

# **Slapstick: Or, Lonesome No More! Study Guide**

**Slapstick: Or, Lonesome No More! by Kurt Vonnegut**

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# Plot Summary

A pseudo-autobiography of how the author imagines his future, Slapstick takes place in an apocalyptic future as Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain, a former pediatrician and President of the United States, writes a memoir of his life at 100 years old. The story skips around to different periods but is generally told chronologically to explain his current existence in the Empire State Building on the solitary island of Manhattan.

Wilbur's childhood is unusual. Born in a set of physically deformed twins, he and his sister Eliza are assumed mentally retarded with short life expectations. Their very wealthy parents fix up an old mansion in Vermont and the locals and a family practitioner care for the children while the parents visit once a year and on birthdays. Wilbur and Eliza quickly educate themselves through the many books in the mansion. While Eliza never grasps reading and writing, she is a creative problem-solver, while Wilbur is very analytical and can read and write. When they are in close proximity to each other, their minds meld to create a 'genius' that becomes the author of several masterpieces of writing and invention. However, they become so consumed by the genius, that they often lose themselves in an incestuous orgy, grasping to get intellectually even closer to each other. When separate, they refer to themselves as Bobby and Betty Brown, boring and inconsequential sorts.

Wilbur and Eliza hide their intelligence, as it seems what is expected of them. However, on their fifteenth birthday they overhear their mother express her hatred for them. She thinks she could endure her role better if her children showed one glimmer of intelligence. Wilbur and Eliza expose the truth, which shocks the whole household. They are tested but after exhibiting one of their genius orgies, Wilbur is sent to a private school for mentally disturbed boys and Eliza is sent to an institution. Wilbur soon forgets his sister as he becomes accepted into medical school and leads a busy, affluent life. After their father dies, Eliza appears to claim her inheritance. She thrashes out in anger at Wilbur and their mother in the press. Eventually, she visits Wilbur and before long, their minds are reunited into the genius. This time, the orgy lasts five days and they both end up comatose. Realizing the danger of being together, Eliza moves to Machu Picchu and never physically sees Wilbur again.

Wilbur graduates from Harvard Medical School and becomes a pediatrician, using a book he and his sister wrote on parenting as a 'genius' as his main guide for patient care. At one point, he is visited by a miniature Chinese man who is interested in 'genius' writings that Eliza and Wilbur hid in the mansion. Wilbur agrees to show him the works and the Chinese man is particularly interested in their papers on gravity. Eliza gets a trip to Mars, which the Chinese have colonized, as a reward. Not long after, Wilbur receives a letter informing him about Eliza's death in an avalanche on Mars. At that moment, there is a massively oppressive gravity shift and the world is changed forever. Machinery becomes almost defunct as major cities fall to ruin. Machu Picchu falls into the ocean. That day, Wilbur takes a drug called tri-benzo-Deportamil and becomes addicted to it for almost thirty years.



Wilbur married and divorced as a doctor, unable to love his wife or son. He changes careers and runs political campaigns proclaiming he will end loneliness for all Americans. He wins the campaign for President and institutes his plan, which he and Eliza had conceived as children. Every person is assigned new middle names, and those that share a middle name are instantly related. Wilbur believes that large, extended families are the cure to loneliness. His plan indeed seems to have a good effect as crime drops and family clubs and newsletters pop up around the nation. Wilbur discovers the White House dishwasher is now his brother. Everything is going along grandly.

Wilbur marries and divorces again, but gravity shifts continue (though not to fatal degrees), and a plague strikes the nation. Most of the population is killed off. New York has its own version of the plague, known as the Green Death, and is hence nicknamed the Island of Death. All the White House staff either dies or disappears, except for Wilbur and the dishwasher. His presidency is forgotten. One day a pilot and frontiersman appear. The frontiersman has a letter inviting him to visit a widow in Indiana whose husband had discovered a way to communicate with the afterlife. The pilot agrees to take Wilbur and the Dishwasher to Indianapolis where the Daffodil family members primarily live. They are given a grand welcome and Wilbur feels good about the results of his extended family plan. The Dishwasher is left there with family while Wilbur visits the widow. Her husband had discovered he could communicate with the dead through a pipe-like device nicknamed the Hooligan. Wilbur is able to communicate to Eliza through it. She tells him that the afterlife is terribly dull and he must kill himself at once to help her figure out a way to make it better. Wilbur gives away his last remaining pills of tri-benzo-Deportamil and has sex with the widow during his arduous withdrawal period.

The pilot takes Wilbur to New York where Wilbur assumes he will die of the Green Death and join his sister. However, he is found by the Raspberry family who need a doctor and is given an antidote. He helps cure a Raspberry man of an illness and is given a candlestick as a present. After that, people always give him candlesticks. He amasses over 1000 and becomes known as the King of Candlesticks. However, there are no candles in New York. Over the years, Wilbur befriends a neighbor named Vera who has a farm with slaves and raises animals and produce. Eventually, a 12-year old girl named Melody shows up claiming to be his granddaughter. Her father was the son conceived by Wilbur and the widow many years before. She is pregnant from being raped but the child is stillborn. Melody finds a lover, Isadore, and he helps her build a pyramid over the baby in the streets of New York. She also becomes pregnant by him at the age of 16. Vera has a grand party for Wilbur's 100th birthday and he is given 1,000 candles made by the slaves. They light them all in the lobby of the Empire State Building and Wilbur feels as if he is a god in the galaxy. It is the last entry in his memoir as he dies soon after, presumably rejoining Eliza in the afterlife.

# Prologue

## Prologue Summary

A pseudo-autobiography of how the author imagines his future, *Slapstick* takes place in an apocalyptic future as Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain, a former pediatrician and President of the United States, writes a memoir of his life at 100 years old. The Epilogue is written from the author's point of view. He calls this novel the closest he will come to writing a biography and like the slapstick of old comedies, it is what life feels like to him. He cites Laurel and Hardy (the dedication for the book) for their will to succeed at every challenge while being "screamingly adorable and funny." Their comedies didn't involve love and the author, Vonnegut, doesn't find it that important. He feels as if he has treated people for long periods with common decency and has had that returned so love didn't really have anything to do with it. He can't distinguish the difference in the love he has for people or affectionate dogs. He remembers that once one of his three adopted sons remarked that he had never hugged him. Vonnegut hugged him and it felt good, like rolling around with a Great Dane he used to have. He thinks love is where you find it and it's foolish to search for it.

He feels his longest experience with "common decency" has been with his older brother Bernard, an atmospheric scientist and widower raising two young sons on his own. He also has three grown children. They have opposite intellects as a scientist and writer and only hug on special occasions like birthdays, and then clumsily. Despite different types of intellects, they share sensibility when it comes to comedy and disorderliness. Bernard's labs are always a mess and once a safety officer chewed him out about this. His brother pointed to his head and said, "If you think this laboratory is bad, you should see what it's like in here." Although brothers by birth, they also have artificial extended families of peer groups, scientists and writers. Growing up in Indianapolis, they had a genuine extended family of German heritage. They had good homes, businesses, reputations, and cottages on Lake Maxinkuckee. However, the war bred a hatred for German things so the family became silent about their heritage. Vonnegut, his brother, and sister left Indianapolis as young adults. The city itself changed to become another homogenous part of the nation.

Vonnegut and his brother still go back occasionally for funerals. In July before writing this novel, he traveled back with Bernard for the funeral of his Uncle Alex Vonnegut. A graduate of Harvard and a life insurance agent, he had also been a co-founder of the Indianapolis Alcoholics Anonymous chapter, though this wasn't mentioned in his obituary. Although he drank, Vonnegut doesn't remember him as a drunk in any regard. He believes loneliness drove his uncle to AA; it was a place he could find a new family. Vonnegut received the news of his death at his home in Turtle Bay where there are actually no turtles and no bay. He travels to the funeral by plane with his brother. They were both over six feet tall with identical moustaches.



The empty seat behind them reminds Vonnegut of his sister Alice, the middle sibling, who died of cancer as a young mother. About her impending death she said, "Slapstick." Vonnegut and Bernard visited her in the hospital as she was dying. Ironically, her husband had died two days before on "the only train in American railroading history to hurl itself off an open drawbridge." Bernard and Alice didn't tell Alice about this but she discovered it anyway. Vonnegut and his wife raised her three eldest sons and their dogs while a cousin adopted her baby son. The sons grew up and the dogs died but not before rolling around for hours on the rug with Vonnegut. The sons have shared that they can remember anything of their parents, but Vonnegut believes this is a child's instinct to protect itself from crippling grief.

Vonnegut shares that his sister was always the one he wrote his novels for and thus the secret of his technique. After she died he kept writing to her, but eventually she faded away. That empty seat on the plane seems especially vacant now. Bernard and Vonnegut talk about the opera and Vonnegut says he would use the interior of Union Station in the first act of Tosca, with relatives from all generations passing in and out of the station. Once in the air, Bernard shows his brother a piece of apparatus that perceived lightening flashes in clouds as clicks they could hear through an earpiece. Vonnegut daydreams about the story contained in the novel, of desolate cities, loneliness, and death; and of him and his sister as monsters.

Vonnegut explains that the story is about a very old man living with his granddaughter in Manhattan, a city where most have died from "The Green Death." The man represents himself experimenting with old age. At first he thought Melody might represent the fading memory of his sister but decides she is the creativity he feels is left when experimenting with old age. The novel begins with the old man writing his autobiography and starting with words from his Uncle Alex who said they should be a skeptic's prelude to nightly prayers: "To whom it may concern."

## Prologue Analysis

The prologue explains the author's inspiration and autobiographical connection to the novel. The main character, Wilbur, is the author as an old man. Like Vonnegut, he is incapable of feeling love in any emotive way. Eliza represents his real life sister who fades in Wilbur's mind when separated as the author's real sister has faded from his since death. His uncle's connection to AA inspired the idea that we all need families of sorts to stave loneliness and hence Wilbur's campaign to ensure every citizen had an extended family. Many of the author's childhood and adult homes appear in the story, such as Indianapolis and Turtle Bay. As one reads the novel, the biographical components and their inherent themes become very evident.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

The story begins from the perspective of the 100-year-old president of the United States, who resides in the Empire State building. He is writing an account of his life. He introduces himself as Dr. Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain. Wearing a toga of purple drapes, he says he is the former and final president and the only one to get divorced while in the White House. The city of New York, like the rest of the country, has been devastated by a disease called the Green Death. He, his granddaughter Melody, and her lover Isadore are the only ones living in the building. Their nearest neighbor, Vera Chipmunk-5 Zappa, lives 1.5 km away on a farm where slaves help her cultivate crops and raise livestock. Visitors are rare since bridges and tunnels are down and people are afraid of the plague that has given Manhattan the nickname, "The Island of Death."

Wilbur recognizes his habit of saying "Hi Ho" at the end of many thoughts and reflections and plans to scratch them all out of the memoir later. The gravity is light as Wilbur writes, giving him an erection. He says he is often referred to as the King of Candlesticks as he has more than a thousand of them. Melody and Isadore are uneducated and have no knowledge or interest in history. When pressed by Wilbur "to name the three most important human beings in history," they answer with Wilbur, Jesus Christ, and Santa Clause. Melody and Isadore hope to be Vera's slaves one day.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter begins to describe the futuristic, apocalyptic world that Wilbur inhabits, yet much has yet to be explained. From Melody and Isadore's apathy, it appears that humankind has succumbed to a droll, basic existence. As the author explained in the prologue, Melody personifies what the author feels might be left of his 'optimistic creativity' at an old age. The chapter sets up the many events of Wilbur's life that he will reflect on, such as being President, the plague, and the purpose behind the odd middle names.



