

# **One Day I Will Write About This Place Study Guide**

**One Day I Will Write About This Place by Binyavanga  
Wainaina**

(c)2016 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">One Day I Will Write About This Place Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1 and 2.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 3, 4 and 5.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7, 8 and 9.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 10 and 11.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 12, 13 and 14.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 15, 16 and 17.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 18, 19 and 20.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 21 and 22.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 23, 24 and 25.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 26 and 27.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 28, 29 and 30.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 31 and 32.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 33.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Important People.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">45</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">47</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">51</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">52</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">56</a>



## Summary

The following version of the novel was used to create this study guide: Wainaina, Binyavanga. *One Day I Will Write About This Place*. Graywolf Press, July 19, 2011. Kindle Edition.

Binyavanga Wainaina knew he was different from other people even when he was a young child. His memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, tells the story of his search for his place in the world. He describes his struggles to come to terms with his desire to write and overcome his fear that he will not succeed. Along with a discussion of his own life, Wainaina includes information about the political and cultural state of Africa, his home country.

As a seven-year-old, Wainaina was aware that he did not fit in with others. He followed his older brother and younger sister and pretended to fit in with the patterns of their lives. He felt his life was anchored when he was around his sister, Ciru. Ciru is the favorite child of Wainaina's family, always doing well in school. Wainaina scored well on exams, though he did not pay attention in his classes. He preferred to read novels.

During his childhood, Kenyetta, the leader considered to be the father of Kenya died and was replaced by Moi. Both Wainaina and Ciru were hurt by this change in leadership because even though they scored among the top students, neither of them were accepted to any of the top high schools. Wainaina writes that the confidentiality of the testing system was breached and all children from the Gikuyu tribe were disqualified from going to good schools.

While in college, Wainaina fell into a deep depression. He was able to attend only a few classes before he began a habit of drinking and partying. Eventually, he reached the point where he was so emotionally and physically drained he could not leave his rented room. During a second try at college after he had spent some time at home to recover, Wainaina did not fare any better. He swore he would not return home until he had made something of himself.

Years later, Wainaina called his mother to tell her he had finally had a piece of his writing published. Sadly, Wainaina's mother had died that day. Wainaina continued writing, and he won the Cain Prize for African Writing. This prize helped to jump start his career. Wainaina was given the opportunity to write for the European Union but refused the offer when he learned the government would be censoring his writing.

Even though Wainaina loves Africa, he tells about coming to New York to work as a teacher in a college. In the final scene of the novel, Wainaina comes to terms with his dislike of traditional African benga music.



# Chapters 1 and 2

## Summary

In Chapter 1, Wainaina opens his book as he is playing soccer with his older brother (Jimmy) and younger sister (Ciru). The year is 1978. At seven years old, Wainaina admits that he does not know "why everybody seems to know what they are doing and why they are doing it" (3). He comments on how his sister, Ciru, is the star child of the family. Later, alone in his room, Wainaina thinks about the power of words. He examines and studies the properties of the words "water" and "thirst."

On the pretext of discussing a friend in school who broke her leg, Wainaina mentions that his mother's country of Uganda fell and was broken. He mentions Field Marshal Amin Dada, the president of Uganda. He indicates that the leader ate his minister for supper.

In Chapter 2, Wainaina recounts a time when he and his sister dressed like Americans in an attempt to fool a rich family that lived near them. No one in the family was fooled, not even the children.

Word phrases fascinate Wainaina. For example, when his brother says that he has lost his marbles, Wainaina goes on a spree of colorful thinking about what might happen if one were to lose one's marbles.

Because he does not want to go to school, Wainaina fakes a nosebleed so his mother will let him go to work with her. His mother owns a hair salon. One of the workers, Mary has come to Kenya to get away from Amin and his cruelty. Wainaina reports that Kenya is a peace loving nation.

Members of a wedding party enter the salon upset because the rain has ruined their hairstyles. As the women are getting their hair done, there is a sound of metal crashing outside. Mary goes outside. Mrs. Karanja is upset because she thinks the garbage cans belonging to the hair salon have been left too close to her coffee shop. Wainaina tells his reader the cans are where they are supposed to be placed. Mary and Mrs. Karanja get into a physical fight over the cans. Mrs. Karanja accuses the Ugandans of coming to Kenya and ruining it. Wainaina feels as if Mrs. Karanja and the group of people who have come to back her are Kenyan, while Wainaina's mother and the salon workers are Ugandan. No one does anything to stop the fight. Wainaina's mother tells him to go back inside the salon. Inside the salon, he watches through the window as his mother and Mary pick up the garbage that Mrs. Karanja has spread over the sidewalk and road.

When the full can is put back where it is supposed to be, Mrs. Karanja orders the guard to dump the can out in front of the hair salon. He does as she asks. Other women begin helping Mary and Wainaina's mother pick up the garbage again. The members of the



bridal party even help. After they are finished picking up, all of the women go back into the salon. They go back to gossiping and fixing hair.

## Analysis

This memoir shares the memories of Binyavanga Wainaina. Wainaina narrates his story beginning when he was seven-years-old. He is growing up in Kenya, which is said to be a peace-loving area of Africa. His mother is from Uganda. The final scene in Chapter 2 describes how there is stress between the Kenyans and the Ugandans who live in Kenya. The women face off over the location of trash cans. Even though Wainaina indicates his mother put her trash cans where the municipal council told her to put them, the owner of the shop next door dumps out the trash with the complaint that “You Ugandans spoiled your country — why do you want to come here and spoil ours?” (18). Wainaina also refers to political tension as the leader Field Marshal Amin Dada, a man who is a leader in Uganda and cruel to his people, is also mentioned by Wainaina.

Wainaina compares himself to his younger sister, Ciru, who appears to be the star of the family. She is good at sports and good in school. Wainaina indicates that he does not understand how other people feel so confident about their actions and their decisions. As Wainaina says about himself: “My patterns are always tripping on each other in public. They are only safe when I am alone” (4).

Even as a young child, Wainaina’s fascination with words is easy to see. He examines the words “water” and “thirst.” Of his understanding of words he says “Words, I think, must be concrete things. Surely they cannot be suggestions of things, vague pictures: scattered, shifting sensations” (5). Wainaina speaks of the different languages he hears spoken in his neighborhood. He describes these languages as being ones “I know the sounds of, but do not understand or speak, Luhya, Gikuyu” (3). He also refers to the way the women in the beauty shop speak in Luganda when they talk about Idi Amin. Even though it is not his mother’s language, his mother does speak this language as well as English, Kinyarwanda, and Kiswahili. His father speaks three different languages. The children speak English and their tribal language of Kiswahili. Language and tribal identity are significant in Wainaina’s story.

Even as a young boy, Wainaina already has a large imagination and knack for words. He is impressed by American culture and is intrigued with the television show *The Six Million Dollar Man*. In Wainaina’s imagination the hair dryer at his mother’s salon becomes a space man.

The writing jumps quickly from idea to idea using long, run-on sentences, almost like the thought process of a child. Despite this almost spastic writing style Wainaina fills his writing with simile. For instance, he describes his sister’s smile as being “as clean as a pencil drawing. It cuts evenly into her cheeks” (3). Wainaina describes his own laugh as being “far away inside, like the morning car not starting when the key turns” (3). A metaphor is used when Wainaina describes a girl whose broken leg is in a cast: “Beatrice’s toes are fat gray ticks” (7). Additionally, Wainaina mimics the speaking style



of his siblings as he runs together a common comment from his brother that he can “cansaythatagain” (4) as if the words are not separate but all one long word run together.

Soccer is an important game in the story. Wainaina and his siblings are playing soccer when the story opens. It is not unusual when he compares the sound of the rain to the familiar sound of cheering at a soccer game. “The sound of the rain swells loud like the crowd after a goal in a stadium” (14).

The author even shows the ability to mix and match senses in his description. When he describes icing, for instance, he writes “Icing tastes in your mouth like Styrofoam sounds when it is rubbed against itself” (16). A final image that Wainaina paints with his words is that of the sound of his mother’s voice. He says, “Mum’s voice is like shards of water and streams of glass. It rises up her throat like warm suds” (16).

## Vocabulary

spherical, disembodied, akimbo, translucent, resolution, speculative, prefect, undulates, lubrication, inevitable, truncheon



# Chapters 3, 4 and 5

## Summary

In Chapter 3, Wainaina's father picks him up at school on the day his baby sister, Chiqy, is born. Wainaina describes the way children are named in his family.

There is no school during the time of mourning for the death of Kenyatta, whom Wainaina calls the father of Kenya. He describes a feeling of fear. As he is watching television he is tired of seeing the image of Kenyatta's body. He has an erection and ejaculation while sitting on the couch.

He and his sister later listen to a delegation from the Nyanza Province as they play traditional instruments in honor of the death of Kenyatta. The name of the instrument "nyatiti" makes them laugh. Wainaina describes the sounds he hears as being gibberish. He comes up with a secret new word "kimay" (25) and describes how his body works to pronounce that word. Kimay appears to represent the things that Wainaina fears, like accordions.

In Chapter 4, Wainaina is nine. He describes how he is reading a new book every day. He makes a kite. When he goes outside to fly it, he describes the village and the buildings he sees. He remarks that year in school he surprised himself by being first in his class.

Kenya's new president is Daniel Toroitich arap Moi. Wainaina indicates the new president does not seem to know what he should be doing. His speech in English is described as stumbling while his Kiswahili is "broken and sincere" (28). Meanwhile, Wainaina reports that Uganda is still in trouble with Idi Amin having run away. His mother is unable to visit her home in Uganda because the border is closed.

In Chapter 5, Wainaina is eleven. There has been a severe storm. On the way to school they look at the damage by Wainaina also senses his father is irritated with him. Wainaina hides from his father that he cannot do things like tying a tie, tying his shoelaces or telling time. They see clumps of pink and gray covering a field, and realize it is baby flamingos that the storm knocked from the sky. They help to save the birds.

Wainaina and his sister attend Lena Moi Primary School which used to be a whites-only school. He says that Kenya's official language is English but that the national language is Kiswahili. He believes no other languages are recognized by the constitution because the leaders are attempting to discourage tribalism.

He goes on to discuss "Pr" words. He says these are "sharp shrill controlling words that sound like they come from an officer's whistle" (34).



Meanwhile, at school students who practice the rituals of their tribes are shunned. When money becomes tight, the kids begin buying lunches in what he refers to as “the other world” (35) where the children think those who speak English are pretentious.

One morning Wainaina and his siblings are woken and told there has been a coup with shooting. An air force private has taken over the Kenyan government. Because Kenya is a more developed country than Uganda, the leader of the coup is displaced after only a few hours. Still, Wainaina reports thousands killed in the uprising.

## Analysis

Wainaina tells about the death and resulting national grief for Kenyetta from the viewpoint of a child. He realizes something serious has happened, yet he and his sister cannot help but make fun of the name of the traditional instrument played at a ceremony for the leader. He describes the new leader, Moi, who does not seem to know what he is doing. Moi had been the vice president under Kenyetta. A significant statement is made about language and identity is made by Wainaina as he describes Moi’s ability with language. Wainaina explains that Moi stumbles when he speaks English and that the Kiswahili is broken. “We have no idea what man and mind he is in his home language,” (28). It is as if they were able to understand him in his native language, they would discover he was a different type of man than his attempts to communicate in less familiar languages.

Along with his journey to find his place in the world, Wainaina also refers to his coming of age. As a young boy, he is both excited and ashamed of himself when the friction of his pants causes him to have an erection and ejaculation on the living room couch. He leaves quickly before any evidence can be linked to him. Wainaina, and his sister, are additionally at the age where the word “nyatiti” (24) makes them giggle because it reminds them of the word “titties” (24).

