

Open City Study Guide

Open City by Teju Cole

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Plot Summary

Open City is the debut novel by author Teju Cole. The story follows the main character, Julius, who is a Nigerian doctor doing his psychiatric residency in New York City. As the story unfolds, Julius takes up walking as a way to distress from the pressures of his job working with his patients. Julius even uses the walks to clear his mind of personal matters, such as a recent breakup with his girlfriend, Nadege. Throughout the novel, the narration of the story does not include any dialogue among the characters, but is told in exposition only.

For Julius, the walks become more than just exercise and a way to clear his mind. He starts to recognize what a true melting pot New York is as far as cultures and ethnicities are concerned. In the face of living in such a diverse city, however, Julius also notices that stark separation that still draws an imaginary line segregating one ethnic group from another.

As Julius walks, he also thinks back to his childhood in Nigeria. His father died when Julius was 14. He is now estranged from his mother. While his father was of Nigerian descent, Julius's mother is white and of German descent, making Julius a mixed race. Due to his mixed race, and light colored skin, Julius feels out of place, even in the worlds where he belongs. As he wanders around the city, black people seem to connect with him, recognizing his African roots.

One of his run-ins with someone he grew up with in Nigeria even reveals that Julius raped her. Subsequently, Julius blocked out the memory of this event and never reveals if he recalls it when his Moji tells him what he did to her.

By the end of the novel, Julius finishes his residency and moves into private practice. It seems as if he has come to terms with some of the events in his life. On the other hand, he never fully addresses some of the other issues to reveal to the reader as to whether the issues are ongoing or resolved.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The narrator and main character of the novel is a psychiatric doctor that does research at a university in New York City. The doctor has not yet identified his or her name or gender. He or she talks about working long and regimented days at the university and coming home to listen to foreign Internet radio stations and read books he or she fished out of the trash at the university. The doctor then takes up walking around the city to break up the monotony of the day.

Julius, who is the main character and narrator of the story visits one of his old college professors, Professor Saito, on the day of the New York Marathon. The professor is 89 years old and has prostate cancer so he doesn't get out of his apartment much anymore. After his visit, Julius walks home past the record store and the Blockbuster store. He notices that both stores are going out of business. he goes into the record store and looks around. He gets the second song playing in the store stuck in his head and it motivates him for the next few days.

When he goes into his building, he runs into his neighbor. When he asks about his neighbors' travels, he says that he travels alone because his wife died last year of a heart attack. Julius can't believe he didn't know this or notice the wife's absence.

Chapter 1 Analysis

It seems as if Julius is somewhat self-absorbed. He works hard at the university, but doesn't have to interact with too many people besides his patients. When he walks through the city, he does it alone. While he sees the city from a new viewpoint during his walks, he seems to be missing the things that are happening right in front of him. For example, one of his neighbors died the previous year and he didn't even know until now. Music is an escape for Julius. He enjoys listening to it on the Internet radio and even buying music from the store. When he gets a good song in his head it changes Julius's outlook on life and everything that is going on in his work and personal life.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

On his way to the movies one night, Julius stops in the bookstore to buy a book he hopes will help him gain insight into one of his patients. She is a Native American suffering with depression. When Julius sits down in the theater, he is with hundreds of people, but they are all strangers to him. After the movie, Julius is waiting for the train when two kids start throwing gang signs at him and asking him if he's in a gang because he is black. Julius is originally from Nigeria. Julius thinks that he would like to find and reunite with her maternal grandmother if she's still alive.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In a way, Julius feels as if he is invisible. Even when he is in a room with hundreds of others, he is alone. Julius starts to question cultural and ethnic atrocities. He thinks that nobody wants to see representations of these bad acts, no matter what color their skin.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Jules and a professor, Dr. Martindale, have conducted a study and written a paper for possible publication on the correlation between strokes and depression in the elderly. Jules set off after sending the paper in for consideration to walk in the rain. On his walk, Julius thinks about how he has been estranged from his mother since he was 17. He also thinks about the time when he was 11, when his grandmother, who he calls oma, visits his family in Nigeria from her home in Belgium. His mother and grandmother are also estranged. The only person that might be able to tell Julius if his grandmother is alive is his mother.

