

## Cat's Cradle Study Questions

### Chapters 1–12

1. What do you think John, the narrator, means when he says the following? "Somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times, without fail. Conveyances and motives, both conventional and bizarre, have been provided."
2. In what sense did the world end when the first atomic bomb was dropped?
3. Summarize the point of the "Fifty-third Calypso."
4. Discuss some of the tenets of Bokononism presented in the first few chapters. How would you characterize this religion?
5. How is it possible that "a useful religion can be founded on lies"? Discuss your interpretation of this idea. Why do you think Bokonon would claim that "anyone who thinks he sees what God is Doing" is a fool?
6. What do you think the descriptions of and anecdotes about Felix Hoenikker are primarily intended to convey about him, and why?
7. What symbolic and thematic significance do you think the Dr. Hoenikker's piece of string and the "cat's cradle" have?
8. Given the context of the preceding chapters, how do you think John (as narrator) intends the reader to perceive his presentation of Dr. Breed's commencement address and the secret of life ("something about protein")? What is the *tone* of this section?
9. Discuss any instances of foreshadowing you noticed in these first twelve chapters. What do you think is likely to happen as the novel progresses?

### Chapters 13-24

1. What thematic relevance do you think the serial killer, George Minor Moakely, has to the story? What about the story about Felix Hoenikker's Marmon?
2. In what sense is the "winded, defeated-looking fat woman in filthy coveralls" (Chapter 15) an "appropriate representative for almost all mankind"? What relevance do you think this observation has to the story?
3. How might the "Peace on Earth" banner (Chapter 17) be ironic in the context of the story? What relevance do you think the quoted line from "O Little Town of Bethlehem" ("The hopes and fears of all the years are here with us tonight," Chapter 20) has to the story?
4. What is the Bokononist view of the value of new knowledge (Chapter 18), and how does it relate to the story? In what way might it actually be good to see things as "magic" (Chapter 16) instead of understanding them scientifically?
5. What is dangerous about "pure research" (Chapter 18), even though it sounds idealistic? Likewise, what is dangerous about the way the "Girl Pool" serves the scientists (Chapter 17)?
6. What is portentous about Dr. Breed's attitude toward the topic of *ice-nine*? Discuss the foreshadowing presented by the narrator regarding *ice-nine*. Discuss the *tone* of the following

sentence from Chapter 23: "*Ice-nine* was the last gift Felix Hoenikker created for mankind before going to his just reward."

7. Discuss the Bokononist concept of the *wampeter* and how it relates to the story.

8. Describe Dr. Breed. What do you think the narrator's opinion of him is?

### Chapters 25-35

1. Why is it that, as Miss Faust puts it, it is unlikely that "truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person"? How does this idea make her "ripe for Bokononism"? What do you think John's opinion of her claim that "God is love" probably is?

2. What irony is there in Miss Faust's comments about Felix Hoenikker and his children at the end of Chapter 27? How is the photograph on Hoenikker's desk significant?

3. How do you think Lyman Enders Knowles (Chapter 28) is significant in the story? Can you think of any thematic significance that his name might have?

4. What does John mean when he says that "life is sure funny sometimes" (end of Chapter 32), and what do you think Marvin Breed means when he replies, "And sometimes it isn't"?

5. In what sense could Felix Hoenikker be seen as "harmless" and "innocent" (Chapter 33)? Explain what Marvin Breed thinks "the trouble with the world" is.

6. Explain what John's "first *vin-dit*" is.

7. Describe Franklin Hoenikker as he is portrayed in these chapters.

8. At this point in the novel, how would you describe John, both as a narrator and as a character? In many places, he expresses his feelings and opinions very subtly, so think carefully. Find some examples to support your characterization.

9. What predictions can you make about what is going to happen later in the novel?

### Chapters 36-48

1. Explain the significance of Sherman Krebbs in John's life and thus in the story.

2. Describe the style of the language used in the *Sunday Times* supplement to describe the Republic of San Lorenzo and the tone of John's presentation of this information. What do these things suggest about this depiction of San Lorenzo?

