



# Cat's Cradle

*Kurt Vonnegut*

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**Cat's Cradle** Kurt Vonnegut

**Told with deadpan humour and bitter irony, Kurt Vonnegut's cult tale of global destruction preys on our deepest fears of witnessing Armageddon and, worse still, surviving it ...**

Dr Felix Hoenikker, one of the founding 'fathers' of the atomic bomb, has left a deadly legacy to the world. For he's the inventor of 'ice-nine', a lethal chemical capable of freezing the entire planet. The search for its whereabouts leads to Hoenikker's three eccentric children, to a crazed dictator in the Caribbean, to madness. Felix Hoenikker's Death Wish comes true when his last, fatal gift to humankind brings about the end, that for all of us, is nigh...

## Cat's Cradle Details

Date : Published 1999 by Penguin (first published 1963)

ISBN : 9780140285604

Author : Kurt Vonnegut

Format : Paperback 306 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Science Fiction, Humor, Literature

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## From Reader Review Cat's Cradle for online ebook

### Lyn says

Vonnegut's best?

Many will say that it is and who am I to disagree. It does include all the best elements of Vonnegut in his genius: humor, dark and subtle, and sometimes not subtle at all, irreverence, absurdity blended with realism to create a surrealistic setting where the reader is cautiously intrigued by whatever is going on.

And the messages and themes, of love, relationships, responsibility, both internally and globally. Also, like several of his more endearing works, this one remains thought provoking years after being read, a quasi-morality play that the reader will revisit often and sometimes with little coaxing.

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### Steve says

Another review in the KISS series (Keep It Short, Steve)

In Anne Fadiman's superb book about books called *Ex Libris*, she divides readers into two categories: those who keep their books in pristine condition (courtly lovers) and those who delight in marginalia (carnal lovers). I started out as one of the former (conditioned, no doubt, by fear of library fines), but became one of the latter. *Cat's Cradle* was my first prurient experience, dating back to high school. Part of the reason was that I snagged my copy at a garage sale for a dime – cheap even then. But the real motivation was to highlight this great little rhyme:

*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.*

That one deserved stars, a yellow marker, and the granddaddy of all desecrations – a dog-ear. I liked how it was framed as such a natural conclusion to the activity of thinking. We *tell* ourselves that our efforts to understand have paid off.

If I'm honest, I don't recall much of the book's premise. I remember thinking Vonnegut was one of those cool, sort of counter-cultural writers who wielded his satirical axe well. He may have been a bit darker than Tom Robbins, and less playful with his words, but he was similarly entertaining, incisive and free-wheeling. The book tracks the unusual offspring of the man who invented the A-bomb. They possess a substance called ice-nine that can make water freeze at room temperatures. And you can imagine what might happen if it fell into the wrong hands. The Russians and Americans procured some as did the dictator of a secluded Caribbean island where a religion called Bokononism is practiced despite being illegal and, according to Bokonon himself, based on lies. Still, anything that sells "living by the harmless untruths that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy" will have its appeal.

Vonnegut would poke fun at religion, politics, and just about any other human institution where our base natures hide in some gussied up form. And he may well have had a point. If I remember this cautionary tale correctly, a follow-up poem of my own might apply:

*Monkey got to play, fish got to swim;  
Man got to risk his life to some psycho's whim.  
Monkey got to doze, fish got to coast;  
Man got to rest assured he won't become a ghost.*

And it may give us pause.

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### **Lisa says**

I loved this book!

It turned out to be one of those easy-to-read stories that leave you thinking, and thinking, and thinking. The science fiction aspect of the plot is not important at all. It is the impact of power, knowledge and ritual on every single individual that made me want to restart reading it as soon as I finished. I absolutely adore the creation of Bokononism and the development of a new language to suit the needs of the religion-in-the-making.

Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam experiments with the same kind of post-apocalyptic scenario and the never-ending question of what humanity needs to survive. Of course Vonnegut's vision is a lot darker than Atwood's. Humanity wiped out completely on a whim, no hope of reproducing our species at all, the only question remaining is how to die and what symbol to carry in your hand to show the hated - and hating - creator above.

The experience of being trapped in Dresden as an American prisoner of war during the bombing and destruction of the city might have formed the sense of absurdity that Vonnegut displays in his vision of mankind.

To put it in Bokononist words: the cruel paradox of the heartbreakingly necessary of lying about reality combined with the heartbreakingly impossible of lying about it is at the center of the book. Foma!

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### **David Schaafsma says**

“Live by the harmless untruths that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy.”

Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five, one of the great anti-war novels of all time, is based on Vonnegut's own experience as a soldier during WWII in the bombing and destruction of Dresden. The book is darkly funny, veering into science/speculative fiction, but underneath it all is barely contained rage and despair at the stupidity of the human race, especially with respect to the conduct of war and the destruction of civilians in cities. Cat's Cradle, his fourth novel, continues Vonnegut's rage against the war machine, this time focused on Doctor Irving Langmuir, one of the architects of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

fictionalized in the guise of Dr Felix Hoenikker, whom Vonnegut has constructed a cat's cradle when the bomb is actually dropped. Vonnegut met and talked with Langmuir at one time.

Here's how to make a cat's cradle:

<https://www.wikihow.com/Play-The-Cat%...>

In this book Vonnegut actually structures it as a kind of elaborate (though seemingly random) cat's cradle. As Vonnegut observes, it is a cheat: No cat. No cradle. Just a series of exes, a pattern appearing to be beautiful, but ultimately meaningless, absurd, like Vonnegut's basic philosophy. If bombs are dropped on cities to win wars, life is senseless. Or acts like this are senseless. His books, Vonnegut once said, "are essentially mosaics made up of a whole bunch of tiny little chips. . . and each chip is a joke."

The book begins like Moby Dick: Call me Johan. Johan is writing a book about the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Much of the action takes place on a fictional island, San Lorenzo, with mostly poor people and a dictator. The country follows the Bokonist religion, one that Vonnegut made up. All religion is absurd to Vonnegut, though one principle of Bokonism makes sense to him: All religion is a pack of lies. Vonnegut uses this religion in various books, involving wampeters, granfalloons, karasses, stuppas, and so on. The plot is silly, fun, dark, all of that, but one point has to do with man's relation to technology and science, especially that which loses its connection to people. The threat of nuclear destruction in the Cold War is a major theme. The Cuban Missile Crisis happened in 1962; Vonnegut's book came out in 1963.

"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."

One thing that it looks at are the Books of Bokonin, whose fourteenth book answers the question:

"What can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?"

It doesn't take long to read The Fourteenth Book. It consists of one word and a period. This is it: "Nothing."

Johan concludes his writing: "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."

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### **Ms. Smartarse says**

*Originally published as Cat's Cradle.*

John had "only" wanted to write an account of the day the atomic bomb had dropped over Hiroshima. He had been diligently gathering data for it, even going so far as contacting the chief scientist's youngest son. And what a story *that* avenue had revealed! But... that had been 2 wives, 250,000 cigarettes, 3,000 quarts of booze... and a different religion ago. He's a Bokononist now. A much more sarcastic, realistic-sounding, but

also a shameless lie of a religion. The perfect one, actually, for his current situation... as the reader will find out.

I had heard of this book, back when I first joined GoodReads. I swear, *absolutely everyone* and their pet chihuahua was reading it, *had* read, or was *planning* to do so in the near future. This of course, gave me enough reason to avoid it more eagerly than the plague. I have never been good at literary analysis, nor at reading profound message between the lines, so *COUNT! ME! OUT!* from this rapture.

... but then *last year* I stumbled on a heavily discounted Romanian translation of it, in *hardcover* no less, so I just *had* to buy. And since I *did* buy it, I might as well read it. A year later.

It was... weird. Sort of similar to the Alice in Wonderland brand of weirdness, but without the talking animals, or flamingo croquet bats. And a whole lot more science. That is to say, *talk* about how everything is all science, and thus perfectly easy to understand. Or at least, it should be.

“Magic,” declared Miss Pefko.

“I’m sorry to hear a member of the Laboratory family using that brackish, medieval word,” said Dr. Breed. “Every one of those exhibits explains itself. They’re designed so as not to be mystifying. They’re the very antithesis of magic.”

“The very what of magic?”

“The exact opposite of magic.”

“You couldn’t prove it by me.”

Dr. Breed looked just a little peeved. “Well,” he said, “we don’t want to mystify. At least give us credit for that.”

Then there is also Bokononism, as it slowly grew on me, to the point that I wouldn’t mind converting to it. Even though the author (and Bokonon) warns us at the beginning, that it is in fact a religion based on shameless lies, I couldn’t help but nod along to every Calypso, or anecdote, that the narrator would cite.

### Score: 4.5/5 stars

A lot of the humor and sarcasm was lost in translation. I don’t mean to say that it was (necessarily) poor. Truth be told, I actually suspect the problem may lie with me, who reads much more in English. That, and the fact that I grasp double-entendres much easier in English.

This is why I’m still unsure what rating I should give this book. Did I find it a 5-star master piece, or did I just like it very much (4+ stars)? On the one hand, I read it very fast, and without getting (too) bored. Heck, I even liked its religion a lot, and could see myself adopting it... maybe. Should I manage to put my laziness/comfort aside for long enough to do so.

