

July's People Study Guide

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Plot Summary

July is the male servant of the Smales family—Bam, Maureen, Royce, Victor and Gina. The white family has escaped the fighting in their village in the Smales' bakkie under July's direction. When fighting overtakes the Smale's hometown, they abandon their comfortable suburban life and find a savior in their servant, July, who offers them a way to safety. After a three-day journey, they arrive in July's village and occupy his mother's hut, much to his mother's dismay.

The Smales' struggle to adapt to rural life and to life without their former servant. They must learn to live without the simplest of suburban accommodations such as hot water for a bath. Where they once enjoyed a master suite, seats from the car now double as beds. They battle the heat, fleas, cockroaches, and mice, constantly hoping for good news from home. July deals with the threat to his person, family, and community that the presence of this white family brings. Over the course of several weeks, the Smales and July struggle to redefine their relationship. What was once so clear and familiar to the Smales—master and servant—is now unclear and ill-defined. Maureen both offers to take on more responsibility, while simultaneously trying to continue to control July and his choices.

The tension in his family and the unwanted attention from the community at-large strains July to his breaking point. The village chief hears of their presence and summons them to speak with him.

The fighting inches closer to the remote village, and the local mine shuts down. The book ends without a definitive conclusion. An aircraft lands in the village. No one is certain whether it is an ally or enemy plane. For Maureen it does not seem to matter. She runs toward the plane without any thought for her husband and three small children.



Section 1 - 2

Summary

Section 1. The novel begins with July entering the hut that previously belonged to his mother, to bring the Smales their morning tea. Maureen Smales, the daughter of a mine shift boss, had slept in mud huts before, but only for leisurely family vacations. She expresses her disbelief that Bamford Smales, an architect, and Maureen Smales, born Maureen Hetherington of the Western Area Gold Mines, now call a mud hut in a village in rural South Africa home. Her three children sleep on seats removed from their car.

She lies on the rusted bed covered with a tarp from the car and her memories take her from the present to her childhood. She recalls her childhood bedroom she enjoyed all to herself and her school shoes being cleaned by their servant, Jim.

The pleasant memories do not last long as she returns to the present and recalls their escape in the vehicle and the three-day journey to their present location—a worn, one room hut.

Section 2. They escape their old life in the 'bakkie', a truck affluent South Africans use when their town car is not adequate. Bam Smales previously used the bright yellow bakkie for shooting trips. Now it is their means of escape from the violence overtaking their once peaceful existence in Johannesburg. The yellow seemed an impractical color, but they never assumed they would need to use the car to escape under cover of night.

The fighting is not entirely unexpected. First there were strikes in the 1980s. The black workers went hungry and jobless as the strikes lingered on, and then riots and arson started. Riots and marching began first in Soweto, and then moved closer to their home in Johannesburg. Fifteen thousand blacks made their way to the business center rioting and protesting. Fearful, Bam and Maureen had taken their money out of the bank when they heard there might be a bank shutdown.

White Rhodesian immigrants, former Selous Scouts and white mercenaries flown in from Bangui, Zaire, and Uganda successfully fought to keep the black fighters from taking over. Business started to return to normal, and the unrest seemed to subside. The Smales are relieved. Before the most recent events, they had discussed leaving for another country, but Maureen convinced Bam to stay. Plus, they considered themselves to be compassionate whites and sympathetic to the plight of the black South Africans. However, before they are able to deposit their money back into their bank accounts, unrest returns. Fighters destroy shopping malls, set fire to homes, and heat-guided missiles bomb airplanes taking off from the local airport. Their cook runs away, and they panic. July, their servant for fifteen years, offers them a way out. They load their bakkie and escape to July's village outside of Johannesburg. They drive with headlights off to avoid patrols and roving bands. The day long journey takes three days and nights while the kids hide under a tarp.



July gives them a zinc tub big enough to bathe the children. Bam bathes in the river, but Maureen worries about infection. July brings them porridge, boiled spinach and paw paw. Maureen boils the river water, fearing the kids will fall ill from bacteria.

Maureen insists they will cook for themselves, but July continues to look after them. July enters the hut with his third born child. July has shown them pictures before, but this is the first time they see any of his children in person. July hides their bakkie in an abandoned hut away from their living huts.

Analysis

The novel commences with a series of stark contrasts: wealthy and poor, white and black, comfort and unrest. For many years the Smales manage to exist somewhere in the middle. They enjoy their wealth and privilege but pride themselves on being more generous than most to their black servants. Despite their perception, their interaction with July is one of power and entitlement, and their move to the village shifts that balance of power in uncomfortable ways.

Village life presents fewer opportunities to rely on their whiteness as a source of power to provide the comfortable life of their past.

