

The Fishermen Study Guide

The Fishermen by Chigozie Obioma

(c)2016 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Fishermen Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapter 1: Fishermen.....	6
Chapter 2: The River.....	8
Chapter 3: The Eagle.....	11
Chapter 4: The Python.....	14
Chapter 5: The Metamorphosis.....	18
Chapter 6: The Madman.....	21
Chapter 7: The Falconer.....	24
Chapter 8: The Locusts.....	27
Chapter 9: The Sparrow.....	29
Chapter 10: The Fungus.....	31
Chapter 11: The Spiders.....	34
Chapter 12: The Searchdog.....	36
Chapter 13: The Leech.....	39
Chapter 14: The Leviathan.....	42
Chapter 15: The Tadpole.....	45
Chapter 16: The Roosters.....	48
Chapter 17: The Moth.....	51
Chapter 18: The Egrets.....	53
Characters.....	55
Symbols and Symbolism.....	58
Settings.....	61
Themes and Motifs.....	62



Styles..... 65
Quotes..... 66



Plot Summary

The Fishermen starts as a fictional story about four Nigerian brothers who struck out on after-school adventures when their father took a job that required him to live out of town and their mother was busy tending to her shop in the market and the two youngest children. The story quickly soured when a madman's prophesy overtook the heart and mind of the oldest brother, leading to tragedy and downfall for the entire family.

Thirty-nine-year-old Ben narrates this story of his childhood. Ben was nine when his father left to work in Yola, but his older brothers -- Ikenna, Boja, and Obembe - were quite capable of filling in the gap. Father was the strict disciplinarian of the family, so with him out of town, the boys decided to try new things instead of studying and reading all the time as Father insisted. He wanted them all to have a Western education and had even plotted professional careers for them. They played football in the streets for a short time, but nothing got their interest as much as fishing in the Omi-Ala River.

The river was once the cultural center of the community and shrines were built in its honor. But when Christianity spread, the shrines were seen as evil, and thus the river as evil too. The boys were forbidden to go there because of all the murders and nefarious acts that occurred there. There was even a 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. curfew at the river to keep people from going there after dark.

Abulu was one of the characters who frequented the river. Half madman and half prophet, Abulu drove the town crazy with his accurate and unsolicited prophesies. To his credit, he used his vision to help the police solve a number of crimes. Abulu ran across Ben and his brothers one day and told the oldest, Ikenna, that he would die at the hands of a fisherman.

The madman's words drove Ikenna crazy. He grew suspicious of his brothers, after all, they were fishermen. Ikenna changed and became cruel to his brothers, especially Boja. Before long, a wedge of hatred separated the two. Enraged, the boys began to fight while Ben and Obembe watched from the house. They got scared and ran to find an adult to intervene. When they arrived back with a neighbor, Mr. Bode, they discovered Ikenna dead with a stab wound in the kitchen. A few days later, Boja -- presumed missing after the incident -- was found dead, floating in the family's well.

Naturally, the family was shaken by the double tragedy. Ironically, Ikenna, the one who brought on the newfound hatred of his brother by his actions, was given a proper burial. Boja, who took his own life, was cremated according to tribal superstition. Ben was sad, but Obembe took his position as the oldest brother very seriously and, at 11 years old, he set out to kill the madman who changed his family forever.

Obembe's focus on killing Abulu consumed him. Ben found Obembe's drawings of stick figures depicting different methods that could be used to kill the man. After hearing his mother talk about Abulu one day and how he tore apart their family, Ben decided to join Obembe in his mission. The longer the boys went without killing the man, however, the



less interested Ben was in carrying through the plan. When Father began to talk of sending them to Canada after the first of the year, Ben was elated. Obembe, however, seemed dreadful because he knew he was running out of time to kill the man.

When the family held a memorial church service for both boys together, Abulu sneaked in to attend. That evening, Father disappeared from the house for quite some time. When he returned, he had a patch on his eye. He told the family he had sudden cataract surgery.

Ben backed out of the plan, but fearful of losing his brother's love and respect, asked to rejoin. Obembe revealed that he has altered their old fishing rods, tying a hook tightly onto the end. The boys sneaked out of the house while Father was out of town and attacked Abulu while he was sleeping under a tree at the river. They flogged him with their barbed rods, ripping chunks of his flesh and causing him much bleeding. The man fell into the river and died.

Mother was elated when she heard the news of Abulu's death. She knew about it before they even made it home from killing him. Knowing that the body was found much too soon, the boys began to panic. Obembe convinced Ben to run away with him to hide in the middle of the night. After hours on the run, Ben decided to turn around and go back home to face the consequences. Obembe went forward, but vowed to write to his brother.

The next morning, soldiers arrested Ben. Before his trial began, Father admitted to Ben that he had also tried to kill Abulu. He also told him that killing the man was a good thing. Ben was sentenced to manslaughter. He was too young for regular prison, but his crime was too serious for juvenile prison. To accommodate the special circumstances, he was held for six years with only visits from a prison priest. He was supposed to serve eight years but got out early due to a change in government policy. Ben was out of jail at age 16.

The story ended with Ben's return home. He got to see his little brother, David, and sister, Nkewm, and realized he is the big brother of the family. In a flashback, Ben recalled part of his trial testimony and he thought he heard Obembe returning. The end, however, is vague and it is not clear as to whether or not Obembe did actually return or if Ben's mind was just wandering.



Chapter 1: Fishermen

Summary

This story is told from 39-year-old Ben's point of view, reflecting back 30 years to an important time in his life. In Chapter 1, nine-year-old Ben introduced himself and his family -- his mom, dad, three older brothers, and a younger brother and baby sister -- and gave insight into his Nigerian family. At the beginning of the chapter, Ben's parents were keeping a secret, one that he and his brothers dared not question. They kept the secret from Friday night to Monday morning, when Father announced to them that he was moving from Akure to Yola that day. His employer, the Central Bank of Nigeria, transferred him there. The family would not make the move with him because of intense fighting and civil unrest. Ben's mother was not happy about the move because she was left to care for six children alone while operating her market.

There was no discussion about whether or not Father would take the job or not. He simply informed his wife and children that he was going and that he would be back for visits. In between visits, they kept in touch by telephone. He warned the boys not to give Mother any trouble.

Ben and his three older brothers -- Ikenna, Boja, and Obembe -- used their father's absence as a chance to break through some of their strict regulations. They did not, however, jump directly into their freedom. They waited until the long drives home every-other-weekend and seeing the violence against young children in Yola appeared to soften Father a little. Only then did they decide to disobey their parents.

Father valued a Western education and insisted his boys read books. With Father is out of town, they began playing football with other neighborhood friends after school. Ikenna's friend Solomon told him what great fun fishing was, so Ikenna and Boja got fishing lines and hooks to go fishing with their friends. Late in January 1996, the boys took Ben and Obembe on their first fishing trip. Fishing became the boys' favorite pastime and they began to consider themselves to be fishermen.

Analysis

Chapter One offers an important setup of expository information. The setting is Akure, 1996. Beyond that, the reader learns about Ben's family. Thirty-nine-year-old Ben is the narrator, looking back on his childhood and telling his family's story from the first person point of view throughout the book. Knowing the Ben is older, the reader expects him to insert some degree of wisdom into the retelling of his family's story.

In the first chapter alone, Ben shows how complex his family is. The family's attitudes and values are a mix of Nigerian tradition and Westernization. Their father symbolizes Western values. He is a strict disciplinarian who demands education and Christianity from his children. Their mother, however, symbolizes tradition because she holds onto



Nigerian customs and superstitions. Her role is a nurturing one even though she can barely keep up with her older children. When Father warns his sons not to give Mother a hard time in his absence and she worries about her inability to properly care for the family while he is away on business, it foreshadows that they will certainly give their mother trouble. Clearly, without Father at home and with Mother pre-occupied with the younger siblings and her shop, The four boys are free to explore independence and the consequences it brings with it. In another example of foreshadowing, Father refuses to take his family to Yola because it is not a safe place for children. Ironically, he will later learn that their own home is just as dangerous.

The name of the book, the title of Chapter One and the first sentence of the novel indicate that fishermen are an important element to the story. By announcing "We were fishermen" as he does on the first page, the author solidifies the importance of the boys being fishermen. Fishing sounds traditional enough to have Mother's approval and Western enough to meet with Father's approval, but knowing that the boys go fishing without permission leads the reader to suspect that, at least in this novel, fishing may not be such a harmless pastime after all.

Ben alludes to the fact that the Omi-Ala River will become a crucial setting to the story. At the end of Chapter One, it seems that learning to fish there with his brothers and friends made this location special for Ben and the others. In the last paragraph of Chapter One, Ben remarks that the river was the place where time began to matter and that their lives and world were changed by the river, foreshadowing events or situations yet to come.

Discussion Question 1

What kind of activities do Ben and his brothers try before settling on fishing? Discuss the role of Western culture in their activities.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss why the boys break free when they do? Why do they believe the timing is right to explore their own independence?

Discussion Question 3

Why specifically does Ikenna take such a liking to the idea of fishing?

Vocabulary

ventricles, soliloquy, lamentations, futile, conjure, deluge, throng, sectarian, mammoth, commandeer, decorum, compulsory, vanquished, sprite, excreta, emissaries, bracken



Chapter 2: The River

Summary

Chapter 2, "The River" explains why being fishermen was such a big deal to Ben and his brothers. They were forbidden to go to the Omi-Ala River because it had a dangerous history. In the old days, the river was pure and an integral part of the community since it provided clean water for drinking and fish for food. It was so beloved, that the early settlers built shrines to the river and worshipped it like it was a god. When Christianity arrived in the area, however, the shrines were seen as an abomination to God and people began to believe the river was evil.

During Ben's childhood, there were many rumors to confirm it was an evil place. Tales of corpses, dead animals, and other rituals were reported on the river banks. After a woman's body was discovered dismembered and mutilated, the town enforced a river curfew from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Ben's parents did not want their children going to the river because of a cult, the Celestial Church, located on the river banks. One day, after singing too loudly when their friend Solomon caught a fish, the boys were visited on the riverbanks by a priest from the Celestial Church. He scolded them for causing a ruckus and for being at the river, saying he knew their parents did not want them there. Shortly after the priest left, Ikenna decided to go home. His younger brothers followed. Ikenna told his friends that he was a student, not a fisherman.

The brothers' interest in fishing had begun to dwindle since the previous week when their neighbor, a woman named Mama Iyabo, saw them on the path to the river. They feared she would tell their mother that she saw them walking to the river. When they were far away from the woman, Ikenna scolded his brothers for taking up the hobby of fishing. Even though he was the one who initially invited them all to go, he blamed them for their folly and predicted that Mama Iyabo would indeed tell their mother.

The day after running into Mama Iyabo on the river path, the boys went straight home after school. Mother just happened to arrive home from her shop early that day in an attempt to catch the boys. She told them that she knew where they had been going. The boys lied to her and said they had only been fishing for three weeks. It was really six weeks. As punishment, she did not give them dinner and even padlocked the kitchen so they could not sneak in later for food. Even worse, she vowed to tell their father what they had done.

Analysis

Often in literature, a body of water such as a river, symbolizes cleaning or purity. Ironically, this is not the case in *The Fishermen*. The river is bad in this story -- the boys are bad for going to the river, the church is bad because it is located near the river, the river is bad because murdered bodies are discovered in it. Through his narration, Ben



suggests that the river only became bad when Christianity spread through Nigeria. Until then, the river had been pristine and an important economic and social aspect of their community. This knowledge introduces the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy to the novel. Christianity would have stated that worshipping the river as a god was idolatry, and thus bad; that was an attribute caused by the people, not the river. It is possible that the new Christians, wanting to be obedient to their new religion, were overzealous in deeming the whole river to be bad. In the community's assumption that the river became evil, good people stopped going to the river, allowing evil to get a foothold. So, because the community assumed that the river was bad, it became a host to bad things.

Labeling the river as evil also personifies the river. As a host to bad events, the river takes on the characteristics of a human. A river cannot actually host any kind of event. Bad things began happening there simply because good people stopped monitoring it.

In another example of irony in Chapter 2, Ikenna is quick to toss the blame for their love of fishing on his brothers when they are spotted on the river path by the neighbor. He is the one initially so excited to go, and he is the one who invited Ben and Obembe to go along. As the oldest, the younger brothers follow Ikenna. Even though he blames his brothers for their fishing folly, they all continue going to the river - even after they are scolded by their mother. The book points out in a flashback, that the boys were caught by their neighbor a week before being scolded by the Celestial Church priest.

Ikenna's prediction that the neighbor will tell Mama foreshadows the importance of predictions to come later in the story. Another important prediction also made near the river will be important later.

This chapter also shows the boys' mother as a weaker character. Even after they are scolded by her, the boys continue going to the river. It is their father that they fear. It is important for the reader to consider that what the boys see as weakness may indicate a character trait that relates more to culture than fortitude. Culturally, women were more nurturing and fathers were disciplinarians. In this book, however, the mother and father also represent religious aspects of their culture. The mother symbolizes their old religion by claspings to many of its superstitions. Snapping her fingers overhead is a superstition she holds onto from the area's previous religion. It is supposed to ward off evil. She also continues wearing the traditional wrappa, despite her husband's insistence on Westernizing his family. In this way, Mother symbolizes tradition, and Father symbolizes assimilation.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Ikenna's attitude and level of maturity relating to the Celestial Church, the priest, and Mama Iyabo. What sets him apart from his brothers?



Discussion Question 2

How do the boys keep their secret fishing trips from Mama for so long, and what does this tell the reader about her?

Discussion Question 3

The boys think the priest is weak when he grimaces at the sight of their captured small fish and tadpoles they have in a can. Discuss the priest's disgust at the situation.

Vocabulary

besmeared, fetish, carcasses, dismembered, prostrated, secretion, folly, monologue, profuse



Chapter 3: The Eagle

Summary

This chapter is about Ben's father. Ben compares his father to an eagle, always watching from high above and keeping an eye on his young.

