

A Hologram for the King Study Guide

A Hologram for the King by Dave Eggers

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Plot Summary

A Hologram for the King is a novel by Dave Eggers that involves the attempts of American businessman Alan Clay to stabilize his finances, find happiness in life, and ensure his daughter has funds to continue her college education.

Alan works for Reliant Systems, a communications company, that has a hologram projection system it wants to present to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, in the hopes that it will get the job of installing IT at the new King Abdullah Economic City. Alan is assigned the presentation job because he knows the King's nephew. Alan is desperately seeking to get the job, because he is in debt by more than \$100,000, and his daughter is in desperate need of college funds. Alan travels with a team to make the presentation.

While there, waiting for the king for more than three weeks, Alan meets a local named Yousef, and the two become friends. Yousef invites Alan up to his father's house in the mountains, where Alan is involved in a hunting accident which almost kills a young shepherd. Alan also has a cyst on his back removed by Dr. Zahra Hakem, and the two begin a tentative, though short-lived, romance as Zahra goes to Paris on business. Alan's presentation to the King goes well, but Reliant does not get the IT job. Alan decides to stay on in Saudi Arabia, to attempt to convince the King to use Reliant in some other way.



Chapter 1 - Chapter 17

Chapter 1 - Chapter 17 Summary

Chapter 1 - Alan Clay goes to bed at 1:12 a.m. in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on May 30, 2010. Clay will be presenting a holographic teleconference system to King Abdullah, hoping to gain the IT conference for the entire King Abdullah Economic City. A successful deal would abate his financial worries, and he would have money to pay for his daughter Kit's college education. Clay is in debt by more than \$100,000 and is divorced. Alan thinks of his friend and neighbor, Charlie Fallon, who committed suicide by going into the lake.

Chapter 2 - Alan wakes up late, and will be two hours late to the meeting. He calls his coworker, Cayley, who explains that he's alright, because they are just setting up. Alan showers and has a driver called. Alan, dressed in his best, feels the lump on his spine, what he suspects may be a tumor. Alan heads out, present in Saudi Arabia because he knows the King's nephew. At fifty-four, Alan's income is rapidly dwindling each year. Alan reflects on American business, on outsourcing jobs, of affordable products in America because of those outsourcing endeavors. Alan's house is on the market, in order to help pay for things. Alan's ex-wife, Ruby, calls frequently to ask about the house's sale. The IT deal with the King, for the company Reliant, seems like a sure thing.

Chapter 3 - The first driver cancels. A second driver is now on his way. Alan is panicked. The King is very busy, so the meeting must occur as planned. Alan had planned the entire trip, had arranged the meeting. Alan hopes to use his friendship with the King's nephew, Jalawi, to his advantage. The other three members of Alan's team -Brad, Cayley, and Rachel- would demonstrate Reliant's abilities, and then Alan would roll out rough numbers. Alan meets his driver, Yousef, downstairs. Before Yousef drives off with Alan, he reconnects the engine's wires, to make sure the car hasn't been turned into a bomb by a man who believes Yousef is having an affair with his wife. This unnerves Alan, but then he calms down. As they drive through Jeddah, Alan is reminded of Los Angeles.

Chapter 4 - Yousef, speeding up the car, explains he is a student in pursuit of business and marketing. Yousef announces they will be in the Economic City by noon. To help pass the time, Yousef plays Fleetwood Mac on his iPod, and Alan tells jokes. Alan thinks again of Charlie, how he took five hours to die in the lake in September.

Chapter 5 - Yousef asks about the kind of marketing and work that Alan does. Alan speaks about King Abdullah's Economic City -KAEC- but Yousef says that the city isn't even off the ground. Saudi Arabia is just about broke. Alan tries to reassure himself by believing that the King will be investing his own money in the city, and with his own name on the project, it is a matter of pride. Abdullah will not let the project fail, Alan believes. They drive on, to find empty streets with streetlights, but only a handful of buildings in the distance.



Chapter 6 - Yousef takes Alan to the welcome center near the beach of the unfinished city. Alan invites Yousef along. They are shown inside by a man named Sayed, who explains the King will not be coming that day. Alan is shown a model of the city-to-be, and is very impressed by it. Another man, Mujaddid, brings Alan to see a film of the plans for the city. They go upstairs to the observation room next, to see a 360 degree view of the city. From there, Alan goes to meet with his team in the presentation tent, while Yousef gives Alan his number, and heads out.

