that he received from God about rebuilding the Temple. Somehow, carrying out that message includes violence.



The Fourth Veil (pgs. 139-169)

The Fourth Veil (pgs. 139-169) Summary

Ellen Cherry arrives for work and greets Spike Cohen. It is Spike who has hired her, mainly for her shoes (sensible penny loafers) and her apolitical views. She has lost her job after the bombing and called her mother to inquire if Uncle Buddy had anything to do with it. Her mother had said no, that Buddy wouldn't do that and that Buddy said it was probably terrorists. Ellen Cherry needs to work because Boomer left over the summer. It is now autumn and she needs money because they are likely getting divorced. Ellen Cherry mentions that Boomer should have money because of his successful "shows."

Back to the present, and waiting for the restaurant to open, protestors turn up, including a group led by Uncle Buddy. The reverend demands that Moslems be removed from Jerusalem so Jesus can return. His voice sexually arouses Ellen and she has trouble concealing it from the owners.

When Abu brings up the idea of displaying Ellen's work in the restaurant, she declines, saying she hasn't painted anything. It's a lie. She has been painting, but not portraits. She's been painting pictures of spoons, socks, cans of beans and nude portraits of Boomer, who it turns out, sold the Airstream to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Having not had sex for six months, Ellen Cherry feels a growing sense of sexual frustration. She wonders how sex would be with the different men she knows: Abu, Spike, Raoul, a street performer, and even the Reverend Buddy. As far as Reverend Buddy, she reveals, "Patsy [her mother] would know."

Wearing a red beret, Boomer appears at her door the next morning. Apparently he is considered the hot new artist in the city, a label that Ellen Cherry thinks is ridiculous. He drives her to work, where a bomb threat is called in. On the way back from work, she stops to watch a street performer, Turn Around Norman, who takes several hours to turn completely around without anyone seeing how he moves. While watching, she runs into Reverend Buddy. He preaches to her about getting back together with Boomer, Turn Around Norman, and why there can't be peace in the Middle East. Buddy says that the time is not right for peace. Meanwhile, watching all of this from a grate beneath the church are five inanimate objects: a spoon, shell, painted stick, dirty sock, and beat up can of beans.

The section ends with an essay on the divisive nature of religion and the troubles, wars and deaths that different religions have spawned. Understanding this is the dropping of the fourth veil.

The Fourth Veil (pgs. 139-169) Analysis

Uncle Buddy is in New York and immediately causing problems for Ellen Cherry, and he might also be a dangerous terrorist. Personally, Ellen Cherry is starting to grow sexually



frustrated, and a strange connection with Reverend Buddy is revealed. Another revelation is that Patsy, Ellen Cherry's mother, had an affair with Reverend Buddy. However, it isn't clear when it happened.

The fourth veil is revealed, and Robbins backs it up with history and Uncle Buddy's actions. Uncle Buddy might be behind one bombing, and he might be bombing more targets, all because he believes God gave him a message. Also, the history lessons change from ancient history, to the Middle East, with Can o' Beans's narration replaced by Abu and Spike. Through the words of Abu and Spike, the reader learns of the religious strife in the Middle East, and the destruction of the great culture of the Catholic Crusaders.



The Fifth Veil (pgs. 170-204)

The Fifth Veil (pgs. 170-204) Summary

Boomer's rise to prominence is detailed. Boomer's turkey, which Ellen Cherry is pleased has been sold because they needed money, was loved by art gallery owner Ultima Sommervel. He quickly became the darling of the city's art scene one that Ellen Cherry grew disappointed in because of its shallowness. Soon Boomer is staying out late, and spending more of his time with New York City artists. One night, instead of sex, he wants to talk about art.

After they receive the check for the Airstream Turkey in the mail, Boomer and Ellen Cherry divvy up the money, with most of it going to Ultima and taxes. Boomer then decides to work on his "art," creating a trench coat with 500 pockets, with encoded messages in each pocket. Ultima loves it and gives him a one-man show at her art studio. Enraged, Ellen Cherry goes back to Virginia for a weekend, and when she returns, Boomer has moved out. They try to get back together, but after an argument about art they stop seeing each other and Ellen Cherry gets the job at *I and I*. What Boomer doesn't tell Ellen Cherry is that all the notes say the same thing: "Randolph Petway III loves Ellen Cherry Charles."

Six months later, Ellen Cherry receives an invitation to Boomer's art show, an invitation that she tears up. After talking to Abu, she becomes motivated to start painting again and stops by to watch Turn Around Norman for more inspiration. There she is watched by the five inanimate objects. The five objects have been hiding in the basement of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Can o' Beans rejoined them after Dirty Sock mended his gash with a welding torch, a skill he learned by watching Boomer. Sock, Spoon, and Can o' Beans had already been fans of Turn Around Norman because his movements mimic theirs. Now, they are convinced that there is some connection between Ellen Cherry and Turn Around Norman, and that one of them is the human who can help them cross the Atlantic Ocean and reach Jerusalem.

Ellen Cherry skips Boomer's art show and attempts to paint, adding tongues to a nude portrait of Boomer. Her guilt at not going to his show stops her from painting and she calls him the next day. Boomer tells her that his art show went well, selling nearly every piece. He admits, though, that he feels guilty for the attention he is receiving. The talk turns into an argument, with Boomer claiming that she always treated him like an inferior and never really loved him. In fact, he claims, she doesn't know how to love someone because she's married to her art. After the honest and emotional talk, they agree to stay in touch after Boomer gets back from Jerusalem.

The Fifth Veil (pgs. 170-204) Analysis

The complicated feelings between Boomer and Ellen Cherry come to a head. It turns out that Boomer, who never had an interest in art, is regarded as a talent by the same people Ellen Cherry was hoping to impress. This causes a mixture of envy and outrage in her. The author reveals the first cracks in Ellen Cherry's attitude toward art. Instead of being confident in her ability and purpose, she's suddenly questioning everything. Also, Robbins uses the developments to poke fun at the art world. In Seattle, artists were consumed with depressing images. In New York, someone with no interest in art is seen as a great new talent.

An important character is also examined further. Turn Around Norman inspires the inanimate objects and Ellen Cherry. To Ellen Cherry he embodies what an artist should be. To the objects, he is someone like them.



The Fifth Veil (pgs. 205-233)

The Fifth Veil (pgs. 205-233) Summary

Boomer makes a sculpture out of cardboard tubes that an Israeli art collector offers to buy, with one request: Boomer must accompany him to Jerusalem to help display it. While Boomer is in Jerusalem, Ellen Cherry learns that Uncle Buddy has plans for Boomer, which Buddy labels "Top Secret."

Inside St. Patrick's, another history lesson on Jerusalem is given. Painted Stick and Conch Shell are separated again, as the Jews were in exile in Babylonia. They were reunited in the Second Temple, built by Herod in 515 B.C. While Herod was close to going completely mad, he agreed to a deal put forth by his stepdaughter, Salome. Salome would perform the Dance of the Seven Veils in exchange for the head of John the Baptist on a plate. Herod agreed. After Herod died, the Romans grew tired of the constant Jewish uprisings and razed the city, with Shell and Stick rescued by a Phoenician.

After the short history lesson, Painted Stick and Conch Shell announce that someone must follow Turn Around Norman to see if he is indeed the right person to take them to Jerusalem. They choose the smallest member of their party to follow him: Silver Spoon.

Meanwhile, Ellen Cherry has been contemplating Boomer's words and wonders if she has been too closely tied to her art. She decides to completely give it up. She goes so far as to ask Spike and Abu, who are arguing about who is more to blame for the violence in the Middle East, the Jews or the Palestinians, for a demotion. As they think it over, she goes for a walk.

During her walk, Ellen Cherry decides to pass by the church and watch Turn Around Norman just as Spoon makes her move. Spoon falls and jumps into a passerby's paper bag. The passer by is Ellen Cherry, who doesn't notice. The other inanimate objects are pleased, knowing that Ellen Cherry is a good person and she'll be back to watch Turn Around Norman soon. What they don't know is Ellen Cherry decides to give up watching Turn Around Norman after she leaves, as part of her breakup from art.

