

# **Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey from a Refugee Camp to Harvard Study Guide**

**Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey from a Refugee Camp to Harvard by Selamawi Asgedom**

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# Plot Summary

"Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard" by Mawi Asgedom tells the story of Selamawi Haileab Asgedom or Mawi. He was a refugee who came to America when he was young. Through hard work and his father's influence, he became a Harvard graduate.

Mawi's mother took him on a long and hard trip through the desert when he was very young. They were traveling to Sudan to meet up with his father. For three years they lived in a refugee camp in Sudan and then they left for America.

The family was able to go to America as part of the World Relief Christian organization outreach. They were placed into a hotel in Chicago until the organization could find a church to sponsor them. They couldn't find anything in Chicago so the family moved to the suburbs where a church finally sponsored them. While they were living in the hotel, people from the churches came to take them around and introduce them to American culture. They also learned about American culture by watching television.

The family was extremely poor and Mawi's father pointed out to his children that they had to work hard in order to overcome the poverty and get an education. He knew that they would be able to get to college by getting scholarships if they were good academically. Even though they were poor, they always reached out to help others. Mawi's father insisted that angels were frequently mistreated because they didn't look like angels. Instead, they come in many different forms including vagrants and beggars. He called them beetles.

Mawi and his brother were very close. They both faced the challenges of school together. Because of their background and the color of their skin, they were often targets for bullying. Back in their home country, they were used to fighting. They fought against the bullies, trying to defend themselves, and were threatened with expulsion. Their father told them to turn away when others picked on them because surviving the academic world with their only way to get scholarships for college.

Mawi's father worked as a janitor, but he eventually again losing his sight and had to become unemployed. Mawi was frequently embarrassed by him, but as he grew older, he heard stories about his father from the old country. The man had been a wealthy doctor admired by many because he was always willing to help others. Mawi realized that his father was a hero. His other hero was his brother, who developed a wonderful heart as he grew older and reached out to help others as well. When his brother was a senior in high school, he was hit by a drunk driver and killed.

Listening to his father, Mawi worked very hard academically. He was also involved in sports, and he tried to befriend everyone, no matter what their social status. When he filled out his college applications, a school counselor encouraged him to apply to Ivy League schools. He was accepted to Harvard with a full scholarship. His father died before his graduation, killed by a drunk driver, just like his brother. At his graduation he

reflected on his upbringing and realized how an awareness of community, always reaching out to help others, was the most important thing in life.



# Author's Note - Coming to America

## Author's Note - Coming to America Summary and Analysis

"Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard" by Mawi Asgedom tells the story of Selamawi Haileab Asgedom (Mawi). He was a refugee who came to America when he was young. Through hard work and his father's influence, he became a Harvard graduate.

Author's note-

Since the author came to the United States, he became known by the name Mawi Asgedom. However, his true name was Selamawi Haileab Asgedom. In his native language, his name means "peaceful power from above to make others kneel before him." He stated that this was the story not just of his family, but of thousands of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees. He originally came from Eritrea and Ethiopia, which had fought a civil war until 1991. Eritrea became an independent nation in 1993.

Memories

The author remembered the desert and the hyenas, but not much more than that. He wasn't sure if what he remembered was actual or was what he had heard in stories. When he was young he played soccer with rocks, and he and his brother were told that they had to go on a trip. He remembered a difficult journey and a woman who walked with them, even though she was limping. Eventually she was crawling across the desert, and her bloody skin was falling off behind her. However, she kept on crawling as it was her only choice. She was a refugee. Mawi traveled with his mother, his 5-year-old brother, and his baby sister. He was three years old himself. They were trying to make it to Sudan where they would meet up with his father. Upon arriving in Awad, they found the city packed with others who were refugees. The people were uprooted, hopeless, and diseased.

The Camp

After reuniting with his father, Mawi and his family found safety at a Sudanese refugee camp in Umsagata. They lived there from 1980 until 1983, surviving on United Nations rations, their small gardens, and healthcare from the Swedish Ministry. They went to a school where the teachers beat them, and the parents sided with the teachers. It was very violent, and the boys learned how to fight hard to survive. They used anything that they had on hand to fight.

