# Cat's Cradle

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KURT VONNEGUT

Kurt Vonnegut was the youngest of three siblings born to Kurt Vonnegut Sr. and Edith Vonnegut (née Lieber). Both of his parents were descended from wealthy German immigrant families, but decided not to teach Vonnegut German language and culture due to a pressure to seem more pro-American. After high school, Vonnegut studied biochemistry for two years at Cornell University. He dropped out in in January of 1942 and joined the U.S. army, receiving training in mechanical engineering. In 1944, Vonnegut's mother committed suicide. Soon after, Vonnegut was sent to fight in World War II's Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes region of Europe. He was captured by the Germans and interned in a Dresden prison camp. During the allied bombings of Dresden, which devastated the city, Vonnegut survived by hiding underground in a meat locker. He and his fellow prisoners were then put to work recovering bodies from the rubble. Vonnegut escaped Germany and returned to the U.SA. in 1945, marrying his high school girlfriend, Jane Marie Cox, soon after. They had three children while Vonnegut supported his fledgling writing career by working various jobs. His first novel was published in 1952, with *Cat's Cradle* being his fourth, published out in 1963. In 1958, Vonnegut adopted his sister's three children after she died from cancer. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, his most famous work, was published in 1969 and draws on his own experiences in the war. Throughout the 1970s, Vonnegut continued to enjoy success with his publications while also battling with depression. His last novel was published in 1997. Vonnegut died at the age of 84 from head injuries sustained in a fall.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Cat's Cradle* was both written and set in the long shadow cast by immense events of the 20th century. As a novel that takes a bleak, unflinching look at notions of human progress, it should firstly be considered as an examination of Enlightenment ideals in the light—or darkness—of the misery humankind inflicted on itself during the First and Second World Wars. In particular, *Cat's Cradle* deals with the idea that scientific development equates to the progression of humankind more generally—that is, that humans are on an upward historical trajectory, improving all of the time. While science brought incredible advances during the post-Enlightenment centuries, Vonnegut objects to the idea that these necessarily equate to progress. At the forefront of the novel is humankind's increasingly immense capacity for self-destruction, made easier and more efficient by technological advancements. Accordingly, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 can be said to haunt the novel; indeed, the narrator starts the book by explaining that he initially set out to write about the fateful day of the first bomb. Of course, though the atomic bomb brought about the end of World War Two, its devastation did nothing to allay the fears that humankind might destroy itself. *Cat's Cradle* is also, then, a novel that absorbs the atmosphere of the Cold War, during which there was a very real possibility that the United States of America and the Soviet Union could bring about the nuclear annihilation of the human race and planet Earth. And, like that conflict, *Cat's Cradle* has a starring role for a small island in the Caribbean—San Lorenzo is a fictionalized play on Cuba. With all the above in mind, it has to be said that *Cat's Cradle*, though greatly informed by its historical context, is concerned with the entirety of human history—both the stories that humanity tells itself about its genesis and the very real possibility of the world coming to an end.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Though Vonnegut felt that "science-fiction" was a somewhat belittling term, *Cat's Cradle* was undoubtedly influenced by writers in the genre such as Isaac Asimov and H.G. Wells. Vonnegut read widely as a young man, taking in science fiction, pulp fiction, fantasy, and the classics. He considered George Orwell, Mark Twain, and George Bernard Shaw to be among his greatest influences, saying of Orwell that he admired his "concern for the poor … socialism … and simplicity." *Cat's Cradle* is also specifically influenced by religious texts; Bokononism, the fictional religion in the novel, offers up an absurdist cosmogony that plays with the idea of religious Creation myths. Other texts gestured to within the novel include Melville's *Moby-Dick*—*Cat's Cradle*'s narrator calls himself Jonah—and the poetry of John Keats. Vonnegut also acknowledged the influence of the ideas of Albert Camus, whose works explored the absurdity of life, a principal theme in *Cat's Cradle*. Vonnegut's novel should also be considered as a work of eschatology—a text about the end of the world.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Cat's Cradle
- **When Written:** c. 1963
- **Where Written:** Massachusetts, U.S.A.
- **When Published:** 1963
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Science Fiction, satire
- **Setting:** New York, San Lorenzo

- **Climax:** 'Papa' Monzano's suicide
- **Antagonist:** Bokonon
- **Point of View:** First person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Star struck.** In 1999, astronomers named a minor planet and its moon after the Bokononist terms for sun and moon: "borasisi" and "pabu."

**Real science.** Vonnegut based the ice-nine technology—which brings about the book's concluding apocalyptic scenes—on an actual idea given to him by Nobel laureate Irving Langmuir. Langmuir had first pitched the idea to H.G. Wells.

## PLOT SUMMARY

*Cat's Cradle* is told retrospectively by its narrator, John, who also calls himself Jonah. From the present-day, which is just after the novel's cataclysmic ending, John explains that he had once set out to write a book about the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Specifically, he wanted to write an account of what important Americans were doing on the day. He also lets the reader know that, back then, he was a Christian; now, he is a Bokononist, a follower of a religion based on the small Caribbean island of San Lorenzo.

John begins his retrospective story. In this, he seeks to contact the children of Dr. Felix Hoenikker—Frank, Angela, and Newt—in order to find out more about the scientist (in the novel, Dr. Hoenikker is one of the "fathers" of the atomic bomb). John speaks to Newt by letter. The youngest of the siblings, Newt doesn't remember much about that fateful day and describes his father as a brilliantly minded but emotionally stunted human being. He recalls how, on that day, his father had tried to show him a **cat's cradle** with string but had ended up only upsetting Newt. Newt gives John an address for Angela, and explains that nobody knows the location of the third sibling, Frank. John also learns that Newt, a dwarf, has a brief relationship with a woman who claims to be Ukrainian dancer—Zinka—who has since left America with the help of the Russian embassy.

Roughly a year later, John takes a writing job in Ilium, New York, which happens to be where the Hoenikkers used to live, and where Dr. Hoenikker used to work—at the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company. John meets with locals who knew the Hoenikkers, and they generally portray the children as outcasts and Dr. Hoenikker as a clever but unfeeling individual only interested in science.

John visits the lab and is shown around by Dr. Hoenikker's old supervisor, Dr. Asa Breed, who describes the lab as a rare place where scientists are allowed to conduct "pure research." Dr. Breed takes offence at John's questions, which seem to him to imply "that scientists are heartless, conscienceless … indifferent to the fate of the rest of the human race." During this conversation, John learns that Dr. Hoenikker was once asked by the U.S. military to find a solution to "mud." The scientist came up with an idea for a substance called **ice-nine**, a "seed crystal" that can make a water molecule freeze at room temperature and in turn "teach" that state to its neighboring molecules. John correctly figures out that such a substance would be highly dangerous, potentially resulting in the freezing of the world's entire water supply. John interjects from the present-day to confirm that, contrary to Dr. Breed's assertions, ice-nine does exist, and that each of the Hoenikker children has a portion having divided up their father's after he died on one Christmas Eve.

John takes a writing assignment that requires him to visit San Lorenzo. Reading through a promotional magazine about the place, John learns that Frank is a government minister on the island. John also sees a picture of the beautiful Mona Aamons Monzano, the adopted daughter of the country's aging dictator, 'Papa' Monzano. John reads about the checkered history of San Lorenzo, which has been ruled by various countries over the centuries despite being a relatively barren environment.

While on the plane to San Lorenzo, John meets the new American ambassador for the nation, Horlick Minton, and his wife, Claire. He also meets H. Lowe Crosby, who is a bicycle manufacturer hoping to start a factory on San Lorenzo, and his patriotic wife, Hazel. Incredibly, Angela and Newt are also onboard; they are travelling to be guests at Frank's wedding, which John learns is to Mona. The Mintons are reading a book about San Lorenzo, from which John learns that Bokonon was born Lionel Boyd Johnson, studied at London School of Economics and ended up on San Lorenzo through a series of chance events (mostly involving ships being sunk). He learns that Bokonon and his partner, U.S. Army deserter General McCabe, planned to start a utopia on San Lorenzo. Realizing they couldn't adequately provide for its inhabitants, Bokonon invented his religion—named after the San Lorenzian way of pronouncing his real name—to bring them comfort, meaning, and purpose. He had McCabe outlaw the religion in order to make life more exciting.

The plane lands, and there is a ceremony prepared for the arrival of the new ambassador. During this, however, 'Papa' Monzano is taken ill, ending the occasion abruptly. With the Crosbys, John goes to his hotel, which is owned by Philip Castle (who wrote the book the Mintons were reading). The Crosbys soon go to stay elsewhere after Philip insults them. John learns that Philip grew up in the island—his father, Julian, runs its only hospital—and was tutored alongside Mona by Bokonon. At the hotel, John walks in on two people in the Bokononist act of "boko-maru," in which they rub their soles together in order to "mingle" their souls.

Frank urgently summons John to his house. When John arrives,

Frank isn't actually there yet. Frank spends some time with Angela, Newt, and Julian Castle. Angela explains that she believes that her father didn't get the credit he deserves. Newt paints a picture comprised of black scrawls, saying that it is a "cat's cradle." Julian, judging the painting to symbolize the meaninglessness of life, throws it into the waterfall below.

Before Frank arrives, soldiers come to the house to protect "the next president." Soon after, there is a power cut. Later on, John reads about the Bokononist creation story, which Bokonon himself calls "foma": "a pack of lies." When the power comes back during the night, John, Angela, and Newt all run out of their bedrooms in a panic, disturbed by the noise. John has grabbed his passport and wallet, while the Hoenikker siblings have with them, unbeknownst to John, their vials of ice-nine.

When Frank eventually arrives, he begs John to become the new president of San Lorenzo once 'Papa' dies—an event which is imminent. Frank feels he isn't suited to the public responsibility, and explains that the role comes with good money and the prospect of marrying Mona. This latter fact sways John, who agrees to become president despite realizing the absurdity of doing so. He conducts boko-maru with Mona, though almost loses her by trying to order her not to have other "loves"; this contravenes her way of life, she explains, causing John to immediately adopt her Bokononist religion.

Frank and John go to see 'Papa' at his castle to get his blessing for John's presidency. John plans to announce his role publicly during the commemorative ceremony for the "One Hundred Martyrs to Democracy," one hundred young San Lorenzians who died on their way to assist America after the Pearl Harbor attack. 'Papa' is attended to by Dr. Schlichter von Koenigswald, who was Nazi doctor at Auschwitz and is trying now to save people's lives to redress the balance. 'Papa' makes John promise to capture Bokonon, because science, not religion, "is magic that works." 'Papa' keeps asking for ice, much to Dr. Koenigswald's bafflement. 'Papa' dismisses the hapless Christian minister, Dr. Vox Humana, and instructs Dr. Koenigswald to deliver the Bokononist last rites—despite what he has just said to John. Dr. Koenigswald and 'Papa' engage in boko-maru, while 'Papa' repeats Dr, Koenigswald detailing the Bokononist creation myth (which says that people are "mud" that got lucky, and should be grateful to God for their brief existence).

John goes off to write his speech. He briefly considers giving Bokonon a place in his government, but realizes the usefulness of the outlawed religion—to provide the islanders with adequate food, infrastructure and other resources would be too difficult. He heads to the ceremonial gathering by the cliffs. From the buffet, John tries a piece of albatross meat. Feeling instantly ill, he rushes to find a bathroom and bumps into Dr, Koenigswald. The doctor is in a panic and gets John to come and look at 'Papa,' who is frozen stiff. He explains that 'Papa' froze after touching a substance to his lip that he kept in his necklace. In trying to clean up, Dr. Koenigswald contaminates himself with the same substance—ice-nine—and dies instantly. John confronts the Hoenikker children about ice-nine; it transpires that each of them had exchanged the technology for their own personal gain (Frank for his place on San Lorenzo; Angela for her U.S. military husband; and Newt, accidentally, for his affair with Zinka). They try to clear up, melting the ice-nine back into water and placing Dr. Koenigswald's body in the cupboard.

Planning to burn the two bodies later, John and the Hoenikkers return to the ceremony. At this, Minton delivers a speech about the futilities of war, imploring the crowd to think of peace instead of patriotism. Just after he throws a wreath into the sea, one of the military planes flying overhead as part of the ceremony catches fire and crashes into the cliff. A great chasm opens up on the cliff face; Minton and his wife are thrown into the water. The damage to the land destabilizes "Papa's" castle, sending his body into the sea. The contact of the ice-nine with the water instantly freezes the sea and, presumably, the entirety of the earth's water. Multiple tornadoes appear in the sky.

John takes shelter with Mona, emerging a few days later. They discover a mass grave in which most of the islanders have committed suicide. A note informs them that they did so on the advice of Bokonon. Mona, seeing a logic to what they have done, takes some ice-nine from the contaminated earth and puts it to her lips, dying too. John is discovered by Newt and the Crosbys.

John takes refuge with the others at Frank's house. Hazel stitches together an American flag, hoping John will place it on San Lorenzo's mountain summit. Frank obsesses over an ant farm—ants seem to be the only insect that has survived, and they do so by sacrificing themselves to melt ice-nine with their body heat so that other ants can drink the water. One day, John takes Newt for a drive so that the latter can "forage" for paint. As he drives, he passes Bokonon and stops to talk to him. Bokonon explains that he is trying to come up with an ending for the Bokononist scriptures. When asked what he's got so far, Bokonon shrugs and passes John a piece of paper. This reads: "If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity"; continuing that he would take ice nine and "make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who."

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**John** – John is the novel's narrator and a kind of everyman. The story is told retrospectively, with John initially setting out to write a book about what important Americans were doing on the day that the atomic bomb was dropped. This leads him to an

interest in Dr. Felix Hoenikker, the bomb's inventor, and his three children: Frank, Angela, and Newt. During his research, John visits Hoenikker's old laboratory and learns that he devised a potentially devastating material called **ice-nine**. By chance, John is assigned to write an article about Julian Castle, who lives on San Lorenzo—where Frank lives too. On the plane to the island, John learns about the island's history from a book belonging to Horlick and Claire Minton, and also meets H. Lowe Crosby, Hazel, Angela, and Newt, all of whom are heading to the island too. With the island's dictator close to death, Frank, who is supposed to take over, asks John to be the new leader. John is reticent, but agrees when he learns he will get to marry the beautiful Mona. She is a practitioner of Bokononism, which John then joins. John never gets to fulfil his new leadership role, because the accidental release of ice-nine into the sea freezes the world's waters and brings about a climate catastrophe. John acts as a kind of comedic foil to the other characters in the novel, allowing them to express their unwitting absurdities and hypocrisies. *Cat's Cradle* is the book that John writes after the disaster.

**Bokonon / Lionel Boyd Johnson** – Bokonon is a mysterious figure of great influence. John learns that everyone on San Lorenzo practices Bokonon's invented religion—Bokononism—despite it being officially outlawed. It is a religion founded on foma: lies that bring comfort. Bokonon was born Lionel Boyd Johnson, and in his early life travelled widely, at one time studying at the London School of Economics. Eventually, he landed on San Lorenzo with a U.S. army deserter, Edward McCabe. There, the two men wanted to start a utopia, but quickly realized that improving the lot of the people was beyond their capabilities. Bokonon thus invented his religion to bring comfort, meaning and excitement to the lives of the islanders, asking McCabe to outlaw it in order to create a sense of purposeful danger. Bokonon was Mona and Philip Castle's tutor when they were children. The book is littered with quotes from Bokonon's own religious text, which usually expresses the absurdity and hypocrisy of humankind. Bokonon only makes a real appearance at the novel's close, when John finds him by the roadside trying to come up with an ending to his religious text. This ending says that, if he had his time again, he would write a "history of human stupidity."

**Dr. Felix Hoenikker** – Dr. Felix Hoenikker is no longer alive at the time of the book's writing, but his influence on proceedings is unrivalled. He is portrayed as an ingenious scientific mind chronically lacking in human empathy. From what John can gather, Dr. Hoenikker considered his work—which included inventing **ice-nine** and the atom bomb—as "pure research," outside of moral responsibility. To illustrate this, his daughter Angela explains that he was as interested in researching turtles as he was developing weapons of mass destruction. As part of John's initial research into a book about the day the atom bomb was dropped, he learns that Dr. Hoenikker was more concerned with showing a **cat's cradle** to the then six-year-old Newt than reflecting on the use that his invention had been put to.

**Frank Hoenikker** – Frank is Dr. Hoenikker's eldest son. John's research tells him that Frank was considered a reclusive child. Initially, nobody knows where Frank has been since the day of his father's funeral. It transpires that he has taken up a powerful role in the government of San Lorenzo, having offered its dictator "Papa" Monzano the technology of **ice-nine**. When "Papa" dies, Frank abdicates his responsibility and asks John, a complete newcomer to the island, to be leader instead of him. Like his father, he retreats from taking responsibility for his actions. After the ice-nine incident, Frank is more interested in keeping an ant farm than in admitting any culpability regarding the freezing of the world's waters.

**Angela Hoenikker** – Angela is Dr. Hoenikker's daughter. Like her brother Frank, she uses **ice-nine**—a chip of which the three children divided up on the day their father died—for personal gain. In her case, she acquires an immensely handsome husband, Harrison C. Conners, in exchange for the technology. This, realizes John, has put ice-nine in the hands of the U.S. government (Connors works for a military technology group). Angela is a staunch defender of her father, insisting that he never got the rewards that he deserved. She also plays the clarinet very beautifully, which is Vonnegut's way of suggesting that the beauty of human culture means little when contrasted with its capacity for self-destruction. She dies playing the clarinet after it is contaminated with ice-nine.

**Newt Hoenikker** – Newton "Newt" Hoenikker is the youngest of Dr. Hoenikker's children and is described as a "midget." He is hoodwinked by another midget (and Soviet spy), Zinka, into giving up the **ice-nine** technology—which John realizes has put it in the hands of the Soviet Union (and thus echoing the reality of the Cold War at the time of Vonnegut's writing). Newt likes to paint in black scrawls, explaining that one of his creations is a **cat's cradle**. The cat's cradle seems to have stuck with Newt since the day the atom bomb was dropped; only six years old at the time, his father had frightened him by insisting on showing him the old trick with string. Newt is one of the survivors after the ice-nine incident and continues to paint.

**Dr. Schlichter von Koenigswald** — Dr. Koenigswald is an employee of Julian Castle's and works at San Lorenzo's only hospital: The House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle. Julian Castle explains to John that Dr. Koenigswald was a physician for the Nazis, participating in the mass murder that occurred at Auschwitz that killed over a million people. Dr. Koenigswald, absurdly, works at the hospital in an effort to pay off his moral debt by saving lives to make up for those he was involved in ending. Near the end of the book, he accidentally ingests **ice-nine** and is killed instantly.

**"Papa" Monzano** – "Papa" Monzano is the aging dictator who

rules over San Lorenzo. He gives Frank Hoenikker a position as his right-hand man in exchange for the **ice-nine** technology. Ultimately, his actions are the final link in the chain that bring about the devastation at the end of the book when all the world's water is made solid through contact with ice-nine. He is a great believer in science, calling it "magic that works."

**Mona Aamons Monzano** – Mona is the most beautiful woman on San Lorenzo, and John practically falls in love with her as soon as he sees her picture. She is the daughter of a Finnish architect who made some of the buildings on San Lorenzo. She was adopted by "Papa" Monzano and has been tutored by Bokonon (alongside Philip Castle). She is a practicing Bokononist and often engages in boko-maru with multiple "lovers." She is due to marry "Papa's" successor, which at one stage is Frank Hoenikker but soon becomes John. She commits suicide by ingesting **ice-nine** after she and John discover the bodies of the San Lorenzians who have killed themselves on Bokonon's instruction.

**Julian Castle** – Julian Castle is an inhabitant of San Lorenzo. He made millions early in life and lived a rebellious, hedonistic lifestyle. At age forty, Julian built the island's only hospital, the House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle. He provides medical care to the islanders, but is not without his absurdist streak. As his son, Philip, relates, he once shined his torch on locals killed by plague and, giggling, told Philip: "someday all this will be yours." Like the other islanders, he is a Bokononist.

**Philip Castle** – Philip Castle is Julian Castle's son and lives on San Lorenzo. He is the author of the only (relatively) academic text about the island, from which John learns a lot about its history. He runs the island only hotel in which he is making a huge mosaic of Mona (with whom he is in love).

**H. Lowe Crosby** – Crosby is a red-faced American patriot whom John first meets on the plane to San Lorenzo. Crosby is going there with his wife, Hazel, to set up a new bicycle factory, principally because he feels the awful labor conditions to be an advantage to him. Crosby, along with his wife, is one of the few survivors after the **ice-nine** catastrophe, and becomes the resident cook for those few that are left.

**Horlick Minton** – John meets Horlick Minton on the plane to San Lorenzo. Minton is due to become the new American ambassador to San Lorenzo and is married to Claire. He is generally world-weary and delivers an impressive speech about the futility of war and patriotism, slightly undercut by his claim to be a "peace-loving American." He dies when one of the San Lorenzian aircraft crashes into the cliffs while engaging in a ceremonial fly-by.

**Zinka** – Zinka is a Soviet spy (and midget) who has a short-lived relationship with Newt under the guise of being a Ukrainian ballet dancer. It is strongly suggested that she steals the **ice-nine** technology from Newt and takes it back to Russia. With the U.S. government also obtaining ice-nine through Angela, Vonnegut sets up a blackly comic parallel with the circumstances of the Cold War and the threat of human annihilation.

**Dr. Asa Breed** – John meets Dr. Breed at the Research Laboratory where Dr. Hoenikker used to work. In fact, Dr. Breed was Hoenikker's supervisor—though he insists that supervising Hoenikker was as unlikely as supervising a volcano. Dr. Breed believes in "pure research"—the acquisition of knowledge for knowledge's sake—and is a devotee of science as an engine for human progress. Dr. Breed is the source from which John learns about **ice-nine**, thought Dr. Breed doesn't realize that Dr. Hoenikker succeeded in synthesizing the material. He gets annoyed with John for suggesting that science is in anyway morally culpable for the way its technologies are put to use by humankind.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Hazel Crosby** – Hazel is H. Lowe Crosby's wife and a motherly, America-loving middle-aged woman. She is excited that John is a Hoosier (from Indiana).

