

Tracks Study Guide

Tracks by Robyn Davidson

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Plot Summary

Robyn Davidson is a young woman from Queensland, Australia, in the 1970s. She decides that she wants to get some camels and make a huge trek across the great Australian desert. It is a lot of work, and the experience changes her into a different person.

Robyn arrives in Alice Springs, the last real town at the edge of the desert, with no money and no knowledge about camels, the desert, survival, or even basic tool use. It is a rough frontier town, and she struggles against sexism as she tries to learn enough about camels and get some of her own. She is deeply bothered by the victimization of the Aboriginal people by the Australian government, and the racism the whites have toward the poverty-stricken, homeless Aborigines. The Aborigines live very closely with the land, so when they are forced off of their land, they feel rootless and culture-less. Part of Robyn's motivation to take her trip is to get to know the Aborigines better. After two years and two apprenticeships, Robyn finally obtains four camels, and "National Geographic" magazine agrees to sponsor her trip. Robyn is excited that she is finally going to realize her dream, but she is disappointed that someone else is involved, since she wants the trip to be hers alone.

Robyn starts off on her trip, sometimes accompanied by Rick, a photographer from "National Geographic" and a close friend to Robyn. Another portion is spent in the company of Eddie, an old Aborigine man who teaches Robyn the importance of paying attention to the world around her and feeling that she is one with it. He also helps her let go of her worries about making good time or being on a schedule. Robyn faces many dangers in the desert, especially wild bull camels. She shoots these when they attack her, but when her rifle jams, she must learn to fight them off with sticks and rocks. At times, Robyn goes somewhat crazy from being by herself in so much desert, and when she is able to give in to the Aborigine mindset, she finds herself stripped of all unnecessary worries and inhibitions, as though she can do anything.

Toward the very end of Robyn's journey, her dog, Diggety, dies from eating poisoned meat. Robyn is devastated by the loss of her only friend. Soon, she encounters a crowd of news reporters, who have heard about the famous "camel lady." Robyn hates tourists and paparazzi, and in her desert mentality, cannot begin to deal with interacting with these people. Fortunately, Rick shows up and sends the reporters off on a wild goose chase, while Robyn finishes the final leg of her journey. Afterward, Robyn wishes that she could go back to the clarity and solitude of the desert.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Robyn Davidson is a young, inexperienced woman living in Queensland, Australia in the late 1970s. While daydreaming with her friends, she comes up with a plan to travel across the deserts of Australia alone, on four camels, which she plans to catch and train herself. The Australian desert is filled with wild camels roaming around, left over from herds imported by North Indians and Afghans.

Robyn finally decides to put her plan into action, although she has few resources or skills for her journey. She takes a train five hundred miles to Alice Springs, the last civilized outpost before the huge desert. She has her dog, Diggety, with her, but little else and no money. Robyn quickly finds that "the Alice," as the town is called, is a seedy tourist trap filled with crazy people and racism. With no money even to pay a fee to stay at a campsite, Robyn meets some hippies who let her stay with them in their tent, but she is disconcerted by their hateful attitudes toward black people. Robyn appeals to the kindness of strangers, and she manages to get a job at a local pub. Conveniently, the pub has a back room where she can stay and meals are thrown in for free too. She asks around, and learns that there are three possible places to buy camels, although everyone who hears her plan tells her that they think it is ridiculous and dangerous. They have a point, since Robyn knows nothing about camels or desert survival, but such naysayers also usually try to get Robyn to sleep with them. Most people warn her repeatedly to watch out for the Aborigines, who camp in the area. Robyn quickly learns that local claims that the Aborigines are like violent, drunken animals, are based on nothing other than racist fear, and the Aborigines that she meets are very friendly.

Robyn visits the home of Sallay Mahomet, an Afghan who has a herd of camels. He immediately laughs at her plan and refuses to help her on the grounds that he thinks she would never survive. Robyn also checks out some people who run a tourist business with camels, but she does not like them, and they are condescending to her. Finally, she tries her last resort, a man reputed to be a maniac. Robyn meets Kurt Posel, a German immigrant who dresses like an Arab and who has a herd of camels. Kurt is the first person who seems to take Robyn seriously, and before she knows it, he has decided that Robyn will be his apprentice for eight months, staying on his ranch, and use her wages from the pub to pay for a one-eyed camel. Robyn feels that she is being swindled, but goes along with it, because she can tell that Kurt knows a lot about camels.

Robyn starts her new job as camel apprentice and it is grueling. She has to constantly be on her feet, taking care of the camels, and cleaning up after them, for Kurt insists that there be no camel poop on the ground. Kurt also screams at her to work faster, even in front of the tourists who pay a dollar to ride a camel. At the end of the day, Robyn is so tired she can hardly stand, and a young man from town comes out to visit her and see how she is doing. Robyn thinks to herself that maybe Kurt's treatment of



her is not so bad, but then Kurt interrupts them in the barn, to yell at her for having a visitor. Suddenly, Robyn decides that enough is enough, and that she is not going to let Kurt treat her like a slave. She yells back at Kurt, telling him what she thinks of him, and then moves back into the pub.