Ben explains that his family was unusual in the community for having so many children. The introduction of Christianity also brought the introduction of birth control, but since Father had been an only child, he wanted a large family. Father always had a plan for his sons: Ikenna would be a doctor (but later changed to pilot when Ikenna expressed more interest in that career); Boja, a lawyer; Ben, a professor (even though he wanted to be a veterinarian); and Obembe, a doctor. Father did not choose a career for his daughter because he said there was no need to do so.

Expecting their father's return one weekend, five days after they were caught fishing, the boys hid their fishing lines and got rid of other evidence that they had been fishing. The two youngest boys, Obemebe and Ben, prayed often that Father would not whip them for going to the river.

When Father arrived, Mother told him the story of how the neighbor had caught the boys on the river path and that they had been fishing for three weeks. At that point, the boys discovered that the neighbor knew the boys had been going to the river frequently because the priest told her he had seen them there often. Father was furious that the boys had disobeyed and equally as mad that his wife had no knowledge of their actions until told by a neighbor. He whipped the boys on their bare behinds, an event he called the Geurdon. Ikenna was whipped 20 times; Boja, 15; and Obembe and Ben each were whipped eight times. When Mother attempted to intervene, he threatened to whip her, too. After the whipping, all the boys refused to eat dinner.

The next morning, Father had a talk with all the boys. He reminded them that he worked hard to give them a good, Western education and told them if their grades fell, he would send them to the village to farm or tap palm wine. Father also revealed that the boys went to the river for six weeks, not three. He scolded Mother and told her it was her job to make sure they read their books. He told her to close her shop at five instead of seven so she could be home more and to no longer open on Saturdays.

Father told the boys that they should use their spirit of adventure to read more and learn more instead of wasting it at the river. He told them he wanted them to become fishermen of the mind and fishermen of good things. Before he left to return to Yola for the work week, Father reminded Ikenna that he was whipped more because he was the oldest, the leader of his brothers. Father warned Ikenna not to lead his brothers astray. He said that a coconut that falls into a cistern will still need to be washed before it can be eaten, and explained that if Ikenna does wrong, he will have to be corrected.



Analysis

The title of this chapter is a metaphor for Father. Father has an eagle-eye, and by soaring high above others, he can see and know many things. He even discovers that the boys lied to their mother about fishing for only three weeks instead of six. Father is also majestic and protective like an eagle. Symbolically, the eagle also represents the United States as its national bird, tying Father once again to his interest in Westernization.

As intent on Western education as he was, Father is not exactly into Westernization. In 1996, the year in which the story takes place, Western children were picking their own careers based on their own interests -- even the girls, who Father disregards in his family's plans for the future. While some strides were made in Westernization, Father did not leave behind his culture's expectations for girls and women. Even though his own wife works outside the home, he does not see her career as important as the health and welfare of their children. He instructs her to cut back her work hours even though he would not alter his work arrangement to be home more or to take his family with him.

In his talk with the boys, Father threatens to doom them to a life of farming if their grades fall. This shows that he values education far more than manual labor and wants his boys to have an easy life. Farming can be tough work and he wants his sons to know that they would have nothing but tough work if they fail in school. Father's expectations of Ikenna are clear by the end of the chapter. Ikenna is to take responsibility for his brothers and to lead them by setting a good example. Also during his talk with the boys, Father does not forbid them from being fishermen. Instead, he attempts to take their interest of fishing to become something more productive and calls them fishermen of knowledge. This means that the boys are still fishermen, an important element of foreshadowing that will develop later in the story.

The example Father uses about a coconut falling into a cistern foreshadows an upcoming tragic event and offers its own symbolism. There are several ways to define cistern. It could simply be a vessel for storing water, or it could refer to a toilet tank storage. Given either definition, Father said that a coconut that fell into it would still have to be washed. The meat of a coconut is inside a very hard shell. It is obvious that the water would not penetrate the shell. If the coconut fell into a cistern and was immediately removed and cracked, water from the outside could taint the meat. If the coconut fell into a cistern and stayed there long-term, perhaps the water would soften it and eventually penetrate the tough exterior and seep into the meaty section in the center. Either way demonstrates how the coconut could be affected by falling into a cistern.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the metaphor related to the title of this chapter. For whom does the metaphor apply and why?



Discussion Question 2

Why is Father's career plan for his boys so important to him? Why does he not have a career plan for his daughter?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Father continue calling the boys fishermen and what lesson does he attempt to teach them in doing so?

Vocabulary

juggernaut, menacing, cistern, interminable, barbaric, endeavor (endeavour in the book), kerosine, plantains, rarity, deterred, emerged, mentor, aureole, marginalization, chronicled, groundnuts, mallam



Chapter 4: The Python

Summary

Ben tells of Ikenna's changing attitude and likens him to a python. Ben realizes that the change was internal at first, but the Guerdon given to them by Father for going to the river made the attitude change materialize. Just an hour after Father gave Ikenna the lecture about not leading his brothers astray, Ikenna called a meeting with them. Again, he blamed them for fishing and said if they had listened to him, he would not have been beaten so much. He showed his brothers his lash marks and blamed them and Iyabo for his whipping. In his narration, Ben compared the marks to those on Jesus of Nazareth. Ikenna demanded that his brothers help him think of a way to punish Iyabo for telling on them and causing him so much pain.

While Mother was gone to church with the two younger children, the boys brainstormed about ways to get even with Iyabo. Boja wanted to kill one of her chickens and fry it. Ikenna dismissed the idea because there would be too much evidence remaining and their mother would be able to smell their cooking. He also said that eating it would be stealing it, which would only garner them more Guerdon if caught. When they looked to Ben for an idea, he reluctantly suggested just beheading a rooster. It would still result in a dead chicken, but not in stealing it. The death of a rooster would also mean less crowing from the neighbor's yard. Ikenna loved Ben's idea. Ikenna and Boja held the rooster down while Boja sliced its head off with a knife retrieved by Obembe. They all had a hand in the event, which was witnessed by a mute man. They buried the head and covered the bloody evidence in their own yard, then tossed the beheaded rooster back over the fence into their neighbor's yard.

Reflecting on Ikenna's change in attitude, Ben explains that changes began when Ikenna started trying to make his brothers hate fishing. He told them the fish were tainted because he had seen a human skeleton in the river water. He also said the bushes around the river were full of human excreta, even though they had never seen or smelled evidence of such a thing. As it turned out, Ikenna did try to stop his brothers from fishing, but when his friend Solomon appeared at his house and all his younger brothers went along, he too went along.

No longer going to fish, Ikenna and Boja left their younger brothers behind to go play football. When they returned home, Ikenna was dirty and bloody. Ben and Obembe eavesdropped to learn that there was a fight at the football game and Ikenna was mad that Boja did not jump in to help defend him. Boja was afraid the other boys would jump in and beat them both up because they were outnumbered. When Ikenna yelled at Boja, Mother heard and banged on their door to ask what was wrong. Boja said they just wanted to sleep. She left them alone.

Obembe and Ben tried to bring their brothers back together again by asking them to watch TV with them. Ikenna expressed his annoyance with the show and kicked his little



sister's plastic chair. In doing so, he broke a framed photo of his father, then sent the other boys to their rooms, marking a clear line of division between him and Boja.

In another instance, Ikenna and Boja began fighting in the living room. Ben and Obembe were in their room and did not know what caused the fight. When Mother tried to break it up, Ikenna accidentally stripped off her wrappa, exposing her naked body down to her underwear. As she redressed, she shouted that seeing her naked was sacrilege and could bring a curse on him. She also said she would tell Father. Ikenna hissed at her and went to his room, leaving Mother shocked at his actions. Hissing at a parent was equivalent to using profanity. When she saw that Boja was bleeding from the fight with Ikenna, she banged on Ikenna's door until he opened it. She flogged him, slapping and beating him for what he did to Boja. Ikenna accused her of hating him, then pushed her to the floor and ran out of the house. He finally returned late at night after a storm began.

While waiting for Ikenna's return, the family barely slept. Ben finally fell asleep and dreamed that he and his brothers were playing football by the river. In the dream, Boja kicked the ball onto an old bridge and Ikenna tried to save it. When he reached the ball at the middle of the bridge, he realized he was in danger but nothing could save him. Ikenna was falling from the bridge when Ben awakened and heard Ikenna had returned home.

One day while watching a football game on TV, Mother asked Ikenna and Boja to go to the store to get medicine for David, the very youngest brother who was still too small to hang out with them. Ikenna refused to go at first, then he refused to go with Boja. Instead of sending him alone, she allowed Obembe and Ben to go buy the medicine instead. Ben recalled how very different Ikenna's attitude toward Mother was. When he was young, he stood up to Father for hitting Mother. Father still had a scar on his finger from Ikenna biting him during the fight.

Analysis

Ikenna's rationalization of not cooking the chicken demonstrates that he is irrational. While, yes, it would be a sin to steal the chicken; it was also a sin to unnecessarily kill it. Perhaps since they are accustomed to killing chickens to eat them, the killing alone does not seem so bad.

Ikenna's father wants him to be a leader and set a good example for the younger brothers, but instead Ikenna becomes their manipulator. Ben metaphorically compares Ikenna to Jesus Christ when Ikenna shows his wounds to him. By convincing the brothers that he suffered the most on their behalf, they begin to follow as his disciples. Ikenna intentionally sets himself up as the victim to his brothers in order to enlist their support and following.

Ikenna's anger at Iyabo for telling their mother about the boys' fishing trips shows more than just passing anger toward the woman. It leads to a growing disrespect for women



in general. After all, if his mother had punished them instead of waiting for his father's return, Ikenna would not have been severely beaten. To Ikenna, he is above blame for the entire situation. His brothers are to blame for their continued interest in fishing, Iyabo is to blame for telling their mother, and Mother is to blame for telling father. Ikenna does, indeed, become the leader his father told him to be; but he chooses to lead them down the wrong path.

Ikenna's lack of respect for women flows over into the household in the relationship that developed between him and Mother. Hissing at an elder is a gesture that is culturally insulting, the biggest insult one can give a parent. He never apologizes to her for unveiling her body when he rips off her wrappa. The curse Mother mentions about seeing a mother naked is the first mention of this idea and foreshadows a connection that Ikenna will have later in the plot. Ikenna's respect for his mother takes a complete turn since his childhood when he once stood up for her. At this point, he has disrespected her and physically pushed her down. Ironically, mothers in their Nigerian culture are often referred to by the name of their first-born. Mother's given name is Adaku, but many neighbors called her Mama Ike, short for Mama of Ikenna, the very child who grows to disrespect her and treat her horribly.

In Chapter 4, Ben animalizes Ikenna, calling him a python. Ben says that pythons are "monstrous serpents." Pythons also wrap themselves around their victims and squeeze the life out of them before devouring them, making this comparison much more telling than just likening him to some other type of snake. If Ikenna's transformation into a python began with the Guerdon from Father, the beating he took when playing football only made his bad attitude grow. He is angry that Boja does not try to help, especially after he had taken additional lashings for Boja and their younger brothers.

With growing fear of Ikenna, Ben and his brothers follow Ikenna to demonstrate their loyalty, fearful at least on Ben's part, of what might happen if they do not. Ben reluctantly provides the idea to behead the rooster. Ikenna manipulates the boys so that the idea to do such a thing is not his. When it comes time to carry out the act, Ikenna only holds the rooster; it is Boja who uses the knife, an event that foreshadows another time Boja uses a knife to kill.

Another example of foreshadowing occurs in Ben's dream. In it, the brothers are playing and lose a ball. Ikenna runs instinctively to save it and ends up plunging to his death while the other boys are helpless to stop him. While looking back on the events, the reader easily sees that Ikenna is not a heroic victim, but instead a tragic antagonist, the young Ben's dream showed the subject matter in a different light.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Ikenna and Boja's relationship to that of Obembe and Ben.



Discussion Question 2

Discuss what Mother means when she says Ikenna has grown horns. How does this statement reflect the title of the chapter?

Discussion Question 3

What does Ben think about Ikenna's treatment of Mother? Give specific examples to back up your claims.

Vocabulary

brawny, autonomous, pawpaw tree, padlock, petrified, frailty, fruitless, careered, consuming, fresco, inscribed, lorry, entreaty, prodigious, venomous, cranium, astounded, brazen, agape, ferocious, sacrilege, stupefied, insufferable, insubordination



Chapter 5: The Metamorphosis

Summary

This chapter was about Ikenna's metamorphosis, but it also indicated a metamorphosis that the entire family will experience. Ikenna had been mean and distant to his family. Boja was even afraid to sleep in their room any more and chose to sleep in the sitting room instead. When the younger brothers realized that Ikenna had destroyed their special calendar, they all know a dreadful change has occurred.

The boys obtained the M.K.O. calendar one day when they left school early. During roll call, other students burst into laughter when they heard Boja's full name, Bojanonimeokpu Alfred Agwu. Boja reacted by holding both hands in the air with fingers spread wide apart, a cursing gesture in his town. The headmistress called Boja to the front, but Ikenna intervened. He said it would not be fair to punish Boja and not punish all those who laughed at him. Then, Ikenna added that he and his brothers would leave and find a better school instead of staying to see one of them unjustly punished. As they left school, the boys knew they could not go home right away. This happened in March 1993 during a political campaign. Ikenna was in fifth grade, Boja in fourth, Obembe in first, and Ben in pre-school.

While wandering around town before going home that day, the boys happened upon a campaign visit by Chief M.K.O. Abiola, a presidential candidate from the Social Democratic Party. M.K.O. and his wife arrived by helicopter. The boys began singing a song of fondness for M.K.O. and the candidate instructed someone to bring them closer. M.K.O. had his picture made with the boys and announced that he was giving them scholarships. The scholarships were awarded at a school assembly and the headmistress seemed to forget all about the incident with Boja's obscene gesture. The photo was printed in a calendar, and even though it was three years old, the brothers held it in the highest regard. After his metamorphosis, Ikenna destroyed it. Boja swept up the pieces and showed them to Mother.

