

# **Behold the Dreamers Study Guide**

## **Behold the Dreamers by Imbolo Mbue**

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## Plot Summary

Jende Jonga arrives at Lehman Brothers for a job interview for a chauffeur position. He is an immigrant from Limbe, Cameroon and with the help of his cousin, Winston, hopes to secure a good job for Clark Edwards, an investor with Lehman. Despite his anxiety about his language and job skills as well as his immigration status as an asylum applicant, Jende makes it through the interview and gets the job a few days later. He shares the news with Winston and they discuss his immigration lawyer, Bubakar. Meanwhile, his wife Neni goes shopping for designer knock-off bags with her friend Fatou. She reminisces on her arrival in America, three years after Jende with their son Liomi, on a student visa. She and Jende both have high hopes for their future in the United States.

Jende's first weeks as a chauffeur for the Edwards are marked by his obsessive attention to detail and his attempts to keep Clark and his wife, Cindy, satisfied with his work. He keeps quiet while driving, but listens to Cindy's distressed phone conversations with Clark and her friends about her eldest son, Vince, who canceled their vacation plans. He meets Clark's secretary, Leah, who drills him for gossip on Clark and warns him that Lehman Brothers is facing trouble. The two laugh over Jende's ignorance of Enron. That night, Neni helps Liomi with his homework before turning to her own. She is studying to become a pharmacist and stays up late many nights to study – something that the American students she encounters do not seem to do. Unlike Jende, her outlook on cultural differences is not as lighthearted and she is frustrated by the lifestyle of her American peers.

The Jongas are eating at Red Lobster when Jende gets a call from his brother in Cameroon and learns that his father has malaria. He sends them money and his father survives, but a few days later Jende learns that his asylum application has been denied. Neni struggles through the week, especially after a parent teacher conference in which she learns that Liomi has been joking around in class, and after she gets a B-minus on a precalculus exam. Her mood lifts soon after when she realizes that she has become pregnant, but Jende stays down, upset at the possibility of returning to Limbe. Bubakar reassures him that the deportation process can take up to thirty years, however, and he begins to relax.

Neni meets with her precalculus professor to improve her grade. When Fatou meets them at the café he reveals he is gay – much to Neni's surprise. Fatou warns her to be honest with Jende about her whereabouts. That week, Jende is driving Cindy to work when he gets a call from his brother asking for money for his children to go to school. Cindy asks about it and gives Jende enough money for his brother and then some. Jende hesitantly decides to keep the extra money. He and Neni attend Winston's birthday celebration at the Hudson Hotel several days later, and Neni feels extremely out of place among the white attendees. She asks Jende to leave and they walk to Columbus Circle and sit together.



Trouble begins to arise in the Edwards family as Lehman Brothers starts to go downhill and Vince decides to leave law school to move to India. Despite the trouble, Cindy decides to spend the summer at her vacation home in the Hamptons with her youngest son, Mighty, and hires Neni as a maid. Neni works hard and develops a strong bond with Mighty. One morning she discovers Cindy unconscious, apparently overdosing on drugs, and wakes her up after calling her friend Betty for advice. The following day, Cindy tells Neni about her poor upbringing and asks her to keep the drugs a secret. The summer continues without incident until Vince tells his parents he wants to go to India. Neni listens to Clark and Cindy fight in the kitchen and consoles her after he leaves. While his wife is away, Jende spends his time with Liomi.

Clark's business and family life get worse and Jende starts to drive him regularly to the Chelsea Hotel. On one occasion, Jende picks him up and drops him at a pier. Clark asks him to come sit with him and the two watch the sunset together before Clark recites a poem. Neni continues to work occasional catering jobs for Cindy with another housekeeper, Anna. At a brunch event, Anna approaches Neni and asks her about Cindy's alcohol use. She tells Neni to go alert Clark, but Neni backs out. Vince and Liomi come to the Jonga's home for a Cameroonian dinner and they promise to spend more time with Liomi soon.

Lehman Brothers declares bankruptcy and Neni and Jende's relationship becomes tense as her pregnancy advances into the third trimester. Jende listens intently to the conversations of his clients, who are worried about the economic recession and what it may mean for their lifestyles. Clark goes to the Chelsea hotel more often to meet escorts, and when he returns to the car without his tie one evening, Jende is worried that Cindy will notice. A week later, Cindy approaches Jende and asks him to log Clark's whereabouts in a notebook, threatening his job if he does not comply. He consults Neni and Winston, who encourage him to blackmail Cindy about her drug use. Instead, he tells Clark about the notebook and he agrees that he can write down everything except the Chelsea Hotel. Clark and Cindy's marriage grows stronger and Cindy happier until a tabloid article comes out that exposes Clark's infidelity.

Neni gives birth to a baby daughter, Timba, three days before Jende gets a deportation order in the mail. Distressed, Neni goes to a church called Judson Memorial and, although initially disappointed, bonds with the congregants and the pastor, Natasha. She tells Natasha about Jende's immigration case and the pastor offers her support. When she tells Jende about the encounter later that night, however, he becomes enraged at her for telling a stranger about his status. After Christmas Jende picks up Mighty for school, and the boy starts crying and telling Jende that his parents are fighting and trying to "get rid" of someone. Clark calls Jende into his office later that day and fires him. Jende finds two dishwashing jobs within the next weeks, but works twice as many hours for half the pay of the chauffeur job. His feet begin to hurt.

Neni goes to Cindy's apartment and shows her a picture of her passed out on a bed, surrounded by pill bottles. Cindy tries to call the police, but Neni stands her ground and leaves the apartment with \$10,000 in a paper bag. She tries to email Mighty after Anna tells her that Cindy spent the night crying, but it bounces back. Five weeks later, Cindy



dies from asphyxiation related to drugs in her apartment. Jende attend the funeral and tries to console a guilty Neni. Her spirits are lifted when she receives an invitation to Phi Theta Kappa, even when the Dean of Students denies her scholarship nomination and discourages her from pursuing pharmacy.

Jende's father dies in August and he sends money to Cameroon for the funeral. He develops severe pain in his back and goes to see a doctor who tells him it is stress related. He decides that he wants to return to Limbe, despite his wife's wishes. Neni researches ways to stay in the United States and considers marrying a U.S. citizen and even putting Liomi up for adoption. She and Jende argue about leaving constantly, and one night he becomes so angry he beats her. Vince calls Neni from India and asks if she can help take care of Mighty, but she declines. As Jende's voluntary departure is approved by an immigration judge, the family prepares to leave the United States. The novel ends as the family arrives in Limbe. Liomi wakes up in the back seat of their truck and asks if they are home.



# Chapter 1 - 5

## Summary

Chapter 1 is narrated from a third-person point of view in the past tense. It begins by describing a man who has never had a job interview of high professional standards. The narrator reflects that the man had gone to a volunteer to help write a résumé describing his past experience as a farmer and street cleaner in Limbe, dishwasher in Manhattan, and cab driver in the Bronx. The man is worried about his English language skills and intelligence, despite his proper dress. He arrives at a business called Lehman Brothers and introduces himself to the lobby guard as Jende Jonga and asks for a man named Clark Edwards. He and the guard exchange greetings and Jende rides the elevator to the 28th floor, where a receptionist leads him to Clark Edwards's upscale office.

Jende introduces himself to Clark and observes a Wall Street Journal article about Barack Obama on the desk. Clark asks Jende about himself and Jende thinks back to the previous night when he and his wife Neni rehearsed a response that would highlight his sense of humor. Jende forgets his prepared answer and instead tells Clark that he is from Limbe, Cameroon and that he has an Employment Authorization Document. Clark is satisfied with his answer, but Jende worries to himself that his immigration status may become invalid if his asylum application is denied. He thinks that, although he is an honest man, he is lying to Immigration to gain citizenship. Clark tells Jende that he will need to sign a confidentiality agreement for the job, and that he will make his decision the next day. As Jende leaves, Clark tells him that if he gets the job he will need a better suit.

Chapter 2 continues in the third person as Neni walks through Chinatown to buy purses with someone named Fatou. The two discuss how long they have been in the United States – Neni a year and a half and Fatou twenty-four years. Neni reminisces on her experience coming to the U.S. with her son, Liomi, as an unwed, unemployed mother. She met Jende at the airport, who had worked for two years to save enough money to get her a visa and bring her to Harlem. She remembers her wedding with Jende and leaving her hometown of Limbe, optimistic about America. She thinks about the present, in which she lives with Jende and her child, is employed as a home health aide, and is studying chemistry. She is happy with her life in the U.S. and thinks about her dream of becoming a pharmacist.

Chapter 3 follows Jende as he receives a call from Clark's secretary offering him the chauffeur job. He wishes to tell someone, but unlike in Limbe, there is no one on the street he knows. He calls and tells Neni, who is overjoyed, then his cousin Winston. Winston tells Jende that he lied to Clark's coworker Frank to get him the job because black men cannot get a good job without lying. Jende expresses concern about passing a background check and Winston tells him that he will find him references. Jende thinks about his immigration status and how he had lied to the American embassy to get a visitor's visa. He reminisces on the past when he first came to the U.S. and hired a



Nigerian lawyer named Bubakar to apply for asylum. As a lawyer himself, Winston doubted Bubakar's legal expertise. Jende trusted him, however, and told him that he was imprisoned for impregnating Neni fourteen years earlier, before the child died of yellow fever. Bubakar decided that the case for asylum would revolve around Neni's father's desire to kill him – a lie.

In Chapter 4, Neni waits up for Jende to return from his first day as a chauffeur. She asks him many questions and Jende describes Clark's wealth the best he can. He talks about Mighty, Clark's nine-year-old son, and how he is a good child. He describes Clark's wife Cindy Edwards, who is "one of those food people" (28), which the reader presumes may mean a nutritionist, and looks like Annette Bening. He describes his extensive work for the day and the pair discuss their future plans to save money and buy a house. Neni sings as she cleans up Jende's dinner.

Chapter 5 continues in the third person. The narration describes how Jende stiffens in Cindy's presence, worried that minor imperfections in his work will upset her. He had driven her to see her grown son, Vince, whom she has not seen in months, and is now on her cellphone telling Clark that Vince will not go on vacation with her to Aspen. The phone discussion progresses into an argument in which Cindy accuses Clark of working too much and caring too little for his sons. Jende notes how sad she looks as she throws her phone down and tries to call friends. Her first call to a friend named Cheri goes to voicemail, and the second friend she calls is too busy to talk. She looks out the window for the rest of the ride.

## Analysis

Mbue uses the language in the dialogue and narration to introduce the theme of language and its relationship to cultural assimilation in the novel. While Jende speaks English well, his dialogue differs from the native English of Clark. He uses "please" and "thank you" in conversation more than is traditional in American English as his vocabulary is still growing. For instance, he struggles to remember the word "references", instead saying "reverencies" (17). Neni and Fatou discuss language explicitly, particularly how a fluent command of English is a key marker for one's citizenship. Fatou remarks, "I tell people I just come here. They hear me talk, they say ah, she don't know English. She musto just come from Africa" (11). Even though Neni strives to have perfect English, her dialogue is interspersed with non-traditional English (such as referring to Angelina Jolie as "Angeli Joeli" (12)), French, and Cameroonian pidgin English. Despite that fact that other African Americans in their city speak in a variety of languages, including Nigerian pidgin English, French, Bakweri, and Cameroonian pidgin English, both Jende and Neni feel that English fluency is essential to becoming truly American and strive to achieve it.

Despite the pressure to fit into a new culture in the U.S., Jende and Neni are optimistic about America, setting a wary optimistic tone for the novel. The novel begins by describing Jende's worries in finding a job among the white elite. He is anxious that everything from his English skills and immigration status to his sense of humor may



differentiate him from the people he hopes will hire him, but he feels optimistic that he will be better able to support Neni and Liomi. Neni has less anxiety about fitting in and has a more unflinchingly optimistic view on the U.S. As she reminisces on her arrival, she expresses that the United States is the only place in which she is able to pursue dreams beyond motherhood. She has high expectations for her new career, Jende's job, and their long-term goal to buy a house. In contrast, Winston appears to be less optimistic about America. He has been in the United States longer than Jende, and is much more critical of many aspects of Jende's life, such as his choice to hire Bubakar and whether or not a black man can get a job without lying. The optimism of Jende and Neni creates a hopeful tone for the novel, but with some unease about how realistic their dreams are.

The narrative uses both explicit dialogue and subtle markers to emphasize the importance of class and race as dividing factors for the characters. Neni, Jende, and Winston are very aware that class and race are major forces that separate them from others. Winston remarks that black men cannot get a good job in America without lying to white people, Jende is astonished at Clark's wealth, and Neni is curious about the way that rich people live. Even in Cameroon class was a dividing force for Jende and Neni, who were discouraged from marrying because Jende came from a lower-class family. While class and race are explicitly discussed among the characters, there are more subtle interactions that highlight class difference as well. For instance, when Jende goes to interview with Clark in a green pinstriped suit, Clark points out that he will need a "better" one in a color more appropriate for corporate America. Even dress is a marker of class in the novel, regardless of whether or not the characters recognize it.

The references to politics and pop culture throughout chapters 1-5 set the chronological context for the novel. There are several references to pop culture throughout the section, including references to Angelina Jolie, "American Beauty" (1999), and "Jerry Maguire" (1996). These references place the narrative in a real-world setting, likely sometime in the 2000's. When Jende interviews with Clark, he notices an article from the Wall Street Journal on his desk titled, "White's Great Hope? Barack Obama and the Dream of a Color-Blind America" (5). This article was published by the Wall Street Journal in 2007 as Obama's presidential campaign gained more momentum, and gives insight into the context of the novel in the end of the Bush era.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the culture of America? Are there many cultures? If so, which one are Jende and Neni attempting to be a part of?

## Discussion Question 2

Mbue intersperses the English narrative with phrases in several different languages. What purpose does this serve in the novel? What importance does language have to the characters so far?





## Discussion Question 3

How does Jende's experience with Cindy in Chapter 5 build her character? What insights do her phone conversations give into her life?

