

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood Study Guide

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood by Alexandra Fuller

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Contents

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-5.....	4
Chapters 6-10.....	6
Chapters 11 - 15.....	8
Chapters 16 -20.....	10
Chapters 21-25.....	12
Chapters 26 - 30.....	14
Chapters 31-35.....	16
Chapters 36-40.....	19
Characters.....	21
Objects/Places.....	26
Themes.....	28
Style.....	30
Quotes.....	32
Topics for Discussion.....	34



Plot Summary

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight is Alexandra Bobo Fuller's memoir of a quirky, poignant, frightening, funny childhood in war-torn Africa between 1969 and 2002. Young Bobo must deal with an annoying older sister, drunken, unstable parents, the dangers of landmines and terrorists, and the death of a beloved baby sister on her journey to young adulthood.

Alexandra Fuller was conceived at Victoria Falls in Africa as her parents fled Kenya for England. Her parents buy a farm in Derbyshire, where Dad sells agricultural chemicals and Mum is too softhearted to kill the rabbits. After one damp, cold winter, the family goes back to Africa. On the way, toddler Bobo develops a high fever and nearly dies.

The Fullers buy Robandi, a cattle and tobacco farm in central Rhodesia, one of the few African nations still under white rule in the early 1970s. There, they are wary of rebels from the neighboring mountains of Mozambique and landmines on the roads to town. Both parents carry machine guns constantly. Children are taught to avoid cookie boxes that may contain bombs, to shoot a gun, and to administer first aid. Like most of her peers, before she is ten years old Bobo is regularly getting drunk and smokes cigarettes. The family returns from a relaxing evening with friends to find that their black maid Violet has been savagely stabbed by her husband, July.

When Bobo is seven, her beloved baby sister Olivia Jane is born. Just seventeen months later, the beautiful toddler drowns in a shallow duck pond while her parents are out shopping. This loss, along with the loss of two infant boys, leads Mum into a deep depression, drinking and abuse of prescription drugs. Eventually she starts hearing voices and imagines the neighbors are conspiring against her.

When the white Rhodesians lose the war, the government orders Robandi sold to black Africans and the Fullers are left with nothing. Dad accepts a one-year job at Devuli Ranch in the most oppressive part of Zimbabwe. While Mum is in the hospital, Bobo falls ill with food poisoning and nearly dies. Older sister Vanessa deals with Mum's increasing irrationality by scheduling a idyllic family picnic.

Dad accepts a job managing a tobacco farm in Malawi, where the houseboy is paid by the government to spy on the family. Bobo and Vanessa act like typical teenagers, experimenting with makeup, sun tanning, swimming, snorkeling, flirting with boys. After an accident with her motorbike, a farm worker invites Bobo into his hut to share a simple meal with her family. Bobo is deeply touched by their compassion, and for the first time feels empathy for the plight of the impoverished black Africans.

The family settles on a fertile farm in Zambia, where Bobo meets and eventually marries a handsome dark-haired American named Charlie. Mum is diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and spends two years in a mental hospital. Eventually, she is released, and lives a "quietly manic" life with her husband on a fish farm in Zambia.



Chapters 1-5

Chapters 1-5 Summary and Analysis

Don't Lets Go to the Dogs Tonight is Alexandra Fuller's memoir of growing up in revolutionary Africa from 1969 to 2002. The story is as vivid, colorful and full of life as the African continent. It is a tale of a young girl learning to strip a machine gun and run a farm, dealing with racism, revolution and alcoholic parents, all under the blazing African sun.

In Rhodesia, 1975, young Alexandra "Bobo" Fuller must not wake her parents up by creeping into their room at night. Mum and Dad sleep with loaded guns on the floor beside their beds, and may accidentally shoot the six-year-old. Bobo is more worried about being shot on purpose, either by her parents or by rebels in the nearby hills. Mum treats the black Africans on the farm with contempt, although she surrounds herself with at least eight rescued dogs. Mum refuses to harm scorpions but is cruel to the black African farm workers, betraying her racism.

In Getting There & Zambia 1987, until Bobo is eleven, there are A, B and C schools. White students attend A schools, black students attend C schools. Indian students and biracial or colored students, who are considered neither black nor white, attend B schools. When the schools are finally integrated the year Bobo is eleven, she is intensely aware of having the wrong color skin for Africa. Other students tease her about being sunburned, comparing her skin to roasting pork. Bobo was conceived in Africa but accidentally born in England to parents descended from Scottish and English settlers. She is a contradiction in terms, a white African who lived in Rhodesia, Malawi and Zambia before marrying an American and moving to the U.S.

Bobo's mother is "throwing a wobbly", growing increasingly drunk. With her eyes at half-mast, Mum offers eighteen-year-old Bobo a drink. Bobo declines, only because she must pack for the nine-hour drive back to her boarding school tomorrow. Bobo and her father go off to their beds, leaving Mum with half the family's pack of rescued dogs. The next day at the border, the family barely avoids being shot by a guard with a machine gun who demands bribes. Still drunk, Mum offers him Bobo instead. The young woman quickly buys him off with a carton of cigarettes, a bar of soap, a hot bottle of Coca-cola and cash. Despite the near miss, Bobo is completely happy traveling through the African countryside.

In Chimurenga I: Zambia, 1999, the author recounts a portion of Africa's history. In Kenya, during the war for independence between 1947 and 1963, thirteen thousand black Kenyans and one hundred white settlers were killed. Mum sees this as a great tragedy for the white settlers and has no sympathy for the black Kenyans. In 1965, Rhodesian President Ian Douglas Smith, a white man, made it clear that there would never be majority rule in Rhodesia. The Fullers moved from Kenya with their one-year-old daughter Vanessa, based on that promise. In Mum's view, an African country



controlled by whites is an oasis of sanity. Mum insists that they fought to keep one country in Africa controlled by whites, and lost, twice. She means both Kenya and Rhodesia, now called Zimbabwe. Drunk again, Mum expounds on her political theories with a dinner guest. Then she tells the tale of her three lost babies. The guest predictably goes through stages of disbelief, panic, intoxication and unconsciousness. In the morning, he is passed out drunk on the lawn.

Chimurenga: The Beginning, continues African history. In 1966, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army, or ZANLA, attacks. This war of liberation is called The Troubles, or This Bloody Nonsense by the whites. Mum and Dad see it simply as the action of uppity blacks. From 1889 to 1893, thousands of white European immigrants stole large tracts of land from the black Africans. In 1896, the blacks fought the first Chimurenga, with about six hundred white settlers killed in two years.

Adrian, Rhodesia, 1968, recounts the family tragedy of the brother who died before Bobo was born. Mum says that the happiest day of her life was the first day she held her son. Like his beautiful older blond sister Vanessa, he had full lips, which the Fullers called tackie lips. Later, Adrian developed meningitis. Mum and Dad took him to the hospital, where the nurse told them they could either watch their baby die or go get something to eat. They took Vanessa to lunch, and returned to find Adrian dead. Heartbroken by this loss, Mum and Dad leave Rhodesia for England. On the way, they conceive Bobo at a hotel at Victoria Falls.



