

# **All Our Names Study Guide**

## **All Our Names by Dinaw Mengestu**

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# Plot Summary

All Our Names is the story of a friendship between two young men united during a time of protest and of the woman whose life is changed after the two men are separated. A young man from a small African village gives up his name and goes to the Ugandan capital of Kampala in hopes of eventually studying literature. He befriends a mysterious yet charismatic man named Isaac and the pair become virtually inseparable. Isaac hopes to be a politician as the government is in an unsteady position at the moment. As time goes on, revolution breaks out with Isaac slowly joining the cause. Eventually, Isaac and the narrator are fully involved in the revolution and when tragedy strikes, the two men are separated, causing Isaac to do one final act out of loyalty and devotion to his friend. Some time later, in a small Midwestern town, a social worker named Helen is assigned to aid an African foreign exchange student named Isaac as he settles in to life in America. Shortly after his arrival the pair form a romantic relationship that is considered taboo in a community still plagued by racism. As Helen develops new ideas about life, a revolution of her own takes place as she learns to finally be free of the tedious life she once had. As Helen and the narrator's stories intertwine, this historical fiction novel is one of devotion, change, and the true meaning of identity.

A young man from a remote village is inspired by an article in an old newspaper to become a writer. Feeling that he must go to the university in the capital city of Kampala, the narrator sheds his name and begins a new life in the city. During this time, the city is experiencing volatile conditions as one revolution has ended but due to the corrupt new government, a new revolution is on the forefront. While posing as a student at the university, the narrator meets another man posing as a student and a friendship begins. This charismatic, yet mysterious man, is only named Isaac and his goal is to study politics as he dreams of aiding his country in the times to come. Over time, Isaac begins to be more active in the oncoming protests. He begins a "paper revolution", writings of crimes against the country, that he places all over the university. This campaign is successful, but when he goes to celebrate this small victory at a popular cafe, he is taunted by the rich students there and a fight breaks out where Isaac is badly beaten. This does not deter Isaac, instead it propels him further by giving him visual marks to show that he is involved in the revolution.

As the "paper revolution" dies down, Isaac holds gatherings where people confess their "crimes". By this time it has become more difficult to gather in crowds. Isaac's gathering is broken up by guards who beat Isaac and others, but the narrator flees before he is injured. The next time the narrator sees Isaac is during a peaceful protest at the university. The students gather all night but tear gas is thrown into the group first thing in the morning and students are forcefully arrested. Isaac and the narrator escape to an abandoned classroom where Isaac is now living. The pair joke about making bombs throughout the day and the narrator is able to get back to his own home shortly after nightfall. After hiding out for several days, the narrator takes a walk and buys a government newspaper. As he is strolling down the street, unknown men assault him, leaving him a bloody mess in the street. When the narrator wakes up in the hospital,



Isaac is there to give him a black notebook and to share his joy that they now have even more in common.

After the narrator leaves the hospital, he is taken to the home of a rebel named Joseph. He is the owner of the Cafe Flamingo and he has nurtured Isaac in the days since. Joseph secretly offers the narrator a way to leave the area before the battles begin, but the narrator chooses to stay. The narrator is sent on a mission to deliver arms to a house in Kampala where fighting is set to begin. After he returns to Joseph's house a fight breaks out between Isaac and the narrator over Isaac's relationship with Joseph, but it is quickly over and they move on to Joseph's hometown to liberate it. After the village is liberated, Isaac has an elderly man take Isaac to another village to keep him safe from the fighting. This does not work as the narrator witnesses the villagers murder refugees seeking shelter. The narrator returns to Joseph's village and finds Isaac who tells him that soon things will be over. Later in the evening, Joseph is brought out of his home by soldiers and executed. Isaac then informs the narrator that it is time for him to leave. Isaac gives the narrator a passport with no picture, a student visa, money, and a notebook. He informs the narrator that he is to take on his identity and, as Isaac Mabira, he is to leave the country and study in America. The narrator opens the notebook and notices that Isaac has written down all of the names that he gave to the narrator previously but they are all scratched out except for Isaac's name at the bottom. The pair embrace and say goodbye, knowing that they will probably never see each other again.

Helen is a middle-aged, white, social worker who has been assigned the task of aiding a young African exchange student named Isaac in settling into small Midwestern USA life. She is discontent with her job and her life, but both are changed once she meets Isaac. When she first meets him, she apologizes for her loud voice as they head to the university. He tells her that he enjoys the sound of her voice and asks her to continue using it. After a quick visit to the university library, she heads back to her office and immediately nicknames Isaac "Dickens", for his proper English. Shortly afterwards, the pair begin a romantic relationship that has her questioning her life up to this point, especially since she is concerned that she will turn out depressed and lonely like her mother.

For quite some time, the relationship between Helen and Isaac is strictly physical and kept in the house. Helen thinks that it is time to make their interracial relationship public, proving to herself that the attraction is more than physical and the need for a change from the silently racist community is needed. She takes Isaac to a local diner where the patrons show their disapproval. Isaac shrugs it off and eats his lunch as if nothing is going on, but Helen is devastated that her experiment has failed. She then avoids Isaac for a few days until he comes to see her in her office to make sure she is okay.

The relationship goes back to normal for a while, but Helen is beginning to change her mind as the relationship is not as emotional or romantic as she would like. Once again, she avoids Isaac, but she also avoids her home and coworkers as well. Helen's supervisor David confronts Helen after he catches her sleeping in her car. Recharged, Helen decides to confront Isaac about the direction of their relationship. Upon arriving at his home, she finds that Isaac is not there. He does not return that evening and Helen



leaves after sleeping in his bed for a while. The next night, Isaac still isn't home. In trying to make the home look more like a home, Helen cooks a plate of eggs although she does not like them. In making a regular dish and setting the table like a house wife would, Helen has an epiphany that she is capable of changing things for the better, even her life and the lives of her clients. She begins with an elderly lady she visits for hours as the lady talks about the life she had before her husband died. This gives Helen some piece of mind as she vows to change things around.

Once Isaac returns, Helen finds out that he has traveled all across the country. She also finds out that he is capable of driving a car. When she goes to visit him after his return, she is turned away at the door by Isaac, although he does not tell her why. Later, she finds out that he has recently been told that his best friend has been killed in Uganda. Helen asks the name of this friend and is shocked to find out that the dead man is the real Isaac Mabira. Helen and Isaac continue to sleep together, and Isaac begins to tell Helen of how he really came to the United States. One morning, Helen decides to use his toothbrush and while doing so, she comes up with the thought that they will never be able to have a happy life together. Immediately, she tells Isaac that she wants to take a trip with him. The pair go to Chicago where Helen reveals that she had originally intended on leaving him there so that he can start a new life away from the bigotry of her small town. She then tells Isaac that she was wrong to do that and that she feels that they can truly have a life together in Chicago. Helen leaves Isaac in Chicago with the promise to return in a few days with all of her things.

# Section 1 Isaac/Helen Part 1

## Summary

The narrator comes to the Ugandan capital city, Kampala, with the dream of becoming a famous author after having read an old article about famous authors. The narrator spends a good bit of time in the beginning trying to emulate other young men in the area who considers themselves revolutionaries. During a political rally on campus, he meets another young man, named Isaac, on the university grounds although neither one of them are students. While chatting at a local tea house, Isaac reveals that his family has plans on him becoming a doctor but that he intends to study politics.

Helen is a middle aged woman who works as a social worker at Lutheran Relief Services. She considers her life to be boring until she is assigned to a young African man, who goes by the name of Isaac. She originally pictures him to be short and sickly looking, but she is proven wrong when she meets him. As Helen takes Isaac on a tour of the small town, she explains that she talks loudly, but Isaac does not mind. He asks to be driven to the university to check out the library. Once inside, Helen loudly asks Isaac how he likes America, but he leaves before giving a response. Helen follows Isaac out, thinking she has offended him, but he assures her that he does not mind the question. The next day, Helen's co-worker, David, asks Helen what she thinks of him. Because of how Isaac speaks, Helen and David nickname Isaac "Dickens".

As time goes on, Helen shows Isaac how to do small things around the house and helps him get acquainted with the town. After a few months of routinely visiting Isaac, an intimate relationship begins. Helen gives Isaac a copy of "A Tale of Two Cities" and she tells him about what he is called at the office. As their physical relationship grows, Helen spends more time with Isaac, even doing small things for him outside of her work as a social worker. This does not bother him at first, but he is occasionally bothered by the fact that he has to depend on Helen's help to do practically everything for him.

## Analysis

The first section of the novel labeled "Isaac" introduces the reader to the narrator as he comes to the Ugandan capital of Kampala during a time of political unrest. As he makes his journey to Kampala, the narrator states that he gives up his name after he leaves his village, therefore his actual identity is not given in this segment. The theme of identity begins with this statement as the unnamed man feels that he can find his identity and place in the world by going to the university in Kampala. The young man is hopeful, but he is unprepared for life in the city. The only items he has had to prepare him for any sort of cultured living are Victorian era novels, causing him to speak perfect English. This causes the narrator to stick out with his neighbors and others in the area and no one wants to befriend him.



Eventually this changes as the narrator meets a mysterious young man who only goes by the name of Isaac. Upon this meeting, the author gives a forewarning statement that this name will become of greater importance to both men sometime later in the novel. The men make an unlikely pair from the start. Both are equally smart, but the author points out that Isaac is angry over his poverty and status. It is also noted in another sense of foreshadowing that there are unknown things that he does not know about yet that cause him further anguish. even though Isaac has these negative feelings, there is still a great deal of charisma that is evident, as he wants to impress those around him, especially the narrator. The narrator is filled with hope that he can become a famous author, based on some of the readings that have trickled into his village from other famous writers. He is also in awe of Isaac. They come to realize that neither of them are actual students, they have both come to the capital city in order to eventually study and find their place in the changing times.

This segment not only shows the beginnings of the friendship between the narrator but it establishes the backdrop for Isaac's portion of the novel. When the narrator arrives in Kampala, he tries to fit in with others in the poor neighborhood he lives in by wearing the clothes of the young men who consider themselves revolutionaries. A revolution has already occurred, but a new one is beginning to take shape that will play out through the course of the novel. On the college campus, groups gather to discuss the turmoil beginnings of new problems that are coming to surface. The general feeling of the area is an uneasy peace, as the vacant buildings in the area are discussed by Isaac. This situation provides the reader with the foundation of the dilemma that is building for the narrator and Isaac.

The next segment is from Helen's point of view and takes place an unknown amount of time after the narrator from the previous section and Isaac meet. This segment is also in the first person as Helen describes how her life has become tedious as social worker in an older Midwestern town. Since she has been bored with the usual case work she receives, Helen is eager to be assigned to Isaac. It is unknown why Isaac has come to the small town of Laurel, but Helen's supervisor, David, has been asked to take care of Isaac by an old friend. Nothing more is mentioned regarding the actual circumstances of Isaac's arrival, but he will be staying in Laurel for at least one year. Before Helen meets Isaac, she envisions him as short and with terrible English. She is surprised to learn that he is the exact opposite of her imaginings, adding to her excitement of working with him.

The segment alerts the reader to a major character flaw of Helen's. She has a loud, boisterous voice that she admits can be annoying at times. Isaac appreciates Helen's honesty when she admits this and he actually encourages it. It is unknown if he is just patronizing Helen at this point. At the local college library, at first it is assumed that he is bothered by Helen's loudness as he walks out on her after she asks him if he likes being in America, but he just tells her to speak even louder the next time as he did not understand her question. It is crucial here to understand that as Isaac speaks to Helen, she cannot get over the fact that he speaks English perfectly. She even thinks that his way of speaking comes from something out of a Charles Dickens book. This will cause confusion here as the previous chapter indicated that the narrator had the perfect English and not the man known at that point as Isaac. It is through this flawlessness that





Helen has nicknamed Isaac "Dickens" to her coworkers although neither she nor Isaac have read any Charles Dickens novels, As a symbol of this characteristic, Helen buys Isaac a copy of "A Tale of Two Cities", which Isaac adds to the growing collection of books in his apartment.

The purchase of the book occurs about a month into a relationship that Helen describes as not having a traditional beginning. Primarily, this functions to inform the reader that more than just a platonic relationship has been established and that Helen takes on more of Isaac's care than a usual social worker. This also sets up Helen as a main character in the story and it develops the connection between Isaac and Helen. It is also revealed here that Helen has never felt any sort of maternal instincts as other ladies her age have gotten married and had children. This is one of the reasons that Helen has been assigned to Isaac. This changes as after Helen meets Isaac, she has a desire to do these things. The most profound example of this change is Helen cooking eggs for Isaac, although it is only a short statement, it is profound as the reader sees a definite shift in Helen's nature, although she admits that she still does not like eggs. Isaac is experiencing changes as well. His dependence on Helen for small things has grown along with his romantic feelings for her. This is mixed with a feeling of anger over being so dependent on Helen for practically everything he does and everywhere he goes. This is in direct contrast to his necessity to being so lonely at times that he even calls her office just to hear the sound of another human voice and his boredom of being in an unfamiliar place during a time when blatant racism still exists.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do the narrator and Isaac come to Kampala? What are their goals?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Isaac so eager to impress the narrator? How does Isaac accomplish this?

## Discussion Question 3

Why has Helen become disenchanted with her job as a social worker? What changes this?

## Vocabulary

christened, shanty, impromptu, grandeur, conspiratorial, imminent, decorum, dispossess, hulking, prestigious



## Section 1 Isaac/Helen Part 2

### Summary

In "Isaac", the narrator and Isaac continue to spend time together, always meeting on campus. Isaac begins to help the narrator differentiate between the rich students at the university and the poor ones. Isaac asks the rich students questions in a mocking fashion, calling them interrogations. He tells the narrator that all of the rich students are named Alex no matter what. Isaac also tells the narrator to look at the shoes of each student. Isaac says that the difference between the poor students and the rich ones is that the rich students have new and clean shoes while the poor ones have dirty and broken shoes. When Isaac mocks the rich students, they are quickly angered and they spit on him or make fun of him. The only students he does not interfere with are the students from Rhodesia because he admires their commitment to their own revolution. Isaac also greatly admires a mysterious man that is rarely seen on campus but he always leaves signs with slogans about revolution. Isaac then begins his own "Paper Revolution" by making signs with slogans about crimes against the country. The narrator and Isaac hang the posters up around mid-afternoon and by the end of the day, the signs have attracted a great deal of attention.

Isaac sends a letter home to his mother in "Helen". Helen imagines herself as having a long term relationship with Isaac and makes a comment about this when the pair go to the post office to mail the letter. Isaac informs her that it is not possible and that she should quit daydreaming of things that will never happen. Helen's own mother is starting to question Helen over if she is seeing someone or not, although she does not know who. David, her friend and supervisor, suspects that there is more to Helen and Isaac's relationship than just professional interaction and he warns Helen to be careful. Helen disregards this warning and instead continues pondering the possibilities of being more open with her relationship. She chooses to take Isaac out to lunch at a local diner, thinking that it would be a great way to get make the relationship public and to make a social statement. Unfortunately, this is a disaster as some of the patrons of the diner are upset that a black man is in the restaurant. There are subtle hints made by the waitress on behalf of the diner's owner and patrons that Isaac does not eat there, but he disregards this. Helen tries to leave, especially after the waitress gives Isaac his lunch on a paper plate instead of the same regular plate as Helen's. Isaac goes on eating his lunch as if nothing is wrong, forcing Helen to do the same.

### Analysis

More of the political drama unfolds in this section as the new leader of Uganda is looked at as a great man in the press but more of the same oppression is occurring in reality. Isaac becomes more intent on examining the large divide between the affluent students and the poor. This is the beginning of Isaac's evolution from a potential student to becoming a revolutionary in his own way. He is quick to point out the differences



between the rich and the poor on campus. The main example of this is his notice of everyone's shoes. The rich come in new and clean shoes, but the poor's shoes are old and have visible marks of deterioration. Isaac teaches this to the narrator so that he may also begin to see the differences as the narrator has been oblivious to the different groups on campus before this time. Isaac has a sarcastic attitude toward the rich students. To Isaac, these students represent the current government that is still very corrupt even though there are new leaders. Prime examples of this are his "interrogations", nonsense questions aimed to mock the rich students for their status. As a further insult, Isaac declares that all of the rich students are named Alex and tells the narrator that he should not believe any of them who say that they are not named this.

The narrator does not take full part in these activities, he is more of an onlooker than anything else. It is unclear if the narrator shares Isaac's exact sentiments, but the narrator remains a solid companion to Isaac. At first, the narrator is embarrassed for Isaac when the rich students retaliate against him by mocking him in return or spitting on him, but after seeing Isaac boldly continue his actions with pride, the narrator feels more of a sense of pride for Isaac. The narrator's presence during Isaac's antics seem to give Isaac the courage he needs to continue ridiculing the rich students, but it comes to an end as most of the people know what to expect when Isaac is around. The author makes a note of a group of students that Isaac does not mock but treats them with respect. The Rhodesian students are not very well described, but Isaac looks at them in awe although they choose not to interact with him. There is also a brief mention of an unknown man on the campus who Isaac finds captivating. No one has actually interacted with him, but there is great suspicion that he is behind the new political posters that subtly hint towards revolution.

Isaac draws a great amount of inspiration from these posters. He is excited to see that there is someone who is poor that is willing to speak out about change instead of the rich students who will eventually become a part of the corrupt government system. This is also the beginning of the government starting to take notice of the activities on campus. A government warning is posted over the mystery man's poster. In defiance, Isaac creates the "Paper Revolution", marking the shift towards a more determined Isaac as he creates his own fliers to spread out on the campus. The narrator has a small role in this action, he helps Isaac write one of the last pieces of the flier and helps to put them up, but he is not as adamant about this process as Isaac is. The narrator is still obviously worried that any trouble could lead to him never becoming an actual student at the university. The desire to just let things be and worrying about consequences is one of the biggest differences between Isaac and the narrator, something that Isaac dismisses. Throughout all of this, Isaac considers the narrator as someone who is very close and shares his optimism without noticing the narrator's fears. The end of the segment reveals a major victory for Isaac as his "Paper Revolution" has caught the eyes of some of the students and he is now beginning to gain popularity, which is a definite shift from the beginning of the segment.

As the next segment moves on to Helen, there is a definite shift in her attitude. More time is spent on her visualizing a life with Isaac in a traditionally married sense, which is a change from introduction of having no such tendencies. Isaac is more of a realist and



quickly shuts down Helen's fanciful notions shortly after a visit to the post office to mail a letter to his mother. This callous attitude towards Helen's musings shows that the relationship between them is not a truly emotional one, although there is no actual evidence that there is any great depth of feeling on Isaac's part. Helen notices that other than the errands she helps him do, there is not much else that the pair do together outside of the bedroom, further displaying their lack of emotional progress with each other.

There is a small break at this point to showcase the effect Helen's inner changes have made on other people. Helen's mother is the first to notice, but Helen disregards her mother's nosiness very quickly. It is noted that her mother originally wanted Helen to marry her coworker David, but for an unknown reason Helen's mother quickly changes her mind shortly after meeting him. Helen's mother is not truly aware of anything going on, she just notes that there is a difference in Helen's demeanor. The only person to truly guess that there is more than just a professional relationship between Isaac and Helen is David. As a friend, David warns Helen to be careful of her actions. It may be guessed that since Laurel is a small town with racist undertones, David is worried that Helen will get hurt.

