

# **Anansi Boys Study Guide**

## **Anansi Boys by Neil Gaiman**

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## Plot Summary

In African and West Indian indigenous folklore, Anansi is the spider god who created the universe. From that core myth, the author spins a fictional web of imagination in which the spider god's two sons, Fat Charlie and Spider, seek and find each other in different corners of the world. Unsurprisingly, the two sons have adopted Nancy, a variation on the name of Anansi, as their surname. They are joined in supernatural adventures that defy common notions of time, space and probability. These encounters within their own black culture and the culture of the white mainstream society generate humorous, thought-provoking and often absurd consequences. The coexistence of their godly abilities alongside the everyday world of the familiar suggests a kind of magical realism found in the works of other writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isaac Bashevis Singer, although this genre is commonly referred to as fantasy fiction.

Londoner Fat Charlie (who is not fat), learns that his father, Anansi, has died in Florida and puts his wedding plans with Rosie Noah on hold while he goes to bury his father. After he returns, though, he whispers through an alcoholic haze to a spider that he wishes his brother would visit. Oddly enough, the dapper Spider Nancy knocks on Fat Charlie's door the next morning and stays for a lengthy visit during which he seduces the virginal Rosie. After a night of prodigious drinking, Charlie is too hung over to go to work but his brother disguises himself as Charlie and goes to work for him at the Grahame Coats Agency where Spider discovers that Grahame Coats routinely embezzles from his clients. He confronts Coats with his criminal activity; Coats offers him a cash payment and a vacation which Charlie uses to return to Florida to ask old friends of his father for help in evicting Spider from his life.

When he comes back to London, Fat Charlie is arrested and thrown into prison in a frame-up engineered by Grahame Coats to place the blame for embezzlement on him. Grahame Coats flees to the Caribbean island of Saint Andrews; Spider arranges for the release of his brother.

Maeve Livingstone, a client of Coats who learns of his theft of her husband's royalties, confronts Coats in his office and he promptly kills her with a hammer, hiding her body in his office. Maeve resists the entreaties of her late husband to enter the afterlife so they can be together because she wants revenge on Grahame Coats. In her torment, Maeve meets the ghost of Anansi who tells her that the god Tiger once owned all the stories and songs, but he tricked Tiger into giving them to himself. As a result, these tales morphed from dark and violent to stories that demonstrate cleverness and imagination.

Bird Woman gives Spider to his mortal enemy, Tiger, who imprisons him and cuts out his tongue. Fat Charlie also goes to the Caribbean island of Saint Andrews in search of a Mrs. Dunwiddy who had put a curse on him when he was a child that separated him from his bad side, which became Spider. Thus, the two brothers originally were one person. When he finds Mrs. Dunwiddy, she places another curse on Charlie that sends him back to the beginning of time where he negotiates with Bird Woman to return the Anansi bloodline in exchange for one of her feathers. Bird Woman gives Spider to his



mortal enemy, Tiger, who imprisons him and cuts out his tongue. From his cell, Spider summons other spiders to help him gain his freedom. But Charlie intervenes and rescues his brother; he also restores his tongue.

The undead Maeve Livingstone kills Grahame Coats and returns to the afterlife with her husband. Charlie becomes a singer and marries police officer Daisy Day. They have a son. Spider, who betrayed his brother, marries Rosie, and operates a restaurant in London.



# Chapters 1-3 (p 1-66)

## Chapters 1-3 (p 1-66) Summary

Charles ("Fat Charlie") Nancy lives in a south London apartment, having moved to England with his parents at the age of 11. He works as an accountant in the Grahame Coats Agency. His mother, before she dies of cancer, goes on a whirlwind tour of 11 the cities in the world she's always wanted to visit. Fat Charlie's father, Anansi, lives in a retirement home in Florida where he savors the senior social life and is fond of performing karaoke. While chatting with his fiancée Rosie Noah, Charlie receives a phone call from Mrs. Callyanne Higglers, one of his father's old friends who informs him of Anansi's death. The old spider god himself has had a heart attack while singing vigorously for a pair of attractive blondes. Once again, Fat Charlie is embarrassed by his father. His whole relationship with Anansi through his childhood was nothing but embarrassment, so it seems fitting that his father dies in such demeaning circumstances. When he receives the news, Charlie tries unsuccessfully to use the event as a way to coax her into sleeping with him. Rosie refuses. But before she leaves, she tells him to make peace with his father for his own peace of mind.

After arriving in Orlando, Fat Charlie rents a car and heads for the Garden of Rest cemetery, which is located behind Wal-Mart on the outskirts of town. He comically stumbles into someone else's funeral and begins grieving with the family before he realizes his mistake and races to his father's grave. Mrs. Higglers hands him a shovel and Charlie picks up a small piece of dirt and tosses it into the grave. Mrs. Higglers tells him to keep shoveling since the grave digger has not yet appeared. After the burial, Fat Charlie follows Mrs. Higglers to her home and eats an enormous meal; he declines her invitation to stay overnight. The two go to Anansi's house and check on its condition. Fat Charlie asks her to tell him what his father was like as a boy. With a smile, she tells Charlie that his father "was always a good-looking man" and someone who women loved. She points to a picture of Fat Charlie's brother, and he denies he has a brother. Mrs. Higglers tells him his brother was sent away at an early age because of his tendency to cause trouble. If he ever wants to meet his brother, she tells him, he should tell a spider and his brother will appear. She also tells him that his father, Anansi, took all the songs and stories in the world from Tiger, who made them into sad stories and songs, so Anansi could remake them all as happy tales.

Upon his return to work, Fat Charlie is assigned the client Maeve Livingstone, widow of a screen writer who has been unable to get the Grahame Coats Agency to release any of the funds in his estate to her. At first, Maeve seems puzzled by the fiscal babble and jive from banks as well as the agency. Charlie assures her things will soon be resolved. When he goes home, he finds Rosie in a hot bathtub and offers to scrub her back. Suddenly, there is a great shriek from the bathroom as Rosie sees a common brown spider in the bath water. Before removing and releasing the spider, he asks says he would really like to see his long-lost brother. When he awakens the next morning, Charlie hears a knock on his door and opens it to find Spider his brother, on his



doorstep. They share family stories and photos; Charlie turns about to discover his brother has disappeared into one of those old photos.

