

# The Great Fire Of London PDF (Limited Copy)

Jacques Roubaud



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# **The Great Fire Of London Summary**

"Exploring Truth in Urban Ashes and Personal Memory"

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## About the book

Ø=Ý% \*\*The Great Fire of London\*\* by Jacques Roubaud

intertwines the historical calamity of the 1666 fire with a labyrinthine exploration of memory, loss, and poetic introspection. Through the lens of Roubaud's intricate prose, we traverse a symbolic metropolis fraught with both literal and metaphorical flames, understanding the profound ways catastrophe reshapes lives and landscapes. As the narrative dances between past and present, readers are invited to delve into a philosophical meditation on the nature of destruction and rebirth, crafted with a poetic brilliance that leaves a lasting impact. Roubaud's tale is both an homage to history and a sophisticated literary puzzle, ensuring every page captivates and compels with its rich tapestry of ideas and emotions. Embark on this timeless journey where time itself seems to burn, and discover what remains when the fire's embers cool.

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## About the author

Jacques Roubaud is a luminary in the world of contemporary French literature known for his versatile and innovative narrative style. Born in 1932 in Caluire-et-Cuire, near Lyon, Roubaud is not only an acclaimed novelist but also a mathematician, poet, and member of the prestigious Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) group, which explores the interplay between mathematics and writing. His academic pursuits in mathematics have profoundly influenced his literary work, weaving complex structures and playful challenges into traditional storytelling. Beyond his involvement with Oulipo, Roubaud's oeuvre spans genres, including poetry, essays, and novels, consistently reflecting both his intellectual rigor and inherent creativity. His profound contribution to literature has earned him numerous accolades, and with works like "The Great Fire Of London", Roubaud challenges the conventions of classic autobiographies by reconstructing personal and historical narratives with his characteristic ingenuity and philosophical depth.

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# Chapter 1 Summary: 1

## Chapter 1 - The Lamp

On the morning of June 11, 1985, the writer begins his day filled with hesitation and anxiety over starting a new writing endeavor. At five o'clock, in a silent, dark room illuminated only by a small, black lamp, he grapples with the fear of failing yet again at his prose, a struggle he has faced for many years. Summer approaches, and with it, the earlier arrival of daylight that threatens to encroach on his sacred space of silence and darkness, an environment he has meticulously crafted to foster uninterrupted thought and writing, isolating himself from the world's noise and light.

The writer, determined to maintain a daily writing routine, details the quiet solace found each morning during the peaceful hours before dawn, when the house and the world outside are asleep. Writing becomes an act of preserving memory, an entanglement of mundane lines that vanish as daylight fades in, leaving only the narration of memory intertwined with the stillness of night.

Reflecting on a photograph taken in Fez in 1980, the writer explores themes of perception and memory. The picture captures a hotel room wall with reflections that evoke the invisible realities of time and place. This



photograph serves as a metaphor for the writer's pursuit of prose, highlighting the interplay between darkness and light, memory and reality. The picture symbolizes the essence of his writing- a mixture of clarity and ambiguity, reality and memory, much like the silent morning hours he cherishes.

In parallel to his morning writing, the writer also plans an "evening branch," a narrative endeavor honoring his deceased wife's project. The evenings bring solitude and reflection, difficult to bear due to their shared past significance. This time is dedicated to exploring their lives together, with the glow of the evening light offering a contrast to the light of the morning lamp.

As the writer progresses, he faces the challenge of divergent paths in his narrative. This struggle reflects the complexities of storytelling, where parentheses and digressions often threaten the continuity of the main story. The narrative requires careful balancing of explanations and digressions, likened to walking through a forest with numerous branching paths.

The writer's project, initially ambitious, exists now as a ghostly reflection of what it once aimed to be, with two projects entangled yet distinct. His typewriter, symbolically named Miss Bosanquet after Henry James's secretary, aids in this daily endeavor of writing. The act of typing becomes a ritual, mirroring the morning's handwriting, pushing through the difficulties





of creating prose.

Poetry, too, finds its place in the writer's life, inspired by the Fez photograph. "The Lamp," a poem offering rhythmic compositions rather than traditional verse, captures the writer's emotional and visual journey. It mirrors the day's transition from darkness to light, much like his prose work limited to the early morning hours before daylight intrudes.