Vocabulary

delirium, equilibrium, stertorously, Afrikaner, indulgently, contiguous, concessions, concomitant, moratorium, prosaically, ostentatiously, phenomena



Sections 3 - 4

Summary

Section 3. July introduces Maureen to his wife. The woman says nothing. Maureen shakes her hand and the hand of July's mother, but neither attempts to welcome Maureen and her family into their village. July attempts to smooth things over by telling Maureen his wife says she's happy to have her there. July's wife had never touched a white woman before holding Maureen's hand. She expressed her surprise at how different white people were in reality. She thought they would be prettier and wear beautiful dresses. She also thought Maureen's hair was funny and ugly. Maureen used to send presents home for July's family every time July returned to the village on leave, but she meets them for the first time in fifteen years. Maureen knows July's woman in town. She is an independent black woman who speaks in black, city English. She works as an office cleaner in the city. July provides no support for her child, and she and July have no children together.

Section 4. July gives the Smales a second bed, a Primus stove, and a nice set of pink glasses belonging to his wife. His mother allows the Smales to sleep in her hut at July's request.

July's family questions why the white family must stay in their village. They refuse to believe there is no other place in the world these white people can go with their money and privilege. They wonder why they do not stay with friends or travel overseas or why Bam does not simply use the gun he is hiding in the roof to defend his family.

July tries to explain their friends were fleeing, the airport was under attack, and one gun was no defense against the fighters.

Analysis

The contrast between city and village life is present in the very presence of the Smales in July's community as well as the distinctions made between July's village wife and his town woman. July finds himself struggling with bringing together the two worlds he has known for more than fifteen years.

The Smales settled into the hut of July's mother. Maureen tried to make acquaintance with his mother and wife, but the tension they felt toward the white intruders overrides any opportunity for friendliness or building a relationship. They resented their presence and thought they brought nothing but trouble. Their presence created tension between July and his family members as they questioned why he would allow these wealthy white people to impose on them. They always flaunted their wealth, so why couldn't their wealth and privilege take them someplace far away?



For the village members, whiteness means wealth and privilege, so they have a difficult time understanding how a white family's only option could be to escape to the simplistic rural village life of their black servant.

Vocabulary

aperture, guilt, sated, chivvy, swayed, crimplene, sterilized, sophisticated, twitching, parody, attribute,

Section 5

Summary

Bam busies himself trying to rig up a water tank and expects July to assist him. They listen to the radio while they work. The fighting continues, and the United States debates whether or not to organize a government airlift for American nationals.

Royce asks to see a film even though Victor and Gina know films are a part of their former life. Maureen can only walk as far as the river. The children no longer wear shoes. They scratch flea bites they receive at night while sleeping on the car seat in the hut. July offers to wash the family's clothes, but Maureen insists on doing it or offering to pay his wife to do it. The men consider washing clothes women's business in his home. Little money changes hands in the village, but they know the paper transforms into material possessions. Maureen considers reading her novel, *The Betrothed*, but knows it is the only novel in her possession. So, she waits.

Maureen wanders into one of the abandoned huts. Badges and medallions awarded to black miners line the walls. A plaque reads "Boss Boy." She remembers the phrase from her father's days as a shift boss. Maureen remembers going to school, dreaming of becoming a ballerina. She remembers being in the city as a young girl and accompanied by a black woman, Lydia, who carried Maureen's school case on her head. Lydia worked in an office but ran into Maureen in the city center during the day when Maureen was on her way home from school. Meeting together there was their routine. Maureen bought a Coke and some gum or chocolate and Lydia kept Maureen's secret—that she rode home on a boy's bike instead of the school bus. A photographer saw them together and took photos. One photo ended up in a *Life* coffee table book about the country and its policies. In the photo Lydia carried Maureen's school case on her head. Maureen wonders why Lydia kept the school case on her head. What did others understand the picture to mean, Maureen wonders?

Analysis

The master-servant dynamic features prominently in this chapter. The expectations associated with those roles are never spoken, but are very much understood by all parties. July helps Bam with the water tank, not because he wants to, but because Bam expects him to. Maureen's memories from childhood include a black woman carrying Maureen's school case home on her head.

In spite of their changed circumstances, Bam continues to cater to the needs of the Smales' family—offering to wash their clothes or find someone else to do it. The children, unlike the adults, adapt more readily to their changed environment. Perhaps for the adults the roles that have been fixtures of their relationship for the past fifteen years are too comfortable to abandon.

Vocabulary

twanging, sprightly, bellowing, dioramas, primitive, contrive, euphoria, immensity, delegation, boundlessness, quarreled, sulked, implements

Section 6

Summary

Bam joins the men in the village for beer. He drinks from a mug while everyone else drinks from a shared clay pot. Maureen needs to talk about how they plan to get out of the village. As she wanders around the huts, Maureen notices some of her gadgets in use. The idea that July may have stolen the items surprises her. She always thought him to be perfectly honest—never entering their liquor cabinet and always placing loose change on their nightstand. That evening, Maureen passes out malaria tablets. She admits to looting the local pharmacy during the fighting. She takes the tablets hoping to survive and be able to take care of her children but wonders who would take care of the children if something happens to either of them. Bam thinks July will care for them until someone rescues them, but Maureen questions who is coming to rescue them.

Their usual radio station returns to the air after being off for twenty-four hours. They suspect a fight occurred to control the radio station and the black fighters lost.