David's warning provides inspiration for Helen to take her relationship with Isaac to a more public level. For Helen, this is a revolution in itself for two reasons. The first being the sight of an interracial couple in such a small town. There is no legal segregation in the area, however it is clear that there is an underlying division between blacks and whites in the area. The second is that becoming more public with Isaac is an acknowledgement for her that an actual relationship exists outside of the parameters of the daily errands they had been performing. It is a step to her daydreams of romance with Isaac becoming a reality and a way for Isaac to become more aware of these daydreams and be more of an active participant in them. In both circumstances, Helen visualizes herself changing things for the better, without giving much thought to any negative effects from this.

The scene in the diner is meant to exemplify the reality of Helen's plan as being careless and disastrous. There is a subtle hint of hatred from the other diners as Isaac and Helen sit at a table in the middle of the room. Helen is at first oblivious to this, all she can think of is the victories she will win by doing this and by being a sort of revolutionary thinking. Isaac becomes immediately aware of how the others feel about him, but the reader knows that he has faced much worse in his home country. The scene intensifies as the waitress is forced to relay the wishes of the other patrons that Isaac should not eat there. She does so in a very humble and polite manner to suggest that she bears no ill feelings towards Isaac. Isaac is understanding of this, but there is a change towards Helen. Since he knows that he is at first being used for Helen's own sense of personal righteousness, Isaac flips his discomfort around to an air of dignity, especially as the waitress brings Isaac his lunch on paper plates, a hidden sign that the others are asking him to leave. Since Isaac's lunch has arrived first and Helen's is still being cooked, Isaac remains calm and proud as he eats his lunch. The most important part of this passage is Helen's deflated feelings and her embarrassment that she has put herself and Isaac on display. This is intensified by the fact that at this point Helen



wants to leave, but Isaac tells her that she is to finish her lunch just as he did. In some ways, this can be conceived as cruel on Isaac's part to make Helen continue to be the center of attention in the restaurant. After the meal, Isaac makes a prolific, yet dark statement about how actions like those of the people in the diner are just one of the many ways that a person can be torn down, giving the hint that perhaps this is not the first time he has faced such adversity.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does the paper revolution begin? Why is it successful in getting the student's attention?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Isaac tell Helen to not daydream about things that cannot happen?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Helen take Isaac to the diner for lunch? What is the result of this event?

## **Vocabulary**

beacon, pompous, girth, patronage, deface, asunder, incremental, segregation, provocative, regression



## Section 1 Isaac/Helen Part 3

### Summary

To celebrate the success of the "Paper Revolution", Isaac renames the narrator from "Professor" to "Langston" in honor of the poet. They go to a local cafe to celebrate but it is a popular hangout of the rich students. Isaac wants to prove that he belongs there as well and to impress the narrator. He claps loudly to get the waiter's attention but he is laughed at by the rich students who are sitting there as well. In retaliation, Isaac throws a rock at one of the boys, breaking his jaw. The rich students beat Isaac, but Isaac tells the narrator to go home before the narrator can get the chance to help Isaac. Isaac returns to the campus a few weeks later, badly bruised, but he is considered a hero by people who do not know him as riots are starting and the police begin using excessive force against people.

"Helen" returns to the office and spends the rest of the day feeling embarrassed over what happened in the diner. She also begins to realize that she has gotten into a dull routine with her life and tries to express this and the fact that she is considering moving to someplace else to her mother, but her mother ignores this. Two weeks after the diner incident, Helen walks into her office to find Isaac waiting for her as if nothing has happened. Their physical relationship resumes once she goes back to his apartment at the end of the day, and for weeks Helen goes right to Isaac's apartment right after work to stay with him until midnight or later. Sometime later, Isaac no longer calls her Helen, instead he calls her "love". Each time Helen sneaks back into her home after this, she realizes that she is slowly beginning to turn into her mother but yet she also takes pity on her as well. Helen then reminisces about her father and the failed relationship between her parents.

### Analysis

Isaac's excitement over the success of the "Paper Revolution" marks another change in terms of Isaac's attitude and actions. Although Isaac has always been easy spirited and bold, he takes his boldness further as he goes to a popular coffee shop to enjoy the afternoon with the narrator. It is to be noted that this particular coffee shop is a popular hangout among the rich students and that the poorer students generally do not come here. This does not bother Isaac, in his mind he has just as much right to be at the cafe as anyone else causing him to disregard one of the novel's themes of cultural division. The narrator is still nervous about his position in this establishment, he knows that this is typically not a place that he and Isaac would be welcomed. In an attempt to prove that he is also worthy of being in this cafe, Isaac claps loudly for a waiter to serve him. This is also another attempt to impress the narrator by trying to show his dominance and control over a situation. The students who are in the cafe mock Isaac, showing their displeasure at a poor man like Isaac trying to fit into their ranks.



Violence is another theme that is beginning to be explored in this segment after a fight breaks out after Isaac breaks a man's jaw with a rock in retaliation for being mocked. Isaac is badly beaten, but the narrator remains unharmed. It is unknown why the narrator did not come to Isaac's defense as the fight breaks out, but Isaac wants the narrator to go home to protect the narrator from any sort of harm. After two weeks, the narrator sees Isaac again, and he is badly bruised with broken ribs. At this point, the author makes a clever use of Isaac's injuries to introduce the violent scenes that are unfolding in Kampala. People do not know that Isaac was involved in just a normal fight, they are silently convinced that he is one of the many people in the area that have been subjected to the recent outbreak of police brutality for defying the government. Isaac is labeled as a hero which earns him more respect on campus, even by the Rhodesians. This is another point of evolution for Isaac, especially since gaining the ability to sit in the middle of the campus and not in the quiet corners. This new popularity causes Isaac a great sense of pride and the confidence to go even further.

In Helen's segment, the actions at the diner earlier in the day have deeply disturbed her. She fears that her relationship with Isaac will be over due to her actions, keeping her away from Isaac for more than two weeks. During this time, Helen is starting to see that she has developed a lackluster routine with her life and the fear that she is turning into her mother. Helen's mother does not take Helen's feelings or thoughts into consideration, especially when Helen suggests that she will be moving into her own home. Helen's mother is so lonely that she is holding on to Helen any way she can.

The focus on the segment goes back to Isaac and Helen as he surprises her with a visit to her office to check on her. Obviously, he is worried about her, but it is unknown what his feelings for her are at that point. Helen takes a moment to focus on the formal tone of Isaac's voice as he is talking to her in the office. She then goes on to relate that it is some time later that he drops the formalities and calls her "love". This shows that Helen, in her role as a narrator, is relating actions that have happened in the past and that she is reminiscing her time with Isaac. After the conversation in the office, Helen goes to Isaac's home after work. The intimate details are not given, but the physical relationship resumes as if nothing negative has happened between them.

Although the segment's purpose is to show the effect of the incident in the diner and the reconciliation afterwards, there is a tremendous focus on emotional relationship between Helen and her mother. The toll of the failed relationship of her parents has deeply affected Helen. She pities her mother, which can be seen a detriment as it holds Helen back from leaving and living the life she wants to live. In some ways, Helen's mother is an example of the theme of dependence as Helen comes to the realization that her life is just as empty as her mother's. In some respects, Helen also realizes that her infatuation with Isaac comes from this emptiness, something that makes her just as sad as the thought of having a lonely life like her mother.



## Discussion Question 1

Why do people consider Isaac as a hero after he returns to the university after being beaten up by students at the cafe? How does this help him?

## Discussion Question 2

How does the narrator feel about Isaac's new found popularity? How does the narrator fit into this?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Helen feel that she is similar to her mother? Will this affect her relationship with Isaac?

## Vocabulary

lavishly, denuded, fraudulent, lope, palate, relegate, relic, cliché, antiquated, whittled





## Section 1 Isaac/Helen Part 4

### Summary

As more political groups form on campus in "Isaac", more people become interested in Isaac and his "Paper Revolution". Two cousins, named Patience and Hope, come to Isaac and the narrator, but they show little to no interest in the narrator. Isaac comes up with the idea of "confessions", gatherings to discuss made up crimes committed by the students against the government. These gatherings begin to gather attention but outside of the university, the violence is getting more intense and closer to the separate homes of Isaac and the narrator. Isaac is kicked out of the room he rents from one of the local families as they fear that they will be arrested for harboring a rebel. Isaac spends a few nights in the narrator's room. as he has nowhere else to stay Shortly after, the university issues a warning that large gatherings on campus are no longer allowed. This only causes the numbers of people coming to hear Isaac speak to grow rapidly to almost 30 people, also gaining the police's attention. On an afternoon in April, the police come to break up the gathering, but Isaac is defiant and they beat him for it. Some time later, the students come back to the university to stage a peaceful protest, with Isaac sitting in the middle.

In an effort to avoid David in "Helen", Helen comes in late and leaves early from the office. She also sleeps in her car at various places to shut out the rest of the world. David confronts her about this, but Helen becomes ashamed and angry that David has been following her. She also does not go to Isaac's apartment until the following week. He is not home on the first night, so Helen takes off her clothes and sleeps in his bed for a while. The next night, Helen comes in and tries her hand at domesticity. She cooks a batch of eggs, sets the table and realizes that she actually likes doing things around the house. Helen remembers all of the times she purposefully sabotaged her own efforts to be more interested in house work. After she throws away the eggs without eating them, Helen feels better and resumes her daydreams of a picture perfect life with Isaac. Helen also makes the realization that she has been complacent at her duties as a social worker. She vows to make things better, so she starts visiting her clients to make sure they are alright. She visits an elderly who talks to her for hours about the past home she shared with her husband, Helen feels that this is just the start of turning her life around.

### Analysis

A remarkable change takes place in this section as Isaac's "Paper Revolution" inspires other groups on campus to put up their own signs. Isaac comes up with a new sign asking students to "confess" to the crimes they have committed against this country. This is a sarcastic reflection on the fact that more things are being considered punishable crimes. Although there is a good deal of interest that occurs because of this sign, the author depicts the interactions between Isaac and the narrator with two attractive ladies, Patience and Hope. The two ladies show little interest in the narrator,



which is a clear signal that publicly he is not considered to have a major role in Isaac's gatherings. It is also a turn of events that more and more of the rich students gather to listen to Isaac, a shift from the ridicule and dislike between Isaac and the rich students shown in previous chapters.

The segment as a whole illustrates the developments in the darkening mood and the elevation of the actions during the narrator and Isaac's timeline. As Isaac conducts his gatherings, the government is outlawing crowds on campus, but Isaac and other students pay no heed to this. Unbeknownst to them, they are being watched by authorities, causing the man who rents the narrator a room tells the narrator to be extremely careful. Isaac has already been evicted from his rented room, with the family friends use the guise of being unable to feed another mouth as an excuse, but in reality, they are afraid that the government will retaliate against them for allowing someone as dangerous as Isaac to stay with them. Isaac's gatherings become a victim to police brutality, but Isaac's defiance as he stands his ground until he is hit in the head with a club by an officer is the most important part of this interaction. This development does not deter Isaac in anyway, he is back on campus within a week as if nothing has happened to participate in a peaceful protest. For the narrator, this signals the beginning of much darker times.

This segment also delves into the role of the narrator as more of a sidekick to Isaac. Cousins Patience and Hope have come to hear Isaac talk. They are amused by Isaac's speech, but the girls pay little to no heed to the narrator after he is introduced to them. This shows the reader that the narrator is not considered to be an important factor in the series of events at hand to the people around Isaac. The narrator is still Isaac's closest friend, no matter how he is perceived by others, further enhancing the theme of friendship. It is especially important when the police come to break up one of Isaac's gatherings. The bond between the men is tested when the police start beating people, but the narrator is so loyal to Isaac that he tries his best to stay no matter the consequence, unlike the last time Isaac got into a fight and was sent home.

Helen's friend and supervisor David takes a more significant role in this segment. Helen is starting to feel ashamed and guilty about her relationship with Isaac, which David had previously warned her about. David is visualized here as being a close confidante of Helen's, previously spending a great deal of time talking together. Part of his past is revealed as he states that he comes from a small community and considered Laurel to be a large town when he arrived many years previous. The author highlights a conversation in which David and Helen talk of their mothers and how they would both be happy if the pair were to marry. This scenario is comical to the pair as it is subtly hinted that David is gay. With Helen's shame over her relationship with Isaac comes the need to avoid others. In an effort to do this, Helen sleeps in her car at various points and has begun to come into the office late and leave early. This does not go unnoticed by David, who confronts Helen, causing her to feel more ashamed and angry as well. The actual reason that David follows her is not given, but it can be perceived as his own way of trying to protect Helen from being hurt.



A new development takes shape in the fact that Helen goes to Isaac's apartment but he is not home. The first night he is not there, Helen actually sleeps in his bed for the first time. This shows that the relationship between the two is no more than physical as she usually never falls asleep while with Isaac. She does not worry about Isaac being home on the second night, but she goes in with a feeling that the house is too perfectly clean. In this way, this is a materialization for Helen's belief that Isaac is emotionless when it comes to her. The loneliness once again reminds Helen of her mother and Helen's desire to not be stuck alone in a home like her. There is a brief flashback here as Helen describes the fact that in the past she purposefully did not learn how to do domestic things so that she would have no choice but to be different from her mother. In order to escape this feeling of loneliness inside of Isaac's apartment, Helen cooks eggs, which she previously admitted she does not like. After successfully cooking, but not eating, a batch of eggs Helen finds herself determined to be more domestically inclined so that somehow Isaac will see this and be happy with her.

With this change to a desire for a more domestic life comes a change in Helen's professional life as well. Helen finds herself more interested in her clients. This surge of positivity causes her to pay attention to her clients and actually want to visit them. Helen has a desire to actually care about her clients, not just treat them like strangers. This is a definite shift in Helen's previous demeanor and she finds it fulfilling. For Helen, the ability to care about others presents a dramatic turn in her progress within the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

How do Hope and Patience treat Isaac? What is the difference between the way they treat Isaac and the narrator?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Helen sleep in Isaac's apartment and cook eggs while he is gone? Why is this significant with Helen's progress through the novel?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the relationship between Helen and David? Why does he follow her in his car when she says she is going out?

## Vocabulary

vigil, unfurled, diatribes, shunted, latrine, fatigues, smoldering, cowardice, girth, ultimatums, decorum, rummage, subsidy



# Section 1 Isaac Part 5

## Summary

In "Isaac", a peaceful protest has broken out at the university, with Isaac sitting right in the middle. Tear gas is fired at the group as many of the protesters are beaten and arrested. Isaac and the narrator sneak into one of the buildings and into an upstairs room. Isaac reveals to the narrator that he is living in this classroom. While waiting for the police to leave, the men talk of making bombs with imaginary materials. The narrator leaves Isaac in the middle of the night, spending the next few days hiding from the authorities in his room. When the narrator ventures out again, he buys a newspaper and goes for a walk. Two men are following the narrator and severely beat him, leaving him a mess in the street. He wakes up in a nearby hospital, a few days later. Isaac comes to visit him and tells the narrator that they now have more things in common.

## Analysis

The violence escalates in this segment but it begins with a peaceful protest by the students of the university. This is the first time that the narrator comes to think of himself as one of the students as they accept him into their group to sit beside Isaac. It is important to note here that Isaac is already in the middle of this group. He has become a popular character on campus, and could possibly be the one who instigated the protest. Because of this, the narrator, as Isaac's friend, is also accepted by the community. There is a notation that Isaac and the narrator have finally become students. This is pivotal to their roles as even the division between the rich and the poor students are erased as they unite for a common cause.

The protest is very quiet at first. The group sing older songs from the previous revolution with no interaction from the nearby soldiers. It is only after daybreak that things take a violent turn as tear gas is thrown into the crowd. This causes an eruption of action as the students are sent running into the groups of soldiers, only to be beaten and arrested. There is a significant difference between the narrator and Isaac at this point as the narrator worries about his comrades that are being taken into custody and Isaac does not seem to care about anything other than his own escape. Their escape takes them to a small classroom in an abandoned building on campus. This has been Isaac's home for some time as it has a view of the entire campus. This makes it easier for Isaac to see the daily happenings on campus. In an effort to protect the narrator, Isaac tells him that he must stay until night so that he is not seen by the soldiers. This could be considered a point of loyalty between Isaac and the narrator as Isaac does not want anything bad to happen to him, or it can be seen as a tactical solution meant to keep Isaac's hiding spot a secret. While hiding, the men talk about the possibilities of classes that were held there previously. They consider the fact that it could have been a science classroom as they look at a copy of the periodic table that had been left behind. From this, they contemplate what it would take to make a bomb. Although the narrator is only



joking about this, it is seen that Isaac could be serious. There is a foreshadowing statement that this innocent play could potentially have deadly intentions behind it.

Later, under the cover of darkness, the narrator leaves Isaac to go home. It is interesting here that Isaac cares enough about the narrator that he devises a way for the narrator to blend in with others. Isaac stays in the room, although the narrator is compelled to ask Isaac to come with him. After the narrator makes it safely back to his room he hides in there for a few days, paranoid that the authorities are still looking for him. Once he comes out of his room, he sees that the conditions of the area have worsened. There is now more of a military presence in the streets, highlighting the start of a dramatic shift in the mood and setting of this location. There is a sense of paranoia still in the narrator, but it quickly dissolves once he buys a government newspaper and starts taking a walk down one of the streets. For him, this is normal behavior, giving him a sense of peace that he has not felt in some time. This peace is false as there are indeed two men following the narrator through the streets. This is the most violent part of the novel thus far as the narrator is severely beaten by the men. It is unknown whether these men are part of the military or if they are revolutionaries, nor does the narrator understand what is being said to him. To show the further impact of this beating, the narrator states that the last thing he remembers is the children he had seen earlier laughing at him as they walk by his body.

The first section of the novel ends with Isaac in the hospital room with the narrator. It is unknown how Isaac learns that his friend is in the hospital, but once again the theme of loyalty is envisioned as Isaac states that now they have even more in common. He feels that the narrator's beating puts him on the same level of dedication to the impending revolution that Isaac has. On the contrary, the narrator does not share the same sentiments, further exposing the differences between the men. As Isaac gets up, he shakes the narrators head and kisses his forehead in a sign of affection and is symbolic of the deep connection they have.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does the military attack the peaceful protest?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is Isaac sleeping in an abandoned classroom? Why does he not leave with the narrator?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How has the city changed since the beginning of the revolution?

## Vocabulary

utopia, resolve, unfathomable, mockery, decipher, immaculate, naive, enamored



# Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 1

## Summary

In "Helen", Isaac returns leaving a basket of little gifts for Helen at her office. He does not say where he has been, but the gifts are souvenirs from an impromptu trip across the country and a note saying the he wishes to travel with her sometime. David questions Helen as to the purpose of these gifts and is still wary of Isaac's intentions. Helen calls Isaac who promises to tell her of his journey later in the evening after she gets off work. She leaves work early to go to some of the places that she and Isaac have gone to previously, ending up at the university. She does not see Isaac at first, but after walking around the campus for a bit, she sees him. He does not see her as he gets into a car of his own and drives away.