## Chapters 1-3 (p 1-66) Analysis

In the midst of the everyday life of Fat Charlie Nancy, his relationship with his father Anansi becomes pivotal. From the outset, the reader is aware of the parallel realities of the spirit world of Anansi and the workaday world of Charlie in contemporary London. The relevancy is more than familial. The deeper resonance concerns freedom of the imagination and soul. Anansi, in life, has made a bargain with the Tiger spirit to wrest from him the songs and words of the spirit, freeing them to serve a positive purpose in the life of mankind. While under the power of Tiger, the gods and demigods who used the songs served little purpose but to complicate and frustrate the affairs of men. Anansi has turned these artifacts of the human spirit toward good, with the result that Tiger and other evil spirits seek revenge on Fat Charlie as a proxy for his father who has diminished their power. The narrative stage is thus arranged in parallel fashion so that the evil and misdeed of humans find their counterpart in the lurking spirit world. This conjunction echoes early African and Caribbean tribal witchcraft that seeks to control and shape human destiny by placating and pleasing numerous gods and spirits.

Whereas Fat Charlie seems entirely modern, he is dragged back into a dark and mysterious history where he struggles to manage the forces of witchcraft in hopes they can be used to produce happiness and balance in his own life. The emergence of Anansi, as well as the appearance of his long-lost brother Spider, are presaged by the discovery by Rosie Noah, his fiancée, of a large brown spider in her bathtub. The immediate arrival of Spider at Fat Charlie's door can hardly be explained as coincidence. It soon becomes obvious to Fat Charlie and to the reader that so-called primitive witchcraft is alive and well even in Contemporary London. These circumstances serve to demonstrate the existence of at least two parallel worlds; the plot then develops along two parallel but occasionally intersecting narrative lines.



## Chapters 4-6 (p. 67-114)

### Chapters 4-6 (p. 67-114) Summary

Spider tells Fat Charlie he is bewildered by the fact his brother never told him that their father had died. Charlie confesses that he sometimes forgets he has a brother, and Spider tells of his many failed attempts to reach Fat Charlie. Spider recommends an evening of "wine, women and song" to cheer themselves up. They hire a taxicab to take them on bar rounds until they are quite inebriated. Then Spider directs them to a West End bar where he picks up not one but several adoring young women. Fat Charlie follows along with Spider and his retinue as they head to a karaoke bar where Spider thinks they should sing a tribute to their father who died of a heart attack after a karaoke-singing performance. Spider sings {"Under the Boardwalk" and Fat Charlie tries to sing "Unforgettable" but can't get the words out of his mouth. Then Fat Charlie gets sick and the brothers head home, inebriated.

Fat Charlie awakens the next morning with a shattering hangover and Spider offers to go in to the agency and take his place. Although not twins, the two strongly resemble each other and sometimes people get them confused. As he lies abed moaning, Fat Charlie lifts his head to see a young woman enter carrying a tray for him—a drink of raw egg, Worcestershire sauce, Tabasco, a shot of vodka and seasonings and a box of Alka-Setzer. Before the fog lifts, Fat Charlie asks the woman her name. Daisy, she replies, asking him why he doesn't remember their night of debauchery. At the Grahame Coats Agency, Spider asks Coats why he has bank accounts in the Cayman Islands that funnel funds from his clients' accounts. Coats dodges his questions and disappears. Rosie's mother drops by to talk to Fat Charlie about wedding plans, and is shocked to see the scantily-clad Daisy bouncing about. He introduces her to Rosie's mother as his cousin. The next day when Fat Charlie goes to work, Coats hands him an envelope with two weeks of pay and tells him to take a vacation.

Daisy, known as Detective Constable Day, goes to Grahame Coats' office to take a report on suspicion of embezzlement. Although the suspect is clearly identified as Charles ("Fat Charlie") Nancy, she seems unable to absorb and react to the name. She takes down his report methodically. Meanwhile, Spider rouses himself from the room in his brother's flat that he has usurped and walks into the living room to see Fat Charlie awakening from the couch after a rough night of drinking. Charlie orders Spider out of his apartment and accuses him of sleeping with his fiancée, Rosie. Spider says he has to oblige her because she thinks he is Fat Charlie and he doesn't want to damage their relationship. Spider eats a choice piece of beefsteak he has purloined from the refrigerator; Charlie angrily protests that is the steak he'd planned to give Rosie that evening, and orders him out again. Charlie calls Mrs. Dunwiddy, a friend of Mrs. Higgle, and asks her how to evict his brother. She advises him to come to Florida and talk to herself and Mrs. Higgle. Charlie and Daisy encounter each other in the waiting room of the agency, where she has taken the police embezzlement report, and she dashes out. Coats takes Fat Charlie into his office and confronts him with fraudulent financial



printouts allegedly showing his involvement in the embezzlement. Fat Charlie gets a taxi to the airport and catches a plane for Florida. Grahame Coats crystallizes his long-hatched plan of escape, just before Maeve Livingstone calls to ask about the strange disappearance of her husband Morris' retirement fund.

## Chapters 4-6 (p. 67-114) Analysis

If, as alleged in the book, Spider is the embodied dark side of Fat Charlie's personality, then the reader gets to see the two sides of this personality at war with each other. Spider neither knows nor respects boundaries, moves right into Charlie's apartment, takes over a spare room as his own and eats freely from Charlie's food. To top it all off, Fat Charlie suspects the obvious—his brother is sleeping with his fiancée, Rosie. And Spider has the audacity to claim he had sex with her in order to improve Charlie's relationship with Rosie, since she believes that Spider is Fat Charlie. Enraged, Fat Charlie orders Spider out of his apartment but Spider refuses. This is evidently emblematic of the difficulty people usually have in changing themselves and adopting new and better behavior patterns. Spider's recalcitrance is everyone's dilemma: how to move from darkness to light.