Ellen Cherry complains about how artists are money-driven. The narrator takes up the point, proclaiming that finding out that money isn't important is the fifth veil. When Ellen Cherry gets back to the restaurant, police, media and ambulances are there. Spike has been shot.

The Fifth Veil (pgs. 205-233) Analysis

While Ellen Cherry comes to grips with the role of money in art, Abu and Spike have been arguing over who is more at fault in the conflict in the Middle East. The author presents both sides, with the Jew (Spike) and the Arab (Abu) arguing against their own

people's history. It's an illuminating lesson, one that provides important details on the history and violence in the region.

As for Ellen Cherry, she continues to lose her artistic vision. Robbins seems to use her as an example of what happens when a true artist is exposed to the modern art world. The modern art scene, instead of cultivating a talent like Ellen Cherry, takes away her enthusiasm for the only thing she used to care about.



The Sixth Veil (pages 234-259)

The Sixth Veil (pages 234-259) Summary

Ellen Cherry's parents, Patsy and Verlin, are in town for Christmas. All three celebrate Christmas Eve at the *I and I*, where Verlin faints after mistaking a bandaged Spike for a terrorist. Spike, recently out of the hospital after recovering from a head wound, unveils his surprise gift: a large, high-definition TV that the narrator says will have an extreme effect on their lives. On her way home that evening, Abu gives Ellen Cherry a spoon the police found in her bag that she dropped the night Spike was shot. Ellen is dumbfounded and cannot understand how the spoon got back to her.

On Christmas, Ellen Cherry and her parents return to the Ansonia where they are joined by Buddy. There, Buddy tells them of his plans and the reason he has enlisted Boomer to help. In a meandering speech, Buddy divulges his plans to destroy the Dome of the Rock, one of Islam's holy shrines, in order to build the Third Temple and bring about the Second Coming. Boomer is just there to help out, Buddy says. The women are shocked and even Verlin is skeptical. Buddy says this is the prophecy he heard in their living room many months ago.

The day after Christmas, Ellen Cherry and her parents go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see Boomer's turkey. On the way, Ellen Cherry explains how she has become jaded about the art scene and its commercialism. After her parents leave, she looks for Raoul, intending to sleep with him after months of thinking about it. The other doorman tells her that Raoul and his band, who unbeknownst to Ellen Cherry have a hit song, left for L.A.

A month later, Ellen Cherry is walking to work recalling the bumper stickers she and Boomer saw on their road trip. One proclaims, "I'd rather be (fill in the blank)." At this point in her life, Ellen Cherry cannot think of anything she'd like to do. Her life seems boring, without purpose and with nothing to care for.

The Sixth Veil (pages 234-259) Analysis

Without her art, and without a lover, Ellen Cherry's life is not bad so much as it's meaningless. There are some feelings that spring up in her life. A letter from Boomer says that he is working with another artist, but it doesn't say if the other artist is a man or a woman. Ellen Cherry is visibly upset. She apparently still has feelings for Boomer. Even so, it doesn't stop her from fantasizing about other men. She considers taking Raoul for a lover, an idea that seems to be steeped more in boredom than genuine attraction. Without art, it seems she's turning to sex to fill the void.

As for Uncle Buddy, his wild ideas are getting more pronounced. He doesn't just think that the world is going to end; he has a plan of how to do it. Ellen Cherry, though, seems more worried about the plans Buddy has for Boomer. She also wonders if Buddy had

anything to do with Spike's shooting. With Ellen Cherry's life seemingly stuck in neutral, and Buddy making plans, it's easy to predict something eventful is bound to happen.



The Sixth Veil (pgs. 260-276)

The Sixth Veil (pgs. 260-276) Summary

The winter has almost passed and Ellen Cherry's life has been uneventful for the past several months, save for a letter from Boomer. The letter tells of Boomer's work for Buddy, which he says was nothing more than delivering some welding supplies to a group of orthodox Jews. The letter goes on to tell of a much needed check for Ellen Cherry that she could pick up at Ultima's art gallery.

While the thought of meeting Ultima repulses Ellen Cherry, she goes because she needs the money. Ultima gives her a check for \$7,000 from Boomer, and \$1,800 from the sale of two of Ellen Cherry's paintings. Ellen Cherry is surprised, having almost forgotten about the paintings Ultima displayed for her when they first met moved to New York almost two years before.

The sale of her art and her complex feelings for Boomer leads to a conflict within Ellen Cherry, and she stays awake at night trying to deal with it. Adding to her anxieties is Uncle Buddy's plan to blow up the Dome of the Rock, a plan that Abu tells her would lead to a large-scale war. Disturbed, she calls Uncle Buddy and hangs up on him when he is unrepentant about the bloodshed that would follow. Ellen Cherry decides that the root of Uncle Buddy's twisted views is loneliness, and that she knows going to bed with him might solve the problem. It's a solution that repulses her, but, when she masturbates that night, she calls out his name.

Sharing the drawer with a vibrator and Ellen Cherry's underwear, Silver Spoon tells the story of how Painted Stick and Conch Shell arrived in the cave, as told to her. After the Romans had retaken Jerusalem, a Roman priestess foresaw the end of their dynasty. So, Phoenicians were ordered to hide Roman artifacts around the world until it was time for the Romans to reemerge. One of those places was America, where Phoenician ships sailed up the St. Lawrence River system and hid the stick and shell in a cave. The two objects were put under a trance, only to awaken when they felt a "familiar energy."

A short time after shouting Buddy's name, Ellen Cherry has a spiritual moment while playing the eye game with the silver spoon, feeling the energy that comes from all things, inanimate or not. It energizes her. At the *I and I*, meanwhile, Abu and Spike hire a Middle Eastern band to try and drum up customers. It doesn't work. The band is about to be fired until they promise to hire a female tambourine player, a request made by Spike and Abu.

The Sixth Veil (pgs. 260-276) Analysis

After a boring winter, the story takes a confusing turn. Reverend Buddy seems to be Ellen Cherry's enemy. Yet, she calls out his name in a moment of ecstasy. This is the second time a sexual connection is revealed between the pair, with Ellen Cherry

becoming sexually aroused when she heard Buddy's voice protesting the *I and I*. The connection/attraction is never explained. It seems that in some way, Buddy reminds Ellen Cherry of who she is and that turns her on. He labels her Jezebel, and that's who she identifies with, that's who she thinks she is.

Ellen Cherry's "eye game" with the spoon is also given significant detail. She feels the connection between the inanimate objects and the world around her. It's the kind of connection the author seems to hint can only be made by an artist. Painted Stick and Conch Shell's history, detailed nearly 200 pages after their introduction, seems to point toward something. They awaken because they think it is the start of the Second Coming, a plan Buddy is working on.



The Sixth Veil (pgs. 277-291)

The Sixth Veil (pgs. 277-291) Summary

It's spring and Ellen Cherry is in an adventurous mood as she leaves for work, leaving her purse, which contains a stowaway spoon, behind. The spoon has been in the apartment for five months now. Watching Ellen Cherry leave for work, the spoon hops up on the window ledge and slips and falls. As she falls, Spoon sees life flash before her, along with images that she never experienced.

Spoon doesn't hit the ground, though. She hits Raoul instead. Raoul is coming back to tell Ellen Cherry that the song he had written about her is about to be released nationally. The spoon knocks him out and the police arrive to investigate. Seeing Ellen Cherry's apartment window open, Detective Shaftoe goes up to find she's not there, but he does find a painting of a spoon.

Shaftoe goes to the *I and I* to question Ellen Cherry. There, along with the rest of the bar, Shaftoe, with Raoul in tow, is treated to the debut of the band's new tambourine girl. The girl performs a belly dance that leaves audience transfixed. After the applause, Abu and Spike ask Ellen Cherry, ignored by all the patrons who normally flirt with her, about their new "Salome." She says that she has skinny legs for a belly dancer.

The cops are called away, and the detective, tosses the spoon in the trash on the way to his car. Ellen Cherry arrives at her apartment and notices her paintings have been turned around and suspects Boomer has been by. She opens her drawer, and finds the spoon is missing. She calls Ultima, who tells her that Boomer is not in town. Then, Ellen Cherry calls Spike, who comes over to calm her down, bringing a bottle of rum with him.