In the first chapter of this book, the amazing and extraordinary thing is knowing that Robyn must have succeeded on her trip, because she has written a book about it. Most of the camel trainers are correct to laugh at her and assume that she would die on such a trip, because she knows almost nothing about camels or the desert. Catching and training wild camels, and travelling all alone with them through dangerous territory, sounds like something a child would dream up. Robyn talks about how part of the reason she wants to do this trip is because she feels inherently weak and cowardly, as part of being female. She wants to prove to herself that she is strong, and capable of taking care of herself in the big world. Practically everyone who meets her sees her as a helpless woman, although simply going alone to a place like Alice Springs takes courage and independence. When Robyn blows up at Kurt, it is partly because he has seen such weakness in her, and decided that he could make a slave out of such a sucker. Robyn determines not to let him take advantage of her. This is an interesting decision, because her choice to stand up for herself and acknowledge herself as a capable, autonomous person, in fact takes her further from her bigger goal of gaining strength and independence by crossing the desert.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Robyn spends the next year working almost constantly. She continues to work at the pub, where she comes face-to-face with rampant sexism, racism, and alcoholism as a way of life. Kurt comes back and begs her to work for him again and she agrees to try it out. This time she is allowed to live in Kurt's house with him and his wife Gladdy, and Robyn learns a lot about camels. In fact, she becomes completely obsessed with them. Kurt comes up with a verbal agreement, in which Robyn will work for him for free, and he will let her use three of his camels for her trip, as long as she returns them. Robyn knows that once again, he is swindling her, but she agrees anyway. Sometimes, Kurt treats Robyn so badly that she storms off, going back to the pub. Working at the pub becomes more and more frightening, and one night, a well-meaning patron warns Robyn that she has been chosen as the next person in town to be raped. This terrifies her, and makes her much more suspicious and defensive around the bar patrons. When Robyn returns to her room at the pub one day, she finds a big piece of poop on her pillow. This is the last straw, and she quits the pub.

Robyn makes an aside to talk about the common mentalities in Australia, which make the area different from many regions of the world. Especially near the desert, the people are wild and crazy, and not just in a metaphorical way. Many people totally ignore common cultural taboos or presuppositions, and there is little need for competition when there is so much empty space. Robyn feels that there is a peculiar quality to Australian friendships, which comes from a casual acceptance of whoever a person wants to be, and having plenty of time to just be together and get to know one another. She also points out that much of the bigoted Australian mentality is a result of the country having been a penal colony with only men, creating an environment where being tough, resilient, and macho is the most important quality. Many of these qualities are similar to those associated with the American Old West, but the United States has had civilization spread across it, while in Australia, there are still vast stretches of desert that are mostly uninhabited.

Robyn's sister sends her a tent, which Robyn moves into. She loves crows, and convinces Kurt to help her catch a baby crow so that she can keep it as a pet. He manages to get one, which she names Akhnaton, but kills its three nestmates in the process. The crow is a fun companion, but he becomes more and more obnoxious, stealing objects, waking Robyn in the morning, and even pooping on her face. As Robyn becomes more comfortable and familiar with the camels, she finds that she now relates better to animals than to people. Remembering this time, Robyn reflects that this is a sign of her failing mental health, as she tries to adjust to the extreme loneliness of her situation. Robyn does manage to make close friends with Gladdy and with some hippie artisans who are her neighbors living at nearby Basso's Farm. They also teach Robyn how to make things out of leather. Although her own creations fall apart easily, Robyn



foreshadows that she will use this knowledge to make and repair equipment on her long trip.

One night, Robyn is drunk on tequila, and she has a vision of three camels in the night. Over the following months, this vision haunts her everywhere she goes and she mentions that the vision is prophetic, foreshadowing that these are the very camels with which she will be traveling. Toward the end of Robyn's time of service, Kurt gets lazier and lazier, leaving almost all of the work to her. She realizes that he is hoping to drive her off so that he will never have to hold up his end of the bargain. One day, he again pushes her too far, and when she refuses to obey his orders, he tells her to obey or get out. She leaves, but by now, Sallay Mahomet, the Afghani camel breeder, has heard of her plight and her skill with camels. Now that he knows that she is serious about her goal and can take good care of camels, Sallay offers to hire Robyn, and he gives her a real contract and a much more reasonable deal than Kurt. Training at Sallay's is still very hard, but Robyn becomes close friends with him and his wife, Iris.

Toward the end of her training, Robyn flies back to Queensland to visit her friends. Her best friend, Nancy, can immediately sense the change in Robyn's personality, and she tells Robyn that she is on the right track. Robyn herself can better understand her own motivations now, and she realizes that the important thing about her trip is not that she can prove anything, or have an adventure. Rather, she feels that it is about tenacity, and going ahead with a very hard goal, and gaining the experience. Instead of a weak, pliant, softhearted female, Robyn now sees herself as a strong, weathered bulldog.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Robyn's friends move out of Basso's Farm, and let her stay there until it is sold. She finds that she absolutely loves living alone, and as the days go by, she becomes more and more of a recluse, often hiding when people come to visit. Sometimes men from town or Aborigine men camping nearby show up in the middle of the night, hoping for drunken sex, but they are greeted at the door by a shotgun barrel protruding from the doorway. They do not know that she never loads the gun. The only person whose company Robyn does not mind is Ada Baxter, an Aborigine woman who lives in a shack on Basso's Farm.

The time comes for Robyn to choose her two camels from Sallay's herd. She chooses Kate, an old, fat pack camel, and a young wild camel named Zeleika, or Zelly. Robyn has a rough time getting the beasts to Basso's Farm down a stretch of busy highway, and both of them have cuts which are infected. Over the next few months, Robyn procrastinates actually preparing for her trip, as all of her time is taken up by caring for the two camels, whose health problems seem endless. From the local vets Robyn learns to do various medical procedures to her camels, while she also trains Zelly to be ridden. One day Sallay comes to visit, and he tells Robyn that he thinks Zelly is pregnant. This is good news, but Kate's infection gets worse and worse, spreading all over her body. Robin knows that it is time to put Kate out of her misery, but when the day comes when she must shoot the camel, Robyn is unprepared for how upsetting it is to kill an animal she has gotten to know so well. Afterward, despair washes over Robyn, as she feels like she is right back at square one, now that she has no pack camel.