Aware that he is being investigated for possible embezzlement, Grahame Coats concocts some fraudulent documents allegedly showing that Fat Charlie is the embezzler, after giving him an envelope containing two weeks' pay for his vacation. Coats wants Charlie out of the picture so he can weave a web of deception about Charlie's alleged participation in the crime. When Fat Charlie is upset, as he is over his brother's behavior, he seeks his answer in folk wisdom. He calls Mrs. Dunwiddy, a friend of Anansi's in Florida, to tell her he's coming to Orlando in search of a way to evict Spider. Although Fat Charlie is neither fat nor stupid, he seeks solace in the old tribal voodoo rather than in any construct of modern life, such as psychology. Although Fat Charlie can't always trust other people, he retains his faith in the power of the spirit world.

Chapter 5 concludes with a retelling of one of Anansi's stories. It bears an uncanny resemblance to the tale of the Tar Baby in "Br'er Rabbit," a collection of Afro-American folk tales from the American South at the time of the Civil War. Anansi gets irritated and orders the tar man to move on but "he don't say one word, he don't move a muscle." Anansi gets angry at the tar man's silence, tells him he is the bravest and strongest man in the world. When the tar man still doesn't respond, Anansi drives a fist into him and becomes stuck. Anansi hits the tar man again, and his other arm becomes caught in the tar. Then his legs get stuck as he kicks at the tar man; his mouth becomes stuck, also, when he tries to bite the tar man. Then the next day, according to legend, Anansi's wife and sons find him dead the next morning, completely engulfed in the tar man.

This story could be considered a metaphor for how the gods sometimes become embroiled in the affairs of men—reluctantly at first, then with increasing passion until humans lose their freedom completely.





## Chapters 7-9 (p. 153-227)

### Chapters 7-9 (p. 153-227) Summary

Fat Charlie gets a plane to Orlando, where he is met at the airport by Mrs. Higglers. He complains that he is starving and wants something to eat, but as she barrels along the freeway she tells him to wait until they reach Mrs. Dunwiddy's house where she has a turkey roasting in the oven for him. Once they have something to eat, Fat Charlie asks if they can help him banish his brother Spider from his home and his life. "We can't make him go away," Mrs. Dunwiddy proclaims, "but we can send you to somebody who can."

The two women—with two of their friends—stage a black magic ritual by placing salt, plant material and other charms at the four corners of a table, with lights lowered. The four women all hum, hiss, grunt and groan. One of them throws something into the bowl at the center of the table, producing a brilliant burst of flame. Charlie is mesmerized by the flame and suddenly discovers himself on a distant and unknown mountainside, approaching one of a cluster of caves. At the first cave, he is met by the demigod Lion who asks him why he can't resolve the problem with his brother and tells him his father, Anansi, should mediate. Fat Charlie tells Lion that his father is dead and can't help. In the next cave, he encounters the trumpeting demigod Elephant. In the next cave Fat Charlie finds a beautiful woman with four breasts who blows him a kiss and tells him that she knew his father. Tiger emerges from the shadows and Fat Charlie asks if he can help. Tiger says Anansi tricked him so many times that the best thing his family can do is stay away from him.

Meanwhile back in London Daisy the detective begins to suspect embezzlement at the Grahame Coats agency.

Fat Charlie next encounters Hyena, a crazed woman who says she likes to eat the bones of her prey. Before Charlie can leave her cave, a hairy creature plops down next to him in the cave mouth—Monkey, the trickster of the demigods. After Monkey leaves, Fat Charlie meets the Bird Woman, who agrees to help him with his problem if he gives over to her the Anansi bloodline. They agree. Fat Charlie is roused from his trance in the late afternoon by the Dunwiddy and Higglers widows. As he comes back to reality, he unclasps one tightly-closed hand to find in it a feather.

Spider, posing as Fat Charlie, deeply enjoys the favors of Rosie, his brother's fiancée but is flummoxed when he goes to visit Rosie's mother because she makes plain that she doesn't like him. Spider—in a gesture very uncharacteristic of his brother—defends and praises himself, telling her she will come to love him. Detective Daisy tells her boss she should be removed from the Grahame Coats embezzlement case because she knows the suspect (Fat Charlie) socially. When she tells her boss that she hasn't slept with Fat Charlie, he responds that she is still on the case and shouldn't bother him with such trivia. Maeve Livingstone, infuriated with Grahame Coats, goes to see him at his office, confronts him with evidence of embezzlement and he kills her with



a hammer. He then hides her body in his office. Spider decides to tell Rosie of his impersonation; her mouth drops open in astonishment and hundreds of birds fly out, harassing and pecking him. He is followed home by a couple of watchful, wary birds.

Fat Charlie lands at Heathrow Airport in London feeling very cheerful. Convinced that he can make everything right with Rosie, Fat Charlie gets a large box of chocolates and when the taxicab pulls up in front of his house, he is surprised to see Spider and Rosie. He gives her the box of chocolates. Rosie looks at Fat Charlie and Spider side-by-side and can't really tell which one is her fiancée. When they go inside, Fat Charlie throws a powerful punch at his brother, once again demanding that he leave. In the midst of their fight, two police officers (one of whom is Daisy) arrive at his doorstep and arrest him on a warrant for embezzlement. Rosie asks Spider where Fat Charlie is; he responds that he does not know. Rosie demands to know whether she slept with Spider or her husband-to-be. Spider tells Rosie she slept with him, and she delivers a powerful slap across her face. "You are both sick, evil men" she says and leaves. Then great swarms of flamingos fly overhead, shutting out the sun, and begin to crash against the windows and fall dead to the ground. Spider is alarmed and frightened.

## Chapters 7-9 (p. 153-227) Analysis

Fat Charlie's trip into the spirit world as the result of a seance in Orlando facilitates his quest for some power to help him rid himself of Spider could also be considered symbolic of man's quest for spiritual growth through various practices and religions. Finally, his spiritual journey also reminds the reader of the close proximity in this novel of the spirit world and the "real" world. Upon his return to London, Fat Charlie learns straightaway that the spirit powers he thinks he has acquired by his trip into the netherworld are insufficient to resolve his problems. He throws a punch at his brother, Spider, but that does not cause him to leave. He tries to reconcile with Rosie but, having found out about her deception, she is angry and tells both Nancy brothers, in effect, to go to hell. An ominous sign of the power of Bird Woman to haunt her tormentors takes the form of swarms of flamingos—tropical birds—crashing against the windows and walls of Fat Charlie's apartment building. Thus the powers of the animal spirits are shown to be highly negative and of little use in bringing about positive change.



