

Little Bee: A Novel Study Guide

Little Bee: A Novel by Chris Cleave

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Plot Summary

Little Bee is the second novel by writer Chris Cleave. In this novel, a young Nigerian woman is released from an immigration detention center where she has been held for two years after sneaking aboard a British tea ship. This woman, called Little Bee, makes her way to the home of Andrew and Sarah O'Rourke, the only people she knows in England. However, Andrew has recently committed suicide and Sarah is still reeling from the shock which is compounded by the sight of Little Bee, someone she had thought was dead. Little Bee is a tragic story of simple humanity that leaves the reader struck by the inevitability of life even as they learn what it means to be human.

Little Bee is released from an immigration detention center only to learn that one of the other three girls also released the same day as her convinced an official at the center to have them all released without the proper paperwork. Little Bee calls Andrew, a man she once met on a beach in Nigeria, and tells him she is coming to see him. However, the girls cannot get a taxi and find themselves staying on a small farm across from the detention center. In the middle of the night, one of the other girls kills herself. Afraid that she will be sent back to Nigeria, Little Bee runs off into the night in search of Andrew O'Rourke.

Five days after Little Bee's phone call, Sarah Summers O'Rourke receives a visit by the police at work and learns that her husband hanged himself. Sarah coasts through the next five days, struggling to deal with her own grief as well as her guilt. Sarah has been having an affair for more than two years and feels that her affection for her husband died long ago. However, Sarah misses Andrew deeply and feels that she should have been able to save his life if she had been aware of and been able to fight his growing depression. Sarah blames herself for Andrew's depression, not only because of the effect her affair had on him, but also because it was this affair that inspired her to take Andrew on a Nigerian holiday two years ago and it is what happened on that distant Nigerian beach that Sarah knows led to her husband's depression and death.

On the morning of the funeral, Little Bee knocks on Sarah's door. Sarah lets her stay, taking her to the funeral along with her four year old son. That night, Sarah asks Little Bee to tell her the story of what happened on the beach that fateful day. Little Bee describes how she and her sister had fled the men hired by the oil companies to kill everyone in their village. However, the men came after them because they could not leave witnesses. Early one morning the girls had reached the edge of the jungle. As they waited for dawn, they saw a white couple walking along the beach, visitors from a nearby hotel compound. The sounds of dogs in the distance frightened the girls and they came out of the jungle and begged for help. The white couple, not understanding their situation, began to leave. However, a group of men with machetes marched out of the jungle and surrounded them. They wanted to take the girls and kill them, but the white woman refused to let them go. The leader asked the white man to cut off his finger in exchange for the girls' lives, but he could not do it. The woman did, however, and the leader promised to spare one of the girls before he dragged them both away.



Sarah learns that after the men dragged her and her sister away, Little Bee was forced to listen to the men rape and murder her sister. Afterward, Little Bee walked until she came across the British tea ship that would take her to England. Now Little Bee wants to help Sarah through the death of her husband, to return the favor in which Sarah saved her life. Sarah pledges to help Little Bee become a legal immigrant in Britain, but before she can, a visit to the river ends in the disappearance of Sarah's son, Charlie. Little Bee calls the police to find Charlie and the police arrest her. Little Bee is soon deported. Sarah travels with her and stays in a hotel with her to protect her from the military police. However, when Little Bee requests that they go to the beach so that she might say goodbye to her sister, they are overrun by soldiers and Little Bee is arrested.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

The author is an Englishman with a French wife. This relationship suggests to the reader that the author, a journalist, might have had some experience with the immigration laws of Britain described in this novel.

Chapter 1. Little Bee is given her few possessions in a clear plastic bag and told she is free to leave the immigration detention center outside of London where she has lived for the past two years. Little Bee is told she can use the telephone to call for a taxi. There are three other girls in line for the phone when Little Bee joins them. The first is told that the taxi company will not pick up immigrants anymore. Little Bee steps up and calls the taxi company and tells a lie, suggesting that she and her companions are not detainees but cleaners who need a ride to their next job. Then Little Bee calls Andrew O'Rourke, a British man she met two years ago on a Nigerian beach, and tells him she is coming to see him. The girls then head outside to wait for the taxi, but Little Bee realizes she is frightened by the idea of being free.