Bam awakes to hear the car engine revving. He sees Maureen still inside the hut. They run outside to see two people driving away in the vehicle. Certain one of the heads was July's, Bam rushes outside and asks the other men about July's whereabouts. No one knows where July went. Bam grows frustrated when no one seems to have an answer for him. Bam's mind reels with uncertainty about what to do next. He considers telling the kids. He thinks about taking his gun down from the roof to be ready for any attack. Maureen continues in her tasks—picking burrs from the children's clothes and opening a can of pork sausages.

Gina walks into the hut with a baby tied to her back. They tell Gina the baby needs to be returned to his mother, but Gina resists. Gina's black friend Nyiko enters and takes the baby back. Maureen offers the girl a pork sausage. The girl makes a gesture of praying and accepts the sausage. Maureen hopes aloud her children pick up some of the manners along with the less desirable behaviors they have acquired. Bam and Maureen resign themselves to the fact July likely will not be back any time soon. Yet Bam continues to glance at his watch.

Bam recalls conversations with his wife about settling somewhere in Canada, but Maureen wanted to stay. He tries to listen to the radio, but only hears static. As Bam tries to adjust the radio station, Maureen stands over Bam in a dominating sort of way, which irritates him.

Maureen expresses frustration that they do not know the language of the people in the village. She thinks back to the shame she felt as the daughter of a shift boss who spoke the black lingua franca of the mines and not the dialect of the educated blacks. She remembers being embarrassed to tell her husband. Bam questions Maureen about why she cares so much about appearances. He calls it being "caught out." He recalls when



she told stories that made her look important. Maureen thinks Bam is just jealous. They continue to argue about whose decision it was to come to July's home. Maureen questions why Bam seems always to go along with her decisions only to avoid having to take any responsibility. The children fall asleep while playing. Maureen leaves the hut and when she returns, she finds Bam reading her only novel. Rain starts, and they carry the children to bed. After Bam falls asleep, she leaves the hut again to wash her clothes and body in the rainwater. While outside in the dark, she sees the headlights. July returns with their bakkie. She does not tell Bam.

Analysis

Maureen and Bam struggle to fully embrace their new reality, one of a loss of control and sense of powerlessness. The depth of their powerlessness is highlighted for them when July takes their vehicle without asking and leaves for an extended period of time.

It is not just the powerlessness, but the feeling of losing control overtaking them in that moment. Before entering the village, July was their servant and obeyed their every order. Now, he is in his own village where he is a leader in his family. Although he continues to serve them in some capacity, the relationship between the Smales and July has changed forever.

Their existence in a state of limbo between the past and the future heightens tensions in their marriage that likely existed long before their escape. Bam sees Maureen as someone most concerned with the appearance of others, and Maureen's comments toward Bam suggest she thinks he lacks assertiveness.

Vocabulary

soporific, elliptical, magnanimously, erudition, baritone, intervened, subliminal, proprietarily, leering, relished, retribution, engendered, prophylactics, galling, bourgeois



Sections 7 - 9

Summary

Section 7. Bam listens to the radio for any news suggesting the fighting has ceased. Bam and Maureen discuss whether they will return. Maureen fails to mention the vehicle, and July asks to enter their hut and provides them with supplies, including batteries for their radio. They offer to pay him. They question him and pretend they were worried about him and not about being trapped in the village without a means of escape. He explains he took the vehicle to the store. They ask July if he has heard anything about the fighting. He says there is trouble at the mine not far away from them.

Section 8. They let the moment pass to ask him for the keys. The next day, July begins driving lessons with a friend as the Smales observe from their hut. During the rainy period, they keep a fire going in the hut. They continue to feel uncomfortable about July taking the keys of the car without asking. Their only solace is that he went to obtain supplies for them. July continues to perform tasks for them they could perform for themselves, like chopping wood.

One of the women offers to give Maureen some herbs for Royce's cough, but July tells her not to take them. He says they are no good. He tells her he will pick something up the next time they go to the store.

Maureen asks for the keys so she can retrieve the rubber mat from the car to put under Royce's bed to help keep some of the moisture away. The request offends July. He feels they do not trust him. July indicates he will go to the store tomorrow to get medicine for Royce. July returns the keys to Maureen. An uncomfortable feeling exists between them. The water pump Bam created begins filling with rain water and the people of the village are excited.

Section 9. Maureen fears losing July and the comforts he provides, which is why she refuses to make a bigger commotion about him taking the car without permission. She wonders if he loves the town woman. Maureen holds on to the keys after getting the rubber mat from the vehicle. Maureen asks Royce to find July. Royce returns with a message telling Maureen to come to his hut. Maureen tells the children to again go and tell July she wants to see him. He finally emerges from his hut.

Maureen attempts to give him the keys. Before he takes them back, July begins to question Maureen about why she is so uncomfortable with his holding the keys. He reminds her he has been her "boy" for 15 years. The term embarrasses Maureen. He questions whether they trust him after all these years. He refers to Bam as his master, offending Maureen even more. July questions whether they are going to pay him for his month's work. Maureen seems surprised. Feeling threatened, Maureen questions July about his town woman. The words hang in the air between them. July will never forgive



her for bringing up the town woman. She feels victorious over him. He takes the keys and leaves her presence.