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## Danger says

I've read this book four times. It's better than the Bible, because unlike the Bible, this book knows it's fiction.

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## Lorenzo Berardi says

There are two voices inside my head. Let's call them Lore and Enzo. At the moment L & E are quarreling on Cat's Cradle.

(...)

- L) Oh come on! This book is wonderful. Perhaps it's the best novel Vonnegut has ever written.
- E) Are you kidding me? Have you read the whole of it?
- L) Of course I've read it from its first word to the very last one.
- E) And haven't you noticed anything strange?
- L) What are you talking about?
- E) I mean, you know, it's a discontinuous novel. I can't deny it has a great beginning, but it gradually loses its brightness reaching the end.
- L) What?! Are you telling me you haven't appreciated the marvellous description of San Lorenzo island and so on?
- E) No, no. The Banana Republic part is ok...but look at the plot!
- L) What's wrong with the plot?
- E) Well..at first the narrator wants to write a book about this eccentric scientist who has planned the atomic bomb.
- L) Yeah. Go on.
- E) And then he decides to interview one of the scientist sons. But as soon as he meets Frank Hoenikker in San Lorenzo he seems to lose all his interest for him.
- L) I disagree! Have you forgotten Ice-Nine?
- E) No, but...
- L) And what about Bokononism? You can't deny that the concept and the teachings of this fake religion link every single chapter of the novel. You can't say it's discontinuous while everything in it is so closely-knit!
- E) That's a point of view. Besides I haven't liked the structure of the novel. More than one hundred chapters..
- L) They're not "chapters" they're more like episodes.
- E) Mmmh...
- L) I think you're not in my karass.
- E) Karass? Actually all that you join are granfalloons.
- L) Foma! Lies! A pack of foma!

Shut up voices! I need a boko-maru right now. Is there anyone who wants to share the soles of her feet?  
Busy, busy, busy.

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## Manny says

Most people have read *Cat's Cradle*, so I won't bother to try and hide spoilers. Did you say you hadn't read it? Well, what are you waiting for? This isn't *Ulysses*, you know, it's short and funny! So, now that it's just us people who know the book, I want to say why I disagree with the criticism you often see, that it's too fragmentary. On the contrary, I think it's very focused, and makes its point with near-perfect economy and wit. There are two obvious themes. One is how the irresponsible use of science to construct ever more deadly weapons is probably going to end up destroying the whole world. The other is a wonderfully crazy take on religion. Each of these themes is satisfying in its own right; what's less clear is that they have anything to do with each other.

Let's look at the first theme. Vonnegut's scarily plausible thesis is that it won't be a question of some madman destroying the world on purpose. I love General Jack T. Ripper in *Doctor Strangelove*, the obvious movie parallel to this book, but I find him somehow less convincing than the series of deranged, helplessly incompetent people in *Cat's Cradle*. Felix Hoenikker, an obvious Asperger's type, invents Ice-9 in response to a casual question from the US military. His three damaged children get hold of the secret, and exploit it for their own petty ends. Plain, charmless Angela sells it to the Americans in exchange for a playboy husband; Newt, the midget, gives it to the Soviets for a dirty weekend on Cape Cod with a tiny Russian dancer; and, fatally, humorless Franklin sells it to "Papa" Monzano, who makes him a Major General in the largely imaginary army of San Lorenzo, a bankrupt state, I believe, loosely based on Haiti and the Dominican Republic. After that, things just proceed by themselves; nothing works in San Lorenzo, so why would you be able to successfully guard a doomsday device? And, sure enough, it gets used completely by accident.

The second theme is presented through Bokononism, a kind of Caribbean version of Christianity, and surely the best fictional religion ever devised. Is there *any* person here who's never tried *boku maru*? (Unfortunately, in real life it doesn't have the effect described in the book. Pity). Bokononism is the one thing that makes life worthwhile for Papa's miserable subjects. Officially, the religion is outlawed; in practice, everyone is a Bokononist, which makes their lives rich and meaningful. Everything about the religion turns out to be a lie, and there is even a technical term, *foma*, for the lies that make up its substance. None the less, Vonnegut succeeds admirably in showing what a good religion it is. The scene where Dr. Schlichter von Koenigswald reads the Bokonist last rites to the dying Papa Monzano is funny, but also moving. I love the line "Nice going, God!", which expresses that particular sentiment with unusual clarity and feeling; it's extremely respectful, while pretending to be the exact opposite.