Chapter 2. Andrew's wife, Sarah, finds Little Bee standing on her doorstep two hours before her husband's funeral. Sarah invites Little Bee to the funeral, insisting on walking to the church even though their slow procession slows traffic and angers drivers behind them. As she sits in the church, Sarah tries to figure out how to explain to her son that it was depression that killed his father. Sarah realizes that the signs were there, but she did not see them or chose not to see them. However, Sarah knows it was that day on the Nigerian beach that caused Andrew's depression, but she closed her eyes to it out of a sense of shame for his behavior. Sarah remembers making love to Andrew the morning Little Bee called the house and having four year old Charlie walk in on them, feeling resentment over the mess he had made that she would have to clean. She also recalls the morning Andrew died, how she texted him moments before the police arrived to tell her he was dead.

At the gravesite ceremony, Sarah suddenly realizes she has not prepared her son for the actual burial. As the ceremony comes to a close and they lower the coffin into the grave, Charlie becomes upset and jumps down into the grave to save his father. Little Bee climbs into the grave and pulls Charlie out.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The novel is written in the first person point of view, but the narrating character switches from chapter to chapter. In the odd chapter, the narrator is Little Bee. Little Bee is a young woman from Nigeria who escaped her country after her entire village was slaughtered and her sister murdered in front of her. Little Bee has spent two years in a detention center where she has worked hard to learn proper English. Little Bee hopes to



make a life in England that will keep her safe from the bad men who want to kill her in Nigeria.

The even chapters of the novel are written from the point of view of Sarah Summers O'Rourke, a middle-aged British woman married to Andrew, a journalist, and mother of Charlie, a four year old perpetually clothed in a Batman costume. Sarah learns that her husband has committed suicide, succumbing to a depression that Sarah believes stems from an event on a Nigerian beach that involved Little Bee. Sarah is so wrapped up in grief that she is not surprised to find Little Bee at her door the morning of Andrew's funeral and does not immediately connect Little Bee to her husband's sudden suicide. However, the reader must suspect that Little Bee had something to do with this tragic event.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary

Chapter 3. Little Bee and the other three girls from the detention center wait for the taxi to come on the street outside. Yvette, a Jamaican woman, is nervous and keeps hoping the taxi will come quickly. When it does arrive, however, the behavior of the women and Little Bee's misunderstanding over a descriptive word causes the man to become angry and drive away. The girls begin to walk when a farmer across the street offers to let the women stay on his farm in an empty laborers' dormitory. At the dormitory, Little Bee learns that Yvette convinced one of the male officials at the detention center to release her without the proper papers. The man also picked three others at random for release so that he would not get caught. This means that Little Bee is in England illegally. During the night, Little Bee wakes to discover one of the other girls has hanged herself over her bed. Little Bee runs away, afraid the police will come and have her deported to Nigeria. Little Bee decides to walk to the O'Rourke's home.

Chapter 4. Sarah calls Lawrence, her lover, after Little Bee arrives at her door but he is busy and she cannot tell him what has happened. Sarah makes it through the funeral, thinking of Andrew and her decision to go on holiday in Nigeria two years ago in a futile attempt to repair their broken marriage. As she recalls this, Sarah finds Little Bee and asks her about that day on the beach.

Little Bee describes how she and her sister hid in the jungle for several days after the oil men came and killed everyone in their village. The men continued to chase Little Bee and her sister because they could not allow witnesses to live. Little Bee and her sister picked new names to hide themselves better and waited for the dawn to come. As the sun slowly rose, the girls could see a white couple walking on the beach just beyond the edge of the jungle where they hid.

The sound of dogs came out of the jungle and the girls knew what this meant. The white couple heard it too, but they thought it was just hunters in the woods. Then a security guard from their hotel compound came and asked them to return to the compound. The couple argued, convinced the guard was blowing things out of proportion. The girls came out of the jungle and begged to go with them to their hotel. The white man thought this was just an act and he stormed off. However, a group of men came out of the jungle with machetes and stopped them. The men wanted the girls. They killed the security guard from the hotel. The man offered to pay them money to spare the girls. The leader took his money and then threw the wallet on the sand. The leader said he wanted the man to cut off his middle finger, then he would let the girls live. The white man tried, but could not cut off his finger. The white woman did, however. The leader told the white woman that she had spared the life of the younger girl, but the older girl must die.

Little Bee has fallen asleep. Sarah calls Lawrence again and asks his advice. Lawrence tells her she should call the police and have Little Bee removed from her home. Sarah



refuses, but she sleeps on Charlie's floor in fear of what Little Bee might do in the night. As she waits for sleep to come, Sarah remembers the tense flight home the same day as the beach incident and how Andrew never forgot.

