

Mating Study Guide

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Plot Summary

In 1980, in Botswana, the narrator, an American anthropologist and doctoral candidate, emerges from the African bush after an 18-month failed attempt to gather data for her thesis. She is exhausted, undernourished, and seriously disillusioned. She wants nothing more than to at least temporarily fall back into the more luxurious, self-indulgent ways of white society in Africa and heads to Botswana's capital city, Gaborone. Hoping for rest, relaxation, and romance, the 32-year-old single woman begins to tell her story, one that will reveal almost everything about her to the reader, except for her name, which is never given.

In Gaborone, the narrator quickly finds a niche within the conglomeration of whites living there: diplomats, spies, scientists, missionaries and politicians from around the world and the Dutch-descent Boer settlers who still control much of Botswana's economic and political structure. She finds herself invited to housesit so she has a place to stay, parties to go to, and several men to dally with. There is Giles, the vain, handsome, but talented photographer, who takes her to an assignment in Victoria Falls, although their relationship never really takes off, emotionally or sexually. She then finds herself more seriously attracted to Martin Wade, an exiled South African living under an assumed name. Wade is an army deserter, a sympathizer with native African independence, somehow involved as an anti-South African operant. Although she admires Martin's sense of justice and air of mystery, he does not lead a life that will really allow him to partner with anyone and they soon part.

The narrator then moves on to a middle-aged British spy known only as "Z," who suffers from agonizing back pain. She keeps him attached to her by ministering to his back, which brings him relief from his constant pain. He rewards her with the information that Nelson Denoon is visiting Gaborone. Nelson is a brilliant intellectual known for pioneering work on socioeconomic projects, which puts power back into the hands of native people. The narrator knows his work well as it has made him an academic celebrity. She is determined to meet him and has "Z" take her to a party where Denoon will be present.

A strange encounter at the party with Nelson's soon-to-be ex-wife leads to the narrator meeting Nelson and hearing him debate black and white politicians. She is deeply intrigued. Later, she tracks him down in Gaborone, trying to make a place for herself in his newest top-secret project, the village of Tsau. No one knows its exact location other than donors and supporters with visitors not yet welcome. The intention is to ward off outside influences until the new village is socially and economically strong. Nelson and the narrator have an interesting conversation and seem to connect but he tells her there is no place for her or anyone else in Tsau. She, however, is even more determined to know more about this man who she finds increasingly alluring. After finding out from his wife Grace where the village is located the narrator executes a daring plan, going out into the Kalahari Desert, and walking to Tsau by herself a harrowing experience that almost claims her life.



Once in Tsau, the narrator finds a prospering village with a much higher quality of life than that of most African villages. More surprisingly, Tsau is succeeding by turning African tradition on its head. All its charter members are women with the land deeded to them inheritable only by another female. Although there are a handful of men in the village the women are in charge, ruling themselves under a governmental body called the Mother Committee. Nelson plans to one day open Tsau to whoever cares to participate but first he wants the women who are on the bottom rung of African society to become comfortable wielding power.

Nelson seems happy to see the narrator again although he asks her to keep their previous meeting a secret. As she begins to fit into life in the village she finds allies in some of the other women and in Nelson a man like none she has ever known. When, after a long and awkward courtship, he invites her to move into his house she accepts and their romance begins in earnest.

Although Nelson and the narrator are highly intellectual and unusual people they suffer the same insecurities and fear of intimacy faced by any couple. Their love grows only to be sorely tested as tensions in Tsau grow from an internal assault by a small group of residents opposed to Nelson's continued role in the village. The narrator who has always feared giving up her independence for the approval of a man becomes more obsessed with her yearning for a permanent place in Nelson's life. He in turn becomes more worried and attached to the outcome of his work, the village of Tsau. When a series of events forces Nelson out into the desert in an attempt to save Tsau he is lost for days and almost dies. To the narrator's enormous relief he is returned alive but she soon finds he is no longer the passionate, argumentative man she fell in love with. Nelson had a metaphysical experience during his ordeal in the desert and is now in an unchanging state of bliss and acceptance. Nothing seems to matter to him one way or the other including his relationship with the narrator.

Unable to reach him as she once did and convinced he is psychologically damaged, the heartbroken narrator takes him to Gaborone for treatment but none of the experts she consults thinks he has a problem. The narrator cooks up a scheme to fix Nelson up with a beautiful young woman hoping to force him to make a choice. Her plan is successful and believing he has chosen someone else she flees Africa returning to her life and academic pursuits in America.

The narrator cannot, however, forget Nelson or find anyone or anything that begins to fill the space in her heart where he resides. When she receives a mysterious message indicating there may be someone in Tsau who thinks she should return she finds herself with a difficult decision to make. Should she remain in the United States and continue her life as she always planned or return to the scene of the most important - and disastrous - love of her life? Given the sketchiness of the information she has to go on the narrator is tormented by not knowing what has become of Nelson or whether there is still a chance for their relationship. In the last lines of the book she decides to return to Africa although to what neither she nor the reader has any idea. The only thing certain is that the love she feels for Nelson is stronger than any distance or obstacle she can put between them.



Chapter 1 (pages 5-32)

Chapter 1 (pages 5-32) Summary

In this section an unnamed 32-year-old American graduate student begins her narrative describing the political, social, and racial climate of 1980's Botswana. She is preparing to travel to the capital city of Gaborone for a respite after spending 18 months in the African bush working on a thesis in nutritional anthropology. Studying the effect of seasonal nutritional availability and its effect on fertility has proven to be unrewarding. Even in the remotest areas the hunter/gatherer societies she intended to study are becoming increasingly difficult to find. Modern foodstuffs have somehow penetrated even the most remote areas so she finds far more people eating canned goods and cornflakes than expected and very few subsisting on their traditional diets. After a year and a half she is exhausted and worried about the cessation of her menstrual periods due to physical stress and poor nutrition. Reluctant to return home she renews her visa for a year and heads to Gaborone.

At a party in Gaborone the narrator finds herself in thrall to the kind of sensual greediness she describes as common among whites of all types living in Africa. There is an intense desire for more, more, more, be it food, luxuries, money, or sex even among those who were not so inclined in their home countries. Many of the whites in Africa are there temporarily studying or fulfilling a government or business obligation. The narrator contrasts this to the average black African generally content and so lacking in greed that social programs are in place to encourage the natives to desire more material goods and work harder to get them. After 18 months of deprivation and with no thesis to show for it the narrator is ready for abundance, luxury, romance, and sex all readily available to white society in Gaborone.

Wanting to find a niche for herself that makes her available without seeming to be on the hunt the narrator decides to position herself as a cultural tour guide. Since the whites have taken over the area the native's are not inclined to be open with the whites, to share or explain their culture. With her grasp of the language and understanding of the native customs she gained while living in the bush she sees herself as a translating medium for whites interested in a culture that remains largely indecipherable outside its own membership. The narrator begins displaying her knowledge at a party and people are fascinated. She is offered a housesitting job and invitations for meals and activities are abundant. Planning for a brief rest until her savings are gone she finds things coming to her in unexpected ways - food, a place to stay, free medical care. Everyone she does little favors for insists on overpaying her. Rather than running out of money she is running a surplus.

The narrator has some quasi-romantic interludes traveling to Victoria Falls with a handsome photographer, Giles who loses his sexual interest in her while on the trip. While that is something of a disappointment she has a visceral emotional reaction to the



sheer beauty and physicality of Victoria Falls that makes her realize she is depressed, uncertain, and lonely.

Chapter 1 (pages 5-32) Analysis

Here the reader meets an unnamed female postgraduate student at the crux of a life shift. Her thesis research is a failure and she is uncertain what to do next so she decides to forsake her study in the African bush for the more luxurious life in Garborone, Botswana's capital. She quickly establishes a place in that society for herself planning to take a short vacation from life. The reader gets quick glimpses of a background overshadowed by an obese, overly dramatic mother who was forced to raise her daughter in poverty somewhere in Minnesota.

The narrator is clearly headed for some kind of major romantic entanglement, repeatedly mentioning a man called Nelson Denoon, then just as quickly drawing back determined to focus on the time that precedes meeting him. Still, the reader knows that he is coming up later in the story and will figure largely in the narrator's life. The author also reveals the narrator's fear of mediocrity, almost a phobia, and of her most unusual quality - a didactic memory. She remembers almost everything she hears and easily learns languages.



Chapter 1 (pages 32-55)

Chapter 1 (pages 32-55) Summary

The narrator, still house-sitting in Gaborone, meets up with Martin Wade, a brilliant South African army deserter, sympathetic to the native people and living under an assumed name. Martin is opposed to white South African rule and involved in mysterious ways as a contra-activist one of the few white men trusted by the black revolutionaries. Despite their shared intellect and political views, Martin is far more ascetic than the narrator is and very opposed to the luxury she represents as an American. In addition, he is involved in political activities that could get him killed and about which he cannot speak. The relationship erodes and the narrator moves on to a British spy referred to only as "Z" who originally seeks her out because he has heard of her relationship with Martin someone everyone is trying to gather intelligence on.

"Z," who is in his mid-fifties is unaware that the narrator knows he is a spy, which is something she learned while in her relationship with Martin. Her curiosity piqued she accepts a ride from him one day while walking home from grocery shopping. "Z" is vain about his looks, wears a girdle, touches up his varicose veins, has a fake tan, and sports a carefully sprayed comb-over. He is divorced, British, and lonely with a deep interest in the anthropology of Africa not shared by most within his social circle. The narrator, to her admitted shame, is attracted to the idea of extracting as many secrets from him as possible while giving him none of the information he seeks about Martin and his allies. On the rebound from Martin she is enjoying the meals, eating too much, and attention from "Z."

An unconventional physical relationship develops with "Z" after the narrator discovers he has a hidden very painful back condition. She is giving him massages and spinal manipulations that bring him more relief than he has known for years. He is extremely grateful to her. She feels good having such power to heal and alleviate pain but has not forgotten her purpose to pry secrets from him. She finally tells him she knows he is a spy and asks him to tell her a secret, even an outdated or useless one, so that she can have some of his "mysterious" inner space. She is not really trying to get closer to him but to manipulate him to achieve her goal. Even she is unclear as to why she is doing this and sickened by the way she is playing him for something so unimportant.

"Z" finally relents telling her of a village being built from the ground up a top-secret social experiment that even donors to the project are not completely privy to. The man running the project is Nelson Denoon someone whose work the narrator had greatly admired while she was at Stanford University. Nelson is a developmentalist, an expert on economic social policy responsible for a series of famous rural development projects in different countries. He is an academic darling who always seems to get what he wants for whatever he is thinking of creating. Nelson is, to the narrator, the apex of what a successful career in academia could mean. With her thesis deadline looming she is thunderstruck by the possibilities of connecting with him. It is not completely self-interest



though she is also consumed by a desire to meet a former academic hero and find out what he is like. "Z" can see how interested she is in this information and they agree to continue to meet once a week for his back massages.

Chapter 1 (pages 32-55) Analysis

The narrator is adrift in her life and without a job, family, or home, the ordinary points of reference most people live by. Her life is temporary, dreamlike, and unstructured. She is living in a country she does not plan to stay in and has no idea what direction to take next. She is staying in someone else's home, living day-to-day largely on other people's invitations, and having odd relationships with men for obscure reasons she is unclear about. Here the author shows the reader a woman living an almost surreal life of non-direction and spontaneous flow. "Z's" revelation about Nelson Denoon foreshadows a turn of events that will soon illuminate the narrator's next step.



Chapter 2 (pages 59-90)

Chapter 2 (pages 59-90) Summary

Through "Z," the narrator learns of and attends a huge, expensive, but disorganized and incredibly uncomfortable party held by an American diplomat. "Z" told her it was rumored Nelson Denoon would be there. She searches without success for Denoon until running into an American woman who is beautiful, obviously rich, and acting rather strange. The woman says she is Grace Denoon and she is looking for her husband. Grace asks the narrator for help finding Nelson. The narrator wants to find him too so is happy to have the excuse of looking for him on behalf of his wife. Grace clings to her and they finally find Denoon in a guesthouse in the middle of a debate with black and white African leaders. The narrator finds his speaking style leaves something to be desired, rambling, and at times boring but his voice is beautiful. Denoon himself is beautiful, older than the only picture of him she has seen but still with black hair in a ponytail and a handsome face.

