

The Poisonwood Bible Study Guide

The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

[The Poisonwood Bible Study Guide.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Plot Summary.....4](#)

[Book 1, Orleanna Price.....5](#)

[Book 1, The Things We Carried \(13-29\).....7](#)

[Book 1, The Things We Carried \(30-42\).....9](#)

[Book 1, The Things We Carried \(43-54\).....11](#)

[Book 1, The Things We Carried \(55-82\).....13](#)

[Book 2, Orleanna Price \(87-98\).....17](#)

[Book 2, The Things We Learned \(101-124\).....19](#)

[Book 2, The Things We Learned \(125-141\).....22](#)

[Book 2, The Things We Learned \(142-158\).....25](#)

[Book 2, The Things We Learned \(159-186\).....27](#)

[Book 3, Orleanna Price \(191-201\).....30](#)

[Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know \(205-222\).....31](#)

[Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know \(223-244\).....33](#)

[Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know \(245-273\).....35](#)

[Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know \(274-298\).....37](#)

[Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know \(299-311\).....39](#)

[Book 4, Orleanna Price \(pages 317-324\).....41](#)

[Book 4, What We Lost \(pages 325-342\).....43](#)

[Book 4, What We Lost \(pages 343-375\).....45](#)

[Book 5, Orleanna Price \(pages 381-385\).....47](#)

[Book 5, What We Carried Out \(pages 386-439\).....48](#)

[Book 5, What We Carried Out \(pages 440-506\).....50](#)



[Book 6, Song of the Three Children.....](#) 54

[Book 7, The Eyes in the Trees.....](#) 56

[Characters.....](#) 57

[Objects/Places.....](#) 64

[Social Sensitivity.....](#) 67

[Techniques.....](#) 70

[Themes.....](#) 71

[Style.....](#) 74

[Quotes.....](#) 76

[Adaptations.....](#) 78

[Key Questions.....](#) 79

[Topics for Discussion.....](#) 80

[Literary Precedents.....](#) 81

[Related Titles.....](#) 82

[Copyright Information.....](#) 83



Plot Summary

The Poisonwood Bible, told through the voices of Orleanna Price and her four daughters, is the story of a missionary family who travel to Africa just as the Congo is on the brink of civil war. The family struggles to adapt to their new surroundings while Nathan Price remains oblivious to his family and to the villagers he is trying to convert. Mirroring the conflict in the Congo, the family begins to disintegrate. Although the family is told to leave, Nathan refuses, putting his family in danger. The final straw comes when Ruth May is killed by a green mamba snake placed in their chicken house by a villager. Orleanna and her three remaining daughters walk out of the village and Nathan's life. The women struggle to come to terms with their time in the Congo and their relationships to one another as the years pass.

In 1959, Nathan Price takes his wife, Orleanna, and his four daughters, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May, to the Belgian Congo with him to serve as missionaries. Arriving in the village of Kilanga, the family struggles to adapt. Nathan tries to bring together his missionary vision with his racial ideologies and religious superiority. He fails to see the effect that his decision to come to the Congo has wrought on his family and steadfastly refuses to discuss leaving. Rachel, the oldest daughter, is on the brink of woman-hood. She is self-centered and vain. Leah and Adah, the twins, are marked by Adah's disability which formed in the womb. Ruth May, the youngest, views the Congo with a vivid imagination and curiosity.

Amid political events, including independence from Belgium, the first prime minister's murder, and western intervention for economic purposes, the family also experiences turmoil. The Prices are told to leave the Congo for their own safety, but Nathan refuses, saying that they must stay until a replacement arrives even though there is no plan for a replacement. Ruth May contracts malaria and Orleanna falls into a deep depression. As Nathan continues to push for the baptism and conversion of the villagers, the leaders become more and more opposed to his mission. One of them places a green mamba snake in the family's chicken house. It bites Ruth May and she dies almost instantly.

In the wake of Ruth May's death, Orleanna walks out of the village, her daughters trailing behind, leaving Nathan and the village. Their paths over the next decades diverge, as the women try to come to grips with what happened. Leah remains in the Congo and marries an African schoolteacher, Anatole. Rachel flies from the Congo to South Africa, where she eventually ends up owning and running a hotel. Adah returns to the United States with Orleanna and attends medical school. Although the daughters try to reconnect at different junctures of their lives, they are kept apart by their own prejudices and their conceptions of their personal responsibility of what happened in the Congo.



