

# **The Laughing Monsters Study Guide**

## **The Laughing Monsters by Denis Johnson**

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# Plot Summary

“The Laughing Monsters” by Denis Johnson is the story of two old friends and colleagues who reunite on another adventure in West Africa where they first met. Their first encounter together was in Freetown in 2001, just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in America. Intelligence and counterintelligence was escalated exponentially around the globe after the attack on New York and Washington and the African nations were no exception.

Michael is a native Congolese and is handsome and charming. He has had some four fiancées and brings with him to Freetown his fifth fiancée whom he met when he was training international groups at Fort Carson in Colorado. Davidia St. Claire is a beautiful African-American who is also the daughter of Michael’s former U.S. commander.

Although Roland has been invited to Freetown to travel with Michael and Davidia to Michael’s tribe in Uganda to get his people’s blessing for his marriage, Roland is also working as an attaché for NATO and the American intelligence to keep an eye on Michael and report in on his activities. He has drawn the attention of the intelligence world because he is suspected of dealing in enriched uranium – something that must be stopped before it gets into the wrong hands. Roland, of course, does not reveal his duality to Michael or to Davidia.

Michael is always thinking and planning. He and Roland profited greatly during the Sierra Leone civil war some time ago. Michael has plans for the two of them to strike again. Although he is vague and continues to tell Roland that he all will be revealed eventually, Roland is not able to pin down exactly what Michael is up to. As a result, Roland has no recourse other than to send in NTRs – nothing to report reports – to his superiors which draws suspicion onto him. It is suspected that Roland may have jumped shipped and aligned himself with Michael and whatever money-making scheme he is cooking up.

At the same time, Roland is dealing with Hamid who offers him \$20,000 for intelligence that includes maps to fiber-optics cable systems in Western African and the coordinates for NATO technological safe houses. It is not clear whether Roland is actually considering the deal or if it’s a ruse and part of his mission.

Roland, Michael and Davidia travel by plane, bus, car and foot on their long journey into Uganda to the village of his ancestors. Their journey is rife with deception, uncertainty and confusion. They meet many challenges and dangers. Ultimately, Roland is detained by intelligence officers who are vague about their loyalties. One of the officers who interrogate him finally admits that he is an attaché with U.S. Naval intelligence – but no names.

Roland has nothing to reveal because he has not learned what Michael is up to. The two old friends have a vicious fight in which Michael claims that Roland has betrayed him. Even though Michael threatens Roland with his machete, the two are able to reach

back and reinvigorate their old relationship. Roland makes a decision about what side to come down on which is not revealed until the conclusion of the story.



# PART ONE – Section 1

## Summary

It is eleven years since Roland Nair had been in Freetown airport in West Africa. He looks around for Michael. As he arrives on the ferry, he spots Horst. Roland checks into the Papa Leone, the only hotel that has a swimming pool and reliable electricity. At the hotel, he sees a pretty young girl across the way selling herself. Roland's communications are cut off at the hotel – the Internet is down and he can't get a new SIM card there. When Roland is at the pool he runs into Horst, a former undercover Interpol agent. Horst suspects that Michael is into diamond smuggling. Diamond smuggling is more lucrative than heroin smuggling but far riskier.

The next morning Michael had left a message at the front desk to meet at the Scanlon. Roland gets a ride on the back of a motor bike to the Elephant Market. Roland enters a photocopying shop named, "Elvis Documents" where Mohammed Kallon, the proprietor, tells Roland he'd seen Michael and referred to him as a deserter. Mohammed is suspicious about who Roland is working for. Roland wants to see his computers and heads for the mop closet. Roland enters a code into interlock which gives him access the basement. Roland sits down at a desk, logs onto the computer and sends a coded message to Tina that he wants the "file 3TimothyA" sent to him. Tina sends the file within minutes. They are both risking life sentences but only Roland knows that. Tina doesn't ask questions; she loves Roland.

Alone in the men's room of a restaurant, Roland secretes the Cruzor USB under the divider between the two toilets. Roland meets with Michael at the Scanlon Hotel lobby. Michael introduces Roland to a beautiful black girl, Davidia St. Claire, who has an American accent. She's from Colorado; Roland is half-American himself. Roland volunteers that Michael saved his life three times. They all plan to meet for dinner. In Michael's hotel room, the power is down. He pulls a leather whip from a drawer and pulls a dagger out of its handle. Michael is handsome and is always smiling and laughing but can be lethal. Once when they were together, he killed two snipers with great dispatch. Roland pushes Michael for the reason he asked him to come there – what is the plan? Michael tells him that it will be revealed. He promises Roland the life of a king with his own militia and a different young girl every night. The plan doesn't involve diamonds; it's about metals and minerals.

Alone at the bar, Roland feels guilty about involving Tina. He thinks they might be married when he returns once he's relieved of his current duty which is reporting on the activities of Michael Adriko. When Michael joins him in the bar, he tells Roland that people are on his trail. He had not seen Roland for seven years. He left Afghanistan and trained at Fort Bragg and worked as a trainer for internationals at Fort Carson in Colorado. The government promised he would become a U.S. citizen and enter the U.S. Army as an officer. They lied. Michael tells him the first step of the new plan is for them to go to Uganda to attend his wedding. He tells Roland that they will get rich.



## Analysis

Roland Nair is in the dark about his meeting with Michael. It is obvious that he doesn't trust Michael. The themes of lies and deception are strongly hinted at. The lies and guilt lay the groundwork for a theme of guilt which is a natural result of being dishonest with someone, especially a friend or loved one. Roland's suspicions about Michael leave him feeling guilty because Michael had saved his life in the past. Law enforcement is brought to bear with the introduction of Horst who is with Interpol suspects that Michael is dealing in either diamonds or heroin. Horst is obviously following Michael, and Michael is savvy and sophisticated enough to know it.

Roland has to walk a fine line because he is on a secret mission to find out what Michael is up to. However, he cannot let on to anyone else what his mission is. Due to the nature of his relationship with Michael – they were friends and partners when they were last together – it is a stressful situation for Roland. He must keep up appearances yet try to probe Michael for information that he can report back to his NATO supervisors who he have tapped him for the mission. Roland is playing a dual role – the overt one of friend and the covert one of NATO agent; hence, Roland is guilty of deception himself although it is one sanctioned by a law enforcement agency.

There's something else that Roland feels guilty about. Guilt seems to be already establishing itself as a motif in this early stage of the story. Roland shows a lack of character when he asks his lover, Tina, to send him a file. Tina also works for NATO and should not be sending him the file, but she loves him and doesn't question him. His request to her is reprehensible because he knows that what he's asking for could put both of them in jail. He knows that, but she doesn't, and he doesn't tell her. This episode hints at Roland's lack of character which could be a very important foreshadowing as the plot is revealed.

### Discussion Question 1

Describe how the problems that Roland has with his ability to communicate with his superiors may give them the wrong impression. What lengths does Roland go to in order to stay in contact with his superiors?

### Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Michael reveal immediately the real reason he wanted Roland to join him in Freetown? Why is it important that Roland find out as soon as possible?

### Discussion Question 3

Where was Michael assigned after he left Afghanistan and what role did he play? Why did Michael feel that the U.S. government had betrayed him?

