

# **Invisible Cities Study Guide**

## **Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino**

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## Plot Summary

The great Kublai Khan sits in his garden, sensing the end of his empire. He sends for news from his distant holdings and is answered by Marco Polo. As Polo weaves tale after tale of the cities he has visited in Khan's name, it is impossible to tell if the cities actually exist or if they were created from Polo's imagination. Polo tells of trading cities, hidden cities, cities and the dead, and cities and the sky. By the end it becomes clear that each of the wondrous places is the same city. Even though *Invisible Cities* is a short novel, it provides volumes of information that will stay with the reader for years after he or she has put it away.

Khan does not necessarily believe what Polo tells him of the distant cities. He is however, entranced by the stories. The conversations between Polo and Khan provide a framework for the different stories that Polo tells. The stories are in essence reports on the cities within the empire. The difference is that these are not standard reports. Polo weaves poetry into his prose and provides a different way of looking at the cities. He gives the cities life and literally describes them as beings. Many times he will refer to a city as though it were a woman.

The reader sees that there is an understanding between the two men, even when they do not speak the same language. They can sit together in silence and imagine what the other will say in response to a question. Khan is worried that his empire is crumbling or that it is so vast that it will collapse under its own weight. Polo tries to get Khan to see the empire as whole by describing certain small aspects. Polo tends to weave his stories around the emperor's moods. If the emperor is angry, Polo tries to appease him. If the emperor is in good spirits, Polo warns him being too confident.

Polo picks dominant characteristics of each city whether it is its architecture, people, or location and then tells his story with that characteristic as its focus. The language Polo uses is evocative, poetic, and existential. His descriptions and conversations with Khan become increasingly surreal as his stories go on. The reader sees that Polo is layering his descriptions on top of each other. He is building towards something. The reader never really learns the purpose of the stories. He or she is simply too entranced in the beauty of the language and surreal nature of the descriptions.

In all, Polo describes 55 different cities. Each city is unique while being very similar to the others. Polo imbues each city with his own perceptions and asks the emperor to do the same. He says that since they are sitting in the garden enjoying a nice breeze, the emperor will understand a description of a city in which he sat outside and enjoyed a nice breeze. He is trying to place them both in a specific time and place. In this way he can make the city come to life for the emperor, even if the city does not exist.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

The great Kublai Khan sits in his garden, sensing the end of his empire. He sends for news from his distant holdings and is answered by Marco Polo. As Polo weaves tale after tale of the cities he has visited in Khan's name, it is impossible to tell if the cities actually exist or if they were created from Polo's imagination. Polo tells of trading cities, hidden cities, cities and the dead, and cities and the sky. By the end it becomes clear that each of the wondrous places is the same city. Even though *Invisible Cities* is a small novel, it provides volumes of information that will stay with the reader for years after he or she has put it away.

Marco Polo meets with Kublai Kahn and describes the cities he has visited in his travels. Kublai Kahn does not necessarily believe Polo, but he is mesmerized by the stories Polo shares. Diomira is full of beautiful things like silver domed buildings and bronze statues. It is best to visit Diomira on a September evening, when the multicolored lamps are lit in the doorways of the food stalls. The city of Isidora has buildings with spiral staircases. The staircases are encrusted with spiral shaped seashells. Isidora is the city a man might dream of.

Dorothea is a city that can be described in two ways. One can describe its canals, towers, people and history. Or, one could describe it in terms of youthful memory and how the doors of the world can open to one on a morning in Dorothea. Polo says that it would be pointless to attempt a description of Zaira. Zaira is a city consisting of relationships between measurements of its space and the events of its past. It is a city where traitors are strung from the lampposts and old men sit on the docks telling stories as they mend their fishing nets. The city does not tell its past. It contains it.

If one moves southward for three days, he will come to the city of Anastasia. Anastasia is a city full of precious and mundane objects such as onyx and agate. It is a city that awakens long stifled desires. Anastasia is a city that would make slaves of men. Continuing the many days journey leads one to the city of Tamara. Tamara is a city of perceptions and symbols. The city's wares are valuable because of what they represent and not what they are. One must see the city as though they were reading the written pages. A man leaves Tamara without having ever discovered its true nature.

One cannot forget the city of Zora. It attaches itself to a man's memory point by point. One's gaze follows the patterns of the city as one would a musical score. A man who knows Zora by heart can revisit it on evenings, when he cannot sleep. His memory will walk him through its streets. The most learned men in the world are those who have memorized Zora. Polo says that Zora has languished and deteriorated. The earth has forgotten her.



Despina can be reached by ship or by camel. It is a peninsular city, showing itself to the traveler by both land and sea. A camel driver, seeing the growing city in the distance, knows he is looking at a city but still sees a vessel out of the desert. A sailor, coming across the coastline of Despina, sees the embroidered fringed saddle of a camel swaying towards him. The sailor, like the camel driver, knows he is seeing a city but he sees a camel leading the caravan towards the palace. Despina is a city between two deserts, one of sand and one of water.

Marco Polo says that he is just returning from Zirna. His memory of the city consists of dirigibles flying, tattoo parlors, and obese women straining from the city's humidity. His traveling companions swear they only saw one dirigible, one tattoo shop setting up for work and one fat woman on the train platform. Isaura is the city of a thousand wells. It sits above a deep underground lake. Its inhabitants are able to find water wherever they dig. There are two forms of religion in Isaura. There are those who believe the gods live in the very depths of the subterranean lake beneath. Others believe the gods exist in the buckets rising suspended from cables and in the blades of the windmills that draw the water up from the recesses below. Isaura moves upward always.

Kublai Khan strolls through his magnificent gardens listening to the reports of his envoys and tax collectors. His messengers speak in languages Khan doesn't understand. They are relating information from a language they didn't understand. He sends them away and Polo comes in to give his report. At first, Marco Polo uses gestures and pantomimes to express himself rather than trying to speak in a language the emperor wouldn't understand. Khan is able to decipher Polo's signs, but is still uncertain of Polo's explanations. He doesn't know if Polo is telling him of an adventure or a person. He does, however, know that the emblems Polo shows him will stay in his memory forever.

After many missions on Khan's behalf, Polo learns the language of the Tartars and is able to be very precise in his descriptions to the emperor. While Khan is completely satisfied with the explanations Polo gives, he still remembers the symbols and emblems Polo used before. Polo's stories now add meaning to the emblems and the emblems add meaning to Polo's explanations. The emperor asks Polo if he will finally be able to fully possess his empire once he has learned the meaning of all the symbols. Polo says Khan will be an emblem among the emblems once he learns their meaning.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 establishes two things. Kublai Khan feels the deterioration of his empire. As he listens to news in languages that he does not understand, he can see the pattern of decay spreading through his lands. Chapter 1 also establishes that all of Polo's stories will be open to interpretation. Polo cannot speak the emperor's language so he must use symbols to represent people and places. As the emperor does not understand the language, he is free to interpret the symbols and emblems as people or actions or places within the cities. Everything that Polo shows him becomes a part of him and his memory. So, when Polo does learn the language, the emperor can only attach Polo's

words to the meanings he has already established in his own mind. This sets up a contradiction for the entire novel. The emperor's perception of Polo's tales will always be played against the information that Polo provides.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

The other messengers warn Khan of famines and advise him on the prices of materials found in his land holdings. Polo, having returned from lands equally as distant, only speaks of the thoughts that come to him while sitting on a doorstep in the evening enjoying the night air. Khan wants to know what the point of Polo's traveling. Polo responds that it is now evening, and they are seated on the steps of the palace enjoying the evening breeze. He goes on to say that whatever country he evokes will be seen from this specific vantage point.

