

# **A Girl Named Disaster Study Guide**

## **A Girl Named Disaster by Nancy Farmer**

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## Overview

A Girl Named Disaster recounts an eventful year in the life of an African girl named Nhamo, the Shona word for "disaster."

Nhamo has spent the first eleven years of her life in a traditional Shona village in Mozambique, where her unloving maternal relatives treat her as a drudge. Her father shamefully ran away after killing another man, and her mother was killed by a leopard when Nhamo was a toddler. Only her grandmother and one female cousin show Nhamo any affection. When cholera strikes, the villagers consult an important traditional healer, who makes Nhamo the scapegoat for all the troubles plaguing the village. To placate the angry spirit of her father's murder victim, the healer decrees, Nhamo must become the junior wife of the victim's brutal brother.

At her grandmother's insistence, Nhamo escapes this dreadful fate by stealing a boat and setting off alone for Zimbabwe to find her father's family. But a journey that was intended to take two days becomes a yearlong odyssey. Nhamo travels the full length of Lake Cabora Bassa, living for several months on an island inhabited by baboons, before she finally reaches Zimbabwe and finds refuge at a science station. Along the way, she faces starvation, isolation, illness, and many physical and psychological dangers. Although she does eventually make contact with her father's people, they are as inhospitable as the relatives she left behind in Mozambique. By the end of the book, however, Nhamo finds a true home for herself among the staff of the science station, who have made her a kind of adopted niece and granddaughter.

The book is written as a third-person narrative from Nhamo's point of view. Since Nhamo initially knows only the traditional Shona life, her perspective may seem alien to Western readers, but unfamiliar terms and cultural practices are carefully defined or explained in the context of the story.

Readers can understand and enjoy the book without any prior knowledge of Africa. A Girl Named Disaster is an excellent introduction to several African cultures. In fact, it was originally intended to be a textbook on African culture, but Farmer wisely decided to turn it into a novel instead. As a tale of adventure, survival, and a quest for home, no remnant of the original didactic impulse remains in the story itself. Factual information that is not intrinsic to Nhamo's story is included in a short glossary of terms, a history of the peoples of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and an overview of the Shona belief system, in addition to scattered but unintrusive footnotes throughout the novel. The story can be read and understood without recourse to any of this additional information. A love of nature is not a prerequisite for enjoying the book, but it will increase a reader's pleasure in the detailed descriptions of the African landscape. The author is a trained naturalist with an abiding love for the African veldt.

## About the Author

When Nancy Farmer was young, her father managed a hotel in Yuma, Arizona. Growing up in a hotel full of interesting strangers, Farmer became fascinated with storytelling. As she remembers, "Every night until past midnight I listened to stories from truck drivers, cowboys, and railroad workers." However, she did not act on this fascination until she was 41 years old, having in the meantime been sidetracked by a love of science and travel. From 1963 to 1965 she was a Peace Corps volunteer in India. After two years of further travel, she returned briefly to the States, then set out to work her way around the world. She never made it beyond her first stop—Africa. She worked as a chemist and entomologist in Mozambique for three years, then in neighboring Zimbabwe for almost 14 years. In Zimbabwe she met and married Harold Farmer, an English instructor, and in 1978 she gave birth to her only child, Daniel.

Farmer began her writing career in Zimbabwe, where she published four books for children, including an early version of her first Newbery Honor Book, *The Ear, the Eye and the Arm*. Despite the fact that she is a white American writing about African characters, her books have been well received in Zimbabwe for their authentic representation of Shona culture. Even after the Farmers moved to California in the early 1990s, Nancy continued to set her books in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, and she says that her years in central Africa have had a profound effect on her writing. She certainly emerged on the American scene as a fullfledged professional writer of great depth and maturity, and she began to reap critical acclaim for her work before scholars and critics even recognized her name. Both *The Eye, the Ear and the Arm* and *A Girl Named Disaster* were named Newbery Honor Books, and the latter was also a finalist for the National Book Award.



## Plot Summary

*A Girl Named Disaster* tells the story of Nhamo and her long quest for her father's family. Her path, which takes her away from her tiny village in Africa, takes a wrong turn that results in a longer journey, but one in which she has to live by her wits and her skills. When she eventually makes her way back onto the right path, she discovers a family that does not want her or value her, but other people who do love and value her.

Nhamo, a young African girl orphaned as a young child, lives in her village with her aunt and grandmother. The aunt despises Nhamo, because Nhamo's mother was the favorite daughter. Grandmother, however, cares deeply for Nhamo.

A cholera epidemic takes the lives of many villagers, and eventually, the chief of the village takes them to a trading post where a *muwuki*, a kind of psychic, tells them their problems will be solved if they marry off Nhamo to the brother of the man her father killed long ago. Nhamo does not want to marry this horrible man, but she is willing to do it to make things better for her family. She doesn't foresee any other way out. Grandmother won't have it, though, and helps Nhamo make plans to escape.

Nhamo takes the abandoned boat of old Crocodile Guts, who was a fisherman in the village and is now dead. Grandmother tells her how to get to Zimbabwe where her father's family lives. So Nhamo sets off on her solitary journey, but it doesn't take long for her to lose her way. She ends up finding places to stop and rest, eventually coming to a huge island where she creates a life for herself. A troop of baboons is a constant reminder of the community and love she needs.

After a long time on the island, Nhamo finally takes her boat and finds the mainland, but her reintroduction into society with people is a struggle. Nearly exhausted, malnourished, and dehydrated, she is taken in by a mishmash of people at a research facility in the middle of nowhere. Two doctors take care of her, while a religious man teaches her to read and do other things. The people here become a surrogate family that she does not want to leave.

The time comes, however, when she must finish her journey to find her father's family, whatever may come of it. Find them she does. They are not too happy to see her, as they did not approve of her mother. The only one who appreciates her is a great-grandfather, a wise man who sees the unique spiritual treasures Nhamo has inside her. He tells her of her father, who died in his mines. Arrangements are made for Nhamo to live with her father's relatives and go to school in the city. When summer comes, she returns at once to Efifi, the research center, and to her spiritual parents. The doctors help Nhamo set up a fund to take care of her for the rest of her life. She also learns of her grandmother's death, but the spirits of all those who have loved her return to her and help her see her own strength as she grows into adulthood.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

*A Girl Named Disaster* tells the story of Nhamo and her long quest for her father's family. Her path, which takes her away from her tiny village in Africa, takes a wrong turn that results in a longer journey, but one in which she has to live by her wits and her skills. When she eventually makes her way back onto the right path, she discovers a family that does not want her or value her, but other people who do love and value her.

Nhamo sits in a fig tree trying to escape the daily grind of the chores her aunt assigns her. Nhamo has a restless spirit that needs the stimulation of beauty and joy. Finally Aunt Chipo finds Nhamo and tells her to get to work.

Nhamo goes to the hozi, the communal storage building, to get mealies. She will grind these for their dinner. Her cousin, Masvita, sits under the building, which is elevated on stilts, making pots. Nhamo thinks they are beautiful pots. Masvita is beautiful and good natured. Nhamo thinks Masvita gets the easy work while she gets the hard labor.

Nhamo goes to her grandmother's hut. Grandmother welcomes her kindly, then tells her a legend of the old kings, who angered the god Mwari. Mwari communicated to the kings through a medium named Tumbale. The people credited Tumbale with a victory against their enemies. The king, Mambo, got so mad that he had the whispering grass burned, the whispering trees cut down, and his youngest wife killed for praising Tumbale. He had her skinned and made a drum from her skin. Whenever the drum was played, the people cowered from the horrible sound. Mwari removed his blessing from the king and abandoned his people. Grandmother says that since then, life has been full of hard work and danger. Nhamo wonders if the wife's spirit lives inside the drum. Her reverie is interrupted when Aunt Chipo calls Masvita in for a drink, praising her for her beautiful pots. Nhamo does not get a drink; she has to gather firewood.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

This first chapter sets up the difference between Nhamo and Masvita. Nhamo is not the favored one. She doesn't seem necessarily jealous of her cousin, but she certainly knows they are treated differently. Nhamo has a spiritual nature—most often main characters who have this trait find themselves getting into trouble a lot, because they don't fit into the expected roles others have of them.

The setting is developed through the use of native words, the food they eat, the names of the old gods and kings. Nhamo is not like American girls, but she does share universal feelings of being treated unfairly, of having to do the bulk of the work, of having differences with family members.





## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Nhamo doesn't mind gathering firewood, even though there are dangerous animals in the woods by the village. She is most afraid of leopards, because it was a leopard that killed her mother. Nhamo was only three years old when it happened. Her father left before she was born, so she never knew him.

While she is out getting firewood, Nhamo goes to her special spot where she has some treasures buried. She takes them out, including a magazine cover. The picture on the cover depicts a mother and daughter. The mother is slicing bread for her daughter. Nhamo imagines this is what her mother looked like. She has a tea party with this imaginary mother.

Before it gets dark, she scurries home, spooking herself into thinking she sees a leopard. It turns out to be an optical illusion.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter provides a lot of information about Nhamo: her mother is dead and her father is gone, which is why she is under the care of Aunt Chipo. We know she lives in a village with the closest major cities far away in Zimbabwe. We know no one in her village can read except for two men. We know there are magazines and cars and hairstyles somewhere "out there," so the book is set in modern times.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

When Nhamo returns from gathering wood, it is time for dinner. Aunt Chipo chides her for being late, and Nhamo does not argue or protest. Other family members gather around now, Aunt Shuvai and her children along with Masvita's siblings. Eating is a serious business, so nobody talks.

After dinner, Nhamo is told to go fetch the dishes from the men's dare, or gathering place. When she goes in, she hears Uncle Kufa telling a story about a disobedient wife whose husband turns into a snake and eats her. It makes her think about what happens to a person's spirit if they are eaten by an animal, like her mother was. As she washes the dishes with ash and sand, she wonders more and more about her mother's spirit.

Nhamo returns to the women, where Grandmother tells a story. When she is done, Nhamo wants desperately to ask about her mother's spirit, but she feels awkward, so she tells a story to introduce her thoughts. She embellishes her imagined encounter with the leopard, adding real growls and a magical flash of moonlight. The other women take this very seriously. They have no trouble believing it was a real spirit leopard and that it was coming for Nhamo.

Nhamo cuddles with Grandmother and asks if mother's spirit is close. Grandmother tells her that when her mother's bones were found in the woods, they killed a cow and buried it in her grave. This is supposed to allow the spirit to go free. Nhamo understands cattle are extremely valuable and this was a great sacrifice Grandmother made, so she must have loved Nhamo's mother very much. She is comforted to know that her mother's spirit was released and is able to protect her.

As the evening wears on, Nhamo wonders why her aunts don't seem to like her very much. She decides that because a child is believed to belong to the father's family, that her aunts are not her real family. She wouldn't want to go live with a group of strangers, no matter how much they might love her.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

The culture in this village consists of a lot of superstitions unfamiliar to Americans. Nhamo wonders about her dead mother the same way any girl would whose mother died when she was too young to remember. Her feelings are recognizable, no matter her culture.

In this chapter, we learn that this culture keeps women and men separate, even for eating. The boys and girls sleep in different sleeping huts. Nevertheless, the elders in each group tell stories and legends, passing down the culture to the next generation.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Masvita has started her monthly bleeding, so now she is entering womanhood. Nhamo is slightly jealous, more jealous than she would like to admit. With great ceremony, Masvita is sent to her aunt's house in another village to be instructed in the ways of women.

Nhamo goes to her special place to talk with her imaginary mother. She can express her jealousy without punishment. A realization hits Nhamo: when she is ready, what aunt will she go to? It is traditional to go to one of your father's sisters, but she doesn't even know if her father has a sister. She is confident that Grandmother will know how to contact him when the time comes.

Nhamo heads back to the village, sure that Aunt Chipo will yell at her for neglecting her work. Instead, Grandmother takes Nhamo into her hut. Grandmother seems to notice Nhamo's jealousy and tells her that some girls mature sooner than others. She tells Nhamo that the slower ripening fruit is worth waiting for.

Grandmother then tells Nhamo some things about her mother, whose name was Runako. Her mother could read. They had lived in a city and the children wore uniforms and went to school. Runako was very smart, and might have gone to the university someday, but Grandfather died and they had to move to the village in order to survive.

When Masvita returns from her aunt's house, there is a big party on the night of the full moon. Everyone comments on how modest and obedient Masvita is and what a good wife she will make. Nhamo is sent out to fetch some bananas. She thinks she hears a leopard and runs back to the village frantic. This causes a chaotic confusion as men run around to protect the animals while women take the babies into the huts.

When things calm down, the talk reverts to bride prices. Everyone is sure Masvita will bring a good price, and then someone comments on Ruva, Masvita's younger sister, and how she will bring a good price too. No one mentions Nhamo, though, and she feels excluded.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Nhamo begins to wonder about her future. Her father has abandoned her - who will she go to when she needs instruction on womanhood? Who will bargain for her bride price? Will she even get married? The fact that no one even mentions her in the discussion of the young women to be married off indicates there might not be any plans to see her married.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Vatete, Masvita's aunt from the other village, is very sick. Nhamo is woken up to cut grass for her bedding. Messengers have been sent to Vatete's village for the nganga, the healer. Before he can arrive, however, Vatete dies. The messengers bring back news that the sickness is killing many in her village. Masvita tells Nhamo it's cholera. Masvita's father, Nhamo's Uncle Kufa, thinks witchcraft is responsible, so Nhamo assumes there will be a witch-finding ceremony. Vatete's body is prepared for burial. The mourners walk to her grave in single file so the witches won't think there's a body to be found and used for evil.

At night, Masvita and Nhamo cannot sleep, so Nhamo tells a story. It's about a woman and her husband who have twins. Because twins are considered evil, they are not allowed to live. The parents can't bear to murder their own children, so they take the babies into the forest for six years, and all six years the kingdom has horrible luck with drought and disease. The king orders the witch finder to figure out why. The parents are sure they will be discovered, so they take their children to a waterfall and throw them in, leaving them there to die, but the children enter an underground world made up of all the rejected beings from earth. One day, they see their father crying above them and they go to live with their parents for a time. The children are given everything they could want, but they decide to return to the world where they belong. Nhamo sees that Masvita has gone to sleep, and so does Nhamo. The next morning she hears that leopard tracks were found at the grave site.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Whenever a novel includes a sequence such as the story Nhamo tells Masvita, it is important to decipher its significance. The story is about parents whose children are lost to them, who are separated. Perhaps Nhamo tells this story because of her own separation from her parents. Perhaps she feels rejected and longs for a world where she can belong. Perhaps it foreshadows twins in Masvita's or Nhamo's future.