## Vocabulary

queue, gangway, loitering, incomprehensible, percussionist, gravitas, quay, tarmac, concierge, okada, protocol, algorithms



# PART ONE – Section 2

## Summary

Michael tells Davidia that he met Roland, in Freetown in 2001. NATO had people in Africa two weeks after 9/11. He was with NIIA – NATO Intelligence Interoperability Architecture but he wasn't a spy. Michael said he was in fiber optics with the CIA which Roland denies. Roland tells Davidia he's in budget and fiscal work now. Roland is on the brink of being engaged to Tina who's an attorney with NATO in Amsterdam. Roland was raised by his father, a physician, in Switzerland. He hasn't seen his mother since he was eight. When he returns to the hotel, the clerk gives him a note from Hamid about the sale of the contents of his Cruiser.

The next day Roland transfers to the Scanlon Hotel. Even though he was sent to Freetown, Roland is happy to be back in the anarchy and madness. He doesn't want to be a king like Michael suggested. He just wants to live. Roland files his first report stating only that he made contact with Michael with details to follow in the next few days. He returns to "Elvis Documents" the next day. Mohammed tells him that Michael had been attached to U.S. Special Forces in eastern Congo and that he's currently AWOL. Michael had come to Freetown on the run. Roland reads a Reuters report that a Special Forces group out of Fort Carson, Colorado, will handle an LRA mission.

Roland meets Hamid at a restaurant in the afternoon. Roland insists on walking on the beach so no one hears them. Roland has maps of the U.S. military fiber-optics cable network in seven West African countries and the coordinates for NIIA Technology Safe Houses. Roland can make the transfer digitally. Hamid warns him that passing false information would mean his assassination. The price had been \$20,000 but it has changed. Now it's nothing because they will be partners and share in the profit Hamid will make selling the information to his client. Hamid becomes angry, calls Roland a liar and storms off. Back inside, Hamid has cooled down but he still wants the original deal.

Roland, Michael and Davidia are at an airstrip for a charter flight to Uganda. Roland tries to get a peek at Michael's passport as Davidia is trying to get a peek at Roland's. He tells her that it's American. Michael's is Ugandan and ready to expire. As they waited for their plane, Bruno Horst shows up. Before they board, Roland throws his SIM card in the ocean just in case NATO is tracing it. Then he threw his phone in. They boarded the plane and took off for Uganda.

## Analysis

Roland shows his true nature when he thinks about being back in the action. Roland seems to be in the midst of inner conflict considering he's on a mission to gather intelligence on Michael yet Roland is happy to be back in the "anarchy and madness." There are strong indications that Roland is not only duplicitous with Michael, he may be





using the opportunity for his own end and duping NATO. He has made contact with a man named Hamid who is interested in buying top secret intelligence on U.S. military fiber-optics cable networks in West African countries and coordinates for NIIA Technology Safe Houses. If this gambit is not part of Roland's mission – which is not readily clear – then he is betraying NATO and U.S. intelligence which had been working closely with NATO since the 9/11 attacks.

Roland is a Danish citizen who was raised in Switzerland by his father who is a physician. His mother is American but he hasn't seen her since he was eight. Perhaps his willingness to sell American intelligence to the enemy stems from a deep-seated hurt that he has over being abandoned by his mother. U.S. Intelligence may be a subliminal symbol of his mother who deserted him.

## Discussion Question 1

Under what circumstances did Roland and Michael first meet? Why does Roland tell Davidia that he is in budget and fiscal work?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe the negotiations that Roland is undertaking with Hamid. Why is the intelligence that Hamid is interested in potentially damaging to the U.S.?

## Discussion Question 3

What information does Mohammed provide to Roland about Michael and his current status? Why is that information important to Roland's mission?

## Vocabulary

encryption, supposition, delve, aquiline, pandemonium, contraband, phosphorescent, inscrutable, martyr, renegade



# PART TWO – Section 1

## Summary

Roland, Michael and Davidia get their Ugandan visas at the Entebbe airport with no trouble. They are staying at the Executive Suites on Lake Victoria. The next day Roland gets another phone, another Nokia. At dinner, Michael tells Roland that they'll travel north to his village which is in sight of Newada Mountain. He feels the spirits of his ancestors calling to him. Michael is a displaced Congolese. He's bringing Davidia there to meet his parents. His biological parents are dead but everyone in the village is one family. If things feel right, he and Davidia will get married then and there.

Davidia and Roland are both in the dark about where the wedding will take place. Michael is being mysterious but tells them it's in Uganda not Congo and that they'll be taking the bus from Kampala to Arua which is the birthplace of Idi Amin Dada. In March some celebrate his birthday. Roland wants to take a plane but Michael fears that if Horst and Mohammed are trying to track them down, they can find out where they are through airplane manifests. Davidia gets upset when Roland mentions that Michael normally liked Middle Eastern girls.

Michael is drunk and begins to talk about Tenex, an organization that handles "U-235 material from dismantled Soviet warheads." Tenex dilutes it and sells it to the United States. Roland becomes upset. "Jesus, Michael – again, the U-235?!" Roland hooks up with a black girl in a blond wig – a "chocolate Marilyn Monroe" he calls her. Michael had handed him a strange poem about a panda from Uganda that Roland doesn't understand.

The next morning Davidia wants to talk to Roland alone. Michael is taking his morning run. He and Davidia had a fight. Michael had tried to listen through the wall to Roland and the girl. She has an attraction for Roland which he doesn't react to. She tells him that Michael has horrible nightmares, talking in his sleep. She thinks something is wrong with him. He took her cell phone and won't let her call home. Her parents must be frantic. Roland explains that Michael is a war orphan and is extremely insecure. He has a pathological need to be in control. Davidia reveals that her father is Colonel Marcus St. Claire, Michael's CO and the garrison commander at Fort Carson.

Roland talks with Michael. He wants to know what he's up to. He thinks Davidia is going to get hurt. Roland asks if Michael ran off from his U.S. Special Forces Unit – if he's AWOL. Michael prefers to call it "detached." Roland wants to know if they're "messing around" with fissionable materials. Michael's not ready to tell him about the U-235. Roland wants to know if Davidia's father will want her back if they travel to the Congo. He'll want her back regardless, Michael responds. Michael wants to know if they can expect Green Berets to be following them. Michael has to return to his village so he has the blessing of his people. Michael had deserted but in truth he is returning to his people who he abandoned.



## Analysis

Michael's fear of being tracked down compels him to insist that Roland, Davidia and he take the bus instead of flying. His guilt over his secret plans drives him to pick the most uncomfortable and potentially most dangerous way to travel to his ancestral home. He puts his friend and his fiancée at risk because of his plans that he doesn't want exposed. Michael's behavior can be explained on two levels. His actions are narcissistic since his demands consider only his own needs. On another plane, Michael knows that he is being followed and could be arrested. Therefore, his reaction could be characterized as one of fundamental survival.

Roland becomes alarmed when a drunken Michael begins talking about Tenex, an organization that deals with U-235, uranium extracted from Soviet warheads. When Michael tells Roland that the material is diluted and sold to Americans, he is aware that Michael may be getting in too deep. Roland knows that his superiors will be interested in this information. His concern that Michael is "getting in too deep" indicates that Roland cares about Michael. Perhaps the bonds of an old friendship are struggling to surface. Again, the theme of conflict comes to the forefront.

Davidia is becoming disillusioned with Michael. For the first time, Davidia who is an American, is seeing her Ugandan fiancé in his natural environment and she doesn't like what she is seeing. He is acting strangely, talking in his sleep and experiencing nightmares. Is guilt and fear driving this behavior because he is aware of the danger involved? There may be old ghosts that Michael failed to deal with in the past. The return to his homeland is dredging up old, unwanted memories – another foreshadowing that Michael may be forced to confront those old ghosts.

### Discussion Question 1

What circumstances has caused Roland to insist that they travel by bus instead of plane?