The two men seem to have an understanding. Marco knows that, when he has irritated the emperor, the emperor needs to be left to follow a private train of thought. It does matter whether questions and answers are spoken aloud between the two of them. They sit silently, pondering their conversations. Marco imagines answering the emperor's questions or maybe Kublai Khan imagines Marco answering them.

Anyone traveling to Maurilia will be invited to enjoy the current city while hearing of its past. Like most cities, Maurilia was once a completely different city with the same name. Fedora is a gray stone metropolis containing a large metal building in its center. In each room of the building is a large blue globe that shows a model of a different Fedora. Each model shows an idealized version of Fedora. Whether that version is a past Fedora or a Fedora that does not yet exist is not important. They only represent possibilities. The city of Zenobia, though it sits on dry land, stands on high pilings. No one remembers why the city was built so high above the ground. If, however, you ask the people of Zenobia to describe a happy life, it is always a city like Zenobia that the people imagine. Eighty miles northwest of Zenobia is the city of Euphemia. Merchants from seven different nations gather in Euphemia every solstice and equinox to trade. Besides poppy seeds, grain, and nutmeg, the merchants also trade in memory.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

Having established the emperor's perception of the events in Chapter 1, Chapter two creates another layer of perception. Polo speaks of his own perceptions of the city. While the other messengers give Khan information about the cities' finances, Polo provides impressions of the cities and their inhabitants. Nothing Polo says is of any real use to the emperor. He is merely creating a city for the emperor's entertainment.

There is, however, a purpose to Polo's descriptions. The impressions he gives the emperor are from a perspective similar to their present one. He tells the emperor that if he speaks of the thoughts that came to him while enjoying an evening breeze, it is only because they are now sitting and enjoying an evening breeze as they converse. Polo is

trying to create a relationship between the emperor and the distant places he will never travel.





# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Kublai Khan notices that the cities Polo describes resemble each other. Khan's imagination takes hold. He mentally creates the cities without listening to Polo. Polo does not realize the emperor has stopped listening he continues to tell of the cities he has visited. Khan interrupts him. He says that he has conceived of a city and wants to describe it to Polo. Polo must tell the emperor if he has ever visited a city like the one the emperor has imagined. The emperor describes the city and Polo interrupts him. Polo says that the city is the one he was just talking to the emperor about before the emperor interrupted him. Polo explains that the city has no name or location and only exists as a dream exists.

Leaving Zenobia and traveling for six days and seven nights, one finds himself at Zobeide, the white city. The city is based on the dream of many different men from several nationalities. New men arrive having dreamt similar dreams and change the city based on the differences of their dreams. When strangers arrive, they are not impressed with the ugliness of the city. They cannot understand what drew people to the city and consider it to be a trap.

Polo enters Hypatia and learns the nature of changing language. In Hypatia, language is about things, not words. He says that he felt cheated by the things he saw. When he expects to see maidens bathing in the river, he sees suicide victims instead. He decides to demand justice of the sultan. He climbs the stairs to the palace and learns that he can only question the philosophers. He finds a philosopher seated on the lawn. The philosopher tells him, "Signs form a language, but not the one you know." Polo realizes that he has to free himself from images in order to truly understand the language of Hypatia. He also learns that language cannot exist without deceit.

Polo does not know if Armilla is unfinished or if it has been demolished. There are no walls or ceilings or floors in Armilla. There are only the pipes rising vertically where the houses should be and spread out where the floors should be. The city is not inhabited but it cannot be called deserted. One is likely to glimpse young women bathing in the many tubs and showers that still stand in the city. Polo's explanation is that the water running through the pipes still belongs to the nymphs and naiads. They are accustomed to traveling through underground veins of water and would find it easy to burst from multiple fountains.

Chloe is a great city filled with people who are all strangers to each other. They pass each other on the street and imagine entire lives for each other. They do not greet each other. They only lock eyes for a second and move away without stopping. There is something in their glances that creates a connection between lives. So, when some people find themselves crowded together randomly, such as taking shelter from the rain, entire lives are lived without a word or touch between them.



Valdrada is built on the shores of a lake. A traveler visiting the city would see two cities, one standing high above the lake and another reflected in the lake's water. The people of Valdrada know that their actions are repeated in the mirror image of the lake. The mirror has the ability to both increase and deny a thing's value. Polo says that the two cities are not equal. Each action in Valdrada is inverted in its mirror image and there is no love between the two cities.

Khan tells Polo about his dreams of a city with a north-facing harbor. The farewells from the harbor are tearful but silent. The people watching the leaving ships stare as it slips around the cape leaving the people waving their last goodbyes. Khan commands Polo to find this city. Polo tells him that sooner or later he will sail from that dock. He says if he does he will not come back to tell Khan about it. Polo explains that the city exists and has one secret. It only knows about departures and not returns.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter is about dreams and imagination. The emperor can dream of a city and Polo will describe it to him. Polo even admits that the city of which the emperor dreams does not have a name and can only exist in the dreams of men. The cities he describes in this chapter are fantastical creations in which nymphs bathe in abandoned cities and strangers live entire connected lives without speaking to each other. He speaks of cities from which a person can only depart and never return. These are cities of the imagination and fantasy. This chapter shows that the emperor is correct in his suspicions of whether or not to believe Polo. It also shows how willing the emperor is to be entertained by Polo's recounts. This chapter foreshadows the emperor's growing dependence upon Polo's stories.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

On some evenings, Khan grows impatient with Polo's stories. He accuses Polo of lying to him about the decaying state of the empire. Polo admits that the empire is sick and that is why he travels to the distant areas. He goes to gauge the amount of happiness left in the empire. He wants to let the emperor know how much darkness is out there by focusing on the small glimmers of light. Other times, the emperor is euphoric and claim how splendid his empire is. On these nights, he asks why Polo focuses on inessential and disappointing things. Polo answers that he is collecting the memories of these cities before they vanish to make room for new ones.

Marco Polo warns the emperor of confusing a city with the words used to describe it. If he describes the city of Olivia as being rich in both products and profits, the emperor must realize that the city also contains fine palaces and exotic creatures. The emperor should also realize from the same description that the city is shrouded in soot in and grease and the desperation of its workers. Polo cannot use any different words to describe Olivia since falsehoods are never told in words, they are told in things.

Sophonria is a city made up of two half cities. One half of the city is a fair with a roller coaster, carousel and ferris wheel. The other half is made of stone, marble, and cement. It contains the factories, palaces, slaughterhouses, and schools. One part of the city is temporary and is taken down every so often so it can be transported to another half-city. So every year the slaughterhouse and hospitals are dismantled along with the schools and refineries for transport to another half-city. The shooting-galleries, the carousel, the shouts from the rollercoaster all have to wait for them to return and the city to be complete again.