## Vocabulary

résumé, bifold, chauffeur, monologue, profusely, trajectory, panoramic, matriculated, jubilant, guffawing, consulate, transgression



## Chapter 6 - 10

### Summary

Chapter 6 begins as Clark asks Jende about Limbe during a drive. Jende tells him that Limbe is a welcoming place, marked by a sign at the town entrance that says, "Welcome to Lime, The Town of Friendship" (37). He describes the town in detail, as well as the simplicity of life. He tells Clark that Vince said he would like to live there, and Clark begins to question him on Vince's activities in the previous night. Turning the discussion back to Jende, Clark asks why he came to the U.S. Jende explains that in Cameroon he would never be able to become a respectable man or provide a good life for his son, but in America a man like Barack Obama can run for president when he grew up with nothing. Clark interrupts the conversation to answer his phone and has a conversation about his business that suggests imminent failure. When the conversation ends, he continues to talk to Jende, describing his childhood in Illinois with his sister Ceci. Clark interrupts once again to call Ceci. He continues his conversation with Jende and they discuss marriage and Winston before Clark picks up his phone once again to learn that Vince has turned down an internship.

In Chapter 7, Clark's secretary, Leah, calls Jende and asks him to bring a folder to Lehman Brothers. Leah meets him at the door and he thinks that she is likely misinformed about Africa. He laughs to himself as he thinks of ways to respond to people who talk about African countries as if they are all the same. She tells him that she has been Clark's secretary for fifteen years, but is worried she may have to leave as the company goes downhill. She tells Jende that the company will lay off "the little people" (50) like them and that they are hiding some "Enron-type stuff" (50). Jende asks who Enron is and she laughs. Jende tells her that he does not think he should ask any more questions, and the two laugh together.

Chapter 8 narrates Neni's night as she does housework and helps Liomi with his homework. She finishes her chores at midnight and reluctantly drinks coffee to stay up and study. She reflects on her love of the silence, and the way other students wasted time at study groups. She thinks to herself that "perhaps losing an hour of study time was nothing to them. It was something to her" (54). She pours another cup of coffee with a busy mind and decides to go to sleep.

In Chapter 9, Jende receives a call from his brother in Limbe. His brother tells him that their father had malaria and would likely die without money to go to a hospital in nearby Douala. Jende rushes to send money, and the narrative skips forward to some days later. His father had survived, but Jende is shaken. He receives another call from Bubakar who tells him that his asylum application has been denied. Jende becomes angry with Bubakar, who reassures him that he can win his case in front of the immigration judge. Jende hangs up the phone and stops himself from crying and reflects on the shame he feels for failing Neni and Liomi. He tells Neni later that night



and they decide that they will sacrifice anything they can to save money and fight to stay in America. They decide not to tell Liomi.

Chapter 10 begins with Neni trying to go through her week as if everything was normal. She worries about Jende getting deported and suffers headaches, loss of appetite, and nausea. She recognizes her symptoms as the beginning of pregnancy, and she and Jende try to be happy despite their anxiety over his immigration status. Neni goes to Liomi's parent-teacher conference, fatigued from a difficult day at work, and the teacher tells her that Liomi is a good student, but is feeding into the Billy's, the class clown, disruptive behavior. Neni takes Liomi home and scolds him, reminding him that she and Jende work hard to provide him an education so he can become a doctor or a lawyer. Through tears, Liomi tells his mother that he wants to be a chauffeur. She laughs, hopeful again for the first time since hearing the asylum decision. She goes to class the next day and receives a B-minus on her exam.

## Analysis

Jende and Neni's experiences in this section begin to question the validity of the American Dream. Jende explains to Clark that, even though he loves Cameroon, America is the only place where one can achieve their dreams and become something. He tells Clark, "I stay in my country, I would have become nothing. My son will grow up and be poor like me, just like I was poor like my father. But in America, sir? I can become something. I can even become a respectable man. My son can become a respectable man" (39). Neni also holds the American Dream in high regard, believing that she can become a pharmacist through hard work and that Liomi can become a doctor or lawyer through hard work of his own. However, their dream becomes increasingly elusive. Despite his hard work, Jende is now facing deportation. Neni, too, is struggling to meet her expectations. Even though she stays awake through the night to study, she does not receive an A on her exam. She is angered and confused by her lack of success. The optimism and hard work of Neni and Jende is not enough for them to achieve their goals, bringing into question how achievable the American Dream truly is.

The cultural difference and isolation felt by Neni continues throughout this section, but Jende begins to bridge the gap with Clark. Neni is an optimistic character, but nonetheless she feels confusion and isolation based on the disconnect between her cultural background and the culture of those born in America. She opts to study alone after her first study group, in which the other students took an hour break to order food. She is astonished that the other students cannot put off their hunger for a few hours, and thinks that "perhaps losing an hour of study time was nothing to them. It was something to her" (54). When she receives a B-minus on her precalculus exam she is distressed, but the professor tells her that many students would be pleased with her grade. She values good grades and hard work much more than the people around her, and she is both confused and frustrated by the disconnect. Jende also experiences cultural differences, but is not nearly as frustrated by them as Neni. For instance, when he meets Leah, he thinks that she is likely misinformed about Africa. Instead of feeling



frustrated by the lack of understanding, he jokes to himself. When he asks who Enron is and Leah laughs, he laughs with her. He accepts the difference as humorous instead of frustrating. Further, he begins to bridge some of the cultural gap with Clark. When Clark asks Jende about his marriage, he explains that he worked to pay a bride-price for Neni. For Clark, paying for a spouse seems to take away from the authenticity of their love. Jende explains, however, that by paying he is giving her family honor and expressing her worth. The beginning of understanding between Jende and his employer suggests that cultural understanding, although daunting, is possible.

Bubakar's description of the immigration court introduces a theme of xenophobia into the novel. Jende and Neni are very aware of their immigration status and keen to observe the immigration status of others. For instance, Neni notes that the Liomi's teacher must be an immigrant or the child of immigrants, based on her accent. However, neither character is aware of the attitudes towards immigrants in the U.S. until Jende learns that he may be deported. Bubakar tells him, "Who knows how those bastards at Immigration really think? We give them a story and hope they believe it. But some of them are wicked people, very wicked. Some people in this country don't want people like you and me here" (57). Bubakar is acutely aware that xenophobia exists in America, and this is the first that Jende has heard of it. This is also the first time that xenophobia is explicitly introduced in the text, suggesting that it may become a more prominent theme.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the American Dream? Is hard work sufficient to achieving success in the United States?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Neni react so harshly to the parent-teacher conference?

## Discussion Question 3

Neni's professor is dismissive of her frustration, saying that a B-minus is good. Why might he feel this way? Why does Neni disagree?

## Vocabulary

nostalgia, decibels, mediocre, naïve, turnpike, cumulus, regal, banal, dinette, celestial, unbowed



# Chapter 11 - 15

## Summary

In Chapter 11, Jende rides the subway in misery, thinking about what he might do if he has to return to Limbe. A young black man asks to sit next to him and he obliges, but continues to think about his pending deportation. The white passengers of the train exit as it travels closer to Harlem, and Jende exits and walks home. He finds Neni in the kitchen looking upset. The next night he calls Bubakar, who tells him that the deportation process may take up to thirty years. He reassures Jende that even if his work permit expires, he will be in a 'gray' area and should simply stay away from the police. They are both hopeful that Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton will win the presidential election and help him gain citizenship.

In Chapter 12, Neni meets with her precalculus professor at a café and brings Liomi. This is her third meeting with the professor, and she finally feels at ease after the first two. She and the professor, Jerry, discuss their upbringings – he was raised in a military family and had lived in the U.S. and parts of Europe. Fatou arrives during their discussion with her two youngest children to take Neni and Liomi for Mother's Day activities. Jerry reveals that he does not have a wife and instead has a boyfriend. Neni is shocked, and as they leave Fatou teases her about her apparent attraction to the man. She questions Neni on why she has not told Jende about her meetings with the professor if they are only for studying, and warns her that she knows a woman whose husband beat her for the same thing. Neni asks what the outcome of the situation was, and Fatou replies, "She do stupid thing, husband beat her. That all. She learn lesson, marriage continue, everybody happy" (80).

In Chapter 13, Jende thinks about his desire to move to a warmer city in the winter. His friends Arkamo and Sapeur encourage him to move to Phoenix or Houston where it is inexpensive and clean. They send Jende and Neni pictures of their large houses, but Jende knows that he will need immigration papers to be able to have the same. He is certain he will move to Phoenix in the winter, but come spring, his love of New York returns. He is driving Cindy to lunch with her best friends when his cell phone rings. He is mortified, but she tells him it is okay to answer. After the conversation, Cindy asks about the call and Jende tells her that his brother's children have been kicked out of school because they could not pay. As he drops her off, she hands Jende a check for five hundred dollars. She asks him to send it to his brother during lunch and keep it a secret. His brother only needs three hundred, so Jende decides to save the other two hundred. He believes it is the right thing to do, since his brother will spend it on luxury, but he is nervous that Cindy will ask about it. When he picks her up from lunch she is on the phone with a friend discussing how June's husband has been cheating on her and how she worries that Clark will cheat on her.

In Chapter 14, Winston decides to have his birthday celebration at the Hudson Hotel, across from his apartment. Neni wonders why people choose to go to bars to socialize



instead of having friends over to their homes, especially Winston, who has a large apartment. She argues with him to celebrate at home, but he declines. Neni and Jende arrive at the party, unsure how to navigate the crowded bar. Winston spots them from the bar but does not come to retrieve them, and they continue to stand awkwardly by the door. Neni rushes to the bathroom, overwhelmed by the number of white people in the bar. She feels uncomfortable and afraid of shaming herself in front of Winston's white friends, who look like the kind of people who "smiled or nodded and she could tell they had no idea what she's just said" (91). She decides the party will be good practice for being a pharmacist and returns to the bar. A white woman approaches Neni and introduces herself as Jenny, Winston's girlfriend. Neni pities her because Winston will likely marry a Cameroonian woman. She leaves with Jende and notices that the people on the street are all accompanied by people of the same race. She decides to never leave her world in Harlem again. She and Jende sit in Columbus Circle, and she reminisces on when she was still in Limbe, when Jende would call her from the same spot.

Chapter 15 begins with Clark complaining about his life to Jende as they drive to a golf course. The CEO of Lehman Brothers, Tom, calls and Clark puts it on speakerphone. Jende clears his throat to alert Tom to his presence, but he continues his conversation with Clark anyway. Tom becomes angry with Clark for talking to a board member behind his back, and the two argue about the long-term strategy of the business. Tom orders Clark to never go to a board member again, and Clark continues to argue that Lehman Brothers change their business strategy to a more honest approach.

## Analysis

Both Neni and Jende's attitudes about New York begin to shift in this section, suggesting that their optimism about America may not be completely founded. Jende is unhappy in New York in the winter. He craves the warmth of home and is convinced every year that he will move to Phoenix or Houston. He sees the lives that his immigrant friends have built in these places, with large homes and cars, and wonders why he should stay in such a "cold, costly, congested place" (81) such as New York City. His attitude shifts from joy and wonderment to discomfort and longing, but this attitude does not extend to America as a whole. Indeed, as soon as the weather warms Jende feels once again at home in New York City. Neni's attitudes are similar. When Winston invites her to his birthday celebration, she is upset about having to go to a bar. She tells him that "America doesn't have the best of everything" (89) and her view is strengthened by her awkward experience at the Hudson Hotel. She feels out of place and isolated here, uncomfortable with the whiteness of the clientele. However, while she admits that America is not perfect for the first time, she reconciles her experience by the end of the night. She notes the racial segregation on the street and feels that it is the way that New York provides community for every person.

Neni's experience at the birthday party develops the theme of racial division in the novel. As mentioned above, Neni feels out of place at Winston's birthday celebration. She dreads interacting with white people who pretend to understand her, and she feels



annoyed by the mannerisms and interactions of the white attendees. For instance, Jenny introduces Neni to her friend by saying that she has “just come from Africa” (93), despite the fact that Neni has been in the United States for years. As she leaves, she observes that the people on the street appear to be segregated by race. Instead of feeling disheartened by this segregation, she feels welcomed by it. She thinks that it is easier to stay within her own world than to try to belong in a world that will not accept her anyway. Her attitude creates a stark contrast between the widely-held attitude in the United States that racial and cultural blending is positive. Because Neni can choose to socialize with other immigrants, she does not have to sacrifice her own culture, but can still access the opportunities in the U.S. that are not available in Cameroon. Neni’s experience causes the reader to question the value of racial integration, as well as how “fitting in” in America may force one to sacrifice their own culture.

The characters in this section struggle to remain honest, and their reasons for lying draw a comparison between them. Throughout the novel, Jende has encountered a number of situations in which he is required to be dishonest to achieve what he believes is right. At Bubakar’s suggestion, he creates a false story to apply for asylum in the United States, and Winston lies about his experience to get him a job with Clark. In Chapter 13 when Cindy gives him five hundred dollars, Jende struggles to decide what to do with the extra money. He believes that his decision to keep the extra money is the ethical choice since Tanga will likely spend it irresponsibly. However, he still worries that Cindy will ask him about it because he will either have to give a long explanation that she may not believe or lie to her. He wants to be honest, but feels as though he has to tell half-truths to do what is right. Neni acts dishonestly when she tells Jende she is going to study. She believes that her explanation is the truth, but omits that she is meeting with a male professor because she does not want him to worry. Fatou points out that this is still a lie. Although Neni lies for the same reasons as Jende – to protect her loved ones – she does not consider it dishonesty at first. Even Clark acts dishonestly when he circumvents his boss to discuss the company with a board member of Lehman Brothers. Once again, Clark is acting according to what he believes are the best interests of his company and, ultimately, his and his family’s wellbeing. Although all three characters are much different in personality, they are linked by their desire to act in the best interests of those they are loyal to.

## Discussion Question 1

The United States is considered a melting pot of cultures. To fit into American society, does one have to give up their own culture? Is it possible to retain both? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Is dishonesty ever justified? Why or why not?



## Discussion Question 3

How does the tone of the novel shift in this section? How does Neni's optimistic attitude change, if at all?

## Vocabulary

merriment, crestfallen, maneuvers, rendezvous, jurisdiction, purgatory, intermittently, camaraderie, circumvent





## Chapter 16 - 20

### Summary

Third person narration continues in Chapter 16 as Jende picks up Vince for a dental appointment. Vince tries to convince Jende that America is not as great of a nation as he assumes by telling him about the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. Jende responds that while he appreciates Vince's efforts, his view of America is good for him. Vince tells Jende that he is leaving law school to move to India because he is looking for a more meaningful life. Jende does not understand his perspective, but sympathizes with Vince anyway. He encourages him to try and see his father in a softer light as he drops him off at his appointment. When he picks Vince up an hour later, he falls asleep from the anesthesia.