Chapters 6-10

Chapters 6-10 Summary and Analysis

The chapter titled Coming-Back Babies reveals that in African tradition, an infant who dies must be buried among tree roots, with offerings following a specific ceremony. If this ritual is not followed, the child's spirit returns to the mother's womb repeating the process of being reborn and dying shortly after birth, over and over. Alexandra Fuller herself should have been a coming-back baby because she was conceived shortly after the death of her beautiful brother Adrian. In contrast to her placid brother, the cover photo shows Alexandra as outraged, willful and angry. The Fuller signature tackie lips that look so voluptuous on Vanessa look sulky on Alexandra.

In England 1969, the family moves back to England when Nicola Fuller is pregnant with Alexandra. They borrow money to buy a farm in Derbyshire. Father Tim Fuller sells agricultural chemicals to local farmers while Nicola runs the farm, caring for goats, chickens and rabbits in addition to two children. Mum is so kind-hearted that she cannot bear to kill the rabbits when the time comes to eat them. Instead, she sets them free to overpopulate the countryside. After one damp, depressing winter in England, the parents are ready to return to Africa.

Dad flies to Rhodesia, while Mum follows by ship with two children and two dogs. Rounding Cape Horn, Mum holds Alexandra up to the wind so she can smell the spicy, woody scent of Africa, a composite of onions, salt, meat, smoked fish, pounded maize and sweat. It is Bobo's first encounter with the continent she comes to love. On the train from Cape Town to Rhodesia, young Alexandra, nicknamed Bobo, develops a high fever and almost dies.

In the eighth chapter, Karoi, the family first moves to arid Dete in northwest Rhodesia, then settles in Karoi. Black witches are traditionally drowned in the Angwa River nearby, a practice that continued until the present generation. No white woman would ever be drowned, of course, regardless of how witchy she might be.

One day while playing in the bamboo, Bobo feels a stinging bite on her privates. Screaming and crying, she demands that the black maid Violet inspect the wound. Both the female maid and the male cook wisely refuse to do so. Bobo cries all day morning until her mother returns from her ride. After chastising her daughter for pulling down her shorts in front of the servants, she removes a tick. Mum squishes the tick, Bobo's blood on the tips of her fingers. It is in Karoi that Bobo first becomes aware of the army guys dressed in camouflage, riding in trucks to fight the rebels. She sees them returning with blank faces and lost limbs.

In Burma Valley, the Fullers move to central Rhodesia, a green, fertile, temperate region. The highlands are cool with no mosquitoes, but the Fullers settle in the deep Burma Valley, a hot, jungle-like region, full of wormy, malnourished children. Putzi flies



in the area lay eggs in water or on cloth that has not been ironed, burrowing under human skin and laying eggs that hatch into wiggling maggots. The Fullers borrow money to buy Robandi, a farm near Umtali with no electricity, bad plumbing and a great view of the mountains bordering Mozambique.

The tenth chapter, titled Chimunenga 1974, recounts the political climate into which the Fuller family is thrust. Their farm in Rhodesia borders Mozambique, where a revolution is just winding down, with the Frelimo rebels defeating the Portuguese colonial government. At the same time, a new war has started, as the Rencimo rebels launch attacks against the new Frelimo government.

In Rhodesia, black Africans have been fighting a revolution against whites for eight years. The black rebels, called terrorists by the whites, establish bases in black-ruled Mozambique to launch attacks on white-owned farms in Rhodesia. The Fullers' new farm is at the epicenter of two revolutions.

The Fullers erect a massive fence topped with barbed wire, with thorn bushes at the base, around the farm to keep terrorists out. They adopt many large guard dogs from the SPCA, and rescue others left behind by white settlers fleeing the revolution. Most of the roads have landmines. The family is supposed to travel to town only in convoy, with a minesweeper in the lead, followed by two or three trucks of soldiers. The farm families follow in their private vehicles, wearing their best clothes and armed with automatic weapons. Mother carries her Uzi on these outings, which Bobo calls an oozie.

At school, a policeman gives a presentation warning the children that bombs may be hidden in cookie tins. Alexandra believes the rumors that the rebels cut off the lips, ears and eyelids of white children. This terrifies her, although she would not mind having part of her over-full lips cut off.



Chapters 11 - 15

Chapters 11 - 15 Summary and Analysis

In chapter eleven, War 1976, Mum and Dad both join the police reserves. Dad has become one of the army guys, dressing in camouflage to go on patrol, tracking down terrorists and fighting rebels for ten day sat a time. The army issues rations called rat packs to the family. They contain candied peanuts, bubble gum, coffee, tea and canned beef.

Mum's uniform is a becoming grey dress with silver buttons and a peaked cap. She takes Bobo with her to the police station, in the third class or black part of town. Mum sits reading while Bobo amuses herself. Prisoners are kept in two tiny jail cells with fenced yards, like dog runs. Bobo stares at them as if they were animals in the zoo. When the black maid brings their tea and cookies, Bobo is concerned that one of the black Africans might have drunk from her cup.

In Dog Rescue, Mum shoots a cobra threatening the dogs in the kitchen with an explosion of automatic gunfire that destroys the pantry, including all the food inside.

Mum is a terrible shot, and she closes her eyes before squeezing the trigger. Before it dies, the cobra spits venom into the eyes of two favorite dogs, Jacko and Shea. Mum risks her life and Bobo's by taking the dogs to Uncle Bob, the vet, in the Land Rover, without an escort. This is especially dangerous since they are women without men, considered helpless. When Dad returns he says that Mum is a bad shot, but Bobo loyally points out that she did kill the snake.

The next chapter, Vanessa, focuses on Alexandra Fuller's sister. Older by three years, Vanessa is a beauty who can take care of herself. On day, Mum and Dad leave the two girls with family friend Roly Swift and his wife. Roly Swift is drunk before lunch and tries to molest both girls, especially Vanessa. She flees with Bobo to a nearby house, where Vanessa demands shelter and lunch for the two. When Mum and Dad return, they chat with Roly and his wife while grinning like skeletons. When Vanessa tells them what Roly did to her, Mum and Dad refuse to believe her.

Missionaries 1975, tells the amusing story of two missionaries who visit in early October. Mum answers the door carrying her oozie and accompanied by at least eight dogs.

The two overweight American missionaries are dressed inappropriately for the extreme heat. When Mum sees their Bibles, she puts the gun away. The men are Jehovah's Witnesses, come to convert the Fullers. Mum has July serve the men tea and cucumber sandwiches on crumbling, stale bread. When the men get up to leave, they have large red welts of fleabites down the backs of their legs. Just before leaving, the men ask Mum and Bobo to pray with them. They tell Bobo she can ask God for anything she



wants. She takes the opportunity to ask God for a baby brother or sister. The missionaries exit hastily when a dog pees on the fattest one's leg.

Ten months later, on August 28, 1976, baby sister Olivia Jane Fuller is born. Bobo believes that she is responsible for Olivia's birth. In January 1977, Bobo is sent to boarding school with Vanessa.

The next chapter, Olivia January 1978, details the baby's death. Mum, Dad and Vanessa go shopping in Umtali, leaving Olivia and Bobo at Aunty Rena's farm, store and clinic. The store is laden with delights, including nylon dresses, bicycle wheels, gold earrings, blankets, multicolored thread, Coca-Cola, chips, candy and tea.