The narrator is still in the hospital in "Isaac". He observes the people around him as families come and go to take care of sick and injured loved ones while he has no one. As he is leaving the nuns at the hospital thank the narrator for paying for his stay there, but it is really Isaac that has paid for this. Isaac is waiting for the narrator outside of the hospital, where the narrator learns he has been put out of his rented room, by the landlord Thomas as he fears retribution by the government. He calls the narrator "Ali" in a joking manner as they walk down the street. An elderly man comes to Isaac begging for some change, but Isaac gives him a good sum of money. The narrator worries about not having a place to live, but Isaac assures him that everything is okay. Isaac takes the narrator to a nice house on the other side of Kampala. They are the only two people there, except for the servants and guards. These people treat Isaac with a great deal of respect but are hardly ever seen. After two nights of relaxing, Isaac informs the narrator that the next day, the actual owner of the house would be coming.

## Analysis

The first segment of the second section starts with Helen's narrative. At this point, she is pondering the possibilities of a life without Isaac and seems contented with living a life alone helping others. Without totally dismissing her relationship with Isaac, Helen has gained the confidence to be content in a life helping others. The story shifts to three weeks later as Isaac returns from an undescribed trip across the country. David is still skeptical of Isaac's intentions when Helen shows him the note that Isaac has written saying that he wishes that he could travel with her. This shows that Isaac indeed has feelings for her enough outside of the bedroom to want to travel with her and share his experiences.

Helen is excited to hear from Isaac, putting the thought of him not coming back to rest and resuming her ideas of romance with Isaac. With plans for later in the evening, she takes off from work early to drive around town. It is interesting that she drives to spots she and Isaac have visited before in attempt to further identify her feelings. This process



comes up short with the first few spots as Helen realizes that she cannot properly identify what truly bonds the pair together. The final stop of this tour is the university where Helen reminisces about a conversation she once had with Isaac. This is where the reader learns more about Isaac's feelings of isolation as he feels out of place in his village. There is a clever allusion to the Isaac narrative as Isaac states that he once belonged to a place that he never fit in, which could be guessed as Kampala.

As Helen is daydreaming, her attention shifts to a man walking across campus. Instantly she knows that it is Isaac, but rather than call out to him, she follows him. Isaac is focused and does not notice anyone around him as he gets to a car. This is the first time that Isaac is seen getting into any car other than Helen's. It is also intriguing to Helen that Isaac now has a car and even more so that he can drive himself around, especially as previously the thought of owning a car was humorous to him.

As the narrator stays in the hospital, the theme of isolation is very present as he observes families with the other patients. The only person to come to him is Isaac, which is problematic for the narrator as he knows that if Isaac has found out where is then his landlord can too and will have him thrown out for being a radical. It is important to note that the narrator is not a radical but since he is associated with one and has been beaten like he is one, then the narrator will be labeled as such. This proves to be true when the narrator comes out of the hospital to find that Isaac has all of his belongings. There is a crucial change to Isaac as he is seen to have more money than the narrator ever thought possible. Isaac is also more sympathetic to the people around him, especially as an old man begs him for money. Isaac has now become as rich as the students he used to tease, but he uses it to help others, like the man and the narrator. At first the narrator does not understand the nurses who try to tell him that his stay has already been paid for, but now he realizes that it is Isaac that has paid for his visit.

As the men leave, Isaac jokingly refers to the narrator as "Ali", for being in a fight, another name that Isaac gives to the narrator. He also relates to the narrator the paranoia that Thomas feels for having a rebel in his house. Although Thomas knows that the narrator is a pacifist, Thomas cannot take the chance of getting into any government trouble as the narrator is linked to Isaac. This does not concern Isaac as he assures the narrator that everything will turn out alright. The narrator is amazed at the sights of Kampala as he is driven through the city. Some of these sights he has never seen as he has always been in the slums of the city. Isaac displays his dominance yet again as he gives the taxi driver a stack of money so that the driver does not get upset over the zigzagging directions.

The pair arrive at a house that is unlike any that the narrator has stayed in. It is in a posh neighborhood and is guarded. It is interesting to note that the guard salutes Isaac as if Isaac is part of the military as well. As the narrator notices this, there is a brief memory of his father's brief service in the military. It is important to note here that the memory revives a sort of restlessness and apprehension in the narrator. This is evidenced by his statement that if he had the choice, he would run away from this place, as if he knows that something bad is going to happen.





The only people who are staying in the house are Isaac, the narrator, and the handful of guards and servants working in the house. There is no mention at this time of the owner or how Isaac has come to be in such a prosperous position. There is also no interaction with the people working inside the home. Food is prepared and left for Isaac and the narrator, but due to the impoverished circumstances of everything around them, there is not much in the communal food pot. Anytime Isaac or the narrator would eat and try to get a second helping, the rest of the food is always gone.

Discussion about Isaac's circumstances never happens in this segment. The narrator is curious, but he does not press Isaac for answers. Instead, Isaac talks of all the places he would like to visit in his life. As the narrator listens to Isaac's dreams of foreign and beautiful places, the narrator realizes in perhaps a foreshadowing moment, that neither he nor Isaac will ever go to such places. They also take to fantasizing about improving the house with things like a pool and better stairways. This moment is perhaps the last peaceful moments that they will have together as on the second night of their stay, Isaac announces that the owner will be coming in the morning.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is David skeptical about Isaac's note with the gifts? Does Helen actually think that Isaac wants to travel with her? What does this say about their relationship?

## Discussion Question 2

How has Isaac changed since the narrator sees him last? How does he have enough money to do some of the things he has done?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Thomas think that the narrator is a rebel? Why is this an untrue statement?

## Vocabulary

curt, quiver, solace, entitlement, dilapidated, indifferent, prostrate, caste, loyalists, delusions



## Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 2

### Summary

In the "Helen" segment, Helen goes to Isaac's house, but decides not to park the car. Instead, she circles the block a few times as she does not see Isaac's car. On the second ride around the block, she passes Isaac as he goes to his house. She parks in front of the house, but before she can get in the door, she is stopped by Isaac. He tells her that it is not a good time to visit and before she can say anything else, he goes back inside, shutting the door behind him.

Isaac busies himself in preparing the house for the owner. The owner and his entourage arrive later than expected, but the narrator recognizes him as the man in the Cafe Flamingo. It turns out that the man is named Joseph and is the owner of the cafe. He takes Isaac under his care for the most part and gives him small jobs to do. After some time, Joseph instructs Isaac to stay at the university to get the students involved in the political uprising, with the peaceful protest as a result. The narrator learns that many of the soldiers are actually Joseph's men and that the raid is mostly staged to rally the students but there were a lot of actual soldiers there that night. Isaac tells the narrator that Joseph is under the impression that some of the real soldiers beat the narrator that night. It is the only reason that Joseph allows the narrator's presence inside the home. Isaac warns the narrator to be careful about this as there is possible troubles ahead.

### Analysis

The focus in Helen's section is on her apprehension to actually go into Isaac's apartment. She takes a small pleasure in spying on Isaac as she circles the block to see where his new car is. She appreciates that now some of his secrets are coming to life. This gives her a slight adventure as she envisions more secrets surrounding Isaac. These secrets would explain for Helen Isaac's recent trip as the eerily immaculate condition of his apartment. There is classic romanticism clash she defines herself as the virtuous woman who shares a romance with a villain. As Isaac has not told her much more about his life, this is the only way Helen has to somehow make sense of the man that is Isaac.

Helen's parks the car for in front of the apartment building for the very first time. In the past, she has been careful to park the car around the corner so that no one gets suspicious of her activities. This embodies a new confidence that Helen has as she eagerly gets out of the car. The feeling is short lived as she notices Isaac looking at her out of his window. He has a foreboding look, as if her presence is not wanted and that he may be angry. Before Helen has a chance to do anything, Isaac is in front of her telling her that it is not a good time for her to visit. There is no indication as to why or if something has gone wrong between the time he last talked to Helen and the present, nor does he offer her any explanation. Helen tries to make light of this situation, but it is



hopeless as she has no valid answer to the situation at hand. For Helen, this feeling of confusion and fear is worse than the feelings she felt during the diner fiasco.

There is a significant change in the compound as the guards are more alert and are cleaning the grounds in preparation of the house owner. The narrator sees a visual change in the area as well as a red dirt path has been made. This path looks like a red carpet to welcome the owner. Isaac takes pride in this work, but he has not participated in it except to give directions to the guards, once again showing his superiority. It is clear to see that Isaac is anxious for this arrival as he nitpicks every detail of the preparations. He is even bold enough to ask the narrator if his arm sling is necessary. In order to not embarrass his friend and to prove that he is tougher than he looks, the narrator discards the sling even though it is extremely painful to do so. This pleases Isaac greatly as his scene is being perfected.

There is something almost maniacal in Isaac's manner as he wants everything to be the absolute best for the owner's arrival. It is easy to tell that whoever this person is, Isaac looks up to them a great deal and does not want to let them down. The narrator is helpless to protest Isaac's abuse of the guards, but he admits that he will have to step in if Isaac starts abusing the servant ladies. Although the guards and ladies have spent all day working hard at making the area pristine, it is many hours before anything happens. After dusk, the guards run to the gate to open it for their leader. This disgusts Isaac as all of his hard work of coordinating this perfect look has gone to waste. It is a small bit of irony, but there is also something sinister behind his statement that the guards are like children. The narrator interprets this as Isaac subtly meaning that the guards are in a lower status than he.

A great flurry of activity begins as the cars come through the gate. The anticipation has built up to a crescendo for most of the people, but not for the narrator. He does not see the purpose in all of this fuss over ordinary people. Once the men exit the vehicles, it is plain to see that these are military men. The special touches that Isaac has put into making the appearance of the house perfect goes unnoticed as these men are focused on getting into the house quickly. Although the other men are unfamiliar to the narrator, he recognizes one man as the man who stopped the students from beating Isaac to death at the Cafe Flamingo. The man goes by the name of Joseph and it is revealed that he is the owner of the cafe. Some of the other men are familiar as well. It is intriguing that a few of the men are the same soldiers that broke up the earlier protests at the university.

Isaac then goes on to relate the tale of what happened to him in the time between the Cafe Flamingo incident and the protest at the school. Joseph becomes like a father figure to Isaac over time as he helps Isaac to heal and gives him odd jobs to do when he is not at the university. It is Joseph who introduces Isaac to the inner workings of the revolt against the government, with the first acts being carrying messages to other rebels. It is also revealed that Joseph is the main force behind Isaac spending so much time on campus and for the peaceful protest. In an exceptional twist of things, more is brought to light as the alleged soldiers who broke up the protest were Joseph's men as well. This comes as a shock to the narrator as this information was never given to him



previously. Isaac also gives the narrator the secret that the only reason he has been allowed into Joseph's home is the belief that the narrator was beaten by some of these men. The chapter closes with an ominous warning that the narrator is never to tell anyone that he was not beaten at the university as trouble is brewing for Joseph. There is another point of identity in these last sentences as Isaac assures the narrator that since no one knows him, the narrator should be safe from the whatever is going to happen next.

## Discussion Question 1

What causes Isaac to not want to Helen to be at his apartment? How does this make Helen feel?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Joseph want everything to be perfect for Joseph's arrival? How did this turn out?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Isaac tell the narrator about Joseph letting the narrator stay in his house? Why is it essential that the narrator not say anything to anyone?

## Vocabulary

intrigue, morose, ingrain, bigotry, meticulous, tedious, nostalgia



## Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 3

### Summary

Helen decides to remain camped out in her car in front of Isaac's apartment. As she sits there, she recalls how she and her mother differ. As she ponders these things and watches Isaac's window, she notices that there is another man in the apartment. After some time of keeping an eye on the place she falls asleep. Several hours later Helen wakes up to find the man walking to his car. She tries to hide in her seat but is unsuccessful as the man drives by her and yells for her to have a good night.

Throughout the night, Isaac and the narrator sit outside while Joseph conducts his meeting inside. As they wait, the narrator remembers a story his father once told him about daylight and hope, but he does not tell Isaac about it. Later in the night, Joseph comes to Isaac and the narrator telling them they can go inside the house. The pair share a bedroom on the third floor, but the narrator cannot sleep. The narrator pretends to sleep for a while but notices that Isaac sneaks out of the room. When Isaac returns, he throws his clothes all over the floor. The narrator decides that it is his job to help protect his friend in any way he can, but rather than tell Isaac this, he folds Isaac's clothes as a way of showing him.

### Analysis

This is perhaps one of the most brief chapters in the novel as Helen is dedicated to finding the cause for Isaac's abruptness. The author adds in here a descriptive comparisons between Helen and her mother physically and mentally. This aids Helen in deciding if she should stay to watch Isaac's apartment or not. Spurred on by these differences, Helen forces herself to continue watching the apartment hoping to find some clues into Isaac's mysterious behavior. Isaac is not alone in his apartment, which seems to be the reason Isaac asked Helen to leave previously. The man is unknown, but it is clear that the men are arguing over something important. This further adds to Helen's sense that she truly does not know Isaac. As morning comes, Helen accidentally falls asleep. To her surprise, as the unknown man is leaving, he yells out to her to have a good night. This is interesting as Helen does not know this man or how he knows of her.

In Isaac's section, the narrator has a flashback of a story once told to him by his father. This is the first time that the narrator's father is clearly mentioned as he tells a tale of how dreams come about. The narrator uses this as an inspirational story to show the hope people have when they are faced with new things. This is an element of the "vision" theme as the narrator wants to tell Isaac of this story and to give him hope. It is unfortunate, but the narrator never tells Isaac this story. The narrator feels that Isaac would not appreciate the true meaning of the story because he is so involved in the rebellion.



Some time passes before Joseph comes to see Isaac and the narrator. There is an element of fear with the narrator as he is accepted into Joseph's group. This fear is based on the unknown of what is to come and of the narrator's role in the hierarchy of the house. Isaac does nothing to dissuade these fears, perhaps in some ways, Isaac feels this himself. This fear leaves the narrator after Isaac sneaks out of their bedroom to do an unknown errand. It does not return in the morning but is replaced with a sense of knowledge that the narrator is now aware of the danger Isaac has placed himself in and of the need to protect his friend. These feelings are kept hidden as the narrator is embarrassed to tell Isaac of these things. As a sign of loyalty to his friend, the narrator picks up Isaac's discarded clothes and folds them. This is subtle but this has a large symbolic impact as this act is meant to be seen as the narrator's pledge to always take care of Isaac.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What causes Helen to stay outside of Isaac's apartment all night? What influence does her mother have in this?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does the author include the story that the narrator's father told him? What kind of parallel is there between the current situation and the story?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does the role of the narrator change in this segment? How does the act of folding clothes affect this?

## **Vocabulary**

profound, superficial, theatrics, irrational, semiconscious, bicker



## Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 4

### Summary

Helen does not immediately drive away from Isaac's apartment in "Helen". She lingers for a while longer before deciding it is time to go. Just as she starts the car, Isaac walks outside. She takes pity on him because he is not wearing his jacket and it is cold out. Isaac notices her right away and gets into her car. As Helen drives with no intentional direction, Isaac remains silent until she asks him about the mysterious man. As Isaac is about to answer, he bursts into tears. Helen finds out that the man is Henry, the friend who brought Isaac to America. Isaac tells Helen that Henry came to him last night to tell him the news that his closest friend has died. Helen demands to know who this friend was and Isaac replies that he was a man he called Isaac.

"Isaac"s section is the beginning of the preparations for the revolution as men start to gather for a meeting. Joseph talks to the narrator privately and lets him know that Isaac wants to keep him safe and close, but Joseph will understand if the narrator wants to leave. The narrator says that he wants to stay, but Joseph asks him if it is because of Isaac or is it because the narrator has no other place to go. The narrator does not answer this, but Joseph is satisfied and says that he is welcome to stay. During the meeting, Isaac and the narrator chat outside as they are not allowed to join the meeting. The meeting is over quickly and trucks begin arriving shortly afterwards. The trucks are mostly filled with food, but some of the crates have bullets in them as well. Joseph is very quick to show the narrator these bullets. Some time later, the group drinks beer in honor of the oncoming revolution.

### Analysis

Helen's segment is a crucial plot point for two reasons: first this segment shows a deepening relationship between Helen and Isaac. This is a mutual occurrence as Helen is worried about Isaac as he comes out of his apartment with no coat on. This is significant as it relates to the fact that Helen is turning into a more nurturing person, something that she previously was not. As Isaac immediately spots her, he does not dodge her or try to get away. Instead he gets into her car and they drive off together with no destination, but Helen drives further out of town so that Isaac can put his thoughts together. There is an outpouring of emotion as he immediately begins to cry, showing that he now trusts Helen enough to show her his true emotions. Helen is patient with him, not wanting to be demanding or force any conversation. When Isaac is ready to talk he reveals that the man in his apartment is Henry, a friend of his. Henry has come to deliver bad news, which proves to be devastating for Isaac. Isaac is so full of grief that it is hard for him to continue. Isaac regains his composure, adding the second prolific piece to his story line. He informs Helen that his dearest friend, someone that he has always considered a brother, has died. there is a slight shock as Isaac says that the



man who has recently died is a man only known by the name Isaac. This adds an intriguing plot twist as Isaac's identity comes further into question.

The rebel leader Joseph is the focus of this "Isaac" as this is the first one-on-one interaction with the narrator. It is interesting that Joseph understands the narrator's pacifist ways and ensures that the narrator may leave at any time. Although the narrator wants to stay, Joseph senses his apprehension and questions whether the desire to stay comes from the friendship he has with Isaac or if it is because the narrator has no home. Joseph knows that it is both, but he does not wish to treat this as a negative answer, for the moment, which has an ominous undertone. This is also a secret conversation and it is the longest conversation that is had between Joseph and the narrator, but it is extremely important as the narrator ponders why he actually is still in Joseph's house.

This segment is also heralded as the beginning of the rebellion led by Joseph. There are many unrecognizable men now in the house, all are from differing backgrounds. Isaac and the narrator are still outsiders in this gathering but Isaac does not seem to mind this. This is still a dangerous situation, however, as the guard is under orders to shoot anyone who tries to enter the meeting at this point. This is a double standard as no one can leave without being shot as well. This seems only to apply to the narrator and others, which is confusing as to why this should not apply to Isaac as well. As the meeting breaks, there is a hint of background information about Joseph as he has been in England for a few years. This small bit of information is not necessary at this point, but it could prove to be useful later on.

There is a slight deviation as food trucks come into the compound to deliver boxes of food. It is unknown at this point why so much has been brought in, but one guess is that it is to be used for Joseph's army of rebels. At this point in the novel, preparations for war are under full swing. This is the first time that any sort of weaponry is introduced as Joseph pulls out a box of bullet strips. He makes it a point to show this to the narrator, which causes the narrator some alarm. The scene flips forward to later in the evening. A celebration is occurring but Joseph makes it a point to indicate that this is not a celebration, it is the beginning of the end of oppression. The narrator and Isaac seem to be in a jolly mood, joking with each other, which is reminiscent of the days spent together on campus. By this point, Joseph is drunk and jovial as well, hoping that he does not blow himself up as he sits on one of the many crates of furniture.

## Discussion Question 1

What causes Isaac to break into tears in Helen's car? How does Helen respond to this?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Joseph have a private conversation with the narrator? How does Joseph know that the narrator is a pacifist?





## Discussion Question 3

Who are all the food crates brought in for? Why does Joseph make a point of showing the narrator the bullet strips?