So, what is the connection between the two themes? I think in fact that Vonnegut tells you straight out, but since he does it at the beginning (a favorite ruse of crime writers), you don't quite notice it. He introduces Bokononism, and recounts its creation myth, which is absurd even by the standards of this magic realist genre. Then he cheerfully tells you that Bokonon himself admits that it's all lies. Finally, he comments, in one of his better-known quotes: "Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either". As already noted, Bokonon's wise lies in fact make an excellent religion.

Here's what I think he means by this. The potential destruction of all life on Earth isn't a very amusing subject. It's so horrifying that you can hardly think about it at all. But Vonnegut manages to present most of the book as a comedy, so that you *are* able to think about it, which we desperately need to do before it's all too late. By making it funny, he is formally lying to us, but these lies are more useful to us than the truth; we're in pretty much the same situation as the San Lorenzans, who couldn't survive without their mendacious

religion.

People during the Cold War were, with good reason, scared shitless that the world was going to end soon in a nuclear holocaust. We came terrifyingly close during the Cuba Missile Crisis. (As Christopher Hitchens says, do you remember where you were the day JFK nearly killed all of us?) There were many books and movies intended to help people relate to what was going on. Some of them just presented the threat straight up, in as realistic a way as they could manage: the version I like most is Shute's *On the Beach*. But I would say that the mirror-reversed ones, like *Cat's Cradle* and *Doctor Strangelove*, were better. It's amazing how powerful a weapon humor is; I feel they did more to help persuade us not to blow ourselves up.

We need these people badly if we're going to stay sane. Can someone point me to a new Vonnegut, who knows how to make us laugh at global warming and the financial meltdown? I'd rather like to read him.

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### **Phrynne says**

I struggled a bit with this one. Kurt Vonnegut's writing is always a little unusual but this book seemed to be excessively disjointed and rambling. I felt my brain wandering off into more interesting thoughts and had to keep rereading bits. Keeping track of all the characters' names was hard too. Not a successful read for me I am afraid.

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### **Ahmad Sharabiani says**

#### 427. Cat's Cradle, Kurt Vonnegut

Cat's Cradle is the fourth novel by American writer Kurt Vonnegut, first published in 1963. It explores issues of science, technology, and religion, satirizing the arms race and many other targets along the way. After turning down his original thesis in 1947, the University of Chicago awarded Vonnegut his master's degree in anthropology in 1971 for Cat's Cradle. At the opening of the book, the narrator, an everyman named John (but calling himself Jonah), describes a time when he was planning to write a book about what important Americans did on the day Hiroshima was bombed. While researching this topic, John becomes involved with the children of Felix Hoenikker, a Nobel laureate physicist who helped develop the atomic bomb. John travels to Ilium, New York, to interview the Hoenikker children and others for his book. ...

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## Jennifer (aka EM) says

This was a difficult re-read. In the flush of youth, when I first read it (at my cynical, pessimistic - and arrogant - peak), every line spoke to me. Now, I am amazed at how flimsy the story, and how brittle and bleak - but oh-so-deeply entrenched - is the cynicism. I don't remember it that way. Today, it made me deeply, almost unbearably sad to think that the world - that I - felt so aligned with the dominant worldview of this novel. It still speaks to me, but it says different things.

I haven't re-read *Slaughterhouse Five*, so can't know right now if I'd have the same response to it, but I can say that in *Cat's Cradle* there is no relief from the pessimism with any of Vonnegut's trademark compassion, humanism or humour, as there is in, for example, *Mother Night* or *Jailbird*, both of which remain enduring favourites of mine upon many re-reads.

All of Vonnegut's novels are, by definition, permeated with a deep pessimism - but most of them offer up at least some slim hope, usually in the form of a single human being's ability to connect with another, or even just need that connection (which at least points to his or her humanity). There is the opportunity for atonement for wrongs done which provides some comfort, if not absolution. There is a sense of humanity's deep flaws, but also its resilience and capacity to love.

There is none of that here.

Here, conversations and human relationships are superficial, cliché-ridden, vapid - even worse, unnecessary. Traditional connections between people are lampooned as *granfalloons* - a gentle and whimsical irony, even the word itself, that betrays a deeper violation of trust and breakdown of social structure.

Science and scientists create world-destroying technologies simply because they can, and because they are so far removed from any connection to humanity, love, a moral or ethical system, that they have no compunction or qualms in doing so.

The drive for conventional sex - as opposed to the Bokononist practice of boku-maru - has evaporated as its only value is not to express love or build intimacy, but for procreation - which dampens desire faster than a cold shower in a post-Ice Nine world. Politics have failed, and are so irrelevant and corrupt that a random stranger who shows up on a remote island is named president because no one else wants the job.