Chapter 17 begins with a description of the summer heat in New York, in which the city dwellers are desperate to find open air and leisure. Clark offers Jende a paid vacation, as he and his family will be in Southampton for several weeks. Cindy offers a housekeeping position to Neni for their vacation, and she takes it. Jende coaches Neni on how to act around the Edwards family, which she deems unnecessary since she was raised in a wealthy family. As Neni rides the train to Southampton to train for her work, she reminisces about the television set and other luxuries her family owned when she was a teenager before her father lost his income.

In Chapter 18, Neni trains with Anna, the housekeeper at the Edwards summer home, and tries to hide her awe at the house. She is amazed by the size and elegance of the home and is uneasy her first few days, worried she might ruin something. Mighty asks her how she likes Harlem and tells her that Jende told him he does not like it. Neni gets along well with Mighty and believes that her skill interacting with him impresses Cindy. Neni is baffled by Cindy and her apparent need to fit in with others. On the fifth day of her stay, Neni calls Jende and tells him she thinks Cindy is ill. She had walked into a guest bedroom to launder the sheets and found Cindy unconscious on the bed, drooling. Jende tells her to let the family find her and to not get into her business. Still worried, Neni calls Betty. Betty tells her Cindy has probably done drugs. She tells Neni to try to wake Cindy up and if she appears dead to call Clark. Neni goes into the bedroom and sees prescription pill bottles and empty glasses of wine. She wakes Cindy up, gets her water and a salad, and runs her a bath. Cindy tells her that Clark will no longer be coming to the home that night and that Vince is leaving for Martha's Vineyard for a few days.

Chapter 19 begins with Neni waking Cindy up at eleven in the morning. She serves her breakfast by the pool, and Cindy asks her to sit down. Cindy thanks her for her help and tells her that she was not sick and Neni apologizes for witnessing the drug use. Cindy tells her that she was raised in an extremely poor family and that she fought hard to come into wealth. She asks Neni to promise, woman to woman, that she will not tell anyone about the drugs. Cindy squeezes her hand and offers to give her and Liomi the



designer clothes she no longer wants, as well as a bonus to prepare for the baby. They smile at each other.

In Chapter 20, Jende takes Liomi to work with him as a cab driver every day while Neni is away. Liomi asks him if they are going back to Cameroon over a meal of attiéké. When Jende questions him about it, Liomi tells him that he heard Neni mention it on the phone. After dinner, Jende calls Neni and yells at her for revealing their situation to their son. She promises to no longer talk about the deportation with anyone. Over the next week, Jende takes Liomi to a classical concert and skips work so that they can go to the public pool. Jende feels grateful for his son and prays for him to have a happy and prosperous life.

## Analysis

Jende's discussion with Vince highlights more cultural difference between Jende and his clients, particularly the value they place on luxuries. Difference in values is a major piece of Vince and Jende's conversation as Jende drives him to his dentist appointment. This is first clear when Vince complains about going to the dentist. Jende ignores the complaint and simply responds that "It's good to have a dentist" (102). Vince takes his dentist for granted, while Jende thinks about how wonderful it must be to have what he considers a luxury. Vince attempts to convince Jende that America is not a great country, even though Jende has had opportunities here that he never would have had in Limbe, and when he tells Jende that he is leaving law school his chauffeur is confused. To Jende, being able to go to law school is a priceless luxury, and having a good job is priority over travel. He believes a career is not the root of one's happiness, and that the opportunities a good job brings are far more valuable than only seeking happiness. For Vince, however, becoming a lawyer means being unhappy – a compromise he is unwilling to make. The different values that Jende and Vince hold emphasize the difference in culture between the two.

The difference between Neni and Cindy's understanding of class emphasizes the way that point of view and personal history impacts experience. As Neni prepares to go to the Edwards vacation home, she reassures Jende that she can handle herself in their presence, stating that "it's not like I've never been around rich people" (110). She reminisces on her wealthy upbringing in Cameroon, marked by their access to electricity, tiled floors, household appliances, and a television. Her father's car, an old broken down vehicle by American standards, was a symbol of his prosperity there. However, when Neni arrives in the Hamptons, she is shocked by the wealth of the Edwards. Wealth for her has meant small luxuries, but for the Edwards it means an unnecessarily large and pristine second home. Even though Neni believed that she understood wealth, her experience in Cameroon is completely different than that of the American elite. Cindy has a unique perspective on class as well. She tells Neni that she was raised in a poor family, but that it is different from being poor in Africa. She tells Neni that the shame is greater in America and tells her about her hardships from living in a poorly heated house to being laughed at in school. Neni acts as though she agrees, but based on Jende's experience the reader can see that even some heat in a home



and the ability to attend school are relative luxuries for many in Cameroon. While Cindy's poor upbringing is significant to her and no less important than a poor upbringing in Cameroon, the difference in history creates a gap in understanding between her and Neni.

The themes of honesty and truth continue to build in this section as Neni compromises her honesty to protect her family. Cindy asks Neni to not tell anyone about her drug use and makes an emotional appeal to her motherhood to convince her. She tells Neni that they both know "how important it is to protect our families" (124), and while she is referring to protecting her family from her drug abuse, a second meaning can be drawn from her statement. Neni must protect Cindy's secret because to break her trust means losing a significant source of income and stability. Neni agrees to conceal the truth to protect herself and her family again when Jende scolds her for talking about the deportation. Neni claims that she wanted to talk to friends because she is scared, but Jende nonetheless orders her to not speak about it with anyone. Neni complies to please Jende and keep her relationship with him strong. Once again, Neni agrees to sacrifice her honesty and openness to protect her family.

The reader gains insight into Cindy's character in this section, which builds empathy for her and creates a comparison between her and Neni. Within a few days of working in the Hamptons, Neni recognizes that nothing is more important to Cindy than her family. Although she is desperate to fit in to the elite social scene of her husband, her primary source of joy appears to be the happiness and safety of Mighty and Vince. Neni relates to her through this, and understands that despite her confusing desperation she is a caring mother and wife. The comparison between the two builds empathy for Cindy, who the reader comes to see as a character with more depth than her superficial mannerisms suggest. Further, the reader learns in Chapter 19 that Cindy was raised in a poor family. She worked hard to afford school and make a stable life for herself, and this insight allows the reader to forgive some of her desperation.

## Discussion Question 1

How do Cindy and Neni's perspectives on class differ? How are they similar?

## Discussion Question 2

When Betty tells Neni she suspects Cindy is sick from drugs, Neni tells her that Cindy is "not that kind of person" (118). What does Neni mean by this? How does Neni think of Cindy?

## Discussion Question 3

Jende is both proud of and worried for Vince. What accounts for these feelings? What is Jende proud of? Afraid of?



## Vocabulary

indoctrinated, perpetuate, cabal, scaffoldings, revelries, countenance, atrocities, portico, sumptuousness, circumspect



# Chapter 21 - 25

## Summary

Third person, past tense narration continues in this section and Chapter 21 begins with Vince initiating a conversation with Neni as she works. He tells her that he is going to tell his parents today, although Neni is unsure what he is referring to. That night Vince, Cindy, and Clark go to dinner. Cindy spends the next day on the phone with someone trying to convince them to change their decision, and Neni still does not know what she is referring to. She calls Jende, who refuses to tell her what is going on. Two nights later, she hears Clark and Cindy arguing in the kitchen and sits by the door to listen. Cindy wants her husband to see a therapist, but he refuses. She tells him that Vince is moving to India because they have failed to provide him a happy life. Clark disagrees, and Cindy continues to argue that he does not prioritize his family. As Clark storms away, Cindy tells him that she just wants her children to be happy. Neni enters the kitchen and tries to console Cindy, who is apparently drunk. Slurring her words, Cindy tells Neni that he was conceived through rape and was beaten by her mother. She tells Neni that she feels everyone thinks they have the right to mistreat her. Despite how hurt she is by Vince's decision to go to India, she just wants him to be happy. She is afraid that something will happen if he is far away.

Chapter 22 begins with Neni taking designer clothes from Cindy's storage, per her employer's request. She returns home with bags of clothes for herself and her baby, as well as toys for Liomi. Betty comes to look at the clothes and talk. Neni tells her that even though Cindy has a hundred pairs of shoes she is still unhappy. They discuss Cindy's father and the drugs she had taken, which they decide were Vicodin.

In Chapter 23, Clark is yelling on the phone every time he gets into the car with Jende. Leah tells Jende that the company is becoming crazy, and Jende feels bad that despite her stress she is unable to leave her job. He wants to tell her that Clark is sleeping away from home and going to hour long appointments at a hotel during the day, but does not because his job is to protect Clark. He picks up Clark from the Chelsea Hotel and, to his surprise, Clark asks to be driven to Hudson River Park. Ten minutes after dropping him off, Clark calls Jende and asks him to join him at the pier. Jende sits and Clark tells him how he loves to watch the sunset. Jende thinks about Vince, who also loves sunsets, and wonders if they would feel differently about each other if they knew they shared this love. Clark tells Jende that Vince is moving to India and that he admires him for it. He says that people need to fix themselves before they can fix the world, and that despite the struggles that come with his work he is proud of how well he takes care of his family. He and Jende watch the sunset in silence. Clark tells Jende that he writes poetry and recites a poem for him about home.

In Chapter 24, Neni thinks about the food from her summer in the Hamptons. The catered food Cindy ordered for parties was different from what Neni was used to, but she loved it nonetheless. Anna calls Neni and asks if she will work as a server for a



brunch per Cindy's request, and Neni agrees. When she arrives, Mighty hugs her and they make plans to spend time together the next summer. She serves brunch to Cindy's friends, who are surprisingly friendly. Anna pulls Neni into the kitchen to talk about Cindy's drug abuse and alcoholism, and Neni reluctantly tells her she saw it in the Hamptons. Anna tells her that they need to tell Clark, together, but Neni is unsure if she should. She thinks that maybe if Clark learns how unhappy Cindy he is he will spend more time with her. As she walks to talk to Clark, she thinks about Jende and turns back. Anna encourages her, and she approaches Clark. She asks him if he is related to John Edwards and goes back into the kitchen.

In Chapter 25, Neni cleans her apartment and prepares a large meal to prepare for Vince's departure. Jende has invited Vince to dinner with Clark's approval, and Vince asks to bring Mighty. Neni declines, worried about bringing Mighty to Harlem in the evening hours, but Jende tells him it is okay. The two boys arrive and Vince talks with Jende while Liomi and Mighty play with toys. When the food is ready, the five of them sit on the floor and eat with their hands. When Vince declares it is time to leave, Mighty begs to stay. The adults refuse his request, but Neni, Liomi, and Jende promise they will spend more time together.

## Analysis

Food serves as a bridge between cultures in this section, allowing both the Edwards and the Jongas to gain insight into each other's perspectives. As Neni bonds with Mighty in the Hamptons, the boy begins to ask her about Cameroonian food and requests that she make him puff-puff, a Cameroonian dish of fried dough. Mighty wants to learn more about Neni and her history, and does so through food. Vince, too, gains some understanding of Jende and Neni through food when he comes to dinner at their apartment. Vince and Mighty eat on the floor with their hands, a style frowned upon in their upper-class lifestyle, and the style of eating allows them to gain more understanding of their hosts. The meal provides an opportunity for the characters to talk and share, uninhibited by the expectations of properness in the Edwards family. Indeed, the two boys apparently pay no attention to the "obvious signs of poverty in the apartment" (163), an instead focus on their company. Coming together over food creates an opportunity for cultural exchange without the barriers created by class. Neni gains insight into the Edwards experience through their cuisine as well. She is shocked by the quality of the catered dishes they order, and thinks that "Rich American people knew something about good food, too" (151). What she considers an unbridgeable gap between her and white people, particularly wealthy white people, becomes smaller when she finds this similarity.

Neni does not keep quiet about Cindy's drug use as she promised, creating a tone of anxiety in the novel. In Chapter 22, Neni gossips to Betty about the Hamptons, particularly Cindy. The reader learns that she has told Betty about not only Cindy's overdose, but about her childhood abuse and history as well. Although their discussion is largely empathetic towards the woman, Neni has nonetheless broken her promise to Cindy by sharing details of her life and drug use with another person. When Anna



approaches Neni to talk about Cindy's drinking, she tells Anna that she witnessed the alcoholism. Neni justifies her decision to talk about her employer with Anna because she does not share any information regarding the painkillers, but she still feels anxious about her decision. She looks over her shoulder during their conversation and battles with whether telling Clark is the right thing to do. Her approach and conversation with Clark creates a sense of suspense for the reader, relieved when she decides not to tell him. Neni has been warned by Cindy and Jende to stay out of the Edwards's business, but she struggles to keep their lives private. Her decision to gossip and the conflict she feels over involving Clark creates anxiety for the reader, who is left to wonder about the potential consequences of Neni's actions.

Jende's experience with Clark at the pier gives the reader a new, more humanizing perspective on Clark's character. Up until this point, the reader has little insight into Clark's character and motivations. His son describes him as an absent father, Cindy describes him an unloving husband, and Leah describes him as working too much. However, there is more depth to Clark than his devotion to work. When Jende sits with him at the pier, he learns that Clark writes poetry and likes to watch sunsets – two unexpected characteristics of a businessman. He tells Jende that he works as hard as he does because he believes it is the sacrifice he must make for his family, and that providing a good life for them is his priority in life. Clark's character has been drawn as a man who cares little for others' feelings and is devoted to work above his family. His discussion with Jende gives the reader a different perspective, one that brings empathy to Clark.

## Discussion Question 1

How is food used to form cross-cultural relationships in the novel? In the real world?

## Discussion Question 2

Mighty and Vince do not appear to care about Jende and Neni's poverty. Why? What is Mighty's understanding of class, if any? What is Vince's?

## Discussion Question 3

Based on the warnings Neni has had throughout the novel, what are the potential consequences of her gossiping with Betty and Anna?

## Vocabulary

crescendo, sultriness, unorthodox, mesmerized, scrumptious, congeniality, beseechingly



## Chapter 26 - 30

### Summary

In Chapters 26 to 30, third person past-tense narration continues. Chapter 26 opens with something happening in September, although the reader is unsure what. Jende has a dream two weeks before in which he walks through Limbe with his friend Bosco. They walk through the market and Bosco points out that the singing gamblers who usually inhabit the square are missing. Bosco exclaims that he hates gamblers, especially “money doublers” who took his money for school as a child. Bosco begins to cry, and as a crowd gathers Jende runs through the market. He runs to the beach but the water has been replaced with garbage. Jende wakes up and blames the dream on his unfulfilled promise to Bosco – his wife had become ill and Jende promised to “see what he could do” (169), but Jende had not done anything. He thinks about the money doublers, who, as far as he can tell, have never doubled anyone’s money.