When he leaves the museum, he fights over a cab with a lady. Then, he tries to find solidarity with the cab driver, who is also African. The cab driver ends up taking Julius to the wrong address and refuses to drive Julius to the correct address, so Julius pays him and walks the several blocks to his home.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Humans often learn how to have relationships from their parents. It's possible that Julius is estranged from his mother because his mother is also estranged from her own mother. Since Julius's mother can tell him if his grandmother is still alive, it foreshadows Julius reconnecting with his mother so that he can reconnect with his grandmother. Julius finds himself at the American Folk Art Museum, so he goes in. Julius seems to be led easily by his surroundings. Instead of controlling his emotions and moods, he allows what he sees, hears, and experiences dictate both his emotions and moods.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

As Julius is walking to a poetry lecture one night, he stops in the park. He notices how the leaves and foliage are changing for the season. He also notices how the people and crowds are transitioning from a busy day to the end of the day movements. When Julius arrives at the poetry lecture, the poet wants to talk persecution instead of reading poetry.

One evening, Julius is riding the subway home. He neglects to get off the train at his stop. Instead, he continues to ride the train, taking in his surroundings. He notices that everyone is wearing black or gray. He also notices everyone seems to be somber and muted. He switches trains. On this train, people are wearing colors and are interacting with each other. When he exits the train, he finds himself in a train station he hasn't been in before and finds it to be elaborately and ornately decorated. Julius believes it's the Wall Street station.

On his way to a nearby church to pray for one of his patients, Julius notices a memorandum book. The author talks about an albino whale the settlers in the city that becomes Albany witnessed. Julius also thinks about the numerous whale events, even the one that turned into the famous book Moby Dick.

Julius continues to walk, taking him past the site of 9/11 where the World Trade Center buildings once stood. He goes into a restaurant nearby and orders a drink. A man says he recognizes Julius because he is a guard at the Folk Art Museum.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Change symbolizes the direct opposite of what cultural and ethnic traditions represent. Cultural and ethnic traditions are something that carry on for years and get passed down from generation to generation. Persecution of these cultural and ethnic groups, however, is what change is all about.

The color scheme and décor affect how people act. When people wear muted colors, it seems to reflect their somber mood or personality. On the contrary, those wearing brighter colors seem to be more interactive and socially interactive. Julius even notices that the nicer areas of town, such as Wall Street, have nicer and more elaborate décor in the train station than less favorable areas of town. This represents segregation to Julius.

The whale is a Biblical figure. The settlers in New York equated the sighting of the sea creatures with weather events and other things that would take place in the area after the sightings.

The guard mentions he is from a foreign country and is surprised when Julius knows where his island is. The guard thinks American are ethnocentric so they don't know anything but their own surroundings and their own people. The guard tries to draw a correlation between himself and Julius both being African. It's as if human beings are drawn to their own.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Julius recalls how his girlfriend, Nadege, has a slight limp as they are heading on a church trip to visit prisoners in a local detention center. When Julius arrives at the detention center, he is assigned to visit with a man that is originally from Liberia. The man tells him about the war in his country and what he had to endure to get to the U.S.

In early December, Julius is in Penn Station. He decides to have his shoes polished and the shoe polish man is from Haiti. The man tells Julius his story and how he transformed from a hairdresser to shining shoes.

After leaving, Julius walks on the street again. He sees one sign flashing "Support Our Troops." A little further on, he comes across anti-war pamphlets. Up ahead, Julius sees a crowd. When the crowd disperses, there is a lynched man hanging from a tree.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The fact that Julius has black skin seems to be attracting others to him that are also black. It's the thought process that people flock to other people that are like them. It also shows the plight that each person has that brings them to the United States, brings them to New York and makes them the person that they are today. Julius also sees the separation of two conflicting worlds, such as those supporting the troops fighting in the war and those opposing the war.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Julius remembers his parents taking him for his interview for military school in Northern Nigeria. Shortly after his acceptance, Julius's father dies of tuberculosis. Julius also remembers that last intimate conversation he had with his mother after his father's death. He was 14 and his mother tells him about her and her mother's escape from Germany.

Julius remembers the music teacher making an example out of Julius, calling him a thief and parading him around the school telling everyone he is a thief and a spoiled brat. The same teacher caned him in front of his classmates on Julius's bare bottom. Julius never tells his mother about the incident, is named head health prefect the following year, and is accepted into college in America.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The stories Julius reflects on this chapter reveal that humans turn into the people they are because of the experiences they have. Ironically, even though Julius sees his mother as a completely different type of person from who he is, they are the same. Both of them come from war torn countries since Julius came from Nigeria and his mother from Germany. Both experience a lack of a father figure at formative ages in the lives. As a result, both end up estranged from the only parent they have left and living life alone.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Julius is on the flight to Brussels where he booked his vacation. On the plane, he sits next to an elderly woman who is originally from Brussels. She is a retired surgeon that now spends three months at a time in her home country. She shares stories with Julius about her childhood, her profession, her friends and her own children. She invites Julius to call upon her for dinner with her and her friends while he is in the country.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The doctor's opinion of various cultures stems from her experience working with them in the medical field. Ironically, she talks down about Nigerians, even though she knows Julius is Nigerian. Additionally, she talks ill of Germans, of which Julius is half German because his mother is originally from Germany. Julius shrugs off the old woman's comments as part of her right to say so as an elderly person.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The woman Julius is renting a flat from in Brussels picks him up at the airport. While they are signing the lease, she tells him about the different ethnic groups in Brussels. Julius describes various hate crimes that are rampant in Brussels because of the integration of blacks, Muslims and other races and cultures into the area.