The unwritten pages weigh heavily on the writer as he imagines a future where he can read them in public. The day-to-day progress is a struggle against time and memory, yet there is a belief that the scattered moments of writing will eventually form a coherent whole.

This chapter establishes a framework of temporal and narrative layers, weaving together the visual memory of a distant photograph, the present experience of writing under the lamp, and the imagined future of the completed work. Through this intricate tapestry, the writer grapples with themes of memory, absence, and the continuous oscillation between solitude and connection, past and present, light and darkness.

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## Chapter 2 Summary: 2

In Chapter 2 of "The Great Fire of London," the narrator reflects on their creative process, particularly a significant project that has occupied them for years. This project has gradually assembled itself in their mind, reaching a point where its completion seems both necessary and possible. The narrator recalls the night in Madrid in 1970 when the project's concept first crystallized, connecting it to both their personal and professional life decisions, drawing parallels with their novel, "The Great Fire of London."

As the narrator recounts their memories, they grapple with feelings of melancholy and doubt about their achievements. Despite having spent years on related works in mathematics, poetry, and beginnings of stories, they question the reality of their project's fruition. There is a struggle between the illusion of purpose that sustained them and the need to manifest the project in tangible form. The narrator admits to entertaining the idea of abandoning the project but ultimately remains driven by the hope of realizing its potential.

The exploration of Arte Mayor, a medieval Spanish meter, and its relation to English iambic verse by Halle and Keyser plays a crucial role in the narrator's thought process. The narrator is intrigued by the possibility of applying linguistic theories to poetry, seeing it as a bridge between abstract concepts and the structured realm of language, influencing their project.



The narrative intertwines with moments from the narrator's life, such as afternoons spent watching Western films with a child named Laurence, and contemplations of Madrid's civil peace under Franco's dictatorship. There's a thread of memory and introspection, where the narrator examines the intersections between their scholarly pursuits and personal experiences, guided by an overarching sense of poetic exploration.

In Iowa, during a snowy night, the narrator encounters a retired professor who discusses rhyme's poetic potential, emphasizing a deeper structure beyond mere repetition. This conversation and the exchange of ideas further influence the narrator's understanding of their project.

The chapter reflects a deep introspection and a struggle to bring an amorphous idea into reality, through a rich weave of memory, scholarly inquiry, and personal reflection, all while grappling with the challenges of artistic creation.



## Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** Balancing Vision with Reality

**Critical Interpretation:** In Chapter 2, you find a profound message about balancing the vision of your dreams with the reality of bringing them to fruition. Just like the narrator, you're encouraged to reflect on your ambitions and recognize that while the journey towards realizing these dreams might be filled with doubt and introspection, persevering even when faced with daunting uncertainties can be the key to achieving personal and professional fulfillment. The chapter inspires you to harness your creative processes, trust your instincts, and remain diligent, illustrating that the pathway to manifesting ideas lies in the persistence of holding onto your vision and incrementally working towards its realization.

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## Chapter 3 Summary: 3

Chapter 3 of this narrative, titled "Prae," unfolds in a reflective and introspective tone. The protagonist returns to their family home with a sense of urgency and determination to unravel the past, specifically focusing on the time before their own birth. They seek to explore family histories and deepen their understanding of their roots, armed with a tape recorder and blank cassettes, originally bought for their blind mother. This visit occurs in early October, coinciding with both the wine harvest and the narrator's annual ritual of gathering azarope—a rare fruit—reflecting the passage of time and the slow decay visible in their mother's blindness and frail movements.

The family home's kitchen and its intricate layout are meticulously detailed, capturing the essence of domestic life and the sensory experiences tied to memory. Azaroles, once a common fruit along the Mediterranean, now rare, symbolize the theme of preservation amid decay. The narrator undertakes the task of making azarope jelly, a process fraught with unpredictability and symbolic of the challenging process of capturing and preserving memories. The jelly, like memory, is capricious and sensitive to the conditions and care it receives.

The exploration of the house extends beyond the physical, venturing into the intangible territories of family stories and the past held within fragile



recordings on cassettes. The narrator grapples with a family legacy marked by loss and silence, represented by empty pages in albums and unspoken family tales. The visit to gather family memory is as much about capturing spoken stories—often infused with personal biases and truncated by time—as it is about acknowledging absences and erasures.