Chapter 7 - Alan meets his team in the presentation tent. It is dark, and though air-conditioned, it is hot. No one can understand why they are in the tent rather than the main building. Brad, Cayley, and Rachel have spent the last several hours attempting to find the wi-fi signal. No other teams are in the tent for a presentation.

Chapter 8 - Alan and Brad go outside. Brad is the engineer, and leads Alan to a satellite dish to see if it is plugged in. Back in the tent, Brad reveals they have been trying to e-mail Karim, their contact in Saudi Arabia. They believe he might be over in the Black Box, the nickname they have given the welcome center. No one wants to go out in the heat to go and check.

Chapter 9 - Eric Ingvall, Alan's boss, is worried about the trip as well, and dissatisfied with Alan's lackluster preliminary prospective report. Alan has explained to Eric that this is so because he hasn't been to Saudi Arabia yet. Alan is overconfident. Eric is not.

Chapter 10 - Cayley and Rachel ask about the King, and Alan explains the King is now more of a philanthropist and investor than a business man. Alan explains the King will not be there that day. The members of the team talk to one another to keep their spirits up, and Alan announces he has a meeting at 3 with Karim.

Chapter 11 - Alan goes from the vinyl tent to the Black Box. Inside, he talks to a secretary about the wireless problem, and she explains that Mr. al-Ahmad, in charge of vendors presenting in the tent, isn't in. Alan returns to the tent. He plans on writing a letter to his daughter when he gets back to the hotel. They have been writing one another physical letters for years, following Ruby's first DWI, which he wanted to put in context for his daughter, so he wrote it down for her.

Chapter 12 - Alan returns to the Black Box for his meeting with Karim, to discover Karim will not be in that day, that he is stuck in Jeddah. Alan returns to the tent, and the team packs it in for the day. Alan reflects on his life back at the hotel, from his first days as a salesman working with Joe Triviale, to Schwinn, to Reliant. Alan calls his father, Ron, who lives on a farm near White River Junction, New Hampshire. The farm, purchased following Alan's mother's death, had reinvigorated his father, and has made him stronger over time. Alan, meanwhile, realizes he has slowed down. Alan's father is appalled that nearly everything being consumed in America is being built elsewhere, but not in America. Ron doesn't believe this is sustainable. Alan hangs up.

Chapter 13 - The next morning, Alan and his team return to KAEC. They have an appointment after lunch, but when no one shows up, Alan goes to the Black Box to be



informed that there will be no meeting again that day. Alan returns to the tent, then returns to the Black Box, and goes through the lobby, up the elevator, and into another room that is bustling with activity -men in suits and women in headscarves moving back and forth quickly with papers. There, he meets a white woman named Hanne, whom he guesses to be Dutch, who works in the office beside Mr. al-Ahmed. She invites him in. Hanne explains she has been at KAEC for eighteen months, and the King hasn't shown up yet.

Chapter 14 - Hanne explains she is a consultant who does payroll. Hanne agrees to do whatever she can to help Reliant's people, including checking on the wi-fi. He asks her if she has sleeping pills, but she says no, and hands him a green bottle which she says to tell people is Olive Oil. Alan returns to the tent to finish out the day.

Chapter 15 - Alan tries some of the stuff in the green bottle, which tastes like gasoline. He calls Hanne, asking her if she is trying to kill him. She replies that grain alcohol isn't legal in Saudi Arabia. He has a few more sips, and works on a letter to Kit. He also punctures the lump on his neck, but there is not much pain. He imagines it is probably just a cyst, and not a tumor. Alan keeps drinking.

Chapter 16 - Alan awakes at 10:08. He has missed the shuttle to KAEC. Alan showers and dresses, and calls Yousef. Yousef laughs, knowing Alan has a hangover. Yousef shows Alan a newspaper, which explains the King is in Yemen, so he won't be going to the KAEC that day. Yousef reveals his father sells shoes, the same as Alan's dad had done. Yousef brings Alan to get lunch, silver and pink fish, called najel. Yousef explains his love life, and his lack of luck with women. His current girlfriend, Noor, is twenty-three and a graduate student, and seems to be the right one. Alan tells him the best way to handle the threat of murder from the husband of Yousef's ex-wife, remarried, is to tell the man that nothing is going on between them, to look him in the eye. Yousef finds what Alan says to be reasonable.

Chapter 17 - Alan arrives at the tent at noon, and Yousef notices blood on Alan's back. Alan agrees to see a doctor the following morning. Alan and his team play poker in the tent. Alan reflects on Charlie Fallon forgiving him for helping Annette, Charlie's wife, move out. Annette had claimed Charlie was abusive.