### Discussion Question 2

What information does Michael reveal to Roland that Roland finds disturbing? How does this information place the US in possible jeopardy in their fight against terrorism?

### Discussion Question 3

How does Michael respond when Roland confronts him about deserting his position? How does Michael excuse himself for his actions?

## Vocabulary

intermediary, oblivion, strictures, mandatory, reverberations, manifests, entourage, condescend, stranglehold, garrison, fissionable



## PART TWO – Section 2

### Summary

The next morning they are traveling in a hired car toward Kampala. They take a bus from there to the northeast corner. Roland observes Michael transition back to being a poor African. The bus conductor holds a minute of prayer that they wouldn't be killed on their journey. Roland thinks to himself how he could have found Wi-Fi in Entebbe and sent a message to NIIA. They sent him into a mess but told him nothing – not mentioning the speculation about U-235, Michael's desertion and Interpol's interest.

The bus travels at a fast clip 100 kilometers down both two and one-lane roads. Big lorries, coming at them with armed men allowed them half the road; their wheels sinking into the mulch. There are several accidents along the way. One accident completely stops their progress temporarily. They arrive in Arua and take rooms at the White Nile Palace Hotel. The rooms are surprisingly clean and comfortable. Roland and Davidia have dinner without Michael. Davidia tells Roland that Michael left after they arrived. She doesn't know where he went. He only said that he was "seeking word."

Michael stays away most of the time over the next few days. Davidia spends timing reading by the pool except when it rains. Roland spends time at the bar eventually vowing not to drink for seventy-two hours. He writes a message to Tina off-line. There is no Wi-Fi. Emmanuel, the hotel manager, is not helpful in getting the system up and running. He asks Tina if she heard from Grant or Major Kenworth or anyone from Section 4. (Section 4 is Internal Inquiries, counterintelligence. They are the spy catchers who hunt down traitors.)

The next day Roland hires a motorbike driver to go to the Catholic radio installation/communications center so he could connect to the Internet. A Ugandan soldier leads Roland to the Secure Communications Environment room or SC lounge. The "safe" communications set-up had been arranged by MI6, British intelligence; it was not an NIIA or NATAO site. He opens an email from Tina. She sent him a half-naked photo of herself. He sends Tina the message he had composed off-line and explains that he had to go to the Catholic Center to get Wi-Fi connection. He thanks her for the photo. He composes a message to Hamid reiterating the deal – 230K in U.S. dollars and a 50-50 split. He suggests they meet in 30 days and that a sample is in the basement of Elvis Documents in Freetown, an NIIA safe site. Roland ends the message telling Hamid not to reply until the answer is yes. In a message from his superior at NIIA, Roland reads that he is to check in daily and provide as much information as possible – doing so is imperative.

That evening, the rain floods the dining room. "Smile" by Nat King Cole plays over and over. Michael shows up with keys to a Toyota Land Cruiser. He was given it to use by the security guys at Pyramid Environments. He knows the manager from Fort Bragg where he trained Colombian commandos. Michael spots some men at another table. He



thinks it's Spaulding and goes over to talk to them. Davidia is worried about Michael's behavior. Michael introduces Spaulding to Davidia as MI6 which he denied.

## Analysis

Michael's strange behavior turns to bizarre. Once the trio arrives in Arua, Michael is suddenly missing. By his absence, he is throwing Roland and Davidia together. There is already a growing attraction between the two and having alone time will only serve to fuel their emotions and feelings for one another.

Roland is continually frustrated by his lack of Wi-Fi access. His mission is to report each day on the activities of Michael who is suspected by NATO and U.S. intelligence of being involved in the selling of dangerous enriched uranium to terrorists. With his all-consuming fear, he is well aware that he is playing with fire. Roland is a savvy and sophisticated agent, however. Surely there would be a way for him to communicate to his superiors so they don't grow suspicious of him. The contrast between Roland's outward actions with internal forces that are apparently guiding him and are stronger than the superficial behavior he displays represent a paradox – which may be at the heart of this story.

Roland is dealing with his own potential betrayal. His only mission is to keep an eye on Michael and his activities. But he is dealing with a man named Hamid who wants to buy secrets from Roland that would compromise the United States in its war against terror. There is no indication that this negotiation is part of his NATO mission. Therefore, Roland is also dealing with terrorists and enemies of the U.S. for financial gain. Roland's concern about Michael getting in too deep and his own behavior may indicate that he's on the verge of betraying those who tapped him for the mission.

## Discussion Question 1

What excuse does Michael give Davidia for being away after they arrive in Arua? How does she react to his behavior?

## Discussion Question 2

What lengths must Roland go to in order to maintain communications with his NATO superiors? What is the final deal that Roland offers Hamid? Discuss whether Roland's dealings with Hamid are or are not part of his official mission.

## Discussion Question 3

What indications are there that Roland's superiors are disturbed that they are not receiving daily reports from him? What could their dissatisfaction with Roland's performance lead to?

## Vocabulary

debauched, incommunicado, lorries, manifestos, moratorium, thwart, vendetta, imperative, commandos, Sikh



## PART TWO – Section 3

### Summary

Michael showed Spaulding his first two hundred dead bodies when Michael was only a young teenager. Roland met Spaulding in Afghanistan. Roland tells Michael that it's already time to leave town.

At the pool, Michael is talking to a Euro, a white man. Roland learns that the man is the businessman that they're in business with. Michael tells Roland that things are in motion and it is time for full disclosure. They meet in Michael's room where Michael produces a package the size of a softball wrapped in yellow electrician's tape. Roland picks it up; it is surprisingly heavy. Michael tears the package open and reveals a small lump of an odd-looking mineral; it is uranium but not the Russian U-235. The uranium comes from the Shinkolobwe mine in the southern Congo, the same place the uranium for the Manhattan Project came from.

Michael expects to get \$1 million for the little lump which is just ore but will fool a Geiger counter. Michael is running a scam. Michael says if there was any Russian U-235 on the market, New York City would be a carter. The man Michael was talking to is a South African named Kruger. They'll get \$25,000 up front and promise to provide five more kilos and the money will be on the table. Kruger works for the Israelis. Roland realizes that Michael is scamming Mossad. Roland tells Michael that he knows Mossad, can contact him and convince him to call it off. Michael backs but wants the initial \$25,000. Roland is disgusted and says he's done.

Roland heads to the bar for a few drinks where he sees Spaulding who's leaving for Entebbe. He has a nightmare and when he wakes in his room, Michael is sitting beside him on the bed. Roland thinks he was drugged by Spaulding. Roland and Michael drive to the market where they meet Kruger and a Zulu man. A fight breaks out when Kruger accuses Michael of stealing. The Zulu grabs Michael from behind and Kruger begins swinging at him with a knife. Somehow Michael sends the Zulu to the floor and rams Kruger with a bench. Michael snaps Kruger's forearm over his knee and breaks it. Michael has sustained wounds to his arm and needs stitches. Roland was able to grab Michael's bag that contained the material. They arrive at the hospital at same time someone is helping Kruger inside. Michael thinks that Kruger wanted the front money for himself. Roland says that Kruger was playing him and that he is too trusting.

Michael tells Roland to get Davidia and their things and return to the hospital. Davidia is reluctant to pack and move. Roland discusses how the intelligence world had changed since 9/11. There's unlimited money available to pay for intelligence. Davidia still thinks he's CIA which he adamantly denies. He confesses that he is still with NATO and has been assigned to watch Michael. He tells her that Michael is in trouble. Roland says that he and Davidia need to get out right away. He makes a pass at her but she rejects him. She decides to go with Michael. Roland asks that she not mention what happened





between them. They drive to the Catholic Internet site. Roland has a message from Hamid. The final offer is \$100K. Roland responds to an angry email from his NIIA boss. He complains about not being briefed on exactly what was coming down. He asks him why he was placed in a position to be murdered. He writes Hamid back with a one word responds, "Sold."