Chapters 3-4 Analysis

In these chapters, the reader learns that Little Bee has been released illegally from the immigration detention center. This means that if Little Bee is caught by the police she will more than likely be sent back to Nigeria and sure death. This frightens Little Bee, but she remains determined to find Andrew O'Rourke. The reader is unclear at first what it is that Little Bee wants from Andrew. However, with the story of what happened on the beach that fateful day, the reader comes to realize that Little Bee blames Andrew for what happened to her sister.

Little Bee and her sister needed help and they asked it from the white couple they found on a beach in Nigeria. However, the man, Andrew, was unable to do what was asked of him. In reality, what the leader asked for Andrew to do was something that most people would most likely be unable to do, therefore it seems harsh to blame him for his failure. However, Andrew's wife was able to do it and she blamed him for his weakness. Sarah believes that it is this that led to her husband's deep depression over the next two years culminating in his suicide.

It is important in this set of chapters for the reader to note Sarah's belief that she, Andrew, Charlie, and Little Bee have all taken on personas that they hide behind. Little Bee has refused to use her own name since the massacre at her village. Andrew hides behind depression and his work. Sarah has taken on the personas of wife, mother, and editor, ignoring her true self that is still buried deep inside of her. Charlie takes on the most obvious disguise of all, his choice to wear a Batman costume day and night. All of this is symbolic of the confusion of identity with which all human beings suffer from time to time.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

Chapter 5. The following morning, Sarah wakes Little Bee and asks to be told what happened after she and her sister were dragged away that day on the beach. Little Bee tells her how the men took them down the beach until they came across an abandoned boat. The men put Little Bee inside the boat and then raped and murdered her sister brutally as she listened. When they were done, the men went to sleep and their leader swam out to sea. After a while, Little Bee sneaked out of the boat and went back down the beach to where she found Andrew's wallet and took his driving license and his business card. Little Bee then walked down the beach until she came to a harbor where she boarded a British tea ship. Little Bee tells Sarah she is illegal and worried about what will happen to her. Sarah tells her that she will try to help her.

The nursery school calls and tells Sarah that Charlie is acting out and cannot be controlled. Sarah and Little Bee go to the nursery and learn that the teachers forced him to take off his Batman costume and this is why he has become violent. Little Bee speaks to Charlie when Sarah collapses in tears. Charlie calms down and walks home with Sarah and Little Bee. Little Bee offers to stay with Sarah until they can adjust to their new reality, but Sarah balks.

Chapter 6. Sarah remembers how she argued with Andrew about the type of reporting she does on her magazine, leading her to decide to write an article on the Home Office. Sarah went to the Home Office and was led into its bowels by a press officer, Lawrence Osborn. As they made their way to his office, the news of the current Home Secretary resignation burst from the television screens. Lawrence soon learned he would have to write a letter of condolence to the Home Secretary, something that left him feeling insecure. As he and Sarah talked about it, they began to flirt and it soon became something else. Over the next few months, Sarah and Lawrence had a passionate affair until Andrew happened upon it one night at a party. Andrew left for several days. Sarah called Andrew and begged him to come back, for their child's sake if nothing else. Sarah suggested they take a holiday to work out their differences, eventually suggesting the trip to Nigeria.

As Sarah and Little Bee talk over the future, Lawrence arrives on the doorstep. Lawrence has told his wife he is taking a business trip to Birmingham in order to stay a few days with Sarah. Sarah does not want him there at first, but allows him to stay. However, Lawrence makes it clear he does not like Little Bee being there and they argue. Lawrence begins to leave, but Sarah calls him back.



Chapters 5-6 Analysis

Sarah learns about the death of Little Bee's sister and what she had to endure in listening to the murder. The reader comes to appreciate Little Bee's spirit as they learn about the darkness that has invaded her life, a darkness that explains Little Bee's obsession with suicide even as she looks at the world around her as a bright place full of possibilities. Later, Little Bee talks with Charlie about coming out from behind a disguise, showing the reader how much she appreciates the need for a disguise at the same time aware that it cannot be a permanent thing. Little Bee is a bright girl who clearly understands much more about human nature than the average person.

Sarah describes how she first began her affair with Andrew and how it led to that beach in Nigeria. It is a typical story of modern marriage, unfortunately, with an unusual result. No matter what might have been happening between them, no one could have said that either Andrew or Sarah deserved what happened on that beach that day. It is clear, however, that Sarah blamed Andrew for not cutting off his finger, leaving a breach in their relationship that was impossible to overcome. For this reason, Sarah blamed herself for his death even as Andrew clearly blamed himself for the death of Little Bee's sister.