Robyn talks a lot about the sad plight of the Aborigines in Australia, who are the victims of intense racism and whose poverty is heartbreaking. In fact, her desire to really get to know the Aboriginal peoples and live among them is one of her motivations for taking her trip across the desert. The Aborigines are targeted by a system of "assimilation," which basically means that the government can take back the land from Aboriginal reservations. There are very few job opportunities open for the Aborigines, mostly unskilled itinerant work, and many of them are starving, surviving on garbage. The luckier ones live in shacks, while the poorer ones are homeless, camping under trash shelters in a dry riverbed that floods at least once a year. Robyn makes friends with many of the Aborigines and sees how the younger ones feel trapped in a cycle of welfare, poverty, and alcoholism.

It is interesting to see the comparison in this chapter between the situation faced by the Aborigines and Robyn's own situation. She herself comes from a reasonably privileged life, with relative wealth, and a good education, while they start out with nothing and often end up with nothing. Yet here in Alice Springs, Robin's education does her little good, because there is so much she needs to learn about the desert and camels. Although she is in a more privileged position because she is white, she is a woman, and



the mysogyny in the area is almost as bad as the racism. She has basically no money, having spent it all on camels, and now she finds herself one camel poorer, despite having worked very hard to save Kate. Rather than conclude some moral from such a hard time in her life, as though everything always works out for the best, Robyn analyzes the time period honestly, acknowledging what a painful experience it was.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

After having to shoot Kate, Robyn is overwhelmed by depression. This is combined with a growing fear of Kurt, with whom Robyn continues to associate, because she needs to use his facilities to care for her camels. Kurt goes away for a few days, and Robyn stays with his wife Gladdy, trying to help Gladdy to have the courage to leave Kurt. One night, Robyn starts to seriously consider suicide, but Gladdy wakes up and asks her if she wants to talk, and Robyn changes her mind. A few days later, Gladdy leaves her husband, and predictably, Kurt takes it out on Robyn. He becomes unbearable, and one day, he disappears, having sold the entire ranch, camels and all, including Robyn herself.

Robyn assures the new owners that she does not in fact come with the ranch, but when she sees that they know nothing about camels, she offers to teach them what they need to know, in exchange for her pick of two of the camels. They agree, but never sign a contract, and once they think they have enough knowledge, they refuse to make good on the deal. Soon, however, a bull camel named Dookie goes into his mating season, and he goes berserk and attacks Robyn. After an intense battle, she manages to subdue the beast with several weapons, and she tells the new owner that this sort of attack is common with bulls, although in reality, she has never seen Dookie behave this way before. The new owner is terrified, and he sells both of his bulls to Robyn. She is overjoyed, because now she has three camels, meaning that she really can go on her trip. One of the camels is white, just like in Robyn's vision.

Two of Robyn's friends, Julie and Jenny, move in with her, and Robyn becomes more used to living among people. She stops living like such a spartan, but she is tied to Basso's Farm, because she has to take care of the camels every day. Every night, Robyn sends the camels, hobbled, out into the desert to graze all night, but one morning, she cannot find them. She searches for a few days, and when it seems like they are really lost, she realizes that this is the perfect excuse to finally go back home, and forget about this crazy pipe dream of going across the desert. Robyn realizes that she has never really thought she would go through with the trip, and considers just giving up. Just then, she sees her camels, and for the first time, she knows that she really is going to do it. She understands that the consequences may be very bad, but she decides to go ahead and follow her dream. This shows that she is a woman of great personal strength, as she manages to climb out of depression and face the many obstacles in her path, without hiding from them. She also resists the temptation to take the easy path, to do what everyone wants her to do anyway. This takes a lot of courage.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Robyn manages to track down and catch her camels in the desert and bring them home. While she is tracking them, she gets completely turned around, which frightens her, as she realizes how bad her sense of direction is. She is plagued with worries now, wondering where she will find the money to pay for the trip and how she can design packs for the camels and what is her true motivation for going on the trip. Robyn meets Rick, a photojournalist, who suggests that she apply to "National Geographic" magazine for sponsorship. Robyn does and is elated when they agree to sponsor her trip, but then she is disappointed about having sold out, so that the trip is no longer her own. The worst part is that Rick, nice as he is, will be accompanying her in a truck for part of her trip, taking pictures.

Zeleika gives birth to a cute baby camel named Goliath. To prepare for the trip, Robyn castrates both of the bull camels, and takes a short practice trip to Utopia, an Aboriginal-owned cattle ranch 150 miles away. The trip takes eight days, and Murphy's Law is in full force. Robyn can not believe how hard it is, but they make it to Utopia. She receives the money from "National Geographic" and buys all the necessary supplies, and she knows that she cannot put off the trip any longer. Still she worries that she will end up having to quit on the first day. Her family comes to say goodbye, and Robyn thinks about what her trip means to her father and sister. The family has always tried to protect one another, ever since Robyn's mother committed suicide when Robyn was a child, and Robyn imagines that her father believes that she can heal some of the pain from her mother's death, by succeeding at this trip.

Robin starts out from a place called Glen Helen. She is filled with exuberance about having finally started, and is amazed that she is really making her dream into a reality. Soon, however, she is annoyed to come across Rick, who follows her all day, taking countless pictures. Rick has also provided her with a walkie-talkie, which she has only taken at the insistence of her family. Finally, Rick leaves Robyn so he can go do his next assignment, and she is finally on her own. After two years, she has finally started what she set out to do.