The comfort of religion is non-existent: Bokononism, the closest thing to a spiritual belief system, undermines the need for belief and a sense of purpose, and its own believers, in a layered irony so serpentine it almost sucks itself into an intellectual black hole. Everyone believes in it in secret, which is not secret, although it is punishable by death. Everyone turns to it for comfort in times of both celebration and trauma, and it invariably mocks them with its own meaninglessness.

Published in 1963, this novel is of a time and place (as was I when I first read it) that no longer exists in exactly this form, although it is hauntingly, chillingly contemporary and because written as an allegory, easily transposed. Although this particular *Cat's Cradle*, a metaphor for seeking pattern and meaning with its

added layer of infinite futility, is an allegory for the scientists who first split the atom and the weaponry of mass destruction to which that accomplishment led, it is an end-times scenario that offers maximum flexibility across time and remains disturbingly apt.

Vonnegut's anger at that particular act, those men, that world is palpable - it radiates from the page.

I've written before on goodreads that the difference between today and 1963 is that the dangers we now face - although surely as potentially planet-destroying - are still far enough away to afford us the false comfort of deniability. Not so in 1963. Vonnegut himself had seen the atom bomb deployed. He knew how the world could end, and it was imminent. In *Cat's Cradle*, he is at his most nihilistic - he believes, as the San Lorenzans did after Ice Nine was let loose, that suicide is absolutely the only sane answer in a doomed world.

In short, though its prose barely holds together as a story, and though its humour is so dark as to be invisible (at least to this reader, on this read), this novel's satire is so biting, its cynicism so pervasive, its sense of futility and purposelessness so extreme, that the thing almost felt hot to the touch. As hard as it was to read, it's equally hard not to acknowledge it as a masterpiece.

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## Evgeny says

**A group read with the following wonderful people: Ashley and Erin. Please let me know if I missed somebody.**

Before I start talking about the plot let me give you a piece of advice. If after you finish reading this one the first question that comes to your mind would be , "WTF did I just read?" it is perfectly normal and common. You can imagine now how easy is it to discuss the plot. Anyhow, Dr. Felix Hoenikker happened to be one of the founding 'fathers' of the atomic bomb. The MC named John (whose name comes up exactly once) decided/forced/hired/given a job to write a book about him.

At this point I have to stop and ask the following question - I am going to do it lots of times here - as everybody and their brother know it took a lot of brilliant scientists to develop the bomb. How comes in the book Dr. Felix Hoenikker was held solely responsible for it? This is a very serious question as two such bombs were used to kill a lot of civilians - some of them died fast, some slowly and painfully. To continue my serious questions (I am quite curious at the moment) - were the people who created it able to sleep at night peacefully after they learned how the first couple of their creations were used? I really hope that pesky little thingy called conscience bothered them at least a little and at least sometimes.

Anyhow John interviewed relatives, colleagues, and neighbors of the good inventor learning more and more about him. The guy was weird (David Lynch type weird) and so is the tale.

For the first half I was fascinated by weirdness and mad glimpses at the mind of a genius. In the second half it all went to hell. The weirdness increased tenfold, the tale became disjoint and... well... weird (this time in the bad sense). I can tell exactly the moment it happens: when John arrived to St. Lorenzo.

And thus I was sure I could rate the book with 4 stars adding my voice to the chorus of countless book fans. It was supposed to be funny; I did not think so but it surely was witty and I loved some of the quotes. How

about this one:

*"Maturity...is knowing what your limitations are...Maturity is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything."*

Unfortunately during the second part I had a serious internal struggle not to DNF the book. At least now I know why pseudo-intellectual hipster snobs hold Vonnegut in such high regard. I have to say that quite a few normal people like it too. From my side I will read other works of Vonnegut; before now I only read some of his short stories that were perfectly normal and thus not as well known.

The book is not hopeless by all means and fully deserves 3 stars. I am glad I read it, but I have no desire whatsoever to reread it even if it would be the last book left in the world.

P.S. What's up with Vonnegut's fascination with midgets?

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### **Michael says**

Hasty and jokey, *Cat's Cradle* begins as a satire about a journalist's attempt to investigate the life of one of the creators of the atomic bomb, but ends as a bleak allegory about the annihilation of life on earth.

Vonnegut's irreverent wit and straightforward prose make his work a useful gateway to adult fiction for teens, and this novel ranks amongst his best. Adults who never encountered Vonnegut's books during their youth, by contrast, might find the book's pessimism or its hyper-episodic structure to be a bit tedious.

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### **Chris says**

Nothing in this review is true.