Chapter 1 - Chapter 17 Analysis

When Dave Eggers's novel, *A Hologram for the King*, opens, the main character, Alan Clay, American businessman, has two looming problems, both of them financial. The first is that Alan is in debt by more than \$100,000; and the second issue, more pressing to Alan than the first, is that his daughter, Kit, needs money for college for her fall semester. Alan is like many Americans: things don't always turn out according to plan, and he curses himself for not taking better care of himself financially. This is the primary motivation for Alan to travel around the world to seek a meeting with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in order to land an IT job for the King's Economic City.



While Alan has high hopes for the project, the reality is startling and jarring. The city being planned has barely been started, and only a handful of buildings stand in the city beside the Red Sea. Alan comes to understand that the city, like much in Saudi Arabia, has been overvalued, and the worldwide economic decline has hit everywhere very hard. Alan wonders why the King doesn't simply invest his own money into the project, rather than relying on investments elsewhere, but no answers are forthcoming. What is even more disheartening is the fact that Alan and his team are sitting around waiting for a meeting with the King, who is not forthcoming. Alan later learns that Hanne has been at the Economic City for eighteen months and the King has not shown up. It appears as if Alan is destined to failure.

At the same time, Alan begins to wonder if his own sluggishness and depression are somehow owed to the lump that has grown on his spine. He wonders whether it is malignant or not. He also strikes up a friendship with a local named Yousef, who serves the Hilton as a driver. Yousef has his own women problems, from his girlfriend to his ex-wife's new husband, who believes she is having an affair with Yousef. Alan begins to wonder about his own problems, and about his own existence. During normal times, people question themselves and their purposes, but during times of trouble, these questions of self seem all the more pressing, all the more critical to the human psyche. Alan is no exception. His listlessness is not just financial in causation, but something personal and spiritual, in effect. There is a question about his own existence that Alan needs answered, and it will become readily apparent that only Alan can answer that question for himself.



Chapter 18 - Chapter 34

Chapter 18 - Chapter 34 Summary

Chapter 18 - Alan has things called off for the day, and the team returns to the hotel. There, Alan goes to the fitness center after dinner. Alan looks around, and leaves. He returns to his room, drinks some more, and continues attempting to write to his daughter. Alan wonders why he couldn't save up enough money for his daughter for college in twenty years. He reflects on his failed attempts to make enough money in one year. He also reflects on failed attempts to get loans, based on a late Banana Republic credit card purchase payment. Alan calls Hanne, who invites him to a party at the Danish embassy.

Chapter 19 - Alan takes a cab to the embassy. There is a lot of alcohol and pills at the party. The people are all in their underwear, or less. Eventually, Alan finds Hanne. Hanne wants to sleep with Alan, but Alan refuses, and she doesn't talk to him for the rest of the night. Alan loses favor with the partygoers quickly.

Chapter 20 - Alan calls Yousef early the next morning, and they go to a doctor. He sees Dr. Zahra Hakem. She explains the lump is truly just a cyst, and nothing to worry about. She then bandages up his neck. She schedules an appointment with Alan in a week to remove the cyst. Yousef is happy to hear it is just a cyst.

Chapter 21 - When Alan gets to the tent, his team is asleep, arrayed out on the floor. The air conditioning has stopped working. Alan leaves the team to sleep, and then goes to the water of the Red Sea, and collects some shells. He recalls his meeting Ruby while on vacation, and heads back to the tent, where he lays down to sleep with the others. He remembers a quick courtship of Ruby, and a fast marriage. He reflects on the time he was almost killed by crocodiles in the Rio Negro.

Chapter 22 - Hanne invites Alan over for dinner. He brings her flowers. Hanne makes stew for dinner. Hanne explains the King will be in Bahrain the following week, so that Alan is free. Alan and Hanne take a hot bath together. Hanne again makes sexual advances, which Alan rejects. Ultimately, Alan concedes and gives her an orgasm by using his fingers on her, but is not aroused himself.

Chapter 23 - It is now the weekend. The team goes out to explore Riyadh, while Alan stays in at the hotel. He thinks about Charlie Fallon cracking up, about his family. Alan tries writing to Kit again, but still can't seem to get the words right. Alan also drinks, and decides to puncture his cyst again, and re-bandage it. He then goes to sleep after calling Ingvall and Jim Wong, his friend to whom he owes \$45,000.