Meanwhile, Spoon begins her journey back to St. Patrick's. She is passed in the street by rolling blur, which turns out to be Painted Stick. Perhaps moved by the spring, Painted Stick had suddenly ventured out on his own to find passage across the Atlantic. He got as far as the Hudson River when he decided to return to St. Patrick's, coming across Spoon in the process. They make it back to the church, but not before Painted Stick is forced to strike a human that tries to pick up Spoon.

The Sixth Veil (pgs. 277-291) Analysis

Like Painted Stick, the spring air seems to be producing changes all around. The young belly dancer is called "young Salome" and she seems to have some power over the audience as they cannot take their eye off of her. It's clear that she will have a main role to play for the rest of the novel, with Ellen Cherry's comment about her "skinny legs" alluding to the book's title.



The Sixth Veil (pgs. 292-307)

The Sixth Veil (pgs. 292-307) Summary

After drinking some rum, Ellen Cherry tries on a pair of shoes for Spike, which quickly leads to sex. Ellen Cherry feels a pang of guilt, but it quickly goes away when she remembers that Ultima said she was going to Jerusalem to visit Boomer. At work that night, Ellen Cherry gets a call from her mother that Buddy is going ahead with his plans to blow up The Dome of the Rock. Patsy voices her concerns about Boomer, but Ellen Cherry says Boomer wouldn't get caught up in something like that. Later that evening, the belly dancer performs again, this time to a packed room.

The narrator then goes into a discussion of the afterlife and the different consequences it brings. People, he says, will put up with all kinds of injustices if they believe there is a reward after death. In addition, people like Reverend Buddy can perform all types of atrocities in the name of God if they believe that their actions will be rewarded after death. This, the narrator states, is the sixth veil; not doing what makes you happy, but living life in fear or without feelings for others because of what you believe will happen after death.

The day after the belly dancer, the bar is not nearly as busy. Abu leaves for the night, with a guard, and Spike and Ellen Cherry are the only ones left. The guard hears Spike and Ellen Cherry having sex. That doesn't startle him. What disturbs him are the words Spike is yelling during sex. Spike is yelling the name of Jezebel at Ellen Cherry's request. The yells cause the guard to put his hand on his crucifix. It also awakens Painted Stick and Conch Shell.

The Sixth Veil (pgs. 292-307) Analysis

As could have been guessed earlier, the relationship between Ellen Cherry and Spike turns physical. It's easy to see why Ellen Cherry could be attracted to him. While the men in her life are either absent or unable to understand her, Spike is always there to reassure her and support her. In addition, they both share a strange sexual quirk: he likes feet and she wants him to yell Jezebel. Ellen Cherry cannot shake the connection with Jezebel.

Once again the connection, between Jezebel, sex and Painted Stick and Conch Shell is touched upon. The two objects are awakened by Spike's cries of Jezebel. Coupled with Painted Stick's earlier attempt to escape, it seems the objects will be making their move soon.

With the revealing of the sixth veil, Robbins again shows his contempt for institutions, and the people who follow them blindly. With only one veil left, it's clear that everyone will soon find out some kind of truth about his or her lives.



The Seventh Veil (pgs. 308-337)

The Seventh Veil (pgs. 308-337) Summary

The inanimate objects are getting restless. The reason they can't leave and need the help of humans is finally revealed. It seems that when they came to New York, they snuck into the church's basement, but the door locked behind them. Stick, Sock, and Spoon can get out through the grate, but not Can O' Beans and Shell. It is now summer and the objects need help, but Ellen Cherry has not been around for months and Turn Around Norman stopped performing when sidewalk preachers, including Reverend Buddy, start to pop up.

Ellen Cherry writes a letter to Boomer, warning him about Buddy's plans. Boomer writes that Buddy wants him to help burn holes through metal gates and Buddy is postponing his plans until January, when a newly-elected, right-wing government will take power in Israel, which should make Buddy's plans easier to carry out. He also tells Ellen Cherry that Ultima has some news that might concern her.

Ellen Cherry visits Ultima and the art dealer tells her that Boomer and an Israeli artist are working on a secret sculpture for a restored area of Jerusalem. Ultima gets a partial peak, and the sculpture has something to do with a map of ancient Palestine. Ellen Cherry is relieved that the artist Boomer is working with is a man. On the way out, Ellen Cherry stops to look at the paintings in Ultima's gallery, which are unimaginative and unoriginal. Ultima says they are artists declaring that nothing is original anymore, and they are admitting defeat. Ellen Cherry disagrees, saying art should at least strive for originality, a thought that inspires her to paint again and to visit Turn Around Norman.

Instead of Norman, though, Ellen Cherry finds Reverend Buddy. She is scared. Apparently, she informed the FBI of his plot months earlier, which got him kicked off the air. Now, he spots her and walks toward her, yelling, over and over, "Jezebel!" With the rain falling and Buddy getting closer, a long, painted object trips Buddy, who falls and busts open his lip. "May the stars above forgive me," Painted Stick says. "I've done it again."

Ellen Cherry returns to her apartment, where Spike comes by for a visit. Complaining that he has lower body pain, he does not want sex. They talk about art and life, and eventually it does lead to sex. Caught up in the act, Ellen Cherry doesn't notice Spike is moaning in pain. He falls off the bed and vomits. She fears he is dead. It turns out to be a kidney stone. A second kidney stone turns forces him to the hospital, where a botched surgical procedure nearly kills him. During his six-week recovery, Ellen Cherry tends to him during the day, visits which extinguish her sexual feelings for him. Meanwhile, Abu has told him that there are the crowds at the *I and I*, thanks to their young belly dancer, and they are getting larger and larger.



The day Spike returns to work, Ellen Cherry learns that her father has died. At the funeral, Buddy gives an eloquent eulogy but doesn't confront Ellen Cherry after the funeral. Patsy tells Ellen Cherry that she had a miscarriage before Ellen Cherry, the father not being Verlin. She also says that she's thinking of moving to New York.

The Seventh Veil (pgs. 308-337) Analysis

Things are starting to happen quickly. Firstly, Turn Around Norman disappears, with no further clues given about who he is. A confrontation between Buddy and Ellen Cherry ends with Buddy on the ground, with a bloody lip. Apparently, Ellen Cherry is being protected by more than just good luck. Also, as could be predicted, the relationship between Ellen Cherry and Spike fizzles. With no man around, Spike seems to have filled some void for Ellen Cherry, but it is only temporary.

It turns out that Ellen Cherry might not need sex to preoccupy her anymore. In another diatribe/essay on art, the author details his views on modern artists. They've given up and are pessimistic. Ellen Cherry, the true artist, doesn't believe it. Instead of being depressed by the art scene's shallowness, she's inspired by it.

Another intriguing development concerns Patsy, Ellen's mother. Once again, an affair between Patsy and Buddy is touched upon. Patsy reveals she had a miscarriage before Ellen Cherry was born, but doesn't say who the father was.



The Seventh Veil (pgs. 338-353)

The Seventh Veil (pgs. 338-353) Summary

The objects devise a plan to escape the church's cellar and carry it out. After gathering wood scrapings and paper, Painted Stick twirls on the pile and starts a fire. Painted Stick, Spoon, and Dirty Sock escape through the grate. While waiting for Shell and Can o' Beans, the stick and spoon are picked up by Buddy, who recognized Spoon from Ellen Cherry's paintings and Stick as the object that tripped him. The reverend has been in the area, talking with someone about his plans for Armageddon. Dirty Sock is left behind and the narrator informs us that he was never to leave the church. Spoon and Stick are taken to Buddy's apartment. They overhear him talking to a Rabbi about plans to send something to Jerusalem and they stow away on the shipment. Shell and Can o' Beans escape the church, and, after waiting three days, set out for Jerusalem by sea.