As much as I enjoy reading Vonnegut, one of the nagging little doubts I always have is that I'm missing something. That there's a hidden message in there that I'm not picking up on. Or, on the other hand, that I *am* picking up messages that just aren't there.

Which is, perhaps, the point of the whole book.

The world is full of lies. Good lies, bad lies and indifferent lies, but lies nonetheless, and we pick and choose the lies that make our lives happiest. The lie that we know more than other people, or that we are chosen by one deity or another. They're all lies, and the acknowledgment of that is.... depressing.

So, rather than just write about that, Vonnegut wrapped it in a "religion" known as Bokononism - the indigenous and completely artificial "faith" of the island of San Lorenzo. And in order to tell us about Bokononism, we need a narrator - and a disaster. Which brings us to Ice-Nine.

A variant of water ice which is the final creation of the father of the atom bomb - Dr. Felix Hoenikker - Ice-Nine is solid at temperatures up to 45.8°C (114.4°F). A single crystal of Ice-Nine can convert any liquid water it touches, which will in turn convert any other water in contact with *that*. If Ice-Nine were to come into contact with a natural body of water, the chain reaction would lead to the total freezing of the planet

Earth.

The narrator's journey to the end of the world is an interesting one, started by a search for the truth and ended with the death of humanity. As, perhaps, all searches for truth must.

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## **Darwin8u says**

*"...for the quotation captured in a couplet the cruel paradox of Bakononist thought, the heartbreakng necessity about lying about reality, and the heartbreakng impossibility of lying about it.*

***Midget, midget, midget, how he struts and winks,  
For he knows a man's as big as what he hopes and thinks!"***

-- Kurt Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle

I first read this in 9th grade. The grade my two kids are right now. Life has a way of making you feel both old and insignificant. When I first read this book I was focused on the technology of Ice-9 and the absurdity of weapons of mass destruction. This time, as I read it in a quickly cooling bath.\* Seriously, all men over 40 should read this book naked in a bath that is quickly losing its heat, while wrinkles develop on their hands, feet, etc. There is nothing emasculates a man faster than a cold bath, nakedness, age, and Kurt Vonnegut.

Anyway, 28 years after first reading it and I still love this book. It was my first Vonnegut. One of my first exposures to the world of literature as absurdism, dark satire, and the wicked wink of postmodernism. I was hooked.

\* with all this damn technology, one would think it would be easy to develop a better system for insulating baths. During the last 60 years, our society has gone from porcelain to plastic. So, now I can't even scratch OR freeze my ass in my tub and remain dignified.

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## **Lawyer says**

### **Cat's Cradle: Vonnegut's String Game**

*Cat's Cradle, First Edition, Holt, Rinehart and Winston*

Published in 1963, "Cat's Cradle" is Kurt Vonnegut's fourth novel. I consider it one of the great satirical works of the 20th Century. Often referred to as a modern Mark Twain, Vonnegut's view of American society more fully embraces a society and its group values, while Twain's targets for his biting wit were more specifically aimed, although with the same verve and joy in the revelation of the foibles of life.

***Kurt Vonnegut circa 1963***

Placing the central character in a supporting role, Vonnegut opens "Cat's Cradle" with the narrative statement of an otherwise anonymous observer of life. "Call me Jonah," he writes, echoing Melville's opening to *Moby Dick*, "Call me Ishmael.

Jonah, as the biblical character was, would prefer to be a neutral observer of life. Jonah's goal is to write a history of the day America dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not what it was like in Hiroshima or Nagasaki, but what it was like to be an American.

It's been a tenet of the rules of human behavior that it's easier to drop a bomb on somebody.

***Paul Tibbets gives a wave from the B-29 he named for his mother. "Hey, Mom! You're never gonna guess what I'm about to do."***

You're not down there to see the damage you did. It's in that dirty, gritty face to face business when you see the face of an enemy disappear in a cloud of red mist, after you've pulled the trigger you may have some problems.

***What Tibbets and his crew didn't see.***

To capture the essence of what it was like to be alive on that day, Jonah searches for and finds the children of Felix Hoenekker, a co-inventor of the atomic bomb.

Hoenekker has been dead for years. However, his children, Frank, Angela, and Newt are very much alive. Newt, the youngest Hoenekker is a whimsical character, an oddity, not only on the basis of his parentage, but also that he is a midget.

Newt offers information that is critical to one of the central themes of "Cat's Cradle." He informs Jonah that he did not ask about the most significant response his father had to the successful test of the atomic bomb. When fellow scientist, a stand in for Robert Oppenheimer, whom Vonnegut does not name, speaks of the sin he and his fellow scientists have created, Professor Hoenekker's response is stunning. "What is a sin?"