Shifting to two weeks later, “on the day Lehman collapsed” (170), Cindy gives Jende a day off. He spends the Day helping Neni, who is in the last trimester of her pregnancy. He decides that she will take two semesters off from school when the baby is born. Neni is upset with him and argues, but he tells her that his decision is made. Neni complains to her friends about Jende’s increasing demands around the pregnancy, but Betty and Fatou tell her that he is only protecting her. Although she does not understand his decisions, she decides to respect them. Neni calls Jende into the living room to watch a news broadcast about Lehman Brothers. They see that the company has collapsed, and Jende calls Cindy to make sure he will still be able to work. She assures him that he will and that Clark will call him.

In Chapter 27, Jende observes Clark on his first day back driving. Clark has appeared to age in a week and Jende wonders why he does not simply leave New York with the money he already has. Jende tells Clark he is sorry, but after his employer’s curt reaction he stays quiet the rest of the week. He listens to Cindy tell Cheri about the situation as he drives the two of them to Cheri’s mother’s house. Cindy says that Clark had come home and sat at the edge of the bed for hours before telling her that Lehman was filing for bankruptcy. She had known that Lehman was struggling, but not to the extent that they would file bankruptcy. The two talk about how bad things might get, and Jende listens intently. Jende worries about Clark, Vince, and Leah, but does not know whether to reach out to them. He decides to call Leah at Lehman and, to his surprise, she answers. She tells him that she was fired and was just clearing things out of her office, and that she was going to go to Florida for a month before looking for a new job. Jende thinks about the financial crisis in Cameroon in the 1980’s and worries about America. He watches the news over the next few weeks as jobs disappear and the stock market crashes.

In Chapter 28, Jende drives Clark to the Chelsea hotel several times over a week to meet with women. The reader can imply that the women are escorts, and Jende





confirms that he will not tell anyone about them. On one occasion, Clark returns from his rendezvous without his tie. Jende notices, but does not say anything when Clark asks to go home. Jende thinks that Cindy will notice the missing tie and that they will fight.

Chapter 29 begins a week after the tie goes missing, the week that Barack Obama is elected president and Jende is given a \$2,000 raise. Cindy asks Jende to talk and he assumes that she had noticed the missing tie when he sees her pained face. She asks him to write every place and person Clark visits in a notebook. Jende tells her that he could lose his job, and she promises that he will not. She questions him about other women, but Jende tells her that he knows nothing. Cindy tells Jende to think of his pregnant wife and if he would like to have a job to support them. After the threat, she stands up and leaves the room.

In Chapter 30, Jende returns home from his conversation with Cindy and finds Winston eating dinner in his kitchen. Winston tells him he is going to see a woman named Maami from Limbe who now lives in Texas. Jende tells him and Neni about his encounter with Cindy, and Neni tells him he must open up to her about Clark. She asks if he knows anything that he is keeping a secret. Jende thinks about the women. He has not told Neni about Clark's infidelity because he worries that it will make her suspicious of him. Her father had cheated on her mother with a teenager and, although he is completely loyal to her, worries that she will become fearful anyway. He tells her that he knows nothing. Winston suggests that Jende refuse Cindy's offer and if she threatens his job, he threaten to expose her drug use. Despite Neni's support of the idea, Jende is hesitant and tells them that he will find a different way to keep his job.

## Analysis

The contrast between Jende and Cheri's reaction to the bankruptcy emphasizes the difference in perspective between socioeconomic classes. When Jende learns about the collapse of Lehman brothers, his initial reaction is fearful. He wonders if he will lose his job and, if he does, if he will ever be able to recover a comparable income with his pending immigration status. Losing his income means that he will not be able to provide for his family without working several difficult, low wage jobs. Even when he learns his job is secure, he still worries for others. He realizes that, for many, a recession means they will lose their "bread and wine" (174), along with their dreams of luxury. Cheri, on the other hand, has a different set of concerns. She initially compares the collapse to 9/11 and the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 – she sees the collapse as catastrophic and comparable to two events that resulted in the deaths of thousands. However, while many may lose their livelihoods, she is not among those at risk. She is concerned that she may have to sacrifice her maid and cook and that her friends may have to sacrifice vacation homes and first class flights. The stark contrast between her and Jende's concerns draw attention to the prominent gap between their lifestyles. Although Cheri's fears are real to her, they are much less threatening to her life and support system than Jende's.



Jende and Neni's relationship is challenged as they try to accommodate for new, uniquely American dynamics, which creates tension in the novel. Both Jende and Neni place great value on their relationship, particularly maintaining a dynamic more traditional of their Cameroonian roots. Although he consults Neni often and values her opinion, Jende makes decisions for his family that she abides by even when she disagrees. Neni's African friends feel that this is normal and encourage her to accept it, and she eventually agrees. However, Neni feels that Jende's decision to keep her out of school will negatively impact her career advancement. The emphasis she places on schooling and becoming a "career woman like Oprah or Martha Stewart" (173) is something she has only been able to prioritize since coming to the United States. Although she complies with Jende's decision, the stress it creates in their relationship is due, in part, to the new opportunities she has in America. Jende struggles to balance his traditional dynamic with his new situation as well. He wants to tell Neni about Clark's infidelity, but decides not to because since moving to America she has become more and more fearful. He likes her body and is not concerned whatsoever with the weight she has gained during pregnancy, but she has become self-conscious anyway. Jende blames her insecurity on her attention to American magazines and diets – "stupid things no one in Limbe talked about" (198). Jende wants to maintain their honest dynamic, but the new pressures in American society prevent him from being as open as he might have been in Limbe. These new stressors in their relationship create tension as their arguments and disagreements become more common.

The theme of trust and honesty continues to grow in this section as the characters struggle to maintain loyalty to each other. Cindy's trust in Clark has been shaky throughout the novel, but when she notices his missing tie her trust is severely shaken. Her faith in Clark's honesty is so minimal that instead of asking her husband directly about infidelity, she goes to Jende instead. She puts Jende in a difficult position by asking him to log Clark's whereabouts – Jende must either violate Clark's trust or potentially lose his job. When Clark talks to Neni about it, he is further forced to lie because he worries that if he tells his wife the truth about Clark, she will lose her trust in his loyalty. Clark's dishonesty to Cindy creates a ripple effect in which Jende must sacrifice his own honesty to preserve his relationships. The reach of Clark's actions highlight an important theme – that dishonesty begets further dishonesty and holds the potential to snowball.

Race and class act as a barrier for empathy, emphasizing the salience of these identities in the characters' relationships. When Jende meets with Cindy, he notes her pained appearance. He wants to reach out and comfort her, but he does not because he believes he has "no right to touch the madam" (193). Despite his empathetic nature, he feels unable to connect with her because she is of a higher class than him. Later, when he talks to Neni and Winston, he struggles to maintain his empathy. Neni and Winston encourage him to blackmail her because, even though he feels bad for her, she only sees him as "just a black man who drives her around" (200). Cindy's actions appear to confirm this dehumanizing attitude, as she threatens not only Jende's livelihood but that of his wife an unborn child for her own personal gain. Jende's struggle to connect with Cindy and her disregard for his wellness highlight the barrier that class and race create



between them – even though Cindy has treated Jende well in the past, she is still willing to use his class and race against him when it benefits her.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Jende's dream? What symbolism is present?

## Discussion Question 2

Clark feels partly responsible for the collapse of Lehman and the impact it has on others and compares himself to Vince for this sentiment. How is he similar to Vince in this section? Different?

## Discussion Question 3

Mbue uses the word "dream" several times at the end of Chapter 27. What is the significance of the word choice? What does the word "dream" come to mean in this chapter?

## Vocabulary

carcass, incessantly, enraptured, hinterland, catastrophic, decipherable, pandemonium, maleficent



# Chapter 31 - 35

## Summary

Chapters 31 to 35 continue narration from the third person point of view. In Chapter 31, Jende goes to work on his 38th birthday. He tells Clark it is his birthday and then asks to talk to him. He tells his employer that Cindy wants him to track where he goes. Clark tells him that he can tell her about everything except the Chelsea Hotel. Jende is relieved, but tells Clark that he is concerned about Cindy because she has lost weight. Clark tells him that his wife is fine.

In Chapter 32, Jende begins to write down where he takes Clark. He is excited to practice writing and writes descriptive narratives in the notebook for Cindy. She reads it every morning when Jende drives her to work and her appearance becomes less stressed every day. She celebrates Thanksgiving with her and Clark's extended families and Jende is shocked at how happy she seems. He tells Neni about Clark and Cindy flirting and laughing together on the night of a gala, and they joke about whether Cindy is using a love potion.

In Chapter 33, Clark and Cindy's marriage deteriorates again two days after the gala when an article is published in a tabloid paper. The article is a story from an escort who claims that high-level executives are paying her for sex with bailout money – including Clark. Leah calls Jende to tell him about the story, but he tells her it is impossible. Leah sounds happy about the gossip, and Jende becomes upset with her for being excited over Clark and Cindy's struggling marriage. He hangs up and thinks of how he is going to deal with Cindy's inevitable questions as he drives to pick her up. When she gets in the car she remains silent, much to Jende's surprise. He offers her the notebook and she tells him to keep it.

Chapter 34 begins with Jende picking up Mighty for school. He thinks the boy has a cold but soon realizes that he is crying. Jende pulls over, reminiscing about the day after his grandfather died when his father made him go to school crying. Mighty tells him that his family has cancelled their plans to go to St. Barths for Christmas. He recounts the night before when he heard his mother screaming at Clark and crying. Jende tells him that married couples sometimes fight and embraces Mighty. Mighty asks to visit Harlem that weekend, but Jende tells him that his parents will not allow it. He offers to bring Mighty puff-puff and fried plantains the next morning, however, and Mighty smiles.

Chapter 35 begins with the birth of Jende and Neni's daughter, Amatimba Monyengi, or Timba. Clark allows Jende to take time off and, although Cindy does not respond to Jende's voicemail telling her the news, they receive a box of diapers from her and Clark. Three days after her birth, Jende gets a letter from immigration ordering his deportation. He is told to appear in court in Friday, and Bubakar tells him that it is only a preliminary hearing. Jende calls Winston, unsure of whether to keep Bubakar as his legal counsel. Winston tells him that Bubakar is an incompetent lawyer and that he should find



another. Neni agrees that he is incompetent, but thinks that they have no choice but to follow through to the end with him. Both she and Jende have nightmares about deportation that night. Just before Christmas, Neni decides to go to church to try and clear her mind of her anxious thoughts. She takes Timba and Liomi to a church in Greenwich Village called Judson Memorial Church, but is disappointed to see a room of “middle-aged white people” (228) instead of the animated youth she remembers from Limbe. However, after the service the congregants come to introduce themselves and she learns that one had served in Cameroon as a Peace Corps volunteer. She tells Jende that she is going to start going to church regularly, but he is skeptical. Neni becomes upset and the two argue about what Jende is willing to do to stay in America.

## Analysis

Jende’s reaction to cultural difference shifts from one of content confusion to frustration and anger in this section, developing his character. When Cindy begins to feel more comfortable in her marriage, Jende is relieved and happy. He feels deep empathy for Cindy and is upset to learn that others do not. When the tabloid article comes out exposing Clark’s infidelity, Jende is uncomfortable with the enthusiasm with which Americans read it to gain “the satisfaction of knowing that others were more pathetic than them” (212). Leah’s reaction in particular bothers Jende. He is agitated at Leah’s love of the gossip and wonders if she cares that it could ruin the Edwards family. His shift from an indifferent attitude towards American culture to frustration marks a change in both his character and in his investment in the Edwards.

Neni and Jende overcome racial difference in this section, highlighting their personal growth. In Chapter 34, Jende embraces Mighty in his car on the way to school. He worries that someone will call the police because it is unusual to see a black man with a white boy in a luxury car. While racism and racial difference are still on Jende’s mind, he decides to bridge the gap anyway and show empathy and affection for Mighty. Neni overcomes her own notions of racial difference as well when she goes to church. Although she is initially disappointed by the all-white congregation, her conversations with the churchgoers changes her mind. She meets white people who know about Africa, Cameroon, and Limbe and who embrace her unquestioningly. She is surprised to form true connections with white people, but decides to go back. Both her and Jende’s decisions to cross cultural barriers and create cross-racial relationships signify personal growth and adaptation to American culture.

Jende’s fate is tied to the decisions of others, creating a sense of powerlessness. Since immigrating to the United States, Jende and Neni’s life is largely determined by other people. The immigration court will decide whether they are allowed to stay in the country and Bubakar will make their legal decisions. When Clark assures him of his job security, Jende thinks that he is responsible for his security, but his ability to take care of Neni and his children, pay for school, and send money to his family in Cameroon. He is willing to make sacrifices for these opportunities, but as Cindy’s and Clark’s marriage deteriorates, Lehman Brothers fails, and the court orders his deportation, the sacrifices seem larger to Jende. When Neni challenges his pride, he tells her that “I lower myself



more than many men would ever lower themselves” (230) and that if he cannot win his deportation case he will not continue to lower himself. The lack of control Jende feels is beginning to wear on him, and he is no longer willing to sacrifice everything to stay in the United States.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Clark tell Jende that Cindy is doing well? Does he actually believe that she is well? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Jende’s word choice in the notebook? What kind of language does he use? What does his writing say about his education?

## Discussion Question 3

When Jende picks up Cindy after the tabloid comes out, she is silent. What tone does her silence set in the novel? What kind of dynamic now exists between her and Jende?

## Vocabulary

harried, banal, discombobulated, ennui, nonchalant, quagmire



## Chapter 36 - 40

### Summary

In this section, narration continues in the third-person past tense. Chapter 36 begins three days before Christmas. Natasha, the pastor from Judson Memorial, emails Neni and asks if she will come in and talk with her. Neni goes back to the church the next day but does not tell Jende. She meets the assistant pastor, Amos, and tells them that she is not sure what she believes and if she wants to become a Christian. Natasha tells her that she is welcome in the church regardless. She and Neni discuss parenthood and Jende's deportation, and Natasha pledges her and the church's support. Neni leaves the church with restored hope and walks by rows of people protesting the bailout. She thinks that one day she will be a citizen and will be able to protest with them. When she tells Jende about her visit, he glares at her. She thinks about how he has changes since the deportation letter, becoming angrier and less caring. She tells him that the church will help them stay in the country and he becomes enraged. He yells at her, and she worries that he will beat her.