Wainaina continues his interest with words and develops a love of reading in this section. He describes how words give him the freedom to do what he wants in his mind: “If I turn back to my book, the letters jumble for a moment, and then they disappear into my head, and word-made flamingos are talking and wearing high heels, and I can run barefoot across China, and no beast can suck me in, for I can run and jump farther than they can. / On my trampoline of letters and words” (27). Even as a young child Wainaina recognizes the power of the written world. He also shares with his reader that he is reading more and more, a book every day, at one point. He does well in class because he likes grammar but admits “I do not concentrate in class, but I read everything I can touch” (28).

Wainaina additionally continues to refer to his fascination with words and sounds. He speaks in this section about words that begin with the “pr” sound. Another word of focus is the word “accordion.” When Wainaina talks Kenyetta’s death, he describes the fear he and his family are in fear from “shapeless accordion forces” (22). It is these





accordion forces that he blames for Kenyetta's death. At the end of Chapter 3 Wainaina admits that he is afraid of accordions.

Kimay is a word that Wainaina makes up in this section of chapters. He goes through a long list of things that kimay represents. Near the end of his description, he indicates that "kimay is the accordion" (26). In this interpretation, it appears that kimay represents the things of which Wainaina is afraid.

Wainaina's imagery becomes more complex and descriptive. One thing to notice through the course of the book is the way Wainaina writes so that his text grows and improves as he gets older. The reader not only sees his physical and emotional growth, but also his intellectual growth and development as a writer. This following quote compares the flight of flamingos off a lake to women's skirts blown in the wind: "God breathes, and across the lake a million flamingos rise, the edges of Lake Nakuru lift, like pink skirts swollen by petticoats, now showing bits of blue panties, and God gasps, the skirts blow higher" (30).

## Vocabulary

mutilate, guttural, anarchy, improbable, aureoles, wayward, compose, compulsory, eradicate, pretentious



# Chapter 6

## Summary

Wainaina records a couple of encounters he has with sex. First he watches Cleophas, a man who works for his family, have sex with a woman. He does not know what he is watching them do. Later, he notes how he hears his new nanny flirting with a man on the phone. When he laughs at her, the nanny runs him away.

President Moi visits Wainaina's school and donates chewing gum to the school even though it is banned at the school. The name of the school is changed with Lena's name removed. It is called the Moi Primary School.

Later, while Wainaina watches Independence Day ceremonies on television, his sister and their nanny (Wambui) practice putting on makeup and lipstick. Because Ciru is acting so girly, Wainaina feels out of place because he has no one to follow. He describes the singing and pageantry he sees on the television. Wambui declares the festivities "boring" (47) and turns down the volume to listen to the radio. As Wambui dances to the music, Wainaina describes what he sees on the silent screen. He imagines alternate versions of his nanny.

Wainaina thinks of the word "bureaucrat" (52) and the way he will write about it that night. He remembers Madaraka Day from the previous year when he was in the stadium with the crowd he now watches on television. The people had attacked the crates of Fanta and were chased and attacked by the police. Tear gas was dispensed. The gates to the stadium were locked, trapping the children inside. When Wainaina was finally reunited with his mother, she told him he would stay at home for the next year's celebration.

As Wainaina makes up stories that might have happened on Independence Day, he decides to himself that he will one day write books.

## Analysis

Wainaina continues to emphasize his love of words and desire to use words to tell stories. He learns the word "bureaucrat" (52) and plays with it as he watches the Madaraka Day ceremony on television. "new word bureaucrat is running around my mind in a panic, stamping and coding and reminding me to never forget that one day, one day I will arrange the words right for this strange night" (52). As a child, Wainaina is disturbed by his poor vocabulary. He has enough knowledge to know he will need to improve his store of words before he can adequately describe the things that he has experienced. "I do not have enough words for all this" (53). Wainaina also writes about the way that his sister and brother take piano lessons. He is jealous of the creative outlet they have in the form of music. He says of himself "I have no such facility. Words must surround experience, like Mum's new vacuum cleaner, sucking all this up and



making it real” (53). It is significant at the end of this section that Wainaina decides that he wants to write books for a living.

Cleophas and Wambui represent the difference in people from different areas of Africa. Wainaina indicates that because Cleophas looks like he is from Uganda and that Cleophas is regularly getting arrested because of his Ugandan looks.

A significant character in Wainaina’s life is introduced in this section. Wainaina’s nanny, Wambui, is fifteen. She is intriguing to Wainaina because of her patterns of speech and because of her developing sexuality. He has fantasies about Wambui where he imagines how she might act if she were from different tribes or of different nationalities. He does not understand that attraction between Wambui and his sister Ciru. Since Wambui has come, she and Ciru spend time laughing and talking about things Wainaina does not understand, like dancing and makeup. Wainaina and Ciru do gang up on Wambui when they make fun of her speech patterns. Wainaina copies these patterns of speech in his writing. In one particular instance, Wambui tries to sing along with a popular song, but her letters r’s and l’s, d’s and n’s, and b’s and m’s get tangled up with each other. Wainaina copies Wambui’s speech patterns in this way: “M’by the livers of m’bambyl-oon, where we sat n’down, yeeah we wept, when we lemeber Zion” (48-49).

Wainaina has a personal encounter with Moi in this section of the novel. He and his sister attended a primary school once named after Moi’s wife, Lena. After Moi visited the school, his wife’s name was dropped from the name of the school. It was named the Moi Primary School. A significant object mentioned in connection with Moi and his visit is the donation of the whole truck full of Orbit chewing gum. This donation indicates perhaps how out of touch Moi was with the needs of the county as chewing gum not only was not needed in the educational process, it had been banned by the school. Of course, the reader must take into consideration the fact that Moi owned the company that made the gum. For this reason, the donations of the gum would have cost him little.

## Vocabulary

incoherent, conical, tycoons, aerials, languid, supercilious, subside, pith, feral, turgid, plaintive, sycophant, impudent



# Chapters 7, 8 and 9

## Summary

In Chapter 7, Wainaina jumps forward to 1983, the year that national exams are given to students. His mother is angry with him for reading novels instead of devoting himself to his education. His school serves students from a variety of types of families. The school generally places first or second in the national exams.

Wainaina describes how some Swedes set up a biogas machine near their school's flag pole. Although the Swedes promoted it as the idea of the future, it was soon considered a derogatory term to be a user of biogas.

Wainaina's mother insists more and more that they attend church. He wonders why his mother goes to church and what she is looking for there.

In a sharp change from his discussion about the church, Wainaina writes that he and Ciru and certain their will be admitted into the best schools. In mock exams, Wainaina is third in the district and first at his school. When the results of the official exam are released, Ciru is first and Wainaina is fifth in their school. Although they are both congratulated on their results because they are both in the top twenty students in their province, their father receives a phone call saying neither of the children are on the lists for any high schools.

Although choices for high schools are supposed to be based entirely on merit, the family has heard that the test numbers were matched to names and the Gikuyu names were searched out. Wainaina writes his Baba and Mum argue because Mum wants to get them into private schools. Wainaina calls his friend Peter and they talk about the schools others are going to. He and Peter eventually wind up in the same school, Njoro High School. It is a district school, a third rate school. The best schools and best teachers are being dedicated to Moi's people.

It is at the end of this chapter that Wainaina says he was circumcised in December of 1983. He is considered a man.

In Chapter 8 Wainaina is bullied at school. He decides to run away. The only person he has told is Peter. In the middle of the night, a group of seniors, including Peter, wakes Wainaina. He and a group of boys tell the senior how one particular boy, George Sigalla had abused them. The prefects go to the headmaster and get George Sigalla demoted.

In Chapter 9 at home over Christmas break, Wainaina learns his Mum has left the Catholic church they once attended and now goes to Deliverance Church.

His brother is the top boy at his high school, Wainaina learns that he had been saved. Ciru is teetering on being saved as religion swept through her high school as well.



Jimmy brings home from school with him a crippled boy. They attend a Bible study together. He knows his mother will not be happy with him when he refuses to put his hand up with the preacher asks who has not been saved. The crippled boy begins to wail. The preacher encourages him to release the evil. His legs begin to work. Wainaina promises God one day he will get saved but wants to enjoy life first.

Even though he has grown used to boarding school, Wainaina runs away one day. He goes home. His mother discovers the way that he has been chewing on his thumbs. She takes him back to school but returns a few weeks later telling him he is going to a new school.

## Analysis

Education is the focus of this section of the novel. Because Wainaina and his sister are top students in their school, it is expected they will be accepted into good high schools. Instead, because Moi has become president it is suspected that there was manipulation of the scores in order to keep students from the Gikuyu tribe from going to the good schools. Ciru is accepted to a posh school after her first year in a poor one, one that does not even have running tap water. Meanwhile, Wainaina is unhappy and hungry at his school. He is forced to trade food for favors. During his first days at school Wainaina is abused by his roommate. Another boy sexually abuses other students. Changes are in store for Wainaina because his mother comes for him at the end of Chapter 9, telling him that he is going to a different school.

Faith is another major focus in this section of chapters. Wainaina's mother has transferred to a new church where she claims she has been cured of her diabetes. Jimmy has been saved and there is pressure on Wainaina also to accept Christ. A significant situation involves a crippled boy whom Jimmy brings home from his school with him. Wainaina has trouble with the boy because he is healed during a prayer service that Wainaina attends. Although Wainaina knows that he should believe in God and be saved, he does not want to do so because he wants to have a certain amount of time to live as he pleases.

At this point in his life, Wainaina has turned thirteen. His circumcision was in December, about a month before he turned thirteen. He is now considered to be an adult.

There are a few things to notice in this section of the novel. First, it is apparent that Wainaina has trouble concentrating when he tries to do his homework. "To me every new thing is always splintering into many possibilities. These can still spin and spin around and leave me defeated" (56). To escape from this feeling of defeat Wainaina reads. He gets through his high school career by pretending he is Ciru and pushing through his work until he has it finished. The unique closeness that Wainaina feels to his sister is significant. He imagines they are twins, even though they are not. Wainaina draws confidence from his sister.



Wainaina continues to be overshadowed by his sister despite his affection for her. His English composition teacher talks to him about his work one day. “She is worried that my compositions are too wild. She says I should concentrate, keep them simple. She is sure I will do well. Like your sister, she says, beaming for the first time I can remember” (59). He is obviously hurt by the way that his teacher beams when she talks about his sister. His own work, on the other hand, is criticized by his teacher. His teacher does, however, describe his compositions as being “too wild” (59). If his writing in the novel is any indication of the sporadic nature of his early compositions, his writing was probably different from anything that his teacher had ever seen before. A final thing to notice is Wainaina’s mimicking of the Six Million Dollar Man when he refers to Moi’s intentions to benefit the people of his own tribe since he has become president. “Gentlemen, we can rebuild tribe. We have the technology” (60).

## Vocabulary

martyr, demurely, crescendo, coherent, lyrical, unbiased, obliterates, scrutinized, secular, demoted, guttural, negotiation, charisma, beatifically, succumb



# Chapters 10 and 11

## Summary

In Chapter 10 Wainaina visits Nairobi with his father. He suspects his mother has asked his father to get Wainaina out of his room. A man tries to get Wainaina to buy a pair of sunglasses from him. When Wainaina will not buy the glasses, the man offers a watch. Wainaina points to his arm, indicating he already has a watch. The man continues to poke at Wainaina until Wainaina moves closer to his father. His father and the other men run the salesman away.