When Robyn is interviewing with "National Geographic," the editors suggest to her that she could write a book of her story. She gives this no more than a passing mention, but of course this was the germ from which this very book grew. Robyn talks about how other people get excited when hearing about her plans, and how they tend to project their own romantic ideas onto it, making up their own reasons for the trip. In fact, she decides that the real reason she wants to do it is to test herself, and really see what she is made of. Many famous historical figures, such as Jesus, Gandhi, or Buddha, underwent extreme testing during their lives, often going out to the desert to be alone. It is interesting that this does not seem to occur to Robyn, who is not doing this to try to

emulate such people. Instead, her motivation is to truly get to know herself, and to live life to the fullest. In a way, exploring the desert is a metaphor for exploring herself.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Robyn's first day traveling on her own is wonderful. All she is aware of is how freeing it is to be alone and the camels are all well-behaved. When she camps at night, she ties the baby camel to a tree, knowing that his mother will not wander far on her nightly grazing. Robyn develops the habit of waking up several times each night to listen for the camels' bells, to make sure that they do not run away in the night. She does not need to worry, for they tend to crowd around her campsite in the mornings. Robyn has learned from Aborigines how to harvest the bountiful food of the desert and she finds that she is healthier than ever from her desert diet. After several days, Robyn arrives at Areyonga, an Aborigine settlement. They are very excited to see her, and call her "Crazy Woman" in their language. The Areyonga especially value camels, and they are amazed that she is trying to learn to speak Pitjantjara, their language.

One of Robyn's biggest challenges in traveling is trying to find the correct track. The tracks are often invisible, and the maps are sometimes completely wrong, so Robyn has to develop her weak sense of direction. She finds that she is a slave to the mentality of daily schedules and hours and minutes, and she tries to let go of these ideas. Such concepts of time do not make much sense in the middle of the desert. Still, she feels obligated to try to make good time, in order to please "National Geographic," and so that she will not have to travel in the heat of the summer. The tracks that Robyn must put so much effort into finding could symbolize her efforts to find her own path in life. Sometimes Robyn must decide between following an established map, or doing what her gut tells her is right, and she knows that her life could depend upon the choices she makes.

One day, Bub the camel has a small problem with his pack, and he flips out, throwing supplies everywhere, and terrifying the other camels. Robyn quickly sees that this could be a major disaster, so she calmly does what she can to calm the camels and help Bub settle down. Then she ties Bub to the nearest tree and beats him hard, letting out all the tension and fear from traveling alone and worrying. Afterward, Robyn recognizes that she should not beat the camels so violently and she compares herself to Kurt. She reflects that she never does grow out of this fault, showing that a soul-searching trip across a desert is not enough to change every single thing about a person. Still, merely getting to the point of starting on such a journey demonstrates that she has grown a lot.



Chapters 7 & 8

Chapters 7 & 8 Summary and Analysis

Robyn hates the thousands of bugs in the desert which bite her and the camels. She also has to deal with countless burrs and prickles that get into everything and she becomes very meticulous in the way she takes care of her equipment. This is quite a contrast to her usual, casual demeanor and she begins to change in ways that she did not expect. She arrives at Ayers Rock, where Rick is supposed to meet her. The rock is beautiful and overwhelming, but Robyn has trouble enjoying the beauty of the place because she feels awkward and fake, posing for pictures for Rick. Her friend Jen shows up for a surprise visit and although Robyn is happy to see Jen, she feels that it is an invasion for her friend to tag along on her trip. Robyn confronts Rick, explaining why it bothers her to have someone with her, and she agrees to let him accompany her to Docker River, five days away.

On the way to Docker River, tensions once again come to a head between Robyn and Rick, and she drunkenly blows up at him. That night they start sleeping together and from then on they get along much better. However, Robyn relates this with regret, knowing that this takes her even further from her dream of having her desert trip be hers alone. Now Rick, and "National Geographic," are much more involved, and Robyn knows that now the article in the magazine is an important motivation. Dookie the camel hurts his leg while crossing a creek in rainy weather, making it necessary to stay at Docker River for six weeks while he heals. Robyn is very depressed, and feels like giving up. She realizes that the Aborigines there do not want Rick to take their pictures, and she tries to convince him to stop intruding. One night while Robyn is sleeping, Rick sneaks out and secretly photographs a secret, sacred ritual of the Aborigines, and they are very offended. From then on, it is hard for Robyn to connect with them, because they see Rick as her husband, and both of them as tourists, outsiders. In fact, Robyn hates the tourists, and does all she can to avoid contact with them.

Robyn flies back to Alice Springs in hope of bringing back some sort of medical equipment that she can use to diagnose Dookie. She feels defeated, like she is starting over, and wonders what is the point of continuing. Robyn returns and Dookie's leg eventually heals. She leaves Docker River to cross an immense sand dune alone. Robyn is overwhelmed by how monotonous and huge it is, and as she crosses the dune, she starts to go crazy in the sun. It seems that time never passes, and the rocks at the end of the dunes never seem to get any closer. Several times, Robyn has to fight off groups of rampaging wild male camels, which she shoots with her shotgun. Robyn hates to kill such magnificent beasts, but she knows she must. She finally comes to the water hole at the end of the dunes, and all the crushing despair leaves her. She camps with several Aborigine men that she meets, and one of them, Eddie, volunteers to travel with her for two days, to protect her. This provides an interesting contrast, since Robyn has now shown herself to be quite capable of facing the dangers of the desert, both physical and spiritual, and yet these strangers want to protect her.