Eutropia is composed of many equal sized cities. They are all like each other and spread across a vast plateau. Only one of the cities is inhabited at a time. When the inhabitants become weary with their day-to-day lives, the population they move to the next city. They take new jobs and marry new people and make new friends. The city repeats its life identically but with different actions. The city of Zemrude takes its form based on the traveler's mood. If he walks with his head held high, he sees the city from below. If he walks with his head held down by grief he will see it from above. The view from below is filled with flapping curtains, fountains and windowsills. The view from above is filled with gutters, fish scales and trash. Both aspects of the city are true.

Khan says that he will describe the cities to Polo. He wants Polo to tell him if they exist. The cities Polo visited are always different from the ones described by Khan. Khan says that he has a model city in his mind. From that city, he can deduce all possible cities. His deductions are based on the cities being exceptions from the norm. Polo also has a model for deducing all possible cities. His deductions are based on the improbability of



the city's existence. Polo says that he cannot think the deductions through, because he will find cities that are too probable to exist.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Khan is at odds with himself. He alternates between pessimism and optimism about the state of his empire. Polo uses this opportunity to expand Khan's understanding of the cities of his empire. He explains that the words describing the city should not be confused with what the city is. He begins dissecting the cities in order to show the whole of them. When he speaks of Olivia, for example, he separates the beauty and extravagance of it from the tiresome labor of its inhabitants. In doing so, he provides a clearer understanding of the complete city. Polo does the same thing with the other cities he describes in Chapter 4. When describing the city of Sophronia, he separates the city into halves. When he describes the city of Eutropia Polo separates the people from the city. Eutropia is not a single city. It is multiple identical cities. When its people grow weary of their lives, they move to the next identical city and begin new ones. In dissecting these cities, Polo is re-enforcing his stance that the cities exist outside of their inhabitants and locations.

Polo also stresses that the words used to describe a city are not important in relation to the city itself. When he tells of Zemrude, he says that its description lies in the eye of the beholder. The way one views the city is entirely dependent upon one's mood. If one were to see it clearly, he must separate himself from the city. Chapter Four is about breaking the cities down so that the emperor can see them completely.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Khan sits high in his palace visualizing the growth of his empire. He sees the conquered territories spreading further and further into different regions. Khan thinks to himself that the empire has grown too far outward and must grow within itself. He dreams of his lands filled with promise and rich growth. The empire does grow and become vast and heavy with products and cities. Now, Khan worries that the empire will be crushed under its own weight. He begins to dream of cities that are light as feathers and transparent. He tells Polo that he has dreamed of a city bathed in the light of the moon. The city seems to play with the moon on clear nights. Polo tells him that the city he dreamed of is called Lalage. He says that the people built their city as invitation for the moon. Khan says the moon has granted Lalage the privilege of growing in lightness.

Octavia is the spider-web city. The entire city is suspended above a huge chasm with ropes, chains and catwalks. The foundation of the city is a large net. The life of Octavia's residents is uncertain. They know the net will hold only so long. In Ersilia the inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of their houses. The strings are different colors. The colors represent relationships. When the strings become so dense that they cannot pass through the city, they dismantle everything and move. They leave the strings and look back to see all of the relationships that make up the city. They move on establish more complex webs. The webs are all that is left, when the city is in ruins.

A traveler does not realize he has arrived, when he gets to Baucis. He only sees slender stilts rising above the clouds. He has to climb the stilts with ladders. The inhabitants rarely go below to the ground. They have everything they need in the clouds. There are three theories about the inhabitants of Baucis. Some believe they hate the earth. Others believe they respect it and that is why they avoid contact with it. Still others believe that they love it so much that they want to view it as it is from above. The city of Leandra is protected by two species. Both are too tiny to be seen and too numerous to count. The first species is Penates. They stand inside the doors of houses in the umbrella stands and next to the coat racks. They follow the families, when they move to new dwellings. The second species is the Lares. The Lares stay in the kitchens hiding under pots and in chimney flues. They belong to the house and remain, when the tenants leave. The Penates and the Lares visit among each other and get along peacefully. One could not tell them apart if he saw them all in a row.

On arrival at Melania, one finds himself caught in a dialogue. It is the same dialogue that has gone on for generations. Melania's population renews itself through the acting out of this dialogue. Each person is born into a role. Every once in a while, one person takes on two roles. As time passes the roles are no longer exactly the same. If the traveler were to look on the city at successive times, he will find the dialog changes from act to act.



Marco Polo describes a bridge made of stone. The emperor wants to know which stone supports the bridge. Polo says that it isn't just one stone. The bridge is supported by all of the stones, in an arch. Khan wants to know why Polo speaks of stones, when it is the arch that is important. Polo replies that there can be no arch without the stones.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

While Chapter 4 is about dissecting the cities, Chapter 5 is about connecting them. The city of Octavia is connected through ropes, chains, and catwalks. The people of Erselia attach strings to their houses to show their relationships to the other people of the city. The city is connected through the inhabitants' relationships. Polo ends the chapter by talking about a bridge made of stone. It is all of the stones creating an arch that supports the bridge. When the emperor says that it is the arch that is important and not the stones, Polo says that the arch cannot exist without the stone. His purpose is to show that the cities cannot exist without the connections holding it together. Rather than trying to separate the cities into parts, he is showing the emperor that the cities are the sum of all of their connections.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Polo accompanies the emperor to the city of Kin-sai, the latest city to fall under Khan's rule. Khan asks if Polo has ever seen a city such as this one. Polo says that he never imagined such a city existed. After sunset, the emperor demands more tales of the cities and Polo complies. By dawn, Polo says that he has told all he knows about all the cities he has visited. Khan says that there is one that Polo never speaks of, Venice. Polo says that every time he describes a city he is saying something about Venice. For Polo, Venice remains implicit. He says that once the images of memories are fixed into words, they are erased. He is not sure if he is afraid of losing Venice all at once by speaking of it. Or, if by speaking of the other cities, he has already lost it little by little.

Esmeralda is the city of water. The streets and the canals intersect each other, leaving a choice of travel by land or boat. The inhabitants are spared the tedium of traveling the same way each day. The city is also layered with stairs, landings and bridges. Those wishing to keep their adventures secret move along the higher routes. They are acrobats, dropping from rooftops and balconies. Conspirators and smugglers move through the sewers below along with the rats. A map of Esmeralda should include all of these routes. It is impossible, however to map the routes of the birds who fly over the rooftops, dominating from every path all the points of the city.

A traveler arriving at Phyllis rejoices in the surprises that meet his every turn. When it is time to leave, he cries out with regret at having never penetrated all the city's secrets. He decides to stay instead and spend the rest of his life there. After a while, the city fades before his eyes and becomes a monotonous series of streets and dwellings. The rest of the city seems invisible, leaving the traveler unable to recall his joy. Polo says that, when he arrives at Pyrrha, he forgets all his imaginings of what the city would be like. Pyrrha becomes what it always was. Pyrrha represents all of the cities Polo has never seen and will never see.

Adelma is the furthest city to which Polo has ever traveled. He lands at dusk during the hour of the wholesale fish market. The people remind him of friends and family that have died. He wonders if Adelma is a city he sees in a dream in which he only encounters the dead. If Adelma is a real city inhabited by real people, their resemblances will eventually change and the faces will appear alien. Either way it is best he not stare at them. He says that he reached a point where in the number of people he has known, the dead outnumber the living. His mind refuses to accept new faces and has to print the forms of people he knew on those he encounters. He wonders if he resembles someone who is already dead to the inhabitants of the city. Maybe Adelma is the city where those who arrive are dying and there they find the faces of people they have known. If so, then he is already dead, and unhappiness waits for the living.