Julius searches the Brussels phone books and even visits an Internet café looking for a listing for his oma. On the second day in the Internet café, Julius introduces himself to the shopkeeper, who is Moroccan. On another visit to make a phone call, an older gentleman is working with the normal shopkeeper so Julius and he are not able to have a standard conversation.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Julius manages to find people that are similar to him, even in Brussels. He even makes it a point to stay away from the restaurants and cafes that the white people frequent.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Julius goes to a café where he and an older woman are the only patrons. When they are leaving, it is raining and so Julius shares the umbrella with the woman that tells him she is Czech. The woman invites Julius up to her hotel room for a drink and they end up having sex. The next day, Julius stays in bed reading. The day after that, Julius goes to the Internet café to phone Dr. Maillote, the lady he met on the airplane and she tells him to call her on Monday so they can have dinner before Julius leaves Brussels. He starts a conversation with the shopkeeper, Farouq, who tells him that one of his projects is to figure out how different people interact with each other on a global level. Farouq says that people from all over the world interact with each other in the café so he knows it works, but wants to see how it works on a bigger scale. He invites Julius to meet with him after he gets off work on Saturday.

On Saturday, Julius wanders around in the rain. He goes back to his apartment to change and then goes to the café to meet Farouq. With Farouq is his best friend Khalil. Khalil launches into a discussion on politics in the US. Khalil asks Julius if the American blacks are all like the ones they show on MTV. The trio launches into a discussion about extremism, Israel and Palestine, as well as the holocaust. Khalil receives a phone call and excuses himself, paying for the dinner and drinks on his way out. Farouq and Julius continue the conversation when Khalil leaves.

Chapter 9 Analysis

After spending the majority of his vacation alone, Julius feels lonely. Since it is right before Christmas and New Year's, it seems as if being alone for the holidays is weighing on Julius as well. This causes him to seek solace in the older woman. Some psychiatrists would argue that Julius has sex with the older woman because he is seeking a mother figure because he and his real mother are estranged. Julius realizes that Arabs are in fact suppressed, even in Europe, because of what happened in the U.S. on 9/11. Julius also correlates Farouq's look with that of a young Robert De Niro in his part in the Godfather.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Julius wakes up from a dream and doesn't know where he is or who he is with at first. When he realizes he is alone in his apartment in Brussels, he hears the rain. It's been raining in Brussels for several days. This causes Julius to recall a day in his boyhood when he was nine or 10. It was a day when he drank a Coke before his mother came home, which he wasn't allowed to do without permission. As Julius runs out to open the gate to let his mother drive in, a torrential rain begins that lasts for the next several days.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The rain in Julius's boyhood is a symbol of baptism. Since Julius did something wrong, the rain is washing away his sins. Julius infers that something happens between him and his mother on the day in his childhood, which foreshadows an incident that changes their relationship and might better explain why they are estranged today.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Julius arrives at the place to eat dinner with Dr. Maillote a half hour early. To kill time, he crosses the street and enters a cathedral. He finds himself alone with the organ music playing. He comes across a cleaning lady. He thinks about how two weeks ago he would have assumed she was from the Congo, but now thinks she might be from Rwanda because of a club full of people from Rwanda that he spent some time in during his stay in Brussels. A white man enters the church, but ignores Julius.

Julius enjoys a late lunch with Dr. Maillote. When Julius discusses the unhappiness of Farouq in the unwelcoming feeling he had in Brussels because he is an Arab, Dr. Maillote dismisses Farouq as a complainer. On his walk home in the rain, Julius helps a mother to save her infant from flying construction materials stirred up by the wind. The rain continues to fall on everything across Europe as Julius arrives back at his apartment for his last night in Brussels.