## Vocabulary

composure, splayed, refrain, servility, precursor, plausible, implicitly, valiant, trite, nostalgic



## Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 5

### Summary

Isaac does not want to discuss his past in "Helen". He and Helen make their way to a motel for some sleep, but Isaac is reluctant to be seen. The pair make love for the first time in a long while. After many nights spent with Isaac, Helen reveals to her mother that she is indeed seeing a man. She spends a little bit of time away from Isaac volunteering in another town affected by a flood. Helen comes back with a renewed look on her job as she works with more enthusiasm. Henry returns to remind Isaac that his student visa is about to expire. Henry and Isaac invite Helen to the apartment for dinner where Henry tells Helen all about how he met Joseph in London and became good friends. Henry is happy that Helen is in Isaac's life and hopes that Isaac will be successful in the next phase of his life. In bed, Helen worries that Isaac will soon be leaving her.

An explosion is reported about on the local radio station in "Isaac". The rebels that cause the explosion are dead, but they are not a part of Joseph's group. Sometime later, the president of Uganda is on the radio talking about how the revolution will be stopped quickly. As Joseph listens to this broadcast, he includes the narrator in his next plans as he needs someone who is intelligent enough to use and create detailed maps. At the start of another gathering a man gives Isaac an envelope with a map of some of the slum areas of Kampala. The narrator is told to memorize the map as he is being sent out on a mission to deliver some goods to another house under the guise of a fruit seller then to return the following day.

Isaac wants to tag along on the journey to the outskirts of town where the narrator will be placed, but he is forced out of the vehicle before it departs. The narrator is successful in making his destination, but he is knocked unconscious. When he awakens, Isaac is there to take him back to Joseph's house. They stop at the house of an older man and listen as explosions happen all around them. With so much hostile activity going on outside, Isaac informs the narrator that they will have to spend the night there.

### Analysis

This segment of the novel shows even more of the escalation of Isaac and Helen's romance plus a consequence of their relationship. In an effort to spend an intimate moment together, the pair go to a motel. Isaac hides in the seat, he does not want to be seen with Helen. There is nothing hurtful about this, he is aware of the negative views on interracial relationships in this area. This shows that Isaac is more aware of the social climate than Helen thinks. Helen secures a room at the back of the motel, away from any curious onlookers and so they may have privacy.



This begins a great deal of time spent together to the point that Helen barely comes home any more as the story jumps forward by an undisclosed amount of time. Helen's mother has become suspicious of Helen's whereabouts, but she is unable to confirm this. After several weeks of staying with Isaac, Helen acknowledges that she is indeed spending her evenings with a man, but it is curious to note that she does not give any more specifics than that. The mother states that she worries about Helen, but it is just a cover for her own loneliness. In an effort to make Helen feel guilty for leaving her alone, Helen's mother leaves her little gifts, in hopes that things can go back to normal between them.

At this point, there is a slight shift in the tone of Helen's narrative as there is a side note regarding the possibilities of a life that she and Isaac could have shared. This gives the impression that Helen is delivering this story as a series of memories and that the relationship is over in the present. Without much further detail, she jumps into an explanation of how her faith in her work has been renewed by a brief separation from Isaac as she is helping another town as it has been flooded. Here there is a renewal of Helen's enthusiasm for her work, more so than in previous segments. This deviation is small but it does not add much to the significance of the rest of the section nor does it provide any pertinent insight other than Helen's contentment.

Once again, the segment shifts in focus as Henry is back into the picture. This casts a sort of cloud over Helen and Isaac's relationship as he explains that Isaac's visa is nearly up and that he will probably have to go back to Africa soon. During a dinner conversation Henry admits that he knows next to nothing about Isaac while more information about Henry is explained. Henry is a former diplomat who is a friend of Joseph's. The pair met in London many years ago, which is why Henry has been so helpful in terms of making sure Isaac is able to be in the United States. Henry approves of Helen, thinking that Isaac has become well adjusted to American life since meeting her. Henry is confident that Isaac will be successful where ever he goes after Henry is no longer able to help him. This is the first mention of the possibility that Isaac may be forced to leave Helen, causing Helen to begin to worry about the status of their relationship.

War is the central element of the "Isaac" section. There is evidence that the rebellion has not fully gotten organized as an explosion involving amateur rebels occurs, killing them all. Instead of feeling sorry for the loss of these men, Isaac takes this to be a point of inspiration. His enthusiasm for violence is beginning to emerge, but it is something that the narrator cannot understand. The eruption of violence brings a change to the local people as the military has the authority to shoot anyone suspected of rebellion. During the president's radio speech, he vows to bring order to the area. The narrator thinks of this as a bad omen until he catches the uncertainty in the president's voice. It is here that the narrator feels his on inspiration to join in the revolution.

As Joseph joins in to listen to the radio, his enthusiasm is also felt. It is key to note here that Joseph senses the narrator's inspiration and finally treats him as an equal member of the group. The narrator's intelligence is useful as he needs someone who can memorize a map. The map is interesting, as it shows the lower income neighborhoods



of the city. With this map, comes the mission to deliver items to a house sympathetic to Joseph's cause. For this purpose, the narrator is to walk through the streets with a wheelbarrow, pretending to sell fruit so that he is not stopped by authorities. The items are not described, but it is important that they be moved from Joseph's house. The narrator is eager to finally fit in with this group, therefore he does not hesitate to accept this mission.

There is a curious occurrence within the start of the mission. Isaac tries to ride along with his friend to the starting point, but he is quickly denied and brought to Joseph. The details of the conversation are not given, but it adds a sense of curiosity that Isaac is singled out, forcing the narrator to head out with unfamiliar people. The mission is successful as the narrator remains anonymous. There is no reason given as to why he is knocked out at the destination, nor is it known how Isaac has arrived to retrieve the narrator. On their next stop, the tragedy of war is very visible. The older man and his wife are extremely poor but they are willing to share their home with Isaac and the narrator until it is safe to leave. There is a silent understanding that the violence outside around them could happen to them at any moment, causing the narrator to feel pity for this man and his family.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Isaac choose to hide himself at the hotel?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe the relationship between Henry and Isaac. Why is Henry happy that Helen is in Isaac's life?

## Discussion Question 3

Is the narrator excited to be a part of the revolution? How do his feelings toward the escalating violence compare to Isaac's feelings?

## Vocabulary

fraudulent, conscripted, enclaves, slack, brutish, crass, sporadic, negligible, inflected, intricately, jostled



## Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 6

### Summary

In "Helen", Isaac tells Helen a little of his past, but he only starts with how he met Henry. He recalls that Henry and Joseph were once friends, which was useful for getting Isaac into the country. Once Isaac is in the country, Isaac tries to tell Henry the truth about how he came to the country. Henry does not want to believe this and only does so after making a few phone calls. Although Henry becomes angry about the deception, he decides that it is for the best if Isaac does not mention any more of his past. Isaac also tells Helen of his father and of how he came to the decision to leave his home village and his family forever. Isaac states that he always had dreams of leaving his village, even though his true name is 13 names long, denoting a long family heritage. His father knows of his intent to leave and only gives permission after radicals come to the village spreading propaganda. The narrator promises his father that one day he will return, but the father calls him "Bird" and says that he knows the narrator will not.

The narrator and Isaac argue lightly as they wait to escape the slums after the weapons delivery in "Isaac". The young boys that the narrator delivered the weapons to engage in fighting with the soldiers. Once the fighting dies down, they both leave their hideout but it takes more than eight hours to return to Joseph's house. They argue on the way back, but they stop once they are held up by some of Joseph's guards because they have recently been invaded by the Tanzanians. After gaining entry into the area by Joseph, Isaac and the narrator wait outside for Joseph's next move. He plans to liberate his home village first then move on to other villages. Isaac and the narrator get into a fight after the narrator questions Isaac's relationship with Joseph. Joseph comes to the narrator after the fight and whispers that he still has the option of staying with the group or leaving before having his men carry him into the house. The narrator still chooses to go with Isaac and the rest of the rebels.

### Analysis

In "Helen", Isaac finally feels confident enough to discuss parts of his past with Helen as she fears that he will leave her unexpectedly. As he does so, Isaac recalls that he once tried telling Henry the truth of how he came to have Isaac's passport but Henry does not believe the truth. Only after calls to the British Embassy does Henry start to believe but he is angered that he has been misguided. In an effort to protect himself and possibly to protect Isaac, Henry does not want to be told any more of what happened in Uganda. From this, a friendship builds, and Henry becomes one of the only friends Isaac has in America. Isaac also reveals to Helen that he felt it was necessary to not reveal his past to Helen previously as the truth could have been damaging to their relationship.

This part centers on the theme of identity as even Helen admits that she doubted who Isaac truly is. She is confused how Isaac can so nonchalantly assume someone else's



identity and be comfortable living someone else's life. She cannot fathom this as she has always thought of herself in one fashion. Isaac understands her concerns and he tells her that once he felt the same way. It is here that Isaac touches also on the theme of isolation and how it helped shape his desire to leave the village. There is a certain pride to Isaac as he tells Helen that he was born with 13 names, one from each generation of his family. This is considered a very blessed accomplishment as not many other families in his village have been around for so long. Isaac recalls that he never had any desire to carry on with this tradition, in fact he did not feel that he fit in with his village at all. He states that he has always had dreams of other places and lives, but he was unable to fulfill his dreams for many years.

The revolution also has a small part to play in Isaac's tale. The soldiers that come to his village talk of an uprising of the poor against the rich. As the narrator's father has already witnessed one revolution, he is aware that these soldiers will try to enlist the narrator. This action is what causes his father to give the narrator permission to leave home and start his journey to Kampala. His father has a feeling that another revolution is on the horizon and he wants his sons to have no part of it. Before the narrator leaves, the father calls him "Bird" to signify that the narrator has always had loftier plans than just being a farmer in a poor village. He is also aware that the narrator will never come home again, but he is not saddened by this. As the narrator enters Kampala, it is important to note that he is happy to finally be a nameless face in the crowd.

The narrator witnesses the first night of the revolution in "Isaac". The narrator is worried about what would have happened to him if Isaac had not come to get him out of the delivery house, but Isaac just shrugs him off. The fighting is very intense as the young men from the house begin killing soldiers. Although the narrator is concerned about these boys' ages, Isaac does not give it another thought. For Isaac, they are just part of a greater cause. This section is action filled as some of the young boys are killed, some ambush other soldiers, but even they are killed as they run out of ammo.

Since the soldiers are focusing elsewhere at this point, Isaac thinks it is best to leave the old man's home. Out of kindness, Isaac leaves money for him and his wife. It is a small token of Isaac's appreciation, but by this time, it can be surmised that the couple is very poor and the money can greatly help them. It is important to note the after effects of this small battle. It is seen that there are many bodies in the street, but no one is greatly saddened by this. In their extreme poverty, they do not care as they lift valuable items off of the dead. Even items considered trash, like shell casings, are valuable items for these people.

This section also highlights a definitive change in the relationship between Isaac and the narrator. There is a certain amount of tension rising as the men walk back to Joseph's village. Once they arrive back in the village, the tension temporarily subsides as they are accosted by the guards working for Joseph. As they assume that Isaac and the narrator are the enemy. Once Joseph allows them in to the headquarters, they notice that a small battle has broken out there. It is revealed that the weapons delivery was just a distraction for militants from Tanzania to invade the area. The narrator is



surprised, but Isaac seems like he has had prior knowledge of something like this happening.

After a brief encounter with Joseph, the narrator and Isaac go back outside as they are not truly a part of the war planning committee. Only Isaac has inside information which he relates to the narrator. The next plan is to go to Joseph's hometown to free it from the government first. Tensions rise to their fullest height as Isaac mocks the narrator for asking what role he has to play in the upcoming events. Out of frustration, the narrator questions Isaac's relationship with Joseph. The narrator does not fully accuse Isaac of anything, but there are implications as the narrative goes on to say that the narrator knows where Isaac goes in the middle of the night. There is speculation that the narrator is accusing Isaac of being related to Joseph or that they are more than just friends. The result of this is Isaac and the other guards severely beating the narrator. Joseph comes over to the narrator but he is kind as he tells him that they will be leaving soon and that the narrator still has the chance to leave the group before having the guards lay him down in the house. Instead of leaving the area and Isaac, the narrator follows the rest of the group as they head to Joseph's village.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Isaac choose to tell Helen parts of his past? What parts worry her?

## Discussion Question 2

What happens after the narrator leaves the weapons? How are the people affected?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the rising tension between Isaac and the narrator. How does this differ from how they have previously acted together. What causes Isaac to beat the narrator?

## Vocabulary

deported, lull, barrage, converged, obscure, volley, lobbed, unscathed, sequestered, convoy



## Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 7

### Summary

Helen does not want to hear any more of Isaac's story in "Helen". They fall asleep, but the next morning, Helen makes an excuse to leave early in the morning and after aimlessly driving past the diner and remembering bits and pieces of her relationship with Isaac she winds up at David's house. He questions Helen on what is going on, but does not press Helen for answers. He informs her that people in the office and around town know what is going on between her and Isaac. After telling Helen a story from when he was younger about racism, he offers to let Helen sleep at his home for a while. When he asks if she will be at work on Monday, Helen replies that she hopes she will not.

Joseph's army arrives in his home village to liberate it in "Isaac". Isaac spends his time with Joseph and the other high ranking militants, while the narrator roams the streets most of the time. While Isaac is saluted as a high ranking officer, the narrator is often ignored. The narrator witnesses the villagers grow afraid of the rebels over time. Two of the rebels try to take a man's chickens but when the man refuses the chickens are killed and his house is burnt down. Once Joseph hears about this, he demands that the men are brought to him, but Isaac executes them to show the villagers that this is what they are being protected from. Later in the evening, Joseph holds a large party for the villagers where he pays them all back for being generous in sharing what they have with his soldiers. During this party, Isaac comes to the narrator, ready to be friends again, even though he is drunk. He offers the narrator the position of lieutenant if he executes one of the soldiers that have recently joined the group. the narrator declines, but the man along with eight others are executed because the other rebels do not think they can be trusted.

### Analysis

"Helen" shows the relationship between Helen and Isaac deteriorating as she no longer wants to hear anymore of Isaac's tale. Isaac admits that he was reluctant to ever tell Helen, as he knew that this would somehow damage the relationship. This turns out to be true as Helen wakes up early the next morning wanting to leave the apartment as soon as possible. She does not know where she is going, but she passes by the diner. There is a recollection of the past events with Isaac. There is a small touch of remorse about this as Helen contemplates the possibilities of further negativity.

Helen decides to visit David, who seems to know that there is trouble between Helen and Isaac. In order to get Helen to talk, David uses methods commonly used on their clients to engage Helen in a conversation about Isaac. He is concerned for Helen as he has heard the town gossiping about her and Isaac. This is the first time that the subject of racism is truly brought to light as David informs Helen that the rest of the town is only





tolerating her actions, especially the past event of taking Isaac to lunch, because she is a local girl. This brings to focus a story that David tells about him being younger and going to Mississippi with his father and encountering racism and the effects of not being a racist like the others around him. This is to illustrate to Helen that he understands her desire for equality but that it does not always happen, especially in small towns. David then invites Helen to sleep in his house for a while and asks her about coming to work on Monday. There is a slight foreshadowing here as Helen answers that she hopes not, giving the impression that she is starting to formulate a plan.

The narrator feels his detachment to the rebellion deepening in "Isaac". He wants to write about the ongoing events, but cannot find the words to do so. Instead he draws pictures of the hills and he feels alone in being the only one that sees the sunset as beautiful while the others are squarely focused on the revolution. This is the most important moment for Joseph as he comes into his home village. At this point there is no bloodshed, the action of liberation is very tame until the village leaders are gathered and eventually executed. They are not executed publicly, but in the privacy of their own homes after a great show is made by Joseph to declare that he is honoring his father's promise to help the people.

Once again, the division between Isaac and the narrator comes into focus as Isaac sleeps with Joseph and other high ranking rebels while the narrator sleeps outside with the common ones. Isaac spends much of his day in talks of war and is saluted as someone highly respected, while the narrator is ignored and spends most of his days wandering the village alone. It is curious to note that among the things that the narrator witnesses is the fact that the villagers start out happy, but soon they begin to hide their valuables as the soldiers begin to loot them.

One of the most tragic instances where the rebels become less like liberators and more like villains is when a pair of soldiers try to take a pair of chickens from a poor family. The man refuses to freely give the soldiers the chickens and in retaliation, the soldiers kill the chickens and burn down the house. These soldiers are no more than teenage boys who are poor themselves. Joseph tries to decide what to do with them, but Isaac makes the case that the boys need to be made examples to the community that they will always be protected. Although they already have broken arms, this is not good enough for Isaac. He feels that the people will not come to trust Joseph's regime if they allow these looters to live. Isaac callously executes both of the boys and has their bodies put out on the main road as a warning sign to others who would try to do the same thing.

The scene shifts to a large party that Joseph is holding to compensate the villagers. This is a show of Joseph's intentions and he hopes to use it as a way to further enforce the concept that he is in the village as a great protector. This is successful as the people become enamored with Joseph. Isaac joins the narrator during the party where the pair joke as if no hard feelings are between them. This exchange is not without its own sort of violence. In a drunken stupor, Isaac whips out his gun and promises to make the narrator a lieutenant if he shoots a high ranking man in the corner. The narrator declines and the man is led out to be executed by someone else along with other men who are



former soldiers who have defected to Joseph's side. These men are executed solely because they are former soldiers and some of the rebels feel that they cannot be trusted. In all, nine men are executed but no one seems to show any remorse. Instead the party goes on as if nothing has happened.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the purpose of David talking about when he was younger? How does it relate to Helen and Isaac?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How do the villagers first greet Joseph and his men? What happens to make this change?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why are the nine men executed? Could there have been another way to find out if they are trust worthy?

## **Vocabulary**

marginally, crude, consensus, vigorous, demagogue, dilapidated, furtively, dint, lavish, jowls



## Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 8

### Summary

"Helen" returns to Isaac's apartment after sleeping at David's house for a few hours. She notices that she and Isaac did not really clean up after the previous night's dinner with Henry and she promises that she will clean later. Isaac asks her what has brought her back so quickly and she lies by saying she forgot that it is Saturday. Isaac knows that this is a lie but pretends not to know this. She then proposes that they take a trip immediately to Chicago. Isaac reluctantly agrees and Helen tells him to pack everything he can into his suitcases. While he packs, Helen showers then uses his toothbrush to brush her teeth. Isaac starts to put on the suit he first met Helen in, but they end up making love. As Isaac showers, Helen cooks him a plate of eggs, then watches him eat them. The first place they go to after leaving the apartment is to Helen's house. Isaac prefers to stay in the car while Helen gets her things. She grabs a suitcase then tells her mother that she and Isaac are leaving for a while. Helen's mother mistakes this quick trip and the fact that Isaac is wearing a suit to mean that Helen is eloping, but Helen quickly dismisses that idea. After a few minutes, Isaac comes to the door and Helen's mother introduces herself as Audrey. Helen takes Isaac on a tour of the house while her mother makes tea. Helen stops at a picture of her grandparents. Isaac admires this picture, but it reminds Helen that she will never have a large family like Isaac's. Isaac quietly drinks tea with Helen's mother while Helen packs and takes one last look at her room. When she comes downstairs, she decides to leave as the situation feels awkward. As Helen and Isaac are leaving, her mother warns Helen to be careful of being seen by anyone.

It is the next morning in "Isaac" and the soldiers are preparing to move out to other villages. The narrator secretly wishes that Isaac would come to a safe place with him, but he does not mention it. Isaac takes him to the edge of the village. An elderly man comes along and Isaac pays the man to take the narrator to a safe village. The pair say goodbye as Isaac prepares to join Joseph and his men. The narrator is taken to a smaller village and called "Daniel" by the residents. He stays in a hut next to the old man's but only the old man really knows why he is there. On the first night, the narrator prays for the safety of all of the people involved in the revolution.