The form of Eudoxia is preserved in a carpet. The carpet captures each place in the city, containing all of the city's elements in its design. It is easy to get lost in Eudoxia, but staring at the carpet will point out the exact street on which one stands. Every inhabitant compares the carpet with his own image of the city. While most believe the harmonious pattern of the carpet is of divine origin, the opposite conclusion could be true. It could be that Eudoxia is the true map of the universe with the carpet as its reproduction.

The great Khan's ears are sharp. He hears the sighs behind Polo's words. Polo travels to throw off a burden, or he returns from his travels with a cargo of regret. He wants Polo to confess to smuggling moods and states of grace. It is likely Khan only imagines demanding these confessions from Polo as the two sit silently smoking their pipes.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

In Chapter 6, the reader begins to understand that Polo is creating these cities based on his memories of Venice. Marco Polo's city is Venice and Venice is a part of him. Since all of his descriptions are based on his impressions of the cities he visits. His impressions are clouded by Venice. When he describes the city of Esmerelda, he talks about the city being connected by canals and traveling by boat. This is a perfect description of Venice.

The descriptions Polo provides of these cities are of their rich history and beauty. He mentions seeing familiar faces in Adelma and the preservation of the city of Eudoxia. All of these descriptions parallel the perception of Venice. Khan questions Polo's motives for travel, because he can hear the longing in Polo's voice. He wants Khan to admit that he is not providing descriptions, he is smuggling memories of his own city. Of course, this is merely Khan's interpretation of the conversations. It is very likely that Khan only imagines confronting Polo. Again, the reader is left unsure of whether the cities or even the conversations between Khan and Polo exist. The reader begins to see that there is no line between reality and imagination. Polo and Khan are the only real constants in any of the stories.





# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Khan wonders when Polo has had time to travel. It seems to him that Polo has never moved from the garden. Polo responds that everything he sees and does assumes a meaning in a place like where they sit. When he concentrates and remembers he is always in this garden in the emperor's presence, even though he continues without pausing up a river. Khan is no longer sure if he is sitting in the garden or riding through the lands that Marco is describing. Polo suggests that the garden may only exist in their minds and that their travels have not yet ended. Each time they partially close their eyes they are allowed to return to the peace of the garden. Khan wonders if this dialogue is actually taking place between two beggars sifting through a rubbish heap. Polo says that perhaps the entire world is covered with wastelands and gardens. Their eyelids separate the two worlds but they do not know which is inside and which is out.

Fording the river and crossing the mountain passes, the traveler will find himself at the alabaster gates of Moriana. Moriana is a beautiful city of coral and villas like glass aquariums. The traveler finds that if he walks in a semi-circle, he will see the other side, the hidden side, of the city. That side is an expanse of rusting sheet metal and pipes black with soot. There is nothing in the city. There is only the front and back of it, each side leading to the other. Each side is unable to see the other.

Clarice is a glorious city with a tormented history. It has a cycle of death and birth, of falling to ruin and being rebuilt. Each time the original city is held as a model of perfection. The people take parts of the old city and use them in different ways to build the new. Populations and customs change several times over the years. Each new version of the city shows off the relics of the ancient city. Random artifacts such as baskets and urns reside in museums. The order of the city's history is lost. It is only a confusion of ill-assorted and obsolete artifacts.

Eusapia is a carefree city, without worry or fear. To make the passing from life to death less abrupt, the people have constructed an underground city identical to the one on the surface. The dead are transported to the city below by a brotherhood in hooded cloaks. The dead are placed in poses of their favorite activities. Only the brotherhood has access to the underground city. They return to tell the living that every time they go below something is changed. The dead are arranging things to suit themselves. The living, not wanting to be outdone, copies their underground counterparts. There is a rumor that it was actually the dead who built the above ground city. There is no longer any way of knowing who is alive and who is dead.

The people of Beersheba hand down the belief that another Beersheba exists suspended in the heavens above. They also believe that a third Beersheba exists in the lowest depths below. The people believe city above is made of gold with silver locks and diamond gates. They honor everything that represents the heavenly Beersheba. The



city below represents a basin of everything disgusting and wrong. They try to erase any thing in their city that represents the toilet of a city below. It is true that there are two projections of Beersheba. The people, however, are mistaken in their beliefs about these cities. The most learned architects built the underground city with the best materials on the market. The heavenly city is filled with abandoned refuse.

Leonia re-invents itself everyday. Each morning the people awake to brand new lives. They wash themselves with unopened bars of soap and wear brand new clothes. On the streets are spotless plastic bags filled with yesterday's Leonia. The street cleaners are honored throughout Leonia and are praised for removing the previous day's city. The city keeps expanding to hold all of those years of the previous versions of the city. Since Leonia manufactures these items everyday, the quality improves. The piles of discarded products are more weather resistant. The city invades the world, pushing its piles of leftovers further and further out. The danger of a landslide looms. One day the mountain ranges of belongings will fall and flatten the city, its citizens dressed in new clothes.

Marco Polo wonders aloud if the gardens overlook a lake in their minds. Khan continues the thought by saying however far their journeys take them they both hold this conversation with them in a place where this evening is always the same. Polo suggests that the people of the cities only exist, because the two of them imagine it. Khan suggests toils, shouts and sores do not exist either. Polo says that these people exist, only because he and Khan think them. Khan admits that he never thinks these things. Polo says perhaps they do not exist. For Khan they could not sit swaying calmly in their hammocks if their conjecture is true. Polo says then he and Khan do not exist while everything else does. Khan says that they already proved that if he and Polo were in the garden they would not be. Polo admits that they are in fact there in the garden.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

In Chapter 7, the reader begins to see how just how enthralled the emperor is with Polo's stories. Even if he does not believe Polo, Khan still depends on the stories Polo tells. Polo has created a mindset for the emperor. Everything the emperor sees is now being filtered through his present circumstances. All Polo has to do is tell the emperor to close his eyes. Polo can then cause the emperor to doubt their very existence.

Chapter 7 also shows the darker side of the cities. Polo starts with a description of Moriana. He describes it as a beautiful glass and coral city. He then says that the other side of the city is composed of soot and rusting sheet metal. There is nothing inside the city. There are only the two faces of it leading to each other. The descriptions of the cities become darker as Polo moves on to the cities of Clarice and Eusapia.

In the case of Clarice, the city is based on a memory of torment and failure. Most of the original city has been lost and the few artifacts remaining serve no purpose for its people. Eusapia is a city in which the living bases their lives on the dead. The darkness of these cities shows the crumbling of the empire.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Marco Polo spreads the wares from his travels at the feet of Kublai Khan. The pavement is checked black and white and on them Polo arranges a helmet, a seashell, a coconut, and a fan. He arranges these things and occasionally shifts them as he tries to explain the conditions of the empire. Khan, who is quite skilled at chess, observes the movements of these articles. He ignores the items and understands the system of arranging one with respect to the others. He thinks that if each city is like a game of chess, he will one day understand the rules and fully possess his empire. Marco Polo would do better to use a chessboard with its specific pieces.