Book 1, Orleanna Price

Book 1, Orleanna Price Summary

The Poisonwood Bible, told through the voices of Orleanna Price and her four daughters, is the story of a missionary family who travel to Africa just as the Congo is on the brink of civil war. The family struggles to adapt to their new surroundings while Nathan Price remains oblivious to his family and to the villagers he is trying to convert. Mirroring the conflict in the Congo, the family begins to disintegrate. Although the family is told to leave, Nathan refuses, putting his family in danger. The final straw comes when Ruth May is killed by a green mamba snake placed in their chicken house by a villager. Orleanna and her three remaining daughters walk out of the village and Nathan's life. The women struggle to come to terms with their time in the Congo and their relationships to one another as the years pass.

Orleanna pictures the forest, full of life and columns of trees. Along the path comes a woman with four girls walking single file behind her. The mother leads them, two blonds and two brunettes. At the river, the woman sets out a picnic. The children eat and then swim in the river, leaving the mother alone on the bank. A deer like animal appears on the opposite bank and the woman and the animal gaze at one another for a moment. At the time, Orleanna didn't know what the animal was. Now she knows it was a male Okapi.

In 1960, Orleanna and her four girls are in the Congo as missionaries with her Baptist minister husband. Married to a man who would never love her, she stays his wife because it was what she can do.

She sees things that her children will never know about: a family of weaver birds for example. The memories weigh on her now. "I'll live or die on the strength of your judgment, but first let me say who I am. Let me claim that Africa and I kept company for a while and then parted ways, as if we were both party to relations with a failed outcomes. Or say I was afflicted with Africa like a bout of a rare disease, from which I have not managed a full recovery" (pg. 9).

She was one more white person in Africa, walking free. She would be no different except that she paid her own part in blood. Her journey there came to an awful end. Her children are now grown and they all can speak only of the things they carried and the things they took away.

Book 1, Orleanna Price Analysis

Orleans's sections of *The Poisonwood Bible* are full of sadness and regret. Hers is also the only voice which looks backward in time. Her recollections of the family's time in Africa foreshadow the events that the girls will discuss in their entries. Orleanna is looking back on what the girls are experiencing in their sections of the book.

This first section offers foreshadowing for events in the novel. Kingsolver tells the reader here that something bad will happen to end Orleanna's time in the Congo, suggesting a climatic event. She also refers to Africa as being like a rare disease to her. For her daughters, Africa will symbolize both life and death.



Book 1, The Things We Carried (13-29)

Book 1, The Things We Carried (13-29) Summary

The family comes from Bethlehem, Georgia, bringing Betty Crocker cake mixes into the jungle. All of the girls count on having one birthday each there, during the twelve month mission. Their mother will not go against their father, so when it becomes certain that they are going, she lays out things she thinks they will need in the Congo: cake mixes, a hand mirror, pencils, a thermometer, and so on. In the Congo with their earthly treasures intact and safe, the supplies represent another world in their Congolese house. Mother tries to think of everything, including illness and hunger. She brings along antibiotics and canned goods.

Getting to the Congo is a trial. When they think they are ready, they discover that the airlines will only allow forty-four pounds of luggage per person. They are sixty-one pounds over. Then, they realize that they do not weigh the passengers, so all of the excess baggage is carried on board, hidden in the family's clothes. Each of the girls leaves home wearing six pairs of underwear with the cake mixes and other goods hidden in pockets. They all wear their best dresses on the outside to make a good impression.

They get off the plane in Leopoldville, where Ruth May, the baby of the family, faints. She comes around quickly though. Children rush at them, begging. A married couple of Baptists, Rev. and Mrs. Underdown, come to get them. They tell the family about Kilanga, where the family will serve. At one point, Kilanga had a mission with four American families and a medical doctor. The Underdowns put them in a plane and leave. At last, the plane bumps down in a landing field of yellow grass. Father pronounces a benediction. The family stares out at the villagers, dark, slender, and silent.

Ruth May thinks that the Bible says that Africans are from the tribes of Ham, who was the worst of Noah's sons. Ham was the youngest, just like Ruth May, and sometimes she is bad too. Ham's children became slaves for ever and ever and that's how they turned dark. In Georgia, they have their own school. Leah and Rachel are gifted children but they go to the same school as everyone, except for the colored children. Their village in Africa is now going to have six white people: Ruth May, Rachel, Leah, Adah, Mama, and Father. Rachel is the oldest; Ruth May is the youngest. Leah and Adah are twins. Ruth May thinks that they can't be one person because Leah runs everywhere and Adah has one bad side and she doesn't talk because she's brain damaged. The other white people they have met in Africa include Mr. Axelroot, who flies the plane. He lives down by the airplane field. Rev. and Mrs. Underdown talk French even though they are white and they have two boys who go to school in Leopoldville.