## Chapters 10-12 (p. 228-296)

### Chapters 10-12 (p. 228-296) Summary

Fat Charlie awakens in a jail cell, wondering how he got there. He is allowed to go outside to the exercise yard but when he does, thousands of birds of all kinds aggregate on wire mesh slung skyward over the yard. He calls for help and is ushered inside by a guard. Maeve Livingstone's spirit returns to the Grahame Coats Agency as she searches for him and for her body. Fumbling in darkness, she pulls out her ringing cell phone to see her husband's image and hear his voice. He pleads with her to come to the spirit world and join him in his loneliness. She tells him straightaway that she has no intention of joining him until she haunts Grahame Coats.

Disguised as Mr. Merryman, Fat Charlie's attorney, Spider enters his cell, takes his brother by the hand and transports them both to a place called Skopsie where, according to Spider, they make the best hot chocolate in the world. Then they travel to the desert to avoid birds, but they are soon encircled by droves of birds. Spider then takes them to Antarctica where Spider apologizes for his behavior, and Fat Charlie apologizes for calling on the Bird Woman to drive him away. Spider asks if there was anything else in his deal with the Bird Woman besides the blood lineage/ bird haunting swap. Fat Charlie says there was a feather, which he can't locate.

After he is returned to his cell, Fat Charlie is visited by Detective Daisy who tells her she's been taken off the Grahame Coats case because it is now a murder investigation. She invites him to come with her for tea and cakes. Charlie finds that he is somewhat spooked by freedom, since it also means he is no longer protected against the dangers of the world outside. Rosie Noah and her mother relax on a cruise ship headed for St. Andrews; Maeve Livingstone calls her husband and asks his advice on locating Grahame Coats. Spider tells his brother that the swarm of birds that always follows him is his problem, not Fat Charlie's, but hints a time may come when the birds will also harass him.

Using Spider's money, Fat Charlie returns to Orlando and searches out his father's grave because he wants to ask him for advice. When he gets no response, Fat Charlie concludes that Anansi is "as dead as roadkill. He looks up and realizes that a Mrs. Bustamonte is waiting for him with her car to give him a ride. She explains that both Mrs. Dunwiddy and Mrs. Higglar are busy and asked her to help. She tells Fat Charlie that Mrs. Dunwiddy is very ill and they drive to her house where Fat Charlie finds her sitting in her bed, looking deathly sick.

Mrs. Dunwiddy tells Fat Charlie that she did a bad thing to him when he was a young man. For Fat Charlie's breaking a mirror ball in her backyard garden, she created Spider by drawing "all the tricksiness, all the wickedness, all the devilry" from him. She admits that she then banished him from the family but incurred the wrath of Anansi for doing so. She tells him she is 104 years old and ready to die. Fat Charlie asks where his feather



is. She responds that Mrs. Higglar has it but has gone to St. Andrews. Charlie stops at a travel agency and gets a discounted \$500 ticket to St. Andrews to look for his feather. When he arrives in St. Andrews, Fat Charlie asks the taxi driver if he knows Mrs. Callyanne Higglar; the cabbie says no and drops him off at his hotel. Grahame Coats encounters Rosie and her mother on the cruise ship and coaxes them into leaving the ship and coming to his island home so he can entertain them.

## Chapters 10-12 (p. 228-296) Analysis

Spirits spook other spirits, curses are cast and lifted in this chapter. Maeve Livingstone's earthbound spirit communes with the departed soul of her husband by cell phone; she insists that she must punish Grahame Coats before she can join him in the spirit world. Fat Charlie learns of the spell cast on him by Mrs. Dunwiddy when he was a young man—a spell that separated his light and dark sides. His dark side became incarnated as Spider, his ersatz "brother." Mrs. Dunwiddy incurred the anger and possibly another curse from Anansi for having banished Spider. At 104, the dying Mrs. Dunwiddy needs to unburden her soul to Fat Charlie.

Once again, Spider takes his brother time traveling. Hand-in-hand, the two brothers fly off in search of the world's finest hot chocolate. Hectored by swarms of birds wherever they go, Spider and Fat Charlie realize it's because the Bird Woman has not lifted her curse on Spider. Even in the dessert, they are pursued by angry birds so Spider then takes them both to the South Pole where they finally get respite. Softening his feelings toward his brother, Charlie tells him he regrets having asked Bird Woman to help evict him from his apartment.

The effect of these developments serves to remind the reader of just how deeply steeped in the world of spirit both Spider and Fat Charlie remain. The freedom they both seek can only be realized if/when they sever ties to that world.



## Chapters 12-14 (p. 297-384)

### Chapters 12-14 (p. 297-384) Summary

On the island of St. Andrew, Fat Charlie rents a bicycle at the Dolphin Hotel and sets out to find Callyanne Higglar. Along the way, he meets and befriends lots of local natives but no one can tell him precisely where Mrs. Higglar lives. As he pedals, Fat Charlie is struck by a speeding black Mercedes belonging to Grahame Coats. He goes over the side of the road down a cliff, then pulls himself and his bent and broken bicycle up again and boards a bus to return to his hotel. Daisy Day arrives at the island airport on her whimsical vacation. Spider awakens to find himself staked to the ground, Gulliver-like. He realizes that the stream of blood from his mouth comes from the remnants of his ripped-out tongue. Spider feels like a disembodied spirit but he hears Rosie's voice behind him, but doesn't realize Rosie and her mother have been kidnapped by Grahame Coats who is holding them in a locked dungeon at his hilltop mansion. As the two women eat the paltry food Coats gives them and talk in the dark, Rosie has the sense Spider is nearby and misses him. Using his mouth, Spider somehow shapes a lump of mud into a spider that he telepathically asks for help. The spider trots off into the grass and Spider stops struggling.