Polo returns from his last mission to find the emperor waiting for him, seated at a chessboard. He invites Polo to sit down and use the chessboard pieces to describe the cities he has visited. Polo recreates the perceptions and spaces of the cities. Khan considers the rules that decree how a city rises and falls. At times he thinks he is on the verge of finding a coherent system, but no model holds up in comparison to the game of chess. Khan no longer has to send Polo on missions. Instead, he keeps him occupied with games of chess. Knowledge of his empire can be found in the hidden pattern drawn on a chessboard. Khan tries to concentrate on the game, but its purpose eludes him. Each game ends with a gain or a loss, but what are the stakes? By trying to reduce his conquests to just the essentials, Khan has reduced them to nothingness.

Irene is a city that is always in the distance. If one approaches it, it changes. The city is one thing for those who pass it without entering, and another for those who dwell within it. Those in the city are trapped and never leave. Argia is different from other cities, because it has earth instead of air. The streets are filled with dirt and the houses are filled with clay. No one knows if the people can move within its worm tunnels and crevices. Nothing of Argia can be seen from above. If one were to put his ear to the ground, however, he would hear a door slam.

A man arriving at Thekla will see very little of the city. It is blocked by scaffolding and evidence of construction. If he asks one of the citizens why the construction is never finished. The inhabitant will say it so that the destruction cannot begin. If that man were to put his eye to cracks of the fences, he would see cranes lifting other cranes and scaffolding holding up other scaffolds. If he asks to see a blueprint or the plans for the city, he will be told to come back after the working day. The working day ends at sunset. The darkened sky is filled with stars and the citizens will respond, "There is the blueprint."

The world is covered by a single city called Trude that does not begin or end, only the name of its airport changes. Olinda is a city that grows in concentric circles like trees. The old walls expand taking the old quarters with them but maintaining their proportions. At the heart of the city sits the first Olinda. All of the Olindas have blossomed from this



one. It is impossible to tell the difference between the next Olinda and the one that will grow after it.

Khan is still lost in thought. He has reduced his conquests to inessential materials. Polo points out the natural flaws in the wood of Khan's chessboard. Khan is amazed at Polo's fluency in his language and at the beauty he uses to describe these imperfections. Khan is overwhelmed by the number of things that can be read in small piece of wood. Polo has already begun talking of an ebony forest and docks and women at the windows.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Khan is trying to find meaning in all that Polo has shared with him. He cannot see the cities as cities. He also cannot see them as their parts. He wants to break them down to their barest essence. He is always on the very verge of understanding the rise and fall of a city. He tries to understand in terms of chess and strategy. The descriptions of the cities in this chapter depict confusion.

Trying to reach the city of Irene is impossible, because it always seems to be off in the distance. It also changes, when the traveler does find its way in, and it traps them there. The city of Thekla is under constant confusing construction. The city of Trude does not begin or end. Finally, it is impossible to tell the difference between the current city of Olinda and the one growing in its place. Khan's confusion at trying to understand the state of the cities within his empire is mirrored by the confusion represented by the cities.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Kublai Khan owns an atlas where all the cities of his empire and their neighboring realms are drawn. Polo's tales teach him that it is pointless to expect news of these places. He asks Marco if he will repeat these tales to his own people. Polo says that it is not the telling of the story. It is the listening to it that shapes it. Khan feels that Polo's voice is at times reaching him from far away while he remains a prisoner of the present. In Polo's voice, Khan hears invisible reasons that make cities live and come to life again after they die.

Khan has an atlas that depicts the terrestrial globe continent by continent. He pulls it out to test Polo's knowledge. Polo recognizes many places and describes them. For the others, he uses descriptions handed down by word of mouth. The atlas shows cities that neither Polo nor geographers know about. Marco gives a name for these cities knowing that city names change constantly. He points out routes to them knowing that every place can eventually be reached from other places. Khan says that Polo recognizes cities better from the atlas than from his travels. Polo responds that the differences between cities are lost during travel. The atlas keeps the differences in tact.

Khan's third atlas gathers together the maps of all the cities. It marks foundations of new cities and ruins of old ones. Polo recognizes ancient cities and sees where some combine to create others. He sees San Francisco and it's Golden Gate Bridge. He sees a milineum into the future. In that world races of yellow, black and red fuse with the surviving whites in an empire greater than Khan's. The atlas reveals cities that do not yet have a form or name. There is the shape of Amsterdam and New York. It is an endless catalogue of forms. The last pages of the atlas contain an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, without shape.

Laudomia is made up of three cities. There is the city of the living, the city of the dead and the city of the unborn. The citizens of the living visit the dead and find their names among the tombstones. They seek explanations from the dead. They visit the cities of the unborn and ask silent questions of them as well. They always ask about themselves and not of those to come. There is no sense of security in the land of the unborn like there is in the land of the dead. The cities comprise an hourglass. The unborn are grains of sand at the top which pass to the living and then through to the dead.

Astronomers create the rules for the foundation of Perinthia. They base their rules on the alignment of stars and divide the map according to the twelve signs of the zodiac. They guarantee that Perinthia will reflect harmony and the benevolence of the gods will be reflected in the citizens' destinies. The city is constructed and populated. Generations are born containing cripples, dwarfs, hunchbacks, bearded women, and obese men. The worst parts of the population cannot be seen. They can be heard from the cellars and basements of those who would hide their monstrous children. The



astronomers must make a difficult choice. They must either admit their calculations were wrong. Or, they must admit that the will of the gods is reflected in this city of monsters.

Each year Polo stops at the city of Procopia and takes lodging in the same room of the same inn. The first time he looked out his window over the landscape there was no one else to be seen. The next time he noticed a round face in the bushes. Each time he visits there are more. He opens the curtain to see a vast sea of similar looking round faces. This year it is not easy for him to move about as there are twenty-six people lodging in his room. Luckily, all of the people are very polite.

Raissa is an unhappy city containing a happy one that is completely unaware of its own existence. The streets in Andria follow the orbit of the planets. The buildings and communities mirror the constellations and luminous stars. The city's calendar is regulated such that the days on earth and the nights in the sky reflect each other. Each change made in the city is reflected in the sky. The inhabitants have two characteristics. They are self-confident, and they are prudent.

Khan reproaches Polo, because the stories describe the heart of the city without telling what lies between them. Polo answers his criticisms with a story. While traveling in the illustrious city of Cecilia, he meets a goatherd. The goatherd asks the name of the city and Polo wonders how he could not know the name of such an illustrious place. The goatherd says that while he can name grazing lands and meadows, cities have no names for him. Polo says he is the opposite. He recognizes only cities and cannot describe what lies between them. Many years pass since his meeting, and he crosses more continents. He finds himself lost and asks a passerby where they are. The man replies that they are in Cecilia, and he and his goats cannot find their way out. He says that they have been wandering through the streets for ages. Polo recognizes the man and says that he too has been wondering deeper and deeper into the city's streets and cannot find his way out. He wants to know how he could have traveled so far away and not have left Cecilia. The man says that Cecilia is everywhere. The places where Polo has been, and the place he is now have merged.