***Robert Oppenheimer, Los Alamos, NM, 1945, quoted from the Bhagava Gita, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."***

During the test, Hoenekker is playing the children's game "Cat's Cradle." Hence, the title, and the degree of Hoenekker's detachment from the consequences of his contribution to the nuclear age.

Vonnegut, following his service in World War II, was employed by General Electric. His job was to write about the smartest guys in the room and put a human face on them. The company was known for allowing its scientists free rein in theoretical research. And, remember that wonderful slogan of GE once upon a time. "GE--We bring good things to life!"

Vonnegut realized that science was capable of wreaking catastrophic results when research led to the development of products capable of being put to destructive use if allowed to fall into the wrong hands. Hoenekker is modeled on a scientist working for GE at the time Vonnegut was earning his paycheck there. In

fact, the man, who shall remain nameless here, joked about creating the very substance which would be the genie let out of the bottle in "Cat's Cradle."

Not only did Hoenekker help build the atomic bomb, it seems he developed a substance Ice-9. For Hoenekker it was an amusement resulting from an exercise of the intellect. However, Ice-9, if allowed to come into contact with moisture of any sort, turned any object into solid ice. The implications are obvious.

Jonah accompanies Angela and Newt Hoenekker to the Island of San Lorenzo. Oldest brother, Frank is the small country's Major General, serving dictatorial leader Papa Monzano. Frank is next in line to become President of the Island. Monzano is quite ill.

Throughout the novel, expounding on the indifference towards the actual results of scientific results, Jonah learns that each Hoenekker heir carries a piece of the deadly Ice-9.

Possibly good might triumph over evil. Perhaps some divine intervention might prevent the release of this deadly substance. Where is God when life hangs in the balance?

Why, God is nowhere to be found. Vonnegut's expressions of his opinion of religion have changed throughout his life. He has gone from believer, to agnostic, to atheist, depending which interview you read and the mood in which Vonnegut was found by the particular interviewer at the time.

But in "Cat's Cradle," religion is represented by a mischievous character named Bokonon who turns religion on its head. Bokonon doesn't hesitate to include in his teachings that all religions are lies.

However, Vonnegut does not allow Bokonon to leave the matter as simply as that. The question is decidedly more complex. It is not that God does not exist, he is merely indifferent. God paid his dues. He made man out of mud, gave him a planet with everything he needed in it. A little worship would be nice, but, hey! Job's done. Time to retire. You're on your own.

Perhaps that is Vonnegut's most terrifying premise. Who needs God, when Man is perfectly capable of making an absolute mess out of a world that was working just fine when Man was given it?

The government of San Lorenzo is ostensibly Christian in its religious belief. The practice of Bokonism is an offense punishable by death. The implement of execution is called the Hook. You get caught practicing Bokonism, you get the Hook. Papa Monzano has made it clear, the HOOK is especially reserved for the man himself, Bokonon.

Papa Monzano turns a blind eye to the fact that all San Lorenzoans practice Bokonism. The Book Of Bokonon may not be printed or published. However, those books are everywhere, carefully copied down by hand. Each book is a personal treasure of the owner. The Book Of Bokonon is against the law for it contains the most basic truths of life. In summary, don't take anything seriously, because at its most basic level the reason behind a social convention is ridiculous.

But it's a joke. One huge Cosmic Joke. Bokonon, the God of San Lorenzo is off the Hook. Always.

Only Man ever ends up on the HOOK. No God or Devil is necessary to hang him there. Left to our own devices, we're perfectly capable of hanging ourselves.

On San Lorenzo, or anywhere else, there's no need for a sermon of the likes of "Sinner's in the Hands of an

Angry God." Neither, would it be necessary for Uncle Screwtape to instruct Nephew Wormwood on the finer arts of temptation in obtaining the souls of men. Jonathan Edwards and C.S. Lewis may be on a library shelf, but they aren't required reading.

Those guys, the scientists? Aren't they the whiz kids we really turn to when we're looking for a better life? Maybe they are the new Man made Gods. Vonnegut doesn't condemn science, or religion, or government, although his depiction of those entities are wickedly presented in satirical fashion. This is a very cautionary tale that reminds humanity to be careful of what it wishes for--that's the message, at least for me.

I first read "Cat's Cradle" as a very young man. I found everything in it profoundly hilarious. In "Cat's Cradle" I found a way to reinforce my rebellious beliefs against practically everything, remarkably reinforced by a writer who was almost as smart as I was. As Mark Twain said about his father, when Twain was 15, he thought his father was the dumbest man he'd ever known. When Twain was 20, he was amazed at how much the old man had learned.