## Chapters 2, 3, and 4

### Chapters 2, 3, and 4 Summary

Wilbur and his twin sister, Eliza, were born in New York but as they were so ugly, no friends or family were invited to see them. They were each born with twelve fingers and as many toes, four breasts, and Neanderthal features. Doctors predicted they had no intelligence and would be dead by fourteen. Now 100, Wilbur believes his sister would have lived as long had she not died in an avalanche on the planet Mars. Their parents, Caleb and Letitia Swain, were an incredibly wealthy couple who lived in Turtle Bay, NY. They were discouraged to raise their children in their home, so they sent them to be cared for in a mansion they owned in Vermont that was surrounded by acres of apple trees. As it hadn't been lived in for thirty years, it was fixed up to suit the needs of young, incapable children. Among the staff of local villagers, two nurses are hired to bathe and change Wilbur and Eliza. A practitioner, Dr. Stewart Mott, is in charge of the household and checked in on the children every day.

Caleb and Letitia feel they have made the best 'asteroid' they can for Wilbur and Eliza, referring to the mansion in the fenced in orchard. They visit their children once a year and on their birthdays. The mansion, with a mausoleum for its former resident and architect, was built by the founder of the family's wealth, Professor Elihu Roosevelt Swain. Growing up, Eliza and Wilbur discover a wonderful secret - there is a mansion within the mansion, accessed by trap doors and sliding panels leading to secret passageways and hidden staircases. They also discover that Elihu's real middle name was Witherspoon and he came up with Roosevelt to seem more aristocratic. Wilbur believes this is what eventually gave him and Eliza the idea of giving everyone new middle names.

Wilbur wonders how Professor Swain was able to navigate the narrow passageways since he was so fat before he died. The servants hear the creaking of the children behind the walls and think the house is haunted. Wilbur remembers his childhood as the happiest of times up until his fifteenth birthday. Since people expected them to be idiots, that's exactly what he and Eliza pretended to be, even though they were quickly learning many skills, such as reading and writing, foreign languages, and calculus. By the age of ten, they had read all of the thousands of books in the mansion, by candlelight in the secret passageways. However, they continued to act like idiots as it was expected of them and seemed to make life easiest for everyone.

### Chapters 2, 3, and 4 Analysis

Chapter 2 goes back in time to the beginning of Wilbur's life. The Monster theme is introduced with Wilbur and his sister being born with grotesque features and being hidden away in a mansion. Wilbur also mentions that his sister died on Mars, alluding

that man has populated other planets. The colonization of Mars is revealed later in the novel.

The secret passageways become a haven for Wilbur and Eliza. They hide in them to read and keep their growing intelligence secret and spy on others to understand what is going on around them. The house symbolizes the children's condition, living on an 'asteroid' hidden from the world at large. The reference to giving everyone new middle names is also important as it has great relevance later in Wilbur's life when he actually institutes the idea as President.

Wilbur remembers his childhood as very happy, though alludes to something bad that happened on their fifteenth birthday. Like Frankenstein, they educate themselves without their 'master' or parents to guide them. They are astute enough to recognize that their feigned idiocy keeps everyone around them content and allows their idyllic world to be safe. This world is cavernous, deep in the hidden passageways of the mansion. It is secret, as they are a secret to the world. Obviously, this secrecy will be exposed if Wilbur is to one day become president.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Wilbur wonders if Dr. Mott really loved him and Eliza and, knowing they were actually intelligent, kept that a secret to protect them or if he was just completely unaware, ergo comatose. When Wilbur finds his reports years later, they simply state physical aspects of weight and growth and consistently reiterate that the children will never have minds sharper than a two to three-year-old. Wilbur is dying to see Dr. Mott in the afterlife to discover this answer. He also wants to know what made Dr. Mott so sad, as even though they were children, he left a strong impression of sorrow. Years later when Wilbur meets his grandson, the King of Michigan (Steward Oriole-2 Mott), he tries to find out this answer but the grandson seems clueless. The King suspects his grandfather was simply one of those sorts of people who were born unhappy.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Dr. Mott is one of the few consistent adults in Wilbur and Elizabeth's lives. Wilbur wants to believe he really loved them and chose to keep their intelligence a secret, given all the clues they left around. However, Dr. Mott may be too consumed by his own sorrow to have cared. This sense of unhappiness affects Wilbur and will become the source of his presidential campaign later in the novel.

# Chapters 6 and 7

## Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

Wilbur remembers his childhood as extremely happy in the 'asteroid', constantly with his sister so both halves of their specialized brains could make up a genius one. They often physically touch though only to make their combined intellectual magic stronger. If they are apart, there is no genius. Wilbur is the practical, methodical one who knows how to read; Eliza is illiterate but far more intuitive and creative at solving problems. She is the one who suspected there were secret passageways among other discoveries. They devour the books in the mansion and argue about Darwin's theory of evolution. They also make a prediction that comes true: gravity can shift, like the wind, and there must have been days of lighter gravity when great monuments, such as pyramids, were constructed. They also disagree with the constitution and believe it should be amended so that every human is given some type of family membership.

Wilbur and Eliza grow to be 2 meters tall. The great height is all right for Wilbur, as he becomes respected playing basketball and a man to look up to in politics. For Eliza, being a tall, 12 fingered and toed female with four breasts is not an ideal situation. As children, they didn't mind their ugliness as, from what they read, beautiful people always had their privacy threatened. Even if their appearance was ugly, their clothes were the finest and the practical nurses would have fun dressing the children up, even if they never went anywhere. Wilbur and Eliza are aware of this absurdity, but don't comprehend the tragedy of their lives until they turn fifteen. Wilbur remembers reading the ugly duckling to Eliza. She concluded that it would have been far more interesting if the little duckling had turned into a rhinoceros instead of a swan.

## Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

A lot of foreshadowing happens in these chapters. The genius that Wilbur and Eliza become leads to greater understandings than normal, such as their theories on gravity and evolution that eventually come true. The idea that every citizen should be given some type of family membership will become the key to Wilbur's campaign for presidential office. It may stem from the fact that as children they were isolated from family. Wilbur and Eliza also show their starkly different intellect as being left (analytical) and right (creative) sided, hence making a whole intelligent brain when combined. Indications of incest creep in as 'touching' occurs when the genius mind is in control.

Wilbur and Eliza's physical disfigurements begin to separate them as they mature. Eventually Wilbur is able to utilize them productively while Eliza becomes even more isolated. It is no wonder she could identify with the Ugly Duckling though her creative bent sees far more interesting possibilities with the story that includes a very satirical ending. The fine clothing they are dressed in as children also seems to parody their

condition, like dressing up dolls in a dollhouse. They have nowhere to go except in their keepers' imaginations.

# Chapters 8, 9 and 10

## Chapters 8, 9 and 10 Summary

When Wilbur and Eliza's parents show up for their 15th birthday, the children expect things to go as always. They put on the usual show of being babbling idiots and pretend not to recognize their parents at first, and then become over excited by the thought of presents. By then they are full grown so when they jump around with glee, even the floor shakes. They use an ancient Greek language their parents won't recognize to communicate. Eliza says she can't believe they "were related to such pretty dolls." At five-thirty, they are taken to bed, as they pretend they need 16 hours of sleep a night.

That evening, Eliza and Wilbur sneak through the passageways to spy on their parents through a hole in the wall. Their father talks about how the Chinese have devised a way to make people smaller. They have also sent 200 explorers to Mars but divulged no secrets in how they accomplished this without a spacecraft. Suddenly, the fireplace bangs and their mother is startled. Whipped into a sudden fury, she exclaims how much she hates her children, Wilbur and Eliza.

After their mother has a fit, she feels guilty and says it is not like her to act this way. Her supportive husband agrees and tells her not to feel guilty. She steels herself for many more such birthdays, but says she wishes she could see a flicker of humanness in her children. Wilbur and Eliza aren't offended as they are emotionally detached sorts, but intellectually they see an opportunity to solve a problem. They write on a bed sheet and sneak into their parents' room to hang it up. It says that they will be as smart or dumb as others wish them to be.

## Chapters 8, 9 and 10 Analysis

Wilbur and Eliza do their puppet act for their parents with the intention of keeping their world safe. However, what was acceptable as small children has taken on a sense of absurdity given their stature. Grotesque dolls larger than most adults make their puppetry a hideous act.

After their performance, their mother is greatly disturbed. For the first time, Wilbur and Eliza sense other people's expectations aren't what they thought them to be. The Monster theme is continued as they gain knowledge about the 'bigger world' from a secretive place, paralleling the Frankenstein Monster's experiences while hiding out in a secret on a family farm.

Like Frankenstein's Monster, Wilbur and Eliza consider themselves a kind, gentle genius. When their mother (and maker) shows her hatred for her creations, they are eager to please her as their world is suddenly threatened. They feel that exposing their intelligence will make their mother feel better, hence their world will be kept safe.

# Chapters 11 and 12

## Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

The next morning Wilbur and Eliza dress themselves and perceive no danger in the house. They encounter one of their practical nurses, Oveta Cooper. They put their heads physically together so that the genius is present when Eliza speaks. She tells Oveta that a miracle has happened and their parents' wishes have come true as now they are cured. They assure the startled Oveta that things will be even more pleasant than before and that the staff does not have to worry about their positions. She asks to have breakfast in the solarium and to notify the other staff as to the miracle that has occurred.

Once in the solarium, various staff members come to greet the children, who know their names and are familiar with their lives. The children apologize for the sudden change but explain they didn't realize anyone wanted them to act intelligent. Dr. Mott is sent for. Eventually, Caleb enters, looking drawn, haggard, and consumed with guilt. He realizes that now that his children are intelligent, it is his duty to love them, something he feels incapable of. Wilbur realizes later they had put the curse of monsters on their parents by asking for respect.

Standing too far apart to use their combined genius brain, Wilbur and Eliza try to impress their father with jokes and conversation but he seems in a trance. Dr. Mott shows up and acts casually when he hears the children speak, as if nothing is amiss. Caleb is angry and asks Dr. Mott how long he has known about the children's intelligence. Dr. Mott replies that he's known for 42 minutes. Sensing something is not quite right, Wilbur and Eliza put their heads together. They get a feeling they are part of some great tragedy and instinctually resort to their idiotic behavior of babbling and drooling. Their father cries.

## Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

Knowing better than to let on to the staff they've been duped all these years, Wilbur and Eliza at first announce their intelligence as a miracle cure. They also recognize that the staff might feel threatened by this revelation so assure them that it won't affect their lifestyle and salaries. They do admit later, after more staff members greet them, that they assumed others wanted them to act as idiots. Their mother is too shattered by the news to see them, though their father braves the event. The Monster theme continues as Wilbur realizes that, like Frankenstein's Monster, they are cursed for requesting respect despite their grotesqueness.