**Claire Minton** – Claire is Horlick Minton's wife. She and Minton are described as "lovebirds" and seem so tightly knit that John describes them as being in a "duprass"—a karass made for two. She dies when one of the San Lorenzian aircraft crashes into the cliffs while engaging in a ceremonial fly-by.

**Edward McCabe** – McCabe is one of the modern founders of San Lorenzo alongside Bokonon. He was a deserter from the U.S. army and originally planned to travel to Miami, but washed ashore San Lorenzo with Bokonon. They tried to start a utopia together, which they soon realized wouldn't work.

**Harrison C. Conners** – Conners is Angela's incredibly handsome husband and president of a shady government tech company called Fabri-Tek. It's strongly insinuated that he only married her to get access to **ice-nine**.

**Miss Faust** – Miss Faust is Dr. Asa Breed's assistant at the research laboratory. She shows John the lab that Dr. Hoenikker used to work in. Her name is an allusion to a famous folktale in which a man sells his soul to the devil in exchange for infinite wisdom.

**Miss Pefko** – Miss Pefko is an administrative assistant to one of the researchers at the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry company.

**Marvin Breed** – Marvin is Dr. Asa Breed's brother and works at the tombstone salesroom by the cemetery where Dr. Hoenikker is buried. He was in love with Dr. Hoenikker's wife, Emily Hoenikker.

**Emily Hoenikker** – Emily Hoenikker was Dr. Hoenikker's wife. She died giving birth to Newt.

**Sherman Krebbs** – Sherman Krebbs takes John's apartment while he is away conducting research. He leaves it in a terrible

state, with the cat dead too. John calls Sherman his "wrang-wrang"—a person who provides a Bokononist an example with the kind of life or avenue *not* to follow.

**Stanley** – Stanley is Frank's servant at his home on San Lorenzo.

**Dr. Vox Humana** A Christian minister who attends "Papa" Manzano as he approaches death. However, "Papa" refuses his services, as "Papa" declares himself to be a Bokonist.

## TERMS

Karass – A karass is the Bokononist term for a group of people brought together to do God's work—though the purpose of that work is not something they can ever be fully aware of.

Foma – Foma is the Bokononist term for lies "that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy." **Bokonon** deems the entirety of his religion to be foma.

Wampeter – A wampeter is central element around which a karass is formed, which can be practically anything: "a tree, a rock, an animal, an idea, a book, a melody, the Holy Grail." **John** believes ice-nine to be his karass's wampeter.

Busy, busy, busy – This is what Bokononists say when they think about the complex and mind-boggling nature of existence.

Vin-dit – This is the Bokononist term for a "sudden, very personal show in the direction of Bokononism."

Wrang-wrang – This is the Bokononist term for someone who steers an individual away from a particular line of enquiry by setting an example of the kind of life that should not be led.

Duprass – A duprass is a karass consisting of only two people.

Granfalloon – This is the Bokononist term for a fake karass. That is, it denotes a grouping of people together that feels significant but is in fact meaningless in the grander scheme of things.

Boko-maru – This is the quasi-erotic Bokononist practice in which two individuals rub the soles of their feet together. This creates a "mingling" of awareness—and a pun on the words "sole" and "soul."

Zah-ma-ki-bo – The Bokononist term for "fate—inevitable destiny."

Borasisi – This is the Bokononist term for the sun.

Pabu – This is the Bokononist term for the moon.

Sin-wat – This is the Bokononist term for a possessive person who wants another to give them "all" of their love.

Pool-pah – The Bokononist term for "shit-storm."

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### SCIENCE AND MORALITY

Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* is a darkly comic book with serious intent. John, the novel's narrator, sets out to write a book about the day the atomic bomb was dropped, before becoming embroiled in the story of the bomb's ingenious creator, Dr. Felix Hoenikker. From the outset, Vonnegut makes it clear that this is a book that goes deep into the question of science's relationship with morality, illustrating how one is entwined with the other. Ultimately, the novel makes the point that "progress" in science does not equate to progress in morality—and that, in fact, scientific developments have the capacity to wreak destruction on the very civilization that they are meant to help.

Vonnegut makes the case that there is nothing innately beneficial about scientific and technological advancements—they are morally neutral, with their implications for civilization only put into motion by those who control them. In other words, it's the people who wield technology that decide what that technology's outcome is for the world. Over the course of the novel, Vonnegut builds a picture of the deceased Dr. Hoenikker to emphasize that the idea that science can sit outside of morality is nothing less than a dangerous myth. There's little doubt that Dr. Hoenikker was a brilliant scientific mind. He invented the atom bomb and, as is later revealed to be even more destructive, the substance of **ice-nine**. Dr. Hoenikker thus represents humankind's capacity for technological and scientific innovation, which accelerated to an incredible pace during the 20th century. From what little information John can glean about Dr. Hoenikker's ethics, however, it is clear that the great innovator was not an empathetic man (though not an evil one either), and did not see it as his concern how his innovations were put to use; his supervisor describes his work as "pure research." Dr. Hoenikker thus also embodies what Vonnegut sees as the naïve idea that science is *amoral*.

Though Dr. Hoenikker had no express evil intent—he was wrapped up in his so-called "pure research" when he formed the atomic bomb—his invention was then put into human hands, meaning it could no longer be amoral, because humans are not amoral. Of course, at this point the reader already knows the sheer destruction that the atom bomb brought to bear upon humanity. Because of the vast and devastating implications of Dr. Hoenikker's research, Vonnegut implies that

there actually is no such thing as "pure research"; science cannot be divorced from morality because its innovations have such potentially far-reaching effects—both good and bad—over the entirety of life on the planet, and depend greatly on the people wielding that technology. One of the key strands to Vonnegut's argument, then, is that scientific innovation cannot be divorced from moral responsibility. Dr. Hoenikker represents a kind of pure science—which Vonnegut demonstrates is a deeply flawed idea.

Though Vonnegut's writing is sometimes characterized as "speculative fiction"—writing that uses the state of the world today to inform a depiction of its possible future—*Cat's Cradle* uses the distinctly un-speculative atomic bomb as its starting point. Vonnegut doesn't need to demonstrate humankind's talent for self-destruction, because the story starts from historical fact. The argument, then, becomes more about the entwined relationship between scientific ingenuity and the way humankind harnesses this to inflict damage upon itself. The atomic bomb was based on a miraculous and deep understanding of nothing less than the make-up of reality—and yet this development caused immeasurable pain to so many in the deployment of the bomb (whether justified or not).

Vonnegut expands on this reality by introducing Dr. Hoenikker's next invention: *ice-nine*. This substance is described as a "seed crystal" that makes a molecule of liquid water freeze in solid form without the need for a low temperature; this molecule then teaches the neighboring molecule to change form in the same way. this was originally conceived by Dr. Hoenikker (though, amazingly, Vonnegut was given the idea by a real-life Nobel scientist) when he was asked to find a way to aid American soldiers who find themselves disadvantaged by muddy terrain. Vonnegut bases this fictional invention on water because water is so essential to human life—it is, as far as is known, one of the key building blocks of *all* life. Creating a substance that exerts control over water in such a way is, on a technical level, an incredible scientific advancement.

But in the novel's conclusion, the true power of ice-nine is released. John learns that each of the Hoenikker children kept a small amount ice-nine and used it for personal gain; most gravely, Frank Hoenikker obtained a high-up government position on San Lorenzo by giving the technology to its dictator, "Papa" Monzano. After Monzano commits suicide by ingesting ice-nine, a military aircraft engaging in a ceremonial flyover crashes into the cliffs, destabilizing "Papa's" castle and sending his body into the see: his contact with the water freezes the world's oceans and fills the sky with tornadoes. Ostensibly, this spells the end of humankind, via a series of errors, selfish actions, and misfortunes—without water, life cannot survive. The novel's bleak ending, which takes place in this aftermath is all the more haunting give the novel's factual starting-point with the atomic bomb. Vonnegut therefore makes a powerful, cautionary argument through his darkly comic novel: that scientific ingenuity doesn't necessarily mean moral progress, and that the responsibility for the latter lies solely with how humankind decides to apply those scientific and technological advancements.

## RELIGION

Vonnegut's satire has religion directly in its sights. Much of the novel takes place on San Lorenzo, a fictional island in the Caribbean where inhabitants practice the outlawed religion of Bokononism (another Vonnegut invention). Through this device, Vonnegut explores both the false and genuine hope that religion offers to humankind, all the while leading to the ultimate conclusion that religion does nothing to offset the potential of human folly and instead is merely a manmade, temporary comfort. Using the fictional religious tradition of Bokononism allows Vonnegut to reveal that religion, more broadly, *is* fictional—through Bokononism, Vonnegut highlights that religion is human-constructed and is a temporary, illusory balm for the pain of living.

From the start, Vonnegut foregrounds the fact that Bokononism is a made-up religion. In fact, the book opens with an epigraph that invites the reader to "live by the foma that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy." Foma is the Bokononist term for "harmless untruths." Religion is thus characterized as a kind of comfort blanket for humankind (though the "harmless" is, of course, deeply ironic, given the amount of conflict that has been, and continues to be, fought over religion). Not only is Bokononism made up by Vonnegut, but within the context of the story it is also expressly fictional. That is, it was invented by Bokonon, who took over San Lorenzo with his partner, Edward McCabe. When the two men failed to raise the standard of living on the island, Bokonon developed the religion as a way of helping the islanders escape the drudgery of their existence. Bokonon even instructed McCabe to outlaw Bokononism, to give it a sense of edginess that would make life more exciting (in the novel, this tradition is carried on by the island's modern-day ruler, "Papa" Monzana—though he practices it himself in secret).

Vonnegut thus portrays religion as a deeply cynical exercise that—though it brings small solace to the inhabitants of San Lorenzo—is based on a deliberate falsehood. By placing the artificiality of Bokononism in plain sight for the reader, while also showing how it functions in daily life, Vonnegut implicitly criticizes the world's religions. Through centuries of distance from their original genesis, these religions have lost sight of their artifice—and much blood has been shed in the defense of their "truths." Vonnegut thus tells a story that in turn implores the reader to view religions as made-up stories too. Though they might have their comforts, Vonnegut portrays them as fictions. This isn't to make a case for atheism

necessarily—Vonnegut is more concerned with highlighting the hypocrisies—dangers, even—in claiming eternal truths, and in showing the way in which the promises of religion fail to counteract humankind's folly besides providing temporary glimmers of hope.

*Cat's Cradle* is, in a sense, written after the main event: the release of **ice-nine** has frozen the world's waters and practically annihilated life on earth. The narrator, John, is writing the book in the last days of existence on San Lorenzo. He has become a convert to Bokononism, and he litters the book with Bokononist terminology and quoted scripture. If the invention of Bokononism allows Vonnegut to explore the role of religion on a wide scale, the use of Bokononist terms within the narrative allows him to take satirical aim at specific traits of religion. For example, John frequently mentions the term "karass": this is a group of people—a "team"—brought together to "do God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing." Vonnegut thus plays with ideas of free will and fate, undermining the idea of a divine plan by the fact that those who carry it out never understand what their purpose actually is. Furthermore, the division into "teams" echoes the division of the world into different religions. Vonnegut seems to suggest the arbitrary nature of the world's religious divisions, which tend to see people follow the religion that matches the geographical location of their upbringing.

Another example is the Bokononist ceremony of "boko-maru"—this is a form of worship that between two Bokononists in which they rub their feet together as a "mingling of awareness." Vonnegut gives these moments an erotic quality which is both darkly comic in its physical innocence and perhaps a dig at religious attitudes toward sex more generally. While boko-maru speaks to the human desire to connect, the reader knows that the whole religion is, in the words of its creator, based on "foma"—lies. And, of course, the idea of heightened interpersonal "awareness" is deeply ironic when placed side-by-side with humankind's capacity for self-destruction.

Bokononism, then, functions as a way for Vonnegut to satirize humankind's relationship with religion (rather than the specific religions themselves). Ultimately, the inhabitants of the island commit mass suicide on the instruction of Bokonon, which, for the reader, removes any sense in which the book could be considered as showing religion as anything but a temporary—and false—redemption from human stupidity. Bokonon, in fact, ends the book by saying, if he were a younger man, he would "write a history of human stupidity," instead, presumably, of starting a religion.

## GOVERNANCE, POLITICS, AND NATIONHOOD

Written and published during the Cold War, against the backdrop of the Vietnam War and in the aftermath of World War II, *Cat's Cradle* functions as a comic deconstruction of deep-rooted ideas about nationhood and statesmanship. Humankind's suffering—represented by the atom bomb and, later, **ice-nine**—is laid side-by-side with the claims made about the progress and advancement of civilization through Western governance. Approximately half of the novel takes place in San Lorenzo, a rocky (and fictional) island in the Caribbean Sea with a turbulent history. Vonnegut uses San Lorenzo to take a close look at politics and statesmanship, and to draw out some of the foolishness of how society is structured. In particular, the novel uses San Lorenzo to critique governments and political leaders as largely ineffectual and just for show. That is, the ideals that they are meant to embody are often at odds the actual state of the world.

Vonnegut employs San Lorenzo and its multitude of problems as a mirror for his reflections on Western governance—he doesn't equate San Lorenzo with America, but employs it as a device to examine American attitudes to nationhood, statesmanship, and the rest of the world. San Lorenzo is run-down, with bad infrastructure and a lack of purposeful direction. In its poor condition, San Lorenzo is a kind of imaginative rendering of the kind of place that a blindly patriotic American might consider to be a backward country, devoid of the promises and riches of America's capitalist dominance. In a way, this is true. But San Lorenzo exists more to deconstruct any idealized idea of America than to praise it. San Lorenzo is officially a Christian nation—though everyone secretly practices Bokononism—and is staunchly anti-communist. Furthermore, it has a new American ambassador (Horlick Minton) and the faint promise of entrepreneurial business development in the character of H. Lowe Crosby, who travels on the same plane as John, hoping to set up a bicycle factory in San Lorenzo (because he thinks he can run it with cheap labor).

San Lorenzo, then, is more closely allied with American ideals than it seems on first sight. It's just that, here, these ideals have not translated into any kind of tangible success. Vonnegut thus suggests that these ideals in and of themselves do not constitute a "successful" nation. Though San Lorenzo has the pomp and ceremony of national events, it has nothing really to celebrate. And herein lies Vonnegut's overarching point: the dominance of a nation like America is not something that people *ought* to celebrate, because, in a global context, humankind's suffering and self-destruction remain undiminished. Vonnegut questions what American ideals—or any other ideals, in fact—can truly mean if human beings still have the capacity to kill millions of their own kind through technologies like the atom bomb or ice-nine. The fact of this immense and ever-increasing destructive ability for Vonnegut undermines ideas of good governance and demonstrates a lack of leadership beneath the veneer of economic or military

prowess.

Vonnegut also takes satirical aim more generally at political leadership gone wrong. In San Lorenzo, the leadership is largely symbolic and wholly ineffective in improving the lives of the island's inhabitants. Its history is essentially one of bad leadership. The original leaders, McCabe and Bokonon (both from the West), had to invent an entire religion just to placate their citizens. "Papa" Monzana, the leader of the island when John first arrives, is an aging dictator with no redeeming qualities. Nearing death, he nominates Frank Hoenikker (the son of Dr. Hoenikker) to be the new leader. Frank is too afraid of the responsibility of being Monzana's successor and farcically passes the opportunity on to John, who is understandably surprised given that he has no credentials nor connection with the island whatsoever. These, then, amount to a vacuum of leadership. The island does technically have a leader at all times, but they never do anything of any worth. The leadership role is filled on an arbitrary basis by whoever seems to be closest to it.

The only instance of seemingly strong leadership comes, ironically, from the American ambassador, Horlick Minton. Towards the end of the book he delivers a speech that attempts to show up the illusions of false leadership and blind obedience to nationhood, and how these can lead to devastation. In this, he proposes that to honor those killed in war "we might best spend the day despising what killed them; which is to say, the stupidity and viciousness of all mankind … Perhaps, when we remember wars, we should take off our clothes and paint ourselves blue and go on all fours all day long and grunt like pigs. That would surely be more appropriate than noble oratory and shows of flags and well-oiled guns."

Minton's speech provides a clear example of Vonnegut's main subject in the book: "the stupidity and viciousness of all mankind." But, though the content of Minton's speech may be venerable taken in isolation, Vonnegut's irony shines through in Minton's description of himself as a "peace-loving American." Minton speaks to ideals that strive to go beyond nationhood—to argue in favor of the entire human family—but he still falls back on his identity as an American. Given that the atom bomb and its fictional successor, ice-nine, are such dominant presences in the book, alongside the historical context of the novel's setting and publication (e.g. the Cold War and Vietnam), Minton's use of "peace-loving" rings hollow and untrue. Vonnegut, then, is suspicious of the grand myths—of progress and peace, for example—that humankind tells itself, and satirizes nationhood and statesmanship to show that these narratives are undermined by the terrible and tragic disasters that humankind maintains the capacity for.

## ABSURDITY AND MEANINGLESSNESS

Vonnegut outlines the way that humankind longs for meaning to its existence. Take, for example, Bokonon's short poem: "Tiger got to hunt, bird got to fly; / Man got to sit and wonder 'why, why, why?' / Tiger got to sleep, bird got to land; / Man got to tell himself that he understand." It's in human nature, suggests Vonnegut, to strive for understanding, and for humankind to tell itself grand narratives in order to give meaning to existence. But, for Vonnegut, these narratives are rendered worthless and absurd in light of the atrocities of the 20th century—in particular, his own experiences in witnessing the Dresden bombings of World War Two at first hand. In other words, progress is a myth. Dr. Asa Breed, Dr. Hoenikker's old boss, is at one point reported as having said "'The trouble with the world [is that] people [are] still superstitious instead of scientific … If everybody would study science more, there wouldn't be all the trouble." This is just one of the grand narratives that humankind tells itself: increase in knowledge equals the betterment of the human race. Vonnegut presents this as a false comfort—humans tell themselves tall tales in order to make life more liveable.

Just like these narratives, Vonnegut's book has at its heart the question of what it means to be human. The difference is, Vonnegut is not interested in false comforts and prefers to use his black comedy to highlight human hypocrisy and self-delusion. Take, for example, the idea of morality and the way in which humankind thinks of itself as fundamentally "good." Through one of the minor characters, Vonnegut satirizes the complexities and double-standards of morality. Dr. von Koenigswald, who works at the charity hospital on San Lorenzo, is a former Nazi officer who is atoning for his role in the Holocaust by trying to save an equivalent amount of lives to those he ended. This is more than just a dark joke on the author's part—it satirizes the way in which humankind comforts itself with moral reasoning.

Vonnegut's absurdist satire is perhaps best exemplified by the symbol of the **cat's cradle** itself. The cat's cradle is a game played with string, one of the oldest games in human history. Dr. Hoenikker reportedly played it on the day the atomic bomb was dropped—as opposed to expressing emotion about all of the people his invention had just killed. The cat's cradle represents humanity's capacity for complexity, mimicking the human effort to make sense of existence. But, as Newt, Dr. Hoenikker's youngest son, points out, there is no cat, and there is no cradle—it's just string. That is, humans can make games out of string—or atomic bombs; they can make the world more complex, but this does not equate to a grand arc of progress. Just like imagining the string to be a cat's cradle, believing the human race to be on an upward trajectory represents a trick of the mind. Vonnegut, then, takes great issue with the notion that humankind is "improving" as time goes on—it is changing rapidly, but this does not diminish its capability for cruelty or

stupidity.

Another key way in which Vonnegut uses the absurd to deflate notions of the "meaningfulness" of human civilization is in the set-up of the book itself. *Cat's Cradle* can be thought of as an eschatological book—that is, one that is specifically about the end of the world. By foregrounding the fact of death—and humankind's ability to force death upon its own people—Vonnegut shows the human search for meaning to be fruitless and misguided. That isn't to say that Vonnegut condemns all humanity. He gently advocates people treating each other with fairness and respect, saying that "it's nice to be nice"—but makes the point that all of humankind's attempts to make sense of the world and each other are undermined by its self-evident cruelty: "History! Read it and weep!" The eschatological nature of the book is integral because, as with the atom bomb, this end-of-times scenario is self-inflicted.

The narrator, John, writes *Cat's Cradle* retrospectively, after the cataclysmic release of **ice-nine** on San Lorenzo has frozen the world's water and caused great storms to appear in the sky. These, combined with the mass suicide of the island's inhabitants, contribute to this sense of Armageddon. Though the above events happen at the end of the narrative, this apocalyptic feel is present in the way John writes from the very beginning. In fact, the book John originally planned to write (about the day the atomic bomb was dropped) was called *The Day the World Ended*. The end of humanity is thus confronted from the start of the book. This reflects the factual context that informs Vonnegut's novel: the dropping of the atomic bomb. In this sense, the book is written in a world that has *already* ended—because this singularly destructive act (and the rest of WWII) completely punctured the illusion of humankind's progressive civilization.

The ice-nine catastrophe at the end, then, is essentially the second ending of the world within the book's pages. This seems to be suggesting that humankind is destined to repeat itself, finding ever new and innovative ways to do the same old thing: destroy. Though the world hasn't quite been destroyed yet, humankind's true "progress" is in making that scenario more possible. Human activity, then, is ultimately portrayed as inherently absurd, and contradictory to the meaning the human race constructs for itself—people can make cities of great complexity, artworks of great mastery, do anything—but eventually humankind will wreak destruction itself again.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### CAT'S CRADLE

The cat's cradle is a complicated symbol that is clearly front and center to the novel, giving it its title. In a literal sense, a cat's cradle is a game played with string in which each player must maneuver their fingers to create different images (one of which is the cat's cradle). It is one of the oldest examples of human play and thus ties in with the idea that the book, though grounded in a specific historical moment, is principally concerned with the entirety of the human story. The cat's cradle is, on the one hand, a representation of human ingenuity. One of the things that makes humans a remarkable creature is the capacity for play; the cat's cradle takes skill and imagination, and it thus functions as an analogy for humankind's increase in scientific understanding, experimentation leading to results, science as a kind of play.