#### *My first copy of "Cat's Cradle"*

Yesterday, a friend told me "Cat's Cradle" has become her daughter's favorite book. She just celebrated her Sweet 16. I'd love to be around to get her take on it when she's 59 going on 60, as I am.

I probably won't be around to find that out. So it goes.

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Update, June 13, 2013: Cat's Cradle has been chosen as a group read by goodreads group "Literary Exploration" for its July read.

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#### **Megan Baxter says**

What is it about Vonnegut's authorial voice? It's simultaneously wry and tender, sarcastic and gentle. I don't know of any other authors that can manage that particular combination. And here, writing about the end of the world in so many different ways, it is on full display.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the recent changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at Smorgasbook

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#### **Dan Schwent says**

When he embarks on a project to write a book about the creators of the atomic bomb, Jonah has no idea what he's going to unearth: Dr Felix Hoenikker and Ice-Nine, a substance that will instantly freeze any water it

comes into contact with into more Ice-Nine, a substance capable of destroying all life on earth. Can Jonah find the missing Hoenikker children and secure their chips of Ice-Nine to safeguard the world?

Here we are, my second experience with Kurt Vonnegut and one of his Big Important Books. This time, he takes on science, religion, politics, and man's ability to destroy himself.

I didn't enjoy Cat's Cradle as much as Slaughterhouse-Five but they probably shouldn't be compared since they aren't the same kind of book. Slaughterhouse is experimental and timey-wimey and Cat's Cradle is much more straight-forward and easy to digest.

Jonah's project leads him to Felix Hoenikker and his three odd children, and eventually, to San Lorenzo and Bokononism, a new religion. Having been through 12 years of parochial school and a couple decades of weekly doses of church, fiction with a religious bend doesn't need much effort to hook me so I was engaged right away. Bokononism is Vonnegut's way of showing how full of shit most religions are, since Bokonon is pretty open about his religion being a pack of lies.

I don't have much else to say about Cat's Cradle. It was a piece of funny yet thought-provoking satire about science, religion, and mankind destroying itself. Four out of five stars.

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### **mark monday says**

there are probably as many reviews of Cat's Cradle as there are stars in the sky, so no doubt there's little i can add that's of any value. who cares? i love hearing myself talk, so let's go for it!

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well, this is harder than i thought. it's as easy as describing why i love my favorite pillow or threadbare t-shirt, or why i like rainy days as much as sunny days. okay, here goes. the inventiveness of Cat's Cradle and its bleak, absurd humor was incredibly eye-opening to me in high school and it practically provided a template for how i looked at things. in college, it was a joy to return to, particularly after the tedious nonsense foisted upon me in various classes (well, in time, i grew to love all the tedious nonsense foisted upon me, but that was years later, and besides the point). after college, it defined the outlook of almost everyone i knew around me, and i remember bothering folks to read it so that they could understand some of my references, or so that they could read their own worldview, in book form. when i said things like "impaled... on a giant hook" or "i want to read your index", folks had no clue about what i was talking about. i guess that's why i eventually stopped saying those phrases.

and back to the book. Cat's Cradle: it has warmth and anger and wisdom and an almost naive kind of brashness at times. i love that combo.

favorite character: cynical young Philip Castle: do-gooder, sarcastic asshole, painter, owner of a hotel that scorns snobs and is therefore pretty empty. i love you, Philip Castle! my second fictional crush slash *look, i see myself!* type character. Holden Caulfield came first and Donnie Darko eventually replaced you... but you were the dreamiest.

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### **Linda Hopf says**

I stopped at page 175 and I have NEVER done that. I never give up on books I start. This book made me rethink that practice. Normally, even if I do not like a book, I can find something about it to keep me going but with Cat's Cradle I just had to quit. I need to feel something - curiosity, irritation, sadness, happiness, love, desire, anger, escapism, like I am learning something new, that I need the lesson this book is offering... whatever. I need to connect to the book, the story, the characters in some way. With this book I felt nothing, nada, eh. It was easy reading for sure but it seemed almost like it was a joke. It reminded me of my junior high schools days when the teacher asked us to write stories and read them to the class. You wrote hollow silly things that you thought sounded clever and exciting and then years later when you come across the story in a box of keepsakes you laugh at how stilted and basic it was. I know, Vonnegut is suppose to be speaking to the issues of religion, science, humanity with irony and humour - lots of people love this book. I did not care about any of it, not even the Ice Nine that probably destroyed the world (I don't know because I didn't finish the book) I decided that to continue would be a waste of life essence. The good thing I can say about this experience is that it made me realize that I don't have to finish a book.

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