The leopard is a continuing presence. It could represent a spirit, a person who protects Nhamo and her village. It could represent evil. Certainly, Nhamo fears leopards, and with good reason. However, the leopard, either real or imagined, does not seem to mean any harm at this point in the story.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Masvita tells the girls in the sleeping hut that her father is sending for the *muwuki* to find the witch responsible for the cholera. After the girls discuss this for a while, Nhamo declares that they don't need the *muwuki*, which results in another girl, Tazviona, saying that Nhamo or at least her mother might be a witch. They get into a fight, a lamp gets turned over and catches a sleeping mat on fire, and the two girls are punished. Aunt Chipo whips Nhamo and locks her in a storage hut. There Nhamo talks to her mother, whose voice tells her she is proud Nhamo stuck up for her.

More people in the village begin to die; the cholera has become epidemic. Aunt Shuvai dies. Masvita gets very sick, but manages to survive, as does Aunt Chipo. Grandmother remains surprisingly well, and Nhamo becomes a nursemaid to everyone. Masvita's younger sister, Ruva, is sent to the other side of the village. Nhamo visits Ruva to take her food because Ruva is so worried about her family that she won't eat.

To get her to eat, Nhamo tells her a story. The story is about a man who hunts for food, but a honeyguide bird flies above him and tells him to keep going each time he finds an animal to kill. The bird says "better things are ahead." The man follows the bird's advice, until he wants to get rid of the bird. He goes into a cave where he finds an old village of only women. The oldest woman has eaten all the men, and she wants to eat him. She tries to trick him into a situation where she can eat him, but his two dogs save him and kill her. The man then becomes the chief of the village and has food and wealth.

Nhamo returns to her hut, where Grandmother and Aunt Chipo argue and insult each other. Masvita asks them not to fight. Nhamo lies down with Masvita. Eventually, the cholera passes. Masvita takes care of Aunt Shuvai's children. Nhamo notices that the village is changed after the sickness, as if everyone is alone, separated from one another.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Nhamo shows her loyalty, maturity, and dedication when everyone is sick. She also hears some appreciation for her storytelling skills. She knows the power of a story to heal, help, and teach.

The story Nhamo tells is about following the spirits sent to guide you. The man does so and has good fortune. No matter how unrealistic the guide's instructions seem to be, it is best to follow them. Nhamo's best guides so far seem to be her grandmother and her mother's voice—whether real or imagined.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Uncle Kufa decides to take the family to the trading post to see the *muwuki* and find out why Masvita's monthly blood had not returned since the cholera. All of Nhamo's family unit will travel there, as will some people from Vatete's village. Other villagers stay to watch the children.

The travelers wear *zangos*, charms against witchcraft. They don't give Nhamo one, and for a moment she believes they think she is the witch. Then Masvita puts one on her and she relaxes. They arrive at the trading post which is full of street vendors and musicians. It's like a carnival. Nhamo thinks it is very exotic.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Nhamo is now traveling unfamiliar territory. Even though she has her family with her, this is a new world, with new experiences. One thing that often happens when a person mixes with others who don't know her history is that she gains a new perspective on herself. For example, Nhamo's whole history tells her she is not as good as Masvita, that she is somehow not a valuable person, that she is not likeable. Among these new people, however, she has the opportunity to see herself as they see her, without all the baggage of her past to muddy their perceptions. This could be a turning point in her life.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

While they wait to see the *muwaki*, Nhamo takes in the interesting people and goes on around the trading post. She watches Grandmother mourn and grieve, growing older every day, so she tries to convince Grandmother to come with her to hear the guitar player.

Finally Grandmother concedes and they go hear the music. People move aside for her, and the trader gives her stool to sit on. They enjoy the music and then Grandmother and the trader begin talking. Grandmother has a few beers. Talking to the trader seems to make her feel better. Grandmother ends up telling the trader all about Nhamo's father, a subject that has been taboo her entire life. Nhamo listens with great interest as Grandmother tells how her daughter Runako went away to Catholic school, met this boy, got married in a church without her parents' permission and without paying a bride price, and came home pregnant. The father, called Proud Jongwe, got in a fight with a man and killed him, then ran away like a coward.

Now Nhamo knows why no one will talk about her father, why her aunt and uncle don't like her, and why she lives the life she does. She is happy Grandmother kept her even after her mother died, because traditionally she would have been sent to live with her father's family. Grandmother cherishes her.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Some people have an odd characteristic that allows them to tell intimate family secrets to total strangers that they don't tell their own family. Nhamo understands her family better after this night, realizing that they don't talk about her father because he murdered a man and no justice has been exacted. They don't want to have to pay for his crime. Not only is it a shameful thing for their family, but it could be harmful if anyone who knows the dead man's family found out.

Nhamo has always felt like a sort of outsider in her own family, but she knows for sure that Grandmother loves her and won't let her go. On the other hand, she is now sure that her father will never arrange a marriage for her, so what will happen to her?



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Finally the *movuki*, the wise doctor, will see the family. They dress in the most special clothes they have and prepare meticulously for their visit. Great ceremony is involved in greeting the *movuki* and getting ready. The *movuki* uses sticks called *hakata* to make his "diagnosis." The sticks help him determine what is true and what is not true. He makes his diagnosis: the dead spirit of the man Nhamo's father killed wants restitution. Grandmother says she paid for it, with two cows when the family demanded ten. The *movuki* says the spirit demands payment.

Aunt Chipo suddenly starts talking as if she is channeling the spirit, demanding payment, demanding that Nhamo be the payment. When she is done, the *movuki* determines that Nhamo shall be sent to be a junior bride of the brother of the dead man, and that really she will be the bride of the spirit, and her first son shall bear his name.

Grandmother refuses to sacrifice Nhamo. She gets angry and calls the *movuki* a witch. He retaliates by striking her with a curse. Uncle Kufa begs for the doctor to help her, and with ample payment he does. They take Grandmother to the Portuguese trader's place where the women take turns watching over her, and Nhamo stays with her the whole time.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

How much of this scene is real and how much is superstition? The *movuki* could have known all the information about the family from the people who overheard Grandmother talking. Aunt Chipo could have been putting on an act just to get rid of Nhamo, a constant reminder of her dead sister who was Grandmother's favorite. The family's superstitions play right into believing all of this. On the other hand, it all could be completely legitimate.

Either way, Grandmother's love for Nhamo is so strong that she refuses to make Nhamo the one to pay for her father's crime. Even so, is it so much love of her granddaughter or more regret over the loss of her favorite daughter that motivates Grandmother's response?





# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Masvita, Aunt Chipo, and Aunt Shuvai's baby are sent to Vatete's village. The rest of the women stay to care for Grandmother. Nhamo stays too, although the women virtually ignore her. As long as they stay there, however, Nhamo feels safe, because the porch is not the awful husband she will be forced to marry to satisfy the spirit. Eventually, though, Uncle Kufa decides Grandmother is well enough to travel, and Nhamo realizes her fate is about to unfold. She cries herself sick. The trader's wife, Rosa, cares for Nhamo and sees what is going on. She wants to let Nhamo stay with them as their own daughter. She and her husband are Catholic and believe the *muvuki* is a fraud. They try to convince Uncle Kufa to let Nhamo stay, using bribes and arguments, but he refuses.

Rosa is ready to bring in rebel soldiers to defy the *muvuki*, and when the trader goes to fetch them, he is caught. The *muvuki* brings him to the trading post tied up and ready for a showdown. Uncle Kufa is with the *muvuki*. Without words, the *muvuki* and the trader come to an understanding. They are both businessmen who have to live peacefully in order to survive. Uncle Kufa is angry, but he realizes he has lost his cause. Still, he will be taking Nhamo with him. She leaves with her family, knowing that the sooner she leaves, the safer Rosa and her husband will be.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

The politics of Africa are hard to understand, because centuries of history play into the present. This chapter shows a glimpse of the conflict between old religious superstitions and new. Much as Nhamo dislikes the results of the *muvuki*'s declarations, she is suspicious of a religion that has as its primary symbol a dead man on a cross. She connects the two belief systems in her own childlike way that demonstrates the superstitious similarities in both religions.

Nhamo is warmed by the thought that Rosa actually wants her; she is so used to being unwanted. However, her fate seems sealed, and she must go along with it to protect her family.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Back in her village, Nhamo is like a ghost to the others. They are preparing for her marriage ceremony to the dead man's brother. Nhamo is resigned to this future, bleak as it seems.

Out of nowhere, it seems, she hears Grandmother's voice calling her name. Grandmother has not spoken since the *muvuki* struck her. Nhamo is surprised, but Grandmother tells her she remembers everything and wants to help Nhamo escape. Grandmother lays out a plan for Nhamo to go to Zimbabwe and find her father's family. She tells Nhamo to find nuns and tell them she is Catholic. Grandmother gives Nhamo a hidden stash of gold nuggets and instructs her how to get the supplies she'll need and how to travel. Nhamo is frightened, but she does as Grandmother tells her. She gets her mother's picture and the pot she keeps it in, stashing it all in a boat she will take.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Grandmother does seem to genuinely care for Nhamo in this chapter. She calls Nhamo "beloved child," a phrase Nhamo has never been called. Grandmother has kept her ability to speak a secret to protect Nhamo and help her escape her cruel fate.

Nhamo is about to embark on a quest in the great tradition of heroes in literature. What she will find is not clear at this point, but her key quality is the ability to jump in and face her fears. She has two strong women behind her—Grandmother and her mother. Thoughts of them and Nhamo's connection to them will guide her and strengthen her in this quest.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Aunt Chipo scolds Nhamo and treats her as rudely as ever, even implying that her marriage is Nhamo's way of getting out of her fair share of the work. After the others go to bed, Nhamo and Grandmother talk. Grandmother tells her that Aunt Chipo's possession at the muvuki's was a fake, because Chipo never liked Nhamo. She was jealous that Runako had a beautiful baby. Nhamo can't believe they thought her beautiful.

Grandmother urges Nhamo to set out on her journey. Nhamo is sad and afraid, but she goes. She's never been in a boat, and she doesn't really like the rocking sensation, but she continues to move forward, and by the time she is on her way, it is with a sense of exhilaration.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

Grandmother's confessions serve to strengthen Nhamo's spirit, and her resolve to leave. Even though parting is horrible, they both know it is for the best. So begins Nhamo's hero quest.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Nhamo's river journey continues. She had fallen asleep and now wakes up, taking a minute to remember where she is. She is not sure what part of the river she is on, so she decides it must be time to row against the current, as Grandmother had instructed her. It is much harder than she had imagined. The village fisherman, Crocodile Guts, must have been much stronger, since he made it look easy. Nhamo has to rest frequently, eating and bailing water out of the boat. The first night she realizes she has never been this alone before.

The next day, Nhamo is determined to make good time, but a group of hippos unnerves her and she goes to shore until they leave. To distract herself from her fear, she lies in the boat telling herself stories. She recounts the creation story of her culture, the god Mwari creating Mother Earth and all the creatures. The evening breeze seems to carry the voice of her mother, which calms Nhamo and allows her to relax into a deep sleep.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

Again and again, Nhamo must face her fears. She is alone, she is not sure of her whereabouts, she has a herd of hippos threatening her, her food supplies are beginning to run short. The best heroes grow strong through trials and troubles. Nhamo relies on the spirit of her mother.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

Nhamo begins teaching herself to swim, or at least to feel comfortable in the water. She kills some guinea fowl to eat and fashions some fish traps to catch fish to smoke. She is beginning to feel more confident in herself and her ability to take care of her needs. She sings songs of pride in herself. She stays in this spot for several days, eating and growing strong.

One day, the hippos are gone and she realizes that she misses them. She had grown accustomed to their sounds and their presence. Eventually, she decides to continue on her journey. She paddles along for the entire day. Then she runs into some sandbars. She decides to stop fighting the sand, so she ties up the boat and rests.

As night descends, Nhamo sees a bright light that she thinks is a star at first, but it is too bright to be a star. Then she realizes it is the electric lights Grandmother told her would be how she would know she was in Zimbabwe. She cannot get there tonight, but it gives her hope.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

As Nhamo learns to fend for herself, she grows confident, but she also realizes she needs other people. Even the worst people like Aunt Chipso seem better than eternal solitude. This is an important realization. While she knows she can survive on her own, she also knows how much other people add to her life.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Nhamo has a bad dream that she has gone to a beautiful place with new huts and two beautiful girls. They invite her to eat, and just as she is about to, Crocodile Guts appears. She is so afraid because she knows he is dead. He tells her how well-built his boat is and how the girls are water spirits, njuzu, who taught him all about the water. He tells her not to be afraid of them.

She wakes from the dream and realizes that her boat was tied only to wispy reeds and has broken loose. She's been drifting the whole time she was asleep. At first she tries to row against the current, but she cannot see the shore so she isn't able to see if she's making any progress. She decides to drift instead and let the current take her.

As it turns out, there is no shore to be seen, and the water begins to have waves; clearly she is not on the river anymore. She manages to maintain a level of composure and then miraculously lands on an island. It's a very small island with no signs of life, but it is at least a resting place.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

Much like Homer's Odysseus in *The Odyssey*, Nhamo is at the mercy of the elements. She too is traveling in a boat and meets with many obstacles. Sometimes it seems as if fate is teasing or testing her.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

Nhamo spends a time on this rock of an island. She realizes she has ended up in the Lake Cabora Bassa. She is not sure what to do, so she gets out her picture of her mother to talk with. She even sets up her pretend tea as they talk. Nhamo tells a story to distract herself. This one is about a man with many sons but no money to buy them wives. He dies, leaving them instructions how to use the bull to communicate with him. One son, named Useless, decides that he should jump in the river. The other sons figure he will drown and there will be one less mouth to feed. Useless does jump in the river and they never see him again, until one day he appears to his mother with his njuzu bride. Useless had become a nganga, a wise healer, and a great chief.

Nhamo finishes the story only to fall into despair again over her plight. She finds some solace in imagining the horrid lives of the wives she would have joined had she stayed in her village. To pass the time and keep her mind from despair, she works on swimming. She tries to figure out how different animals swim and decides to copy their motions.

Her food rations run out, and she tries to eat her mealie (corn) meal, but it is spoiled. She still has some dried beans, which she would normally cook. However, she remembers that she can soak them and sprout them and this will provide a source of food.