Mother worried about what had happened to Ikenna. She snapped her fingers over her head in a circular motion, a superstitious way to protect against evil. Late that night, Mother went into Obembe and Ben's room to ask if they knew what had happened to Ikenna. Obembe told her that the change in Ikenna began the day they met Abulu, the madman, at the river. In a flashback, the reader also learned the story.

A week before they were caught by their neighbor, Iyabo, the boys saw Abulu lying under a mango tree. He was lying on a bed of leaves and humming. Boja insisted they poke fun at the man, but Solomon and Ikenna said not to do it. Abulu jumped up in an acrobatic way and the younger boys cheered. Another friend, Kayode, threw a mango at the old man and he caught it mid-air. As the boys began to walk away, Abulu began laughing hysterically and calling out Ikenna's name. He mispronounced it, but the message was directed to Ikenna. Abulu was known to give prophecies and Ikenna



reminded that it was not good to listen to those prophesies. The prophesy given by Abulu to Ikenna that day was:

You will be bound like a bird on the day you shall die. You will be mute. You will be crippled. Your tongue will stick out of your mouth like a hungry beast and not return to your mouth. You will lift your hands to grasp air, but not be able to. You will try to speak but the words will freeze in your mouth. You will die in a river of red. An airplane flew overhead and drowned out the last part of Abulu's prophesy. Obembe heard it, though. Abulu said Ikenna would die at the hands of a fisherman. Ikenna turned to his brothers and said that the vision meant one of them would kill him.

Analysis

With the full story unfolding in flashback form, the reader finally sees what has driven Ikenna mad -- the prophesy given by a madman. Ironically, Ikenna was the one telling his brothers not to listen to the man; but the prophesy was about him so he listened and even demanded to hear the part he missed from Obembe. Ikenna was living in fear that one of his brothers would try to kill him. His fear turns into anger right before their eyes and his reactions to his fear and anger begin driving a wedge between him and his brothers.

The shredding of the M.K.O. calendar is a serious sign to the boys and their mother. At one time, as Mother pointed out, Ikenna would have protected that calendar. The brothers that he once protected, symbolized by the calendar, are no longer important to him. As the oldest in the family, he has spent much of his time protecting the younger brothers and feels betrayed by the prophesy Abulu gave. Ikenna should have heeded his own words and not listened to the madman, whose prophesy can only come true if Ikenna allows it. Kayode pointed out that they were Christians and that madmen were of the devil.

A self-fulfilling prophesy is defined as a prediction that causes itself to come true by the feedback of belief and behavior. Ikenna chooses to believe the prophesy, so his beliefs and behaviors begin changing in ways to make it happen. Even though his brothers cannot fathom the idea, his treatment of them becomes worse and worse. The boys got in trouble for fishing two weeks after hearing the prophesy, so even when their father punished them, he still allowed them to remain fishermen (but this time, fishermen of the mind and of knowledge). So, even though the boys stopped fishing in the river, Abulu's prophesy can come true. Ikenna can be killed by a fisherman of the mind. The reader must wonder if Father had forbidden them to be fishermen, if Ikenna's view of the prophesy would have been different.

Abulu's prophesy is foreshadowing Ikenna's pending death. While there are many fishermen, including friends Solomon and Kayode, Ikenna assumes that his killer will be one of his brothers. The first part of the prophesy brings to mind the day the boys killed their neighbor's chicken. That day, it was Boja who actually killed the chicken by cutting off its head with a large knife. The rest of Abulu's prophesy, however, is rather standard



and generic. It is reasonable to assume that one might not be able to move or talk if they are dying, and gasp for air. It is, then, the "bound like a bird" aspect of the prophesy that troubles Ikenna most. While it was Ben's idea to behead the bird, it was Boja who helped hold it in place while beheading it. If Ikenna had known about Ben's dream in Chapter 4, he might have considered a more generalized death such as falling from an old bridge while trying to save something for his brothers instead of the violent death he imagined after hearing Abulu's prophesy.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the elements of Abulu's prophesy. What makes Ikenna so sure he will die at the hand of one of his brothers?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss what makes Abulu unusual in the town.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Ikenna's metamorphosis from Chapter 1 through Chapter 4. Be sure to consider the timeline in which it all takes place.

Vocabulary

dumbfounded, megaphone, prolonged, facade, aspirant, disengaged, cascading, pungent, knapping, abattoir, furtive, obliterating, procession, plodding, ponderously, declivities, psyche, burrow, endearment, lobotomy, partitioned, detest, noteworthy, rapturous, imperceptible, firmaments



Chapter 6: The Madman

Summary

A tribal proverb begins Chapter 6: Those the gods have chosen to destroy, they inflict with madness. This chapter is about Abulu.

Obembe told Ben what he had heard about Abulu. He said the man's brain turned into blood after an accident that left him insane. When they were young, Abulu and his brother Abana were inseparable. They attended the best high school in town together. The boys grew up without their father, who had left on a religious pilgrimage and never returned. Some believed he met an Austrian woman and moved there to start another life; others believed he was killed by a bomb in Jerusalem. The boys grew up solely in the care of their mother, who owned a restaurant in which they worked. The restaurant never made much money, and the boys turned to stealing. Their older sister was a prostitute and moved to Lagos.

Obembe said that one day Abulu and Abana robbed a house. While making their getaway, Abulu was struck by a car. His brother carried him to the hospital, but all of his brain cells had leaked to other portions of his head, according to Obembe's tale. Abulu had occasional outbursts of insanity that his brother would help him control. One day when Abana was gone, Abulu saw his mother naked and watched her bathe. When she completed her bath, he knocked her onto a bed and raped her. He held her as she cried until Abana returned. Abana beat Abulu with his belt. Abulu ripped the TV antenna out and pinned his brother to the wall with it, killing him. Abulu became a transient and eventually turned an old abandoned truck into his home. Rumor was that a widow who wanted a child seduced Abulu. When people began calling her his wife, she left town, leaving him with a passion for women and sex.

Abulu's insanity was two-fold: madness and prophesy. As a madman, he wandered filthy and naked, dancing in the streets and doing other bizarre things. The prophesy, though, was viewed as an extraordinary gift by some. He sometimes used the ability to help police officers solve crimes. The problem with his gift was that people believed his prophecies caused people to fear the fate that awaited them. He avoided time in a psychiatric ward by going on suicidal hunger strikes. The hospital would release him whenever he began to demand a lawyer.

Analysis

Ben and his family are members of the Igbo tribe, and the proverb that begins the chapter is part of his heritage despite the family's assimilation to Westernization and Christianity. As the reader learns more about Abulu in this chapter, it is clear to see that an accident caused the man's mental issues. This chapter shows that Abulu is more than just the town madman; he is actually respected as a prophet by local police. While



his predictions may seem crazy to some, knowing that the police often ask for his help in solving crimes gives his prophecies some credibility.

The reader learns something else about Abulu -- he also had a brother with which he had a good relationship. When the accident altered his mind, that relationship did not change. Perhaps Abana felt responsible for the accident or felt guilty that it happened to Abulu and not him. The insanity changed Abulu, though, and the rape of their mother was something Abana would not allow to go unpunished. Ironically, Abulu and Ikenna have something in common at this point -- seeing their mother naked. According to their tribal superstition expressed by Mother in Chapter 4, this alone can drive a boy mad. Since the chapter starts with a tribal proverb, the reader sees the continued importance of old superstitions to the family.

Abulu's fight with his brother turned deadly, foreshadowing Ikenna's pending death at the hands of one of his brothers. Until this chapter, it is not difficult for the reader to cast aside Abulu's prophecy for Ikenna based on the town's recognition of the man as a madman. Learning in this chapter, however, that he is protected and respected by local police for his help in solving crimes with his visions adds more substance to the prophecy he gives Ikenna. The townspeople believe his visions so much, that they sometimes take their own lives instead of waiting to face their predicted fate. This reputation must have severely troubled Ikenna as he grows to detest his family while awaiting his fate.

The author could have explained this information earlier, when Abulu's character was first introduced in Chapter 4, but he chose to wait. Having the information presented at this point in the story has allowed the reader to consider Abulu's prophecy as simply words of a madman that will be proven wrong in time. This additional knowledge presented now, however, indicates that the story will turn tragic after all.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Abulu and Ikenna and their madness.

Discussion Question 2

Why isn't Abulu ever arrested for his public displays of sacrilege?

Discussion Question 3

What can the reader learn from Obembe's description of Abulu's life? What must the reader discern while considering the information?

Vocabulary

pilgrimage, raffia, spectacle, apparition, slunk, ballast, doppelgangers, leered, intermediary, inevitability, catastrophe, prominent, inhabitant, matrimonial, oblivious, foreseeing, botched, incarcerated



Chapter 7: The Falconer

Summary

Ben described Mother as a falconer, someone who stood on a hill to shoo away anything that might affect her children. She tried to sniff out troubles in her sons while they were yet forming. When the M.K.O. calendar was destroyed, she knew something bad was happening to Ikenna. She found out about Ikenna's prophesy from Abulu and went directly to Ikenna and Boja's room to confront them about it. Ikenna barged into Ben and Obembe's room to ask who told. Obembe answered loud enough to get Mother's attention and she came to the rescue. Ikenna vowed to punish them when Mother was gone.

Mother told them a story. She said that she carried her udu to the stream to fill with water. When she returned home, she discovered it empty. She told them they had leaked out of her udu. She thought her life was full of them, but they leaked out. She said they would all go to church that evening to pray for whatever curse had been instilled upon them by Abulu. Ikenna refused to go, saying he had no demon in him and was fine. He begged her not to make him go. Boja also said he would not go. Ikenna went to his room and shut the door; Boja went to Ben and Obembe's room and shut the door. Mother was upset because the two brothers no longer talked with each other. Ben and Obembe went to church with Mother. The congregation prayed to refute the demonic spirit that the prophesy left on Ikenna.

The sitting room offered signs of Father's absence. He used to enforce dusting, but Mother could not get the boys to dust the shelves in his absence. Ben wished his father would return to break the spell under which it seemed Ikenna and Boja were possessed. The prophesy had destroyed Ikenna's mind and was spilling over into their entire family. Ikenna stopped walking to school with Boja and avoided family dinners in which they shared from the same bowl. His physical appearance was affected. He lost a lot of weight and the whites of his eyes yellowed.

Mother told Ikenna that they all love him and that his problem is that he has allowed fear to cultivate Abulu's vision. She told him Abulu had recently been seen sucking the udder of a cow and remarked how crazy that was. She told Ikenna that people were praying for him even though he was not praying for himself, and told him he could blame only himself for living in useless fear. He thanked her, something he had not done in months. Mother insisted on believing that Ikenna would be healed.

The neighbor, Iyabo, stopped by to visit and told Mother that a woman they knew killed her husband that day. She said that Abulu prophesied that the thing the man treasured most would kill him. The children heard the remark and Mother refuted it, saying it was just the talk of a madman. Ikenna ran to the bathroom to vomit. A few days later he vomited again. This time, he did not make it to the bathroom and Mother saw him. She



was concerned. Ikenna locked himself in the bathroom. She forced him to go to the hospital and they kept him overnight for typhoid to receive an IV.

After recuperating from his illness, Ikenna announced he no longer wanted to attend church because he did not believe there was a God. He said he was a scientist and therefore did not believe in God. Mother said they would never accept an atheist child and that if he wanted to eat or sleep there, he would go to church. She got Father's belt and Ikenna went and got ready for church.

They walked home from church on a dirty street. The boys spit along the street and erased their spit marks with their sandals as was the custom. When they returned home, Boja said he saw Abulu try to enter the church. He was not admitted because he was naked. Boja reminded Ikenna that they were children of God and that Abulu's demonic prophecy could not affect them. He reminded that Abulu said he would die in a river of red but that is not possible. The brothers tried to reassure Ikenna, but he simply told them to leave him alone. Ikenna destroyed another family memory - a newspaper clipping featuring Ikenna for saving his brothers during civil unrest. Boja was very upset by this and said he hated Ikenna. Ikenna said that if Boja had not destroyed his passport, he would have been living a better life in Canada now. Ikenna pushed Boja, who hit his head on a metal box and began to bleed. Mother took him to the clinic.

Analysis

Mother is very troubled by Ikenna's situation and she sees how it is affecting her family. She wants to help Ikenna avoid trouble, but he buys into Abulu's prophecy to the point that he does not trust anyone in his family. She attempts to give up the superstitions to which she is accustomed to fully embrace the newer dictates of Christianity. After the congregation prays for Ikenna and the family, she feels better and holds onto the theory that Ikenna will be fully healed. When Ikenna and Boja refuse to go to church the first time, she allows them to stay home. The prayer gives her comfort and confidence to stand up to Ikenna when he announces he is an atheist. Seeing her confidence when she grabs Father's belt, Ikenna dresses and goes to church with the rest of the family.

The announcement of another of Abulu's prophecies coming true comes as a blow to Mother. Instead of buying into the gossip she normally would have had with her neighbor, she shoos her away to protect her children. The superstition also challenges her newfound strength in Christianity, so she removes Iyabo from her house. The boys try to comfort Ikenna and tell him how much they love him. The prophecy continues to hold Ikenna captive. He begins vomiting and cannot hold down food.

The destruction of the newspaper article shows that Ikenna no longer has a bond with his brothers. He is no longer proud to have saved them during the rioting that took place. This differs from the time he shredded the M.K.O. calendar. The calendar was a good memory that they had in common. The newspaper article is a reminder that he had saved his brothers, one of which now, he believes, will become his killer. All this time, Ikenna's family tries to convince him how much they love him and that he is safe



with them despite the words of the madman Abulu. Ikenna finally pushes Boja over the brink when he tears up the newspaper article. This is significant because it is the first time hatred is voiced among the family.

In a flashback, Ben recalls the passport incident. Once again, Ikenna stuck up for his brother. When Father was about to punish Boja for tossing Ikenna's passport in the well, Ikenna stepped in and took the blame. He says he asked Boja to do it so he would not have to go to Canada without him. It becomes apparent that, as the oldest, Ikenna has cared for his younger siblings a great deal throughout his life. He feels like he has sacrificed for them, with little in return.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the custom of erasing spit marks made in the dirt. What does Ben believe is the consequence of not doing so?