Nelson's wife hides herself away seemingly plotting something while the narrator is left to listen to the political debate that ensues. Nelson is saying that while capitalism is destroying Africa and its village's socialism is not the answer to the distaste of many in attendance. Goaded about his vision of a totally different kind of economic system something apparently supposed to be top-secret, Denoon launches into an explanation of what he calls "Solar Democracy." He paints a picture of Africans harnessing the power of the ever-present sun in their country to fuel industry and business, cutting costs, and reducing the need for fuels that cause ecological disasters. He believes Africans can create utopian village-societies where workers choose the kind of work they are suited for, interested in, and where there is always time to also pursue a life of ideas and dreams.

The narrator despite her critique of his speaking style is impressed. She is even more impressed when he re-delivers the speech in perfect Setswana, which shows that he is not just one more educated or politically empowered white telling black Africans how they should run their country. The entire performance ends punctuated by a violent African sandstorm.

Chapter 2 (pages 59-90) Analysis

The narrator catches up with Nelson Denoon and has a chance to take in the man and his ideas during a political exchange at a party. The author is providing the reader with a rich sense of contrast as the elite, both black and white, discuss the future of ordinary Africans who for the most part are only on the premises as domestics.

The narrator is prepared to find Denoon just another academic blowhard and does find his public speaking skills in need of some focus and polish. However, she is stunned



and impressed by his ability to compose his own original thoughts as opposed to debating the merits and drawbacks of the thoughts of others. Denoon is revealed as a brilliant although not perfect man. He is in the position of advocating a better future for black Africans while being himself both white and suspect but also indebted and dependent on the white power structure for what he can accomplish. Even his detractors are impressed and the author's use of a freak sandstorm kicking up as Nelson ends his speech is allegorical. It signifies the restless and inevitable winds of change in Africa and as the narrator's first experience of a sandstorm is an auspicious marker of her first encounter with Nelson.



Chapter 2 (pages 90-111)

Chapter 2 (pages 90-111) Summary

Following Nelson's speech Grace grabs the narrator from behind and propels her forward holding her at the hips like a human shield. As the narrator draws closer she is finding Nelson ever more physically appealing although she is somewhat disgusted by herself and the way she is going through her checklist of attributes. Also, she hates being touched without permission but the whole thing feels like fate and she is realizing that part of Grace's problem is drunkenness. The other part of Grace's problem is that her relationship with her husband is over. The narrator moves quickly to establish herself with Nelson as a unique, interesting individual speaking to him in Setswana and being very witty.

The next day the narrator goes to Naledi a squatter settlement where Nelson is rumored to be staying with a native African family. She intends to offer herself as a volunteer in his mysterious development project. Wandering the area she cannot find him and the residents suspicious of what appears to be an official-looking white woman are not helpful with their directions. Finally, she convinces some children to lead her to the home of Nelson's hosts. On arrival the narrator's aplomb is somewhat destroyed by the fact her bladder is bursting.

The narrator sees Nelson who retreats. She heads for what she thinks is an outhouse. It is but after relieving herself she finds that Nelson is waiting for her and she has committed a grievous error. She used an experimental composting toilet and used it the wrong way. She is mortified, baffled, and apologetic as he explains how she ruined the compost. He invites her in but tells her there are no openings of any kind with his project. They talk and she is both appreciative of and critical of his holier-than-thou political attitudes aware that he is something of an elitist. He cannot really understand the choices more common less-gifted people have to make. Fascinated by his intellect the narrator restrains herself from reacting to his barbs about anthropology and privileged whites. She finds herself drawn to what she calls "intellectual love" meeting someone whose mind easily notices and confirms the very things you have long wondered about or questioned.

Chapter 2 (pages 90-111) Analysis

Nelson enchants the narrator although she is clearheaded about his foibles as well as his intellectual gifts and despite the unfortunate beginnings of both their meetings so far. Nelson is obviously far from ordinary and she is a woman who fears and despises mediocrity - so she is very naturally attracted to him intellectually and physically. Although she is unsuccessful at insinuating herself into his project and he derides her field anthropology as stale and useless she feels that at least she got his attention.



Chapter 2 (pages 111-128)

Chapter 2 (pages 111-128) Summary

The narrator is preparing to make her way to Nelson's project but its location is top secret. Unfazed she continues to ready herself to go convinced that she will somehow find out where it is. She runs into Grace again while shopping for the tweezers she wants to take with her. Grace is again drunk this time in the company of a powerful Boer well known for his lechery and innumerable girlfriends. Grace is happy to see her and the narrator takes her to a restaurant. Grace tells her she has a sixth sense and knows the narrator is someone Nelson will like. Grace says Nelson is free now and she wants him to be happy if possible. The narrator tells Grace she likes Nelson too but does not know where to find him. Grace tells her his village is named Tsau and she knows where it is as its location is information Nelson was forced to give her lawyers. She tells the narrator how to get there and even draws her a map. The narrator realizes Grace is a kind person who has not always been as she is now.

The narrator having sold or mailed off everything she has other than what she is carrying rides a flatbed truck carrying supplies that serves as a sort of bus service for people hitching rides along the way. It will take her to Kang 100 miles east of Tsau. She has light camping gear, a map of waterholes, and her previous experience spending eighteen months in the bush. After an endurance-testing, jolting ride, she spends some time in the town of Kang staying in a mission with an order of nuns for a week before heading off by herself on foot towards Tsau. Although the narrator tells the nuns otherwise no one knows where she is or where she is going.

Chapter 2 (pages 111-128) Analysis

The narrator's season of "guilty repose" as she calls it, is definitely over. Motivated by her interest in Nelson and his secret development project at Tsau she quickly sheds her city life and luxuries. Her willingness to set off by herself on an arduous, dangerous trip to accomplish her mission is in stark contrast to her time spent in Gaborone. The reader sees the courageous side of the narrator's nature that led her to Africa in the first place. Her quest shows how deeply she wants to impress Nelson, how completely he has captured her imagination, and how courageous she is when setting her sights on something.



Chapter 3 (pages 131-163)

Chapter 3 (pages 131-163) Summary

The narrator sets off into the desert towards Tsau with two donkeys loaded with provisions. The first day goes well although she awakes early in the morning fearing lions might attack her donkeys, which she is fond of and thinks of as "my boys."

The second day she begins having strange illusions thinking at first there is too much light despite her sunglasses. She begins to believe her sunglasses are keeping her from seeing the true colors of the Kalahari Desert but when she removes them she feels some kind of deep vibration locked within the landscape. Then she begins to believe that if she takes her sunglasses off she will see the true color of nature and reality. She is aware that her perceptions are not normal. The strange feeling evaporates when she remembers someone telling her that to survive the desert you had to get past the feeling it is an organism demanding surrender.

That night the narrator collects wood for a ring fire and sets herself and the donkeys up inside it but as soon as she closes her eyes she hears a lion roar. She has no weapon other than a bush knife and a dawning realization that she could easily die in this desert. She continues the next day watching for snakes and starting to burn despite her sunscreen. Fortunately, it is mid-April and not as hot as it would be in summer. One of the hardest things for her to handle is the complete solitude. Both she and the donkeys are frightened after the lion and she finds it soothes them all when she sings so she starts singing every song she knows.

The fourth or fifth day out the narrator's mind wanders and despite the objections of her donkeys she goes into a sinister-looking wooded grove. She lets go of Mmo's rope and he runs away. She cannot catch the donkey and with him are some of her provisions, the water, and tent. She is left with only one donkey, Baph and she is scared and stricken with guilt at what will happen to Mmo alone in the desert. That night she stops at a deserted cattle post and builds a huge fire to keep the lions away. She begins to obsess about losing her mirror and comb worrying how she will look when she arrives at Tsau. Food and water are dangerously low for her and the remaining donkey. The next morning it takes hours of agonizing hard work to bring up enough water to refill her canteen and water the donkey. By now she is far beyond the four days she thought it would take her to get to Tsau and as hard as she pushes it does not appear. She and Baph who seems to be getting slower and sicker push on through the night. At some point she slips in a mental fugue state where walking is painless and thinking stops. The next afternoon the hills that signify she is within eight miles of Tsau appear.

As the narrator enters Tsau she notices many strange man-made contrivances woven into the landscape including posts marking the way in with discs of glass attached. The narrator flashes forward in thought as she has begun to do more and more within the telling of her story to a tale Nelson will tell her later. It has to do with why he loved glass



and contains details of his life growing up with an adored but alcoholic father and a passive mother.

Chapter 3 (pages 131-163) Analysis

In this chapter the narrator is removed from her angst of uncertainty about what to do with her life as she battles for her very survival. She is ultimately proud of what she has accomplished as it is something she thinks few women could have done alone. In the beginning of the book she refrained from lengthy references to her future times with Nelson trying instead to tell the story of how they came to be together. In recent chapters and as she approaches Tsau she begins to tell longer narratives about Nelson from some point in the future. She jumps ahead in time to explain things what she did not understand at the time but will later.



Chapter 4 (pages 167-199)

Chapter 4 (pages 167-199) Summary

As the narrator finally reaches the village proper her fortitude begins to unravel. She is frantic by the time a woman discovers her and takes her into her home. The narrator is put in bed to rest after being cleaned up and having her injuries treated. The narrator drowsily reflects on her rescue by this woman whom she now knows is named Mma Isang. It strikes her how it differs from her recurring childhood refuge fantasy of being taken in by a rich generous uncle or father.

The narrator decides to pretend she is an ornithologist who went astray in the desert. She does not want anyone to know that she already knows Nelson Denoon or to suspect she came here looking for him. She wonders if he has come to see about her and awakes one night thinking of a woman she knew who was beautiful but willing to live with an abusive lover for fear of being alone.

The narrator finds Nelson in her room where he quickly pins her and puts his hand over her mouth telling her she must be quiet. She agrees and he tells her she must pretend they have never met. Tsau is a project for destitute and socially ostracized native African women who had been living in the most abject poverty. All the homesteads belong to women with an agreement struck that only female offspring or designees can inherit. There are a few men, relatives of the women there who have found their way to Tsau but the idea is to balance some of the particular injustices black women in Africa face. What little prosperity or power there is for native Africans is held only by men. The women do not have mates or will be unlikely to get them in the primarily female Tsau so there is some sensitivity on the issue. Nelson does not want anybody to think he brought the narrator to Tsau for his own happiness and she agrees to stick to her story of being a lost traveler.

Nelson seems quite happy to see the narrator and to realize she came to be with him. He tells her Tsau will make money soon and more men will come when the women are firmly established. He tells her he thinks she deserves to be here. The next day she starts exploring the neat little village with well-kept round thatched huts where things are clean and orderly and everybody works together. She sees many of the inventions Nelson is trying out in an effort to conserve water and energy.

The next day Mma Isan introduces her to several women including Dineo, a shrewd, sensual looking woman and a member of the Mother Committee governing Tsau. Dineo keeps asking the narrator if she was certain she had not heard of Nelson who is a famous European. The narrator insists she has not. Dineo tells the narrator the village is not ready for new additions yet so she must leave as soon as arrangements can be made.



The narrator keeps a journal describing how Tsau functions as a community. There are 200 homesteads with 12 more under construction and a population of about 450. About 50 of Tsau's inhabitants are men. Women are deeded their houses and plots with ownership making them voting members of the Sekopololo or the Key a voluntary labor credit system. Labor or crafts are exchanged for a local currency used for goods in the storehouse, which contains both domestic products and imported items. Ownership of a house entitles residents to a share in the cattle herd and a patch of land for a garden. The women also export some of their handwork items for sale and other things the narrator is not allowed to know about as an outsider. The narrator notes that many of the inhabitants are older women with a visible defect or deformity who would be scorned within their own culture. The food is surprisingly good and varied the homes comfortable and far above the standards of a traditional village. There are workers who will come and read to someone engaged in a repetitive task or to the illiterate. The narrator is uncertain of the sexual atmosphere - she assumes there must be some sexual liaisons both heterosexual and same-sex but sees no evidence of any. Her meeting with the Mother Committee keeps being postponed. She never sees Nelson alone and wonders what he is thinking of her. She begins to believe he wants to keep her there so she can offer an outside judgment on his development project.