## Analysis

Michael's hubris is on display when he finally reveals his outrageous plan to Roland. Perhaps he didn't trust Roland initially because of his background with NATO. Michael may feel the need to have a partner in this dangerous operation and is compelled to bring Roland in although he may not fully trust him. Michael has reached a point of desperation. He needs Roland and hopes their long-term relationship and his own charms can draw him on to his side. Michael may sense that Roland has a secret agenda but that his allegiance to it is fading.

Finally, the theme of honesty emerges in this section – at least as far as Roland is concerned. Roland is appalled by the plan. Michael plans to pass off some worthless ore for Uranium for the unbelievable cost of \$1 million. When Roland is informed of all the details, he knows that Michael is planning to scam a dangerous terrorist. Roland wants nothing to do with something that could only turn out very badly. Roland can save the day by contacting Mossad, who he knows, and convince him to back out so that Michael saves face and doesn't have to produce the false material. Roland knows that even if the ore would initially pass a Geiger counter test, it would be just a matter of time that the terrorist would realize that he had been duped. Michael's life wouldn't be worth the price of the phony uranium. Roland's cause in prior sections has come to fruition. Michael is in too deep and Roland wants no part of the plan. Roland responds to Michael honestly for the first time. Roland seems to gain strength from his truthfulness. It seems to have diminished Michael in his eyes. Roland is energized by honesty, but does it have a chance to last?

Loyalty, honesty and commitment are themes that emerge in the interaction between Davidia and Roland. With his feelings growing for Davidia, Roland feels compelled to tell her the truth. He is still with NATO and his mission is to watch Michael. He doesn't want her to be in jeopardy and stresses that Michael is trouble and potentially in grave danger. He wants Davidia to leave with him for her own safety. But her love for Michael has weakened but has not died. She feels a loyalty for him and decides to stay with him. Roland decides to be honest with Davidia to convince her to leave with him. Her sense of loyalty and commitment keeps her with Michael. Davidia's decision forces Roland to deal with rejection.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe the money-making deal that Michael has planned. Why does he want Roland to join him in the plan?



## Discussion Question 2

Why is Michael's plan a potentially dangerous operation? Who are Kruger and Mossad?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Roland tell Davidia about his mission? What does she decide to stay with Michael despite what she has learned about him?

## Vocabulary

unfurl, nonsensical, bewildered, inertia, mumbo jumbo, brigands, cranium, studiously, leprous, lethargy, coffer, conjure



## PART THREE

### Summary

Roland, Michael and Davidia head toward the Congo border in the borrowed – now officially stolen – Land Cruiser with a Congolese guide. Michael throws his phone into the White Nile River; he tells everyone to toss their communication devices. Davidia tosses her phone and Roland his phone and lap top. Michael speeds along the rough roads. He drives carelessly, hitting a woman and leaving the scene. Davidia is sobbing and begging Michael to return to the woman but he refuses – she wasn't watching, he says. They sleep in the car that night.

Near sunrise, Michael starts talking like a madman. Davidia is sure he is going insane. Michael is taking Lariam because he had malaria once. It can cause nightmares and bizarre behavior. They are back on the road by 9 am and see very few motorized vehicles. Many pedestrians stroll on the roadway on either side of the road. The Land Cruiser makes them stand out. They can't risk facing any officials so Michael goes off road down rugged footpaths and gulleys.

The Happy Mountains of Michael's youth come into view. He connects with them even though others look at them as "laughing monsters." Michael warns Roland about the devil and the practice of voodoo. Michael's people had stabbed and martyred the missionary James Hannington. The wedding will be blended into the Burning of the Blood, a week long ceremony. On the second morning, they realize that they have arrived at the foothills of the mountains. Their vehicle breaks down. They go by foot to the village. The village people speak Michael's dialog but they're not his "close family."

Roland tells Davidia that Michael's using her for something mystical. Davidia is willing to leave on foot with Roland. They hear the sound of multiple vehicles and gunfire. Michael bursts out of a group of trees yelling for them to run. Michael guides them through a banana grove. He has them get down. They can't run from bullets. Roland sees that the Land Rover has been set on fire. Michael leads them along the edge of a grove to a cornfield. Most of the villages had escaped but Roland, Michael and Davidia are captured.

Roland is placed in the main hut with the commander, a Congolese general, and a dozen other men. All his money and possessions are taken from him. He spots a young girl outside digging what looks to be a grave. The general thinks Roland is the leader of the three because he's white. The next morning the general holds a court martial proceeding for the boy who'd blown up the Land Cruiser. The general taunts the kid but doesn't execute him. The general then threatens Michael but as soon as Michael shows weakness, the general drops his weapon and talks softly to him. As he passes by, Michael tells Roland and Davidia that everything will be fine. He's talking to the people a few of who are Kakawa like Michael is. Roland has fallen in love with Davidia. He is grateful that she is all right and sorry that Michael is not dead.



## Analysis

Some level of chivalry is displayed by Roland who is not able to leave Davidia in danger and stays with her and Michael. He knows that Michael would have a meltdown if he knew what he had confessed to Davidia, so he asks her to keep quiet about it. Davidia undoubtedly realizes that she made the wrong decision when Michael, who is place them in more peril by speeding along the rugged terrain. When he hits a woman with a car and she appears to be dead but Michael still leaves her behind, Davidia pleads with him to return to the woman to help her. Michael is obsessed with his own plans, however, and coldly refuses to help the woman. Michael's narcissism is gaining strength and Davidia is seeing Michael for the brutal and self-centered man that he really is. What has she gotten herself into?! Roland may be enjoying Michael's display of ruthlessness and experiencing a sense of self-righteousness since he warned Davidia about Michael. He may be wrong to think that Davidia will turn to him if she is through with Michael. At her core, Davidia is a strong and independent woman who doesn't need a man.

Michael displays more aberrant behavior when he warns Roland about the "magic men" of the jungle who can transform themselves into animals. Michael hints that he can turn into a lizard. By now, Davidia has heard more than enough and she wants to leave with Roland. She is terrified of the man who she loved and wanted to marry. During a vicious attack by Congolese soldiers, Roland, Michael and Davidia are captured. Things become more complicated for Roland who has given into his feelings for Davidia and admits that he is in love with her. Roland has only known Davidia for a very short time. His "love" for her may actually be an admiration for the characteristics of strength, loyalty and commitment that she represents – characteristics that are mainly missing in Roland.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Michael throw his phone in the White Nile River? Why does he insist that Roland and Davidia throw their communications equipment away, too?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Michael driving like a maniac on the dangerous roads and terrain of the region? Why is Michael so cold about the woman he hit with his car? How does Davidia react?

## Discussion Question 3

What happens to the person who blew up Michael's car? Why does the Congolese general taunt the young boy and Michael with execution? Why does the General decide to talk with Michael?

## Vocabulary

capillary, cymbals, copse, martyred, syncopating, mystical, coercing, tangent, apathetic, aide-de-camp, malefactor, harangue, pensive, candor



# PART FOUR – Section 1

## Summary

Roland writes to Tina that he's sorry he involved her. She'll probably be hearing from the boys in Sec 4. He tells her to remind the Sec 4 boys that she works for the U.S. not NATO. He suggests she return to the U.S. Roland is safe from the Congolese Army. He has a French cell mate named Roux. The U.S. Tenth Special Forces Group has detained him. He thinks Davidia is there somewhere. Michael is not there. He got away.

