

# **The Famished Road Study Guide**

## **The Famished Road by Ben Okri**

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# Plot Summary

Shortly after birth, it became clear that Azaro was a spirit child. He had vivid dreams, which foretold the future and he could see spirits interacting with the living. The spirits called to him and caused him to leave his body for a time, which caused his parents to think he was dead. He woke up in his own coffin and his parents found they could not afford the spiritual ceremony to cut his obvious connection with the spirit world.

Azaro grew and learned more about his "gift." He ran out of his compound (forcing his mother and father to follow) just before it went up in flames. Priestesses who saw his true power abducted him. Azaro made a narrow escape, only to end up in the house of a police officer whose dead son tried to take over his body. He desperately called out (psychically) to his mother, who rescued him.

In their new compound, Azaro's parents threw a feast to celebrate his return. It quickly grew out of control and Azaro's father went far into debt to pay for the party. Creditors began harassing the family. His father beat several of them badly and became known as a "troublemaker" to the landlord. His mother became very sick and almost died from fever; a local bar owner, Madame Koto, helped revive her. Azaro found himself routinely distracted by spirits, who would lure him into the woods and get him lost. His visions were powerful.

Azaro spent much time with Madame Koto at the bar. She considered him lucky because of his spirit connection. Azaro's parents struggled to make ends meet; the family didn't eat well. In fact, Azaro would often rely on Madame Koto to feed him. The creditors came and took away their furniture until Azaro's father could pay his debts. His father shamed them into returning the furniture, before finally paying them off. The landlord grew more hostile towards the family.

One day Madame Koto hung a magical ornament (a fetish) above the doorway of the bar and almost immediately, strange customers began to fill the establishment. Azaro saw misshapen figures, blind men and half-man, half-animal spirits in the bar. One night, a group closed in on him and carried him out in a sack. He escaped by cutting a hole and running away. On the way back, he was plagued by visions and became lost. In the morning he found his way home and was beaten by his angry father. Azaro came down with malaria and it took him several days to recover.

When Azaro was feeling better and back at the bar, he saw a similar group of spirits intermingling with the living. He realized that the fetish above the door was attracting them. Azaro took it and fled into the night, with many of the angry spirits in pursuit. After a long chase, he lost them and buried the fetish far into the forest.

The political season opened with rival parties of the rich and poor making promises out of loudspeakers mounted on vans. The party of the rich gave out powdered milk, which turned out to be tainted and made everyone sick. When the van returned later, the villagers attacked it and beat the men inside. The van was burned and became a



"landmark" in the village. The local photographer managed to take pictures of the incident and had them published in an international paper, making him momentarily famous. It also made him a target of the politicians. They sent men to find him and he had to "go underground," spending many nights in Azaro's home. Political thugs became more prevalent in the village. Rival gangs would fight in the streets. Azaro's mother was harassed at the marketplace because she supported the "wrong" political party. The photographer returned to Azaro's house beaten, but otherwise unhurt.

Azaro wandered into the city one day and was shocked to see his father working under backbreaking conditions. He carried huge bags of salt and cement and was shamed when he saw his son watching him.

Madame Koto updated her bar and became a supporter of the party of the rich. More thugs began to frequent the bar and they harassed her "regular" clients. Powerful men of the party arrived and Madame Koto hired prostitutes to appease them. Azaro's father was thrown out the door one night because he threatened several of the thugs to a fight after arguing about politics. Azaro had another strong vision of the spirit world in the forest. Madame Koto became much richer while many of the villagers suffered, including Azaro's family. The landlord raised their rent more than any other tenants. Azaro's father told him the story of the "King of the Road." The clientele changed again at the bar and Madame Koto had added a gramophone (record player), which terrified Azaro. The rainy season caused a downpour, which lasted for two weeks. Houses flooded and collapsed; Azaro's home leaked badly.

One night while Azaro's father was arguing about politics with some prostitutes, Azaro was visited by a three-headed spirit. This spirit wanted Azaro to follow him to the spirit world. Azaro refused and the spirit became angry, saying a more powerful spirit would return for him. Meanwhile, Azaro's father was prodded to fight by five thugs in the bar and he managed to beat them all, but told Azaro that they would never return to Madame Koto's.

Azaro was then tricked by spirits into breaking the window of a magical blind man in the village. He followed Azaro home and his parents became angry. Azaro's father beat him so badly, that Azaro let himself finally be led by the three-headed spirit to the spirit world. He saw visions and places and finally came to the point of no return. He also saw his parents try and wake him, but he was too angry to care. Herbalists eventually brought him back to his relieved parents, who tried to be more optimistic.

Azaro's father started training to become a boxer (he had boxed previously as a young man). He trained all hours of the day, except when working and sleeping. Azaro's father became obsessed and worked less and less. The family's money problems became worse. One night, while Azaro was out watching his father train, a man that called himself the Yellow Jaguar challenged him. After a long and grueling fight, in which Azaro's father had to change his tactics many times (and take a severe beating in the process), the Yellow Jaguar fell back in defeat and disappeared into the ground. He had been a ghost from the spirit world. Azaro's father took almost a week to recover and



then started training anew. He became more popular; villagers would follow to watch him shadowbox around the town. His nickname was Black Tyger.

Madame Koto's bar was updated again for electricity. It was a new thing for the villagers to see, since many of them had never seen a light bulb. She also bought herself a car, raised prices and opened another bar on the other side of town. Azaro met a friend named Ade. Thugs began hassling Black Tyger and brought a huge man named Green Leopard to fight him. Azaro's father sent him to bet all their money on himself and then he came out for the fight. Black Tyger started out pummeling his opponent, but the Green Leopard would not fall. Then the Green Leopard returned the beating. Finally, the Black Tyger prevailed and the Green Leopard was carried away. Azaro's family made a good deal of money on the bet. Azaro's father spent days in a coma fighting spirits in his head. When he awoke, he had a passion for politics. He planned to run for office; his first constituency was a group of beggars. He threw a party, which again turned into a disaster when food ran scarce.

Azaro's father had a final fight at Madame Koto's with a spirit man in a white suit. Again, he had Azaro make a huge bet and the thugs lined up to bet against him. The fight was brutal; Azaro's father was beaten to within an inch of his life. A man in the crowd kept distracting him until Azaro and Ade pushed him away. Then Azaro's father pulled the suit off the "man" and the crowd recoiled when they saw how inhuman he looked. The Black Tyger knocked his opponent out of the ring and made it back to his home to collapse. Azaro's father went on to fight the forces of evil in his dreams and eventually he defeated them. He awoke three days later and spoke of a new day beginning. Azaro felt peace for the first time in months. The spirits were quiet.



# Book 1

## Book 1 Summary

"In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry." Life and death intermingled. There was no fear, only an understanding with the spirit world. Rebirth was common and many people looked forward to "birth" (death) with pleasure. There was a great, wise king who had lived many lives in this fashion. His deeds were easily spotted throughout history. This king spoke to Lazaro just before his "birth." He was born smiling, even though he was told that he would be a "mischievous one" who would cause much trouble and travel many roads.

Lazaro had many visions as a child where he had lived many lives before. At times it became difficult to tell them apart. He heard voices, which called him to the river; Lazaro resisted. He still spent much time playing with friends from the spirit world. The spirits lured him out of his body and Lazaro found himself in a coffin upon his return, presumed dead. He recovered and his name was shortened to Azaro. An herbalist offered to sever Azaro's connection to the spirit world, but his parents could not afford the ceremony.

Growing older, Azaro found he could read minds and foretell the future. He had a dream and ran out into the night. When his parents were taking him back, they realized that the entire compound where they lived was on fire. Confused people crowded the streets. The landlord was furious with his loss and summoned police to beat the now homeless people. There was mayhem as the crowd retaliated. Azaro was separated in the riot that followed; a group of veiled women grabbed him and took him away. He suddenly noticed that the air was full of spirits, but the women ignored them. He was taken to an island, cleaned and covered in oils. Azaro felt the power in the house. The women looked at him with their "powerful" eyes, but never spoke. They then began a ceremony to their goddess. A cat told Azaro to flee for his life and he did. The women chased him, but he managed to escape back to the city.

Azaro wandered the streets, looking at bizarrely shaped persons intermingling with "normal" people. He realized that they were spirits and invisible to everyone but him. Once they realized he could see them, they chased him, until he learned to ignore them. He found it difficult to walk with the crowds while pretending not to notice the grotesque figures, which floated just off the ground. They were very different in size and appearance. Some were ugly; others were beautiful. Azaro saw blood dripping from a newly cut tree. A crazy man started following him. Azaro evaded the man and was lulled by the sound of his old spirit friends calling to him. He collapsed in the middle of the street.

Azaro was taken to the home of a police officer to be looked after until his parents could be found. He sat down to a delicious dinner with the mother, father and small boy who stared at him constantly. Azaro lost his appetite when he realized that the boy was



dead; his pictures covered the walls of the house. The parents were obsessed with the loss of their son and dressed Azaro in his clothes. The mother began calling Azaro by her dead son's name. An angry spirit entered Azaro and made him very sick and he realized he had to escape. He called out to his mother and was sure she had heard him. He saw spirits everywhere in the house.

Azaro witnessed a ceremony where a group of seven police officers chanted and swore oaths to varying deities. He saw more spirits the next day and realized that they had somehow been drawn to the police officer who lived in the house. The spirits were angry; the ghost of the policeman's dead son still followed him. Then there was a terrible storm and the house was hit by lightening. While the family struggled to put out the fire, there was a knock at the door. It was Azaro's mother.

Azaro's parents were living in a new compound. His father was bandaged; the police had beaten him during the riots. His mother had looked for her son for days before speaking to someone who had seen his picture in the newspaper. She then tracked him down to the police station and the officer's house. An herbalist instructed her to wait outside the house until lightening struck, or Azaro could not be freed.

The new house was dirty and small, but it felt like home to Azaro and at least there were no spirits. Azaro's father showed him the neighborhood and the huge forest that surrounded them. He explained that the forest would disappear as more poor people came to live in the area. They then went to the palm-wine bar and Azaro's father let him drink some wine from a small glass. His father became drunk and started a fight over a bar game. He won his game when his opponent became irate and was thrown out and beaten in public by the bar's owner, a woman named Madame Koto. Azaro's father and Azaro walked back through the woods and Azaro saw many cruel spirits. His father caught a wild boar and took it home for a roast, to celebrate his son's return.