Analysis

The balance of power shifts when July takes the vehicle without permission and returns without volunteering an explanation or an apology for his departure. Maureen and Bam struggle to maintain some measure of power over July. Their only symbol of power is the possession of the keys to the vehicle. Their ability to take and return these keys at will is their only means of maintaining any measure of control over July. When Maureen realizes this loss of control, she resorts to attacks to try to weaken him. However, the unavoidable reality is that Maureen and Bam are at the mercy of July and the other members of the community in which he lives. This fact is unsettling to them as it runs counter to the white-black, rich-poor dynamic to which they have grown accustomed.

Vocabulary

affable, deprecating, deprivation, fastidious, pretence, affront, pantomime, fug, paraffin, caricature, incumbency, ubiquitously, swatch, competent, dollop, hierarchy, jubilantly, eluded, divestiture, archetypal, chastisement, abstractions, formulated, discernment, tritons, bilharzias, jargon, persecutor, insinuated, subtlety, priggishly, gesture



Sections 10 - 11

Summary

Section 10. Bam takes his gun to hunt wart hogs. A group of villagers travel with him. He promises Royce a piece of the hide in order to keep him from trying to come along. Bam lets July's young friend Daniel handle his gun. He shows him how to aim at a moving target and explains how to load the gun. They kill two wart hogs. Bam feels proud to bring home meat to the village. Maureen tells him to keep the smaller pig for them. He finds this annoying at first, feeling he does not need her to tell him what to do. She explains the meat on the smaller one will be more tender. They eat meat for the first time in two weeks. Maureen and Bam are in good spirits after the meal, and for the first time in weeks they make love in the presence of the sleeping children, cockroaches, crickets, and mice in the darkness of the hut.

Section 11. July's mother tires of her hut being used by the white family. She wants to gather thatch for a new roof, but is unable to replace the roof before the cold season with people living in her hut.

To calm her, July promises to build her a new home. He tells her they will do what he says. If he allows them to stay, they can. His wife questions him about the white people. She asks him about his life in town. Did he answer to the white woman there—cook this, clean that. July remarks he did not do the cooking. There was a woman for that. His wife's interest peaks when he mentions there being another woman, but her concerns fade when he mentions the woman shared a room with the male cook.

Analysis

Even though they are adjusting to their new reality, their sense of entitlement from wealth and whiteness continue to play out. They appear unconcerned about the emotional toll their presence takes on July and his family. When Bam hunts for meat, instead of giving the choicest meat to the village people who have housed and saved their lives, Maureen encourages them to look out for themselves first. Her behavior contrasts July's sacrifice on her family's behalf.

Vocabulary

clandestine, gingerly, flippant, subversion, oedematous, effigy, incessantly, raconteur, diuturnal, obstinancy, stolidly, ominous, metamorphosed, titillation, aseptically, taciturnity, abattoir, protocol, hallucinatory



Section 12

Summary

The kids play with an orange sack. A man from the village comes to the hut and asks for his sack. He uses the sack to make ropes. The kids say the sacks were just lying around. Victor feels angry because the man accuses him of stealing. Bam gives the man two rands and pats him on his back, allowing Victor to keep the sack.

A litter of kittens find their way to their hut. Maureen and Bam want the kittens to leave. Later that day, Maureen tells Bam she drowned the kittens. Bam expresses both surprise and disgust. He looks at her hairy, unshaven legs and her scratching at the flea bites on her rib cage and thinks “poor thing.” Bam asks her why she didn’t get one of “them” to do it.

Analysis

A sense of privilege and entitlement pervade this section. Victor decides he is entitled to something that belongs to the poor black villager simply because he does not consider it as valuable. Victor’s parents encourages this behavior by allowing him to steal and then paying to keep him out of trouble. When Maureen undertakes the gruesome task of drowning the kittens, Bam questions why she did not have “one of them” do it, as if certain duties are acceptable for the poor, black villagers but unacceptable for a formerly privileged and wealthy white woman.

Vocabulary

vermin, excrement, sullenness, aggrieved, savage, admonition, mewling, seclusion, evacuate, bureaucratic, stolidly, ominous, subconsciously



Sections 13 - 14

Summary

Section 13. Maureen walks to the fields and helps dig up roots. July's wife laughs at her white, hairy, varicose veined legs. Maureen learns that July's wife speaks English. For dinner the family eats the greens Maureen picked. They try to listen to the radio, but they can only access the area military network, not their usual radio station. Maureen walks out into the evening. She walks toward the hut with the bakkie. July rests underneath the bakkie trying to fix the exhaust pipe. Daniel helps him but leaves shortly after Maureen arrives. July acknowledges to Maureen his worries about what is happening. He questions why Maureen looks for spinach with the other women and whether there is not enough to eat. She says she does it to pass the time. He tells her it is "not her work." Maureen thinks he is worried she will tell his wife about his town woman, and she tells him so. July questions what she could possibly tell his wife other than that she has been pleased with his work for the past fifteen years. She watches as July fumbles with the tools, unable to fix the car. She knows he is bad at fixing things, but she never said anything in order not to hurt his pride. She says something now. She tells him he should have Bam fix it, because he's never been able to fix machines.

July mentions that the village Chief wants to meet the entire Smales family. Maureen wonders why.