Chapter 24 - The next morning, Alan feels reinvigorated and declares to his team that he will get answers. He goes to the Black Box, discovers Karim is in New York, and then decides to go and visit Hanne. He believes his visit with Dr. Hakem is the source of his



feeling better. Instead of finding Hanne, Alan comes face to face with Karim, who is not in New York. Karim promises to attend to everything Alan and his team need, but he cannot say when the King will be in. Through the window, Alan sees a yacht, and engages Karim to allow him to drive the boat. He drives the yacht through the canals of the city. Alan returns to the tent, and discovers that within an hour, the wi-fi signal is in. The air conditioning is restored. The system is set up, and a rehearsal is done. They test the holographic system successfully with a colleague in London. The team has a new-found respect for Alan.

Chapter 25 - On Wednesday, there is much traffic at KAEC. The tent is full of workers, remaking the interior. Alan and his team believe this is the day for the presentation to finally occur. They are very excited, but then it is announced there has been a miscommunication, and the King will be in Jordan for three days instead. Mujaddid then meets up with Alan, in an attempt to get him to buy a home or a condo in KAEC. But Mujaddid has an appointment, and lets Alan see the condo building himself. Alan interrupts a group of workers fighting over a cell phone, and the workers become angry with Alan for interrupting things and not having a solution. Alan races to the fifth floor, where he is met by Hasan, the owner of the condo. Hasan explains he has been attempting to sell condos for years, that many chains have backed out of their commitments made long before. Alan is reminded of Yousef's statement that the city is broke, which it is. Alan and Hasan both know the King can build the city in five years, but do not understand why he is dragging it out over twenty.

Chapter 26 - Alan and Yousef meet up. Yousef explains that the husband and his henchmen showed up at his house and just stood outside. Yousef says he will be going up into the mountains to stay with his father for a while. Yousef brings Alan to meet his father at his shoe shop in the Old City. Yousef buys Alan a pair of sandals. Salem, one of Yousef's friends, accompanies them to the mountain village in the Sarawat range. They arrive at Yousef's father's house, a beautiful, three-story home. Most of the house is empty, meant for use by the villagers for weddings and celebrations. Inside, Yousef shows off his rifle collection, and Alan wonders if he will have to help defend Yousef. He spends the night there with them. He writes more to Kit. Alan reflects on the fortress-like home, and reflects on his own decision to build a stone wall at home, one done successfully, but against the wishes of the zoning department. He was then forced to take down the wall.

Chapter 27 - Alan goes out taking pictures the next morning, sees a man who asks him if he is from the CIA, and Alan jokingly says he is. He then returns to the house. After breakfast, they use Yousef's guns for target practice. The man shows up, angry, and Yousef has to explain that Alan was joking about being in the CIA. Yousef, Salem, and Alan then return to target practice. Hamza, the caretaker, later drives the three men around to show them the town and the land. While they are out, Alan helps two local workers to build a stone wall. Yousef then invites Alan on a hunt to kill wolves.

Chapter 28 - After dinner, the hunt is on. Salem refuses to go, but Alan and Yousef do. Alan meets a friendly older man named Atif, who jokes around about eating animals and men. Alan tells Yousef about his father being in World War II, about escaping by bike



from the Nazis and then the Soviets. Alan himself had gone on to sell bikes -a connection vocalized by Yousef, which pleasantly surprises Alan. Alan believes if he kills a wolf, he will have done something good, something important. Then Alan sees movement, and fires, and misses. The movement had been the shepherd boy, and the others are not happy with Alan. Yousef says he will have a car drive Alan back in the morning. Yousef is not happy, and doesn't know if they are friends anymore. Alan is driven back to Jeddah by a driver named Adnan.

Chapter 29 - Alan is at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center, awaiting surgery on the lump. He goes under, and when he awakens, he is met by Dr. Hakem. The operation is underway, and Alan vows he will be a better person if he makes it through. He also thinks about Kit, and a trip they took together to Orlando. Alan is patched up, and Dr. Hakem tells him they got it all.

Chapter 30 - Dr. Hakem reveals the cyst has not damaged his nerves at all, so Alan is perplexed as to why he has been feeling so listless and sluggish. They get to talking, and arrange a follow-up meeting. Dr. Hakem gives Alan her number in case he needs anything. She then leaves the room.