The next day, as the boar cooked, many villagers came over in anticipation of the great feast. Azaro's mother and father dressed up for the occasion. Drinks were served and the house soon became crowded with hungry guests. Azaro's father had to go back to the store several times to restock with beer on credit. But the great boar itself wasn't enough to feed everybody and some of the crowd became angry. The resident photographer managed to take a photograph of the occasion. Azaro saw spirits curiously watching the camera. Then the landlord showed up and joined in. Madame Koto also arrived with palm wine. When the party broke up, Azaro noticed that many of the spirits had left with Madame Koto. But they came back to Azaro during the night and lured him out of the house and into the forest. Madame Koto found him and led him back to his house. Many of the drunken men were still asleep on the floor and had to be carried out. Upon awakening, the landlord asked for his rent. It took most of the day to clean the house.

The next day, Azaro's father went out to look for a job and his mother took Azaro to sell wares in front of the house. Men from the party, who Azaro's father had bought beer for, hounded his mother about paying her debts. She sold nothing all day and started feeling



ill. When she went home to bed, Azaro's father was furious that she hadn't prepared supper.

Azaro's mother told her husband about the creditors harassing her. Then the creditors came to visit and reminded Azaro's father how much he owed, after praying for his mother's recovery. Azaro's father followed the creditors outside into the courtyard and insulted them. The mother hallucinated throughout the night. Her breathing slowed and Azaro saw a blue mist rise above her. He ran to Madame Koto's, thinking his mother was dying. Koto managed to revive her and she was feeling better the next day. Madame Koto spoke to Azaro's father and told him that she would forgive him the money he owed her if she would let Azaro sit in her bar several minutes every day. Azaro's father agreed. Koto considered Azaro good luck. After having a few drinks, however, Azaro's father flew into a rage at the creditors, who were still harassing him. He beat two of them senseless.

When Azaro went to walk home, he became lost in the forest. Even though there was one straight path connecting his house to the bar, the trails seemed to lead everywhere. A man with a jumbled face kept passing by. Azaro even met himself on the path and asked himself questions. Then he finally found his way out, only to see his father arguing with the two beaten creditors and the landlord. The landlord arbitrated the "meeting" and decided that Azaro's father owed them ten pounds and had to pay them in a week or move out. They went home and Azaro's father talked angrily of becoming a boxer. His mother explained that Azaro's father had previously boxed, but had had a curse put on him and stopped fighting. Azaro's father said that Azaro's grandfather was a head priest, the priest of roads. Azaro's father was supposed to have succeeded him, but he did not.

## Book 1 Analysis

Emerging as a powerful spirit child, Azaro takes some time to realize his full powers, but other magical people see his potential immediately. Some try and give him advice and help, while others try to abduct him to use his power. Azaro does not receive much direction from his own father, who should have known better than to expect Azaro wouldn't have powers, especially given the circumstances of his birth. His parents couldn't afford the "spirit severing" ceremony that the herbalists wanted to give to clear Azaro, so his entanglements with the "other side" were pretty much a foregone conclusion from the start.

Azaro also finds out that his powers are genetic; it runs in the family. As the grandson of the priest of roads, Azaro has great potential. His father knows very many things about magic, but has not followed in his father's footsteps. Azaro's father has spurned the spiritual life for the most part, by deciding to live his life on his own terms, originally through boxing and now through manual labor. Azaro's father is very suspect about Azaro's stories of ghosts and spirits. He either doesn't believe him, or chooses not to let Azaro think that he believes him. For someone well versed in the spirit world, Azaro's father doesn't give his son much leeway when he comes under pressure from spirit





forces that take him away from home. Constantly throughout the story, Azaro's father doubts his son, when his own experience should have told him better.

Character growth is significant for Azaro throughout the course of the story, but even more so for Azaro's father. Originally, he tries to work himself through the frustrations of his life by relying on drinking and violence (without direction) as an outlet. His character learns that there is much more to life and he experiences much change as a result of his son.

# Book 2

## Book 2 Summary

Madame Koto was a very mysterious person; Azaro realized this the more time he spent with her at the bar. She performed rituals in the backyard, planting pebbles in the earth, or digging them up. She was determined that Azaro would attract customers for her. Koto treated all customers with respect; though there were very few to begin with. Azaro would spend his time swatting flies away from the palm wine. Women would stop by in the afternoon on the way to the market and he learned much from eavesdropping on their conversations. Azaro didn't work well with customers; usually he would look around for Koto when someone came in and asked for service. Then there was a day when three strange men came in the bar. Each looked odd and had six fingers on each hand. When Azaro came back with Madame Koto, they were gone.

Azaro's mother had recovered, but she was very sad. She spent most of her time chasing rats out from the cupboards. Azaro's father was always out working. The family cut back on food and Azaro was hungry most of the time. At night, he could hear the rats chewing under the house. Azaro's father came home and complained that everyone was talking of politics since the election was drawing near. Some employers would not let him work unless he supported the right party. Azaro's mother would go out in the mornings barefoot to sell her wares in the marketplace.

Azaro would still go to Koto's empty bar everyday after school. Some days she would feed him. A madman attacked Azaro in the bar one day and Koto chased him out, but not before he had urinated all over the floor and broken furniture. Madame Koto shook her head and wondered if Azaro was only bringing bad luck. To remedy the situation, she took a fetish (small ornament) and hung it over the doorway to her bar. That night, many new clients came in. Azaro couldn't help staring at a particular cross-eyed man, but Madame Koto could see nothing wrong with his eyes. Azaro had some palm wine and saw spirits rising from the floor and studying the fetish. Koto had a very good night, but everyone was "different" somehow. She gave Azaro some food to take home to his family. His mother warned him to be wary of Madame Koto.

There came a day when the landlord and the creditors confronted Azaro's mother about the unpaid rent (Azaro's father was not home from work yet). She said they had most of the money, but not all. They argued late into the night, until the creditors finally took furniture out of the house to repay their debts. Azaro's father finally came home drunk and mumbled about joining the army so he could shoot people. His temper blew when he realized the table was gone. He screamed at the creditors and insulted them until most of the village was awake. One of the creditors guiltily snuck the table back to their house. Azaro's father called him a rat and threw his money on the ground. He then paid the other two creditors and collapsed in bed.



People at the compound stopped talking to Azaro's family. His mother got a stall at the market to sell her goods. The landlord threatened that they would be kicked out if Azaro's father repeated his performance with the creditors. Later that day, when Azaro went to the bar, he found it locked up. Madame Koto was in the back making soup and she told him she had put devils in it. Azaro went to wander the forest, waiting for her to open up for the evening. He noticed the forest was shrinking; the trails were growing wider and the big trees were further in the woods. There were workmen about, as well as house foundations and piles of brick.

That night, the bar was full of strange-looking people. Azaro noticed some of the bizarre traits: no teeth, albino, small eyes, very short and tall, long necks, three fingers. Two albino men with dark glasses tried to take Azaro with them and he had to fight them off. They then offered to buy him from Madame Koto. She refused. The night wore on, with the strange group eating and drinking so much that Koto started running low on supplies. Then a tall man at the bar also threatened to take Azaro. When Koto announced she was closing up, the patrons simply vanished in an instant, with the exception of the two albinos and a woman.

When Azaro was distracted, they threw him in a sack and carried him out with them. They carried him for a long time, until they crossed a river and the sack started filling with water. Azaro used a small knife to cut a hole in the sack and escape. He ran through a marsh until he was away from them. He was lost and wandered for hours. People floated by and trees spoke. Azaro finally collapsed under a tree and slept until dawn. He ran through the streets; the roads changed and teased him. At last, he saw a two-legged dog that led him through the forest until he recognized home.

Azaro's parents had been worried and were furious. His father whipped him with a cane and he fell asleep after the beating, only to awaken with a fever. His mother treated him for malaria and it took several days for him to recover. She warned Azaro to be careful because the road could swallow people. Azaro told everyone he had gotten lost, but he didn't mention the abduction.

Politicians came to the village with a van and a loudspeaker to ask for votes. They were the party of the rich and made promises about electricity, roads and schools. The landlord was with them on the van, as well as several thugs. They started handing out free powered milk to the crowd. There was a frenzy to get to the van. The thugs started hitting and lashing out at the crowd. The photographer came out and took pictures of the event and there was powered milk everywhere.

That night Azaro's father came home and spoke of being harassed by political thugs at work. He refused to support the party of the rich. Azaro saw a dragonfly materialize out of the milk on the cupboard and fly off. His father was furious when he heard the milk came from the party of the rich and threw it out. Then, the next day, people in the compound began to get sick. Men and women threw up everywhere and the toilets soon were overflowing with waste. Azaro's family was the only one not affected. He told his father of the dragonfly he saw rising from the milk and Azaro's father realized that the



milk was bad. He ran through the compound yelling about poisoned milk. Soon piles of white powder filled the streets. It came to be known as "The Day of the Politician's Milk."

The next time Azaro went to Madame Koto's, the same freakish crowd was there, but their strange attributes had switched between them. They now intermingled with normal looking people. At one point the bar became very crowded and again, they attempted to abduct Azaro. He fled from them, but could not escape the bar. The bizarre people seemed to multiply before his eyes. Azaro realized that they were spirits and that the fetish above the doorway had been attracting them. He grabbed the fetish and ran into the night, the spirits in pursuit. Madame Koto was angry and chased him as well. He ran through the village and tried many times to hide, but found the spirits could smell him. Azaro ran deep into the forest and it got dark and began to rain. He finally evaded his pursuers, found a clearing and buried the fetish. Then Azaro went home and listened to the oncoming storm.

Over the next few days, Azaro did not go back to Madame Koto's. He wandered around the village after school. The photographer would display his pictures in a cabinet in front of his studio. There were shots of Azaro's "homecoming," as well as the milk riot; it was the local newspaper of a crude kind.

Azaro would also wander into the forest to play. The trees were becoming even more thinned out. He ran errands for some of the construction workers, who paid him in pennies. He wandered further, into the city center itself. There was traffic everywhere; it was a frantic place. He saw men straining to carry large sacks of garri and salt. Azaro was shocked to see his father straining to carry two large bags of salt. The loading men insulted him as he staggered along. Azaro called to him and he looked ashamed and ran off. His father didn't come home until the next morning, when he flew into a rage and threw food. He hit his wife, but then they embraced and fell asleep together. Azaro's father asked her for forgiveness.