3. What does John's obsession with Mona Aamons Monzano suggest about his character? (See the end of Chapter 40 in particular.)

4. Why do you think John "[ca]n't make the Mintons bubble about anything" (Chapter 41), and what do you think the significance of this fact is? (Consider, for one thing, Horlick Minton's comment about "the pot at the end of the rainbow" at the end of Chapter 45.)

5. What is H. Lowe Crosby's attitude toward the U.S. economy and American society? What hopes does he have for San Lorenzo? What does he reveal about his own character through his words, and how do you think John intends the reader to perceive him? (See Chapters 42-43.)

6. Why are the Hoosiers a "false *karass*"? Explain the meaning of Bokonon's rhyme about *granfalloon*s at the end of Chapter 42.
7. Why are the people of San Lorenzo supposedly so "well behaved"? What does the anecdote about the man roasted alive in a chair (at the end of Chapter 43) suggest about such draconian (cruel and extreme) measures?
8. What do the Mintons think about America's view of itself and American foreign policy? Do you agree with them—do you see any signs in today's society that this might be true?
9. Can you explain how Bokonon's theory of "Dynamic Tension" might create a good society?
10. Find two instances of foreshadowing in these chapters.

### Chapters 49-60

1. What would you say is the primary characteristic of Lionel Boyd Johnson's (Bokonon's) life, and what deep conviction does he draw from his experiences that influences his religious ideas? See Chapter 49 in particular.
2. Why do you think John "no longer ha[s] a clear idea of what [his book] would or should mean" (Chapter 51)?
3. How do you think the index of Philip Castle's book is so revealing to Claire Minton?
4. Describe Newt and Angela as they are portrayed in these chapters (based on the actions they take, the things they say, the things John says about them, and your own inferences about them).
5. Describe San Lorenzo based on the information presented in these chapters. What thematic significance (in terms of what its history says about human nature and human society, for example) do you think it has? Why are any efforts to make it into a utopia bound to fail?
6. Why do you think John mentions *ice-nine* multiple times in these chapters (e.g. near the beginning of Chapter 51, the end of Chapter 52), even though when these events were happening he didn't yet know that it existed?

### Chapters 61-73

1. Why do you think the people (and even the dogs) of San Lorenzo are so quiet when the Americans arrive?
2. Describe the San Lorenzan National Anthem. Given the context of their presentation to the reader, what is the tone of these lyrics?
3. Describe Mona. What do you think it means that she "has the simplicity of the all"? How do you think she is useful to "Papa" Monzano? (Don't just quote the book; interpret what the book says about this.) What does her behavior during the ceremony (and during "Papa's" collapse) show about her?
4. In what ways is the story of the "Hundred Martyrs to Democracy" ironic? (Consider their name, first of all.)

5. Describe Philip Castle. What do you think he means when he compares writers to drug salesmen (Chapter 70)? Why does he not want to follow in his father's footsteps and become a doctor?
6. Describe the Casa Mona. How does the hotel itself relate to the propaganda about San Lorenzo that we have seen so far?
7. What is *boko-maru*? Speculate about why it is such an effective and popular ritual.

#### Chapters 74-85

1. Discuss the symbolic meaning of the cat's cradle as it relates to the book.
2. In what way are the things that Julian Castle says and does "satanic," as John puts it?
3. Why do you think everybody on San Lorenzo is "a devout Bokononist, the *hy-u-o-ook-kuh* notwithstanding"? What is the goal of Bokononism? Explain why Bokonon suggested that he and his religion be outlawed and that violators be threatened with death on the hook—psychologically and socially speaking, how does this "give the religious life of the people more zest, more tang"?
4. Why did both McCabe and Bokonon go insane? Discuss the "agony of the tyrant" and the "agony of the saint"—what do you think these expressions mean?
5. At the end of Chapter 80 and again at the end of Chapter 81, why does Newt say, "See the cat? See the cradle?"
6. Discuss the meaning of the poem quoted in Chapter 81.