Chapter 4 (pages 167-199) Analysis

The narrator is exploring Tsau, which in many ways is like exploring the man that created it the man whose mystique drew her across the desert. In this section the reader sees the narrator begin to trace some of the shape of the heroine's dilemma - she is powerfully attracted to being in a relationship with a man and equally afraid of being swallowed up in it. We hear of her father/uncle fantasy the lost father-figure that otherwise has not been discussed - all we know is that she grew up with a very overweight and overprotective mother and that they lived in poverty. Her mother's eating compulsion, appearance, and emotional problems made getting or keeping a job very difficult. The absence of a father in her life has likely shaped both her fear of and yearning for a strong male in her life. She is determined to remain independent having seen what can happen to a woman abandoned by a man.



Chapter 4 (pages 199-222)

Chapter 4 (pages 199-222) Summary

The narrator is summoned before the eight members of the Mother Committee. She is given a history of Tsau and told that Tsau's women, even if they leave, do so with money and skills and so never have to serve others again. The committee praises the narrator for speaking Setswana and not making them speak English to her. One woman, Dorcas, seems to be suspicious making veiled derisive references about bird studies as though she doubts the narrator's cover story. The committee finally votes and they make a rare exception allowing the narrator to stay as long as she is interested in the struggle of poor women strengthening themselves. She may stay in the rondavel, the round thatched hut, next to Mma Isang who will give her food. The narrator must work at whatever tasks she chooses for fifteen hours a week.

The narrator is falling into the rhythm of life in the village where every evening the villagers make the rounds stopping to socialize and visit at all the houses that have a welcome light on. She is also starting to see Nelson more during the nightly visits and other public occasions. They sometimes take walks together while Nelson inspects windmills and other apparatus around the village. The courtship has begun although the walks are mostly proper but with a little handholding and kissing at times. The narrator feels it is moving at a slower pace than she would like. She tries to do some intellectual and emotional probing but discovers Nelson likes periods of deep silence.

Nelson goes away for four days without telling the narrator. This retreat is something he does every month but she does not know this. He could not find her to tell her before leaving and was afraid to leave a note that might be read or to have anybody see him breaking his routine. He feels the public perception of their relationship must seem to be something that is happening gradually so no one will think he brought her there to be with him. Unable to ask anyone where he is and not knowing of his habit the narrator convinces herself that he is involved with another woman. She goes to Nelson's house and prowls around. His yard is full of machines and machine parts and the property ends on a cliff. She notices he has a bathhouse with a bathtub but it is not hooked up to any piping so it would have to be filled by hand. She slips inside the hut and imagines herself living there with him.

The narrator is surprised to be summoned the next day by Dineo one of the women she has imagined to be her unknown competition. Dineo meets with the narrator to discuss her job in the village's rabbit raising project. Dineo mentions several things Nelson wants to do or do differently and tries to use a crank-powered fan he set up although it takes a lot of trouble to wind up and moves very little air. Dineo tells the narrator she should rely on the advice of women especially certain women. She names several that work with animals. Then to the narrator's mystification Dineo tells her to follow her to the bathhouse, which has several tubs with a lukewarm water supply heated by a solar power generator. Dineo disrobes displaying a perfect body marred only by what looks



like a hysterectomy scar. It seems intentional yet not sexual. The narrator wonders what the scene is about but Dineo never stops talking and after a short while she dresses and they leave.

Nelson returns and asks the narrator to have dinner with him at Mma Isang's house. Mma Isang soon starts leaving them alone together. There is a faction in the village that thinks Nelson and the narrator should become a couple although there is also presumably a faction that thinks they should not. A little irked by Nelson's seeming lack of intense passion for her especially after his absence the narrator starts telling him stories and Tswana jokes, which he loves. She is somewhat mortified to find they all seem to be about the male penis but it is the beginning of what will become an important part of their relationship together, intimate comedy. The narrator discovers she loves making him laugh and wonders why she never did it with any other man she was serious about. Although embarrassed by her own gaffe she thinks he might be the first mature male she has known.

Chapter 4 (pages 199-222) Analysis

The author develops both the relationship between the narrator and Nelson and reveals some of the undercurrents and dynamics within the village. Dineo without saying so outright brings up something the narrator has already noticed - that Nelson uses the project with however good of intentions as a workshop for his own ideas. Many of the water and fuel-saving devices he has rigged up take more labor and energy to work than seems worthwhile. He has innumerable ideas for how to do or run things, which is fine but the women in the village ultimately have to live with the results and make them work. There seems to be a desire that he would include and consider them more often when concocting new schemes and devices or when laying out work areas

The scene in the bathhouse with Dineo raises questions that are not answered. What seems clearer is Dineo's message that the narrator should talk things over with the other women rather than Nelson implying that the women are not enthusiastic about all of his ideas for Tsau. Also revealed is Nelson's puritanical streak. He has lived a privileged life as an American academic who is well respected and it seems to shame him deeply to allow himself any luxury such as a bathtub with running water.



Chapter 4 (pages 222-250)

Chapter 4 (pages 222-250) Summary

Nelson is in a bad mood over some Spanish political labor issue and the narrator trying to cheer him up finds herself rebuffed. He wants to be angry. This is disturbing to her after growing up with an emotionally unstable mother. She remembers how she finally got her driver's license and borrowed a car to take her mother to a lakeside cabin getaway the kind of thing her mother had never gotten to do. Her mother, too heavy to lift the suitcase into the trunk, left it behind the car thinking the narrator would put it in the trunk, which she did not see it and backed over it with the car. It was a new suitcase given to her mother by her therapist and she said, the nicest thing anyone had ever given her totally ignoring the gift her daughter was trying to offer. Her mother grieved for the suitcase for three months and so moodiness in relationships is not something the narrator likes to see.

Nelson seems unconcerned about the morale of the men in the village and somewhat loathing of what he sees as male tendencies in general towards violence and victimization of the weak. He does include himself in this at times and the narrator wonders if he is trying to disarm or warn her. He finally invites her to his house, which has changed considerably since she was there snooping. It has been cleaned up, furniture added, and a water storage tank has attached to the bathtub. They embrace but the narrator breaks away deciding to go home. Whatever happens she wants them to be real friends.

Although she hates snakes the narrator becomes one of the women on the snake team dispatched to handle snake sightings. The object is to bring the snake back alive if possible as their skins and skeletons can be sold and some species milked for venom for which there is also a market. Although terrified at first being on the snake team was a great honor and the narrator finds herself elated. She is also praised for being a hard worker in general and is enjoying her life in the village. To her surprise at a public tea Nelson pulls her to her feet and asks her to come live with him. She says yes but it annoys her he did not ask her privately and that it was staged as a public relations move. That night Nelson comes to get her bringing gifts for Mma Isang. He takes the narrator back to his house with an entourage of villagers accompanying them as though they had gotten married. Nelson and the villagers are elated when a major rainstorm breaks out shortly after reaching his house. It is a not the time of year when it normally rains and this is a village in the middle of a desert - it is be considered the best possible omen for their union. In the days that follow Nelson and the narrator settle in as a couple and as lovers. She is happy and emotional but also embarrassed and a little worried at how deeply she feels for him. While he sleeps she cleans, writes in her journal, and ponders what is happening to her heart.



Chapter 4 (pages 222-250) Analysis

Although these are golden, building-in-anticipation days of the narrator's relationship with Nelson it is also clear this story is being told by a woman no longer so starry-eyed. She recounts their early closeness lovingly but also mentions the little slights and hurts that bothered her at the time; ones the reader feels she has gone over many times since. She is also extremely defensive and fearful at the prospect of softening and turning into a dependent servile woman who will then be abandoned or treated without respect.



Chapter 5 (pages 253-300)

Chapter 5 (pages 253-300) Summary

The narrator and Nelson continue to share stories from their past with each other, about their parents, childhood, and previous love relationships. They also continue to play point/counterpoint with each other arguing constantly about political and intellectual positions and Nelson's role in everyday Tsau life. The idea is for him to turn over the decision-making to the village's inhabitants and gradually phase himself out of the project completely. However, he sometimes has difficulty turning over the reins particularly in areas that conflict with his beliefs or attitudes.

Nelson does not want guns in Tsau although there is some difference of opinion on that in the village. The vervets, small monkeys, are being a pest in the village and some people feel they should have guns to defend themselves from this or more serious threats. Nelson does have a gun himself for emergencies but is extremely loath to use it revealing his distaste for what he feels is the traditional male inclination towards the enjoyment of killing. The narrator who knows how to shoot convinces him to let her use the gun to shoot the vervets. While on this mission she has an encounter with one of the village's few male inhabitants, Hector Raboupi who wants to do the shooting and is angered by the narrator's refusal to let him use her gun. Hector is supposed to be the long-lost brother of Dorcas the village postmistress who has always seemed to oppose the narrator's presence there and suspicious of her claims of being an ornithologist who accidentally stumbled upon the settlement.

One day a married white couple appears at the village having been flown in on the supply plane that occasionally comes causing great consternation in Tsau since the village is still supposed to be a secret. Harold Mace and Julia Rodden are actors who say they were flown in by the British Council to read Shakespeare at the schools. Nelson is suspicious and disdainful of British interference but the narrator and the British Council convince him that it is an error not an attempt to spy on Tsau or interfere with what is still a closed project. They will be there for four days. Nelson agrees but is upset and baits the visitors getting into an extended argument with Harold over the true authorship of the literary works attributed to Shakespeare. For the next few days, Harold and Julia go about the village enacting scenes from Shakespeare in costume. Meanwhile, Nelson has gathered some of the villagers to work on their own production to be presented to Harold and Julia although the narrator does not know exactly what they are planning.

On the couple's last day in the village, after their final performance, Nelson brings out a group of performers who sing and enact verses about British imperialism and its injustices to the African people. Nelson's attempted attack falls short with the village audience and the narrator who finds it rude and overdone. Nelson's performers then enact a version of their Lamentations of Women a recital of all the bad things happening to women in Africa before coming to Tsau. It has become a ritual in Tsau with the leader



calling out general social injustices and the audience adding their personal examples of these trials and tribulations. Although the narrator acknowledges the catharsis the lamentations provide and has her own list of frustrations she is embarrassed by the spectacle and leaves. She comes back at the end of the performance to hear two complaints ring out about having to drink the local tea and use the local soap despite the desire of some to import higher-quality items. Nelson opposes this because he thinks it is better for them to support native-made items whenever possible.

In defiance the narrator invites Julia and Harold to dinner. She puts out all her best food their hardest-to-obtain luxuries. Harold brings scotch and after some hesitation Nelson begins to drink although he is opposed to alcohol in the village and forever battling the demon of his alcoholic father's memory. Julia takes the narrator aside and confides to her that Harold is not really her husband and is in fact homosexual. Julia is worried about him getting drunk and telling Nelson something that could get back to the British Council. The women go back to find both men quite drunk and rather than being at each other's throats they are getting along quite well. The narrator notices Nelson has broken out two bottles of fine wine, which upsets her. She feels if Nelson had such a treasure hidden it should have been saved for a special moment between them. She also sees Nelson acting much as he has told her his father did while drinking.

The narrator after seeing Harold and Julia off the next morning returns to take a very hung-over Nelson to task for his behavior the night before but finds him completely contrite and upset. She forgives him but tries to get him to admit that while he shuns male aggression he shows it in his own way through political and intellectual argument. It is still the same desire to dominate and conquer. They work through their points of disagreement and she feels the pleasure of security in a relationship that allows disagreement and forgiveness. The next day Nelson refers to her as, "my dear turtle" and she is overjoyed at his use of an endearment.