Crucially, however, the cat's cradle is also a representation of illusion. As Newt Hoenikker points out, the cat's cradle created by the string isn't *actually* a cat's cradle—literally speaking, it's just a gathering of string. The cat's cradle thus also represents an emptiness at the heart of humanity: as Newt tells John, there is "no damn cat, no damn cradle." The cat's cradle is the first position of the string in the game, and so it's prominent place in the story can also be taken as a suggestion that humanity is still in its first position too—that is, for all its delusion of progress, humanity is fundamentally the same as it ever was, and ever will be.

### ICE-NINE

Ice-nine is Dr. Felix Hoenikker's invention, conceived at the request of the U.S. marines in order to solve the "problem" of mud. It is a molecular material that teaches water to change its chemical structure and freeze into solid form, without any need for a reduction in temperature. It is an ingenious invention with grave implications, and thus represents humankind's capacity for scientific invention and, crucially, the talent for putting that invention to cruel and harmful use. Amazingly, the idea was actually suggested to Vonnegut by a real-life Nobel scientist. Ice-nine technology is based on a fundamental understanding of water—one of the building blocks of life—just as the atomic bomb required an incredible understanding of the most basic structures of the physical world. Ice-nine, then, like the atomic bomb, represents humanity's undeniable capacity for knowledge—but this is offset by the fact that it uses this knowledge to destroy itself.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dial Press edition of *Cat's Cradle* published in 2010.

## Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ When I was a much younger man, I began to collect material for a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*.

The book was to be factual.

The book was to be an account of what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan.

It was to be a Christian book. I was a Christian then.

I am a Bokononist now.

**Related Characters:** John (speaker), Bokonon / Lionel Boyd Johnson, Dr. Felix Hoenikker

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 1-2

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in the opening chapter, which functions as introduction to the novel's narrator, John. It establishes the book as a work of eschatology—that is, writing principally concerned with the end of the world. It also places humankind's capacity for self-destruction front and center of the book by immediately raising the specter of the atom bomb. Vonnegut carefully manipulates the sense of the novel's place in time—John's words have a retrospective tone, suggesting to the reader that he is speaking to them from the "other side" of some kind of cataclysmic event. Whatever that event is, it's clearly had a huge impact on John, completely changing his identity and introducing to the reader the major theme of religion.

John's original plan for a book also establishes the novel's taste for the absurd; the initial book had fairly mundane aims not especially in keeping with the immensity of the subject. The fact that the book was once planned—and is now clearly abandoned—also contributes to the feeling that momentous events, perhaps on the same scale as the dropping of the atom bomb, are to follow (and, indeed, have already happened).

## Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I do not intend that this book be a tract on behalf of Bokononism. I should like to offer a Bokononist warning about it, however. The first sentence in The Books of Bokonon is this:

"All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies."

My Bokononist warning is this:

Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either.

So be it.

**Related Characters:** Bokonon / Lionel Boyd Johnson, John (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 5-6

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of John's general introduction, before he launches into the main narrative of the novel. It foregrounds the importance to the story of San Lorenzo's fictional religion—Bokononism. Most importantly, it establishes the utter absurdity of that religion, which its own creator instructs his readers is nothing but "shameless lies." John's comments to the reader that understanding his book depends upon understanding the importance of lies to "useful" religion is a challenge to the reader. One thing that the world's religions can be said to share is a reliance on the notion of "truth"—each one claims that be able to provide people with that "truth" and therefore help them make sense of their existence. Bokonon, John, and by extension Vonnegut, are daring the reader to see the fictions behind the "truth." At the same time, the word "useful" serves an important purpose. Even though Bokononism is founded on "foma," it still offers its followers some kind of meaning. In keeping with the absurdity of the book, any meaning is consistently undermined.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

"But he went down on his knees on the carpet next to me, and he showed me his teeth, and he waved that tangle of string in my face. 'See? See? See?' he asked. 'Cat's cradle. See the cat's cradle? See where the nice pussycat sleeps? Meow. Meow.'

"His pores looked as big as craters on the moon. His ears and nostrils were stuffed with hair. Cigar smoke made him smell like the mouth of Hell. So close up, my father was the ugliest thing I had ever seen. I dream about it all the time.

"And then he sang. 'Rockabye catsy, in the tree top'; he sang, 'when the wind blows, the cray-dull will rock. It the bough breaks, the cray-dull will fall. Down will come cray-dull, catsy, and all.'"

**Related Characters:** Newt Hoenikker (speaker), John, Dr. Felix Hoenikker

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 12

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of Newt's written reply to John's letter asking about what Dr. Hoenikker was doing on the day the bomb was dropped. It serves various functions. Firstly, it demonstrates that Dr. Hoenikker was a man who acted only on the whim of his intellect—this exchange takes place just after his invention, the atom bomb, has killed a huge amount of people on the other side of the world. Nothing in his actions suggests an acknowledgement of the event, which is in keeping with the general impression formed throughout the book that he, consciously or not, felt himself and his work to be outside of the moral sphere. Secondly, it paints Dr. Hoenikker as a kind of apocalyptic figure, which ties in with the novel being a work of absurdist eschatology—a text concerned with the end of the world. His ugliness, seen through Newt's innocent child's eyes, embodies the Hellish consequences of his invention. The cat's cradle itself is a symbol of man's ingenuity, and the lullaby grotesquely hints at the destruction that is to come.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

There are lots of other good anecdotes about the bomb and Father, from other days. For instance, do you know the story about Father on the day they first tested a bomb out at Alamogordo? After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, 'Science has now known sin.' And do you know what Father said? He said, 'What is sin?'

**Related Characters:** Newt Hoenikker (speaker), Dr. Felix Hoenikker, John

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 17

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is also part of Newt's reply to John regarding the day the atom bomb was dropped. The banality of the exchange—the idea of there being "good anecdotes" about such a horrific event—is part of Vonnegut's overall absurdist project, in which his characters never really face up to the gravity of events. The conversation between Dr. Hoenikker and the other scientist serves two functions. Firstly, it reinforces the idea that Dr Hoenikker is somehow removed from humanity—he doesn't understand it, or wish to understand it. Secondly, it demonstrates the impotence of religion when it comes to stopping humankind from inflicting self-destruction upon itself. Dr Hoenikker clearly doesn't believe in the categories of good and evil, seeing himself and his work as fundamentally immoral. The scientist's point is the opposite: science has a moral responsibility, and that, with the invention of the atom bomb, it has crossed a moral line. The atom bomb serves no purpose other than to allow humans to kill other humans, and therefore undermines the idea that humankind is on an upward trajectory of progress and civilization.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

"Here, and shockingly few other places in this country, men are paid to increase knowledge, to work toward no end but that."

"That's very generous of General Forge and Foundry Company."

"Nothing generous about it. New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become."

Had I been a Bokononist then, that statement would have made me howl.

**Related Characters:** John, Dr. Asa Breed (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 41

**Explanation and Analysis**

This is a quote from John's conversation with Dr. Asa Breed, the man who used to be Dr. Hoenikker's supervisor at the Research Laboratory. Dr. Breed is intensely idealistic about the role of his institution, believing that his scientists are engaged in "pure research." By this, he means that their only concern—and the only requirement of them—is to follow their intellect wherever it leads. The flip side of this is that they are discouraged from thinking about the consequences of their work, institutionally supported as amoral adventurers in the lands of human knowledge.

The General Forge and Foundry Company is most likely based on General Electric, for which Vonnegut used to work. The final sentence of the quote is a quip from present-day John, who has witnessed firsthand the destructive capabilities of human knowledge. Bokononism is a fundamentally absurdist religion—it is constructed of "comforting lies"—and therefore is opposed to the idea that humankind is somehow getting "richer."

## Chapter 22 Quotes

"If the streams flowing through the swamp froze as ice-nine, what about the rivers and lakes the streams fed?"

"They'd freeze. But there is no such thing as ice-nine."

"And the oceans the frozen rivers fed?"

"They'd freeze, of course," he snapped. "I suppose you're going to rush to market with a sensational story about ice-nine now. I tell you again, it does not exist!"

"And the springs feeding the frozen lakes and streams, and all the water underground feeding the springs?"

"They'd freeze, damn it!" he cried. "But if I had known that you were a member of the yellow press," he said grandly, rising to his feet, "I wouldn't have wasted a minute with you!"

"And the rain?"

"When it fell, it would freeze into hard little hob nails of ice-nine—and that would be the end of the world! And the end of the interview, too! Good-bye!"

**Related Characters:** Dr. Asa Breed, John (speaker), Dr. Felix Hoenikker

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 49-50

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote comes towards the end of John's visit to the General Forge and Foundry Research Laboratory. Over the course of his interview with Dr. Breed, the latter man grows increasingly frustrated by John's line of questioning. Rather accidentally, John links science with moral responsibility, or at least suggests that the two cannot be untangled from each other. Here, he follows the logic of Dr. Hoenikker's ideas for ice-nine. Ice-nine is a substance that teaches water to freeze without needing to be at a low temperature—that water then passes on that "knowledge" to neighboring water, and that water in turn passes it on. Logically speaking, then, the deployment of ice-nine would pretty quickly solidify the entirety of the world's waters (which are connected from essentially any two points on the globe). Dr. Breed can sense that ice-nine, which he doesn't think actually exists, would be catastrophic—but doesn't want to admit that science would have any responsibility in such a scenario. The "yellow press" is a term for sensationalist journalism.

## Chapter 37 Quotes

"The Republic of San Lorenzo," said the copy on the cover, "on the move! A healthy, happy, progressive, freedom-loving, beautiful nation makes itself extremely attractive to American investors and tourists alike."

**Related Characters:** John (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 79-80

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote is from a magazine supplement that John reads about San Lorenzo. It is deeply ironic, as the reader soon finds out: San Lorenzo is none of the things it claims to be. The claims made on San Lorenzo's behalf sets up the barren, impoverished island as a kind of mirror of America. It, of course, has none of the economic success that America does, but in claiming to embody American ideals it allows Vonnegut to explore the worth of such ideas. The mention of American investors foreshadows the absurd, bloated character of H. Lowe Crosby, who heads to San Lorenzo to set up a bicycle factory, believing the inhabitants to be poor

and impoverished enough to have some "common sense."

## Chapter 42 Quotes

"Whenever I meet a young Hoosier, I tell them, 'You call me *Mom*.'"

"Uh huh."

"Let me hear you say it," she urged.

"Mom?"

She smiled and let go of my arm. Some piece of clockwork had completed its cycle. My calling Hazel "Mom" had shut it off, and now Hazel was rewinding it for the next Hoosier to come along.

Hazel's obsession with Hoosiers around the world was a textbook example of a false *karass*, of a seeming team that was meaningless in terms of the ways God gets things done, a textbook example of what Bokonon calls a *granfalloon*.

**Related Characters:** John, Hazel Crosby (speaker), Bokonon / Lionel Boyd Johnson

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 91

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes when John is on the plane to San Lorenzo. On the flight, he meets Hazel Crosby and her husband H. Lowe Crosby. The Crosbys are the satirical picture of American conservatism, blindly loyal to their country and genuinely believing in its inherent superiority. Hazel's faith in America and its ideals makes her automatically in favor of anyone that she feels she can relate to, extending here to Hoosiers (people from Indiana).

John's opinion, informed by his conversion to the absurdist religion of Bokononism, is that grouping people together by geographical location is fundamentally meaningless. A "granfalloon" is the opposite of a "karass"—essentially, it is a word to describe a group of people that feel loyalty and affinity to each other that is founded on, at base, nothing. Her insistence on being called "mom" is an absurdist expression of her superficial civility.

## Chapter 51 Quotes

"I might as well tell you," Angela said to me, "Dr. Breed told me I wasn't supposed to co-operate with you. He said you weren't interested in giving a fair picture of Father." She showed me that she didn't like me for that.

I placated her some by telling her that the book would probably never be done anyway, that I no longer had a clear idea of what it would or should mean.

"Well, if you ever *do* do the book, you better make Father a saint, because that's what he was."

**Related Characters:** Newt Hoenikker, Angela Hoenikker (speaker), Dr. Felix Hoenikker, Dr. Asa Breed

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is also from John's plane journey to San Lorenzo, on which he, by chance, bumps into Angela and Newt Hoenikker. Angela's words reveal that Dr. Breed's fallout with John at the research lab has led him to warn other people off John—because he feels that John does not treat science and its ideals fairly. Angela is, like Dr. Breed, a staunch defender of Dr. Hoenikker, and believes that he was never rewarded appropriately for his service to knowledge and humanity. John's comments about his book are true: he never does complete the book he originally planned, *The Day the World Ended*. Ironically, that's because the world essentially *does* end due to the release of ice-nine—which Angela, like Newt, has in her possession.

## Chapter 58 Quotes

I wanted all things
To seem to make some sense,
So we all could be happy, yes,
Instead of tense.
And I made up lies
So that they all fit nice,
And I made this sad world
A par-a-dise.

**Related Characters:** Bokonon / Lionel Boyd Johnson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 127

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote is from the Bokononist religious texts, *The Books of Bokonon*. It neatly summarizes a lot of what the religion stands for. First of all, it sets up the dilemma of human nature, which is that life is fundamentally absurd. Humankind longs for meaning, deeply wanting to understand its purpose in the world, but the world offers no solace in return. In his religious writings, Bokonon constantly foregrounds the fact that the religion is entirely fictional, made up by him to bring some kind of temporary, but illusory, comfort to its followers. The writings often take the form of doggerel—naïve, bad poetry—which is befitting of the fact that is expressly meaningless. By extension, Bokononism is a critique of the world's religions, which have lost sight of their inherently fictional nature.

## Chapter 65 Quotes

"Welcome," said "Papa."

"You are coming to the best friend America ever had. America is misunderstood many places, but not here, Mr. Ambassador." He bowed to H. Lowe Crosby, the bicycle manufacturer, mistaking him for the new Ambassador.

"I know you've got a good country here, Mr. President," said Crosby. "Everything I ever heard about it sounds great to me. There's just one thing..."

"Oh?"

"I'm not the Ambassador," said Crosby. "I wish I was, but I'm just a plain, ordinary businessman."

**Related Characters:** H. Lowe Crosby, "Papa" Monzano (speaker), Horlick Minton, John

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 141

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote comes once John and the others have landed on San Lorenzo. The island's aging dictator, "Papa" Monzano, has arranged a ceremony to welcome the island's new American ambassador. But he mistakes Crosby for the ambassador (who is actually Horlick Minton) which makes a comic farce of the situation in line with the absurdist environment of San Lorenzo and the book more generally. "Papa" probably mistakes Crosby for Minton because Crosby is more in line with his idea of what an American is like: Crosby is arrogant, bloated, and full of misguided self-confidence based on his fundamental faith in America and its ideals. Minton is a more nuanced character, willing to present a more critical stance on his country and its actions. The quote suggests the arbitrary nature of power, implying that power is a kind of accident thrust upon people who across the board don't know how to use it properly.

## Chapter 72 Quotes

What I had seen, of course, was the Bokononist ritual of *boko-maru*, or the mingling of awarenesses.

We Bokononists believe that it is impossible to be sole-to-sole with another person without loving the person, provided the feet of both persons are clean and nicely tended.

The basis for the foot ceremony is this "Calypso":

We will touch our feet, yes,
Yes, for all we're worth,
And we will love each other, yes,
Yes, like we love our Mother Earth.

**Related Characters:** Bokonon / Lionel Boyd Johnson, John (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 158

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote comes just after John has arrived at San Lorenzo's one hotel, Casa Mona, which is run by Julian Castle. While walking around its hallways in search of a chambermaid, he stumbles upon two people engaging in boko-maru, the Bokononist practice of rubbing soles. They are doing it in secret because, officially, Bokononism is outlawed and San Lorenzo is a Christian nation. But this is an entirely farcical state of affairs—in fact, everybody on the island is a Bokononist. Furthermore, its outlawed status was a deliberate strategy by Bokonon and his original co-founder, McCabe, to make the religion seem more exciting and invigorate the lives of its followers. The ceremony has a certain heartwarming simplicity to it, but is also intentionally funny. Essentially, Vonnegut is making a pun on sole/soul.

## Chapter 73 Quotes

"Oh, yes. Anyway, one sleepless night I stayed up with Father while he worked. It was all we could do to find a live patient to treat. In bed after bed after bed we found dead people.

"And Father started giggling," Castle continued.

"He couldn't stop. He walked out into the night with his flashlight. He was still giggling. He was making the flashlight beam dance over all the dead people stacked outside. He put his hand on my head, and do you know what that marvelous man said to me?" asked Castle.

"Nope."

"'Son,' my father said to me, 'someday this will all be yours.'"

**Related Characters:** John, Philip Castle (speaker), Julian Castle

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 162

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote comes from a conversation John has with Philip Castle about the latter's father, Julian. After a life of big business and debauchery, Julian decided to build the island's only hospital, the House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle. Philip is describing what it was like when bubonic plague visited the island and wiped out many of the inhabitants. In Philip's story, Julian is portrayed as a fundamentally absurdist man, driven to laugh in full view of immense suffering. That doesn't mean that he's unfeeling necessarily, but more likely that he is expressing a kind of eternal "truth" about humankind—that it is hopeless, and wedded to its own eventual destruction (a point that runs throughout the book).

His comment to his son Philip—that "someday this will all be yours"—also speaks against the idea of human progress. In essence, he is saying each generation hands on its miserable existence to the next, in a kind of lineage of inevitable suffering.

## Chapter 81 Quotes

Tiger got to hunt,
Bird got to fly;
Man got to sit and wonder, "Why, why, why?"
Tiger got to sleep,
Bird got to land;
Man got to tell himself he understand.

**Related Characters:** Bokonon / Lionel Boyd Johnson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 182

**Explanation and Analysis**

This is another quote from *The Books of Bokonon*, in which Bokonon sets out the terms of his illusory religion. Essentially, this is a poem about the human condition. Just as tigers hunt and birds fly—that is, they behave according to their instincts—humankind is biologically programmed to question its very existence. Bokonon suggests that entirety of human endeavor—whether it's trying to make scientific progress or develop religion to make sense of the world—is driven by this fundamental existentialism. Bokononism is a religion that gives answers to life's deepest questions while paradoxically hammering away at the point that these answers are lies. It thus takes a bleak overview of humanity, shared by the book at large, that those answers are beyond the limit of human capability.

## Chapter 83 Quotes

"He was in the S.S. for fourteen years. He was a camp physician at Auschwitz for six of those years."

"Doing penance at the House of Hope and Mercy is he?"

"Yes," said Castle, "and making great strides, too, saving lives right and left."

"Good for him."

"Yes. If he keeps going at his present rate, working night and day, the number of people he's saved will equal the number of people he let die—in the year 3010."

**Related Characters:** John, Julian Castle (speaker), Dr. Schlichter von Koenigswald

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 185

**Explanation and Analysis**

Integral to the novel's less-than-hopeful outlook on humanity are the horrors of the recent past. These horrors are foregrounded from the beginning, initially by references to the atomic bomb. Here, Vonnegut brings in further reminder of the moral depths to which humanity has sunk by creating a character directly tied to Nazi atrocities: Dr. von Koenigswald. As with many other aspects of the novel,

this character is fundamentally absurd and wrapped up in contradiction and skewed moral reasoning. Dr. Koenigswald played a part in one of the most symbolic examples of humanity's capacity for self-destruction. Julian's logic is absurd, too, and probably deliberately so. His suggestion is that Dr. Koenigswald can atone for the role he had in mass murder by helping save lives at the hospital. The overall argument suggested by Vonnegut is about the existence moral endpoints from which an individual, or humanity at large, can row back. Once again, Vonnegut is treating the idea of human progress with intense suspicion and cynicism.

## Chapter 110 Quotes

❝ From what Frank had said before he slammed the door, I gathered that the Republic of San Lorenzo and the three Hoenikkers weren't the only ones who had ice-nine. Apparently the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had it, too. The United States had obtained it through Angela's husband, whose plant in Indianapolis was understandably surrounded by electrified fences and homicidal German shepherds. And Soviet Russia had come by it through Newt's little Zinka, that winsome troll of Ukrainian ballet.

**Related Characters:** John (speaker), Harrison C. Conners, Zinka, Dr. Felix Hoenikker, Newt Hoenikker, Angela Hoenikker , Frank Hoenikker

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 244

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes just before the novel's climax, when ice-nine makes contact with the Caribbean Sea. "Papa" Monzano has committed suicide by ingesting ice-nine and thereby confirmed to John that the dangerous substance, contrary to Dr. Asa Breed's earlier assertions, *does* exist. John realizes that each of the Hoenikker's has used ice-nine for their own personal gain: Angela exchanged it for a husband (who was working for the U.S. military); Frank has given it to "Papa" in exchange for his position of power on San Lorenzo; and Newt (though accidentally in his case) has given it to the Soviet Union via Zinka.

This state of affairs, with two great powers holding the capacity to destroy the entire world, is as true as it is terrifying: the novel is written against the backdrop of the Cold War, when nuclear annihilation was a very real possibility. The three Hoenikker children present no sense of responsibility, each of them behaving in a way that they think is without consequence. The quote, then, also speaks to humanity's inability to take responsibility for its actions—and all the potential devastation that comes with that.

## Chapter 114 Quotes

❝ And I propose to you that if we are to pay our sincere respects to the hundred lost children of San Lorenzo, that we might best spend the day despising what killed them; which is to say, the stupidity and viciousness of all mankind.