Chapters 7-9

Chapters 7-9 Summary

Chapter 7. Sarah wakes early and takes Little Bee with her to pick up some milk and buy gas for the car. Sarah wants to explain why Lawrence spent the night at the house, but Little Bee already understands. What Little Bee does not understand is the dependence on oil that ruined her life. Back at the house, Sarah returns to bed. Little Bee watches television with Charlie for a while before Lawrence asks to talk to her. Lawrence wants Little Bee to give herself in to the police. Little Bee refuses. When Lawrence threatens to turn her in anonymously, Little Bee threatens to tell his wife about his affair with Sarah. They are at a stalemate. Then Little Bee tells Lawrence how she arrived at the O'Rourke house three days before Andrew's suicide and hid in the garden. One day Andrew spotted her and thought she was a ghost. The following day Andrew called her out. They talked and Andrew went into the house and prepared the noose. Little Bee tried to convince him that she was real, that he should not hurt himself. Andrew hanged himself, but did not die right away. Little Bee knew she should help him, but she was so frightened of being deported that she could not decide before it was too late. Lawrence is horrified by this story and warns Little Bee to never tell Sarah.

Chapter 8. Sarah goes into work, but an argument over an article with her assistant leaves her exhausted and she returns home. At home, Sarah and Lawrence argue once more about Little Bee.

Chapter 9. Little Bee remembers once when she was eight and her sister ten that they went into the jungle alone together in the middle of the night and became lost. When Little Bee woke the next day, she found an abandoned Jeep that the jungle had grown over. Little Bee recalls wondering if the Jeep grew out of the jungle or if the jungle grew out of the Jeep.

Sarah tells Little Bee she wants to spend the day at the river. They take the train into London to the Thames. Little Bee thinks it would be easy to disappear and allow the city to swallow her whole. However, Little Bee is reluctant to leave Charlie. Little Bee returns to her friends and takes Charlie down to the river to build a sand castle. Little Bee asks Charlie to take off his costume because of the heat, but he tells her that he cannot because his dad will die. Little Bee explains to Charlie how she took a new name to hide from her past and that she will tell him her real name if he will take off the costume, but Charlie refuses.

Lawrence comes down and asks Little Bee to speak with Sarah. Sarah tells Little Bee how she found research in Andrew's office that she believes he was gathering to write a book about girls like Little Bee. Sarah has decided to continue with his work. Little Bee agrees. Little Bee returns to the river where she and Lawrence argue briefly before Sarah joins them, begins to make an announcement, then notices that Charlie is missing.



Chapters 7-9 Analysis

In these chapters, the relationship between Sarah and Little Bee grows even as Lawrence continually harps on the dangers of harboring a fugitive. Sarah feels caught between Little Bee and Lawrence, but she needs to have them both. Sarah feels she must honor her husband in a way she could not while he was alive by helping Little Bee. However, Sarah also feels she is too old to find love like she has with Lawrence and as though she quit on Andrew and cannot quit on Lawrence. This causes a great deal of stress for Sarah, forcing her to struggle to decide what is right and what is wrong.

Little Bee tells Lawrence how she was there when Andrew died, was in fact the catalyst that caused him to kill himself. This is difficult, but it shows the reader several things about Little Bee. First, it shows Little Bee's deep, unacknowledged anger with Andrew for not saving her sister. Second, it shows Little Bee's deep fear of being deported back to Nigeria. This is a fear that will stay with Little Bee throughout the rest of the novel and inspire some of her actions. At the same time, the reader sees Little Bee's deep connection to Charlie that keeps her with Sarah and company, leading her to disaster later down the road.



Chapters 10-11

Chapters 10-11 Summary

Chapter 10. Sarah quits her job after speaking to Little Bee and immediately has second thoughts. However, when she goes to tell Little Bee and Lawrence of her decision, she discovers Charlie is missing. Sarah runs all along the river, searching for her son. Eventually Lawrence takes control, organizing the search and sending Little Bee to call the police. Moments after Little Bee leaves, Lawrence finds Charlie in a dark drainage pipe.

Chapter 11. Little Bee waits for the police and then panics when one of the cops asks who she is and how she is related to the missing child. Little Bee tries to run, alerting the cop to her fear. The cop has Little Bee taken to a station for fingerprinting and she later learns that she will be held over for deportation. Sarah comes and Little Bee tells her that she was there when Andrew died, convinced that this will keep her from wanting to help.