Chapter 5 (pages 253-300) Analysis

Although Nelson and the narrator are still being cautious with each other and argue their positions constantly they also seem to balance and heal each other. The dynamic of their respective childhoods continues to be an obstacle. Nelson is terrified of being like his alcoholic father who was a liberal intellectual in the habit of browbeating his religious, submissive, more traditional Catholic wife. Nelson's disgust is well placed for he does indeed often seek to establish superiority by bending others to his way of thinking.

The narrator is equally worried about becoming so smitten that she gives her heart to someone who will take advantage of and then abandon her as happened to her mother. While the reader can see that these two are well-matched and genuinely in love both are still afraid to trust each other or even themselves. The author hints that their innate distrust and fear of intimate relationships is likely to poison the apple.



Chapter 5 (pages 300-326)

Chapter 5 (pages 300-326) Summary

Nelson tells the narrator that he is going to start being absolutely truthful with her. Although she is burning to ask many questions she finds herself less inclined to push for answers from him than before. Among her questions are where their relationship is headed, what his plans for the future are, and how much longer he intends to stay in Tsau. He has already been there for eight years and the project is well underway. It is assumed that at some point he will need to bow out, continue his life elsewhere, and leave the villagers to themselves but he seems to love the place more than ever. The narrator asks him about his sex life during his years alone and he says she really wants to know if he slept with any women in Tsau. The answer is no including Dineo

The narrator out of curiosity about the women in the village starts asking Nelson more questions about their backgrounds, religious beliefs, and political affiliations. Nelson draws up a political diagram that shows the families, tribes, and affiliations by population in the village. For some reason the narrator finds this repellent and does not want to see it, which offends and upsets Nelson. Angry, he folds it up and burns it, telling her it is because she is a woman and she thinks it's manipulative. She tells him that these people have a right to be as they are without having it recorded on a piece of paper. She remembers her own mother's racism. Her mother once thought all black people were funny an idea drawn from the radio shows at the time. The narrator has difficulty expressing what she thinks but surprisingly Nelson hugs her and tells her, "I'm yours. I am." His declaration weighs on her mind as she wonders even more about his divorce and ponders the changes in their sexual relationship. They are having what she terms "blank sex" with an undercurrent of sadness where there is no thinking beyond trying to encompass the partner in every way and somehow keep them, as they are forever knowing it is never possible.

One day as the narrator is cutting Nelson's hair a group comes from the village led by Hector Raboupi who is bearing lion spoor. There is Hector, his sister, about five other women, and six men. Dineo who arrived first with a warning the group was on the way tells Hector the spoor looks very old to her. Hector's group wants to have guns in Tsau and they are showing the lion spoor as proof firearms are needed to protect the village from danger. The group starts chanting, "Enfields!" (type of rifle). Nelson tells them to ask the Mother Committee if a few rifles can be stored and put out for hire if there is some need for them. Hector of course wants the rifles to be regularly stocked in the storehouse where they can filter through women to the men who live with them. Nelson says he will turn his own rifle over to the storehouse to get things started and Dineo supports Nelson's idea. It is an important test of Nelson's leadership and the narrator is proud of the way he balances his own distaste for any guns with a proposal that would make them available but in small numbers. Nelson is still upset though knowing what will happen. They are in the middle of a game preserve where only a Basarwa settlement nearby has hunting rights. He is certain the men will start poaching and then



selling the meat through the Basarwa back to Tsau with Hector receiving a kickback. It would also help establish the traditional male hunting class and Tsau is a village trying to upend tradition.

The narrator suggests that they make a rule that women are to be included in any hunting parties and trained in the use of the rifles so that men do not become the only ones handling guns. Nelson likes the idea but still becomes depressed saying he has a premonition that Tsau will only prosper if it takes nothing more from the desert than what is needed to be there. He tells the narrator it is a sort of intuition and that his mother had psychic powers giving the narrator several examples. She discounts the stories as fables or lies and he drops the subject and then stops worrying about the rifle issue. The narrator thinks to herself that she hates the mysterious because it lends itself too easily to liars and liars are the enemy. Nelson discusses with her his thoughts that when you are leading the right life events become serendipitous and synchronicities abound.

Life continues with the narrator feeling happier and securely established in intimacy with Nelson. He is even allowing her in his glassworks, which previously had been his sanctuary and he is telling her more about his past and feelings without her constantly probing. An upset occurs when the breeding pair of ostriches for the ranching experiment Nelson wants to try escapes. Hector shows up with the two young girls Nelson has recently grudgingly accepted into the settlement. The two girls convicted of stealing are parolees. They are very hardened and have attached themselves to Hector, his sister Dorcas, and the handful of others with a critical attitude about Tsau. The narrator convinces Nelson that it is simply a case of the extremely powerful ostriches escaping under their own power. He tells her he could be married to her and then goes on to ask her about her thesis and implies that she could be doing great things in the world.

Tsau is also starting to barter more with the Basarwa. Nelson worries that the hunting tribe lacking many of the conveniences of Tsau is being taken advantage of in the arrangement. Nelson comes to the narrator one day upset. Pine Nut Soda is a new import item as is Milk Stout, which is even worse to him as it contains alcohol. The narrator defends the items saying they are traded at a very high credit rate and used for special occasions or celebrations. The labor/storehouse complex is thriving as people were willing to exchange large amounts of work for them. He tells her that he wants to be able to tell her things and stop thinking about them to feel less over-involved in everything that happens in Tsau.

Later, more signs of trouble surface in Tsau. Mma Sithebe is the summarist someone who goes about reading literature to people as they work, in English or translated to Setswana. She is the town crier roaming about the village announcing meetings or current events. Three of the enterprises, the laundry, the fabric print house, and the kitchen have told her they would rather talk among themselves than have white literature forced on them. Dorcas is apparently behind stirring up this sentiment among the workers. Nelson tries to comfort Mma Sithbe telling her she does a wonderful job and that it is he being rejected not her.



Chapter 5 (pages 300-326) Analysis

Nelson and the narrator's relationship is becoming more open and trusting. He is beginning to say things to her that indicate he is thinking of a long-term relationship. In contrast Tsau is starting to sprout factions, conflict, and changes uncomfortable although always part of an evolving community. There seems to be a more organized faction of Dorcas, Hector, and a few of followers determined to unseat some of Nelson's rules such as no guns in Tsau. Nelson seems less inclined to want to influence decisions than before and often bows out entirely after discussing things with the narrator. This is also a sign of his increasing trust in her judgement. The narrator is worried, however, about the insurrection against Mma Sibethe's reading. This small group of the dissatisfied does seem to be rising in influence and wanting to create situations they can then exploit for themselves.



Chapter 6 (pages 327-356)

Chapter 6 (pages 327-356) Summary

After telling the narrator he would never leave her the obviously unwell Nelson falls into some sort of delirium. Unable to rouse him the narrator tells him that she loves him and runs for help. She runs frantically around the village looking for help and by the time she returns Dineo is already in the house taking care of things. Nelson is having a recurrence of malaria and for forty-eight hours the narrator is constantly with him, reading to him, giving him his medication, holding him when he shakes. She will not allow anyone else in the house to help. Later as he recovers she has to break the news that he is only welcome to come to committee meetings when invited. However, some time during his illness Nelson has given himself wholeheartedly to the narrator. He simply gazes at her with love when she tells him and says it is nothing. Later, when he is well, she comes down with a case of hives and he is almost disappointed when she recovers quickly because he wants to care for her as she did him. He seems unconcerned that he is being phased out of Tsau's affairs and concentrates on his relationship with the narrator. She is heartened and thinking he may be ready to start thinking of a future somewhere else.

The narrator attends some childbirth labors in the birthing house to improve her midwifery skills but the women deluge her with complaints about Nelson. They want him to stay away. He worries about the women in labor and constantly checks on them. At one point Nelson was encouraging men to attend the births. Tswana culture believes that if a male looks at a baby's forehead the fontanel will not close and their presence is unwelcome. Tsau women give birth sitting up in a chair with stirrups and a trap door in the seat allowing the baby to emerge into the hands of the midwife. Flowers and other special items are brought in so that the first things the baby sees are beautiful. The narrator is accustomed to childbirth, which seems to occur easily and naturally in Tsau. Yet, somehow she finds it terribly upsetting. Afterwards she always feels hostile and depressed and vents these feelings on Nelson so after attending two births she decides to quit going.

The Basarwa seem to be producing more game lately and the gun has been checked out for a supposed lion sighting. Nelson suspects Hector is hunting and filtering the game through the Basarwa. Nelson goes to Dorcas' house where Hector lives with his sister. Hector is not home and the inhabitants of his hut are very rude to Nelson. Nelson says he wanted to thank Hector for something, which he actually did despite his suspicions. The Basarwa had started coming into Tsau to beg for food and Nelson had asked Hector to tell them to stop, which he did.

One morning to the narrator's surprise a couple of women ask if she will run for election to the Mother Committee. The narrator is shocked and flattered but she wants to discuss it with Nelson. When he refuses to give her an opinion saying it is her decision and a tribute to her she puts off the suggestion and lets the matter fade away.



Nelson and the narrator are falling ever more deeply in love finding it increasingly easy to navigate conflict with each other and to compromise. They are merging as a couple. Nelson often talks about the importance of justifying one's life and the narrator thinks that Tsau itself is quite an accomplishment in his but he does not like to talk about it. They talk about other countries where there are social and economic difficulties but Nelson says Tsau is his last project. He thinks he might, however, like to try a writing project an essay against violence. He might also like to do something to help outlaw bank secrecy and secret accounts.

The new mother committee has been elected and Dorcas advanced to second chair. The large general community meeting has been postponed but men are admitted to the Sekopololo so they can now work for credits to buy goods in the storehouse; however, they remain ineligible to run for office, serve on committees, or inherit land. One day a couple of women approach the narrator asking her to confirm what they've heard about her: That her mother is poor, she has no father, and she is getting no money from home. They seem to commiserate saying that if she goes back to her country there will be no one to pay her for studying birds and she will probably end up having to be a barmaid. The narrator finds it strange. Meanwhile, Nelson is working hard on a glass luminary ornament something he put off because the design would take so long. The narrator notes to him that he is trying to put back together the glass sculpture he created in childhood out of discarded whiskey bottles. His father had found it and smashed it in a fury thinking Nelson was making fun of his drinking problem.

One night the narrator and Nelson are together in his glassworks when he suggests that they could stay in Tsau. There is a provision in his contract that will allow him to elect African citizenship. As a man he can only stay in Tsau as a dependent or relative of a woman. Nelson tells her that as his dependent she can be a citizen of Africa and as her dependent he can live in Tsau and participate in the labor exchange. She meets the rules of residency for Tsau having no money or job and no family to support her. The narrator feels very conflicted. On the one hand she loves the idea of being with him but on the other it feels her whole life is being arranged for her that she can have him but only if she stays in Tsau. The proposition is on the table but they put it aside to give her time to think.

Chapter 6 (pages 327-356) Analysis

In this chapter the author sets up the turning points for a number of situations. Things are changing and the framework for the next phase of development is being laid - for Tsau and for the relationship between Nelson and the narrator. Although Nelson is withdrawing as a leader, or seeming to, he would like to live on in the project he has created. The narrator would like to be with him but is uncertain if she wants to spend the rest of her life there. Different factions in Tsau are arising some that seem to want to pull the village back to the more traditional native African culture, which could threaten the premise of the project. The author paints a parallel between the village and the individuals within it all of which are feeling their way towards their next stage of evolution and preparing to make the choices that will define what they next become.



Chapter 7 (pages 357-379)

Chapter 7 (pages 357-379) Summary

The narrator is struggling constantly with her decision about Tsau. At times it seems impossible and undesirable to remain in Tsau and she feels like an exile. She fears, as she always has, making such a decision based on her love for a man. She is afraid of being a dependent woman giving up everything she wants to serve the man she loves. At other times her love for the atmosphere and people of Tsau is so strong that it seems like it would be her best choice.