One day as she is swimming, she is almost too weak to make it back to shore. She thinks she will die here of starvation.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

The range of emotions Nhamo experiences go from elation and self-confidence to despair and longing. With no one else but herself to rely upon, she is able to keep going, but she is running out of strength and ideas. She has no idea what will happen to her: if she stays she will starve, and if she leaves she may still starve.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

It is time for Nhamo to leave the rock island before she dies of starvation. She submits to fate. She thinks she hears the voices of her mother and of Crocodile Guts talking to her, reassuring her. Nhamo lies in the boat and lets it take her where it will. She sees land and rows toward it.

The shoreline is steep, but she finds a fig tree with long roots where she can tie up the boat. Nhamo thanks her ancestors and the njuzu spirits for guiding her safely to this island. Using the fig tree roots like a ladder, Nhamo climbs up the sides of the banks to the rest of the island. There she finds bananas, tomatoes, and mealies growing in abundance. Nhamo begins to understand how this is. The Portuguese dammed up the river, creating this huge lake, but there were villages here before that. The island she now stands on is the highest point of land not flooded by the dam. No animals can climb the steep shores, so the food grows without any creatures eating it. She is very grateful for this good fortune, and she prepares an offering to her ancestors.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Pacing is something a novelist must master. The main character must experience hardship and despair, but there must also be times of respite to allow for hope that the character in the book will have everything work out for her. In the pacing of this novel, this chapter is one of respite and good luck. For a while, at least, Nhamo can live safely here and have all the food she can eat.





# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

Even though the island is lush and green and there are no harmful animals, Nhamo chooses the safety of her boat for sleeping. She prepares food to take on her trip. She makes twine from bark. She imagines the people who once lived here, hoping they were happy and prosperous.

One night the waves are too big to allow her to sleep in the boat, so she fashions a shelter near her cooking fire. She is afraid to sleep, but she finally does. She has a dream about herself telling the girls in her village a story about a woman named Long Teats who ate children and gave birth to locusts. In her dream, she leaves the girls' hut to go outside and when she tries to return, the hut is gone, replaced by the Portuguese hut. Long Teats comes out of the hut looking for a meal. In the dream, Nhamo runs to her boat which has been smashed among the rocks by the waves.

When Nhamo wakes up, she is afraid. She prays to her ancestors to keep her safe. A breeze smelling of gardenias wafts by, which she believes is a signal that her ancestors are trying to distract Long Teats. Nhamo goes to the shore to check on her boat, which is fine. She wonders what her dream was trying to say to her. Perhaps her ancestors want her to stop delaying and get to Zimbabwe.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Nhamo's religious beliefs play a big role in her life, both when she lives in the village and now when she is on her own. Her superstitions sometimes scare her and at other times comfort her. One role they play is to make her examine her own motivations and what she needs to do.

This island seems almost perfect, but also at times haunted. While it has food in abundance, the place has an eerie presence. Nhamo cannot be completely comfortable and relaxed here.



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

Nhamo decides to leave this island, but the water is too choppy from the wind, so she will have to spend another night. She goes to get some branches to protect her from Long Teats. On the way, she has to cross by the Portuguese hut, and she sees that the door is wide open. Nhamo is in shock and very afraid. She hears her mother's voice telling her to go shut the door, so Nhamo works up her nerve to go into the house. She sees the bones of a long-dead body lying on a bed. She thinks the spirit of the dead person will be nervous about the open door, because then witches can come and take the body. Nhamo promises to get some gardenia branches to ward off the witches. She finds a beautiful huge knife that she can use.

After she cuts down branches and performs a ceremony to protect the dead, she does the same for her own sleeping area. She forgets, however, to put the knife back inside the house, and she is too afraid to go back in the dark. She cleans it and places it near her fire, telling the spirit thank you for allowing her to use it, and suggesting that if he doesn't need it anymore, she could certainly benefit from it. In the morning a puff adder, a symbol of the spirit, lies across the knife. It is preying on a mouse eating Nhamo's peanuts, a sign that the spirit wants her to have the knife. She thanks the spirit and gets ready to venture out on the vast water again.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Even though the island is bountiful, Nhamo feels more strongly than ever the need for other people to love and be with. Spirits just aren't the same as live people. Once again, she conquers her fears and does what she needs to do, and is rewarded by the spirit with the gift of the knife. It will help her hunt and cut branches for shelter as she continues her journey.



# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

As Nhamo continues, she zigzags, sometimes paddling against the current, sometimes allowing it to carry her. She hopes for land, but does not find any. After several days, she sees land, but more importantly, she has started her monthly bleeding. She is now a woman. In her village, it would be said she has crossed the river into womanhood, but she is proud to have crossed a whole lake.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

Nhamo acknowledges the importance of her transition, even though no one is there to give her a ceremony or a party. She also realizes the symbolism of having crossed the entire lake. She has achieved far more than other girls at her age.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

For days, Nhamo paddles around and around the island, but she does not realize it is an island until she has gone all the way around. She yells at the island for not being Zimbabwe. Then her boat rams into some rocks and she immediately feels bad for yelling at the island. She has to fight off a baboon and steer clear of a crocodile, but she is not afraid. Nhamo repairs the boat's leaks with clay from a termite hill and waits for it to dry.

In the meantime, she tells herself a story about a man with two wives. The senior wife has only daughters, while the junior wife has only sons, and so she is more revered. The wives argue and bicker. They don't like each other. One day the junior wife puts baboon meat in the senior wife's stew—the baboon is the totem of the senior wife, and a person is not supposed to eat the meat of their totem. The senior wife turns into a baboon, and when the family discovers it was the junior wife who did it, they send her back to her family in shame.

Nhamo thinks about all the totems of all her family members and all the clans. She doesn't want to forget this information. Thinking of Grandmother in particular makes her very sad, but she won't allow herself to dwell on it. She remembers that Tazviona, a girl in her village, has baboon as her totem. Oddly, the baboon on the island has a twisted foot, as does Tazviona. She wonders if it is her friend who ate baboon meat.

## Chapter 21 Analysis

Nhamo is getting virtually nowhere. She is stalled. In a hero quest this stagnant phase symbolizes how in living we all come to places where we get stuck and can't seem to progress forward. It is a time for reflection and mindfulness.



# Chapter 22

## Chapter 22 Summary

Nhamo intends to settle on this large island until she can figure out what to do. Her boat is not capable of navigating the big lake in its mangled state, and she thinks she might have to wait until some other humans come to the island to help her. Then she hears the voice of Crocodile Guts praising her idea of building her own boat. She decides that is what she will do.

Nhamo ventures further inland, memorizing landmarks so she can return to retrieve her supplies from the shore. She is nervous because the lone baboon must have been fleeing from something, either a predator or some other danger. She knows that danger is probably still present.

Nhamo finds an area where she can camp, surrounded by lucky-bean trees, which animals know to be poisonous and will not bother. She will build a platform in the trees which will be safe, but in the meantime she needs a place to sleep tonight. She finds some caves in the cliff. Nhamo retrieves her food supplies, scant as they are, and brings them to the cave, cooks them, and gets ready to sleep.

A troop of baboons come to the stream nearby to drink. They find her cook fire and her scent. Immediately, the lead male issues a challenge and Nhamo realizes she has taken their sleeping area. Not sure what to do, she shows herself to the troop and is challenged again. She throws a big rock at one of the males and it hits him in the face. The baboons decide to sleep in a gathering of trees. Nhamo is ecstatic. She won. She beat the baboons. However, the noises of other animals in the night shake her confidence a bit and she doesn't fall asleep until nearly dawn.

## Chapter 22 Analysis

Nhamo is quicker to make big decisions than she has been. When she confronts her problem with the boat, her decision to build her own boat is instantly confirmed by Crocodile Guts. Whether his spirit is really talking to her or it's just her own inner voice, she is affirmed. Similarly, when she has to find a place to sleep, she is able to decide and move forward. Even the threatening baboons are easily dealt with as she takes decisive action. These changes in her character can be compared with the young woman who not long ago was ready to be married off to a man who would probably be the death of her—and without saying a word of protest or being involved in the decision at all. Nhamo is learning who she really is and what she is capable of.



# Chapter 23

## Chapter 23 Summary

Many things occupy Nhamo's mind: finding food, building her shelter, making a boat, and planting a garden. It's as if she plans to live on this island forever. First she must gather some immediate food supplies, so she finds wild vegetables and berries. She eats roasted grasshoppers. Once she is fed, she sets up traps to catch small birds, baskets to catch fish. Next she works on her platform shelter in the lucky-bean trees. It is much more comfortable than the cold, damp floor of the cave.

She begins making rope for a ladder up to the platform. While she does, she tells her mother's picture a story. It is about a young woman whose parents are very picky about choosing a husband for her. They tell her not to talk to any suitors. One day a boy comes near her house. He sits making rope. When he eats, he eats with only one hand while the other hand continues making rope. The girl finds this intriguing, as do her parents. They begin to talk to the boy and ask about why he won't stop working on his rope. He tells them he has to pull his grandmother's fields closer to her house. The father thinks this is a great idea. He invites the boy to their house, the boy and girl fall in love and get married, on the promise that the boy will drag the father's fields closer to his house one day. After many grandchildren are born, the father asks why they have not pulled his fields. The girl laughs and tells him it was a joke. He forgives her because he loves his grandchildren.

Nhamo tells her mother she wishes she could make a rope to pull the island closer to Zimbabwe. Her mother replies that she should work on the boat. Crocodile Guts gives her advice on making it by taking small bites from the trunk, the way termites do.

## Chapter 23 Analysis

Again, Nhamo tells a story. This one mirrors some of her own circumstances. For one, she is making rope and the boy in the story is making rope. Another similarity is the issue of being old and alone. Nhamo worries that she may end up living the rest of her life on this island, alone, with no children. The girl in the story begins to worry that her life may be spent without a husband because her parents seem intent on not letting her marry. Stories are important in a culture like Nhamo's where reading and writing are not the norm. The stories teach lessons as well as pass along cultural experience and truth. In this case, the lesson of the story is to be patient and wait for the right moment.



# Chapter 24

## Chapter 24 Summary

Nhamo has plans for the tiny island offshore of the big island. She will plant her garden there, but the only problem is the deformed baboon who lives on the island. One day, she sees him lying on the ground. She thinks he is dead, but when she pokes him with a stick he starts, raging at her. She is seriously frightened, and angry. Nhamo goes back to the big island to gather some fruit for this lonely baboon. She makes a trail of the fruit for him to follow to the big island so he will abandon the little island and let her plant her garden. He does leave and she plants her garden.

She spends her days busily tending to her garden, building her boat, and gathering food. In the evenings, the baboons have been sleeping elsewhere, but one night they return to the cliff area. No matter how vehemently Nhamo protests, they will not leave. They show her that the deformed baboon has returned to the troop. From then on, the baboons sleep in the cliffs, which oddly enough, comforts Nhamo. For the most part the baboons simply ignore her. She is surrounded by animals of all kinds, and she enjoys the company. She nicknames the lead male Fat Cheeks and the deformed one Rumpy. Every morning and afternoon, the baboons spend a long time grooming one another, but Rumpy grooms himself—that's how much of an outcast he is.

## Chapter 24 Analysis

The baboons remind Nhamo of a village, with all the usual roles: the males who try to demonstrate who is better, the mothers who nurse their babies, and the children who play and bother the adults. Rumpy is just like her: alone, unwanted, unloved. He is the outcast, but he has returned to his troop. Perhaps she will be able to someday return to hers.



# Chapter 25

## Chapter 25 Summary

Nhamo is at a crisis point. She gets stung by a scorpion as she is working on her boat. The venom is strong, causing her to hallucinate and vomit. She makes her way to her platform and has a dream. In the dream, Grandmother, Masvita, and Nhamo are watching a scene in which Princess Senwa is mourning her husband's betrayal. She sends cattle over a cliff, then baskets of food, beads, and pottery, then men and women, then finally the warriors and then herself. When Prince Kakono sees what has happened, he does the same, finally throwing himself off the cliff. For some reason, Masvita joins the throng of jumpers. They live now under the water.

When Nhamo wakes from this dream, her head is pounding and her heart is racing. She sees the baboons coming home for the evening and is comforted by their gentle ways with one another. Even when they are fighting and even terrorizing each other, Nhamo knows they would never march the others off the edge of a cliff.

## Chapter 25 Analysis

Whenever a character has a dream, hallucination, or vision, it is there for a reason. This dream seems rather ludicrous at first. It demonstrates the really awful things human beings will do to satisfy their foolish pride. Even Aunt Chipo was willing to figuratively march Nhamo off a cliff in order to soothe herself. The whole village was willing to sacrifice Nhamo. Not Grandmother, though. Grandmother saved Nhamo. Ironically, the wild baboons seem to treat each other better than humans do.





# Chapter 26

## Chapter 26 Summary

As Nhamo recovers, she is able to venture down from her platform. She goes to the stream to drink. The baboons are there, but they ignore her. She likes watching them interact, almost like humans. A baby repeats its endless jumping game with its father. Nhamo wonders if baboons can be married and if they tell stories.

Nhamo gets new thatch grass for her platform and carries it back. She should go check her traps, but merely standing upright makes her dizzy. She decides to leave her traps until the next day, when she regrets doing so because they are all broken and the prey is gone. A wildcat of some sort is the suspect, based on tracks around the trap. She makes some new traps, deciding that she also must learn to hunt.

Hunting will require spears with sharp tips, so Nhamo fashions some out of wood hardened in the fire. She practices on a rabbit skin with little luck. She settles on hunting dassies, or bush babies. With very little effort, Nhamo kills one on her first try. There is a lot of meat, which she can smoke dry.

## Chapter 26 Analysis

Nhamo's will and ability to survive is commendable. She learns that she need not be as afraid of animals as she had once thought. She teaches herself to hunt. She is self-sufficient. The baboons, however, are a constant reminder of what she is missing by not having a community. There is value in being part of a larger whole. As much as she longs for that, however, she really cannot forget that her community was willing to abandon her.



## Chapter 27

### Chapter 27 Summary

The dry season continues and Nhamo's food stores are running low. She talks to Crocodile Guts, who tells her she needs to be getting on her way. He tells her she hasn't been paying attention and that she needs to listen more to the water spirits. As Nhamo sees one of them use a hot coal to light Crocodile Guts' pipe, she realizes she can use coals to hollow out her boat.

In the meantime, Nhamo decides that if she is to find enough food, she should follow the troop of baboons to see where they get their food. She does, and is pleased to find many new sources of food. She is slowly accepted by the troop to the point that one of the babies, whom she calls Tag, surprises her by grooming her. Nhamo bursts into tears knowing that this touch, this community, is what she so desperately misses.

Her mother's spirit tells Nhamo to stop following the baboons around and get to work on her boat. Crocodile Guts echoes that idea. Even though Nhamo likes the company of the baboons, her mother tells her she needs the company of people. They continue to urge her on before the rainy season begins again.