Little Bee is placed on a plane headed to Nigeria with a security guard. Once the plane is in the air, Little Bee discovers that Sarah and Charlie have boarded the flight as well. At the airport, the guard turns Little Bee over to the local military police. Sarah's presence, however, confuses the men and they let Little Bee go. However, several cops are posted at the hotel where Sarah, Little Bee, and Charlie stay for the next two weeks.

Sarah tells Little Bee she wants to write a book filled with stories like Little Bee's, that she feels this will protect Little Bee. After telling Sarah the truth about the day Andrew died, Little Bee agrees. They spend two weeks collecting stories. One day Little Bee tells Sarah she wants to go to the beach to say goodbye to her sister. They drive two days to the beach and spend the day playing. Little Bee is sleeping when Sarah wakes her, showing her military soldiers walking on the beach toward them. Sarah sends Little Bee away, hoping she can talk the soldiers away from her. However, when Charlie makes a run for Little Bee, the soldiers fire at him. Little Bee tells them she is the one they are looking for. Little Bee then tells Charlie her real name, convincing him to finally shed his Batman costume. As Little Bee watches Charlie play on the beach, she feels that she has finally realized that the point of life is to live.

Chapters 10-11 Analysis

In these chapters, Little Bee finds herself in a position in which she must choose between Charlie and herself. Little Bee chooses Charlie. Little Bee is then deported and is shocked when Sarah tries to protect her from the inevitable. When this proves impossible, Little Bee once again chooses Charlie over herself. As Little Bee reveals her true self to Charlie and then watches him play, she realizes that the secret to life is not where you live, how you live, but living itself. It is a lesson Little Bee has learned in the



most difficult way possible, but it is a lesson that leaves her at peace even as her worst nightmare begins to unfold.

Little Bee spent much of the early part of the novel discussing ways in which she would kill herself if the men came. However, when the men do come, Little Bee's thoughts are not of suicide, but of life. It is an ironic turn that might leave some readers thinking Little Bee gave up or did not learn from her experiences, but instead it is more a poignant ending that should leave the reader with a great deal of hope for humanity despite its flaws.



Characters

Little Bee/Udo

Little Bee is a Nigerian girl whose village was overrun by men paid by the oil companies to run the people off their land. All the men were killed as the women fled into the jungles. The women were killed as well, run down in the jungle. Little Bee and her sister escaped, but the men continued to search for them for days, finally finding them on a beach. A white couple was on the beach and tried to intervene, but the man could not bring himself to pay the price the oil man wanted. Little Bee's sister was killed, but she survived to escape to Britain on a tea ship.

Little Bee is released from an immigration detention center by mistake. Little Bee sets out to find the O'Rourke's, the white couple who could have helped her and her sister, but did not. When Little Bee arrives, Andrew O'Rourke is so consumed with guilt over that morning on the beach that he is convinced Little Bee is a ghost. Andrew hangs himself as Little Bee watches, powerless to do anything. A few days later, Little Bee lets her presence be known to Sarah, Andrew's widow, even attending the funeral with her.

Little Bee desperately wants to help Sarah through her grief and repay her for saving Little Bee's life. However, Sarah is torn between her need to help Little Bee and her lover's warnings of danger. Little Bee struggles with the truth and with finding a way to survive, in the end resigning herself to the inevitability of life. However, she never loses hope.

Sarah Summers O'Rourke

Sarah is a magazine editor who is in a broken marriage. Sarah is resentful of her husband because he is intelligent and he tries to challenge her to do something meaningful with her life. For this reason, Sarah begins an affair with another man. When Andrew learns of the affair, Sarah begs him to return for the sake of their child. To fix their marriage, Sarah suggests a holiday. Sarah chooses Nigeria because of free tickets she has received as the editor of a magazine. This proves to be a disastrous choice.

In the two years after their trip to Nigeria, Sarah is aware of her husband's depression, but she does little to support him or help him past the darkness. In truth, Sarah blames her husband for his own depression because he failed to save two girls on a beach by cutting off his own finger, something she was willing to do. In the end, Andrew commits suicide and Sarah is left with the realization that she stopped loving her husband years before and she let him down.

When Little Bee comes to Sarah's house, Sarah immediately takes her in. Sarah feels that she owes Little Bee something. However, Sarah struggles between her need to help Little Bee and her lover's conviction that helping Little Bee will only lead to trouble. In fact, helping Little Bee takes Sarah back to another Nigerian beach.