At a party the narrator gleans her first information about the night men, a group of Hector's men but not including Hector, who are essentially serving as prostitutes sleeping with women for gifts. The narrator does not think much about the issue of male prostitution other than that it seems natural enough under the circumstances.

A public meeting and sort of competitive debate something the village does regularly is being scheduled. A subject is picked and opposing views are given with heavy questioning and participation from the floor. Then people choose the prizewinner the side they most agree with by physically shifting their position to the side they favor. Nelson moderates the events and the subject for this one, God, greatly disturbs the narrator. There is a seemingly peaceful mix of religions in the village and the narrator wonders why it is necessary to debate the issue. Nelson says the Mother Committee picked the subject and he thinks it will be useful to see what village consensus is on the matter.

The narrator suffering a terrible headache comes to the meeting late and finds that what is being questioned is whether or not it is right that Tsau is the one village in Botswana where believers cannot raise a church building. At first all goes well but then things turn ugly as the debate shifts to whether or not things are as they are because of the control of the white man who set up the rules. Soon the subject of the debate becomes lost in a shouted uprising against Nelson mostly led by the group that has been long forming in opposition to his influence: Dorcas, Hector and their friends. Many of the complaints are about things the villagers do not really understand like Nelson's insistence on hand washing and sanitation. He has shown slides of bacteria to demonstrate why this is necessary and he is now accused of trying to frighten children with pictures of monsters in the water they drink. Things settle down but as the discussion resumes whenever Nelson speaks the men in Hector's group start drowning him out with moaning noises becoming louder and louder. Although their protest is directed at Nelson they also show disrespect to the women by ignoring their requests to stop. Things heat up to a direct confrontation between Hector and Nelson. The narrator knowing she has to stop this gets up and pretends to faint. The event quickly ends as people scramble to help her including Nelson.



Chapter 7 (pages 357-379) Analysis

The long-sensed rebellion of Dorcas and Hector's entourage, many of them men, comes to a head at the village symposium making it clear they want Nelson out of Tsau. Hector in particular seems to have his own agenda as though he is someone expressly there to divide and conquer. The reader also remembers the narrator has been uneasy about the status and probable unhappiness of the men in Tsau for some time. They do live as second-class citizens but Nelson created that situation so the women would not quickly revert to being subservient. With time and the project well established there will be more men in Tsau. What Nelson has probably failed to consider is that this is a hardship for many of the women who still long for a lover.



Chapter 7 (pages 379-409)

Chapter 7 (pages 379-409) Summary

The day after the symposium the narrator and Nelson argue about its significance. She tells him that Tsau is trying to expel them and that it is time to let go of his position there. He says that he does not believe it is as negative or serious as she claims and says he is willing to be whatever the people of the village want him to be. Nelson's dismissal of her opinion infuriates the narrator. The next morning when he stays in bed far longer than usual not getting up when she starts making noise in the kitchen she sits staring at him and starts to obsess. The narrator feels she has to get his "true dimensions" and gets a measuring tape. In her mania she measures his buttocks, his calves, and his genitals the last act awakening him as he violently pushes her away. Despite her many diatribes in the past about liars, she lies. She says she was trying to get his inseam measurement to make him a new pair of pants, which he accepts.

Although the narrator realizes she is out of control she continues with her project of, "getting Nelson on paper" continuing to gather and record information on him like preparing for a thesis. She writes down everything she knows about him; his measurements and his views on subjects like fatherhood and religion. She writes down his jokes, his attempts at humor, and a complete, minute physical description. She senses the project is partly an attempt to delay making a decision about whether or not to stay with him in Tsau.

The narrator is working feverishly on her project of compiling everything there is to know or think about on the subject of Nelson when three women from the village come to get her for a ceremonial event. They are raising an arch over a newly named street. This time some of the men have volunteered to help. Mma Isang is hurrying the women saying they decided to erect the arch without notice to keep the "night men" or male prostitutes from coming. The narrator realizes that resentment against the men in question is starting to escalate. One of the women tells her that the men are uprising against the women assisted by the women who want them and so defend them. Rules have been established such as no lingering about waiting to be invited to meals the men must go when asked and they must use protection to prevent pregnancy or disease. However, some of the women are disturbed by the practice although the narrator thinks that sex could not forever remain a non-issue in Tsau and that it is fitting the prostitutes are men. Nelson appears belatedly missing most of the ceremony. When he asks why it was not announced the narrator tells him thinking she has already mentioned to him the presence of the night men. Nelson is shocked and upset and it does not help when she says Tsau is normalizing first with the development of begging and now with prostitution.

Nelson becomes more distant spending several days in discussion alone with Dineo. Yielding to the narrator's questions Nelson tells her Hector has gotten a 13-year-old girl pregnant; a child that was planning to continue her education with the nuns in Kang. Now the narrator is outraged demanding that Hector be punished but Nelson tells her



there is little he can do. She tells him there is no social invention for this in Tsau and he is to blame for not thinking of one. He tells her that Hector has given the girl's mother some money probably income from his game scheme with the Basarwa. The narrator suggests abortion but Nelson says it is illegal and enemies of the project would use it against them. Their argument escalates to a furious pitch and the narrator runs out of the hut going to where she can sit and watch the fires of the Basarwa settlement.

After a few hours the narrator goes in to the village to find unrest and the surprising sight of Dineo running past her. There is a troop of about thirty people led by Dorcas coming up the street doing a Zulu war jog. When they arrive Dorcas starts screaming at the narrator asking why she is there and asking where Nelson is. Dorcas asks where her brother Hector is as if the narrator would know. The narrator pushes past the group of people entering the building where Dineo is lurking. Outside Dorcas is telling people she thinks her brother was lured outside in the night and murdered. They leave and head for Nelson's house. The narrator runs after them arriving to find them encircling the bathing tent screaming at Nelson to come out. She goes into the tent and finds him trying to put on one of her kimonos wanting to know what is going on and where she has been. He tells her he looked for her through the night. The narrator tells everyone to back off while she gets Nelson some clothes and Dorcas bursts in saying Nelson must not be allowed to wash and should be checked for blood.

Dorcas is apparently accusing Nelson of murdering her brother. The narrator brings back his clothes and stands in front of him as he dresses. Nelson tries to appease Dorcas who the narrator notices is pronouncing some of her words in the South African way, which seems odd. The narrator, unlike Nelson, is furious but he is trying to keep the situation from becoming violent. It is the women leading the charge and when one of the men tries to tie Nelson's hands with leather thongs Dorcas rips them from his hands saying only the women can touch Ra Pulang as the villagers call Nelson.

Although the loyalists to Nelson, accompanied by children, start to show up they are ineffective against Dorcas. Nelson is led away to the village where he is kept under house arrest in one of the offices of the Sekopololo. Defying those who say she cannot stay there with him the narrator sits in a chair outside the room where Nelson is being held. The narrator leaves once, briefly, to go check on their house. Nothing is disturbed but the radio, which has wires and leads pulled out of the back. Later, the narrator is able to talk to Nelson and he assures her that everything will be fine and not to worry. He is willing to let the village he created deal with him, which angers the narrator who feels he should fight. She believes Hector's disappearance has been cooked up to set the stage for Nelson's removal.

Nelson remains completely calm reading the Tao Te Ching during the two days he is under arrest. He is finally released to repair the radio transmitter so Dorcas can call in a murder complaint to the police who are unimpressed. The police tell Dorcas a male relative going off without notice is not unusual or even a concern. The whole village begins searching for Hector and a reward is offered. The justice committee meets and decides that no one knows what happened to Hector who may very well be alive. The



authorities have been notified to look for him and Dorcas is told to stop repeating her accusations against Nelson.

The girl Hector impregnated miscarries and goes off to school as she originally planned although the narrator suspects there may be more to the story. Nelson wants the incident to be over and to stay in Tsau and he begins shutting the narrator out making it clear that he is not seeking her opinion on things as he has in the past. This is his profession not hers. With both Nelson and the narrator under stress they turn away instead of toward each other. Nelson retreats into his thinking and the narrator into her writing including lists of questions she wants to ask him. She thinks of returning to her academic pursuits but is uncertain if she really wants that. She dreams she is back in the small falling-down house she lived in for a time as a child.

Chapter 7 (pages 379-409) Analysis

The narrator, after an idyllic period of feeling loved and secure with Nelson, is stung by their emotional separation and his pushing-away of her opinions about the situation in Tsau. Like the women she has so often pitied she finds herself completely obsessed with the man and the relationship. Her maniacal attempt to catalog and define him in writing is an attempt to "capture" his essence forever even if only on paper.

Tsau is coming apart but like a father with an errant child Nelson is more inclined to search for ways to rectify the situation than to flee it. Although he has done similar projects he considers Tsau his most important work. The narrator finds herself furious on his behalf and more compelled to defend him than he is to defend himself. She also finds herself in competition with his project playing second fiddle or so it seems to his feelings about his work. He would rather be destroyed by it than give it up. Ironically, despite their intellectual beliefs about gender equality both are playing out some of the traditional male/female tendencies both would consider obsolete. Left to choose between his purpose and his relationship Nelson is choosing his work. Pondering the same choice the narrator chooses him.



Chapter 7 (pages 409-436)

Chapter 7 (pages 409-436) Summary

The narrator awakes to find Nelson packing to go away. At first she thinks he is preparing to leave Tsau forever but he tells her he has a plan to help stabilize Tsau. Nelson has decided to go to the tiny village of Tikwe forty-five miles to the north of Tsau. Nelson believes that what Tsau needs is a sister colony. As Tsau has become more established and successful people have forgotten what the purpose was and what they overcame. An exchange with another community will refocus the villagers on what Tsau is about and expand the idea behind it. Nelson says Tsau is now prosperous enough to begin expanding in a small way. He is going to investigate setting up a branch in Tikwe or at least see about bringing a couple of the women living there back as interns. Also, since one of the few places anywhere nearby Hector could have gone is Tikwe Nelson will be able to look for him there or find out if anyone has seen him since his disappearance from Tsau.

The narrator senses this is a desperate plan being thrown together quickly. Nelson plans to borrow a horse but the two horses in Tsau are communal property and he should be going through a committee; however, he does not plan to go through a committee because he is leaving immediately. The narrator tells him he is acting just to be doing something and doing it in a risky way not well thought-out. He argues her points with her but says that he is going and if he's wrong it will just be one more thing she's proven right about. She tells him she could stop him, that she's dead set against the idea, and that she is being left to handle the anger of the women in the village when they find out he's taken off with one of the horses. She also knows that he is using her in a way to smooth things over for him while he is gone. He knows that she loves him and is exploiting that love knowing she will not work against him. Nelson says he is trying to save Tsau although he cannot deny anything the narrator has said. She tells him this is wrong for the last time and he leaves.

After he leaves the narrator mulls over why Nelson feels compelled to do this so quickly without the proper preparations. She thinks maybe he does know the people in Tsau want him to go; some actively, like Dorcas, some still appreciating him but wishing for less interference, like Dineo. If Nelson starts a new project within a project at Tsau by expanding its concept to other villages it will provide some social and economic exchange. He may be able to carve out a new role for himself that no one objects to, which would allow him to stay. She thinks that maybe the reason the women in the village were so eager to accept her relationship with Nelson was because they hoped he would eventually leave with her. Still, the narrator does concede that the idea of Tsau expanding and becoming a model for other villages has merit. She considers going after him and making a final plea for him to reconsider but instead gives up and goes back to bed.



The village is in an uproar the next day when one of the horses is discovered missing. Dorcas is telling everyone Nelson must have taken Hector's body out into the desert to hide it. The narrator lies at first saying she was asleep when Nelson left and does not know anything about it but tells the truth to Dineo. Dineo is upset and makes her write a statement about the incident to document what happened to the horse. The next day the narrator goes to see Baph, her donkey. The narrator has gotten into the habit of pouring her heart out to it when she is troubled, but finds a guard posted. The narrator gave Baph to the communal exchange and they are making sure she does not take him or the remaining horse to follow Nelson. She feels completely isolated and cut off from Nelson both physically and emotionally and from the women who are becoming increasingly wary of Nelson and by extension the woman who loves him. The narrator is worried about Nelson and has no one to turn to for comfort. She bitterly resents Dorcas and her group who are following her around and spreading more rumors.