Wilbur's earlier questioning about Dr. Mott's knowledge of their intelligence comes into play, as the doctor seems so lackadaisical about their sudden change. Is he truly aware or simply that disconnected to the world around him? The father is again the audience

of a grotesque play that has now taken on new dimensions. Being responsible for moronic monsters is one thing, taking care of intelligent ones quite another as it requires an emotional aspect, something Frankenstein was incapable of offering to his creation. Wilbur and Eliza have the natural instinct of trying to put things back to the way they were before, where their world was safe, but of course, a Pandora's Box has now been opened.



# Chapters 13 and 14

## Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

Back in the future, six days have passed since Wilbur began his memoir. The gravity has been shifting frequently from light to oppressively heavy. Now it is light so Melody and Isadore continue to work on a Pyramid they are constructing from building and car parts, furniture, and whatever else they can find. The pyramid is being constructed over a manhole, under which is a stillborn baby in a humid box. The baby was born by Melody at the age of 12 and was the result of being raped on her way to find her grandfather, Wilbur. Now sixteen, Melody is pregnant by Isadore. Isadore is part of the Raspberry family. They are hunters and gatherers and grow some of their own crop. They primarily live around the ruins of the New York Stock Exchange and will eat just about anything.

Wilbur wishes for Melody what his parents wished for him - "a short but happy life on an asteroid." He wonders if he and Eliza might not have lived out their whole lives happily in the mansion if they had not showed off their intelligence. Wilbur continues to write by the light of a burning rag in animal fat while Melody and Isadore play backgammon on a giant board he painted on the floor. Despite all his candlesticks, there are no candles. Wilbur knows that Vera, Melody, and Isadore are planning a 101st birthday party for him, which is a month away. From eavesdropping, he has learned that Vera's slaves will be fancily dressed for the occasion. Wilbur knows he must not drink too much lest he spill a secret - that the afterlife is "infinitely more tiresome than this one."

## Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

The theme of Death pervades this chapter. In the apocalyptic future, humans still acknowledge death with rituals, as shown by Melody and Isadore who construct a massive pyramid over Melody's stillborn baby. The gravity shifts determine their ability to be active or not, much like the author might be imagining his creativity at an old age, sometimes functioning, at other times completely dysfunctional; ergo its slow and unpredictable death.

In a sense, Melody and Isadore are Wilbur's monsters as he assumes a parental role and they are raised in virtual isolation; rather than physically, they are monstrous intellectually as they lack curiosity and basic knowledge such as reading. Wilbur attempts to make their "asteroid" happy by doing fun things such as painting the giant backgammon board. He alludes to a secret about the afterlife that he wants to spare others from knowing, a secret that will be revealed later in the novel.

# Chapters 15 and 16

## Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

Once their intelligence is discovered, Wilbur and Eliza are not allowed to act like children again. Dr. Mott is fired and all sorts of medical experts are brought in. At first it's rather fun as the experts joke around with the children, making them feel at ease with their ugliness. However, when they are separated for a series of tests, Wilbur and Eliza begin to feel stupid and as if their brains are made of wood or filled with syrup. They make up names for themselves when they are apart, as though these are other people - Bobby and Betty Brown. After Eliza dies years later in the Martian avalanche, her will reads that she wishes to be buried where she died with the grave marking, "Here Lies Betty Brown." The last specialist who takes over, psychologist Dr. Cordelia Swain Cordiner, declares that the children should be permanently separated and, hence, remain forever Bobby and Betty Brown.

Dr. Cordelia Swain Cordiner is a highly respected psychologist but something of a "malicious lunatic" when alone with Wilbur and Eliza. She expresses a great deal of anger and rage at the family's immense wealth and greatly resents spoiled-rotten children. Although her middle name is the same as their last name, she emphatically tells Eliza and Wilbur that she is not their sweet Aunt Cordelia, which they then call her in private. The children get nervous when they find out she'll be administering tests on them separately. She will not listen to their reasoning that they would do much better with their heads together. She gives them a piece of advice: "Paddle your own canoe." They eavesdrop when Cordelia shares the results with their parents. She says Eliza will probably never learn to read and write and that Wilbur is a good boy when not distracted from his sister so he could possibly become a janitor or gas attendant.

At the same time, the Chinese have been exploring telepathy and using it to create super-powerful synthetic minds, an idea they purportedly got from WWII American and European scientists who put their heads together with the single purpose of creating the atomic bomb.

## Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

Wilbur and Eliza's world is upset with the discovery of their intelligence and suddenly they are no longer in control of their lives. They label their unintelligent separate minds with names as mundane as they feel when apart. When Dr. Cordiner appears on the scene, the threat of remaining forever dull becomes horrifically real. Since they have never been separated since birth, this threat is almost incomprehensible.

Like the advanced Chinese and European scientists, Wilbur and Eliza combine into a telepathic genius when they literally put their heads together. Dr. Cordiner is far too self-serving and hostile to see the positive qualities of their unique combined intelligence

and seems rooted in separating them. It seems apparent that she had to struggle to succeed, given her loathing for the very rich and her advice, "Paddle your own boat."

# Chapters 17 and 18

## Chapters 17 and 18 Summary

To their horror, Wilbur and Eliza hear Cordelia tell their parents that the children should be separated; she believes Wilbur should be sent to a boys' school that is not too academically demanding. Not to give away their secret hiding spot, Wilbur and Eliza scurry back down stairs in tears, then burst into the room saying they will commit suicide if they are separated. Cordelia laughs and says that her testing showed that neither of the children would ever attempt suicide. This makes their mother snap and for a brief moment, she is like an angry mother bear protecting her young. The children ask to be tested together. They explain that Bobby and Betty Brown are the two people they hate most and they want to show what they're capable of together. Cordelia pushes her haughty condescension to the point the mother calls her "an over-dressed little sparrow-fart."

Wilbur and Eliza are retested as a pair, with their parents watching. They answer every question correctly. The only problem is that in their shared excitement, they discover by the end that they are under the table, groping and sniffing each other's crotches. Cordelia has fainted and their parents are gone. The next day Wilbur is to be sent to a school for seriously disturbed children.

## Chapters 17 and 18 Analysis

The children's worst nightmare has come true with the threat of being permanently separated. It is already known that Eliza will die on Mars with a Betty Brown marker on her grave, so their separation is inevitable. Their despair and Cordelia's contempt finally make the mother's natural instincts take over and her response is the closest she ever gets to being a true parent to Wilbur and Eliza, as it is an emotionally based one.

The incestuous orgy is only a prelude of what will happen later in the novel. Wilbur and Eliza's shared intellectual energy is becoming so strong that they are no longer in control of it and memories of such encounters begin to escape them. Their behavior, not their intelligence, is what finally tears them apart - it is monstrous in the eyes of others.

# Chapters 19 and 20

## Chapters 19 and 20 Summary

It is sundown in the future and Wilbur listens to the sound of a whippoorwill, or whip poor will as he calls it. He remembers listening to the bird cry with his sister and calling it "the cry of the Nocturnal Goatsucker." They listen to the bird on their last night before being separated into Bobby and Betty Brown. They take all their best writing and put it into an empty funerary urn in a mausoleum originally intended for Professor Swain's ashes, though he chose to be buried in New York instead. Wilbur tells Eliza he loves her but it doesn't quite sound right. He asks if she loves him but she questions what there is to love about Bobby Brown.

Eliza does not see her brother off in the morning. Wilbur gets so involved in the structured school program, that his memory of her starts to fade, which he describes as a child's natural defense mechanism for grief. He travels Europe, goes to summer camp, and is the first student at the school to take college boards. He does so well that he is accepted into Harvard. His parents are proud of him and he occasionally hears about a sister he has who is almost a vegetable and in an institution for people of her sort. During his first year in medical school, his father is killed in a car accident. Wilbur is named the executor of the will. Soon after, a lawyer named Norman Mushari, Jr. appears - he is Eliza's attorney and she is after her share of the money.

## Chapters 19 and 20 Analysis

The bird cry is an ominous portent of their impending separation and fate as the people they hate most, Bobby and Betty Brown. When they hide their papers in the mausoleum, it is as if they are burying their genius. Incapable of feeling emotion, Wilbur tries to express his love for his sister, but she already views him as Bobby Brown, someone she can't possibly love as it represents their separateness.

Wilbur's fading memory of his sister is much the way he describes his nephews' fading memory of their mother (his real sister) in the prologue. The nephews express guilt that they can't remember their mother, but the author believes this is a child's way of coping with the horror of the loss. In a sense, Eliza has died as Wilbur is completely physically cut off from her. His own life blossoms as he gets accepted to Harvard medical school. Of course, Eliza isn't dead and her return will inevitably stir up powerful consequences.

# Chapters 21 and 22

## Chapters 21 and 22 Summary

Wilbur admits that by the time Eliza comes after his inheritance, he is a conceited as well as a stupid Bobby Brown. A first year medical student, he dresses stylishly and is driven around in a Jaguar. The story of Eliza's quest for her inheritance makes big headlines and Eliza is not shy about pointing out her relatives shortcomings. Eliza refuses to show herself in interviews so grants them from inside a confessional booth her lawyer purchases for her. When asked how she spent time in the institution, she says singing for her prince to come rescue her. Asked who the prince was, she says her brother; she points describes him as a swine because for never rescuing her.

Wilbur and his mother don't contest Eliza, so she easily gains her inheritance. The first thing she does is buy half-interest in the New England Patriots. Although she still gives interviews from the confessional box where she can't be seen, her lawyer Mushari assures reporters that she is wearing a Patriots' jersey. When asked to comment on current affairs, Eliza says she doesn't blame the Chinese for going home. They are now so miniaturized that the ambassador is only 60 centimeters tall. The Chinese decided to leave the US embassy, as they have no more interest in the west. Eliza doesn't blame them for leaving the "hell-hole" of America where people treat their relatives so badly.

One day Eliza appears in public and a crowd of people and reporters soon gather. She smokes while carrying a parasol. Mushari is dressed in a white suit with a red rose in his lapel. Wilbur and his mother watch these events on the TV anxiously as they realize Eliza is making her way toward their house on Beacon Hill.

## Chapters 21 and 22 Analysis

Wilbur's comfortable world is abruptly shaken by Eliza's return and criticism in the media. As the emotional one of the twins, she expresses her emotions freely, which include anger and resentment. Her life in the institution was evidently less pleasant than Wilbur's experiences over the years and given her songs to prince brother, undoubtedly very lonely. She is very guarded about letting her disfigurements show, such as delivering interviews from a confessional. Unlike Wilbur who has been free in the world, she has been confined her entire childhood and the confessional is symbolic of that, as well as symbolic of Wilbur's sins toward his sister and his need to confess them.

Eliza's purchase of interest in the Patriots gives her plenty of media attention with which to vent more of her resentment. She describes America as a hellhole given the way family members treat each other, ergo the way her brother treated her. This touches on themes of Loneliness and will influence Wilbur's decision later in life to ensure every citizen has a large extended family. The chapter ends with an inevitable showdown about to ensue between the twins.