Chapter 31 - For the next few days, Alan is able to awaken and dress on time for the shuttle. They spend their days prepared to do the presentation, passing the time by watching movies, playing cards, and talking. Yousef calls to say he may soon return. Alan decides to e-mail Dr. Zahra Hakem, who e-mails him back. They agree to meet up again. Alan will be going to Zahra's brother's seaside home for lunch.

Chapter 32 - Zahra arrives for Alan in her SUV. As they drive the hour to her brother's house, they talk about their lives. Zahra explains how she went to high school in Geneva, and how she worked in a medical hospital in Kabul for a year. Zahra has two teenage children. The boy she hopes will not grow up like his father. At the house, Zahra and Alan go swimming. She swims topless, and they kiss. Back in the house, they go to have sex, but Alan is unable to become aroused, and he blames it on all of the things weighing on his mind.

Chapter 33 - Zahra reveals she will be in Paris for a few weeks, and asks how long Alan will be in Saudi Arabia. He doesn't know. Alan relates a story of the time he and his father went camping in New Hampshire, without a tent or any such amenities. They construct a shelter to sleep under. They saved themselves by building something.

Chapter 34 - Eleven days later, King Abdullah finally arrives for the presentation. Unfortunately, another firm gets the IT job. Alan decides to stay on, to attempt to persuade the King to use Reliant Services in some other way.

Chapter 18 - Chapter 34 Analysis

Alan and his team are still waiting for their meeting with the King, a meeting that has no planned date and time. This waiting for a purpose is symbolic of, and reflective of Alan's own life, which appears without purpose. He appears to be passing much of his time



only by passing it, as the members of the team do while awaiting the King. The King, in effect, therefore serves the purpose of a purpose. Essentially, Alan is also seeking his purpose, which he believes is to land the IT deal for Reliant, and to become financially solvent once more. However, at the same time, Alan's purpose eludes him. He is also a father, and a good father at that -writing letters of advice to his college daughter, Kit. The writing of letters is a practice very out of date in 2010, and for Alan to commit advice and encouragement to his daughter in such a measured and permanent way as the written word is evidence of genuine love, concern, and care.

Indeed, the worldly pursuits of sex, alcohol, and drugs that appeal to many have no appeal to Alan, but not just because he has moral ramifications against them. He has severe physical disinterest, even in sex, and his current state of affairs means that he cannot become aroused either for Hanne, or for Zahra later on. Indeed, as it turns out, the only thing that Alan appears to be good at is being a father, and this is something that he does not recognize, ironically. Alan dreams not just of a purpose, but of doing something great, and fatherhood does not appear to Alan to be all that great. Usually, men attach their self-worth to their work, to their careers, to their successes, not to the finer things in life like parenting and family.

Ultimately Alan's trip to Saudi Arabia seemingly ends as it has begun. The King gives the IT job to a Chinese company, who will do the work at half the rate in half the time. Alan's relationship with Zahra is seemingly short-lived, as she goes to Paris, and Alan's own stay in Saudi Arabia appears to be ended. Nevertheless, Alan refuses to give up. He displays the American spirit of indomitability, refusing to be kept down, and staying on in Saudi Arabia in hopes that a second meeting with the King will prove more successful than the first, if he is able to convince the King to use Reliant Systems's services in another way. Most of Alan's questions are therefore left unanswered.



Characters

Alan Clay

Alan Clay is the main character and principle protagonist in the novel *A Hologram for the King* by Dave Eggers. Alan Clay is an American businessman who works in consulting and sales for Reliant Systems, a communications company. Alan is divorced, and has a college-age daughter named Kit whom he loves deeply, and to whom he writes touching letters of advice and encouragement. Alan, though he has been a successful businessman, has been unable to successfully manage his finances, and has found himself in more than \$100,000 worth of debt, and without a way to pay for his daughter's college education in the coming fall.

Alan Clay, who is an old friend of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia's nephew, is tacked on to a Reliant trip to the country, seeking to score the IT job at the King Abdullah Economic City. Alan hopes the trip will secure his finances, pay for his daughter's tuition, allow him to do something great, and help to cure his apparent depression and malaise. While in Saudi Arabia, Alan befriends a local named Yousef, who works as a driver through the Hilton hotel in Jeddah. Yousef drives Alan to and from the KAEC, and eats and dines with him. He later invites Alan on a trip to go wolf hunting, but Alan almost kills a shepherd accidentally, and returns to the KAEC.