That evening, the "party of the rich" van returned. The loudspeakers claimed that the party of the poor had been responsible for the bad milk. An angry crowd quickly surrounded the van and began to shout insults. The photographer took pictures. Thugs attempted to subdue the crowd, but were quickly overwhelmed. They were beaten and burned with boiling water; then the van was overturned and burned. The police arrived, but they were too late to do anything, as the crowd had already broken up. The burnt van stayed in the middle of the street; people soon stopped noticing it. The photographer was arrested and returned from prison a hero. Some of his pictures were featured in a national newspaper and he became locally famous. He stopped by Azaro's house and had dinner. Azaro's father predicted that trouble was coming.

The next day there were three strange men in suits looking at the van. They all had dark glasses and waited for the photographer, but he was warned about them and fled. Azaro went to the market to look for his mother. His eyes soon hurt from looking at the mass of faces. The crowds pushed him and he ducked under a stall to rest. He took some food from an old man and began to feel light headed. Azaro heard voices coming from the moon. Then he was back in the marketplace, wandering through the stalls. He saw



thugs threatening a woman if she would not swear allegiance to their party. Then he finally found his mother and they walked home together. It was late and Azaro's father was furious that his dinner was not ready.

Azaro had a vision of the photographer being beaten up by the three men in glasses. The next day, he went to the photographer's cabinet and knocked on the studio door. The photographer was there, hiding and very worried about the three men. Azaro left for a few minutes to return to see the three men smashing the photographer's cabinet and breaking into his studio. He followed and found the studio empty. There were footprints leading to the marsh.

That night, there was a vengeful crowd outside. They ran through the streets, shouting. Villagers and thugs ran amok. Azaro saw the dead rising up and joining the crowd, so he hid in the burned out van. Then there was a gunshot and pandemonium erupted. The thugs dominated the streets for a while and then the villagers prevailed. In the morning, there were several wounded in the compound. The thugs were gone and the photographer was feared dead. The violence was soon forgotten, especially since there had been no one there to record it on film.

## Book 2 Analysis

The villagers have a very short attention span when it comes to most issues. When they became sick with the milk and were attacked by government thugs, they soon forgot and basically let things go back to normal. They wanted more than anything else to live a normal life, with food on the table and no violence. The photographer was the one force that made them remember and become angry about how they were being treated. The thugs realized this and targeted the photographer for that same reason. For good reason it seems; once the photographer was not around to "document" events in the village, the events seemed to lose their reality soon after happening. People were more apt to forgive and forget, or just wonder if the event actually took place at all. The fact that spiritual dreams were so real and often interpreted as such made many people wonder what was "real" (physical) and what was a dream. This line was very blurry for many of the characters, especially Azaro.

The thoughtlessness and shortsightedness of the politicians is also shown here. They have no intention of keeping their promises. They show up just before the election and will disappear immediately afterwards, not to be seen again until the next political season. Politicians hope the poor, ignorant villagers can be bought by giving out powdered milk and other trivial goods. Votes are seen as being cheap, as are lives. Visits are planned for optimum coverage and minimum effort. Vans travel quickly and loudspeakers take away any chance at making a real "person to person" connection with voters. The politicians did not consider the residents of the ghetto worthy of this much effort.

There is a theme of good versus evil starting to develop at this point in the story. The villagers are simply trying to live their lives in peace. The politicians and their thugs want



to control them. The dividing lines are being drawn (although loosely). Evil is taking place in the form of violence against people who support rival parties. The photographer becomes the good "hero" somewhat by default just for documenting day-to-day life. Azaro's father correctly predicts (in the photographer's presence) that trouble is coming. It turns out to be correct, as the photographer shortly disappears with signs of a struggle.



# Book 3

## Book 3 Summary

Azaro's mother wasn't doing well at the marketplace because the thugs were becoming more brazen in harassing her. Instead of just arguing as they had before, they now posed as customers and stole her merchandise. Azaro's father always looked exhausted when he returned from work. Azaro imagined himself flying above his body while his mother and father slept. One night he even flew through the roof and into the sky. He was suddenly awakened by a knock on the door. It was the photographer. He had been beaten badly when returning from the swamp, where he had been hiding. He promised to bring poison to kill the rats that were clearly audible in the cupboards.

Later that day, six large thugs fought in the street for supremacy. They were all strong and well built. They flailed and hit at each other in the hot sun of the afternoon. They kicked, they threw stones and they used clubs to assail each other. Villagers watched the strange event. As two men lay bleeding on the ground, three other men ganged up on the fourth. Soon it was over and the victors danced up the street. They could have represented the party of the rich or the poor, no one knew.

The landlord came to demand his rent. He brought three large men with him. Azaro's father came home with the rent money but looked exhausted. He had a bad odor about him that was new to Azaro. Azaro's father was despondent for days. The photographer visited late on some nights. Madame Koto also visited and asked Azaro to return to her bar. His mother agreed to allow it.

The bar had been updated and there was a new sign and a carpenter was working on the bar itself. Azaro saw a girl in the bar that Madame Koto could not see. When a customer came in, the spirit would blow out the match every time Azaro tried to light it. He yelled at her and his customer became irate. Azaro's father came in and argued with the carpenter about politics. Madame Koto had to break them up.

Later, thugs chased a man into the bar. Azaro helped him out the backdoor and delayed the large men pursuing him. Azaro looked out later to see that they had caught the man despite his help. The man pleaded that he was innocent. With a crowd watching, the thugs took the man off into the woods. Later they returned to the bar alone and told Madame Koto that they would bring her business since she was a supporter of theirs. Koto seemed delighted and went out of her way to serve the men. They became drunk and intimidated her regular customers until they left the bar. Madame Koto did nothing to stop this. The thugs tipped Koto well and promised to get her electricity. A fight developed when the carpenter attempted to get a drink and the thugs told him to leave. There was a fire and Madame Koto went into a rage and attacked everyone in sight-clearing out the bar in minutes. Azaro sat with her later at the bar and realized that a transition was taking place. Things would never be the same again.



When Azaro returned home, his mother showed him machete marks and blood on their door. Someone had put out their cooking fire as well. They feared the other compound residents were angry with them. His mother talked about death and Azaro had a vision of her actually dying. He panicked and fell into a deep depression. He felt his third eye opening in the center of his forehead and his heart burning.

The photographer returned in good spirits. He said he was moving soon and ate some garri. He claimed to have powers that allowed him to become invisible and fly to the moon. He also talked about killing the rats. Azaro fell asleep to be awakened by his mother's screams. His father had six rats by the tail. They were all dead except one, which was still twitching. The bodies were everywhere: on Azaro's mat, by the wall and in Azaro's father's boot. His mother swept them out and Azaro put them in a large box and carried them down by the van. She then disinfected the place and they ate. A man, who said that the landlord was raising the rent, on their family only, interrupted them. Azaro's father was devastated. He talked about life and wicked people and made a scheme of asking Madame Koto to loan him the money.

Azaro went to the bar and found that it had been further updated. It was quite busy for the afternoon, but the clientele was new. Azaro recognized one of the customers as the poisoned milk distributor. The man yelled at Azaro and Madame Koto referred to him as a chief. One of the other men suggested Koto should hire girls to replace Azaro. The man then chased Azaro outside and he fled into the forest. He watched the new construction in the heat of the day. Then there were great trees and images. An old man approached, but never appeared to come any closer. Azaro slept and woke up to find a frightening mask. He stared through it to see a different world. It was suddenly dark and there were snake dogs, musical celebrations and colored birds. He took the mask off and the world returned to normal. He went into the clearing where he had buried the fetish of Madame Koto's. A tree had grown in the exact spot. Azaro climbed it. When he put the mask on again, the world changed drastically. A giant was coming. The tree became a wild bucking animal beneath him. He had difficulty taking off the mask because it had adhered itself to his skin. He flew off the beast, which crushed the mask in its departure.

Azaro went back towards the bar to see Madame Koto counting a huge amount of money. When she saw him she became very defensive and accused him of being a thief. She was mean and spoke of replacing him with others. Azaro felt dislike towards her for the first time. She bragged of how good the future was going to be for her. Azaro sat until his father came in. Azaro's father didn't have the courage to ask her for money. When her usual new customers entered they asked Azaro's father which party he supported. They told him to leave when he wouldn't answer and he challenged them to a fight outside. When he went out with Azaro, the men locked him outside. He called them cowards and went home with his son.

Azaro's mother was still cleaning up dead rats when they returned home. She said that they would need to cut down on food to afford the increased rent. Azaro's father would not hear of it. He told Azaro the story of the "King of the Road." The king would eat travelers who did not make food sacrifices to him. People set out to poison him and it





made the king go mad and eat himself until only his stomach was left. The stomach became part of all of the roads and the king was still out there waiting and still hungry. Azaro made a road sacrifice of some dead rats. The photographer returned and showed Azaro his pictures. Some people were dead in them. Azaro told him that his rat poison had worked well. The photographer was gone by morning.

## Book 3 Analysis

As far as the author is concerned, there is basically no real difference between the parties of the rich and poor. They both lied constantly and tried unfairly to influence people to vote for them. The political season brought much overall confusion to the settlement. Many times, fights would break out over politics, but no one really knew what side they were on. Both parties were corrupt, brutal and made basically the same promises.

An element of foreshadowing takes place in the bar when Azaro has the thought that things will never be the same again. There was a specific instance when Madame Koto chose greed and power over what was right. Azaro correctly sensed the power struggle shifting to support the thugs. From that point on, Madame Koto's bar would be the place of "the enemy." The old, friendly neighborhood bar was gone.

It is revealing of Madame Koto's character that when given the chance to gain power and further her own interests, she quickly turns on her old "friends." This occurs when she has a clear choice in sticking up for her regulars at the bar who had been going there for years, but they weren't rich. She stands by and allows these people to be run out of "their" bar by the political thugs. This ends with even Azaro's father being banned from her bar. She showed that she wasn't afraid to choose sides and even take on clients physically in the past, but she makes the choice in this instance to do nothing. It is not clear in the story if she experiences any guilt, other than that she continues to help Azaro's family throughout the novel.