#### Chapters 86-96

1. How would you characterize Franklin Hoenikker's speech in Chapter 87? (Consider phrases such as "the cut of your jib," "let the chips fall where they may," and "beating around the bush.") What do you think the manner of his speech is intended to convey about his character?
2. Discuss the meaning of Franklin and Bokonon's definitions of maturity.
3. What does John mean when he says, "I'm a notorious pervert in that respect" (near the beginning of Chapter 89)?
4. What ironies of Franklin's life does Chapter 89 deal with?
5. Why does John *saroon*? (See Chapter 90.)
6. Why is Mona automatically willing to marry John, and what does her choice imply about religious prophecies?
7. What different views of human relationships do Mona and John have? (See Chapter 93.) What change comes over John, and why is this change so quickly dispelled?
8. What characteristics of Bokononism support Franklin's claim that man (and only man) is sacred to Bokononists?
9. What is the "Fata Morgana" at the end of Chapter 95, and why is it a "Fata Morgana"?

10. What does it mean to "make religion live" (Chapter 96), and how does Bokononism demonstrate this principle?

### Chapters 97-106

1. What ironic fact is revealed in Chapter 97? Can you explain the paradox of Papa Monzano's beliefs—even though it sounds like he's contradicting himself, what reasons might he have for holding these conflicting beliefs?
2. According to Dr. von Koenigswald, what is the defining characteristic of a good scientist? How does this information make the conflict between science and religion clearer?
3. What attitude(s) toward life do the Bokononist last rites express?
4. An oubliette is a secret dungeon whose only entrance is in its ceiling; the word *oubliette* is derived the French word for "to forget." In what way is Franklin "going down a spiritual oubliette," as John puts it at the end of Chapter 100?
5. Why do you think John finds that he needs to believe in God? Why does he realize that he can't be the kind, enlightened ruler he wishes he could be?
6. Why would people "die like mad dogs" without "new books, new plays, new histories, new poems" (Chapter 103)? On the other hand, why is it futile to record history (Chapter 105)?
7. What is your opinion of Mona—does she represent "the highest form of female spirituality," or is she "a cold fish" (Chapter 104)? In what way can it be said that "a lover's a liar"?
8. Why do you think the people of San Lorenzo are interested only in "fishing, fornication, and Bokononism" (Chapter 104)?
9. In what sense is committing suicide equivalent to "destroying the whole world" (Chapter 106)?

### Chapters 107-116

1. What *pool-pah* (see the definition in Chapter 110) is revealed in Chapters 108-110, and why does it "exceed John's power to comment" on it? What is suggested by the extremely concise *Fourteenth Book* of Bokonon?
2. What themes are expressed by the story of how the Hoenikker children came to possess fragments of *ice-nine*?
3. What important ideas does Horlick Minton express in his speech about the Hundred Martyrs, and why does he have such strong feelings about this subject? What do you think he means when he says "my soul insists that I mourn not a man but a child" (Chapter 114)?
4. What important role in the plot does John's nausea happen to play?
5. Describe the manner of the Mintons' death. What does it reveal about their character?
6. What is the "grand AH-WHOOM," and what causes it? What tone is expressed by John's choice of this term to refer to it?

## Chapters 117-126

1. What do the Crosbys yell in response to the threat of the tornados, and what naïve belief of theirs is revealed by this response?
2. Why do John's words at the end of Chapter 117 "carry so much freight"?
3. What kind of God is described in *The Books of Bokonon* as revealed by Chapter 118? Why do you think Bokonon says that God will "just smile and nod" if people scold him (Chapter 119)?
4. Why do you think Bokonon tells the gathering of survivors on San Lorenzo to kill themselves?
5. Describe the mood of the survivors John encounters and his tone in describing them. What kinds of things does he say to Frank? What do the survivors' response to the situation and Frank's response to John's comments suggest about human nature?
6. How is Bokonon's couplet about midgets (end of Chapter 125) a good summary of his philosophy?
7. What do the last two chapters suggest about John's future?