Alan also has a benign tumor removed from his neck, and falls for his doctor, the beautiful Zahra Hakem. She is smitten with Alan, and the two have a brief romance, put out by Zahra's departure for Paris, and Alan's uncertainty as to the length of his stay in Saudi Arabia. Alan ultimately gets to make his pitch to King Abdullah, who rejects Reliant in favor of a Chinese firm. Alan ultimately decides to stay on in Saudi Arabia, to appear before the King once more, to attempt to sell Reliant's services in some other way.

Kit Clay

Kit Clay is the daughter of Alan Clay. She is attentive, kind, and does not get along well with her mother, who is cold, distant, and manipulative. Kit idolizes her father, and exchanges written letters with him. Kit is in college. Her fall semester is rapidly approaching, but tuition has not yet been paid. It is this reason primarily that propels her father into a last ditch attempt to make a sale and save her college career.

Ruby Clay

Ruby Clay is the ex-wife of Alan Clay, and the mother of Kit Clay. Ruby is very intellectual, sophisticated, and distant from her daughter. The only time Ruby contacts Alan is to learn about whether or not he has sold their house, and refuses to help Kit pay for college, leaving everything up to Alan to fix and solve.



Cayley

Cayley is a young woman and a member of the Reliant Team sent to Saudi Arabia. She is part of the presentation that will be made to King Abdullah. She and Alan get along well together, but they are too far apart in age and demeanor for anything to come of it.

Yousef

Yousef is a local in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, who is working his way through school by driving for the Hilton Hotel. He becomes Alan's driver one morning, and the two become fast friends. Yousef has an ex-wife who has remarried, but who nevertheless bombards his phone with text messages and his Facebook with posts. This causes jealousy in the new husband, who wants to kill Yousef. Yousef goes to hide away in the mountains at his father's house, and is joined for a few days by Alan. But Alan's near-fatal shot at a local shepherd by accident on a hunting trip leads to the friendship being upended, and Yousef has Alan return to Jeddah. Nevertheless, they become friends again.

Brad

Brad is a young man, and part of the Reliant Systems team that goes to Saudi Arabia to pitch their holographic communications system to the King. He is courteous and kind, but doesn't appear to be very motivated by his work.

Rachel

Rachel is a young woman, and a member of the Reliant Systems team that goes to Saudi Arabia to pitch their holographic communications system to the King. Rachel is seen as kind and friendly.

Karim

Karim is in charge of vendor presentations at the King Abdullah Economic City. He meets with Alan, and has the team's issues -such as wireless communications and a broken air conditioner- taken care of.

Dr. Zahra Hakem

Dr. Zahra Hakem is a doctor and surgeon who treats Alan's cyst on his spine. She finds him engaging, and they take an instant liking to one another, and begin a whirlwind romance that ultimately ends when Zahra goes to Paris. Zahra appears to be divorced, and has two teenage children, the son whom she hopes will not grow up like his father.



Charlie Fallon

Charlie Fallon is the deceased neighbor of Alan, who has two daughters and an ex-wife who left him supposedly because he was abusive. Charlie's life seems to stop making sense, and he dies by hypothermia, wading out to stand in a lake near their homes. Alan frequently reflects on Charlie's life as he reflects on his own.



Objects/Places

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is a country in the Middle East, wealthy and ruled over by King Abdullah. It is the location of Jeddah and the King's Economic City, and the country to which Alan and his team travel to make their sales pitch.

Jeddah

Jeddah is a city in Saudi Arabia, and is the location of the Hilton Hotel where Alan and his team stay. It is also the home of Yousef and his father's sandal shop.

King Abdullah's Economic City

King Abdullah's Economic City is a forthcoming metropolis planned by the King. For unknown reasons, construction has not gotten off the ground, and the King refuses to solely finance the city.

Hilton Hotel

The Hilton Hotel is located in Jeddah, and is where Alan and his team stay for the duration of their trip to Saudi Arabia.

The Red Sea

The Red Sea is a large body of water that borders Saudi Arabia, and specifically, the King Abdullah Economic City. Alan collects shells at the Red Sea, and goes swimming there with Zahra.

The Black Box

The Black Box is the welcome center and hub of operations for the King Abdullah's Economic City. It is where Hanne and Karim work.

Grain Alcohol

Grain alcohol, moonshined in Saudi Arabia, is given to Alan by Hanne. Alan consumes copious amounts of the grain alcohol.

Letters

Letters are what Alan and his daughter write to one another, having begun with Ruby's first DWI. Alan's first letter to his daughter had been an attempt to contextualize things, but the letter writing has become a tradition for the father-daughter duo.