Mawi remembered one bully who he thought would kill him. His brother came to his rescue, but even before his brother could reach him, a dog bit the bully. In their leisure time, the boys would go hunting with their homemade slingshots. One time, his brother



caught a bird. The bully came by to visit, and took their entire bird. The author pointed out that in retrospect he doesn't feel anger because later on, the bully had to join the Ethiopian liberation movement, where he became one of the "list of senseless casualties."

While the family members lived in the refugee camp, they constantly had to fight illness. The author once got a deadly disease, but he recovered. He remembered how his father was known for his dancing skills. He also remembered how his mother used to scare the young children into correct behavior.

In addition to disease and violence, they also had to worry about Sudanese rebel groups. Always on the lookout for new soldiers, they drafted refugees on a regular basis. They couldn't go home, so Mawi's father began talking about going to Amerikha. He told them that the land was paradise. Their friends and family warned them that bad things could happen, and it might not be paradise after all.

### Coming to America

Going to Amerikha wasn't something they could do easily. The family needed some help, and they asked World Relief, a Christian organization based in the United States, to help them. This organization was known for helping refugees resettle in the United States. Amerikhan sponsors would agree to help refugees find jobs, housing, medical treatment, furniture, and schools. Before a family could go, they needed to take a test. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason as to how to answer the questions on the test. Some people get accepted while others were rejected even when answering in exactly the same way.

Mawi's father told his family that he would be the only one to speak. Whatever he said worked. The family was cleared to go to the United States in 1982. However, a few days before they were supposed to leave, Mawi's half sister surprised them by visiting from another region in Sudan. The family determined that they would not travel without her. The only had permission to leave as a family of 5, and after much negotiation, the sister was allowed to go, but the family had to wait for another year. They left for Amerikha in 1983. Their friends warned them about problems they might face in Amerikha, even though they thought it would be paradise. It was a bittersweet goodbye.



# A New Life - Playground Warfare

## A New Life - Playground Warfare Summary and Analysis

### A New Life

The first two weeks that they lived in Amerikha, they shared a two room, two bedroom hotel room in Chicago. Workers from World Relief met them at the airport, and the family was put in a hotel room as the organization looked for a church to sponsor the family. They couldn't find anyone in Chicago, so the family was moved to a different hotel. This one was in the suburbs. A woman named Beth worked with World Relief to find a sponsor in the area. Meanwhile, she helped them get medical care since Mawi's father had malaria. She visited the family, offering compassion and whatever help she could offer. It was very difficult trying to become accustomed to a new land, especially since they didn't speak the language. It was particularly difficult for Mawi's mother who thought that, by culture, she was not supposed to speak when visitors came. The Bethel Presbyterian Church agreed to sponsor the family. It was in Wheaton. The family members rarely left the hotel because they were worried that they would get lost. One day, their father decided that they all should go out anyway. They had never seen so many cars and lights at night.

The author uses some foreshadowing as he talks about his father's fear of headlights in the destructive power behind them. People connected to World Relief visited the family daily, taking them out to tour Chicago. They learned about Amerikhan life from parks to grocery stores and sky scrapers. Still, they missed their home, especially the food. One day, the author said two angels came to their door. It was two people from their country, and they brought the family native food. They spent some time with Mawi's mother, showing her how to make the native food with Amerikhan utensils.

On days when no one came to visit them, the family entertained each other with stories. They also discovered the television, but their father was appalled by what he saw on television. Looking at the television screen, they observed that rumors they had heard were true. Amerikhans are very concerned with cleanliness and looks. The parents warned their children never to go out looking sloppy.

Finally, they were given their own house. It was a two-story house with a huge yard. They couldn't believe it. It was too big. They couldn't afford to live in it. To make ends meet, they found a renter for their upstairs. While they were in this house, Mawi's little brother was born. They named him Hntsa-Eyesus, which meant "thank you." The child was conceived in Sudan, and the family was thankful that they all made the trip safely, and that the child was born in the new land. He was a symbol of their new life.

God's Angels



As they were getting used to life in Amerikha, Mawi's father talked to his children about strangers. He told them that they should always treat strangers well because they could be God's angels. He warned his children that angels didn't necessarily look like angels. In fact, they were often disguised as the lowliest of beetles. Angels could appear as vagrants, beggars, and misfits.