Back at the *I and I*, business is booming. The belly dancer is attracting national attention and the restaurant is Manhattan's new hot spot, although, little is known about the young Salome because she talks to no one. It is learned through Detective Shaftoe, now a devoted fan of her, that the girl is sixteen, of Lebanese descent, and works in a hospital. Abu speculates that she is half Arabic and half Jewish. Ellen Cherry tries to fight feelings of bitterness toward the dancer. The restaurant's success drains her time, and coupled with the lack of men in her life, she feels lonely and bored.

A rumor gets out, started by the detective, that the belly dancer's best dance is the Dance of the Seven Veils. Abu tells the bandleader that he will pay her triple if she performs the dance. The bandleader tells him that she refuses. It is a matter of tradition.

The Seventh Veil (pgs. 338-353) Analysis

As expected, the objects finally make their move. In the process, the connection between Ellen Cherry, the objects and Reverend Buddy is revealed. By sheer chance, he has come across two of the objects. Just like Buddy is disrupting the plans for everyone else, he disrupts the plans of the objects. Their escape, though, indicates that no matter what stands in their way, the objects will reach Jerusalem. What is not known is what will be there waiting for them.

At the *I and I*, the young dancer's influence is growing. She is attracting a larger crowd, and her mystery grows. Her connection to the Dance of the Seven Veils, the dance the author is using for the novel's structure, is exposed. The bandleader says she will not do the dance, but it seems like only a matter of time.



The Seventh Veil (pgs. 354-374)

The Seventh Veil (pgs. 354-374) Summary

Another bomb threat is phoned in. While waiting for the bomb squad to do its search, Ellen Cherry inquires about the Dance of the Seven Veils. Abu tells her the dance refers to the seven veils the moon goddess must drop at each of the seven gates of the underworld to save the sun god. With each veil dropped, another illusion was revealed. When all are gone, a central mystery of life was revealed.

Abu and Spike then tell Ellen Cherry that they have commissioned a sculpture in Jerusalem, and the sculptor is Boomer. They tell her they are worried about the sculpture because of his previous works. Soon after, a delivery person leaves a bouquet of roses for Ellen Cherry, the same one that leaves a picture of the sculpture for Spike and Abu to review. Ellen Cherry reads the card in the flowers and finds out it was Boomer in disguise.

The sculpture turns out to be a hermaphroditic donkey standing on top of an old map of Palestine. Abu and Spike learn that Arabs and Jews used to worship the donkey. Boomer, he explains in a letter to Ellen Cherry, is trying to remind the Arabs and Jews of what they share, with a little sense of humor thrown in. After thinking it over, Abu and Spike OK the sculpture.

Somehow inspired by Boomer's work, Ellen Cherry paints a large, mural on a wall in the *I and I*, the kind of abstract landscape paintings she used to make. The belly dancer takes one look at the mural, and agrees to do the dance of the seven veils.

The Seventh Veil (pgs. 354-374) Analysis

The circle is complete. The connection is made between Abu and Spike, Boomer and Ellen Cherry, the objects, Uncle Buddy, and the dancer. It turns out that Boomer, the character with no artistic abilities, inspires all the major developments. It is his sculpture that gets Ellen Cherry to paint the mural. Just as significant, Ellen Cherry also seems to finally admit that Boomer's sculpture really is art. Ellen Cherry finally gets back to painting. Her art, not inspired by money or any other commercial gain, is powerful enough to inspire the dancer.



The Seventh Veil (pages 375-394)

The Seventh Veil (pages 375-394) Summary

Young Salome does not perform the dance right away. After some prodding, she announces that she will perform the dance on January 23, roughly seven weeks away at 3:00 p.m. When the date is announced, Detective Shaftoe realizes there is a "catch." January 23 is the date of the Super Bowl. A conflict emerges. Since the large TV will be obscured by the crowd watching young Salome, people must choose between watching a football game, which will include the local New York team, and the dance. Heated arguments ensue, turning the restaurant into a microcosm of Jerusalem, Abu says. Finally, Abu and Spike decide to move the TV outside.

Ellen Cherry's mural, meanwhile, is attracting praise and analysis. She isn't looking for either, but she does experience a small epiphany. She is going to strive for beauty in her paintings, regardless of what cynical and snobby artists think. Ellen Cherry whites over her earlier paintings of the Spoon, Sock, and Can o' Beans. She sells a portrait of Boomer with seven tongues for \$7,000. Patsy, her mother, soon arrives and has lunch with Buddy. Patsy is horrified at Buddy's proclamation that if the Messiah doesn't come after the Dome of the Rock is destroyed, he would step in and be the Messiah.

Buddy is then visited by three CIA officers who come to his apartment the night he is supposed to leave for Jerusalem. He is taken to Washington D.C. where he meets the Vice President. The VP tells him that he agrees with his ideas, but that Buddy must wait. The VP says the current President would not allow a world war to happen because it would "gum up" the prophecy. He tells Buddy to be patient. Buddy agrees and is flown back to New York, his grand plans dashed.

The Seventh Veil (pages 375-394) Analysis

In a comic development, the Dance of the Seven Veils, eagerly awaited by the crowd at the *I and I*, will be held at the same time of the Super Bowl. Which is more important to people: the Super Bowl or the Dance of the Seven Veils? The question almost seems to be one between sex and sports, with many men apparently choosing football over seeing a beautiful naked woman.

Ellen Cherry isn't concerned about either event. In a rebuke of modern art, the author admonishes artists for not trying, for giving up. It's an attitude that Ellen Cherry rejects. The good news is that it finally inspires her. She stops caring about what people think, and when she does, she produced a great work.

The shocking development in this chapter, though, is Buddy's trip to Washington D.C. It seems that his plan isn't crazy, it is just bad timing. Robbins indicts not just the zealots in the South, but the entire government.



The Seventh Veil (pages 395-422)

The Seventh Veil (pages 395-422) Summary

The big day is at hand and when Patsy and Ellen Cherry arrive at the restaurant hours before it opens and find a line of people are waiting to get in. The crowd is split between people there to watch football on the big TV, and fans of young Salome. The belly dancer arrives and begins her dance at 3:00 p.m., the exact time as kick off.

Shockingly, the first veil dropped is the one covering her pelvic region, exposing her vagina. As each veil is dropped, Ellen Cherry and the rest of the crowd begin to receive ideas and thoughts through an inner voice. They are the same lessons and ideas the narrator attaches to veils 1-6. Finally, the young Salome takes away the seventh and final veil, the one covering her face. When she removes it, the final lesson is beamed to the crowd: "Everybody's got to figure it out themselves."

Ellen Cherry understands the final message, but she's not altogether satisfied. She wonders if that's it, and the voice answers: "We're making it up." The voice goes on to say that everyone makes up their own reality. The messages overwhelm Ellen Cherry and the others who saw the dance. They walk outside, not really walking toward any destination. They hear honking horns and people celebrating. For a moment they believe everyone else heard the messages and is celebrating them. Instead, the crowd is celebrating the win for the home team in the Super Bowl.

Buddy, upset that his plans have been derailed, decides to stage a demonstration at the *I and I*. He enters and finds the naked dancer onstage and rushes toward her, ready to choke her. Detective Shaftoe shoots him dead, and the security guards, firing wildly, shoot Salome and the detective. The dancer and the detective survive, with the dancer moving back to Lebanon and the detective retiring.

Ellen Cherry decides to fly to Jerusalem to see Boomer, whose sculpture is controversial, but still standing. The shell and stick have already been reunited and are waiting for Third Temple inside the Dome of the Rock. Can O' Beans, rusted after the journey, and was happily left on the rocks in front a sculpture that he adored, Boomer's sculpture. Sitting on the patio on a sunny day in Jerusalem, Ellen Cherry is finally at peace with herself. She has reconciled with Boomer and they make plans for the future, which include buying a house in the woods near Seattle. One day, Boomer returns from a scouting mission to see his sculpture, making sure it has not been vandalized. He brings a gift with him that he found near the sculpture and presents it to Ellen Cherry. It's a silver spoon.

The Seventh Veil (pages 395-422) Analysis

The dance proves to be a spiritual moment for all who saw the performance. It also gives the author a chance to revisit the themes he brought up in the previous sections.