Hologram System

A Reliant Systems Hologram System is what Alan and his team hope to use to pitch a sale to the King, in order to win the IT job in King Abdullah's Economic City. The hologram system is perfect and flawless.

Chevy Caprice

A Chevy Caprice is what is owned and driven by Yousef for his work for the Hilton. Alan travels around in the Chevy as a passenger to get from one place to another.



Themes

Meaning

Meaning is the singular most dominant and overarching theme in Dave Eggers's novel, *A Hologram for the King*. Meaning involves the search for purpose, for the reason for existence. Meaning is especially important to Alan, and meaning appears in two different ways to him, though he is only fully cognizant of one meaning.

Alan travels to Saudi Arabia because he is looking to secure his finances and pay for his daughter's college education. This provides his most immediate meaning, the thing which drives him and propels him. He has tied his identity to his career as most men do, and his business successes and failures translate to his self-confidence and his self-worth. But even despite the purpose ahead of him, Alan wonders what his purpose is beyond the potential sale. His search takes on a greater metaphysical dimension as he realizes that work and material things alone do not translate into his purpose.

However, the one area of purpose commonly agreed upon by most as important is that of family, of fatherhood. In an age where electronic communications mean instant contact, answers, and results, Alan still writes handwritten letters to his daughter. He takes time to compose these letters, through which he offers her advice and encouragement, and in which they talk about life. By all appearances, Alan is an excellent father -though this is not something that he dwells on, and therefore it is a point and a purpose which he misses. Raising his daughter and providing morally and spiritually for her is a tremendous thing to do, but it is one which Alan does not recognize as such.

Yet, at the end of the novel, the Saudi Arabian sale and the search for meaning both elude Alan, so he consents to continuing his search.

Appearance of Free Will

The appearance of free will is a major and forceful theme in Dave Eggers's novel, *A Hologram for the King*. Free will consists of the ability of a human agent to make his or her own choices and decisions about his or her own life, freely choosing or not choosing various paths at the discretion of the individual. Free will appears as both present and negated in the novel.

The presence of free will includes Alan's arrival at his current predicament. He is financially insolvent and unable to pay for his daughter's college education primarily through his own fiscal irresponsibility. He acknowledges he has had two decades to save up money, but has failed to do so through his own choices. Now, at his own will, Alan is attempting to right his past and prepare for the future. To do this, he travels to Saudi Arabia to make a last ditch effort to effect a change. When this fails, he decides to stay on of his own free will, to attempt to right things yet again.



The negation of free will occurs when factors beyond the control of Alan and others take away the possibility of free choices and free actions. Alan has no free will when he waits around for the King. He is entirely at the King's disposal, and has no choice but to wait. Alan's free will is also negated by the fact that the Economic City has not yet been built. This is also true of the men who await word to begin construction. They cannot construct or sell buildings without the go-ahead from above, and this is beyond their free will.

Globalization

Globalization is a major and driving theme in Dave Eggers's novel, *A Hologram for the King*. Globalization consists of international interconnectedness in terms of influence, trade, the sharing of ideas, medicine, technology, and so on. Modern communications, such as the hologram system, have only added greatly to the possibility of globalization and an interconnected and intertwined world. This has many benefits, and many drawbacks. Both are illustrated in the novel.

In positive places, globalization means improved economies, more jobs for people of all nations, and the availability of specialists, medicines, technology, and ideas in places that had previously not known them. The surgical team that operates on Alan, for example, is composed of people from multiple countries, including Russia and Italy. The firms that pitch IT sales are from the United States and China, meaning that globalization provides extended and larger markets for products.

In negative ways, globalization means that the ill-fortunes of one country will affect all others, and economic recessions in one place will affect all others. It also means increased competition between countries and their services, as Alan's American firm loses the IT bid to a Chinese company that vows to do the job in half the time for half the price. Yet the Chinese are also revealed in the novel as having stolen technology to advance their own interests -a danger in a globalized world. Globalization also means that individual nations may import more than they export, and that national pride in nationally-manufactured products falls, as is the case with Alan's father's dislike of foreign products.



Style

Point of View

Dave Eggers tells his novel, *A Hologram for the King*, in the third-person omniscient perspective. The vastly-different Saudi Arabian landscape and people, as well as Alan's experiences, are deftly handled by the objective narrator, explaining conventions and customs when needed. Though the experiences are Alan's, the third-person narrative enables the plot to proceed at a flowing pace, without being drawn down by the thought processes of a depressed and unsure individual. In this way, the reader is able to relate and understand Alan Clay secondhand, rather than experiencing events through the eyes of Alan Clay himself, or being drawn down into the opaque place of his life.