## Chapters 23, 24, and 25

### Chapters 23, 24, and 25 Summary

Not up to a confrontation, Wilbur's mother goes upstairs to her room. Wilbur sends the servants away and opens the door to Eliza and Mushari. Police keep the crowd from entering the home. Once inside, Eliza chastises Wilbur and suggests that their father was a sea turtle in Turtle Bay whom their mother mated one night. Wilbur feels self-loathing as Eliza's drinking and smoking have taken their toll on her appearance. She tells him that they've come to hear what he has to say since he is the brainy one, while she was merely a tumor that needed to be removed from his side. She calls him a fascist and describes Mushari as the only family she has. Wilbur says their mother is wrought with guilt, and Eliza says that is as it should be, because the only thing Wilbur and their mother ever earned was guilt.

Eliza continues to verbally assault Wilbur. She considers the fact that Bobby Brown could become a doctor the best argument she's heard for Christian Science. She says he might be good with a gong, alluding to a rumor that the Chinese were successfully treating breast cancer with ancient gongs. Eliza then asks Wilbur to touch her, but he is so afraid he is paralyzed. Eliza says she will touch him and hopefully neither will die. She quotes a line from a joke they heard as children: "Keep your hat on, Buster. We may end up miles from here." When she touches him, they become a single genius again.

Once reunited, Eliza and Wilbur have an orgy that lasts five days and nights, after which they sleep for three days. When Wilbur finally wakes, he is being fed intravenously. Wilbur has lapses of memory of the orgy such as when he and Eliza captured all the servants, his mother, and Mushari and gagged and tied them to chairs. They gave them water and peanut butter sandwiches. He does remember reading pediatric books to Eliza and typing furiously. By the time Wilbur is out of his coma, Mushari has paid the servants well for their suffering and to keep silent. Wilbur's mother is out of the hospital and in bed at her home in Turtle Bay.

When he ventures around his home, Wilbur discovers that he and Eliza had written a manual on childrearing. It was to become the most popular book of all time after the Bible and The Joy of Cooking. Wilbur finds this book helpful later when working as a pediatrician. The publisher titles the book *So You Went and Had a Baby*, though the original title/authorship given it to it was "The Cry of the Nocturnal Goatsucker by Betty and Bobby Brown."

### Chapters 23, 24, and 25 Analysis

Wilbur faces Eliza's wrath and feels guilt over her accusations. Eliza drinks and smokes heavily to numb feelings of pain, unlike Wilbur who simply suppresses what little

emotion he has. She was in fact treated like a tumor at his side as she describes. Her accusations are sharp and all Wilbur can do is stand there and take the barbs. When Eliza asks him to touch her, Wilbur is terrified, as he knows he will lose all sense of control if their minds meld. She is aware of this too when she jokes about it. However, powerless to each other's attraction of force, their minds are reunited into the genius of their childhood.

After all their years of separation, the genius is an all-powerful force that almost drives them to the brink of insanity. The genius they become kidnaps anyone who might stand in the way of its need to exhibit itself. Wilbur has little memory of the orgy and the childrearing book they write is perhaps the genius cry from their childhood and what childrearing should have ideally been like. As a pediatrician, Wilbur will rely on the genius writings for providing the care a Bobby Brown might not be able to deliver on his own.



# Chapters 26 and 27

## Chapters 26 and 27 Summary

After the orgy, mutual fear keeps Eliza and Wilbur apart. Mushari tells Wilbur that Eliza was even more shattered than him. She purchases a condo in Machu Picchu in Peru, which is becoming a popular haven for the rich from the world over. Mushari confesses that he was motivated by greed when he took on Eliza's case, but witnessing the orgy has left him tired and perplexed. He hands over Eliza's affairs to Wilbur's lawyers. Wilbur hears about Mushari again several years later after graduating medical school at the bottom of his class. Tap dancing was gaining popularity and Mushari had invented peel-on taps that could be taken on and off shoes at convenience.

Wilbur never sees Eliza again but physically hears her two more times, once when he graduates medical school and once when he is president, many years after Eliza has died. Wilbur and his mother never imagined Eliza would know about his graduation party or would come from Peru to be there. She never phones or writes letters, though Wilbur has heard rumors she drinks too much and has taken up golf. Wilbur has fun at his party and when a bellhop instructs him to go outside, Wilbur assumes his mother has bought him a Rolls Royce. Wilbur is led to a statue in a forested public garden. He hears the whir of a helicopter. The bellhop, actually one of Eliza's Inca servants, fires a flare that lights the sky behind the approaching helicopter. Eliza is on it with a bullhorn. She recites a Shakespeare sonnet on separation and love. Wilbur cries out that he loves her, really meaning it for the first time. In return, she asks God to guide his mind and hand as a doctor then takes off.

## Chapters 26 and 27 Analysis

Given the power of the orgy, Wilbur and Eliza are too afraid to imagine its strength the next time, and it is the last one they will have in their lifetimes. Machu Picchu is where all the women in Wilbur's life will end up, a place of ancient civilizations. America will soon become more focused on a natural way of life and eventually a ruined civilization like the Incas.

Wilbur alludes to the after-life when he says he heard Eliza many years after she died. Her soliloquy on love and separation at his graduation expresses her sadness at the necessary separation from her twin brother. Her appearance at his party has a profound effect on him, stirring his emotions for the first time and conjuring up his ability to truly love someone.



# Chapters 28, 29 and 30

## Chapters 28, 29 and 30 Summary

Wilbur is elated when he returns to the party and rumors abound about the marvelous sighting and voice from heaven. Wilbur goes to his mother to share what happened and finds her talking to a nondescript man. She introduces him as Dr. Mott, the physician who took care of Wilbur and Eliza as children. Wilbur is so caught up in the party, he pays little mind to the doctor. By the time he returns to his mother, Dr. Mott has left, to Wilbur's regret. He has left a note for Wilbur as a present. A Hippocrates quote says, "If you can do no good, at least do no harm." Wilbur always remembers those words as a physician. He uses the childrearing manual he and Eliza wrote as his major reference source. The years fly by. In that time he marries a wealthy woman, Rose Aldrich Ford, though she is unhappy because Wilbur does not love her or take her anywhere. They have a son, Carter Paley Swain, who Wilbur admits he fails to love and was totally disinterested in. After divorcing, Rose and Carter move into the same condominium building as Eliza in Machu Picchu and Wilbur never hears from them again.

Toward the end of her life, Wilbur's mother tells him that she hates unnatural things like synthetic, preferring natural products such as clay and cotton. Things have changed in the country - machinery is dying and communication is becoming vaguer. People are riding horses instead of cars. Wilbur has a Clydesdale named Budweiser. No one who enters China ever comes out, so "Going to China" becomes a euphemism for committing suicide.

One day, a roving Chinese ambassador about the size of Wilbur's thumb appears in his bedroom. His name is Fu Manchu. He sends greetings from Eliza and asks to see the papers she and Wilbur hid in the urn so many years before. He explains that during a Chinese expedition to find Inca secrets, Eliza approached the Chinese and claimed she had far better secrets and as a reward, wanted to go to Mars. Wilbur asks Fu Manchu how he got into the bedroom. Fu Manchu replies he did it the same way they get to Mars.

Despite his diminutive stature, Fu Manchu makes Wilbur feel inferior, as he knows the Chinaman is so intelligent. He takes Fu Manchu through the secret passageways into the mausoleum in the home of his childhood. By the time they arrive through a trap door, Wilbur is covered in cobwebs. He only has a candle for light, but Fu Manchu opens a small box that illuminates the entire room. Wilbur rolls out the papers and Fu Manchu studies them carefully, particularly the essay on gravity. Finally, Fu Manchu tells Wilbur he is going to dematerialize. Wilbur asks if he found anything valuable, to which Fu Manchu replies a rather large Caucasian woman will be getting a ticket to Mars.

## Chapters 28, 29 and 30 Analysis

Ironically, Wilbur becomes a pediatrician like Dr. Mott and thus takes care of children while being incapable of caring for his own child. The book he and Eliza wrote serves as a guide, the teachings of their combined genius that Bobby Brown is incapable of creating on his own. His marriage is a side-note to his life and of little consequence since there is no emotional attachment.

There are themes of regression and progress. The country is shifting from manmade to more natural ways of living, becoming in a sense more old fashioned like Wilbur himself. While the US becomes technically regressive, the Chinese are the opposite, making incredible discoveries and expeditions. There is little in the west they can learn from anymore, but the genius writings have tapped their curiosity.

As Bobby Brown, Wilbur feels inferior to the Chinaman despite their significant difference in stature. The genius writings from childhood have little meaning for Wilbur anymore, as they are beyond his simple imagination, his mind as dusty with cobwebs as those that cover him in the mausoleum.

# Chapters 31 and 32

## Chapters 31 and 32 Summary

On the morning of his 50th birthday, Wilbur rides Budweiser into town to collect his mail. There is a letter from Eliza sent two weeks previously saying Happy Birthday and announcing her trip to China. There is a more recent letter from Fu Manchu informing him of Eliza's death in an avalanche. Wilbur is coping with the weight of this information on the wooden porch in front of the post office when the strangest feeling comes over him. He can't begin to move his feet and his features get dragged down "like melting wax." Gravity has suddenly shifted, becoming far more oppressive. The nearby church bell collapses and Wilbur crashes through the porch floor to the earth below. Around the world, elevator cables snap, planes crash, and bridges collapse, among many other tragedies.

The jolt of gravity lasts less than a minute but changes the world. Shell-shocked, Wilbur crawls out from under the porch. Budweiser is dead. People scream out for help and although he is the only doctor in town, Wilbur walks away. He ends up in his family apple orchard opening a package from a pharmaceutical company containing sample pills, tri-benzo-Deportamil, used to treat Tourette's syndrome. Wilbur takes two pills and within minutes feels confident and content. This is the start of what would become a 30-year addiction.

Wilbur is amazed that no one in his hospital was killed. His mother slept through the entire event. Wilbur wonders if the gravity change was a force of nature or a Chinese experiment. He gets the papers from the urn but his and Eliza's writing on gravity makes no sense to him now, as he is not intelligent as Bobby Brown. However, the paper they wrote on how everyone in America should have an artificial extended family captures his eye. Fu Manchu had considered it ridiculous. Wilbur thinks of types of artificial extended families, such as professional groups, but they are exclusive and specialized. Their idea as children had been to organize America into 10,000 extended families so that each family would have its own parliament of sorts. His reading is interrupted by the head nurse who tells him the frightened patients have finally gone to sleep. Wilbur asks her to order two-thousand doses of tri-benzo Deportamil.

## Chapters 31 and 32 Analysis

While Wilbur absorbs the great weight of his sister's death, the world around him literally weighs down with a major gravity shift that causes worldwide destruction. This major turning point happens literally half way through Wilbur's life. The course of his remaining half-century will shift radically and his focus will turn from himself to a much wider picture.

While the ever-confident Eliza used alcohol to numb her pain, Wilbur becomes addicted to a drug that gives him confidence, something that will aid him on the road to presidency. It seems the Chinese have used the genius writings to experiment with gravity, though Wilbur doesn't have the intellect to be sure of the connection. His rediscovery of the extended families becomes his obsession and in a sense, his one gift to the nation.