If one moves along the compact walls of Marozia, a crack will open and a new city will appear. An instant later it vanishes. Marozia consists of two cities. There is the city of the rat and the city of the swallow. Both cities change with time, but their relationship to each other does not. The second is always on the verge of freeing itself from the first. When he arrives at Penthesilea, Polo finds that he can advance for hours and not be sure whether he is in the midst of the city or still outside it. When he stops to ask for directions, the people point him further on or tell him to turn back in order to reach the city. It is a city full of vague spaces and patches of countryside. He cannot tell if Penthesilea exists or if it is only an outskirts of itself.

Theodora is a city that has been racked by invasions of animal species. The humans exterminate each species one by one. When finally there are only humans left, they establish a library to remember what types of animals once lived there. They do not realize that the original creatures of the city, those who were exterminated by other animals, are returning to reclaim what was once theirs. Berenice is a city built of two



cities. There is the unjust city of Berenice and there is the just city of Berenice. In the city of the just, a seed of corruption grows, waiting for the chance to form an unjust city. In the city of the unjust, a kernel of hope, built on love of justice waits to blossom. In each seed lies the small spark of its opposite. Berenice is a succession of cities waiting to blossom into a metropolis. Berenice is also all of these cities wrapped together.

Khan lays out his last atlas. It is an atlas of promised lands only imagined but not yet found. He asks Marco Polo to tell which city of the future the empire is heading towards. Polo says that he cannot draw a route or set a date for landing in the city. He thinks that the new city will be made from the bits and pieces of other cities on his journey. He says that even though his journey towards this city is scattered and unknown, the journey cannot end. The city may even be rising as the two sit speaking to each other. Khan believes the journey will be useless if the final city is an inferno. Polo tells him that if it is an inferno, they have two choices. They can either accept it, becoming a part of it so that they no longer see an inferno. Or, they can protect those who are not a part of its hellishness and help them endure.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

The final chapter of this novel shows Khan trying to lock Polo into a definite answer to his questions. He lays out the atlases as a way of trying to pinpoint cities that will exist and cities that used to exist. His purpose is to find out where they are now. The chapter becomes an exercise in existential debate.

The reader sees that all of these cities are one city and no city. Trying to determine an exact place on the map is futile as each city will eventually be the one in which they currently live. Whether the city is Venice or any of the cities that Polo has described up until this point does not matter. What does matter is that Khan sees the possibilities and potential within each city. He must see that the cities are and will forever be changeable. The direction in which the cities grow does not matter, because Khan has no say in it. The only power Khan has is to protect those who need protecting and hope for the best.



# Characters

## Kublai Khan

Kublai Khan is the ruler of the Mongolian Empire. His empire is vast and spreads across most of the continent. At the time of the novel, Kublai is aging and unable to travel far into his lands. He must rely on messengers for news of what is going on in his empire. The emperor is a large man who enjoys strolling or sitting in his gardens in the evenings. He is meditative and enjoys smoking a pipe. The surreal quality of the novel seems to be echoed in Khan's character. He asks questions of Polo only to wonder if he has asked or if he has only imagined asking. He is also unsure of whether Polo is answering his questions or whether he only imagines Polo's answers to questions he has imagined asking.

The reader is never sure if they are dealing with the Khan of history or a fictional character based on the historical one. Khan is as complex as the novel is. He is both wise and innocent. He does not necessarily believe Polo's stories, but he needs Polo to tell them. Even when he becomes irritated with Polo, he cannot send him away. Khan is a strategist. He understands things in terms of strategy and linear thinking. There is at first a language barrier between he and Polo, but he understands what Polo is telling him through gestures and objects. After many hours of dialogue being lost in translation, Polo finally learns the language and is better able to communicate with Khan. Khan insists that Polo use a chessboard to discuss the cities. He understands the strategy of chess and can relate the rise and fall of a city to the strategies of chess.

As the novel progresses, the reader sees just how dependent Khan is on the stories being told to him. Even though he can sense the decay of his empire and worries about it collapsing under its own weight. He needs to hear the everyday slice of life tales that Polo gives him. He needs to know that there is something good and worth nurturing left in his crumbling ruin of an empire. His dependency upon Polo becomes most evident during the final chapter of the novel.

In Chapter 9, Kublai Khan begins pulling out his vast collection of atlases. At first he seems to be testing Polo's knowledge. He asks Polo to identify certain cities. The reader sees that Polo does not know about all of the cities that Khan asks him about. Khan however is satisfied with the answers he is given. Whether he believes Polo at this point or whether he has simply grown accustomed to listening to him is not clear. What is clear is that the emperor needs Polo to approve of his empire. He needs Polo to tell him what will happen to his empire. He needs reassurance that he is a good emperor. One can sense fear in Khan. He is afraid that he will die and leave his empire to crumble and finally collapse with no one to bear witness.





## Marco Polo

Marco Polo is a Venetian traveler who describes the cities of the empire to Kublai Khan. The Marco Polo of history is well known, and it is believed that *Invisible Cities* is actually based on his famous travelogue, *The Travels of Marco Polo*. In his travels, Polo discusses his meeting with Kublai Khan. The historical Marco Polo, however, is not what the reader is given in this novel.

Marco Polo is a young man who captures Kublai Khan's imagination. It is never made clear what his intent is. He simply weaves tales of the cities that he has visited and entrances the emperor with them. He is witty and intelligent and his thoughts always seem to be one step ahead of the emperor's. He has a ready answer for any question the emperor asks and seems to be able to read the emperor's mood.

Marco Polo tends to romanticize everyday occurrences. When he gives what should be fairly straightforward reports on the cities, he uses a poetic prose. He uses symbolism and metaphors to describe what should be practicalities. Rather than being a standard messenger, Polo is an artist. He is painting pictures for the emperor using an impressionistic paintbrush. He describes the city of Zora by comparing it to a musical score. Rather than saying that the city is rundown and on the decline, he says it has languished and deteriorated. The most significant detail about Polo's descriptions is how he portrays the cities as beings rather than places. Many times he will refer to a city as her. For Polo, the cities are living breathing creatures with their own emotions and thoughts.

Marco Polo is extremely intelligent. He does not speak Khan's language at first. He uses gestures and objects to explain things and is very good at providing meaning without the use of language. It does not take him long to learn the language, because he is a very fast learner. He is also very good at reading situations and the emperor's moods. There is something slightly manipulative about Polo's dealings with the emperor. As he can read the emperor so easily, he tends to tell the emperor exactly what he wants to hear. Every time the emperor comes close to understanding what Polo is talking about, Polo changes it to keep him off balance. In this way, Polo retains all of the power in these conversations. Khan is left needing Polo to continue explaining the cities, even when Polo is giving the same description about a different city.

The reader can really see how manipulative Polo is towards the end of the novel. As the emperor begins pulling out the atlases, it is as though he were seeking Polo's approval. Polo, by having controlled the conversations, has set up a situation in which he can advise the emperor. He is no longer a messenger giving reports to the emperor about far away lands. He is now a necessary counselor. The emperor needs Polo's approval and council on how he should handle his empire.



# Objects/Places

## Kublai Khan's Garden

The conversations between Khan and Marco Polo take place in Khan's palace garden. Polo uses the garden to provide a point of origin for the stories he tells. He wants Khan to visualize the cities from the perspective of sitting in a beautiful garden on a nice evening.

## The City of Venice

Marco Polo's home city is the city of Venice. Each story he tells about the cities contains his impressions of Venice. All of the cities are filtered through the city of Venice and its inhabitants.