His father led by example, and he once invited a man into the home who smelled horribly. They fed the man and sheltered him. When he left, the man gave the family an address book. It was all he had.

Mawi remembered another angel who helped them. This one actually looked like an angel. She would take the children to the college to play soccer and play on the playground. She also sang to them as she played the guitar. Her name was Charlene.

### Playground Warfare

Mawi's mother and father stressed the importance of education to their children. They frequently told the children that they were very poor, and most likely the parents would never find decent jobs or really understand their rights so people would take advantage of them. However, the children had a chance. They knew that if their children worked hard on their academics, they would be able to get into a college at low cost. They couldn't afford college, so scholarships were the only way to go. The children believed their parents and decided to work hard.

It wasn't easy. The mostly white children in the area had never seen anything like Mawi and his siblings. While most of the classmates treated them well, others ignored them, and some were very nasty. They would tell the children to go back to Africa and tease them about the refugee camps in the starving children. The brothers fought back since they were used to that back in their homeland.

Mawi's brother would fight with him and help protect him. One time, his brother was not around. A bully came after Mawi and pressed them into a fence, squeezing him until he thought he couldn't breathe and that he was going to die. At the last second, his brother saw what was going on and came to help him. Eventually, Mawi started making friends through recess and soccer games. His past games of playing with the rocks in Sudan paid off. His brother found some friends as well. Still, there were always mean classmates. The bullies would draw skeletons on Mawi's sister's locker and serenade her with the famine fundraising song, "We Are The World." When she fought back, she was suspended.

Confrontations weren't just with the white children. Mawi found that he and his brother also had conflicts with the only other Africans at their school. He knew that they should have been making peace, but instead, they fought. Frank and Mbago were brothers from Nigeria. Mbago was always provoking Mawi. If Mawi retaliated, Mbago would fetch his older brother, and they would beat Mawi. One day, Mawi and his brother decided to get back at them. They hid in some bushes and waited for the brothers to come along. They beat them with sticks. It made the brothers feel very good at first, but then they





began to worry about the repercussions for their actions. Mawi's parents were furious. As both sets of parents talked with each other, they became friends.

Still, the bullying continued at school with the other students. Eventually the principal sent home a note saying that the boys might be expelled. Mawi's father told his sons that they should let the other students hit them without retaliating. This made Mawi and his brother feel betrayed. He told them that they didn't have a choice. They were poor, and they couldn't afford expulsion because they needed scholarships to move ahead in life. He told his sons that if their classmates came after them, they should run. There were a few occasions with they still felt that they had to fight back, but for the most part, they learned to accept the taunting without retaliating.

The brothers ran into some real trouble the following year when Jake Evans decided to go after Mawi's brother. Jake was huge, and he liked to use an illegal-length switchblade. He also had a group of followers. There came a day when Mawi's brother knew that he was going to be attacked after school. He prayed to God to save him. A van with four tall black guys pulled up to them and confronted the bully. They warned Jake that if he ever touched Mawi's brother, they would be back to get revenge.

When they were still in elementary school, Mawi's brother told him wonderful, hilarious stories at night. The stories were about five Chinese brothers who moved to the United States. They were masters of martial arts. In all the stories, the brothers would be doing something innocent, and someone would come and do something harmful. The brothers would have to fight back. Later in life, Mawi realized that the stories were symbols of their own situation.



# Days of Mischief - Coffee Tales

## Days of Mischief - Coffee Tales Summary and Analysis

### Days of Mischief

In Sudan, there was a special annual celebration in which the villagers built a huge bonfire. They would gather large sticks and turn them into torches and run around the village from house to house. They would cry out that it would be a new year filled with peace and nothing bad could harm them. The author realized that the Americans had a similar holiday. They called it Halloween. On that date, children would go from house to house making adults smile. They would use witches and other creatures of hell instead of fire, and the children would get showered with candy and fruit and money.

This quickly became the children's favorite holiday, and by their second year of celebrating it, they already had a plan. They would go out two times, and they would take all the baskets and dump the entire contents into their bags. Sometimes they would steal candy from the other children. One time, things went wrong, and an old woman fell down as they grabbed the candy. The words that she threw at them frightened them.