# Chapters 33 and 34

## Chapters 33 and 34 Summary

Two weeks later, Wilbur's mother dies. Gravity would not be a problem again for another 20 years. Time flies in a rather drug-induced haze. In that time, Wilbur gives up medicine, becomes a senator in Vermont, and the one day is running for President. His campaign slogan is "Lonesome No More!" When gravity issues returned, they were milder but frequent. Wilbur suspects the Chinese have refined their experiments to cut down on property damage and injuries. In his campaign speeches, he talks of how loneliness is one of the biggest problems in the country and describes his anti-loneliness strategy. Each person would be assigned a noun as a middle name, separated by a dash with a number. Those with the same noun and number would be brothers and sisters, those with the same noun only would be cousins. He offers many benefits to this plan. The pills Wilbur is addicted to have been outlawed but he credits them for his vigor and stamina. At 70-years-old, he has remarried a pretty 23-year-old woman, Sophie Rothschild Swain.

Wilbur's first challenge as president is getting computers to spit out all the new middle names, given the severe fuel shortage. He speaks to his ramshackle army at the National Archives and explains that most government criminal activity in the past could be attributed to loneliness but now that will all change. He hands out ribbons and plastic buttons to his soldiers. Naturally, the buttons bear his slogan, "Lonesome No More!"

## Chapters 33 and 34 Analysis

Wilbur's journey into politics is fueled by writings of the genius and the recognition of loneliness within himself and all around him. The drugs fuel his drive and his ability to become president and remarry. He knows without them, he would simply be a rather apathetic Bobby Brown. The Chinese have gained a superior hold on the world, and the earth has become a lab for their experimentations. The United States will be Wilbur's experiment for curing Loneliness, a major theme in the novel.

# Chapters 35 and 36

## Chapters 35 and 36 Summary

Wilbur writes midmorning in the Empire State Building. Later that day, he, Melody, and Isadore are going to have a picnic on the roof. Wilbur's birthday is only two days away. Vera's slave has brought a chicken, some bread, and creamy beer for them to enjoy. Melody is plucking the chicken. Because of the light gravity, feathers float around her. Isadore sweeps with a twig broom and sings one of only two songs he knows, Row, Row, Row Your Boat. Wilbur remembers the day he received a letter from himself assigning his new middle name - Daffodil-11. He was delighted by his middle name and had the oval office painted pale yellow. A shy dishwasher from the White House kitchen entered and said his middle name was also Daffodil-11. Wilbur calls him "my brother."

There are those that oppose Wilbur's artificial extended family concept and retaliate by forming a group of their own with the slogan, "Lonesome Thank God!" Sophie begins wearing such a button, as she is insulted that her middle name has been changed to Peanut-3. After a few weeks of stewing about this, she crawls into Wilbur's office on a particularly heavy gravity day and tells him she hates him and that he has gone too far. Wilbur is distracted reading an article about a Chinese delegation that has visited a physicist in Urbana, which makes Sophie even angrier. She considers peanuts lowly and doesn't want to be related to people who have "crawled out from under damp rocks" like earwigs and worms. She wants her original middle name back, but Wilbur is rigid in his thinking that no-one should change their government-issued names. He regrets this later and name changing becomes common practice. He tells Sophie that by virtue of the new extended families, humans will "clime the evolutionary ladder" in a matter of days or weeks.

## Chapters 35 and 36 Analysis

Wilbur's life as a 100-year-old man is simple and carefree outside of gravity shifts. The light gravity and floating feathers are indicative of the lightness of being Melody and Isadore share, simply romping through life with no purpose or direction. This reminds Wilbur of one of his happiest memories, the discovery of his new middle name and its bright, cheery symbolism. A president could now be brother to a dishwasher he had never met - people of all backgrounds could now come together in unity.

Wilbur's systematic plan seems to work well except in his personal life. His wife doesn't embrace the concept as he does and wants her individuality back. She finds the idea of familial associations with strangers appalling. The physical weight of the day is very reflective of the oppressiveness of his campaign on his wife and the inevitable doom of their marriage.

# Chapters 37 and 38

## Chapters 37 and 38 Summary

Sophie divorces Wilbur and goes to live in a condominium in Machu Picchu. He is busy with the task of putting together family directories and there are only enough to go to certain state government offices and libraries. Wilbur has a Daffodil directory in the Empire State building. He is glad Sophie never saw the Peanut directory as it did contain lowly sorts, the most famous being a roller derby star. Soon family newspapers began getting printed. Wilbur's was The Daffy-nition. Sophie's was The Goober Gossip. Certain interesting statistics were found about different groups, such as skills in music or variances in gender or weight. Family clubs sprouted. Wilbur cut the ribbon at the opening of the Daffodil Club in New York, once a club to elite wealthy men like his father and grandfathers, and now teeming with women and children.

A Thirteen Club also starts for those with the number 13 in their middle names, making it the largest club of all. In addition, a new cult, The Church of Jesus Christ the Kidnapped, begins in Chicago and grows to be the most popular religion in America. The belief is that Jesus is among people but has been kidnapped by evil forces, so followers must spend all their waking hours searching for him. If not, they will suffer God's wrath and it will be the end of mankind.

## Chapters 37 and 38 Analysis

Sophie ventures to where all the women in his life have gone, the mystical Machu Picchu. While his personal life is a wreck, Wilbur's extended family plan is firmly taking root and connecting people from all walks of life across the nation. It gives him pleasure that elitist clubs have gone by the wayside to include all people. This sense of uniform acceptance is something he and Eliza never had as deformed, isolated children. Shifts in gravity and family structure radically change the face of America. Paranoia of an apocalypse is rippling through the nation with the search for the kidnapped Jesus.



# Chapters 39, 40, 41 and 42

## Chapters 39, 40, 41 and 42 Summary

Everything is going so well, with Americans happier than they have ever been, when disease strikes. People start dying in the millions from the Albanian Flu, and in Manhattan from the Green Death. It marks the end of a nation, though various Dukedoms and Kingdoms spring up. Otherwise, it is simply a nation of families. During one extremely heavy gravity day, Machu Picchu, and all its condominiums, tumbles down the Andes and into the sea. More and more people paint pictures of the kidnapped Jesus. News comes to the White House for a while, but staff members there are dying quickly. Calls became more and more infrequent until communications faded away and Wilbur's presidency was forgotten, thus over. His biggest worry is that his supply tri-benzo-Deportamil has almost run out. All the staff members finally die or move out except for one: the dishwasher Carlos Daffodil-11 Villaviciencio.

With nothing to do after his presidency is all but forgotten, Wilbur becomes obsessive about counting things, such as spoons or Venetian blind slats. One day as he is counting banister posts, two men arrive. One is in buckskins and the other wears a military pilot uniform. They have come separately, each on an urgent mission. However, Wilbur is so disheveled that they don't believe he is president. They hunt through the White House and find Carlos who convinces them otherwise.

The frontiersman in buckskins has brought a letter from the widow in Urbana who had been visited by the Chinese delegation, including Fu Manchu's son. She writes that her physicist husband, Dr. von Peterswald, had made an extraordinary discovery before he died — a way to communicate with the dead. However, after-life seemed so extraordinarily tedious that he referred to it as a badly run Turkey Farm. The widow says the Chinese showed her and her son how to use the device after studying her husband's journals but seemed rather disinterested in it. She has communicated with Eliza who says it is urgent that she talk with her brother directly, hence the letter. The widow apologizes ahead of time for her son's tendency toward expressing obscenities as he has Tourette's Syndrome. She signs the letter Wilma Pachysandra-17 von Peterswald.

The frontiersman explains that he mistook Wilma's friend who was delivering the letter as a hereditary enemy and shot him. Before dying, the man made the frontiersman promise to deliver the letter to the President. Wilbur asks him his middle name, but he hasn't one. He is a member of the Hatfields, one of the original extended American families waging battle with the McCoys since 1882. Then the man in the pilot uniform, Captain Bernard O'Hare, says he has been working in a secret underground location that conceals a Presidential helicopter and thousands of gallons of priceless gas. He finally broke orders to come above ground to see what was going on. Wilbur asks if the helicopter is ready to fly. The captain says it is, so Wilbur gives him a rather tattered "Lonesome No More" pin.

The next day, Wilbur, the captain, and Carlos leave the White House by helicopter. They plan to stop in Indianapolis since it is so heavily populated with Daffodils. Wilbur plans to leave Carlos there to be cared for by relatives in his senior years. He is rather glad to be getting rid of Carlos, who bores him. After that, he and Captain O'Hare will go to Urbana and then to Vermont at which point Wilbur promises the captain the helicopter. He also tells the captain he'll have a hard time without a middle name and assigns him Eagle-1. The captain is pleased. Wilbur is so happy to be leaving Washington DC, he sings a song he and Eliza used to sing as children, the Wonderful Wizard of Oz.

## **Chapters 39, 40, 41 and 42 Analysis**

The pervasive apocalyptic feeling comes to fruition when disease strikes the nation. Machu Picchu, like the relationships he had with his wives, is destroyed. In the post-apocalyptic world, the nations separates into new territories of kingdoms and dukedoms and the only glue holding survivors together is their shared middle names. As Wilbur's presidency is forgotten, only his Daffodil brother remains with him.

Wilbur's allusions to knowledge about the after-life are explained and the discovery that it is a very dull place. A turkey farm implies that the dead are a babbling mass with nothing to do but make noise. However, one of those noises comes from Eliza and represents a chance for Wilbur to connect with her again.

The campaign button, like Wilbur's Presidency, is tattered. He realizes real extended families existed before his introduction of artificial ones, such as the Hatfields and McCoys. Of course, this was not his experience growing up. The realization that there is a helicopter to be had gives Wilbur a chance to escape the White House and go communicate with Eliza. Wilbur's plans have a final destination in Vermont, his childhood home. Dorothy sought the Wizard of Oz to take her home, perhaps sparking Wilbur's remembrance of the song as that where he is eventually bound. Wilbur has discovered that artificial family members can be as dull and annoying as real ones and is glad to be getting rid of Carlos.

# Chapters 43 and 44

## Chapters 43 and 44 Summary

Back in the future, Melody and Isadore have gone to visit Isadore's large family, the Raspberries. Wilbur walks to the baby pyramid, then to the Daffodil Club, and finally to Vera's farm which had once been his parents' home in Turtle Bay. Her happy slaves plant watermelon, corn, and sunflowers while singing Ol' Man River. Some were formerly Raspberries but now all the slaves are Chipmunk-5s, which is required to work on Vera's farm.

Vera usually labors with her slaves but on this day, Wilbur finds her tinkering with a microscope. She is trying to view an opal but not having any luck. People give her jewelry as they give Wilbur candlesticks, though both items are useless now. The reason he, Vera and others escaped the Green Death is that they took an antidote accidentally discovered by the Raspberries from polluted fish they ate. Vera is unhappy, as now Wilbur won't be surprised by the microscope, which is to be one of his birthday presents. She tells Wilbur that Melody and Isadore came to her again saying they wanted to be her slaves. She wonders what will happen to her slaves when she dies. Wilbur tells her not to think about tomorrow, as it will take care of itself.