Rachel feels as though the family is in for it in the Congo. Mother takes her hand and Ruth May's, which is something that Rachel would not have tolerated in the United



States. The people are all going to a building which has an open dirt patio with a roof over it. This turns out to be their father's church. The girls end up in the church with the people and Rachel almost screams when she realizes that a stranger is holding her hand. Rachel wants to change clothes but there is no chance for that and she doesn't know where any of the bags went. Finally, the girls are allowed to sit on benches made of rough logs.

Rachel feels her mother pinch her in the neck as she gathers all four girls within arm's reach. Those in the church begin to sing and Rachel realizes that the tunes were of Christian hymns. She is dismayed to realize that some of the women are singing even when they are naked from the waist up. Some women dance while others cook. After a long time of singing, the food is put in front of the family.

In all the chaos, Rachel hears someone talking English and turns to see a black man in a yellow shirt welcoming them. Another older man is behind him. The first man asks Father to give thanks for the feast. Father raises an arm and gives the blessing. All is quiet as he gives the blessing, punctuated by accusing glances at the people. The people's expressions go from joy to dismay. The people begin to leave the building.

Book 1, The Things We Carried (13-29) Analysis

This chapter offers an introduction to both Ruth May and Rachel Price, the oldest of the Price girls. Rachel appears as a sheltered, girly, self-righteous young woman. She is concerned about her clothes and the dirt rather than the people who have come to greet the family. She finds the people of the Congo confusing and different. In light of this, Rachel tries to keep her distance from them and what she sees as their weirdness. An important incident in this section that illustrates her feelings about the Congo is her horror at finding that a Congolese stranger is holding her hand.

Through the girls' voices, the reader is brought along as the family reaches the Congo. From the beginning, nothing goes as planned. The family has to find alternate ways of bringing what they need with them. The Congo greets them with children begging and the chaos of voices speaking in a language that they don't understand. Once they reach the village, Rachel sees differences between herself and the villagers. She is taken aback by what she sees.



Book 1, The Things We Carried (30-42)

Book 1, The Things We Carried (30-42) Summary

A road lies in front of her and Adah sees it as a flat plank chipped into pieces and shapes. The world is a jumble of colors and shapes that all compete for her attention. The Congo lies in the middle of the world. The Kilanga village is alongside the Kwilu River and has little houses in long rows like a snake. All around are trees and bamboo. Every red mud house has a red dirt yard. This helps people see the snakes. The church building is at one end of the village. At the other end is the Price house. Each house has a thatched roof over a single room, although the people don't stay under the roof for long. Elephant grass hides anything in the distance beyond the village.

The Price females lament coming to the Congo, all except Adah who keeps her judgments to herself. She doesn't speak. She thinks that their Father speaks for them all, but even he is not saying much right now. He says that the Kwilu River is navigable downstream but not upstream. Adah thinks that nothing here continues to its end. The Congo is a long path going from one hiding place to another. For news or mail, the family has to wait for Eben Axelroot, the pilot. Nothing continues to an end. Adah wants to walk down the path, even though she won't be able to walk fast or well. "I was born with half my brain dried up like a prune, deprived of blood by an unfortunate fetal mishap. My twin sister, Leah, and I are identical in theory, just as in theory we are all made in God's image. Leah and Adah began our life as images mirror perfect. We have the same eyes dark and chestnut hair. But I am a lame gallimaufry and she remains perfect" (pg. 33-34). Adah's condition is officially called hemiplegia. At their birth, the doctor told her parents that Adah may learn to read but that she'd never learn to talk.

Adah is inclined to let the doctor's prophecy stand and thus, she keeps her thoughts to herself. She finds that silence has many advantages. She writes and draws in her notebook and reads what she wants. She doesn't speak as well as she can think, but she thinks that's how it is with most people.

In the beginning, Leah's sisters play indoors and help Mother as they are afraid to go outside. Ruth May thinks that the people will eat her and Rachel wants to spend the next year in bed. The girls help unpack and put out the mosquito netting. Malaria is their enemy and every Sunday, they take quinine tablets.

Leah chooses to help her father in the garden. She likes outdoor chores. As soon as possible, Father starts clearing a patch of earth. He beats down the tall grass and then bends to rip the grass out of the earth. He asks Leah why she thinks the Lord gave them seeds. Leah is fourteen and a half and doesn't know the answer. He tells her it's because the Lord helps those who help themselves. He takes the hoe and hacks out a small square. Leah walks behind him and finds the severed heads of several orchids, which she holds up to her nose and thinks that God created these flowers.



Mama Bekwa Tataba stands and watches them. She is a little jet-black woman, balancing a white tub on her head. Her job is to live with the Prices and earn a small stipend by doing work for them as she had done for Brother Fowles before. Brother Fowles had left Mama Tataba and a parrot, Methuselah. Both speak English. The Mission League had allowed the Prices to come because Brother Fowles left, some saying he had unconventional alliances with the locals and others that he'd gone crazy. At first, the Mission League had turned Father down but since no one else applied, they'd finally agreed. Brother Fowles had been in the Congo for six years which Leah thinks is a long time.