Andrew O'Rourke

Andrew O'Rourke is a pompous, well-educated man who has definite opinions about everything that he expresses in a newspaper column, but fails to act out his opinions in real life. After failing to save two girls on a Nigerian beach, Andrew becomes deeply depressed. At the same time, Andrew begins to research a book about Nigerian refugees that he clearly hopes he will be able to use to help people like those girls on that beach. When one of the girls shows up at his house, Andrew thinks she is a ghost and he commits suicide in her presence.

Charlie 'Batman' O'Rourke

Charlie is Sarah and Andrew's son. Charlie is a four year old who loves Batman and refuses to remove the costume his mother has bought for him. Charlie does not truly understand death and he struggles with his father's death. In the end, the reader learns that Charlie wears his Batman costume because he wants to save his father. Little Bee convinces him, however, that sometimes it is better to be yourself.

Lawrence Osborn

Lawrence is a government employee who lives a mundane life and considers himself something of a loser. Lawrence has been having an affair with Sarah for more than two years and is deeply in love with her despite his wife and three kids at home. When Andrew dies, Lawrence comes to comfort her, but ends up fighting endlessly with her over her decision to help out Little Bee. At the end of the novel, Lawrence sends Little Bee to call the police, leaving the reader wondering if he has done it intentionally to allow the police to take Little Bee out of their lives.

Nkiruka/Kindness

Nkiruka is Little Bee's sister. Nkiruka is two years older than Little Bee and she escapes with her during the massacre of their village. When they reach the beach, Nkiruka suggests they take names that are not indicative of their village. Nkiruka chooses Kindness. In the end, Nkiruka is raped and murdered by the men hired to empty the village for an oil company. However, Little Bee imagines Nkiruka is with her throughout her journey to and around England.

Clarissa

Clarissa is a good friend of Sarah's and works with her at the magazine. Clarissa pushes Sarah to publish fluff articles, often talking her out of the more hard hitting articles in order to support their readership. When Sarah takes time off for her husband's funeral, she returns and finds Clarissa firmly entrenched in her office.



However, it is Clarissa who urges Sarah to change her mind when she decides to quit her job.

Yvette

Yvette is a refugee from Jamaica. Yvette is released the same day as Little Bee. Little Bee later learns that Yvette had sex with an official at the detention center to convince him to have her released. The man did as asked, choosing three women at random to be released with her so that no one will stumble upon his scam. This is how Little Bee is released even though she is still technically illegal.

Linda Osborn

Linda Osborn is Lawrence's wife. Lawrence believes that his wife is ignorant of his affair with Sarah, but Sarah thinks that Linda knows. Later in the novel, Little Bee threatens to tell Linda about Lawrence's relationship with Sarah if he were to turn her in to immigration.

Neck Wound Guy

Neck Wound Guy is the leader of the men who are chasing Little Bee and Kindness out of the jungle the morning of the fateful meeting on the beach. Neck Wound Guy tells Andrew if he will cut off his middle finger that he will let the girls live, but Andrew cannot bring himself to do it. Sarah cuts off her finger, sparing Little Bee's life, but not Kindness's.



Objects/Places

Tea

Tea becomes symbolic of her land to Little Bee.

Machete

Sarah cuts off her left middle finger with a machete.

Driving License and Business Card

Little Bee takes Andrew's driving license and business card out of his wallet after her sister is killed.

Electrical Cord

Andrew hangs himself with an electrical cord.

Hawaiian Shirt

Little Bee wears a shapeless Hawaiian shirt in the detention center in hopes of avoiding the attentions of men.

Newspapers

Little Bee learns to speak proper English by reading newspapers in the detention center.

Research

Sarah discovers research Andrew has done on Nigeria and refugees in his office after his death.

Abandoned Boat

The men hired by the oil companies take Little Bee and her sister to an abandoned boat on the beach where they force Little Bee to hide inside the overturned boat while they rape and murder her sister.



Batman Costume

Charlie O'Rourke constantly wears a Batman costume, connecting the superhero with his ability to keep his father alive and well.

Black Hill Immigration Removal Centre

Black Hill Immigration Removal Centre is the name of the detention center where Little Bee spends two years after arriving in England on a tea import ship.

Jungle

There is a jungle near the village where Little Bee lives with her family. Little Bee and her sister escape into the jungle during the massacre of their village.

Nigerian Beach

Sarah and Andrew O'Rourke meet Little Bee and her sister on a Nigerian beach after slipping out of the hotel compound where they have been on holiday. This meeting leads to tragedy, causing a depression that will eventually cause Andrew to commit suicide.