### Analysis

Helen's narrative shows a dramatic twist in her relationship with Isaac. She returns and notices the mess that was left the night before and she is happy that the usually pristine house needs tidying. This shows that she is actually a part of Isaac's life. Isaac asks her what brings her back so quickly, but Helen's lie is obvious as she tells him that she did not remember it is Saturday. Isaac acts as if this lie does not bother him. He knows that due to his revealing parts of his past that Helen is trying to leave him, but he does not mention this. Helen tells Isaac that they need to take a trip. Isaac is originally reluctant,



but he agrees to accompany Helen to Chicago. It is curious that Helen wants Isaac to pack all of his things, as if he is not coming back to the apartment. There is also a sense of urgency with Helen as she says that they must go immediately.

As Isaac packs his few items into his suitcase, Helen showers. The item of Isaac's toothbrush is important in this segment as Helen uses it to brush her own teeth. She experiences a sort of intimacy she has never felt with Isaac before, but it is short lived. While she brushes her teeth, her plan comes more into her mind and she realizes that the relationship needs to end soon. After Helen emerges from the bathroom, Helen and Isaac make love for probably the last time, although Isaac does not know this yet. Helen does not feel any regret over this. Helen makes Isaac a plate of eggs while he showers. This is significant as it shows that Helen has truly evolved. She watches Isaac eat the eggs, and is reminiscent of how her mother used to watch her father eat his breakfast every morning before her parents divorced. Helen makes the comparison between her and her mother as her mother did not know when her father was going to leave them, but Helen knows that this is truly the end of her and Isaac.

Before the pair leave Laurel, Helen makes a stop at her home. It is important to note that Isaac stays in the car as Helen gets out. He is again aware of his status as an African man and he does not want to call attention to anyone that may be watching. Helen's mother is watching from behind a curtain and when Helen comes in, Helen informs her mother that Isaac has been the man that she is seeing. When her mother inquires about his use of a suit, Helen makes the mistake of saying he only wears it for important occasions. Helen's mother misinterprets this, but Helen is quick to assure her mother that they are not getting married. After a few minutes, Isaac comes to the house, but Helen's mother is very undecided as to how to act. She is seen as awkward at introducing herself to Isaac and from there a stiff exchange is acted out between the pair. As Helen's mother makes tea, Helen shows Isaac around the house. She stops at a picture of her grandparents and she compares Isaac's long family line to her own short one. She also realizes that the house is large enough for a family more like Isaac's, but it is something she will never have.

As tea is prepared, Helen packs a few of her things. Over the years, Helen has become less sentimental over material objects and now does not have many items. Isaac and Helen's mother sip tea carefully, trying to avoid much conversation between them. Helen notes this and is quick to leave before the situation worsens. As Helen leaves, her mother whispers to her to be careful of anyone seeing her with him. It is not for totally Helen's sake, it is more for Isaac's. Her mother knows that this kind of relationship is taboo and wants both of them to avoid any kind of repercussions.

In "Isaac", the narrator wakes to the sight of soldiers either sleeping off the drunkenness of the previous night's party or preparing their things. As the narrator watches the sun rise, he has a wish that he and Isaac could flee the area and get away from the revolution. It is noted that the narrator no longer dreams of big city or university life. He just wants to find a small place in the country that is peaceful and has not been touched by war. He wants to tell Isaac these things but he does not get the chance to do so.



Isaac is extremely quiet as they walk to edge of the village. Any attempts to talk are shushed until Isaac informs the narrator that it is time to wait.

What Isaac is waiting for is an older man who has come to take the narrator away. This shows that Isaac still cares enough about his friend to keep him out of the fighting. This astonishes the narrator, he figures that he was going to go with Isaac and the other troops. Isaac makes his intentions clear that he wants the narrator to rest and then get as far away from the fighting as he can. There is no sense of finality to this discussion, but there are many things that the narrator wants to say to Isaac but finds that he cannot. When the narrator asks how long the fighting will take, Isaac changes back into his militaristic form and turns to leave the narrator to go prepare to leave with the other troops.

The journey to the other village does not take too long. The narrator is amazed at the peace and quiet of the countryside along the way. Unfortunately, the narrator knows that this peace is short lived as war will soon be in all parts of the country and the peace will be ruined. It is noted that the narrator spends three days in the village, but only the first day is highlighted in this section. The narrator goes by the name of Daniel, the name given to him by the old man and his son as they cannot pronounce the narrator's real name. Only the old man and his son know that the narrator is being kept there for safety purposes. The rest of the villagers do not know anything about him, which pleases the narrator.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is the toothbrush such a significant item in Helen and Isaac's relationship? Could they have elevated their intimacy in other ways?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Helen's mother so awkward around Isaac? Does he share this same feeling?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Isaac pay a man to take the narrator to a different village? How does the narrator feel about this?

## Vocabulary

aura, gauge, caricature, affectations, idyllic, hamlet, enclave, anonymity, contend



## Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 9

### Summary

Helen and Isaac leave her mother's house in "Helen". As Helen pulls away, her mother watches from the door, wondering if she will see Helen again. Helen decides that she has one more stop to make before heading to Chicago. She wants to look in on her client, Rose. She pulls onto the street of Rose's house, but she notices that there are more "for sale" signs on the street. As she nears Rose's house, Helen sees that one has been placed on her lawn. Helen comes to realize that Rose has died recently but no one has told her. Helen knows she has not been informed of this because she and David have an agreement that while she is working with Isaac, Helen does not have to go to any funerals or hospital visits for her clients. Seeing Helen's sadness, Isaac says that it is definitely the right time to go to Chicago.

In "Isaac", the narrator witnesses a group of injured refugees come to the village seeking shelter on his fourth day of living there. Members of the village gather at the entrance, determined to keep the refugees out. After the villagers talk together, they start firing their weapons into the crowd. The refugees scatter and try to retreat into the forest, but they are chased down by the villagers. All of the refugees are murdered in cold blood and their bodies are hidden deep in the forest. The narrator is horrified by this scene and when the coast is clear, he escapes the village before the same can happen to him and he walks back to Joseph's village.

### Analysis

As Helen and Isaac leave, her mother stands at the door watching them go. There is a brief moment where she wonders if Helen will return or if she is gone for good. The theme of isolation is briefly touched on here as she wonders about living in such a large house by herself. As Helen drives, even Isaac wonders how her mother can live in such a large house all alone. Helen knows that it is difficult for her mother, but in order to avoid any further discussion on the topic, Helen assures Isaac that her mother is not lonely. This discussion reminds Helen of Rose, the client she had been visiting.

Rose is the inspiration for Helen's trip to Chicago, as Rose has previously told her many stories of her trips to Chicago. Helen goes to visit Rose now as Helen seeks reassurance that her own life will turn out alright, even if she lives the rest of her life without anyone. Helen feels that something is wrong as soon as she turns down Rose's street. Before Helen even gets to Rose's house, Helen knows that Rose is no longer there as she can see the "for sale" sign on Rose's lawn. Helen continues to Rose's driveway anyways, and she looks at the house. Helen is filled with remorse for a few reasons. The first that she was not able to visit Rose again before she passed away. The second reason is that Helen has gone back on her promise of being a better social worker. It is obvious that David knew of Rose's death and chose not to tell Helen. At this



point, an agreement is revealed between David and Helen that she would not have to deal with any deaths or hospital visits while she takes care of Isaac. It is unknown how long this agreement has been in place, but Helen feels this death in ways she has not with other clients. Isaac is attentive to Helen's depression. In an effort to get her attract her attention away from her grief, he gently tells her that it is time to leave for Chicago.

The "Isaac" section contains an act of violence that is brought about by the paranoia and fears of the village that the narrator is living in. Refugees come to the area, their own village has been destroyed by the revolution. All they are seeking is a safe shelter as many of them are injured. Before this time, the narrator has contented himself with just blending in unnoticed in the village. Attention is called to him by some of the young boys as they pass by. These boys are headed to the village entrance along with the adults of the village. Once they call the narrator's name, the villagers notice him. there is a certain amount of contempt in this scene as they come to realize that he is not one of their own and has no business in the village.

Once most of the villagers get to the entrance, there is a stand off between the refugees and the villagers. Because the village has limited resources, the refugees are perceived as a threat. Not only are the resources limited, there is the fear that these refugees could take over the whole village if given the chance. Confusion breaks out as to what to do with these people, but a decision is quickly reached. In a horrific act, the villagers fire what few guns they have at the crowd with the intent to kill. They do not care about these people, they feel that they are just eliminating a threat to their homes. this is one of the consequences of Joseph's revolution. Fear and paranoia have given way to villages fighting amongst themselves, trying to hold on to what little bit they can.

The narrator watches these events, wondering if the same will happen to him. This place has become no longer safe for him as the villagers could turn on him next. As the villagers are hiding the bodies of the refugees in the forest, the narrator makes the decision to leave while he still can. He wants to write of these things, but he is so shocked that he finds he cannot. Instead he makes a map of the road he is walking on. As the narrator has nowhere else to go, he decides to make his way back to Joseph's village, in hopes of finding Isaac.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Helen want to visit Rose before she leaves? Why does she feel guilty when Helen finds out that Rose has died?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do the villagers turn on the refugees? Could something have been done to help them?



## Discussion Question 3

How does the narrator's position change as the refugees come to the village? Should he have stayed there?

## Vocabulary

fraudulent, compounds, maize, perch, draped, thatch





## Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 10

### Summary

Helen and Isaac finally make it out of Laurel. Isaac takes one last look as Helen drives away. Helen tries not to cry as she drives. The pair stop at a restaurant along the way, but they are met with cold stares by the people as they eat. Helen does not try to make any sort of public displays of attention so they do not draw any further looks. After a considerable time of driving, they finally reach Chicago. Isaac grows more excited as he sees the size of the city, but Helen becomes more depressed as she thinks about her plans.

In "Isaac", the narrator returns to Joseph's village, but instead of finding parties from the success of the liberation of other villages, the narrator sees many injured rebels and a truck full of dead ones. Two rebels stop him and the narrator asks where Isaac is, but they will not answer him. Along with other men from the village, he is ordered to help bury the dead. As he sees each corpse, he tries to find something nice to say about each one, calling them different names. After some time, he runs out of things to say and calls each man "Adam". Once finished he is taken to see Isaac. Isaac helps the narrator wash up before helping the other rebels and then himself as there is not much soap left in the village. Afterwards, the pair walk to the graves of the other rebels. There, Isaac confesses that they slaughtered people in the other villages by beating or cutting them instead of just shooting them. In anger, Isaac declares that the recently buried rebels got a more decent burial than they deserved.

### Analysis

Isaac is still oblivious to Helen's plans in "Helen". As they finally make their way to the town's border, Helen has Isaac take one last look at the town. He is unaware that this will be the last time he ever sees Laurel. This departure is bittersweet for Helen. She is hopeful that her plan will be a success but her heart is also breaking at the thought of losing Isaac. The theme of inequality is briefly touched on in this section as Helen and Isaac have lunch at a rest stop along the way. This scene is not like the previous experience of going to the diner in Laurel, but there is still hostility that is felt as Helen and Isaac eat. This time differs in that Helen is not trying to make a show of her relationship. Instead, their lunch is quiet and they try to be as inconspicuous as they can. There is a definitive separation between the pair. They are civil to one another, but there is not much more to their conversation.

Helen and Isaac reach Chicago many hours later. Isaac is excited by the vast size of the city, especially as he has never seen a city of this magnitude. In his excitement, he comments on how great this trip will be. Helen takes this as a way of knowing that her plans have still not been discovered.



Joseph's army has returned to the village, giving the narrator hope that he will see Isaac. There is a certain amount of fear that Isaac is among the wounded or dead as the narrator comes upon the village square and sees the remnants of Joseph's army. The narrator is aware that this is not a joyful scene like he has previously seen. This strengthens the narrator's resolve to get away from all of the bloodshed, but first he is desperate to find Isaac. A group of soldiers descend upon the narrator as he tries to look around. They mock him for his desire to leave. Their antagonism quickly turns to anger as the narrator asks where Isaac is. They have no clue who Isaac is and do not seem to care, even though he is one of their superiors. The scene is desolate as villagers are rounded up from their homes and brought into the square. They, along with the narrator, are given the task of burying the dead rebels. This is a large task as one entire truck is filled with bodies. The soldiers seem unconcerned with their fallen comrades. Isaac is sad for the large amount of lives lost. He tries to think of something kind for each body that passes by him, but as there are too many, he stops thinking about it. He is still determined to find Isaac, which becomes his entire focus. He does not know what he will do if he finds Isaac's body among the dead.

Once the group is finished, everyone goes back to what they were doing without giving much thought to the dead men. Two of the soldiers come to the narrator and lead him to the courtyard, although the narrator does not know what they want. The narrator is elated to see Isaac there unharmed. The pair wave to each other as if no time has passed between them. In a tremendous act of kindness, Isaac takes the narrator to an area with water and he washes the narrator's hair and hands. This could also be because Isaac wants to save as much of the soap and water as he can. Eventually, Isaac washes a few of the other soldiers as well, which can be seen as a way of taking care of his troops.

Although Isaac has seen carnage and bloodshed, he is still kind towards the narrator. At this point, it is becoming clear that even Isaac is wearying of the revolution. He is evasive to the narrator's questions of how many men he has killed. There is a certain sadness to Isaac as he confesses to the narrator how the soldiers in other villages were killed. As the narrator gets out his notebook to write what Isaac is talking about, Isaac implores him to write about something happier than this war. The conversation is important as Isaac despises the rebels ways in which they have destroyed other villages. This is probably far from the ideas of liberation that Isaac once had. As Isaac stands on top of the freshly dug graves of the soldiers, he declares that a decent burial is more than what these men deserved for their actions.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Helen not tell Isaac of her real plans? Should he know?



## Discussion Question 2

How does the lunch on the way to Chicago compare to the lunch had in the Laurel diner? How does it differ?

## Discussion Question 3

How has Isaac developed to this point? Is he still eager about the revolution?

## Vocabulary

silo, cackle, spires, lorries, communal, stout, festering, lapel



## Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 11

### Summary

The first place Helen and Isaac visit in Chicago is the Hancock Center. As they walk down the street towards it, they do not hold hands. Once they get to the Hancock Center, they admire it from many different angles, but they do not go in. After they begin walking down the street again, they hold hands. Helen looks around at people to see if they are paying attention to this, but they are not. Next, Helen wants to go to the lake to walk on the beach. They walk that direction and pass through a tunnel. Everyone yells in it, including Helen and Isaac. Once at the beach, they take off their shoes and walk along the sand. As they are walking, Helen has a change of heart about her plans of leaving Isaac and tells him. She admits that she has been previously afraid of their relationship and he understands. Isaac had some of the same feelings and wants to stay in Chicago, but only if Helen will stay with him and continue the relationship. Through this, Helen realizes that they just might have a chance to have the relationship she wants after all.

In the final "Isaac" section, Isaac and the narrator leaves the graves to go back to the village. In the same place where Joseph once stood to liberate the village, a soldier is standing there talking to some of the men. Isaac and the narrator are quick to flee the area unseen. The revolution is over and now Isaac and Joseph are wanted men. Isaac then takes the narrator to a hidden part of the village. There is a house there and Isaac shows the narrator around it. It is the house that Joseph was to share with Isaac and other people if the revolution was a success. The largest room in the house is meant for Isaac but the smallest room is to be Joseph's. Isaac then informs the narrator that Joseph has made arrangements for Isaac to leave the country and go to America as a student. He also says that the revolution is much different than what he thought it was going to be. For him, the revolution is over because he and the people around him are in a position of affluence, but no one seems to care about the people who are still extremely poor and this saddens him.

Isaac is supposed to be already gone, but he does not want to leave without seeing Joseph again. Isaac and the narrator go into the rebel headquarters, Isaac goes with Joseph and the narrator to an upstairs room to rest. He wakes up to find Isaac standing above him saying that the revolution is finished. The narrator goes out to the balcony to see more soldiers in the courtyard. Joseph comes out and the man who was talking to other soldiers accuses Joseph of various crimes before executing him. At this point, Isaac says that it is time to leave, but he shocks the narrator by telling him that he is not coming with the narrator. Isaac gives him a passport with no picture, a student visa, and other documents, saying that he is giving his identity to the narrator so that he can leave in safety. The narrator protests, but in the end he agrees with Isaac. The pair embrace and the narrator leaves. On the way to Kenya, the narrator looks in the bag that was given to him and notices a notebook in with the items Isaac has given to him. Inside the notebook is the list of all the names that Isaac has ever given him, with his own name at



the bottom along with a quote about how much they have loved each other. It is the same quote he tells Helen as she leaves, promising that she will be back in a few days to start their life together.

## Analysis

This is the culmination of the Helen narrative as the pair arrive in Chicago. Isaac is amazed by the size of the city, but what he really wants to do is visit the Hancock building. He views the city as a set of possibilities and opportunities that could be awaiting him, but being in the city fills Helen with a sense of dread. She knows that the end of their relationship is coming, even though the end is being brought about by her.

Isaac is eager to see and touch the Hancock Center. His fascination with this building is unknown, but Helen agrees to go with him. As they walk, Isaac points out things of interest to him, but Helen is not really paying attention. She puts more of her focus into the people walking by her. In some ways, Helen is feeling paranoid as she walks down the street with Isaac. She is convinced that people are watching her and they they are disapproving of her being with Isaac. This stems from their previous treatment in Laurel.

Once at the Hancock Center, Isaac is captivated by it. He is almost boyish as he and Helen view the building from all sorts of directions before declaring that he must touch the building as well. It is curious to note that they do not go into the building. Isaac thinks that by going inside, they will not be able to appreciate the magnitude of the building. After Isaac has had time to go over the building as much as he wants, Helen wants to move on to the lake. As they walk along, they hold hands, something they did not do on the way to the Hancock Center. Helen still wants to see if people notice what she is doing and is somewhat deflated when she realizes that no one is doing so. This starts to change how she feels about leaving Isaac in the city. She also regrets not feeling this free with Isaac sooner.

There are a few people that look at Helen and Isaac, but she is starting to not care. She considers this a victory that could not have come in a small town like Laurel. She also feels that they stand out less in the crowd, especially when they go through the tunnels on the way to the beach. The couple blends in just like any other beach goers and this thrills Helen. This is the first time that Helen is truly carefree and able to show her happiness publicly.

Her happiness soon turns to sorrow as they take off their shoes and walk on the sand. Helen is disappointed that the sand does not feel as she thought it would. At this point, it is a parallel for the conflict that she is having. She thought it would be easy to just leave Isaac and go home to Laurel, but she realizes that this is not right. It is here that Helen finally admits to Isaac that she has ulterior motives for bringing him to Chicago. She thought that if she could show him a large city where it is easy to blend in, he might be happier. She would continue to visit until eventually he settles into a new life and no longer needs her. She realizes that she was wrong for doing so, especially for not telling Isaac previously of this plan. She also admits the the pressures of being under the



scrutiny of a bigoted town had gotten the better of her as she feared that the reactions of the other people would ruin the relationship. Finally, Isaac admits his feelings for the entire relationship. He has worried as well as he knows that racism is very prevalent in small town America. He also confides that he was willing to leave Laurel upon Helen's recommendations, but it was only if she comes with him. Isaac understands if Helen wants to leave, but instead, she takes her hand in his and lifts up their arms. This is a success for both of them as they finally understand each other and have the ability to be free with their love.