Chapter 11 Analysis

It appears as if everyone is sticking to interacting with their own people and segregating themselves from those that are not their own. The rain falling on everything and everyone is biblical symbolism. The rain is washing away all of the sins of the people, the city, and the places on which it is falling.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

As Julius's plane is descending for landing in NYC, he is reminded of a scale city model he saw in the museum. The day after Julius returns, he thinks about how much work and resentment awaits him because of the four weeks in a row he was on vacation. He spends Sunday at the museum. A man looking at the photographs of Berlin strikes up a conversation with Julius. The man tells Julius about his escape from Berlin during the war. Later, Julius runs into the sister of an old schoolmate in Nigeria. She recognizes him but he doesn't recognize her until she tells him who she is.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Once again, the man from Berlin and Julius has a connection. While Julius is of mixed race and raised in Nigeria, he has a Berlin connection because of his mother and oma. The white Jewish man telling the story to Julius in the museum lived the atrocities of the war in Berlin first hand. After talking with the man in the museum, Julius also realizes that everyone in the city has some story about their life that they either tell or carry around as their burden. The law of attraction is at work once again with Julius running into the sister of his old schoolmate. It backs up the notion that those that come from the same place and experience the same things in life are drawn to each other.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

On his way to meet with his accountant, Julius realizes he forgot his checkbook. He makes several attempts to withdraw cash from two ATMs but cannot remember the PIN. After meeting with the accountant and promising to drop a check in the mail, Julius walks back home through the park. He sees various groups different people—a group of Chinese women dancing, a man reading an issue of *El Diario*, etc. He thinks of the obituary that he read that morning about one of his patients named V. He forgets about forgetting his PIN until the bank calls the following day about the numerous failed attempts at the ATM. He eventually has to look up the forgotten PIN.

Chapter 13 Analysis

It infers that Julius's patient, V., committed suicide. One of the reason he cannot remember his PIN is because it is so mundane in the wake of his patient's suicide. The park is symbolic of the melting pot that represents the United States. In one place and in one city in the country, Julius finds Chinese descendants, Hispanic descendants, and more.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Julius goes to visit Professor Saito for the first time since he returned from Brussels. Saito's home has been invaded by bedbugs. Julius reads the newspaper to the professor and the professor asks him to read the story in full about gay marriage. Julius thinks about how the professor's sexuality has come up a few times. When Julius returns home, he reads about bedbugs in his various medical journals. Before going to sleep, he checks his mattress for bedbugs but doesn't find anything.

Chapter 14 Analysis

The bedbug is symbolic of several different aspects of life. It represents the blood that the bugs suck from the human body - blood that is thought to have magical powers. Secondly, the bedbugs tend to bite in the hours leading up to dusk, which are the hours that most humans are sleeping and dreaming. Finally, bedbugs invade the sanctity of the home, taking over from the humans. The bugs also represent cannibalism and symbolize the fear of the unknown.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Julius dreams about a bombing in the marketplace where his mother and sister, Nadege, are. When he wakes up, he goes to visit Saito, who is on his deathbed. Julius then goes to visit his friend and his nine-year-old daughter that is visiting. Julius's friend suggests that humans should be able to end their own lives before they get ill, but when they feel they have enjoyed life to its fullest. He goes on to say that by the time he is ready to die, this form of ending your life will become mainstream.

Chapter 15 Analysis

The conversation between Julius and his friend foreshadows Julius helping his professor end his life with a self-assisted suicide.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Several weeks after seeing Professor Saito last, Julius calls and a woman that is not his typical nurse tells Julius Saito died. Julius realizes now that he didn't visit the professor because Julius was trying to avoid death. Julius finds out the funeral is private—for friends and family only. Their friendship was so private, Julius realizes he might not be included. Julius calls Nadege, who is now living in San Francisco. While he's talking to her, Julius hears a man's voice in the background. Nadege admits she's engaged and getting married later in the summer. She asks Julius not to call her. Julius listens to classical music and then walks to the post office to mail a book to Farouq. The man at the post office that helps him is black. The post office worker starts reciting some of his poetry to Julius and tells him that he's raising his daughters African. When Julius leaves the post office, he walks into Chinatown or the part that is residents rather than tourists.

Chapter 16 Analysis

It seems as if Julius has spilt personalities. He might even be schizophrenic himself. While the narration makes it seem as if the people Julius meets are telling him stories, it might be that Julius is hearing these stories in his mind. At the end of the chapter, Julius infers this because he is talking about this "double of mine."