An American with the NIIA is flown in by helicopter. He wants to talk to Roland, but Roland refuses to talk to him. A sergeant interrogates him about his messages to his superiors. He wants to know why they were all NTRs – nothing to reports. Roland responds that they were NTRs because there was nothing to report. He doesn't know where Michael Adriko is. Roland is told that he is being detained under U.S. antiterrorism laws which does not afford him an attorney. Roland offers to tell the sergeant everything if he can be sent up the chain of command. In the end the sergeant accepts the deal.

An officer meets with Roland in a Quonset hut. They have noticed a lot of anger in Roland's letters and messages. Roland is angry. He was sent to the region on a mission and now he's being treated like a terrorist. Roland is considered "absent" from his mission. He was sent to watch Michael who went AWOL and got into enriched uranium. Yet, Roland never had anything to report. The man tells Roland that he is a U.S. navel attaché, attached to a U.S. Special Operations command. Davidia is not in any kind of trouble but Tina may be. Roland has not seen Davidia.

Roland tells his captors that he can only vouch for the existence of two kilos of uranium. Roland offers to be paid to return to his mission to see if the parties can be brought back together again – the Israelis and the people who Michael is working for. The sellers want \$2 million or forty-five kilos of gold. Roland spots Davidia being led to a helicopter. He runs toward her calling her name but she doesn't hear him and takes off in the copter.

Roux wakes Roland up and tells him it's time to go. Roland had suspected that Roux was not what he appeared to be. They leave at night in the rain and go by foot down the road. Roux opens a sack that contains an envelope with the rest of Roland's money and a map of the Congo. Roux also has a printed copy of Roland's email messages and his original handwritten notes. In the bottom of the sack are two fake kilos of gold worth \$2 million. There will be a fix on Roland's location throughout the rest of the mission. Roux gives him the sack and all its contents and leaves to the camp.



## Analysis

Guilt overwhelms Roland. He feels remorse for getting Tina involved in his dubious activities. He knows she is in jeopardy. He hopes she returns to the U.S. where she'll be safer. But her involvement in his actions is not the only source of his guilt. He knows that she still hopes for a future with him. She, of course, doesn't know that he has fallen in love with another woman.

Michael proves his cunningness by somehow escaping from his captors. Roland is being "detained" and shares a tent with another detainee, a Frenchman named Roux. Roland is belligerent when he is interrogated by intelligence officers over his activities and relationship with Michael. Roland is bitter that he was sent on a mission to report on Michael and now he's being treated like a terrorist. But it is the times following 9/11 and no one really trusts anyone in the intelligence world. It's something that Roland must fundamentally know based on the experiences he has had and those in which he is currently involved. Ironically, Roland is upset that he is not trusted yet he's been on a duplicitous mission that targeted his old friend.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Roland refuse to talk to the NIIA agent who is flown in to interrogate him? What are NTRs and why is Roland grilled about them?

## Discussion Question 2

What have intelligence officers detected in letters and messages written by Roland and why does it concern them?

## Discussion Question 3

Who does Roux turn out to be? What does Roux supply Roland with and how does he help him?

## Vocabulary

redacted, impinges, redundant, salvo, vestibule, gunnery, haversack



## PART FOUR – Section 2

### Summary

Roland writes a letter to someday be given to either Tina or Davidia or both. Roux assures Roland that no harm will come to him but warns him not to drop the mission, as he'd be hunted down. Roland feels the pressure of being tracked by people who would either imprison or murder him. He walks for hours in the rugged terrain of the jungle. He expects to see Michael at any time but doesn't. He stops at a café in Darba where he passes out on a table. Roland follows a coffin maker who is going to Newada Mountain.

Roland writes a letter to Davidia to tell her that he is still alive. He is not held by others but is captive to his mission. He tells her he arrived at the village of New Water Mountain. A white woman had approached him telling him all the chickens, goats and most of the children were dead. The village is toxic because of the lust for precious metals. She and her husband will be driving back through in the next day or so and will try to make room for him in their car. He looks around a few huts and calls Michael's name with no response. Roland sleeps in an abandoned hut. A woman's scream wakes him in the morning. He's thirsty but afraid to leave the hut.

From his hut, Roland sees Michael near the coffins holding a machete and arguing with a large woman. There are 29 women sitting on the ground around there. They have gathered for the burial of two children. The woman is the village queen, La Dolce. Michael whacks at La Dolce's chair and threatens to destroy the place. Roland is afraid that Michael will kill her. When Roland finally emerges from the hut, he tells Michael that Davidia went home. Michael thinks Roland betrayed him. He feels like cutting the lies out of him. Michael isn't interested in going to Bunia with the missionaries and then onto Freetown. Michael tells Roland to leave him alone. Roland stumbles to a creek and drinks filthy water.

Roland is miserable and ready to return to the Americans and go to prison. Roland is very drunk. He tells Michael they have to return to Freetown because he'd negotiated the sale of some material. They argue viciously; Michael threatens Roland with his machete. Michael is softer the next day. He speaks about his violent past. He killed his first person when he was nine. His siblings died in the disturbances. He fears he has brought down a curse on his own clan. He vows to never take another life. Michael wants travel to Bunia with the missionaries. He tells Roland that it's still the "two of us." They make their way to Freetown where Roland meets Hamid who examines the goods and gives Roland \$100,000, the price for betraying everyone. They hire a large boat to travel to Abidjan, Liberia or anywhere. Maybe they'll stay on the run. They don't have to put down roots anywhere.





## Analysis

Guilt and betrayal have endured and are a strong motif of “The Laughing Monsters.” Roland is confusing his feelings for Tina and Davidia. The letters and messages that he writes are sometimes just to Tina and sometimes just to Davidia. However, some of the letters seem to blend together and he writes to both of them. Perhaps it’s the stress of his recent activities, his conflicted feelings for Davidia and the guilt he has about Tina that has created his confusion. Roux is actually an agent and helps Roland escape from his detention. He warns him to not complete his mission or else he’ll be hunted down.

Roland meets up with an angry Michael again who feels betrayed by his old friend. But after angry words and threats of violence the two men realize that they only have each other. Davidia has returned to the States and Tina is part of Roland’s past. Michael, in his own way, feels he has brought bad luck on himself – the first sign he has shown of introspection.

The paradox of Roland’s confused loyalties at last has denouement. In the end Roland chooses the dark side and sells the intelligence for \$100K. He has lost everything else – the woman he used, the woman he loved, his reputation and his freedom if he is caught. He says that the \$100K is the cost of betraying everyone he knows. They have no one to turn to but each other. The story ends with Roland and Michael on the run and telling themselves that they don’t need to put down roots anywhere.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Roland become confused as to who he is writing his letters to? Why is it important to him that he tells everything about his mission and experiences?

## Discussion Question 2

Why have the women of the village gathered? Describe the interaction between Michael and La Dolce.

## Discussion Question 3

What decision does Roland make at the conclusion of the story? What does the future hold for Roland and Michael?

## Vocabulary

garrison, berm, kiosk, travesty, aubergine, genocide, animists, elephantine, ostentatious, pungently, formalin, crapulence, poignant, intrepid



# Characters

## Roland Nair

Roland Nair is reuniting with an old friend and partner, Michael Adriko, who he made a lot of money with during the civil war in Sierra Leone, West Africa. It has been seven years since they'd seen each other. Michael contacted Roland to meet up with him again to join him and his fiancée on a journey to the Ugandan village of his ancestors. Unknown to Michael, Roland has another agenda. He has agreed to conduct a mission for NATO and U.S. intelligence. They suspect that Michael is involved in the sale of enriched uranium - something that has to be stopped in its tracks. Roland's only responsibility is to report on Michael's activities.