Mama Tataba asks what they are doing. Father tells her that they're cultivating the soil. She responds that the small tree he is wrestling with is poisonwood and that it'll bite. Father begins talking about the parable of the mustard seed. She says that they have to make hills, but Father responds that he's been cultivating the soil since he could walk. She says the plants won't grow and leaves. Father seems unconcerned.

There are some mysteries of Africa that appear quickly. The next morning, Father wakes up with a rash on his hands and arms, probably from the poisonwood tree. Leah goes outside after prayers and finds that Mama Tataba has reshaped their garden into hills. She gets Father and they level the ground back out and plant seeds. Leah thinks that her father's heart is as large as his hands and that he has great wisdom.

Book 1, The Things We Carried (30-42) Analysis

As the novel's introduction to Adah, the author gives the reader several key pieces of information about her. Throughout the novel, Adah is regarded as somewhat of a freak with her limp, lack of speech, and brain issues. Yet, her voice throughout the novel is perhaps the most intelligent and thoughtful about the Congo, her family, and the events going on. Adah chooses to remain silent, registering her thoughts and feelings in her notebook instead.

Leah and her father concentrate on creating a garden once they've arrived in the Congo. This venture illustrates Nathan Price's attitude toward Africa and the villagers. He is convinced that he knows the correct and only way to cultivate and plant a garden. He fails to adjust for a different climate and landscape. Mama Tataba tries to tell him and then tries to help the family by creating the hills in the garden. Yet, Nathan insists that the garden be leveled and planted as he would do in the States. This attitude will carry over into his attempts to convert the villagers. He will again and again believe that his way is the right and only way to do things.

The title of the book also comes into play in this section as Nathan Price is introduced to a poisonwood tree while he is trying clear the garden. Mama Tataba warns him that the tree will bite but he pays no attention to her. He wakes the next morning with a horrible rash over his arms and hands. Like the biting poisonwood tree, Nathan's religion bites, offering little comfort or solace for the villagers.



Book 1, The Things We Carried (43-54)

Book 1, The Things We Carried (43-54) Summary

There are no new clothes for the girls on Easter Sunday. Rachel and her sisters head off to church in their old shoes and dresses. Rachel can't even primp for church because the only mirror in the house is her faux-ivory hand mirror that the whole family has to share. Mother set it out in the living room, propped up against the wall. Rachel thinks that she is the only sister who cares what she looks like.

Rachel is appalled by what the Congolese wear. Children wear the ragbags of Baptist charity or nothing. People don't color coordinate. The women never wear pants just a sarong on bottom and another on top. The men dress in all kinds of clothes. Sandals are made of car tires. Rachel thinks that the people have the attitude that if they have it, they should wear it. This is how Easter Sunday is too. Rachel does have to admit that the church is hardly the place for crinolines and patent leather. Birds can fly in under the roof. The altar is made of palm leaves. But Rachel is hardly allowed to complain about the lack of new dresses because it's not really even Easter. The family arrives in the middle of summer but Father discovers that the days and months don't matter to the people. So, Father announces that it is Easter.

Father organizes a pageant for the fake Easter. The men of the village dress up like Roman guards and then in the second act, leap around, dismayed that the stone has been rolled back. Rachel doesn't really want to look at the men in the pageant as she doesn't know why they have to be so African.

Antelope is their daily bread. Mama Tataba cooks whatever the men kill and the village wives bring over. The men in the pageant carry their bloodstained spears and Rachel is sure that this isn't what Father planned. She knows that he wants a baptism, a joyful procession down to the river with everyone getting saved. But the men don't want it to happen. The women oppose getting dunked in the river and they keep their children away from church on the fake Easter. The only females present are Mother, Rachel, her sisters, and Mama Tataba.

After the service, Father tries to get everyone as close as he can to the river by way of a church supper. They picnic on the banks of the Kwilu and since the Prices donate most of the food, everyone comes. Everyone keeps staring at Rachel. She has long platinum blonde hair and sapphire blue eyes. Some of the people yank on her hair. The Easter picnic is a long drawn out afternoon. The river bank smells and is not pretty at all. Rachel daydreams about soda pop. Mother makes fried chicken for the picnic from the chickens that the family found waiting for them when they arrived. Mama Tataba had apparently kept people from eating them in between Brother Fowles and the Prices. Father doesn't seem to notice how Mother has won over the crowd with her cooking. He mostly stares out at the river. Rachel is sore with him for making them all come to the Congo.