Chapter 37 begins on Christmas morning as the Jonga family eats plantains and beans. They do not exchange gifts because Jende does not want Liomi to think that gifts are the best way to show love. Jende wants to invite Leah over, but only calls her instead so as not to overwork Neni. He reminisces about his first Christmas in America which he spent alone, unable to call to Limbe because of crowded phone lines. Five days later Jende goes back to work, but there is little to do since Clark is staying at a hotel and Cindy is taking time off. He picks up Mighty and asks about his holiday, but the boy states he does not want to talk about it. He tells Jende that Vince has dreadlocks and that his parents fought again the night before. He recounts his mother throwing dishes at the wall and yelling that she did not want to see someone ever again and that Clark should "get rid of him" (242). After he drops Mighty off at his piano lesson Jende calls Winston. Winston tells him not to worry, but Jende is convinced that Cindy was referring to him. Winston offers to call Frank and ask him to talk to Clark, and Jende agrees. As he tries to calm himself, he reminisces on the four months he spent in prison in Cameroon for impregnating Neni, his struggle to win her affection, and the ten years he spent saving money to come to the U.S. He forces himself to think positive thoughts about Clark, Cindy, and Vince until he receives a phone call from Clark. Clark tells him that they need to talk and asks him to come to the office after Mighty's lesson.

In Chapter 38, Jende removes his belongs from the car before entering Clark's office. He goes inside, reassuring himself that Clark simply wants to talk about a new duty or a bonus. When he sits in Clark's office, Clark compliments his work ethic and tells him that he is being let go. Jende asks him why, and Clark evades the question. Jende becomes angry and throws Cindy's notebook on the desk. He yells at Clark to tell him why, but he simply hands Jende a check. They shake hands and Jende leaves.



In Chapter 39, Neni listens to Natasha preach that sharing joy with others when you are sad is a mark of love. She wants to tell Jende when he gets home, but she does not because she does not believe the message herself. Jende comes home exhausted and tells her about the firing the next morning.

Chapter 40 begins with Jende trying to get his job as a cab driver back. The company owner tells him they have no work available. That week Jende gets two dishwashing jobs, but the income from working all day six days a week is still less than half of his job with Clark. After three weeks, Jende develops pain in his feet. Neni asks him to go back to work, but he tells her that she needs to stay home with the children. He goes to court for his first hearing and the judge tells him to appear again in June.

## Analysis

Jende's personality shifts significantly in this section, emphasizing the difficulty of life as an immigrant. Since receiving the deportation letter, Jende has become increasingly angry and loses his temper with Neni and Liomi more often. Neni thinks that it is "as if the letter of his court appointment had turned him from a happy living man to an outraged dying man intent on showing the world his anger at his impending death" (235), and she treads lightly to avoid upsetting him further. When Clark fires him, he becomes so angry that he loses control and yells at his former boss – something he would not dare do until this point even if given a reason to. When he returns home that night the anger is gone, replaced with despondency. To Neni, Jende has become a different person completely, "a grotesque being created by the sufferings of an American immigrant life" (237). The changes in his personality are so significant that he has lost many of the characteristics that make him Jende Jonga, instead replaced by reactive anger and hopelessness.

While Neni becomes more invested in the American Dream, Jende begins to lose hope in it, creating tension in their relationship. Despite the difficulties in her life, Neni continues to have faith in the possibility of a good life in America. Her hopes are bolstered by her newfound church community, and after she talks with Natasha she admires protesters, believing that one day she will be able to stand with them without fear. Natasha also shows her that some American citizens do welcome immigrants and are welcome to fight with them instead of against them. While Neni feels more hopeful, however, Jende becomes increasingly burnt out. When he first came to the United States he faced more challenges than he expected, such as the lack of communication with family and helplessness when Neni and Liomi were in a car accident in Limbe. Now he faces even more difficult challenges, like deportation and unemployment. Even though he is able to find another job after Clark fires him, he works nearly every waking hour and does not see his children – for half of the pay. He becomes a man "pitilessly bowed by life" (254). His struggle with American life and Neni's newfound faith in it create a division between them that stresses their relationship and diminishes their trust in one another.





The tone of the novel shifts from optimism into hopelessness as Neni and Jende face increasingly difficult circumstances. Life has been difficult for the Jongas since their arrival in the U.S., but they have always managed. Now life has become unmanageable, with Jende losing his job, facing deportation, and becoming verbally violent towards Neni. Jende tries to hold onto his optimistic nature up until Clark fires him, choosing to think about the good things in his life, but as prepares for immigration court he cannot help but think that the worst is yet to come. He feels his deportation is inevitable. Neni also feels hopeless, even after attending church. The tone of the novel shifts from cautious optimism and anticipation to despair as Neni and Jende find themselves in a situation that appears to have no positive outcome.

## Discussion Question 1

When Neni sees the protestors, she admires their “passion for their country” (234). Are their protests motivated by passion for the United States, or something else? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

What inspires Jende’s optimism as he drives to Clark’s office? How does he convince himself that things will be okay, and what do his coping techniques indicate about his values?

## Discussion Question 3

After his hearing, Jende feels that he would rather be “truly free” (259). What does true freedom mean for Jende?

## Vocabulary

hiatus, travails, indefatigable, pulchritudinous, chiding, plaintive



# Chapter 41 - 45

## Summary

Chapters 41 to 45 continue third person narration, and Chapter 41 begins with Neni riding a bus with a gift bag in her lap. She overhears two men talk about President Obama's inauguration excitedly, in disbelief that a black man was elected president. Neni exits the bus and walks to the Edwards's apartment building. The doorman tells her to take the service entrance, and Anna lets her into the apartment where Cindy is in the living room. Neni tells her she wants to give Cindy a gift and refuses to show it to Anna. Anna had called Neni after Jende was fired, fearful that she would lose her position next since Cindy's health was becoming worse, and in the apartment Neni assures her she will not be fired. She goes into the living room and gives Cindy a dress that her mother had made in Cameroon. Cindy takes it but does not look at Neni, and then tells her to give Jende her greetings. Neni sits beside her and asks her to help Jende. Cindy declines, and Neni pulls up a picture on her phone of Cindy in the Hamptons unconscious on the bed, surrounded by pill bottles. Cindy tells Anna to call the police, but Neni stays in place. She goads Cindy to call the police until she puts the phone down and tells Neni to name her price. She gives Neni a paper bag full of money in exchange for the SIM card in Neni's phone, and Neni leaves.

In Chapter 42, Neni returns home and shows Jende the money. He is upset with her and tells her that he wants nothing to do with her "wicked" act. They argue briefly and Jende goes into the bathroom to wash his face. When he returns, he tells her that she is strong but that she can never do something like this again. He is uncomfortable, but the money will be helpful. He asks how she is not concerned with Cindy calling the police, and she tells him that she knew it was what she had to do.

Chapter 43 begins with Neni shopping at the grocery store in New York. She thinks back to when she came to America and was overwhelmed with the choices and prices of the food. She thinks back to walking sixteen blocks with Liomi to the store and the orderly American shopping experience, completely different from the markets in Limbe. Now her grocery budget is very small and she reminisces on the shrimp dinners in the Hamptons. Neni thinks about the morning after she blackmailed Cindy. Anna had called and told her that Cindy spent the night crying alone in the bathroom. Neni tells her that Cindy is responsible for her own problems and that her own priority is herself and her family.

Chapter 44 begins with a man in a wheelchair on a subway platform singing and playing harmonica for money. He finishes his song and Neni gives him fifty cents. She rides the train to Judson Memorial and helps Amos put fundraising letters into envelopes. Natasha arrives less than an hour later and Neni sits to talk with her. She tells the pastor about a new idea she has to fight the deportation in which she will divorce Jende for a few years and marry an American citizen. Natasha advises her that it does not seem like a sound plan and that doing nothing may be better. When Neni gets home



that night she sends Mighty an email telling him to be nice to his mother, but it bounces back.

Chapter 45 begins five weeks after Neni's blackmail, when Cindy dies alone in her apartment. Frank tells Winston, who tells Jende and Neni. Anna had found her in her bed, dead from choking on her own vomit after taking too many pills and drinking too much wine. Cindy's friends had tried to get her to see a psychiatrist, and she eventually agreed for Mighty's sake. She passed away three days later, and Clark had cried over the phone when Frank told him.

## Analysis

Neni's blackmail of Cindy and Cindy's death raise questions about morality in the novel. Initially, Neni feels empowered by her actions. For the first time in her interactions with Cindy, she is not afraid of retribution and, in her thoughts, "her moment [has] arrived" (265). She feels so confident in her actions that when she comes home to tell Jende, she puts on lipstick and admires herself in the mirror. However, she soon begins to feel guilt over the blackmail. Jende tells her that her actions were wicked, and while she rebukes him, she feels enough sympathy for Cindy that she emails Mighty to tell him to be kind to her. When Cindy dies, Neni is shocked and cries openly. She wonders why someone did not help her, even though she had the opportunity to tell Clark previously. It is unclear if Neni's actions played a direct role in Cindy's death, but the reader is left to wonder the impact that the blackmail had on her. Neni believes that her actions were right and necessary, but the death raises the question whether they were morally defensible.

Family continues to be the driving force for the character's actions in this section, highlighting its importance as a theme. When Neni confronts Cindy with the photo, she tells her that she is acting as a mother trying to protect her family – just as Cindy had when she asked Neni not to tell anyone about the drugs. Protection of their families proves again to be the only way in which the two can relate to each other, even when it means bringing harm to others. In addition to motivation for blackmail, taking care of her family, Mighty in particular, is Cindy's only motivation to go to drug treatment. Clark as well appears to be deeply invested in his family when he learns about Cindy's death. Despite his often-cold demeanor, he cares deeply for Cindy and is devastated by the loss. The characters' dedication to their families emphasizes that, although they may not always act in ways that show it, family is their priority.

Despite the progress in previous chapters, racial and cultural difference once again becomes a barrier for empathy for Neni. For the first time since joining the church, she is bothered by the cultural differences between Cameroon and the United States, particularly those in grocery shopping. Food is more expensive and the stores more sterile and subdued in the U.S., and Neni longs for home. Her attention to the cultural divisions is one of the major factors that allows her to blackmail Cindy without remorse. When Jende becomes upset with her for her actions, she responds that Cindy and people like her don't care about people like her and Jende. She states that Cindy



“thought she could use us, stupid African people... she thinks we’re not as smart as she is” (272), and is adamant that racism allowed her to push Jende out of his job. Racial difference, in Neni’s view, prevented Cindy from empathizing with her and Jende, and it now prevents her from empathizing with Cindy.

The events in these chapters raise questions about self-preservation, and what individuals have the right to do to protect themselves. Throughout the section, the idea that individuals have a “right” to do whatever is necessary to preserve themselves prevails. Jende expresses his forgiveness for Clark firing him because he acted how he needed to act for Cindy’s sake, and Neni believes that the ten thousand dollars she took from Cindy is justified because she and her family needs it. However, both these actions created extreme hardship for the Jongas and the Edwards, respectively. The reader is forced to question whether self-preserving actions are justified if they bring harm to others.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Cindy tell Neni to give her greetings to Jende? Why is Neni confounded by it?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Is it immoral for Neni to blackmail Cindy? Why or why not?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Neni email Mighty? How does the tone of the chapter shift when it bounces back?

## **Vocabulary**

foyer, aloofly, valance, superfluous, asphyxiation



## Chapter 46 - 50

### Summary

Chapter 46 begins at Cindy's funeral a week after her death, where Mighty plays Clair De Lune on the piano. The priest and several of Cindy's friends and family speak, including Vince, who tells the mourners that she was flawed but beautiful. Jende, who is sitting in the back row, feels sorry for Mighty. That night he lays in bed with Neni and tells her that Cindy's death was not her fault. Neni tells him that they should give her money away, and he tells her that Cindy would have died even if she had not given it to her.

In Chapter 47, Neni receives an invitation to the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. She does not know what it means so she calls Betty, who tells her it means she is smart. She shows Jende the letter later that night and he happily agrees to spend one hundred dollars for the application. After she is accepted she goes online to apply for scholarships, but the only ones still available require a dean's nomination. She emails Jerry, who gives her the name and office location of Dean Flipkens. She goes to him the next day, but he tells her he does not nominate students by request. He tells her that the financial aid office will not be able to help either since she is an international student. He asks her why she wants to become a pharmacist, and tells her that it is unlikely she will be able to achieve her goal. She tells him she will become a pharmacist and leaves the office angry. When she tells Jende she will not get any scholarship, he decides not to go to the society's ceremony. She invites Winston instead, who is delighted. After the ceremony, she goes to an expensive dinner with him, Fatou, and her children.

Chapter 48 begins with a description of the rainy season in Limbe. Pa Jonga, Jende's father, dies during the rainy season in May and Jende's brother Moto calls to tell him while he is at work. He leaves his shift early and cries with Neni. Winston and Maami and a handful of other friends come to their apartment to console Jende. The next week, Jende sends money to Moto for the funeral, an extravagant affair that lasts days. Moto films it, and Jende watches the video in grief. The next night, the pain in his feet travels to his back and he must call out of work. He goes to a cash-only doctor who asks if he has any stressors in his life, and Jende thinks about all of the things in his life that are causing him stress.

In Chapter 49, Jende leaves the doctor's office and knows that "it [is] over" (305), though the reader does not know what "it" is. That night he asks to talk with Neni and tells her that he is ready to go back to Limbe. He tells her that he is hopeless, but she is irritated at his giving up. He tells her that even with citizenship he will not be able to get a good job. She tries to convince him to stay in the U.S. while he goes into the bedroom and looks through drawers. He tells her that the only reason he has survived so far is because of Winston, who is now having a child and will not be able to help him. He tells her that he is not willing to continue suffering to stay in America.



In Chapter 50, Neni is resolved to stay in the United States. She reminisces on her life before immigrating and the American television shows and movies she watched that showed black people living prosperous lives. She talks to Fatou about Jende's decision and her friend tells her that she must follow her husband. Betty comes by and tells Neni that suffering in America is better than suffering in Cameroon and that she can use Cindy's money to stay. Later that night, Neni searches online for advice but finds none. She decides to fight Jende to stay no matter what. Betty calls in the morning and complains about her husband to Neni. She asks if Neni has told Jende that she is thinking about divorce, and Neni tells her that she will soon.