The final veil is perhaps the simplest. It's a message that doubles as the author's final piece of advice. The seven veils are enough to change the people in the room, but what about the people that didn't see it? Those people, the author seems to say, are too busy with things like sports to see the real truths.

As far as Buddy, his fate might have been foretold in his final confrontation with Ellen Cherry. On the steps of the church, he is knocked down by Painted Stick. In the restaurant, he again goes after a woman he feels is a Jezebel. Once again, his anger and hatred work against him. Instead of getting tripped, however, he is shot and killed.

After not mentioning them for some time, the remaining four objects make a final appearance, and they all end up happy. It's the spoon, though, that has the biggest impact. She led Detective Shaftoe to the *I and I*, and he wound up saving young Salome. It is also Spoon that gives Ellen Cherry her first spiritual awakening when she played the eye game with her. In the end, it's Spoon who provides the book's closure.



Characters

Ellen Cherry Charles

Ellen Cherry Charles is a beautiful, sensual, smart, and funny woman with mixed feelings about her relationship with art and her husband, Boomer Petway. Her artistic development started early, looking at things with a different perspective while lying in the back seat of her father's car. She becomes the best artist in her small town of Colonial Pines, Virginia, with her art becoming more abstract as she gets older.

Supported by her mother, a former dancer, Ellen Cherry goes to study art at college before she is forcibly removed by her father, Verlin, and her extremist uncle, Reverend Buddy. The incident emotionally scars Ellen Cherry, who runs away to Seattle and works as a waitress while finishing art college. She becomes a local success and is happy. Then, Boomer Petway, her high school boyfriend, rumbles into town with an RV altered to look like a giant turkey. She marries him and they agree to drive to New York. Almost immediately, she starts having second thoughts about marriage, second thoughts that lead to feelings of guilt.

In New York, Ellen Cherry's career stalls while Boomer's flourishes. This leads to the disintegration of their marriage. He moves out, while she takes a job as a waitress at the *I and I*, where she has an affair with one of the owners and stops painting. The artist loses her purpose in life. Encouraged by her husband's bizarre sculpture, however, and inspired by the unoriginality of local artists, Ellen Cherry finally gets motivated to paint again. Her first work is a mural at the *I and I* that inspires the restaurant's young belly dancer to perform the Dance of the Seven Veils. Like the rest of the audience, she receives lessons about life from an inner voice during the dance. In the end, Ellen Cherry reconciles with Boomer, reuniting with him in Jerusalem. At last, she finally seems at peace with her art and her husband. Randolph "Boomer" Petway III

A high school dropout, Boomer Petway goes from welder, to husband, to darling of the New York art scene in a wild couple of years. Physically, Boomer, about thirty-years-old, is big and muscular with thinning hair. He has a limp from a work accident, and his wardrobe consists of jeans and Hawaiian print shirts. When he is first introduced, he is a beer-drinking, dancing, good 'ol boy with no regard for art. However, he fashions some metal wings and legs for an Airstream RV and makes it look like a turkey. He uses this to win back Ellen Cherry, who had left Colonial Pines, Virginia, for an art career in Seattle. The ploy works and the pair get married.

Once in New York City, the marriage falls apart when the RV is deemed a great work of art by a prominent art dealer. He starts wearing a red beret and becomes a hit in the city's art world. This puts a strain on his relationship with Ellen Cherry, who believes he is not a true artist, a point that Boomer admits. Eventually he moves out and travels to Israel to work on a project. The project is funded, unbeknownst to Ellen Cherry until it is completed, by the owners of the *I and I* restaurant, where Ellen Cherry works. The



project is a controversial, bizarre sculpture of hermaphroditic donkey standing on Palestine.

In the end, the pair gets back together, making plans for their life together while spending time in Jerusalem. It's Boomer who provides the novel's closure, finding a special/mystical silver spoon that Ellen Cherry lost back in New York. Reverend Buddy Winkler

Scarred by red pustules on his face, Reverend Buddy, or Uncle Buddy to Ellen Cherry, goes from just another Southern preacher to a demagogue, with plans to start a World War in order to spur the Second Coming. Buddy is Verlin Charles's cousin and the pair, according to Patsy Charles, was wild in their younger days. There is also a reference to an affair between Patsy and Buddy that might have resulted in a miscarriage.

Buddy preaches fear, and believes the devil can be found in everything from makeup to art. It's a condition Ellen Cherry feels is due to his loneliness. He genuinely and firmly believes that Ellen Cherry is going to Hell because of her lifestyle. Along with Verlin, he charges into Ellen Cherry's nude portrait class while she is at college and forcibly removes her, violently scrubbing off her makeup and calling her Jezebel. Reverend Buddy is also popular. His sermons are carried on the radio, with new affiliates recently added in California. Along with the boils, he is described as having a lean look, with rotting teeth, black hair, and a moving, saxophone-like voice.

During a visit to Patsy and Verlin's house, he has a vision: God wants him to erect the Third Temple, which would signal the Second Coming. The revelation causes Buddy to organize the Third Temple Platoon, a coalition of ultra orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians who plan terrorist attacks on Arabs. He leaves his church to preach on the streets of New York. There, he tells Ellen Cherry, Patsy and Verlin his master plan to blow up the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim holy shrine. Patsy and Ellen Cherry react in horror to his plans. Later, he is whisked away to Washington D.C. by a helicopter where he meets the Vice President. He is told to call off his plans, not because they are wrong, but because the timing isn't right.

Upset about his plans being put on hold, Buddy decides to take out his frustration by protesting the *I and I*. There, he sees the young belly dancer the restaurant has hired naked following the Dance of the Seven Veils. He calls her Jezebel, runs toward her in a threatening manner and is shot by detective in the crowd.

Conch Shell and Painted Stick

The two objects are ancient religious artifacts that first met about 1,000 B.C. Conch Shell is roughly one foot long, with shiny pink whorls. Painted Stick is a meter long, with tiny horns carved near the top. Conch Shell was brought to an ancient observatory by a Phoenician sailor, while Painted Stick was carved by a priest and painted a rust color by a priestess. It's clear that Conch Shell is supposed to represent the female reproductive anatomy, while Painted Stick seems to represent religious piety.



In the centuries that followed, power in Jerusalem changed hands between followers of Yahweh (God) and Astarte, the female goddess. As such, Conch Shell and Painted Stick took turns being displayed in temples, and being forgotten or hidden. As the reader learns later in the novel, Conch Shell and Painted Stick were taken to the U.S. by Phoenician sailors following the orders of a Roman priestess, who foresaw the Roman Empire's fall. The shell and stick were placed in a trance, only to be awakened by a follower of Astarte, which the shell and stick mistook for Ellen Cherry and Boomer having sex. After being awakened, Conch Shell and Painted Stick made the trip to New York, with the goal of reaching Jerusalem and being placed in the Third Temple during the Second Coming of Jesus.

The objects are stuck in the basement of the St. Patrick's Cathedral until a fire is purposely started by Painted Stick, which allows them to escape. Conch Shell makes the journey across the Atlantic to Jerusalem, carrying Can o' Beans with her. Painted Stick smuggles aboard a package Reverend Buddy sends to Jerusalem. After finally reaching Jerusalem, they reunite. There's no second coming. The pair hides out together in the Dome of the Rock, awaiting their time.

Silver Spoon

Silver Spoon is a kind-hearted, somewhat naive member of the band of inanimate objects. She was bought by Ellen Cherry at a Catholic garage sale. Deeply religious, she admires Can o' Beans for its knowledge, but is put off by its anti-religious beliefs. It's Can o' Beans' relaying of information to her, though, that provides the back-story of Conch Shell and Painted Stick.

After reaching New York, she is selected to approach Turn Around Norman for help in reaching Jerusalem. Instead, she is picked up by Ellen Cherry who is dumbfounded by finding the spoon after she was sure she left it in a cave. Silver Spoon later falls off the ledge and hits Raoul, the former doorman of Ellen Cherry's hotel, in the head. She finds her way back to the church where the others are hiding. Before her fall, though, it's Spoon who allows Ellen Cherry to tap into a type of spiritual moment by playing the "eye game" with her. Eventually, Spoon is picked up by Reverend Buddy during the objects' escape along with Painted Stick. The pair stow away on a shipment to Jerusalem. Painted Stick joins Conch Shell at the Dome of the Rock, while Spoon is found by Boomer and returned to Ellen Cherry once again.