Ruth May is confused about how someone can have a big, fat belly and still be hungry. She thought all the children were fat until Father explained that they had big bellies because they are hungry and don't get enough vitamins. Ruth May only got to bring two toys: pipe cleaners and a sock monkey. The sock monkey is already gone. She left him on the veranda one night and he was gone the next morning. Ruth May is not sure whether it is a sin or not that one of the children took the monkey.

The men are all called Tata something. Tata Undo is the chief and he wears a whole outfit. The women are all Mama something. Mama Mwanza lives in a house close to theirs. A long time ago, a fire burnt up her legs but not the rest of her. She scoots around on her hands, which look like feet bottoms. She still has to tend to her husband and seven or eight children and nobody lets on that there's something wrong with her. She carries things in a basket on top of her head and when she scoots down the road, nothing falls out of the basket.

Everyone stares at the Prices. Ruth May is blonde too but not as blonde as Rachel. Father and Mother think it will do Rachel good to be cranked down a notch or two. Rachel was Miss Priss and now she's seen as a freak of nature. Adah used to be the one that got stared at. Now nobody stares at Adah and nobody cares that she's bad on one side because everyone has their own handicap or knows someone who does.

Father thinks the body is a temple. Mother says that the bodies here have to do hard work. He reprimands her and Mama doesn't say anything else. Mama says that there's another family living in their house in Bethlehem, Georgia right now.

Book 1, The Things We Carried (43-54) Analysis

Rachel again demonstrates her own ethnocentrism, believing that her way of life is best and failing to understand how the people in the Congo do things. As a young woman, she is concerned with clothes and the way that people look. She finds the Congolese lacking in this area. She thinks that they should dress and look more like her. She also thinks that the people act too "African," believing again that they should act more like her and not seem African.

The Easter picnic does not go as Nathan Price wants it to go. Whereas he has visions of a mass baptism of all the villagers, the people are much more concerned about the food that Orleana cooks up. He again fails to see what the people need and what would make a difference in their lives. It is almost as though he expects the people to immediately see that his way is best and drop everything to follow him and his religion.

Both Adah and Ruth May see the Congo and the villagers differently than the other members of the family. Adah sees things through her own disability and seems much more accepting of what she sees than the older family members. Ruth May sees the world through the eyes of a five year old child. She is curious about things and wonders why things are the way they are. Yet, because she is a child, this curiousness is not attached to a sense of superiority or condemnation.



Book 1, The Things We Carried (55-82)

Book 1, The Things We Carried (55-82) Summary

To amuse herself during homework time, Adah writes a quote from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and gives it to Leah, asking her where it is from. Leah thinks it's from the gospel of Luke. Adah laughs inside without smiling on the outside. Adah used to read many books from the library in Bethlehem, even some books that her father would not have approved of. Mother knew about this but didn't say anything. She is beset by Leah and Adah's status as exceptional children. In the first grade, they are labeled gifted: Leah because of her high scores on reading comprehension and Adah by association.

Father receives news of their giftedness by warning Mother not to expect too much from the girls as he doesn't think girls in college is a good thing. Adah's hobby is to ignore the rewards and excel when she wants to. She can read and write French, which is what the people who go to the Underdowns' school in Kilanga speak. When she finishes reading a book front to back, she reads it back to front. She thinks of her name as Ecirp Nelle Hada, which is her name back to front. She thinks the Congo is a good place to learn how to read the same book over and over.

When the rainy season comes, it comes like a plague. It starts raining in July, months before the family was warned it would come. Methuselah screams from the eave of the porch. He is an African Gray parrot with a scarlet red tail. He mumbles mostly incomprehensible things but also talks in English.

The Verse is the girls' punishment. Father gives them a verse which they must copy out, including the next ninety-nine verses that follow it. The one hundredth verse would be what they are being punished for. He prefers the American Translation of the Bible that includes the Apocrypha.

The house is made of mud walls and palm thatch. Yet, the house is also different than the others in Kilanga. It is larger, with a wide front room and two bedrooms in back. The kitchen is in a separate hut behind the house and in the clearing beyond that is the latrine. The chicken house is out there as well. Unlike the other houses, the windows have glass in them and the floor and foundation are cement. The dining room table looks like it came from a wrecked ship and there is a big roll-top desk in the front room. Mother brought her big, oval white platter with blue forget-me-nots painted on it. Outdoors is a long veranda where Adah and her sisters lounge in the hammocks.

The rain stops before sunset and the world looks drenched. The girls run outside, wanting to see what the flood has left. A low cloud turns out to be tiny ant-like creatures hovering above the ground. The girls walk in their permanent order: Leah, Ruth May, Rachel, and Adah. They discover a nest of baby birds that have all drowned. The garden is ruined as the seeds and sprouts were carried off. Father comes out later to



look at this, vowing to rebuild. He sends Leah in but stays out there beating the ground, pushing the garden up into rectangular hills.