Aunty Rena tells Bobo to watch Olivia. It is almost lunchtime before anyone misses toddler Olivia. She has wandered out to the ankle-deep duck pond behind the store, fallen facedown and drowned. The next morning, Mum is in the baby's room, nothing that the cot still smells like Olivia. Mum is very quiet for a long time after Olivia's death. She turns from a fun drunk into a crazy, mean one. Bobo feels responsible for Mum going crazy, as well as Olivia's death.



Chapters 16 -20

Chapters 16 -20 Summary and Analysis

In *Afterward*, life is sliced in half. Nothing will ever be the same. Before Olivia's death, Van and Bobo rode with neighbor children on top of the Land Rover, singing patriotic songs while baby Olivia laughed happily inside. Afterward, both parents are drunk and Dad's driving is almost suicidal.

In *Vacation*, the family takes a pleasure trip through the war-torn landscape of Rhodesia. The girls sing while Mum gets drunk. It is the perfect setting to encounter terrorists. Instead, the family picks up two young white tourists who are hitchhiking.

They drive past neat, prosperous white farms safe behind razor wire fences. On the Tribal Trust Lands where most of the black Africans live, the schools are bullet-marked and the cows are sickly, emaciated. Bobo exclaims over the fact that the black Africans do not use modern farming methods of soil conservation, not realizing that their poverty and lack of education make this impossible.

Chimurenga, 1979 recounts the final days of the war for independence. All the young men from the village have joined the rebel forces. Van and Bobo discover abandoned rebel camps on the farm. They see that the guerrillas have been watching while Van paints and reads on the veranda or Bobo goes for her morning horseback ride.

More than one million black Africans are moved to protected villages, compounds like prisoner of war camps. The sparse crops on the Tribal Trust Lands wither and die, with no one to work the fields. The starving cattle wander onto white farms to eat the lush grass.

With Dad away fighting the war, Mum runs the farm. The wild cattle are a real threat, since they spread disease and will impregnate the domesticated cattle with inferior calves. Mum tries to scare the wild cows by shooting them with Bobo's air gun, but it has no effect on their tough hide. In a manic episode, Mum forces Bobo to help her round up the cattle all day in the hot sun with no food or water. Mum tells the villagers that they can have their cattle back, but they will have to pay her a high fee for allowing the cows to graze on her land. None of the villagers can afford Mum's fee, so they lose their cattle. Mum fattens the cattle up and sells them.

In *Violet*, at sunset the family returns from an idyllic outing to a neighboring farm to find they have been robbed. All their clothes are missing, as well as the food from the pantry, knives and bedding. Worst of all, the Mum's rings are missing. Without them as collateral, the family will not be able to borrow the money to plant a tobacco crop and pay the mortgage. They will lose the farm.

Dad goes to the compound and finds Violet, the maid, wounded. Her skin has been slashed all along her arms, legs, face and torso by July, the cook and her husband.



Mum gives the young woman first aid and calls the medics, who finally arrive just before dawn. The medics seem in no hurry to get Violet to the hospital. Mum offers them tea or a cocktail before they go.

Dad rounds up the most loyal workers, grown men whom he calls boys, to go after July and his accomplice. When the medics depart at dawn, the posse leaves. They find the two men miles away, hiding under a bridge. Dad allows the workers to beat the two men for a while before he stops them. The police finally come to take the men away.

In Selling, Dad wakes them up in the middle of the night to dress in their best clothes and go to the tobacco sale in town. They drive for hours before arriving at the tobacco barn. There, everyone is treated to a free buffet breakfast. It is the only time all year that Bobo can stuff herself. Then the whole family stands next to the bales of tobacco in the barn, trying to look winsome and hungry, in hopes that the tobacco buyers will offer a higher price out of pity. If the price offered for the tobacco is good, they are rich for one day. They will go to the dentist, buy a new set of clothes and shoes, and stop by the used book store. That night they stay with a friend who actually has TV. The next day they return to their hardscrabble life on the farm.



Chapters 21-25

Chapters 21-25 Summary and Analysis

In *School*, Vanessa goes away to boarding school when Bobo is four. Bobo gets packets from the correspondence school in Salisbury. Each morning she does her lessons at the tiny blue desk and chair on the veranda, next to Dad's desk.

When Bobo is eight, she is sent to boarding school, where she will be called Alexandra. The white-only school has one hundred acres of grounds including tennis courts, rugby field, track, roller rink, and swimming pool. They have dozens of white teachers for music, art, sewing, woodwork, and coaches for every sport.

In *Independence*, everyone is shocked when they lose the war. In March 1978, Bishop Abel Tendekayi Muzorewa of the African National Council forms an interim government of the country now called Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. Fighting immediately breaks out between tribal factions and black political groups. After six months, Muzorewa gives power back to the British, who decree that the country will be independent and the majority will rule. A cease-fire is declared. Mum and Dad have to turn in their automatic weapons, the FN and the omnipresent oozie. In the 1980 elections, Robert Gabriel Mugabe, a man most white Africans have never heard of, is elected Prime Minister of the new country, Zimbabwe. The day the election results are announced, white parents begin to arrive at school, to take Bobo's white classmates away. At dinner the next day, only twenty of the two hundred boarders are left.

The next day, black African and biracial students begin arriving. Some are highly cultured like the first black student, Oliver Tendai Chiweshe, who arrives with his driver. Others have never attended a school, seen a knife and fork or used a flush toilet before. Soon Bobo is one of only five white students left in the school. Her classmates speak together in Shona, a language she does not understand. During a water shortage, Bobo is dismayed to find that she must share bathwater with the black students.

In *Losing Robandi*, the family farm is auctioned. Under the new government, much land formerly owned by white farmers will now be sold to black Africans. Since 1888, white settlers have been tricking black Africans out of land. At the beginning of the war, 48 million acres of the 96 million in Rhodesia were set aside for whites only. Black Africans were allowed to own only 7.5 million acres of their own country, while 21.5 million was set aside as Tribal Trust Lands, similar to reservations.

Even before the sale, black African squatters from Mozambique begin living in the hills, harvesting the Fuller's crops and destroying streambeds. Mum, who is pregnant again, loses control and rides into the hills with Bobo, screaming at the squatters to get off the land. Her outrageous and illegal conduct sparks a visit by the police, trigger-happy men who were recently rebel fighters themselves. After holding the family at gunpoint for hours, the police finally leave, telling Dad to control his wife better.



In Devuli, Dad accepts a job for one year, rounding up cattle at arid Devuli Ranch in the hottest, most oppressive part of Zimbabwe. There, they meet the white manager and his wife. A few of the best employees from Robandi accompany them. The farm is so dry and infertile that it is impossible to raise food. The family eats impala at every meal.

In Mutare General, the doctor in the nearby town of Mutare seems too old to be delivering a baby. The overworked doctor is pale as only a man who works from before sunrise to after sunset can be, in Africa. Mum is having a difficult pregnancy, with bleeding and cramps. When she has heart palpitations, the doctor prescribes bed rest in the hospital. Dad suggests that she should just let the baby go, but Bobo and Van disagree. When they take Mum to the hospital, there are long lines of black Africans outside, many of them dying of dysentery while they wait for treatment.