Dirty Sock

The only member of the inanimate objects not to make it to Jerusalem, Dirty Sock exhibits many of the same characteristics as his former owner, Boomer Petway: humorous, a bit crude, but good-natured. He is left in the cave along with Silver Spoon and Can o' Beans, where he meets Conch Shell and Painted Stick. On the journey to New York, he is attacked by a porcupine. He is rescued after floating down a creek and he recovers after drying himself in the sun. The attack leads to Can o' Beans getting



thrown against a rock by campers. Dirty Sock, having learned how to weld by watching Boomer, closes the wound with a welding torch.

After reaching New York, he escapes the church where the quintet is hiding during a fire, but he is left behind after Reverend Buddy finds him, Silver Spoon, and Painted Stick in the street. It is unclear what happens to him next. The author suggests that he haunts the church, tripping unsuspecting people in the process, or goes on to that dimension where all lost socks go.

Can o' Beans

Can o' Beans is an atheist and intellectual, and has no gender assigned to him by the author. It was originally acquired by Ellen Cherry, having been left in her Seattle apartment by the previous owner. The can is taken by Ellen Cherry on her cross-country trip to New York and is left in a cave after Ellen Cherry and Boomer are scared away. Later, he is thrown against a rock and suffers a gash in his can, which threatens to get him left behind. His cut is mended by Dirty Sock and he joins the others in New York. Riding inside Conch Shell, Can o' Beans crosses the Atlantic. He is rusted by the time he reaches Jerusalem and is left by Conch Shell in front of the strange, controversial sculpture created by Boomer Petway.

Can o' Beans seems to represent intellect, which doesn't have a gender according to the author. It is also through Can o' Beans that the story of Painted Stick and Conch Shell, as well as the history of the Middle East, is told. Spike Cohen

The son of Russian Jews who immigrated to the U.S. after escaping Russia during the winter, a trek which cost the five members of their family to lose their toes to frostbite, Spike is the co-owner of the *I and I*. The "crab family," as his family is called, led to Spike's fascination/fetish with women's feet and, ultimately, shoes. He becomes a successful businessman, opening a string of shoe stores. He's kind and supportive to Ellen Cherry, a relationship, which eventually becomes physical. After suffering a kidney stone, Ellen Cherry cares for him, which permanently puts out the fire in their relationship. He later meets and marries Ellen Cherry's mother, Patsy.

Roland Abu Hadee

The son of a rich Middle Eastern businessman, Abu left for Harvard at eighteen-years-old and quickly found himself thrown out of three colleges due to poor grades and wild partying. After getting cast out by his family, he moves to Madison, Wisconsin, where the only relative who will help him offers him a job as a dishwasher. After three years of washing dishes, which teaches him humility and scars him with a red nose, he marries his relative's daughter, starts a falafel stand, and joins the anti-war movement during the 60s. Later he receives an inheritance from his late father of \$6 million. He meets Spike Cohen while playing tennis at the gym. Wise, fair, and open-minded, he is a devoted family man with a sincere hope that the restaurant will provide an example of Arabs and Jews living together.



Patsy Charles

Ellen Cherry's biggest supporter, her mother is constantly sniping and verbally sparring with Verlin, her husband, and Reverend Buddy. It's Patsy who convinces Verlin to allow Ellen Cherry to go to college in the first place. She also shares physical characteristics with her daughter: a sexy figure and curly brown hair. Several times during the novel, she claims that she could have been a dancer if she had followed her dreams, an indication of why she supports Ellen Cherry's dream to be an artist. Her past is also a bit of mystery. Ellen Cherry hints that Patsy and Reverend Buddy had an affair, though it's not clear if it was before or after her marriage to Verlin. Her affair with Buddy was one of many trysts she had with men in Colonial Pines. She moves to New York City after Verlin's death and helps Ellen Cherry out at the *I and I*. There, she falls in love with and marries Spike Cohen. Verlin Charles

Ellen Cherry's father is described as a good, honorable man who is too easily influenced by his cousin, Reverend Buddy. The football fanatic condemns his daughter for her art and dislikes New York City. Along with Reverend Buddy, he travels to Ellen Cherry's college, drags out of a nude portrait class, violently rubs off her makeup, and calls her "Jezebel." He dies in front of the TV while watching a football game.

Young Salome/ Belly Dancer

The beautiful, voluptuous sixteen-year-old is an immediate sensation, driving men and women crazy with her belly dancing at the *I and I*. Detective Shaftoe later learns she's a Lebanese immigrant who works at a mental hospital and hopes to become a doctor. Eventually, she agrees to perform the Dance of the Seven Veils, unveiling the truths about human nature to the audience. She is accidentally shot by the *I and I*'s security, recovers, and moves back to Lebanon. Ultima Sommervel

The British art dealer Ultima Sommervel "discovers" Boomer. She's the first to consider the "turkey" a work of art. According to Ellen Cherry, she represents everything that's wrong about the New York art scene: cynical, smug, and unoriginal. Ellen Cherry also suspects Ultima is having an affair with Boomer, something that's never proven. Detective Shaftoe

A middle-aged, stocky, ex-football player, Shaftoe investigates Ellen Cherry at the *I and I* after Raoul gets hit by Silver Spoon and becomes fixated on the young belly dancer. He turns into a regular at the restaurant and is the first to realize her Dance of the Seven Veils coincides with the Super Bowl. Later, he shoots Buddy when the reverend goes after the dancer. He retires from the force, spending his time painting.

Raoul

The young Puerto Rican is an aspiring singer/songwriter who works as a doorman at the Ansonia Hotel and has a crush on Ellen Cherry. His band eventually gets signed and



he comes back to tell Ellen Cherry and gets hit on the head with Silver Spoon. The investigation leads Detective Shaftoe to the *I and I*, where both are transfixed by the young belly dancer. He goes on to perform at Super Bowl halftime.

Turn Around Norman

Norman is a street artist who performs in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral, taking several hours to complete a full rotation. He inspires Ellen Cherry, provides entertainment for the inanimate objects, and is the ridicule of Reverend Buddy. He's mysterious, doesn't say a word, and performs every day except Wednesday afternoons. He suddenly stops performing when street preachers overrun the corner.



Objects/Places

Colonial Pines, Virginia

Colonial Pines is the fictional, conservative, Bible-Belt hometown of Ellen Cherry Charles, located in East-Central Virginia. It has no downtown, and to Ellen Cherry, no cultural or artistic value.

The Ansonia Hotel

The Ansonia is the New York City hotel where Ellen Cherry and Boomer first move. They live there through an artist friend of Ellen from Seattle.

Ishmael and Isaac's

Referred to as the *I and I*, *Ishmael and Isaac's* is the restaurant opened by Spike Cohen (Jew) and Roland Abu Hadee (Arab) across from the U.N. that is supposed to symbolize the possibility of peace in the Middle East. It is firebombed a few weeks after it opens, and the target of protests and bomb threats. Later, it is the site of the Dance of the Seven Veils. The Turkey

The Turkey is an Airstream RV that Boomer Petway customizes to look like a turkey, adding steel legs and wings to the sides. Ellen Cherry credits it with "tricking" her into marrying Boomer. It later turns into "art" and is displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

St. Patrick's Cathedral

St. Patrick's Cathedral is the famed Catholic Church where the five inanimate objects hide in the basement. It is also where Turn Around Norman and later Reverend Buddy Winkler perform and preach, respectively.

Ellen Cherry's Hair

Described as an unruly mob of caramel curls, Ellen Cherry's hair is referred to repeatedly in the novel.

Abu's Red Nose

Also referred to regularly, Abu's nose turned red after years of washing plates and exposing his nose to hot steam.



Buddy Winkler's Pustules

The reverend is scarred by ugly, red pustules on the side of his face.