The narrative reflects on the difficulties of truly knowing one's past—images, like memories, are fragmentary and often lacking in context. The surrounding environment contributes to the introspective atmosphere, with the narrator engaging in contemplations inspired by the changing winds and the swaying branches outside, drawing parallels to the uncertain nature of recalling and understanding one's past.

In addition to personal recollections, the narrative explores the complexity of family dynamics through detailed descriptions of shared meals—a setting where vast quantities of food underscore familial bonds, generosity, and the struggle against the inevitable progression of time and aging. This environment is characterized by the narrator's father's penchant for sharing produce from his beloved garden and ordering food from catalogs, reflecting a desire to preserve tradition and extend hospitality.

Concluding the chapter, the narrator departs for Paris, leaving behind a world of preserved memories and old traditions, highlighted by a journey through familiar landscapes steeped in history. This final imagery bridges



the nostalgia for the past with a present tinged with a sense of finality and transition, encapsulating a blend of remembrance and acceptance.

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## Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** The protagonist's dedication to unravel the family's past symbolized by making azarope jelly.

**Critical Interpretation:** The protagonist's journey to comprehend their family's legacy by creating azarope jelly serves as a profound metaphor for life—it emphasizes the importance of understanding and preserving the past, even amidst the chaos of the present. This culinary act represents the beauty and challenge of capturing memories and history, much like jelly making requires delicate care and attention to detail. In your life, this key point inspires you to embark on a similar quest to delve into your own familial narratives and honor your roots. By embracing both the sweetness and bitterness of memories, you find a path to deeper self-awareness and interconnectedness with your heritage, encouraging you to cherish and preserve the stories that shape you. In doing so, the unpredictable process of memory preservation transforms into a fulfilling endeavor that enriches your existence and fosters a profound appreciation for the intricate tapestry of life.





## Chapter 4: 4

Chapter 4 of "The Great Fire of London," titled "Portrait of the Absent Artist," traverses the intricacies of the narrator's internal and external worlds. This chapter is a meditative exploration of self-portraiture, not just through physical description, but through a series of occupations, passions, and philosophical musings.

The narrator begins with a description of his height, recalling how his 184.5 centimeters used to make him stand out in mid-20th century France. This physical attribute shaped his experiences, from awkward moments in cramped movie theater seats to the sensations of being one of the tallest in a crowd. The reflection on his height transitions into an account of family gigantism and the discomfort it brings his mother, suggesting a narrative of familial traits and expectations.

The theme of physicality continues with the narrator's early athletic endeavors and disappointments, a metaphoric leap into a discussion on growth and personal limits. His physical description delves further as he recounts the early onset of balding, tracing hair loss through family lineage, resulting in a somewhat relieved acceptance of a bald identity—one less preoccupied with hair's management.

Noses and self-perception follow, marked by humorous anecdotes and



philosophical digression into self-portraits, images, and reflections, both literal and metaphorical. Here, the narrator examines the discrepancies between photographic representations and mirrored reflections, weaving in historical and personal lenses. Gilles Deleuze's philosophical musings peek through these passages, accentuating the nature of identity and self-recognition.

From the head down, the focus shifts to the ritual of shaving—a daily, rhythmic act offering tranquility and continuity amidst life's changes. This ritual provides a segue to the narrator's appreciation of movement, as he shifts from verticality to horizontality—a theme he expands upon in his favorite pastimes: walking and swimming.

For walking, the narrator emphasizes an ingrained insistence on pedestrianism, eschewing modern transport for the timeless pace of footfalls. Through this, he reflects on walking's power to convert time into space, its capacity to prompt reflection amid familiarity or inspire exploration governed by self-imposed navigational rules derived from Raymond Queneau's influence.

In swimming, the narrator expresses his affinity for the Mediterranean—its saline calmness symbolizing both freedom and nostalgic connection to his heritage. The narrative embodies an elemental longing, resonating between earth and water, while contemplating potential existential finalities



reminiscent of Jack London's "Martin Eden."

Another layer of self emerges with counting, an activity as intrinsic to him as swimming and walking. Through counting, he extends a reflection on his mathematical background, its influence on this practice, and the personal comfort numbers provide against life's uncertainties.