Roland suspects that Michael is up to more than just bringing his bride to his village. Michael hints at another venture but is vague and cagey. Roland, therefore, has nothing specific to report on Michael's activities and submits daily NTRs – Nothing to Report reports – which brings scrutiny on Roland. The powers that be begin to think that Roland might have jumped ship and joined up with Michael in whatever money-making scheme he is planning.

Roland is detained by U.S. intelligence officers who interrogate him about his and Michael's activities and plans. But Roland has nothing to report. Roland himself had been involved in a deal to sell U.S. intelligence to a middle man who planned to resell it. Initially, it is not clear whether it's part of Roland's mission or if he is making a dirty deal himself.

Michael suspects that Roland betrayed him and they have a vicious encounter. But in the end, they find a way to mend their relationship. Roland makes a decision about which side he comes down on in the shadowy world of intelligence and counterintelligence at the conclusion of the story.

## Michael Adriko

Michael Adriko is a thirty-six year-old African man who is handsome, charming and well-educated. He is described as a misplaced Congolese whose parents and siblings were lost in tribal warfare. He was raised in a village in Uganda and educated in Kampala, the nation's capital. Michael had befriended and worked with Roland Nair in Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa, where the two made a lot of money during the civil war that took place there years before.

Michael contacts Roland to meet him again in Freetown for a reunion. Ostensibly, Michael wants Roland to accompany him and his fiancée, an American named Davidia St. Claire, to his village in Uganda so that he can receive the blessings of his ancestors for his impending wedding. Roland comes to Freetown to accompany Michael and Davidia to Uganda but he has another agenda; he has been tapped by NATO



intelligence to keep an eye on Michael and report on his activities. Michael is AWOL from a U.S. military unit he was attached to. He had been a training officer for international recruits. He felt betrayed by the U.S. military that made promises to him that they didn't keep.

Michael, Davidia and Roland travel by air, bus, car and by foot into the Uganda interiors. Michael does have a money-making scheme that he wants Roland to be part of. But for most of their time together, Michael is vague about what the deal is. When Roland is detained by U.S. intelligence, Michael gets away. Later, he confronts Roland who he feels has betrayed him. Michael and Roland resolve their differences and Michael hires a large boat that will take them away to anywhere they want to go.

## **Davidia St. Claire**

Davidia St. Claire is the beautiful American who is Michael's fiancé. They met when he was assigned to Fort Carson in Colorado. Davidia is the daughter of Michael's Fort Carson commander. She comes to Africa because Michael wants to marry her in his village.

## **Tina**

Tina is Roland's love interest who he corresponds with during the entire story although she is never "seen." She is an American who works for NATO in Amsterdam. Roland updates her on all his experiences and thoughts. He feels guilty for involving her when his mission goes dark.

## **Mohammed Kallon**

Mohammed Kallon operates the "Elvis Documents" copy shop in the Elephant Market in Freetown, West Africa. He is involved in secret deals and has a secret computer system set-up in his basement.

## **Hamid**

Roland is deal-making with Hamid who offers \$20,000 to purchase maps of the U.S. military fiber-optics cable networks in seven West African countries and the coordinates for NIIA Technology Safe Houses.

## **Bruno Horst**

When Roland arrives in Freetown, he spots Bruno Horst, a CIA agent, on the dock. Roland and Michael fear that Horst is following them.



## **La Dolce**

La Dolce is a village queen who lives in a tree near the Newada Mountain. She describes herself as the giver of life while Michael calls her the priestess of genocide.

## **Woman Missionary**

When Roland is on foot trying to return to civilization, he runs into a woman missionary who prays for the people but every morning wakes up wanting to kill somebody. She tells Roland that if she and her husband have room in their car when they drive toward Bunia, he can ride with them.

## **U.S. Naval Attaché**

After Roland is “detained” by intelligence officers, he is interrogated by a nameless man about his activities and those of Michael. The man finally tells Roland that he is an attaché with the U.S. Navy. He wouldn’t provide a name other than that of “Susan Rice.”

# Symbols and Symbolism

## NATO

When Roland and Michael first met in Freetown, Sierra Leone, ten years before, Roland was with the NATO NIIA – NATO Intelligence Interoperability Architecture. Even though it was an intelligence-gathering agency, Roland was not officially a spy.

## Uranium

The story focuses around the sale of enriched uranium. NATO and American intelligence is trying to hunt down those involved in these nefarious dealings and stop them in their tracks.

## Mop Closet

A secret computer system is set up in the basement of the Elvis Documents copy shop which can be accessed only through the back wall of the mop closet.

## Email Messages/Letters

Much of the story is told in the email messages and letters that Roland composes to Tina, his lover and an employee of NATO who works in Amsterdam. Late in the story, Roland falls for Davidia and begins addresses his letters to her and Tina.

## U.S. Military Fiber-Optics Cable Networks

Hamid offers to pay Roland \$20,000 for intelligence that includes maps of the U.S. military fiber-optics cable network in Western African countries and the coordinates for NIIA Technology Safe Houses.

## Tenex

Tenex is an organization that handles U-235 material from dismantled Soviet warheads. It dilutes the uranium and sells it to the U.S.

## Machete

Michael goes off the deep end when he reunites with Roland after Roland's release from being detained by U.S. intelligence. Michael suspects that Roland betrayed him and threatens him with his huge machete.



## **Quonset Hut**

After Roland Nair is detained, he is brought to a Quonset hut where he is interrogated by members of U.S. intelligence about his and Michael's activities.

## **U.S. Tenth Special Forces Group**

When Michael was in the states, he was a training officer under the U.S. Tenth Special Forces Group which Davidia's father commanded. Michael is AWOL from that unit.

## **Magic Men**

Michael tells Roland about "magic men" who can transform their arms to the length of pythons and who can change into any animal. Michael refers to his own transformation into a lizard.



# Settings

## Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa

Roland Nair is invited by Michael Adriko to meet him in Freetown. The two old friends and partners had made a lot of money during the civil war in Sierra Leone seven years before. When Roland arrives in Freetown he notices at the airport is “still a shambles.” He remarks at the heat that hits him in the face when he steps from the air-conditioned plane out onto the steam heat of West Africa.

As Roland crosses the bay on a ferry he watches as the mass of crumbling buildings that represents Freetown’s skyline comes into view. Although he was familiar with the city, the fog of memory made him forget the poverty and blighted condition of the city. He remarks that all around the declining buildings is a “multitude of shadows and muddy rags trudging God knows where, hunched forward over their empty bellies.” The tragedy of Freetown is not its crumbling buildings but its starving residents.

Returning to Freetown is like traveling back in time to another era. The phones in Freetown actually ring. The author uses the cacophony device when Roland remarks that the phones emit “that English ring-ring! Ring ring!” The Internet going in and out is also a reminder to Roland that he is not in London or New York. As he leaves Freetown, the imagery is that of an accident on the road and a farmer arguing with the other driver while a bloody goat lies at their feet.

## Uganda

Roland, Michael and Davidia travel to Uganda so that Michael can receive the blessings of his ancestors for his marriage to Davidia. If things seem right, they may go ahead and marry in a ceremony there. When first arriving in Uganda, they land just five kilometers north of the equator. They are twenty kilometers south of Uganda’s capital, Kampala which is their destination. The headwaters of the Nile River and the Mountains of the Moon are to their west. They are warned that at an elevation of 1,200 meters, that the temperatures would not rise above 30 Celsius.