The garden grows fast after the rains stopped. The pumpkin vines take on the personality of jungle vines, growing large. Father watches the progress in the garden and Leah walks behind him. She helps him construct a barricade around the garden so animals cannot get in.

Rachel's birthday comes in August but the Betty Crocker cake mix lets them all down. The stove isn't a proper oven and it burns hot. The humidity changes the powdered mix. Leah finds Mother on the morning of Rachel's birthday in the kitchen hut crying. She bangs the box against the stove to show Leah.

Father's body moves strangely the first time he hears Methuselah say "Damn." He asks the girls which one of them taught the bird to say this. Methuselah imitates not only words but also the voices of the people. Rachel apologizes and Father gives them all, except Ruth May, the Verse starting at Numbers 29:34. Leah knows that this Verse ends at Numbers 32:32 which says that when you sin against God, you'll be found out so you'd better watch what comes out of your mouth. Leah hopes that Father believes that Rachel said the word. They all know that it was really Mother, as she cried over the ruined cake mix. Yet, no one will admit this to Father as they feel they need to protect her.

The family receives a stipend of \$50 a month. This is not the regular missionary stipend but is less because Father is a renegade who came without the blessing of the Mission League. The money comes in an envelope, carried by Eeben Axelroot, and most of it returns to him.

Father promises the hungry people of Kilanga that by the end of the summer there will be more fish than the people have ever seen. He thinks that if he feeds their stomachs first that their souls will follow. After the under water thunder, fish rise to the surface of the water in droves. The village feasts. More fish go bad along the riverbank. Father preaches about Daniel. Adah watches Tata Anatole who translates. She thinks that he could be saying anything to the people and Father would never know. Adah invents snmyhymns, as she calls them, her own personal hymns which can be sung forward or backward. When they sing the hymn, Adah mouths the words to her own snmyhymns.

When church is over, Mama Tataba takes the girls back to the house, while Father and Mother greet the people at the church. Mama Tataba is in a bad mood and yells at the girls. She says that Father should give it up. Adah thinks that she is saying that when Father wants to baptize all of the people, they are not receptive to this at all. Father is still wound up at the dinner table later. He is in a Socratic mood and Adah thinks that this is not dangerous, for he rarely strikes one of them at the table. This mood is designed to show all of the females as dull-witted. He ends these conversations with an exasperated conversation with God about females' hopelessness. Methuselah seems to be on the girls' side, talking at the top of his lungs throughout dinner. The girls hang their heads and file out to help stoke the firebox. Cooking meals requires half the day and



cleaning up after eating takes the other half. They have to boil the water since it comes from the stream and is full of parasites.

Father goes out to the garden alone every day. Leah thinks that it disturbs him that the plants are not producing fruit. Sometimes Leah goes out to sit with him. Father thinks that maybe there is too much shade from the trees. Leah is excited when Father talks to her about the last Bible convention in Atlanta, telling her that the delegates argued about the size of heaven. Leah is worried that Father is suggesting that God isn't obligated to send down any fruits or vegetables. He says nothing more to her about this.

Father's first sermon in August is on baptism. Later, at home, Mama Tataba gives him a talking to. The girls are shocked that anyone would yell at Father and it shocks them even more that he stands there trying to get a word in edgewise. Mother tells the girls to go read their schoolbooks when she sees them watching. Mama Tataba quits. Leah follows her out the door, watching her go. She goes to find Father, who is sitting against a tree trunk. He holds out a blossom to her and says that there aren't any pollinators, which is why there is not fruit or vegetables in the garden. They sit together and look at the garden. Leah asks why Mama Tataba was so angry. He tells her that a girl from the village was killed the year before by a crocodile. The parents no longer let their children anywhere near the river, not even to be baptized. He doesn't understand why no one has told him this before. He gets to his feet, walks to the porch, and opens Methuselah's door. When the bird doesn't come out, he reaches in and hurls the bird up toward the treetops.

Book 1, The Things We Carried (55-82) Analysis

Adah again uses her powers of observation to describe more of the family's life and their surroundings. She describes how differently their house looks from the others in the village. Their house has a cement floor, glass windows, and more rooms while the others in the village are smaller houses with dirt floors. Not only does the family's appearance and customs set them apart, but their dwelling sets them apart as well. This separation is one part of a larger struggle that the Congo is engaged in as they seek to throw off European rule and oppression and rule themselves. Kilanga serves as a small microcosm of this as the white Prices have more than the black villagers. Race will underline the larger struggle as well as the Prices' interactions with the villagers.