Perhaps, when we remember wars, we should take off our clothes and paint ourselves blue and go on all fours all day long and grunt like pigs. That would surely be more appropriate than noble oratory and shows of flags and well-oiled guns.

**Related Characters:** Horlick Minton (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 254

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of Horlick Minton's speech during the San Lorenzo ceremony in honor of the "Hundred Martyrs to Democracy" (a hundred young men killed in a shipwreck on the way to America after the Pearl Harbor attack). It is perhaps the neatest summary of the novel's overall argument but is not without its element of satire and farce. Taken at face value, it argues that progress is a myth—humankind is as cruel, irresponsible, and misguided as it has ever been. This keeps conflict a constant in the world. Minton is speaking to humanity's animalistic nature, arguing that humankind has a grossly inflated sense of its own importance. But importantly, Minton comes to San Lorenzo professing to be a "peace-loving American," and in his role as ambassador is wedded to his nation just as much as any of the other characters. He seems to be arguing that false division in the world—nations, rather than a greater human family—cause human misery; but in fact, he's part of that. The overall effect, then, is to build a sense that humanity is locked in to its cruel, irresponsible nature.

## Chapter 127 Quotes

If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who.

**Related Characters:** Bokonon / Lionel Boyd Johnson (speaker), John

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 287

### Explanation and Analysis

This are the last lines of the book. In the post-apocalyptic world John finds himself in after the release of ice-nine, he stumbles across Bokonon by the side of the road. It seems fitting that in such an absurdist novel, its arguably most important character only makes an appearance at the end (which is also in line with the novel as a work specifically about the end of the world). Bokonon's words are a kind of draft for the end of his religious texts, *The Books of Bokonon*. Now that the world has been, in essence, destroyed, Bokonon feels it is time to conclude his religious works. The quote speaks to humankind's inflated self-importance, symbolized by the idea of ascending to the top of a mountain—the notion of human progress as a kind of upward climb. Bokonon rejects this, as does the book.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### CHAPTER 1. THE DAY THE WORLD ENDED

The narrator, John, who also calls himself Jonah, explains that as a younger man he intended to write a book about "what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped." It was to be a Christian book, he says; now, he is a Bokononist. Bokononists believe humanity is organized into teams—a "karass"—that "do God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing."

*Immediately, Vonnegut introduces the end-of-times atmosphere by placing the atom bomb front and center in the book. The way John talks about "then" and "now" creates the sense that there are terrible events approaching with inevitable momentum. This sets up the novel as a work of eschatology—a text that deals with the end of the world.*

### CHAPTER 2. NICE, NICE, VERY NICE

John quotes from *The Books of Bokonon*, explaining that a karass "ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries." He recites Bokonon's "Fifty-third Calypso," which explains that all the different people of the world fit together "in the same machine."

*While never losing sight of its absurdist quality, Bokononism often contains ideas that seem to argue in favor greater cooperation between humans. These ideals have to be weighed against Bokonon's own insistence that the religion is founded on harmless lies. Vonnegut here critiques the way that division between peoples, on whichever boundaries, leads to conflict.*

### CHAPTER 3. FOLLY

John quotes Bokonon again. This time, it's an autobiographical anecdote that talks about "an Episcopalian lady" who professed to understand "God and His Ways of Working perfectly." Bokonon pours scorn on this idea, explaining that "she was a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who think she sees what God is Doing."

*There is a paradox in Bokononism—it insists that the existence can't be explained while also going through the motions of seeming to offer such an explanation. It is thus, despite its occasional kernels of wisdom, a deeply absurdist device.*

### CHAPTER 4. A TENTATIVE TANGLING OF TENDRILS

John explains that this book is intended to examine what is his karass "have been up to." He explains that Bokonon is a religion founded on foma: "shameless lies" (a direct quote from *The Books of Bokonon*). He cautions the reader that if they can't understand how a religion founded on lies can be useful, they will not understand this book.

*Vonnegut makes a complicated point here that highlights both the potential comforts of religion and the fact that religions are human inventions. Foregrounding the artificiality of Bokononism forces the reader to think of the way in which the world's major religions developed, and hints at the role they have played in humankind's destructive nature.*

John outlines who he sees as the members of his karass: Dr. Felix Hoenikker, the inventor of the atomic bomb, and Hoenikker's children, Newt, Angela and Frank.

*John is telegraphing to the reader that his fate is entwined with these other characters, setting up the development of the book.*

John once wrote a letter to Newt, the youngest of the children, to ask for "anecdotes" about Dr. Hoenikker on the day the bomb was dropped. In the letter, he told Newt that his book intended to "emphasize the *human* rather than the *technical* side of the bomb," so even the recollections of Newt (very young at the time) would be helpful.

*Vonnegut here is being deeply satirical—there is no "human" side to a weapon that killed around 200,000 people. Newt's youth at the time functions as a way of gesturing to the innocence of childhood in stark contrast to the devastation of the atomic bomb.*

## CHAPTER 5. LETTER FROM A PRE-MED

In his reply letter to John, Newt says that John would do better to talk to his older siblings as they would remember more; he gives Angela's address, but doesn't know where Frank lives.

*The banality of the exchange is in ironic contrast to the seriousness of the topic.*

Newt explains that he was only six on the day the bomb was dropped. He was playing on the carpet when Dr. Hoenikker interrupted him to show him a **cat's cradle** made from string. This string, continues Newt, had been wrapped around a book written by a prisoner about the end of the world in the year 2000.

*The cat's cradle is one of the oldest games in human history. It involves using the fingers to arrange string into different shapes, one of which is supposed to look like cat's cradle. It stands as a symbol of human ingenuity and imagination, but also of a stark contrast between imagination and reality (which plays out in how humankind thinks of itself versus how it actually behaves).*

The incident with the **cat's cradle** was, according to Newt, the closest Dr. Hoenikker ever got to playing a game with his kids. He was once quote in *Time* magazine saying: "Why should I bother with made-up games when there are so many real ones going on?" Newt relays how his father's behavior, instead of entertaining him, made him cry.

*Dr. Hoenikker was a man who lacked the qualities often considered essential to being human: empathy and a sense of humor. The suggestion from his quote is that reality is a kind of game, and that his science was just a form of play. He thus considered his work as fundamentally amoral.*

## CHAPTER 6. BUG FIGHTS

Newt's letter continues. Apparently, Angela told Newt that he had really hurt Dr. Hoenikker by not admiring the **cat's cradle**. Newt doesn't think his father was very capable of being hurt. On that day, Newt ran outside after the incident with his father, where Frank was making bugs fight inside a jar, which Frank described as "experimenting."

*Angela is the staunchest defender of her father of the three siblings. As Newt points out, Dr. Hoenikker is portrayed as lacking the ability to relate to other people. Frank's bug-fights are a gesture towards human conflict, and set up the opposition between experimenting—science—and violence.*

Newt describes Angela as one of the "unsung heroines" of the atom bomb. At one stage during its development, Dr. Hoenikker became more interested in turtles than in completing the bomb. Angela told the scientific authorities to take away his turtles, which made her father return to his work. She saw her father as "one of the greatest men who ever lived," and believed that he "won the war."

*The description of Angela is deeply sarcastic—"heroism" and the atom bomb do not belong together. Dr. Hoenikker's interest in turtles suggests that his scientific mind led him wherever it wanted to go, regardless of the consequences.*

Newt asks if John would like anecdotes about other days than the day of the bomb. He mentions the day the bomb was first tested. After its immense power of destruction was confirmed, a scientist turned to Dr. Hoenikker and said "Science has now known sin." Dr. Hoenikker replied, "What is sin?"

*The scientist's comment about the atom bomb states the potentially devastating moral impact of its development. Dr. Hoenikker did not believe in religion, only science. This moment again underlines the false separation of science and morality.*

## CHAPTER 7. THE ILLUSTRIOUS HOENIKKERS

Newt signs off by suggesting John should not refer to his family as "illustrious" (as John had done in his initial letter." Newt explains that he is a midget and the last he heard of Frank is that he is wanted by the FBI for "running stolen cars to Cuba." "Glamorous," says Newt, is probably a better word.

*Glamorous is, of course, as absurd a word as "illustrious." Newt's information about Frank sets up the later appearance of his sibling on San Lorenzo. The nod to Cuba reminds the reader of the Cold War context.*

## CHAPTER 8. NEWT'S THING WITH ZINKA

Two weeks after sending his letter to John, Newt wrote to Frank about his new girlfriend, Zinka. She is a Ukrainian midget, who eventually went to the Russian embassy seeking to go back home; she found Americans "too materialistic."

*John later realizes that Zinka was a Soviet spy, tasked with obtaining the ice-nine technology from Newt. She is thus emblematic of the Cold War atmosphere of paranoia, deception, and imminent destruction.*

## CHAPTER 9. VICE-PRESIDENT IN CHARGE OF VOLCANOES

A year after his exchange of letters with Newt, John heads to Ilium in New York to see where Dr. Hoenikker did most of his work. He makes an appointment with Dr. Asa Breed, who was Dr. Hoenikker's supervisor. On the phone, Dr. Breed explains he was a supervisor in name only: Dr. Hoenikker "was a force of nature no mortal could possibly control."

*Dr. Breed echoes the line that science is separate from morality. Here, he does so by likening Dr. Hoenikker's work to the natural world—essentially something that is out of the control of humankind. This, of course, is a farcical position given that Dr. Hoenikker is very much a human.*

## CHAPTER 10. SECRET AGENT X-9

The night before his visit with Dr. Breed to Dr. Hoenikker's old research laboratory, John gets drunk in a bar. The bartender and the woman sitting next to him both went to high school with Frank Hoenikker. The woman details how they used to call Frank "Secret Agent X-9," because he never spoke to anyone.

*Though Frank's old nickname was just a joke reflecting his perceived isolation, it pre-empts his later role in the book as the facilitator of dangerous technology. "X-9" also verbally echoes "ice-nine," hinting the link between that substance and Frank.*

## CHAPTER 11. PROTEIN

The two people in the bar explain to John that Dr. Hoenikker was meant to give a commencement speech at their school. Dr. Asa Breed gave it instead, saying that "the trouble with the world was that people were still superstitious instead of scientific…if everybody would study science more, there wouldn't be all the trouble there was." Dr. Breed also said that one day science would "discover the basic secret of life". The bartender heard recently that this was discovered recently, and that it was "something about protein."

*Dr. Breed is an advocate for the idea that scientific progress equates to the progress of civilization more generally. He does not entertain the idea that science has anything to do with the horrors of humankind. The "secret of life" here functions as a kind of dark joke—the answer is fundamentally underwhelming and of course doesn't answer any of life's deeper questions about the meaning of existence.*

## CHAPTER 12. END OF THE WORLD DELIGHT

An older bartender comes over and tells John what he was doing on the day the bomb was dropped. He was working in the bar, and made someone a cocktail called "End of the World Delight." A scientist from Dr. Hoenikker's lab came in, saying he was going to resign as "anything a scientist worked on was sure to wind up as a weapon, one way or another."

*This unnamed scientist is the antithesis of Hoenikker and Breed; he resigns because the link between science and morality is all too obvious. Of course, this makes him an outsider. The cocktail name is in keeping with the absurdist trope of the end-of-times running throughout the novel.*

## CHAPTER 13. THE JUMPING-OFF PLACE

The next day, a hungover John gets a ride with Dr. Breed to the research lab. Dr. Breed explains that the lab site is where they used to carry out public hangings of criminals. One man, in 1782, was hanged for killing 26 people, and expressed no remorse at all. Dr. Breed expresses disbelief that the man's lack of penitence.

*Dr. Breed's comment on the hanged man is deeply ironic, given he sees nothing worthy of remorse in having been involved with the development of the atomic bomb. Responsibility in the novel floats around untethered, never settling.*

## CHAPTER 14. WHEN AUTOMOBILES HAD CUT-GLASS VASES

John and Dr. Breed travel through heavy traffic on their way to the lab. Dr. Breed explains that Dr. Hoenikker once abandoned his car in the middle of the Ilium traffic on the way to work. When the police called him, Dr. Hoenikker told them he didn't want it anymore. His wife, Emily, picked it up for him—and injured her pelvis in a crash on the way home. That injury, explains Dr. Breed, is why she died giving birth to Newt.

*This story is used to illustrate the way in which Dr. Hoenikker does not behave like other human beings. Leaving his car seemed a perfectly logical thing to do. The fact of his wife's crash and subsequent death is representative of the consequences of his actions, seemingly coming about by chance—this mimicks the way in which Dr. Hoenikker saw his scientific developments as disconnected from the way in which they would be used.*

## CHAPTER 15. MERRY CHRISTMAS

Now at the lab—fully titled "The Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry company"—Dr. Breed explains that seven hundred people work there (one hundred being researchers). They meet Miss Pefko, a "vacantly pretty" secretary of one of the researchers. She expresses the view that scientists "think too much."

*The research company is most likely modeled on General Electric, where Vonnegut himself once worked.*

## CHAPTER 16. BACK TO KINDERGARTEN

Now inside the building, Miss Pefko turns on the power for the educational exhibits in the Lab, setting flasks bubbling and lights twinkling. She describes it as "magic"; Dr. Breed takes offense at her use of that "medieval" word. The exhibits, he says, are the "exact opposite of magic."

*Miss Pefko expresses wonderment at the exhibits. Dr. Breed takes exception because, to him, wonderment is directly contradictory to the aims of science—to explain, to eliminate mystery. His use of the word "medieval" is telling, betraying his view that human history is an upward trajectory set in motion by scientific progress.*

## CHAPTER 17. THE GIRL POOL

John meets Dr. Breed's aging secretary, Miss Faust, who is putting up Christmas decorations. She and Dr. Breed unfurl a banner which says, "Good Will Toward Men." She informs her boss that she has got the chocolate bars for the Girl Pool—a Christmas tradition.

*The banner is another one of Vonnegut's jokes. It is, of course, being hung in the lab where humankind's most destructive—and least representative of goodwill—technology was produced. The banality of the girl pool tradition contrasts with the gravity of the atomic bomb. "Faust" is a nod to a famous legend in which a man sells his soul to the devil in exchange for unlimited knowledge. The implication is that the dangerous knowledge the scientists have accumulated has come at the cost of humanity's soul.*

## CHAPTER 18. THE MOST VALUABLE COMMODITY ON EARTH

In Dr. Breed's office, John begins to question him. Despite John's best efforts, "every question I asked implied that the creators of the atomic bomb had been criminal accessories to murder most foul." Dr. Breed takes offence at the line of questioning, saying John seems to think that scientists are "indifferent to the fate of the rest of the human race." He laments that people don't understand what "pure research" is.

*"Murder most foul" is one of many allusions to Shakespeare, in this case to Hamlet. That particular play seeks to deal with the question of the meaning of life, a question which also runs throughout Vonnegut's novel. John's natural morality means he can't help but frame his questions in a way that implies some level of responsibility of science in relation to morality. Dr. Breed believes in "pure research": scientific work that exists in its own category and needn't be concerned with anything other than itself.*

Dr. Breed insists that, at this lab, "men are paid to increase knowledge, to work towards no end but that." The more truth humankind has, he says, "the richer we become."

*Dr. Breed sees the increase of knowledge as equivalent to the general improvement of the human race. Vonnegut puts this idea under the microscope, asking his reader to forensically examine the myths of progress.*

## CHAPTER 19. NO MORE MUD

Dr. Breed explains that, though Dr. Hoenikker was free to work on whatever he felt like, he was often asked for solutions to particular problems. A marine general wanted him to find a way of getting rid of mud, which the marines were apparently sick of fighting in. To John's disbelief, Dr. Breed tells him that, theoretically speaking, Dr. Hoenikker fulfilled the general's request successfully.

*The request from the marine shows the complex interplay between science and governance, in this case the military arm of the state. The use of mud is an ironic gesture towards the Bokononist cosmogony, which states that man is made out of mud.*

## CHAPTER 20. ICE-NINE

Dr. Breed tells John about Dr. Hoenikker's proposed solution to mud: **ice-nine**. This is a substance which can make water crystallize at an atomic level. A "seed" of the substance makes atoms "stack and lock" and freeze. Dr. Breed's explanation is interrupted by the Girl Pool singing "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

*Essentially, ice-nine can make water freeze without it needing to be at a low temperature. The interruption is absurd, the harmless carol contrasting with the potentially world-changing implications of ice-nine.*

## CHAPTER 21. THE MARINES MARCH ON

Dr. Breed hands out chocolate bars to the Girl Pool. He then returns to the subject of **ice-nine**, asking John to envisage a scenario in which a Marine could carry a capsule of the ice-nine seed. If he were to throw it into a puddle, the pools and streams connected to it would freeze, says Dr. Breed. "The United States marines would rise from the swamp and march on!" he exclaims.

*Readers following the logic of Dr. Breed's explanation will quickly realize the potential damage ice-nine could cause, which John outlies in the next chapter. Though ice-nine might seem like a smart solution to a fairly minor problem, its ability to "infect" water with solidity has serious consequences. Dr. Breed's comment is nationalistic and narrow-minded.*

## CHAPTER 22. MEMBER OF THE YELLOW PRESS

John asks Dr. Breed whether **ice-nine** really exists. Dr. Breed insists it doesn't, and is only talking about Dr. Hoenikker's theory to demonstrate the latter man's problem-solving skills. Furthermore, given that the lab operates a "pure research" policy, he insists Dr. Hoenikker wouldn't have worked on ice-nine unless it genuinely interesting to him.

*As John comes to learn over the course of the story, ice-nine is very much in existence.*

John continues asking about **ice-nine**: "If the streams flowing through the swamp froze as *ice-nine*, what about the rivers and lakes the streams fed?" Dr. Breed confirms they would freeze too. John follows the logic and asks about the oceans connected to those rivers. Annoyed by John, Dr. Breed confirms that they'd freeze too, as well as "the springs feeding" the frozen lakes and streams, and all the water underground feeding the springs."

*John spells out the potential consequences of ice-nine for the reader. If each water molecule teaches the next to freeze, essentially all the water in the world will turn solid. Water is, of course, one of the basic needs for human, and other, life to exist. Amazingly, the idea of ice-nine was actually pitched by a real Nobel laureate to Vonnegut as something he could use in a story.*

Dr. Breed shouts at John for being a "member of the yellow press." He confirms John's assumption that rain would freeze into "hard hobnails of **ice-nine**." He says, "and that would be the end of the world! And the end of the interview, too! Good-bye!"

*The yellow press is a derogatory term for sensationalist journalism. Dr. Breed acknowledges that ice-nine would spell the end of the world, but is essentially too scared to acknowledge the responsibility of science in such a scenario. Feeling offended, he terminates the interview.*

## CHAPTER 23. THE LAST BATCH OF BROWNIES

From the vantage point of the present day, John informs the reader that Dr. Breed was wrong: there *is* such thing as **ice-nine**. Dr. Hoenikker had made a small chip of it just before he died. He told Frank, Angela, and Newt about it on the Christmas Eve that he died—and they divided that chip between themselves.

*John's interventions from the present-day contribute to the sense of the novel as a post-apocalyptic text. The link between ice-nine and Christmas, as with the carol in the previous chapter, ties both science and religion together in the idea that neither can save humanity from itself. The division of ice-nine between the children also represents the division—and disappearance—of personal responsibility.*

## CHAPTER 24. WHAT A WAMPETER IS

John introduces another Bokononist term: "wampeter." No karass is without a wampeter, he says, "just as no wheel is without a hub." The members of a karass "revolve" around their wampeter, "in the majestic chaos of a spiral of nebula." Anything can be a wampeter—"a tree, a rock, an animal, an idea, a book, a melody, the Holy Grail"—and John believes **ice-nine** was the wampeter of his karass.

*These interventions from a different time perspective create the sense of inevitability that the events in the book are propelled towards a destructive endpoint.*

## CHAPTER 25. THE MAIN THING ABOUT DR. HOENIKKER

John returns to the story about his visit to the laboratory center. After his fall-out with Dr. Breed, Miss Faust is ordered to show him the door. On the way out, he convinces her to show him Dr. Hoenikker's lab first. She tells him that she doesn't think Dr. Hoenikker was "knowable." All he was interested in, according to what Dr. Breed told her, was "truth." She says she can't understand how that could be enough for someone.

*Miss Faust reinforces the idea that there was something fundamentally inhumane about Dr. Hoenikker—namely, his lack of empathy and relatability. Miss Faust acts as a mouthpiece that questions the value of "truth," suggesting that truth has no worth outside of the use it is put to.*

## CHAPTER 26. WHAT GOD IS

Miss Faust recalls a conversation with Dr. Hoenikker. He bet her she couldn't say anything "absolutely true." She told him "God is love," to which he asked what both of those things were. Miss Faust insists to John that "God really *is* love, you know."

*Miss Faust's sentiment is an example of a naïve yet comforting religious idea, which also characterizes Bokononism.*

## CHAPTER 27. MEN FROM MARS

John and Miss Faust arrive on the sixth floor, the location of Dr. Hoenikker's old lab. There is a plate commemorating him on the wall. The lab is just as Dr. Hoenikker left it. John notices a lot of "cheap toys lying around." Miss Faust explains how many of his experiments were "performed with equipment that cost less than a dollar."

*The presence of the toys is a grotesque nod to childhood innocence, which is essentially what Dr. Breed claims of Dr. Hoenikker—that his work was a kind of play, free from moral constraints or implications.*

Miss Faust calls Dr. Hoenikker an "unusual man." "Maybe," she hypothesizes, "in a million years everybody will be as smart as he was and see things the way he did. But, compared with the average person of today, he was as different as a man from Mars."