Another time, when it was not Halloween, they decided to steal bigger things. They figured out how to knock down a parking meter, and they brought it into a cave. To their great surprise, a policeman found them. They remembered a story their father had told them about a boy who died for stealing things. He had warned his sons never to steal. He had told him that if he ever caught them stealing anything they would have to fear for their lives. When the policeman found them, they were more terrified of their father's reaction to the situation than they were of the policeman himself. They quickly ran away and hid.

### Libee Migbar

Even though they stole Halloween candy and parking meters, for the most part, the boys were good boys. They worked hard in school, and they were very thankful for their teachers. They began to think about ways they could help their family. When Tewolde was 13, he really began to transform. He was developing a heart.

The brothers often went to the Wheaton Public Library. In January of 1989, the brothers saw someone shivering at the library's entrance. They decided to help the stranger and gave him their lunch.

Tewolde had a knack for getting things for free. He would frequently find things in dumpsters that the family could use. One time, about a year after the library incident, a friend was giving away a weight bench. They didn't need it, but Tewolde said that he had a friend who could use it. He asked Mawi to help him transport it. They brought it to a basement that looked like a place a factory worker with live in. The man they brought the bench to looked very familiar to Mawi. As they talked, Mawi realized that it was the



man from the library. Tewolde had found him housing and a job without ever mentioning it to anybody else.

Mawi remembered trying to make money when he and his brother were too young to work legally. Their father told them that they should work for cash. They restructured damaged driveways. They left that job to work for a cleaning service. When Tewolde was 17, he started his own cleaning business. A teacher helped him by showing the boy how to market. This led to a business cleaning windows. He wanted to clean the windows for the library. Tewolde was determined to get this job, but it never happened because during the middle of his senior year, a drunk driver killed him. People had many wonderful things to say about him as they remembered him.

After his death, Mawi was looking through his room and found a picture of a boy from South Amerikha that his brother had sponsored. Mawi wondered how he found money to help the boy when his own brother had barely anything. Mawi thought of all the different ways Tewolde had held their family. He looked forward to the day that they would meet again.

### Coffee Tales

The children knew that there were several topics to avoid talking about with their parents. One was sex and the other was why their father had left the family back in their homeland. The parents talked to the children about it when they were older, but when they were young, the children gleaned most of their information by eavesdropping on conversations held while their mother had coffee with her friends.

They learned that their father was a healer who helped many people. He was so helpful that the rebels wanted him to be a healer for them. Whenever the armies would approach, he would go and hide. Eventually, they came to often, and he left for Sudan alone. He sent his family and message telling them to join him. At first, Mawi's mother did not want to leave. She sent her sons to her brother for safekeeping when the armies came close, but they almost died from a snake, and he told his sister to take her children back so she could keep them safe. When they became ill, she realized that she needed to go and find her husband. They took the long, hard journey, fighting sickness along the way. Kind people helped them, and she eventually reunited with her husband. He gave them medicine to heal the children and worked at the Swedish Ministry clinic until they left for Amerikha.



# The Making of a Man - Eyeing the Mountaintop

## The Making of a Man - Eyeing the Mountaintop Summary and Analysis

### The Making of a Man

The children learned more about their father, Haileab, when they were older. He was born in Eritria in 1934. His father died soon after his birth, and his mother was sick and couldn't care for him so he was raised in a Coptic Christian monastery. He was an unpaid laborer who had a thirst for knowledge. Haileab studied so hard that he beat others in a test to go on to further education. Eventually he became an advanced dresser, not a full-fledged doctor. However due to a lack of doctors, he did everything a doctor would do. The man was very popular amongst the villagers. He played hard and he worked hard. Soon he was wealthy as well as respected. He believed in treating everyone, no matter what their background was. Still, he knew that the Army wanted him. They would destroy his life. To escape this, he moved away without his family. If they went with him, he knew they would be intercepted. If he went by himself, the rebels would think he was just going to buy supplies in Sudan. Later he would send for his family. He left all his wealth and people behind.

### The Unmaking of a Man

Used to wealth and prestige back in his homeland, Haileab found himself metamorphosed into a black beetle in Amerikha. He was unqualified to work in the medical industry, and found himself lucky to get a job as a janitor at the college. He began to lose his vision, which forced him into unemployment. He couldn't pass the vision test to get a drivers license, and he became very dependent on others. He lost his teeth, developed diabetes, and became increasingly paranoid.