Robyn is learning that sometimes, even fulfilling a long-dreamed-about goal does not turn out the way we expect, or make us feel the way we think it will. She sees it as a selling-out, allowing others to be involved with her trip, without recognizing the huge measure of self-reliance and determination it has taken her to get as far as she already has. It may seem strange that Robyn feels so depressed and ready to give up when she has finally accomplished something that has taken two years just to begin, and she is finally succeeding at it. It is often disappointing when we come face-to-face with the reality of a goal and must admit that it is not the same as the fantasy. Sometimes, the reality pales in comparison with the fantasy, and this can be the time when it is easiest to give up and go home. The fact that Robyn can continue on her journey, even after having to fly back to Alice Springs, shows just how important it is to her. What she sees as weakness is really evidence of strength.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Robyn quickly finds that she loves travelling with Eddie, her old Aborigine chaperone. Eddie shows her all kinds of things about the desert that she would not normally have noticed and Robyn begins to adjust to Eddie's slower, more leisurely pace, rather than hurrying from here to there. Soon Robyn asks Eddie to accompany her the two hundred miles to Warburton as well, and he agrees excitedly, especially when promised a rifle just like Robyn's. As they travel, the Aborigines that they interact with accept Robyn because she is with Eddie, and they have a wonderful time laughing and sharing food with Aboriginal travelers. Once, they run into some tourists, who condescendingly tell Eddie to pose next to a camel for a photo. Rather than get angry at their racism, Eddie plays up the part of the dangerous, kooky savage, and then demands money. As Robyn and Eddie laugh over his antics, she realizes that Eddie bears no bitterness about such treatment, and decides that she, too, can deal with such people graciously, without hatred.

Robyn starts to realize that although she and Eddie both act completely crazy, no one out here really seems to care if anyone is crazy. As Robyn walks, she has so much time to think that she goes over every detail of her past, allowing her to examine her experiences and let go of any emotional baggage that is holding her back. Although she has been hoping for some cataclysmic moment of enlightenment or growth, instead she has undergone a gradual change, becoming more laid-back and self-assured. She starts to take on the Aborigine mentality, understanding how magical and foundational the land can be, and enjoying the moment, without worrying about what people think of her. The Aborigines have a complex relationship with the land, and see it as owning them, rather than them owning it. This is a major reason why the government forcing Aboriginal tribes onto small, poverty-stricken reservations has such a negative effect on Aboriginal culture.

Although Robyn starts out her trip with a fierce desire to be on her own, feeling intense irritation at the presence of other people, she eventually learns to deal with them, through traveling with Eddie. Eddie has so much fun on his journey, that he teaches Robyn to enjoy the journey for its own sake, and she finds that his presence does not hamper her ability to be herself, and get to know herself. Robyn thinks that she needs constant solitude for personal growth, but Eddie teaches her how to grow whether or not there are other people around, and he shows her that she need not let others' preconceptions of her tell her how to act.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Now Robyn must travel down the Gunbarrel Highway, and she will not see another human for a month. This is the longest portion of her trek, as she now must cross 800 miles of harsh, uninhabited desert. As she travels, Robyn manages to let go of the mindset that is appropriate for civilization and really let herself become a part of the desert. Now Robyn can see at a glance the myriad connections between all parts of an environment and she feels that her boundaries have collapsed, so that her sense of self reaches all the way to the horizon. Some days, traveling is miserable, but often Robyn is overcome by exuberance at the infinite free space around her. She leaves behind her alarm clock and walks naked, having forgotten to care about social conventions. She is strong, and hardly feels pain anymore.

Robyn faces death more than once. One day, she is confronted by a group of wild bull camels, and her rifle jams. Suddenly, she must fight them off with rocks and sticks and she does this many times, relying on her wits and instincts to get out alive. One night, Robyn's dog, Diggety, starts vomiting all over the place and Robyn realizes that Diggety has eaten poisoned meat that the rangers drop from planes to try to kill off dingos. Robyn shoots the dog, and then mourns her closest friend. This episode happens directly after Robyn has just decided that she has learned everything that the desert has to teach her, when she is at the pinnacle of her joy about making it this far. This shows that life does not work the way we expect, and Robyn remarks on how tragedy tends to strike out of the blue, when we are most complacent. It seems fitting that this new lesson is that the desert is uncaring and that death is always a real possibility. This deadliness is the flipside to the boundless freedom and beauty of the desert and is a quintessential part of the desert. Robyn talks about how she learns to really live by facing her fears, as though overcoming fear opens a door to infinite personal growth. The fear of losing a loved one is often as great a fear as the fear of death, and Robyn begins to understand the price that the desert asks of her. At least she has become strong enough that she can put the dog out of her misery, and leave the dog's carcass to rot on the ground, which is the way of the desert.



Chapters 11-12

Chapters 11-12 Summary and Analysis

Robyn misses Diggety as though a human had died, since the dog has been her only companion and friend for much of the trip. After several days of eating practically nothing, she dances naked in the dust until she can let go of the pain and move on. When Robyn has only about a hundred miles to go, a crowd of reporters shows up, wanting to take her picture and interview her. She has gotten so used to the aloneness of the desert, and the laid-back attitudes of people who live in the bush, that she can not handle this unexpected, unwanted contact with humankind. Sometimes she hides from the paparazzi, but other times she acts completely insane, threatening them. In fact, her crazy demeanor is not an act.

Word of Robyn's adventure has spread to newspapers all over the world, mostly with misinformation. Robyn has no desire to be famous, but she has become a role model for people all over the world. Rick soon arrives to protect Robyn from the reporters, who decide that Robyn just wants to remain loyal to "National Geographic." Soon Robyn and Rick manage to evade the reporters by spreading false rumors of where Robyn is and changing her route at the last minute. Robyn decides to head to Woodleigh, which is very close to the ocean, where her friends Jan and David have a ranch where the camels can live for the rest of their lives. Although Rick travels with her for much of this part of the journey, Robyn asks him to let her do the final day alone. When Robyn and the camels finally arrive at the beach, the camels are shocked at the sight of the ocean. Robyn and Rick camp on the beach for a week, before they head off to Sydney, then New York.

Robyn hates the return to civilization, and she hates that she has been assigned the personae "the camel lady," especially because she is anything but ladylike. She realizes that people find her story so inspiring because of the courage it took, and think of her as something superhuman. On the contrary, she considers herself very human and weak, and thinks that the message of her story should be that anyone can accomplish anything, if they just make up their minds to finish the project. Although Robyn does not see this as an example of personal strength or courage, it shows that she has the courage to make that decision and that she has huge inner resources of strength, in her belief that anyone can accomplish whatever they set their mind to.