*Miss Faust's comment acts as a counterpoint to the idea of the relentless march of human progress. The progress represented by Dr. Hoenikker—the atom bomb—is too far ahead of humanity's ability to respond appropriately.*

## CHAPTER 28. MAYONNAISE

Miss Faust and John get into a lift back to the first floor. The lift is operated by Lyman Enders Knowles, described as "a small and ancient Negro" who is "insane." Miss Faust finds Knowles's seemingly incoherent talk, which ranges from Mayan architecture to mayonnaise, quite irritating.

*Knowles acts as a kind of wise fool, seemingly speaking nonsense but with, on closer inspection, a degree of profundity. The juxtaposition of the Mayans with mayonnaise, apart from being a fun play on words, develops the sense that the novel takes a sweeping look at the entirety of the human story.*

Knowles points out that "*re*-search means *look again* … Means they're looking for something they found once and it got away somehow, and now they go to *re*-search for it!" He wonders, "who lost what?" Knowles says he knew Dr. Hoenikker, and that when he died he didn't really die, but "entered a new dimension."

*Knowles asks a key question, wondering what it is that humanity is really searching for, particularly with science. If science doesn't improve humanity's own attitude towards itself and its planet, to what extent can it be said to represent "progress"? Knowles implies that humanity has lost something fundamental, gesturing both towards the biblical loss of innocence and the sense of loss felt after the use of the atom bomb.*

## CHAPTER 29. GONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

John takes a cab to the cemetery where Dr. Hoenikker is buried, hoping to take a picture of the tomb (potentially as an image for the cover of his book). The cemetery custodian tells him that he can't miss it: "the marker was an alabaster phallus twenty feet high and three feet thick." John calls it "a suitable memorial to a father of the atom bomb." Wiping away some sleet from the monument, John notices that it reads "MOTHER."

*The remarkable sight of the huge memorial speaks to humankind's ability to celebrate or commiserate itself, here in an especially pompous way. Vonnegut flips it on its head by having the phallus commemorate Emily Hoenikker, not Frank.*

## CHAPTER 30. ONLY SLEEPING

John wipes away more sleet and uncovers the epitaphs. He sees they are from Angela, Frank, and Newt in tribute to their mother Emily (though Newt's is just an imprint of his infant hand). John discovers that Dr. Hoenikker's memorial is actually nearby, and is just a "marble cube forty centimetres on each side."

*Dr. Hoenikker's memorial is comically small, reflecting the fact that he did not feel responsible for the way in which his scientific developments were used. He is, in a way, written out of history, at least in terms of being responsible for its shape.*

## CHAPTER 31. ANOTHER BREED

John's taxi driver asks if he can take a detour first to his own mother's grave and then to the tombstone salesroom nearby. John agrees peevishly. The owner of the salesroom is Marvin Breed, brother to Dr. Breed.

*The taxi driver's request functions as a gentle reminder of grief. The unspoken presence of the dead hints at the indiscriminate way in which weapons like the atom bomb kill people.*

## CHAPTER 32. DYNAMITE MONEY

Marvin Breed calls Dr. Hoenikker "a queer son of a bitch." He explains that the large monument to Dr. Hoenikker's wife was bought by the three Hoenikker children, after their father failed to put any marker on the grave. They bought it with Dr. Hoenikker's Nobel Prize money. John calls it "dynamite money."

*Marvin's account of Dr. Hoenikker reinforces the idea of him as not fully human, given that he did not wish to memorialize his wife's existence.*

John interjects from the present to say that, if he'd been a Bokononist at the time of this conversation, he might have whispered "busy, busy, busy" to himself. This is the Bokononist expression used when "we think of how complicated and unpredictable the machinery of life really is."

*John is trying to figure out the puzzle of Dr. Hoenikker. As a Nobel winner, Dr. Hoenikker was a highly celebrated human being—yet he seems to have been so lacking in the very qualities that make people human.*

## CHAPTER 33. AN UNGRATEFUL MAN

John asks Marvin if he knew Emily Hoenikker, Dr. Hoenikker's wife. Marvin relays how they knew each other well at high school. He had a crush on her, but she went out with his brother Asa instead. He describes her as "the prettiest face that ever could be."

*Emily Hoenikker is a notable absence from the book. The death of both Hoenikker parents is suggestive of the children's inability to take responsibility for their actions.*

Marvin talks disparagingly about Dr. Hoenikker, who took Emily away from Asa and then didn't appreciate what he had. He says he knows "all about how harmless and gentle and dreamy me he was supposed to be … but how the hell innocent is a man who helps make a thing like an atomic bomb?" He wonders if Dr. Hoenikker, like many other "people in high places," was born "stone-cold dead."

*Marvin here neatly encapsulates the contradictory character of Dr. Hoenikker, whose air of naïve innocence when alive doesn't match up to him being the "father" of the atomic bomb. Marvin's point widens out to criticize people in positions of power.*

## CHAPTER 34. VIN-DIT

"Vin-dit" is the Bokononist word for a "sudden, very personal show in the direction of Bokononism." The cab driver, weeping, looks at a stone angel and insists he wants to buy it for his mother's grave. Marvin continues talking about the Hoenikkers. He explains that Emily married Felix because she believed "his mind was tuned to the biggest music there was, the music of the stars." He also explains that nobody has seen Frank since the day of Dr. Hoenikker's funeral.

*Emily had a romanticized notion of Dr. Hoenikker's work, echoing the views of Dr. Breed. Thinking of Dr. Hoenikker's mind as being tuned to the music of the stars hints at his understanding of the fabric of existence—the molecular world—but also distances himself from the earthly repercussions of his work.*

John says he's heard that Frank is wanted by the police. Marvin explains that Frank used to work at "Jack's Hobby Shop"; when he left town, he worked in another model shop which turned out to be a front for a car-stealing operation. Newt, he says, is probably with Angela in Indianapolis. He describes Angela as "big" and "gawky," and talks about how she used to lock herself in her room and play clarinet along with her records.

*Frank, at this stage, is an increasingly notable absence, with numerous theories given as to his whereabouts. It is known, however, that he has been missing since his father died, indicating that this event was a rupture in his life.*

The cab driver asks Marvin how much he wants for the stone angel, but Marvin insists it isn't for sale. He explains that the stone was commissioned by a German immigrant whose wife had died of smallpox. He had ordered the stone from Marvin's great-grandfather, but was robbed of all his money. The man said he would come back to pay for the angel. John notices that the family name on the stone is his own.

*The story about the stone angel, like the cab driver's grief over his mother, creates a sense of distant sadness. The reduction of the German man's life to a story is not dissimilar from the way casualties in war become mere statistics—the humans behind the stories or statistics get lost in the distance of time and space.*

## CHAPTER 35. HOBBY SHOP

John visits Jack's Hobby Shop. The owner, Jack, shows him an exquisitely made model island built by Frank when he worked there, describing Frank as a genius. Frank would spend "thousands of hours" working on it, explains Jack.

*This story ties in with the idea of Frank as an experimenter, not dissimilar from his father. He created an impressive stage-set of real life, but it is ultimately just that—artificial.*


## CHAPTER 36. MIAOW

John explains to the reader that, while he was on his trip to Ilium, he let his room out to a "poor poet named Sherman Krebbs." When he returned from Ilium, he found his couch had been burned, his cat killed, and the rest of the apartment vandalized. John speculates that Sherman was part of his karass, serving as "wrang-wrang"—"a person who steers people away from a line of speculation by reducing that line."

*Sherman is absurdity incarnate, undermining the banal symbols of John's way of life. In retrospect, John sees this as part of his overall trajectory as a Bokononist.*


## CHAPTER 37. A MODERN MAJOR GENERAL

John returns to his main narrative. One day, he finds a magazine supplement advertising "The Republic of San Lorenzo," a Caribbean nation described as "healthy, happy, progressive, freedom-loving, beautiful nation … extremely attractive to American investors and tourists alike."

*As the reader later learns, San Lorenzo is none of these things. The specific appeal to Americans sets up the way San Lorenzo functions as a mirror to American and, more generally, Western society.*

On the cover of the supplement is Mona Aamons Monzano, whom John says he falls in love with immediately. Inside, he reads a portrait of the island's dictator, "Papa" Monzano. John is astonished to find a picture in the supplement of Frank Hoenikker, who is mentioned as the "*Minister of Science and Progress in the Republic of San Lorenzo.*"

*The entire story functions by way of intentionally absurd coincidences (in this case John finding Frank in the magazine). The job title given to Frank is another of Vonnegut's ironic jokes, as its Frank's "science" that brings about the end's apocalyptic scenario (which doesn't look like "progress" at all).*

## CHAPTER 38. BARRACUDA CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

John learns from the supplement that San Lorenzo is a small island with a population of around half a million. It is "fiercely dedicated to the ideals of the free world," and apparently considered by sports fishermen to be "the barracuda capital of the world." John reads an essay by "Papa" Monzano that outlines the "Master Plan" (a great infrastructure project), and makes references to Frank as the "blood son of Dr. Felix Hoenikker."

*The write-up in the magazine develops the idea of San Lorenzo as a mirror holding reflecting Western ideals. In a way, it is an experiment in what those ideals mean if reduced from the indicators (social and economic) that are usually held up as proof of their success. The "Master Plan" has both an ominous and an absurdist ring to it.*

## CHAPTER 39. FATA MORGANA

John reads another essay that he suspects is ghost-written but is purportedly by Frank. In this, Frank outlines how he was stranded on a raft in the Caribbean Sea, fearing he was close to death. He looked at the sky, willing to meet his "Maker," but instead saw the mountains of San Lorenzo. He wondered if this was "Fata Morgana," but it was the peak of Mount McCabe. Frank alighted on San Lorenzo. John points out, from his present-day vantage point, that "the essay didn't say so, but the son of a bitch had a piece of **ice-nine** with him."

*Like Bokonon and John, Frank's description of his arrival on San Lorenzo ties in with the idea of fate bringing people onto its shores. This fate is rendered absurd by the books ending. "Fata Morgana" is a kind of mirage, suggesting the illusory nature of the claims about San Lorenzo. John's interjection reminds the reader that the end—of both the novel and the world—is coming.*

## CHAPTER 40. HOUSE OF HOPE AND MERCY

John is then assigned by a magazine to do a story in San Lorenzo. This isn't meant to be about "Papa" or Frank, but Julian Castle. Castle is an American sugar millionaire who, at the age of forty, founded a "free hospital" in the San Lorenzo jungle. His son, Philip Castle, runs the hotel—Casa Mona—at which John plans to stay. John is mostly excited by the possibility of meeting Mona.

*No explanation is given as to Julian's transformation from ruthless entrepreneur to philanthropist. Philip's hotel is named after Mona, with whom he is in love (they were both tutored by Bokonon as children).*

## CHAPTER 41. A KARASS BUILT FOR TWO

John takes a plane bound for San Lorenzo. On this, he meets the elderly Horlick Minton, the new American Ambassador for the island, and his wife, Claire. John describes them as "lovebirds." Present-day John reasons that they were a "duprass"—a karass made of only two persons. He therefore excludes them from his own karass.

*This plane journey continues the chain of astonishing coincidences throughout the novel, which Vonnegut does not attempt to make seem realistic.*

John converses with Minton and Claire. Minton seems nonplused about becoming the new ambassador. Present-day John tells the reader that according to Bokonon members of a duprass usually die "within a week of each other." When it came time for the Mintons to die, says John, "they did it within the same second."

*Whenever the end-of-times atmosphere seems to be diminishing, Vonnegut is sure to make John interject to remind the reader that disaster is looming. The characters of Minton and Claire are killed off, or revealed to be killed off later, almost immediately after the reader encounters them.*

## CHAPTER 42. BICYCLES FOR AFGHANISTAN

John goes for a drink in the plane's small saloon bar. Here he meets H. Lowe Crosby, an American entrepreneur, and his wife, Hazel. Crosby explains that he is planning on moving his bicycle-manufacturing business to San Lorenzo. He hates what America has become: "It's all human relations now. The eggheads sit around trying to figure out new ways for everybody to be happy. Nobody can get fired, no matter what."

*Crosby is a representative of brute business, sniffing out where the money can be made and caring little for the conditions of his potential workers. He is a grotesque embodiment of American ideals: the free market, individualism and patriotism.*

Crosby tells John he thinks San Lorenzo will be better for his business, as the "people down there are poor enough and scared enough and ignorant enough to have some common sense!" John and Hazel discuss how they are both "Hoosiers." She tells him to call him "Mom." Present-day John introduces the Bokononist term, "granfalloon"—"a false karass, of a seeming team that was meaningless in terms of the was God gets thing done."

*Hazel is meant to represent the idiocy of "granfalloons"— people who feel an affinity with one another based on some kind of false (according to Bokonon) division, e.g. nation states. She is the epitome of superficial civility, but deep down is only interested in getting to know people who are as much like her as possible.*

## CHAPTER 43. THE DEMONSTRATOR

Hazel and Crosby talk glowingly about their imagined lives on San Lorenzo. Hazel is relieved "they all speak English and they're all Christians," and Crosby likes how the San Lorenzians deal with crime: "the hook." He describes this as "a great big kind of iron fishhook" on which criminals are hanged.

*Hazel has the pretense of being outward-looking and wanting to get to know other people, but she only wants to get to know people that fit in with her view of what constitutes a proper person. As with being a "Hoosier," the English language and Christianity are strongly suggested to be "granfalloons" too. The hook is a comic nod to San Lorenzo's apparent status as the "barracuda capital of the world."*

Hazel relates how she and Crosby once saw a similar torture implement when they were on holiday in London. They'd also seen an "iron chair a man had been roasted alive in," for murdering his son. It turns, Hazel says, "he hadn't murdered his son at all."

*Hazel's casual talk about torture implements distracts from the terrible pain such instruments have inflicted on human beings. As the reader finds out later, the hook is actually based on the very same implement that Hazel is talking about. The story of the executed man, who was actually innocent, contributes to the building sense of misguided violence in the novel.*

## CHAPTER 44. COMMUNIST SYMPATHIZERS

John returns to his seat near the Mintons. Minton asks John who he was talking to at the bar; Minton heard Crosby call him a "communist sympathizer." Claire explains how a letter she wrote once got Minton fired from the State Department for being un-American; it dealt with "how Americans couldn't imagine what it was like to be something else, to be something else and proud of it."

*The way in which Minton and Crosby demonstrate paranoia in this scene is demonstrative of the Cold War atmosphere in which the book was published. Minton and Claire, though official representatives of the U.S., are far less slavish to their country than the Crosbys.*

## CHAPTER 45. WHY AMERICANS ARE HATED

Claire's letter was published during the McCarthy era, she explains, and Minton was fired twelve hours later its publication. Minton says that "the highest possible form of treason … is to say that Americans aren't loved wherever they go, whatever they do." John suggests Americans are hated in a lot of places; Claire points that "people" more generally are hated in a lot of places.

*McCarthyism is named after an American senator renowned for baseless accusation and suspicion during the "Red Scare of America," when America was generally distrustful of the Soviet Union and Communism. Claire's comment is a withering assessment of the rife divisions between peoples across the globe.*

## CHAPTER 46. THE BOKONONIST METHOD FOR HANDLING CAESAR

John and the Mintons talk about Frank. Minton explains that Frank is no longer a U.S. citizen. John asks Minton about the book he and Claire have been reading—it is the "only scholarly book ever written about San Lorenzo." Its author is Julian Castle. John opens the book to a chapter about Bokonon: "Pay no attention to Caesar. Caesar doesn't have the slightest idea what's *really* going on."

*Bokonon is a kind of religious trickster, putting in place quasi-religious rules while also undercutting his authority at every turn. Here, he takes aim at one of history's prime examples of leadership—Julius Caesar. He undermines him, but also undermines his own credentials for leadership elsewhere.*

## CHAPTER 47. DYNAMIC TENSION

Engrossed, John reads about Bokonon's theory of "dynamic tension." John laughs to himself, thinking that the phrase is accidentally the same as one used by a "mail-order muscle-builder." Then he reads that Bokonon was in fact an alumnus of that muscle-building school. Dynamic tension is the belief that "good societies could be built only by pitting good against evil, and by keeping the tension between the two high at all times."

*Bokonon's religious framework is laughably arbitrary. But this belies a serious point: that all religions are invented. The dynamic tension theory is less a genuine plan for society than a description of how things already are.*

## CHAPTER 48. JUST LIKE SAINT AUGUSTINE

John reads about Bokonon's life. He was born in 1891, was originally an "Episcopalian and a British subject on the island of Tobago." He came from a wealthy family and was christened "Lionel Boyd Johnson." He did well at school; that said, the fourteenth calypso from *The Books of Bokonon* details a taste for hedonism in his early days.

*The title of this chapter, as with many others, is highly ironic: Saint Augustine is one of the central figures in the growth of Christianity. Similarly, he had a taste for "the flesh" in his youth.*

## CHAPTER 49. A FISH PITCHED UP BY AN ANGRY SEA

John narrates the story of Bokonon's life as told by Philip Castle's book. Bokonon went to the London School of Economics before fighting in World War One. He spent two years in hospital after being gassed at the Battle of Ypres, before heading back to his native Tobago. On his way home, he was captured by a German submarine, which was in turn sunk by a British ship.

*Bokonon has an incredible back story that creates the sense that he was fated to end up on San Lorenzo (which is part of his myth).*

Bokonon then travelled around the world, working various odd-jobs. One of these was as a gardener on the Rumfoord large estate on Rhode Island, where glimpsed many distinguished guests (e.g. J.P Morgan, General Pershing, and Franklin D. Roosevelt).

*The guests that Bokonon served were some of the most influential figures in modern American history. J.P. Morgan was powerful financier; Pershing was a US general in WW1; Roosevelt, of course, was president. They are all part of the construction of American ideals.*

Bokonon was then tasked with sailing the yacht belonging to one of the Rumfoords. This ship crashed in India, and Bokonon spent two years as a follower of Mohandas K. Ghandi. He then built his own ship, sailing it around the Caribbean.

*Ghandi was an Indian activist who fought peacefully against British colonial rule. The mention of him, as with the famous Americans, reminds the reader of the idea of humankind's historical arc. The suggestion that Bokonon is part of it is meant to be deeply absurd.*

One day, Bokonon sought shelter from a hurricane by landing in Haiti. Here he met Earl McCabe, a Marine deserter who had stolen his company's recreation fund. McCabe offered Bokonon money to transport him to Miami, but they were also caught in bad weather. They swam ashore, naked, to San Lorenzo.

*There is obviously a clear irony in San Lorenzo, a country purportedly in line with American ideals, being founded by a U.S. army deserter. The book is full of double standards and hypocrisy, with everyone's standpoints built on (literal) shifting sands.*

Bokonon was enchanted by San Lorenzo, feeling that he was fated to end up there. "Bokonon" is the San Lorenzian way of pronouncing his birth name, "Johnson." John says the San Lorenzian English dialect is "easy to understand and difficult to write down." He gives Philip Castle's translation of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." According to Bokononist legend, Bokonon's ship will sail again, painted gold, when the end of the world arrives.

*The use of "Twinkle, Twinkle" is a deliberate gesture towards the innocence of childhood and, in particular, the corruption of childhood (the cat's cradle serves a similar function). This section establishes the end-of-times myth for Bokononism.*

## CHAPTER 50. A NICE MIDGET

John's reading is interrupted by Hazel, who is amazed to have found two more Hoosiers aboard the plane—Angela and Newt.

*Hazel expands her "granfalloon." Vonnegut relishes in unlikely scenarios; here, John finds Hoenikkers on the same plane as him.*

## CHAPTER 51. O.K., MOM

John finds Angela and Newt. From the present, John criticizes them for carrying **ice-nine**, "while under us was God's own amount of water." Angela says she didn't reply to John's letter as she didn't have anything interesting to say about the day the bomb dropped—it was "just like a regular day." She's surprised Newt replied, saying that she doesn't she how he could remember anything about that day.

*Vonnegut juxtaposes the mundane with the incredible—Angela's boring day with the fact that it was the same day as the dropping of the bomb. While he's on the plane, John doesn't know the others are carrying ice-nine.*


Angela tells John that Dr. Breed told her not to have contact with him. John says he'll probably never finish the book anyway. She says that, if he does, he better make her father "a saint, because that's what he was." She explains that they are heading to San Lorenzo for a wedding—Frank is due to wed Mona.

*Angela is a blind devotee of her father and frequently tries to defend his reputation. The use of the word "saint" is an ironic gesture to the role of religion in the novel.*


## CHAPTER 52. NO PAIN

Angela shows John some of the pictures that she carries with her, many of which are of her father. She talks a little bit about the Christmas when Dr. Hoenikker died. He passed away in a "big white wicker chair facing the sea." John reminds the reader that she fails to mention the **ice-nine** she and her siblings divided up between them on the same day.

*The reader now knows that ice-nine is real and that it is being carried to San Lorenzo (in fact it is there already). The Hoenikker children never really think about why they divided up the ice-nine, which mirrors their own father's failure to take responsibility.*

## CHAPTER 53. THE PRESIDENT OF FABRI-TEK

Angela shows John a picture of her playing the clarinet, and then one of her "strikingly handsome" husband, Harrison C. Conners, who is the president of Fabri-Tek, a secret government tech developer. Harrison, Angela tells John, sought her out after Dr. Hoenikker died. They married two weeks later.

*Vonnegut clearly implies here—as is confirmed later—that Conners was tasked with marrying Angela in order to get access to ice-nine.*


## CHAPTER 54. COMMUNISTS, NAZIS, ROYALISTS, PARACHUTISTS, AND DRAFT DODGERS

John returns to the book about San Lorenzo, looking up Mona in the index. He finds a section about her father, Nestor Aamons, who fought in World War Two. In Portugal he met Julian Castle, who invited him to design the hospital—"House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle"—on San Lorenzo. On the island, he fathered a daughter with a native woman, Celia, and died soon after.