Wilbur and Vera reminisce about the Battle of Maxinkuckee in Northern Indiana. Wilbur had witnessed it on his helicopter ride to Urbana while Vera was in the thick of it. She and her husband were field cooks for the King of Michigan. Not only did she have to face the enemy assault but her drunken husband was also beating her up. He blackened her eyes and broke her jaw before getting lanced to death by an enemy fighter. The moral of the story, according to Vera, is "don't ever get married." Before that, she and her husband had worked in a Thirteen Club in Indiana, which Wilbur is curious about. Vera describes it as a Halloween type of environment with stuffed black cats and jack-o-lanterns. She says it didn't go over too well even though there were Thirteen Clubs nationwide. Indianapolis was a Daffodil town and you weren't anybody if not a Daffodil.

## Chapters 43 and 44 Analysis

Vera's farm is an idyllic representation of the past, with happy slaves and life flourishing in nature. Items once of worth, like gems, are now worthless as they are not practical for survival. The microscope now is no more than an interesting toy. While Vera worries about the future, Wilbur has lived too long to worry about it and knows that the world will carry on regardless. Vera is a tough lady given her history but like Wilbur, unable to make healthy personal connections. Wilbur's family campaign has divided people into groups that are as elitist as any others were before, such as the exclusive Thirteen Club and the domineering Daffodil family in Indianapolis.

# Chapters 45, 46, and 47

## Chapters 45, 46, and 47 Summary

Wilbur has been regaled as a millionaire, pediatrician, senator, and president but never did it mean as much as when he was welcomed by the Daffodils in Indianapolis. They put on parades and feasts for Wilbur and Carlos. Wilbur changes Captain O'Hare's middle name to Daffodil at his request. They attend a family meeting and an 11-year old girl named Dorothy is picked from a drawing to act as chairperson. The family votes on several motions, the most pressing of which is the need for four Daffodil replacements in the King of Michigan's army. A blacksmith eagerly volunteers, though he is chastised for acting as if war is fun. The main reason the blacksmith is not allowed to go to war is that he has three illegitimate children and two more on the way; the family is making sure he does not shirk this responsibility.

The Daffodil meeting is so orderly that Wilbur has great respect for it. Years later in New York he looks up the inventor of orderly meetings in the Encyclopedia and discovers it was a West Point Graduate and engineer named Henry Marty Robert. When he lost control of a church meeting prior to the Civil War, he invented Robert's Rules of Order. Identical rules were being followed in Indiana.

Recruits are chosen for the King of Michigan's army and next on the agenda is how to feed and shelter the Daffodil refugees trickling in from battlefields. A rather disheveled young woman, Cousin Grace, offers her home but others remind her that she is an incompetent housekeeper and even her own children have run off to live with other Daffodils. Her dog would also have died of starvation if neighbors hadn't intervened. Later, Cousin Grace suggests that any Daffodil who served in the Great Lake Pirates or Duke of Oklahoma's army should be expelled. The little girl at the lectern reminds her, "Once a Daffodil, always a Daffodil."

It is finally Wilbur's turn to speak. He describes himself as no longer a president and simply Cousin Wilbur. While he can't bring peace, he is grateful that the machines have died and it is just people now. He is also glad that fighting is not just between strangers as everyone has relatives on the other side. The audience is a little disconcerting, as most are also followers of the kidnapped Jesus so they keep jerking their heads around looking for him. However, they listen enough to applaud and cheer at appropriate times. He says he has just witnessed the Battle of Maxinkuckee where people fought with spears, cannons, and other old world weapons. He also saw a lot of embracing and deserting going on. It wasn't a massacre.

## Chapters 45, 46, and 47 Analysis

Wilbur takes pride in seeing how well the Daffodils manage their affairs and hold each other accountable for their actions. This sense of family, albeit artificial, means more to

him than any of his other accomplishments and for once, gives him a sense of belonging. Like real families, everyone knows each other's affairs and decisions are made on the good of the whole, not the individual.

While wars wage, Wilbur takes comfort in knowing his extended family plan has created meaningful connections and people are less reluctant to hurt family than strangers. He embraces a retreat to older weapons and a lack of machines so less harm is inflicted. Of course, the nation is now backward with no attempt at progress, unlike the Chinese who have far superseded America in every progressive way.

# Chapters 48 and 49

## Chapters 48 and 49 Summary

While in Indianapolis, Wilbur is invited to visit the King of Lake Maxinkuckee at his summer palace. He and Captain O'Hare take off after bidding Carlos goodbye. The palace is a former military academy. There are no journalists or TV cameras at the meeting, only scribes who write with pen and paper. The pomp and circumstance of the palace amuses Wilbur. The King sits at a map table reading a war book. There are no other seats so Wilbur stands in front of him after he is announced. The king is the spitting image of his grandfather, Dr. Mott. He says that he only reads history books. Wilbur says that it's good to study history or humanity will undoubtedly repeat old mistakes such as using up fossil fuels, dying in the millions of a plague, and electing senile presidents and being once again inferior to miniature Chinese. He thinks this is funny but the king does not. Therefore, Wilbur addresses the scribes and essentially tells them that "History is merely a list of surprises" and one can only be prepared for them again.

The king's motive for the meeting is to get Wilbur to sign a document saying he no longer had control of North America and is selling a good portion of the territory for a dollar to the king. They chat about the king's grandfather, Dr. Mott, and then Wilbur and Captain O'Hare fly to Urbana for the electronic reunion with Eliza. Back in the future, Wilbur is tired as he writes, having consumed too much wine and beer at his birthday party. Vera's main gift was a thousand candles that her slaves had made, which they fitted into all his candles ticks on the lobby floor. After lighting them, Wilbur felt like God in the Milky Way.

## Chapters 48 and 49 Analysis

The King of Lake Maxinkuckee's pomp and circumstance are a parody of old conquerors and kings. Wilbur recognizes the satire in his life when he addresses the King. His own life has been a list of surprises with repetitions in themes and characters, like world history. In the final chapter, Wilbur's memoir reaches the point where he is going to Urbana to talk to Eliza in the afterlife. The birthday party has exhausted him, and his last words convey a sense of magic and mysticism about a universe far greater than himself.

# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary

The Epilogue is written in third person after Wilbur's death and describes events after he left for Urbana. When Wilbur heard Eliza in the afterlife, Wilma von Peterswald and her son David were present. David suffered from Tourette's and could not control his obscenities, which were echoed by voices in the afterlife. Finally, Wilbur and Eliza were able to converse. She told him to die as quickly as possible so they could put their heads together to improve the afterlife. Wilbur told her of the diseases affecting the living and with their combined brains, they solved how it happened: the flu was caused by miniature Martians but their invasion had been repelled by the survivors antibodies since the flu had subsided; the Green Death were microscopic Chinese who were accidentally inhaled or eaten and fatal to humans. After speaking to his sister, Wilbur only had 11 tri-benzo-Deportamil tablets left. When David began more obscene talk, Wilbur handed him the pills. To cope with the withdrawal, he was tied to Wilma's bed for six days and nights during which they made love and conceived a son who would become Melody's father.

Wilbur then flew to Manhattan where he prepared to die by inhaling microscopic Chinese. He ended up at the Empire State Building where human skeletons littered the lobby. However, members of the Raspberry family who had seen the helicopter captured him and were thrilled to discover he was a doctor. He was forced to swallow the antibiotic and was hustled to the Financial District to save the head of the family. The man had pneumonia and Wilbur treated him accordingly. The man lived and the Raspberries offered him one of their most prized possessions. Wilbur selected a candlestick that established the idea he was crazy about them. He didn't like living the communal life amongst the Raspberries so moved into the Empire State Building lobby. The Raspberries gave him food.

Time flew and eventually Vera showed up and was given the antidote, and then Melody arrived, pregnant and with a candlestick for a gift, as she had heard the rumor that her grandfather liked them. Melody's father (Wilbur's son by Wilma) was one of the few survivors of what had become known as the Urbana Massacre and was forced into service as a drummer boy for the Duke of Oklahoma's army. He gave Melody, at age 14, to a 40-year-old laundress. Melody was captured at 6-years-old by the King of Michigan after her parents were killed in the Battle of Iowa City. She followed her father's dying words and searched out her grandfather, the King of Candlesticks, in New York. So began her journey to the Empire State Building, leaning on family members who shared her middle name to help her make it to the Island of Death.

## Epilogue Analysis

This chapter explains Wilbur's last encounter with Eliza, his knowledge of the afterlife, how he ended up in New York, and how Melody came into his life. The extended family plan in a sense became a gift of survival for Melody, who leaned on such family members for survival in her search for her grandfather. The story ends with Melody, Wilbur's only living real family member, and her unique journey to the Island of Death, Wilbur's final resting place.



# Characters

## Dr. Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain

Dr. Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain - Wilbur is the main character in the book, which is told from his point of view. He is almost 100-years-old when he begins his memoir from the Empire State Building. He and a twin sister, Eliza, were born in New York to Caleb and Letitia Swain. They each were born with twelve fingers and as many toes, an extra set of nipples, and Neanderthal features. They grow to be two meters tall. Assumed idiots who will die soon, they are raised in a family mansion in Vermont. Wilbur and Eliza self-educate themselves in secret and discover that when their minds are combined by being physically close to each other, they become a single genius. As a genius, they create many extraordinary works of writing such as a guide to child rearing. Unfortunately, once their intelligence is discovered they are separated. Wilbur is sent to a private school where he does well enough to be accepted in the medical program at Harvard. As a physician, he becomes addicted to a drug called tri-benzo Deportamil and continues the habit for almost 30 years. He has all but forgotten about his sister until his father dies. She and an attorney appear to stake her share of the inheritance. Wilbur and Eliza experience the 'genius' once more but it almost kills them. He never physically sees Eliza again. Without their shared genius, they perceive themselves as Bobby and Betty Brown, ordinary boring sorts.

Wilbur eventually becomes president, winning on a campaign to combat loneliness. He assigns everyone in America new middle names so that everyone who shares the same one instantly has a large extended family. His middle name is Daffodil-11 and most Daffodils congregate in Indianapolis. Wilbur is married twice but soon divorced. He is incapable of loving anyone except for his sister.

During his presidency, the plague strikes and kills most of the population. Combined with sudden shifts in gravity, machinery is rendered useless and people go back to a more natural way of life. Battles ensue and Wilbur's presidency is forgotten. He visits his extended family in Indianapolis and speaks to his dead sister through a contraption called the Hooligan. He ends up going to New York for the second half of his life. He expects to die there but is saved with an antidote. Eventually, Melody shows up. Wilbur gets to enjoy his 100th birthday party but dies soon after. The assumption is that he is with Eliza again in the afterlife, otherwise known as the Turkey Farm.

## Eliza Mellon Swain

Wilbur's twin sister Eliza is the creative one of the pair. Born physically disfigured like him, her talents are in juxtaposing. When they are a combined genius, she is the imaginative right brain to Wilbur's analytical left. She exhibits most of the same intelligence as Wilbur but cannot read or write. As such, she is sent to an asylum while Wilbur is sent to a private school for psychologically disturbed children. She yearns for



her brother to rescue her but he never does. She is furious by the time she gets out and goes after her inheritance. She chain-smokes and looks terrible. She conducts interviews about how horrible her family is from a confessional box so reporters can't see her. However, she and Wilbur unite their minds once more, which results in a 5-day orgy. It is such a physically and mentally dangerous connection that Eliza moves to Machu Picchu.