The Big-Screen TV

The six-foot, high-definition TV is a present Spike Cohen buys for the *I and I*, and instantly increases business by attracting sports fans to the restaurant. Later the TV becomes a source of heated arguments, as patrons must choose between the Super Bowl and watching the Dance of the Seven Veils.

The Pales Sculpture

Boomer and an Israeli sculptor build a bizarre and controversial sculpture for a reconstructed neighborhood in Jerusalem. The sculpture is a 3-D map of ancient Palestine, stood over by a donkey with breasts and a penis.

Ellen Cherry's Mural

Stuck in an artistic funk, Ellen Cherry finally breaks out of it with a mural on the wall of the *I and I* that takes three days to finish. The mural is an abstract landscape. It inspires the young belly dancer to perform the Dance of the Seven Veils.

The Eye Game

The key to Ellen Cherry's artistic development was a game she played while lying in the back seat of her father's car during long trips, hoping to avoid carsickness. Ellen Cherry squints her eyes, seeing formations and images most people would never think to see. This unique point of view is reflected in her art.

The Dome of the Rock

The Dome of the Rock is a Muslim holy shrine located in Jerusalem. It is the target of a proposed terrorist attack by Reverend Buddy Winkler.

The Third Temple

The Third Temple is the mythical temple that would replace the Dome of the Rock and signal the Second Coming.

Social Concerns And Themes

As he does in *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971) and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976), Robbins chronicles the failure of western society to live in harmony and peace with itself. He believes modern Western culture, particularly as it is represented in Christian fundamentalism, is responsible for much human unhappiness and social discord. According to Robbins, modern man has been deceived by a culture that has impaired his spiritual vision.

To illustrate his position, Robbins uses the Middle Eastern Dance of the Seven Veils as a means to present seven illusions which keep the naked facts of life from our eyes. As the veils drop in the course of the dance, Robbins reveals his philosophical position: that through ignorance or dissembling our purpose in life is hidden; that we do not have dominion over plants, animals, and inanimate objects; that political expediency is often advertised as virtue; that organized religion diminishes rather than enhances our spiritual life; that valuing money clouds our minds as much as valuing organized religion; that living as if only the afterlife were important keeps us from fulfillment in the here and now; and that every individual is responsible for his or her spiritual growth.

Robbins believes that the cure for the diseased Western cultural system is a return to earlier and healthier feminine principles, like the veneration of Astarte, the pre-Christian goddess of fertility once worshipped across the Middle East. Additionally, he suggests that much of the political discord in the Middle East is a result of the various groups — whether Jews, Arabs, or Christians — losing touch with the older religious system they once shared. Cultural veils lead us to prefer dry spirit in place of fertile soul, the easy power of money in place of the mysterious creative power of magic which produces art.

Overlaying Robbins's social concerns is a tale of two artists who attempt to come to terms with art and each other.

Skinny Legs and All develops the relationship between beautiful painter Ellen Cherry Charles and lame welder Boomer Petway, a twentieth-century romance between Venus and Vulcan.

This love story connects the political, class, religious, and artistic themes of the novel.

Techniques

Skinny Legs and All is divided into seven major sections, each one corresponding to one of the seven veils dropped by Salome as she performs the Dance of the Seven Veils on Superbowl Sunday. As with each of Robbins's novels, this one manifests its author's delight with the written word, a delight reflected in his verbal humor, puns, stretched metaphors, and wordplay. Unlike his previous works, however, this novel is less experimental.

The metafictional intrusion of the author into the work, which has been noted in *Another Roadside Attraction*, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, and *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980), has given place to more traditional methods of exposition. Still, Robbins's latest fiction successfully merges fantasy with many of the elements of popular culture as a means of articulating his views on Western sexuality and spirituality.



Themes

The Definition of True Art

Skinny Legs and All holds up many items for ridicule and/or satire, but Robbins spends a lot of time trying to define what art is, and what is good and bad art. The main vehicle for this exercise is Ellen Cherry Charles and her husband, Boomer Petway. An artist since her youth, Robbins sees her as the artistic ideal. Ellen Cherry is never happier than when she is painting, but it is a relationship that overshadows her feelings for her husband. Robbins uses the big city art scene for further proof of modern art's absurdity. Ellen Cherry is a success in Seattle, despite the popularity of dour, depressing images there. In New York, the concept of popular art is further ridiculed. Boomer, a beer-swilling high school dropout with little artistic tendency, becomes a success for sculptures that would seem silly to most people. Meanwhile, Ellen Cherry's abstract landscapes are not selling very well.

One of the most telling moments comes near the end of the novel, when Ellen Cherry sees the art hanging in a trendy gallery. The works are uninspired and unoriginal, because, the curator explains, there is nothing original anymore. Suddenly, she is inspired. The true artist, Robbins writes, should aspire for beauty, and should not be intimidated by the prospect of not being great or original.

In a way, however, Robbins seems to admire Boomer's work. Boomer states that he has no fear of anything, and his work, while debatable on its merits, is without pretense. In other words, he's not trying to be anything more than what he is. In the end, even Ellen Cherry must admit that Boomer just might be an artist.

Religion's Impact on Society

To Robbins, Buddy Winkler isn't just the "bad guy" in his novel. Buddy encapsulates everything that is wrong with religion. Buddy is fearful and judgmental. He finds the devil in makeup, art, music, and dancing, among many things. It's this attitude that drives Verlin Charles to physically remove Ellen Cherry from college after he learns she is drawing nude portraits. As Ellen Cherry says in the novel, Verlin is a good man who is led astray by Buddy's extreme religious views.

Robbins makes no secret of his dislike not just for ultra-conservative religious views, but also for all religion. It's not just Christianity he criticizes; Robbins makes sure to find fault in Muslim and Jewish faiths as well. He uses the Arab-Israeli conflict as an example of how religion leads to war. In fact, religion is one of the seven veils that Robbins writes that humans must shed in order to be truly free.



The attacks on the *I and I* are other examples Robbins provides of how religion can lead to violence. The restaurant, started by an Arab and a Jew, was started in part to show that both parties could live together in harmony. A few months after it opens, it is firebombed. The main suspects are the members of a group made up of ultra orthodox Jews and fanatical Christians.

One of the novel's strongest statements about the negative consequences of religion the impact it has on Turn Around Norman, a street artist in New York. Turn Around Norman performs every day, regardless of the weather or people disturbing him. When sidewalk preachers start showing up on his street, he stops in mid performance and walks away. As the Conch Shell states, "Pious dogma, if allowed to flourish, will always drive magic away."

Sexuality

Readers might be taken aback by the frank and sometimes-explicit language Robbins uses in describing sex, but perhaps that is the point. As he mentions in the first section, the first veil that must drop for people to find true happiness concerns sex, specifically female sexuality. The Dance of the Seven Veils, which the author uses for the book's structure, is a dance that leaves the performer nude.

Ellen Cherry, along with encompassing many of the traits of a true artist, also exudes the sexuality Robbins feels shouldn't be feared. She states that she loves sex almost as much as art. Later, it's a sexual act between Ellen Cherry and Boomer that awakens the Painted Stick and Conch Shell, two of the main characters in the book. Ellen Cherry also engages in kinky sex with Spike Cohen, half owner of the *I and I* restaurant, and satisfies her sexual cravings with a vibrator.

It is the fear of female sexuality that also drives the novel's story. Reverend Buddy and Verlin physically remove Ellen Cherry from college after she's found to be painting nude portraits. If Verlin and Buddy weren't afraid of sexuality, Ellen Cherry likely would have graduated from the college and lived happily as an artist, without incident. Instead, they call her Jezebel, the biblical figure that was killed after flaunting her made up face. Jezebel is a reoccurring character in the novel. Ellen Cherry forms a kinship with her, and it's the cries of Jezebel that awaken Painted Stick and Conch Shell.

Robbins even finds the fear of sexuality part of the problem in the Middle East. The religious conflicts, he contends, started with the conflict between worshipers of God and those of Astarte, the female goddess. It is the woman, and sex, that are responsible for the creation of all things, Robbins contends.