*Like Bokonon, McCabe, Castle, and John, Mona's father has a seemingly fated inevitability about being drawn to San Lorenzo. The construction of unlikely meaningful connection with the island is deliberately satirical.*

## CHAPTER 55. NEVER INDEX YOUR OWN BOOK

John looks at all the different index entries for Mona. From these, he learns that she grew up in the compound of the hospital, had a romance with Philip Castle, and was turned into a "national erotic symbol" by "Papa" Monzano. Bokonon was her tutor.

*Mona is generally quite a flat character, mostly held up as an example of extreme beauty. But with the other characters acting so foolishly, perhaps there is a dignity behind her silence. "Papa's" use of Mona as an erotic symbol for the nation suggests a cynical effort to find something to appease the islanders.*


John talks about indexing with Claire, who used to do it professionally. She sees Philip Castle's indexing as embarrassing and "self-indulgent." She can tell from the index that Philip is in love with Mona, but that "he'll never marry her." Minton later whispers to John that this is because Claire can tell from the index that Philip is homosexual.

*Claire's index-based prophesy does turn out to be true in the sense that Mona is "destined" to marry the next ruler of San Lorenzo.*

## CHAPTER 56. A SELF-SUPPORTING SQUIRREL CAGE

John reads about Bokonon and McCabe's arrival on San Lorenzo. At the time, the locals were destitute and disease-ridden. Before their arrival, the island was a sugar colony under the authority of Philip Castle's grandfather. San Lorenzo did not have any effective system of governance.

*San Lorenzo, though fictional, has a history that is not out of keeping with its neighboring islands. As with those nations, its history represents a tussle between different world powers (which might explain its current state).*

## CHAPTER 57. THE QUEASY DREAM

John explains that many people had taken over San Lorenzo in its history, and that the island was essentially "worthless." Over the years, the island was conquered by various nations, including France, Spain, Denmark, England, and the Netherlands. When McCabe and Johnson arrived and initiated their take-over, Castle Sugar (the sugar company) made no attempt to stop them.

*As part of his overall project of satire, Vonnegut inverts the typical colonial site by making San Lorenzo in essence quite undesirable. The different colonial powers are all keen to get rid of it. Usually, they'd be fighting to take control.*

## CHAPTER 58. TYRANNY WITH A DIFFERENCE

Bokonon and McCabe dreamed of making San Lorenzo a utopia. Bokonon invented his religion: "I made up lies ... and I made this sad world a par-a-dise." Newt interrupts John's reading and takes him back to the bar. He talks about Zinka and how they spent hours in each other's arms, sitting in Dr. Hoenikker's wicker chair facing the sea. She broke his heart, he says.

*The main difference with Bokononism and the world's major religions is that the youngness of Bokononism means its origin story—the tale of how it came to be conceived—is not lost or obscured. Furthermore, the absurdist Bokonon actively incorporates his religion's artificiality into its religious content, e.g. in* The Books of Bokonon.


## CHAPTER 59. FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELTS

Crosby comes over and talks drunkenly about "pissants," whom he describes as "somebody who thinks he's so damn smart, he can never keep his mouth shut." His daughter once nearly married a pissant, but he "squashed him like a bug."

*Crosby is frequently drunk and belligerent and, ironically, rarely keeps his mouth shut. He represents a kind of blind patriotism, thinking only he and his country can ever be right.*

As the plane nears its landing, Crosby realizes he's heard Newt's surname before. Newt describes Dr. Hoenikker as "the father of the atom bomb." Crosby was thinking more about something to do with a "Russian dancer."

*Newt shows a kind of pride in describing the identity of his father—his comment conceivably makes him a sibling of the atom bomb. Considering the irresponsible handling of ice-nine by him and his other siblings, this is not far from the truth. Crosby has been keeping up with the Red Scare press.*

## CHAPTER 60. AN UNDERPRIVILEGED NATION

John looks at San Lorenzo from above. It is barren and stony, with just one city: Bolivar. The book tells John that McCabe and Bokonon planned for San Lorenzo's total income to be divided equally between its inhabitants—but it never generated any money.

*McCabe and Bokonon's first plan is more in line with Karl Marx than with free market ideals. San Lorenzo, however, seems immune to any kind of economic development.*

## CHAPTER 61. WHAT A CORPORAL WAS WORTH

At Monzano airport, the passengers convert their American money into local currency, called "Corporals." John notices wanted posters for Bokonon, and warning that any practitioners of the religion will be killed on "the hook."

*There is a subtle joke at play here. The Corporal currency unit is named after McCabe, who himself was a corporal in the U.S. army. But the name is most likely based on cartoonist Norman McCabe, who created a Looney Tunes propaganda film ("Tokio Jokio") mocking the Japanese in 1943 (and was credited as Corporal McCabe). The wanted posters and warnings about Bokonon are just for show.*

## CHAPTER 62. WHY HAZEL WASN'T SCARED

John and the others are ushered out of the airport and on to a reviewing stand. Around 5,000 "oatmeal-coloured," "thin" locals have gathered. The women are bare-breasted and the men wear "loose loincloths." A military band is poised to play, but is currently silent. John notices the flag of San Lorenzo and the American flag hoisted up high. Hazel says how relieved she is that it's a "Christian country."

*The islanders are portrayed as adhering to a fairly typical western idea of "primitive." Hazel doesn't fear the locals because she's heard that it's a Christian country. The pomp of the ceremony is ready to go, just waiting for "Papa's" arrival.*

## CHAPTER 63. REVERENT AND FREE

Six fighter planes stand by close to John and the others. Each is painted with a snake "crushing a devil to death." "Papa" Monzano arrives in a black Cadillac limousine. He gives a signal and the crowd sing the national anthem, originally written by Bokonon: "What a rich, lucky island are we! Our enemies quail, for they know they will fail against people so reverent and free."

*John noticing the insignia on the planes is important, because it foreshadows their involvement in the chain of events that brings about the destruction at the end of the book. The national anthem is intentionally funny, mocking nationalist songs more generally. Its words are completely hollow, of course.*

## CHAPTER 64. PEACE AND PLENTY

The crowd falls silent. John notices that Frank is "Papa" Monzano's personal bodyguard. John can't help staring at the beautiful Mona, who plays some music on a xylophone for the crowd.

*John's infatuation with Mona is important as it influences his decision later whether to become San Lorenzo's new ruler.*

## CHAPTER 65. A GOOD TIME TO COME TO SAN LORENZO

"Papa" addresses the gathering, directing his words at the new American ambassador; he mistakenly thinks this is H. Lowe Crosby rather than Minton. He says, "you are coming to the best friend America ever had. America is misunderstood many places, but not here." H. Lowe Crosby points out Minton as the real ambassador.

*"Papa"s mistake serves to highlight the artifice of the occasion—it's all symbolic, signifying nothing. His comment about America being misunderstood is a satirical quip about America's place in the world. The point is that Crosby looks more like "Papa"s idea of what an American should be.*

"Papa" winces in pain, before shaking Minton's hand. He promises that San Lorenzo is a Christian and "anti-communist" place. He explains that tomorrow is "one of the happiest days" for the nation—"The Day of the Hundred Martyrs to Democracy" and the engagement of Frank and Mona. Minton congratulates him, and the newly-weds.

*Minton has already demonstrated on the plane that he is no longer impressed by such occasions, but he knows how to go through the motions. "Papa" is extremely keen to emphasize how much San Lorenzo is pro-America and anti-Soviet.*

Minton pretends that every American schoolchild knows the story of the noble sacrifice of the "Hundred Martyrs to Democracy." He has been asked by his president, he says, to through a wreath into the sea tomorrow to honor San Lorenzo's role in World War Two. "Papa" looks in pain again, suddenly telling the crowd to 'go home!' He collapses.

*Minton tells a white lie which hints at the bleaker truth that most people are not very clued up on their history anyway. The ceremony will be a huge occasion, but not in the way that it's intended. "Papa's" sickness suggests the fragility of the San Lorenzo set-up.*

## CHAPTER 66. THE STRONGEST THING THERE IS

Frank frantically tries to help "Papa" by loosening his collar and blouse. John notices that Mona still looks serene. In fact, she appears to be rubbing her feet with one of the airline pilots—whose face appears to be in "orgiastic rigidity." "Papa" tells Frank he will be the next president, because he has science and "science is the strongest thing there is." He also says the word "**ice**" before passing out.

*Mona is engaging in boko-maru, a Bokononist ritual that John will try himself later on. "Papa" consistently states his devotion to the marvels of science, which is at odds with the sorry state of the island. He mentions "ice" here, as he does on his deathbed; no-one yet knows that he's referring to ice-nine.*


## CHAPTER 67. HY-U-O-OOK-KUH!

"Papa" doesn't die, "not then." Minton and Claire are driven to their embassy; Newt and Angela go to Frank's house; H. Lowe and Hazel Crosby are taken along with John to the Casa Mona hotel. The Crosbys ask the cab driver about the identity of Bokonon, whom the driver describes as a "very bad man." The driver explains that Bokonon is in hiding. Anyone caught helping him would get the "hook," which the driver pronounces as "hy-u-o-ook-kuh."

*"Papa's" death is constantly being deferred, heightening the novel's sense of absurdity. The driver is only pretending to badmouth Bokonon—everyone secretly practices Bokononism on the island—who in turn is only pretending to be a religious leader. The hook is the torture implement based on something Bokonon saw at Madame Tussauds' in London.*

## CHAPTER 68. HOON-YERA MORA-TOORZ

John asks the driver about the Hundred Martyrs to Democracy. He explains that, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, San Lorenzo had conscripted a hundred men to fight for the U.S.A. They were put on a ship to the States, which was sunk, killing all of the men, by a German submarine just after it left San Lorenzo.

*The story of the hundred martyrs is deliberately comic. Vonnegut delights in placing the idea of heroism against the fact that these hundred men never actually did anything in the war—they had only just left when they were killed.*

## CHAPTER 69. A BIG MOSAIC

John, Hazel, and Crosby arrive at the Casa Mona hotel, which has no previous guests in its guestbook. A white man is working on a "huge mosaic" of Mona. Crosby talks to him, concluding that he is a "pissant." John goes up to talk to the man, asking if he is an American; he is. The man is sarcastic in the exchange. He calls Frank Hoenikker a "piece of shit." He reveals that he once wrote a book—this is the book John has been reading on the plane. The man is Philip Castle.

*Philip Castle doesn't suffer any fools, which makes Crosby hate him immediately. The mosaic of Mona is not just representative of Philip's infatuation, but of John's too.*

## CHAPTER 70. TUTORED BY BOKONON

John explains that he is a writer and has come to see Julian Castle, Philip's father. Philip explains that Bokonon was his tutor as a boy, as well as Mona's.

*The main characters on the island are closely interlinked, contributing to the sense that they may be members of John's karass (which, it's worth remembering, is an entirely made-up concept).*

## CHAPTER 71. THE HAPPINESS OF BEING AN AMERICAN

Crosby comes over angrily, asking if Philip is a "beatnik." Philip replies that he is Bokononist; Crosby is shocked, considering that being a Bokononist is against the law: "I believe in obeying the laws of whatever country I happen to be in." He shouts at Philip, before marching over to the hotel lobby to complain about Philip. The desk clerk reveals that Philip owns the hotel.

*Crosby's comical anger embodies the suspicion around young counter-cultural Americans in the mid-20th century, who were thought to be—and sometimes were—attracted to the ideas of Communism. "Beatniks" were young Americans associated with the Beat poets (e.g. Allen Ginsberg). Crosby's statement is patently ridiculous, suggesting that a given nation's laws are the most important thing to obey, rather than any self-developed sense of morality.*

## CHAPTER 72. THE PISSANT HILTON

Hazel and Crosby check out of Casa Mona, calling it "The Pissant Hilton." John goes to his room, which overlooks the Bolivar harbor and the airport. The bed is unmade, and the room has no coat hangers or toilet paper.

*The Crosbys hilarious nickname for Casa Mona implies an interesting point: hotel chains like Hilton try to create the same customer experience in whichever country they choose to venture into. In a way, they are trying to establish small pockets of American/Western sameness in deeply different locations around the world.*

John goes to look for a maid. He opens a door and finds two people pressing their naked feet together. They are shocked to see him and beg him not to tell anyone—otherwise they'll die on the hook. John explains from the present-day that he had just witnessed the Bokononist ritual, "boko-maru"—"the mingling of awareness." He quotes one of the calypsos: "we will touch our feet, yes, yes for all we're worth, and we will love each other, yes, yes, like we love our mother Earth."

*The two people John discovers are engaged in the same act as Mona was earlier. Boko-maru has an air of eroticism, but is also Vonnegut having fun with a pun on soul/sole. The "mingling of awareness" is a blackly comic comment on Vonnegut's general suggestion that humankind is distinctly unaware of the perils of its own behavior.*

## CHAPTER 73. BLACK DEATH

John returns to his room, finding Philip Castle there installing a roll of toilet paper. Philip complains about the hotel, wondering why he built it. He says he had to choose between being "a hermit" or opening a hotel.

*Philip clearly feels disenfranchised, because he no longer buys into either the myths of America or the myths of San Lorenzo. He is a distinctly absurdist figure.*

John asks Philip about his upbringing at Julian Castle's hospital, and more generally about Julian's character. Philip describes his father as "funny." He tells a story about a time when the bubonic plague came to San Lorenzo. Fourteen hundred people died horrific deaths in the space of ten days.

*This story represents one of the peaks in the novel's absurdist humor.*

The story is interrupted by a phone call to the room; Philip didn't realize the phones were connected yet. On the phone, Frank tells John in a panic that he needs him to come to his house immediately.

*The fact that the phone rings even though Philip hadn't connected it is a little comic detail that reminds the reader that this is a novel about humanity, not realism.*

Philip goes back to the story. After trying to treat the plague victims, Julian and Philip walked through the hospital, finding dead body after dead body. Julian was giggling. He made his torchlight dance over the dead bodies and said to Philip: "Son … someday this will all be yours."

*Julian's behavior is obviously absurd, but it masks a deeper point. Julian represents one view of humanity, which is that each generation merely passes on the baton of misery to the next; this contrasts with the alternative view put forward by some of the other characters: that the human race is on an upward historical arc of progress.*


## CHAPTER 74. CAT'S CRADLE

John goes to Frank's house in a cab, on the slope of Mount McCabe. The house was designed by Mona's father, Nestor Aamons, and has a terrace over a waterfall. Frank is not yet home, so Stanley, Frank's servant, shows John to his room.

*Vonnegut comically delays John's conversation with Frank, despite the urgency with which Frank begged John to come to the house.*

The only person in the house is Newt, whom John finds on the terrace. Newt, asleep in a chair, has been working on a painting, which is "small and black and warty." John wonders if it represents "human futility." Newt wakes up and explains that the painting is a **cat's cradle**. He says it's no wonder kids grow up crazy; adults show them a bunch of string and call it a cat's cradle—but there's "no damn cat, and no damn cradle."

*Newt's painting is not aesthetically pleasing, but in its ugliness seems to John to represent the meaninglessness of human effort. Newt foregrounds the meaning of the cat's cradle symbol: it shows humankind's immense talent for increased complexity (be it scientific, social or cultural) but is ultimately an illusion or trick.*

## CHAPTER 75. GIVE MY REGARDS TO ALBERT SCHWEITZER

Angela comes back to the house, with Julian Castle, who is wearing a white linen suit and has a "scraggly moustache." John tells him that he has heard Julian is a follower of "Albert Schweitzer"; Julian retorts that John should tell Albert, if he ever meets Dr. Schweitzer, that he is no hero of his.

*Julian has the typical garb of a westerner in the jungle. Albert Schweitzer was a philosopher and Christian missionary who made many ventures into Africa in order to convert people (though he was also critical of the behaviors of colonialists).*


## CHAPTER 76. JULIAN CASTLE AGREES WITH NEWT THAT EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS

Julian squints at the painting; John asks him what he thinks of it. Julian hypothesizes that it might be hell; John explains it's meant to be a **cat's cradle**. Angela calls it ugly. John talks about the significance of the cat's cradle, causing Julian to call it a "picture of the meaninglessness of it all." He tells John to quote him: "man is vile, and man makes nothing worth making, knows nothing worth knowing." He picks up the painting and tosses it into the waterfall.

*Julian embodies the bleakest assessment of humankind's worth in the novel. His comment is in line with the absurdist idea that life is inherently meaningless.*

## CHAPTER 77. ASPIRIN AND BOKO-MARU

John asks Julian about "Papa" Monzano's wellbeing. Julian explains that he and "Papa" don't speak, because "Papa" "doesn't like the way we treat the whole patient," and because his hospital administers the last rites of Bokononism to those patients that want them.

*"Papa" is actually a practicing Bokononist, just like the rest of the islanders. Outlawing Bokononism is just a pretense he keeps up to make the religion seem more exciting for the islanders.*


Julian explains that the last rites involve boko-maru, which he believes "works." He reveals that everyone on the island is a practicing Bokononist.

*The last rites are actually hilarious and absurd, as is revealed later.*

## CHAPTER 78. RING OF STEEL

Julian goes on, saying that Bokonon and McCabe threw out the Christian priests when they arrived on the island. They "cynically and playfully" came up with a new religion. They did so because they realized that "no governmental or economic reform" would improve the lot of the San Lorenzians; "so Bokonon made it his business to provide the people with better and better lies." He also conspired with McCabe to outlaw himself and his religion, thereby making it more exciting for the islanders.

*Everything about Bokononism, then, is a lie. Bokonon and McCabe took Karl Marx's idea that religion is the "opiate of the masses" and ran with it, making Bokononism the "stimulant" of the masses too, in the sense that it provides their daily lives with excitement by virtue of the religion's outlawed status.*

Bokonon also came up with "the hook," having seen something similar at Madame Tussaud's in London. No one died on it in the beginning, explains Julian. McCabe would regularly stage hunts for Bokonon, who hid in the jungle. The fake hunt would result in McCabe declaring that Bokonon had "done the impossible … escaped, had evaporated, had lived to preach another day."

*McCabe and Bokonon were thus engaged in a kind of absurd performance put on for the "benefit" of the islanders. Each time McCabe would "fail" to find Bokonon it would heighten his mythic quality.*


## CHAPTER 79. WHY MCCABE'S SOUL GREW COARSE

Life on the island remained "short and brutish and mean." But the legend of Bokonon made "the happiness of the people grow." Over time, the situation made both McCabe and Bokonon unstable. At this point, McCabe really did start killing people on the hook. McCabe understood that without "the holy man to war against, he himself would become meaningless." "Papa" gets this too. According to Julian, "Papa" ceremoniously kills one person every two years on the hook. Julian says "busy, busy, busy," and admits that he, too, is a Bokononist—and that John will become one.

*The performance turned into a genuine vendetta, and McCabe and Bokonon began to lose sight of what is real. This seems to suggest that conflict is the natural state of humankind, no matter its original good intentions—a distinctly cynical view of the idea of progress.*

## CHAPTER 80. THE WATERFALL STRAINER

Angela, Newt, John, and Julian have cocktails on the terrace. Angela drunkenly complains of how the "world had swindled her father. He gave so much, and they gave him so little." She says that Dr. Hoenikker didn't earn what he deserved; Dr. Breed earned more.

*Dr. Hoenikker gave the world the capacity to destroy itself not once, but twice. That Angela finds this worthy of reward reflects her blind worship of her father and refusal to infuse science with morality.*

Julian points to a small village at the bottom of the waterfall, and explains that the villagers "have a net made of chicken wire" down there. By now, they've probably gathered up Newt's painting, he assumes. Angela grows more hysterical, so Newt implores her to fetch her clarinet.

*The villagers of the island are a notable absence from the book. John rarely speaks to any of them and they are usually talked about in an abstract, collective form.*

When Angela is out of earshot, Newt apologizes on her behalf, explaining that her husband, Harrison C. Conners, is unfaithful and treats her badly. John says he thought they had a happy marriage; Newt responds by making a **cat's cradle** with his hands, asking "see the cat? See the cradle?"

*Angela's marriage is, of course, a sham, based on Conners's desire to acquire the ice-nine technology. Newt re-employs the cat's cradle to signify the difference between illusion and reality.*

## CHAPTER 81. A WHITE BRIDE FOR THE SON OF A PULLMAN PORTER

Angela returns with her clarinet. When she plays—along to a record—John is astonished by the beauty of her playing. Julian quotes a poem from *The Books of Bokonon*: "Tiger got to hunt, / Bird got to fly; / Man got to sit and wonder, "Why, why, why?' / Tiger got to sleep, / Bird got to land; / Man got to tell himself he understand." John says he'd like to see a copy of the book. Julian explains that the only copies of it are made by hand, and Bokonon adds things every day. Newt shouts "religion!" and makes the **cat's cradle** sign again.

*Angela's clarinet playing is a kind of absurd representation human culture. It is beautiful but ultimately feels insignificant compared with the gravity of the book's apocalyptic subject. She is a bit like the band playing as the Titanic went down. Bokonon's poem neatly aligns the novel with absurdist philosophy, especially that put forward by Frenchman Albert Camus. Man wants to understand the world, but the world does nothing to satisfy that desire.*

## CHAPTER 82. ZAH-MA-KI-BO

Frank doesn't appear turn up for dinner. He talks to John on the phone and explains he is keeping "vigil" by "Papa" Monzano's bed. John tries to ask what it is that Frank needs to speak to him about. Frank can only reply, cryptically, that it is about "something you're *going* to do." John asks Frank for a hint; Frank's reply is "Zah-ma-ki-bo." John learns from Julian that this means "fate – inevitable destiny."

*Comically, "Papa" still hasn't died yet. This exchange increases the sense that John's life has taken on a momentum out of his control.*

## CHAPTER 83. DR. SCHLICHTER VON KOENIGSWALD APPROACHES THE BREAK-EVEN POINT

At dinner, Julian explains that "Papa" has cancer of just "about everything." Newt says he would kill himself in that situation; Julian replies that that's what Corporal McCabe did, but reasons that he was worn down by "unrelieved villainy" rather than cancer.