## Analysis

While Jende loses hope in his future, Neni's hope is restored, creating further tension in their relationship. When Neni is invited to Phi Theta Kappa, she feels a restored sense of hope in her future that persists through the section. She is not discouraged by Dean Flipkens, who tells her that her dreams are unachievable. Instead, she is empowered by his lack of faith and shares an optimistic dinner with her friends and family, who also encourage her. Jende does not attend this dinner, however, due to his own loss of hope. Instead of supporting Neni by attending the ceremony, he tells her it is a waste of time if it will not provide her a scholarship. When he visits the doctor for his back, he reflects on all the negative aspects of his life – his deportation case, his father's death, his mother's increasing need for support, his financial hardship, and his difficulty supporting his family. He is so overwhelmed by the stress in his life that he decides to return to Limbe, telling Neni that he has suffered enough. The stark contrast between his and Neni's outlooks creates a massive division in their relationship, one that is so severe Neni begins considering divorce. The tension in their relationship creates tension for the reader, who is left to wonder if reconciliation is possible.

The lack of omniscient narration creates suspense in the novel as the reader learns of Neni's plan for divorce. The style of narration in the novel gives some insight into the characters' motivations, but some key thoughts are deliberately omitted to create rising tension. For instance, the reader was unaware of Neni's intention to blackmail Cindy until she did it. In this section, the reader is once again cued into Neni's thoughts only by her dialogue with another character. Betty questions her about her thoughts on divorce, and it becomes clear that Neni is considering divorcing Jende. The dialogue does not provide concrete details of Neni's plans, however, and the reader is left to wonder their nature and extent. The shift between omniscient and non-omniscient narrative creates suspense and foreshadows conflict.

Mbue creates a comparison between Cindy's funeral and that of Pa Jonga, drawing attention to the similarities and differences between their cultures. Cindy's funeral is marked by gray suits and somber music, as well as a distinct effort to contain emotion. Clark sits in the front wearing sunglasses which hide his face, and even Jende forces back his tears when Mighty plays the piano. Pa Jonga's funeral, on the other hand, is "a two-day extravaganza of food and drinks, speeches and libations, dancing and singing and crying" (301). The funeral is followed by an enormous funeral procession where



mourners continue to dance and cry in Pa's memory. While the two funerals are different in tone and extravagance, they share some features. Mourners at both believe that their loved one has been welcomed into heaven and celebrate their arrival. The music, while different in character, contains similar messages between the funerals. The contrast between them highlights cultural difference, but the similarities emphasize that, despite these differences, the mourners feel the same grief.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Jende tells Neni that Cindy would have died whether she blackmailed her or not. Is he correct? Why or why not?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Neni references many television shows and movies that have influenced her understanding of American culture. What is the significance of Mbue's reference choices? What messages does Neni learn from the shows?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Is Neni's reaction to Dean Flipkens justified? Why or why not?

## **Vocabulary**

eulogy, oblong, coifed, derisively, draught, synonymous, plight, polychromatic



# Chapter 51 - 56

## Summary

Chapters 51 to 56 continue the third person narration. Chapter 51 begins with Neni talking to Jende as he brushes his teeth. She tells him that she wants to use Cindy's money to marry Betty's cousin. She will get citizenship through him and then re-marry Jende. He tells her to shut up, and when she continues to tell him about her plan, he slams the bathroom door in her face.

In Chapter 52, Bubakar agrees to petition for Jende's voluntary departure in exchange for closing the deportation case. He tells Jende that Timba and Neni should have little trouble returning to the U.S. if they want to, but that he and Liomi will have a much harder time. He tells Jende to think very hard about his decision, and that he suffered too before creating a successful life in the U.S. Later, Winston tells Jende that Bubakar is wrong. He tells his cousin that even with hard work Jende may never make it as an immigrant. Jende is grateful for his support, as even his mother thinks his decision to return to Cameroon is a bad one.

Chapter 53 begins with the memory of Liomi's birth. Neni had a long and difficult pregnancy without Jende's presence and she sobbed when he was born, grateful for her newborn son. In the present, Natasha asks Neni why she wants to give him up for adoption. Neni tells Natasha that she wants to give Liomi to Jerry and his boyfriend so that he can become a citizen if she must return to Limbe. Natasha tells her that she will most likely regret the decision, but offers to get her a free consultation with an adoption lawyer anyway. Neni tells her that she feels like she is becoming a different person.

In Chapter 54, Neni and Jende grow distant from each other. They fight about leaving the U.S. and one night while Neni is massaging Jende's aching back, she tells him that the doctors in New York are better than those in Limbe. He tells her to shut up, and when she does not he slaps her. She taunts him in disbelief and he beats her. When Liomi comes out of his bedroom, Jende threatens to beat him too. A neighbor knocks on the door to check in and Neni tells him she is okay. Jende sleeps on the living room floor while Liomi, Timba, and Neni sleep in the bed together. The next day Jende comes home with a new game for Liomi and roses for Neni and begs her forgiveness, which she gives to him. Three days later, Jende stands before a judge to request voluntary departure, but he only feels relief when he comes home to Neni that night.

Chapter 55 begins with Neni receiving an international call from an unknown number. She does not answer because she is running late for a party with her friend Olu. She forgets about the call until the next morning, and checks her voicemail to find a message from Vince. In the message he asks her to call him back because he has a question. She gets out of bed, sure that Vince wants to know what happened between her and Cindy, and calls him back. Vince picks up and delightedly tells her about his travels and Clark, who has restructured his entire life to be a better father to Mighty.





They talk about Cindy's death and Vince admits that he is more homesick than expected. After several minutes, Vince finally tells Neni that he called to ask her to be Mighty's nanny. He tells her that Mighty needs a mother figure and had a special connection with Neni. He promises to call her in a few days when she has thought it over. Neni thinks that she cannot take the job because even if she did not have to leave the U.S., she could never go into Cindy's home again.

In Chapter 56, Jende's voluntary departure request is approved and he is ordered to leave in ninety days, by the end of September. He gives Neni five hundred dollars to shop for things they cannot find in Cameroon, and she spends eight hundred on toys, food, clothes, and beauty creams. She worries that Jende will be sought after by other women when they return to Limbe, so she prepares to keep her youthful appearance by any means possible. She and Jende go to dinner at Red Lobster and he promises her a good life in Limbe. As they walk through Times Square after their meal, Neni thinks of all the things she will miss.

## Analysis

Bubakar's view on perseverance loses validity due to his incompetent character and Jende's diminished trust in him. When Jende asks him to file for voluntary departure, Bubakar encourages him to think about staying. He tells him that the path to becoming successful in the United States is not easy, but that "with hard work and perseverance, anyone can do it" (322). His view encapsulates the American Dream – the idea that anyone can succeed with enough work and patience. Winston, however, questions this view. He reconfirms Jende's position that the hard work is too great a sacrifice sometimes, and that even if he does get citizenship he may never have a good life. Bubakar's position is further brought into question because, overall, he has not proven to be an effective lawyer or trustworthy character. As Jende's trust in him diminishes, so too does the validity of his ideas.

Vince, Clark, and Neni adjust to their new, difficult circumstances by using their families as anchors, solidifying the importance of family in the novel. Vince and Clark face hardship after Cindy's death, but both gain new love for their remaining family. Vince remarks that since his wife's death, he has sacrificed the work that was once so important to him to spend more time with Mighty. Vince himself decides that, despite his disdain for the country, he will return to the United States often because his family is there. Both Clark and Vince have shifted their priorities to accommodate for their family, and Neni does the same. She considers leaving the man she loves to stay in the United States, not for her own sake, but for Liomi and Timba's. Even if she cannot stay, she considers giving up Liomi to Jerry so that he may have the opportunities in life that he will not have in Cameroon. She is willing to make extreme sacrifices for her children's wellbeing, once again emphasizing that protecting and supporting family is the priority in her life and in the novel.

Both Neni and Jende experience significant changes in their character, highlighting the influence of extreme stress on personality and creating further tension in their



relationship. When Neni talks to Natasha about putting Liomi up for adoption, she reminisces on mothers in Cameroon who sent their children to live with wealthier families. She tells Natasha that she feels as if she is becoming a different person. Jende, too, has changed since coming to the United States, particularly since losing his job with Clark. He has gone from loving and optimistic to moody and depressed, and reaches his breaking point when Neni tells him that doctors in New York are better than those in Limbe. Foreshadowed in Chapter 36, Jende beats Neni. She is shocked by his actions and does not see it coming. His dramatic change is due to the stress in his life. Neni's desire to stay in the U.S. and continue to make sacrifices reminds him of his own suffering and the injustice they face, which only makes him angrier. Their relationship becomes more and more distant and unpredictable as the stress in Jende's life mounts.

## Discussion Question 1

Is Neni happy with the person she is becoming? Would she be happy with her change if she stays in the U.S.? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

How are Clark and Neni alike in regards to their children? How are they different?

## Discussion Question 3

How does the tone of the novel change in this section, particularly after Jende hits Neni?

## Vocabulary

laden, fraught, counterfeit, impudent



## Chapter 57 - 62

### Summary

This section continues in the third person point of view, and Chapter 57 begins with a description of the money Jende and Neni have saved. They will return home with \$18,000, which in Limbe will make them some of the wealthiest people in the town. Jende plans to start a business, and Winston encourages him towards farming when he comes to visit him and Neni in Harlem. Jende tells Winston how sad Neni is, even though Limbe will soon have everything New York has. Winston encourages him to be sympathetic and asks him to avoid becoming an “American Wonder” – African people who return from the U.S. and claim to be more American than African. As Jende prepares to return and start his business, Neni packs her things. Fatou tells her that if her husband allowed it she would go back to Africa immediately to be with her parents.

In Chapter 58, Jende is ready to leave New York in August, even though the other Bakweri people in Limbe believe that August is a cursed month. He is ready to go back and does not feel he will miss too much. Neni is still unhappy about leaving, however, and cries throughout her days. She worries that she will no longer have anything in common with her friends, and she dreads seeing her father after denying him money for his illegitimate son’s hospital bills. Although returning to Limbe will bring some positive things into her children’s lives, they will lose the “unquantifiable benefits” (362) of living in New York City.

In Chapter 59, Betty throws the Jongas a going-away party. Many friends come and even Neni cannot help but dance to the music that Winston plays on his laptop. In the second week of August, Jende goes to church with Neni. Natasha gives a sermon about welcoming visitors and shares Jende and Neni’s story with the congregation. The congregants offer money and support and wish them well in their return to Cameroon.

Chapter 60 begins with Jende calling Clark and asking to come say goodbye. He arrives at Clark’s office in the same suit he wore on his first day of work as a chauffeur and is pleased to see that Clark looks happy and healthy. Clark tells him that he and Mighty are moving to Virginia and his parents are moving from California to be closer to them. He and Jende talk and laugh about Vince, and Jende thanks Clark for giving him the opportunity to improve his life. As Jende is leaving, Clark asks why he chose to return to Limbe. He is surprised at Jende’s answer, having had no knowledge of his immigration case. He offers to help him find a way to stay, but Jende tells him he is ready to go home and Clark gives him a white envelope. He asks about Leah, and Clark tells him that she has probably moved out of New York because she could not find a job. The two men shake hands and Jende leaves.

In Chapter 61, Neni and Jende clear their furniture and unwanted belongings from their apartment. The new tenants, two young, white musicians, come to look at the apartment with the landlord and share a kiss in the bedroom. Less than a day before their flight,



Neni sits in the empty apartment and looks around the living room. She feels as if she is forgetting something, but cannot think of anything.

The final chapter of the novel, Chapter 62, begins as the Jongas take a cab to the airport. Neni rides in silence and watches the city “passing her by” (379). Jende sits with a backpack that contains all of their savings in bundles of cash – money that he chooses to carry so that the Cameroonian government will not know he has it. They arrive at Douala International Airport in Cameroon the next day, which is full of people and vibrant. Moto meets them and drives them the two hours to Limbe. When they pass under the sign that welcomes them to Limbe, Liomi wakes up in the back seat and asks if they are “home” (382).

## Analysis

The Jonga’s return to Limbe and the positive things that accompany it bring into question the assumption that the United States is unequivocally better than Cameroon. Despite Neni’s skepticism, Jende is excited to return to Limbe and believes that many of the things they have in New York will be there when they return. What’s more, many of the negative aspects of American life will be left behind – they will have a large house with more comforts than in New York, and Jende will have a job that does not leave him exhausted and in pain every night. Even Neni thinks that life in Cameroon has many positive features, and that her children will grow up among family learning about their culture. Returning to Cameroon seems a better option for Jende than staying in the U.S.

Jende experiences a second shift in character when he decides to return to Limbe, one that highlights the transformative nature of adversity. Under the stress of deportation, Jende lost his optimistic nature. He now shifts back into a positive state of mind – but he does not revert to the blind optimism of his first years in the United States. He challenges the idea that America is the land of opportunity and instead focuses his positive nature onto the good things that can be found in his home nation. His shift back into optimism without his initial ignorance is a transformative change rather than simply a return to his previous state, showing that while adversity changes individuals, it is not always for the worse.

The end of the novel restores a tone of hope, as Jende creates new dreams and expectations. Jende had a number of goals when he immigrated to the United States, the most prominent being to become a successful employed citizen and to provide the opportunity to do the same for his son. As life becomes more difficult in the U.S., however, he loses sight of some of these goals, overwhelmed by the amount of hard work and sacrifice he must make to achieve them. As his health declines and his demeanor becomes angrier, his dream of an American life disappears, and with it his optimism. His decision to return to Cameroon does not signify giving up hope, however – it signifies a new hope to replace that lost by life as an immigrant. Jende will return home with enough money to start his own business and send both of his children to good schools. He feels that his time has finally come “to stand above others and hear



yes, Mr. Jonga” (353), and he feels optimistic for the first time in several months. His newfound hope allows for an uplifting ending tone for the novel.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the tone at the end of the novel? Is Jende’s optimism restored?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What are the “unquantifiable benefits” (362) of New York that Neni refers to?

## **Discussion Question 3**

When Jende tells Winston that many of the things in New York are now in Limbe, he is referring to physical goods. What other things might be in Limbe that were not before? What is Neni bringing back with her besides material items?

## **Vocabulary**

bassinet, gyrated, unquantifiable, arduous



# Characters

## Jende Jonga

Jende is Neni's husband and Liomi's father. He spent most of his life in Limbe, Cameroon in a lower-class family, working to win over Neni after her father sent him to prison. He immigrated to the United States several years before the beginning of the novel, working menial jobs to raise money for Neni's student visa. He is employed by Clark as a chauffeur for most of the novel and trying to gain citizenship – first through an asylum application, then through immigration appeals.