Wainaina's father and the other men are trying to fix an old car. Wainaina does not know about cars and does not want to know about them. However, he nods because he wants to feel like he belongs with the men. When he gets bored with the mechanics, the narrator walks around. Although he is in a poor neighborhood, he knows that not far away is a rich neighborhood with roads and skyscrapers.

In Chapter 11, a bookstore called Ndirangu's is described by Wainaina. He sneaks out of school to buy books there. He is now attending Mangu High School. The founders never finished building the school but it is still a national school with some of the brightest students in the area in attendance. The culture of the old school sets the standard for academic excellence. Wainaina indicates he keeps a callus on his base of his right thumb from turning pages.

He reports there are strange things happening like a drought worse than any recorded since 1870. Famine is at its worst since 1930. Breakdance: The Movie is a hit. It breaks every record. He says "the God people" (82) get louder every day in their cries about demons. The girls think Massai braids are cool. A new headmaster has come who wants to make the school the best sports school.

A fire makes its way toward Wainaina's school. The teachers continue their lectures as wild animals stampede past the buildings trying to escape the flames. The leaders of the country accuse the dissidents of destroying the country. The Maxists and Ugandans are accused of having taken away the rain. People are either God fearing or breakdancing, dancing considered a sin, Wainaina says. He and the other boys try to find ways to fit in with society even though they sneak away during weekends to drink.

The boys are fed corn donated by Americans because they are so hungry. One day they surround the headmaster's office. The headmaster sneaks out and runs away from the boys. They break into the campus pig pens and kill the pigs, eating them before they are even completely cooked. Even though the students suffered the worst year ever, when their national exams are graded they are found to have scored the best.

In his fourth form exams, Wainaina fails in all the sciences and does well in all the arts. Wainaina does not study much for his A-level classes, . He and Peter put on a



successful play called *The Verdict*. Because the play is received so well, five students start a theater company.

Wainaina moves on to Kenyatta University where he studies education, French, and English literature. He fears he will be a school teacher. Kenya's most famous writer Thiong'o has been imprisoned by Moi. His books are banned.

## Analysis

Wainaina expresses an opinion of African writers. "I love writing. I love the theater. I fear writers; they want to go too deep and mess up the clear stepladders to success. I cannot see myself being this sort of person" (88). He refers to the writer Thiong'o who was imprisoned by Moi because of the content of his books. At this point in his life, Wainaina does not yet understand the fight for free speech and what the African leader was doing to writers and other intellectuals who did not bend their writings and thoughts to Moi's desires. He believes it is the fault of the writer that they are being punished. Near the end of his story, Wainaina will voice a different opinion.

Even though his mother discourages it, Wainaina continues to read. He describes his reading in this way: "I gobble them (books) like candy. I read two or three of them a day. I can write one, I am sure, a big saga and make lots of money, and eat pizza every day" (79). As he reads more and more, Wainaina becomes more certain that he can write a book as well. He believes at this point in his life that writing will be a lucrative career.

Wainaina also describes the role of the radio in the lives of the Kenyans. He writes at one point: "From the radio, we know that foreign influences are invecting us, secret foreign influences are infringing us, invincing us, perferting our gildren, preaking our gultural moralities, our ancient filosofies, the dissidents are bushing and bulling, pringing segret Kurly Marxes, and Michael Jagsons, making us backliding robots, and our land is becoming moonar handscapes" (84). The leadership blames foreign influences for the troubles in the country. Further along in this section the leaders even tell the people the drought in their country has been caused by women wearing mini skirts and makeup. The radio, as well as television, was a way to spread this message to all of the people. Notice also the way that Wainaina mimics the way in which the Africans, even radio newscasters, mangle the English language.

When Wainaina is with his father, Wainaina's desire to fit in, despite the knowledge that he is different, is obvious. He stands with the others around a broken down car as they try to fix it and tries to look as if he understands what the men are saying. He does not know about or care about what they are saying. Wainaina hopes that if he pretends he wants to fit in, he will win his father's approval. Already there are signs of Wainaina's coming depression. In this particular section, Wainaina suspects that his mother has asked his father to take him to Nairobi just to get him out of his room, in which she believes Wainaina has been spending too much time.



## Vocabulary

lacerated, derogatory, permutations, catapults, repetitive, plaintive, melodramatic, perpetually, bionic, cronies, dissidents, bestial, rhetoric



# Chapters 12, 13 and 14

## Summary

In Chapter 12, Peter goes to school in America. He is attending on a scholarship. Wainaina will be studying at a university in Africa. His parents are concerned because the government is planning to stop subsidizing university educations. Once the subsidizing stops, his parents decide to allow both Wainaina and Ciru to leave the country to attend the University of Transkei. Wainaina indicates it is a shame that the university system in Africa, where the rich and poor are equal, has been destroyed. With the changes even the rich cannot afford much schooling.

Meanwhile, Wainaina has been influenced by the novel *Decolonizing the Mind*. He decides that when he is rich he will go back to his native language.

At the airport as Wainaina and his sister are on their way to the university, Wainaina goes first to the duty-free shop. He believes the airport leads the way to the world of which he wants to be a part. There is no kima there. He buys a bottle of Polo aftershave.

In Chapter 13, Wainaina introduces the reader to Brenda Fassie. Although she was born in one of the worst, poorest townships, she worked her way up to being a famous singer. Even though Wainaina says he wants to stop paying attention to this singer, he is unable to do so.

Wainaina and a group of fellow students go to St. John's College to look for girls. They take the girls to a nightclub called Dazzle. They believe they are no longer in Africa, that South Africa is not Africa. One girl tells Wainaina that he looks like Luther Vandross. Although he drinks, the girl he is sitting with drinks cider. In 1991, the women are not allowed to smoke in public or go to a nightclub without a man.

In Chapter 14, Wainaina describes his new friend Victory Ngcobo. Victory supports himself and his family with his job driving a taxi. He also does well in school. His girlfriend Lulama is quiet. Whenever Victory is busy, she talks to Wainaina.

Wainaina describes how the college students often protest and shut down the college. He describes the way the college sounds when a protest is beginning.

Meanwhile, Brenda Fassie appears to be finished as a singer. She has missed concerts, and she is found drunk and incoherent.

A year later, things begin to change. On the dance floor at Dazzle there is a group of women wearing trousers and men's shirts. They attack the bouncer when he tries to clear them off the floor. One of Wainaina's friends asks one of the women for a dance but she tells him they are all lesbians.



## Analysis

A major change comes for Wainaina when he and his sister go to a university in South Africa to study because the government of Kenya has decided to subsidizing university study. They have an uncle who teaches at the university. He helps get them places there. When Wainaina talks about the changes in the university system that he indicates what a bad step he believes that these changes are for the nation. He indicates the university program was the one program in which all students, rich and poor alike, had equal opportunities. It can be inferred that the change in the university system is one initiated by Moi, the new president.

A significant object is the bottle of Polo aftershave that Wainaina buys in the store at the airport. The bottle represents the new person whom Wainaina wants to be in South Africa. It is his way of saying goodbye to Kenya and the person he was there.

Politics continue to be important as there are protests at the university and the beginning of women's liberation. At the university that Wainaina attends, there are frequent protests by the students. These protests shut down the school. Although it is 1991, the women in South Africa are not allowed to do the same things that men are allowed to do. Men can go to nightclubs and can drink and smoke in public. Women, however, have to be accompanied to these same nightclubs. They are not allowed to drink or smoke in public. It is just a year later that a group of women gather at the nightclub Dazzle. They are there without male companions and claim to be lesbians.

Wainaina continues his vivid descriptions. His new friend Victory is described as being "a long happy guy with arms and legs like the last piece of spaghetti slithering across the plate as your fork chases it" (100). Note the simile that he uses to compare his friend to spaghetti. Notice also how little time Wainaina spends in class and studying. He talks mostly about drinking and partying.

## Vocabulary

subsidizing, caterwauling, askew, apartheid, louche, ostentatiously, shebeen, incoherent, counter-intuitive, utopian

# Chapters 15, 16 and 17

## Summary

In Chapter 15, Wainaina watches a black and white television in his room off campus. He is twenty-two. For the past year, Wainaina has been isolating himself from his friends and family. He does not know what happened to himself. He began moving slower and, eventually, stopped going to class. Now, he hardly leaves his room at all. When he does leave, his head aches. Ciru is about to graduate. Sometimes, she comes and knocks on his door, but he does not answer. She puts money under the door and sometimes leaves food.

There is fighting in Rwanda. They have not heard from Aunt Rosaria who lives in Rwanda. Even though Wainaina knows he should call his mother because she is worried about her sister, he does not call. There are even clashes near the area of Kenya where the narrator's parents live. Moi has rigged the election. The economy is in downfall. Kenyans are begin to run from their homes in the Rift Valley Province.

Wainaina wants to go home, but he does not know what he would do there since he has no money and no degree. Wainaina's father begs him not to come home.

It is after Wainaina learns that Chris Hani is dead that he goes back to the university. He visits Victory who is drinking a good deal and dating an older woman. Lulama broke up with him. She says that she is a lesbian.

Tsietsi grabs at a girl, and Wainaina beats him. He is happy with the feeling of being alive. Trust pulled Wainaina away from Tsietsi. He knew how much trouble Wainaina was in. Just when it seems the fight is over, Tsietsi hits Wainaina over the head with a beer bottle. Wainaina walks toward Tsietsi, but Trust grabs him and puts him in the car. Ciru is there.

In Chapter 16, Nelson Mandela is elected president. Wainaina is elated because he is allowed to go home. His family will also be able to attend his grandparents' wedding anniversary in Uganda. For the first time in months he feels as if he has a purpose. He has decided his only problem is that he is homesick.

Some changes in Africa include the new shame of Brenda Fassie. Black Africans are earning middle class slots. The market has been taken over by branding, the idea of selling a product by connecting it to the right images and attitudes. White people are no longer allowed to sell things to black people.

Wainaina remembers when he and friends were on a campus trip how they stopped the bus to dance the Bus Stop, while other cars honked. Even though they knew there were guns and threats close by, they were united in their joy. He notes the people do not want to think about Brenda Fassie because she reminds them of "the essential cruelty of hope" (113).



On the way home, Wainaina meets a taxi driver who explains to him that the black people do not like other foreign blacks because they remind them of how blacks are still slaves. A sound reminds Wainaina of home, and he is suddenly homesick. He is physically sick to his stomach because he has been out of his room for longer than he has been in a long time. He reminds himself he will be home the next day.

In Chapter 17, even though Wainaina accidentally put his passport through the wash, the man at the airport allows him through. As he looks down on the country from the airplane, Wainaina thinks about how the world has been arranged into boxes of wealth and poverty.

## Analysis

Between Chapters 15 and 16, the tone of the memoir changes. While Wainaina is depressed and reckless in Chapter 15, he is triumphant when Nelson Mandela is elected president and Wainaina is allowed to go home. Wainaina has spent months locked in his room off campus because he has suddenly lost the urge to do anything. He does not study. He does not go to class. Because he is not going to class, he loses his status as a legal immigrant, but he does not tell his parents what has happened to him.

It is only when he learns that he will be able to go home that Wainaina's spirits rise. Even while he is on his way home, he suffers with what might be called panic attacks because he is outside the safety of his room. The only thoughts that seem to calm him are his thoughts that he is going home.

Nelson Mandela was elected to the presidency in 1994 in the first democratic election. He is against the racialism and tribalism that has been legal in Africa up to that point. There is hope in the country and in Wainaina's life. Even with the promise of changes coming, Wainaina looks down from the airplane on his way home and sees the way that the country is divided into neat squares of poverty and privilege.