### Chapter 27 Analysis

Nhamo realizes two important things in this chapter. First, she knows she must pay attention to the spirits that are trying to help her. She needs to do what they tell her and follow their example. Second, she experiences touch for the first time in months. She feels deeply how important touch can be, as well as the closeness of a community, a family. Nhamo is torn between staying with the baboons and having the sense of community and working on her boat so she can continue her quest for her father. One is known and the other is unknown, and sometimes the known feels safer and better, even though the quest of the unknown can lead to even greater blessings.



# Chapter 28

## Chapter 28 Summary

Nhamo is having a more and more difficult time finding food, and she is fatigued and listless because of it. She tries to work on her boat, but she can hardly keep her head up. On one trip with the baboons, she discovers a cave and mulberry trees. The cave appears to belong to some sort of animal; she guesses a caracal.

Later, however, as she finds a dead antelope clearly killed by some animal, she deduces that the predator is a leopard, and she believes the leopard is the occupant of the cave. Even though there is no way she can fight a leopard, she hopes the animal has eaten its fill for now and is asleep. Nhamo risks stealing some of the meat and returns to her platform to smoke it and roast some. The baboons can smell the meat, and Nhamo hopes they don't eat it.

## Chapter 28 Analysis

The sense of urgency to leave the island grows as Nhamo's food runs out. The reader wants to call out to her to get going. Indeed, one may begin to wonder why she does not work harder to get away. We do come to understand, however, the effects of hunger, as Nhamo loses energy and interest. That's why she is willing to take a risk to get some of the antelope meat; she needs the food. She will die of starvation, so the threat from the leopard is no worse. Maybe now she can finish her boat and be on her way.



# Chapter 29

## Chapter 29 Summary

Nhamo tells her mother's spirit a story about a man who lived near a forest full of baboons. The baboons want food, and the farmer will not let them have any of his. The baboons raid his goat pen and eat up a goat. They get the notion to fill the goatskin with their own droppings as a joke on the farmer. They set the goatskin near the farmer's door; when the farmer comes out he thinks it is his goat and he tries to get it to move away from the door. When the goat doesn't move, the farmer kicks it, opening up the skin and exploding baboon droppings all over the farmer's hut. The farmer devises a plan to get back at the baboons. He digs a pit and concocts a plan so the baboons will fall into the pit. The plan works, and the farmer lives happily ever after.

Mother's spirit talks to Nhamo about finishing the boat, how it will be more difficult with the change in atmosphere, now that Nhamo is wary of the leopard. She tells Nhamo to be more careful, but to understand that there will always be dangers in the forest. Nhamo finishes drying and storing her meat, when the baboons return.

One baboon, the one with the disabled foot whom Nhamo calls Rumpy, has taken to being assertive with her. Since he is the one always picked on in his troop, he seems to enjoy having Nhamo to push around. She has never been afraid of him until now, as he is getting more and more aggressive. Rumpy gets into Nhamo's platform and into her food stores. Nhamo grabs a burning stick to scare him away, and he falls off the platform, knocking off the jar with mother's picture in it as he falls. The jar breaks and the picture falls into the flaming fire. Although Nhamo tries to get it out, the picture is just a few ashes now. Mother's spirit talks to her as the ashes fly away, telling Nhamo not to be frightened.

## Chapter 29 Analysis

Danger increases every day that Nhamo stays on the island. The leopard is lurking somewhere and the baboons are as hungry as she is, making them more desperate and more dangerous. When Rumpy gets into her food, Nhamo defends her property, only to lose the picture of her mother that represents so much to her. How will she go on now?



# Chapter 30

## Chapter 30 Summary

Nhamo grieves the loss of her provisions and her mother's picture. She lies on her platform neither eating nor drinking. She is just waiting to die. The spirit of Crocodile Guts visits her to tell her his relatives have made their offerings and now he is going home. He also tells her that the water spirits, who come as snakes, might visit her since they will be lonely when he is gone. They do visit her, forcing some water into her, which renews her drive to live.

She spends an entire day eating and drinking to regain her strength, then Nhamo makes plans for how she will prepare. As she works on her boat, she senses a difference in the forest, then she realizes trees are budding, which means the rainy season is about to start. She is mad at herself for waiting so long, because she knows she cannot possibly have her boat finished before the storms come. Nhamo decides to make plans for staying on the island during the rainy season—how she will reinforce her platform and plant her garden.

Rumpy, the injured baboon, cannot climb the cliff very high, but finds himself a crevice to sleep in. Nhamo hears a leopard below. The baboons have gone utterly silent. Suddenly a shrieking, wailing sound pierces the silence. Nhamo knows the leopard has its prey. The sounds remind her of the events when the leopard killed her mother. Everything goes back to normal now, but she senses the absence of Rumpy.

## Chapter 30 Analysis

Nhamo's vacillation between wishing for death and wishing for life is mirrored in the life cycle of the grassland. Life is dangerous, and it is meant to be that way. The death of Rumpy is juxtaposed with her memory of her mother's death. While Rumpy is not as beloved, he was her family while Nhamo has lived on the island.

The water spirits who appear as snakes are both frightening and life-saving for Nhamo, in the same way her life on the island is both dangerous and life-saving. If not for the island, she would be at the mercy of the lake, and as the rainy season moves ever closer, that is not the place she wants to be.



# Chapter 31

## Chapter 31 Summary

After all this time on the island, Nhamo suddenly decides not to stay any longer. She remembers Crocodile Guts talking about plugging holes in his boat with sap from the mutowa tree. Nhamo decides to quit trying to build a new boat and instead repair the old one. At least it will get her off the island and to the shore.

Nhamo manages to navigate the boat down the river until she comes to a village that looks very much like her own. She finds being with people so odd after all this time. The women of the village feed Nhamo and tell her how to get to Zimbabwe without encountering the border patrol or the land mines. Nhamo hopes to spend the night in the village, but she makes the mistake of mentioning how she would talk to her mother and to Crocodile Guts, as well as to the njuzu, the water spirits. The villagers think she's a little nuts, and they get her out of the village as soon as possible.

Once again, Nhamo is on her own with no idea where she's going, except this time she is on foot. After a while on the trail, Nhamo hears a helicopter overhead, but she doesn't know what it is, only that it might be soldiers who can kill her. She runs off the path, and when the helicopter is gone, she is lost. She knows Zimbabwe is west, so she continues toward the setting sun. A storm is approaching, and somehow Nhamo finds an abandoned hut. The storm blows through and Nhamo huddles in the hut. Then animals stampede by, and a buffalo steps on a land mine. Nhamo is frightened and shocked, but she is determined to keep going. She decides that if she only steps in elephant footprints, she will be safe from land mines, so she continues on in this way. Darkness comes, and she can finally see a bright light from a house she believes to be in Zimbabwe.

## Chapter 31 Analysis

Oddly, Nhamo leaves the island in what seems a sudden act, and arrives where there is land and people very quickly. Nhamo is eager to get on with her journey. When Nhamo does finally find a village, she is only there for a short time and then alone again. The hero quest must be accomplished without others; it is a solitary quest. Strangers may offer help and food, but ultimately, she must go on alone. After all these months on the island, what must it feel like to reach people, to eat food prepared by them, to know the end is near? Nhamo is more comfortable with the dangers of the wild than with the dangers of men's land mines.



# Chapter 32

## Chapter 32 Summary

Nhamo follows some of the lights to a house. She is enthralled by the green grass and the large fence. A white family is sitting down to dinner. Nhamo salivates as she watches a feast set on the table, some of the food is familiar and some is not. She assumes the African woman who serves them is a junior wife. Nhamo is so taken with this fantastic scene that she sneaks under the fence and stares into the window. The white woman notices her and screams. The man opens the door and sends his vicious dogs upon Nhamo. She runs, going back under the fence, and they follow her. When she reaches a dead end, she decides to threaten the dogs; some run away, and the one that remains, she kills.

The spirit of Long Teats talks to Nhamo and tells her it was she who helped Nhamo escape the dogs. This worries Nhamo, because if she is possessed by a witch, she will never be let into a village with people. Nhamo goes back into the woods, but she lost her bag of food to the dogs, and she is hungry, dehydrated, and exhausted.

Finally, Nhamo comes upon a sort of underground barn, where cows and goats are kept. She thinks it is a special, spiritual keep for all the broken animals. She finds a goat with a full udder and Nhamo drinks the milk. She fills up and falls asleep, dreaming of a room with white walls where her mother sits reading by the window.

## Chapter 32 Analysis

It seems Nhamo has been apart from other people for so long that she hardly knows how to act. Still, in this chapter she experiences white people for the first time—she's heard stories from her mother and grandmother about them, but she's never seen them for herself. She is naturally curious about them.

Things are getting more desperate for Nhamo, even though she is now on the mainland and near people. She is still alone and starving, plus she has no idea where she is going or how to get there. It is ironic that though she should be safer with people than with baboons and leopards, she is not. Ironic, also, is the fact that she is starving while she observes the white family eating what seems like a feast, although it's probably an ordinary meal for them.



# Chapter 33

## Chapter 33 Summary

Nhamo is taken to a hospital, although at first she believes she is dreaming. An old man comes and reads to her; she thinks he is her grandfather. Slowly, she is able to stay awake more and begins to understand she is being treated. The female doctor who takes care of her Nhamo imagines is her mother, although she eventually realizes this is not true. A white doctor comes to observe her, but Nhamo screams and leaps out of her bed. She tells the female doctor about her experiences with the white man and the dogs. The doctor tells her about a recent civil war and the racist hatred that still exists.

When she is able to get out of bed, Nhamo moves about and sees herself in a mirror. She is appalled at how skeletal she looks. The nurse tries to comfort her. The nurse allows Nhamo to help cook food on an electric stove, which Nhamo thinks is miraculous. She won't have to collect firewood anymore.

Eventually, Nhamo learns about where she is. It is called Efifi, and it is a science research center. The livestock in the underground pen were there to act as bait to tsetse flies, which the researchers captured and tried to find ways to kill. They explain to Nhamo that the flies carry diseases and they want to get rid of the flies. Everyone in Efifi is a scientist, nobody actually lives there, and there are no children.

## Chapter 33 Analysis

Although we don't know for certain, we can infer that the researchers found Nhamo when they came to take the cattle out of the pen. It was a lucky turn of events for her, because she would probably have died soon if they hadn't found her. Nhamo seems to be out of danger, at least the kind of danger she was in until now. We are certain that these doctors will not release her back out on her own. They will make sure she is cared for, but how will that fit into her plans to search for her father? How will that serve her quest?





# Chapter 34

## Chapter 34 Summary

Nhamo stays at Efifi and helps whoever will let her. She tries to be at once invisible, so they won't send her away, and helpful, so they will not send her away. They tolerate her somewhat good-naturedly, although she clearly can get in the way. Baba Joseph, the old man, likes having her around. He is of a religion called vapostori, which observes Saturday as a holy day, so he likes having Nhamo to tend his animals on Saturdays.

Nhamo lurks around when the adults gather, to listen to them talk. The doctor she calls Mother, Dr. Masuku, is not married, calling marriage the same as slavery. However, the white doctor, Dr. van Heerden, thinks she should get married and have children. He says Nhamo has certainly taken to her like a mother. Dr. Masuku replies that she was just the first one Nhamo saw when she woke, and so she is bonded.

Nhamo drifts along like this, even though she knows she should ask about the nuns and try to find her father. Instead, she observes the vapostori and their rituals. She tells stories to the animals as she tends them.

## Chapter 34 Analysis

In many hero quest stories, the main character finds herself/himself being tossed along by what sometimes seem to be random events. Imagine Odysseus, who ends up stopping in numerous places before he finally arrives home. The purpose of this is to give the hero time to learn what she needs to learn before she gets to the end of the quest. Nhamo is learning about a world beyond her own. While she was marooned on the island, she learned how to survive on her own. Now she is learning to survive in a completely new environment. She is learning about peoples other than those she grew up with, other tribes of people whom she has been told are evil. She finds out they are not. These must be important lessons for her to learn as she grows up.



## Chapter 35

### Chapter 35 Summary

Nhamo still lives at Efifi, but she overhears the adults talking. The doctor she calls Mother says that one day soon they will need to send Nhamo to a city so she can go to school. Nhamo takes this personally, becoming angry with Dr. Masuku and ignoring her to spend time with Baba Joseph. Baba Joseph tells her about Satan, and in return Nhamo tells him a story about how it became the custom to sacrifice a cow when someone dies. Baba Joseph tells her these superstitious beliefs are all wrong.

### Chapter 35 Analysis

For the first time, Nhamo is exposed to another religion, in fact, told outright that her beliefs are false. She finds this hard to take, though, because she knows how the spirits of Crocodile Guts, Mother, and the njuzu helped her through her struggles. She will not abandon them now.



# Chapter 36

## Chapter 36 Summary

Nhamo watches as a wasp stings and kills a spider much larger than it. The wasp flies away instead of staying to eat its prey. Nhamo doesn't understand.

Dr. van Heerden is back, with supplies and luxuries from the city. He has brought his dog with him. He opens the door of his truck and the dog bounds out, scaring Nhamo as she connects this dog with those that attacked her on her first night in Zimbabwe. Nhamo has her knife in her hand from cutting Lucerne. Thinking the leaping dog is attacking her, she slashes at it with her knife. When Dr. van Heerden tries to protect the dog, she stabs him with the knife. Soon, she is being pulled off of him, the bones in her wrist broken as someone tries to wrench the knife from her hand.

Dr. Masuku stays with Nhamo the rest of the day. Nhamo won't let her leave and now calls her Mother again. Dr. van Heerden and Dr. Masuku talk about what to do with Nhamo. Dr. van Heerden found her father's family, if not her father, and they decide that it will be best if they send Nhamo to that family. Baba Joseph enters and chides them for being too quick to send her away. Nhamo hopes they will keep her.

## Chapter 36 Analysis

Dr. Masuku has taught Nhamo some things, such as how insects live and eat. That is why Nhamo observes the spider and the wasp so closely and with such awe. This bit of education seems to have inspired Nhamo. It is a glimpse of the promise she holds. In contrast, the scene in which Nhamo injures Dr. van Heerden and his dog reflects just how far Nhamo has to travel in order to fulfill her promise. Oddly, after traveling all this way to find her father, after all she has been through, she suddenly does not want to leave Effi. Since Dr. Masuku has become Mother in Nhamo's mind, she does not want to leave.