Discussion Question 2

Has Mother had a transformation or metamorphosis of her own in Chapter 7? Discuss whether it is her strength or Ikenna's weakness that allows her to demonstrate confidence and provide support for your claims.

Discussion Question 3

What makes the destruction of the newspaper article so important and why?

Vocabulary

discern, kernelled, convex, sidled, brethren, gyrating, convene, attests, conjured, escalated, delirious, gauze, atheist, engulfed, immense, premonition, retaliate



Chapter 8: The Locusts

Summary

The locusts arrived the week after Boja's head injury caused by Ikenna, bringing with them traditional heavy rains and storms. Everyone stayed indoors. When Mother confronted Ikenna about the injury he caused Boja, he simply said he was threatened first and would not let Boja threaten him. When Ikenna burst into tears, Mother was sure he was out of his mind. Boja did as Mother instructed and stayed clear of Ikenna.

The power went out when the boys were watching a game on TV, so they walked downtown to watch at a viewing center. Ikenna and Boja stayed away from each other. Obembe and Ben had to leave early because they were being trampled in the crowd of people at the viewing center. The two youngest boys walked home, leaving their older brothers at the center. They hid when they saw Abulu. Obembe heard him repeating Ikenna's name.

At home later that night, Obembe woke Ben because he heard their brothers fighting. Obembe realized that Ikenna returned home drunk. Ikenna slept late, meaning that Boja could not go into their room to get his things. In the afternoon, Boja knocked on the door. When Ikenna did not answer, the knocking became more fierce. Ikenna finally came out of the room and the two began fighting. They ended up fighting in the backyard. The younger boys began to cry, and ran to get help. They finally ran across Mr. Bode, a mechanic who lived a few blocks away. He went back to their house with them and saw no one fighting in the backyard. Obembe and Mr. Bode discovered Ikenna's body in the kitchen. He was lying facing the refrigerator, arms spread out, and his tongue hanging out of his mouth. He had been stabbed with a kitchen knife. Blood poured out of him like the Niger and Benu rivers, thus making Abulu's prophesy come true.

Analysis

Locusts are often associated with curses or plagues, so when they arrive in Chapter 8, it is a sign that a curse will come to fruition. Ikenna's death is the climax of this plot, only half-way through the book. Obviously, there is still much more to happen.

Abulu's prophesy seems to have some truth to it:

"You will be bound like a bird on the day you shall die." Ikenna's arms were spread like wings.

"You will be mute. You will be crippled." Ikenna's was dead and had a stab wound in his chest.



"Your tongue will stick out of your mouth like a hungry beast and not return to your mouth." Ikenna's tongue was hanging out of his mouth.

"You will lift your hands to grasp air, but not be able to." Perhaps this is why Ikenna fell outspread.

"You will try to speak but the words will freeze in your mouth." Ikenna was found facing the refrigerator, which is cold.

"You will die in a river of red." Ben observes the likeness of the streams of blood pouring from Ikenna to two rivers.

"You will die at the hands of a fisherman." At this point, this is assumed since the two were in a fight when the younger brothers left to get help.

Discussion Question 1

Does Boja really hate Ikenna all along, or has he grown to hate him after the changes in Ikenna's demeanor? Support your reasoning with facts from the chapter.

Discussion Question 2

Does Abulu's prophesy for Ikenna come true in this chapter? Which parts do not? Which parts do? What does this say about the prophesy?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss why Mr. Bode is a good person to help end the fight between Ikenna and Boja, if only he had arrived in time.

Vocabulary

forerunner, herald, pummeled, confluence, makeshift, inscription, jubilation, ferried, riotous, afflictive, gesticulated, muffled, commentary, yield, partake, gladiators, fisticuffs, transfixed, grappling, presentiment, doddering



Chapter 9: The Sparrow

Summary

Ikenna was the sparrow that this chapter is titled for. His life quickly flew out of sight, just like a small sparrow, Ben said. Ikenna's death was hard for Ben to fathom at his age. It became a little more real when Father returned home to stay for good two days after Ikenna's death. Ikenna was buried four days later and Boja was missing. Relatives that Ben had seldom seen arrived for the funeral services. Ben noted that, in his casket, Ikenna took on the shape of a small bird, a fragile sparrow.

Ben explained an accident that happened to Ikenna when he was only six years old. One of his testes was kicked inside his body. He had surgery to correct the problem. At age eight, Ikenna was stung by a scorpion and his right leg shrunk compared to the left leg. Ikenna had been through a lot in his lifetime. Ben used the chapter to tell more about Ikenna.

Ben walks the reader through the funeral service customs, often pointing out ways in which Ikenna was like a sparrow. One thing seemed to be missing from the funeral service-- Boja. Throughout the funeral, Ben's thoughts were of his brothers and the joys they celebrated together, too. He specifically mentioned his "lost" brothers, reminding that Boja was not present. Ben recalled how they all celebrated when Ikenna won first place in a race. He remembered Ikenna scolding him and Obembe for making fun of the worshipers of the Celestial Church, and playing Commando and Rambo with Ikenna and his other brothers.

In the last memory shared in Chapter 9, Ben once again likened Ikenna to a sparrow. During Christmastime in 1992, Ikenna actually tried to rehabilitate a sparrow. Most of its feathers were gone and it had a piece of twine around its leg. For three days he kept the bird, and when it died, he and Boja buried it in their back yard.

Analysis

This chapter shows Ben's mind wandering during Ikenna's funeral. His mind floods with memories and he struggles with acceptance and understanding of the finality of death. Narrating the story as an adult, Ben can finally put those thoughts into words.

The sparrow is both a metaphor and a simile for Ikenna. The beginning of the chapter started with the phrase "Ikenna was a sparrow." He uses this metaphor to explain how quickly Ikenna's life fluttered away. When describing how Ikenna lay in his coffin, Ben used the sparrow as a simile. The way his hands are placed at his side and his ankles are crossed, he took on an ovoid shape, like that of a sparrow. He also likened Ikenna to a sparrow because he was fragile and did not choose his own fate. Ben takes the sparrow simile farther when he explains that sparrows have no home and neither does Ikenna's heart at this point.



The sparrow is not the only simile used in Chapter 9. At one point, Ben likens Ikenna's corpse to a groundnut whose meat has been removed. When people break down in tears at the funeral as dirt is being tossed into the open grave, he likens the emotional eruption to that of a pod nut cracking.

Weather conditions provide tone throughout the chapter. When Father returns at the beginning of Chapter 9, the weather is damp, drizzly, and cold providing a backdrop for the grief and emotion associated with death. Those gray weather conditions often depict sadness, grief or depression. During the funeral, Ben notices thick, gray clouds forming, another indication of a mood of depression or darkness setting in.

Discussion Question 1

In previous chapters Ikenna was described as something of a monster. In Chapter 9, Ben describes him as a sparrow. Discuss the change in Ben's view of Ikenna.

Discussion Question 2

Ben describes Ikenna as a sparrow, a fragile being who does not choose his own fate. Do you agree with this description? Discuss why or why not.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the comparison Ben makes between the gravediggers and himself, digging for memories.

Vocabulary

allusion, louvers, boisterous, effulgence, geniality, radiance, obituary, anguish, fortitude, ashen, inaudible, inadvertently, gauge, theatrical, veranda, bungalow, din, de-plumed, obliterated

Chapter 10: The Fungus

Summary

Boja was the fungus Ben told about in Chapter 10. While the title sounds mean or offensive, Ben actually explained how Boja did have a fungal problem. Fungi in his kidneys made Boja wet the bed until he was 12 years old. Mother thought he was under an evil spell and she prayed for him and anointed his mattress with holy oil. Still, Boja wet the bed.

Just like a person can have a fungus and not know it, Boja lived (figuratively) for four days after Ikenna's death on the family's compound and was never seen. He appeared in their dreams and sometimes Mother thought she caught glimpses of him. Fliers were posted around town seeking his whereabouts and the fact that he was missing was heavily televised on area news stations.

In retelling the story of Boja's birth, Ben shared that Ikenna's death was not the first time Boja caused someone to bleed immensely. When he was born, suddenly and unexpectedly, Mother was forced to give birth to him at home. There was so much blood that it stained the floor under the bed on which she gave birth. Since no word had come of the search for Boja in four days, Father went to check on progress at the police station. Ben went along. The officer in reception asked Father for a bribe, but apologized when he learned that Father was there to check on the investigation of his missing son. Father learned that there had been several leads, but none had been beneficial. The deputy recommended offering a reward, but Father said he wanted to delay for a few more days to see the preliminary results of the search. Father thought Boja was somewhere safely hiding, fearing the consequences of killing Boja.

Ben said Boja revealed himself shortly after he and Father returned from the police station. Mrs. Agbati found Boja's body floating in the family's well. Mr. Bode entered the well and brought Boja out. Obembe and Ben watched from their second floor terrace. They did not gather by Boja's side as they had with Ikenna. Boja had a history with the well. Once a falcon fell in it and died and Boja drank a cup of water from it. Father rushed him to the hospital and was told that Boja would be fine.

With Boja's death, Father told Obembe that as the eldest, he now had to set a good example for Ben and their youngest brother, David, and be their leader. When Father left, Obembe explained to Ben that they had drunk the blood from Boja's wounds over the last four days. Obembe covered himself in one of his mother's wrappas and began to cry. Ben vomited and took a drink of water offered by Obembe to feel better. There was no mention as to whether this water is from somewhere else other than the well that was still contaminated at the time. Ben recalled that Ikenna had Mother's kitchen knife in his possession the day he knocked Boja down and sent him to the hospital. They thought perhaps Ikenna intended to kill Boja that day. Ben imagined that Boja's death in the well was tragic and morbid.



Analysis

The idea that Boja is fungus has a double meaning. Ben explains his brother's fungal infection and the bed wetting it caused, but there is more to the fungal idea than that. His bloody body also contaminates the family's well and they all drank from it for four days. As water often symbolizes life, in this way, Boja was still alive on the family's compound. Boja did not reveal himself as Ben originally said. Instead, Boja is revealed when his body finally floats to the top of the well and is discovered by Mrs. Agbati.

The term fungus has a bad connotation. Mold is a fungus that grows unwanted in damp, dark places. Fungi may also grow in rotting areas. Perhaps Ben, in comparing Boja to fungus, has that in mind, too. As Ikenna's faith in Abulu's vision grew, his expectation for his own future grew dark and grim. Following the fungus metaphor, Boja's growing hatred for his brother thrives in that atmosphere. As Boja's love for his oldest brother begins to rot, hatred grows even more.

It is ironic that Boja has caused two family members to bleed extensively. The first was Mother, during childbirth. Her labor began so quickly that she could not get to a hospital in time. Despite bleeding through the mattress and leaving a permanent stain on the floor, Mother lived. Ikenna died after he was stabbed and bled rivers of red in their kitchen floor.

If the past is any example, Father's talk with the eldest son foreshadows something else that will take place later in the story. With several more chapters to go and two sons already dead, there is more to the story yet. Obembe is already acting like the big brother because he comforts Ben and cleans up his vomit, just like Boja did for Ikenna when he had typhoid. Using this example, Boja wronged Ikenna. Will Obembe wrong Ben?

Ben's imagined process of Boja's death is very morbid, especially considering Ben is only nine years old. Imagining brain matter and a crashing skull, along with the other details Ben pictures, indicates he is under a heavy amount of stress caused by two very violent deaths of his brothers and the pressure of grieving for two.

When Boja is discovered in the well, flocks of people arrive in the family's yard. Ben said they are pigeons, metaphorically representing large flocks that lazily stand around waiting for a morsel to be tossed to them. In this case, the morsel was gossip.

Discussion Question 1

When Ikenna was forcing Boja out of the room they shared and fighting with him, Ben felt sorry for Boja. Why does he call Boja a fungus now?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss Father's talk with Obembe and Ben. How does this talk compare to the one on Chapter 3 when he referred to them as "fishers of the mind?"

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the importance of Ben's family well to the entire neighborhood.

Vocabulary

fungus, pockmarked, corruption, plaguing, aperture, peruse, dictator, multitude, insufficient, converted, congregating, affirmatively, mechanical, barracks, banished, pandemonium, deafeningly, tranquility, contorting



Chapter 11: The Spiders

Summary

It was a tribal belief that spiders nested in homes of grieving people. Mother began having visions of spiders. Father did everything he could to soothe her fear of the spiders. The pharmacist and Iyabo told Father to do what she wanted to help her through the grieving process. He stomped a lot of spiders and swept out a lot of webs, including imaginary ones, in the process.

After the spiders were gone, Mother began to hear voices. She talked of a strange dream she had that forewarned of Boja's death. Ben said that people all across Africa believed that if something is going to happen to a mother's child, she knows it. Mother's recounting of her dream made Ben wonder if he should have interpreted his own dream about Ikenna on the bridge as a forewarning. Mother's stories began drawing a crowd to the home, something Father did not like. He came home one night after drinking wine and when she began telling him a story about her forewarning, he shouted for her to stop. She shouted back. He tried to drown her out with the television, but everyone heard. A storm made them lose power and they all sat silent in the darkness.

Mother's grief began to consume her. She referred to Nkem, the baby, as "this thing" one day. It scared the little girl and Mother said she did not realize it was her and she began to cry. The next day, she thought Ben was a shiny white cow in the house. Father put her in a psychiatric hospital for a couple of weeks. He finally took the children to see her. When she returned home, Mother insisted on burning all of Ikenna's and Boja's belongings. She feared that Abulu's curse would transfer from those items to the rest of the family. Father did as she asked and reassured her that they would get through this grief together.

Analysis

Mother, who during Ikenna's rough times seems to abandon her tribal traditions to rely on Christianity, goes back to her tribal beliefs. Based on superstitions that Father hated, Mother begins to see spiders and other visions of madness during her grief. She starts a grief-fueled rant and almost bares her breast in broad daylight but a friend quickly pulls down her blouse. Losing two sons is maddening. Father tries to be supportive, but can only take so much before shouting at her. Uncharacteristic of Mother and the women of their culture, Mother stands up to him and insists she is hearing from the spirits of the dead children to whom she had given life.