He found control in his own home, and he made the children get up and exercise and do aerobics. If they protested, they were hit with his belt. He exercised alongside his children. He also made them clean the house regularly, and he worked alongside them as they did this as well. When the children protested about their yard work, he told them that it was important to work hard and someday they would benefit from it. That day came when they were evicted from their home because they couldn't pay the increased rent. They had to live in a new area, and the housing development people interrogated their neighbors on what kind of people they were. The neighbors only had good things to say.

One day, in the new housing, Haileab decided to help the neighbors by cleaning up their leaves and getting garbage out of the water in the lake. When he was finished, he didn't know what to do with the debris so he set it on fire. The firemen came and should have



arrested him, but after hearing his story, they just gave him a warning. Mawi's father felt terrible about the situation saying that the world was treacherous. When you do good for somebody, you end up getting punished for it.

Occasionally hundreds of refugees would gather together in reception halls in Chicago. They shared news of the homeland and became friends. At these gatherings, Mawi's father would go up to the microphone and recite poetry. This embarrassed Mawi. As he grew older, he started to really listen to the poetry his father wrote, and he appreciated it.

Mawi once met a refugee friend who had been back to the old country. He told Mawi about a time that he was there and people started talking about Mawi's father. Many people gathered and told wonderful things about Mawi's father. He was a kind and generous man who reached out to help others on a regular basis. This was the first time Mawi realized that his father had been a hero. Perhaps he still was.

### Eyeing The Mountaintop

As Mawi grew older, he realized his family was unique. Not everybody looked for angels everywhere they turned. Often, they only saw angels when they personally benefited from the experience. Mawi decided not to be like that. He remembered how his brother saw angels everywhere he went, and he wanted to be like his brother.

Mawi understood that he wanted to take responsibility for his family, and his way to do that was through academic success. He read all the time, and his English vastly improved. He was a high honor roll student until he hit middle school. Then, succumbing to the taunting of his classmates, he developed low self-esteem. His grades dropped dramatically.

His family encouraged him, as did his faith in God. By high school, he was ready to fight for scholarships and took challenging courses. He began to get straight A's and everything was going well. Then, his best friend, his brother, was killed during Christmas during his senior year of high school. A drunk driver who was heading in the wrong way killed him. This almost made Mawi abandon his dreams, but he knew his brother would never want him to give up. He decided to pursue his goals in honor of his brother. Turning to God for strength, and keeping his brother in his heart, he started to work even harder.

School wasn't just about academia. Mawi was also involved in basketball. Since he couldn't get a ride to practice, especially on Saturdays, he would run the three miles to school. When the season was over, the track coach encouraged him to join the track team. He was very good, and he needed better shoes, but he didn't have the money. For the next four years, his coach paid for shoes for him. Mawi worked hard and excelled in the sport.

Thanks to the sports and his advanced-level classes, Mawi grew to have more friends. He worked hard not to sort friends through a caste system, but to appreciate everyone as they were. During Mawi's senior year, he became the president of the student



government. He knew he was elected because he treated everyone well, no matter what their social status was. Mawi begin to apply to colleges. He wondered how he was going to pay for the education, and went to his school counselor for suggestions. She suggested that he apply to an Ivy League college.

He decided to go for it and got all his paperwork in order. He discovered that his kindness to others paid off. Teachers had been observing him, and in classes where he might have had a "B" average, the teachers bumped him up to an "A" because he was so nice to others. He didn't have the money for the application fees, so he sent a note asking if they would consider waiving the fee. They did. Mawi received acceptance letters and large scholarships from several colleges. He even earned admission into two of the best colleges in the country. Harvard offered him a full-tuition scholarship.



# Father Haileab - Epilogue

## Father Haileab - Epilogue Summary and Analysis

### Father Haileab

The author didn't see his father very often during the last two years of his father's life. In 1997, they spent two weeks together during Christmas break. It was the last time Mawi saw him. During this visit, his father told him stories Mawi had never heard before. Years before, some of their friends from the old country had gotten into trouble and had asked Haileab to translate for them. They went to court, and the judge asked if his friends were guilty. He knew he could not say "yes." They explained that a child had gotten in the way of the car, and his friend had hit the signs trying to avoid the child. This was a lie, but it was the only way he knew how to help his friends.