Fat Charlie and Daisy encounter each other at the resort and have a heart-to-heart talk. Meanwhile, Rosie tells her mother they need to start digging an escape tunnel when they hear Grahame Coats leave the house. At a Dolphin Hotel buffet, Fat Charlie and Rosie encounter Grahame Coats who threatens them with his gun and tells them he wants to take them back to his house and have "a proper talk." Daisy makes it plain that she is no longer on the murder/embezzlement case but agrees to accompany Fat Charlie. Before they leave, a band begins to play and Fat Charlie leads everyone in singing and clapping their hands. After he sings, Charlie takes the mike and asks Rosie to marry him. The room explodes as Daisy quietly nods. When they reunite at their table, Grahame Coats is gone.

Determined to free himself, Spider jerks at his restraints until he is able to pull one stake out of the ground; then he gradually works his limbs free of the other stakes. He is aware of an evil presence nearby. Tiger spies him and starts to charge, but Spider whirls one of the stakes at the end of its rope hard against his snout, driving the big cat away. Spider then sits down beside the river and begins to gather rocks that he can hurl in one hand and stacks them. Spider is approached by a naked stranger, a part man-part beast creature that walks upright but has a long tail. The beast carries the carcass of a lamb over its shoulder, Spider throws heavy rocks at the creature, causing him to drop the carcass and run. Tiger is hungry but finds the lamb carcass pulsing with maggots. He throws the carcass in the river and washes his hands.

Fat Charlie and Daisy visit Mrs. Higglar where Charlie asks her to return his feather so he can deal with the Bird Woman. She hands it back to him in an envelope. "What do I do with it?" he asks. She summons Mrs. Dunwiddy and two other elderly women for a



seance. Charlie is transported through thick mists to a bridge where his father sits in a chair. Charlie shows Anansi the feather and his father tells him not to let it get tattered because Bird Woman might not like it. Then he disappears into the mists as Charlie continues his walk. The little spider that Spider had made with clay and his own blood and spittle returns with an army of other spiders, some venomous and poisonous. Just when Tiger returns to threaten Spider again, the arachnid army attacks and drives the cat away.

Grahame Coats arms himself with knives and his pistol, then heads toward the cellar. But before he can reach them, Rosie and her mother confuse and disable him by bringing a heavy metal structure down on his arm, sending the pistol across the floor. They scurry outside the meat locker and lock the door with Coats inside. bleeding and losing consciousness, Coats lies down in the darkness but is roused by some kind of four-legged beast that tells him to take his hand. When he does, Coats feels stronger, arises and searches for the two women who are slowly making their way up the staircase in darkness. Fat Charlie continues in the mist until he meets Dragon, who says he will devour him; with some semantic sleight of hand Charlie evades the Dragon but then encounters Bird Woman. He gives her the feather and demands the instant return of his brother. She hands him something warm and wet, and he holds onto it until he finds Spider, He hands it to Spider, who immediately puts it into his mouth. His tongue is then restored.

Rosie and her mother make it upstairs and lock the door behind them. As they thread their way through the darkness, Rosie becomes aware of some kind of beast in the shadows—a beast that throws back its head and roars. Terrified, she throws an object at the beast. A knocking at the front door becomes a pounding and the door is kicked open revealing a group of people, car headlights, a surging tide of people on rescue mission. One of them recognizes Rosie as "one of the missing tourists." By the time they enter, the beast on the floor transmutes into a beaten and bloodied Grahame Coats. Maeve Livingstone, huddled in Coats' library, tells her husband Morris that she is satisfied with her revenge on Grahame Coats and is ready to join him in the afterlife.

Daisy awakens Charlie and tells him they must go visit Rosie and her mother in the intensive care unit of the local hospital—the same place as Grahame Coats. Spider arrives and after a brief argument, begins kissing Rosie. Daisy reports that Grahame Coats is dead and Rosie's mother is not doing well. Charlie tells Spider they must do whatever they can to save Rosie's mother's life. The brothers step back in time and place to the caves where they encounter Lion, Elephant, Crocodile, Python, Rabbit, Scorpion and the other gods and demigods. He tells Spider they must sing all the songs of the world that their father had bartered away from Tiger. Charlie sings and sings, driving Tiger back into his cave, but the other spirits are wildly appreciative. Before Rosie is discharged from the hospital, Spider steals all of Grahame Coats' money using the Internet. Spider uses some of the money to purchase a fish restaurant, and marries Rosie. Charlie Marries Daisy and they have a son, Marcus. Charlie loses weight and becomes a popular singer.



## Chapters 12-14 (p. 297-384) Analysis

Once again, Charlie is transported to the spirit world so he can talk to his father. He encounters various animal spirits in a series of caves; this subterranean search is reminiscent of Orpheus' descent to the underworld in search of Eurydice in Greek mythology. The series of caves inhabited by various animal spirits is similar to Dante's "Inferno" as well the caves of perception in Plato's philosophy and the poetic caves evoked by John Milton in "Il Penseroso." In his case, however, the journey is a step toward freedom so that Fat Charlie can ask Bird Woman to lift her curse on his brother. Karma arrives for everyone in this concluding chapter: the criminal Grahame Coats dies in hospital from a beating he sustained after his prisoners—Rosie and her mother—are freed. Maeve Livingstone prepares for her reunion with her husband, having settled her score with Coats. Could her revenge have been the final attack on Coats that caused his death? The brothers are reconciled and both get married—a sign that the turbulent years of their adolescence and early manhood are behind them as are the spirits that haunted them.;



# Characters

## Fat Charlie Nancy

Fat Charlie is one of two sons of Anansi, the spider spirit god said to have created the universe. His brother, Spider, is the embodiment of Charlie's dark side and a spiritual Type A to Fat Charlie's Type B. Charlie is good-natured, easygoing, and somewhat naive. Since Charlie does not even meet his brother until he is an adult, the story of this novel could be viewed as his attempt to reconcile the different aspects of his own nature following the death of his father in Florida. The two brothers time travel together, arriving in unlikely times and places that confuse Charlie, as they seek to unravel a curse on the Anansi family by the Bird Woman. Charlie's naiveté blinds him to the fact his trickster brother has bedded down his fiancée, Rosie, who has told Charlie she will not sleep with him until they are married. Finally when Charlie realizes he's been duped, he exhibits some anger but both brothers end up married to different women - perhaps a spiritual reconciliation that gives them both peace.