Hearing from the spirits of dead children is different from seeing the living children as shiny white cows, however. This shows Father that Mother's situation is very serious and beyond the grief process. He takes her to a psychiatric ward for help. Ironically, no one makes a connection between her madness and the madness that is associated with



Abulu. She has previously mocked Abulu for sucking milk from a cow's udder. In this chapter, she sees her own children as cows.

Mother seems to have her spirits lifted after destroying all of Boja's and Ikenna's belongings. If Ikenna's prophesy came true because of a self-fulfilling prophesy, perhaps the curse will end because of Mother's self-fulfilling prophesy. She believes Abulu's curse will end when the belongings are destroyed.

When Mother is institutionalized, Ben finds himself caring for David more often. In flashbacks, he recalls how Ikenna and Boja had both taken care of him throughout their lives.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Mother's return to tribal superstitions. Why do they happen and what did each mean?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Abulu as a madman and Mother as a madwoman. Ultimately, what is the difference between the two?

Discussion Question 3

Father guards Mother "like a rare egg," according to Ben. In what ways does he protect her? Why does he do that and what does it say about Mother's role in the family? What does it say about Father's role in the family?

Vocabulary

hindsight, harken, proliferation, gait, prescient, jarred, spryly, strewn, recounted, bereaved, confrontation, agitated, incantation, throatily, dreadlocks, designation, exorcised, rheumy



Chapter 12: The Searchdog

Summary

Obembe is the search dog that the chapter's title refers to, because he always seemed to be the first to discover things. He discovered a loaded pistol in the house when chasing a fly. The gun did not belong to his Father; it was left in the house by a previous owner. Father took it to the police station. Ben suspected that Obembe wondered if Boja was in the well because he had complained about the water being greasy and having a foul odor. He was the first to notice that the bathing water had a slick surface on top of it.

Obembe and Ben wondered when Boja's funeral would be; their parents did not talk about it and neither boy wanted to ask. It was Obembe who discovered a small jar with a plastic bag inside. The bag held what appeared to be ashes. On it was Boja's name and the years in which he was born and died. They confronted Father about it a few days after finding the jar and he did not deny it. He said that family members told them it was sacrilege to bury a person who had committed suicide or fratricide, and Boja had done both. Father did not believe the old tribal superstition, but he went along with it for Mother's sake.

Obembe also searched for knowledge. He told Ben about a story in which people were captured because they were not united. He explained that their brothers died because there was a division between them. He said the only reason they were divided was because of Abulu's prophesy. Obembe reasoned that he was going to kill Abulu to avenge their brothers' deaths. Ben was shocked by the comment and shocked again when Ben lit a cigarette. He cracked their bedroom window to blow the smoke outside so their parents would not know. Ben was horrified to see his 11-year-old brother smoking like a grown man but weeping like a child at the same time.

Ben found a journal in which Obembe had sketched different ways he could kill Abulu. One was by stoning; another was by beheading him. Even though the drawings were stick figures, they terrified Ben. Obembe was mad when he caught Ben looking at the drawings. Ben tried to talk him out of his plan to kill Abulu, but Obembe insisted it was the only way to avenge their brothers.

In November, Father opened a bookstore in the marketplace. Mother laughed when a rat ran out of the store when Father opened the door. Leaving the bookstore, the family saw Abulu for the first time since their brothers died. He waved and smiled at the car, but Father ignored him. Mother said he was an evil man and would die a cruel death. At that point, Ben realized Abulu was at the center of his family's strife and grief just as Obembe said. Ben counted 13 ways Abulu had adversely affected his family, and he later told Obembe that he also wanted to kill Abulu.



Analysis

Calling Obembe a searchdog foreshadows events that will occur in an upcoming chapter. Does Obembe actually search for the things he finds, or does he happen upon them? In the case of the gun, he accidentally found it. The same is true with Boja's ashes. Noticing the greasy, foul-smelling water was also a coincidence. To a little brother, though, it seemed as if Obembe was gifted in finding information. Many times, Ben would not have known information if Obembe had not shared it with him.

In keeping with what all four brothers did in Chapter 1, Obembe and Ben do not trouble their parents with questions regarding Boja's funeral because it is not being talked about in front of them. This respect, or fear as it may have been, goes to the wayside upon Obembe's discovery of Boja's ashes. Father's handling of the matter shows a kinder side to him that the boys are not accustomed to seeing. Father levels with them, indicating a new level of respect on his part for his young sons. The boys also see that Father is willing to compromise for Mother's sake.

While he would have preferred to give Boja a burial, Father agrees to go along with tribal superstition to cremate him instead. His willingness to do this indicates a shift in the family dynamic. Perhaps he is concerned about Mother's health. Perhaps he feels guilty about leaving her alone with the boys while the strife between Ikenna and Boja continued to grow. There is also a chance that Father realizes the importance of Mother to raising their youngest children, David and Nkem. Whatever the reason, it shows Ben and Obembe that their father can also be a man of reason, one who will talk about matters instead of yelling and whipping.

Father's talk with Obembe in Chapter 11 was reminiscent of the one he had with Ikenna before things got worse. In Chapter 12, Obembe takes the next step and manipulates Ben into his plan to kill Abulu. Remember, after Father's talk with Ikenna in Chapter 4, Ikenna then made his brothers feel sorry for him and fearful of him, causing them to behead the neighbor's rooster. In his story about unification, Obembe lays the manipulative foundation that makes Ben decide later in the chapter to join him in his quest to kill the madman. Just as Ben and his brothers had been afraid of Ikenna, Ben finds himself afraid of Obembe after seeing the drawings of various murder methods he made in a journal. At first, Ben does not say he will help and Obembe never asks, but the idea that two brothers are already dead because they were not united has a big impact on Ben. Ben's announcement that he wants to help kill Abulu garners a big hug and a bedtime story from Obembe. He is pleased that his little brother is united in the effort. Mother's comment that Abulu will die a cruel death is also foreshadowing.

In making his decision to kill Abulu, Ben notes 13 reasons that Abulu should die. While Ben does not mention the significance of the number, it is worth noting that 13 is often considered a bad number by those who are superstitious. The number sets an ominous tone for the remaining three chapters of the book and falls into the motif of superstition that has been prevalent throughout the plot.



Ben feels the pressure on Obembe to grow up and to be a leader when he sees the 11-year-old smoking and crying at the same time. Still a little boy just two years older than Ben, Obembe suddenly has the weight of the world on his shoulders. In many ways, he acts exactly like Ikenna did when that same responsibility was placed on him, perhaps because he takes things very literally. In Chapter Three, Ben told a story about how Obembe had taken a figure of speech literally which led to Father and Mother always explaining exactly what they meant when talking in parables. Being literal, Obembe becomes exactly the big brother Ikenna had been, one who seeks revenge.

Discussion Question 1

Compare Ikenna and Obembe as big brothers and leaders. Discuss the good qualities of each as well as what seems to be their fatal flaws.

Discussion Question 2

Would Ben have joined Obembe in his quest to kill Abulu if his family had not run across the man when leaving church? Discuss your reasoning.

Discussion Question 3

In Chapter 6, the reader learns that Abulu is known to chase down cars to give prophecies to those inside. In Chapter 12, Abulu dashes toward Ben's family's car as they drive by. Write what you think Abulu's prophecy for them would have been had they stopped to listen?

Vocabulary

slaloming, VHS, transparent, clansmen, fratricide, perennially, erratic, garnered, pruned, wiles, transformed, springboard, dumbfounded, brandishes, brooding, blockhead, rubble, babbling, legion, tubers, trudged, epiphany



Chapter 13: The Leech

Summary

Hatred was the leech Ben wrote about in Chapter 13. The leech was planted so deeply in Obembe's soul that it could not be removed. Ben and Obembe started spending many hours locked in their room, plotting Abulu's death. They started by reviewing Obembe's journal drawings. In the "David and Goliath Plan," the boys would stone Abulu to death. Ben said that since they were not servants of God, though, it might not work. Obembe thought stoning would be good, but could not figure out a way to do it without getting caught.

The second death plan was called the "Okonkwo Plan," named after a character in the story Obembe told Ben about things falling apart without unification. This plan involved stabbing, just like Ikenna had been stabbed. Ben suggested that the man might fight back and stab Obembe, so they crossed it off the list. One by one, they crossed all the plans off Obembe's list. Frustrated, the boys did not give up. They continued thinking of ideas while searching for Abulu in the daytime when their parents were at work. They plotted the madman's moves in the morning and afternoon. Obembe and Ben had time to do this because they skipped the semester of school to recover from their family's tragedies.

On one of their daily missions to track Abulu, Obembe and Ben ran into a boy named Nonso. Nonso, who had a Mohawk hairstyle, was one of Ikenna's classmates. They ask Nonso if he had seen Abulu lately. Nonso said he had not seen him since two days before, when he saw him with a corpse on the side of the road. According to Nonso, Abulu discovered a girl's body there. Police left it there until the afternoon. Early in the day, onlookers would pass and look at the dead girl, but interest dwindled by the afternoon, Nonso said. Suddenly, he saw a crowd forming around the body and went to see what was happening. Abulu had undressed the corpse and was raping her. A few people thought he should be stopped, but the majority thought it would be okay since the girl was already dead. After relieving himself, he fell asleep holding onto the corpse. The story terrified the boys and they did not go looking for Abulu again that day.

News at breakfast from Father that his friend, Mr. Bayo, would soon take Obembe and Ben to Canada to live with him made the whole family happy, except Obembe. Father said David would go, too. After Father and Mother left for work, Ben asked Obembe why he wasn't happy. Obembe said they must step up their work to kill Abulu since they would be leaving for Canada soon. Ben had hoped they could just move away and forget the plan, but he did not express that to Obembe. Obembe vowed not to go to Canada without first avenging his dead brothers.



Analysis

A leech is a parasite that sucks blood to live from its host. In Chapter 13, Ben likens hate to a leech. Metaphorically, hatred attaches itself to Obembe and sucks so much of his soul out that he cannot even be happy when Father announces his upcoming move to Canada. Moving to Canada symbolizes a new start for the boys in several ways. First, it is an opportunity to move westward into the culture Father values so much and dreams of for his sons. He tells Ben that the school there will be better than the one he attends in Nigeria. Second, it is a new start toward a lifetime of prosperity. Remember, Father always had a plan for his children. He outlines specific professions for each so his offspring will be valuable contributors to society. Waiting until the boys become teenagers did not work well in the case of Ikenna and Boja, so perhaps he thinks sending the boys earlier will put them on the right path to success earlier. A third reason to send the boys to Canada is to keep them safe and out of trouble. Father and Mother must worry about Obembe and Ben, although they have no idea of the boys' plot to kill Abulu to avenge their brothers' deaths. The parents allow the boys to skip school for the semester to allow them to come to grips with the tragic deaths of their brothers, but one must wonder, too, how much of that decision was actually made for the protection of the boys. Would the other students tease them about the fratricide, or would tribal superstitions discussed at school have a negative impact on the boys?

Nonso's story about Abulu raping the corpse really shakes the boys. The action shows them how truly crazy Abulu is, but it also shows them that he is criminally insane. Keep in mind that rape is an act of violence. Despite Abulu's penchant for sex discussed in previous chapters, he sexually violates a corpse. This incident gives the reader a glimpse into the societal norms of the Nigerian culture at the time. The crowd, watching Abulu rape the corpse, discuss whether it is right or wrong and the majority decide he isn't hurting anything since she is dead anyway. This signifies a lack of respect for women. Just as troubling as the rape spectacle is the fact that the body is allowed to lie in the open so long. Nonso expects the woman was discovered around dawn. Abulu rapes her just after noon. Police do not hurry to remove the body simply because it is on a low traffic route. There is no respect given for the dead, or for the people of the town who have to see the corpse.

The death plans sketched by Obembe trouble Ben from the beginning. Even though he asks to help Obembe kill Abulu, Ben expresses some relief each time he and his brother deem one of the plans as impossible. Ben is also relieved when Father announces their pending move to Canada. He thinks the plan to kill Abulu will dissolve and he will get to move forward with a fresh start in another country. The same news is oppressive to Obembe because he sees the move as a deadline to kill Abulu. Even though Obembe is now the oldest brother and trying to act like a man by avenging his brothers' deaths, Abulu still frightens him. Father's directive to be the leader inspires Obembe to continue on with the plan to kill the madman. Ben is disgusted by Abulu and wants to avoid him, possibly seen as a more childlike trait even though it is the wisest choice. Obembe's intent to move forward with killing Abulu continues the rising action just two chapters away from the end of the novel.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the different reactions from Ben and Obembe when Father announces they will soon be moving to Canada. Explain their reactions.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the metaphor of the leech in this chapter. In addition to hatred, what else in this chapter fits into the leech motif?

Discussion Question 3

What does Nonso's discussion with Obembe and Ben suggest their other peers believe about the deaths of Ikenna and Boja? Discuss the clues that lead you to that conclusion.

Vocabulary

leech, wicked, fictional, hawker, embedded, quest, vendor, encountered, corpse, nimbus, providence, reconnaissance, berated, taut, sinews, decomposed



Chapter 14: The Leviathan

Summary

Ben said Abulu was a leviathan. He was a transient who lived in the worst conditions but could not be killed. Ben recalled that Solomon told them he believed Abulu was an evil spirit taking on human form. Solomon told him he saw Abulu get hit by a car one day. The man lay still, presumably dead, on the roadside for a while, then got up and dusted off his clothing. He had a wound on his forehead and was bloody, but walked away from the accident.