Five days later Nelson has not returned and the narrator is convinced something terrible has happened. The narrator tries to get Dineo to authorize a search party but she is unconcerned saying Nelson has gone off for days at a time before and there is no reason to worry yet. Also, there is the matter of the horse, which upsets people. After a few more days the narrator begs for her donkey back promising she will pay any amount or work off any amount of credits they set if only they will allow her to take him and go look for Nelson. Dineo tells her that under the current circumstances she cannot approve it; they will have to have a meeting first. Frustrated, the narrator retires to a hill where she sits with binoculars and watches for Nelson. She thinks of how her only true friend in Tsau is Nelson and he is in danger with no one to help. She feels completely disconnected and powerless.

The narrator is now fully aware of what it means to go out into the Kalahari alone unlike her first venture into the desert. She tries unsuccessfully to get someone to go with her part of the way. She radios for help but only gets vague promises from the authorities to keep an eye out for Nelson and to make inquiries. She reads all she has compiled and written on Nelson only to conclude that he is the man she wants no matter where he wants them to live. After eleven days with Nelson still missing the narrator starts preparing to go after him despite her fear. Dineo tries to stop her saying an official search party will go out soon although she will not say when. The narrator sets out alone on foot furious with the people of Tsau for what she sees as their ingratitude to Nelson. A young girl brings her a gun and a shell issued by Dineo at the last minute. Rather than feeling touched the narrator is depressed. The gun is a reminder of how dangerous her trek is and it is heavy and will slow her down.

After only a few miles the narrator is already demoralized. The walk is grueling and this time she is not just moving toward a geographical target but having to stop and scan everything for some sign of Nelson. She thinks of turning back to Tsau realizing she has no real plan, no tent, no donkey to help bear her pack, and there is no way to reach Tikwe in less than three days on foot. Tortured by memories of Nelson she pushes on so self-absorbed by her thoughts that she does not notice the six horsemen approaching her slowly through the brush until they are right before her. They are Baherero a tribe whose dialect she has not learned all fully armed. She manages to



communicate with them enough to understand that they want her to put down her rifle, which she does although grudgingly. She sees a seventh rider advancing slowly pulling something on a travois behind him. Running to it she pushes back the covering and finds Nelson his face swollen and burned. She can see he must have been injured and left lying in the sun. The tribesmen tell her he is sick but will recover and push her away so they can resume their journey. They had found him in the desert and are taking him back to Tsau.

The narrator tries to keep up with them but is slowed by the weight of the rifle, which she finally sticks in a tree hoping to come back for it later. Desperately trying to keep up and not slow down the procession, which she wants to get to Tsau as quickly as possible she sheds her backpack, then one of her canteens, then her binoculars. She begins running toward Tsau. When she still cannot keep up one of the riders is left to wait for her and give her a ride. They arrive in Tsau about a half-hour after the others to find Nelson already in the infirmary. He seems to be sleeping although the nurse tells her he had been awake taken some liquids and had recognized everybody. He has sunpoisoning, a broken left arm, a broken right ankle, and possibly a broken collarbone.

The narrator desperate to be with Nelson makes herself an obstruction to his care. She is trying to keep everyone but herself and the nurse away so distraught that she is thinking of trying to somehow have sex with Nelson so she can capture his seed should he die. The narrator runs back to their house to put makeup on fearful he will awaken and find her looking and smelling as she does after her walk into the desert. When she returns the women tell her they want her to eat something and take a sedative. She refuses the pills but they outsmart her putting sleeping powders in her drink. She gets dizzy and passes out finally forced to rest.

The next day Nelson is awake sitting up outside in a chair and looking much better. The narrator runs to him throwing her arms around him and weeping asking him questions and telling him how worried she was. He only smiles and murmurs then closes his eyes. Dineo tell the narrator he has already answered all their questions about how what happened and needs to rest now. The narrator notices Nelson is strangely passive responding to people but initiating nothing himself.

As Nelson continues to improve he is mentally and emotionally quite unlike himself, kind but remote. He seems uninterested in interacting with narrator or telling her what happened to him in the desert. He often responds only with a tolerant, holy, blissful smile as though there are things no one else would be able to understand. The narrator starts taking notes during their conversations then taping them. Nelson shows no objection to anything. The narrator can hardly get him to talk although she understands from the nurse and Dineo that he apparently laid injured for eight days before being discovered by the Baherero. A snake had fallen from a tree and bitten his horse, which panicked and threw Nelson breaking its leg in the process. When he came to his horse was dying slowly and miserably. He somehow managed to drag himself to it remove his supplies and cut the animal's throat with his knife.



Nelson then passed into a visionary state sensing a female presence somehow protecting him from the jackals and a lion along with swarms of bees that were also protecting him from danger. He had a number of insights and what the narrator believes were hallucinations and says he managed to survive on so little water by becoming something that did not need it. What he will tell her is all very metaphysical and strange and it disturbs the narrator deeply along with his continued display of deep detachment. He is not even interested in reading, which shocks her. He only pretends to read so she will leave him alone, which wounds her deeply. He has stopped eating meat and wants to dress in nothing but white. He seems to have no interest in the political issues he has been so passionately involved with his entire adult life.

The narrator is convinced he is psychologically damaged although physically Nelson is healing at an astonishing rate. He could go home but he prefers to remain in the infirmary. It seems he is in some blissful state of consciousness that he would like to have left undisturbed. The narrator wants him evacuated for psychiatric treatment but no one else in the village shares her concern saying he is doing well and she should leave him alone.

Finally, Nelson returns to their home but he remains dreamy and distant repeating certain phrases and continuing to act unattached to her or anything that interested him in the past. For the narrator this is an unbearable situation. After deciding she truly loves him and wants to stay in Tsau after experiencing the terror of thinking she'd lost him and the relief of finding him alive she is disturbed to find her nightmare not ending but just beginning. She has Nelson back physically but the man she loves seems to have disappeared from his body.

Chapter 7 (pages 409-436) Analysis

The author creates an atmosphere of almost unbearable suspense and loss during this passage. The reader shares the narrator's agony as she fears for Nelson's life and her frustration at not being able to take quick action to save him. Although her trek into the desert to find Nelson is not nearly as long or physically arduous as her original journey to find him at Tsau psychologically it is almost more tortuous. Now she is afraid not only for herself but for the man she loves. In many novels the agony would end with the welcome news that her beloved is alive and their subsequent reunion. However, it will not be that simple for the narrator who finds the joy of being reunited delayed by Nelson's lack of response to her and his seemingly completely changed persona.



Chapter 7 (pages 436-463)

Chapter 7 (pages 436-463) Summary

As the days pass the narrator continues to feel isolated and paranoid without Nelson to turn to and suspicious of the motivations of the women in the village. She wonders if their support in the past was simply an act something they displayed in hopes she would someday take Nelson with his troublesome interference away. Now she suspects that the women and Dineo in particular may want to keep him a founder with connections who is also completely passive and easily manipulated. She even considers the idea that Nelson did murder Hector and then went out in the desert as a punishment for himself. The women she is closest to in the village brush aside her concerns and treat her as though she is the person whose mental condition is in question.

The narrator goes to talk to Dineo determined to get Nelson out of Tsau and in the hands of someone who can better evaluate his physical and mental condition. She finds Dineo who she has considered something of a friend, cool, imperious, and resistant to her suggestions. The narrator is open with Dineo telling her that she remembers the day in the bathhouse. The narrator said she took that incident as Dineo's attempt to tell her not to worry because her hysterectomy scars showed she could not bear children or be a suitable mate for Nelson. Dineo indicates she is correct. The narrator also tells Dineo she believes that the village encouraged her relationship with Nelson in hopes she would get him to leave Tsau sooner. Now she wonders if they think a newly compliant Nelson might be an asset. Dineo denies all of this but in a formal way that seems insincere.

Dineo brings up the missing rifle and the dead horse and the narrator realizes that she wants them to sign documents of liability for the lost goods, which she agrees to do. Dineo says she will speak to the Mother Committee and says she assumes the narrator and Nelson will leave all their possessions in Tsau, which the narrator also quickly agrees to. Dineo shows that she does know Nelson is not himself by expressing a concern to the narrator about Tsau's project donors visiting him. Dineo knows that in his current state Nelson will agree with anything. The narrator promises to keep them away and arrangements are made for her to fly Nelson to Gaborone for further examination.

In Gaborone Nelson continues to be submissive and although he has begun to read some again will only read the Tao Te Ching. After a night in a hotel the narrator rents a house for them to stay in and tries not to pressure Nelson. In the week that follows he offers only one statement that is not a response to a question - "Time is an ape." The narrator invites the embassy nurse over telling her she wants her to refer him for psychiatric care. The nurse, however, reacts much as the women in Tsau did. She tells the narrator that Nelson is in wonderful physical and mental condition. She seems more concerned that the narrator might be suffering from some kind of paranoia. The only visitor Nelson responds to is Hiram a former high school teacher who is hideously



scarred from being tortured during a political coup in the seventies. He is shunned, a beggar who has been mentally damaged by his ordeal as well. Nelson had known him before and when he comes to visit the two sit silently staring into each other's eyes although Hiram is normally very talkative. They seem to be communing on some other level.

Nelson continues to be complacent and uninterested in sexual contact. One day he tells the narrator that they could get married while they are in Gaborone and that they could have children. He delivers this as an afterthought with no real emotion and the narrator bursts into tears uncertain what it is that he is really trying to do since he no longer seems to be in love with her. Although in the past both she and Nelson have shared contempt for the psychiatric profession the narrator calls in a Sri Lankan psychiatrist. Like the nurse before him this doctor insists that not only is there nothing wrong with Nelson he is a wonderful man he would like to spend more time with.

Seeing that no one believes Nelson is in trouble the narrator decides to do whatever is necessary to jolt him out of his mental state whether he likes it or not. She forces him to recount his experience in the desert day-by-day. He tells her of watching the jackals come and tear his horse apart and how he tried to keep from emitting the smell of fear by pretending to be inanimate like the trees or the earth. He spent eight days in this alternate state of consciousness taking very little food or water. He had, what he says she will think was a hallucination, although he obviously believes otherwise experiencing his own body consciousness at a cellular level. Nelson then diverts his narrative to tell a parable, the upshot of which is, if he tries to force his new viewpoint on the narrator that it will not work and could even be destructive. The narrator tells him this is just his way of blocking her out again and she hates it. Under further pressure she finally gets him to tell her that consciousness is bliss. This is the state of being he entered during his crisis in the desert and the state he is in now an ecstasy so complete it has to be contained to function in any kind of normal setting.

Nelson goes on to tell the narrator the rest of the story as he remembers it. Lying in the desert helpless a male lion approached. As it approached him a swarm of bees attacked stinging the lion and driving him off. While Nelson admits his memories may be hallucinatory he affirms that the state of consciousness he is now in is not. The calmer he gets the more agitated the narrator gets and she finally leaves to go to the mall where she stops at a bookstore. In the bookstore the narrator meets a young intern whose beauty is legendary. The narrator discovers her reading a book by Nelson completely engrossed in and inspired by his work. Brown is not intellectually gifted but she is undeniably gorgeous. The men in the store cannot take their eyes off her and the narrator has a strange inspiration. She decides to bring Brown to Nelson and see what happens. The narrator thinks that maybe this beauty who will be awed to be in the presence of her hero will jolt him back to normalcy if only through lust or anger at the narrator for her manipulations. She decides to throw a party for Nelson invite Bronwen and see what happens.