Section 14. Maureen tells Bam that the chief wants to meet with them tomorrow. Bam gets up from the bed and Maureen notices the sweaty odor of his body after sleep. She never noticed it before, because they always had access to showers and baths.

They all pack into the bakkie, including Daniel, to visit the chief. July hands Bam the keys. July put a leopard cover over the steering wheel, which Bam finds humorous and surprising. Bam feels certain the chief will ask them to leave. He does not tell Maureen about his suspicions. July goes ahead first and the rest of them wait in the vehicle.

Analysis

July occupies an uneasy existence between his former life as a servant and his village life. It is difficult for him to divorce himself from notions of "acceptable white woman's work" and his traditional role as servant. Like Bam suggesting that Maureen should have found someone else to do the dirty work of killing the kittens, the implication is there are certain activities beneath the dignity of a white person. Oddly, race and class lines continue to exist even in an area where everyone lives in some state of poverty.



Vocabulary

transcendent, discernment, pigment, egrets, vleis, varicose, plumage, transmission, vulnerable, illusion, abstractions, constipation, edible, presumptuous, phlegm, sinister, voluptuousness, quenched, transpose, sensationalism, chivalry



Sections 15 - 16

Summary

Section 15. Bam sits impatiently in the car, wondering why they cannot go in. Daniel tells Bam to let July handle it. They all sit in the car as Daniel listens to his radio. A man returns to the car with July. He asks a series of questions—why are they here, where did they come from. The man is the chief's headman.

The chief finally appears. They accept plastic chairs to sit on. The chief does not know any white man's language, so July translates. The chief asks the same questions. Why are they here? Where did they come from? He asks what happened back in their homeland? He asks why the police do not stop the violence. The chief disbelieves parts of their story. The chief asks if the Cubans and Russians can find them here. He says they are already by the mine, trying to take this land. The chief asks Bam to bring his gun and show him how to shoot. He says even as chief the white people forbid him to have a gun. He tells Bam when the Soweto and Russians come, that Bam needs to help them. The chief asks how many guns he had, but Bam says he does not kill people. The chief shows disgust. The chief permits them to leave and return to July's village.

Section 16. They return to the huts, and Bam tries to listen to the radio. They talk about the possibility of U.S. aircraft being sent to rescue U.S. citizens and citizens of other European nations. She does not feel the need to remind Bam they are neither American nor European. Maureen thinks July's comments are more about himself than the chief. July is always doing what whites say.

Analysis

There exists an uneasy feeling that the unrest they sought to escape by coming to the village is making its way rapidly to their new home. Questions of loyalty arise. Can a white man be loyal to a group of black villagers upon whom the very survival of his family has depended, or will he ally himself elsewhere?

Vocabulary

emanation, ingratiate, feeble, irascible, majestically, furrowed, denominations, contradicted, murmured, magisterial, ingratiating, unconscious



Section 17 - 18

Summary

Section 17. July's mother gathers grass to thatch the roof of the house the Smales' have taken from her. Maureen does not understand the old woman's displeasure and comments toward her or why she wants her gone. White people are trouble according to July's mother. July's wife asks him why he took the white people to visit the chief.

July says he will take her back to town with him when the fighting stops. She wants nothing to do with town. She suggests they buy more land and July set up a shop here and sells supplies now that he can drive.

Section 18. A man comes to the village with a box that plays music—a gumba-gumba. The children recognize it from back in Johannesburg. The adults pass around the beer and listen to the music play. The Smales go back to their hut not wishing to engage in the drunken partying for another night. They return to find their gun is missing.

Analysis

Everyone is growing weary, and one gets a sense things are going to change swiftly. July's mother is fed up with the white family inhabiting her hut, which she needs to prepare for the winter. July's wife is equally on edge with the continued presence of the white people. Tension builds in the tiny settlement of houses. July's wife and his mother find it hard to believe their whiteness, wealth and privilege cannot afford them another opportunity outside of their village. For the villagers, whiteness means trouble. Distrust accompanies their existence no matter how much July vouches for them, and a required visit to the chief only heightened the villagers' worries, particularly his wife and mother. Interestingly, neither group trusts the other.

Vocabulary

enamel, reproached, thatching, jaunty, lorries, prowess, complicity, contours, finials, obstinately, olfactory, fermented, receded, lurching, amplifier, contraption, dispossession



Sections 19 - 20

Summary

Section 19. The missing gun sends Bam and Maureen were in a panic. Maureen looks for July. She finds him in the hut with the bakkie. Maureen questions July about the gun. At first they suspect Victor, but it wasn't he. She asks where Daniel is and if he took the gun. Daniel is gone, and Bam does not know where. Maureen finds this hard to believe. She tells July he must get the gun back. July refuses, and he says he doesn't even know if Daniel has the gun. Angered, she then tells him she knew he had taken small items from her home. He denies this, stating she had given him those things. July tells Maureen Daniel has joined the black people in town who were fighting.