At the very end of her trip, Robyn has practically no possessions or equipment left, in contrast to the 1500 pounds of baggage she starts out with. This can be seen as a very real symbol of what is going on inside Robyn herself. As she learns to rely on herself and accept herself as she is, she sheds many unnecessary worries, vanities, and fears, freeing herself to just move with her environment.



Characters

Robyn Davidson

Robyn Davidson is the author, main character, and narrator of "Tracks." Robyn considers herself to be an ordinary, suburban woman, who grew up in Queensland, Australia, going to boarding schools. Some would see her as foolhardy, since she plunges herself into her plan to take camels across the desert, with no resources or knowledge about how to do it. Whether or not she takes foolish risks, there is no denying that she is tenacious, and through her transformative journey, she learns that she can accomplish anything, if she is just willing to see it through to the end. Robyn clearly has a strong work ethic, and she works herself to exhaustion for two years, suffering abuse in order to learn about camels. She ends up understanding them deeply, because Robyn tends to relate better to animals, from crows to camels to dogs, than to people. Robyn finds the antics of the animals and the beauty of the desert to be endlessly entertaining and breathtaking. Robyn changes her attitudes as she travels with Eddie, an old Aborigine man, and she stops worrying about social conventions and taboos. She feels that she becomes one with the desert and when the time comes for her to return to civilization, she has trouble adjusting to being around people again since she is such a loner. Robyn starts out as a coward that people can walk all over, and she ends up being a fearless Amazon who can fight off wild camels.

Eddie

Eddie is an old Aborigine man that Robyn meets one night while she is camping in the desert. Eddie and his friends agree that Robyn needs one of them to travel with her for a while, to protect her, chaperone her through sacred Aboriginal territory and teach her about the land. When Robyn meets Eddie, he is wearing one sneaker and one high-heeled woman's shoe, and she is delighted when she finds out that this silly old man will be her companion. With Eddie, Robyn can feel just as uninhibited as though she were alone, because he is so jovial and easygoing, and he gives in to his own urges to sing, dance, and cavort. Eddie slowly teaches Robyn his language, but more importantly, he teaches her how to have the attitude of an Aborigine, who does not worry about what time it is or whether they are wearing the right thing. Eddie understands so much about the desert around him, seeing the relationships that various parts of the ecology have with one another. Despite his age, he is far more physically fit than Robyn and she is happy to have him continue further with her on her trip. Eddie loves Robyn's rifle, and is very excited when she promises to get him one just like it. When Robyn happens to meet Eddie's wife, she is overwhelmed by the closeness and devotion that she can see in their faces.



Kurt Posel

Kurt is a German immigrant who raises camels on his ranch and he trains Robyn in how to take care of camels. Although he is an expert on camels, Kurt is an angry, violent man, and he finally drives Robyn off with his bad temper and unreasonable demands.

Gladdy Posel

Gladdy is Kurt's wife, and Robyn's friend. Robyn helps Gladdy have the courage to leave her husband.

Rick

Rick is a photojournalist for "National Geographic" magazine. He and Robyn become very close as he photographs her on her trip.

Sallay Mahomet

Sallay is an Afghani man who agrees to apprentice Robyn when he sees that she has learned something about camels. Sallay gives Robyn two camels in exchange for her work.

Jenny Green

Jenny is a friend of Robyn's, who lives with her for a while at Basso's Farm. Jenny comes to visit Robyn unexpectedly on her trip.

The Aboriginal Peoples of Australia

There are various Aboriginal tribes native to Australia and Robyn loves learning about their culture and their mindset. Unfortunately, the government keeps taking land away from these people, and they suffer from intense racism on the part of most white Australians.

Dennis

Dennis is the other hired hand at Sallay's ranch. He and Robyn have to share a tent and a job, and they do not get along well.

Joanie

Joanie is a young Aborigine girl who recognizes that there are few opportunities open to her. She is friends with Robyn.

Ada Baxter

Ada is an Aborigine woman who lives in a shack behind Basso's Farm. She is the only person Robyn can tolerate when she wants to be alone.



Objects/Places

Queensland, Australia

Robyn Davidson is from Queensland and to her the city represents comfort, safety, and civilized culture.

Alice Springs, or The Alice

Alice Springs is the last actual town at the edge of the huge Australian desert and Robyn goes there to prepare for her trip. The town is characterized by racism, sexism, and alcoholism.

Ayers Rock

Robyn meets Rick at Ayers Rock, having finished the first leg of her journey. She finds the beauty of the Rock to be breathtaking.

Glen Helen

Robyn starts her trip from Glen Helen, which is near Alice Springs.

Diggety

Robyn's dog Diggety accompanies her on her trip. Diggety is her best friend, and when Diggety eats poisoned meat and dies, Robyn is devastated.

Robyn's Camels

Robyn manages to get four camels: Zeleika and her calf Goliath, and two bulls named Bub and Dookie. Each camel has a distinct personality.

The Gunbarrel Highway

One of the hardest parts of Robyn's journey is down the Gunbarrel Highway. This road is only traversed about four times a year.



Woodleigh

Woodleigh is a place that is very close to the end of Robyn's trip, near the ocean. Jan and David, Robyn's friends in Woodleigh, agree to take the camels afterward.

Basso's Farm

Robyn loves her time spent at Basso's Farm, whether she is hanging out with her hippie friends, or reveling in her aloneness. She lives there in the final days before her trip.

The Gibson Desert and The Great Victorian Desert

Much of Australia is covered by nearly uninhabited desert. Robyn discovers that this desert is not a barren wasteland, but a bountiful garden to those who know how to look for food.

The Pub in Alice Springs

Robyn works off and on in the pub, where she learns to really appreciate how disgusting and terrible many of the citizens of Alice Springs are.

