

San Francisco Chronicle Sept. 6, 1994

## HALF ASLEEP IN FROG PAJAMAS

By Tom Robbins

Bantam; 387 pp.

It is the worst day of Gwen Mati's life. Just two days before Easter, and the 29 year-old Seattle stockbroker watches the market plunge 900 points. Gwen has been unethically churning her accounts, and now realizes, "I've left my clients so far underwater, they're going to need gills to breathe." Her career in finance looks doomed.

Add to Gwen's woes a tepid romance cooling with a man blander than generic cornflakes, a 300-pound Tarot-reading girlfriend's disappearance, a kleptomaniac born-again monkey on the loose, streets terrorized by a Safe Sex Rapist, and a blow to the back of her head followed by someone stripping the underclothes from her unconscious body.

And yet, in spite of this, Gwen may still call this Friday good.

It is the day she will meet Larry Diamond. Once a financial wizard himself, Diamond now lives beneath a bowling alley and hangs out in bars wearing jeans and tattoos. He's recently had his "brain redone...a little cognitive redecorating," and is something of an off-the-Wall Street gnostic declaring, "The world's a very different place than 98 percent of its inhabitants think it is." He's learned this while studying in Timbuktu with your basic Tom Robbins sympaticos: the likes of John Lilly, Timothy Leary, Fritjof Capra and R.D. Laing.

And, although if she were any straighter-laced she couldn't tie her shoes, Diamond wants to impart his transformative vision to the downwardly mobile but upwardly nubile Gwen. He looks at her with a "leer that could peel the velvet wallpaper off the walls of virtue." But for Gwen, a true moral child of the junk bond years, falling in love with anyone might mean being unfaithful to herself.

Theirs is the unlikeliest of trysts. They speak different languages. Diamond's pontifical diction sounds midway between Wilkins Micawber and Beldar Conehead, while Gwen beseeches this guru figure almost like Steinbeck's Lenny asking George about the rabbits: "Larry, tell me about the good old days. Tell me about the eighties."

At that, their first sexual encounter gets interrupted by a special telecast of visiting Japanese oncologist Dr. Motofusa Yamaguchi explaining his breakthrough cure for colo-rectal cancer, involving a priceless crystalline jade enema nozzle.

Tasteless? Of course. Robbins is seldom far from tasteless, just as he is seldom far from brilliant. He has always skipped to the beat of an eccentric bongo. He steps from the hilarious to the vulgar to the visionary with the swift ease of a kid playing hopscotch. You can almost imagine the boy he was sauntering to the soda counter and asking for chocolate milk—shaken, not stirred. Fortunately, as a man he has not put away childish things. Rather, his impishly febrile wit zaps flash into a mixture

of Eastern and New Age thought which Robbins distills rather than generates. If not an original thinker, he is a wonderfully original writer.

To note here that *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* is not Robbins' best novel is perhaps to praise it with faint damnation. It suffers two pervasive flaws. For one, Robbins, usually the most inventive of writers, here employs a second-person viewpoint, something that was mannered even before Jay McInerney's debut, and since then seems not only gimmicky but derivative. Secondly, his major characters would be tough to warm up to even in a sauna.

These flaws, though, pale beside Robbins' two cardinal virtues: his perpetual flights of thought and of language. Before they're done here, readers will have had to rethink their basic conceptions about economics, government, health, biology and history. And, in contemporary fiction, only Lorrie Moore matches Robbins's early-Shakespearean delight in wordplay and extravagant imagery: "The sun is rising like it isn't street legal," "The afternoon lasts approximately as long as fourth grade," "You reply so innocently that no turtledove would hesitate to build its nest among the quince blossoms of you inflection."

Once again, Robbins proves a mind-expanding experience, a game of ping-pong with our psychic paradigms. And once again he shapes philosophy and spirituality into sport, like the Shinto priest Joseph Campbell once wrote of who, when asked by a Western scholar to explicate his theology, said, "Theology? We don't have theology. We dance."