To visit his tribal home, Michael tells the others that they will head north for Newada Mountain. Michael feels drawn there by spirits of the past. Privately, Roland is concerned about venturing into such a remote locale. He is sure that NATO maintained no safe houses anywhere in Uganda and he would not be able to communicate with his superiors to whom he is to report to each day. During the trip, Michael got into a fight and checked into the emergency room at the Kuluva Hospital in Arua to get some stitches. It is in Uganda that Michael, speeding dangerously down rugged roadways, hit a Ugandan woman and left her for dead.



## **The Congo**

Michael is a displaced Congolese whose parents and siblings were murdered in tribal wars when he was a boy. He survived the war and was taken to a village in Uganda to live.

## **Amsterdam**

Tina, Roland's lover, is an American and an employee of NATO in the Amsterdam office. He confides many private things to her in letters and messages and feels guilty that he involved her in his dubious enterprises.

## **Fort Carson**

Michael was a training office at Fort Carson in Colorado which is where he met Davidia, his Commander's daughter.





# Themes and Motifs

## Deceit

A strong theme that emerges from “The Laughing Monsters” by Denis Johnson is one of deceit. The story takes place in the backdrop of the world of intelligence and espionage which by its nature is rife with deceit. At times in this story, it is difficult to determine what side the protagonist, Roland Nair, will eventually come down on. It appears especially difficult for him to make that decision.

As the story opens, Roland Nair, a former member of NATO’s NIIA – NATO Intelligence Interoperability Architecture division – is still involved with NATO although his exact capacity is not made clear. He has agreed to conduct a mission for NATO which places him in the middle of a spider’s web of deceit. His mission is to merely report on the activities of a former friend and colleague, Michael Adriko. Nair necessarily is deceitful in his dealings with Adriko who he hadn’t seen in seven years. He presents himself as a friend who Adriko wants to accompany him to his village where he is to marry his American fiancée, Davidia.

Prior to their departure, Nair visits a copy shop called, “Elvis Documents,” where he accesses a secret computer room through the mop closet. Mohammed, the proprietor of the shop, has had dealings with Nair in the past and wants to know who he’s working for but Nair does not answer him directly. Nair also has a meeting with a man named Hamid who offers Nair \$20,000 for some intelligence he has. It is not clear if his dealing with Hamid is sanctioned by NATO or the Americans or if he is actually selling intelligence. Nair is deceitful in his dealings and the author is deceitful with the reader in that Nair’s dealings are confused and unclear as to who’s side he is on other than his own.

Nair corresponds with Tina an employee of NATO who he may marry when he completes his mission. He complains to her about the danger he’s in and his worries about being murdered or imprisoned, he is fundamentally happy to be back in the “anarchy and madness.” Although he presents himself as Tina’s lover, he frequently hires prostitutes and winds up falling in love with Adriko’s fiancée, Davidia. He is deceitful to Tina throughout the story. When Adriko realizes that Nair is not what he has presented himself to be, he accuses him of betraying him and lying to him. Adriko has a machete that he threatens Nair with; he feels like “cutting” the lies out of him.

## Disloyalty

A theme of disloyalty is rampant in this story of espionage in a kind of spy vs. spy world that U.S. intelligence became after the 9/11 attacks. Michael Adriko was given what seemed to be an outstanding opportunity for a man raised in a tribal village in Uganda. He was attached to a U.S. military unit in Fort Carson in Colorado where he had the



responsibility of training international recruits to join the fight in the war on terror. Michael winds up going AWOL from his unit an undeniable action of disloyalty. But who was disloyal first?

He tells Roland that after he left a mission in Afghanistan, he trained at Fort Bragg in the U.S. and then became a training officer in Colorado. He had been told all along by the U.S. government that in exchange for this commitment, he would become a U.S. citizen and enter the U.S. Army as an officer. None of that materialized and he became completely disillusioned with the U.S. government which, he claims, compelled him to go AWOL.

Roland is a citizen of Denmark but he always tells people that he is half-American, with American relatives in the States. Michael had invited Roland to meet him in Freetown and travel with him and his fiancée to his tribal village where he would seek the blessings of his ancestor for his marriage. Roland agrees to meet him, but NATO takes advantage of the situation and taps him to monitor Michael's activities because they suspect him of being involved in some nefarious dealings in enriched uranium.

Where do Roland's loyalties lie? Does he betray his friend or does he betray his superiors who he agreed to help? Roland is involved in some dark dealings himself with the selling of intelligence to those who will resell them to the highest bidder with no concern who that highest bidder might be. Roland makes a decision to betray his superiors and stay on the run. What are the chances it will be his final act of betrayal?

## Character

The matter of character is a theme that is pronounced theme in "The Laughing Monsters" – more appropriately it is the lack of character that emerges as a recurring motif in this tale of confusing espionage and intriguing drama. The protagonist is Roland Nair and the story is told from his perspective. In this story "protagonist" does not equate with hero.

At the same time he is writing his lover Tina, who works for NATO and is stationed in Amsterdam, and thinking that he'll marry her when his mission is completed, he has no qualms about hiring prostitutes. How much does he love Tina if he can cavort with women from a region that is racked with disease? He could very easily contract a debilitating sexually transmitted disease and pass it on to her. He seems to have no morals, no conscience and focuses only what he wants at the moment. Hiring prostitutes is not the only way Roland cheats on Tina. Roland's lack of character, morals and self-restraint permits him to fall in love with Davidia, Michael's fiancée. He, therefore, shows no regard for either Michael, his friend, or Tina, his lover.

In the end, Roland decides to take \$100K and betray NATO and U.S. intelligence and give a middleman information that can cause serious damage to the efforts to defeat terrorists. Again, he thinks of himself as opposed to the harm that he could cause innocent people by his lack of values and character. Michael is not better. He is ready to

sell enriched uranium which is used for nuclear bombs to the highest bidder. But character is not a compelling force for Michael – only money is.

# Styles

## Point of View

“The Laughing Monsters” by Denis Johnson is told in the first person from the perspective of the protagonist, Roland Nair. Nair is on a mission from the NIIA (NATO Intelligence Interoperability Architecture). Although the organization is an intelligence-gathering unit of NATO, Roland is not a spy – at least officially. Roland tells the story of his relationship over a shadowy, volatile and somewhat mysterious character, Michael Adriko. Roland is assigned to merely watch the activities of Michael who, among other issues, is AWOL from the U.S. military. Roland’s job is to report on Michael’s activities but it is destiny that Roland becomes more involved than anyone had planned. The Americans are worried about Roland’s movements due to his boasting about selling enriched uranium. Since this story is post-9/11, anyone involved with such dark dealings is a suspicious actor. Roland, of course, does not reveal his true purpose to his old friend, Michael, who he meets up with in Freetown, West Africa, after a seven-year lapse in their relationship.

Roland conveys his confusion and conflicts over his mission in his letters to Tina, an American who works for NATO in Amsterdam. He sends her emails when he can and when there is no Internet connection, he writes letters by hand with the intention of sending them to her later. When the mission turns around and Roland is suspected of espionage, he regrets that he has involved Tina who he thought he might marry some day.