# Chapter 37

## Chapter 37 Summary

Baba Joseph is convinced that Nhamo's attack on Dr. van Heerden is the result of her being possessed, and he is determined to perform an exorcism. Nhamo's hair is shaved off, because he says demons get tangled in hair. He takes her up to a mountain that is supposedly inhabited by witches. Other prophets from his religious group go along. Nhamo watches as they begin their rituals. They build a fire and walk on the hot coals, roll in them, and eat them. Baba Joseph is ready.

He calls out the spirit of Long Teats and tells her to go away. He puts Nhamo's panga on the fire and splashes holy water on it, causing it to crack as Long Teats wails her lament. Then he calls on other spirits, and Nhamo begins to worry he will get rid of her entire family. She is afraid she won't ever see them again. The other prophets are not so sure this ceremony is really working; however, they gain the spirit too and start to act strangely. The night wears down, and Nhamo tries to soothe the exhausted Baba Joseph. Dr. van Heerden and Dr. Masuku show up, clearly skeptical of the entire event, and worried about Nhamo.

## Chapter 37 Analysis

Baba Joseph means well, but his ritual is a little odd in Nhamo's mind. While she's comfortable with her own set of superstitions, she's not so keen on his. Was Baba Joseph a little crazy, or was it just his dedication to Nhamo that made him take on such a strange ceremony? When the two doctors show up, out of worry for Nhamo and perhaps for Baba Joseph too, it is clear they care far more for her than they might like to admit.



# Chapter 38

## Chapter 38 Summary

Back at the hospital Nhamo questions Dr. Masuku about the ceremony. The doctor, Mother in Nhamo's mind, talks about how hard it is to forget the old ways when one learns about Christianity. Mother tries to suggest to Nhamo that it is time she start searching for her relatives—this time not from frustration with Nhamo, but from caring. Nhamo is afraid they might make her go back to her village and get married, as promised. Mother gasps that she will not let that happen. Letters are sent with every possible messenger, but routes of communication are not sophisticated here, and months go by.

During this time, Nhamo learns math and reading and writing. She learns to wear such civilized things as underpants and a bra. She learns to care for her hair and skin to make them soft. She even drinks soda.

One day a haze gathers and moves toward where Nhamo sits. She hears the voices of her ancestors, grandmother is dead. Nhamo is beside herself in anguish. Mother—Dr. Masuku—decides it is definitely time to find her father's relatives.

## Chapter 38 Analysis

Outward changes reflect the inner changes Nhamo experiences. Her growing body mirrors her growth inwardly, her ever maturing understanding of this new world. As Nhamo learns skills needed in the modern Africa, she is on the brink of understanding that she will have to reconcile these with her life in her village as a girl. She has rested at Efifi for a long time, healing, growing, and learning, but also being afraid. After all she has faced along her journey, dangers, wild animals, the river, the lake—somehow, in this safe place, she wants to hide and wait. Now the hiding and waiting must be done, and she must complete the last stage of her journey.



# Chapter 39

## Chapter 39 Summary

It is time for Nhamo to meet her family. Sister Gladys takes her up to a mansion; the two doctors stay behind, because they don't want to offend the family, as they are white skinned. Nhamo is amazed at such a huge house, with a doorbell, and a servant. They are led into a parlor where they meet Nhamo's aunt. She is not warm and welcoming, and she tells them to come back at 5:00 when her husband will be home. They go back to find the doctors, Sister Gladys fuming at the aunt's disinterest in Nhamo.

At 5:00, they all go back, including Dr. van Heerden and Dr. Mazuku, since they are pretty sure their white faces won't matter now. A large crowd of relatives seems to have heard about this girl, and they are gathered at the house. Nhamo's uncle is there this time, and he seems inclined to not acknowledge Nhamo as one of them. They all try to say that she does not look like her father. The doctors ask if they can't talk to the father, and the relatives all say no.

In walks a ngana, a healer, who talks to Nhamo and encourages him to tell him about herself. She does. She tells her entire story, going on for hours and hours. She especially relates how the spirits guided her and Long Teats possessed her. He says she looks like his first wife and how even if she didn't, he would accept her into the family, because she has such a connection to the spiritual world.

## Chapter 39 Analysis

At first, when the family seems all ready to reject Nhamo, the reader wants to be mad like Sister Gladys. When the nganga talks to her, she feels that she is finally home—truly, spiritually home. It would be too heartbreaking for her to have come all this way to be met by a bunch of relatives who don't want her. This man wants her. He welcomes her. He sees in her the special gifts and talents others, like grandmother and Dr. Mazuku, have seen. Nhamo is left in limbo regarding the fate of her father and her own future. Will she live here or will the family reject her?



# Chapter 40

## Chapter 40 Summary

Arrangements are made and Nhamo is to live with the Jongwe family. Dr. Mazuku reminds Nhamo that they care for her and she can come back to Efifi any time. For now she will live here. Nhamo's aunt, Edina Jongwe, puts her in the care of servants, which Nhamo realizes is where her aunt's own children live too.

Nhamo befriends another wife's child, whose name is Clever. He is teased and abused by Edina's children, because Edina is the first wife. Nhamo identifies with him and treats him equally. She tells him a story one day about an elephant with two wives, one a hyena and one a jackal. The jackal plays a trick on the hyena who ends up hunted and killed. The nganga overhears her telling Clever this story and thinks she is clever herself. He tells her they are going to see her father.

## Chapter 40 Analysis

Nhamo quickly sees the disparities in the household. When Edina tells Nhamo she is allowed to beat Clever, Nhamo cannot bear the thought of treating someone that way, even if it means her status is higher than his. She loves school and learning new things, and so perhaps the sacrifice of living in this highly dysfunctional family is worth the benefits. Once again, her story mirrors real life, and this time it displays her feelings about the wives of her uncle.



# Chapter 41

## Chapter 41 Summary

The ngana, who is Nhamo's great-grandfather, takes her into the mountains where her father is buried under a mountain. It is a beautiful place with streams of water and flowers blooming. The ngana tells Nhamo how her grandfather, the drunk, mean man at home who sleeps all day and fights with his wife, made a fortune in the chrome mines.

The old man tells her about her father, Proud Jongwe. He was an alcoholic, but he had big plans. The family did not approve of Nhamo's mother, and the grandfather disowned his son. So Proud came to this mountain and dug mines under it. One day, they collapsed with him inside.

Before they return to the mansion, her great-grandfather explains his views about the family totems. Their family totem is the leopard, which shocks Nhamo, because in her culture, a leopard marrying a leopard would be incest, and she would have been married to Gore Mtoko, also a leopard.. He reassures her it would not be incest, because they also have the lion as a totem; they have two strong clans combined. While not incest, however, it certainly would have been evil. He believes her father's spirit appeared to her as the first leopard she saw in order to get her away from her village and send her on this journey to find his family.

When they return home, great-grandfather goes into her grandparents' room to get a picture. It is the wedding portrait of Nhamo's parents. He tells her he will give her the marriage license too, which proves her parentage.

## Chapter 41 Analysis

The nganga is the only one here who cares about Nhamo. Although he is the elder of this clan, he is not proud of the things they have done. He seems to understand and forgive. So does Nhamo. She is not disturbed by her father's misdeeds. She understands that after his death, his spirit came to help her. The nganga also wants her monetary interests protected, so he makes sure she has the proper documents she will need to receive whatever is legally hers. He doesn't say so outright, but she can infer why he wants her to have these papers. More important to Nhamo is the knowledge of her father, the story, and the understanding of how her life has come full circle, the perfect ending to a hero quest.





# Chapter 42

## Chapter 42 Summary

Nhamo returns to Efifi for summer vacation. There, she is told a letter finally arrived from her village telling her that Grandmother has died, but Masvita has a new baby—now two children. Nhamo tries to imagine living back in her village, the drudgery of pounding mealies and hauling water, and the lack of books.

Dr. van Heerden and Dr. Masuku talk to Nhamo about her grandmother's gold nuggets, which are enough to support her for a long time. They advise her to open a bank account separate from the Jongwes in order to protect her funds. They tell her she can work in Efifi during the summers and make money which will be added to the account. Her mind is reeling with the suddenness of all this information, but she agrees. She knows they care about her and her future.

Then Nhamo sees the cover of a magazine with the picture of the woman in the apron spreading margarine with a little girl standing by her. Nhamo is upset that the picture doesn't look like Dr. Masuku. As it turns out, the picture looks very much like the grown-up Nhamo.

Near the end of her summer vacation, the spirit of Grandmother comes to Nhamo, along with her mother's and father's spirits. They talk for a long time, and Nhamo is reassured by their continued presence.

## Chapter 42 Analysis

Symbolically, the picture in the magazine that Nhamo had practically worshipped as the image of her mother turns out to be the image of herself as a young woman. This has been Nhamo's journey to herself, her hero's quest to discover and come into her true nature. She will do well in this world where her independent spirit and love of learning will be appreciated, and where her connection to the spirit world will be respected. Her grandmother, mother, and father are with her always, and now she has surrogate earthly versions of them in the form of the ngana, Dr. van Heerden and Dr. Masuku. She is now full and complete. She also symbolically represents the changes in the whole of Africa, a continent in constant war and struggles between the old and new. Nhamo represents a fine combination of both the old superstitious ways and the new, modern ways, neither one dominating, but both a piece of the whole.



# Characters

## Nhamo

The title character, whose name means "disaster." Nhamo is just on the cusp of puberty, but restless with the ways of her village. She longs for something different, but she is not sure where or what it is.

## Aunt Chipo

Aunt Chipo is Nhamo's guardian, her mother's sister. Since Nhamo's parents are both gone, Aunt Chipo is raising her. However, Aunt Chipo doesn't like Nhamo much.

## Masvita

Aunt Chipo's daughter, Nhamo's cousin. The two girls are like sisters, even though Nhamo is acutely aware that everyone seems to think Masvita is so perfect and Nhamo is somewhat of an outcast.

## Uncle Kufa

Aunt Chipo's husband, Nhamo's uncle. It is he who takes the muoviki's advice to marry Nhamo to the brother of the dead man.

## Grandmother or Ambuya

Grandmother is Nhamo's maternal grandmother. Grandmother adores Nhamo, partly because Nhamo's mother was Ambuya's favorite, but also because she understands Nhamo's restless spirit. Grandmother arranges for Nhamo to escape the village before she can be married away.

## Aunt Shavai

Aunt Shavai is Nhamo's aunt who has a baby. Aunt Shavai dies from cholera, and Masvita takes care of her baby.

## Ruva

Ruva is Aunt Chipo's younger daughter, Nhamo's cousin. Even this second daughter is more praised in the village than Nhamo.



## **Muvuki**

Kind of a mix between a psychic and a witch doctor, the muvuki is supposed to be able to determine if someone is a witch. The family visits him at the Trading Post after many villagers die of cholera because Uncle Kufa thinks it is because of witchcraft that so many are dying.

## **Rosa**

She is the Portuguese trader's wife. After the muvuki tells Uncle Kufa to marry Nhamo off and Nhamo becomes ill, Rosa takes care of her. Rosa wants to keep Nhamo as her own daughter, but in the end it won't work out.

## **The Portuguese trader**

He owns the trading post where a wide array of people congregate for various purposes.

## **The Njuzu**

Water spirits that help guide Nhamo during her journey. Nhamo is afraid of them, but finally learns to trust them.

## **Long Teats**

A witch that Nhamo encounters while on the small island.

## **Dr. van Heerden**

A white doctor who helps take care of Nhamo in Efifi.

## **Dr. Masuku**

A female scientist in Efifi who is the first one Nhamo sees when she wakes up in the hospital. Nhamo latches on to her and calls her mother for most of the time she is there. Dr. Masuku shows Nhamo another side of being a woman in Africa.



## **Baba Joseph**

A vapistori man who helps care for the animals at the research center. His beliefs are very strange to Nhamo, but she learns that he is a good-hearted man who helps her and cares for her.

## **Sister Gladys**

A nurse at the hospital who helps care for Nhamo.

## **The Nganga**

This is Nhamo's great-grandfather, her paternal grandfather. He accepts her into the family, and everyone else has to abide by this decision, because he is the head of the family. He tells Nhamo about her father and mother and what they were like. He cherishes Nhamo's feel for things spiritual.

## **Edina Jongwe**

She is an aunt of Nhamo's on her father's side. Edina is cold toward Nhamo, but Nhamo soon realizes she is that way with her own children as well.

## **Clever**

A cousin of Nhamo's by her uncle's junior wife. Everyone teases and harasses him because of his status. Even though Edina tells Nhamo she is free to beat Clever, Nhamo refuses, knowing what life is like on the bottom rung.

## **Industry Jongwe**

Nhamo's uncle, her father's brother. He is almost as rude as his wife, and not very nice.



# Objects/Places

## Leopard

A leopard killed Nhamo's mother. When the leopard appears in the village again, it is not easily forgotten. The people in the village think it is coming for Nhamo. It is also a totem of Nhamo's family and of her father. Her great-grandfather tells her he thinks the leopard that came to her was really her father's spirit trying to driver Nhamo away from her village to find his family, to reunite her with her father's spirit, and to help her find her future.

## Crocodile Guts' boat

Not only was this the boat Nhamo used to escape, but it connects Nhamo with Crocodile Gus' spirit, which helps her navigate the river and keep the boat repaired so she can make her journey.

## Nhamo's village

Nobody wants to leave their childhood home. A familiar place, in reality it is not an especially safe place for a girl with Nhamo's spiritedness. Grandmother is the only person who really loves Nhamo there

## The trading post

Here Nhamo discovers a bit of the world outside of her village. It is not an entirely pleasant picture, but she does come into contact with Rosa, another woman who acts as surrogate mother toward Nhamo and shows the girl that there are those who love her.

## The river

The river is at once a blessing and a curse. It is Nhamo's means of escape as it is unlikely anybody from the village will be able to track her on the river. At the same time, the river is like a clever trickster, keeping Nhamo from reaching her father's family in the soonest possible way. Yet, providentially, Nhamo's journey takes her to Efifi, where she finds people who sincerely want to help her.



## The small island

A small miracle at a time when Nhamo needs it desperately. Food grows in abundance and helps Nhamo stave off starvation, but she cannot stay longer because there is not enough to feed her.

## The big island

Here, Nhamo learns many things about herself. She learns that she is self-sufficient, that she doesn't need someone else to care for her physical needs. She also learns that she needs a community to take care of her emotional needs. She can face her fears and at the same time need and desire the touch and love of others.

## Efifi

Here Nhamo finds the odd assortment of people who become her true family. They care for her, teach her, protect her when she needs it, and push her to take the final steps she needs to in order to complete her journey. Because of its isolation, it is a stepping stone on her journey from the island to the city.