Setting

Dave Eggers sets his novel, *A Hologram for the King*, in the Middle Eastern nation of Saudi Arabia. In times of trouble, people often look to the rich, the powerful, and the influential to help ease their burdens. Alan Clay's character is no different. One good sale, and his finances will be secured. And who better to sell to than an oil-rich Arabian king? The setting of Saudi Arabia provides for the selection of the very powerful and very rich King Abdullah to be the focus of the sales pitch that Alan and his team make. The setting also allows the reader to experience the global recession outside the Western world, in Saudi Arabia.

Language and Meaning

Dave Eggers tells his novel, *A Hologram for the King*, in language that is simple and straightforward, unpoetic, but not without familiarity. In other words, the language is objective enough to warrant third-person omniscient narration, but informal and plainspoken enough to allow the novel's readers to relate to it and find it relevant. The language and meaning, therefore, work hand-in-hand with the perspective, allowing the reader to imagine Alan's story being related by a third party or a mutual friend. This makes the work engaging, and allows the reader to effortlessly follow the plot.

Structure

Dave Eggers structures his novel, *A Hologram for the King*, in thirty-four linear chapters. The chapters themselves alternate between the past and the present; usually, individual chapters alternate between the past and the present with respect to Alan. The linear structure of the chapters allows the reader to focus on the plot itself, rather than the construction of the novel's arrangement; and the time alternating in each chapter gives the plot greater depth, and gives Alan's present state greater relevance when viewed through the lens of his past.



Quotes

"At his last high school reunion, a man, a former football player whom Alan had despised, said, 'Alan Clay, you've got a thousand-mile stare. What happened to you?'"

-Chapter 2, p. 12

"There had to be some reason Alan was here. Why he was in a tent a hundred miles from Jeddah, yes, but also why he was alive on Earth? Very often the meaning was obscured."

-Chapter 8, p. 59

"He had just left his team, three young people tasked with setting up and demonstrating holographic communications for a king. But there was no king, and they were in a tent, alone, and there seemed to be no knowing when any of this would be rectified."

-Chapter 11, p. 71

"Then again, was there ever a time when a young American wanted to learn from an older American, or anyone at all? Probably not. Americans are born knowing everything and nothing. Born moving forward, quickly, or thinking they are."

-Chapter 17, p. 126

"The age of machines holding dominion over man had come. This was the downfall of a nation and the triumph of systems designed to thwart all human contact, human reason, personal discretion and decision making."

-Chapter 18, p. 139

"He looked around the room, at the phone, at the trays, the mirrors, the towels soaked in blood. 'This is grandeur,' he said aloud, and felt very good about it all."

-Chapter 23, p. 190

"And so they shared their frustrations of being at the mercy of factors out of their control, too many to count."

-Chapter 25, p. 214

"I think we have a lot of people willing to fight to support the people who are trying to be free. Americans like a cause. And they don't think too much about it."

-Chapter 28, p. 258

"In death, you can hope for dignity but should expect disarray."

-Chapter 29, p. 267

"Everyone wants to be somewhere else."

-Chapter 32, p. 292



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the theme of meaning in Dave Eggers's novel, *A Hologram for the King*. What is meaning? How does it relate to Alan, and why does meaning matter so much to him? Does Alan ever find his meaning in life? If so, what is it? If not, why?

In the novel, Alan appears to have absolutely no luck with women. Is it an issue of self-confidence and self-worth, an issue of Alan's economic ineptitude, or is there something else at the root of Alan's failed romantic endeavors? Explain.

Discuss the theme of free will in Dave Eggers's novel, *A Hologram for the King*. What is free will? How does it affect the character of Alan? In what ways is he free, and in what ways is he not? Does he truly have free will? Why or why not? Provide evidence from the novel to support your claim.

Why does Alan decide to remain in Saudi Arabia following the rejection of his company's bid for King Abdullah's Economic City's information technology systems? What are the financial and personal motives for his staying? Are they good reasons, or is Alan on a fool's errand in lieu of free will, globalization, and his own search for meaning? Explain your answer.

Discuss the theme of globalization in Dave Eggers's novel, *A Hologram for the King*. What is globalization? How does it affect the events of the book, especially with respect to Alan? Is globalization presented as a positive thing, a negative thing, a neutral thing, or a mixture of all three? Explain your answer using evidence from the novel.