Brenda Fassie is a symbol of the old Africa in this section. People do not want to think about her because she represents what Wainaina describes as a casualty from the past. He says this singer is a reminder of the "essential cruelty of hope" (113). Wainaina poses a question to himself and the people of Africa. He wonders what will happen if there are actually changes that come to the country of Africa and the people of that country are unable to change.

Notice the personification as Wainaina describes himself braiding his hair. "My fingers watch themselves on the candlelit wall as they play with an Afro comb splitting my scalp into clean squares" (106). He describes his ability to braid his hair by feel as being accounted for by his fingers being able to see.

He also continues his fascination with words. For instance, when the man gets on the plane next to Wainaina, the word that comes to mind is "boing" as he looks at the man's face. Also, when he discusses the stopping of the bus so those aboard could dance the



Bus Stop, Wainaina tells about the words of the song, “I found I knew the words, but not the meaning; I knew the intent” (113).

## **Vocabulary**

ominously, dubious, credible, ruefully, turgid, disheveled, unguents, plasticine, fuselage



# Chapters 18, 19 and 20

## Summary

In Chapter 18, once he is in Nairobi, Wainaina indicates that the people there have become creative in bettering themselves. He notes even the city center is grimy and full of potholes. Since he has been in South Africa, the duality of the people who live in Kenya is more apparent. He notes that the people there live different lives in different languages.

He watches as soldiers run away a group of women street traders because they are selling goods illegally. Even though these women pay city taxes to the same council that employs the soldiers, they are still run away. Despite the ugliness he sees in Nairobi he moves forward toward his family.

In Chapter 19 at home, Wainaina thinks that his mother looks frail but decides it is only because he has changed. His mother realizes that he has begun smoking, but she does not hit him with the full power of her disappointment. He suspects that his parents are worried about him.

Later that day he notices the painting of The Nandi Woman. It had scared him as a child. As an adult, he realizes it is the African equivalent of the Mona Lisa.

Wainaina admits that he is avoiding his Baba. Jimmy had taken him for a ride in his car and tried to talk to him about his troubles. Wainaina remembers a time when he was fourteen when he and his father had taken an overnight trip together. His father had criticized his math grades even though Wainaina had attempted to defend himself by reminding his father he was still among the top five students. He could tell his father was disturbed by the conversation.

Back in the present, Wainaina admits he is not sure how to explain his position to his family. He decides to travel around and try to forget his own problems.

In Chapter 20, Wainaina gets a part-time job trying to convince farmers to grow cotton again. His father, who has bought a cotton gin, gave him the job. His parents have been happier with him since he has been reading fewer novels and being more present in the world. He and his driver visit Mwingi, where Wainaina particularly enjoys the goat they serve. Even though Wainaina wants some privacy and a book after the activities of the evening, Mr. Chief insists they go to his house to spend the night. They talk the next day about cotton.

During the party that evening Wainaina connects with the other people as they talk about their struggles and shortcomings. He realizes in order for him to grow up he has to share with others the sensual pleasure that he finds in the writing he does even though that writing, right now, is done only in his mind. Even as he makes up his mind



he has to write, he fears he will fail. The following morning, the chief wakes Wainaina asking to be told all about the cotton business.

## Analysis

When Wainaina goes home to Nairobi, he connects with people more than he has in the past. He notices the changes in the capital city and the changes in his parents. He recognizes they are worried about him and tries to ease their worry by helping out and not reading as much. He happily accepts a job that his father creates for him and even finds himself connecting with the people with whom he talks on a level that he has never connected before.

One of the things that Wainaina understood even as a child was that other people followed patterns that he could not understand. He believes he needs to write about these patterns that other people take for granted." I have lived off the certainty of others, have become a kind of parasite. Maybe I can help people see the patterns they take for granted. Cripples can have triumphant stand-ups" (141). After reading this reference of Wainaina to a cripple, the reader probably thinks about the cripple that Jimmy brought home from college, the one who was healed by God's power.

It is during a party that Wainaina realizes that even though he has never put any of his thoughts down on paper, he has been writing all along. His habit of describing things and writing in his mind have been a way for him to enjoy and describe his own sensual pleasures. He realizes that in order for him to "grow up" perhaps both as a writer and a person, he has to share what he writes with others. It is later that same evening that Wainaina recognizes his deeply set fear that if he fails as a writer, there is nothing else that he feels equipped to do.

Some non-English words are used in this section. The author does not completely describe what these words mean, but the reader might be able to determine the meaning by context. For instance the word "matatus" translates to English to mean a type of personally owned mini bus. The "askaris" who beat the women who are "illegally" selling items on the street are soldiers or police.

Wainaina continues to include in his writing the colorful descriptions to record the way he sees life. He refers to the conditions he sees when he returns to Nairobi as being like a straight jacket in this phrase: "This is what you do to get ahead: make yourself boneless, and treat your straitjacket as if it were a game, a challenge" (124). He indicates that the people think of the restraints that have been put on them as a challenge. They must find ways to support themselves despite these restraints. In another phrase, Wainaina writes that he is "certain that the world of my family is as solid as fiction, and I can relax and move toward them without panic" (127). This comparison to his family as being "solid as fiction" seems contradictory at first since fiction denotes a form of literature that is made up, or not true. In Wainaina's case, however, since his reality is made up mostly of writing and literature, a good deal of it fiction, in his case, comparing the solidity of his family to fiction is fitting.





There is an interesting simile in this quote: “A short gnarled old tree has twisted around and back on itself like a dog leaning to nibble an itch on its back” (133). In another description, Wainaina uses a metaphor to describe the sun. “The sun is the deep yellow of a free-range egg, on the verge of bleeding its yolk over the sky” (139).

## Vocabulary

improbable, solicit, bludgeons, cynical, intangible, fluent, amiably, escarpment, disemboweling, abysmal, nomad, privatized, monotonous, nonchalantly, precipice, ominous, charisma, inebriated, frugal, pliant, improvise



# Chapters 21 and 22

## Summary

In Chapter 21, Wainaina describes what Maasailand is high up in the Mau Hills. Wainaina is particularly interested in the freezing temperature.

He also describes a celebration among the Maasai women. For a season those who have given birth are released from domestic duties and allowed to take lovers. Wainaina is warned to stay away from any bands of women he sees. They meet a group as they are returning from work one day. The man driving the tractor cannot turn around so he keeps driving toward the band of women. One of the men warns him not to stop but he has no choice. The only way to get around the women is by giving them money.

Wainaina soaks up a list of new words from his father's World Almanac and Book of Facts 1992. He compares the list of words to an American infomercial.

Wainaina speaks to a girl who lives in two worlds. She has allowed herself to be circumscised because she would be put out of her community had she not been. At the same time she wants to be married to an old man who will let her be free. Wainaina does not point out her contradictions because he does not think it is polite to do so since all Kenyans seem to have their own contradictions.

Wainaina notes at the end of Chapter 21 that he has begun writing down his thoughts. He knows the time has come for him to start shaping words on paper but he still doubts himself.

In Chapter 22, Wainaina decides to try to finish college. He hopes to finish his degree in a year but worries he will start to fail again. Before going back to college, he and his family will meet in Uganda for his grandparents' wedding anniversary. It will be the first time Wainaina has visited Uganda.

Wainaina recalls how that year has been a mixed one for Africa. After Mandela was released from jail. During a rugby game the leader managed to help the country heal and melt away a good deal of the hostility in the country since he had been released.

From his childhood, Wainaina has associated Uganda with Idi Amin and the horror his relatives talked about when they escaped that country. Once in Uganda, he was unhappy because the seven hills of Kampala were not as spectacular as he believed they would be.

Once in Kampala Wainaina meets some old school friends and they go to a bar and drink. They travel from Kampala to Kisoro and then on to St. Paul's mission. Ciru is next to him. He notices how his mother looks like everyone else in Uganda. She points out the border with Rwanda.



On the car ride, Wainaina was careful to join in the conversation and not be as dreamy as he usually was during car trips. His father had talked to him about finishing school. They had made a deal and Wainaina felt he could not fail for his parents' sake.

Wainaina is named after his mother's father, a man he does not know. Wainaina describes the reunion in terms of a movie. His Aunt Rosaria and her family are the stars of the family since they were feared dead during the Rwandan war but had hidden in their basement and survived. Aunt Christine, who encouraged the family members to get together has not arrived yet. It is the first time the family has been together since 1961.

After they have been together for two days, Wainaina indicates that they feel like family. On Christmas Eve, it still appears that Aunt Christine will not be able to make the gathering. The men are busy slaughtering a bull for more meat. During a church service later that night, Wainaina leaves to help peel potatoes. He sees a woman he assumes is Aunt Christine walking up the hill and goes out to meet her.

When they usher Aunt Christine into the service, everyone there begins to cry. The priest is the only one unaffected by the reunion. It is at this point that Wainaina states "One day, I will write about this place" (164).

## Analysis

The title of the memoir is the same as the words that Wainaina uses to make a promise to himself in Chapter 22: "One day, I will write about this place" (164). The place to which he refers in this particular quote is Uganda, a place he finally gets to visit for the sixtieth anniversary of his grandparents' wedding. It is memorable because he meets members of his family whom he has heard about only in stories. He also gets to witness first hand things that his mother has told him about from her childhood.

As he comes closer and closer to the place where his family would reunite, Wainaina allows himself to be taken over by his creative nature, the part of himself that sees the world around him in terms of words and writing. "I have a dizzy vision of a supernatural movie producer slowing down the action before the climax by examining tiny details instead of grand scenes. I see a narrator in the fifth dimension saying, "And now our Christmas movie: a touching story about the reunion of a family torn apart by civil war and the genocide in Rwanda" (161).

Wainaina shows by his words that he recognizes what a spectacular experience he is about to have. He understands the seriousness of what his family has been through and what their reunion means to them. He even realizes that the story would have interest for the general public. Notice that even as Wainaina describes what is happening in terms of the way it might be portrayed in a movie, he still adds humor indicating the movie is sponsored by "Sobbex," a made up tissue manufacturer.

When visiting Uganda, Wainaina notes how hard the people of Uganda have fought to bring themselves out of despair and away from hopelessness. "This country gives me



hope that this continent is not, finally, incontinent” (154). Wainaina draws hope from the story of Uganda and believes Uganda’s success indicates the rest of the continent of Africa is able to pull itself from despair as well. Notice the play on words with Wainaina suggesting that the “continent” of Africa is not “incontinent” a word that indicates a lack of restraint or control.

Also of significance in this section is Wainaina’s decision to return to college. He has been with his family, has been working, and is feeling better. He notes: “I have been fine the past few months, so much so that it is hard to explain to myself why I have been so... unable. I am nervous. I do not know what I will do if I start to fail again” (153). Wainaina does not even remember why college went so badly for him during his first attempt but the memory of his failure is sharp. He worries, even before he starts, that he will fail again.

Even though he has ignored his parents’ requests in the past for him to stop reading so many novels and be more present in his life, Wainaina seems to pay more attention to his parents’ concern in this section. He is more considerate of their requests especially when he realizes that his brother, Jimmy, has even been enlisted to help him be more realistic. He writes: “There is a conspiracy to get me back to earth, to get me to be more practical. My parents are pursuing this cause with little subtlety, aware that my time with them is limited” (159). Wainaina notes that his father went so far as to ask him if he was having a problem with drugs.