The final "Isaac" segment is the resolution of the Ugandan narrative as well as the novel as a whole. There is a shift in the rebel's regime. Isaac was once proud and able to walk through the streets freely, but as he and the narrator go towards the center of the village, there is apprehension. They almost run into a pack of soldiers standing at the same monument that Joseph gave his first speech. There is one man in particular who looks to be the leader of the group and Isaac especially wants to avoid him. The rest of the village is remarkably silent, the villagers have gone to an undisclosed location.

Isaac then leads the narrator to a house that is hidden from the rest of the village. It belongs to Joseph and is the place that he and his people, including Isaac, were to share after the revolution. There is a touch of sadness within Isaac as he gives the narrator a tour of the home. Isaac is actually subtly explaining that he is losing this place as the revolution has been lost.

Two key items come from this conversation. First is Isaac's revelation that Joseph has secured a way to get Isaac safely out of Uganda and into America under a student visa in an attempt to save his life. The second item is that Isaac realizes that his dreams of revolution have not become reality. The purpose of revolution for Isaac is for all of the people to be united and equal. Under Joseph's regime, nothing has really changed except the people who are in charge. The corruption and the division of the people is still prevalent. Isaac says that he realizes this when he realizes that he has food to constantly eat and clean clothes, but there is always someone to serve him, and Joseph makes a joke about becoming a revolutionary solely to reap the benefits of being the master.

Before Isaac can leave to start his new life, he feels he must talk to Joseph and tell him goodbye. Joseph is comforted by this but does not seem to be depressed or saddened about the failure of his revolution. Instead he seems very confident even with this new challenge. Joseph and Isaac go into the sitting room to spend what will be their final moments together. As the narrator is exhausted from the days events, he goes upstairs to take a nap. He is awoken from a nightmare to see Isaac standing above him. This is the first time that Isaac uses the narrator's real name, but it is never revealed to the reader. Isaac declares that it is almost time to go, but one thing remains. The ultimate act in the failure of the revolution occurs as the man who was at the town monument accuses Joseph of various crimes before executing him. Isaac does not witness this, but he knows that it was bound to happen. The narrator is too shocked to mourn or cry out, but as Isaac sits in the bedroom, his grief is evident.



Very quickly, Isaac snaps out of his grief, determined to perform his final act of love for his friend. It is here that Isaac gives the narrator everything that was to belong to Isaac, the passport, the visa, and a bag of money. Isaac in some ways is still devoted to his own cause of one day having a peaceful and united Uganda. He feels he cannot leave while his goals remain underachieved. The narrator does not want to do this, he wants to leave with Isaac or not leave at all. This touches Isaac, but he begs the narrator to be free and live a happy life for both of them. Reluctantly, the narrator agrees to leave his friend behind. For the last time, the men embrace but when the narrator leaves, Isaac is too full of grief at the loss of both his mentor and his friend to watch the narrator leave.

The novel closes with the narrator describing in small parts his trip to get out of Africa. While on his travels, he gets a chance to look in the bag that Isaac has given him. Along with the money is a notebook similar to the one that he gave to the narrator in the hospital. It is surprising to learn that Isaac has written a detailed account of everything through the course of their friendship. Every name that he has ever called the narrator is written in the book along with a line of how Isaac has always viewed their relationship as one of outstanding love and devotion. The last few lines tie the narrative of Helen to Isaac's as he remembers this line as there is a switch from past reflection to the recent departure of Helen. The new Isaac remembers the line from his friend as he reminisces about Helen's promise to return shortly with her things so they can start a new life together. It is unknown whether she actually fulfills that promise or her plans to permanently return home to Laurel.

## Discussion Question 1

What does being in Chicago represent for Isaac? What does it mean for Helen?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Isaac react when Helen tells him the truth about her intentions? Does this feeling change?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Isaac give the narrator his identity? Why does Isaac choose to stay in Uganda? Should he have left with the narrator?

## Vocabulary

etchings, roadster, ungrounded, axioms, ebbed, recoiled, askew, rivulets, fetid



# Characters

## Isaac - Narrator

The narrator is a young man who comes from a small village to the capital city of Kampala to study literature. He is inspired by an old newspaper article about famous authors to become a famous author himself. He obtained permission to leave from his father after socialists come into the village asking the narrator to join up with them. The narrator has never felt like he fits into his village as he has always had lofty dreams of becoming a more intellectual figure rather than living the agricultural life of his people. When he first arrives in Kampala, he does not fit in with those around him because he speaks proper English, making him stick out. He tries to blend in with the revolutionaries in the area, but that does not work. The narrator is lonely until he meets Isaac Mabira, another young man who comes to the capital in search of a better life. The narrator becomes more of a sidekick to Isaac as he begins to take more of a role in the pending revolution against the corrupt government. Isaac gives the narrator all sorts of nicknames to show how much the narrator means to him. Some of these include Professor, Langston, Pharaoh, Ali, and others.

The narrator is more of a pacifist and tries his best to avoid major confrontations. When Isaac is beaten outside of the cafe, Isaac tells the narrator to run so that he is not injured as well. The narrator also runs away when Isaac is beaten at the hands of the police on the campus. Isaac is wholly devoted to the narrator. The narrator is beaten while walking down the street for carrying the wrong newspaper. It is Isaac who pays for the narrator's hospital stay and who comes to take the narrator to a different home because the narrator has been put out of his. When rebel leader Joseph comes, he offers the narrator the chance to leave with no repercussions because he knows that the narrator is a pacifist. The narrator stays, even after he is beaten by Isaac when he questions Isaac's relationship with Joseph.

Although Isaac is fully involved in the revolution, Isaac wants to keep the narrator as safe as he possibly can. This includes sending him to another village to hide until it is safe. The narrator flees the area when the villagers annihilate a group of refugees who seek help. The narrator believes that since he is not of the village, the people could turn on him next. When the revolution is winding down and the government is imprisoning and killing the people behind it, Isaac makes the ultimate sacrifice for the narrator. Isaac gives the narrator his name, passport, and the financial means to escape to America, even though it means that Isaac himself will not be able to escape the authorities.

Once in America, Isaac is an exchange student at the university in Laurel. He is under the care of social worker Helen. Shortly after his arrival, he begins an intimate relationship with Helen. Isaac does not show much of his emotional side. He prefers to keep this to himself. Throughout parts of the novel, Isaac's quiet and stoic nature sometimes bothers Helen as she feels that they are not moving forward with their relationship. Although he cares about Helen, he sometimes despises the fact that he





has to depend on her for every part of his daily life. Helen dreams of having a more committed relationship with him, but Isaac initially tells her to not daydream about these things. When Helen tries to make their relationship more public by taking him to the local diner, Isaac ignores the adversity shown by the other diners, even though Helen is mortified by how they are treated. As he has already been through traumatic circumstances in Uganda, the narrator is more equipped to handle negative circumstances.

Some time after this incident, Isaac leaves without giving Helen any sort of warning, adding to his mysterious character. Upon his return, he sends Helen a box of small souvenirs of national landmarks, with a note that he would love to travel to some of these places with Helen. In the afternoon, Helen leaves early to analyze her relationship, winding up at the university. There, she finds Isaac getting into a car, driving himself home. On his vacation, he learned how to drive so that he may achieve independence as his student visa is set to expire soon and he will have to decide if he should blend into American society or return to Uganda. On the same night of his return, the narrator is surprised by a visit from Henry, the man who helped him enter the country. It is here that the narrator's emotional status becomes more evident as Henry has come to deliver bad news. Isaac hops in Helen's car after she has spent all night watching his window. She asks him to tell her what is going on and he is finally comfortable enough to let his guard down. He cries in front of her, telling her that his closest friend has passed away. Once Helen prods him for more information, he reveals that his friend is named Isaac, giving away the fact that he is not the real Isaac Mabira.

Isaac only explains to Helen what happened to him after he came to America, but he never discusses much of the revolution. He knows that by telling her these things, he may have permanently damaged his relationship with Helen. Although he is secretly afraid of this, he does not mention it right after he tells her his story. Isaac does not seem to be aware of the plans Helen has shortly after this to take him to Chicago to leave him so he can find a new and happier life blending into a larger city. He is eager to accompany her to Chicago when Helen suggests it spontaneously. He does as she asks him and packs all of his things into his suitcases. The only thing he leaves out is his suit, which he wants to wear as it is the nicest thing he has.

On the way to Chicago, Helen makes a few stops. First is to see her mother, but Isaac does not want to come inside at first. He does so after a few moments, but the situation turns awkward after Helen takes him on a tour of the house. The next stop is to Helen's client named Rose. Seeing that Helen is visibly upset at the passing of Rose, Isaac feels that this is an omen that they should leave the town and head to bigger and better things. When they arrive in Chicago, Isaac is overwhelmed and excited about the city as he has never been to anywhere so large and modern. The first place he wants to go to is the Hancock Center. He does not want to go inside it, he wants to admire it from any way he can on the outside and he wants to touch it. With this goal accomplished, he accompanies Helen to the beach where she finally reveals her plans to him. Secretly, Isaac has always known that there has been something that is going on with Helen, especially since he noticed previously that her suitcase is so light. After Helen is done explaining her point of view, Isaac finally is able to let go of his inhibitions and to fully tell



Helen that he does love her but that he knows they could never have lived a happy life while in her hometown. He wishes that Helen would stay with him, for him this would lift his spirits and he can finally be happy as well. Helen leaves him a short time later, with the promise to return. As she is leaving, he tells her that the same thing that is written in Isaac's notebook about not loving anyone as much as they both love each other. It is unknown if Helen actually returns to him or if he is left to begin a life of his own.

## Isaac Mabira

Isaac Mabira is a charismatic young man who comes to Kampala to engage himself in the changing political tides of the country. Although he is not a student, he has a desire to study politics, not medicine like his grandfather wanted. Isaac spends a great deal of time loitering on the university campus, trying to fit in with the other students. While listening to a speaker on the campus, Isaac meets the narrator and they both figure out very quickly that neither of them are students. From this, a friendship builds, with Isaac being more of the leader between them. Isaac is charming and talkative as this friendship blossoms. He is easy going, but determined to make a name for himself.

On the university's campus, Isaac confronts the rich students, mostly in a way that mocks their financial status. He does not have any animosity towards them, but he realizes that one of society's current problems revolve around the rich and the poor. In this light, Isaac calls all of the rich students "Alex" in a way to class them all together in one group. Isaac does not mock or harrass the poor students as much as he does the rich students. Isaac also says that there is a way to tell the rich from the poor just by looking at the state of their shoes. the rich students have brand new shoes on at all time, therefore their feet are not getting dirty while the poor students' shoes are dirty, full of holes and have obvious signs of continuous repair.

In an effort to gain more popularity and to begin his journey into the changing political climate, Isaac creates the "paper revolution", posters listing crimes against the government. He is successful in getting the students talking about the political climate then goes to the Cafe Flamingo. To show that now he considers himself as fitting in with the affluent students, he claps to get the waiter's attention. The others make fun of him, causing Isaac to break one of their jaws with a rock. He is beaten, but his soul is still motivated as he can use his wounds as sort of a badge of honor, gaining even more popularity and attention. This also earns him the respect of the cafe's owner, Joseph Mabira. He takes Isaac in, initially giving him small jobs to do but Isaac's status grows with Joseph as time goes by.

Isaac begins holding gatherings on the campus, having students "confess" their alleged crimes. His gatherings become popular until they are broken up by the police. He is once again beaten but this only fuels his determination to rebel against the authorities. There is a peaceful protest a short time later, with Isaac in the middle. It is important to note that when the authorities begin their sweep of arresting and beating the protesters, Isaac feels nothing for them, nor does he try to help any of the escape. The only one he aids is the narrator as they make their escape to an abandoned classroom where Isaac



has been living. He also helps the narrator get back to his house when the commotion dies down so that the narrator is not arrested.

The next time Isaac sees the narrator is when the narrator is hospitalized after being beaten by thugs in the street. Unknown to the narrator, Isaac has paid for the entire duration of his stay. He also has collected the narrator's things from the room he rented as the landlord has thrown him out. Isaac tries to explain to the landlord that the narrator is not involved in any radical activity, but it does not work. Instead, Isaac decided to take the narrator to the place he has been staying. There is a remarkable shift in Isaac's character at this point as Isaac has become more prosperous and is able to share his new money to help others. An elderly and very sick man comes to Isaac to beg for coins, but Isaac gives him a nice amount of cash. He does not want to be thanked for this, showing that even though he has more money, he is humble and still wants to help others.

Once Isaac has the narrator away from the hospital, he takes hi to a house that is in a more affluent part of town. The pair spend the days relaxing but eventually, Isaac must get the house prepared for the owner, Joseph. In his desire to have everything perfect, Isaac turns into someone who micro manages everything. He does not want to let Joseph down in any way and wants to fully impress him. This causes him to be rather insulting to the guards and the people working in the house, but he does not care about their feelings. He even goes as far as to ask the narrator to remove his arm sling because he does not want anyone to appear weak in front of Joseph as it would reflect badly on Isaac.

Isaac is not initially a part of Joseph's meetings. He stays outside with the narrator for the first few meetings, but it is easy to see that he is very interested in the upcoming operations. He is with Joseph constantly after everyone settles in and the narrator makes a note of Isaac leaving their room in the middle of the night constantly to meet with Joseph. Isaac seems to have more knowledge of the events at hand, as he has prior knowledge that the mission he sends the narrator on to deliver guns is just a distraction and that the Tanzanians would soon be invading the compound. There is no actual evidence of what the relationship is, but when the narrator begins to question this. It causes Isaac to go into a rage and severely beat the narrator. After Joseph's village is liberated, Isaac gets very drunk and comes to the narrator as nothing has happened. n his drunken stupor, he offers the narrator the position of lieutenant if he executes on of the soldiers that has recently converted to the group. The man is executed but Isaac has no care about this, showing that Isaac is growing more callous as the revolution goes on.

Isaac still has a tender spot for the narrator. Once the fighting becomes intense, Isaac sends the narrator to a distant village by paying an old man to take the narrator with him. Isaac goes to join Isaac, but he reveals later on that the violence was intense and not what he thought. Instead of just shooting the soldier, many people were beaten and cut down in gruesome ways. He also learns that Joseph's revolution as a whole has not been one that is intended to aid the poor, it is just a struggle to be in a position of power. This is not what Isaac envisions and in some ways he is saddened by this. This is



especially evident when the narrator returns from the safety of the other village and Isaac takes the narrator to the hidden house that belongs to Joseph. For Isaac, at this point, the revolution is over.

Joseph has made arrangements for Isaac to go to America to escape the violence and the consequences for being involved in the revolution. Although Isaac is supposed to be already gone, he wants to see Joseph one last time, not caring if he gets caught or not. He meets with Joseph one last time, but the information from that meeting is not known. In the late evening, Isaac comes to the narrator's room to wake him up and to tell him it is time to go. As the narrator watches from the balcony, Isaac stays in the room as Joseph is brought out into the courtyard and is executed. Isaac's grief is very obvious although he tries not to show it. Remembering that he has one final important thing to do, Isaac composes himself. He informs the narrator that it is not he who is going to study in America, but the narrator. He gives the narrator a passport with no picture so that the narrator can assume the identity of Isaac Mabira. Isaac knows that this will mean that he will never leave Uganda, but he has come to terms with this. Isaac still feels that there is a revolution to be fought, not for power like Joseph and the other revolutionaries before him, but a revolution where his dream of a united and equal Uganda can be realized. This relinquishing of his identity is the ultimate sacrifice that Isaac can make, but he does so freely and in devotion to his friend. After the narrator leaves, he finds the notebook that Isaac has been writing in. Inside of it, is the entire account of their friendship, which surprises the narrator. At the end, Isaac writes about never having loved anyone else the way he loves the narrator. Unfortunately, after the narrator makes it safely to America and is settling into his new life, Isaac is killed, presumably as a result of the revolution.

## Helen

Helen is a white, middle aged, social worker in the small town of Laurel. For years, Helen has become slowly disenchanted with her life and job. Helen has an intense fear of being like her mother, so she does not like to do any sort of housework or do anything that she would think her mother would do. Helen also pities her mother and her loneliness, wishing that there is something that could be done about it. As for her father, Helen has few memories of him that shape her views on relationships and is a contributing factor to her desire not to settle down with a husband and family. Helen is assigned to take care of an African exchange student named Isaac Mabira, and with that her world changes. As she takes him to the university, she apologizes for her overly loud voice. Isaac appreciates her honesty and her voice, telling her to keep talking this way. This makes Helen happy as she finds Isaac intriguing since he is mysterious and is not like any of the local men she knows.

As Helen gets to know Isaac, a physical relationship evolves. At first, Helen loves being with Isaac as this is a new step in her life. She gradually becomes dissatisfied because the relationship seems to be going nowhere. In an effort to show the world that she is confident in her relationship and to make things more public, Helen takes Isaac to a local diner for lunch. The event proves disastrous as the patrons of the diner make their



racism known. Out of shame that she put Isaac through this ordeal and his seemingly callous reaction to it, Helen avoids Isaac for some time but begins seeing him again after he visits her office.

Even though the relationship continues as usual, Helen feels that the relationship has gone stagnant and starts avoiding him again, but this time she is avoiding everyone in her life. After a confrontation with David over Helen's recent behavior, Helen decides that it is time to express how she is really feeling to Isaac and to demand changes with their relationship. Upon entering his apartment, Helen finds that Isaac is gone, but she is not worried. In fact, she prefers that Isaac is not there, feeling that he is easier to live with this way as she does not have to act so rigid. On the first night, she sleeps in his bed for the first time as she never actually falls asleep with Isaac. The next night, she feels lonely as his apartment is immaculately clean. In order to give the home a more "lived in" feeling, she sets the table and cooks a plate of eggs, one of Isaac's favorite things to eat. As she does this, she realizes that she has the ability to change not only herself and her relationship with Isaac but the lives of the people she serves at her job.

To pass the time until Isaac's return, she visits an elderly client named Rose. Rose tells Helen stories of how she and her husband would travel to Chicago. This captivates Helen and she enjoys hearing these stories. When Isaac comes back, he delivers small gifts to her and she calls him. She makes plans to see him later in the night and leaves work early to contemplate her relationship with Isaac. She drives past places that they have gone together and she thinks about the status of their relationship to that point. Upon realizing that there is not much to their relationship, Helen goes to the university where she observes other students on the campus. It is while she is observing a group of students that she sees Isaac come out of the building and get into a car, driving away. This intrigues Helen more as he has never been able to drive previously.

Helen is excited to be coming to see Isaac after his absence. When she is turned away at the door by Isaac saying that it is not a good time for her to be there, Helen begins to wonder what she has really gotten herself into. Hoping to gain more insight into his life, Helen sits in her car all night, watching Isaac's window. She takes a nap, waking at sunrise as a man leaves the apartment. A few minutes later, Isaac comes out with no coat on and he gets into Helen's car. Helen knows that something is wrong, so she gently tries to coax it out of him. Upon his revelations that his friend Isaac is dead, Helen does not know what to do, so she drives to a local motel where they spend the whole day together. It is here that the relationship shifts into a more emotional one as she is finally able to get a glimpse into Isaac's private life.