## The Stone Bridge

At the end of Chapter 5, Polo describes a bridge made of stone. The stone form an arch, which holds the bridge in place. Khan questions the importance of the stones if it is the arch that holds the bridge in place. Polo has to explain to him that the arch could not exist without the stones.

## Khan's Chessboard

Khan's understanding of strategies translates directly into the game of chess. So, when he is trying to understand the birth, growth, and decline of a city, he wants Polo to use chess as a means of describing them. He wants to force what he does not understand into the parameters of something he does.

## Khan's Atlases

Khan has many atlases that he shows Polo at the end of the novel. He uses the atlases to try to force precise descriptions out of Polo. He wants absolute answers that he can point to and the atlases represent his need to control the situation.

## The City of Kin-Sai

Kin-Sai is the only city that Khan and Polo visit together. It is the most recent addition to Khan's empire. Polo could never imagine the existence of such a city even after all of his travels throughout the empire.



## **The City of Armilla**

Armilla is a vast city consisting of pipes, showers and tubs instead of walls, floors and windows. While the city seems deserted, it is not. According to Polo, a traveler can catch a glimpse of nymphs using the showers and tubs.

## **The City of Chloe**

Its people define the city of Chloe. The people are strangers to each other. They pass each other without speaking or acknowledging one another. Strangely, each person can imagine an entire life full of relationships for the next.

## **The City of Esmeralda**

Esmeralda is the city of water. It is the closest Polo ever comes to fully describing the city of Venice. His descriptions of the canals and methods of travel match the descriptions of Venice throughout history.

## **The City of Eusapia**

Eusapia is described as a carefree city. However, there is darkness in a city in which the living bases their habits and lives on those of the dead.



# Themes

## Imagination and Perception

Is Marco Polo making up these stories about the surreal cities he has visited? Is Kublai Khan simply imagining the conversations he has with Polo? These questions become very important when trying to decipher the novel. The theme of imagination runs throughout the novel. Khan is at times unsure if he has spoken to Polo or if he has only imagined speaking to him. When Polo describes a city he is asking Khan to imagine himself sitting in that city on an evening like the one they are currently experiencing.

Imagination ties to perception, when Polo tries to get the emperor to understand why he describes the cities the way he does. He wants the emperor to imagine a circumstance to their current one and filter the cities through his own perceptions. If it is a warm evening with a nice breeze blowing, the emperor should allow those perceptions to color his vision of the city being described.

While imagination and perception are two different things, the surreal nature of the novel intertwines them. How much of what Polo describes is simply his perception of events? , when he describes the city of Zirma, he remembers flying dirigibles, tattoo parlors, and many obese women complaining of the heat. His companions swear that there was only one tattoo parlor, one obese woman, and one dirigible. Polo's perception of the place is completely different from that of the people who traveled with him. Once he understands how much of the story is perception, the reader must then determine how much of it is imagined.

Even Kublai Khan doubts the truth of Polo's stories. He questions Polo and even becomes angry, when he thinks the Venetian is simply telling his stories to pacify him. Interestingly enough the reader never knows if Kublai Khan actually asked these things or if he only imagined doing so.

## The Inevitability of Time and Decay

Kublai Khan is aging and is worried about his empire. As vast and wonderful as his empire seems, he can sense the decay of termites and time working its way through it. Time and decay are inevitable facts of life within the empire. Polo tries to explain this to Khan through his descriptions of the cities. He explains that some cities fall one after the other in the exact same place only to grow up again with the same name. The cities do this without contact between the old and the new. It is simply an old city dying and a new one rising up in its place. The people of the new city do not realize that they have grown from the decay of the old.

The inevitability of time and decay is most evident in Polo's description of the city of Eusapia. The people of the city are carefree, because they know that once they die, they will have the chance to live the life they always wanted. The city is comprised of



two cities. There is an above ground city inhabited by the living. There is also a below ground city filled with the dead. The two cities are identical to each other with the exception of their inhabitants. When a person dies, he or she is taken to the underground city and put in a pose of their favorite activity. The decay of death is actually taking over the above ground city. There are only a select few people allowed below ground. These people have sworn that the dead have moved and changed the city more to their liking. The people in the above ground city take these descriptions to heart and model the above ground city after the city of the dead below. That they do not realize they are basing their lives around the innovations of the dead suggests they are unaware of the decay that it taking over their city.

## Truth and Deception

Polo may be carrying out a great deception on the aging emperor. It is clear that the emperor thinks so. At one point the emperor says, "Your cities do not exist. Perhaps they have never existed. It is sure they will never exist again. Why do you amuse yourself with these consolatory fables? I know well that my empire is rotting like a corpse in the swamp, whose contagion infects the crows that peck at it as well as the bamboo that grows, fertilized by its humours." To this Polo responds that while he knows the empire is sick, he wants to find the glimpses of happiness that still remain. In this way he can find out how much darkness is in the empire by comparing it to the glimmers of light.

The interesting thing about this conversation is the emperor accuses Polo of telling consolatory tales. He does not realize that Polo is actually consoling the emperor. Polo tells half-truths to keep the emperor in good humor. He plays with the emperor during these conversations. The emperor allows the deception. Many times throughout the novel he accuses Marco Polo of making up these stories to deceive him. Each time, he allows Polo to continue. Kublai Khan does not want to know the truth. Or if he does, he only wants to know a part of it at a time. If that means that he must hear one part deception and one part truth, then that is the way he will accept it.

The reader must decide after each report how much of what Polo has said is true and how much of it is a complex deception. For the deceptions are as complex as the novel itself. This is made clear, when the emperor points out that Polo does not describe the city of Venice. Polo is from Venice and knows it better than any other city. It becomes clear that he is using things he saw in Venice to embellish the stories about these cities.



# Style

## Point of View

Invisible Cities is unique in that the point of view shifts throughout the novel. It begins with an omniscient narrator describing Kublai Khan having a conversation with Marco Polo. The omniscient narrator describes the garden, the evening, and the mindset of the emperor. He knows what the emperor is thinking and whether or not the emperor is voicing his thoughts.

When Polo is sharing his travels with the emperor he becomes the narrator. The point of view slips between Polo's first person point of view and him telling it in the third person. This stylistic choice sets a surreal tone for the entire novel. The shifts in point of view emphasize how important perspective and impression are in the stories Polo shares with Khan. The reader is presented with Polo's impressions while he describes cities that most likely did not exist as part of the Mongolian empire.

Each chapter is prefaced by a conversation between Khan and Polo. The conversations are related by an omniscient narrator and provide Khan's perspective. Khan is at first impatient with Polo as he does not believe the things Polo tells him. As the novel progresses, Polo wins Khan over with his stories and his perspective.

## Setting

The novel has several settings. The conversations between Khan and Polo take place mainly in the gardens of Khan's palace. They do have one conversation in the city of Kin-sai, the empire's latest conquest. After touring the city, they return to palace where Khan demands more stories. While the framework of the novel sets it in Khan's garden, the stories Polo tells take place in 55 different places.

Each city Polo speaks of has its own setting. The settings are created by Polo's descriptions of the cities' architecture, history, and inhabitants. The reader is tempted to believe that Polo is simply making all of it up. The settings he describes include cities that trip men with their dreams of it, cities with suicide victims floating in the river, and cities that consist of only plumbing.