## Vocabulary

levering, tenets, empowerment, impeccable, disconcerting, demeanor, sacrilege, cynical, incontinent, inanimate, bourgeois, accolade, taciturn, coup, saunters



# Chapters 23, 24 and 25

## Summary

In Chapter 23, Wainaina is able to maintain his confidence in school for only one week. He goes to only one class. That night he gets so drunk he is kicked out of the club to which he had gone. He lives with a woman named Sylvia and begins writing a novel. He cannot face his parents.

Black empowerment becomes a popular idea with many people whom Wainaina had attended school winding up in prosperous careers. He notices how one person who has designed a state of the art conventions center whom he knows is described as having grown up in a mud hut. Wainaina knows otherwise. This friend offers to let Wainaina market his project. He realizes how much the people of South Africa have given him and how this friend, a person who trusts him, is giving him.

Wainaina works with his friend, Chuma, to promote the business. A few weeks into the project, however, George tells Wainaina and Chuma he is canceling his tour. He pays them anyway. Wainaina takes his part of the money and buys books. Wainaina packs and moves to Cape Town.

In Chapter 24, although people had thought Brenda Fassie was finished, she rises from the past. In Cape Town, Wainaina is running a small catering business. During a ride in the taxi to find a phone so he can share news with his mother Wainaina hears a new song by Brenda Fassie. Days earlier, Wainaina's father had gotten in touch with him. He had told Wainaina to call his mother. Wainaina felt his father was hiding something. He has talked to his mother several times since then and has learned Jimmy is married. Both Ciru and Chiqy have babies.

Wainaina notes the 1997 election was rigged and that Moi is back in power.

Charlie, a man who has been critiquing Wainaina's writing calls on the phone to tell Wainaina the story about his trip to Uganda is beautiful. Charlie suggests the story should be published. Wainaina works on the story, getting it into shape and sending it off that day to the Sunday Times. The story is accepted for publication. Wainaina wants to let his mother know that he is a published writer.

In Chapter 25, Wainaina tells the story of his mother's life including how she met his father. He shares with his reader that his mother loved books growing up. His father's sister was a famous playwright. When Wainaina calls his mother's home in Kenya to tell her he has been published, one of her brothers answers the phone. He tells Wainaina that his mother is dead. She died that day.



## Analysis

Triumph and heartbreak come simultaneously for Wainaina. On the same day that he learns he will be paid to have a piece of writing published, Wainaina's mother dies. He learns of her death when he calls her to tell her his good news. Chapter 25 is a synopsis of his mother's life. Notice the writer tells a good deal of this chapter from the third person point of view where he refers to himself as "he" and even by his first name at some points. It is as if writing about his mother's death is too painful for him to face and he must distance himself from it by this change to the third person.

Wainaina's triumph is important because he feels he had once again failed at college. He had gone only to one class and then had wound up getting drunk and never returning to college. He had gotten by on odd jobs and promised himself he would not return home until he had made something of himself. While this desire is laudable, Wainaina also loses time with his family while he is trying to make a success of himself.

Notice the way that race relations seem to both improve and take a step back in Africa. One of the things that Wainaina first mentions is black empowerment, an idea that has become very popular at that time. Wainaina describes black empowerment in a simile in this way: "Like paragliding, black empowerment has the ability to lift you very high, on a front of warm air" (166). One of the girls with whom he had gone to school starts her own business. When he sees her in a business magazine he notes how she is "looking very aerodynamic in a business suit" (166). The idea that she is aerodynamic, of course, is connected to Wainaina's description of black empowerment as a paraglider.

Wainaina also refers to affirmative action and an experience that he had in a grocery store. A colored woman had refused service to Wainaina, insisting that he go to another line. To his shock, her sarcastic response indicated there was nothing he could do about her refusal to serve him.

In his writing, Wainaina also points out the way that one of his friends seems to manipulate the idea of black empowerment to advance himself. He gives talks on empowerment and has made up posters about himself that indicate he was born and grew up in a mud hut. Wainaina knows this claim is falsified because that man had lived in a "four-bedroom home with a double automatic garage door" (168) growing up, a far cry from a mud hut.

Of course, most significant is the fact Wainaina has finally become successful with his writing. It is his friend Charlie who tells Wainaina the piece he wrote about his family's reunion in Uganda was fit for publication. Notice that Wainaina still uses the words from his childhood "accordion" and "kimay" to describe his tendency to become fearful and confused. He says of his work as he polishes it: "I want to send it somewhere before I sleep and get all accordion and kimay" (174).

Also significant in this section is the new song by Brenda Fassie. Just when the people of Africa thought that she was finished and that they had left her behind, she comes up



with a new hit song. In this song she speaks to the heart of the people in Africa. When he first hears the song with others, Wainaina indicates their feelings of being separate peoples as well as tribalism and political strife were all washed away. In fact, Wainaina had to hide his tears as he listened to the singer address the issues in Africa just as strongly as she ever had.

## **Vocabulary**

bionically, malicious, subsidized, candor, deposed, transcend

# Chapters 26 and 27

## Summary

In Chapter 26, the year is 2001. Wainaina is back in Nairobi. He was not able to leave after he visited for his mother's funeral. He lives in a hostel where he spends his time writing. He has a regular job with an online magazine that pays him a small income. For the past weeks, Wainaina has been polishing a story to submit for the Caine Prize for African Writing. The prize will not only garner him cash but also a good deal of commissioned work. Because of a technicality, Wainaina is unable to submit the story on which he has been working and instead submits his story about Uganda for the prize. Because it can only be accepted if it was published in print, Wainaina believes his story has been disqualified.

Wainaina finally has to move back home. He babysits for his nephews, cooks and writes. He learns he has been placed on the shortlist for the Caine Prize. He goes to England and learns he is the winner of the prize. He and the community of writer he has befriended start a magazine. Noted also in this chapter is that the elections in Africa are a year away. Moi cannot serve again because he is in his second term.

In Chapter 27, Wainaina begins traveling in Africa as he works on articles for magazines. He is approached by a man who works with the European Union Humanitarian Something. The man is hoping to produce a book about sleeping sickness in Sudan. Wainaina is promised that what is wanted is a book written by an African writer that will be a powerful piece of literature accompanied by photographs. When he finishes his work, Wainaina is called to a meeting with the man. The EU is uncomfortable with the book because it violates some EU policy. They decide to let Wainaina keep the money he was paid but instead do a photography exhibit with Wainaina providing some paragraphs of explanation with the photographs. Wainaina refuses. He gets the book published by the magazine company he has started.

Wainaina notes he realizes, finally, that there is little good literature in Kenya because those who could be good writers are instead making money by writing what the government wants them to write.

Wainaina writes that Moi is finally out of power. He traveled to Nakuru to vote. On the day the new president was inaugurated Moi was booed and had mud thrown at him. Wainaina notes the people are passionate. They want changes.

Wainaina visits Pokot. As he talks to an elderly woman on the way there he thinks about how he is honored to be able to write for a living. Sometimes he thinks he needs to stop writing for fear that one day his job will be gone.





The man who drives the taxi in which Wainaina rides explains that the Pokots are done in by their culture. Even though they do well in school, they return to their home land. He said the same was true of himself, he could only live in his own culture.

## Analysis

As Wainaina ages and becomes more mature, he has a different view of things. One example is how he views his father. Wainaina had always been afraid of his father. He did not want to admit his downfalls to him. After the death of his mother, however, Wainaina realizes that his father is not the hard, flawless man he had always thought him to be. "It is hard to believe this Baba who makes mistakes, who can be unsure of himself, who is not up and out of the house at 8:00 a.m. every day" (185). Wainaina says of his father.

Wainaina also begins to realize why writers in Africa do not write good literature. He has an experience when he is hired by a man from the European Union to write a piece of literature about sleeping sickness in Sudan. Even though he is told he will be given free rein, the EU refuses to publish the book because it violates too many of their standards. Even though they will not publish the book, Wainaina is allowed to keep the hefty commission he had been offered. Wainaina takes from this experience that because the good writers want to be paid well, they cower and write what the government wants them to write. Wainaina takes a stand and refuses to cooperate with the EU. He has his magazine company publish his book as he had written it.

Wainaina does make a huge step forward when he wins the Caine Prize for African Writers. He had written a story that he believed was perfectly shaped to win the award. It was correct politically and he believed it was written the way those who awarded the prize would want it written. Because the story had to have been published, Wainaina is forced to fall back on his story about his family's reunion in Uganda. Even then he gets a notification from the committee his story has been rejected because it was published only online. His question back to them, that he was not sure where they were going to find stories for their competition in that case since there had been only one anthology of stories published in Africa in the past year apparently won his case because he was notified his story was on the short list.

## Vocabulary

infatuated, trajectory, imminent, incompetence, asymmetrical, pungent, critique, inaugurate, mundane, succumb, permutations, pungent



# Chapters 28, 29 and 30

## Summary

In Chapter 28, Wainaina says he is going to Lagos and is prepared for it to be as bad as it has been described. Despite the description, he hopes to find coherence there. He is there to run a writers' workshop. The man driving in the car seems to disapprove when Wainaina buys a magazine from a man selling them on the street. Later, Wainaina is shocked when a man on a motorbike help him and his driver find the place they want to go without getting paid. He notes that would never have happened in his country.

Wainaina describes how the sound "msslp" (205) means different things in Kenya and in Lagos. In Kenya it is a sound made by those who are sad or resigned. In Lagos the sound represents disdain.

In Chapter 29, three years into Kibaki's term as president there are tensions developing. Because Kibaki is Gikuyu, some people feel that an agreement was broken when Moi's party was removed from power. Ralia had been promised the post as prime minister but instead was made the ministry of roads. There is a feeling that the Gikuyu people are hoping to claim power. Although the people thought these struggles were over with, the politicians seem intent on continuing to manipulate power to tribes. He remembered having been manipulated by such a situation when he had traveled back to Kenya for his mother's funeral. He had to pay a bribe of \$100 in order to be allowed into the country because he did not have his yellow fever certificate. In 2002 after Kibaki's election, Wainaina was treated in a completely different manner when he was at the same airport.

A year or so after that in the same airport, Wainaina was asked what tribe he was from, a question he had never been asked before. He answered in a way to avoid her question but she continued to push so he answered in Kiswahili, intended to be a stern reprimand. She still continued to question him until he indicated to her he did not have to tell her his tribe in order to be checked onto the plane. He notes other ways in which he is treated differently because a person from the Gikuyu tribe is the president.

In the remainder of the chapter, Wainaina describes what life is like as a Gikuyu in Kenya. He listens as people who are Gikuyu talk about the way they do not like those from other tribes. He also realizes people from other tribes are afraid of people who are from the Gikuyu tribe. He does not like or want to be around either type of person.

In Chapter 30, Wainaina is in West Africa writing for the World Cup anthology. It is 2006. He will be traveling to Togo because that city's team has qualified for the World Cup. A younger man named Alex helps Wainaina to find the members of the soccer team. Later, Wainaina takes Alex out for a drink as a thank you. They are joined by a man named Yves.



## Analysis

Wainaina indicates that during Kibaki's rule, tribalism, a problem of which Wainaina has seen both sides, is increasing. Wainaina and his sister have had a personal experience with the downside of tribalism when they were not invited to attend a good school because they were of a tribe different from the president's tribe. Now that the leader of Kenya is Gikuyu, the same tribe as Wainaina, he does not like the way he is treated in these circumstances either. He describes how the non-Gikuyu's feel betrayed by the Gikuyu's, while the Gikuyu's have developed the idea that they are better than those people from other tribes.