# Book 4

## Book 4 Summary

Azaro went to visit Madame Koto less and less. She grew detached from the community and grew in size as well. The photographer's smashed glass cabinet had disappeared and the garbage by the van had been set on fire. The black, acrid smoke filled the neighborhood with its harsh fumes. Azaro visited the bar and found it updated again and he didn't recognize any of the patrons. Women and men danced closely in arousal. Azaro was frightened when he noticed the gramophone machine, as he saw it as a spirit box. The scene grew more chaotic. A midget woman asked Azaro to marry her. He ran to the door, where he finally saw Madame Koto. She wore a wig and asked him to help with drinks. Azaro went back in and saw spirits arriving. Then a bird flew into the bar and became entangled in a woman's hair. She panicked until Koto finally freed the bird. The men left and the women stayed.

Azaro wandered the thinning woods with other children. He saw workers hooking up electricity. They saw a pale-skinned man giving orders to the workers and stared. The man became angry and sent workers to chase and beat them. Azaro disliked the white man and called on the wind to punish him; it blew away the umbrella that had been protecting him from the intense sun. The workers chased the children away again.

Through his mother's friends, Azaro learned that the women who worked in Madame Koto's bar were prostitutes. It was also rumored that she would soon be rich, with electricity and a car. They were worried that Azaro's father was late to return home. Azaro told his mother about the white man and she told him a story. She said in the beginning that white people came to their land and were taught how to count and understand the stars. Knowledge was shared; but then the whites forgot and came back with guns to take slaves. She said not all of them were bad but some of them wanted to own the world. She closed the story by adding that beauty and justice would someday rule the world. The story was interrupted when a mad-looking woman came out of the forest. Azaro's father was behind her. He said that a group of drunken men had tried to kill him because of his politics. Only the woman made them flee.

The rainy season bursts upon the village with a vengeance. The children ran naked in the rain, but soon all of the streets were mud. The wind blew the rain sideways and thunder roared. Bungalows collapsed. A blind man at the end of the street "saw" Azaro and chased him. The man acted crazed, shouting that he could use Azaro's eyes to see. Azaro ran until he found himself at the new construction site. Much of the new tarmac had been washed away and the new electric poles appeared to be burnt. The white man was standing on a log giving orders. Suddenly a pit opened up next to him and he screamed as he slowly slid in. The earth enveloped him and the log rolled over to completely cover where he had disappeared. Three workers went after him and also disappeared. "The pit that had helped create the road had swallowed them all."



Azaro wandered to a building where a woman bathed and fed him. He slept on a bed under a giant mosquito net. He felt the presence of the "ancient mother" who stared at him intently. She spoke to him through the objects in the room. Azaro saw snails on the walls, then slept and woke up to find the room deserted. He walked to Madame Koto's. The prostitutes were arguing and bragging. Madame Koto asked him why he had touched her snails. Azaro said that he hadn't. Then Azaro's father came in and argued with the prostitutes about politics. As Azaro's father drank, a three-headed spirit entered the bar and looked at Azaro. A voice told him to shut his eyes. He obeyed and found that he could still see. The spirit walked around the bar staring at people.

Azaro's father recognized a man who entered as one of his attackers and called him a coward. The prostitutes yelled at Azaro's father and he challenged the man to fight outside. The man then made threats and Azaro's father hit him so fast that the man seemed to disappear out into the night. The women attacked Azaro's father and it took him some time to pull them off. By then five men had surrounded Azaro's father, with the women encouraging them. He beat two of them quickly and disappeared into a pile of muddy bodies. The spirit came to Azaro again and told him that he was to follow to the spirit world. Promises had been made that needed to be adhered to. Azaro refused to follow and the spirit told him that his spirit friends would send a four-headed spirit to come for him next. Meanwhile, Azaro's father was menacing his opponents with a board. The men fled and his father went back into the bar. The women jumped on him and took his "weapon." He went outside and the group stoned them. They then retreated into the bar until the crowd left.

Azaro's father confronted Madame Koto with the fact that her friends and employees had attacked him. She said nothing and Azaro's father cursed her, saying terrible things would happen to her. He said they would never set foot in the bar again.

## Book 4 Analysis

As an infant, Azaro had made a promise with the spirits to return (so they would let him live) and they never forgot about it. They kept interfering in his life and pressuring him to keep his promise. One of their most successful methods was to come to Azaro when he was having a difficult time with his parents, telling him that he could live peacefully with them. When that didn't work, they tried taking him by force with stronger and stronger creatures (three-headed, four-headed, etc.). Eventually Azaro's father goes up against the strongest of them all, the seven-headed spirit.

The white foreman had no respect for the land and no respect for nature. He also did not care about the local customs. He also killed a lizard, which was considered bad luck. His arrogance finally sealed his fate. Azaro witnessed him being eaten by the King of the Road. In this case, the road claimed a powerful sacrifice indeed. It was ironic that the men that build the roads thought they were the real kings. They were mistaken and ultimately became part of the road itself.



The "third eye" is considered to be the eye to look into the spirit world and into one's self. When Azaro's eye finally opened up, it made him a much more powerful person. It wasn't a physical eye that the ordinary people could see, but a mystical hidden eye. He found by talking to the three-headed spirit that he could close his physical eyes, but still see through his third eye.



# Book 5

## Book 5 Summary

The rain poured down for two weeks. The ceiling in Azaro's house leaked to the point that his mother used all of her pots and pans to hold the water. The pans would overflow and the holes in the roof became so bad that Azaro could not sleep on the floor. The water overflowed the streets and poured into their room from the doorway. The wetness was everywhere and they were cold all of the time. Azaro was often punished at school because his books were wet.

Azaro was caught in a storm outside and blown into the yard of the crazed, blind man. The man again commanded Azaro to let him see with his eyes. Azaro felt himself floating and his eyes burned. He ran away and made his way home. Azaro's father had decided to train to be a boxer. He sent Azaro out for a drink of ogogoro. On the way back, spirits threw objects at him and teased him until he threw a stone back and broke the window of the blind man. His mother noticed he had spilled some of the ogogoro on himself and became angry. Then the blind man came to the door and accused Azaro of breaking his window. Azaro's father offered to pay for it and became furious when Azaro said that spirits had taunted him. His mother hit Azaro and he sat on the bed until he fell asleep. When Azaro's father took the carpenter to the blind man's house and was humiliated he came home full of rage. He beat Azaro savagely with his belt until Azaro went numb and stopped feeling the pain of the beating.

Azaro refused to eat and withdrew into himself. By the third day of his fast, he "began to leave the world." Azaro didn't care anymore. He saw his parents talking to him from very far away; they didn't have the power to frighten him anymore. He retreated further to punish them. The three-headed spirit joined him on the fourth day. It beckoned for him to follow since his parents were treating him badly. In his anger, the spirit made sense to Azaro. He followed the spirit down a large green road. The trees spoke in different languages and the road started flowing backwards against their travel.

They came to a valley with ever-changing colors. Azaro saw his father's face close to his and moved onwards. He saw figures working on the road. The spirit explained that they would never finish building it. He explained the meaning of Heaven. Azaro saw his father shouting at him and it materialized as a storm in his spirit world. His mother wept and some of the houses flooded in the valley. Warriors attacked them and Azaro shouted angrily that they would never finish their road. There was thunder as the gods became angry that Azaro had disclosed their secret. They created a crevasse in Azaro's path. The spirit took Azaro to fly over the blackness and Azaro realized he didn't want to go on.

Azaro saw his mother. They continued and he saw a lizard with the face of the blind man playing an accordion. He chased the lizard and broke the instrument. They walked onwards and upwards and approached a great river. The spirit explained that there was



no return from the great river. Azaro's father was leaning over Azaro and talking gently. The spirit had summoned the ferrywoman and a fight ensued. Azaro's father had an herbalist with him and cut a chicken and let it bleed on Azaro. As he did this, the spirit let out a scream and died. Azaro woke up and his parents were elated. He recuperated by eating soft food and everyone stared at him closely. Azaro's father seemed happier. Azaro felt reborn and saw the world differently. The rainy season finally came to a close. It was rumored that the old blind man had a dream where a lizard chased him and destroyed his accordion.

## Book 5 Analysis

Azaro had the ability and knowledge that he could return to the spirit world to "live" (and physically "die") at any time. He made the active decision to bear out life's difficulties despite the easy way out that was always available. But when he was badly beaten by his parents, he experimented with leaving just to spite them. This proved to be somewhat reckless, because he was nearly unable to return to the living. His father and herbalists had to intervene on his behalf to get him back. During his voyage Azaro saw people that were linked strongly to the spirit world, manifested as creatures along his path. Even during his spiritual voyage where he was far away mentally, Azaro would still see his parents talking and pleading with him. They were physically close to him, but in actuality Azaro was the equivalent of a world (or several worlds) away.

There was also a very real symbolism between the actions of Azaro's parents and what happened in the spirit world with him. When his mother cried, it materialized in the spirit world as a rainstorm that actually washed away houses. Her tears were amplified to torrents of real water. A similar event happened with his father. His anger caused a storm to unleash itself in Azaro's "world." His physical emotion caused turbulence in the spirit realm. The ceremony with Azaro's father and the herbalist also coincided with the battle, which took place between the three-headed spirit and the ferrywoman. As the ceremony proceeded, the spirit started getting damaged (losing heads). When the ceremony concluded, the spirit "died."



# Book 6

## Book 6 Summary

Azaro started feeling better and getting his strength back. He spent much of his time sitting in a tree, where he had an excellent vantage point overlooking both the blind man's home and Madame Koto's bar. The bar had electricity now and cars would stop by often. Madame Koto saw Azaro and told him to come down. Azaro refused. After she went away, he went back home. Azaro's father was practice boxing by hitting a bag full of rags on the wall. He switched to shadow boxing after the neighbor complained about the noise. Azaro's father became obsessed, jabbing at anything he could find: the close line, his shadow, even mosquitoes. His appetite grew immensely and Azaro and his mother had to eat less. She commented sadly to Azaro, "poverty is driving him mad."

Azaro's father wrapped his hands in cloth and punched at walls. His manner changed; he seemed somehow calmer but more intense at the same time. Neighbors started following him when he shadowboxed outside. He "fought" at night when he tired of having an audience. Azaro felt the roads were safe at night when his father was on his rounds. He called himself Black Tyger.

One night when he was training outside in the darkness, Azaro saw small lights hovering near his father. They seemed to be watching him fight. Another night, there was a pair of floating yellow eyes that watched him, as well as the lights. They followed Azaro's father as he trained. When Azaro went over to where the eyes were, they disappeared.