## Zimbabwe

The ancestral home of her father's family, Zimbabwe is the ultimate goal of Nhamo's journey, at least on the physical plane. It is also the place where Nhamo receives an education that helps her come into her own. Finally, it is the place that connects her to her father.

## The magazine picture

For most of her life, Nhamo has used this advertisement picture as a stand-in for her mother. She talks to it and almost worships it. The loss of it because of a baboon's misdeeds hits Nhamo hard. The most telling feature of the picture, however, is near the end of the novel, when Nhamo sees it again only to find that the picture looks more like her than her mother. It turns out that she has mothered herself to the place she needs to be.

# Setting

Setting is a vital element of *A Girl Named Disaster*—at least as important as character or plot. The general setting is the border country of Mozambique and Zimbabwe in 1981. Both countries had recently won independence from colonial rule: Mozambique freed itself from Portugal in 1975, and Zimbabwe overthrew English domination in 1979. These were not peaceful transitions. Echoes of the recent violence occur in Nhamo's story in passing conversations, the presence of freedom fighters and land mines, and the hostility between the Shona and the Matabele tribes and between native Africans and white settlers. In 1981 both countries are a study in contrasts. In more urban areas European influence has changed tribal life through the introduction of Western technology, institutions, religions, and ideas. Although no scenes take place in cities, the reader, like Nhamo, learns of the wonders of civilization through her grandmother's reminiscences, Portuguese traders, the staff of the science station at Efifi, and old magazines that find their way to the village.

The first third of the book is set in and around Nhamo's village in Mozambique.

Although a few of the men have learned the rudiments of reading and writing and the villagers trade for valued items like sugar and tea, for the most part the village follows the traditional ways of its ancestors. Males and females are segregated by duties and social standing. Females tend to cooking, serving, childcare, and making cloth and pots, while males protect the village from predators such as leopards, tend the domestic animals, hunt and fish, and rule the households and the village. Unmarried girls share a sleeping hut, the onset of menstruation is cause for ritual celebration, and brides are purchased through contract for a predetermined gift of animals and material objects. The Shona are a paternalistic tribe, so children are perceived as belonging to their father's family. Thus Nhamo has no social standing in the village because she lives with her mother's relatives. Her father, Proud Jongwe, came from a distant town in Zimbabwe and has not returned to claim his daughter.

The Shona revere their ancestors, respect their elders, and fear incursions from the spirit world. A traditional healer takes care of minor illnesses and spiritual attacks, but for serious problems the Shona consult a *muvuki*. In Western culture, the *muvuki* has long been stereotyped as a witch doctor.

Farmer is careful to avoid the stereotype.

She never uses the phrase "witch doctor," and her glossary defines *muvuki* as "A medical specialist who deals with causes of death." But witchcraft is a serious threat in the Shona belief system, and a *muvuki* may practice witchcraft himself as well as sniff out other witches.

As a contrast to the village setting, the first part of the book also introduces the reader to a Portuguese trading post. Although the Portuguese no longer rule Mozambique, many white settlers remained after independence. Representatives from Nhamo's village



come to the trading post to consult the *muvuki* when the village is hit with a cholera epidemic. Compared to Nhamo's village, the trading post is a thriving metropolis with a diverse population.

The Portuguese trader and his Shona wife are Catholic and eat foods out of tins and listen to music on a radio. At a nearby army camp a group of native soldiers maintains a military presence. Nhamo is shocked to discover that some of the soldiers are women. Despite these indications of a larger world beyond the tribal village, traditional ways are still foremost in importance at the trading post, and the strongest influence in the area is that of the *muvuki*. He may wear European clothing, but his power derives from centuries of tradition.

Almost half of the book centers on Nhamo's journey to find the *Jongwes*, her father's family. The setting alters to Nhamo's small boat and its constantly changing environment, but in Farmer's hands even this limited setting comes alive. The climate, plants, and animals of the region are described in detail through Nhamo's experiences but never in a way that detracts from the story.

These descriptions are fired by the author's own entomological interests and add a rich background and texture to the tale of Nhamo's journey. Nor do they disrupt the narrative but rather fit into it seamlessly. When Nhamo lazes on the riverbank during an afternoon break from rowing, the description flows slowly and lazily as well: The heat in the acacia thicket was overpowering. Even the ants seemed dazed by it. They sat on the thorns and waved their antennae slowly. A small, green snake slid along a branch, causing Nhamo's heart to speed up, and disappeared into a crack in the bark. A *Nephila* spider spun a golden web, lazily swinging from twig to twig. It finished the beautiful pattern and settled itself at the center with blue-furred legs outspread.

Later the setting shifts to several islands where Nhamo camps for varying lengths of time. The first island is hardly more than a large rock. Here Nhamo begins to teach herself to swim. The second island is a godsend for Nhamo: its large abandoned garden allows her to replenish her supplies.

This island seems a veritable Eden at first, until Nhamo discovers a skeleton in a ruined house and has a nightmare about an evil witch called *Long Teats*. The larger island where Nhamo spends the long dry season receives the most descriptive attention. During the months she spends on this island, Nhamo builds a tree house, gathers supplies, and attempts to carve a new boat to replace her damaged one. The island is also the home of a troop of baboons who eventually become almost a substitute tribe for Nhamo. With the detailed descriptions of landscape and weather, the island setting is as fully realized as Nhamo's village.

The final part of the novel alternates between the science station at *Efifi* and the home of Nhamo's paternal uncle in *Mtoroshanga*. The science station is a village in itself, but it is isolated from civilization by its purpose—to study disease-carrying tsetse flies. Here Nhamo is nursed back to health and becomes first a mascot then a surrogate child to





the scientists and their staff. The laboratory, animal pens, and European lifestyle at Efifi are described in realistic detail but also with great affection.

Mtoroshanga is a complete contrast. Nhamo's uncle is the wealthy manager of a chrome mine and lives in the only large house in a dust bowl of a town. For all its rich accoutrements, the house is a cold, loveless place where Nhamo is barely tolerated. Every word of description contributes to the sense of emotional distance, in direct contrast to the warm bustle of Efifi.

No discussion of setting would be complete without mention of the Shona spirit realm, which is entirely real to Nhamo.

From the moment her journey begins, Nhamo finds herself drifting in and out of the spirit world in dreams and visions. The witch Long Teats lives in this realm, as do the water spirits and the spirits of Nhamo's mother and Crocodile Guts, the late owner of Nhamo's boat. Most of the time the spirit world appears to Nhamo as an ideal traditional village: It was very beautiful, with trees full of fruit. Cattle grazed in thick grass that rippled about their legs, and goats with fat udders wandered with clanking iron bells tied about their necks. On either side she saw hillocks covered with pumpkin vines, while beyond stood row upon row of ripe mealies. . . Presently she came to a cluster of huts in a clearing: fine huts that looked as though they had been built yesterday. The thatching was evenly trimmed, the walls freshly plastered, the ground smooth without the print of a foot.

Even the inhabitants of the spirit world are extraordinarily attractive, or in the case of Long Teats, extraordinarily ugly. The spirit realm has a major impact on Nhamo's life and influences her every decision. Although the author describes it in ideal terms, she presents the descriptions in the same matter-of-fact tone used to describe Nhamo's village and never questions the reality of this other dimension.

## Social Sensitivity

Farmer's sensitivity for the peoples of Africa is one of respect, admiration, and affection for the Shona culture. She is never patronizing and seldom critical. When she does express a negative view about an aspect of the traditional life—bride bartering— she is careful to put the criticism in the mouths of native characters rather than white characters. While she sometimes criticizes personal behavior, she also explains the motivation for it and spreads the bad behavior fairly among native and white characters. Readers get a negative view of the jealous aunt and the nouveau riche relatives who imitate European practices, but they also hear criticism of the white settlers who colonized Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Farmer is also careful about the connotations of words. She does not want to play to any stereotypes her American readers may have picked up about Africa. Instead of witch doctors, she has ngangas and muvukis. And to make certain that she does not patronize any particular group, she uses the word tribe for every group, including the English and Portuguese. The fact that it sounds strange to hear the English called a tribe indicates how pervasive and subtle a patronizing attitude can be.

Farmer's concern for her readers' sensitivity is not as acute. She tackles religious attitudes and beliefs honestly, and Nhamo's dismissal of Christ as another ngozi, or avenging spirit, may offend some Christian readers, as may the description of the Vapostori sect and the exorcism. The same readers may take exception to the presentation of the Shona belief system as valid and real. Farmer also does not romanticize nature, which can sometimes be brutal, and sensitive readers may react badly to the occasional scenes of violence. In one gruesome scene, a buffalo is blown up by a land mine. Anyone who objects to matter-of-fact descriptions of menstruation may also be offended. However, Farmer's objective tone and the sheer cultural distance may preclude any negative responses.



## Literary Qualities

A Girl Named Disaster has been criticized for its irregular pacing, which is an element of plot development. The reviewers who make this complaint seem to think that the book has three separate stories—life in the village, Nhamo's journey, and her new life in Zimbabwe—and that the final part of the story is a letdown. However, the journey itself would not seem so urgent without the village background, and the last part of the book brings Nhamo's story full circle. As important as her adventures are to Nhamo's development, they are not the purpose of her travels. She has not set out to seek adventure but to find a home and family.

And her survival involves more than overcoming the physical dangers of the trip.

Because the themes of the book are multilayered, all three parts of the story are necessary to fully explicate them.

The foremost literary quality of the book is Farmer's excellent ability to maintain the viewpoint of a preteen raised in a Shona village. The reader experiences everything through Nhamo's eyes and emotions.

Nhamo's words, thoughts, and actions reflect her character precisely. One of the best ways to examine point of view is to look at how an author uses similes and metaphors.

Farmer chooses only similes and metaphors that are appropriate to Nhamo's age and background. For example, when Masvita has her first period, Farmer writes, "Nhamo felt a little serpent tongue of envy wriggle inside because her cousin had crossed the river into womanhood first." Similarly, Farmer uses comparisons to donkeys, spiders, broken necklaces, cow dung, and other things that are part of Nhamo's daily life.

The point of view never wavers except for one almost invisible slip when the author, a trained entomologist, uses the Latin name for a spider instead of the local name Nhamo would have used.

The detailed descriptions of the culture and climate are excellent—so good that the setting comes alive and almost becomes a character in the story. Characterization itself is subtle. The author clearly knows how to show rather than tell. None of the characters are flat except possibly Nhamo's idealized mother. Even minor characters are brought to life vividly with a few choice words. For example, when Nhamo observes a white family through a window, she sees a little boy stick his finger in the jam and his older sister slap his hand. This brief exchange captures the sibling relationship beautifully. Even the baboons on Nhamo's island are carefully individualized through appearance and actions. Humor is similarly subtle. Many of the stories Nhamo tells contain an undercurrent of sly humor, and Efifi abounds in humor, from Dr. van Heerden's attempts to collect fresh cow droppings straight from the cows to Baba Joseph's exorcism ceremony. In fact, the humor is so subtle that a casual reader can easily miss it.



Like the themes, symbols bind the three parts of the story together and create threads of connection from beginning to end. The most obvious symbol is the Stork margarine advertisement Nhamo has torn from a magazine. In Nhamo's mind, the margarine ad is an actual picture of her mother and herself. This picture is Nhamo's greatest treasure, and when it is accidentally destroyed, Nhamo loses her desire to live and her ability to communicate with her mother's spirit. A margarine ad is an ironic choice for a spiritual symbol; it should represent capitalism and the more doubtful benefits of European civilization. However, Nhamo's mother experienced a European lifestyle at the Catholic school before she returned to the village, so it is appropriate that her symbol should be a token of that civilization that somehow finds its way to the village. The picture is central to the story from its first appearance in chapter one to its sudden reappearance in the last chapter. Its force as a symbol is particularly noticeable in its effect on the scientifically-minded Dr. Masuku, who is astounded to discover that Nhamo was "communicating with the spirit of Stork margarine all those years" and awed by the realization that Nhamo has grown into the perfect image of the woman in the ad.

If the margarine ad symbolizes Nhamo's mother, the leopard symbolizes her father.

The leopard is introduced in the same chapter as the margarine ad. It is significant that no one ever sees the leopard itself: it is a sound, a shadow, a footprint on a grave.

The villagers fear that Nhamo has met a spirit leopard, and they later come to believe it is the spirit of the man killed by Nhamo's father many years before. A leopard was also responsible for the death of Nhamo's mother. In later chapters, Nhamo hears a leopard in the banana grove and discovers signs of one on her island. When she finally accompanies her great-grandfather to the site of her father's death, the old man explains that there were two spirit leopards at work: the murdered man's spirit was responsible for the deaths of Nhamo's parents, but her father's spirit made sure Nhamo left the village and came to his family in Zimbabwe. Since one of the Jongwe totems is the leopard, it is appropriate that Nhamo's father would take this form to influence his daughter's life. As the old man points out, even though Nhamo feared the leopard, it never harmed her in any way and its manifestations kept her moving forward on her quest.

A third important symbol is the panga, the machete-like knife Nhamo finds on the Edenic island. Besides being a weapon for hunting and defense, the panga has a strong association with spirits. Nhamo believes it belongs to the spirit of a dead Portuguese farmer and that a spirit-possessed snake has given it to her, but when she is possessed by Long Teats and kills the dog, she learns that the panga belonged to the witch.

Fearing that her association with a witch will make her a permanent social outcast, Nhamo dares not tell anyone about Long Teats until the witch causes her to attack Dr.

van Heerden and his dog. During Baba Joseph's exorcism, the panga is destroyed and along with it Long Teats's power over Nhamo. Although the panga is clearly a symbol of spiritual power, it also represents Nhamo's outcast status. Only after the panga is

destroyed does Nhamo find happiness at Efifi, where she is finally accepted, safe, and wanted—no longer an outcast.



# Themes

## Family

Who is family? Nhamo starts out with blood relatives, her aunts and cousins, and particularly her grandmother. She has no parents. This extended family takes care of her because they have to, because she has nobody else, but aside from Grandmother and Masvita, they don't seem to love her as a family should. They want to marry her into a family that will probably destroy her. Modern Americans think of marriage as starting a family, but this marriage would not only take Nhamo away from her family, it would also be the end of her.

Setting off to find her father's family is a way to escape, and also a way to embrace her culture. In Nhamo's world, a person belongs to their father's family, so Nhamo is seeking where she truly belongs.

The baboon family she observes on the big island reminds Nhamo how families ought to treat each other. Ironically, these animals seem to be better at family life than Nhamo's family back in her village.