Chapter 7 (pages 436-463) Analysis

The borders of what is sane and insane are examined and shown as largely a matter of circumstance and perspective. Nelson's trauma in the desert may have created an evolution into a higher state of consciousness but the narrator feels he has left her behind. He may be superior in his new state of being but she wants back the man she loved and finds his new persona disturbing.

Here too there is a subtle irony as the narrator finds herself with a sweet, trustworthy, compliant man - someone who will do whatever she wishes and is willing to marry her and start a family. They have reversed the traditional roles the narrator despises with Nelson taking a submissive acquiescent position and the narrator trying desperately to penetrate his awareness to find a way to jolt him back to his former self. In this unbearable attempt to prospect for her lover within the body of a man that seems alien to all that he was the narrator is ready to try anything and her own rationality is now in question. She is concerned about Nelson's psyche but fails to perceive the degeneration of her own a classic case of projection.

The course the narrator decides to take has precedent one that seems ironic and prophetic now. Nelson's wife, Grace did essentially the same thing finding Nelson a new lover by helping to bring the narrator to him. The narrator is now exactly what she feared most and never thought possible for her to become - a woman so out of her mind with love and longing that she will do almost anything to end the pain.



Chapter 8 (pages 467-477)

Chapter 8 (pages 467-477) Summary

The narrator is suddenly back in Palo Alto, California, with an extension on her doctoral thesis but her mind continues to dwell on Nelson and Africa. She finishes the tale of her last days in Africa in backflashes interspersed with a description of her current life. Things are going well for her in America. Her mother lives and works in a Lutheran nursing home and feels more secure and valued than she ever has. The narrator has been welcomed back into the academic community and given a good job as the editor and manager of obscure doctoral dissertations. She is also a highly paid speaker on the subject of the feminist village of Tsau.

The narrator's plan to throw Bronwen at Nelson went off without a hitch. Nelson's acquaintances in Gaborone were delighted to be invited to the party especially the beautiful and impressionable Bronwen. The narrator made sure there was plenty of alcohol and gently guided Bronwen to Nelson. The two of them retired to the bedroom before the night was over. The narrator scrubs the place clean and leaves them a pitcher of orangeade for breakfast before departing herself.

Between the narrator's blithe descriptions of her new life and the memories of the one she just left are several references to a message she received a month before. It is somewhat cryptic taken by the narrator's receptionist who thinks it was a woman calling but is not certain. The caller left no identification or request for a return call just a short message, "Hector proven alive, Manhope police agent, Bronwen sent from Tsau after one week." The narrator realizes Manhope is a misspelling for Mangope a dictator that wants to take over Botswana. She thinks it means Hector was a political agent planted to stir up trouble and get Nelson ejected so his faction could use Tsau as a base for some kind of takeover plot.

The narrator tries to decide what to do about the message as she continues to think about Nelson and in many ways to relate to him as though he were still with her. She continuously carries on conversations and arguments with him in her head. She has started reading the Tao Te Ching despite her earlier objections. She thinks she has uncovered the flaw in Nelson's thinking and longs to point it out to him. She is still hurt that he chose to allow Bronwen into his bed even though she set it up herself secretly she had hoped he would be outraged. She wonders where the message came from, who made the call, if she is being manipulated somehow. Continuing to concoct theories and argue with herself in the last lines of the book she asks herself what is to be done concluding "Je viens. Why not?"



Chapter 8 (pages 467-477) Analysis

Having left Africa and Nelson the narrator claims to have escaped the situation but in fact has not. She is beginning to make a life in America again and it is exactly what she was hoping to achieve when she first went to Africa to work on her thesis. Yet wherever she may be geographically it is obvious that her heart and mind remain in Africa and completely focused on Nelson. She seesaws back and forth trying to find reasons not to return until finally she reveals that she has reached some sort of decision. Although she has no clue what will happen if she returns to Africa she apparently plans to do just that.



Characters

Narrator

The narrator who remains anonymous is an American anthropologist who came to Africa to work on her doctoral thesis. Although her name is never known we know that she is in her early 30's, very literate, and very much an independent modern woman in ideology. She is terrified of gaining weight or becoming mediocre in any way; anxieties that seem to be tied to her fatherless upbringing by an obese emotionally-damaged mother who had to raise her only child in poverty. The narrator is in a constant state of inner conflict between her need for romantic fulfillment and her fear of becoming swallowed up or dominated and then devalued in a heterosexual relationship. She tends to obsess about her relationship with Nelson Denoon and she feels a strong urge to write down everything she experiences. She also has an unusually strong memory and is able to recall entire conversations and episodes faultlessly.

Nelson Denoon

A brilliant academic maverick and socio-political theoretician Nelson's life work has centered on setting up planned settlements for underprivileged segments of society where they can learn to reach and maintain social and economic balance. Having seen so much poverty and lack he deplores the hypocrisy of allowing any luxury in his life while others suffer. Like the narrator, Nelson has had a difficult childhood raised by a submissive religious mother and a left wing, alcoholic father. Now in his forties, Nelson's intense passion for his work and world of ideas tends to eclipse his relationships. He fears becoming like his father or showing the traits of dominance and violence he despises in other men.

Grace Denoon

Grace, Nelson's beautiful, aristocratic wife becomes mentally and emotionally unhinged during their separation and divorce. Grace is, however, a kindhearted woman who seems to care deeply about Nelson enough to help the narrator who she befriends and asks her to help find him in hopes of starting a relationship.

Giles

Giles is a handsome, talented, Canadian photographer who has a brief dalliance with the narrator. She goes with him on assignment to Victoria Falls but the attraction mutually wanes during the trip never to return.



Martin Wade

Martin Wade is a white South African army deserter and exile politically aligned against apartheid and the South African government. He is a rumored ally of the African National Congress. Martin and the narrator have a brief romance during her stay in Gaborone but their relationship is not strong enough to withstand the demands of Martin's life as an undercover political operant and activist.

Z

"Z" is a middle-aged British spy in Gaborone with whom the narrator becomes involved with while on the rebound from Martin Wade. Although she finds him somewhat attractive her main interest is seeing if she can get him to reveal any of the secrets he has gathered as a spy. He adores her for her helpful massages and manipulations of his back, which had kept him in constant pain but now improves with her care. The bit of information she finally coerces him into giving leads her to Nelson Denoon.

Mma Isang

A charter resident of Tsau, Mma Isang is a middle-aged member of the Mother Committee that governs Tsau. She gives the narrator shelter and support when she first comes to the village and remains her friend throughout her time there.

Dineo

Another resident and member of the Mother Committee in Tsau, Dineo is a shrewd, beautiful, and sensual looking woman in her forties and a powerful presence and leader in the village community.

Dorcas and Hector Rapoubi

Dorcas is a Tsau resident and the village postmistress who seems antagonistic towards the narrator and her presence in Tsau. Hector is her brother who seems similarly opposed to Nelson. Later, the narrator receives information that indicates Hector may have been a political plant with a hidden agenda.

Bronwen

Bronwen, introduced at the end of the book, is a lovely young state department intern working in Gaborone. Based on nothing more than Bronwen's extreme physical beauty and her obvious admiration for Nelson Denoon the narrator decides to bring them together for a romantic interlude. She hopes it will jolt Nelson out of his passivity and force him to make a choice. Nelson does allow Bronwen into his bed the night they meet

although he sends her away after a week in Tsau. When Nelson accepts Bronwen as a temporary lover the narrator gives up on her relationship with Nelson and leaves Africa.



Objects/Places

Garborone

The capital city of Botswana contains a large white population of diplomats, business people, tourists, missionaries, game hunters, and tourists from around the world. Largely developed by whites in the 1960's the city reflects little of African tradition and looks more like a southwestern American college town where English is the official language.

Because the cultures are so different there is little social interaction between whites and native Batswana. This misunderstanding is probably both the reason for and the result of the racism and guilt. The Batswana are not eager to intermingle with the whites in control of their country or to teach them about native culture. The mostly transitory groups of European whites poorly understand the customs and history of the native tribes.

Tsau

Nelson Denoon's seemingly successful social experimental village is set up to run on cooperative labor with women as landowners and government. Nelson believes the restoration of the African village is the key to the successful survival of the native tribes in a country colonized by whites from around the world. However, African culture denigrates women so he sets Tsau up as an example of what women are capable of given the correct resources.

Kalahari Desert

The desert the narrator must cross alone to reach the village of Tsau the Kalahari is portrayed as a brutal dangerous environment and a metaphysical entity with a life and spirit of its own.

Sekopololo

Translated as "The Key" the Sekopololo represents both the physical storehouses and offices and the heart of the concept of the labor cooperative designed to sustain Tsau. Village inhabitants go to the Sekopololo to offer their labor for jobs that need to be done and to receive village currency, which they can then exchange for the imported and domestically made goods stored at the Key.



Donkeys

The only animals the narrator shows attachment to she crosses the desert with two donkeys, losing one in the process. The other remains with her in Tsau and she considers him her friend and pet often going to talk to the animal when she has no one else to comfort her.

Snakes

Snakes, the classic phallic symbol and representation of choice and consequence, appear several times in the novel as symbols with initiating action. The narrator overcomes her fear of snakes to become one of the women dispatched to handle them when they threaten the village. Later, Nelson will come close to death in the desert when a snake falls from a tree and bites his horse, which throws and injures him.

Lions

Lions, like snakes, are another symbolic representation of masculine power that threatens both Nelson and the narrator at different times. While crossing the Kalahari the narrator is terrified that they will attack her and her donkeys and both she and her animals are left shaking after hearing their roars near their camp one evening. The Tsau villagers challenging Nelson use the excuse of lions nearby to introduce the idea of having guns in the village. When Nelson is injured and helpless in the desert a lion approaches but is driven off by what Nelson perceives as a powerful feminine protective presence that animates a swarm of bees driving the predator away.

Journal

The narrator suffers from what she calls 'scriptomania' the need to journal every detail of her life particularly her relationship with Nelson. She spends hours every day writing in her journal and it is never far from her.

Glass

Nelson has a lifelong fascination with glass beginning with a child's creative sculpture from empty whiskey bottles and continuing into adult life when he keeps a glassworks in the village of Tsau. Nelson turns to his glass creations for comfort and inspiration much as the narrator does to her journal. The glass also represents a childhood fascination misunderstood and destroyed by his father.

Tao Te Ching

The Tao Te Ching is the classic Chinese text written by Lao-Tzu and consulted frequently by Nelson after his experience in the desert. The book explains the philosophy of the Tao or "The Way" a process of attaining elevated ecstatic consciousness through the realization that all is perception. It advocates practicing detachment, acceptance, and unconditional love.



Themes

Political, Social and Economic Injustice

In many ways author Norman Rush makes the issue of political, social, and economic injustice the true setting of his story with Africa as a local example. The recognition and pondering of this theme is what drives the characters and much of the action in the novel. Nelson Denoon has devoted his life and intellect to solving the problem and the narrator's perception of him as a great man is induced by her own discomfort with the inequalities and unfairness of human society. Certainly the village of Tsau and its inhabitants are metaphors for an attempt at a solution.

The author also explores the way a society maintains balance even at a great cost to some of its members, i.e. how the downtrodden sometimes accept their own victimization because it feels familiar to them. He also raises the issue of people deciding for other people what is right, fair, and appropriate for them to have, do, be, or desire, particularly when the judge is from another culture. At times, Nelson's "helping" strays into a paternalism that limits the personal choice he really wants to expand.

Equality and Balance in Male/Female Relationships

The central characters in *Mating* are certainly sophisticated enough to reject traditional gender roles in love and romance yet they soon find it is not as simple as the theory. The narrator finds a certain feminine instinct to want to yield to and support a strong masculine energy and Nelson battles his own tendency to dominate intellectually and emotionally. Both characters have disturbing examples in their backgrounds of what can happen in a relationship with traditional gender roles but both begin to learn that simply reversing those roles is not necessarily the solution. Maintaining balance and flexibility is more desirable but also much more difficult.