*Julian implies that McCabe's constant need to perform his "villainy" eventually caused him to kill himself.*

John asks who is "Papa" Monzano's doctor; Julian explains that it is Dr. Schlichter von Koenigswald. Dr. Koenigswald was a physician at Auschwitz for the Nazis. He now works at Julian's hospital. If Dr. Koenigswald keeps saving lives at his current rate, says Julian, he will "equal the number of people he let die – in the year 3010." John, from the present-day, says Dr. Koenigswald is another member of his karass.

*Dr. Koenigswald is an utterly absurd figure, trying to atone for committing atrocities against humankind. His banality and his general air of decency is meant to suggest that evil doesn't always arrive with a forked tail and sharp teeth—it can be just as mundane as being nice.*

## CHAPTER 84. BLACKOUT

Later that evening, Julian returns to the hospital. Angela, Newt, and John sit on the terrace overlooking Bolivar. Stanley points out different places on the horizon: the hospital, "Papa" Monzano's palace, and Fort Jesus. Fort Jesus, he explains, is the training camp for San Lorenzo's soldiers.

*Vonnegut has a little joke here at Christianity's expense, naming the military complex on San Lorenzo after Jesus. This is meant to throw the idea of peaceful religion against the fact of humankind's self-destruction into stark contrast.*

A convoy of five "American-made army trucks" with machine gunners arrive at the house. The soldiers start digging "machine-gun pits." They explain that they are acting under orders to "protect the next President of San Lorenzo." John and the others are baffled, as Frank isn't there. Suddenly, a power failure turns all of the lights out on the island.

*John doesn't know at this stage that he is intended as the next president—which is why the convoy has arrived.*

## CHAPTER 85. A PACK OF FOMA

Frank's servants bring the group gasoline lanterns. Angela and Newt tell John that Dr. Hoenikker had a twin brother, who is called Rudolph and makes music-boxes in Switzerland. He also had a sister.

*Dr. Hoenikker's brother serves as a distant figure who reminds the reader that the doctor's intelligence could easily have been put to more harmless use.*

John excuses himself and asks Stanley if there is a copy of *The Books of Bokonon* in the house. Stanley pretends not to know anything about the book, then calls its filth, before fetching a copy for John. John reads about the "Bokononist cosmogony," which involves a conflict between the sun and the moon.

*John is intrigued by Bokononism by this point. Stanley keeps up the pretense that nobody practices Bokononism, but not for long.*

According to Bokonon, the sun, borasisi, held the moon, pabu, in its arms, wanting a "fiery child." But all of the moon's children were cold, which angered the sun, who threw them away. These became the planets. The moon was cast away too, and went to live with her "favourite child, which was Earth." Bokonon calls his own cosmogony "Foma! Lies!"

*The Bokononist cosmogony is unexpectedly beautiful, even if it is complete "foma." This highlights the literary worth of religious texts while undermining their value as "truth." The petty fight between the sun and the moon is also emblematic of humankind's readiness for conflict.*

## CHAPTER 86. TWO LITTLE JUGS

John falls asleep, and is woken by a loud banging. He flees out of the house, as do Newt and Angela. It turns out that the power has returned, and the noise is coming from the radio. Each of them has grabbed certain objects, having believed their lives to be under threat. John has his passport and money, while the two Hoenikkers have "little Thermos jugs," which they seem shocked to be carrying.

*The three characters have gathered the objects they feel are somehow most important to their survival. In fact, these objects are an almost subconscious expression of what each character feels to be most important to them.*

Outside, they see Frank trying to fire up a large motor-generator. He has Mona with him. John, from the present-day, tells the reader that the thermos jugs carried by Angela and Newt contained chips of **ice-nine**. Frank takes John aside to talk, while John lusts after Mona.

*Angela and Newt have thus prioritized ice-nine over all other possessions, because deep down they feel its potential significance to the planet. They don't, however, translate that feeling into one of responsibility.*

## CHAPTER 87. THE CUT OF MY JIB

John talks about Frank, describing him as "pinch-faced child" who speaks "with the timbre and conviction of a kazoo." Frank talks in clichés, such as "I like the cut of your jib!" They go down the waterfall steps and to talk in a cave behind the water, which has tables and bookshelves. The walls are adorned with paintings of "very early man," all fixated on the subject of Mona.

*Frank is trying to take on the vernacular of a leader, though all of his cliché phrases ring hollow and don't seem to suit him. The cave paintings are a reminder that this is a story about the entirety of human history—not just the 20th century.*

Frank tells John that "we need each other." He explains that he has a job offer of sorts for John, which will pay him "a hundred thousand dollars a year." Frank wants him to be the new president. John thinks this is a ridiculous idea.

*This is, of course, a ridiculous idea: John has just arrived and has no depth of knowledge about the country.*

## CHAPTER 88. WHY FRANK COULDN'T BE PRESIDENT

Frank says that he feels that "maturity" means knowing your limitations, and that he is too limited to be the new leader. John, from the present-day, explains that Bokonon calls maturity "a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything." Frank says he isn't good at facing the public.

*In reality, Frank doesn't want the responsibility of being leader—like his father, he doesn't want to be held accountable for his actions and would rather exist in a space free of judgment. Bokonon's quote expresses the absurdist idea that there comes a time in an individual's life when they come to see its meaninglessness.*

## CHAPTER 89. DUFFLE

Frank complains that people used to yell at him, "Hey, X-9, where you going?" He explains that, when he used to go to Jack's Hobby Shop, he was actually "screwing Jack's wife every day," which is why he failed high school. He then begs John to be president.

*Frank is trying to demonstrate his prowess to John, with absurd timing.*

## CHAPTER 90. ONLY ONE CATCH

John starts to open up to the idea of being president but assumes there must be a catch. Frank explains that there is a catch: John would have to marry Mona. It says in *The Books of Bokonon*, explains Frank, that she will marry the next president.

*The "catch" is, of course, no such thing for John. He has been fixated on Mona since he first saw her picture in a magazine.*

## CHAPTER 91. MONA

Frank brings Mona to the cave and leaves her alone with John. John admires her physical beauty, and greets her nervously. She says, "It is not possible to make a mistake," which is a Bokononist greeting used when "meeting a shy person." She says that John can have her, if he wants.

*Mona is a strangely stoic figure who seems to embody the principles of Bokononism—despite the fact that it's entirely made-up. The "courtship" between John and Mona is distinctly unerotic.*

Mona initiates boko-maru with John, saying it will help him. John, from the present-day, tells the reader that he must have slept with "more than fifty-three women," but nothing compared to boko-maru with Mona.

*John's decision to accept the presidency is thus entirely founded on his sexual excitement felt towards Mona.*

## CHAPTER 92. ON THE POET'S CELEBRATION OF HIS FIRST BOKO-MARU

John quotes some of Bokonon's words about boko-maru: "My soles, my soles! / My soul, my soul, / Go there, / Sweet soul; / Be kissed. / Mmmmmmmm."

*Bokonon's absurd poem foregrounds the sole/soul pun, just in case any readers missed it.*

## CHAPTER 93. HOW I ALMOST LOST MY MONA

After boko-maru, John tells Mona that he loves her. She loves him too, she says. He asks if there is "anyone else" in her life, to which she replies "many." And there are many, she says, with whom she performs boko-maru.

*Mona's "love" is not specific to John, but more a general love towards all humanity. But it rings a little hollow, based as it is on the "foma" of Bokononism.*

John tries to order Mona to be his and his alone from now on. Tearfully, she says, "I make people happy. Love is good, not bad." She calls John a "sin-wat," a Bokononist term for "a man who wants all of somebody's love."

*John tries to impose his Western monogamy on Mona. Her belief system is almost aligned with the counter-cultural "free love" of Western youth in the 1960s, though this book slightly predates that movement.*

John asks Mona about her boko-maru with the pilot during the ceremony, and whether she used to perform boko-maru with Philip Castle. She insists she will not marry a sin-wat, saying that Bokononist religion instructs that people should love all others "the same." She asks John what his religion his says; he admits he doesn't have one, asks if he can become a Bokononist. Mona says, "of course," and the two become reconciled, once more saying "I love you."

*Bokononism is on the one hand, then, a kind of radical humanist religion—people should love all other people the same. But it's also a hollow set of principles that its own leader says are lies. This is in keeping with absurdity of the book: the reader will be left wanting if they look for definite principles about what constitutes a good way of living/being.*

## CHAPTER 94. THE HIGHEST MOUNTAIN

At sunrise, Frank drives John to "Papa" so that John can get his blessing. On the way, John admires Mount McCabe, comparing it to the hump of a whale. Frank says that, as far as he knows, nobody has climbed to the mount. They talk about Bokononism; Frank says that the only thing sacred to the religion is "man."

*The "whale" comparison is one of a few allusions to* Moby Dick *in the novel (e.g. John's suggestion that he be called Jonah in the opening chapter). Moby Dick, interestingly, was called a genuine absurdist novel by Albert Camus. It seems less that "man" is "sacred" in Bokononism, and more that man is its only real ingredient.*

## CHAPTER 95. I SEE THE HOOK

Frank and John arrive at "Papa" Monzano's castle. The castle was built by Tum-bumwa, an escaped slave who was once Emperor of San Lorenzo. John sees a hook which is reserved especially for Bokonon, and resolves that, as ruler, he will chop it down.

*John has lofty ideas about liberating Bokonon, which he will quickly let go of.*

## CHAPTER 96. BELL, BOOK, AND CHICKEN IN A HATBOX

Frank and John can't get in right away to see "Papa". His doctor, Dr. Koenigswald, tells them they need to wait half an hour. They wait in a room that was once a torture chamber, and Frank tells John that there is an oubliette installed in the floor.

*An oubliette is a secret dungeon accessible only through a trapdoor. Along with the hook, it's another western torture device that has found its way to San Lorenzo.*

A Christian minister, Dr. Vox Humana, is on-hand to administer to "Papa" Monzano's "spiritual needs." On a table in front of him he has laid out "a brass dinner bell," a bible, a hatbox containing a tranquilized chicken, and a butcher's knife. Dr. Humana explains that "he had to feel his way along with Christianity, since Catholicism and Protestantism had been outlawed along with Bokonon." Accordingly, he has to "make up a lot of new stuff."

*A vox humana is a part of an organ that supposedly contributes to a sound similar to the human voice. The minister's collection of strange objects is meant to reflect on the forgotten strangeness of the objects important to real religions. Likewise, the threat of the chicken and the knife are suggestive of the violent potential of religious conflict.*

## CHAPTER 97. THE STINKING CHRISTIAN

Dr. Koenigswald leads John and Frank in to see "Papa". The dictator is in a bed made of "a golden dinghy"; it is the lifeboat that once brought him and Bokonon ashore. "Papa" is clearly in a lot of pain. He is wearing a necklace with a cylinder on the end, which, at the time, John thinks is a "magic charm." Present-day John tells the reader that it actually contains **ice-nine**.

*The golden dinghy is part of the Bokonon myth. The fact that the island's dictator, who allegedly presides over a society that is distinctly anti-Bokononism, sits in Bokonon's boat demonstrates the fun Vonnegut has with making his characters contradictory and hypocritical. Present-day John reminds the reader of the impending sense of doom relating to ice-nine.*

"Papa" keeps whispering hoarsely, saying "goodbye" and "**ice**." Dr. Koenigswald is slightly baffled, as whenever they bring him ice he doesn't seem to want it. "Papa" croaks that it doesn't matter who is president. He tells John to "get Bokonon" and kill him. and to apologize on his behalf that he never killed Bokonon. He says Bokonon "teaches the people lies," and that John and Frank should teach them science, because "science is magic that *works*."

*"Papa", of course, is referring to ice-nine. His instructions to John are again entirely contradictory, considering in the next few moments he asks for the Bokononist last rites. His quote about science embodies the naïve idea that science can be separate from morality.*

"Papa" falls silent before asking for the last rites. But he doesn't want them from Dr. Humana, instead proclaiming that he is a Bokononist and wants the appropriate rites from that religion.

*Dr. Humana is rendered useless, and "Papa" is revealed to be a Bokononist—just like everyone else.*

## CHAPTER 98. LAST RITES

John witnesses the last rites, administered by Dr. Koenigswald—who is not completely sure how they go. Even though he's a scientist, he says "I will do anything to make a human being feel better, even if it's unscientific." Dr. Koenigswald gets into position to perform boko-maru with "Papa".

*Here, Koenigswald expresses a relatively noble sentiment towards alleviating the suffering of others. The only problem is, he used to be a Nazi physician. Just like every other moment in the novel in which there seems to be a move towards a moral position, it's undercut by the absurdism of the situation.*

## CHAPTER 99. DYOT MEET MAT

The rites are conducted in the Bokononist dialect, which John translates for the reader. This litany expresses the story of humankind's creation, which starts with God, having made "the hills, the sea, the sky, the stars," making some of the world's mud "sit up" and become human.

*In the Bokononist religious structure, man is no more important than mere mud. Mud, of course, ties in with the original purpose of ice-nine—to solve the problem of mud faced by US marines. The apocalypse brought by ice-nine thus solves the "problem" both types of mud—literal and metaphorical.*

Dr. Koenigswald continues. The mud praised God's creation, and feels "very unimportant" in comparison. But human mud should be grateful for getting to "sit up and look around," as most mud never got to do so.

*This ties in with humankind's longing for meaning, which Vonnegut suggests is most often a fruitless task.*

## CHAPTER 100. DOWN THE OUBLIETTE GOES FRANK

With the rites concluded, "Papa" still doesn't die just yet. John asks Frank about when they should announce his presidency. Frank insists it is up to him; he will take care only of more technical issues, like the repairing the power plant and staging an air show that afternoon. The show is for the "Day of the Hundred Martyrs to Democracy" and will involve six planes shooting at targets in the water. Frank tells John that he's the boss, and John feels like Frank is "escaping human responsibilities" by "going down a spiritual oubliette."

*Frank is well along his journey of abdicating himself of all responsibility for the events to follow. John, absurdly, finds himself facing up to being in charge.*

## CHAPTER 101. LIKE MY PREDECESSORS, I OUTLAW BOKONON

John writes a speech for his inauguration. He feels that in writing it he has to "lean on God." He considers inviting Bokonon to join his government, "bringing about a sort of millennium for the people."

*John, like Bokonon and McCabe, has noble intentions at the start to improve the lot of the islanders. It's worth remembering that John only converted to Bokononism to impress Mona.*

John realizes that, if he did bring Bokonon back, he'd have to then improve the lives of the inhabitants: "good things for all to eat … nice places to live … good schools … good health and good times for all." He concludes that he can't provide these and that "good and evil" will have to remain "separate." Guests begin to arrive for the ceremony and John walks to the uppermost battlement of the castle, looking out over his guests, servants, the cliff and "my lukewarm sea."

*Like "Papa" and Bokonon before him, John quickly sees that improving the lot of his people is impossible, and that he will need to rely on the myth of good and evil to rule effectively.*

## CHAPTER 102. ENEMIES OF FREEDOM

All the passengers from the plane are part of the ceremony crowd. John, from the present-day, tells the reader they are "almost all dead now." A buffet is laid out, with barracuda, crabs and "bite-sized cubes of boiled albatross." An alcoholic drink made from acetone is served in coconut shells.

*The food and drink mirror the occasion itself in that they are presented ceremonially but in truth are a bit strange. The albatross is a harbinger of doom (e.g. in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Coleridge.) Acetone is a solvent—not something desirable to drink.*

Crosby drinks the rum, looking out at the cardboard targets in the sea. Each of these is a significant figure from history. Hazel spots "Hitler … old Mussolini and some old Jap." There are also cutouts of Karl Marx and Chairman Mao. Crosby says, "they got practically every enemy that freedom ever had out there."

*Crosby doesn't miss a chance to drink. He and Hazel present a naïve, simplified account of the world bases on America being the good guy, battling valiantly against its evil enemies. Marx is perhaps unfairly targeted given he was never a dictator/authoritarian.*

## CHAPTER 103. A MEDICAL OPINION ON THE EFFECTS OF A WRITER'S STRIKE

John observes that none of his guests know that he is to be president, or how close to death "Papa" is. Philip puts it to John that he might call "a general strike of all writers until mankind finally comes to its sense." John doesn't agree with this idea, asking Julian how people would die when "deprived of the consolations of literature." Julian says either by "putrescence of the heart or atrophy of the nervous system."

*Here, Vonnegut turns his absurdist satire back on himself and the reader. Just as religion, science and government have been exposed as deeply flawed, literature and art fares no better.*

## CHAPTER 104. SULFATHIAZOLE

Mona largely ignores John but speaks to the other guests. Present-day John ponders "the meaning of that girl," wondering if she represents "the highest form of female spirituality" or "a cold fish."

*Mona is a paradox. She could be interpreted as a stoic being, spiritually advanced enough to quietly accept the flaws of those around her—or she is just genuinely detached from care.*

John, as a leader, feels newfound respect for Crosby and wants the bicycle factory to be built. Julian tells him the inhabitants are interested in only three things: "fishing, fornication, and Bokononism." John asks if they'd be interested in progress; only in the "electric guitar," replies Julian.

*Julian's speech to John is comically absurd, but the point is to ask whether what he's saying can apply to humankind generally. Perhaps all people are really driven by is reproduction, survival, and needing something to believe in.*


John rejoins Frank, Hazel, and H. Lowe Crosby. Frank is explaining to them that Bokonon is "against science," which Crosby can't understand. Hazel asks her husband for the name of the substance that once saved his life, which he tells her is "sulfathiazole."

*Crosby equates science with progress. Sulfathiazole is an antimicrobial drug less common these days.*

## CHAPTER 105. PAIN-KILLER

Having unthinkingly eaten some of the albatross, John searches for a bathroom, feeling sick. He bumps into Dr. Koenigswald, who seems very worried. He explains that "Papa" took whatever was in the cylinder necklace, and is now dead. He says it seems to have turned him into "cement."

*The reader knows by this point that "Papa's" necklace contained ice-nine, and thus can sense the arrival of the ensuing catastrophe.*


John goes to see the body of "Papa" Monzano, which is transfixed and stiff. His eyes are "glazed with a blue-white frost." John, from the present-day, says that this "syndrome is no novelty now," but it was then. "Papa" had taken **ice-nine**.

*John's interjection from the present-day clues the reader up on the terrible consequences to come from the release of ice-nine; it's just a case of waiting to see how, not if, the disaster happens.*


## CHAPTER 106. WHAT BOKONONISTS SAY WHEN THEY COMMIT SUICIDE

Dr. Koenigswald explains that "Papa" had been raving about "pain, ice, Mona," before saying "now I will destroy the whole world." This is what Bokonists say before they commit suicide. Dr. Koenigswald goes to wash his hands, but they are contaminated with ice-nine and freeze the water. He touches the tip of his tongue and immediately freezes solid and crashes to the floor. "At last," says present-day John, "I had seen **ice-nine**!"

*The Bokononist suicide phrase is deeply ironic here. Its content is not meant to be literal—suicide equates to the destruction of the individual's world, but not the world itself. In this case, however, it's uncannily accurate. Dr. Koenigswald ramps up the dangerous atmosphere that surrounds ice-nine.*

## CHAPTER 107. FEAST YOUR EYES!

John lets the Hoenikker siblings into "Papa" Monzano's room, knowing that he is in the presence of **ice-nine**. He confronts them about the ice-nine, sure that Frank must have given it to "Papa", and that Angela and Newt must have some too. Newt throws up.

*John realizes what's been going on—the Hoenikker children have all kept ice-nine in their possession. Newt's visceral reaction is in proportion to the gravity of the situation.*

## CHAPTER 108. FRANK TELLS US WHAT TO DO

All Angela can say in response to what she is seeing is 'Uck." Newt, looking down at the deceased Dr. Koenigswald, says that what's happened is "like the dog" on the night Dr. Hoenikker died, but doesn't clarify what he means. Newt asks Frank if he gave "Papa" the **ice-nine**, and if the promise of ice-nine was how he got "this fancy job" on San Lorenzo. Frank is visibly distressed, before saying, "we've got to clean up this mess."

*Angela is appropriately speechless as she is not able to take any responsibility for what's happening. And, in a way, no-one in the novel is directly responsible for the release of ice-nine. Responsibility is shared out and dissipated until it ceases to exist.*

## CHAPTER 109. FRANK DEFENDS HIMSELF

John asks Frank, as his "general," how he proposes to clean up "this mess." Frank suggests they sweep up the big pieces **ice-nine**, melt them in a bucket, and blowtorch "every square inch of floor with a blowtorch, in case there are any crystals." In an eureka moment, he proposes that they burn the bodies on a funeral pyre by the hook.

*Considering the devastating simplicity of ice-nine, the reader senses that this clean-up operation is doomed to failure (and has been informed as much by John throughout). These actions therefore have an air of desperation—it's too late.*

As Frank goes to leave in order to fetch the tools they need, Angela asks, "How *could* you give it to a man like "Papa" Monzano?" Contemptuously, Frank says that he's acted in the same as she did to get a "tomcat husband," and Newt did to buy "himself a week … with a Russian midget" (Zinka).

*The truth about the Hoenikkers is exposed—each of them used ice-nine for personal gain.*

## CHAPTER 110. THE FOURTEENTH BOOK

Sometimes, John tells the reader, the "pool-pah" (the Bokononist term for "shit-storm") is beyond the "power of humans to comment." John realizes that, with Angela and Newt also having traded **ice-nine** for personal gain, the American and Soviet governments must have its technology too. Angela, trying to defend Newt, says that Zinka stole ice-nine from him; he didn't give it to her.

*The brilliance of Vonnegut's absurdity is that it is totally grounded in factual reality. At the height of the cold war, with the two great powers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, both possessing nuclear capabilities, there was a genuine fear that the human race might annihilate itself. For Vonnegut, fact is stranger than fiction.*

John wonders, "what hope can there be for mankind … when there are such men as Felix Hoenikker to give such playthings as **ice-nine** to such short-sighted children as almost all men and women are?" He recalls a question from *The Fourteenth Book of Bokonon*, which asks "What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?" The answer is "Nothing," and this question and answer constitute the entire fourteenth book.