One significant interaction in this section is that between Wainaina and the airline hostess who insists on knowing what tribe he is from. Wainaina refuses to tell her, feeling that his tribal connections should have no impact on his ability to fly on that airline. He knows it is not a question the woman needs answered. Pretending not to know she is being rude, the woman continues to insist that he tell her his tribe. He believes this woman was not familiar with the ways of the people as he notes that other people could have determined his tribe without asking in such an outright manner.

When dealing with this woman, Wainaina indicates how language can be used to belittle another person. For her, Wainaina chooses to switch to Kiswahili. The use of this language should have been a sign to the woman that he is accusing her of ethnic bigotry. When his use of the ancient language still did not move the woman, Wainaina was forced to almost threaten to woman to make her allow him to pass.

Notice Wainaina's use of hyperbole when describing the way the women in Laos dressed. Hyperbole is a literary term that refers to exaggeration. In one description, Wainaina writes: "One woman is wrapped in gold and purple lamé cloth; her head looks like a Dubai hotel. There is the Leaning Tower of Pisa wrapped around another head. There is more bling on that head than in a Las Vegas casino" (203). Wainaina compares the women and the way they are dressed to several well-know luxurious landmarks. One of the women's head is said to look like a "Dubai hotel." In describing another woman's outrageous head gear he exaggerates the amount of jewelry and showy things she is wearing by indicating she has more bling than a Las Vegas casino.

Notice a reference to the importance of literature when Wainaina is told by his host in Laos that at one bank, the people who apply for jobs are asked what literary piece they last read. Significant also, and different from Africa, is a man on a motorbike who gives Wainaina and his host directions without expecting payment in return.

## Vocabulary

coherence, machinations, immaculately, coalition, victimized, beneficiaries, waylaid, overtly, rhetoric, primeval, constituency, voluptuous, conspire, stagnation, aspiration



# Chapters 31 and 32

## Summary

In Chapter 31, the year is 2006. Wainaina gets a teaching position at Union College in Schenectady. He describes health problems that have suddenly begun to plague him. He craves sugar and has an immense thirst which he blames on being in a different place.

The people in Kenya are becoming more intent on defending leaders who are of the same ethnicity. There is concern that when the elections are held the following year the democracy will not be strong enough to keep the peace when the ruling president is removed from office.

Later in the chapter the narrator goes on to explain it had been hoped a new constitution would have been in place before the election but it appears that will not happen. It is that constitution that makes it hard to remove a president from power.

Wainaina explains that things are getting more intense in Togo the closer the time comes to the World Cup. He describes soccer in Africa as being “not a negotiable object” (227). It is a sport that belongs to the people and cannot be determined by politics.

He takes a train to New York City. Even as he searches for information about the state of Kenya on his laptop, he is distracted by an American woman with red hair. He believes that because the World Cup will be played in Togo that journalists are looking for normal Africans to write about.

Wainaina tells his reader that he will vote for Raila in the Kenyan election even though that man is from a different tribe. He does not think the current president should stay in power.

Wainaina pays a visit to Kenya in time for the opening match of the World Cup. All of the people of Kenya, despite their age, socioeconomic condition or tribe, cheers when Togo takes the lead over the South Korean team.

In Chapter 32, Wainaina reports the election is three days away and that he is fed up with it. He believes the politicians have gone mad. There have been rumors that people are paying money to help rig the election. People in the Gikuyu tribe are voting for Raila, a man not in their tribe. Wainaina tears up his voter’s card.

Wainaina describes a man whom he meets on the plane. The man speaks perfect Kiswahili, a pattern of speech that Wainaina believes is rude because the man speaks so perfectly. Once he reaches his destination of Lamu, the Wainaina realizes that the people there regard his speech in the same way he reacted to the man on the plane.



When the count for the election begins, Wainaina says that it is clear that the election has been rigged. Considering that the last election went nearly perfectly, Wainaina wonders why this election is going so badly. He has no clear answer. People are rioting in Nairobi. Wainaina and his friends watch coverage of the election on television.

Kivuitu announces the results from the election in a small room with no members of the independent press there. President Kibaki is announced as the winner. Violence breaks out as members of different tribes, even close family members, kill and threaten each other. Wainaina begs his father to leave Kenya, but he refuses.

Wainaina switches to the second person point of view to tell how you will watch as your nation is taken over by anger and hate. The president is silent. Even though there is fighting just a short distance from his father's house, Wainaina's father insists that he will not leave.

## Analysis

There is another election impending in Kenya. Wainaina, who is living in the United States, is getting fed up with the way politicians use tribalism in order to manipulate the votes. He is tired of the people of one tribe being pitted against people of other tribes. "I do not want to vote for a better Gikuyuland. I want to vote for a better Kenya. If I can't trust my vote to a leader of another tribe, I may as well take a green card and not go back" (234). Wainaina is so tired of tribalism that he is willing to vote for a man of a different party in order to do what is best for Kenya.

Wainaina is quickly frustrated when he learns that people are being bribed to vote in a certain way. He symbolizes his frustration with the elections in his country by tearing up his voting card. This act of tearing up the card shows his loss of faith in the way the elections are run in Kenya. Although the people of the country are trying to transfer to a democracy, they still have a constitution in place that keeps them from easily transferring power from one leader to another. Although many people believe Raila might be best for the country, Kibaki might be able to cause a disturbance when an attempt is made to remove him from power.

In this section of the novel, notice the way that Wainaina describes both soccer and the election at the same time. He makes the point that while the government can be manipulated, soccer cannot. "Soccer itself is not a negotiable object" (227). He explains that soccer is a sport that a person can play and excel at with just "plastic and string and will" (227).

Wainaina, who is probably about 35 at this point, has finally earned a spot as a teacher in a university in the United States. While he is pleased with his position in his life, he has begun having problems with his health. Wainaina uses an analogy with chairs to describe the changes he has noticed in his body. "My body has been a soft and comfortable beanbag, nicely worn into the right shape for my mind to wiggle around" (226). This description indicates that up to this point, Wainaina's body has served him



well as a place for his mind to perform. As he ages, he notices that his body has changed. He says of his body: “It has become one of those American chairs— fat and cushy, with numerous moving parts and levers that can chew your fingers” (226). Wainaina’s body seems to have revolted against him. He is thirsty all of the time and craves sugar.

## Vocabulary

nuanced, referendum, incumbent, timbre, sublime, rampant, eradicated, imploding, batik, dogmatic, xenophobic



# Chapter 33

## Summary

In Chapter 33, Wainaina goes back in time to share a memory from 1983. He steals a copy of the book *The Black Stallion* from a friend. Even though he is supposed to be studying for the national primary exams he is busy reading, listening to music and masturbating.

The place where they lived had been built by white settlers. At that time, no black Africans were allowed. His father had bought the house in which they lived cheaply.

He describes how Congo music and bad Kenyan music distresses him, referring to the feeling he gets from them as “kimay” (248). Movies and images on television screens do not impact him in a big way but he can see the images written about in the pages of novels.

Wainaina also notes that at that time the people did not know that Moi had a room in his official building where people like writers and intellectuals were tortured.

Wainaina moves forward to 2009. He is working at Bard College. He had stayed in Kenya through the violence and unrest but has sworn not to return except for visits and holidays. He considers getting his green card. He remembered breaking into tears when he tried to talk about Kenya during a reading at Williams College.

In 2010, Wainaina returns to Kenya for the World Cup. He has been diagnosed with diabetes. A doctor has also told him his knees are bad. As a result he more aware of pain and problems. He learns also that he has sleep disturbances.

During a visit to Kenya, Wainaina buys a benga compilation. He is afraid at first to watch the CD included because he is afraid he will discover he still does not like benga music. When he first hears the nyatiti and lyre, he is not bothered by the music. It is not until the orutu joins them that he feels kimay, the uncomfortableness that he always felt when listening to benga music.

He learned the tradition of this music was begun in 1940 when soldiers went to help the British fight. It was in that time period that the men began to play this music on the Spanish guitar. It was a form of story telling. He realizes his feeling of kimay was the feeling he got when people talked without words.

## Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that Wainaina discovers his dislike for the traditional music played by Kenyans. He once described this music as giving him a feeling of “kimay” a word that Wainaina made up. Wainaina tells his reader that this music makes



him feel uncomfortable and uncertain. When he watches the documentary on this type of music, he begins to understand it better. He gets the understanding that what he described as kimay was the feeling he got when people spoke without words, through instrumental music. He comes to realize that the uncomfortable feeling that he had was caused by his own lack of imagination to realize that people could talk without using words.

Wainaina also learns some definite information about his health issues. He is diagnosed with diabetes, the same illness from which many of his family members suffered. While he does not seem too disturbed about this diagnosis, Wainaina is disturbed when the doctors do an MRI and discover that his knees are badly deteriorated. He indicates, tongue in cheek, that he believes the test brought on the health problem. Before he learned there was something wrong with his knees, Wainaina says he never had any problem with them. When he gets the words his knees are bad, he notices that they hurt and often pop out of joint. Wainaina additionally learns in this section that he has some sort of sleeping disorder. He feels almost vindicated by this diagnosis, believing that perhaps all of his problems have been caused by this disorder.

## Vocabulary

pungent, charismatic, tentative, imminent, coherent





# Important People

## Kenneth Binyavanga Wainaina

Kenneth Binyavanga Wainaina is the author and narrator of this memoir. He is the son of Job Muigai Wainaina, whom he calls Baba, and Rosemary Kankindi, whom he calls Mum.

He begins his story as a seven-year-old, living in Kenya in 1978 and continues through 2006 when the team from Togo plays for the soccer World Cup.

Through his story, Wainaina not only tells of his own struggle to make a place for himself in the world as a writer and teacher, but also to prove himself to his family. He believes he has disappointed his family because he failed to succeed in college.

Wainaina also describes the political atmosphere in Africa as that country struggles to become a democracy. Despite movements for change and the people's desire for change, politicians continue to pit one tribe against the others in order to garner votes. Elections are rigged and power is abused. Wainaina describes his love/hate relationship with his home country and its inability to better itself.

## Rosemary Kankindi (Mum)

Rosemary Kankindi is Wainaina's mother. She is from Uganda. Since she is from Uganda, she is sometimes the target of abuse by people from Kenya.

Even though she encouraged Wainaina to do well in school and not read so many novels, it is later learned that she read a great deal when she was a small child.

Wainaina worked hard to prove to his mother that he could make something of himself. He was wounded to the core when she died before he got the chance to tell her that he had finally had a piece of his writing published.

His mum's voice is one of the characteristics of her that Wainaina found most endearing. Wainaina later indicates that he wished one of his mum's granddaughters had inherited her voice so that at least that part of her would have stayed alive.

## Jun "Ciru" Wanjiru Wainaina

Jun "Ciru" Wanjiru Wainaina is Wainaina's younger sister and the sibling that he connects with most strongly. She is five and a half at the opening of Wainaina's story but has been skipped forward several grades because she is so intelligent. For this reason she goes to high school and college at the same time that Wainaina does.



Wainaina depicts Ciru as the star of the family. She usually earns the top spots in her classes and is chosen for special activities.

In primary school and at home, Wainaina cues off Ciru and often follows her example when doing schoolwork. He sometimes imagines they are twins. It could be his separation from Ciru that causes Wainaina to falter so badly in college.

## **Peter Karanja**

Peter Karanja is one of Wainaina's best friends. They attend Njoro High School together.

After Wainaina told Peter how he was bullied in school, Peter arranged to have Wainaina and some other boys who were being abused taken under the protection of several senior prefects.

While in school together the two put together a play called *The Verdict*. Because the play is so successful, Peter, Wainaina and a few other students start a theater company called the *Changes Pycers*.

While Wainaina struggles in college, Peter gets a scholarship to go to an American university.