## Spider

A complete stranger to his brother, Charlie, Spider appears at his door in London shortly after Charlie whispers to a random spider that he wants to meet his long-absent brother. Magically, through the web of spider gods, Spider knocks on Charlie's door and sweeps into his quiet life. Unlike his brother, Spider is conniving, deceitful and amoral - the dark side of Fat Charlie's character that has become embodied in another person. One way to read this sudden appearance and disappearance of gods is that Spider represents the piece of Charlie's personality that has been buried all his life, released upon the death of his father. The narrative is thus a search for Charlie to find balance in his life.

## Rosie Noah

Rosie Noah is engaged to Fat Charlie when the story opens; however because of a seduction trick played by his brother Spider, Rosie rejects both men telling them they are "sick and evil" for having duped her. Rosie is essentially a goodhearted young woman who is gullible and subject to easy deception. She eventually marries Spider, however.

## Anansi

Anansi is the omniscient spider god in African and West Indian folklore. He is embodied in the father of Fat Charlie and Spider. Because of the associations of the name, the family has changed it to Nancy. Through witchcraft, Spider and Fat Charlie are able to access a rich spirit world that includes in addition to their deceased father, a whole





panoply of human souls who have taken on the names and characters of animals, such as Tiger, Lion, Monkey, Snake and Bird Woman.

## **Tiger**

As one of the denizens of the spirit world, Tiger is one who has had bad dealings with Anansi. Spider tells Fat Charlie he will not help him with his domestic problem because his spider god father had tricked and fooled him so many times he hates Anansi.

## **Bird Woman**

The Bird Woman helps Fat Charlie on his spiritual quest to be rid of his brother, Spider. The Bird Woman agrees to use her powers to drive Spider away on the condition that she inherits the Anansi bloodline. Frustrated and angry, Fat Charlie agrees to any plausible scheme to exorcise his shifty brother.

## **Grahame Coats**

Grahame Coats is the dishonest, double-dealing con artist who embezzles millions in retirement funds from his clients, including the deceased husband of Maeve Livingstone. His criminal activity is suspected by Spider, Fat Charlie, Detective Daisy Day and Maeve Livingstone. Coats is an unrepentant swindler who dreams only of making a fast escape to the Caribbean island of St. Andrews.

## **Maeve Livingstone**

Maeve is the widow of Morris Livingstone, a screen writer who suffers an early death. When she can't access any of her husband's funds on deposit with the Grahame Coats Agency, she becomes suspicious. Further digging reveals the extent of Coats' embezzlement activities. She confronts him with the evidence. He murders her and hides the body.

## **Callyanne Higglar**

Callyanne Higglar is an old friend of Anansi, Fat Charlie's and Spider's father, who lives in Orlando, Florida. Charlie goes to see her hoping for some mojo that will cause his pestilent brother to leave. She is a loyal friend, but can't help directly. She and Mrs. Dunwiddy, another old friend, direct Fat Charlie to a seance where he is able to meet the demigods who can help him.

## Daisy Day

Detective Daisy Day of the London police force is a lively young Brit who meets Fat Charlie at a bar then sleeps with him. Feeling guilty because he is engaged, Fat Charlie shuffles her out of his apartment the next morning but not before fiancée Rosie's mother drops in for a visit and sees the nearly naked girl scurrying about the apartment. Fat Charlie lies that she is his sister, and Daisy tries to get taken off the Grahame Coats Agency case because she knows the accused, Fat Charlie.



# Objects/Places

## London

London is the center of most of the action in the novel. It is also where Fat Charlie lives and where his brother, Spider, comes to visit.

## Orlando, Florida

Orlando, Florida is where Anansi - the father of both Fat Charlie and Spider - dies and the place to which Charlie returns to gather information about his father from his old friends, and to ask how he can rid himself of his intrusive brother.

## St. Andrews

St. Andrews is the fictional Caribbean island where Fat Charlie has familial roots. It is the same place to which the embezzler Grahame Coats flees when Spider uncovers his dishonesty at the Grahame Coats Agency.

## Hammer

Grahame Coats uses a hammer to murder Maeve Livingstone when she confronts him about his theft of her deceased husband's money. He then hides her body in his London office.

## Feather

Fat Charlie returns a feather to Bird Woman in exchange for her relinquishment of use of his family name, thus helping to clear any negative connections to the spirit world that would impede his happiness.

## Nanking

Nanking is the city from which Fat Charlie's mother sends him a postcard complaining about the local Chinese food. She decides to see the world after she is given a prognosis of just three months of life.



## **Fortress of Cool**

The Fortress of Cool is the imaginary world of Fat Charlie's daydreams in which he and his fiancée Rosie are swept away by passion, breaking their vow to save sex until they are married.

## **Holborn Tube**

Holborn Tube is the London subway that Fat Charlie uses to commute to his job at the Grahame Coats Agency.

## **Wimpole Street**

Wimpole Street in London is the location of a flat occupied by Rosie Noah's mother. It is also, incidentally, the home of the fictional Barrett family in "The Barretts of Wimpole Street."

## **Dolphin Hotel**

The Dolphin Hotel is where Fat Charlie stays on the island of St. Andrews while he searches for Callyanne Higgler, an old friend of his father, Anansi.



# Themes

## Animism and witchcraft

Animism, or the so-called primitive form of religion practiced in Africa and some other Third World countries, becomes a major theme of this work because of the constant interplay between the "real" world and the world of the spirit filled with gods, demigods, demons and magic. Anansi, which translates roughly as "the spider who created the universe," is the physically dead but spiritually alive father of Fat Charlie and Spider who is always in the background playing an invisible part of their lives.

Anansi is not a sky god of western religions, but a physical reality found everywhere in nature. The Bird Woman also is an animistic apparition, an evil goddess who brings hordes of dead flamingos down from the sky as a curse on Spider. Her spell can not be broken until Fat Charlie and Spider return the feather she gave them in exchange for permission to claim the Anansi family as her own. So, evidently spiritual families can be just as dysfunctional as human families, with long-held resentments, betrayals, and blood justice.