At the beginning of the novel, Jende is optimistic and light hearted. He is happy to be with his family and willing to work hard to make life in the United States work. He is unfazed by the differences between himself and natural-born citizens, and has little trouble forming a relationship with Clark, Mighty, and Leah. As the novel progresses, however, his optimism wavers and he becomes harsher and more easily upset. He becomes disillusioned with American life and decides to file for voluntary departure. He moves back to Limbe with Liomi, Timba, and Neni.

Jende has a loving relationship with Neni and confides in and consults her regularly at the beginning of the novel. As he endures more stress he becomes more short-fused with her and starts to threaten her with violence. His anger intensifies until he beats her. The next day he apologizes profusely and tries to restore their relationship, but his decision to return to Cameroon prevents their dynamic from returning to its original state.

## Neni Jonga

Neni is Jende's wife and Liomi's mother. She was raised in a relatively wealthy family in Limbe and, despite have Jende's child, was only allowed to marry him after he immigrated to the United States. She has a buoyant personality and several close friends, whom she spends much of her time with shopping and gossiping. She is in school to become a pharmacist and studies hard, even when she is working. She initially works as a home health aide but is hired by Cindy to work in Southampton over the summer and works several catering jobs afterwards. She becomes pregnant with Timba midway through the novel and Jende forces her to leave school and work for the last part of the pregnancy.

Neni is an optimistic character with high hopes for her life in America. She is determined to pursue her dreams, even when Dean Flipkens tells her that they are out of reach. She does not listen to any discouraging words except for those of Jende, whose word she abides by even when she disagrees. She is a strong woman and speaks her mind – even when it may get her in trouble. She confides in her friends and Natasha about her personal life despite warnings from those around her.



In contrast to Jende, Neni feels confused and frustrated by the cultural differences she encounters in the United States. She does not relate to other students or non-African people, especially white people. She feels acutely uncomfortable in primarily white settings until she finds Judson Memorial. Attending the church helps her feel more at home among white people as well as native-born Americans. By the time Jende decides to return to Limbe, she feels very at home in Harlem and wishes to stay, even considering divorce. She ultimately concedes to Jende's wishes and returns with him to Cameroon.

## Clark Edwards

Clark Edwards is a successful Wall Street investor with Lehman Brothers and Jende's employer for most of the novel. He is a dedicated businessman who is engrossed in his work and often rude or dismissive to others. Work appears to be his primary focus in life, and both his wife and son accuse him of being an absent and unloving father and husband. He is attractive and extremely wealthy.

Clark builds an image of himself as a stoic and unloving man, but as he builds trust with Jende, the reader gains insight into the depth of his character. He enjoys sunsets and writing poetry, and is not afraid to engage with the more sentimental aspects of life – so long as it does not interfere with his work. Although he does not openly share his poetry, he does so when prompted, and after Cindy's death begins to write for *Mighty* while his son sleeps.

Clark struggles to be loyal to his family throughout the novel. He often misses vacations and dinners, and has multiple affairs with escorts behind Cindy's back. While others believe his actions are driven by callousness, he believes that his dedication to work is for no other reason than to provide his family the best life possible. Like Cindy, he wants nothing more than to see his children well-provided for and happy, even if his concept of happiness differs from that of others. When Cindy dies, he gives up much of his work life to take care of *Mighty*. He begins to skip meetings and work functions to spend time with his son, and appears much happier for it at the end of the novel.

## Cindy Edwards

Cindy Edwards is Clark's wife. She is a nutritionist who Jende describes as looking like Annette Bening. Despite her flawless skin and elegant features, she often looks sad and worn down. She is an alcoholic and uses prescription painkillers recreationally. Neni observes that "nothing [appears] to matter more to the madam than the happiness of her children" (115), and she is constantly worried over Vince and *Mighty*'s wellbeing. Her second priority is her social status, which she meticulously maintains by constant contact with the New York elite.

Cindy was raised in an extremely poor family. She was conceived in rape and grew up without a father. Her mother abused her, and she worked hard to break away from her family. She paid for her own education and housing until she met Clark, and now holds



onto her wealth tightly. She feels as though the people in her life treat her poorly, but continues to try and please them anyway.

Cindy is suspicious of Clark and her relationship with him is tumultuous. She fights with him often, arguing that he works too often and cares too little about his family. She grows suspicious of his infidelity after he comes home without his tie, and asks Jende to log wherever he goes – threatening his job if he does not comply. When her suspicions are quelled, her marriage (as well as her appearance) improve, but when she reads the tabloid outing Clark she declines once again. She starts to drink and use drugs more heavily, eventually dying in her bedroom from asphyxiation after consuming a combination of pills and alcohol.

## Vince Edwards

Vince is Clark and Cindy's eldest son. At the beginning of the novel, he is attending school to be a lawyer, but leaves to move to India. He is disillusioned with the United States as well as his parents' upper class lifestyle, and is driven to live a different type of life than them. He chooses to pursue grand concepts such as "Truth" and "Enlightenment" instead of wealth and stability, partially because he dislikes his father and partially because he simply wants a different lifestyle. He spends little time with his family initially, choosing instead to be with friends. However, after his mother's death he decides to make a larger effort to see his father and younger brother in the U.S.

## Mighty Edwards

Mighty is Clark and Cindy's youngest child. He is smart, polite, and kind, and Neni thinks that he is a "token of how normal rich children [can] be" (114). He loves his parents and forms an especially close bond with Neni. He is sensitive to his parents' marital distress, and becomes increasingly distraught over their fights to the point where he stays in his room nearly all day.

## Liomi Jonga

Liomi is Jende and Neni's eldest child. He is ten years old, mild-mannered, and studious. He has a good relationship with his parents, particularly Jende, and becomes excited about returning to Cameroon when his father tells him stories about it.

## Winston

Winston is Jende's cousin. He is successful lawyer and is responsible for helping Jende get a visa to the United States initially. He supports Jende through his entire experience in the U.S., helping him get his job with Clark and supporting his decision to return to Limbe. He has a vast social life and dates a number of white women until wooing and impregnating Maami.





## Bubakar

Bubakar is Jende's immigration lawyer. He is a Nigerian immigrant with short stature and fast speech. He has been in the United States for twenty-nine years and worked hard to get from "struggling immigrant to successful American" (322). He believes in perseverance and the American Dream. Winston believes that he is an incompetent lawyer, but Jende has more faith in his legal expertise.

## Fatou

Fatou is a friend of Neni's and an African immigrant. She has been in the United States for twenty-four years but deliberately speaks English with her native pidgin dialect. Neni describes her as a "one-woman book of odd opinions" (313), and she never hesitates to share her opinion on any matter. She wants to return to Africa but remains because she is loyal to her husband.

## Leah

Leah is Clark's secretary at Lehman Brothers. She is "wide and round" (47), with an overtly feminine manner. She loves to gossip and has a slightly condescending outlook on Jende. She has worked at Lehman for years and the stress affects her physically – she has high blood pressure, hair loss, and insomnia. However, she has a positive outlook on her life even after losing her job.

## Betty

Betty is a friend of Neni's. She is an African immigrant and American citizen who has lived in the United States for thirty-one years. Unlike Fatou, she understands why Neni wants to stay in the U.S. and supports her in it.

## Natasha

Natasha is the pastor at Judson Memorial Church. She is a "subdued woman" (233) with long gray hair. Neni trusts her as a confidante, and she supports her through her worst times in the United States by talking her through her decisions and raising money for her and Jende.

## Amatimba Monyengi Jonga

Amatimba, or Timba, is Neni and Jende's youngest daughter. She is born in the United States towards the end of the novel.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Green Pinstripe Suit

Jende wears a green pinstripe suit on the day that he interviews with Clark in Chapter 1. Although Jende believes that his suit is impressive and well-suited for a job interview, Clark tells him that he will need to dress more professionally if he gets hired. The suit symbolizes the subtle cultural markers of wealth in the United States.

## B-minus

After weeks of all-night studying, Neni receives a B-minus on her precalculus exam in chapter 10. She is upset by her grade, but the professor tells her that many students would be satisfied with it. The B-minus symbolizes the higher standard for success that Neni sets for herself than what is expected in American society.

## Blue Peugeot

The blue Peugeot is Neni's father's car in Limbe. The "dilapidated" (110) car is a symbol of wealth and prosperity in Limbe despite its condition. As Neni's father loses his income, he retains the car, symbolizing the inability of possessions to secure wealth.

## Television Set

The television set is one of the luxuries that Neni had growing up in a wealthy family in Limbe. Although television has become widely accessible there now, to her it represents a happy and blessed upbringing in comfort.

## The Wall Street Journal

Jende first notices the Wall Street Journal on Clark's desk during his job interview. As the novel progresses, he starts to read the Journal when Clark discards it. It symbolizes Jende's desire and drive to become a successful American in the footsteps of men like Clark.

## Clark's Tie

Jende notices Clark's tie, adorned with world flags, as he drives him to the Chelsea hotel. When he leaves the hotel without the tie, Jende is anxious about Cindy's reaction. The tie, and its subsequent disappearance, symbolize Clark's infidelity to Cindy.



## Briefcase

Jende gets a briefcase when he gets the chauffeur job. Carrying it makes him feel as if he fits in with the white-collar workers that he encounters on Wall Street, and riding the subway home with it makes him feel indistinguishable as a chauffeur for powerful men instead of one himself. The briefcase symbolizes Jende's desire to fit in with the American elite and the markers of class that he successfully adopts.

## Dictionary

Jende's dictionary, which he carries with him every day, represents his devotion to achievement and hard work. He reads the dictionary in his spare time and references it regularly when he writes in Cindy's notebook. While native English speakers rarely, if ever, read a dictionary, Jende takes on this task without complaint. The dictionary comes to symbolize not only Jende's commitment to becoming a citizen, but also the great lengths that immigrants must go to to fit in.

## Shrimp

When Cindy was a child, she asked her mother for shrimp and vegetables and her mother hit her in response. Neni reminisces on shrimp dinners when she walks through the grocery store, limited by Jende's new, lower income. For both Cindy and Neni, shrimp is a mild luxury – one that both feel they deserve access to. It symbolizes the relativity of luxury, as well as the common ground Neni and Cindy share.

## Cameroonian Food

Cameroonian food is referenced heavily throughout the novel. For the Jongas, it is a comfort and a link to their country of origin. For Mighty, Cameroonian food becomes a special treat, and one that strengthens his bond with Neni. Cameroonian food in the novel symbolizes the value of one's own culture as well as one of the ways that people can connect and find common ground across cultures.



# Settings

## Limbe, Cameroon

Limbe is the hometown of both Neni and Jende. It is an ocean town marked by a sign declaring it the “Town of Friendship”. Jende describes it as a welcoming and jovial place, and that “no matter who you are... whether you are big or small, you will feel happy that you have made it to Limbe” (37). It is marked by colorful dress, friendly people, and loud, bustling markets.

## Columbus Circle

Columbus Circle is a traffic circle in Manhattan, New York. It is a scenic location where Jende spends his evenings calling Neni in Limbe before she comes to the United States. When he and Neni leave Winston’s party, they return there and sit together. Jende thinks that it is the “center of the world” (96) and the best place in New York City.

## The Edwards's Vacation Home, Southampton

The Edwards’s vacation home in Southampton is an enormous gray-stone house with a portico and elegant features. Neni is astounded at its size and its luxury – the five bedrooms, all-white décor, large windows, wool rugs, and extravagant chandeliers. Neni spends the summer her working as a maid for Cindy and Mighty, and it is here she witnesses Cindy’s drug use and takes the picture she later uses to blackmail her.

## The Sapphire

The Sapphire is the apartment building on the Upper East Side of New York where the Edwards live. It is filled with and surrounded by well-dressed people and even the streets around it are spotless. The apartment itself is elegant and furnished with expensive and lavish furniture and appliances. Neni goes to the apartment once, to blackmail Cindy.

## Harlem

Harlem is where the Jongas live in a small apartment. It is a primarily black area, and although Neni and Jende have heard rumors of crime they view it as a welcoming and culturally diverse neighborhood. Neni in particular loves Harlem, and even though she misses Limbe, she walks to the store every day enjoying the people and scenery of her new location.



# Themes and Motifs

## The Viability of the American Dream

Jende and Neni come to the United States with high hopes of creating a successful life for themselves and for their children. However, as the novel progresses they start to lose hope in their dream. While Neni keeps faith in the American Dream until the end of the novel, Jende loses it and decides that life as an immigrant is not worth the suffering for a goal that he may never achieve. At the beginning of the novel, Jende is invested in his dream and has an unwaveringly optimistic view of the United States. When questioned about why he immigrated, he tells Clark that “I stay in my country, I would have become nothing. My son will grow up and be poor like me, just like I was poor like my father. But in America, sir? I can become something. I can even become a respectable man. My son can become a respectable man” (39), and even when Vince tries to convince him that the United States is less than he imagines, he does not alter his point of view. Neni is more cautious with her optimism, but nonetheless believes that life in the U.S. is the best option for her and her children.

Jende’s optimism begins to crumble when he receives a deportation letter. Although he holds strong for some time, eventually the struggles of immigrant life begin to wear on him. He becomes increasingly aggressive with Neni and Liomi, and does not understand why despite his hard work and assurances from Bubakar he is being denied the promise of citizenship. When he loses his job, he loses all faith in the American Dream. In an argument with Neni one night, he tells her about another chauffeur – a white citizen – he met who lost his job when the recession hit. He interrogates her: “So you tell me—if he, an American, a white man with papers, cannot get a new chauffeur job than what about me? They say the country will get better, but you know what? I don’t know if I can stay here until that happens. I don’t know if I can continue suffering like this just because I want to live in America” (310). The stories of success around him are few and far between, and even though Neni is committed to the United States, he knows that he will not be able to support her there.

Jende’s abandonment of the American Dream – the notion that hard work and perseverance will allow him to achieve any goal – forces the reader to question its viability. When he returns to Limbe, he will return with enough money for a house and a car, as well as enough left over to start a business. The Jongas will be one of the wealthiest families in their town, able to support themselves for years to come. The stark contrast between life in Cameroon with Jende’s new seed money and the continual suffering he would have to endure to survive in America show that while many think opportunity abounds in the United States, the reality is far less spectacular.