Section 20. Maureen returned to the hut and told Bam that Daniel had the gun. Later during the day, Maureen is in the hut alone and feels a change in the normal noises of the hut. There is an aircraft. Everyone is running in a panic and terror. Maureen follows the sounds of the plane to where it lands. She doesn't know if it is a friendly plane or an enemy plane, but she runs toward it. She doesn't look first for her husband or children. She takes off after the plane.

Analysis

July has reached his breaking point with Maureen's distrust and finds no reason to continue to take orders from her. The master - servant dynamic that existed in the City and the remnants of which followed them to the village exist no more. July is fed up with taking responsibility for them and refuses to take responsibility for their missing gun. Even after July expresses his outrage at her behavior and the trouble she has caused, Maureen's only response is to continue to try to order him to do what she says. Her efforts were useless. Maureen, in a desperate attempt to hold on to some measure of authority over July, accuses him of stealing some small items from their home. Their usual, expected existence in the village ends with the arrival of a plane. It is unclear whether the plane carried enemies or allies. Perhaps the realization of the approaching plane or not, her family's days in July's village were numbered, and Maureen rushes toward the plane. We are left wondering whether she rushed towards danger or safety. Perhaps it doesn't matter for her or her family at this point.

Vocabulary

fetid, cloying, obeisance, indemnified, exaggerated, petrified, jacardanas, taxonomy, reminiscence, provocative, vulgarly, despicable, roving



Characters

Maureen Smales

Maureen Smales, born Maureen Hetherington, daughter of the shift boss for the Western Area Gold Mines, is the mother of three small children—Royce, Victor and Gina. She was once the wealthy wife of Bamford Smales, a partner in an architectural firm. When she was younger, she dreamed of becoming a ballerina. Now, she struggles with defining herself apart from her wealth and social status. She fancied herself to be an enlightened and liberal white South African, treating her servants well and refusing to call them “boy,” but the experience of being at the mercy of her black servant brought her face-to-face with her own unaccepted prejudices and sense of entitlement.

Bamford Smales

Bamford Smales (“Bam”) is an architect with Smales, Caprano & Partners and husband to Maureen Smales. He strives to take care of his family, but often it seems as if the traditional role of male provider is taken over by Maureen. She often answers on behalf of the family and makes decisions on issues that will impact the entire family’s well-being. Bam relented in the decision making only to later blame her for the outcome. He becomes somewhat child-like in her presence. The measure of respect he once received for his ability to provide for their basic needs and many comforts slowly fades the longer they spend time away from their comfortable existence.

July

July is the servant of the Smales. He is a father and a husband. He also has a mistress in town. He worked for the Smales for fifteen years, and they prided themselves on treating him very well. He lived a dual existence—city servant and rural villager—and throughout the novel, the reader witnesses the tension existing between these roles. He is a leader in his family’s community of huts but expected to merely follow the orders of his white bosses while in the city. The tension between these two roles is felt most deeply when the Smales take up residence in his village. His two worlds collide. While he is aware the Smales no longer have power over him, he still behaves in a servile manner—preparing their food, taking their clothes to be laundered by the women, and telling Maureen she should not engage in the same work as the other women.

Victor Smales

Victor Smales is the son of Maureen and Bam. He is headstrong and willful. Like the other children, he adjusts to his new life but still holds on to remnants of the past. When he is accused of stealing an orange sack from a black man in the community, he is angered a black man should accuse him of anything.



Martha

Martha is July's wife. They have three children, often conceived during his visits home every two years. She is quiet but unafraid to speak her mind—questioning July about his decision to bring the white people to his village. She is strong and accustomed to managing the affairs of their home without his presence.

July's Mother

July's mother is a headstrong woman. She objects to her home being taken over by the white family, but she moves at July's request. She is old, but she continues to help provide for her family—picking grass to provide a new roof for her hut. Presumably, a great measure of respect is afforded to the matriarch in a village, but she still managed to be removed from her home to accommodate the Smales family.

Chief

The chief of July's village is a man who does not appear to command a great measure of respect from his people. According to July, he does whatever the white man tells him to do, never refusing to follow their instructions. He summoned the Smales to him to ask them questions about the fighting they had witnessed in Johannesburg. Most of his questions and comments seemed rooted in fear of what will happen when these fighters arrive on their soil.



Objects/Places

The City

Johannesburg traditionally represented progress, power and security until the black fighters seized control and overtook the city. What was once a place of education and commerce was now at the mercy of black fighters fed up with the inequalities that existed throughout South Africa. Although the author never uses the word apartheid, one can imagine the events taking place in the City are a direct representation of the events that took place during the overthrow of apartheid.

The Village

Rural village life was sometimes described as backward by Bam and Maureen. The rural villages were perceived to be less civilized and desirable places to live. The language spoken among the villagers was different from that spoken in the city. Progress and violence were slower to reach the outskirts of the villages. The village stands in direct contrast to everything Johannesburg stands for but ironically is their refuge when their presumably stable, sophisticated way of life is threatened.

Huts

Huts were fashioned out of mud and thatch. These dwelling places were modest in comparison to the spacious home the Smales enjoyed in the city, but they were a safe haven and a prized possession in the village. Existing in the mud hut challenged the Smales' notion of home. Was home merely a comfortable suburban structure, or was home any place they could find safety and security?