National Geographic Magazine

Robyn agrees to let "National Geographic" sponsor her trip across the desert, not realizing that the trip will lead to a media circus.



Themes

The Plight of the Aboriginal Peoples

As Robyn travels throughout Australia, she witnesses countless examples of the way the Aboriginal peoples of Australia are victimized by the Australian government, and the prevalent racism against the black Aborigines. The treatment of the various tribes is reminiscent of the treatment of North American Indians by the United States government. The Aborigines are forced onto smaller and smaller reservations, where they live like homeless people or prisoners, and often they must live side by side with their traditional tribal enemies. Not only that, but the government also has a policy called assimilation, which basically amounts to taking away their land. As Robyn declares in Chapter 3, ". . . the [Australian] Prime Minister can speak out against apartheid in South Africa, maintain a clean international reputation, and still carry out a policy which appears on the surface to be antithetical to apartheid but which, on closer inspection, produces identical effects," (Chapter 3, p. 61).

The effect of such policies, combined with racism, means that most Aborigines can get only the lowest-paying itinerant jobs, and most live in shacks, or in hovels built out of trash. Many of them are starving and it is hard for their children to get a decent education when their parents have to keep moving around. Robyn speaks of a fourteen-year-old Aboriginal girl named Joanie, who already looks at her own future without hope. "Joanie wanted things from life—things that would remain forever out of her reach, because of her colour, because of her poverty," (Chapter 3, p. 57). In addition to these privations, the government workers assigned to work with the Aborigines know little about the people's culture and do not try to understand how the people live. Disease is rampant, and the government cuts funding rather than let the tourists see the ugly side of the Australian outback.

The Desert

Robyn makes it clear that it is not possible to understand the power of the desert unless one is in the heart of it. However, she does describe the area and its majesty with vivid descriptions, giving the reader a glimpse of a world that can only be seen after undergoing great trial to get there. The desert in the middle of Australia is immense and anyone who ventures there alone will have to defend him- or herself from many deadly dangers. Robyn is enchanted by the emptiness and the boundless freedom in every direction. She especially begins to understand the terrain when she is traveling with Eddie, who opens her eyes to the way all parts of an ecology are connected. It is easy for Robyn to find food around her and in Chapter 9 she notes, "The land was not wild but tame, bountiful, benign, giving, as long as you knew how to see it, how to be a part of it," (Chapter 9, p. 179).



One of the most important aspects of the desert is the fact that there are no people for miles and miles. This can be a frightening experience, as Robyn learns when she has to fight off wild camels alone and when she is devastated by the death of her dog. Toward the end of her journey, as she is crossing the longest stretch of barren, uninhabited desert, she thinks to herself, "I was perhaps treading now on country where no one had ever walked before, there was so much room—pure, virgin desert, not even cattle to mar it and nowhere in that vastness even an atom of anything human," (Chapter 10, p. 194). She teeters on the brink of madness from the isolation, but she comes to let go of all the unnecessary trappings of human society that are holding her back. After leaving the desert, Robyn wishes to go back to the purity of essence and meaning that she found there.

The Journey of Personal Growth

The journey is one of the most ancient themes for stories and lessons. Some journeys are through literal terrain, while others are in the spiritual realm, but they are often associated with personal growth and discovery. Usually, it is assumed that the journey will include great peril and trials, and the harder the going, the greater the perceived gain in adventure or insight. Robyn's journey is both a geographical and a spiritual one. Physically, she is transformed from a delicate, civilized woman in a city to a strong, courageous Amazon in the beautiful middle-of-nowhere. Spiritually, she is changed from a cowardly doormat who tries to please everyone, to a joyful, down-to-earth warrior who believes she can do anything. In Chapter 9, Robyn remarks on the changes in her social demeanor, saying, "To my own eyes, I was becoming sane, normal, healthy, yet to anyone else's I must have appeared if not certifiably mad then at least irretrievably weird, eccentric, sun-struck and bush-happy," (Chapter 9, p. 186).

After her trip is over, and Robyn is reflecting on all that she has done, she decides that she did not do anything special, except that she followed it through to the end. She thinks that initiative and tenacity are the keys, concluding, "The two most important things that I did learn were that you are as powerful and strong as you allow yourself to be, and that the most difficult part of any endeavour is taking the first step, making the first decision," (Chapter 12, p. 254). Robyn can say this with conviction, because she has witnessed firsthand where this can take her.

Style

Perspective

"Tracks" is an autobiographical novel, a true account of Robyn Davidson's trek across the desert. Robyn tells her story in the first person, from the vantage point of having already experienced it. The book takes place in the late 1970s, in Australia, where the frontier is more like the American Old West. Robyn becomes aware of her audience, since her trip is sponsored by "National Geographic" magazine, and of the media circus surrounding her voyage, and she knows that many people see her as something superhuman. She wants her readers to take away the opposite lesson, saying, "If I could bumble my way across a desert, then anyone could do anything," (Chapter 11, p. 238). This humble point of view partially comes about because of Robyn's association with the Aboriginal peoples.

To say that Robyn Davidson's point of view changes throughout the book "Tracks" is an understatement. At the beginning of the book, she has the viewpoint of a bored suburban girl educated in boarding schools in Queensland, Australia. Without considering any practical details or the likelihood that she will fail or die, Robyn jumps headlong into her dream of crossing the desert with camels and quickly discovers what a scary, unpleasant place a frontier town can be. Robyn learns to take care of camels, and how to survive in the desert, but she also learns how to be strong and not give in to her fear. Robyn starts standing up for herself and she comes to the point where she does not care at all what others think of her. Robyn ends up with a more Aboriginal point of view, seeing all of the earth as one and herself as a part of it. This also means she is more laid-back, not worrying about what time it is anymore.