At Efifi, Nhamo creates for herself an odd sort of surrogate family, which turns out to be the truest family she has. They love and accept her for who she truly is, unconditionally. They have no expectations of her aside from wanting the best for her and hoping to help her achieve her full potential.

Finally, Nhamo comes to meet her father's family. They aren't really any better or more welcoming than her mother's family. They don't even seem to be much of a family to one another. Only her great-grandfather accepts her enthusiastically, as if he has been waiting all these years for her to arrive so he can know her. He takes her in, he tells her the stories of her parents, he makes sure she is educated and cared for, he makes sure she has the papers she will need to prove who her father is, so that the family cannot refuse her.

In the end, however, her real family remains those in Efifi. They will always take her in, help her grow, and support her stepping in adulthood. They will never forsake her.

## Journey

The theme of a long journey, a hero quest, is abundant in literature of all cultures. The journey represents one's life. There is even a saying that "life is a journey." Nhamo's journey is multi-faceted, and there are several journeys in this book. There is the journey to the trading post, fraught with fear and trepidation. There is the journey on the river, long, arduous, like falling off a cliff into the unknown. There is the journey from the island to Efifi, more dangerous than the wild animals on the island. Finally, there is the journey to Zimbabwe from Efifi.



Each one of these shorter journeys is part of a bigger journey, the overall journey of the novel. One could say the journey to the trading post is like a journey toward realization. Nhamo realizes she must leave her home and what family she knows if she is to grow into a woman. The journey on the river has a "go with the flow" message. Nhamo must learn to accept life as it comes, as well as to try to steer it where she wants it to go. Ultimately, though, she must realize that individuals sometimes have very little control over the course things take. Sometimes, as she learns on the island, the best one can hope for is a time of merely surviving.

The journey leads Nhamo to the island, where she grows and learns much about herself, a necessary part of the quest. However, when one becomes too comfortable, one can stagnate and never reach the end of the journey. Nhamo must push through that stagnation, the road blocks, the despair, and continue onward. At the next stage of her journey she reaches Efifi, where she is able to heal, rest, and grow. Even though she is using the time in a way that will carry her forward, she is also using the time to hide from what she knows she must do, and so she must complete the journey to her father's family.

In truth, the journey is not really about reaching her father's family. Really, it about completing herself by making the journey through all her fears and the past until she finds her own true self. This is the only real journey anybody ever takes; all other journeys are just a means to that end.

## Storytelling

Stories are important in Nhamo's culture. Because nobody reads, oral lessons are the way the culture is passed on and maintained. In this novel, stories help teach, comfort, heal, and motivate. They are also an important way that Nhamo expresses herself. Many of the stories have to do with family relationships and how people treat one another. Because her search is partly for a group of people that treat her the way a real family ought to, the stories help her define what that looks like.

One way to grasp the significance of the stories is to take them out of context and read them by themselves for clues to other themes in the book, and to the growth and changes that Nhamo experiences.

## Religion

To American readers, Nhamo's religion might seem like a jumble of superstitions rather than what we would consider religion. However, her beliefs do for her what religion is supposed to: they help her make decisions, they comfort her when she needs it, they help her define the world and her place in it. Africa is a continent fraught with a host of religious conflicts. In this novel, there are the traditional beliefs, there is the Catholic church, and there is the vapostori sect of Baba Joseph. It is a confusing time for Nhamo and for anyone in her world. Religion is the source of many conflicts and wars, as well as personal alienation. What Nhamo experiences, though, is that the people whom she



encounters in different religions are often good-hearted, helpful, loving people. Rosa, for example, is a Catholic who treats Nhamo as if she were her daughter. The same is true for Dr. Masuku, who doesn't seem religious at all, but shows the same love to Nhamo that grandmother and Rosa have.

Religion in this novel is as much a part of the setting as anything. One cannot write about Africa without including the traditional beliefs as well as the new ones. They affect how people act, who they will accept and who they will not.





## Themes/Characters

Nhamo is a remarkable character. The first unusual characteristic she exhibits is a gift for detailed observation. She can recognize the footprints of everyone in the village and she has learned a great deal about the local flora and fauna merely by watching them closely. Nhamo uses quiet observation as a form of self-discipline: Nhamo's spirit had to be kept very busy to keep her from losing her temper.

The other girls in the village never felt restless. Nhamo was like a pot of boiling water. "I want... I want..." she whispered to herself, but she didn't know what she wanted and so she had no idea how to find it.

Later the reader learns that Nhamo is very much like her late mother—intelligent, imaginative, curious, and eager for knowledge. These traits also encourage close observation. Life has developed other traits in Nhamo as well, such as independence, strength, and resourcefulness. These are the qualities that enable her to survive her long journey. The time she has invested in close observation of the world around her proves invaluable in her travels.

Survival is the main theme of the novel, and a resourceful hero or heroine is vital to a tale of survival. Nhamo is equipped to survive her ordeals because of her cultural training, her difficult childhood, and her personal qualities. The survival theme reverberates throughout the book at many levels. The most obvious level is physical survival. Nhamo faces many dangers from predators, land mines, illness, poisonous plants and insects, starvation, accident, and weather changes. Because she has been raised in a traditional Shona village, she knows how to forage, how to prepare simple foods, and how to make basic tools.

When she needs to develop a new skill, such as rowing or hunting or making a boat, she calls upon her determination, resourcefulness, and the bits of knowledge she has picked up from watching others do these things. She encounters endless setbacks in her quest, yet she always perseveres.

At other levels, this is also a tale of emotional, psychological, and spiritual survival. At the beginning of the novel, Nhamo is already a survivor of emotional neglect and physical abuse from her maternal relatives, especially from Aunt Chipo, who resents Nhamo's very existence. However, there are times during Nhamo's adventurous journey when her emotional survival seems a shakier prospect than her physical survival. Her intense need for companionship is a point of vulnerability throughout the book, leading her into an unhealthy dependence on the baboons and later on Dr. Masuku, the Matabele scientist at Efifi.

Similarly, Nhamo's psychological survival seems doubtful on occasion, particularly when her beloved magazine picture is destroyed and when she kills the dog. There is little left of her psychic stability when she wanders into the Efifi science compound.



Nhamo's spiritual survival, on the other hand, seldom seems at risk. Her spirit is her one true source of strength, rebounding time and again from blows that should shatter it. She draws strength from her own spirit and from the spirit realm, which is completely real to her. Her conversations with the spirits of her mother, Crocodile Guts, and the njuzu, or water spirits, revitalize her. At her lowest points, spiritual guidance or assistance always arrives in the nick of time, restoring her will to live.

Other themes surface through Nhamo's relationships with her relatives. Nhamo's grandmother, or Ambuya in the Shona tongue, and Aunt Chipo are particularly interesting character studies. In her younger days, Nhamo's maternal grandmother lived beyond the village in a town in Zimbabwe, so she has a store of worldly wisdom and the good sense to realize it would not be appreciated in the village. As an elder, Ambuya deserves respect, but the simmering resentment between her and her second daughter, Aunt Chipo, occasionally boils over.

Nhamo is the focus of that resentment.

Ambuya does not dare show open affection for her favorite granddaughter for fear of making the child's life even more miserable. Aunt Chipo treats Nhamo as a drudge, giving her the hardest and most unpleasant tasks, and scolding her constantly for laziness and selfishness—two qualities that are actually not in evidence in Nhamo's character. Aunt Chipo treats her own daughter Masvita with excessive care, but she will go to extreme lengths to create trouble for her niece, even to faking a spiritual seizure.

These relationships contribute to a Cinderella theme in the first part of the book, with Aunt Chipo playing the role of wicked stepmother and Ambuya a kind of fairy godmother. In the Grimms' version of the fairy tale, instead of having a fairy godmother, Cinderella is watched over by the spirit of her dead mother. This situation is paralleled in Nhamo's story, at least in Nhamo's imagination. But the Cinderella motif cannot be taken too far because Masvita is far too sweet-tempered to be an ugly stepsister and there is no handsome prince to come to the rescue. Instead, the Cinderella theme seems to segue into an Ugly Duckling one. In the village Nhamo is the awkward, unwanted duckling who doesn't fit in, but at the end of the book she is transformed into a beautiful swan. That transformation is vital to the story. Nhamo has always considered Masvita to be the beautiful one, although she privately thinks her own face is attractive too. But her ordeals alter her physical appearance completely.

The first time she sees her reflection after she enters Zimbabwe, she doesn't even recognize it as a reflection: It was too tall and bony. Tufts of hair stuck out from under a head rag, and the eyes stared from a face gone skeletal. If Nhamo had met the creature on a forest path, she would have climbed the nearest tree.

Later, when Nhamo realizes she was looking at herself, she is horrified and thinks despairingly that she looks like "a wall spider with a burr stuck to its head." From that moment on Nhamo refuses to look into a mirror until the end of the book, when Dr.



Masuku forces her to see herself in a fulllength mirror. The Ugly Duckling finally realizes that she is a swan.

Now she gazed in amazement at her image. She was taller and had a womanly figure. Her hair shone with good health, and her eyes no longer stared back from hollows. She wore a flowered dress and pink plastic shoes. The almost-emeralds glittered in her ears.

She was beautiful.

And she looked like the woman in the Stork magazine ad.

Heritage, both cultural and familial, is another theme of the book. Nhamo is on a quest to find her father's family because that is her proper place in the Shona culture. A child belongs to her father's clan and has no social position outside it. Nhamo is searching for her heritage, and she finds it in an unexpected way. Initially the search is an escape from an unwanted marriage.

The Portuguese trader and his wife attempt to help Nhamo by claiming that her parents were Catholic and that therefore it is illegal for her maternal relatives to give her away in a pagan ritual. That gives Ambuya the notion of suggesting that Nhamo flee to Zimbabwe and take refuge with the first nuns she finds and have them send for her father. But Catholicism is not Nhamo's true religious heritage, nor is the Vapostori sect that the old man Baba Joseph heads at Efifi.

Her time alone has brought her into close contact with the Shona spirits. Her greatgrandfather, a respected traditional healer, recognizes her because of her spiritual heritage: "If this child hadn't resembled my first wife, I would still have accepted her," announced the old nganga. "She has obviously inherited my ability to communicate with the spirit world. She has been trained by the njuzu. I am pleased to welcome her into our family."

Nhamo's great-grandfather is the only member of the Jongwe family who does welcome her; everyone else ignores her.

Her father is dead and her great-grandfather is old and weak, so there is no one to stand up for her in this new family. However, Nhamo also possesses an intellectual heritage from both parents. She is a sponge for knowledge. It is her intellectual curiosity, as well as her hard work, that earns her first the respect of the Efifi scientists then their affection. She builds her own family at Efifi, with Baba Joseph as an adopted grandfather and the scientific staff as aunts and uncles. Other than Ambuya, they are the only people who truly care about her. They establish a bank account for her with her inheritance from Ambuya—a bag of gold nuggets—and insist on paying her for her work at Efifi every summer. They check out her family situation very carefully before they turn her over to her relatives and keep a close eye on developments there. For Nhamo, Efifi becomes home.

Survival and heritage are the major themes in the book, but others weave in and out also. As in other literary works, the journey or quest plays a role beyond plot



development. The physical journey parallels Nhamo's psychological journey toward maturity. The quest to locate her father's family is really a search for a home—a place to belong. Because of the strong presence of the quest motif, Joseph Campbell's monomyth of the hero's quest can also be used to interpret the novel: the call to adventure, descent into the underworld, completion of tasks, and return to community. Death and rebirth, which are part of the Campbellian myth, echo throughout the story. When Dr.

Masuku explains imprinting to Nhamo, her words resonate to Campbell: In one sense, you died after leaving the village, Nhamo. If the spirit world exists, you certainly went through it, and when I found you in the underground chamber, it was as though I brought you back to life.

Although the cattle pens where Dr. Masuku finds Nhamo are literally an underground chamber, Campbell would interpret them as a spiritual underworld, and a Freudian critic would identify them as the mother's womb. Both interpretations are valid, since Nhamo herself believes she has entered the spirit world and her "rebirth" convinces her that Dr. Masuku is her mother. A Campbellian interpretation of the novel intensifies the importance of the spirits. In Campbell's myth, heroes are often assisted by otherworldly beings. And some of the most interesting characters in *A Girl Named Disaster* are the spirits. Nhamo's mother is clearly an idealization of motherhood built in Nhamo's imagination, and Long Teats is in a sense the epitome of evil witch (although she does seem to take care of Nhamo at times). But the njuzu and Crocodile Guts are neither idealized nor demonized. In death Crocodile Guts is the same smelly fisherman he was in life, complete with dirty fingernails and lice. Nhamo assumes that she sees Crocodile Guts because she is in his boat; normally her spirit would only visit her own ancestors. While he is waiting to join his ancestors, Crocodile Guts gives Nhamo excellent advice about boating and urges her to trust the njuzu. Nhamo is initially afraid of the snakelike water spirits, but she begins to tell them stories and learns to depend on them for help and companionship. Crocodile Guts tells Nhamo that the njuzu taught him everything he knew about water, so she turns to them for help in learning to swim and row. The njuzu are impersonal spirits, but they train Nhamo well, and she is always careful to offer ritual thanks for their help.



# Style

## Point of View

*A Girl Named Disaster* is from Nhamo's point of view. She is the main character, and she is the only one whose point of view is used. This serves the plot well, because during the bulk of the book, Nhamo is alone and isolated, so it wouldn't work to tell the story from another character's point of view. It serves the plot in another way as well. The story reflects Nhamo's transformation from girl to woman, from village outcast to beloved beauty. The use of her point of view helps the reader see this transformation.

Another important reason the book is from Nhamo's point of view is that it was written for young readers, who will more readily identify with Nhamo's voice than with the voice of someone else, such as the aunt or the grandmother.

The story is told in third person rather than first person. Many stories for young readers are told in first person very effectively; however third person works better for this story. Because Nhamo is a young African girl, it would not be realistic to tell the story in her own words—no one in the U.S. would be able to read the book. Even if the story were told as if Nhamo could speak English, most likely her own voice would be filled with phrases and images that would not make sense to most people. Third person is the most effective way to handle this situation.

## Setting

This book is set in Africa, specifically Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The setting mirrors Nhamo's journey. First she is in her village, surrounded by her family, especially her grandmother who loves her unconditionally. Next she is on the river, trying to find her way to her father's family. The river is not a truly dangerous place, but it does take her down the wrong path. Then she is on a series of islands in the middle of the river. Here Nhamo learns to live by the knowledge and skills she learned in her village. She arrives at Efifi completely unprepared for the city and technology she encounters. Through contrasting Nhamo's village to the isolation of the river and the islands to the technology of Efifi and city life of her father's family, a picture of the complex and diverse place modern Africa is portrayed.