At first, Helen is anxious to hear about Isaac's past, but as Isaac reveals his reasons for assuming another identity and the fact that it would be dangerous to know any more, Helen becomes slightly repulsed. It is not enough to truly destroy the relationship, but it comes under a great amount of strain. In her work life, she is taking on more responsibility, especially as she helps a local town after a flood. With Isaac, she is spending much more time with him, to the concern of her mother, but she does not care and spends most of her nights with Isaac. During this time, the strain becomes more



evident, causing Helen to make a crucial decision, especially as she knows that Isaac's visa will expire soon and he will go away.

This fear of Isaac leaving her causes her to come to the realization that she needs to leave Isaac before he leaves her. After she returns to Isaac's apartment after being questioned by David and informed that people are really taking notice of what they consider an inappropriate relationship, Helen tells Isaac that they should leave for Chicago for a small trip. As she tells Isaac to pack up, the plan is formulating in her mind. As she is cleaning herself up, she uses Isaac's toothbrush. It is an act of intimacy for Helen, one that she notices has never happened before. It also makes her realize that she can never be truly intimate with Isaac in such a small town, and that her plan is absolutely necessary.

As the pair leave, Helen wants to go to her house to gather a few of her items. Her mother mistakes this sudden trip as an elopement but Helen is quick to dismiss that thought. After Isaac comes in and introduces himself to her mother, Helen takes Isaac on a tour of the house, stopping at a picture of her grandparents. While Isaac admires the picture, it fills Helen with a sort of sadness that she will never get to have a large and loving family in the house, further giving her the resolve she needs to carry out her plan.

A brief visit to Rose's home increases Helen's sadness as Helen finds out that Rose has died. Helen feels that she has neglected her duties and has broken the promise to herself to be a better social worker. She is upset at herself that she has been so careless and wrapped up in her own world and not paying attention when she is needed. With this new sadness upon her, Helen and Isaac head to Chicago.

In Chicago, Helen is so preoccupied with the fear that people are watching her and Isaac that she does not really give much consideration to what they are actually doing. She cannot fully enjoy the visit to the Hancock Tower or taking in the sights of the streets around them. On the way to the beach, Helen's paranoia begins to fade, especially when they go through the tunnels with several other people who do not seem to give Helen and Isaac much attention. Helen is relieved to see that no one is really paying attention to the couple even when they are holding hands. This causes a change in Helen and she reveals her plan to Isaac that she is going to leave him in the city as she feels that they cannot have the relationship she wants in her small, bigoted town. Once Isaac hears this, he completely understands and reveals some of his own fears to her. This finally puts Helen's mind at ease. She knows that Isaac cares about her just as much as she cares about him. Her fears are put aside as Isaac relates his own fears and his hopes that they can build a life together. Through this, Helen finally feels that she can have a happy life with the man she loves. She promises Isaac that she is going back to Laurel to gather the rest of her things and that she will return in a few days, although her return is unknown.



## Helen's Mother

Helen's mother has become bitter and lonely over the years following her divorce from Helen's father. She is mostly an introvert, only leaving the house for church and to go to the store. The rest of her interaction with the outside world comes from Helen. Helen's mother relies on Helen for companionship and tries to dissuade Helen from leaving the house to find a life of her own most of the time. She also has a wish that Helen would settle down with a nice local man and be more like her. Helen has an intense fear of becoming like her mother to the point that she intentionally messes up any housework that she does. Helen also pities her mother as she begins to understand her mother's loneliness.

## Joseph Mabira

Joseph is the man who stops the fight at the Cafe Flamingo and is the owner of the property. After getting Isaac medical care, he takes a liking to Isaac and decides to help Isaac further himself in his political activity. He is a father figure for Isaac as Isaac eventually takes his last name. It is unknown whether Joseph is actually Isaac's father, but the narrator accuses Isaac of being Joseph's son, which causes Isaac to beat the narrator. Joseph is the leader of the rebellion against the government and enlists the aid of others in his quest for social justice. He does not try to recruit the narrator however. Instead, Joseph offers the narrator the opportunity to escape unharmed on a few separate occasions. Joseph does not personally engage in the fighting, but he is extremely skillful in planning his attacks. He is caught towards the end of the revolution and is quickly executed.

## David

David is the office manager of Lutheran Relief Services and a friend of Helen's. David is as unenthusiastic about his job as Helen, but he does not show it very often. He is single and loves to do handiwork around the house. There is a subtle hint that he is gay as he has never shown any interest in the local ladies and the fact that his mother would be relieved if he married Helen. David follows Helen around when she is avoiding him and Isaac, catching her asleep in her car. When he confronts Helen, he does so out of concern for his friend's well being.

David's character is not a strong supporting character, he only comes into the scenes when Helen absolutely needs him. After Helen hears Isaac's story of how he came into the country, Helen winds up at David's house in search of guidance and moral support. David is understanding of Helen's relationship, but he also warns her that other people in the community are watching them and some of them are not so pleased. He knows that interracial relationships should be accepted, but he has also heard the gossip surrounding Helen and Isaac. Out of friendship, David warns Helen about this and he tells her a story of when he was younger and had to encounter racism during a visit to his family in Mississippi. He only wants Helen to be careful and not make any bad



decisions. There is no jealousy within David, just a deep concern that his friend could wind up getting hurt by either Isaac or the people Helen has known all her life. He offers to let Helen sleep at his home for a few hours because he can see that she is visibly tired.

After this encounter, the last thing that is mentioned about David is the fact that he and Helen have an agreement. While Helen takes care of Isaac, she does not have to visit clients in the hospitals or attend their funerals. This causes Helen to not be notified at the death of Rose, causing Helen to feel ashamed of herself for being so centered on Isaac.

## Patience

Patience is a student at the university in Kamapala. Together with her cousin Hope, the pair go to seek out Isaac and are some of the first people at his "gatherings". As they leave, Patience is the only one to say goodbye to the narrator as Hope ignores him. After the police break up the peaceful protest, the narrator sees the police dragging Patience away to be arrested. She is the only person that is arrested that the narrator truly feels sorry for.

## Hope

Hope is Patience's cousin and they are among the first people to visit with Isaac as his gatherings are gaining popularity. She is very interested in Isaac, potentially in more of a romantic way as well as intellectually. She gives little notice to the narrator, even as she leaves and Isaac tells her to tell the narrator goodbye, she ignores him. It is unknown if she is with Patience at the protest when Patience is arrested.

## Henry

Henry is the former diplomat that meets Joseph in London and becomes his friend. As a result of this friendship, Joseph is able to secure a student visa for Isaac to study in America. When the narrator becomes Isaac, Henry is suspicious at first, but helps Isaac to gain entry into the United States. Henry enlists David's help in placing Isaac in Laurel. After the revolutionary Isaac dies, Henry informs the narrator about this death.

## Rose

Rose is an elderly client of Helen's. Once Helen comes to the decision that she wants to actually help her clients instead of treating them nonchalantly, one of the main people she visits is Rose. Rose lives in a small house and rarely receives visitors. Rose is grateful for Helen's visits and loves to talk about the past that she once shared with her husband. It is Rose that inspires Helen to go to Chicago as she previously talked about staying in the same hotel as Al Capone. When Helen actually does head out for



Chicago, the last person she wants to see before she leaves is Rose, but once she pulls into her driveway, Helen finds out that Rose has died and no one has told her.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Paper Revolution

Isaac creates posters listing crimes against the country all over the campus in an effort to get people talking about the political atmosphere. The posters gain Isaac popularity with the students but it is one of the first things that attract police attention to Isaac.

## A Tale of Two Cities

Helen buys this novel for Isaac to illustrate to him that he is called "Dickens" around the office because he speaks perfect English. This is also a symbol of the story between Isaac and the narrator as Isaac gives him his whole identity so that the narrator can escape from Uganda.

## Eggs

In the beginning, Helen makes it clear that she does not like eggs as Isaac comments that the eggs in America are smaller than eggs in Uganda. After Isaac leaves for a month to travel across the country, Helen comes into his apartment and cooks a plate full of eggs in an attempt to make the apartment feel less cold and lonely. It is through the cooking of these eggs that Helen realizes that she would like to live a more domesticated life and begins dreaming of one with Isaac.

## Shoes

In order to tell the rich students from the poor ones at the university, Isaac tells the narrator to look at the students' shoes. The rich students have new or perfect looking shoes while the poor students have badly damaged, dirty, or falling apart shoes. As the narrator and Isaac's shoes are dirty and full of holes, they know that they will not be able to fit in with the rich students.

## Alex

Alex is the name given to any of the rich students on the university campus in Uganda. Isaac says that no matter what the student's real name is, they are all "Alex".

## Notebook

Isaac gives the narrator a black notebook in which to write about what is happening in the country when the narrator is attacked. There is another notebook that Isaac gives to



him as he helps the narrator escape to America. In this is a detailed history of events along with the entire list of nicknames that he has ever given to the narrator, with his own name at the end as a sign that he is giving the narrator his identity.

## Arm Sling

After the narrator leaves the hospital from being attacked, Isaac takes him to the home of Joseph Mabira. The narrator is wearing an arm sling to protect his damaged arm and his broken ribs. On the third day of occupying the house, Isaac gets the home ready for Joseph's return with the desire that everything be absolutely perfect. When he sees the narrator in the arm sling, Isaac asks if it is absolutely necessary to wear it, as he perceives it to be a sign of weakness. Out of wanting to ensure that Isaac makes a good impression on Joseph, the narrator removes the sling, no matter how damaged and hurt he still is, causing Isaac to be even more proud of his friend.

## Passport

The passport that Isaac gives to the narrator says the name Isaac Mabira, but there is no picture. Isaac tells the narrator that it was done purpose and that the narrator should put his own picture in once he reaches Kenya. This enables the narrator to go to America and to escape the bloodshed going on in Uganda. As this is Isaac's final gift to his friend, it is acknowledged that the real Isaac will possibly die during the remaining parts of the revolution but Isaac does not mind this as long as it keeps his friend safe.

## Toothbrush

In a sign of intimacy with Isaac, Helen decides to brush her teeth with Isaac's toothbrush. She feels that this brings them closer in more ways than just sex has, but she also comes to another revelation. She realizes that in the small town of Laurel the pair will not be able to have a decent life together. It is at this point that she comes up with the plan to take Isaac to Chicago to leave him there with the hopes that he has a better life.

## Hancock Center

The Hancock Center in Chicago is the first landmark that Isaac wants to visit. He is so amazed by it that he feels he must examine it from every angle possible and then he must touch it. He does not want to go inside as he feels that he cannot fully appreciate it from the inside.



# Settings

## Kampala, Uganda

Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, is the main setting for the narrator in his interactions with Isaac. There is a large amount of civil unrest in the area as people begin protesting the current government. The narrator Isaac and the revolutionary Isaac live in different parts of the slums of the city. At first, the city is seen as a place of hope for the new political regime, but it soon becomes a place of revolution. The military steps in to quell the protesting and any subversive behavior. Streets become lined with officers, military vehicles and fires break out. There is violence in the street and the city as a whole becomes a battleground.

## Laurel

A small Midwestern town, this is the main setting for the "Helen" segments of the novel. It is large enough to have a university, but there is not much else to the town, although a mall is supposed to be built there some time later. Segregation has been over for some time, but it is still a racist area, as demonstrated when Helen takes Isaac to the local diner. Although it is the main setting for Helen's narrative, there is little else that describes the town.

## Kampala University

The university in Kampala is the destination for both the narrator and the revolutionary Isaac. They meet here during a speech given by one of the radicals and they also find out that both of them are not currently students. The pair spend most of their time on the campus as they observe the students. It is here that Isaac begins his involvement in the revolution, starting with his interrogations of the rich students. To make more of an impact and to become more known throughout the campus, Isaac starts the "paper revolution". Once he is successful with this, he moves on to holding his own group gatherings. After gatherings have been forbidden, Isaac continues with them anyways, but is beaten by the campus security. Shortly afterwards, Isaac is involved in a peaceful protest, but it is raided by the police and many of the students are arrested.

## Cafe Flamingo

The Cafe Flamingo is a popular coffee shop used by the rich students of the university. After the success of the "paper revolution" Isaac takes the narrator to this cafe to celebrate. In order to get the waiter's attention, Isaac claps his hands and draws the attention of the rich kids as well. They begin clapping as well in an effort to mock Isaac as he is poor and does not fit in. To retaliate, Isaac picks up a large rock and throws it, breaking one man's jaw. The students beat Isaac for his actions, but Isaac does not



care. The wounds he receives are a source of pride and give him the appearance that he is truly a part of the revolution. Later in the novel, it is revealed that the owner of the cafe is Joseph Mabira, the rebel who becomes like a father to Isaac.

## Lutheran Relief Services

Lutheran Relief Services is the workplace of Helen and David. Originally, both of them have lofty ideas of helping people in their positions as social workers, but over time their dreams fade and they are left disenchanted with their work. After Isaac leaves for a while, Helen is able to see that she is stronger and more domesticated than what she thinks and tackles her job with a new purpose of actually getting involved in people's lives and no longer treating them like a tedious task to tend to.

## Chicago

Isaac and Helen travel to Chicago after Helen comes up with the spontaneous idea to go somewhere. Helen's intentions are to leave Isaac in Chicago and to return home by herself. This is because Helen realizes that she and Isaac cannot have a fulfilling relationship under the racist eyes of some of the people in Laurel and that their relationship is not as strong as she has always hoped. While in Chicago, the pair first go to the Hancock Center, which amazes Isaac. Then they go to the lake where Helen realizes that her original intentions were wrong. On a street in the center of the city Helen leaves Isaac with a promise to return with all of their things so that they may start a new life there. It is unknown if she ever returns or if Isaac is left all alone.

# Themes and Motifs

## Identity

The theme of identity is probably the most important of the novel. In the beginning, the narrator states that as he is leaving his village, he gives up the name that his family has given him. This is to suggest that he wants to start a fresh and anonymous life as a student at the university. The narrator does not fit in with people in his neighborhood as he tries to fit in with everyone around him. The narrator knows what he wants to study at the university, although he is not a student. He would like to be a famous writer, like the ones he has read about in an old newspaper article. At the beginning, the narrator's identity is unknown as he hopes to blend in as a nameless face in the crowd.

Over time, it is revealed that the narrator actually has 13 names he was born with. These names represent a generation of his family. It is meant to show the longevity of the narrator's family, something that is remarked as very long and blessed by others around him. As he is leaving his village, he is called "Bird" by his father. This is symbolic of the narrator's desire to elevate himself above the farming life that is prevalent in the community. This is also his father's way of acknowledging the fact that the narrator is leaving with no desire to ever return.

Upon meeting the narrator, Isaac begins giving the narrator a list of names, starting with Professor. There is nothing harmful in these nicknames, instead they are more symbolic of how Isaac views the narrator at the time. They change with the circumstances, such as when the narrator is attacked, Isaac calls him "Ali" after he comes out of the hospital. It is curious to note that towards the end of Isaac's portion of the novel it is revealed that Isaac has kept a list of all of the nicknames that he has for the narrator. All of the names have been scratched out except for one at the end. It is Isaac's own name, the last name that he can ever give to the narrator. This is a tremendous gift as it enables the narrator to escape the bloodshed that Isaac knows is coming.

As for Helen's identity, it evolves over the course of her portion of the novel. In the beginning she is shown as someone who has lost her focus in life. The job she maintains at the Lutheran Relief Services has become dreary for her. The clients she sees become boring to her. They do not offer any new or exciting challenge and this is definitely reflected in the nonchalant way in which she treats them. At home, Helen has no desire to do any of the things that are considered to be normal for a woman of her age.

This all changes once she meets Isaac. Helen evolves into someone who becomes more in tune with her emotions as she develops an intimate relationship with Isaac. Over the course of the novel the reader sees that Helen becomes more caring towards people through her love for Isaac. There are some points where she actually thinks that she has the ability to settle down with Isaac. Her domestication also comes with the cooking of eggs, something that she could not stand to do previously. She also evolves



into a more understanding and kind social worker as well. Helen takes time out of her schedule to begin visiting with more of her clients, particularly an elderly lady named Rose. Helen also finds herself wanting to help more as she volunteers to help a neighboring town after a flood.

Helen's identity evolution also comes with the growing desire to not end up lonely and trapped in her house like her mother. This is originally the cause of her desire not to have anything to do with housework. This changes as she pities her mother for her lonely existence and Helen becomes determined not to make the same mistakes that her mother has made. Helen wants to be more than just an old maid in her home. Through all of these things, Helen has evolved enough to know what she wants out of life and is stronger for it. Unfortunately, she also realizes that she and Isaac can never have a life together, causing her to abandon him in Chicago.

## Relationships

There are two main relationships within the novel. First there is the relationship between the narrator and Isaac. These are two young men who are searching for their own place in the world but find each other instead amidst the chaos of political upheaval. Their goals are very different, but their tenacity in holding on to their beliefs is the same. The pair meet as they are listening to a speaker on the Kampala university's campus. Both of them are not students and although they try to hide that from each other, they both know this fact to be true. The pair is evenly matched as Isaac has the charisma to gain popularity while the narrator has the intelligence to aid him whenever it is needed.

Over time, there is a distinct change in the friendship between the narrator and Isaac. As Isaac envelopes himself more into the revolution, there is a distinct gap between the pair as the narrator is seen as more of a pacifist. They still care greatly for each other, but at some points Isaac seems to mock the narrator for his non-violent nature. A fight breaks out between them as the narrator guesses that Joseph and Isaac may actually be related due to the high level of confidence and preferential treatment that Joseph gives to Isaac. After the violence truly erupts and the war becomes bloodier, Isaac cares enough about the narrator to pay an older man to care for the narrator in another village to keep him from being hurt. The narrator still feels very loyal to Isaac as he returns to Joseph's village in search of Isaac.

As Isaac knows that the only way to escape from the revolution is death unless extreme measures are taken, Isaac makes the ultimate sacrifice for the narrator. Joseph previously made arrangements for Isaac to flee the country if things get too bad. Instead of using the passport and visa for himself, Isaac gives them to his friend in an ultimate act of love and friendship. The narrator knows that this will mean death for Isaac, but Isaac persuades him to take his identity and be happy in his life. Once in America, the narrator transforms himself into Isaac Mabira and tries to live a happy life, but he is devastated when Henry, the man who helps Isaac into the United States, informs him that Isaac has been killed.



During the course of the time that the narrator is in America, he is known as Isaac Mabira. He is taken to a small Midwestern town to live as an exchange student while being helped by social services worker Helen. After a short time of getting to know one another, a physical relationship ensues. This relationship is the focus of Helen's narrative of the novel. It is often seen as tedious, for the most part, there is no discussion of feelings. There is also no long term commitment that is fully discussed. On the one time that Helen mentions meeting Isaac's mother, he quickly dissuades Helen from talking about the possibility of meeting her, saying that Helen should not daydream of things that will never happen.

Helen does more than daydream about a possibility of a fuller relationship with Isaac. Although the civil rights movement has already passed, there is still a sense of racism in the small town. Helen decides to take their private relationship a step further by becoming more public with it and taking Isaac out to lunch at a local diner. This proves disastrous as the men in the diner want Isaac to leave, but they make this known in subtle ways. Helen instantly becomes ashamed of herself and of what she has done. She avoids Isaac for some time before seeing him again. Once she does start seeing him again, the routine goes on same as normal, with nothing more mentioned about the incident.