The next night, the eyes and lights returned as his father trained. The eyes went into the swamp and a man came out. He challenged Azaro's father and declared that his name was Yellow Jaguar. Azaro couldn't see the man's eyes. They sparred back and forth until Azaro's father savagely released a combination of hooks, crosses and upper cuts on the man. The Yellow Jaguar staggered and fell back into the swamp. There was no sound for a minute, then he returned with a new energy; this time his eyes glowed yellow. He pounded into Azaro's father relentlessly, seeming to know what he would do next. He countered his every move effortlessly. The man appeared to be everywhere, like a blur. Azaro's father staggered and absorbed the blows. He cried out.

Azaro's father then changed his style to a more simple form and started swaying back and forth. Azaro cried out to him, "use your power!!" With that, he counter-attacked with a sudden rage. The Yellow Jaguar staggered and howled. The light in his eyes dimmed and finally went out. He fell backwards into the ground and there was a strange thud. The body had disappeared, leaving only an imprint in the ground. Azaro's father was dazed, but suddenly frightened. He said that a man named Yellow Jaguar had been a famous boxer in the area, but had died years ago. Azaro realized that his father had beaten a boxer from the spirit world. They went home in wonder.



It took Azaro's father six days to recover. His face healed in half that time, but he seemed to still be fighting inside. He would stare and smile like an idiot, then would jerk on the bed and drool. Madame Koto came to visit. She had grown even bigger. The other visiting neighbors were cold to her and she became angry and left. Her support of the rich party had made her unpopular among the villagers. The blind man even came to pay his respects by playing his accordion. The awful music seemed to make his father's suffering worse. The room began to stink. Azaro's father struggled to sit and collapsed when the old man finally stopped playing. The photographer took a picture.

Azaro's father seemed to recover completely on the seventh day and continued his shadowboxing routine. He seemed very fuzzy on what had taken place during the previous fight and made Azaro repeat what had happened numerous times. His father was very angry that no one else had seen the fight but Azaro. He had an electrical presence about him. He would run through the compound training. A crowd would cheer him on, shouting "Black Tyger!" Locals began to talk about him more and more. Azaro and his mother ate less as his appetite grew. His father spent fewer hours at work and money became much more scarce. Azaro grew afraid for him. People would buy him drinks and he stayed out to all hours of the night.

Azaro was by the van one day when he saw a shadow that turned into a boy. The boy climbed onto the van and fought with Azaro when he tried to push him off. After their argument, they became friends. The boy's name was Ade. He had a large family and was scared of his parents. Because of this, he would never wander far from home with Azaro. They ran into Madame Koto in the woods and she gave several pound notes to Azaro. They both knew Azaro couldn't tell where the money really came from. She seemed very sad and Azaro couldn't understand why, since she had more wealth than anyone else in the village. His mother and father questioned him intensely about where he had found the money. Koto had given him more than he had realized. Azaro maintained he had found it in the bushes and stuck to the story. The family lived well for more than a month on the money.

On the day of the political rally, many people gathered at Madame Koto's place. The electric lights were a marvel of the neighborhood. She shrewdly raised her prices, even adding a fee just to enter the bar. Madame Koto had to have the rear door widened so her large bulk would fit. Her excessive jewelry clattered when she walked. Many cars would arrive nightly. Rumors abounded about her from the jealous villagers. It was said that she ate children and drank blood to keep herself young. Still, she prospered, even opening another bar on the other side of town.

A group of religious zealots blocked the entrance to her bar. The leader spoke of her evil and prayed. Many more people joined them and she had no customers that day. The next day, there was a larger crowd in front of her bar, but they became frustrated when she didn't open her doors. Different factions began to bicker amongst themselves and soon a full-scale melee was occurring. It began to rain and people ran everywhere. Only the head priest stayed and soon looked foolish in his soaked smock. When Madame Koto came out to give him an umbrella and he sheepishly took it, the crowd began to





jeer him. He left and it was later learned that the party of the poor had persuaded him to lead the protest.

Madame Koto bought a car and would careen around the neighborhood wildly. Mothers would pull their children indoors when they heard her motor. She kept trying, but never got the hang of operating the vehicle, so she hired a driver. People would gather around when she washed it. Her bar began to serve beer, which was considered "higher class" than palm wine.

Azaro's father now had to compete with the car for an audience. He challenged seven men to a street fight and easily beat all of them at once. His notoriety grew. He explained to Azaro that he would lie low for a while to let rumors grow. He would come home from work, cut through the crowds, then stay indoors until they got tired and left.

The party of the rich started up its campaign again. There were numerous vans, thugs and countless leaflets. They promised a huge political rally with musicians, gifts and even jobs available. Madame Koto's car was used exclusively by the party of the rich. Her driver liked to terrorize the children by almost running them over; only Ade was unafraid. The party of the poor also sent its own van through the neighborhood, making the same claims as the opposition party. Azaro assumed there would be violence, but it seemed that people had forgotten about the riots and the bad milk. Azaro's father was oblivious and it was almost hopeless for his mother to even try and talk to him. He told Azaro that he was "beginning to see things for the first time." Azaro spent much time with him.

One day, a van pulled next to Azaro's home and blared music. Azaro's father went out and physically stopped the driver from playing the music. Then a group of thugs came out and the largest one announced that he was the infamous Green Leopard, a former armed robber and world boxing champion contender. Merchants converged on the scene. Sami, the betting shop owner, started collecting odds. They were heavily in favor of the Green Leopard. Azaro's father annoyed the crowd by not showing himself for some time. He shrewdly gave Azaro all their money to bet on himself.

Azaro's father finally came out and looked puny compared to his opponent. He announced he had "no weight" when asked and the Green Leopard laughed. The two men hopped around, sizing each other out. Azaro's father hit him fast and drew blood, but the Green Leopard counterattacked with a round of punches. Azaro's father came back and knocked him down; he looked strong and calm. When the Green Leopard would rush him, Azaro's father would simply step aside. The Green Leopard was pummeled savagely, but he would not fall.

Then the blind man distracted Azaro's father and the Leopard got in a punch that sent him flying into the crowd. The Green Leopard then went berserk and started throwing women and children out of his way to get at him. He caught him and pounded him without mercy. Azaro's father was stumbling and almost unrecognizable, until he staggered and simply disappeared. People were stunned. Suddenly, he came out of the swamp and stood before the Green Leopard in the ring. He told him that to kill him the



Leopard would have to find him first. Azaro finally succeeded in hitting the old man with a lump of eba and he left. His father looked beaten and the Leopard went in slowly to finish him off. At that moment Azaro's father screamed and countered his opponent with a blur of punches. The Green Leopard fell and was out cold. His followers carried him away. The crowd was shamed because many locals had not put their money on Azaro's father. Azaro's father carried Ade and Azaro to the betting shop where Sami paid up (after a slight prodding by Azaro's father). His father didn't collapse until he was back in his room.

Azaro's father slept two straight days, then began howling and jumping frantically on the third. He broke many things in the small room. Azaro's mother brought three women into the room to help him, one of which was Madame Koto. They said he was in the land of fighting ghosts and they themselves fought mental battles to bring him back. Azaro's father woke up and fled from the house with everyone following. The women appeared to change shape as they ran into the darkness after him. They finally caught him and led him back to the house. His father shocked the women by saying that he had been fighting a seven-headed spirit who wanted Azaro. Azaro's grandfather had attacked the spirit and cut off two of its heads. The priest of roads had freed Azaro's father by taking his place.

Azaro's father was back to his own self the next day (with the exception of his battered face). He was euphoric, talking about roofing the ghetto, building food stores for the poor and running for political office. He wandered around the compound talking to people at random. He was very idealistic in his goals, envisioning how his new government would run. Azaro's father spent his winnings buying classic books like *Arabian Nights* and the Bible. Azaro would read and his father would explain the difficult parts. His passion began to wear more on and Azaro and his mother. He would explain his political plans to them. He tried unsuccessfully to organize the prostitutes. Beggars arrived and began to follow him. Azaro's father decided to try and learn from Madame Koto. His wife protested, but gave in when he explained, "where there's politics, there's money." Azaro's father was different and much more subtle than before. His madness began to make sense. There was a strategy to it all.

Azaro's father threw a party and invited selected people, but everyone showed up. He drank and boasted. The room filled with locals, beggars, thugs and even some wizards. A beggar family led by a beautiful girl named Helen arrived and asked for Azaro's father. He became drunk and began making speeches to the crowd. He spoke of the beggars as the true destiny of the world. The hungry crowd stopped listening and began to get rowdy. Pandemonium erupted and Madame Koto's drunken driver crashed the car after knocking Ade down. The man screamed and the party began to break up. It started to rain. Azaro saw blood leaking into the road and feared it would wake up.

## Book 6 Analysis

Azaro's father found his true "calling" through boxing. He used the violence and pain to channel his spirits to inner peace and tap into a great power. This power, plus the



recovery from the debilitating punishment he would take gave him a new insight into life. His life was never the same, in fact. It was said when he was younger that he could never follow his father as high priest because he was a boxer. In the end, he used boxing as a channel to the spirit world. This gave him physical reserves far beyond what a normal man would have. It allowed him to take on opponents physically stronger than he was-even to take on spirits.

Azaro's father traveled to new planes of existence, which allowed him to see the true moral dividing lines of the world very clearly. Right and wrong were clearly defined for the first time. He found that his earlier life of mindless labor would not quiet his mind. He had to find an outlet for his new energy and that became boxing and later politics. Once Azaro's father had a direction to take out all of his frustrations, he could not be slowed down. There is a clear-cut establishment at this point of the good versus evil theme. It is basically Azaro's family versus the politicians, thugs and Madame Koto; the villagers are merely bystanders. It is not a case of Azaro's father working hopelessly for the slight change of getting ahead, but him physically and mentally fighting a real opponent in a clear win or lose situation.



# Book 7

## Book 7 Summary

After the party, Azaro began to have more encounters with spirits. Azaro's father somehow kept the spirits away when they were together. The neighborhood was getting violent again. Madame Koto was having her car pushed to the repair shop when opposition thugs attacked her thugs. Azaro's father had a new toughness in his eyes. Azaro went back to Madame Koto's to "spy" on her for his father. Beggars chased him and followed him into the bar. They demanded Azaro and a fight broke out between the thugs and the beggars. Azaro had a vision that the five-headed spirit was coming. Azaro's father came in the bar. He said that his head was getting bigger and wanted to talk politics with Madame Koto. He had a vision of a new country. The beggars came in again but Azaro's father led them outside at Madame Koto's request.