Eliza returns once for Wilbur's medical school graduation party and recites Shakespeare to him from a helicopter - a soliloquy on love and separation. While in Machu Picchu, she meets Chinese explorers and tells them that she has something far more valuable than they will find there. She leads them to Wilbur and their childhood writings on gravity. As a reward, she gets a trip to Mars as she requested. However, she dies there in an accident. Years later, she speaks to Wilbur from the afterlife through a device called the Hooligan. She tells him that it is unbearably boring and to hurry up and die so they can put their brains together there to improve things.

## **Melody Oriole-2 von Peterswald**

Melody is Wilbur's granddaughter who lives with him and her lover Isadore in the Empire State Building. She was caught up in wars, enslaved and managed to escape at age twelve. She went in search of her grandfather, the King of Candlesticks. On the way, she was raped, so arrived pregnant. The baby was still-born but, by sixteen, she is pregnant again by Isadore. She and Isadore are illiterate and aspire to be slaves for Vera.

## **Isadore Raspberry-19 Cohen**

Melody's lover is a member of the Raspberry family, skilled at hunting and gathering. He is strong and often carries Melody and Wilbur when the gravity is heavy.

## **Vera Chipmunk-5 Zappa**

Passionate about life, Vera runs a successful farm with slave labor. She raises cattle, pigs, chicken and goats and grows corn, wheat, vegetables, and fruits. Vera, Melody, and Isadore plan a big party for Wilbur's hundredth birthday. Her main gift to him is 1,000 candles to fit into all his candlesticks.

## **Caleb Mellon Swain and Letitia Vanderbilt Swain**

Caleb and Letitia come from enormously wealthy families and live in Turtle Bay, NY. Neither graduated college but are well spoken, kind, and humble. They adore each other and are always together. When they give birth to Wilbur and Eliza, they strive to do the right thing by having them raised out of public view in an 'asteroid', a mansion surrounded by apple tree orchards. Letitia expresses guilt when she confesses she



wishes her children would die. Once it is discovered they are intelligent, it is even more shocking. Since Wilbur can write, they decide he should go to private school while Eliza is sent to an asylum. Wilbur is a physician when his father dies in a car accident. Letitia lives with Wilbur but can't face Eliza when she returns. Letitia dies of an illness two weeks after the first major gravity shift. Before her death, she expresses her distaste for unnatural things.

## **Dr. Stewart Rawlings Mott**

Dr. Mott is Wilbur and Eliza's childhood pediatrician. He looks in on them every day. They nickname him Flocka Butt. Wilbur always wonders if he ever suspected that he and his sister were actually intelligent. Dr. Mott is a melancholy Texan and very private. His grandson would become King of Michigan while Wilbur is in his second term as President. Wilbur sees Dr. Mott at his medical school graduation party but doesn't have time to talk to him. Dr. Mott gives him a written piece of advice, "If you can do no good, then at least do no harm." Wilbur hopes to see Dr. Mott in the afterlife to know what he really thought of them as children.

## **Oveta Cooper**

Oveta is Wilbur and Eliza's Practical Nurse, responsible for bathing and dressing them. A simple village woman, she is taken aback the first time they speak to her intelligently.

## **Dr. Cordelia Swain Cordiner**

A highly respected psychologist, Wilbur and Eliza come to discover that she is in fact a "malicious lunatic." After their intelligence is revealed, Dr. Cordiner is hired to test them. She dresses elaborately but cannot stand wealthy people, especially their children. She is paranoid and opinionated and rarely listens to others. Eliza and Wilbur call her Aunt Cordelia behind her back. She convinces Caleb and Letitia that the children should be separated, as they are unintelligent when tested alone. The children protest and are allowed to be tested together. They answer every question correctly but the intensity of their combined effort results in an orgy. Wilbur is sent off to private school the next day while Eliza is sent to an asylum.

## **Norman Mushari Jr.**

Mushari is Eliza's lawyer, who Wilbur describes as fat and shifty-eyed. He is also very short. He represents Eliza when she goes after her inheritance once Caleb Swain dies. After experiencing the orgy that Eliza and Wilbur go through once they are reunited, he negotiates deals with the servants who were captured and witnessed the horror. He is so shaken himself that he turns over the Swains legal affairs to others. Years later when tap-dancing is popular, Mushari invents a 'tap' that can be glued on and easily removed off shoes at convenience.



## **Rose Aldrich Ford and Carter Paley Swain**

When he becomes a doctor, Wilbur marries Rose Ford, an equally wealthy woman. They have a son, Carter Paley Swain. Wilbur fails to love them both so the relationship ends in divorce. Rose and Carter move to a condominium in Michu Picchu, and Wilbur never hears from them again.

## **Sophia Rothschild Swain**

When he is president at age 72, Wilbur marries a pretty 23-year-old woman, Sophia Rothschild Swain. He fails to love his second wife. Her limit comes when Wilbur assigns everyone new names and her's turns out to be Peanut. She considers this name to be too lowly for her status and is appalled at the thought of having a new extended family of Peanut sorts. She also leaves Wilbur for a condominium in Machu Picchu.

## **Fu Man Chu**

Fu Man Chu is a Chinese official emissary about the size of Wilbur's thumb. In a deal with Eliza to send her to Mars, he asks Wilbur to view hidden papers they wrote as children. He is particularly interested in their writings on gravity. Fu Manchu also sends a letter to Wilbur notifying him about Eliza's death in the avalanche on Mars.

## **Carlos Daffodil-11 Villavicencio**

On the first day that Wilbur discovers his new middle name is Daffodil-11, a White House dishwasher approaches him and says that he has the first middle name. Wilbur embraces him as his new brother. When the plague strikes, Wilbur and Carlos are the only survivors at the White House. A pilot takes them to Indianapolis, and Wilbur leaves Carlos there to be cared for by the Daffodils. He is rather relieved, as he finds Carlos a bit of a bore.

## **King of Michigan**

Dr. Mott's grandchild becomes King of Michigan after the plagues strike and battles ensue. He is a very militaristic young man but becomes fat and obscene in older life. Melody is enslaved by him. After Wilbur's presidency has disintegrated, the King of Michigan has him sign a contract selling a big parcel of North America to him for one dollar.

## **Bernard Vonnegut**

Bernard is the author's real life older brother. In the prologue, Kurt and Bernard Vonnegut are flying to Indianapolis for an uncle's funeral. Bernard is an atmospheric

scientist for the State University of New York at Albany. He is a widower raising two young sons and has three grown children. Although their sensibilities as a writer and scientist are very different, they share a similar sense of humor and physical traits, such as height and dark moustaches.

## **Alice Vonnegut**

The author mentions his older sister Alice in the prologue and explains how his relationship with her impacted ideas in the novel. Eliza was in part modeled after her. Alice died of cancer two days after her husband died in an accident. They left 4 young boys, 3 of which Vonnegut and his wife adopted and raised.



# Objects/Places

## The Empire State Building

As an old man, Wilbur lives in the lobby of the Empire State Building along with his granddaughter Melody and her lover Isadore.

## The Island of Death

Manhattan adopts this nickname after the gravity shifts rend machinery useless, and the Green Plague wipes out most of the population.

## The Baby Pyramid

Melody and Isadore construct a pyramid from junk over a manhole, under which is her still born baby in a humidior box she conceived after being raped at 12-years-old.

## Candlesticks

As an old man, Wilbur is known as the King of Candlesticks. When he helped heal a member of the Raspberry family, he chose a candlestick as a gift, so others assume he likes them and also give them. He collects over a thousand, which they light on his 100th birthday.

## Vera Chimpunk-5 Zappa's Farm

Wilbur's nearest neighbor in New York, Vera owns a farm run by grateful slaves where she raises crops and livestock. There is also a windmill, a still, and a smokehouse at the farm.

## Turtle Bay, NY

Wilbur and Eliza's parents live in Turtle Bay. It is also where Vonnegut lived at the time of writing this novel.

## Vermont Mansion

Built by Professor Elihu Roosevelt Swain, the family mansion where Wilbur and Eliza are raised is located near the town of Galen, Vermont. It is in the midst of two-hundred acres of apple trees surrounded by a chain link fence. It had been uninhabited for thirty years before the children moved in, so it was revamped for their needs. It contains



secret passageways which Wilbur and Eliza use to spy on others or communicate in secret. The mansion also contains a mausoleum of Professor Swain.

## **Indianapolis**

Wilbur's artificial extended family, the Daffodils, live predominantly in Indianapolis. He is warmly received there after his presidency ends. Indianapolis is also where author Kurt Vonnegut grew up as he describes in the prologue. The novel begins as he is on his way back there for his uncle's funeral and comes up with the pseudo-biography of himself as an old man.

## **Maxinkuckee**

After the plagues, battles are waged all over the country, one of which is the Battle of Maxinkuckee. Lake Maxinkuckee is also where Vonnegut's family once owned summer cottages.

## **Machu Picchu, Peru**

Machu Picchu becomes a popular haven for the wealthy from all over the world. Eliza moves there after her 5-day orgy with Wilbur. Both of Wilbur's ex-wives also move there. Machu Picchu ends up in the sea after the first gravity jolt.

## **The Hooligan**

A clay pipe and particle-accelerator set up just so in a home in Urbana allows people to talk with the dead in the afterlife in a place nicknamed the Turkey Farm. A lunch pail jammed against the pipe is critical to its effectiveness.

## **Tri-benzo-Deportamil**

A drug for Tourette's Syndrome that Wilbur becomes addicted to for almost 30 years.

## **Mars**

The Chinese colonize Mars. When Eliza does them a service, her reward is a trip to Mars. She dies in an avalanche and is buried there.

## **The Ritz, Boston**

Wilbur has his medical school graduation party at the Ritz. Eliza surprises him with a Shakespeare sonnet delivered through a bullhorn in a helicopter.

## **The Nocturnal Goatsucker**

Wilbur and Eliza refer to the whippoorwill's (or 'Whip Poor Will) sound as the cry of the Nocturnal Goatsucker after a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. They also name their famous childrearing book with that title, though it is renamed *You Went and Had a Baby*.

## **The White House**

Wilbur is in his second term of his presidency when the plague takes over the nation and gravity has taken its toll. Wilbur is divorced by his second wife while there. The White House goes to ruin. All the staff die or leave until only Wilbur and the dishwasher that shares his middle name are left.



# Themes

## Loneliness

Loneliness is a central theme in the novel. Wilbur proposes the solution to such a widespread disconnect is to create artificial extended families assigned by shared middle names. His campaign slogan is "Lonesome no more!" This national interconnection and interdependence instills a sense of hope and responsibility in the masses. The underlying message is that life holds most value when individuals support each other; and what stronger support system is there than family? For those who are without family or generally lonely, this welfare strategy of sorts shows that whether relationships are artificial or hereditary, such bonds are a necessity for the survival of the community at large. After Wilbur institutes this program, crime drops as family members hold each other accountable. Spirits are raised, as there is always a family member to lend a hand or share company. The glue of success comes from a sense of 'common decency', which the author mentions in the prologue is the essence of love, at least in his viewpoint.