Chapters 26 - 30

Chapters 26 - 30 Summary and Analysis

In Loo Paper and Coke, while Mum is in the hospital, Bobo and Van go on a weeklong trip with Dad, across the range to herd cattle. The girls pack, but forget to take toilet paper, which in British fashion they call "loo paper", or Coca-Cola.

One day Bobo drinks a few swallows of slimy stagnant river water without boiling it, and becomes desperately sick with diarrhea and vomiting. She almost dies and cannot keep anything down until Vanessa convinces her to suck on the last orange. In the Land Rover on the way back home, Bobo vows never to leave Africa. She loves Africa as much as she loves life.

In Ranch Work, Devuli Ranch is so dry that even the impala and wild cattle are subdued. Dad herds the cattle with Bobo and Vanessa, gently urging the cows on. He uses the girls to teach the farm hands how to herd cattle gently, because stressed cows lose their calves.

In Charlie Chilvers, the girls get up at four in the morning for the weekly trip to town with Dad. He shops quickly, leaving time to stop by the hospital and visit Mum. She chides Dad because the girls' hair and fingernails are dirty. Mum insists that Dad must supervise their baths, but now that they are young ladies of thirteen and sixteen, he is reluctant to do so. Vanessa tells Mum that the girls will fix up a nursery for the baby.

On the way home the family picks up another hitchhiker, a young woman named Charlie Chilvers. She accompanies them home and cares for the girls in their mother's absence. One night, there is news during the nightly phone call. A baby boy has been born. Joyously, the girls decide to name him Richard Steven Fuller. Their glee is soon dispelled. They can tell by Dad's tone of voice that something is wrong.

In Richard, Dad goes to Mutare General Hospital to fetch Mum, leaving the girls with Charlie Chilvers. He answers reluctantly when Bobo asks if he will also be bringing Richard home. The girls empty a storeroom at the end of the corridor and outfit it with the crib and baby toys. After four days, Charlie says that Mum and Dad have gone on a little vacation to Inyanga without them. When Bobo asks about the baby, Vanessa squeezes her hand so hard it hurts. They empty the baby's room.

When Mum and Dad finally arrive, Bobo asks where the baby is. Mum replies that this is what happens when you have a baby in a free African nation. Mum is very quiet for a long time after that, taking pills and drinking.

In Nervous Breakdown, the outside world seems to be going as crazy as Mum. Now the days before Mum going to the hospital seem idyllic. During that time, Vanessa and Bobo went on a picnic in the nearby hills with Thompson, the cook. Bobo threw an ancient pot they found in a cave, which Thompson says is bad luck. Now, Bobo thinks that it is her

fault Richard died and Mum is going crazy. She eats nothing and claims that the ranch managers are trying to poison her. Nothing is normal, and Mum is scary as a ghost.



Chapters 31-35

Chapters 31-35 Summary and Analysis

In *Moving On*, Mum lives with the ghosts of her dead children, erratic and unable to finish a simple sentence. Bobo believes that this is because her infant brothers Adrian and Richard lie in unmarked graves. Van promises to make a plan to rescue the family.

The next day Vanessa announces her plan for the family to take a fishing trip and picnic at the dam. They invite Richard, a sexy young South African law student visiting Devuli Ranch, to join them. The family has an idyllic time, seeing egrets, warthogs and catching catfish. All eyes are on Mum, who grows increasingly erratic as the day becomes hotter. Finally, she wanders to the water's edge and walks in, fully clothed. Bobo is afraid her mother will try to kill herself, because she can barely swim. Instead, Mum wades into the chest-deep water and gaily calls for Dad to join her, and bring her a beer.

The tension is broken and everyone enjoys a lovely afternoon floating in the river, drinking warm beer. That night, Richard joins them for dinner and wine. Everyone dances until the generator dies. Then they sip Irish coffee under the stars.

The chapter entitled *Malawi* begins with a history lesson about that country, north of Zimbabwe. One-fifth of Malawi is covered by a large lake with the most freshwater tropical fish in the world. The highlands abound with rivers and lakes stocked with trout from Scotland. Malawi has the lowest per-capita income in the world.

Dad accepts a job managing a farm in Malawi. The elderly Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda is the dictator of Malawi and Dad's new employer, who has named himself President for Life. Before the family leaves Zimbabwe, Mum cautions the girls never to say anything negative about him, even in private. Banda's political enemies often die mysteriously of natural causes, their bodies riddled with bullets.

Dad is hired to manage Mgodhi, one of many tobacco farms owned by President Banda. The president claims that Mgodhi is a shining example of Malawian agriculture. In fact, when the family arrives, the farm is a shambles. A thousand peasant farmers each raise one acre of tobacco and have a small garden to feed the family.

At sixteen, Vanessa is at a private coed high school focusing on the arts, where students are encouraged to express themselves. Bobo is at Arundel High School in Zimbabwe, with the focus on academics, where students are completely forbidden to express themselves in even the smallest ways.

In *Touching the Ground*, the family moves into a large, poorly constructed house in the tiny, densely populated and desperately poor country of Malawi. Monitor lizards six feet long swim in the pool. Bobo zips around the farm on a motorbike, inspecting the crops.



The government believes that Malawians are superior to all other races. A single complaint from even the poorest worker is enough to have anyone thrown out of the country - even a white Malawian.

An important event happens one day while Bobo is riding her motorbike at the north end of the estate. A laughing child runs from a hut, arms outstretched. Looking over her shoulder, the child runs into the motorbike as his mother comes out of the hut. Bobo is sent sprawling. Astonished, the child begins to cry. The mother scoops up her child, who continues to wail. Terrified, Bobo asks repeatedly if the child is all right. She apologizes in sign language.

An older man speaks from the shadows of the hut and reassures Bobo, calling her Madame. Next to him on the porch, a nearly naked disabled boy of about thirteen lies on a reed mat. His body is rigid, with uncontrollable muscle spasms. The family also has an infant.

Bobo rights the motorbike to leave, but the father calls her back. He invites her inside and offers her lunch. As she eats with the whole family watching, Bobo realizes that she is consuming food meant for the family's main daily meal while they stare at her hungrily. This is the first time she has been invited into the home of a black African, although she has entered uninvited many times. Bobo is appalled by the family's poverty, and touched by their kindness to a stranger. This kindness by the family is a turning point for Bobo. Suddenly, she sees black Africans as people, not some inferior species of animal. For the first time in her life, Bobo has empathy for them.

In The Goat Shed, the Fullers' health suffers in their isolation in Malawi. A man arrives unexpectedly and insists that he is the Fullers' new houseboy. When Mum objects, he says they have no choice but to hire him because he has orders to be there. The family finally understands that this new houseboy is a spy from the government. He reads their mail, searches their belongings, is a terrible cook, but insists that they cannot fire him.

The family finds that they cannot say anything negative about the country, including the government, the roads and even the weather, for fear they will be reported as traitors. At night, after the spy leaves, Mum shouts about conspiracies against them as the generator hums. Bobo, Van and Dad play poker for matches while the whole family drinks.

The family begins to spend weekends at the sandy two-mile beach of Cape Maclear, a bay near the southern tip of Lake Malawi. They join other expatriates or "expats" there. Bobo and Van act like typical teens for the first time, swimming, flirting with boys, snorkeling, reading, waterskiing and getting sunburned.