## **Brenda Fassie**

Brenda Fassie is an African singer who rises to popularity several times during the course of Wainaina's story. Fassie's story is an African success story. She grew up in one of the worst towns in Africa, but she became a symbol of the nation.

Fassie has her troubles when she becomes addicted to drugs and refuses to stay in rehab. Wainaina thinks that she represents Africa's past, she symbolizes all of the things the people want to escape.

Fassie re-emerges in the late '90s with a crossover song. Wainaina is surprised how the song touches him personally and captures the atmosphere in Africa.

## **James "Jimmy" Muigai Wainaina**

James "Jimmy" Muigai Wainaina is eleven, four years older than Wainaina at the beginning of the book.

While still attending college, Jimmy brings home the crippled boy who makes an impression on Wainaina because the boy is healed during a church service. Jimmy also tries to help his wayward younger brother by encouraging him to talk about his problems in college.



Wainaina writes that Jimmy becomes a sort of legend at the bank where he works. After Jimmy gets married, Wainaina tells himself he will not return home until he has made something of himself.

## **Mrs. Karanja**

Mrs. Karanja is the Kenyan woman who owns the shop next to the beauty shop run by Wainaina's mother. Because Wainaina's mother is from Uganda, Mrs. Karanja takes it upon herself to criticize the place where the beauty shop's trash has been put out, even though the can is in the correct place.

Mrs. Karanja is a significant character because she represents the way the people in Kenya treat people from Uganda. Wainaina compares the conflict between the two women to the conflict between the two countries.

## **Moi**

Moi is the president of Kenya during much of Wainaina's life. He takes over the presidency after Kenyetta's death and remains as the president until 2002.

Moi is the politician who has the most impact on Wainaina's life because it is under his leadership that the test results are manipulated. The children from the Gikuyu tribe are not given places at the best high schools even if they scored the best on the tests. Wainaina and his sister are both sent to low rate high schools because of this decision.

## **The Cripple aka Julius**

This cripple, later given the name Julius, is a boy who convicts Wainaina about his refusal to accept Jesus as his savior, like Wainaina's family wants him to do.

Wainaina is particularly convicted by this cripple because the crippled boy is healed and regains use of his legs during a church service that Wainaina attends. Even though Wainaina writes that he plans to get saved and knows he needs to do so, he wants to live some before he devotes his life to religion.

## **Wambui**

Wambui is Wainaina and Ciru's fifteen year old nanny. Wainaina is both infatuated by and in awe of Wambui. He sees her as a sex symbol and imagines how she might act if she were in different situations or if she were of a different race.

There are times when Wainaina gets to know a woman and then is disappointed by her reality. He sometimes refers to this woman as Wambui in disguise.



## **Job Muigai Wainaina aka Baba**

Job Muigai Wainaina is Wainaina's father. As a young boy Wainaina is afraid of his father and the idea that his father might be disapproving or disappointed in him. Wainaina thinks that his father is in control and perfect. He does not realize how much his mother keeps his father in line both in his private life and his career. It is not until after his mother's death that Wainaina sees that his father does not really have it all together.

## **Melissa "Chiqy" Kamanzi Wainaina**

Melissa "Chiqy" Kamanzi Wainaina is the youngest of Wainaina's siblings. She is born when Wainaina is eleven years old. Because Wainaina goes to a boarding high school soon after her birth and then on to college, he is not able to get to know her well. He mourns later in his story the fact that he does not know his youngest sister.

## **Nelson Mandela**

Nelson Mandela was the president of South Africa beginning in 1994 until 1999. Wainaina mentions Mandela being released from prison in 1991.

It is in 1995, after Mandela is elected to the position of president that Wainaina is finally able to leave South Africa where he had gone to attend college, and return home.

## **Air Force Private Ochuka**

When Wainaina still a child, this member of Kenya's Air Force leads a coup and overthrows President Moi. He remains in power for about six hours before he is taken from power.



## Objects/Places

### Orbit Chewing Gum

When Moi, the new president, comes into power, he donates a truckload of Orbit Chewing Gum to the school. It is a symbol of his lack of knowledge about anything practical in his role as president. This symbol is introduced in Chapter 6.

### Yellow American Maize

During the years of the drought in Africa, the boys were fed yellow American maize at school. The Africans believe this corn has been treated with chemicals for birth control and is only used to feed animals in America. It is a symbol of the distrust the Africans have in Americans. This maize is mentioned in Chapter 11.

### Polo Aftershave

By purchasing a bottle of Polo aftershave Wainaina is technically saying goodbye to Kenya in a not very nice way. The bottle is purchased in Chapter 12.

### The Nandi Woman

As a child, Wainaina was scared of The Nandi Woman painting. It was not until he was much older that he realized it was an African version of the Mona Lisa. This painting is mentioned in Chapter 19.

### One Hundred Dollars

One hundred dollars is a bribe that Wainaina pays to airport officials to get through security because he does not have his yellow fever certificate. Wainaina thinks that he is held up at the airport because of his membership in his tribe.

### Green Art

Green Art is the name of the hair salon owned by Wainaina's mother. It is outside this salon where the differing groups of women fight over the trash.

### Nakuru

Nakuru is the name of the town from which Wainaina and his family came.



## **Afraha Stadium**

Afraha Stadium is the place where Independence Day is celebrated. One year when Wainaina performed with a group at the celebration there was a riot with tear gas and police action.

## **Nairobi**

Nairobi is the capital city of Kenya.

## **University of Transkei**

The University of Transkei is the college in South Africa where Wainaina attends. He and his sister are able to attend that college because they have an uncle who works there as a professor.



# Themes

## Effects of Politics on Families/Citizens

Politics in Africa has a tremendous effect on the attitudes of the people who live there. Wainaina states this again and again in his memoir. One aspect of African culture that politicians manipulate often to cause distress among the people is the people's allegiance to their tribes. The country is peaceful or in turmoil depending on who is in charge and how that leader handles his power. Rigged elections also deny opportunities for the deserving and can tear families apart.

The people's dedication to their tribes is an aspect that politicians often manipulate in order to win an election. Some leaders have a natural mark either against them or in favor of them because of the tribe from which this leader descends. In 2005, when Kibaki, a Gikuyu, is in power. Wainaina notes that the non-Gikuyus feel that Kibaki betrayed them because he did not put the man he said that he would put in the prime minister spot there. Later, in 2007 Kibaki, a Gikuyu, and Raila, a non-Gikuyu, run for the office. Wainaina plans to vote for the man not from his tribe because he believes so strongly that he will be a better president for Kenya. He notes that many others do not feel this way.

Wainaina and his sister are directly affected by the way a leader of a tribe different from their's can affect their chances at a good future. Although the system for students to get into secondary schools is believed to be unbiased, the year that Wainaina and Ciru are to get into secondary school, the results are manipulated. None of the Gikuyu are allowed into good secondary schools, even though who had good scores on their tests. Politics affect other people in different ways by providing some with good jobs and many opportunities while others have limited opportunities. For instance, the soccer player Hubert tells Wainaina that he lives in Ghana because there are more opportunities there than in Togo. "Ghana has no politics" (215), Hubert tells Wainaina.

The politics in Africa, Kenya in particular, often lead the citizens to riot and be violent. There was so much turmoil associated with the 2007 election between Kibaki and Raila that few were allowed to attend either the session to announce Kibaki had won the presidency or his inauguration. The people were also known to be violent during events that should have been celebrations. When Moi was relieved of office, for instance, the people threw mud at him and cursed him. Also during an Independence Day celebration the people rioted at the celebration. Wainaina remembers being locked in the stadium where the celebration was taking place until police could arrive and get the crowds under control.



## Failure as a Defining Factor of Wainaina's Relationship With His Family

Wainaina believes that he has been a failure and disappointment to his family. These feelings cause him to miss out on being with his family and developing strong family relationships. Wainaina first wants to make his mother proud of him, and he does not want to disappoint his father any further. When he sees his brother excelling in his career, Wainaina makes a promise to himself not to return home until he has made something of himself. Years later, he realizes how much he has missed by staying away from his family.

While Wainaina was struggling through college, he knew how his lack of direction upset his mother. Aware of how much she wanted him to succeed, he thinks about her when he gets his first piece of writing published. He makes his first phone call to her to tell her the good news only to discover that she had died earlier that day.

To Wainaina, his father is a person who is unfailing and able to conquer anything. He is everything that Wainaina believes that he himself is not. Although his father does not say much about Wainaina's failures in school, Wainaina can feel that his father is disappointed in him. His relationship with his father becomes stronger when Wainaina begins to make something of himself and when Wainaina's mother dies. It is only after his mother's death that Wainaina realizes it was his mother who helped his father be the competent person he always appeared to be.

Wainaina decides to stay away from his family when he learns that his brother is excelling in his banking career. Also, there is the news that his brother has gotten married. At this point in his life, Wainaina is not able to stay in college. All of these situations lead Wainaina to decide that the best thing for him to do is to stay away from his family. It is later when he realizes he has missed out on spending time with his mother during her later years and that he also had missed out on getting to know his youngest sister.

## Wainaina's Infatuation With Words and Writing

Even as a child, Wainaina has an infatuation with words. He experiments with words like one might experiment with science. He reads novels voraciously even though his parents try to keep him from doing so. Wainaina tells his reader that it is not pictures or movies that arouse him, but descriptions written on a page that he can visualize most clearly. When he realizes that he lives his life writing in his head about the experiences that he has had, he knows that his future lies in writing.

As a seven-year-old playing soccer with his siblings, Wainaina is struck by the words "thirst" and "water." He sits in his bedroom and runs these words through his mind, determining their meaning based on sound and the ideas that make their way into his mind when he says them. At one point, when he is eleven, Wainaina states in his writing





that he knows he does not have enough words in his vocabulary to describe what he is experiencing.

By the time he is nine, Wainaina is reading a book nearly every day. He gets these books from where ever he can. Some come from barrels of things sent to Kenya by missionaries. When he is eleven, Wainaina begins reading storybooks. As he gets older, Wainaina discovers bookstores where he can buy books cheap. He borrows books from libraries. Wainaina enjoys reading because he can get lost in the experiences he reads about in a book.

When Wainaina is much older, he works for his father. Wainaina encourages farmers to begin planting cotton again. It is at this point that he realizes that he has to be true to his talent and try to write. He describes feeling as if he is being selfish by keeping the way he sees the world to himself. Even though he struggles with fear that he will not be a successful writer, Wainaina is able to overcome his fear and break into a career as a writer and teacher of writing.

## The Way Language Defines People

The language one speaks, the circumstances under which one speaks this language, and the way in which a person is able to communicate in a particular language tell a good deal about a person, according to Wainaina. In the memoir, some people speak only English. Others speak English and the traditional language of their tribes. Although Wainaina can understand language with words, he has the most trouble with the language of the traditional music of Kenya because it tells stories through music. Wainaina is uncomfortable with this form of art because he does not understand it.

The people in Africa often speak many languages. Wainaina notes that at his school the students are asked to speak in English in an attempt to obliterate tribalism. English is the official language of Kenya with all documents written in English. Kiswahili is the tribal language that Wainaina and his family speak. It is also considered to be the national language of Kenya.

After Moi becomes president, Wainaina notices the languages the new leader speaks and how he speaks them. Wainaina says the leader's English is stumbling, but his Kiswahili is "broken and sincere" (28). What is most significant about Wainaina's description of Moi and the languages he speaks is Wainaina's mention that the people of the country do not know Moi as he speaks in his native language. "We have no idea what man and mind he is in his home language, Tugen" (28). This suggests that Moi may not be able to properly encase what he is thinking in the words of English or Kiswahili.