There was another time he ended up in court. Some other people from his country had come to Amerikha, and the strong son did not understand how the shower worked. He pulled the faucet off the wall, and the water poured out, damaging their housing. The landlord tried to sue for damages. In Haileab's arguments, he stated that the landlord should have known that they were refugees and didn't understand the way things worked. He stated that the landlord should have shown them how to use the different utilities in the apartment. They won the case.

Mawi's father was always an advocate for the underdog. He did everything he could to help others. He spoke several languages, and would often work as a translator. He was killed by a drunk driver while he was riding his bike near home one evening. At his funeral, many people spoke about the way the man reached out and helped and comforted them when they were dealing with trials in life.

### IZG1Hare Yihabkoom

The author wondered what his father would have done if he had attended his graduation from Harvard. He guessed that his father would have stood up and shouted out to others. Mawi found it ironic that his father didn't live long enough to see his dream come to fruition. All his children graduated from college.

As he looked back on his life, Mawi realized that education was a wonderful dream, but true power came from a focus on giving, not just taking. He found his inspiration from beetles and angels.

### Epilogue

In the epilogue, the author printed out the text of his speech from his Harvard graduation in 1999. He recalled how his mother had told him to always remember where it came from. During his sophomore year, he was very busy and an old woman needed

something done. He really didn't have time to do it, but he reflected on what his mother had said. Where he came from, there was an emphasis on community and kindness.





# Characters

## Selamawi Haileab Asgedom

Selamawi Haileab Asgedom, also called Mawi, is the main character of this book. He was very young when his family had to leave their home, and his memories are mixed with stories other people have told about his journey across the desert. He remembers living in the refugee camp where he played soccer with stones, was beaten by his teachers, and learned to fight with other students. His family moved to America where they had to become accustomed to a new culture. His father stressed that he needed good grades, and for a while he did well academically. However, people at school made fun of him, and he developed a low self esteem. With the encouragement of his family, he pulled himself out of that rut and began to do better academically once again. He wasn't perfect, and when he was young he liked to take other peoples Halloween candy, and once he helped knock over a parking meter.

As he grew older, he understood how important it was to reach out to help others. He wanted to help his family so he dedicated himself to academia once again. He was kind to others, and befriended them, no matter what their social status was. He worked hard, and he eventually earned a full scholarship to Harvard University.

## Haileab

Haileab was Mawi's father. He was raised in a monastery and didn't have formal education. Instead, he taught himself by reading many books, and he became an academic success. He helped heal people, and he was so good at it that he made a lot of money and had a good position in life. He would help people whenever he could, no matter what social position they were from. When his country became more involved in warfare, he knew the rebels wanted him to join their cause so he ran away. Soon, he had his family joined him. They all went to America together where he became a janitor. After a short time, he began to lose his vision so he became unemployed. His son was embarrassed by him many times as he was growing up, because he was loud and demanding, but later Mawi realized that his father was a hero. He was always reaching out to help others, saying that they could be angels because angels frequently showed up at the lowliest beings.

## Tewolde

This character was Mawi's older brother. They were best friends and Mawi was greatly influenced by his brother's compassion.



## **Mehret**

This character was Mawi's younger sister. She, too, had to fight back against bullying.

## **Mulu**

This character was Mawi's half-sister. They stayed in the refugee camp another year so she could join them in America.

## **Kiros**

Kiros This character was a tough young boy who could really use his slingshot. When he came to America, he got into trouble.

## **Tsege**

This character was Mawi's mother. She was in her mid-20s when they moved to America.

## **Sam**

This was a boy who cornered Mawi at school. Mawi's brother beat him up.

## **Jake**

This was a bully that wanted to do serious harm to Tewolde. He had an illegal-length switchblade he liked to use.

## **Hntsa-Eyesus**

This character was Mawi's youngest brother. He was conceived in the old country and born in America.

## **Kroger**

This character believed in Mawi and appreciated his dedication to track. He bought the boy clothes and running shoes.

## **Beth**

This character helped the family find a home when they came to Chicago.



## Objects/Places

### **Malaria**

This is what Mawi's father had when they lived in a hotel and were trying to find a home.