Also part of the setting are the religious beliefs of the culture, such as the superstitious visits to the *muvuki*, Nhamo's constant encounters with Crocodile Guts' spirit, the water spirits, and so on, the Portuguese import of Catholicism, and the *vapostori* sect. These seemingly incongruent religious and spiritual beliefs add texture to the view of modern Africa portrayed in *A Girl Named Disaster*. Wildlife is another piece of the setting—the leopards, the baboons, the hippos all create an image of a wild land. Cultural habits also help paint a picture of the place Nhamo lives. The food they eat, the language they use, the beliefs about men and women, the roles of women, the different forms of



government and society all show how African cultures are different from other cultures. Even the kind of knowledge Nhamo carries with her—not school education, but practical knowledge of how to survive—is true to her setting. Because she hasn't been in school like children in the west, but has learned how to cook, kill food, farm, and other such practical skills, Nhamo can survive on her own.

## Language and Meaning

Language is a vehicle into the life of Nhamo, as important as the setting, and reflects the life Nhamo lives. Because this book is meant for young readers, the overall language cannot be difficult or full of abstract phrases or ideas. However, the language needs to create a sense of place, so there are many Shona words that would be part of Nhamo's everyday vocabulary. The words evoke the hierarchy of the society Nhamo lives in. For example, the names and totems of the families reflect the patriarchal nature of the society. The words for grandmother and other familial relationships emphasize the importance of family ties. Other words refer to the connections between families, and the way women are viewed since there can be junior wives, and so on. Another example is the different names for different kinds of spirits. This language reflects the superstitious nature of Nhamo's life, and the way she sees the world. Many Shona words pertain to animals and other living things. All of these concepts are important themes and concepts in Nhamo's world.

The language used also indicates the complexities of Africa and the changes it has gone through in the last few decades. Nhamo's experience echoes that of her continent. The names of the different religions, the different tribes, and the superstitions contrast with the words for technology, science, and modernism. Africa, like Nhamo, has to contend with transition from village life to city life, from tribal structure to national structure, from practical education to formal academic education, from the roles of women as subservient bearers of children to roles such as doctors. All of this complexity is represented in the language and the contrasts shown through language.

## Structure

The overall structure of this novel is many short chapters, which suits the intended audience of middle grade to young adult readers. It also emphasizes the episodic nature of Nhamo's journey. Each little bit is important and not important at the same time. The transformation of Nhamo from child to adult does not occur in big momentous ways. Rather, it happens in the day to day survival and individual moments of living another day. The book's structure focuses on these daily ways in which Nhamo comes of age, such as what she eats, how she grows and hunts her food, where she lives, how she builds herself a shelter, and her communion with the spirits who help her. This is the way children experience the world—in the daily, practical moments of living.

Also included in the novel are several map views of the lay of the land, which give a glimpse of the journey Nhamo takes. The maps emphasize how long the journey was

and how circuitous the route. The maps also provide overall structure to the journey, suggesting that one not get too caught up in the small moments but look at the big picture as well.

At the end of the book some extra resources help make sense of this strange world called Africa. There is a glossary of Shona words to help explain the vocabulary. A passage describes the history of Zimbabwe and Mozambique to aid in understanding the political situation. An explanation of the religious belief systems sheds light on the very complex religious climate Nhamo has to navigate. Finally, a complete bibliography provides further opportunities to explore Africa and all its struggles.





## Quotes

"The other girls in the village never felt restless. Nhamo was like a pot of boiling water. 'I want...I want...,' she whispered to herself, but she didn't know what she wanted and so she had no idea how to find it." Chapter 1, p. 2.

"Nhamo lay awake and tried to sort out her thoughts. Could she have been mistaken about the shadow by the stream? She was certain it was a trick of the light, but everyone else took the appearance of a spirit leopard seriously. It was almost, she thought as she rolled a sleeping toddler back onto her own mat, as if they were expecting it to appear. And as if they were expecting it to come looking for *her*." Chapter 3, p. 16.

"Rather, there was a space between one person and the next. It was as though a necklace had come apart and each bead rolled separately across the floor. The village had broken somewhere deep inside, and she had no idea how to mend it." Chapter 6, p. 41.

"Nhamo thought about the *muvuki*. Grandmother said that perfectly good *ngangas* were sometimes tempted to use their power for evil. Once they did, she said, you didn't go near them, any more than you would approach a dog that had gone rapid." Chapter 7, p. 47.

"Most people would have sent her away after Mother died, but not Ambuya. Grandmother had insisted on keeping her, had treated her kindly and called her Little Pumpkin." Chapter 8, p. 56.

"At the words *beloved child* Nhamo began to cry silently and hopelessly. Never in her life had anyone called her that." Chapter 11, p. 78.

"*Ambuya* smoothed her hair, and Nhamo felt a tear drop onto her head. 'The journey will be the hardest thing you'll ever do, but it will be worth it. Just think of finding your father. I don't expect the trip will take more than two days—we're very close to the border. Remember to push yourself against the current when you reach the Musengezi. Close to the border the river divides in tow, but it doesn't matter which branch you take. They both go to Zimbabwe.'" Chapter 12, p. 86.

"I am Nhamo, a tree full of fruit,

Not a weed.

Pay attention, little girls!

I am now a woman

And allowed to scold you.





My pots will be stronger, my baskets finer.

The roofs of my houses will not fall in.

I am Nhamo, a mighty woman

For whom crossing a measly river was not enough!" Chapter 20, p. 142.

"That afternoon Nhamo cooked the last of her mealie meal. It was damp and would spoil anyhow. She would have to conserve as much of her other stores as possible for the dry season, which was coming. It made her sad to empty the sack. Aunt Shuvai and Aunt Chipso had grown this grain; she and Masvita had ground it. It had been made with the many, many hands of the village, and when it was gone she would have no more food that had been touched by her people." Chapter 22, p. 155.

"Nhamo labored for several days, but one morning the lonely-sickness struck her with such force, her spirit felt like it was being circled by hyenas." Chapter 28, p. 195.

"It was a light, a brilliant light. It was brighter than a hundred cook-fires. It came from the first house beyond the border of Zimbabwe." Chapter 31, p. 224.

"They looked at Nhamo, who gazed back at them full of remorse and sorrow, but also with the faintest beginning of hope." Chapter 36, p. 255.



## Topics for Discussion

1. One way to interpret the supernatural elements in the story is to explain them as figments of Nhamo's imagination.

Another way to look at them is to accept them as real, as Nhamo does. What evidence is there in the story to support either or both of these possibilities?

What is the author's attitude toward the spirit realm?

2. Stories about a person or group of people who are stranded on an island far from civilization and have to survive indefinitely on their own are called "Robinsonnades," for the famous setting from Robinson Crusoe. Is *A Girl Named Disaster* a Robinsonnade? Is this a realistic tale of survival? Could a girl of Nhamo's age and background survive on her own in unfamiliar territory for such an extended period of time?

3. Farmer uses many foreign words and phrases. Do these terms help or hinder the story? Are they necessary for the reader's understanding or would it have been better to use only English words?

4. Many writers and teachers argue that an outsider cannot speak authentically for another group of people. When white Americans write about Third World cultures, their books can be patronizing and full of inaccuracies. Can Farmer be accused of such cultural crimes?

5. Storytelling is an important aspect of the Shona culture. What role does it play in Nhamo's personal life? How do the specific stories she tells fit her situation?

6. At the end of the book, Nhamo has grown up into the perfect image of the woman in the margarine ad. What is the significance of this physical transformation?

7. Journeys in literature tend to be symbolic of other things. What does Nhamo's journey represent? Compare her travels to other books you have read that contain a journey or quest motif, such as *Huckleberry Finn* or *Moby Dick*.

8. *A Girl Named Disaster* is in many ways an adventure story. Adventure has traditionally been perceived as a genre that appeals mainly to males. Does this book break the stereotype? Why would adventure appeal more to males than to females? What kind of story would have the opposite appeal?

9. What is the significance of Nhamo's name? Does she live up to its meaning or overcome it?

10. How do past events influence Nhamo's life? Look particularly closely at the relationship between Ambuya and Aunt Chipo and at the personal characteristics of Nhamo's parents. Does family history have a similar influence in American culture?



## Essay Topics

What does Nhamo learn while journeying by boat, both about herself and about others?

How does Nhamo's journey compare with the journey of Homer's Odysseus?

Storytelling plays a large role in this novel. Aside from entertainment and distraction from her problems, what purpose do the stories serve? How do they aid our understanding of Nhamo's life? Try researching them to see if they are real stories from the culture or if the author made them up.

Are Nhamo's traditional religious beliefs a hindrance or a help to her? How so? Use examples from the novel to support your answer.

Even though Nhamo cannot read or write, she knows more than most. Describe the kind of knowledge she has, and give examples from the book. How did she get this knowledge?

Nhamo learns many lessons before she finishes her quest. What does she learn at each stage of her journey, and how does it prepare her?

How does Nhamo change while at Efifi? Do you consider these to be changes for the better or for worse?

How might the story be different if Nhamo's father was still alive? Is it more satisfying the way it is written, or do you think it would be more satisfying if she could meet her father and get to know him?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research baboon social structure and examine whether or not Nhamo's observations of the baboon troop are accurate.
2. Look up information about the symbols of life and death in the Shona belief system. How does Farmer use those symbols in *A Girl Named Disaster*?
3. Research the history of Zimbabwe or Mozambique, paying particular attention to the struggles for independence.
4. Compare the customs and history of the Shona and Matabele tribes. What is the source of the hostility between these two groups?
5. What is the importance of chrome mining to Zimbabwe? How is chrome mined?
6. Do a report on one of the numerous plants and animals that appear in *A Girl Named Disaster*.
7. Research Shona praise poetry and examine whether or not Nhamo makes appropriate use of it in celebrating her achievements.
8. Why did the Portuguese dam up the Zambezi River and flood the valley?

What happened to the people who lived there? Did the flooding create the kinds of islands Nhamo finds?

9. Research in detail one aspect of Shona life, such as dress, food, rituals, marital practices, games, or religious practices.
10. Do a report on the current state of the scientific study of tsetse flies. Are there places like Efifi? How is scientific research funded in Zimbabwe? What is the ratio of native to non-native scientists?
11. Read some Shona folktales and compare them to the ones Nhamo tells. Is she inventing her own stories or telling traditional ones?
12. Are cholera epidemics common in Mozambique? What is the progression and treatment of the disease?



## Further Study

"Farmer, Nancy." In *Contemporary Authors*.

Volume 167. Detroit: Gale Research, 1999, pp. 118-121. The most up-to-date information on Farmer. The article contains brief commentaries on all of Farmer's books and lists her many literary awards.

"Farmer, Nancy." In *Something about the Author*. Volume 79. Detroit: Gale Research, 1995, pp. 70-71. Short entry based on autobiographical comments. This article is of limited use because it appeared before Farmer had received much critical attention, but the autobiographical information is interesting.

Osborne, Linda Barrett. Review. *Washington Post Book World* (4 May 1997): 16.

Osborne, who is also an author of books for young adults, says, "This is a richly atmospheric novel that moves effortlessly from the depiction of domestic life to the grandeur of the African landscape. It vividly portrays the intricate set of relationships that form a family and a village. . . . Farmer does not sentimentalize nature, whose harshness and unpredictability remain a challenge to Nhamo throughout the book."

Parravano, Martha V. Review. *Horn Book* 72 (1996): 734-735. A starred review of *A Girl Named Disaster*, which Parravano characterizes as "An extraordinarily rich novel . . . featuring a most remarkable heroine." Parravano recognizes the Cinderella motif in the first part of the book and admires the novel's scope and setting. About Nhamo she comments, "Her experiences are told in fascinating, minute detail that incorporates much of the Shona belief system as the author matter-of-factly provides Nhamo with companionship in the form of the spirits of her mother and Crocodile Guts (the late owner of the boat), as well as the creepy but benevolent snakelike njuzu, or water spirits."

Pine, Susan. Review. *School Library Journal* 42 (1996): 144, 147. This is a starred review written by a staff member of the New York Public Library. Pine says, "This story is humorous and heart wrenching, complex and multilayered, and the fortunate child who reads it will place Nhamo alongside Zia (*Island of the Blue Dolphins*) and Julie (*Julie of the Wolves*). An engrossing and memorable saga."

Rohrlick, Paula. Review. *Kliatt Young Adult Paperback Book Guide* 32 (1998): 10. Rohrlick says, "Nhamo is a wonderful character, as brave and intrepid as Brian in *Hatchet* or Zia of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. She's got a wry sense of humor that helps her through her ordeals, along with her faith in the spirits that assist her.... This is an exotic and enthralling survival and coming-of-age story, as well as a glimpse into the complex culture of the Shona, Nhamo's tribe." Rohrlick also points out that *A Girl Named Disaster* is a 1997 Newbery Honor Book and an ALA Notable Book and Best Book for Young Adults.



Tillotson, Laura. Review. Booklist 93 (September 1, 1996): 118-119. One of the few negative reviews of *A Girl Named Disaster*. Tillotson is unhappy with the pacing of the novel but admires the characterization. She writes, "Nhamo's relationships with her grandmother and cousin ring true, as do the occasionally humorous stories she tells herself in times of despair. However, the pacing of the complex story line is uneven, and many readers will be unnerved by the overflow of foreign words, which are sometimes explained in footnotes that could seem interruptive."



## Related Titles

Farmer's *The Ear, the Eye and the Arm* (1994) is also set in Zimbabwe and discusses Shona customs, but it is a science fiction tale that projects those customs into the twenty-first century. When General Matsika's three children are kidnapped, the general and his wife hire three mutant detectives—the Ear, the Eye, and the Arm—to find and rescue the children. But the detectives are always one step behind the resourceful children, who escape from one tricky situation to another. One of the places the children find refuge is a traditional Shona village very much like Nhamo's. The Shona spirit world is as much a reality in *The Ear, the Eye and the Arm* as it is in *A Girl Named Disaster*.

Survival stories with male protagonists are much more common than stories about female survivors, but there are several wellknown stories with female protagonists, including Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960) and Jean Craighead George's *Julie of the Wolves* (1972) and its recent sequel, *Julie's Wolf Pack* (1997). *Island of the Blue Dolphins* tells the story of an Indian girl who survives alone for eighteen years on an island off the coast of California. In *Julie of the Wolves*, a thirteen-year-old Eskimo girl runs away from an unwanted marriage and is befriended by a wolf pack. The parallel to Nhamo's story is obvious. Both of these earlier novels won the Newbery Award, an achievement *A Girl Named Disaster* almost equaled.



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