The houseboy spy returns home for the holidays, where he will plant a crop and impregnate his wife. Dad and a crew build a small thatch-roofed hut on a tiny plot at the lake. The knee-high walls enclose an open space and crude slat beds. Dad jokingly refers to the humble hut as a palace, in front of the houseboy.



After Christmas, the Fullers return to the beach. The expats inform them that a Presidential Inquiry group was at the beach the previous week, asking questions about the Fullers. The secret agents were there to inspect the supposed palace that the Fullers' have built. When they say the raw mud hut, the leader proclaimed it a goat shed. Van and Dad make sign out of driftwood that says "The Goat Shed" and proudly mount it on their tiny weekend retreat. When the houseboy/spy finally arrives, he is dismayed to see the humble hut.

In Federal Fullers, Van and Bobo sunbathe on rocks and buy marijuana from the Malawi fishermen. Bobo looks like a grasshopper with hair. Van notes that it is no wonder that no one will "snog" or kiss Bobo. Van allows as how one boy they know, Geoffrey, might kiss her. Eventually, he does. Bobo is so shocked when he French kisses her that she instinctively bites his tongue. He tells everyone else and Bobo knows that none of the expat boys will ever kiss her again. She longs to move away.

Bobo's prayers to move are answered when Dad's two-year contract with the president of Malawi expires. After considering other options, the family decides to move to a farm in Zambia. The owners agree to buy horses for Mum and to pay for Vanessa and Bobo to attend private schools in Zimbabwe. They will even pay the girls' airfare home for the holidays. The large farmhouse has electricity all day, with two bathrooms and another in the guest cottage. There is a horse stable and swimming pool. It is in the Mkushi district near the border of Zambia, near twenty or thirty other expat families.



Chapters 36-40

Chapters 36-40 Summary and Analysis

The chapter titled Mkushi reveals that Zambia has been independent since October 1964. There is only one political party, and the country is currently ruled by President Kenneth Kaunda, or KK, a non-drinking son of a missionary. He often gives public speeches about the importance of love, tolerance and reconciliation. Critics of his government are tortured and killed. The occasional ill-fated coup is suppressed, quickly and violently.

The fertile Serioes Farm is three to six hours from the impoverished town of Lusaka, depending upon the condition of the roads. In this part of Zambia, one in three people has AIDS, and one in six has tuberculosis. The family must pass four roadblocks just to get to the farm. At each roadblock, they can show passports and face a long delay, or simply bribe the guards with cash, cigarettes, soap or cooking oil.

When one drunken guard at a checkpoint takes a particularly long time, Dad impatiently tells him to shoot them or let them pass through. The soldier laughs, and Dad drives through without waiting for permission. Bobo reflects that many so-called accidental deaths in Africa result from such behavior.

In Balm in the Wounds, Mum cleans and decorates, telling Adamson not to smoke marijuana inside the new house. They collect a new batch of dogs and a kitten named Percy. The farm owners buy the two promised horses, one of which is a pregnant mare. Mum rescues a spotted owl, which refuses to eat dead food. Finally, Mum pays the farm children to catch mice for the owl. Next time the family goes to town, Mum goes to the hairdresser's for an attractive new short haircut that makes her look beautiful.

The Last Christmas takes place four years later, the year Bobo turns eighteen. The winter rains are late. In the oppressive heat, there is only enough water for drinking. Bathwater must be shared. The crops wither in the fields.

In December, it is still too dry to plant the tobacco that usually goes in the ground in October. On Christmas Eve, family and friends get drunk and drive around the countryside in a pickup truck, singing carols to neighbors. As Christmas morning dawns, it begins to pour, ending the long drought and saving the tobacco crop. Vanessa and Bobo lie in the bed of the pickup truck with their mouths open, drinking in the rain. Mum pays the drunken farm workers a cash bonus to plant tobacco on the holiday.

In Charlie, Bobo is attending university in Scotland and then Canada, but she is homesick for the farm in Mkushi. Stepping off the plane, into the hot, reeking African air, she sees guards with machine guns. The customs official advises her to marry a Zambian citizen so she can stay in the country forever. Bobo vows to try.



Vanessa gets pregnant and marries a man from Zimbabwe in an elegant church ceremony in London. Mum celebrates with a smoking cigar in one hand, swigging from a bottle of champagne. Dad has vowed that he will not have a second daughter pregnant before her wedding. Back in Zambia, Dad hires a guard to stand outside Bobo's cottage.

Bobo is in Lusaka riding Dad's polo ponies when she spies a dashing American playing polo. Charlie runs a safari company. Bobo asks him for a job as a cook on his safari. Instead, he invites her on a romantic safari to explore a new route for his company. Charlie asks his cook Rob, who has known Bobo for years, to prepare a romantic meal for a beautiful woman. Rob snorts, remembering the skinny, mud-covered young girl. On the safari, they see lions, hippos, an elephant, hyenas and a leopard. That night they unwrap the romantic meal Rob has prepared for them - one beer and a single pork chop to share.

The next weekend Bobo takes Charlie to meet Mum and Dad for tea. Dad asks how many tents they used on the safari, and Charlie admits that they only took one. Then Dad remarks that there is a very good Anglican Bishop in the Copperbelt region. Mum suggests that they all have a drink.

Eleven months later, Bobo and Charlie are married at the farm. The stagnant pool is hidden under colorful balloons for the ceremony. The drunken celebration continues for three days after the newlyweds depart for a honeymoon at the South Luangwa National Park. When finally the water and electricity run out, Dad intentionally sets himself on fire. An alert, sober American guest douses the fire with a bottle of champagne.

In Now, Mum has been diagnosed with manic depression. For a while birds talked to her from trees, and she took their advice. She tried to be drunk by breakfast, so she could not hear the voices. One day she ran away from home, ending up at a local clinic, where she told the nuns she just wanted to sleep. She slept for most of the next two years.

Mum was in an insane asylum in Harare for two years, on drugs. One day a fellow patient urinated on her, shocking her out of her drugged stupor. Now Mum and Dad alternate between a simple thatched hut and their fish farm in Chirundu on the lower Zambezi. Mum is gently manic on medication, planting a garden.

Vanessa left her first husband and remarried. They live near Mum and Dad, and Van is expecting her fourth child. The baby, born the day after Christmas, is named Natasya Isabelle Jayne in honor of their dead sister, Olivia Jane Fuller. Bobo thinks that life does not come full circle, but it goes on.



Characters

Alexandra Bobo Fuller

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight is Alexandra Fuller's memoir of her youth in Africa. Her family nickname is Bobo, short for baboon. Alexandra has black hair and green eyes. The signature full lips that look voluptuous on Vanessa merely look sulky on Alexandra. As a child, Alexandra is willful and defiant. While her siblings have cheeks that strangers want to pinch, Alexandra looks as though someone already pinched hers. While Alexandra is attractive, she doesn't see herself that way. Everyone believes that her sister Vanessa is far more beautiful in a conventional, blond way.

Growing up in Zimbabwe in the middle of a revolution, Bobo lives in terror that the family will be killed. Young children at school are taught how to give an IV, but only to do it if all the grownups are dead. The road into the nearest town is mired with landmines.