*Substitute "atomic bomb," or "hydrogen bomb," for "ice-nine" and the predicament outlined by John is utterly real. The fourteenth book of Bokonon encapsulates the idea that humankind is inherently hopeless.*

## CHAPTER 111. TIME OUT

Frank returns with "brooms and dustpans, a blowtorch, a kerosene hot plate, and a good old bucket and rubber gloves." They all put gloves on, before heating up the bucket with the hot plate and melting chunks of **ice-nine** inside. They sweep and blowtorch the floor.

*The clean-up operation begins, which has an absurd air of domesticity about it.*

John asks Frank, Newt, and Angela to tell him about the story of the dog on the Christmas Eve that Dr. Hoenikker died. The dog was a friendly black Labrador, they explain. All day long Dr. Hoenikker had been "teasing them with hints about **ice-nine**," showing them a bottle with a foreboding label. He had been playing games in the kitchen with water, ice-nine and pots and pans. He left a mess in the kitchen, probably planning to clean it later (but then died).

*Dr. Hoenikker's behavior demonstrates that he really did like any adult sense of responsibility, playing with ice-nine like a child. If it had got into the water supply, for example, the world's water would have frozen even sooner than it does.*

## CHAPTER 112. NEWT'S MOTHER'S RETICULE

Continuing the story, Angela says she assumed Dr. Hoenikker was just sleeping in his chair, but was dead. While she decorated the Christmas tree, Newt and Frank came in with the dog. Frank wiped some water of the floor with a rag, and threw it in the pan, which contained **ice-nine**. It turned into something like a "finely-woven gold mesh." Frank held down the pan nine for Newt to see, thinking it was cake frosting. Newt likens the ice-nine to his "mother's reticule." As he did so, the dog licked the rag and "froze stiff." Newt went to tell his father, and found that "his father was stiff, too."

*The dog is representative of the innocent victims of war and technological advances in the instruments of war. Dead people in the novel often have their "stiffness" emphasized, underlining the physical fact of their deadness in an unsentimental way.*

## CHAPTER 113. HISTORY

The group finish cleaning up "Papa" Monzano's bedroom. They still need to burn the bodies but decide to wait till after the "Hundred Martyrs to Democracy ceremony." They hide Dr. Koenigswald in a clothes closet.

*The situation quickly descends into farce. The most devastating material known to humankind is on the brink of being released, but outside there is a ceremony celebrating the sacrifice of 100 San Lorenzians in service of "good."*

Angela, Newt, and Frank talk about how they divided up Dr. Hoenikker's **ice-nine** on the day he died; at the time, "there was no talk of morals." They carefully put pieces of ice-nine into three Mason jars. The dead dog, says Frank, was put in the oven: "it was the only thing to do." John quotes Bokonon: "History! Read it and weep!"

*Angela's quote neatly sums up the central message of the book: there is no talk of morals. Bokonon's quote, too, is an encapsulation of the book's message: the history of humanity is the history of suffering.*

## CHAPTER 114. WHEN I FELT THE BULLET ENTER MY HEART

John goes back up to the top of the castle and looks out over the ceremony guests and the scenery. He tells Frank to tell Minton to deliver his speech. Minton decides not to follow his planned speech, but to "do a very un-ambassadorial thing" and speak about how he really feels.

*Minton is supposed to through the motions expected of him but has other ideas (unwittingly appropriate to what's going on unbeknownst to him). Or, perhaps, this is the way he always delivers similar speeches—Vonnegut provides no heroes or feel-good messages.*

Minton calls those that have lost their lives in war "children," not men—because he himself lost his own son in World War Two (the same war). He says his "soul insists that I mourn not a man but a child." They do die "like men," he continues, which makes possible "the manly jubilation of patriotic holidays."

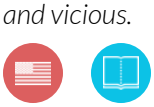
*Minton echoes the thoughts of John in the previous chapter—that, if humanity itself were a human being, it would still be a child. This speech has gravitas and profundity, but these qualities can never be fully trusted in the novel.*

Minton says that the best way they can all honor the war dead is by spending the day thinking about what killed them: "the stupidity and viciousness of all mankind." Perhaps they should all "go on all fours all day long and grunt like pigs," because his would be a better tribute than flags and military demonstrations.

*Minton argues that this kind of ceremony is a sham, unbefitting the reality of war and suffering. They would do better to remind themselves of their animal nature, he suggests, rather than pretending that they have advanced.*

Minton says that a military show is only a fitting tribute if everyone is "working consciously and tirelessly to reduce the stupidity and viciousness of ourselves and all mankind." He recites a poem which includes the lines: "When I felt the bullet enter my heart / I wished I had staid at home and gone to jail … Instead of running away and joining the army."

*This is a poem (by Edgar Lee Masters) that strikes at the heart of patriotism and nationalism, wondering, as many did after the world wars, what it means to die for a country. Minton's speech is fairly in line with the overall thrust of the book: that humankind is stupid and vicious.*



Minton asks what it means to die "for one's country … any country at all." He says people shouldn't think about countries, but "peace … brotherly love … plenty." If man were "kind and wise," the world would be a "paradise." As a representative "of the peace-loving people of the United States," he says that he honors San Lorenzo's war dead, and casts a wreath into the sea. The six military planes head toward the gathering.

*Minton's words seem so simple, and yet so impossible to enact. Kindness and wisdom would equate to peace, he seems to say—but nothing in the book suggests that this can happen. The military planes' approach signals the arrival of the book's apocalypse.*

## CHAPTER 115. AS IT HAPPENED

John stands next to Crosby to watch the flyover. Suddenly, one of the planes goes up in flames as it approaches the island; it spirals into the cliff below and explodes. This causes a rockslide, bringing down one tower of "Papa" Monzano's castle. The crowd look on in astonishment.

*Though this is the obvious beginning of the calamitous events that bring ice-nine into contact with the sea, the behavior of the Hoenikkers started the process long before. It's fitting that it's a ceremony—a demonstration of civility and might—is the accidental cause of the destruction.*

The rock slides continue, and a great crack emerges in the ground. The crowd race to get across the crack. John, Philip, and Frank help Hazel and H. Lowe Crosby to safety, but Claire and Horlick Minton refuse their help: "My guess is that they were thinking of dignity, of emotional proportion above all else." The Mintons float off on the split of rock, holding hands and facing the sea. Their rock crashes down into the water.

*The Mintons don't wish to scramble for their lives, instead lending the proceedings their symbolic deaths. The crack in the ground riffs on the biblical prophecy that Armageddon will be signaled by a similar seismic event.*

## CHAPTER 116. THE GRAND AH-WHOOM

A great chasm opens in front of John, which he briefly considers jumping into. As he steps away, parts of the castle fall in. The contents of "Papa" Monzano's room plunge into the hole, including "Papa" himself in his golden boat. John closes his eyes and hears a sound "like that of the gentle closing of a portal as big as the sky, the great door of heaven being closed softly." He describes this as a grand "AH-WHOOM." Opening his eyes, he sees that the sea has turned into **ice-nine**. The sky darkens and is filled with tornadoes, likened to "worms."

*The apocalypse arrives as "Papa" Monzano's body makes contact with the sea. The sound is that of practically all the world's waters freezing into its ice-nine state. This throws the weather system into instant disarray, highlighting the fragile balance of different factors required to sustain life on earth.*

## CHAPTER 117. SANCTUARY

With the tornadoes travelling menacingly overhead, the people flee in different directions. Crosby and Hazel cry out "American! American!" towards the tornadoes.

*The Crosbys' absurd cry, as if tornadoes recognize national identity, demonstrates how much they depend upon their status as Americans.*

John and Mona take shelter in one of "Papa" Monzano's other rooms, the wall and the roof now gone. John opens the manhole cover of the oubliette, and the two of them take shelter. The room has a tank of water, a chemical toilet, cases of food and alcohol, and a set of *The Books of Bokonon*. John opens a can of chicken soup.

*John and Mona enter into survival mode. They are effectively in a bunker, which notably contains religious books and alcohol along with more vital supplies. This suggests human reliance on items that dull the anxiety and pain of mere existence.*

## CHAPTER 118. THE IRON MAIDEN AND THE OUBLIETTE

During John and Mona's first twenty-four hours in the oubliette, tornadoes rattle overhead. John tries the radio, but there is no sign of life—which present-day John tells the reader is still the case. He imagines that the tornadoes are strewing **ice-nine** everywhere, destroying all life.

*The reader thus becomes aware that the entire text is written in John's post-apocalyptic days. The tornadoes would spread ice-nine to any body of water not connected to the great seas and oceans (e.g. lakes and reservoirs).*

John looks in *The Books of Bokonon* for comfort. The first book implores the reader to close the book, as everything contained within is "foma" (lies). It retells the Bokonon story of creation, in which man asks God for the "purpose" of the world. God questions if there should be a purpose, to which man says "certainly." God then tells man to think of one for himself.

*Humankind's purpose is its own to divine. Though the Bokononist scriptures often seem quite wise, they are built on their own profession of uncertainty and falsehood. Only lies can bring humans comfort, they seem to suggest.*

John and Mona have separated beds; Mona is not interested in sex with John; present-day John implies that they did have sex, but that Mona was "repulsed." Mona says that "it would be very sad to have a little baby now," which John agrees with "murkily."

*Mona's point is that it would be unfair to bring a baby into a world so full of devastation. John's sexual desires seem absurd in this end-of-times scenario.*

## CHAPTER 119. MONA THANKS ME

John rides a bicycle in the room that makes the fan move, while making up a tune to a verse by Bokonon that says, "we do, doodely do, doodely do, doodely, do / What we must, muddily must, muddily must, muddily must." John mentions to Mona that humans breath in oxygen and breath out carbon dioxide, telling her that it is "science."

*Both Bokonon's nonsense verse and John's vain attempt to talk about science add to the absurdity of the situation. John talks about the basics of human life, highlighting that the humanity has been reduced to a state of "post-civilization."*

On the fourth day, John peeks out of the oubliette's manhole and sees that the outside world has "somewhat stabilized," but in a "wildly dynamic" way. The sky is still full of tornadoes, but they seem subdued.

*There is a kind of reverse cosmogony at play—while, as the story goes, God created the world that man inhabits over the course of a week, man's actions undo it all almost instantly. Vonnegut deliberately has John and Mona hide for a week to highlight this very point.*

Three days later, with the tornadoes hanging high in the air but no longer posing a threat, John and Mona venture outside. Every step John takes makes "a gravelly squeak in blue-white frost." John says to Mona that "death has never been quite so easy to come by"—all anyone would need to do is touch the floor and then touch their lips. Mona calls "Mother Earth" a bad mother. They search for other life, but find none.

*The ground is infected with ice-nine everywhere that John and Mona step. Mother Earth, of course, has nothing to do with what's happened. John and Mona are like an absurdist Adam and Eve, seemingly doomed to live in their grotesque paradise alone.*

By the palace gate, John reads something that has been newly written on the wall in white paint, a quote from Bokonon: "someday, someday, this crazy world will have to end, / And our God will take things back that He to us did lend. / And if, on that sad day, you want to scold our God, / Why go right ahead and scold Him. He'll just smile and nod."

*Bokonon portrays God, who he doesn't believe in anyway, as a kind of morally ambivalent trickster. God, he reasons, doesn't care what humans do with the world. The wider point is that, whatever Armageddon humans reap upon themselves, chances are that the world will go on after without us. Also, God taking no responsibility echoes the unwillingness of any of the book's characters to take ownership of what has happened.*

## CHAPTER 120. TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

John recalls an advertisement for "a set of children's books called *The Book of Knowledge*." In this, a child asks his father why the sky is blue, with the ad suggesting that the answers can be found in the product. John thinks that, if he was with "a daddy," he would have many questions in his current situation, e.g. "why are all the trees broken? ... what makes the sky so sick and wormy?" John realizes he is "better qualified" than anyone else to answer such questions, if anyone else is even alive.

*This ties in with the idea of humanity as child-like, in the sense that it has not yet grown up. The book mentioned was a real encyclopedia for children published between 1912 and 1965. Its mention is intended to highlight that, for all humankind's advances in knowledge, in other ways it is as violent and brutish as ever.*

As John and Mona walk, John wonders where they'll find the dead. He has a resurgent feeling of wanting to climb Mount McCabe. Then they come across a "natural bowl" in the land, in which "thousands and thousands" of people lie dead. Their lips are frosted with **ice-nine**. John reasons that they must have taken shelter there, before opting to poison themselves. Many of them appear to have died during boko-maru.

*The anonymity of the dead is hauntingly reminiscent of civilian casualties caught up in war. There is something indiscriminate about the way they are piled up together, perhaps reminding the reader of the Holocaust. Their religion, built entirely on lies, seems to have been their last comfort.*

By the dead, there is a note signed by Bokonon. It says that the people in the bowl survived the "freezing of the sea," and made "a captive of the spurious holy man named Bokonon." They had demanded guidance from him; he had advised that God was trying to kill them, and that they "should have the good manners to die"—which they did.

*Bokonon took his absurdism to its extreme limit, by interpreting the storms as a sign from God (in whom he does not believe). He seems to have a dastardly taste for the increase of his myth, which this neatly fits into.*

## CHAPTER 121. I AM SLOW TO ANSWER

John and Mona can't see any sign of Bokonon. John is outraged at the "gall of the man." Mona laughs, saying that "it's all so simple." She asks if John would wish any of the dead people to be alive again. She touches her finger to the ground, raises it to her lips, and dies.

*Mona doesn't share John's outrage. She essentially points to the meaninglessness of life as a cosmic joke, and takes that as instruction for her to join the other suicides.*

Present-day John says he doesn't remember if he wept, but that Crosby, Hazel, and Newt now came to his aid in Bolivar's "one taxicab." In the taxi, Hazel tells John not to worry as he is with "mom" now. He leans on her with "deep, idiotic relief."

*It transpires that there were other survivors. John, shaken by events, is relieved to be comforted, even if it is in a "deep" and "idiotic" way.*

## CHAPTER 122. THE SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON

Crosby, Hazel, and Newt take John back in the taxi-cab to what is left of Frank's house by the waterfall. All that's left is the cave behind the waterfall, which is now "a sort of igloo under a translucent, blue-white dome of **ice-nine**." Those apart from John and Mona initially took shelter in a dungeon of the palace.

*The title of this chapter is a reference to the book of the same name, in which a family is shipwrecked but manages to survive on a desert island before their eventual rescue. The situation in that book is much more hopeful and idyllic than the one faced here.*

Frank has painted white stars and "U.S.A." on the taxi-cab; he left the paint somewhere, which was then used by someone else to write the poem John saw by the palace gate. John assumes Angela, Philip, and Julian are dead, but doesn't want to ask how yet.

*Frank, who is no longer a U.S. citizen, seems to revert to type, employing the hollow symbols of his home country.*

As he rides in the cab, John is surprised by the "gaiety" of the others. Hazel explains: "wait until you see how we live. We've got all kinds of good things to eat. Whenever we want water, we just build a campfire and melt some. The Swiss Family Robinson – that's what we call ourselves."

*Hazel seems totally ignorant of the immense destruction that has just been brought to bear on humanity.*

## CHAPTER 123. OF MICE AND MEN

Present-day John explains that "a curious six months followed – the six months in which I wrote this book." In these six months, he and the others have an "easy" way of living that "is not without a certain Walt Disney charm." No other life has survived, but all the animals and fruits are frozen and thus provide easy access to sustenance.

*Walt Disney is, of course, strongly associated with America, and Vonnegut's mention of him is highly ironic. The destruction of life has meant a temporary world of plenty for the survivors.*

Hazel stitches an American flag, though the colors are off and the stars are "six-pointed stars of David rather than five-pointed American stars." Crosby does the cooking for the others, enjoying his role. Frank makes an SOS transmitter that constantly signals for help.

*Like Frank, Hazel clings onto the symbols of Americanism. The wrongness of the flag signifies the misguidedness of her blind faith to America. The whole scene is intended to mimic an idealized suburban scene.*

Hazel asks John how the writing is going, noting that a "lot of famous writers were Hoosiers." She hopes it will be a funny book, and notes how each member the group has their own special skill (Newt paints pictures, John writes, Crosby cooks, etc.). John quotes an old Chinese proverb: "many hands make much work light." Hazel wishes she'd studied the Chinese more, when she had the chance. John quotes Bokonon: "Of all the words of mice and men, the saddest are, 'It might have been.'"

*As John pointed out earlier in the book, grouping people together as "Hoosiers" is a "granfalloon"—a meaningless grouping together. Bokonon's quote is a variation on a poem by John Greenleaf Whitter called "Maud Miller."*

## CHAPTER 124. FRANK'S ANT FARM

John hates to see Hazel finishing the flag because she wants him to put it on the peak of Mount McCabe when it's done. John goes to see Frank, who has constructed an ant farm, which seem to be the only insects that have survived. The ants wind themselves around grains of **ice-nine** to melt it and produce water; this act kills some of them, but allows others to drink water (and eat the ant corpses). Frank admires the ants' talent for "cooperation."

*Hazel wants John to conquer Mount McCabe and claim it for America—of course, it's a wholly pointless thing to do. The survival of the ants is indicative of the fact that, even in a nuclear annihilation that wipes out the human race, some life will probably survive (and then thrive without humans to hold it back). Frank's admiration for their cooperation only highlights the chain of failures that have brought about the world's destruction.*

Frank marvels at the ants, wondering "who *taught* them how to make water." He feels that he has "grown up a good deal," and that people can longer "bluff" him and take advantage of his lack of self-confidence. John suggests glibly that "the mere cutting down of the number of people on earth would go a long way to alleviating your own social problems." Walking away, John remembers a quote from Bokonon: "beware of the man who works hard to learn something, learns it, and finds himself no wiser than before."

*Frank has no sense of moral responsibility for what has happened, even though it was his ice-nine that brought about this situation. Bokonon's quote highlights that the usefulness of knowledge depends on what people do with it. Dr. Hoenikker undoubtedly advanced human knowledge, but he did nothing to advance the race more generally. In fact, it has evidently regressed to a less civilized state.*

## CHAPTER 125. THE TASMANIANS

John goes to see Newt, who is painting "a blasted landscape a quarter of a mile from the cave." Newt asks John to drive him so that he can "forage for paints." As they drive, they both agree that they have no "sex urge left."

*There is, essentially, no point in John or Newt reproducing—they are stranded, and the rest of the world is presumably destroyed. The idea of "foraging" for paints is an ironic mix of high culture and so-called primitivism.*

John recalls something he once read about "aboriginal Tasmanians." They were "encountered by white men" in the 17th century, who found them so "contemptible" that they hunted them "for sport." The aborigines "found life so unattractive that they gave up reproducing." John feels an affinity with that story. Newt observes that "all the excitement in bed had more to do with excited about keeping the human race going than anybody ever imagined."

*In fact, a big driver in the drop in aboriginal Tasmanian reproductivity was the introduction of Western diseases by the colonizers. Newt wonders if life is essentially meaningless, beyond the need for it to propagate.*

Newt also points out that they don't have any women "of breeding age among us," describing Hazel as old "beyond having even a Mongolian idiot." John quotes Bokonon about midgets: "midget, midget, midget, how he struts and winks, / For he knows a man's as big as what he hopes and thinks!"

*Bokonon's quote sums up the idea that humankind has got ideas above its station. It thinks it can control the world, that it is rational, but neither proposition is true. It has inflated sense of purpose.*

## CHAPTER 126. SOFT PIPES, PLAY ON

John cries out about Bokononism: "such a *depressing* religion!" He and Newt talk about utopias. John recalls that Bokonon's seventh book was on the same subject, quoting: "The hand that stocks the drug stores rules the world. Let us start our Republic with a chain of drug stores, a chain of grocery stores, a chain of gas chambers, and a national game. After that, we can write our Constitution." John calls Bokonon a "jigaboo bastard."

*John is exasperated by Bokononism because its pointed criticisms of mankind cut close to the bone. The seventh book of Bokonon takes aim at free market capitalism, something which has escaped relatively—and surprisingly—unscathed within the book. "Jigaboo" is a racist slur. The title of this chapter comes from John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which questions the meaning of human existence and culture.*

John explains how Julian and Philip Castle died. They had set out on foot for the hospital while the tornadoes still raged. Angela died playing her clarinet, which was contaminated with **ice-nine**. "Soft pipes, play on," murmurs John. Newt suggests that John could find "some neat way to die, too." John wants to climb Mount McCabe and place a symbol there, but isn't sure what symbol would be right. As they drive, they go past "an old Negro man," who is alive. John realizes that he has just seen Bokonon.

*Angela dies an absurd death, not lacking in poetry (as Newt points out). The idea of having a "neat" way to die is emblematic of the way that life has come to mean very little—and perhaps never did. It is fitting that, in such a darkly absurd book, one of its main characters only makes a first appearance in the penultimate chapter.*

## CHAPTER 127. THE END

John goes to talk to Bokonon, who is sitting barefoot on a rock, his feet "frosty with **ice-nine**." John asks what Bokonon is thinking; he replies that he is searching for the "final sentence" for *The Books of Bokonon*. John asks what he's come up with.

*Bokonon, in a way, is the book's authority. But throughout his writings he consistently denies his own authority, thereby making this a world without any true authority. By implication, the real world is the same. Furthermore, with nobody left to believe in Bokonon, it is absurd that he is even working on the last pages of his scripture.*

Bokonon, shrugging, hands John a piece of paper. It reads: "if I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe … and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison … and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who."

*Bokonon is given the last words of the actual book that the reader is holding, thus making* Cat's Cradle *conclude in the same way as* The Books of Bokonon. *The statement of humanity's stupidity, then, is the concluding note of Vonnegut's book too.*

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