Finally, the narrator arrives at reading—illustrating it as a consuming passion rooted in his identity as *Homo lisens*. He describes a life surrounded by books, noting their importance as sources of knowledge and companionship. Here, he shares a vivid memory of a Japanese text, underlining the shared human experience and connection through books.

Concluding his self-portrait, the narrator introduces the concept of his 'fifth passion': solitude. As both a condition for creation and a space of existential contemplation, solitude is a recurring theme. It frames his narrative not as mere isolation but as space for independence and introspection, essential for his project, "The Great Fire of London."

Thus, Chapter 4 forms an intricate lattice of introspection where external descriptions merge into revelations of an internal world, guided by memory, family legacy, and personal ritual. It paints a portrait of an 'absent artist,' deeply entwined with the passions and paradoxes defining a solitary life—emphasizing that through exploring these dimensions, the narrator



might find not only artistic clarity but also existential solace.

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## Chapter 5 Summary: 5

Chapter 5 of the book "The Great Fire of London" explores the intricate interplay between dreams, decisions, and projects in a narrative that intertwines past reflections with the present writing process. The chapter unravels through an elliptical deduction method, offering insights into the narrator's journey between the abstract and the tangible.

The story is framed by the narrator's recollection of a transformative dream from 1961, in which the idea for a novel, *The Great Fire of London*, was birthed. This dream becomes a pivotal point, setting in motion a dual endeavor: the dream of writing a novel and the overarching Project—a complex, conceptual undertaking that blends the narrator's pursuits in mathematics and poetry. The dream's clarity is described as being not in its literal images but in its style, offering a distinct vision that propels both the novel and the Project.

The narrative is structured around assertions (formerly maxims) that explore three intertwined elements: the dream, the decision, and the Project. These elements are examined through different tenses—past, present, and future—as the narrator navigates through moments of memory and creation. This structure echoes the Bourbakian mathematical prose that influenced the narrator's stylistic ambitions, with the dream serving as a catalyst for reflections on life choices and artistic aspirations.



In the narrator's retrospective, the dream harbors the seeds of all that follows—the decision to embark on the Project and the title for the anticipated novel. The title, *The Great Fire of London*, symbolizes an event and conveys the novel's profound connection to the dream's inner essence. Yet, the dream's fleeting nature raises questions of memory and motivation, as it fades upon being documented. The narrator links this fading to the ultimate abandonment of both the Project and the novel.

Throughout the chapter, allegorical images from literary and visual traditions—such as Japanese paintings, the *Heiki monogatari*'s flames, and Dickens's London—interweave with the personal narrative, highlighting the elusive interplay between reality and fiction. The chapter delves into the concept of a double language—creating a palindrome of life's events that, much like the dream, requires continual translation.

The narrator's contextual reflections reveal fluctuations between clarity and obscurity. Despite intermittent doubts and the relinquishment of the Project, the dream persists as a powerful mnemonic repository holding the truths of what was and what might have been. The narrator's journey through notions of poetry, memory, and mathematics reflects the ambition to construct a reality interwoven with imagination—a tableau where the novel, though uncompleted, intimates the confluence of these endeavors in the narrative's very architecture.



Ultimately, the chapter serves as a metafictional contemplation on creation, failure, and the persistence of dreams, echoing the motifs of intertwined stories and unattainable riddles, while the narrator faces the haunting realization that the Project and novel remain visions unfulfilled—a poignant testament to the beautiful yet elusive nature of aspiration and memory.

Section	Summary
Introduction	Chapter 5, "Dream, Decision, Project," explores the intricate relationship between the author's past dreams, decisions, and ambitions, inspired by a dream.
Complexity and Approach	The chapter's complexity arises from its elliptical deduction method, akin to mathematical prose, encouraging readers to approach it with an open mind.
Dream as Catalyst	The narrative draws from a dream experienced nineteen years ago, leading the author to decide to write "The Great Fire of London" and conceptualize a broader Project.
Assertions and Maxims	Throughout thirty-one moments, the author explores assertions stemming from the dream, decision, and Project, reflecting their interconnectedness and evolution.
Evolution of Thought	Assertions transition from maxims to numbered colored fragments, representing stages in understanding the dream's implications.
Conceptual Interconnections	The assertions highlight the trinity of dream, decision, and Project as interconnected, with each element presupposing the others.
Reflective Distance	Author retains a measured distance from the original dream, maintaining a loop of interconnected thoughts.
Literary Styles	Inspiration from medieval Japanese poetry deepens the narrative, infusing stylistic and philosophical elements.