Bobo accepts her parent's racism and sees black Africans as sub-human until around the age of thirteen when she almost runs a child down on her motorbike. In Malawi, the farmer could protest and have the entire Fuller family thrown out of the country, possibly imprisoned. Instead of blaming Bobo, the family invites her into their hut and feeds her the food that was intended for their main meal. This act of kindness makes Bobo realize that the Africans are just like her. She suddenly sees the tiny hut and meager belongings as a great injustice to be overcome, rather than merely a fact of life.

Vanessa Fuller

Alexandra's older sister is a beautiful blond with voluptuous lips nicknamed Van. She is much more artistic than Bobo, and spends most of her youth reading and drawing. Van eventually attends secretarial school and marries when she becomes pregnant. She settles in Africa near her parents with her second husband and four children.

In typical older sister fashion, Van tells thirteen-year-old Alexandra that no boy will ever want to kiss her. She teases her younger sister unmercifully, even telling a five-year-old Alexandra that there is a terrorist hiding under her bed. When terrorists turned policemen really do arrive, Vanessa is unflappable and bakes a cake. Vanessa accompanies the five-year-old Bobo to the outdoor latrine, warding off scorpions and snakes, but refuses to keep watch for her during a camping trip when Bobo is a young teen. Instead, in teenager fashion, Vanessa teases her younger sister.

Because the Fuller parents are frequently drunk, drugged or incapacitated by bouts of insanity, Vanessa often acts as a parent to her little sister, although she is only four years older. When Mum becomes suicidal, Vanessa plans a picnic that seems to revive her, at least for a while. On a one-week camping trip, Bobo becomes desperate ill with dysentery or food poisoning and almost dies. It is Vanessa's efforts as a nurse that save Bobo's life. When Bobo is completely dehydrated and has lost so much weight the



sleeping bag hurts her hipbones, Vanessa convinces her to suck the juice from an orange to replace her electrolytes, saving her sister's life.

Nicola Fuller

Alexandra's mother, called Mum, is a study in contrasts. She is pretty, intelligent, amusing and passionate, given to intense enthusiasms for pastimes like woodworking, and yoga, which pass quickly. She's an avid reader and a good singer who has performed on tables in bars across several countries. She is also a raging alcoholic.

Mum adores animals. She rides horses for hours every day, and rescues a dozen or more dogs during the course of the story. She refuses to kill scorpions, throwing them into the swimming pool instead. When a rescued owl refuses to eat meat, Mum cuts off her own hair to wrap around it. She raises rabbits in England, and then releases them into the countryside because she is too kind to kill them.

Yet, Mum is intensely racist, treating the black farm workers much worse than her dogs or stray lizards. When one hundred white settlers are killed in a war while thirteen thousand Kenyans die, Mum sees this as a great tragedy for the settlers. She overlooks the fact that the white settlers have tricked the black Africans out of their land, and believes that a white-ruled country in Africa would be an oasis of sanity.

Mum is increasingly drunk and mentally ill throughout Bobo's youth. She progresses from being drunk at night to being drunk all day, to getting drunk before breakfast every day and wanting to kill herself. Especially after the deaths of her last two babies, Olivia and Richard, Mum sinks into mental illness, hearing voices and shouting that the neighbors are conspiring against her. Eventually, Mum is diagnosed with bipolar disorder and hospitalized. By the end of the story, she is on medication and only gently manic.

Tim Fuller

Alexandra's Dad is more stable than her mother is. He provides for the family by working as a tobacco farmer, raising cattle and managing farms for others. During the revolution in Zimbabwe, Tim Fuller volunteers to defend the white government against the black population on ten-day patrols into the countryside. Despite Dad's hard work, the family is very poor by today's standards. They wear clothes from thrift shops, have meager meals, and buy used books as a special treat.

Drinking is a Fuller family tradition that Dad wholeheartedly condones. By the time she is ten years old, Alexandra has passed many evenings by becoming drunk with one or both parents. In the absence of TV, drinking is how the family most often passes the evening and celebrates holidays. While Dad is often more sober than Mum, especially in the early years, his drinking gradually increases as his wife becomes mentally ill.



Dad allows both girls to drink and smoke from an early age, but he draws the line at sex. When Vanessa gets pregnant before marriage, he hires a man to stand guard outside the cottage where Bobo sleeps when she is home from college. When Bobo goes on a camping trip with her new beau, Charlie, Dad angrily demands to know how many tents they took. When Charlie admits that there was only one tent, Dad insists that the two must get married.

Charlie

The tall, dark, dashing American owner of a safari company whom Bobo meets on a polo field when she is twenty-two years old. The two go on a romantic exploratory safari and are eventually married at her parent's farm in Zambia.

Adrian Fuller

Adrian is the Fuller's second-born, older than Bobo but younger than Vanessa. A beautiful, blond, blue-eyed child, he died of meningitis as a toddler, before Bobo was born.

Olivia Jayne Fuller

Olivia is Bobo's younger sister, the family favorite, a child so lovely that she wins beautiful baby contests. While the Fullers are shopping in town, Olivia wanders into a shallow duck pond and drowns. Bobo feels responsible for the toddler's death and for her mother's subsequent insanity.

Richard Steven Fuller

Richard is the Fuller's final child. During a difficult pregnancy, Mum is hospitalized for months before the baby's birth. When he is finally born Vanessa and Bobo are ecstatic, but their joy does not last long. The baby soon dies in the hospital, without the girls ever seeing him. After this death, Mum's mental illness spirals out of control.

President Ian Douglas Smith

Ian Douglas Smith is the white president of Rhodesia, before the revolution. When he publicly vows that the country will never be ruled by the black majority, the Fullers move to Rhodesia with their infant daughter Vanessa. Smith's vow proves to be a hollow promise.



Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army

Throughout most of the book, the ZANLA is merely referred to as the rebels, or the terrorists. The ZANLA launched a successful revolution against the government forces headed by President Ian Douglas Smith, for the control of their native country, which whites call Rhodesia.

Violet

The Fuller's black maid at Robandi, who is savagely stabbed by her husband, July. Violet is near death when the Fuller's discover, but Mum's quick first aid saves her life. Although the Fullers are told that she survived and returned to her home village, they never see her again.

Bishop Abel Tendekay Muzorewa

Bishop Muzorewa of the African National Council forms an interim government in the new country of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia after the revolution. Fighting immediately breaks out between his government, tribal factions and black political groups. Within six months, Muzorewa returns control of the country to the British, who hold elections.

Robert Gabriel Mugabe

Mugabe is elected Prime Minister of Zimbabwe in the 1980 elections. Until that point, many white residents of the country had never heard of him. He was to rule the country for many years.

Charlie Chilvers

A female Australian tourist that the Fuller's pick up hitchhiking, Chilvers cares for Vanessa and Bobo while their mother is in the hospital.

Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda

Dr. Banda is an elderly dictator who has made himself President for Life of Malawi. He hires Tim Fuller to manage a large tobacco farm, but sends a spy to work as houseboy for them.

President Kenneth Kaunda

Nicknamed KK, President Kaunda of Zambia is the non-drinking son of missionaries. His public speeches are full of love, tolerance and reconciliation but critics of his government are tortured and killed.