There does come a time when the pair are separated. Isaac leaves Helen to go on a tour of the country without telling her first, which in some ways indicates that their relationship still has not become more than a physical attraction. When he returns, they are happy to see one another again, but something changes between them. Upon hearing of the real Isaac's death, the narrator and Helen become closer as he grieves his friend's death. This newly formed bond between them makes their relationship more emotional. As Isaac tells Helen more of his story, the relationship shifts again. This time, Helen begins to fully realize that the relationship with Isaac will come to an end, especially as his student visa expires, forcing him to move on without her. Perhaps in a way to save herself from the heartache that is to come, Helen comes up with the idea that she and Isaac should go to Chicago. She has him pack up most of his belongings to take with him, but it is curious that she never reveals her true intentions of leaving him in the city. Once there, they visit places like the Hancock Center and the lake before she reveals that she had intended on helping him get to Chicago but that originally she does not plan to stay with him. After a brief discussion, Helen changes her mind saying that their relationship could actually thrive as no one seems to notice their feelings for each other. Helen does leave Isaac in Chicago, but she promises to return with her things. It is unknown if she does or if Isaac is truly left on his own.

## Equality

Both narratives of the novel deal heavily with the theory of equality. In Uganda one revolution has recently ended. This revolution was to bring about peace and prosperity for all of the people of the country and to hopefully catch on in the rest of Africa as well. Although this is a dream come true for many of the people, it soon turns into a nightmare. The new government is slipping into old ways. The rich continue to be rich





through means of malice and corruption, but the poor are becoming poorer. The hope of equality among the people becomes diminished.

Isaac holds on to the dream of an equal society. He has a disdain for the rich students at the university. He can see the difference between them and the poor students, especially by looking at their shoes. Isaac often mocks the rich students, calling them all Alex and confronting them any chance he gets. He does not interfere with the poor students as he empathizes with them, although he is not a student himself.

Once Isaac joins with Joseph and his revolution, Isaac rises through the ranks and becomes a close confidante of Joseph's. There is a distinct difference in the goals of the revolution. Isaac wants to unify the people so that they can overcome the corruption and to keep the original promise that the people will be equal in all parts of life. Joseph's goal of revolution is to just become the leader of the country. Ultimately, Joseph is defeated, but Isaac stays in Uganda because he still believes that his dream can be accomplished.

In the small town of Laurel, the civil rights movement has just passed, but there is still sense of racism. When Isaac first comes to America, Henry informs him of this and warns him to just keep his head down and to avoid trouble at any costs. Isaac is successful with this until he meets Helen. He strikes up an interracial relationship with her that could be disastrous if publicized too much.

Helen does not see this towards the middle part of the relationship. She feels that they are just a couple, the same as any couple in the area. She wants to prove this by taking Isaac to the local diner. Helen feels that she should be able to sit at a table comfortably and have a nice lunch with Isaac, no matter what his skin tone. This is disastrous as the pair are under the scrutiny of others sitting in the diner. They make it apparent that they do not feel that Isaac is equal because he is a black man. In order to prove their point, the diner owner has the waitress wrap Isaac's meal in a to-go container, as a hint that he should leave. Although Helen is embarrassed by this, but Isaac is not. He has been through enough in his past that he is not intimidated so easily.

As the town will never accept Isaac and Helen as an equal couple, Helen makes the decision that Isaac should leave and have a better chance in a larger community. There he can fit in better and truly be equal to others around him. On the way to Chicago, they stop at a small restaurant where they receive a few stares, but not much else. When they reach the city, Helen is careful to avoid physical contact with Isaac because she is so paranoid that people will stare or treat them differently. As they go through the city, visiting what Isaac wants to first and then heading to the beach, Helen comes to realize that while some people do look at them, there is not much attention being raised by her holding hands with Isaac in a public display of affection. It is here that Helen changes her mind to her plans and realizes that perhaps they can have a happy life together after all.



## Isolation

The narrator Isaac begins his story as an isolated young man as he comes to Kampala by himself and is surrounded by strangers. He does not fit in with anyone around him, no matter how hard he tries. At the university, he is isolated as he is not a student like the others on campus. This changes after he meets Isaac, another young man who is there but not a student. This feeling of isolation is lifted, but due to Isaac's charismatic nature, the narrator feels isolated again as more people pay attention to Isaac and only view the narrator as an afterthought. As Isaac goes further into the rebellion, the narrator is more on the outside of the action than an integral part of it.

After the narrator becomes Isaac and escapes to America, he is isolated again as he settles into the small town of Laurel. Because he is African and there is still a sense of racism in the area, Isaac has no one to turn to. After he begins a relationship with Helen, he finds himself despising the fact that he is so dependent on Helen for all of his needs. He has no ability to do much for himself for a few reasons. The first being that he has no clue where everything is at since he is not from the area. The second is the fact that he is an African man in a small, racist community. In the first segment labeled "Helen", the reader becomes aware that due to his race, Isaac has been verbally abused and it can be surmised that Isaac does not feel comfortable trying to get things done in this kind of environment.

Another point to consider is the fact that Isaac has given up everything and everyone he loves to come to America. Originally he leaves his family to study in Kampala, in his own village he feels empty and isolated as his ideas on life differ from that of his family. The narrator Isaac feels this especially when he is in the hospital and watches other patients receive care and visits from their families. At this point, the narrator Isaac realizes that the room he has in the slums is not a home, no matter how nice the landlord is to him.

As for Helen, there is a certain isolation that comes with her life as a middle-aged social worker. Part of this is self imposed, she has no desire to do things that other women of the time do such as get married, have children, and take care of homes. In fact, Helen is the exact opposite on purpose. After some time, the daily routines have created a dull void in which Helen does not think she will get out of. This changes when she meets Isaac, who brings a certain resurgence to her life as she is intrigued by him and is also drawn by his own loneliness. Even though Helen and Isaac carry on a romantic relationship, Helen feels in some ways still isolated. Throughout the novel, Helen has no actual knowledge of who Isaac is or of what his intentions are. There is nothing to suggest that the couple have a loving relationship. This causes Helen frustration as she hopes for more out of him emotionally but is slow in receiving anything.

A contributing factor in Helen's isolation is her mother. Helen's parents divorced many years prior, with her mother keeping the house. Over time, Helen's mother becomes isolated as she only leaves her home to grocery shop and for church. The only source of interaction is Helen herself, although her mother still wishes that Helen would settle down with a man and a family. Helen's mother is oblivious to the fact that Helen wants



another life besides the boring existence she shares with her mother. If she does, then it is out of loneliness that she makes subtle suggestions that Helen does not leave her.

All together, even though the characters are isolated, there is a sort of bond in this. Helen and her mother are bonded together as they share a house. It is a bond that goes back to the beginnings of her mother's separation from her husband. Helen's mother feels bitter and lonely that her husband has left her behind, but Helen feels lonely that she has been neglected by both parents. Isaac is lonely in America as he has no one who knows him as he truly is. He is dependent on Helen for almost everything that he does and very rarely leaves the house except to go to the university. He and Helen have a physical relationship, but for Helen there is no warmth or emotion within it. They are able to work this out as they decide to shed the constraints of having a relationship that is hidden from the rest of the world. They decide to take a trip to Chicago, thus exposing their feelings for each other to the world.

## Revolution

In Isaac's narrative one revolution has already occurred, which is part of the catalysts bringing the narrator and Isaac Mabira to Kampala. At this time, another revolution is beginning as the promises of the new governing regime prove to be false as it becomes as corrupt as the previous government. In the beginning there are little traces of the bloodbath that is to come. The only indications that something is stirring are signs across the campus written by an unknown person. Isaac is inspired by this and comes up with his own signs, calling it the "paper revolution". These signs were of supposed crimes against the country, which is answered by the university declaring that the signs are a crime against the country itself. Isaac does not heed this and continues with his signs until he gains more supporters.

Once Isaac finds a group of students that have become interested in Isaac's cause, he begins to gather them for various speeches. During these speeches, he interrogates some of the people, asking what crimes have they committed. It is during one of these speeches that Isaac draws the attention of the government. Soldiers come and beat Isaac and others in the crowd. Instead of deflating Isaac's spirits, Isaac becomes more motivated than ever. He continues to hold his gatherings and he also takes part in a peaceful protest. The narrator also engages in this protest, which lasts most of the night. In the morning, the military busts up the protest, arresting many of the students. Isaac and the narrator are able to flee the area to an abandoned classroom where Isaac has been living. After a time of waiting, the narrator is able to go home but he is attacked by rebels later on.

The narrator is also kicked out of his home due to his affiliation with Isaac. Although the narrator is more of a pacifist, the landlord does not care. All he cares about is the fact that the narrator is known to be hanging around with a known revolutionary. During this time, anything or anyone that could be connected to any revolutionary idea or person could land a person in jail or worse. The landlord displays feelings that are considered normal for this time as he does not want to be even remotely associated with anything



that could lead to his own arrest, no matter how innocent he is. Isaac feels that the landlord is acting too scared for his own good, but he takes the narrator to the leader of the revolutionary movement's home. While there, it is noticed that there is a dramatic shift in the behaviors of not only Isaac, but of the people around him. The men in Joseph Mabira's compound are detached and almost unfriendly. They are solely focused on the coming war and Isaac says at one point that they will not hesitate to shoot anyone that interrupts their plans. Isaac himself has gone through a transformation as well. Although Isaac is still jovial towards the narrator, Isaac makes his allegiance to Joseph and his commitment to the revolution clear. In some ways, Isaac has become fanatical with his devotion, even going as far as to severely beat the narrator when he is questioned about his relationship to Joseph.

As the revolution becomes bigger, the change in the area is significant. Originally, the revolutionaries come to liberate the villages around them. The people are at first grateful and happy to see the rebels as they come into the towns. There is an air of hope within the first few days and parties break out. This feeling of goodwill is shortly extinguished as soon there is no food or supplies in the villages for the people to eat. The soldiers take what is the property of the villagers and some are even hurt when they do not give what they have. A pair of young soldiers burn down the home of a family who refused to give their last two chickens. Once Joseph finds out, the two boys are shot as a sign that Joseph truly means that he intends to protect the citizens from further corruption.

Not only are the villagers starting to become afraid of any soldiers but they are also paranoid of anyone that tries to enter their village. After Isaac has the narrator taken to a separate village to keep him away from the fighting, the narrator tries to blend into the village as best as he can. He observes the people rally against people from a village that was recently destroyed from all of the fighting. The villagers attack the refugees and kill them all, dragging them into the forest as they do not want outsiders infiltrating and taking what they have. Instead of being liberated, the people are more in despair than before the revolution began.

This action causes the narrator to flee back to Joseph's village. The true carnage of the situation is evident as trucks are filled with dead and injured soldiers. The narrator realizes one of his greatest fears of finding Isaac among the dead. He is glad to find Isaac unharmed, although Isaac has changed mentally. The tolls of war are taking its effect on Isaac, he is shown as weary of the fighting and of the bloodshed. He informs the narrator that Joseph has made preparations for him to leave, but he wants to see Joseph's home one more time. At this point there is a certain sadness to Isaac's character as he realizes that the revolution will soon be over, with Joseph's regime on the losing side. Joseph himself is executed as a rebel later in the evening with the narrator and Isaac watching. Isaac knows that he should leave while he has a chance, but he remains committed to the failing revolution. Instead, in one final act of devotion, Isaac persuades the narrator to take the accommodations that were arranged for Isaac and to start a new life in America, forever leaving Isaac and the war behind.

# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is told from two different characters' point of view. Half of the novel is told from a narrator whose name is never really known until Isaac gives him his own name towards the end of the novel. The second half is told months later by a social worker named Helen who is assigned to assist a man named Isaac. The two segments interchange one after the other for the entirety of the novel. The story is related in the first person as the narrator and Helen reminisce over their experiences. Both points of view are limited to the thoughts and events of the character narrating in their own segments. In the sections labeled "Isaac", the narrator is recounting his experiences with a man named Isaac until he is given Isaac's name as a way to save his life. In "Helen", the narrative is Helen's side of the blossoming romance between herself and the exchange student known as Isaac which takes place several months after the sections labeled "Isaac".

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is not overly complicated. Although the story is partially set in Africa, there are no samples of local vocabulary or dialogue. The dialogue in the sections labeled "Isaac" is mainly between the narrator Isaac and the revolutionary Isaac with very few other conversations mixed between. There is very little in terms of vulgar language or graphic depictions of violence. In "Helen", there are few conversations with other characters, such as David, but little else in the way of interaction with others. As the relationship turns physical, there is only the subtle indication that sexual intercourse occurs, but there is nothing obscene to these events. Overall, the novel is not written to be overly descriptive in terms of scenery. The language depicts more action than it does imagery, as the narrators for each section describe their side of events.

## Structure

The novel is divided into the tales of two characters, the narrator Isaac and Helen. The segments follow one after the other but the novel as a whole is broken up into two unnamed sections. The first section begins with Isaac and follows a pattern of "Isaac" then "Helen" for the first 8 chapters, then a solo "Isaac" chapter closes the section. The second section begins with Helen and continues in a "Helen" then "Isaac" pattern for the rest of the novel. In this section there are an equal 11 sections for both "Isaac" and "Helen". Each section is short as it relays a specific event for both characters, without a great deal of back story or reminiscence. Both tales are told in a straightforward fashion, with an introduction, rising movements, climax, and then finally a denouement. In the "Isaac" story line, the events center around the narrator Isaac as he and his friend Isaac

take part in the political upheaval of Uganda. "Helen" refers to Helen's life as she interacts first on a professional level then on an intimate level after the narrator Isaac assumes his name several months after the "Isaac" segments ends.



## Quotes

Perhaps only two men meeting unexpectedly in the middle of a desert after having traveled for so long would know what we felt like. In the province of the slums we meant little to each other. Here we were everything.

-- Narrator (Section 1 Isaac/Helen Part 1 "Isaac" paragraph 10)

**Importance:** This quote embodies the building relationship between the narrator and Isaac. They are both unknown men from the streets where typically they would have had nothing to do with each other. They are joined together by the fact that they are both not students at the university, but they try to pass themselves off as if they are. The pair recognize this about each other very quickly, which adds to their bond.

In a life of small town wonders, a man with a passport that had been stamped several times was already extraordinary, and Isaac, by those measures, was remarkable. The more mystery I could attach to him, the more exceptional he became.

-- Helen (Section 1 Isaac/Helen Part 3 "Helen" paragraph 36)

**Importance:** Helen is immediately intrigued with Isaac as he is someone who is foreign and has already seen much of the world. For her, Isaac represents the possibilities of life besides the mundane life she has been living. This is also important as it shows that Helen's perceptions of Isaac are not fully realized at this point as she knows next to nothing about him.

Most of us didn't know one another's names or ages or reasons for being there, and that was fine, because silence isn't the same when it's shared. It's sad and lonely sides are shunted off.

-- Narrator (Section 1 Isaac/Helen Part 4 "Isaac" paragraph 21)

**Importance:** This shows the revolution on campus just beginning. There is no actual organization to it; it begins as students who come together to hear Isaac speak about the "crimes against the government".

Our silence had begun as the easiest way to avoid any further damage, and had turned into a source of pain in itself.

-- Helen (Section 1 Isaac/Helen Part 5 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This defines the turbulent relationship between Isaac and Helen. Although they have a physical relationship, there is nothing to suggest any sort of romantic feelings towards each other. This also shows that the relationship is taking its toll on Helen as the pair have very little in common.

They dream of belonging to a place that will never have them. I made that mistake once.

-- Isaac (Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 1 "Helen" paragraph 33)



**Importance:** Isaac vaguely makes this statement to Helen at some point of their relationship, but Helen remembers it as she watches the black students at the local university as they chat together. This is a short allusion to the life that Isaac had dreamed of before he came to America. This quote signifies Isaac's dream of being a student and of fitting in among the people in Kampala and how it is destroyed as the revolution forces him to flee the country.

What was worse was being alone in public and, for reasons you were reluctant to admit, feeling frightened because your lover held your arm.

-- Helen (Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 1 "Helen" paragraph 8)

**Importance:** This is a significant quote as Helen realizes that she does not know quite that much about Isaac, and this concept frightens her. Until this point Helen has maintained the vision that although Isaac is mysterious, there is still a potential for a deeper connection between them. She is confused and hurt that Isaac does not want to see her at this point in time, but she tries to hide it.

Had I woken him up and told him that when it came to me he was safe, he had nothing to worry about, he would have kicked me out of that house, and we would never have spoken again. I wanted him to know that, though, and so I did the only thing I could think of: I picked his clothes up from the floor.

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 3 \*Isaac")

**Importance:** By this point, there is a rift between Isaac and the narrator as Isaac has become more militant and it is widely known that the narrator is not as into the revolution as Isaac. The narrator cares deeply for and worries about Isaac, but does not know how to show this without looking less masculine or without incurring Isaac's mockery or anger. In the action of picking up Isaac's clothes, the narrator is subtly showing this affection.

I was worried for him and for us. Nothing traveled better than death. Grief thrived in isolation, and I was afraid of being all that Isaac had.

-- Helen (Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 4 "Helen" paragraph 21)

**Importance:** Helen is unsure of how to console Isaac during his time of grieving over the real Isaac. She wants to try, but she knows that the ways she consoles her clients is a way that is more formality than actually caring. She also knows that since Isaac is alone without her, she will be the only person that Isaac is able to get comfort from and this scares her.

I had no conviction I could point to, no house to look back on and say: That is why I am here; this is what I'm willing to fight for. If I understood the intent of Joseph's story correctly, I had only so much time to change that.

-- Narrator (Part 2 Helen/Isaac Part 4 "Isaac" paragraph 23)

**Importance:** This is the narrator's true feeling about the revolution. It is clear that he is unattached to the land or the places that Isaac and Joseph are fighting for. Joseph also





knows this and gives the narrator a chance to get out before the real fighting starts, but the narrator also knows that the Joseph's offer is only because Isaac greatly cares for the narrator but it is only a short term offer. If the narrator does not show any intent to either join them or fight, then he may not find himself under Isaac's protection for much longer.

What I didn't know until then was that loving someone and feeling loved in return was the best exercise for the heart, the strength training needed to do more than simply make it through life.

-- Helen (Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 5 paragraph 39)

**Importance:** Helen is becoming more aware of the changes that are going on for her emotionally. She finds herself able to do tasks like aid a neighboring town during a flood, something that she would never have done before she met Isaac. Helen realizes that finding love is the thing that she needed to make herself stronger and to finally feel like she is alive and capable of doing anything she wants.

I thought I had a plan. I thought if I was the one who took you away from Laurel you would see there was no point in going back. You'd want to stay here, and I would help you do that.

-- Helen (Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 11 "Helen" paragraph 54)

**Importance:** Helen realizes that the relationship is almost over especially as his student visa is about to expire, mixed with the fact that she knows that she and Isaac can never have a happy life together in Laurel due to bigotry and the fact that they have never had a truly emotional relationship. She brings Isaac to Chicago so that he can start living a life of his own, but does not tell him until they are standing on the beach of the lake.

No one will have ever loved each other more than we did.

-- Isaac (Section 2 Helen/Isaac Part 11 "Isaac" paragraph 86)

**Importance:** Isaac writes this in the final line of the notebook that he gives to the narrator along with the passport and visa. This is also what the narrator tells Helen as she leaves Isaac in Chicago. In both cases, this shows the ultimate feelings that the narrator shares with Isaac and Helen and that they have for him.