Themes

Immigration

This novel tells the story of a young woman who has come to England illegally. Little Bee leaves the detention center where she has been held for two years with the belief that her release is legal, only to learn that she has entered the country illegally. While Little Bee's entry into the country was intentional, her release as an illegal is not completely her fault. Little Bee's reason for coming to England are also quite urgent and compelling, her desire to live.

As the novel progresses, the reader learns how some people in England feel about immigrants. A great many characters in the novel express disgust at the people who come to England illegally, as well as disbelief at the idea that these people are detained against their will for years under harsh conditions. Not only this, but one of the characters expresses a deep concern for the laws that govern people who become involved in harboring immigrants. It becomes clear that a great many people in England do not have sympathy for people like Little Bee.

Immigration is a central theme to this novel because of the impact leaving her country and being forcibly returned has on the main character, Little Bee. It is a difficult position in which Little Bee finds herself, a need to be safe, but unable to find a place where she can easily find safety. This novel seems to underscore many people's misunderstanding of immigration and the needs of those who come to other countries illegally. For this reason, immigration is a major theme of the novel.

Hope

In this novel, two women cross paths at dark times in their lives. When Little Bee first meets Sarah O'Rourke, she is running from men she knows want to kill her. Little Bee turns to Sarah for help and for a few minutes feels hope when Sarah attempts to help her. However, this hope is shattered when Little Bee's sister is brutally murdered. Little Bee never gives up, however, and continues to fight until she finds herself on Sarah's front door step.

Sarah has just lost her husband to suicide when the novel begins. Sarah's husband has killed himself because of the day they met Little Bee when he failed to save her and her sister. Sarah struggles to face her own role in Andrew's depression and suicide, as well as the horrific experience Little Bee had to experience with the death of her sister. However, Little Bee's survival brings hope to Sarah's life and she clings to it, using it to convince herself that she can save Little Bee. For these reasons, hope is a theme of the novel.



Identity

Little Bee and her sister take new names that morning on the beach in hopes that should they reach safety they will be able to hide with these new names. Little Bee continues to use this name long after her sister has been murdered, even after she has come to England where she hopes to find a new life and safety.

Charlie insists on wearing a Batman costume and going by the name Batman. Charlie believes that if he wears this costume he can save his father from death. At the same time, Sarah feels like she has lost her identity in her roles as mother, wife, lover, and editor. Sarah thinks that they all live in a disguise, facing each day with this disguise out of fear what it would mean to face the world as themselves. In the end, however, Little Bee convinces Charlie that they do not need to hide anymore, revealing her true name to him. For this reason, identity is a theme of the novel.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The narrating character differs from one chapter to the next. The odd chapters are seen from Little Bee's point of view, while the even chapters are told through Sarah's point of view. This point of view creates an intimacy between the reader and these two characters, opening the door to an understanding of these women that the reader might not have otherwise.

The first person point of view is the most intimate a writer might utilize in fiction. This point of view allows the reader to develop an intimate relationship with the characters that is not available in the third person or second person points of view. In this novel, the author has two main characters he wants to reveal to the reader, therefore he switches from one narrator to the next, creating a mild amount of confusion for the reader, but an intimacy that overcomes this confusion.

Setting

The novel is set primarily in London. The novel begins with Little Bee coming out of a detention center on the outskirts of London and making her way to the suburbs where the O'Rourkes live. As Little Bee makes her way through this alien world, she suffers some confusion from the number of people she sees and the customs that are so alien to her own. It is after this that the reader learns of a beach in Nigeria where Little Bee's life changed forever when she met the O'Rourkes.

The settings in this novel could not be more different from one another. London is a sane, metropolis that most readers will understand from their own experiences. The beach in Nigeria where this story basically begins, however, is a contrast of tones. The beach seems like a peaceful, happy place, but it soon becomes the scene of darkness that changes the lives of Little Bee and the O'Rourkes forever. This setting, though utilized briefly in the novel, becomes a symbol of loss that starkly contrasts with the city where both Little Bee and Sarah try to find hope.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The language tends to be somewhat formal throughout, both because of Sarah's level of education and employment as a writer and editor as well as Little Bee's determination to speak the Queen's English well in order to help her gain asylum in England.

The language of the novel contains few foreign phrases that are not easily explained, but it does contain some slang that might be unfamiliar to non-British speakers. The language of the novel, however, stays true to the characters and gives an authentic



sense of who these people really are. The author has done a great job imitating the language of someone who has learned English as a second language, as well as a native speaker with a high level of education. For this reason, the language of this novel works well with the plot.