Objects/Places

Zimbabwe

The Fullers move to Zimbabwe, then called Rhodesia, when Bob Fuller is still a toddler. They live on a farm there while Mum and Dad fight the rebels in nearby hills.

Robandi

In Zimbabwe, the Fullers take out a mortgage on a farm called Robandi, located in the Burma Valley bordering Mozambique. Despite landmines and hardships, the family is relatively happy on the arid, unproductive farm until the revolution is lost and the farm is sold to a black owner.

Malawi

After losing Robandi, The Fullers move to the African nation of Malawi, where Dad manages a farm for the president of the country.

Zambia

After leaving Malawi, the Fullers move to the African country of Zambia, where Dad manages a fertile farm. When she is away from African, Bobo is homesick for Zambia.

Derbyshire, England

As an infant, Bobo lives in Derbyshire, England on a farm, although the family returns to Africa when she is two years old.

Victoria Falls

Bobo is conceived at a hotel at Victoria Falls, in Africa, as her parents travel from Kenya to England to live. She seems to get some of her tempestuous nature from the majestic, intimidating waterfall.

Coca-cola

Coca-cola is the all-purpose luxury in Bobo's Africa. It is drunk hot, straight from the bottle, because there is no ice or refrigeration. Coca-cola is considered a special treat, and a cure for dehydration or diarrhea. Border guards are often bribed with cash, cigarettes, soap, cooking oil or Coca-cola.



Tribal Trust Lands

Before the revolution in Zimbabwe, the Tribal Trust Lands are preserves where the black Africans live, similar to Indian reservations. Villages and farms on the lands are desperately poor, and become even more poor during the course of the war.

Mutare General Hospital

The hospital in Mutare where Mum is confined to bed rest during the last months of her ill-fated pregnancy with Richard.

Arundel High School

The private high school that Bobo Fuller attends in Zimbabwe.

Mum's Rings

When a farm worker steals Mum's rings, it is a major financial crisis for the Fuller family. Each year, Dad pawns the rings for money to plant a tobacco crop. After harvest, when the tobacco is sold, he pays off the loan, pays a bit on the mortgage on the farm, and redeems the rings. Without the rings, the Fullers will lose the farm. Fortunately, Dad and a crew of men track down the culprit and recover the rings.

The Goat Shed

The Fullers build a mud hut with a thatched roof on Lake Malawi, which Dad jokingly calls a palace. A governmental commission inspects the hut, because they suspect Dad of embezzling money to build the palace. The disgusted inspector proclaims the hut a goat shed, and the name sticks.



Themes

The Importance of Family

The Fuller's are a strong, cohesive family despite the many failures of their members. The parents manage to raise two healthy, sane girls in a land torn by revolution, constantly under the threat of terrorist attacks, avoiding daily hazards like snakes, leopards and landmines. Perhaps because they face so many obstacles together, they have strong family loyalty and tolerance for individual quirks.

Yet, Mum and Dad Fuller would not win any prizes for parents of the year. When Bobo is young, Mum spends most of the day riding horses or woodworking. One daughter is at boarding school and the other is being cared for by a black African nanny. Mum is frequently drunk, and after the loss of babies Olivia and Richard, adds prescription drugs to the mix. She suffers a nervous breakdown and begins to hear voices. Dad is not much better as a parent, frequently drunk and often absent.

As in many alcoholic families, the older child, Vanessa, often assumes the role of parent to her younger sister, Bobo. It is Vanessa who tries to make everything right with the family and feeds Bobo when everyone else forgets. Vanessa even plans a family outing that temporarily eases Mum's nervous breakdown. The Fuller's allow their daughters to drink alcoholic beverages and smoke cigarettes from the age of seven. As teens, they smoke marijuana openly. Despite the fact that Mum and Dad often leave the girls sitting in the Land Rover while they spend the evening getting drunk in a bar, the girls never seem to doubt that they are loved.

Race and Revolution

Racism and revolution are central themes in this memoir. Mum and Dad are racist. They simply assume that whites are superior to blacks, and that Europeans had the right to trick Africans out of their land a generation or two ago. They are shocked to lose the revolution in Rhodesia, because they assumed that white Africans are inherently superior and would naturally win. Mum and Dad constantly make disparaging remarks about how lazy black workers are. While Mum shows great compassion for dogs, rabbits, scorpions and other animals, she shows none at all for black Africans.

Race is politics in African during this period, when by law the black African majority could own only ten percent of the land in Rhodesia. Most black Africans are relegated to Tribal Trust Lands, much like the Indian reservations in the U.S. Only the most menial jobs are available to them. Most of the children have never been to school, never eaten with a fork or used a flush toilet until after the revolution. When they begin attending Bobo's boarding school, both the white and black children have to make adjustments. At first, eleven-year-old Bobo genuinely believes that using the same bathwater as a black



student will permanently change her skin color to black, because that is what she has been told.

The black workers on the Fuller's farms live in abject poverty. While the Fullers have little, their employees have almost nothing. Bobo accepts this disparity as natural until about the age of thirteen, when she has a minor motorbike accident and almost runs over a black child. Instead of taking revenge, the child's parents show her kindness. For the first time Bobo realizes that the people living in squalor in mud huts around the farm are humans, just like her.

Africa

The continent of Africa is more than a location in the book, it is a central theme. African is a wild, savage, vibrant place that reeks of sweat, iron, smoke and raw onions. Bobo loves it as much as she loves life itself, despite all the hardships.

There are myriad hardships for a young girl growing up in Africa. Children and cows have intestinal worms that distend their bellies and make their bodies malnourished. Children get putzi flies from wearing clothes that have not been ironed. The flies lay eggs under the skin's surface, which hatch into maggots beneath the skin. Finally, the winged flies burst out of the skin. A simple trip to the bathroom involves avoiding scorpions, giant spiders, baboons, and snakes.

The portions of African where the Fullers live are arid. Crops often fail, and water runs low in the dry season. Drinking water is murky, and Bobo must share bathwater with her sister or schoolmates. There is no TV in the remote region, and electricity for only a few hours at night.

There are scenic aspects to Africa, too. Two lizards take up residence in the Christmas tree one year. Mum adopts a wounded owl who lives in a huge enclosure in the garden. Children ride on the top of the Land Rover, singing patriotic songs at the top of their lungs.

When Bobo meets the dashing young owner of a safari company, it seems a match made in heaven. Instead of a first date, he takes her on an exploratory safari where they see leopards, hippos and other animals. Lions wander through their camp at night and the couple can smell their hot cat-urine scent through the tents. The danger and discomfort only make Africa more attractive to those who live there.

Style

Perspective

The memoir is told in first person, present tense from Alexandra Bobo Fuller's point of view. The main character is a child at the beginning of the story, and the perceptions are immersed in that character. For example, Bobo's mother habitually carries an Uzi, a machine gun manufactured in Israel. Bobo refers to it phonetically as an oozie, because that is how she understood the word as a child. This matter-of-fact attitude extends to terrorists, land mines, and the revolution going on all around them. Bobo accepts lessons in delivering a baby or treating wounds if all the grownups are dead, with childlike practicality.