Azaro's mother was crying when they came home; she had had a hard day at work. She said, "this life has not been good to me." Azaro's father and Azaro stayed up talking. Then Helen's beggars arrived. His mother screamed for them to get out, but Azaro's father said that they were messengers. The beggars left without saying a word and Azaro's mother slapped his father until she fell asleep in exhaustion.

Beggars were now living in an abandoned house and terrorizing the neighborhood. Locals were actively working to get them out. There was fighting between them and the locals. Azaro's father tried to get the beggars to clean up the streets. His efforts were mostly in vain.

Many men met at Madame Koto's that night. They were powerful and it was meant to be an exclusive party for them only. A tent was erected with lights to shelter them. Locals put on their best clothes and hovered near the tent. Beggars converged as well. Azaro's father was still trying to get them to help him clean up the streets. Villagers attacked him and then turned on the beggars. The beggars fled into the tent, only to be driven out by the thugs, who then turned on the villagers. Madame Koto begged the crowd to hold off so she would give them their own party. Azaro's father came back with some beggars. He had to beat several of the thugs, but they finally let him in.

Azaro followed and saw many ghosts. Azaro's father talked politics while politicians mingled with the prostitutes. There was more drinking and Azaro had a vision of the ocean. He woke up to see a female midget staring at him. She danced with him and Azaro saw that many of the politicians had goat legs and hoofs for feet. They were spirits disguised as human beings. The midget morphed into the four-headed spirit and Azaro found he couldn't let go. He dreamed and cried out for help. He called out to his mother and she came to him. Then Azaro saw Madame Koto pregnant with evil spirit children. She saw him staring at her stomach and hit him.



Madame Koto caught some beggars stealing food and made her bodyguards whip them. Azaro's father tried to intervene, but the bodyguards held him down. They began to whip Helen. Azaro's mother tried to stop them and left in disgust, shouting insults at Koto. His father suddenly threw off the thugs and went to help Helen. As the thugs surrounded him, someone yelled, "stop!"

A man in a white suit stepped up and hit Azaro's father so fast he didn't know what happened. It took several more hits for Azaro to convince him that the beating was real. Azaro's father thought he was back in the land of fighting ghosts. Sami came and started taking bets on the fight; they were heavily against Azaro's father. Azaro's father couldn't seem to touch the strange looking man. Azaro's father's face was horrific to see. The man would jerk and his father's head would fly back, as if the punch was faster than the eye.

Azaro realized that the blind man had been making a strange sound that was distracting his father. With Ade's help, they wheeled him out of the tent and into the forest. He screamed that wizards had him. When they got back to the tent, Azaro's father had regained his momentum. He grabbed his opponent's collar and ripped off his coat and then his pants. The man looked so inhuman and like an animal that the audience gasped. The man's eyes filled with fear. He scuffled with Azaro's father for another ten minutes before his father actually hit him so hard that his body flew outside the tent. The man wasn't moving and Azaro's father himself collapsed in complete exhaustion. The beggars carried Azaro's father home while the blind man came back after Azaro. He caught Ade instead and sent him into spasms by trying to "see through his eyes." Azaro got him to let go and he fled outside with Ade, who was still twitching. Behind them they heard a gust of wind and saw the tent blowing over before the lights went out.

Back at the house, Azaro's father looked to be in worse condition than ever before. Other than an occasional twitch, he didn't appear to even be alive. Ade was also delirious. He spoke of a wonderful change coming. Azaro slept and entered his mother's dream. She was chasing after Azaro's father, begging him not to leave. She yelled at Azaro to leave her dream. When they both awoke, Azaro realized that both of them had actually been in his father's dream. His mother said that they had to stay awake to bring back Azaro's father's spirit. She told stories to Azaro and Ade throughout the night. As dawn came, Azaro's father awoke, blurted out to "keep the road open," and then fell back to sleep. This time he snored and Azaro's mother was relieved.

Ade's father came and yelled at him for staying out all night. Azaro realized that Ade was tired of the suffering of the living and wanted to be with his spirit friends. They were both spirit children, but it was just that Ade wanted to join them, while Azaro fought against them to stay living. Ade walked out with no emotion.

## Book 7 Analysis

Azaro and Ade were "kindred spirits" of a sort. They both had strong connections to the spirit world. But Azaro loved life in the physical world and had to fight the temptations of



his spirit "friends" to stay in the world of the living. His temptations were many and it took considerable effort on his part to stay alive. Ade on the other hand, was tired of his life and would have preferred to go to the spirit world forever. When his father took him home, he looked close to giving up for good.

Many spirits liked to "live" in the material world and pretend to be alive. It gave them energy and made them feel strong. However, they also had a great wish to have their identities, as spirits, remain a secret. When unmasked, they would usually flee or become enraged. The man in the white suit became very ashamed when his "half-animal" spirit identity was revealed. It made him falter and lose his concentration, which gave Azaro's father the opportunity he needed. Most spirits needed to at least "appear" to be human and this one was no exception. There was also a magic that Ade had that would not work on someone wearing white. When Azaro's father unclothed the spirit, it lost that protection.

One gets the feeling that the forces of nature could act on the "good" side of the story. When Azaro's father defeats the spirit man in white, panic ensues for the thugs left over. Even Madame Koto becomes angry. With this loss in power of the evil side, a quick storm whips up and destroys Madame Koto's tent. Were the forces of nature just waiting for their chance?



## Book 8

### Book 8 Summary

While it rained outside, Azaro's father slept. The beggars made halfhearted attempts to pick up the garbage. Azaro's mother rationed the food more tightly. His father did not see the political quarrels outside, or the visitors who came to see him. He was "redreaming" the world, trying and trying again to make it right. Azaro would follow him sometimes into his dreams; Azaro's father couldn't see all the other dreamers in there with him, he thought he was alone. Azaro's mother preyed while his father ranged farther out into other realms. He lived out whole lives in other lands.

Meanwhile, Madame Koto grew more powerful. She bought up land and spoke of turning her bar into a hotel. Her dreams began to affect the energy of the villagers. Azaro understood that as his father fought for fairness, Madame Koto fought for power. The locals grew weaker from her efforts. As the political race expanded, wizards and witches took sides and battled each other in the spirit world. Bad dreams multiplied, as Koto became known as the "queen of the ghetto night." Azaro saw a dream where Madame Koto tried to take his power and was driven away by mythical creatures of justice.

Azaro's father then awoke suddenly on the third day and said that they were protected. They were on the fringe of a new age and had to be ready. It was harder to love than to die. They needed to fight not to become tyrants. The world was beautiful and if they understood time, then they couldn't be hurt by evil. He got up and they ate. He embraced his wife. A peace settled over the house. There was a good breeze and Azaro was almost shocked by the quiet. His mind was no longer troubled. His fear of time melted away and with it. Then it was another day and he was alone and he realized that the best part of life could be a dream.

### Book 8 Analysis

Azaro's father's greatest battle took place in his own head. He fought, lived, died, was born and repeated the process of living in various different lives in the "real" time span of two days. It begs the question as to what version of life was "real" in the truest sense of the word. Was the spiritual world merely a staging ground for physical birth, or the other way around? Could it be that physical life was the test for a genuine life in the spirit realm?

Another theme discussed by Azaro's father at the end of the story is awareness. People think they are helpless, but they have more power than they realize. Effort and the quest for knowledge are paramount to this. He made the statement that, "people are freer than they think." It describes an optimism that there are good things in the world and it can be a better place. People need to pay attention to the world around them. They

need to look, hear and most importantly, understand. In this specific case, he referred to the upcoming election. He said that the world he dreamed of could be real. It was up to the individual to make it better.





# Characters

## Azaro (Lazaro)

Azaro is a spirit child who has the power to see and communicate with ghosts, as well as foretell the future. He is a quiet boy who spends much time trying to understand how he is different from everyone else. He spends much of his time alone, exploring his world. He is quick witted, although sometimes thought of as slow due to his shyness. He is patient and often observes, rather than acts.

Azaro gets very little from school; he gains more from wandering around the village and learning by example. Azaro is small of stature, but brave and tough in reality. He faces many terrifying foes and manages to escape from his enemies numerous times. He also learns to love and respect his father, although the beatings he takes because of his father's temper almost cause him to leave the material world forever. He learns much from watching his father train to box men larger than himself. Azaro is descended from a long line of people linked to magic. His grandfather was the high priest of roads, a powerful figure in his time. Azaro's father teaches him about his history and who his grandfather was.

Azaro gradually experiments with his power. He can leave his body at will, mostly when sleeping and travel over his surroundings, or enter the spirit world itself. He learns at a young age that he cannot leave his body for long or he will be mistaken for dead. There was a point when his parents could have taken his powers away by cutting his ties to the spirit world, but they could not afford the ceremony. Azaro becomes friends with a boy named Ade who is also a spirit child.

## Azaro's father

Azaro's father is a stubborn, tough man who feels it is his lot in life to suffer. He works backbreaking jobs to support his family. He has a temper and does have episodes where he beats both his wife and his son. He is the son of a powerful spirit priest and has power which he does not take advantage of until late in the novel. He boxed as a young man, but had a curse put on him and had to stop. He also is very knowledgeable in the spirit arts. Azaro's father is a hard man, but he does love his family; he shows his emotion when Azaro almost doesn't return from the spirit world. He celebrates hard and likes to drink. Azaro's father is impulsive and gets the family into debt by throwing a large party that that he can't pay for. He also doesn't suffer fools gladly or hold in his opinions.

Azaro's father rediscovers his boxing talent and takes on a fighter from the spirit world. He realizes that relying on brute force isn't doing him any good and becomes very frustrated that he is working himself to death for no good reason. He is then forced to start using his mind instead. Azaro's father reaches deep inside himself and finds the



energy and will to defeat his opponent. When he recovers, he has a renewed passion for boxing and a desire to pursue politics. He sees a vision of a better world, with good winning out over evil. Azaro's father is in effect "born again" to be a smarter, wiser man at this point. He begins to pursue reading for the first time with Azaro's assistance. He becomes a seeker of knowledge. Even in the sport of boxing, he doesn't merely rely on his formidable strength. He learns to channel his energy, which is much to his success.

Azaro's father's final battle gives him an epiphany that shows him the optimistic future of the world. He sees that love is powerful and justice is possible. The message he shares is that people need to become aware of their surroundings and take responsibility for making their lives better. He realizes that educated, well-informed people have a real power that no political thug can take that away.