Setting the novel in a time period is difficult. Considering the novel is based on conversations taking place between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, one would assume that the novel takes place at height of the Mongolian empire. The descriptions Polo uses suggest otherwise. He talks about airports and flying into the cities. He also discusses distant cities that would not exist during that time period like San Francisco and New York. There is no way that the historical Polo could have knowledge of these cities or of airplanes and airports.



## Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is surreal. The meaning of the novel is completely open to interpretation. Although the novel is written in prose, its language is very lyrical and almost poetic. The poetry of the novel is sandwiched between conversations between Polo and Kublai Khan.

There is a mystical quality in the language Polo uses to describe the cities. This same quality is found in his conversations with Khan. He poses existential questions and suppositions to the emperor. He asks the emperor to see things through the eyes of a man in Khan's own circumstances. Khan in his turn poses hypothetical questions to Polo. Interestingly enough, the narrator often questions whether the conversations between Khan and Polo are actually taking place. The narrator suggests that the two men sit in silence and imagine asking and answering each other's questions.

The language suggests that none of the characters including the unknown narrator are not to be trusted. Polo's descriptions call into question whether or not he is telling the truth. The fact that the reader never knows whether Khan has actually posed a question or has only imagined it calls into question Khan's mental state.

The language of the novel is also dense and at times convoluted. The novel itself is very slim, but it speaks volumes on the state of a decaying empire and the man in charge of it. It also suggests that Polo is simply telling the emperor what he wants to hear. Polo seems to know what the emperor needs to hear even if the emperor does not.

## Structure

*Invisible Cities* is a deceptively small volume. It is 165 pages long and broken into 9 chapters. The chapters are further broken down into 55 distinct sections. The structure of the novel, like the novel itself, is simple and complex at the same time. In each of the chapters Marco Polo describes the cities that he may or may not have visited to Kublai Khan.

Each of the 55 sections can be viewed as a report from Marco Polo to Kublai Khan. Each of the sections falls into one of 11 groups. The eleven groups can be classified as thematic categories based on the given description of the cities Polo describes. The thematic breakdown places the cities in one of 11 categories indicating what type of city it is. These categories are Cities in Memory, Cities and Desire, Cities and Signs, Thin Cities, Cities and Eyes, Cities and Names, Cities and the Dead, Cities and the Sky, Continuous Cities, and Hidden Cities.

If one excludes the first and the last chapters of the novel, they will see that each chapter contains 5 reports. The first and last chapters contain 10 reports each. Each chapter is framed by a conversation between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. These conversations are italicized to emphasize the difference between them and the reports. These conversations can be seen as small interludes to break up the travelogue aspect

of the reports. The conversations seem to take place in present time, while the reports are past adventures of Marco Polo.





## Quotes

"Kublai Khan Does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other explorer of his." Chapter 1, pg. 5

"This city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the coursers of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightening rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls." Chapter 1, pg. 11

"Zora's secret lies in the way your gaze runs over patterns following one another as in a musical score where not a note can be altered or displaced." Chapter 1, pg. 15

"Futures not achieved are only branches of the past: dead branches." Chapter 2, pg 29

"On the map of your empire, O Great Khan, there must be room both for the big, stone Fedora and the little Fedoras in glass globes. Not because they are all equally real, but because they are all only assumptions." Chapter 2, pg. 32

"Kublai Khan had noticed that Marco Polo's cities resembled one another, as if the passage from one to another involved not a journey but a change of elements. Now, from each city Marco described to him, the Great Khan's mind set out on its own, and after dismantling the city piece by piece, he reconstructed it in other ways, substituting components, shifting them, inverting them." Chapter 3, pg. 43

"Cities also believe they are the work of the mind or of chance, but neither the one nor the other suffices to hold up their walls. You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours." Chapter 3, pg. 44

"Your cities do not exist. Perhaps they have never existed. It is sure they will never exist again. Why do you amuse yourself with consolatory fables? I know well that my empire is rotting like a corpse in the swamp, whose contagion infects the crows that peck it as well as the bamboo that grows, fertilized by its humors." Chapter 4, pg. 59

"No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city must never be confused with the words that describe it. And yet between the one and the other there is a connection." Chapter 4, pg. 61

"The Great Khan contemplates an empire covered with cities that weigh upon the earth and upon mankind, crammed with wealth and traffic, overladen with ornaments and offices, complicated with mechanisms and hierarchies, swollen, tense, ponderous." Chapter 5, pg. 73

"Thus, when traveling in the territory of Ersilia, you come upon the ruins of the abandoned cities, without the walls which do not last, without the bones of the dead



which the wind rolls away: spider webs of intricate relationships seeking a form."  
Chapter 5, pg. 73

"You return to Melania after years and you find the same dialogue still going on: in the meanwhile the parasite has died, and so have the procuress and the miserly father: but the braggart soldier, the amorous daughter, the foolish servant have taken their places, being replaced in their turn by the hypocrite, the confidante, the astrologer." Chapter 5, pg. 80

"Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it little by little." Chapter 6, pg. 87

"If Adelma is a city I am seeing in a dream, where you encounter only the dead, the dream frightens me. If Adelma is a real city, inhabited by living people, I need only continue looking at them and the resemblances will dissolve, alien faces will appear, bearing anguish. In either case it is best for me not to insist on staring at them." Chapter 6, pg. 94

"This is what I wanted to hear from you: confess what you are smuggling: moods, states of grace, elegies!" Chapter 6, pg. 98

"I do not know when you have had the time to visit all the countries you describe to me. It seems to me you have never moved from this garden." Chapter 7, pg. 103

"Perhaps all that is left of the world is a wasteland covered with rubbish heaps, and the hanging garden of the Great Khan's palace. It is our eyelids that separate them, but we cannot know which is inside and which is outside." Chapter 7, pg. 104

"And to make the leap from life to death less abrupt, the inhabitants have constructed an identical copy of their city, underground. All corpses, dried in such a way that the skeleton remains sheathed in yellow skin, are carried down there, to continue their former activities." Chapter 7, pg. 109

"Returning from his last mission, Marco Polo found the Khan awaiting him, seated at a chessboard. With a gesture he invited the Venetian to sit opposite him and describe, with the help only of the chessmen, the cities he had visited." Chapter 8, pg. 122

"Contemplating these essential landscapes, Kublai reflected on the invisible order that sustains cities, on the rules that decreed how they rise, take shape and prosper, adapting themselves to the seasons, and then how they sadden and fall in ruins."  
Chapter 8, pg. 122



## Topics for Discussion

Are any of the cities Polo describes real?

Is Marco Polo manipulating the emperor or merely trying to appease him?

Invisible Cities is a very short novel. However, the information in it is very dense. Describe how the book's structure contributes to its dense nature.

Many times Polo will use artifacts to explain something to the emperor. Does the emperor really understand what Polo is saying or is he simply imagining his own cities?

Each time the emperor asks Polo a question Polo is ready with a contradictory answer. Does Marco Polo really want the emperor to understand what he is talking about or is he deliberately trying to confuse the emperor?

Describe the importance of death and decay as it pertains to the cities of the empire.

Choose a city from Polo's descriptions and describe whether or not it is based on an actual city.

Did Marco Polo actually visit the cities he describes or is it all an exercise in imagination?