Nelson and the narrator are able to achieve this balance at times as when Nelson decides to trust the narrator's judgment about certain issues like having guns in Tsau and the villagers' desire to have modern imported luxuries in their storehouse. His deference to her opinion touches her as he 'gives up power' in recognition of her less-biased approach in some matters. The narrator is generally more defensive and unwilling to do the same thing but at times does try as when she allows Nelson to go into the desert without notifying anyone who would try to stop him.

While the give-and-take strengthens their relationship under stress Nelson and the narrator tend to take their old contra-traditional stances. Nelson, in a fit of worry over the state of Tsau refuses to listen to anything the narrator has to say completely shutting her out and basing his actions solely on his own thinking. The narrator, asked by Nelson to stay in Tsau as his permanent partner agonizes over the decision on her own sharing very little of what she is thinking and feeling with him. Finally, the concept that it is



balance and not role reversal that most satisfies the main characters is evident after Nelson comes back from his traumatic experience in the desert passive and detached. The dynamic that fueled the relationship and their intellectual meeting of minds is lost and the narrator discovers that she does not want Nelson to be completely submissive any more than she wishes to be. The balancing act of sharing power in the relationship while nerve-wracking seems to be necessary for its survival.

Acting Out Childhood Issues

Both Nelson and the narrator are obsessed by and determined to deviate from some of the traits expressed by their parents; things that caused them pain as children. Nelson admired his father's radical politics and attitudes but also felt damaged by his father's alcoholism and hypocritical attitudes. Nelson also saw and apparently empathized with what his mother experienced as a wife. Yet Nelson is in many ways much like his father in temperament and intellect and at times treats the narrator like the codicil and burden to a man's more important dreams and theories that his mother was in his family. The effect of alcoholism on Nelson's father's personality is something that was probably poorly understood by his young son. On the one occasion Nelson drinks heavily in the story he is horrified to find himself both out of control with the drinking and acting much as his own father did.

If Nelson fears alcohol for what it did to his father, the narrator has a similar fear of being overweight or mediocre. Her fear is based on a childhood with a mother with a severe eating disorder; a woman whose size and shame limited both their lives. The narrator whose father seduced and abandoned her mother is also loath to be open and trusting with men. Weight affected her mother's relationships, personality, and her ability to get a decent job. The narrator herself has a tendency to put on weight and it terrifies her signifying for her the slide into becoming her own mother. She is equally rigid about the dangers of trusting and submitting to men knowing that her mother's innocence on the subject led her to being duped and abandoned with a small child. Both the narrator and Nelson tend to be overly sensitive about tendencies they share with their same-sex parents misidentifying what is within the normal range of human behavior as sure signs they are becoming exactly as their parents were.



Style

Point of View

Mating is told in the first-person narrative by an unnamed female protagonist who tells the story strictly from her personal perspective and recollections. The reader is only certain of the narrator's thoughts and feelings. The thoughts and feelings of other characters are filtered through the narrator's sense of what they thought or felt or by dialogue from personal conversations she had with them.

Stories told from the first person are told from the viewpoint of "I," which is instinctively the way the reader thinks of themselves. This creates a bond between the reader and the narrator but also makes it painfully clear how limited a single human perspective always is - it has its insights and its blind spots. The fact the narrator has no name magnifies this aspect as the reader is less able to objectify her as a character and so remains more deeply enmeshed in her subjective perception of events. The narrator's anonymity also provides an interesting contrast to her unique well-delineated character. She is not "every woman" and certainly has her own distinctive style yet she is not given a name as an identifier leaving the reader forced to think of her more in terms of her whole personality.

Setting

Setting is often tied to the emotional tone of a story and Africa provides a dramatic, expansive, dangerous, beautiful, and compelling natural background for a relationship between the narrator and Nelson Denoon that evokes many of the same adjectives. The narrator specifically alludes to the way the "feel" of Africa has a specific effect on the behavior of those who live or visit there at the beginning of the book. The country is just "so much" that it is hard to take in and people seem to become greedier and more sensual driven by a sense of wanting more.

The village of Tsau is a more intimate setting that focuses more on interpersonal relationships. The village is more than Nelson's project and a collection of buildings. It is an environment of relationships; people living together to satisfy both personal and collective needs. In this way Tsau is symbolic of the burgeoning relationship between Nelson and the narrator. A certain amount of work needs to be done with responsibilities and labors shared fairly to reap rewards and live peacefully. As it does within the intimate context of Nelson and the narrator the issue of power plays out within the village when some of its people begin to resent Nelson's influence and interference. As Tsau begins to divide and sprout opposing factions it is really about maintaining the balance of power in human relationships, both for the village, and for Nelson and the narrator.



Language and Meaning

Mating makes use of very sophisticated language with an international and academic flavor including foreign phrases often employed by the intellectually elite. It also introduces a variety of terms indigenous to the area and a short glossary of African terms and phrases is included in the back of the book to help the reader navigate those particular references. Even readers with a well-developed and extensive vocabulary may find themselves in need of a dictionary at times.

The narrator in particular uses many obscure literary allusions as well as foreign and academic phrases to the extent it at times seems almost an affectation. However, her style of communication also helps define the narrators' character that of a well-read intelligent woman who seeks enlightenment through intellectual pursuits. As a woman in an academic career she is expected to communicate in a way that reflects the breadth of her study particularly with her peers. It also reflects the environment of whites in Africa particularly in Gaborone a multinational city with a melding of varied linguistic influences.

Finally, the very erudite language used by the narrator in her inner and outer conversations seems at times defensive and faintly self-mocking. Both she and Nelson are well-read scholars who have taken the trouble to study and learn a vast amount of material gleaned from great thinkers. Yet, they often find themselves at a loss when engulfed in the difficulties of relationships or pondering their own highest purpose. Both the narrator and Nelson soon find that intellectual gifts only go so far when it comes to unraveling the mystery of any individual's own human heart.

Structure

The plot of Mating is structured as a mostly retrospective re-telling of the narrator's experiences in Africa and her relationship with Nelson. This changes in the last chapter of the book, which finds her in the present moment pondering what to do next. Although the narrator attempts to give a chronological presentation of the facts her memories tend to jump around in time sequence especially when she is re-telling a memory that future or past information sheds more light on. The narrator's non-chronological focus on Nelson allows her relationship with him to permeate the entire book more fully bringing him into sections where he is not yet actually there as an active character. This device also makes it clear to the reader what the most compelling focus in the story is for the narrator.

Mating is not the classical pyramidal structure of rising action leading to a climax of emotional or situational tension that dissipates as those tensions are resolved. Instead, the action rises and falls throughout the story building at several times to points of high emotional intensity followed by lulls of peacefulness then building again. There is the narrator's struggle for survival while crossing the desert followed by an almost idyllic period after reaching Tsau disrupted later by incidents of confrontations and conflict within the village and her relationship with Nelson. Nelson's near-death experience in



the desert is followed by the relief of his rescue but quickly takes another turn when the narrator finds him a changed man. The tension dissipates as the narrator returns to the United States and starts living a more 'normal' life but there is no tidy resolution for the reader. In the last two lines of the story the narrator suddenly makes a decision to return to Africa that leaves conclusions as to the final outcome of her relationship with Nelson and the life she will choose to lead completely open-ended.

Quotes

"In fact for a disappointee, Gaborone was perfect, because you circulate in a medium of other whites who are disappointed too. Nobody uses the word." Chapter 1, page 6

"I was engaging in something deluded and worthless. What was I doing? How stupid a goal could you set for yourself? I suppose I had a dark night of the soul. I had no relation to anything that had meaning." Chapter 1, page 48

"I had a flash of the feeling I used to get from time to time of the Batswana as spectators at a great game played by whites called Running Your Country." Chapter 2, page 69

"Why can't every mating in the world be on the basis of souls instead of inevitably and fundamentally on the match between physical envelopes?" Chapter 2, page 93.

"Denoon was an answer to something I was only subliminally aware was really bothering me, namely the glut of things you feel you ought to have a perspective on," Chapter 2, page 108

"But actually I did feel slight irritation at their interposing themselves between me and one of the great unalloyed solitary joys of life - being up at first light and setting out on empty roads to go someplace difficult and significant." Chapter 3, page 132

"Equilibrium or perfect mating will come when the male is convinced he is giving less than he feels is really required to maintain dependency and the woman feels she is getting more from him than her servile displays should merit." Chapter 4, page 173

"Assortative mating shows that there has to be some drive in nature to bring equals together in the toils of love, so why even in the most enlightened and beautifully launched unions are we afraid we hear the master-slave relationship moving its slow thighs somewhere in the vicinity?" Chapter 4, page 250

"I was emotional a lot, privately. I wanted to incorporate everything, understand everything, because time is cruel and nothing stays the same." Chapter 4, page 250

"In blank sex everything tangible about your partner is transformed into something that excites and weakens you, seems irreplaceable, his breath, even physical defects, and all these things are somehow necessary for your physical survival or salvation, and yet you know you can never possess them even as you caress them and try to convince yourself that contact with them in the heat of sex is the same as claiming them, having



them forever, which in your heart you know is untrue, and thus the tonus of despair."
Chapter 5, page 308

"I hope never again to undergo the state I was in. I even remember one peculiarity of it; I was aware more than usually of the edges of my field of vision, my lashes, the ghostly nose we forget is always there." Chapter 7, page 384

"The message was I should stick to my lares and penates while he got on with his work. A brain surgeon doesn't consult with his wife on how to attack a tumor just because he loves her and she's a lovely person. Also the message was that it was time for me to see myself not so unqualifiedly as a colleague." Chapter 7, page 406

"I would try to revivify my feeling for anthropology from time to time, even carrying my efforts into little fantasies of pulling out, going alone and whole hog back to Stanford and into a new thesis and a new thesis advisor and lo and behold, having Nelson without warning show up, having followed me across the world to be with me." Chapter 7, page 408

"But at the same time I felt a tremor of disgust with the world that somehow the fate of this man, my beloved man, hadn't come to somebody's attention in Gabs, because something was seriously wrong with him and he was important." Chapter 7, page 441.

"This is not precisely Guilty Repose, but it resembles it. Being in America is like being stabbed to death with a butter knife by a weakling." Chapter 8, page 471

"But back to my phone call, because inhering in it is the cultural ghost of the whole perplex of women waiting in agony to be phoned by some man or other." Chapter 8, page 471.



Topics for Discussion

Both Nelson and the narrator seem to have a strong fear of being anything like their own same-sex parent. How does this play out in their relationship with each other and how much conflict does it generate with each other and within themselves?

One of the main themes in the story is the way women lose or fear losing their own identity and power when they fall in love with a man. The narrator is particularly determined not to fall victim to this, yet she remains a nameless character in the book. Why do you think the author chose to leave his main character completely anonymous?

Nelson explains to the narrator early in the book that what usually makes projects like Tsau fail is that the people it is designed to benefit eventually become tired of accepting someone else's idea of what is best for them. As they become stronger, they want to take control of their own lives and communities. What are some of the ways this occurs in Tsau? Is that really a failure, or simply a healthy sign of increased empowerment?

The vocabulary in *Mating* is very challenging and literary, containing many foreign phrases. Do you think the author simply writes and speaks that way himself, or is it part of drawing the background and education of his characters, particularly the narrator? Is the main characters' obvious intelligence and ability to analyze useful in managing their emotional affairs?

How do you think the author draws parallels between the inception, growth and maturation of a community and that of a relationship between two people? Discuss how Nelson and the narrator's life as a couple mirrors some of the events and cycles in the village.

Several times in the book, the narrator tries to weigh decisions, balancing her heart against her fears. Often, she finds herself having an outside force determine her priorities for her, as when she fully realizes what Nelson means to her while he is lost in the desert and decides to remain in Tsau. Is her final decision like that or is it different? What do you think is motivating her to return to a situation she found so painful?

What do you think the author is trying to say about the difficulty of maintaining equality and balance, whether in a society or a personal relationship?

When Nelson comes back from his experience in the desert a changed man, his new personality seems sane enough to everyone but the narrator. Was the narrator right in her concern for his mental health, or was she the one suffering from a distorted perception of reality?