Style

Point of View

Robbins's liberal use of different points of view allows him to mix several styles into one book, and sometimes even one page. The novel opens in the third person, with a narrator describing the action of the main characters. When the characters speak or think, however, the point of view changes to the first person, as many times the characters' conversations or thoughts go on for pages. At other times, the book turns into an essay on Robbins's political and philosophical beliefs, more or less talking directly to the reader in the second person.

Robbins cleverly uses the first person to provide background information essential to the story. When giving ancient history lessons, and there are many, Robbins uses conversations. The parallel history of Painted Stick/Conch Shell and the Middle East, for example, is told through Can o' Beans relaying the information to Silver Spoon or telling it back to himself. Also, the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is told through conversations between Spike and Abu and Ellen Cherry. It's an effective device. Instead of the history lessons coming across like a textbook, they are told in a conversational style, making them easier to understand, and more pleasing to read.

At the end of every section, it's fair to say that Robbins switches from novelist to essayist. Using the seven veils as his vehicle, the author's personal thoughts on everything from religion to money to self discovery is communicated. Instead of coming across as smug, though, it's done in a prose-like, and often times quirky and humorous style.

Setting

Since the novel is largely an analysis of modern times, the novel is set in the present, which, given the publishing date, is in the late '80s and early '90s. The setting isn't static, however, as Robbins uses the story line to take the reader through different parts of the U.S. and beyond.

The story begins in the West, as Ellen Cherry Charles and Boomer Petway drive from Seattle to New York. Along the way, they stop at various remote towns and locations, each richly described by the author. Robbins also takes the reader through the South. The fictional Colonial Pines, Virginia, is put forth as an example of a typical suburban, Bible-Belt town. Later, the action moves to New York, where the majority of the novel takes place.

Using the characters' dialogue, Robbins also takes the reader back to ancient times. Roughly one third of the novel is the retelling of ancient and biblical history. Through first-person accounts and retellings, the reader is transported back to those times.



Language and Meaning

The reader should be prepared for a challenge. Nearly every paragraph contains some kind of metaphor, turn of phrase, or pun. Many times, the writing resembles a poem more than a novel, with abstract ideas and seemingly nonsensical phrases appearing with regularity. In addition, coarse, sometimes sexually explicit language is quite common.

It's a style that might require a careful read of every line to catch all the meanings. It's rare for Robbins to describe an object or scene simply. In describing Reverend Buddy's suit for example, he writes that he looked "like an ear of corn with a diamond in its lapel. Buddy looked prosperous, in a seedy kind of way." Robbins uses these same word skills to describe the sexual matter that runs through the novel. However, it's clear that Robbins isn't using the sexual matter to titillate; it's just his style of writing.

Structure

Skinny Legs and All is divided into seven sections, each representing a different veil of confusion that conceals "truth" from society. However, with action shifting from several different story lines, Robbins provides subheadings in the form of hieroglyphic-like symbols to break things up. Each section also follows a similar structure. The progress of the inanimate objects, Ellen Cherry, and Buddy Winkler is chronicled. There is usually a section reserved for a lesson on ancient history and religion and, at the end of each section, when a veil is revealed, there is a philosophical essay that describes what each veil means.

Each separate story, though, is not told in chronological order, testing the reader's patience. The author introduces characters, situations, and phrases that initially make little sense. It is only after further reading that several basic questions are answered. In the opening paragraph of the novel, for example, Robbins describes Boomer and Ellen Cherry riding through the West on a "turkey." The reader must wait until midway through the first section to find out that the turkey is an Airstream RV that has been altered to look like turkey. While this structure might prove frustrating at times, the novel lends itself to a second reading, which might actually be more pleasing than the first.



Quotes

"My husband is a complete idiot. But I've got to admit, he's a hill of fun." - Ellen Cherry Charles, pg. 19.

"In the haunted house of life, art is the only stair that doesn't creak." - Ellen Cherry Charles, pg. 28.

" ... Veils of ignorance, disinformation, and illusion separate us from that which is imperative to our understanding of our evolutionary journey, shield us from the Mystery that is central to being." - Narrator, pg. 46.

"Every time they substitute an all-purpose, sloppy slang for the words that would actually describe an emotion or a situation, it lowers their reality orientations, pushes them farther from shore, out onto the foggy water of alienation and confusion." - Can o' Beans, pg. 64.

"Those people who recognize that imagination is reality's master, we call sages, and those who act upon it are called artists." - Narrator, pg. 91.

"I'd be obliged to say this much. Of the Seven Deadly Sins, lust is definitely the pick of the litter." - Patsy Charles, pg. 94.

"Long as you're not afraid, nobody can run your life for you. Remember that. Hell is being scared of things. Heaven is refusing to be scared ... " - Boomer Petway, pg. 97.

"It (religion) is not merely the opium of the masses, it is the cyanide." - Narrator, pg. 167.

"If there's a thing, a scene, maybe, an image that you want to see real bad, that you need to see but it doesn't exist in the world around you, at least not in the form that you envision, then you create it so that you can look at it and have it around, or show it to other people who wouldn't have imagined it because they perceive reality in a more narrow, predictable way. And that's it. That's all an artist does." - Ellen Cherry Charles, p. 179.

"What is plain is that money nor the love of it is the root of all evil. Evil's roots run deeper than that. Anyway, money is not a root. Money is a leaf. Trillions of leaves, actually; dense, bushy, dollar-green, obscuring the stars of reality with their false canopy." - narrator, pg. 231.

"To emphasize the afterlife is to deny life. To concentrate on heaven is to create hell." - narrator, pg. 305.

"Pious dogma, if allowed to flourish, will always drive magic away." - Conch Shell, pg. 316.



"If one didn't cultivate beauty, soon he or she wouldn't be able to recognize ugliness." - Ellen Cherry Charles, pg. 380.

"It (figuring things out for yourself) was different for everybody as it was the same, so everybody had to take control of their own life, define their own death, and construct their own salvation. And when you finished, you didn't call the Messiah. He'd call you." - Narrator, pg. 413.

"The trick is to keep your eye on the ball. Even when you can't see the ball." - The voice, pg. 414



Topics for Discussion

What are the seven veils? Give examples from the book of people who have thrown off the veils and those who are still blinded by them.

Discuss modern day Israel and how it serves as metaphor for different people and places in the book.

Explain the relationship between the biblical story of Jezebel and how it relates to, and inspires Ellen Cherry Charles.

What is the room the author introduces in the prelude and what is the wolfmother wallpaper? Use examples from the book where the idea is touched upon.

Why does the author use inanimate objects such as a stick, spoon and dirty sock? Also, identify what these objects represent including why Can o' Beans is not assigned a gender.

In the final chapter, only those who watch the dance of the seven veils become enlightened. What is the author trying to say about the people who chose watching the Super Bowl over watching the dance?

Examine the relationship between Reverend Buddy and Ellen Cherry. Why is she sexually aroused by his voice and why does she call out his name in ecstasy?

According to the guidelines set up by the author, is Boomer Petway an artist?

Literary Precedents

Robbins has indicated that he appreciates works by E. L. Doctorow, Gunter Grass, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker. *Skinny Legs and All*, although less innovative than his earlier work, still expresses the playful style and literary techniques reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut.



Related Titles

Robbins's protagonist, Ellen Cherry Charles, plays a cameo role in his earlier novel *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984), in which she first appears as one of the "Daughters of the Daily Special" who receives a grant from her sister-waitresses to pursue her interest in painting. More importantly, the author's treatment of issues concerning personal freedom, spirituality, organized religion, human sexuality, and art which appear in *Skinny Legs and All* have been previously introduced in earlier works.

Robbins's experience as art critic for the *Seattle Times* and his research on Jackson Pollack appear to have provided him with much of the background for Ellen Cherry Charles's artistic philosophy, the character of Ultima Sommervell, the art dealer, and the New York setting. Once again, Robbins directs some biting satire toward his birthplace, the Richmond, Virginia, area. His fictional Colonial Pines, actually Colonial Heights, Virginia, is depicted as the constricting home of Ellen Cherry Charles and the home base for misguided fundamentalist preacher Buddy Winkler. The area fosters an atmosphere that drives out art and encourages soul-deadening religion.



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