### **Sudan**

This is where the family lived as refugees before coming to America.

### **Amerikha**

This is where the family moved to get away from the warfare of their land.

### **Ethiopia**

This is where Mawi's mother came from.

### **Chicago**

This is where Mawi's family came to live when they arrived in America. It was where Mawi grew up.

### **Eritria**

This is where Mawi's father came from.

### **Wheaton**

This was the college near the place where Mawi grew up. He used its sports facilities to exercise.

### **World Relief**

This was the Christian organization that helped refugees settle into a new land. Mawi's family came to America with this organization. It found sponsors for them, jobs and a home.

## **Beetles**

This is what angels often appeared as according to Mawi's father.

## **Harvard**

This is where Mawi attended college on a full scholarship.



# Themes

## Angels And Helping Others

The title of this book refers to angels and beetles. This saying came from Mawi's father who insisted that angels were often mistreated because they weren't recognized. They didn't always look like heavenly beings. In fact, they often came to people in the lowliest forms such as beggars and vagrants-beetles. Because of this belief, Mawi's father would always reach out to help others, no matter what they look like or smelled like. Mawi had childhood memories of his father inviting people into their home who were homeless and smelly. The family didn't have much to offer, but they still provided shelter for others. As Mawi grew older, he heard stories of his father from the old country. The man was loved by many because he was always doing his best to help others.

Later, Mawi discovered that his brother also reached out to help others. He did it quietly without letting others know that he was helping. One time he helped the man find a home and a job as well as some food. He also supported a young child in another country even though he had hardly any money himself. When Mawi was in college, his mother reminded him to always remember his past, where he came from. He realized that he came from a real sense of community. People were there to help each other. This lesson, by far, was one of the best lessons he had ever learned in life.

## A Family That Sticks Together

A big theme in this book is family bonding. Mawi's father had to leave his home for his own safety and the safety of his family. He missed them, and sent for them. They made a long, hard journey across the desert to get back to him so they could all be together once again in Sudan. Even though the family had the opportunity to go to the United States, they decided to push off their journey for another year so that a family member could join them.

When they reached the United States, they stuck together as a family unit, learning about the new country together. Mawi went to school with his brother and sister. Together they faced the bullies. Mawi's older brother was his best friend, and they had many adventures together. His brother was also his protector. Once his older brother got into trouble because he was trying to help protect Mawi. As they grew older, Mawi's older brother began to develop a heart, realizing how important it was to reach out to help others. This was a trait Mawi decided to emulate. They both learned this from their father, who was known for helping people.

Mawi was well on his way to reaching his own goals when his brother died. Instead of giving up, he continued on, knowing that would be what his brother would have wanted. The same held true for college, even when his own father died. At his graduation, he



couldn't help but wonder what his father would have been like if he had been there. He and his siblings had made his father's dream come true.

## **Hard Work is The Key to Success**

Back before Mawi was born, his father already had a difficult life. His own father had died when he was an infant, and his mother couldn't take care of him due to illness so he was raised in a monastery. He didn't have the educational choices that other children had, and he taught himself. He became one of the best in the class when they took exams, and eventually he went on to help other people. He did this through compassion and hard work.

Hard work was a concept he talked to his children about, stressing the importance of it. He told his children that their only way to make it in life was to work hard at their academic so that they could get scholarships so they could go on to college. He knew that this was how they would make it in the new land. Their poverty and their skin color would make the task difficult, but the children could work and overcome the obstacles.

Academia wasn't the only area he wanted the children to work hard in. He also stressed the importance of keeping fit by having them run and do aerobics. They also had to work on the house and yard. He taught them by example, and told them that someday they would appreciate the payoff for their labors. This was shown to be true when they needed new housing, and their new housing administration came to interrogate their neighbors on what the family was like. Since the children and father were always seen raking and doing other chores, it put them in a good light. Their hard work helped them get their new home. The hard work also paid off as Mawi earned a full scholarship to Harvard.