In the prologue, the author also describes his lonely uncle who joined AA more for companionship than need. He also mentions the artificial extended families he and his brother individually shared with peers - writers and scientists - though noted those were limited in scope. Hence Wilbur's plan includes every man, woman and child. Wilbur and Eliza's childhood also involves isolation and separation from family and, eventually, each other. It is no wonder that Wilbur seeks to alleviate this void as much for himself as others. While incapable of emotive love himself, he recognizes the pain that results from lacking it. While he fails in his marital and parental relationships, his connection with his granddaughter is meaningful. He wishes her the same thing his parents wished for him, a short happy life on an asteroid.

## Death

Death is a major theme in the novel. In the prologue, the author is on his way to an uncle's funeral and reflects on the premature death of his sister Alice to cancer. She described her impending fate as "slapstick". Even her husband died in a freak accident two days before her death.

The central character, Wilbur, writes his memoir from the Island of Death, so named after the Green Death wiped out most of New York City's population. In fact, most of the country has died from a plague and the survivors carry on in a post-apocalyptic fashion. Melody and Isadore construct a pyramid over her still born baby's body, mimicking death rites of centuries ago.

Written with satire, even death is not all it is cracked up to be as no heaven awaits - the afterlife is a drag, comparable to life on a badly run turkey farm. All one can do in the

afterlife is wait for others to die and join in the everlasting boredom. Wilbur and Eliza communicate between life and death through the Hooligan contraption and she is anxious that he commits suicide to join her. While Wilbur goes to New York with the expectation of dying from the plague, he lives to be 100, perhaps finding life with the living at least a little more interesting than what awaits.

Ultimately, the novel was inspired by the author imagining himself as an old man and the slow death of his creativity, personified through simple, uncurious Melody. The wasteland of New York, bereft of machinery or power, creates a feeling of emptiness and pointlessness that parallels the sensation of losing one's creative spark.

## Monsters

The main characters in the book, Wilbur and his twin sister Eliza are born deformed, with additional nipples, fingers and toes. They also have Neanderthal features and are two meters tall. They are aware of their monstrosity at an early age and believe that concealing their intelligence will make them more acceptable to others. Like Frankenstein's monster, they gain their intelligence in secret by reading and observing others while in hiding. When they overhear their mother express her hatred for their monstrosity, they believe that exposing their intelligence will 'fix' things. However, like Frankenstein's Monster, their intelligence becomes a curse and they are separated as a result. Also like Frankenstein's monster, their intelligence made them even more grotesque in their creators' (parents) eyes and they are cast away, Eliza to an asylum and Wilbur to a boarding school for mentally disturbed boys. Modeled by the author after himself and his real sister, the incestuous monster alter egos seem to be his way of parodying the sometimes-grotesque comedy of life.

## Regression and Progress

Themes of regression and progression appear many times within the novel. America as a nation is regressing. Machinery is being replaced with old-fashioned horsepower and natural items are replacing synthetic ones. After the plague, citizens live in a communal way of hunting and gathering with no system of education or concern for history. Wars are waged with spears and cannons over modern weapons. In contrast, the Chinese have become highly advanced to the point they can make people shrink and teleport themselves around the earth or even to Mars. This reflects some American fears of China becoming a superior power in a technological race for progress.

As children, Wilbur and Eliza are highly progressed for their age, yet regress to infantile behavior as that keeps their intelligent world safe. Since no one expects them to show the capacity of more than a two year old, they play the part yet in hiding read every book in the mansion and conjecture all sorts of progressive theories that come into play when they are adults. Their genius ability is monstrous to others and dangerous to each other, so only so much progress occurs because of its rare illumination.

# Style

## Point of View

Except for the prologue and epilogue, the novel is written in the first person point of view of Wilbur Swain. The novel is his memoir as a 100-year-old man reflecting on his extraordinary life. The prologue is written from the author's point of view. It explains how much of his own history in terms of family and relationships helped spur the idea for this novel, which he calls the closest to a biography that he will ever write. The epilogue is written in a third-person point of view. It describes his conversation with Eliza in the afterlife through the Hooligan contraption. It also explains how he fathered a child while in withdrawal from tri-benzo-Deportamil and his impending travels to and experiences in New York. It touches more on his first encounters with Vera and Melody and her personal journey to find him.

## Setting

The novel takes place in a number of pertinent locations that reflect the author's personal history. For example, Wilbur and Eliza's parents live in Turtle Bay, NY, which is where the author lived at the time and Wilbur's extended Daffodil family primarily live around Indianapolis, which is where Vonnegut grew up.

A pivotal setting includes the mansion in Vermont where Wilbur and Eliza are raised. Located on a mountain in Vermont, the mansion sits isolated amid apple tree orchards and is an 'asteroid' of pure happiness for the children. They thrive on all the books at their disposal and learn what is going on around them through secret passages they discover through which they can spy on others.

When Wilbur becomes president, the setting shifts to the White House. He has the oval office painted yellow when he discovers his middle name is Daffodil. He is in his second presidency when the plague strikes, and the House goes to ruin.

The central location of the novel is New York, primarily the Empire State Building, from which Wilbur writes his memoir. For the second half of his life he lives there, joined in later years by his granddaughter Melody and her lover. By the time he moves there, machinery no longer works due to intense gravity shifts and most of have died of the plague. His nearest neighbor is Vera who runs a farm about 1.5 km away. It is a post-apocalyptic world in many regards, though there is a sense of harmony he helped create through his extended family plan that helped reunite people. Vera's farm is a sanctuary in New York that Wilbur often visits. It is a thriving farm in a once densely populated area.

The Turkey Farm is the nickname for the afterlife. Although not 'seen', it is described as a mundane, boring place where the dead simply wait for others to enter for lack of

anything to do. Wilbur keeps his knowledge of the Turkey Farm a secret, as it is so disappointing.

Machu Picchu, Peru is where Eliza moves after the five-day orgy with her brother. It is a popular spot for the wealthy. Wilbur's ex-wives also move here, though after the first big gravity shift, it crumbles down the mountains and into the ocean.

## Language and Meaning

In the prologue, the author states that this novel is the closest he will come to writing a biography. It is about imagining himself looking back on his life as an old man with the slapstick humor with which he generally views things. Wilbur's voice and behavior therefore model the author's voice, while the events and situations are ludicrous as slapstick is meant to be. Like the author, Wilbur is incapable of expressing love, even though he feels good when it is exhibited. Eliza's language is far more expressive than her brother's, as it is implied was the author's own sister Alice. Eliza shows her emotions, especially when she returns after being trapped for years in an asylum. She romantically wanted a prince (ergo her brother) to rescue her, she shows intense anger and resentment when she is reunited with her family, yet expresses her great love for her brother at his graduation party. Vera expresses a humanity that Wilbur is incapable of but appreciates, one of earthy warmth and kindness. The author states in the prologue that Melody may represent what might be left of his creativeness as an old man. She is illiterate and with very little curiosity, yet hopeful.

## Structure

The novel contains a prologue and epilogue from the author's point of view, and 49 short chapters of approximately 2-5 pages each from the main character's point of view. The story is told in a non-linear fashion, often shifting between various events in Wilbur's life, past to present. The first half primarily focuses on his childhood and relationship with his twin sister Eliza, and the second half on his presidency and extended family plan. By the end, Wilbur's personal history seems cohesive, as despite the time shifts, more detail keeps being added to the events to explain their relevance. Although the story spans 100 years, the chapters represent Wilbur's memoir written over a matter of days. It culminates with his 100-year birthday party and the lighting of his 1,000 candles, his last entry before he dies.

## Quotes

"It is a thing I often say these days: "Hi ho." It is a kind of senile hiccup. I have lived too long." Chapter 1, p. 25.

"We were something new. We were neanderthaloids. We had the features of adult, fossil human beings even in infancy — massive brow-ridges, sloping foreheads, and steamshovel jaws." Chapter 2, p. 30.

"They were innocent great apes, with limited means for doing mischief, which, in my opinion as an old, old man, is all that human beings were ever meant to be." Chapter 3, p. 39.

"And all the information we received about the planet we were on indicated that idiots were lovely things to be." Chapter 4, p. 44.

"We thought that ugliness was simply amusing to people in the outside world. We did not realize that we could actually nauseate strangers who came upon us unexpectedly." Chapter 7, p. 61.

"And indeed they were under a malediction. But Eliza and I had not guessed its nature: That they were all but strangled and paralyzed by the wish that their own children would die." Chapter 9, p. 71.

"He was horrified to discover what our mother knew she would discover, if she came downstairs: That intelligence and sensitivity in monstrous bodies like Eliza's and mine merely made us more repulsive." Chapter 11, p. 81.

"If I drank too much, I might spill the beans to everybody: That the life that awaits us after death is infinitely more tiresome than this one." Chapter 14, p. 93.

"Well, mental telepathy was useless to Eliza and me over distances greater than three meters." Chapter 16, p. 104.

"She laughed unpleasantly. "But I can see why you and mother might want to boast

about your guilt. After all, it's the only thing you two monkeys ever earned."" Chapter 23, p. 139.

"And now, without my realizing it, the shell of my character stood before her concealed howitzers at nearly point-blank range, as naked and brittle as a Franklin Stove." Chapter 24, p. 142.

""Eliza!" I said. And then I shouted something daring, and something I genuinely felt for the first time in my life. "Eliza! I love you!"" Chapter 27, p. 158.

"I have never been good at loving. We had a child, Carter Paley Swain, whom I also failed to love." Chapter 28, p. 163.

"There was fresher news in the same mail. "Regret to inform you that your sister died on Mars in an avalanche." It was signed, "Fu Manchu."" Chapter 31, p. 173.

"I spoke of American Loneliness. It was the only subject I needed for victory, which was lucky. It was the only subject I had." Chapter 33, p. 183.

"But then, just when everything was going so well, when Americans were happier than they had ever been, even though the country was bankrupt and falling apart, people began to die by the millions of "The Albanian Flu" in most places, and here on Manhattan of the "Green Death."" Chapter 39, p. 213.

"I tell you - I have been regaled as a multimillionaire, as a pediatrician, as a Senator, and as a President. But nothing can match for sincerity the welcome Indianapolis, Indiana, gave me as a Daffodil!" Chapter 45, p. 241.

""History is merely a list of surprises," I said. "It can only prepare us to be surprised yet again."" Chapter 48, p. 255.

""Please, brother Wilbur," she said, "this is Eternity here. This is forever! Where you are now is just nothing in terms of time! It's a joke! Blow your brains out as quick as you can."" Epilogue, p. 264.

## Topics for Discussion

The author reveals his state of mind and some events and characters in his life when he wrote "Slapstick". What were some of the major influences that appeared in the book?

In what ways does the story reflect the comedy term "Slapstick", the main title of the book?

Loneliness is a major theme in the novel. How has Wilbur been affected by loneliness, and how has he combated it?

Wilbur and Eliza consider themselves two halves of one genius. What does each character contribute to this whole identity? How are they different?

Wilbur admits he is incapable of love and only sincerely expresses it once, to his sister. Why does Wilbur lack emotion while Eliza is capable of expressing anger, hurt, and other emotions?

After civilization collapses, in what ways do survivors create order in a chaotic world?

What structures or items in the collapsed world are symbolic icons of the past?

The story revolves around a rather dismal, apocalyptic world, and the afterlife, or "turkey farm," seems even less appealing. Does the novel offer any sense of hope or purpose in life, even if it is toward the unknown?