Section	Summary
Resolution	The narrative concludes with a resolution acknowledging the enduring impact of the dream, transforming past ambitions into present clarity.

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## Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** The transformative power of a dream

**Critical Interpretation:** Chapter 5 of 'The Great Fire of London' captivates with the profound influence a single dream can wield, igniting a cascade of decisions and nurturing a lifelong pursuit—both personal and artistic. As you immerse yourself in the narrator's journey, consider the dream not just as a collection of veiled images but as a stylistic revelation that emboldens your own aspirations. This dream, framed by abstract reasoning and tangible insights, unveils a truth often overlooked: while the ephemeral nature of dreams might threaten to diminish their impact, they present a powerful beacon guiding you through life's complex tapestry. In it lies the realization that each dream—ever so fleeting—contains seeds that, when pursued with conviction, can blossom into remarkable ventures. Embrace the transient, embrace the unrealized, for therein may lie the keys to inspiration and innovation, encouraging you to pursue pathways of thought and action that lead to unforeseen yet beautiful horizons.



## Chapter 6 Summary: 6

In Chapter 6 of "The Great Fire of London," the narrator, whose narrations reflect his own solitude and introspection, details his experiences during a visit to London in August 1984. He begins with an ordinary morning at the Crescent Hotel where he interacts with a Japanese tourist and Italian women with a sense of mundane duty, before setting off to the British Library housed within the British Museum.

The day-to-day activities reveal a man seeking solace and anonymity in a city where he has no personal ties. London is portrayed as a realm of self-imposed seclusion and a sanctuary for his literary pursuits. Despite the perpetual rain and routine interactions, the narrator finds tranquility in walking the streets, shielded by his cap and Burberry, feeling at ease amidst the unfamiliar faces.

Upon reaching the British Library, the narrator assumes his usual seat, labeled R14—an homage to his name and the structure of a sonnet. Here, he indulges in his passion for reading, drawing from the vast collections available, particularly old European books and English novels not found elsewhere. His visits to London are not driven by planned engagements or social expectations, but rather by an inexplicable pull to the city's libraries and bookstores.



Through the chapter, London emerges as both familiar and alien to the narrator, a metaphorical book-city built of prose and poetry. His meanderings lead him to explore bookstores like Dillons and Foyles, in search of detective novels and "English women's prose," a domain of literature encompassing the works of influential novelists like Jane Austen and Trollope—a project of personal sentimentality and bibliophilic quest.

Interactions within London are limited to polite exchanges with fellow library patrons, where the quiet hum of English voices provides comfort amidst his private realm of books. The narrator, immersed in this literary oasis, appreciates the cultural specificity and understated elegance of the library—a haven against the tides of modern efficiency.

The significance of London is further enriched by the narrator's reflections on past literary encounters, notably his first adult book, "The Man in the Dark" by John Ferguson, which signifies his deep-seated connection to English literature since childhood. London's urban environment—the libraries, parks, and pubs—invokes memories and reveries, including moments shared with his late wife, Alix, whose love for the city's pubs and easy conviviality remains a poignant part of his visits.

The narrator also frequents London's parks, embodying their quintessential British character, enjoying their greenery and the calm they offer amidst the city's bustle. Here, animals become silent companions in his solitary



reflection, evoking a dreamlike sense of kinship with the literary animals from his childhood stories, like those of Kenneth Grahame and A. A. Milne.

In his solitary walks and readings, the narrator muses upon the idea of living permanently in London—a waking dream of embracing a life centered around silence, books, and calming routine. Despite knowing the impracticalities, he fantasizes about settling in a Chelsea mews, relishing the quietude, yet recognizing this as more a dream of escape than a concrete plan.

Ultimately, London acts as a backdrop for introspection—a paradoxical city of nothing to do and yet a perfect realm for reading, where the narrator can indulge in his passion for literature, find solace in self-reflection, and become a transient citizen of a language-city, existing within its literary confines.

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