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

In the spring, Julius is in the park picnicking with some of his friends. Julius notices how one season gives away to another by plants and flower life dying, while something else blooms. Julius also thinks about how he thrives in the sunnier months and withdraws in the cold, winter ones. The crowd in the park watches as four people parachute out of a plane above and land in the park. The police come to arrest the parachutists with the crowd booing at them. Julius also thinks back to his boyhood when he once saved a boy from drowning in the lake.

The group launches into a discussion about killer African bees and how something is killing the bee population in masses. Julius then starts to talk about the plagues of humans, such as wars and diseases. His friend's girlfriend, Lise-Anne, interrupts Julius and gets him to talk about being a shrink. Julius indulges them with his patient stories, as well as those of his colleagues. Julius talks about how paranoid schizophrenics create the worlds in which they live. Eventually, they leave the park. Julius is walking with Moji, his friend's sister that he ran into in the grocery store. Julius feels an attraction to her, but in a way that is different from how he felt about Nadege.

The department chair at the university changes. This changes the work environment and culture for Julius and his colleagues for the better. Julius begins to believe that the epidemic that is sweeping the nation is depression and sadness. He treats a patient that his family thinks has Alzheimer's but turns out to be depression instead. Mr. F., the patient, tells Julius he is glad to see a black man in a white coat because it has always been a struggle for them.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Julius talking about paranoid schizophrenics creating the world in which they live is a reflection of Julius's own life. Once again, Mr. F., Julius's patient, is identifying with Julius more because of the color of Julius's skin than for the treatment and medicine Julius provides.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

As Julius is walking home from work, two African-American teenagers walk by him on the street. They acknowledge him with nods of their head. A few minutes later, he sees the teens approaching him again. Suddenly, someone strikes him from behind. He realizes it's the two boys and a friend that has joined them. They beat him and steal his wallet and cell phone. Nobody is around and nobody helps Julius. Julius eventually gets up, walks home and if up.

Two weeks after his mugging, Julius is in a diner. He watches as a blonde American student teaches an Asian girl Chinese. Julius's wounds have healed, except the pain he feels in his left hand from one of the boys stomping on it. As he leaves the diner, he sees a long line of what appears to be immigrants standing in front of a federal building. He wanders until he comes to a monument declaring the ground is a burial ground for African-American slaves in the 17th and 18th centuries. As he bends down to pick up a stone, a pain shoots through his hand.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Julius feel as if he has succumbed to the stereotype of young African-Americans attacking and stealing from each other. It's ironic that a blonde American is teaching an Asian girl the Chinese language. The pain Julius is having in his hand foreshadows there is major damage from his beating.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Julius remembers that when his father died, his aunt took him to the tailor for fitting of his funeral clothes. Julius remembers that his father's funeral was his first real experience with death. He also remembers five years earlier, his driver hit a girl crossing the street as he was taking Julius to school. They took her to the hospital but Julius never thought about her or asked her until five years later.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Julius saw his professor as a father figure. When the professor dies, it forces Julius to face some of the other deaths in his life. Primarily, this is the death of his father. Secondary, it's the possible death of the girl his age that his driver hit while driving Julius to school.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Moji invites Julius to a party she is co-hosting with her boyfriend, John Musson. Julius leaves work and walks home instead of taking the subway. He notices the buildings, donations and monument in a particular area are all dedicated to someone or something, such as an organization. He draws the conclusion that medical buildings are not neutral scientific grounds, but instead succumb to those that fund it. As Julius walks further from the university, he notices that the people in the neighborhood are changing. Professor Saito's former nurse, Mary, waves at him and they stop to have a brief conversation. Julius walks up a flight of stairs and it's as if he's walking into a different world—one with white residents and a different aura.

John greets Julius when he arrives for the party. The party ends and Julius leaves in the wee hours of Saturday morning. On his walk home, Julius stops for a cup of coffee at a diner. He sees all walks of life, from a white man with a tattoo that covers one his arms to an Hispanic man sitting in a car. He also sees a couple sitting on the side of the road after a car accident, with the fireman attending to their injuries. When Julius arrives home, he runs into the old man, Seth, that is his neighbor. Seth is getting rid of his mattress because he has bedbugs.

Julius remembers back to something Moji said to him prior to his leaving the party. She tells Julius that when she was 15, that he had raped her at a party he brother threw. Moji says ever since the incident, Julius acts as if he doesn't Moji, including not recognizing her when they ran into each other at the grocery store recently.