## Madame Koto

Madame Koto is a local businesswoman who has much experience with the world of spirits. Originally just greedy, but still sometimes helpful to Azaro's family, Koto is drawn in by the power of the party of the rich and becomes the embodiment of evil by the end of the novel. She grows in size and power throughout much of the story, until she is defeated in the end.

Madame Koto is a large, somewhat vain woman whose past is shrouded in mystery. She likes wearing lots of jewelry. Her age is not known, rumors persist that she is over a hundred years old. She performs small magical ceremonies daily. She also attracts spirits to her bar. When rich enough, she is the first in the neighborhood to buy a car, although she never learns to drive it properly.

Even though she is self-serving, Madame Koto has a good streak; she takes a liking to Azaro and helps out his family several times. She also forgives Azaro's father of his debts. Madame Koto helps Azaro's mother when she is sick and his father when he is in the land of fighting spirits. Madame Koto is very magically aware.

In the end, Madame Koto turned towards evil. She saw no moral lines when she let the cruel thugs take over her bar and went out of her way to please them. Once they plied her with money, she made her decision to cater to them. Azaro saw at one point that she was pregnant with evil spirit children. Koto also had no qualms about hiring prostitutes to please her new clients, even though they were reprehensible people. Koto also makes the decision to beat the beggar girl, Helen. She has to force her thugs to participate in the brutal event.

## The Photographer

The photographer is the first "hero" of the novel. He documents the brutality of the political thugs and is celebrated by the locals. At one point, his pictures become international and he is momentarily "famous." Unfortunately, this also draws the attention of the politicians, who try and make him "disappear." This attempt is not



successful, but does cause the photographer to spend much of his time hiding towards the end of the story.

Originally driven by profit, the photographer does grow to be more selfless and keeps his cause alive. This cause is to not let the politicians get away with their aggressions unnoticed. When the photographer stops publishing his pictures for a time, people forget the incidents with the political thugs. The photographer is beaten several times for his courage. He develops a kinship with Azaro's family, because they are also unpopular in the village.

## **Azaro's Mother**

Azaro's mother is a dutiful wife and mother. She is used to hard times and wonders why life keeps her family down. She is also sad because she sees old school friends doing considerably better than her. Her life is made more difficult because she supports the party of the poor and is constantly hassled by thugs from the rival political party. She is mostly submissive to her husband and sometimes mistreated. She does exert considerable influence on the family though and her husband always asks for forgiveness after losing his temper. For the most part, she is unappreciated. She grows both physically and mentally weary in spirit from everyday life.

Azaro's mother is also wise in the ways of the spirit world and worries constantly about the links her son has to it. She also educates Azaro by telling him many stories about culture and tradition. She is very resistant to change. When her husband begins boxing and talking politics, she becomes angry and confused, but eventually learns to accept his new passion.

## **The Landlord**

The landlord is a petty man who owns the primitive shelters used by many in the compound, including Azaro's family. He considers Azaro's father to be trouble, because he sticks up for himself and he threatens to evict the family several times. He becomes involved with the party of the rich at a low level, mostly just for his own self-interest. The landlord is basically a coward who only looks out for himself. He has no real compassion for the people who live in his slum, only in being paid his rent.

## **Blind Old Man**

Blind and slightly mad, he is an old sorcerer who lives just down the road from Azaro's home. Although physically blind, his other senses are greatly heightened. He tries to grab Azaro several times to "see through his eyes," and ends up getting hold of Ade instead. He appears to have the power to take over other people's senses. Ade is sent into convulsions in the brief time the old man grabs his arm, before Azaro forces him to release. The old man is not necessarily evil, but very mischievous. He distracts Azaro's



father more than once during his big battles. At one time, the fight goes against Azaro's father until Azaro and Ade stop the old man.

## The Green Leopard

The Green Leopard is the ghost of a fallen local boxer who takes on Azaro's father shortly after he begins training. He is an inhumanly strong creature that is originally "beaten" by Azaro's father before using his spiritual energy to "immunize" himself to further attack and emulate everything Azaro's father did. He forces Azaro's father to tap into his spiritual energy in order to finally defeat him. The Green Leopard is shocked to find that Azaro's father also has a source of spirit energy.

## The Yellow Jaguar

The Yellow Jaguar is an enormous, powerful fighter who is supported by the party of the rich. He takes on Azaro's father in a brawl, which causes him to lose control and attack the crowd of onlookers. Again, Azaro's father taps into his spiritual strength to finally defeat him. The Yellow Jaguar is a tool of the politicians. He is only useful to them until he loses his fight to Azaro's father.

The Jaguar's flaw is that he was a creature of force and nothing else. When tactics were changed on him, he was put at a disadvantage. Brute force failed him and he became furious and lost his composure when it started happening. Azaro's father was able to take advantage of this and wear him down.

## Ade

Azaro's only close friend towards the end of the novel is Ade. He is linked to the spirit world like Azaro and this bond keeps them close. Unlike Azaro, Ade finds the world too cruel to live in and wishes he could retreat to the spirit world. He is timid and lives in fear of his overbearing parents. At one point he does step up to assist Azaro and his father, but in return is punished and taken away by his own father.

Ade is a good person and he allies himself with Azaro and his father, as opposed to most of the other villagers. Ade is brave, but only to a point. His friendship is conditional on not upsetting his father.

## Helen

Helen is a beautiful beggar girl who Azaro becomes infatuated with. She stands out as a mildly deformed person in a group of largely deformed beggars. Helen is the leader of the small group. She takes to following Azaro's father around when he starts politicking. Helen is beaten at Madame Koto's insistence when she is caught stealing food at the great party.



# Objects/Places

## City center

This area is the traditional "downtown" area of a large village or city.

## Fetish

The fetish is a small, ornamental object.

## Kaoline

Kaoline is a white clay derivative used for various medicinal purposes, including an astringent.

## Dongoyaro

Dongoyaro is a native African drink made from the dongoyaro or neem oil tree.

## Ogogoro

West African gin made from ethanol is called Ogoro. It is usually locally produced or homemade in very small batches.

## Palm wine

Palm wine is fruit-based alcohol made from the syrup of the palm tree.

## Agbada

Agbada is a traditional West African gown synonymous with a type of "business" attire for men with social status. It is worn by the chieftains, who were the powerful men involved with the party of the rich in Madame Koto's bar.

## Garri

Garri is an African drink, which is a by-product of cassava, a root vegetable common to Africa and South America. It can also be made into a paste, which becomes eba (see below).



## **Eba**

Eba is a paste made from the cassava plant. It is an African staple food equivalent to rice or potatoes in other countries. It is the main carbohydrate source in a typical African diet.

## **Gramophone**

Gramophone is a record player. It is used to entertain guests in Madame Koto's bar. Azaro found the music to be very disconcerting.

## **Madame Koto's bar**

The bar was originally a simple drinking establishment and hangout for many of the poor locals in the village. It became more upscale establishment, catering exclusively to members of the party of the rich. Over the course of the story, it is renovated several times. Electricity is also added, along with an entrance fee and music.

## **Marketplace**

The marketplace is a location near the village where merchants would openly trade their wares. Azaro's mother would try and sell her goods here on most days. It is also a place where political thugs would exert their influence by harassing vendors who did not support their candidate.



# Themes

## Good versus Evil

The battle of good versus evil becomes defined and more evident throughout the novel. Madame Koto, originally just a greedy bar owner, slowly loses any sense of right and wrong as she puts her profits first. At one pivotal point, she allows her regular (local and poor) bar patrons to be displaced by her new clientele, consisting of thugs from the party of the rich. For this, she is rewarded with more business, money and political favors, including electricity. This gives her incentive to endear herself to her newfound "friends" even more.

Azaro's father starts the story as a simple workman, who gets pulled into conflict with both the spirit world, through Azaro and local political thugs. The father has a "live and let live" attitude at first, but he realizes at one point that he has to take a side. He quickly becomes the subject of the thugs' wrath when he refuses to support their party. After several physical fights, Azaro's father is drawn into a huge battle in the spiritual plane. It would have been much easier for him to just quietly acquiesce, but he shows that he has much more character than that.

This sets up the final conflict of the novel, when Madame Koto grows so powerful, both financially and spiritually, that she actually draws the energy from the local townspeople. Azaro's father, representing good and justice, fights in the spirit world to defeat Koto's evil. He is assisted by good spirits and eventually prevails. He also brings back a message of hope to his family that the world can be a good place.

## Spiritual Strength versus Political Strength

Azaro's father learns to tap into his long-dormant spiritual strength when he battles opponents much more powerful than he is. Several times in the story he uses this reserve of energy to come back from the brink of defeat, with an onslaught of blows that catches his enemy off guard. At times, he appears to hit opponents so fast that his arms cannot be seen moving. At other times, he simply "disappears," only to reappear and attack from another direction. This power gives him an almost supernatural strength at times.

Azaro's father is very good at getting opponents to underestimate him. When taking on spiritual opponents, they are shocked to see that he also has strong spiritual powers. This creates a state of mind that keeps him in focus and pushes his physical body far beyond its normal extents. A repercussion of this is that after the fights, Azaro's father usually falls into an exhaustive coma for several days to recover. The time spent in a coma is often seen as troubled by Azaro and his mother. Sometimes Azaro's father continues fighting in the spirit world long after his physical fighting is over. These battles are much more encompassing and important than the brawls seen by villagers. Most of



the real action takes place in Azaro's father's head. Azaro and his mother even join him in a dream at one point.

There are interesting similarities between politics in all countries. Most issues the politicians argue over do not and will never affect the common man, like in "modern" countries. They generally think only of themselves and are extremely arrogant. They also do not hesitate to use their power to their advantage, fairly or unfairly. The spiritual strength that Azaro's father is capable of harnessing, makes the simple brute force methods of the politicians seem pale in comparison. In fact, both parties are shown as being insensitive and corrupt. Both the party of the rich and the party of the poor make the same promises and demonstrate that they are empty. The party of the rich shows it will use its power to "persuade" villagers by any means necessary, including violence, to vote for them. In the end, political strength of the corrupt parties is found to be only as strong as their strongest thug. When Azaro's father beats their man, it shames them.