Obembe devised a plan to kill Abulu by giving him rat poison-laced bread to eat. He believed the deed would not be traced to them because the man ate from garbage and gutters. They poured rat poison on chunks of bread and headed out to find Abulu. They did not find the man on their morning trip out of the house, but they did see him that afternoon. Abulu was "cooking" in a wok in which he had poured old leaves, pieces of bones and other junk. Obembe and Ben stood and watched his antics. Two men joined them. They had just come from church and were going to pray for Abulu. Obembe told them not to pray for him because the madman was their father, a phony who just acted crazy to beg for money. The men were shocked, but told the boys to pray for their "father" to convict him of his greed. After the men left, Obembe revealed that he lied to them because he was afraid they had some power and could heal Abulu before they could kill him. A family stopped by to watch Abulu's cooking antics, so Ben and Obembe left, deciding there were too many people to safely pass off the poisoned bread.

The boys found Abulu the next day near an elementary school. He was parading around, stomping and chanting. The boys followed him and Ben began to feel sorry for Abulu. The man was like a stray dog, Ben saw women throw rocks at Abulu and tell him to go away. On the bridge, the boys were alone with Abulu and Obembe gave him some of the bread. The boys ran away, but stayed close enough to watch him eat the bread. Some men walked by Abulu and did a double-take. Obembe thought it was because Abulu was dying. Convinced they have finally killed the man, Ben and Obembe relaxed. Then, they realized Abulu was dancing toward them, singing and clapping as he got closer. The poison did not work.

Obembe's failure to kill Abulu continued to rip him apart, but Mother and Father were starting to recover. They even planned a memorial service for Ikenna and Boja since Mother was doing so much better. During the service, Father began to cry and Ben felt ashamed. During a song called "It is Well with My Soul," Abulu tried to enter the service. Abulu's actions had been disruptive to church in the past, like a time when he did not wear any clothing, so the church had decided to forbid him. They even chased him with sticks to keep him away. During the memorial service, however, Abulu slipped in unnoticed at first. A woman he sat by said he repeated Ikenna's name throughout the service.



Shortly after the memorial service, Father left the house and was gone all day. Father finally returned after midnight with one eye bandaged. He told them he had cataract surgery and not to ask any more questions. Even when the bandage was finally removed, Father could not close his eye all the way. While watching TV with him one day while he was recuperating, the boys asked him when they would go to Canada. The only commitment he would give was "Early next year." When Obembe told Ben they would kill Abulu that night, it dawned on Ben that it was December 23, the night before Christmas Eve. Christmas was different without his brothers.

Obembe hatched a plan to go out after midnight to find Abulu. Ben knew that even adults were afraid to go out in town after midnight. While Obembe planned, Ben went to talk to Father. They fell asleep in the sitting room; Ben hoped Obembe would not bother him there. The next morning, Ben told Obembe that he got up for a drink of water and Father talked to him so long that he did not realize when he fell asleep. Obembe did sneak out of the house, but Abulu was not to be found, he said.

When the New Year holiday came, no sorrow was allowed. Ben, Obembe and their little brother and sister danced and celebrated. After the celebration ended, Obembe focused again on killing Abulu.

Analysis

In this chapter, Ben metaphorically refers to Abulu as a leviathan, animalizing the madman as a sea monster of sorts. Referring to him as a sea monster may be based on one of two possibilities. First, to nine-year-old Ben, perhaps sailors are the toughest people he can imagine. Imagining the madman as a sea creature would fall into what boys his age found captivating. Another reason he might refer to Abulu as a leviathan was because the madman was tied to them by water, the Omi-Ala River where they first met. In this way, Abulu was something from the river that was big, evil, and strong enough to avoid death.

There are plenty of reasons for the boys to think Abulu is not going to be killed. First, Solomon's account shows supernatural strength or ability on the part of the madman. Even the rat poison given to him by Obembe does not affect the old crazy man. He sounds like a monster incapable of being destroyed. Despite Abulu's seeming indestructibility, Ben sees that Obembe is still determined to kill him. If so many different situations did not kill the man, why does Obembe think that he and his little brother possibly can?

It is ironic to see that Obembe has a strong faith in God while yet planning to kill a man. He intervenes when the two men are going to pray for Abulu's healing because he does not want it to occur. He believes God's intervention could save Abulu. It is interesting to note that in all of the book, neither Ben or Obembe pray for God to remove him from the town or to have their family be rid of the man. It has always been about vengeance for the boys, even though the Bible states that vengeance belongs to God (Romans 12:19). Think about the song the congregation sings at the memorial service for Ikenna and



Boja. The words are written to the verses and they are not fully formed. For example, what should have been "It is well (it is well) with my soul (with my soul)" are actually spelled to show a mispronunciation: "It is weh (it is weh) with ma so (with ma so). This mispronunciation indicates either a newness with the English language or a newness with the Christianity preached by the English missionaries in the community, or a combination of both. Considering the prevalence of tribal superstitions still in existence from other chapters (like not burying Boja so his murderous evil might affect the soil), the idea that Christianity is still fairly new to Ben's Nigerian community is feasible.

The idea that Father leaves the house after his sons' memorial service and has an unannounced cataract surgery is ludicrous. Father is able to pull off the stunt by being stern and domineering, and insisting that the family stop asking him questions about it. Father's secret utilizes the element of foreshadowing. The reader cannot help but think it has something to do with Abulu's attendance of the church service earlier in the day.

The author makes the story more believable when he creates the Christmas holiday as a sad one. Ben even forgets that it is nearing Christmas because the family has no Christmas joy this year, common after a tragic family loss. The fact that even Obembe celebrated on New Year's illustrates that local customs and superstitions still take precedence over Christianity. Their pagan past is not yet far enough removed from life in Ben's village.

Discussion Question 1

Is Ben a coward for devising his plan to fall asleep in the room with Father? Discuss Ben's fears associated with his action. Why does he do it and what does he fear the next morning?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the simile in the last sentence of Chapter 14. What point is Ben trying to get across to the reader? In your opinion, is the comparison a good one?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Ben call Abulu a leviathan? Cite several reasons from the text to support your response.

Vocabulary

unfeigned, detritus, furred, riffled, malicious, enunciate, acquire, inflaming, bleak, befogged, commodities, termite, splayed, cataract, virtue



Chapter 15: The Tadpole

Summary

Ben likens hope to a tadpole. He recalls catching tadpoles with his brothers, taking them home and hoping they would live and evolve, only to find they died time and time again. Ben hoped his brothers would always be there for him and they were not. Father hoped his sons would grow up to do great things, but they did not. Ben said his hope to go to Canada also died.

The New Year brought new hope to Ben. Mr. Bayo would be coming soon to take him and Obembe to Canada. Ben noted that his father still referred to him and Obembe as fishermen. Mother and Father began to recover from their family's tragedies. The only one who did not seem more positive was Obembe. The idea of being able to ride bikes through town was big like an elephant or cow to Ben, but as small as an ant to Obembe. He was focused on revenge.

On January 5, 1997, Father announced he was leaving for Lagos to get the boys' passports. He was also wearing a shirt with a Central Bank of Nigeria logo on it. He gave the boys some money, cautioned them to be careful, then left, just like the time he left to move to Yola for work. Obembe told Ben that after their mother left with the youngest kids, they would prepare their weapons to kill Abulu at the river with hooked fishing lines. Obembe planned for them to find Abulu at the river at sunset. After Mother left for work, Obembe showed Ben the transformed fishing rods that were shortened and had hooks attached to the end. Seeing the weapons terrified Ben. Obembe had fashioned the weapons in the evenings when he would disappear for periods of time. Seeing the rigged rods made the mission real to Ben.

While Obembe placed the weapons back under the bed, Ben's mind flooded with the opportunities that awaited them in Canada. He tried to talk Obembe out of killing Abulu. Obembe was outraged and said he would do it himself. Ben said he would go after all, but Obembe was still mad. Ben was scared that his dead brothers would be mad that he did not want to avenge their deaths. He begged Obembe to let him help. Obembe told Ben that going to Canada shortly after the murder was what he had planned. He said they would not be happy in Canada if they did not first kill the madman. They headed out with their weapons at dark.

The boys saw Abulu giving a prophesy to a man named Mr. Kingsley. The prophesy was that Mr. Kinglsey's son would be shot to death by armed robbers and blood would splash all over the window of his car. Mr. Kingsley went into his house and came out wielding a machete. He threatened to kill Abulu if he came to his house again. The boys continued to follow Abulu at a distance and decided to wait until they were sure two men they had spotted were not at risk of going back by them. Obembe hugged Ben and told him they were doing the right thing and that God knew. He said they would be free after killing Abulu.



Obembe rushed into the darkness toward Abulu and Ben followed. They rushed him, crying out loudly as they did so, not being stealthy at all. Abulu was lying under a tree with his eyes closed when they attacked. The boys jabbed their hooks into his chest, face, wherever they could hit. Abulu was dazed and frantic and began running backward while screaming. The boys continued to flog him with the hooks, pulling chunks of flesh out every time they hit him. Blood was everywhere and Ben said the man's helpless cries shook the core of his being. The boys were sobbing the whole time they were killing him. Abulu fell back into the water and was carried downstream. As they watched him float downstream, they heard two men coming toward them. One of the men caught Ben. The man reeked of alcohol. Obembe got away, but the other man chased him. Ben smacked the man with his hooked fishing rod and got away. Then, he realized the men were soldiers that they had seen at the river a previous day.

Ben met Obembe back at their home and explained why he did not return with his weapon. It was stuck in the soldier's hand. Obembe told Ben not to worry because the job was finished. He hugged Ben.

Analysis

As with all the other chapters, Chapter 15 starts with a metaphor. By likening the emotion hope to a tadpole, Ben points out that hope can either grow and evolve into something or it can die. Throughout this book, it was Ben's experience that hope most often dies. Even so, he clings to the hope that Canada will offer him new opportunities and a chance to become the educated, successful son that his father wants. The metaphor also serves as foreshadowing, to let the reader know that Ben's bad experience with tadpoles not living may also happen to his own dream of living in Canada.

Ben, just a couple of years younger than Obembe, is intrigued by the idea of living in a safe community in which he can ride a bike while getting a good Western education. The boys roam the streets rather freely in their town, but often see dead bodies, filth, fighting, etc. The idea of a more civilized community appeals to him a great deal. It is no surprise to see that Ben is the one who wants to take a more civilized approach in dealing with Abulu. Instead of murdering him, Ben wants to simply move to Canada for a new life. Canada does not appeal to Obembe, symbolizing his choice to commit an uncivilized act against Abulu.

It is ironic that Father continues to refer to the boys as his fishermen, especially after all the trouble their fishing episode causes the family. Had they not gone fishing, they would not have met Abulu or received a prophesy from him. The fact that a fisherman (Boja) killed Ikenna just like Abulu's prophesy warned is reason enough alone not to refer to the boys as fishermen again. Perhaps Father's reference to the boys' former decision to be fishermen keeps the wound fresh in their minds or makes them feel somehow responsible for their brothers' deaths.



Father's departure for Lagos makes Canada seem like a potential reality, a dream that is stripped away when Ben sees the rigged fishhook weapons made by Obembe. The weapons symbolize death, not only the death of Abulu the madman, but also the death of Ben's dream of leaving Nigeria for a new life in Canada. Ben is rightfully afraid of the mission to kill Abulu, but he also fears losing Obembe by not going through with it. The idea of brotherhood is a strong theme throughout the novel. After losing two brothers to death, Ben is cautious about losing another one, especially an older brother. The older brothers always looked out for him and had more wisdom to share.

For a moment, the reader believes if the boys carry out their mission to kill the crazy man that there will be someone else who is suspected of the crime. Mr. Kinglsey's threat to kill Abulu if he ever returned to his house was a loud, public display. Unfortunately for the boys, the commotion they caused during their attack on Abulu and his cries and outbursts drew attention to their crime. In addition to being spotted as two young boys and having a motive, Obembe was calling out Ben's name as a soldier chased after him. These facts would make their search for Abulu's killers much easier, foreshadowing an identification and capture of Ben and Obembe.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Ben's inner conflict regarding his desire to please Obembe. Despite his urges to get out of their plan to kill Abulu, he begs to participate. Discuss how Obembe's words and actions affect Ben's decision.

Discussion Question 2

After a lot of careful planning on Obembe's part, the plan to kill Abulu goes awry. Explain why.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the tadpole metaphor in detail. How are the stages of development of a tadpole like hope?

Vocabulary

carrion, escarpment, indecipherable, decrepit, domineering, smattering, deafening, boring, perforated, thicket, ferried, craning, visa, abruptly, eluded, contradictory, fluorescent, déjà vu, resemblance



Chapter 16: The Roosters

Summary

Ben says he and Obembe were roosters. Upon their return home from killing Abulu, they found Pastor Collins visiting their house. When the boys entered without their shirts, Mother asked where they had been. Obembe told her they removed their shirts when they got too hot and that they had been playing football near the public high school. David removed his shirt, too, following his big brothers and saying he, too, was hot. David turned a fan on while Obembe and Ben went to clean up.

Ben's hands were shaking as he washed. Obembe asked if he was afraid, and Ben said yes. Ben was afraid the soldiers would kill them all. Obembe said the soldiers did not know who they were or where they were. Obembe assured Ben that the soldiers would not kill their parents. After the boys were clean, the pastor prayed for them. He prayed that their lives in Canada be a fresh start and that they have safe travels. He also prayed for their Mother, and thanked God for answering the prayers. When the pastor left, Mother celebrated. As the boys ate dinner, she told them that Abulu was dead.

The news made Ben drop his fork and mashed beans. Mother said she heard that some boys had murdered Abulu. She was very happy about the madman's death. She said that her sons' deaths were avenged with the death of the madman. The boys were not prepared for this news. They thought Abulu's body would not be discovered until it had started to decompose. After retiring for the night, Ben heard Obembe break down in the night, sobbing an apology. The next morning Ben said he was still afraid the soldiers might find them. Obembe told him they just needed to stay indoors until they left for Canada. As Mother was preparing to leave for her store, she told the boys that soldiers were carrying Abulu's body away in a truck and that they were searching the town for the boys who killed him. She also said she did not think the killers should be in trouble for murdering the madman. She instructed the boys to stay indoors and not to get mixed up in any of the investigation. They closed all the curtains and hid inside until Father arrived. At one point, soldiers did knock on the gate, but the boys did not answer. When their father arrived, Ben locked the gate behind them. He told Father there had been an armed robbery that day.