Nathan's self-righteousness and oppression are again evident in this section. He is upset that Methuselah has learned a swear word and thinks that one of the girls said the word. He gives them the Verse for their punishment. Yet, the girls didn't utter the word, Orleanna did. They all try to protect her from Nathan's wrath and disapproval. Although it was Nathan's desire and choice to bring the family to the Congo, it is Orleanna and the girls who will endure the vast majority of the hardships. Nathan continues to live in a self-ordered world where everything should conform to what he wants and expects. The girls are beginning to realize that this world doesn't constitute reality.



Adah's voice continues to be unique among the girls in her observations. She is also the most critical of Nathan Price. While Rachel is mad him for making them come to the Congo, Adah is both thoughtful and critical about her father's mission in the Congo. She realizes that the villagers don't want what Nathan Price is trying to force feed them. She also sees his failures with Orleanna and the girls, trying to make it look like they are less smart and less able than he is. Leah's voice in this section contrasts with Adah's. Whereas Adah turns a critical eye toward her father, seeing his faults and mistakes, Leah has the most loyalty to Nathan Price. She believes in him and his mission, admiring him and wanting to be close to him.



Book 2, Orleanna Price (87-98)

Book 2, Orleanna Price (87-98) Summary

Every few years, Orleanna catches the scent of Africa: ripe fruits, flowers, dark spices, and other things that she's never seen. She thinks that this is a cruel trick, her body never free from the small parts of Africa, where one of her children lies in the red earth.

She thinks that she could have been a different mother, could have seen what was coming. She had thought that she could have it both ways: be one of the villagers and Nathan's wife. Yet, she realizes that she was his instrument and nothing more. She studies her daughters now for signs that they are at peace, wondering how they managed.

In the early months in the Congo, Orleanna would wake and think that she was in Pearl, Mississippi, her childhood home. Everything changes on the day that they lost both the parrot and Mama Tataba. The bird hangs around but Mama Tataba vanishes from the village. Orleanna can still recite the efforts that it took to keep her husband and children alive and fed each day in Africa. The hardest work was deciding each day to stay with her family. Nothing was free there, not the mail or the water, which had to be carried for a mile and a half and then boiled.

For a while, Orleanna couldn't figure out how other families were getting by on the food available. Then she learned about *fufu*, a gluey paste which comes from a tuber. It has no nutritional value but it fills the stomach. The women spend their day planting, digging, and pounding the manioc to get it. Orleanna's family expect three remarkable meals a day and they cannot understand the work involved in just getting one.

In the beginning, Orleanna does not know any Kikongo except for the few words that Mama Tataba taught her. At sunrise, she sometimes goes for walks, taking a forest path. Sometimes she startles elephant families and she sometimes sees families of Pygmies moving in the shadows.

Nathan does not hear her worries, thinking that they have the Lord's protection. He is only concerned with Kilanga's salvation. He cannot see how far off he is with his fixations. Tata Ndu, the village chief warns people away from the church and Nathan balks at some sort of reconciliation. After several visits, Tata Ndu informs him that the previous missionary had some strange ideas about only having one wife. He wants Nathan to disavow this before he will endorse the church. Nathan believes that this is God's way of testing him like Job. He pays less and less attention to the children, hardly noticing them.



Book 2, Orleanna Price (87-98) Analysis

Orleanna's words foreshadow many of the major events that will happen in the rest of the book. First, and foremost, she reveals that one of her daughters will die in Africa. As she doesn't name who this will be or mention any of the girls' names that she still sees now, the identity of the daughter who will die remains a secret. This creates a certain amount of suspense for the reader, who will now anticipate reading about this event and wondering how it will happen and to whom. This also creates a picture of a dangerous Africa, even if the reader does not know how this child will die.

Orleanna also points to the racial issues and oppression in the Congo. She discusses how she feels different from the others in the village because she is white. Race is a recurring theme in the novel as the Prices watch the Congo move to independence and strain out from under colonial (white) control. Orleanna is conscious of the differences. Leah points out earlier how the Price home is different from the villagers' homes. With Mama Tataba's exit from the family, the Prices come closer to living like the villagers, yet because of their whiteness, they are still set apart.



Book 2, The Things We Learned (101-124)

Book 2, The Things We Learned (101-124) Summary

When the family first arrives, they are like Adam and Eve, having to learn the names of everything. Leah copies down new words in her notebook, promising to remember them forever. They learn from the books left behind by Brother Fowles, from the children of the village, and even from Mother, who recognizes some of the trees. Leah looks hard at everything and blinks, as if she is taking a picture of it. They are gradually getting to know the people there. Tata Boanda is an old fisherman who goes out in his boat every morning. Leah confesses that he is a sinner because he has two wives. They even all come to church. Leah's not sure how to pray for them. The older wife looks sad all the time and the younger one has all the children.