## Spirit World

Many in the story believe in a strong link between the living and the dead. Reincarnation is very real and some spiritual people can actually remember earlier lives. It is believed that some children live part of their lives in the spiritual world and that they see the dead and the dead call out to them. These spirit children are powerful and are feared and misunderstood by many villagers for this reason. They would go back to meet their spirit friends, die and be reborn again many times. The understanding of the close link to the spirit world made the notion of death more akin to a vacation than to being gone forever. It was assumed that souls didn't really die; they just wandered the earth, or waited to be reborn in a new body. Azaro had a vision in the story where he actually remembered several of his past lives.

There is also much confusion between "good" and "bad" spirits and magic. Superstitions prevail in the culture, particularly the "King of the Road" that has the power to swallow all those who walk upon it. Many older people make sacrifices to the road to appease it. Azaro himself was misled by the road many times when paths intertwined and went back upon themselves to confound him. He was also a witness to the road swallowing the highway engineer who killed the lizard. Lizards were believed to be messengers from the spirit world. The construction crews who mindlessly carved out the forest, which bled in Azaro's eyes, had no understanding of nature or the overall balance of things.

When people became sick, the common "doctor" was an herbalist, who would often fight spirits to make someone well, as much as working with balms and lotions to heal the physical body. Herbalists were considered professionals and were also very well paid for their labor. Sorcerers and witches were also real characters who could be either good or evil.





# Style

## Point of View

*The Famished Road* is told in the second person from Azaro's point of view. His life is difficult because he lives in a world where he alone sees the spirits. For the first half of the novel, Azaro acts mainly as an observer, trying to understand who he is and what is happening to him. Later, he grows wiser and closer to his father. Azaro learns to take action at several pivotal points in the story. Where his early point of view is merely as a bystander, he later attaches meaning to seemingly bizarre events.

Slowly, Azaro learns that his father and grandfather are both very strongly linked to the spirit world. His knowledge from his father and mother allow him to understand the strange events that take place in his life. Azaro has a destiny that connects him to the afterlife. He learns to understand, live with and use his power. Thanks to his father's teachings, he learns to use his power for the sake of good and justice.

A theme that emerges is the fact that life seems very unfair for the "helpless" villagers through out most of the story. They work hopelessly towards a dismal future. There is no real goal in life except to keep from starving or getting killed. Azaro's mother epitomizes this attitude when she laments that life is just too hard and contemplates suicide. But Azaro's father on the other hand, starts to possess an almost crazed optimism that things can be made better. He plans the future for the first time. He shows that there can be justice. Bad characters are defeated. He thinks of modernizing the ghetto and the political system. His point of view becomes more hopeful.

## Setting

The main setting of the story takes place in a Nigerian ghetto village, where commoners eke out a simple existence from mostly manual labor. The new compound starts out mainly rural, but it quickly becomes evident that new construction is decimating the local forest. The structures are simple and crude, with tin roofs. When it rains heavily, they leak badly. Even though this story takes place in a 1960s-1970s timeframe, there are no "modern" conveniences like television, appliances, or air conditioning. Most homes don't have plumbing and none, with the exception of Koto's bar later, have electricity. Roads are undeveloped paths that turn to rivers of mud when it rains. Cars are nonexistent for the villagers; everyone walks where they need to go. There are also no public services; people take care of themselves for the most part.

This dismal setting is the main backdrop for the characters. Azaro's father works a drudge's life and he comes home exhausted every day. Most of his earnings go to pay for essentials like rent and food. His wife also works hard on the streets to haggle goods, but this is done mostly in vain. Azaro's home is also infested with rats until the



photographer kills them with poison. Together, Azaro's family has a hard life, but they also have a sense of love between them.

A large part of the novel also takes place in the spirit world, which is a place of ghosts and elemental powers. Azaro spends much time visiting the spirit world, both by choice and against his will. Other major characters in the story also make this journey. Such a majority of the pivotal actions in the story happen in the spirit world that the book ends with a thought that dreams can be more important than reality. This world has similarities to the physical world, with trees, roads, ground and sky. But trees bleed, roads flow and the ground and sky change colors seemingly at random. Physical laws don't seem to apply.

## Language and Meaning

The language and meaning of the story is framed through the understanding of a boy named Azaro. He sees the world as a strange and cruel place that he quickly learns to adapt to. There are many meanings and lessons from the spirits that Azaro grows to understand as he becomes older. Basic life actions are grouped into good and evil as the dividing line between the two sides grows. The blatant lies of politics are laid bare as villagers are used and intimidated for votes. The significance behind the political fight moves beyond mere bullying for votes to the battle for absolute power.

The language of the villagers is simple. They lead simple lives of futility and it comes out the way they talk. There is also strong talk of ghosts, superstition and the afterlife. Many people believe and speak of the spirit world. There is both fear and respect for those who understand the ways of the spirits. There are also many who live their lives totally unaware of this other realm.

Another meaning that comes through in the story is that of family unity. Azaro's family stays intact through great stress and outside influences. These include a fire, Azaro being kidnapped, Azaro being mistaken for dead, political harassment, the landlord trying to pressure them out and the final battle for justice. Azaro's father loses his temper at several times throughout the story, but he apologizes for his anger. The amazing thing is that the family functions through the course of the story, mostly for the better. They are poor, but they have pride. They maintain their dignity throughout the turmoil.

## Structure

*The Famished Road* is divided into eight "books"; with each book subdivided into "mini chapters." Book one details the birth of Azaro and his early introduction to the spirit world. Azaro almost dies when he visits the spirit world; he is kidnapped and the family must relocate when their compound burns. Book two describes Azaro's "job" at Madame Koto's bar and the arrival of the politicians. Spirits begin frequenting the bar and there is a riot when politicians hand out tainted milk to the village. The spirits also manage to kidnap Azaro from the bar; he escapes, but they keep trying.



Political thugs intimidate the village in book three. Also, the landlord threatens Azaro's family and the political thugs pursue the photographer. Azaro also hears the story of the "King of the Road." Book four describes Madame Koto's rise to power. She allows her new "higher class" clientele to harass her old patrons. The rainy season wreaks havoc on the village. Azaro's long journey to the spirit world is detailed in book five. He allows himself to be led by a spirit away from the material world because he is angry with his parents for punishing him. He comes to a river that is the crossing between life and death. His parents fight to get him back and finally succeed.

Azaro's father trains and fights as a boxer in book six. He takes on a spirit boxer named the Yellow Jaguar and has to rely heavily on his spiritual energy to defeat him. He also defeats a boxer representing the party of the rich named the Green Leopard. Book seven describes the political ambitions of Azaro's father and his last physical battle. This mostly takes place at Madame Koto's party. Azaro's father is attacked by a spirit man dressed in white and nearly loses his life in the encounter. Azaro's father wins the final battle in the spirit world in book eight. He achieves a state of enlightenment and explains how people need to start paying attention to their world. Azaro feels at peace for the first time in months.



## Quotes

"You are a mischievous one. You will cause no end of trouble. You have to travel many roads before you find the river of your destiny. This life of yours will be full of riddles. You will be protected and you will never be alone." Book 1, pg. 6

"Learn to drink, my son. A man must be able to hold his drink because drunkenness is sometimes necessary in this difficult life." Book 1, pg. 35

"The road will never swallow you. The river of destiny will always overcome evil. May you understand your fate. Suffering will never destroy you, but will make you stronger. Success will never confuse you or scatter your spirit, but will make you fly higher into the good sunlight. Your life will always surprise you." Book 1, pgs. 46-47

"The whole world is sick, but my family is well. That's how God reveals the just. By their fruits we shall know them. We are a strong family." Book 2, pg. 131

"We are your friends. We will bring you electricity and bad roads, not good milk, I mean good roads, not bad milk." Book 2, pg. 153

"They are the madmen of our history. They are just waiting for a crazy war to come along." Book 3, pg. 193

"Our destiny will protect us. Don't fear anything, my son. The worst they can do is kill us." Book 3, pg. 228

"Some people have too much and their dogs eat better food than we do, while we suffer and keep quiet until the day we die." Book 4, pg. 281

"When people fight you, toughen up, study them, wait for the right time and then fight them back. Fight them like a madman, like a wizard. Then they will respect you." Book 4, pg. 305

"... each new generation begins with nothing and with everything. They know all the earlier mistakes. They may not know that they know, but they do. They know the early plans, the original intentions, the earliest dreams. Each generation has to reconnect the origins for themselves. They tend to become a little wiser, but don't go very far. It is possible that they now travel slower and will make bigger, better mistakes. That is how they are as a people. They have an infinity of hope and an eternity of struggles. Nothing can destroy them except themselves and they will never finish the road that is their soul and they do not know it." Book 5, pg. 330

"Forgive me, my son. I did not mean it. But we are not thieves in our family. We are royalty. We are poor, but we are honest." Book 6, pg. 372

"When people don't believe you can do something and you do it, they begin to respect you. That is the time to disappear. The longer they respect you, the better. Then you



keep your secret. Their interest grows. Time passes. They get tired of you. They get bored waiting for you. Then they don't believe in you any more. That's when you really begin to show them." Book 6, pg. 385

"A man can wander round the planet and still not move an inch. A man can have so much light in his mind and still not see what's right in front of him ... A man can carry the world and still not be able to bear the load of his own head." Book 7, pg. 433

"The only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you." Book 7, pg. 483

"A simple thought of ours could change the universe. We human beings are small things. Life is a great thing. As I am talking now they are holding elections in heaven and under the sea. We have entered a new age. We must be prepared ... We must look at the world with new eyes. We must look at our senses differently. We are freer than we think. We haven't begun to live yet. The man whose light has come on in his head, in his dormant sun, can never be kept down or defeated. We can redream this world and make the dream real." Book 8, pgs. 497-498



## Topics for Discussion

Why was Azaro's name changed when he was very young?

Differentiate between the party of the rich and the party of the poor.

Explain how Madame Koto managed to get ahead financially, compared to the rest of the villagers.

Why did the thugs always single out the photographer for punishment? Did they fear him?

What was the "land of fighting ghosts"?

What was the Yellow Jaguar? How did Azaro's father defeat him?

Why was the white engineer claimed by the "King of the Road"?

How were Azaro and Ade alike and different when it came to their relationship with the spirit world?

Was Madame Koto a bad person? Explain.

What possessed Azaro's father to pursue political office?

Why was the landlord hostile to Azaro's family?

Why was Azaro's mother usually frustrated and sad?

Explain the meaning behind the last line of the novel, "A dream can be the highest point of a life."