Racism, financial inequality and the politics of revolution are addressed in the novel indirectly. Fuller never labels her parents as racist, because as a child she did not perceive them that way. She merely reports their actions and statements accurately. When Mum shows a great deal of compassion for her dogs and none at all for her black servants or the farm workers, it illustrates racism perfectly without elaboration or comment from the author. As the main character matures, her intuitive understanding of the economic disparities of Africa deepens. Bobo never consciously addresses this issue, but she begins to mention details that reveal a deeper understanding of the terrible conditions around her. Once she begins to go to boarding school, Bobo realizes that despite their pretensions and assumption of superiority, the Fuller's are less wealthy than many white Africans, and almost poor. She sums up that attitude perfectly in the first chapter, when her mother says that the family has breeding, which is better than having money.

Tone

The tone is very honest, straight forward and objective. Fuller accurately reports events and scenes as she remembers them. A genuine affection for her quirky parents flows through the book. Fuller never condemns her parent's alcoholism or drug use, never blames them for any imperfections in her life as an adult. In fact, although many readers will disagree with the Fuller's racism and politics, one cannot help but admire their ability to raise strong, vibrant daughters in the midst of a revolution while literally avoiding land mines.

Much of the book's strength relies on the fact that Alexandra Fuller does not attempt to hid imperfections, whether they are her own, Vanessa's, her parent's, those of the various African political leaders, or of the vast, wonderful, frightful African continent itself. Fuller accurately reports the perceptions of a child filled with wonder, even when that includes a black maid viciously stabbed by her husband who almost dies. Another author might have been tempted to exaggerate the horror of a war-time childhood. Fuller reports it gently, with an affectionate amusement.



The author fearlessly reports her guilt over the death of baby Olivia, left in the care of seven-year-old Bobo. While the reader may think that this is too great a responsibility for such a young child, Bobo never implies it. She does not make any effort to gloss over her parent's alcoholism, neglect or racism, but neither does she rail about what horrible people they are. In fact, the entire book is suffused with a gentle, loving admiration for two parents doing the best they could under terrible circumstances.

Structure

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs is divided into forty chapters, some as short as one and a half pages. The chapters are generally in chronological order, but loosely arranged by topic at times. Each chapter is like a postcard of a particular moment in Bobo's life.

Even within chapters, events are not always in chronological order. The narrative flows like a conversation with a very precise, expressive friend. Within a story or a scene, the author mentions events in the order they occur to her, not necessarily in the order that they happen. This produces an intimate narrative with the tone of a genuine conversation with a very dear friend recounting oft-told stories of an exotic and exciting childhood.

Harsh details like being taught to disassemble and oil a machine gun before putting it back together contrast with the young author's naivety. When her sister tells her that the policeman has come to school to punish young Bobo for sucking her thumb, he is, in fact, there to teach the children not to pick up cookie tins, which may contain bombs. This juxtaposition underscores the childish innocence in the midst of a brutal continent.

Significant events in the author's life are mentioned more than once. The integration of Bobo's boarding school is mentioned at least three times, starting with the very first chapter. The death of baby Olivia is mentioned several times. This technique underscores the emotional significance of certain events in the main character's life.

The story is told almost entire in scene, with very little summary. Rather than rely on long descriptive passages, the author evokes the scene with specific details including sound and scent. For example, she tells the reader that five-foot monitor lizards floated in the swimming pool at one house. The author often uses the technique of listing to immerse the reader in the time and place of the story.



Quotes

"Mum won't kill snakes because she says they help to keep the rats down (but she rescued a nest of baby mice from the barns and left them to grow in my cupboard, where they are holes in the family's winter jerseys)."

p. 4

"When they saw that the Europeans were the kind of guests who slept with your wife, enslaved your children, and stole your cattle, they saw that they needed sharp spears and young men who knew how to use them. The war drums were brought out from dark corners and dusted off and the old men who knew how to beat the war drums, who knew which rhythms would pump the fighting blood of the young men, were told to start beating the drums."

p. 26

"Some Africans believe that if our baby dies, you must bury it far away from your house, wit proper magic and incantations and gifts for the gods, so that the baby does not come back, time after time and plant itself inside our womb only to die..."

p. 35

"Mum was don't-interrupt-me-I'm-busy all day."

p. 42

"I want to do it to show my dad that I'm as good as a boy. I don't want to be a bunch-of-bloody-women-in-the-house."

p. 75

"[Olivia] is floating facedown in the pond. The ducks are used to her body by now, paddling and waddling around it, throwing back their heads and drinking the water that is full of her last breaths."

p. 87

"At the beginning of every planting season Mum has to give her rings to the tobacco man who lest us have money to grow another crop and he gives Mum back the rings at the end of the season when we have sold the tobacco."

p. 119

"The day Robert Gabriel Mugabe wins the elections the Afrikaans parents drive up to the school, making along snake of cars like a funeral procession, to collect their kids."

p. 144

"I sit up and find that I have not been shot. The soldiers' eyes are blazing red, and they smell strongly of ganja and native-brewed beer."

p. 157



"I keep vomiting. By late the next afternoon, I am too tired to keep my eyes open. Vanessa goes into the old ammunition box and finds a wrinkled orange, the last saved piece of fresh fruit in our store. She slices it open and comes back to the tent. 'Here' — she presses a quarter of orange between my teeth — 'suck on this.'"
p. 178

"And this is how I am almost fourteen years old before I am formally invited into the home of a black African to share food. This is not the same as coming uninvited into Africans' homes, which I have done many times."
p. 236

"The food, which is sharp and oily in my mouth, has been eagerly anticipated by everyone except for me. I know that I am eating part of a meal intended for (I glance up) five bellies."
p. 238

"This is not a palace! This is nothing but a goat shed."
p. 254

"People have died like this. They have driven through road-blocks when it has not been clear that they have been waved through and a drunken sergeant has pumped several rounds of ammunition into the backs of their heads."
p. 265



Topics for Discussion

Is author Alexandra Fuller afraid of the lions, disease and hardship in Africa? Or does she admire the beauty and love the vibrancy of life there? Cite evidence to support your answer.

Alexandra Bobo Fuller drinks alcoholic beverages and smokes, with her parent's permission, before she is ten years old. In your opinion, is this a good, or not? Explain your answer.

Bobo believes that the deaths of three children in infancy drove her mother mad. Many psychologists believe that bipolar disorder has genetic roots. Which do you think is more accurate, and why?

Alexandra Fuller's perspective on black Africans is radically changed the day a family invites her into their hut and shares their meager meal with her. Why is she so touched by this gesture? How are her attitudes before and after this incident different?

Alexandra Bobo Fuller feels responsible when her seventeen-month-old sister Olivia drowns. In your opinion, should a seven-year-old be babysitting a toddler? Why or why not? Is Bobo right to feel guilty?

The Fullers are not very wealthy people by our standards. They have no TV, wear clothes from a thrift shop and buy books at the used book store. Yet, they feel wealthy and superior to the black Africans around them. Why?

In time, Alexandra Fuller comes to empathize with the black Africans who work on the farm. What major event sparks this change? How does Alexandra show it?

Vanessa teases her younger sister Alexandra without mercy, telling her that no boy will ever want to kiss her. But several times in the book she saves Alexandra's life, including nursing her when Alexandra is desperately ill and vomiting on a camping trip. Is it possible to love someone, but tease them in a cruel way? Why or why not?