Structure

The novel is divided into eleven chapters. The narrating character is divided between these chapters evenly, with Little Bee narrating the odd chapters and Sarah the even. The story is told in a round-about fashion, with the reader learning the true story of that day on the beach in past tense, as well as several other elements of the story that are important to understanding the climax of the novel.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot is the story of how Little Bee's arrival at the O'Rourke home impacts the family. One of the subplots develops around the events that led to the O'Rourkes and Little Bee meeting in the first place. Another subplot centers around Sarah's affair with Lawrence. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"Most days I wish I was a British pound coin instead of an African girl." Chapter 1, pg. 1

"The English countryside stretched away to the horizon. Soft mist was hanging in the valleys, and the tops of the low hills were gold in the morning sun, and I smiled because the whole world was fresh and new and bright." Chapter 1, pg. 20

"Finally it was Little Bee who went down into the grave and held up my son for other hands to haul out." Chapter 2, pg. 43

"If the men come suddenly I will be ready to kill myself. Do you feel sorry for me, for thinking always in this way? If the men come and they find you not ready, then it will be me who is feeling sorry for you." Chapter 3, pg. 47

"It was exhausting, prospecting for grief like this, unsure if grief was even there to be found." Chapter 4, pg. 87

"Three weeks and five thousand miles on a tea ship—maybe if you scratched me you would still find that my skin smells of it." Chapter 5, pg. 129

"Handing out in-flight meals in a plane crash. That's what our affair was meant to be." Chapter 6, pg. 161

"I still do not know what gasoline truly looks like. If it looks the way it smells on a rainy morning, then I suppose it must flash like the most brilliant happiness, so intense that you would go blind or crazy if you even looked at it. Maybe that is why they do not let us see gasoline." Chapter 7, pg. 181

"You start off thinking you can kill all the baddies and save the world. Then you get a little bit older, maybe Little Bee's age, and you realize that some of the world's badness is inside you, that maybe you're part of it. And then you get a little bit older still, and a bit more comfortable, and you start wondering whether that badness you've seen in yourself is really all that bad at all." Chapter 8, pg. 209

"What is an adventure? That depends on where you are starting from." Chapter 9, pg. 211

"My social conditioning fought against my panic. I felt ashamed." Chapter 10, pg. 236

"I felt my heart take off lightly like a butterfly and I thought, yes, this is it, something has survived in me, something that does not need to run anymore, because it is worth more than all the money in the world and its currency, its true home, is the living. And not just living in this particular country or in that particular country, but the secret, irresistible heart of living." Chapter 11, pg. 264

Topics for Discussion

Who is Little Bee? Why is she called Little Bee? How has she come to England? Why has she been detained for two years? How much longer might she have been detained? Would Little Bee have ever gotten out of the detention center? Explain. What did Little Bee hope to find in England? Did she find it?

Who is Sarah O'Rourke? What happens to her in the early chapters of the novel? Why does Sarah blame herself for this event? Did Sarah do something to cause her husband's depression? Was Sarah to blame for the depression? How might Sarah have handled her husband's depression differently? Did Sarah love her husband?

Who is Andrew O'Rourke? Why was he depressed? What did he blame himself for? What did he do to soften the guilt? Should Andrew have blamed himself for the deaths of those girls in Nigeria? Would you have been able to do what Andrew could not? Why did Sarah do it? What was the result?

Who is Lawrence? Why does Lawrence fight so hard for Sarah to turn Little Bee out of her house? Is there some merit to Lawrence's arguments? How does Lawrence's opinion support the opinions of many people in England and America? Should immigrants be sent back to their homes? What would have happened to Little Bee if she had not escaped her country?

Why does Charlie wear his Batman costume all the time? Why does Sarah support this? What reason does Charlie give to Little Bee for wearing the costume? Why would the child think this? How does Little Bee convince Charlie to take the costume off? What is the result?

Why does Little Bee not tell Sarah immediately that she was in the house when Andrew died? Could Little Bee have done more to save Andrew? How does Little Bee's inaction in Andrew's death compare with his inaction to save her sister? Could either have done something different? Explain.

Discuss the final section of the book. Why does Little Bee just watch Charlie play? Why does she not try to escape? What does Little Bee mean when she says that living is not about where you live, but living? Why does Little Bee not look for a means to kill herself? What has changed in Little Bee in the course of the novel's plot? What does this mean for Little Bee? For the other characters?