At one point when Wainaina is being questioned by an air hostess about the tribe to which he belongs, Wainaina demonstrates to the reader how language can be used to criticize and belittle another person. Wainaina is irritated by the girl for asking so openly the identity of his tribe and her apparent belief that it is not rude of her to ask. He



speaks to her in Kiswahili, intending her to understand he is being critical of her. She does not seem to understand what he is trying to tell her.

Wainaina is so disturbed by this music when he hears it during an Independence Day celebration that he comes up with a word for it: kimay. Anything that does not fit Wainaina's definition of music or is a language he cannot speak is described as kimay. It is not until he is an adult, watching a commentary about traditional African music, that he understands he never liked the music because it attempted to tell a story without words.

## Soccer as a National Pastime

One minor theme in the novel is that of soccer as Africa's national pastime. Wainaina never comes out and says that soccer is a favorite sport of the Africans, but his references to the sport in his book make it clear how popular it is. Soccer is played often and it seems that almost everyone knows how to play the game. In his description, Wainaina also argues that soccer is any man's sport. He also indicates that soccer is a game that cannot be changed or manipulated even by politics.

The reader should notice right away that most of the people in Wainaina's life know how to play soccer. In the opening of his memoir, Wainaina and his siblings are playing soccer. It is a way to amuse themselves when they are not in school. He also notes that Wambui, the nanny who watches Wainaina and Ciru knows how to play soccer. She learned the game from her grandmother. Even the famous singer Brenda Fassie plays soccer. She creates a scandal when she is spotted playing soccer topless with a group of young boys.

When interviewing the members of the Togo soccer team, Wainaina makes some interesting discoveries about the members of the team. He notes that while these young men all wear fashionable clothes, they are not from rich or powerful families. They are instead from middle class families. Because they are well muscled, it is apparent these young men spend time taking care of themselves and building up their bodies. These young men in their twenties are not superstars, just athletes who have worked to become good.

As far as politics go, Wainaina notes that "soccer itself is not a negotiable object" (227). All through the years, there has been no political power that has had the strength or ability to ban soccer. Wainaina believes this is because soccer is a game the does not require specialized equipment and can be played by almost anyone. "Soccer is a skill one can cultivate to the highest levels with nothing but plastic and string and will" (227). Soccer also crosses political lines with all Africans showing their excitement and support when the team from Togo earned a spot in the World Cup games.



# Styles

## Structure

Wainaina basically tells his story in a linear timeline. He begins with his childhood as a seven-year-old in 1978. The story concludes in 2010 when the people in Kenya are voting on a new constitution.

There are a few deviations from the linear line of the story. For instance, in Chapter 25 Wainaina goes back to 1960 to tell the story of his mother's life. Again in Chapter 33, Wainaina goes back in time to detail a portion of his life before he concludes his story.

Climaxes in Wainaina's life come when his mother's family is able to reunite in Uganda for Wainaina's grandparents' sixtieth wedding anniversary. The second high point in Wainaina's life hinges on this reunion. The first piece of writing that he has published and receives payment is a story he wrote about this reunion. Wainaina later goes on to win the Caine Prize for African Writing with this piece.

## Perspective

Wainaina tells his own story in the first person. The only exception to the use of the first person perspective is a small section of Chapter 25 after Wainaina learns that his mother has died. It is almost as if Wainaina still hurts so much from his mother's death that he has to distance himself from it even to be able to write about it.

Because he is writing from his own perspective, Wainaina describes the situation in Africa as he encounters it. He does not do a great deal of research about history or political policies to fill in details. Instead, he shares with the reader what he knows from his experience. For this reason, the reader may get caught up in some of Wainaina's exposition and lose track of where his country stands politically. Some individual research about leaders and important events mentioned by Wainaina might help the reader to understand better the political atmosphere in Wainaina's story.

## Tone

More often than not, Wainaina's tone in this novel is hopeful. There is one point in Chapter 15 where this is not the case. Wainaina falls into a deep depression that prevents him from being able to leave his room. This depression comes as Wainaina is trying to complete his college education at a university in South Africa. In places, Wainaina expresses his fear that he will not be able to succeed as a writer and that there will be nothing else that he will be fit to do.



## Quotes

I am seven years old, and I still do not know why everybody seems to know what they are doing and why they are doing it.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Wainaina expresses his lack of understanding in the way that everybody else seems to know what they are doing and why they are doing it. He does not have that same sense about his life.

Words, I think, must be concrete things. Surely they cannot be suggestions of things, vague pictures: scattered, shifting sensations?”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Even as a young child, Wainaina questions words and the substance of words. It is the beginning of his love of words and writing.

No one speaks. The wedding women are silent. My ears heat up. It is as if Kenya is over there, with the crowd, and behind us are the wedding women — who have sided with Uganda. All of Kenya is pulled together by Mrs. Karanja. And the wedding women have been shamed to silence.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Wainaina describes a stand off between his mother and the owner of the cafe next door. He compares it to the discord between the Kenyans and the Ugandans.

If I turn back to my book, the letters jumble for a moment, then they disappear into my head, and word-made flamingos are talking and wearing high heels, and I can run barefoot across China, and no beast can suck me in, for I can run and jump farther than they can. / On my trampoline of letters and words.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Wainaina describes how he can travel and have unique experiences when he reads.

For years I will hide from him my inability to tie a tie, to tie my shoelaces, to tell the time, and, later on, my inability to do long multiplication. Friends will tie my tie for me, and I will keep it tied for a whole term.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Wainaina is so fearful that his father will criticize him that he does not tell him that there are things he is not capable of doing, like tying a tie or doing long multiplication.

English is Kenya’s official language. All documents that are legal and official must be in English. Kiswahili is not compulsory in school; it is our national language. That is what



our constitution says. So, we have news in English and Kiswahili.”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Wainaina explains that although English is the country’s official language, individuals and families still communicate with one another in their tribal languages. Kiswahili is one of the tribal languages. In fact, Kiswahili is considered to be the national language of the country.

My new word bureaucrat is running around my mind in a panic, stamping and coding and reminding me to never forget that one day, one day I will arrange the words right for this strange night.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** It is after he spends the evening watching the Independence Day ceremonies with his sister and nanny that Wainaina decides that one day he hopes to have the words he needs to describe what happened to him that night.

Soon, they are on campus too, girls having all-girl parties, buying their own booze, and smoking in huddled groups in public. Every single one of them has dreadlocks. Liberation is coming. It is all over the radio.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 14 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** In addition to political changes in Africa, Wainaina also describes the beginning of women’s liberation in that country.

Moi rigged the elections, and the economy is sinking. There have been ethnic clashes in the Rift Valley, not far from where my parents live, where I was brought up.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 15 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Even while he traces the course of his life and development of his writing, Wainaina discusses the way that politics affect his life and his country. In this particular instance, a rigged election caused wars and a bad economy.

I do not tell him explicitly that I am now an illegal immigrant. I do not say I haven’t attended class in a year, I have failed to let myself disappear into the patterns of a school where there is no punishment, no bell, no clear timetable, no real shame, for I am not at home, and don’t much care for the approval of people here.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 15 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Wainaina is kicked out of college for not attending classes. He cannot bring himself to tell his father how badly he is doing in college.

It is 1995. Mandela is the president. We all danced and cheered for the inauguration. And I am going home. They sent a ticket. My parents. The day after tomorrow, I will be sitting next to my mother.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 16 paragraph N/A)



**Importance:** This is a high spot in Wainaina's life. After Nelson Mandela is elected as president, he is finally able to freely travel from South Africa back to his home in Kenya.

We find, for the first time, nothing at all to like about Brenda Fassie. We don't want casualties from the past; they remind of us of the essential cruelty of hope. What if change comes and we find ourselves unable?"

-- Narrator (Chapter 16 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** To Wainaina and his friends, Brenda Fassie represents the old ways of Africa. When the good news comes that Mandela has been elected president, they want to put Brenda Fassie in the past, a relic of that older time.

I am afraid. If I write, and fail at it, I cannot see what else I can do. Maybe I will write and people will roll their eyes, because I will talk about thirst, and thirst is something people know already, and what I see is only bad shapes that mean nothing."

-- Narrator (Chapter 20 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Even after Wainaina decides that his purpose in life is to write and share what he sees with other people, he battles the fear that he will fail as a writer. He equates failure as people not being interested in what he has to say in his writing.

Although they are very close, they haven't been together since 1961. Visas, wars, closed borders, and a thousand triumphs of chaos have kept them apart. We are all looking forward to their reunion."

-- Narrator (Chapter 22 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Wainaina speaks of the victory his mother's family shares when they are finally able to reunite in Uganda, a place many of them had to flee because of fighting and dictatorship.

Jimmy got married, to his girlfriend Carol, and I missed the wedding. I am not going home until I make something of myself."

-- Narrator (Chapter 24 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** After Wainaina misses Jimmy's wedding, he makes a vow to himself that he will not go back home until he makes a success of himself.

I want to be home. Just to be home. I don't want people being born, people dying with me away. My baby sister is all grown up and I do not know her."

-- Narrator (Chapter 26 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** After Wainaina made a vow to himself that he would not go home until he made a success of himself, he grieved because he was separated from his family. His grief was overwhelming after his mother died while he was away.

I win the Caine Prize, and cry, bad snotty tears, and come back with some money."

-- Narrator (Chapter 26 paragraph N/A)



**Importance:** Winning the Caine Prize indicates that Wainaina has finally become a writer. He has made something of himself in the eyes of public opinion.

I start to understand why so little good literature is produced in Kenya. The talent is wasted writing donor-funded edutainment and awareness-raising brochures for seven thousand dollars a job. Do not complicate things, and you will be paid very well.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 27 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** As Wainaina grows older, he becomes more perceptive of how writing the reality of life is viewed in Africa. Writing the truth is not encouraged in that country. Those who write what the government wants them to write are the best paid writers.

Many things have happened. Many good things — but tribalism is increasing.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 29 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Even though good things are happening in Africa, Wainaina recognizes that tribalism is getting worse.

The commission can't raise them on the phone. It turns out that they are waiting to see the numbers before fiddling with their own numbers and sending them in.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 32 paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Even as the country seems to be making strides forward, Wainaina indicates that the election is still being manipulated unfairly.



# Topics for Discussion

## Socioeconomic Levels

Consider the way that the different economic levels are represented in this novel. How do these different people interact with each other? How do attempts to equalize socioeconomic levels fail?

## Brenda Fassie

Discuss the role of Brenda Fassie in the novel. What does she represent?

## Wainaina's Writing Style

Discuss the way that Wainaina changes the style of his writing from the time that he was a child up until the point he is an adult. What does the development in his writing indicate?

## Kimay

Discuss kimay, the word the author creates as a young man. What does kimay represent when he is a child? What does it represent when he is older?

## Wainaina's Relationship with His Parents

Compare and contrast Wainaina's relationship with his mother and his relationship with his father. How does his relationship with his father change after his mother's death?

## Wainaina's Decision to Leave Kenya

Why does Wainaina decide to leave Kenya at the end of the novel to go to America?

## Tribalism

Discuss the way tribalism is presented in this novel? How is Wainaina directly affected by tribalism?





## **Wainaina's Depression**

Why do you think that Wainaina is not successful in college? What accounts for his deep depression?

## **Story's Climax**

At what point in Wainaina's life do you think the climax occurs? Why do you think this particular instance is the high point in his life?

## **How American Trends Influence African Culture**

How is Africa and the culture of Africa influenced by American trends?