Chapter 20 Analysis

The roots of the neighborhood Julius walks into is ironic. The area is full of historic and iconic buildings that have been around for centuries. The irony is that the neighborhood is full of Hispanic immigrants from all over the world. Julius compares the pain in his hand to story by Nietzsche, where he places several lit matchsticks in his palm to burn it and bear the scar it leaves. The mugging and beating Julius endured is the retribution for forcing himself on Moji 18 years earlier and never acknowledging what he did.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Julius starts working in a private practice. Two weeks prior, he had hand surgery to fix the damage from the beating. He also lives in a new apartment close to his new work. Julius attends a symphony and notices that the majority of the audience members are white. Leaving the symphony, Julius accidentally walks out the emergency exit door and locks himself on the fire escape. He manages to get back in through another door. As he's walking by the pier on his way home, the captain of a party boat invites him on free. As he rides on the boat, he sees the historic lighthouse responsible for disorienting flocks of birds and causing them to dive to their death.

Chapter 21 Analysis

It's ironic that in modern times there is still a great degree of segregation and separation between the races. The mass deaths of the birds symbolize the mass epidemics that humans endure.



Characters

Julius

Julius was born and raised in Nigeria. His father is Nigerian and his mother is of German descent. When Julius was 14, his father died of an illness. Something causes Julius to become estranged from his mother, so he decides to apply to college in the United States. Julius is the main character and the narrator of the novel. When the novel opens, Julius is finishing his residency in psychiatry in New York City.

While there is never a conclusive statement, it seems as if Julius is suffering from his own identity crisis or split personality. Part of this originates from his heritage, since he is half black and half white. It also seems as if Julius struggles with good and evil because he seems to block out some of the bad things he has done in his life.

Additionally, Julius is overcoming a recent break up with his girlfriend. The pressures of work and his personal life have led Julius to take up walking around the city. During his walks, he sees the different people, cultures and ethnic groups that make up the melting pot of New York City. By the end of the novel, Julius finishes his residency. He goes into private practice in the city.

Professor Saito

Professor Saito is the former English literature teacher of Julius's from college. Julius still visits the professor, who is now in his 70s or 80s. The professor is dying of cancer. In many ways, Julius is close to the professor because Julius sees Saito as a father figure.

Because Julius's father died when Julius was 14, Julius's father was not there for him during his formative years of becoming a man, which might lead Julius to seek out the attention of men such as Professor Saito.

By the middle of the novel, Julius also reveals that Professor Saito is homosexual. In his apartment, the professor has many unique objects and collections. The professor's health deteriorates throughout the novel. By the end of the novel, Professor Saito dies.

Nadege

Nadege is Julius's ex-girlfriend. She was living in New York. When they broke up, however, Nadege moved to San Francisco. Nadege is of African descent as well.

She is religious and volunteers through her church to visit people in the detention center. On one trip to the detention center, she takes Julius along. Nadege walks with a slight limp from a childhood injury that she had surgery to correct.



When Julius calls Nadege after the professor dies, she tells him she is engaged to be married to a family friend who is Haitian-American. Nadege also requests it is better if Julius doesn't contact her anymore.

Moji

Moji is from Nigeria too. She is the sister of a boy that Julius attended military school with in Nigeria. Moji runs into Julius in the grocery store and she recognizes him right away. Julius doesn't recognize Moji until she tells him who she is.

Moji and Julius become friends, even getting together with a couple that is friends with Julius for a picnic in the park. Moji has a boyfriend and she invites Julius to a party he's having at his home. The next morning after the party, Moji confesses to Julius that he raped her when they were teenagers back in Nigeria. She says that Julius has acted indifferent to her and not recognized ever since, but that she wants him to face it now.

Sean

Sean is an elderly man. He lives in the same building as Julius. When Julius first meets Sean, his wife is alive. The next time Julius runs into Sean, Sean tells him that this wife passed away.

When Sean and Julius originally meet, Sean asks Julius to keep his music at a lower level. He also tells Julius that he and his wife travel on weekends, so he can turn his music up them.

Farouq

Farouq is a man Julius meets during his vacation to Brussels. Farouq works in the café where people can use the Internet and make international calls. When Farouq was a student, he wrote a paper that was deemed too controversial after 9/11 on Muslims, so Farouq thinks this caused the university powers to accuse him of plagiarism.

While Julius is in Brussels, he and Farouq have several conversations about religion. They also discuss philosophy and several other controversial topics. When Julius returns to the U.S, he ships Farouq a book he wants him to read.

Oma

Oma is Julius's grandmother. She is his mother's mother, so she is his maternal grandmother. Julius first became close to his grandmother when he was about nine, when she visited them in Nigeria. She was a refugee from Germany with Julius's mother.