Tone

The tone of "Tracks" changes often, but it is always a pleasure to read. Robyn tells her story in a frank, honest way, not trying to make people sound nicer or stronger than they really are. As she describes many of her close friendships, she always talks about how warm Australian friendships can be. Her story is often humorous, as she describes anecdotes of living among animals and often her details are bawdy. Sometimes the tone is very sad, for she faces many obstacles along the way and often has to start over. Whenever Robyn describes dealing with the death of one of her animals, the reader can understand the deep sadness and helplessness that Robyn goes through. Robyn gives lovely, detailed descriptions of the wild desert terrain she covers and communicates the wonder and energy of such places. As Robyn travels further into the wilderness, she reflects more and more on her inner landscape, and how she is learning about herself. Sometimes the feeling of the book is terribly lonely, as Robyn goes weeks without seeing another person, but ultimately it is triumphant and joyful, with a conclusion that anything is possible.



Structure

"Tracks" is divided up into four basic parts and each part is divided into chapters. The names for the parts seem to refer not to Robyn's physical journey, but to what is going on inside of her. Part One, "Alice Sprung," contains Chapters 1 through 5, and it describes the process Robyn goes through just to get started on her trip. This period takes two years and takes place in Alice Springs. Being "sprung" suggests that Robyn escapes from the prison of Alice Springs and her former, weak self. Fully half of the book is taken up with preparations for the trip. In the second half, time begins to blend together, prompting Robyn to leave her clock behind. She remarks, "I couldn't know when it was because by then I had realized that in the desert time refused to structure itself," (Chapter 10, p. 200).

Part Two, "Shedding Burdens," covers Chapters 6 through 8, and it tells about the beginning of Robyn's journey, as she gets used to being alone in the desert and tries to come to terms with having to share her trip with "National Geographic." Robyn must learn to shed many of her mental burdens, epitomized by the need to organize her life around a clock. Part Three, "Little Bit Long Way," contains Chapters 9 and 10, and it describes the rest of her journey, a long way through harsh desert. The title comes from an Aborigine unit of distance, and reflects Robyn's increasingly Aboriginal mindset. Part Four, "On the Far Side," has Chapters 11 and 12, and it describes Robyn's efforts to hold on to the lessons of the desert, even after returning to civilization.



Quotes

Even back in the city where the man on the street was unlikely ever to have seen an Aborigine, let alone spoken to one, that same man could talk at length, with an extraordinary contempt, about what they were like, how lazy and unintelligent they were. (Chapter 1, p. 22)

One does not have to delve too deeply to discover why some of the world's angriest feminists breathed crisp blue Australian air during their formative years, before packing their kangaroo-skin bags and scurrying over to London or New York or any place... (Chapter 2, p. 33)

One really could do anything one had decided to do whether it were changing a job, moving to a new place, divorcing a husband or whatever, one really could act to change and control one's life; and the procedure, the process, was its own reward. (Chapter 2, pp. 50-51)

Although she could not understand my desire to be alone, her company was never an infringement of my privacy, as it was easy and relaxed and carried with it that ability many Aboriginal people have to touch and be affectionate without stiffness, and to be comfortable with silence. (Chapter 3, p. 54)

I was a battleaxe—a product of the frontier. (Chapter 4, p. 7)

Before I went to Alice Springs, I had never held a hammer, had never changed a light-bulb, sewn a dress, mended a sock, changed a tyre, or used a screwdriver. (Chapter 5, p. 93)

So far, people had said that I wanted to commit suicide, that I wanted to prove a woman could cross a desert, that I wanted publicity. (Chapter 5, p.101)

... what I wanted to do... was to be alone, to test, to push, to unclog my brain of all its extraneous debris, not to be protected, to be stripped of all the social crutches, not to be hampered by any outside interference whatsoever, well meant or not. (Chapter 5, p. 102)

"But I said to you, don't worry, darling, if we can float on water, we can float on mud." (Chapter 5, p. 110)

It was just how I felt. As if I were made of some fine bright, airy, musical substance and that in my chest was a source of power that would any minute explode, releasing thousands of singing birds. (Chapter 5, p. 111)

Following tracks is most often easy, sometimes frustrating, and occasionally downright terrifying. (Chapter 6, p. 119)



. . . the desert is bountiful and teeming with life in the good seasons. It is like a vast untended communal garden, the closest thing to earthly paradise I can imagine. (Chapter 6, p. 121)

When in doubt, follow your nose, trust your instincts, and don't rely on maps. (Chapter 6, p. 126)

He was sheer pleasure to be with, exuding all those qualities typical of old Aboriginal people—strength, warmth, self-possession, wit, and a kind of rootedness, a substantiality that immediately commanded respect. (Chapter 9, p. 165)

And then it struck me that people don't really mind if you're crazy out there. (Chapter 9, p. 167)

When the beliefs of one culture are translated into the language of another culture, the word "superstition" often crops up. (Chapter 10, p. 216)



Topics for Discussion

If you did not know the outcome already, would you expect Robyn to succeed on her trip? Why or why not?

Robyn finds the desert landscape to be unique and breathtaking. What is your favorite type of landscape? Is there a place that is especially meaningful to you?

Robyn is alone for much of her trip. What does she learn from being alone for so long? Do you think it is important to spend time alone?

What are some of the metaphorical things that Robyn leaves behind as she travels? How do these relate to the material objects she leaves behind?

What is the significance of Robyn's two-way radio? Do you think it is fitting that it never works in the end?

Robyn sets out to achieve a huge goal. What is a huge goal you would like to achieve? What is standing in your way? How can you overcome these obstacles?

A journey is a very important thing in the human experience. What do journeys mean to you? Describe an important journey you have taken.

Why does Robyn not like the image of her as portrayed by the media? How is this image incorrect?