Father could tell something was wrong with the boys, especially when Ben's voice seemed shaky. Obembe told him they had been thinking of Ikenna and Boja and burst into tears. Father reminded them that they were about to get a new start on life and to always think first of their mother before they decided to do something. He told them that Mr. Bayo would arrive next week to take them to Canada. That seemed like too long. Ben wanted to go stay in Ibadan with Mr. Bayo until they were ready to leave. Obembe did not want to give any information away.

Mother returned from work and told Father about Abulu's death. Ben went to bed with a bad headache. He was so ready to go to Canada that he was willing to go without



Obembe. When Obembe went to bed, Ben suggested they tell Father what they did so he could help them get to Canada sooner. Obembe did not respond. In the night, Obembe woke up Ben and told him to pack. He had already begun throwing items into a bag. He said the soldiers would find them because he recalled seeing the old priest when he ran from the soldier. Obembe ran into the priest and almost knocked him over, something he did not previously tell Ben. Ben suggested they stay and let Father hire a lawyer. Obembe said Mother shouldn't have to go through that. He convinced Ben to pack a bag and the two left through the window.

As they ran through the darkness, Ben decided to go back. When Obembe tried to drag him along, Ben fought his way loose. They hugged one last time and Obembe ran away, promising he would write to Ben. When Obembe was gone, Ben fell to the ground and sobbed.

Analysis

Ben describes himself and Obembe as roosters, creatures who awake others and are consumed by humans. Using this analogy, the brothers wake the community up to Abulu's death. They hope his body will not be discovered for weeks or months and that they will be living in Canada by then, but this is not the case. The analogy that they would be consumed by humans is shown at the end of the chapter, when Obembe hides to avoid being consumed, or captured, in connection with Abulu's death. It foreshadows Ben's probable capture in an upcoming chapter. Recall that in Chapter 15, they ran screaming toward Abulu when they killed him, alerting bystanders of an attack. So, they were like roosters then, too.

Obembe tries to calm Ben after the murder, just as he calmed him to encourage his participation in it previously. With the body found even before they can get home, the boys know their plans, and potentially the consequences, are likely going to be drastically different than they had perceived. They are so shocked by the fact that the town already knows of Abulu's murder that they fail to concentrate on Mother's happiness over the man's death. If Father wants them to do something that makes Mother happy, they had certainly just done it. Ironically, Mother does not have any inkling that her boys are the madman's killers. She says the killers should not be punished because they killed that menace to society.

For the first time since the beginning of the story, the boys actually do what their mother tells them when she leaves for work the next morning. They stay locked in the house to avoid capture by the soldiers that are scouring the streets for Abulu's killers. They do not tell Father of Abulu's death, which should have triggered suspicion on their parents' part.

Obembe seems to be the big brother and leader Father wants him to be, but he caves under pressure. Whether he suddenly remembers that he ran into the priest or was hiding it all along is not exactly clear. Whatever the situation, Obembe only knows to flee, and to encourage Ben to go with him. Suddenly, Obembe faces the knowledge that Ben shows at points all along -- being able to kill does not make a boy a man. It also



does not make him a leader. Ben realizes that following a good leader is sensible; following a bad leader is not. Obembe does not intentionally set Ben astray. The truth is that at only 11 years old, Obembe is not mentally prepared to make adult decisions. Father does not really want him to make adult decisions, just more responsible ones. This is another case in which Obembe takes comments literally rather than figuratively. In the end, it is Ben who makes the wiser and more mature decision to return home and face the consequences.

Discussion Question 1

Father tells the boys to always think first of their mother when making a decision. Apply this directive to Obembe's decision to run away and Ben's decision to stay and face the consequences.

Discussion Question 2

Apply the rooster metaphor to Ben and Obembe. The book tells why they are roosters at the beginning of the chapter. Are they still roosters at the end of Chapter 16? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Select one simile from the chapter and explain its meaning and significance in the context of Chapter 16.

Vocabulary

sonorous, apprehensive, reverence, humility, reckoning, sporadically, mustered, evangelical, baptized, spittle, vanquished, thunderous, decompose, interspersing, muezzin



Chapter 17: The Moth

Summary

Ben likened himself to a moth, basking in light but losing its wings and falling. Without his older brothers, he felt wingless. Ben went home and back to his room while Obembe ran away. Ben lay on his floor and cried because he had officially lost all of his older brothers. The soldiers arrived that morning. When they threatened to shoot, Ben opened his bedroom door for them. Soldiers took him away.

After three weeks, Ben was allowed to return home to get ready for court. Ben's lawyer was Barrister Biodun. He said injuring one of the soldiers would count against Ben, but that his youth would be in his favor. He said Ben would be released in a short period of time. Ben revealed that one of the prison wardens called him a "little murderer. He had a bucket in which to use as a toilet and a water cask that was filled weekly. Pastor Collins told Ben he was and would be a great man.

When they finally had time alone, Father revealed to Ben that his eye injury had not been cataract surgery. Abulu did it to him. Father said he wanted to kill Abulu with his own hands and went with a knife to do it. Abulu threw contents of a bowl in his face and almost blinded Father. He made Ben promise not to tell Mother what had really happened.

Mr. Bayo told Ben he would take him to Canada as soon as he was freed. Ben begged to go right away, but could not since he was scheduled for trial.

Analysis

Ben, metaphorically, is a moth, drawn to bright lights like his big brothers just to be figuratively burned by them one way or another. Ben's loss of his final big brother is what he tries to avoid at all costs. The idea of losing Obembe too is what keeps Ben in on the plan to kill Abulu and what makes him run into the night with Obembe to flee. Finally realizing that Obembe is not making clear decisions, Ben does what he knows he should do and returns home to await capture.

The prison conditions are such that a 9-year-old boy should not have to endure. The prison is not separated by ages like we are accustomed to today. Prison is prison no matter what age the inmate is in Ben's village. This information is important foreshadowing for the final chapter of the book.

Father's admission to Ben shows him that the urge for revenge is normal. His tone even sounds as though he appreciates the boys avenging the deaths of their brothers and the attack on Father that damaged his eye. Father, the pastor, and Mr. Bayo all demonstrate that they had not lost hope for Ben, despite his pending trial. Father still wants to invest in Ben's future by sending him to Canada and Mr. Bayo is still committed to getting him



there. The pastor is supportive through prayer and through faith. These things seem to make Ben feel better for a while, but he remains sad about opportunities lost by decisions he made. After all, he could have been riding his bike through the streets of Canada instead of sitting in a prison cell.

Discussion Question 1

Are Father, Mr. Bayo and Pastor Collins successful in cheering up Ben and encouraging him? How do they try to do this and why does or why doesn't it work?

Discussion Question 2

How does Father make imprisonment seem like Ben is avenging his brothers' deaths just by being there?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss how the author ties the moth metaphor into both the beginning and end of the chapter. What happens in between that carries the metaphor through the chapter?

Vocabulary

awning, distilled, proffering, subdued, engulfed, delinquent, swathe, ferocious, manslaughter, pungent, complexion, curt, riposte, gaping, advert, catatonic, smitten, obliterate



Chapter 18: The Egrets

Summary

David and Nkem were egrets, white birds that appear after a storm. Ben realized that both his younger siblings did not experience the family's storm of tragedy because they were so young at the time. Ben noted that he had not been able to see any of his family for his six years of incarceration. Ben was only allowed to see a preacher during his time in prison. Special circumstances were needed since Ben was not old enough for life imprisonment or capital punishment, but his crime was too serious for a juvenile facility. Instead, the punishment was for him not to see his family. He was supposed to serve until he was 18, but got out at age 16 for good behavior. He was surprised to see Father thin and bearded. Mother also aged. Father told Ben that Mother started seeing spiders again shortly after he and Obembe left home, but that she recovered quickly. Ben was surprised to see that David looked so much like Boja. He was 10 years old.

Ben learned that Obembe had not contacted his parents at all since he ran away from home. Ben did get some letters from him in jail, but did not tell the family about them. Their former neighbor Igbafe delivered the letters to Ben in jail. In one letter, Obembe promised to return home when Ben got out of jail. The letters stopped coming because of Igbafe's death, which Ben learned about in this chapter.

While hugging Nkem on his return home, Ben saw a shadowing figure in the darkness. Ben went closer to investigate and saw that it was Obembe who had returned to see him as promised. Suddenly, Ben's narration transfers back into the courtroom again where he was giving testimony.

Analysis

The vague ending of this book leaves the reader to decide it for himself or herself. When Ben thought he heard Obembe, he slipped into a flashback of his trial. Was Obembe really there climbing over the wall to welcome his brother home from jail? Since Ben moves forward and the remaining family stays in the shadows, it seems unlikely that Obembe is really present. If he is really present, perhaps the last line of the novel, "I opened my eyes, cleared my throat, and started all over again," might signify that Ben has to relive the murder again as Obembe goes through his own trial.

David and Nkem are assigned the symbolism of egrets. Ben explains his reason for the symbolism. He sees them as pure and unscathed from the tortures directly associated with Abulu. The color white is always associated with purity and birds with freedom. They are pure of heart, meaning that the youngest brother and sister did not get involved in the deadly association with Abulu the madman. They also have freedom. Neither David nor Nkem are bound by any association with Abulu and neither have ever really felt the



connection to the man's prophesy that killed their two oldest brothers, sent one on the run and another to prison.

The fact that David and Nkem both welcome Ben home so heartily shows that there were no harsh words about him in his absence. They are not reluctant to welcome him back. Seemingly, the idea that he and Obembe had killed Abulu to avenge their brothers is regarded with esteem. Ben is not given a hero's welcome, but he is not shunned, either.

Discussion Question 1

In your opinion, does Obembe return at the end of the book? Support your response with clues from the text.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the egrets' role as a method of hygiene. How could this role also apply to David and Nkem?

Discussion Question 3

When Father said Obembe had not been in contact at all, he answered sharply and shot Ben look in the mirror. Discuss what that look and tone meant and support your response with clues from the chapter.

Vocabulary

gaunt, wiry, accrued, humidity, pleasantries, enthralling, deemed, incarceration, guttural, pedestrian, jumbled, roused, veritable, whimper



Characters

Ben

Ben, at age 39, reflects on his family's story as the narrator and protagonist of the novel. Along with his three older brothers, Ben refers to himself as a fisherman when the boys rebel from their strict study rules when Father leaves home to work in another town.

Ben is nine years old at the time the story begins. He is captured for his role in killing a madman and spends six years incarcerated. As a younger brother, Ben often follows his older brothers, but in a rare instance, he does not run away with Obembe to escape capture for the murder. Instead, he remains and faces his consequences.

Ikenna

Ikenna is the oldest brother who first introduced the notion of fishing to Obembe and Ben. It begins when he and Boja meet a couple of their friends after school to go fishing. Ikenna loves fishing so much that he invites Obembe and Ben to go along. It isn't until he hears a prophesy from the madman, Abulu, that his love for fishing dwindles.

After hearing the prophesy that he will be killed by a fisherman, Ikenna is convinced that one of his brothers will kill him. Ikenna is killed by a stab wound in a situation that perfectly fits Abulu's prophesy.

Boja

Boja was the second-oldest child in Ben's family. He looks up to his big brother, Ikenna, until the prophesy takes over Ikenna's mind and makes him suspicious of his brothers. These suspicions also lead Ikenna to be mean to his brothers, especially Boja.

After killing Ikenna, Boja flings himself into the family's well and drowns. Four days later, a neighbor finds Boja's body floating near the top of the well. Neighbors gather in the yard and Mr. Bode pulls his bloated body from the well.

Obembe

After the deaths of Ikenna and Boja, Obembe finds himself in the role of leader of the brotherhood. Much like Ikenna did when convincing his brothers to help him get revenge against a neighbor who told on them, Obembe manipulates Ben by telling him a story of unity. Ben does not go along with Obembe's plan to kill Abulu at first, but does eventually after hearing his mother talk about all the bad things the madman caused to happen to their family.



Obembe, at only age 11, takes the revenge matter seriously and draws morbid stick figure drawings of different ways he can kill the madman. He also starts smoking, like he thinks adult men do.

Mother

Mother is described as the falconer by the narrator. She likes to know that her nest is safe and that her offspring are well-protected. She is caught between her own tribal beliefs and the Westernized life her husband tries to instill upon the family.

Mother goes back and forth between Christianity and her Igbo tribe beliefs. After praying for her sons, she believes faithfully that Ikenna will be okay. When prayer seemingly lets her down, she returns to Igbo beliefs that spiders fill a grieving home and even experiences temporary mental issues herself.

Father

Father is focused on Westernization. He is convinced that a Western education will benefit his boys and help them become productive members of society. He works hard to make money to save for them to move to Canada with a dear friend he met through work.

Father is described as an eagle. Under his watchful eye, the boys cannot get away with much mischief. The eagle, also an icon connected with the United States, symbolizes Father's determination on Westernization. Only when he realizes how much grief and how many mental problems Mother is having does he give in to some of the Igbo traditions for her sake.

Abulu

Abulu is a madman who is respected by police for his prophecies, but dreaded by the general public for the same reason. From what Ben tells the reader, all of Abulu's prophecies come true. What he does not discuss is if this is due to self-fulfilling prophecy or not. From his narration, it seems that the public simply believes Abulu's predictions do come true. There is no talk of him ever being wrong.

Abulu is more than just an eccentric madman; he is criminally insane. He rapes his own mother and a corpse that has been on the roadside for half a day.

Mr. Bode

Mr. Bode helps the boys when their brothers start fighting when their parents are gone. As the boys run through the neighborhood looking for help, Mr. Bode is the first adult they find who has time to go back to their house. Mr. Bode is a good person to find,



because he is muscular and more likely to be able to break up the serious fight between Ikenna and Boja. Unfortunately, they arrive too late with Mr. Bode. Boja is missing and Ikenna is dead in the kitchen.

Mr. Bode also helps the family when Boja's body is discovered in the well. He is strong enough to pull Boja's dead weight out of the family well.