## Race, Class, and Empathy

From the beginning of the novel, race and class are prevalent and powerful dividing forces between the characters. From the very start, Jende is aware that, as a black man in the United States, he faces racism in addition to discrimination based on his national origin. Winston makes this point clear, telling him, “you think a black man gets a good job in this country by sitting in front of white people and telling the truth?” (17). Jende is forced to lie and rely on outside support to get a job that he is qualified for, and even when he does Clark notifies him that he will need a more professional suit than the one he wears – a more subtle marker of class that will distinguish him, at least in dress, from a poor African immigrant to an American man fitted for Wall Street. Neni is no stranger to racial and class divisions either. She and Jende were prohibited from marrying because they came from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and she is skeptical of “fancy white-people ideas” (31) from the start. Her discomfort with white culture becomes especially clear when Neni attends Winston’s birthday party. She immediately feels uncomfortable in the mostly-white crowd and leaves after a short interaction with Winston’s white girlfriend. The wariness and skepticism of wealthy white people that Jende and Neni have prevents them from fully empathizing with the Edwards, and vice versa. For instance, when Jende goes to talk with Cindy in Chapter 29, he wishes to reach out and comfort her. He stops himself, however, because he feels that someone of his class has no right to touch a woman of hers. She fails to empathize with Jende in return when she threatens his job to get what she wants. She uses his vulnerability as a poor black man to manipulate him into writing down Clark’s whereabouts, even though it could cost him his relationship with Clark.

The barriers between the Jongas and the Edwards created by class and race prove to be penetrable, at least temporarily. After Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy and Jende gets his deportation notice, the two families support each other in unexpected ways. When Mighty cries on the way to school, Jende risks his own safety to pull over and embrace the boy until he has cheered up. Later, Vince and Mighty come to his and Neni’s home for a dinner in which they share more than just food. Despite the apartment’s impoverished appearance, Mighty and Vince are happy to enjoy quality time with Neni, Jende, and Liomi free from the posh manners of Cindy and Clark’s affairs. Neni too steps out of her comfort zone and finds comfort in a primarily white church after talking to the congregants. The deep bonds that form over these events show that, while difficult, the divisions of race and class can be transcended to form human relationships.

When Clark fires Jende, life gets more difficult for both the Jongas and the Edwards, and the struggle to maintain human bonds proves to be too much for Neni. She develops disdain for Cindy, the woman she once connected with mother-to-mother, claiming that she only views her and Jende as “stupid black people” (272). She blackmails the woman, and when she tries to email Mighty some days later, it symbolically bounces back. By the end of the novel Neni has sacrificed her bond with Mighty, but Jende continues to maintain his relationship with the Edwards family. He attends Cindy’s funeral, and thanks Clark before he leaves for Limbe. Much like



success in the United States, bonds across the lines of race and class prove to be possible in “Behold the Dreamers”, but not achievable under all circumstances.

## Coping with Cultural Difference

Cultural difference is a hallmark of Jende and Neni’s experience as immigrants in the United States. They both view and cope with their separation from American culture in different ways that shift over time and draw attention to the ways in which culture affects every aspect of life. Initially, Jende feels confused at the cultural variance he discovers in the U.S., but instead of being frustrated by it he simply finds it amusing. For instance, when he asks Leah who “Enron” is, she laughs at his ignorance. Although embarrassed, he laughs with her, suggesting that he does not ask any more questions. He accepts that he has a limited understanding of the country and its culture, and when Vince tries to convince him that the U.S. is not a good country, he tells him that “maybe the way I see America is good for me” (103). Jende is not overly concerned with becoming completely educated about the country, believing that the only thing that truly matters is that he can succeed there.

Neni has a slightly different take on her difference than Jende. She is more acutely aware of the differences between herself and people who are not African, and is more frustrated by the disconnect. For instance, when she attends a study group she is confused and somewhat upset by the other students’ lack of focus, when earning a good grade is so important to her. She criticizes African Americans for assimilating into American culture, which she finds petty and undignified, and she feels out of place among white people. Although she loves New York, she misses aspects of Cameroon, like the busy markets and colorful dress. As the novel progresses, however, Neni begins to assimilate into the culture more and more. She becomes more concerned with her weight and starts attending an American church.

By the end of the novel, Jende is disillusioned with American life. He decides to return to Cameroon partially because he is sick of life in the U.S. and the unforeseen limitations he has encountered. While Neni has adapted to her new life and has found new comfort through the church, he longs for home. The conflict between him and Neni highlights the way that cultural adoption and assimilation work to secure comfort in new surroundings.

## The Value of Honesty

Honesty, and the lack thereof, prove to be important factors in preserving relationships throughout the novel. Jende places perhaps the most value on honesty of all the characters, often describing himself as a distinctly honest man. When he immigrates, however, he begins to tell half-truths and outright lies about himself to secure his new life. At Bubakar’s urging, he fabricates a story of persecution in Cameroon to apply for asylum, and when he applies for the chauffeur position he omits details about his status in hopes of getting the job. Although most of Jende’s dishonesty throughout the novel



brings about no negative consequences, the false story of persecution leads to his deportation order.

Other characters have similar experiences with honesty. While Neni does not tell outright lies to Jende, she does not tell him that she is meeting her professor at the café. Later, she opts not to tell anyone of her plan to blackmail Cindy because she knows they will advise her against it. While earlier acts of dishonesty yielded no punishment, Cindy dies shortly after the blackmail, leaving Neni to wonder if her dishonesty was the cause. Clark lies to Cindy repeatedly when he goes to the Chelsea hotel, and his lies lead directly to his marriage failing. Further, his dishonesty has put Jende in a position where he must also lie to keep his job – which he loses anyway when Cindy learns of Clark's affairs. The lies form an intricate network that ultimately collapses in on itself, emphasizing that while most dishonesty goes unnoticed, when it comes to the surface, its consequences can be severe.

## **Family as Motivation and Justification for Actions**

All of the central characters in the novel are motivated into action by their families, highlighting its value. However, some of the actions they take to protect their loved ones are questionably immoral, forcing the reader to consider what lengths a person is entitled to go to to take care of those they love. From the start of the novel it is clear that the Jongas care deeply for each other. Jende moves to the United States to make enough money to marry Neni and raise their child together in the land of opportunity, and they are both willing to leave their home to give Liomi better opportunities. Cindy is also obviously committed to her family, and even Clark, who seems to be indifferent to the wellbeing of others, admits that his primary motivation for his work is to take care of his wife and children. All of them are willing to sacrifice their own wellbeing for those they love, and as the novel progresses, they begin to sacrifice others' wellbeing as well.

When Cindy overdoses in Southampton, she implies to Neni that her job security depends on her promise of secrecy. Cindy believes that if her family discovers her drug use, it will tear them apart, and she is willing to put the Jonga's entire livelihood on the line to protect them. Neni turns threat into action, however, when she blackmails Cindy. Neni believes that the money she takes is “needed and deserved”, and in fact it may be. However, Cindy dies soon after from drug related causes. Neni's actions to protect her own family played a role in the destruction of another. Similarly, Clark's decision to fire Jende was made to protect his family – again, at the expense of another.

As the novel comes to a close, the characters are left with lives radically changed by the events of the previous year. While the Edwards and the Jongas have suffered, they have also restored familial bonds that were threatened by their struggles. Clark changes jobs and spends more time with Mighty, telling Jende that “family's everything” (369), and Neni, who is unhappy about leaving New York, leaves with Jende, Liomi, and Timba instead of following through on her divorce and adoption plans. Familial bonds in the novel are the strongest motivating factor for the characters across the board, and the most resilient.





# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is narrated from the third person point of view. Narration shifts focus between Neni and Jende, and while at times gives insight into their thoughts, is only partially omniscient. Mbue uses character insight selectively in the narration to build suspense, such as when Neni goes to blackmail Cindy. The narrative stays in the past tense, but events are often relayed in a non-chronological order that jumps between the present and past memories. The chronology of events is occasionally explicit, but often relies on context.

## Language and Meaning

The novel is written primarily in English, but words and phrases from several other languages are often used, including French and pidgin English. Language and dialect is used to distinguish characters by class and nation of origin. For instance, characters who live in Africa or are African immigrants intersperse their dialogue with French words and more subtle phrases like “bo”, “bebe”, “mami”, and “eh”, while native English speakers do not. Several characters have distinctive, character-specific dialects, like Vince, whose language is marked by erroneous capitalization, or Fatou, who speaks in deliberate pidgin English.

Mbue uses intentional misspellings to mark misunderstandings or miscommunications in the novel. Neni and Jende often reference people and titles from popular culture and mispronounce them. These mispronunciations are carried over from dialogue to narration and allow the reader to engage with the narrative from the characters’ perspectives.

The United States is primarily referred to as “America” in the novel. While “the United States” is the proper name for the country, “America” is often used as slang or in the context of patriotism. This word choice signifies that in referring to America, the characters are often referring to something larger than the country itself. The word “America” comes to represent not only the physical country, but its reputation and the ideas contained within it.

## Structure

The novel consists of 62 chapters of varying length. Chapters primarily take place chronologically, but some chapters consist of memories and flashbacks that occur prior the events in the narrative. Chapters primarily follow one character, usually Neni or Jende, but occasionally follow multiple.



## Quotes

You think a black man gets a good job in this country by sitting in front of white people and telling the truth? Please, don't make me laugh.

-- Winston (chapter 3)

**Importance:** This quote, in which Winston tells Jende how he got the chauffeur job, highlights the importance of race in America. Winston believes that Black men are disenfranchised by their race and can only achieve success by compensating with lies.

Why did you come to America if your town is so beautiful

-- Clark (chapter 6)

**Importance:** This discussion between Clark and Jende highlights the strength of the 'American Dream' to Jende and other immigrants. To Jende, even the joys in his home country cannot compare with the idealized image of America.

For the first time since Bubakar told Jende about the possible deportation, she was hopeful. Until the day she left the country, she was going to keep believing that she and her family had a chance.

-- Narrator on Neni (chapter 10)

**Importance:** This quote, in which Neni has just scolded Liomi for playing in school, emphasizes Neni's undying optimism about America. She believes that as long as she remains in the country, she will be able to achieve her dreams and provide a good life for her son.

This place wasn't her kind of place; the people out there weren't her kind of people. Winston had friends of all races, she know, but she had no idea he had so many white friends—she didn't have a single non-African friend and hadn't even come close to being friends with a white person. It was one thing to be in the same class with them, work for them, smile at them on the bus; it was a whole other thing to laugh and chat with them for hours, making sure she enunciated every word so they wouldn't say her accent was too difficult to understand.

-- Narration (chapter 14)

**Importance:** In this quote, Neni thinks about her discomfort around white people. Her thoughts highlight what is, in her mind, an unbridgeable gap between races and cultures, made wider by a language barrier.

Jende nodded and said nothing, though he thought about how funny it was that both Clark and Vince loved sunsets—the only people he'd ever met who went out of their way to sit by a body of water and stare at the horizon. He wondered if Vince knew this about his father, and what difference it would make if he didn't know and then discovered it by chance; how differently Vince would feel about his father if he realized that they shared a great love for something only a sliver of humans make a deliberate



effort to see.”

-- Narration (chapter 23)

**Importance:** In this quote, in which Jende and Clark sit on the pier to watch the sunset, Jende thinks about the similarities between Clark and Vince. The quote gives the reader an alternate perspective of Clark, who has more traits in common with his son than expected. It also highlights Jende’s desire to connect the father and son, who are reluctant to connect with each other on their own.

Home will never go away.

-- Clark (chapter 23)

**Importance:** This quote, the poem that Clark recites for Jende, gives insight into Clark’s character. He values and loves his son, and although he disagrees with his choice to go to India, will always be there for him as “home”.

But it’s scary how bad this could get,’ Cheri said, her tone turning serious as their laughter ebbed. ‘When people start talking about flying coach and selling vacation homes...

-- Cheri (chapter 27)

**Importance:** This quote, in which Cindy and Cheri discuss the collapse of Lehman Brothers, highlights the perspective on class of the American elite. For the lower-class characters in the novel, financial hardship is marked by holding multiple jobs and sacrificing necessities. For Cheri, however, the loss of major luxuries signals extreme hardship. This difference in perspective is central to the themes of the novel.

For the first time in a long love affair, she was afraid he would beat her. She was almost certain he would beat her. And if he had, she would have known that it was not her Jende who was beating her but a grotesque being created by the sufferings of an American immigrant life.

-- Narration (chapter 36)

**Importance:** In this quote, Jende is upset with Neni for telling Natasha about his immigration status. Her fear highlights the change that Jende has experienced since coming to the United States from an optimistic, caring, and kind husband to an angry and hopeless man. This change suggests that his and Neni’s optimism about the U.S. may be unfounded.

Her husband was in London, on a business trip, as she lay dying. Her firstborn son was in India, walking the Path to Enlightenment. Her younger son was at the Dalton School, being groomed to become a man like his father. Her father, whose identity neither she nor her mother ever knew, had been dead for two decades. Her mother, who she believed loved her too little, had been gone for four years. Her half-sister, completely out of her life since the death of their mother, was still in Falls Church, Virginia... Her friends were all over Manhattan, shopping at Saks and Barneys, lunching and drinking fine wine, planning dinner parties and galas, attending meetings for charities, looking



forward to their next vacation to an exotic locale.

-- Narration (chapter 45)

**Importance:** This quote, which describes the circumstances of Cindy's death, draws attention to her isolation. Despite her extensive social life, she dies alone while her family and friends go about their lives in other places.

But it's not only my father's death. It's everything that's happened. I lost my job. My papier situation. This work, work, work, all the time. For what? For a little money? How much suffering can a man take in this world, eh? How much longer...

-- Jende (chapter 49)

**Importance:** This quote, in which Jende has just told Neni he wants to return to Limbe, marks a major shift in Jende's character. He has lost his hope for a better future in the United States and is unwilling to continue suffering for a future he may never have.

I persevered, and look at me now. I'm not going to sit here and lie to you that life is going to get easy for you next month or next year, because it might not. It's a long, hard journey from struggling immigrant to successful American. But you know what, my brother? Anyone can do it. I am an example that with hard work and perseverance, anyone can do it.

-- Bubakar (chapter 52)

**Importance:** This quote, in which Bubakar asks Jende to consider his decision to leave the United States, exemplifies the core of the American Dream. Bubakar believes that through hard work, anyone can succeed in the U.S., even if Jende no longer believes this to be true.

She worried that she might have too little in common with her friends, being that she was now so different from them, being that she had tasted a different kind of life and been transformed positively and negatively in so many different ways, being that life had expanded and contracted her in ways they could never imagine.

-- Narration (chapter 58)

**Importance:** In this quote, Neni is apprehensive about going back to Limbe because she worries she will not fit in anymore. She feels that life in the United States has changed her too much to ever be happy in Cameroon again.