Before the Bird Woman's curse is lifted, she delivers Spider into the clutches of Tiger - an old nemesis of his father's. Tiger harbors a grudge because Anansi once charmed Tiger into giving him all the songs of the world, transforming them from dark, gloomy riffs into more uplifting stories that stress characters' strengths instead of their weaknesses. In his desire for revenge, Tiger rips out Spider's tongue so he can neither speak nor tell stories nor sing songs. Spider remains in this dumb isolation until he is rescued by his brother Fat Charlie, who restores his tongue magically.

Ordinary mortals, of course, are not capable of casting spells or breaking them, hoarding songs or giving them away, and especially not able to suddenly regenerate body parts. These are the magical accomplishments of animal gods who practice witchcraft to control the destinies of men. Even the origin of Spider—Fat Charlie's long-lost brother - smacks of witchcraft since he was formed out of Fat Charlie, as if his soul were bifurcated into "good" and "bad" sides with Spider being the latter. The reader can be forgiven some dismay at how the intercession of these spirits, demons, and animal gods affects the world of men. It is between these two poles -the fantastic and the realistic - that this novel unfolds.

## Triumph of Good Over Evil

The story is interwoven with numerous examples of good or innocence, winning out over evil. One example is in romantic relationships involving Fat Charlie and his brother Spider. A somewhat shy and unassertive youth, Fat Charlie worships his fiancée Rosie and play along with her game of no sex before marriage. Then Spider appears on the scene and promptly starts sleeping with Rosie, breaking his brother's heart and



revealing Rosie as somewhat of a phoney. But by the end of the story Fat Charlie has married Daisy, the cop, and is raising a son. The reader senses that this is a better match for Fat Charlie and that his goodness and honesty have amply rewarded him.

In another instance, Maeve Livingstone figures out the crooked dealings of the Grahame Coats Agency in embezzling the funds of the people it represents. Maeve goes to see Grahame Coats, demands that he give back all the money he has stolen from her late husband's royalties and is rewarded by being shot to death by Coats. Although the spirit of her husband calls out to her to come join him, Maeve exacts corporeal revenge on Coats by taking his life. Then satisfied that justice has been served, Maeve goes off to join her husband in the world of spirits.

Due to their evil deeds, both Coats and Tiger are lured into a cave then sealed inside by Spider, who rolls a huge rock over the cave entrance. If, as French existentialist Jean Paul Satre said, "hell is other people," then the two bad characters seem doomed to spend an eternity trapped together inside the cave.

In effect, the author summons the dark beliefs of animism, shows how they work in peoples' lives, then banishes those beliefs by showing how they are powerless to overcome the innate goodness of most people. By dragging these animistic beliefs and characters into the sunlight, they lose their power which is based upon manipulation of human beings through fear.

## Spiritual Journey

All the characters, whether gods or humans, are on their own spiritual quests. The Nancy brothers initially seek reconciliation; Maeve Livingstone seeks justice for Grahame Coats' murder of her husband; Anansi himself seems able to direct the energies of his two sons from the grave as they seek to lift a curse by the Bird Woman; Rosie Noah needs to experience her dark nature by pairing with Spider; Tiger can not find the spiritual liberation he seeks until his captive, Spider, is released from captivity. And the deplorable Grahame Coats must experience murder in retribution for his murder of Maeve Livingstone as part of his own spiritual path. There is a thematic undercurrent of characters moving from darkness toward light. Those stuck in their spiritual journey must perform some redemptive act on earth before they can achieve their destination of peace in the afterlife. Those who inflict suffering on others must suffer themselves before their spirits can evolve. In this sense, the allegorical meaning of this book parallels protestant theology in the notion of gaining admission to paradise (heaven) by completing good works in one's lifetime. The animistic beliefs in demigods, evil and good spirits and demonic possession that is the folk inheritance of Charlie and Spider are thus melded with more modern Christian precepts, which fits with the book's juxtaposition of the real and surreal.



# Style

## Point of View

The story comes from the point of view of the narrator; the action is conveyed in the third person as in a majority of conventional novels. This method works well to lead the reader through the various contortions of time and space that serve as the landscape for the action. The reader gets a sense that the narrator really knows more about the story than anyone else and is the best source for unraveling the overlapping layers of time, locale and characters.

## Setting

The novel is set in the contemporary world of London, Florida and the Caribbean island of St. Andrews. In sections where characters disappear into or stumble out of the spirit world, there is abundant use of flashbacks. Whereas the setting in known physical places on planet earth is clear and accessible, the alternative setting of the spirit world is murky, indistinct as to time and place, and filled with gods, demigods and demons. Whether this spirit world is just a place where the characters occasionally visit in their minds or a form of objective reality is never defined by the author. This lack of precise definition therefore gives the author liberty to fluidly blend the two settings, which only further challenges the reader to separate fact from fantasy and psychic regression from reality.

## Language and Meaning

Generally, the language is contemporary English as spoken in England and the United States. But there are times when the Calypso speech of Anansi, Mrs. Dunwiddy, Mrs. Higgle and others emerges. The author notes in his acknowledgements the assistance of "Nalo Hopkinson, who kept a helpful eye on the Caribbean dialogue and not only told me what I needed to fix but suggested ways to fix it." Here is an example from an exchange between Fat Charlie and Mrs. Dunwiddy:

"I do you wrong," she said. Long time ago, I do you wrong."

"I know," said Fat Charlie.

"What you mean, you know?"

"I figured it out. I'm not stupid."

"No. You not. True thing, that."

"Are you going to talk about the bad turn you did to me?" Fat Charlie said.

"You should never have break my garden mirror ball."

## Structure

The larger narrative arc of this book supports the idea of exorcism. Fat Charlie wants to have his brother exorcised from his apartment. Spider would like to, in effect, be exorcised from his brother, Fat Charlie, so he can assume his full identity as a person. His seduction of Rosie is one example of this yearning. Rosie, for her part, wants to be fully exorcised from both brothers because of the deception and cruelty she feels they have visited upon her. Fat Charlie would like to have his father, Anansi, exorcised from his life to clear his path to a happy existence free of any transferred resentment by animal spirits against Anansi that affects him. The plot proceeds in a linear and temporal progression that includes the familiar problem of struggle followed by victory and resolution common to most novels. This progression is interrupted at times by flashbacks, time travel, witchcraft, and trickster spirits that bend the narrative enough to introduce an element of chaos and unpredictability that sets the proper British conventionality against snarling, flesh-rending spirit beasts of the underworld.