Mama Iyabo (Iyabo)

Mama Iyabo is the whistle-blower who tells on the boys for fishing at the river. No only does she see them at the river, she confirms with the Celestial Church preacher that the boys have been going there for some time.

Mama Iyabo is one of Mother's closest friends, but Mother shoos her away when she enters the house with news of yet another Abulu prophesy coming true.

Abana

Abana is Abulu's brother. He was dead throughout the course of this novel, and referred to in explaining why Abulu is known as a madman. According to a story Obembe tells to Ben, the two brothers robbed a house. As they were running away, Abulu was struck by a car. Abana carried him to the hospital.

After the accident, Abana took good care of Abulu. That stopped one day when Abulu raped their mother. Abana beat up Abulu, who grabbed a TV antenna and impaled Abana with it.



Symbols and Symbolism

Omi-Ala River

Once worshipped by the Nigerian town's pre-Christian culture, the Omi-Ala River is seen as bad or evil after Christianity spread into the region. It is seen as bad or evil because the pre-Christian culture built shrines to the river and worshipped it, an act which Christianity teaches is idolatry.

Eagle

Symbolically represented by the eagle, Father seemingly soars high above the others and nothing escapes his watchful eye, especially when it comes to taking care of his children.

Python

Ikenna becomes a python, a serpent who is willing to squeeze the life out of his victims. Boja loves him, but Ikenna's constant strife stirred by Abulu's prophesy eventually squeezes that love out of Boja. When Boja hates his brother, the prophesy is able to come to fruition.

Locusts

Traditionally symbolizing a bad omen because of their biblical connection to a plague, Ben says the locusts in this book are a good sign because they indicate rain is coming. The narrator specifically refers to them as "forerunners." Ultimately, they are forerunners of bad news, sticking with the traditional symbol of locusts.

Sparrow

Ben refers to his deceased brother, Ikenna, as a sparrow. Formerly described as a python, the sparrow image creates a much more fragile impression. The narrator chooses the sparrow as symbolism for the deceased boy because his body inside the casket takes on an ovoid shape, like that of a sparrow with its wings by its side. The sparrow also has no place to call home and is able to fly away, like the spirit that leaves Ikenna's body when he dies.



Spiders

Spiders symbolize grief, according to the Igbo tribe traditions. They leave behind abandoned webs like grief leaves behind abandoned memories.

In this story, Father compromises his Western beliefs to help Mother deal with her grief, symbolized by the spiders. He stomps real and imaginary spiders at her whim and whisks away cobwebs as she dictates. While his beliefs are strongly Western, he realizes this tradition is part of her grieving process and he is committed to helping her through it.

Leech

Leeches symbolize hatred in this story. Hatred attaches itself to Obembe, like a leech, and drains him of the ability to have any happiness or hope for the future. He concentrates on ways to avenge his brothers' deaths, which bleeds him of his childhood in many ways.

Not even the promise of a new life in a safer community is enough to remove the leech of hatred from Obembe. While Ben looks forward to starting a new life, Obembe only dreads it because of the looming deadline to kill Abulu that he has perceived.

Tadpole

The tadpole symbolizes hope. Hope starts as something small, birthed as an egg then grows into a tadpole. When conditions are right, the tadpole evolves into something bigger and different, just like hope can. When conditions are not right, tadpoles can die, just as hope died for Ben and his brothers many times.

The use of the tadpole as symbolism serves as foreshadowing, too. The reader already knows at this point that the tadpoles continued to die at the house because the boys were constantly trying to cover the smell. The tadpole analogy, then, symbolizes more death to come.

Roosters

Roosters symbolize an awakening. In this story. In first reference to a rooster, the boys kill a neighbors rooster to alert her that someone is not happy with her. They do it to get even with Mama Iyabo for telling on them for their fishing trips.

The community is awakened with sudden news of Abulu's death. Roosters are also symbolic of male dominance. Upon killing Abulu, it seems as though Obembe and Ben feel dominant at least for a short period of time.



Moth

The moth symbolizes a fragile winged insect, drawn to light but often damaged by it as well. Moths seem to flutter around aimlessly until they find a light to follow. Ben is a moth, following his older brothers as though they are his light. Following them too closely gets him in trouble several times, just like a moth staying at a light too long can kill it.

The moth's tendency to flutter aimlessly at times reflects Ben's fluttering back and forth on his willingness to follow Ben's plan to kill Abulu. He feels like he should do it to remain loyal to his brothers and to not lose the love of his only remaining older brother, but he still struggles with his decision.



Settings

Akure

Ben's hometown of Akure is located in western Nigeria.

Omi-Ala River

The Omi-Ala River was once worshiped by pagan settlers for its contribution to the region. After Christianity spread, however, the townspeople begin to see it as an evil place because of the shrines built in idolatry to the river.

Abulu's Abandoned Truck

A family was killed in a violent accident in a truck they were driving. The accident was so bad that no one wanted to remove the truck or clean it up. Over time, weeds began to grow in it. Abulu adopts the truck as his living quarters and stores many strange trinkets and bobbles in the truck.

Church

Typically just referred to as church, Chapter 17 reveals that the name of the church is Assemblies of God Church, Ataromi, Akure Branch. Mother takes Obembe and Ben there to pray for them. Pastor Collins is a friend of the family. The family holds memorial services for both Ikenna and Boja at the church, but only provides a funeral for Ikenna.

Prison

Ben serves six years in prison on a manslaughter charge for killing Abulu. The small cell contains a bucket for bathroom functions and a vessel of water that is freshened once a week.



Themes and Motifs

Superstition

Superstition is given some validity and respect in this novel, as demonstrated by Mother's superstition eventually being acquiesced to by Father, as well as Abulu's prophecies proving to always be true. Ben's family is part of the Igbo tribe, a culture that his mother still embraces. Many times throughout the book, Mother snaps her fingers circling her hands overhead, a tribal superstition believed to ward off evil spirits from affecting one's mind. Cremating Boja instead of giving him a burial exemplifies another superstition. The Igbo believe that burying a person who commits suicide or fratricide (Boja did both) will infect the earth and cause evil to spring up in its place.

Father leans more toward Westernization because he sees benefits for his children to be successful in a Westernized culture. Mother and many of her friends, however, still hold onto the superstitions of their tribal culture. In trying to help her deal with the grief of tragically losing Ikenna and Boja, Father compromises to Mother's superstitions.

The idea of Abulu's prophecy is a superstition according to Christianity. Ben's church teaches that false prophets are of the devil. They see Abulu as a false prophet, even though the reader never learns of a prophecy that doesn't come true, because he has so much association with evil and crime, such as the rape of his mother and a roadside corpse.

Christianity

In this novel, Christianity is a new concept to the village and not completely understood or followed by the main characters, although it is something they are willing to try out while grieving.

Christianity is also a theme in the story. Ben's family is proud to be Christian and the church plays an important role in their lives. The pastor is with them through their times of hardship and the congregation is always happy to pray for them or help in any other way possible.

The boys do not have a firm grip on Christianity, however, as demonstrated in their willingness to kill. When they decide to kill the neighbor's rooster, they opt not to eat it because that would be stealing. They did, however, kill an animal that does not belong to them and in killing it, steal financial livelihood from the neighbor and steal life from the rooster.

Even the father, who prides himself on Westernization, takes off to kill Abulu, and he was old enough to know better. This indicates that Christianity is still fairly new to the region. Some of the basic concepts are understood, but putting them into play in the tribal world takes some adjustment.



Brotherhood

Brotherhood is shown throughout the novel as a strong motivator for multiple characters' decisions and actions.

Brotherhood is important to Ben and his three older brothers. In the beginning, their bond is strong. After Abulu's prophesy, the bond begins to weaken. At first, the break in bond is between Ikenna and Boja. Ikenna's treatment of Boja separates the two, eventually leading Boja to hate his oldest brother. Later, Boja begins to separate himself from Obembe and Ben. When the two oldest brothers die, Ben still has Obembe. When Obembe runs away to hide, Ben feels that the bond of brotherhood is broken.

Examples of the strength of the brothers' bond is evident throughout the book. There is a time when Ikenna takes up for Boja at an assembly, the boys ended up pictured on an M.K.O. political calendar together. Ikenna and Boja led Ben and Obembe through a riot to safety once and the event was featured in the local newspaper. Losing this bond is as frightening as going to prison for Ben.

Father also emphasizes the importance of the brotherhood theme. He reinforces the theme with his talks to Ikenna and Obembe about being leaders. Also, omitting their sister from their father's career plans for the boys indirectly solidifies the importance of brotherhood. Sisters were not important to Father and had no important role to play in society, according to Father's way of thinking.

Animals

Animals are used as a way for the narrator to convey his childlike thoughts and understanding of tragic events that occurred when he was only nine.

Throughout the book, the narrator compares people to a variety of animals. Part of this is because he is retelling the things he saw as a child and many children are fascinated with animals. In Ben's case, he really wanted to be a veterinarian when he grew up, even though his father planned for him to be a professor.

Even as a 39-year-old narrator of the story, Ben relies on his animal descriptions because that is how he related to the events as they happened 30 years earlier. The writer's ability to do this often makes the reader forget that it is an adult retelling the story and not a child narrator.

Using animals as a theme also demonstrates paternal respect in Ben's culture. While his desire is to be a veterinarian, he never questions his father's career choice for him.



Leadership

Although at least one character - Father - wants leadership to be a positive motivator, it is shown throughout the novel to be used more often for negative reasons, such as manipulation.

Father expects his sons to be leaders and expects more from the oldest since the others looked up to him. Ikenna is angry about the whipping he takes for his younger brothers and their fishing insistence, even though he was the one who encouraged it initially.

When Father gives him a talk, Ikenna uses his leadership position to manipulate the younger boys. When Father gives Obembe the same talk, he uses his leadership position to manipulate Ben. To Father, leadership is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. To the boys, Ikenna and Obembe, it is a curse and they distorted their leadership positions to gain their own desires.

Ironically, Father does not do a very good job of leading his family when he moves out of town to work. Setting his family up so that he was the primary disciplinarian backfired when he was no longer there to be strict and enforce the rules.

Styles

Point of View

This book is narrated from the first person point of view by 39-year-old Ben, reflecting on his experiences as the youngest of the four fishermen.

Language and Meaning

Ben is telling this story as an adult looking back on events of his childhood, but in doing so he captures much of the juvenile emotion he felt at the time. He has an extensive adult vocabulary, but maintains childlike aspects of his memories. For instance, he makes many comparisons between people and animals because he wanted to be a veterinarian when he grew up. His comparisons reflect his youthful memories, but his vocabulary is adult in nature.

Structure

It seems as though the book is building to a climax of Ikenna dying, but that actually happens about midway through the book. The first eight chapters are expository and build to Ikenna's death. Once that happens, the shift of brotherhood power to Obemba is the focus, eventually leading to the killing of Abulu in Chapter 15. The remaining three chapters of the book focus on Ben and his coming of age as he faces imprisonment without the brother who spearheaded it all.

Quotes

I must have my pound of flesh and you must all join me in this because you caused it.
-- Ikenna (4: The Python paragraph 4)

Importance: Ikenna uses the lashes his father gave him to manipulate his brothers into joining him in getting revenge against the neighbor who told on them for going to the river.

M.K.O., you are beautiful beyond description, Too marvelous for words, The most wonderful of all creatures, Like nothing never seen nor heard. Who can touch your infinite wisdom? Who can fathom the depths of your love? M.K.O., you are beautiful beyond description. Your majesty is enthroned above.
-- Ikenna, Boja, Obembe, and Ben (5: The Metamorphosis paragraph 1)

Importance: The boys sing this song and get the attention of M.K.O. as he is campaigning. He brings them up front at his political rally and awards them scholarships.

We did it. We avenged them -- Ike and Boja.
-- Obembe (chapter 16 paragraph 9)

Importance: Obembe was finally satisfied that the deaths of his brothers were avenged. He believed they would get away with it despite being seen by two soldiers

I want to go back.
-- Ben (chapter 16 paragraph 4)

Importance: Ben finally took a stand for himself, to do what he thought was right. Obembe wanted to run away. Ben wanted to stop running and to face the consequences.

We will do our best and leave the rest in God's hands.
-- Attorney Barrister Biodun (chapter 17 paragraph 2)

Importance: The lawyer hired by Father for Ben tried to reassure Ben before his day in court.

What you have done is great. Do not regret it, but your mother must never hear a word of what I tell you here now.
-- Father (chapter 17 paragraph 2)

Importance: Father admits to Ben that he, too, tried to kill Abulu but was unsuccessful. The madman almost blinded Father.



No, not even once.

-- Father (chapter 18 paragraph 6)

Importance: This was Father's reply to Ben when he asked if Obembe had been in touch with them in the past six years.

You have to be cleansed from every evil spell Abulu has cast on you.

-- Mother (chapter 7 paragraph 4)

Importance: Mother, who is very superstitious about curses, wants the boys to go to church for redemption. She combines her tribal superstitions with the fairly new tenants of Christianity.

Did you say you hate me?

-- Ikenna (chapter 7 paragraph 4)

Importance: By getting Boja to say that he hates him, Ikenna has succeeded in creating a division between the two brothers. As the division grows, it will lead to the fulfillment of Abulu's prophesy for Ikenna.

Okay, let's go.

-- Mr. Bode (chapter 8 paragraph 7)

Importance: Mr. Bode agreed to intervene in the fight between Ikenna and Boja when Obembe and Ben ran to get an adult. Later, Mr. Bode, who is very muscular, pulls Boja's dead body from the well. Mr. Bode builds a relationship with the family.

Leave me, leave me, let me watch the shiny white cows.

-- Mother (chapter 11 paragraph 2)

Importance: When Mother says this, Father realizes she is losing her mind and could be dangerous to the children who she is recognizing only as shiny white cows. The event leads Father to institutionalize Mother temporarily.

We were fishermen. My brothers and I became ---

-- Ben (chapter 18 paragraph 2)

Importance: In a flashback, the reader learns that this is how Ben began his testimony when his case went to trial.