Bakkie

The bakkie was a car, and symbolized protection, power and freedom. It was the Smales' last symbol of their former life. They held tightly to it, thinking it to be the last bit of control they had over July. The keys represented that control. Giving and taking away the keys to the car was a constant reminder of his servitude to them. It was also a display of trust or distrust.

Money

No one in the village had a pressing need for money, but they still understood its ability to allow them to acquire certain material possessions. When the Smales arrived and started paying people for their services or goods, the people of the village prize the paper notes called rands more than clothing or any of the other basic needs that must

be met on a daily basis. They carefully tuck away the money on their person, hiding it and treasuring it. This afforded the Smales a measure of power they had enjoyed in the city.

Guns

Guns are a means of security and power when in large enough numbers. One gun is useless against the large bands of fighters, but Bam's gun in the village was a prized commodity. He shot birds and other game for his family and the villagers. It also provided protection in case they needed it. Most of the rural villagers, including the chief did not know how to use a gun. July was nervous around guns, but they were the primary means by which the black South African's gained control.



Themes

Race

The fighting taking place in South Africa is divided along racial lines. One race had enjoyed power over another race for decades and the imbalance was being adjusted through violent means. In this novel, race is defined in two terms—whiteness and blackness. Whiteness is associated with access, privilege, power and wealth while blackness is associated with poverty, servitude and inferiority. Some white South Africans like the Smales believe themselves to be sympathetic to the plight of black people until their plight threatens their comfortable existence.

Notions of race and its perceived power are both confirmed and challenged when the Smales arrive in July's all-black, rural village. Some symbols of race—July's service to the white family—remain for a time while others—July's complete obedience to the Smales instructions—disappear never to return. Even the children know of the existence of race. Victor becomes angered over a black man accusing him of stealing.

Language

Language serves as a class identifier among whites and blacks. Blacks from the City speak a certain dialect. Blacks from the village speak another. Blacks from the mines speak yet another dialect. Black people who used white English are afforded a measure of respect among white people they may not otherwise enjoy. Bam expresses his surprise when July's friend, Daniel, speaks in English and uses the proper verb tense.

Geography

The geography influences who enjoys power as well as whether race exercises any power. In the city, the power associated with whiteness is accepted. In the village, everyone questions it, including the Smales. What they were comfortable with July doing in the city in their suburban home, they are uncomfortable with in the rural village. In the village, July is a servant if he chooses to be. In the city it was his source of financial stability and a necessity. In the city, the Smales enjoyed all the comforts life had to offer, but in the Village they sleep in a mud floor hut on seats removed from the vehicle. They have nothing.

Power

Power as it is displayed in this novel exists only in relationship to race, geography and wealth. The Smales are most powerful when they are most wealthy. When they can no longer rely on currency to provide them with their status, their power diminishes and they respond defensively. July feels most powerful when he seizes a measure of wealth



in the form of the bakkie. His access to this material possession gives him a measure of power over his fellow villagers. July's race also affords him power over the white family. In his community, he is not the black servant. He is a black leader. He is not the minority. He is known throughout the village he has lived in his entire life. They can no longer relegate him to a room in their backyard. He decides whether they stay or go.

Family

Family means protection and security. Wealth cannot buy those relationships. Ironically, they have to turn to July and his family ("his people") for something their money cannot buy—a sense of community and security only family can bring. The black villagers are aware of the power of family—living close to their kin, sometimes in the same hut. They are in disbelief these wealthy white people have no one, no family member or friend they can turn to in a crisis.

Trust

Trust and its presence or absence is determined in large part by who is in power and by whiteness. When the Smales are in the city and in complete control of July's every move, they feel they can trust him. Even when they leave for periods of time for travel and entrust their home in his care, they still feel powerful and thus able to trust July. When they lose that sense of power that comes from possession and whiteness after moving to the village, their ability to trust July diminishes. They become distrusting to the extent they have no power and to the extent they are no longer in the majority.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the third person and includes quotes broken up by hyphens without the normal identification of the speaker. Often times, the reader is left to determine who is speaking when confronted with the unidentified quotes.

Setting

The setting is a rural settlement of mud huts in South Africa contrasted with the former city life of the Smales (through recollections). The story is set in the modern day. Exact dates are not given, but the events presumably take place during the mid to late 80s or possibly even early 90s in South Africa. The characters recall events from the past, making it difficult to pinpoint a precise date or year.

Language and Meaning

The language is conversational English and without formality.

Structure

The novel is divided into unnumbered Sections. Each section consists of events taking place during a short period of time in a settlement in a rural area of South Africa. The entire novel spans the course of three to four weeks.



Quotes

Why do they come here? Why to us?

-- Martha (Chapter 4)

White people here! Didn't you tell us many times how they live there... Now you tell me nowhere.

-- July's Wife (Chapter 4)

White people must have their own people somewhere. Aren't they living everywhere in the world... Don't they go anywhere they want to go? They've got money.

-- July's Mother (Chapter 4)

They can't do anything. Nothing to us anymore.

-- July (Chapter 4)

White people. They are very powerful, my son. They are very clever. You will never come to the end of the things they can do.