Roland falls in love with Michael’s fiancée, Davidia St. Claire, an American and the daughter of Michael’s Commander who led the U.S. Tenth Special Forces Group. After Roland’s feelings grow for Davidia, he begins writing her in the same fashion as he writes Tina. In the final section, he writes to both and because of the complex and confusing circumstances of his mission gone wrong and too much to drink, Roland begins to blend the letters to the two women never sure who he’s writing to. In the end, however, he wants to put in writing the status of his relationship with Michael and what side he comes down on in the shadowy world of counterintelligence.

## Language and Meaning

“The Laughing Monsters” by Denis Johnson takes place in Western Africa. Naturally, there are African names, exotic locations and references that some readers may not be familiar with or have difficulty pronouncing. The story begins in Freetown, Sierra Leone where French (*c’est moi, une femme, tres jolie*) and a language called Krio are spoken. There are references to the Elephant Market and the Ganesha Market in Freetown and to the Bawarchi restaurant and Tisio Valley. A group of street dancers are referred to as being from the Kissi Chiefdom. There are references to women wearing long African dresses and skirts and turbans and carrying large baskets on their heads.



One of the main characters is named Michael Adriko who is a misplaced Congolese who lived in a Ugandan village. He is of the Kakawa tribe and was educated in Kampala. He is taking his fiancée and friend Roland back to his village to receive the blessings of his ancestors. Michael arranges them to fly from Freetown to Entebbe and stay near Lake Victoria. They had traveled southeast from Freetown and laded just five miles north of the equator and twenty kilometers south of Uganda's capital, Kampala near the Mounts of the Moon and headwaters of the Nile River. The village of Michael's ancestors is near the Newada Mountain.

The queen of one of the villages is called La Dolce which means "giver of life." There are references to superstitions and strange beliefs. The tribal people believe in ghosts and spirits and magic. Michael makes reference to magic men who stretch their arms to the "length of a python" and change into all kinds of animals. Michael speaks of transforming into a lizard. Michael warns Roland that once pricked by a type of evergreen it draws blood and takes one's soul. The wedding of Michael and Davidia was to take place during the Burning of the Blood, a weeklong ceremony "when... the bad blood of the war" is put away.

## Structure

"The Laughing Monsters" by Denis Johnson is separated into four main parts. Part One covers the reunion of old friends and partners, Roland Nair and Michael Adriko. Together they had made a ton of money some years before during the civil war in Sierra Leone. Now Michael has asked Roland to meet him again in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Michael is vague about any intentions he may have for their reunion. Roland is tapped by NATO intelligence to monitor the activities of Michael because he's AWOL from his attachment to the US military and there is speculation that he's dealing in the sale of enriched uranium.

Part Two covers the trip that Roland, Michael and Davidia, Michael's fiancée, take from Sierra Leone to Uganda. Michael wants to get his impending marriage blessed by members of his ancestral village. Michael reveals to Roland that he has plans other than seeking a wedding blessing. He is planning a scam that will yield \$1 million and he wants Roland to take part in it.

In Part Three the trio continues into deep Uganda to the Congo border. Michael is displaying aberrant and dangerous behavior which pushes Davidia away from him. Roland is captured by Congolese soldiers but Michael is able to escape. Roland also realizes he has fallen for Davidia.

Part Four finds Roland at odds with Michael who thinks he betrayed him. But the two mend their differences and Roland betrays his superiors by selling intelligence for \$100K. Michael hires a large boat to flee. It doesn't matter where they go; they don't have to have roots.



## Quotes

I locked eyes with a young girl loitering across the street, selling herself. Poor and dirty, and very pretty. And very young. I asked Emil how many kids he had. He said there were ten, but six of them died.

-- Roland (Part One paragraph 12)

**Importance:** This passage captures the poverty and poor conditions of Freetown, West Africa.

A kilo of heroin nets you six thousand dollars US. A kilo of diamonds makes you a king.

-- Horst (Part One paragraph 64)

**Importance:** Horst is pointing out the benefit of smuggling diamonds rather than heroin even though diamond smuggling is risky.

Israel has six nuclear-tipped missiles raised from the silos and pointing at Iran. Sometime during the next U.S. election period – boom-boom Teheran. And then it's tit for tat, that's the Muslim way, my friend. Radiation all around.

-- Horst (Part One paragraph 71)

**Importance:** Horst warns Roland about the possibility of nuclear war and disparages the Muslims as warmongers.

Nobody's going to cook me and eat me, I hope,' Roland said. 'People don't quite understand,' Michael said, and he may have been serious, 'to be eaten pays a compliment to your power.'

-- Roland/Michael (Part Two paragraph 20)

**Importance:** Roland is going to be Michael's best man in a ceremony at Michael's village. Michael makes a light remark about cannibalism. Michael's response makes Roland wonder if being eaten was indeed a possibility.

Desertion is a coin. You turn it over, and it's loyalty.

-- Michael (Part Two paragraph 206)

**Importance:** Michael is trying to justify the fact that he deserted his U.S. military unit. He is asserting that his first loyalty is to the people of his village, people who he had abandoned.

The passengers settled in all around, pulling their cell phones to their heads and talking. They smelled of liquor and urine and armpit. Michael now placed himself among them, resuming the mantle of African poverty—the way a civilian African does, relaxing the shoulders and calming the hands and letting down the veil over his heart.

-- Roland (Part Two paragraph 211)



**Importance:** Roland is observing Michael as he returns to his roots. He is undergoing a metamorphosis, transitioning from living a Western lifestyle and returning to his African village.

He's going mad. We'll be holding him down while he screams bloody murder before it's over.

-- Davidia (Part Three paragraph 32)

**Importance:** After the trio reaches the Congo border, Michael begins to talk like a madman saying he's in a cocoon and is coming out of his skin. Davidia has been wondering for a while about his sanity. This episode confirms to her that he has problems.

Michael pointed at the hazy distance and claimed he saw the hills of his childhood, the Happy Mountains called by the missionary James Hannington, in frustration and disgust, the Laughing Monsters.

-- Roland (Part Three paragraph 49)

**Importance:** Michael is returning to his roots and wants to reconnect with his childhood. He remembers the region as happy while others found it mocking and monstrous.

The wedding would be blended into the Burning of the Blood, a weeklong ceremony, he said, 'when we put away the bad blood of the war, and drink the new blood of peace.

-- Roland/Michael (Part Three paragraph 51)

**Importance:** The importance of marriage to Michael is revealed in this quote. He explains that after the ceremony there is an orgy when many babies are made. But only boys conceived within wedlock can become a man of peace.

The Congolese Army couldn't reach us here. I could sleep knowing I wouldn't be prodded awake with a gun barrel and then shot; though I rather expected to be greeted one morning with some delicious coffee and informed of my arrest on a charge of espionage.

-- Roland (Part Four paragraph 12)

**Importance:** Although Roland was safe from the Congolese Army, he was being detained by NIIA and the Americans on suspicion of being a traitor. It is not clear at this point what side Roland is on.

Well, I was dispatched to this region on an assignment, and now two weeks later I'm being dealt with as some kind of terrorist.

-- Roland (Part Four paragraph 176)

**Importance:** Due to Roland's inability to discover any questionable behavior by Michael, U.S. intelligence has become suspicious of his motives. Since the 9/11 attack the entire intelligence world had grown more suspicious of everyone.



A Special Forces attaché goes AWOL, starts making alarming noises about enriched uranium. You're sent to make contact, deliver one report that you've done so, and you immediately go silent.

-- Special Forces Officer (Part Four paragraph 179)

**Importance:** This passage covers the heart of the story. Michael appeared to go rogue and seemed to be involved in selling enriched uranium. Roland was sent to monitor his activities but instead of reporting on Michael, Roland had nothing but "nothing to report" reports.