# Style

## Perspective

The book concludes with a section about the author. It states how the author fled from war-torn Ethiopia when he was three years old. He lived with his family in a Sudanese refugee camp until he emigrated to the United States when he was seven. In America, he overcame many challenges included linguistic, financial, and cultural challenges before he earned a full tuition fellowship to Harvard University. He won many awards at Harvard and majored in American history. Mawi delivered his commencement address at his graduation, which he printed out as the epilogue in this book. He is currently a speaker for businesses, community groups, and students. Mawi still lives in Chicago with his family.

## Tone

The tone of this book is subjective. "Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard" is the narration of events that happened to Mawi and his family. As the author states at the beginning of the book, this is a tale about his family, but it could be about any refugee.

The reader has the opportunity to connect with the author and with life as a refugee on a personal basis - seeing the struggles the refugees face - from poverty to prejudice -through stories and advice. Mawi writes about his family and their circumstances in narrative form, showing compassion even as he writes about bullies. He is easy to identify with as a person because he is far from perfect. He and his brother did some mean things, and Mawi is honest about that.

The tone is very casual, and the writing is in first person. The language in this book is mixed - with African words and phrases mixed in to common English. The author uses some words that will stretch a reader's vocabulary, but all words are in context so it's simple to understand their meanings.

## Structure

"Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard" begins with a Table of Contents followed by a section with quotes raving about the book. After that, there is a dedication than an author's note that shows the reader what they might get out of the upcoming story. These sections are followed by 14 chapters and an epilogue, telling his story. The chapters are not numbered, but each chapter has a name, which highlights an important event in the chapter. Sometimes, the chapter names summarize a theme for the chapter such as in the chapters "The Making of a Man" and "The Unmaking of Man."

The epilogue is actually the text of the speech the author gave as his commencement address at his graduation from Harvard in 1999. The epilogue is followed by acknowledgments, which last for several pages. The acknowledgments are followed by information on the HAT foundation, which received one third of the final proceeds from the sale of this book. Following this comes a page of quotes praising Mawi as a speaker.

After the quotes, the author highlights some native recipes made from readily available ingredients. Finally, the book finishes with a reading group guide followed by suggested reading, a section about the author, and a preview of another book that Mawi has written entitled "The Code." The last part of the book is the introduction for his new book.





## Quotes

Would you go to paradise if it meant knowing no one? Would you give up everything you had ever known? The Camp, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 11.

For even the most horrifying memories are you; they are yours and no one else's. Coming to America, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 17.

People always mistreated the angels, my father said, because the angels never looked like angels. They were always disguised as the lowliest of beetles; beggars, vagrants, and misfits. God's Angels, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 30.

For we knew the exchange of gifts blesses the giver even more than the receiver. God's Angels, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 30.

But if you have enough desire to outwork all the other students and you never give up, you will win the race one day. Playground Warfare, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 33.

What's both beautiful and scary about you children is that they will believe most anything that their parents tell them. Playground Warfare, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 34.

Around age thirteen, he started to go through a special transformation, an emotional maturity that my people call libee migbar, or developing a heart. Libee Migbar, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 63.

All three of us cultural wholes but political half-breeds, with our father from Eritrea and our mother from Ethiopia. The Making of a Man, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 88.

We are the same people. Same language. Same food. Same culture. We even share the same genes ... But somehow, we have formed separate identities, and more recently, have become bitter enemies. The Making of a Man, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard pp. 88-89.



All that time, the thought had never occurred to me that my father had once been a hero. Or that he might still be a hero, tragic and flawed though he might be. The Unmaking of a Man, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 107.

Sticks and stones can indeed break bones, but words can often do worse. The Unmaking of a Man, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 111.

I wonder sometimes if God sent my father to test the truest sentiments of their hearts. I wonder if God sends angels to all of us. Father Haileab, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 129.

True power comes from focusing on what we can give, not just on what we can take. IZG1Hare Yihabkoom, Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey From a Refugee Camp to Harvard p. 134.



## Topics for Discussion

Why was Mawi's family separated when he was three-years-old?

Discuss some of the difficulties the refugees faced in Sudan.

Discuss some of the difficulties the refugees faced in America.

Why did Mawi's father decide to take his family to America in spite of the warnings from his family and friends?

Compare Mawi's father's life back in Eritrea compared to his life in America.

Discuss the concept of angels and how Mawi's father felt about them. How did Mawi and his brother feel about the angels?

How did Mawi's feeling regarding his father change as he grew older?