Something happened between oma and Julius's mother because they became estranged. When this happened, it also caused Julius to lose touch with his oma. At some points in the novel, especially when he is in Brussels, he tried to find out if she is still alive and where she is living.

Dr. Maillote

Dr. Maillote is an elderly woman that sits next to Julius on his plane trip to Brussels. It turns out she is a retired surgeon. She is originally from Brussels. She now vacations there about three months at a time.

On the plane, she discusses her childhood in Brussels, the war, etc. she also tells Julius some stories about some of her friends, her children and grandchildren. Before getting off the plane, she invites Julius to have dinner while he's in Brussels. The two end up sharing a meal the night before Julius flies back to the U.S. from his four-week vacation in Brussels.

V.

V. is one of Julius's patients when he is doing his residency. She suffers from depression. He calls her V. because she is famous and also to conceal her identity—as in doctor/patient privilege. When Julius leaves on his four-week vacation to Brussels, V. undergoes treatment from one of his colleagues. During his time away, V. commits suicide. Julius reads her obituary when he returns to New York City.

Gregoriades

Gregoriades is the head of the psychiatry department at the university where Julius is doing his residency. The department head is accused of making racist comments about the Asian students. He is transferred to another place and a new department head comes in. While Julius never had a problem with Gregoriades, the presence of Gregoriades was bringing the morale of the department down.



Objects/Places

Internet Radio

When the novel opens, Julius is listening to Internet radio. One of the habits Julius has taken up is listening to radio stations on the Internet that are broadcasting from different countries. Julius learns to appreciate new and classical music by listening to the foreign stations.

New York City

The primary setting of the novel is New York City. It is the streets of New York City that Julius walks and explores to distress. It's on these same streets in NYC that Julius runs into various types of people, of different cultures, different ethnic groups and different socio-economic statuses. Julius remains living and working in New York City when he completes his residency.

Brussels

Julius decides to use his four weeks of vacation in December. He flies to Brussels. Brussels is where his mother and grandmothers escaped Germany from the war. He also has a sexual encounter with a stranger he meets in a café while in Brussels. Finally, Julius makes a friend that he can debate politics, religion, and other issues with at the Internet and phone café by the name of Farouq.

Park

Julius picnics in the park with Moji, his friend and his friend's girlfriend. While they are enjoying their wine and munchies, they see a plane fly over. Out of the plane jumps four parachutists.

Umbrella

Julius uses an umbrella to protect himself from the bad rain storms in Brussels. The umbrella is symbolic of protection from the cleansing effect the rain symbolizes. The umbrella, however, breaks, and Julius ends up throwing it away. When the umbrella breaks, this leaves Julius vulnerable to the rain and the cleansing.



Internet Cafe

The Internet café is where Farouq works. Julius uses the café to get on the Internet and to make international phone calls. Figuratively, the café represents a melting pot. According to Farouq, people from all over the world flock to the café. They all get along and are able to interact with each other while in the confines of the shop. Farouq believes that everyone in the world can get along like this on a grander scale.

San Francisco, California

San Francisco is the city where Nadege lives now. She is in San Francisco when Julius calls her. Julius wants to talk with Nadege because of Saito's death. When Julius calls Nadege, she tells him she's engaged and that he shouldn't call her there anymore.

Chinatown

Julius wanders to Chinatown on one of his walks. On this particular day, though, he goes to the area where the residents live. Most of the residents are Chinese immigrants that run shops or work in the area and do not speak English. He observes the culture of the residents of this area of town while wandering around it.

Art Museum

Julius visits the art museum to see a photography exhibit. While viewing some pictures of the German war, Julius meets a Jewish man whose family escaped from the war. They discuss the atrocities of the war. Julius realizes that everyone in the city is carrying around burdens and stories of some kind, just as the man he meets in the museum.

Nigeria

Julius was born and raised in Nigeria. Before his father dies, Julius attends a military school for boys in the northern part of the country. He leaves Nigeria for college, but Julius holds on to his Nigerian roots, some memories and some experiences—but not all. Julius's father is also from Nigeria.



Themes

Relationships

One of the primary themes running through the novel is relationships. The novel reveals that even the individuals that make up a particular ethnic or cultural group have different relationships with each other. The members that belong to a certain ethnic group, cultural group or that share common interests, also tend to flock to each other because they can identify with others that are like them.

Relationships seem to be hard for Julius to form. He feels isolated because he is of mixed race and estranged from his family. He also experienced a recent break up with his girlfriend, so he suffering from the loss of a romantic relationship as well. In the middle of his personal relationships, he also has to work on his professional relationships.