## Quotes

"Fat Charlie was only ever fat for a handful of years from shortly before the age of 10, which was when his mother announced to the world that if there was one thing she was over and done with (and if the gentleman in question had any argument with it he could just stick it you know where) it was her marriage to that elderly goat that she had made the unfortunate mistake of marrying and she would be leaving in the morning for somewhere a long way away and he had better not try to follow, to the age of 14, when Fat Charlie grew a bit and exercised a little more. He was not fat" (Chapter 1, p. 3).

"Rosie was not going to sleep with Fat Charlie until they were married. She said it was her decision, and she had made it when she was 15, not that she had known Fat Charlie then but she had decided. So she gave him another hug, a long one, and she said: 'You need to make your peace with your dad, you know.' And then she went home" (Chapter 1, p. 23).

"So much to do? Like what? Fish off bridges? Play dominoes on the porch? Await the inevitable invention of karaoke? He [Anansi] wasn't busy. I don't think he ever did a day's work in all the time I knew him,' Fat Charlie said. 'He was crap, a rotten husband and a rotten father'" (Chapter 2, p. 37).

"Stories are like spiders, with all they long legs, and stories are like spiderwebs, which man gets himself all tangled up in but which look so pretty when you see them under a leaf in the morning dew, and in the elegant way that they connect to one another, each to each" (Chapter 2, p. 45).

"His brother looked like Fat Charlie wished he looked in his mind, unconstrained by the faintly disappointing fellow that he saw, with monotonous regularity, in the bathroom mirror. Spider was taller and leaner and cooler. He was wearing a black-and-scarlet leather jacket, and black leather leggings, and he looked at home in them" (Chapter 3, p. 65).

"In Fat Charlie's world, women did not simply turn up. You needed to be introduced to them; you needed to pluck up the courage to talk to them; you needed to find a subject to talk about when you did and then, once you had achieved those heights, there were further peaks to scale. You needed to ask them if they were doing anything on Saturday night and then, when you did, mostly they had hair that needed washing that night, or diaries to update, or cockatiels to groom or they simply needed to wait by the phone for some other man not to call" (Chapter 4, p. 78).

"Rosie had become quite used to a world in which her mother hated the idea of her marrying Fat Charlie Nancy. She took her mother's opposition to the marriage as a sign from the heavens that she was probably doing something right, even when she was not entirely sure in her own mind that this was actually the case" (Chapter 6, p. 101).



"And then he saw Spider and Rosie, walking hand-in-hand on the other side of the road. Rosie was finishing an ice cream, Then she stopped and dropped the remainder of the ice cream into a bin and pulled Spider toward her and, with an ice-creamy mouth, began to kiss him with enthusiasm and gusto. Fat Charlie could feel his headache coming back. He felt paralyzed" (Chapter 6, p. 107).

"Like all sentient beings, Fat Charlie had a weirdness quotient, For some days the needle had been over in the red, occasionally banging jerkily against the pin. Now the meter broke. From this moment on, he suspected, nothing would surprise hi. He could no longer be out-weirded. He wad done" (Chapter 6, p. 137).

"Grahame Coats truly enjoyed milking the clients of the Grahame Coats Agency, and he was good at it. He had been pleasantly surprised to discover that, as long as he picked his clientele with care, the celebrities and performers he represented had very little sense of money and were relieved to find someone who would represent them and manage their financial affairs and make sure that they didn't have to worry" (Chapter 6, p. 143).

"Every person who ever was or will be has a song. It isn't a song that anybody wrote. It has its own melody, it has its own words. Very few people get to sing their own song. Most of us fear that we cannot d it justice with our voices, or that our words are too foolish or to honest, or too odd. So people live their songs instead" (Chapter 8, p. 189).

"Maevae thought about it. 'I would like to see you rot in prison,' she said. And then she sighed, and nodded. 'All right,' she said. 'I take the money. I never have to see or deal with you [Grahame Coats] again. All future royalty checks come directly to me" (Chapter 8, p. 197).

"The flamingos hit the window like feathery pink cannonballs and the glass shattered, fragments of window flying across the room, scattering and embedding themselves in the in the walls, the floor, the bed. The air was filled with plummeting pale pink bodies, a confusion of huge pink wings and curved black beaks The roar of a waterfall exploded into the room" (Chapter 9, p. 219).

"Daisy was starting to feel like the kind of cop you only ever see in movies: tough, hard-bitten and perfectly ready to buck the system—the kind of cop who wants to know whether or not you feel lucky or if you're interested in making his day, and particularly the kind of cop who says, 'I'm getting too old for this shit.' She was 26 years old and she wanted to tel people she was too old for this shit" (Chapter 12, p. 275).

"Spider opened his mouth to moan and blood ran from his mouth and puddled on the powdery clay. Reality thinned. Time passed, in that place. Spider, tongueless and furious, raised his head and twisted it to look at the ghost birds that few around him, screaming. He wondered where he was. This was not the Bird Woman's copper-colored univberse, nor her cave, but neither was it the place he had previously tended to think of as the real world" (Chapter 13, p. 307).



## Topics for Discussion

How does "Fat Charlie" Nancy get his nickname?

Why does Fat Charlie have a mission to perform karaoke?

Who first suspects criminal activity at the Grahame Coats Agency?

What do the songs and stories that Anansi takes as his own symbolize?

When Grahame Coats lures Rosie and her mother to his hilltop house in St. Andrew, what is his intention in locking them in the cellar?

How is it that Spider has the gift of time travel when his brother, Fat Charlie, does not?

What are the two spirits that cause the most trouble for Anansi and by extension, his two sons?

What is Spider's profession?

At what point is Detective Daisy Day taken off the embezzlement case involving Grahame Coats?

Why does Fat Charlie want his brother, Spider, removed from his apartment?