-- July's Mother (Chapter 4)

No. I didn't think she would be like that, a rich white woman.

-- July's Wife (Chapter 4)

They looked different there—you should have seen the clothes in their cupboard. And the glasses—for visitors, when they drink wine. Here they haven't got anything—just like us.

-- July (Chapter 4)

No. I meant it. If we can get a hold of a bag of cement, we can make a foundation. I saw some old piping lying somewhere...? You could have quite a decent rain-water supply all through the rainy months. It's a waste. The women won't need to go to the river. It'll be much better to drink than river water.

-- Bam (Chapter 5)

I caught Royce wiping his behind with a stone this morning.

-- Maureen (Chapter 5)

If only ours'd pick up the good manners along with the habits of blowing their noses in their fingers and relieving themselves where they feel like it.

-- Maureen (Chapter 6)

Why is it the whites who speak their languages are never people like us, they're always the ones who have no doubt that whites are superior? If we could talk...

-- Maureen (Chapter 6)



What d'you bloody want to do? Conjure up Superman to bear them away? I know I gave him the fucking keys.

-- Bam (Chapter 6)

And where were you yesterday? What's the story?

-- Bam (Chapter 7)

I would have never thought he would do something like that. He's always been so correct.

-- Bam (Chapter 8)

What do they know, these farm women? They believe anything. When I'm sick, you send me to the hospital in town. When you see me take this African medicine?

-- July (Chapter 8)

The master. Bam's not your master. Why do you pretend? Nobody's ever thought of you as anything but a grown man. My god, I can't believe you can talk about me like that...

-- July (Chapter 9)

Take it. It's not the keys for your kitchen. Fifteen years I'm work for your kitchen, your house, because of my wife, my children, I must work for them. Take it.

-- July (Chapter 9)

They will bring trouble. I don't mind those people. What do they matter to me? But white people bring trouble.

-- July's Mother (Chapter 9)

If I say go, they must go. If I say they can stay...so they stay.

-- July (Chapter 11)

Well, I know one thing, not all Africans are nice like July. Some of them are horrible. Horrible.

-- Victor (Chapter 12)

You're not going to take guns and help the white government kill blacks, are you? Are you? For this –this village and this empty bush? And they'll kill you. You mustn't let the government make you kill each other. The whole black nation is your nation.

-- July (Chapter 15)

He is our chief, but he doesn't fight when the white people tell him he must do what they want—they want.

-- July (Chapter 16)

What will the blacks think? What will the freedom fighters think? Did he join the people from Soweto? He took his whites and ran.

-- Bam (Chapter 16)



Good god! He runs the risk of getting killed himself, for having us here! Although I don't think he realizes, luckily...

-- Maureen (Chapter 16)

So you yourself are the one who thinks the chief will give them a house. Did you ask him?

-- Martha, July's Wife (Chapter 17)

When the fighting's over I'll take you with me, I'll take you back and show you, you'll stay there with me. And the children too.

-- July (Chapter 17)

You've got to get the gun back.

-- Maureen (Chapter 19)

You stole small things. Why? I wouldn't tell you then but I tell you now. My scissors like a bird, my old mother's knife grinder.

-- Maureen (Chapter 19)

Me? I must know who is stealing your things? Same like always. You make too much trouble for me. Here in my home too. Daniel, the chief, my-mother-my-wife with the house. Trouble, trouble from you. I don't want it any more. You see?

-- July (Chapter 19)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Discuss power and how it is displayed in the novel. Who had it? How did they keep it? How was the presence or absence of power tied to geography, race and/or gender? What attempts were made to divorce power from these elements and by whom?

Topic 2

What did the main characters understand about race? Who held power? Who obeyed whom? Who had access to privilege because of race? How did the access change over time? What events shifted the balance of power associated with race? How did the Smales and July interpret these events differently?

Topic 3

Describe July's understanding of his relationship with the Smales while he worked as their servant in town and after he returned with the Smales to his village. Describe the master-servant aspects of their relationship and how these remained the same and changed over time.

Topic 4

Discuss the idea of home and how it stays the same and changes depending on their geographic location. How did July's ideas of home change whether he was in the City or the Village? Describe the Smales' understanding of home. How do the children understand home differently than the adults? Discuss the change in the relationship between Bamford and Maureen. Contrast their relationship before and after their escape to the village. How do the children change in relationship to their environment over time? How is their relationship with their village environment similar to or different from that of the adults? Compare and contrast Maureen's relationship with July before and after the escape.

Topic 5

Describe the class relations that exist in the black African community. What differences are noted between rural blacks and town blacks? What differences are noted between black Africans fighting for freedom in the city and those living in rural villages?



Topic 6

Compare July, Bam and the Chief and their displays of leadership. How are they similar and different in their leadership styles? Describe Maureen, July's wife, and July's mother and how they carry out their roles as matriarchs. How are they similar and different in the way they interact with the males in their homes and with their children?

Topic 7

Discuss the political beliefs of Bam and Maureen Smales. How are those beliefs similar to or different from July and his people? What side of the unrest did July, Bam and Maureen fall? How were their political beliefs influenced by their race, their class, and their perceived notions of power or powerlessness?