Julius's professional relationships include interaction with his colleagues. Additionally, it is about doctor and patient relationships Julius has to form with his psychiatric patients to try to help them.

Coming of Age

One of the primary themes that run throughout the novel is growing up and coming of age, even against adversity, such as going through the death of a parent and the loss of a girlfriend. Julius struggles with the fact that his coming of age includes not remembering he raped one of his friend's sisters when he was still living in Nigeria. Julius deals with the responsibilities in life of having a dead father and being estranged from his mother and grandmother, while trying to get his career on track.

Even Moji deals with strong coming of age issues, such as rape. She shows how strong she is by facing her rapist, as if nothing ever happened. She grits her teeth, bites her tongue and acts friendly toward Julius. Eventually, however, she breaks down and confronts Julius about what he did and how it affected her and changed her life forever.

Diversity

Diversity is the central theme throughout the entire novel. This is because the story line is about the lives of the numerous people that Julius comes into contact with while he is walking throughout the city. It also includes the people he meets while traveling to and staying in Brussels. In the end, it is amazing to Julius how diverse the population in one city is, yet how segregated these groups are at the same time.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first-person point of view, from the perspective of main character, Julius. The novel swings back and forth between the present and the past. The present represents the time after Julius came to the United States and while he is finishing his residency. The past represents the time leading up to Julius coming to U.S., when he was living in Nigeria.

The point of view of this novel is intimate, allowing a reader to connect closely with the main character, Julius. The book written in this manner allows the reader to get inside Julius's head, thoughts and inner struggles. The reader cares what happens to the narrator. The point of view also allows the author to inject his own opinions into the narration and to expand on the events taking place around the other characters and the occurrences taking place.

Setting

The novel is set primarily in New York City. It's during the 21st century, after the events of 9/11. The main character is undergoing several personal and professional issues that cause him to take up walking around the city of New York to de-stress. Naomi is constantly trying to remember the last four years of her life, which is the time frame she lost when she hit her head.

The setting of this novel works well with the plot. At first, the reader is not aware of all of the personal and professional issues that lead Julius to walk. Second, the reader isn't aware of the people Julius comes into contact with during his walks. However, as events unfold, the groups of people and the events that surround them are a constant part of the plot, the lives of the characters and even the outcome of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is relatively simple and easy to read. The author, however, interjects some foreign and very complex words to fit into the setting of the novel. The language is from the 21st century, which is when the novel is set. The language is descriptive enough that it helps to explain the situations and is detailed enough for the reader to truly understand.

Structure

The novel is divided into 21 chapters. Each chapter ranges from five pages to 30 pages long. The chapters tell the story in exposition. The narrator injects his own voice and



thoughts throughout the book, providing his opinions and feelings of the events unfolding in the novel.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot is that of human relationships, including friendship and romantic relationships. One subplot is the coming of age of the characters, primarily Julius. Another subplot is diversity.



Topics for Discussion

Who is the true Julius? Do you think he has his own mental issues? Why doesn't Julius react when Moji tells him he raped her? Why do you think Julius is estranged from his mom? Why does he give up on finding his oma so easily?

Discuss the relationship between Julius and Nadege. Are they friends, foes or somewhere in between? Is there true competition in their relationship? How does Nadege feel about Julius? How does Julius feel about Nadege? How do Nadege's feelings change? What does she do about it?

Discuss the relationship between Julius and Professor Saito. Are they friends, foes or somewhere in between? Is there true competition in their relationship? How does Julius feel about Professor Saito? How does Professor Saito feel about Julius? Why does Julius not visit the professor for several weeks before he finds out he is dead?

Discuss the relationship between Julius and Moji. Are they friends, foes or somewhere in between? Is there true competition in their relationship? How does Moji feel about Julius? How does Julius feel about Moji? How do Moji's feelings change after she confronts Julius?

Discuss the relationship between Julius and his mother. Why does Julius stop talking to his mother? Is there true competition in their relationship? How does Julius feel about his mother? How does his mother feel about Julius? How do Naomi's feelings change after the death of his father? What does he do about it? What happens to their relationship?

Who is Moji? Is she a tortured soul or simply a normal woman that suffers through a tragedy? Do you think she accidentally ran into Julius or tracked him down? Why does she form a relationship with Julius prior to confronting him about the rape?

Discuss Julius's walks. What impact do his walks have on the characters of the novel? How does it motivate them and how does it derail their lives? Does the walking de-stress Julius or make his life more stressful, but in different ways?