In late fall, the bushes around the house show themselves to be poinsettias. Leah and Adah's birthday sneaks up on Leah. They are fifteen now. Leah thinks that she must start being concerned with growing into a mature, Christian lady.

Each morning, the girls do their schoolwork. After lunch, they have a few hours of freedom. The children of the village run and scream when the girls go outside. After a minute or two, though, they start creeping forward again. Leah tries to ignore them, pretending not to care that they look at her like an animal in the zoo. Leah really wants them to play with her. "I suppose everyone in our family wanted the same, in one way or another. To play, to bargain reasonably, to offer the Word, to stretch a hand across the dead space that pillowed around us" (pg. 106).

Ruth May is the first to bridge the gap. Leah thinks that this shouldn't have been a surprise since Ruth May has a very strong will. Leah's job is to keep an eye on Ruth May. Afraid that she'll run away, Leah sometimes threatens her with catastrophe to keep her in check. After she has Ruth May scared, Leah can go do things like look for the Pygmies or cut fruit for Methuselah, who still hangs around the house. Leah thinks that it is always better to be outside than inside the house.

Most of the girls Leah's age in the village have babies. She thinks that they are way too young to be married. The children call them "Beelezi" which means Belgians. In the middle of the village is a big kapok tree. Every fifth day, the village has a market here. The women come to sell and bicker. Leah thinks that there are many things to see on market days: green bananas, vegetables, bottles of orange soda, soap, witch doctors with pills and animal pieces, and so on. On the days that there isn't a market, the people congregate on the main square for gossiping and shoe repair. Women get their hair done there and a tailor sets up shop. Mama Lo is the main hairdresser. She also runs a palm-oil business. Leah likes to settle on a stump close to the edge of the square because the villagers forget that she is there. She likes to watch. She's also gone down



to Eben Axelroot's shack by the airplane field and spied on him. He is boring to watch though. Her parents shun him.

Midway through September, Ruth May makes her move. Leah comes back from spying one afternoon to find Ruth May playing "Mother May I?" with half the children of the village. Ruth May teaches the children giant steps, scissor steps, and a few other moves that she has invented herself. For several afternoons after that, they all play the game. Soon, Leah and the other girls lose interest. The Congolese children always win because Leah and her sisters forget to ask "Mother, may I?" The game breaks the ice.

When the other children get sick of Ruth May's bossiness, one boy stays. His name is Pascal and he is Leah's first real friend in the Congo. Their friendship consists of Pascal telling Leah the names for things. Once they are friends, Pascal cuts sugarcane for Leah to chew on. She invites him back to the kitchen house and they look over the magazine pictures that Mother has tacked up on a wall. For the first time, Leah feels anger at her father for making her a white child from Georgia. She realizes that life is very different for the Congolese children and that childhood is something invented by white people.

Mama warns Ruth May every day that she'll crack her head open. Ruth May breaks her arm instead. She is spying on the African Communist Boy Scouts, who look like regular Congo Boy Scouts. They don't have any shoes on and they have red hankies around their necks. Mama doesn't like the girls to play with the boys, especially those with the red hankies. That is how Ruth May comes to climb up the pear tree to spy on them.

In the mornings, Ruth May can't spy. Her sisters have their school and Ruth May has to color and learn letters. Ruth May doesn't like having school. Sometimes, Ruth May can play with her pets: Leon, the chameleon, and the mongoose. No one gave Ruth May the mongoose; it just kept coming closer and closer to her every day. One day it came in the house and then it just kept coming in. The mongoose likes Ruth May best and she calls it Stuart Little. The girls find the chameleon on their own. The girls take him back in the house whenever Mama and Father are at the church.

The day Ruth May breaks her arm is the day that Eben Axelroot is due. Yet, when he arrives, he leaves, saying that he'll be back the next day. Her arm hurts but she doesn't cry. Mama makes her a sling. Ruth May, Father, and Mr. Axelroot fly to Stanleyville. The plane is full of bags. Some of them have little bags inside them. Ruth May looks in one of the small bags and sees dirty rocks and sparkly things. She knows that they are diamonds but she can't tell anyone because she saw them by spying. Mr. Axelroot shows them hippos and elephants from the plane. Ruth May wants to see a green mamba snake but Mr. Axelroot says that they hide better than anything. They land on the grass and Ruth May goes to the hospital, which is full of white people.

Ruth May tells the doctor that she was hiding from the Jimmy Crow boy when she fell from the tree. Father and the doctor talk about "man things." The doctor is surprised that the Jimmy Crow boys are there. The doctor and Father argue a bit about religion and the Americans' interest in the Congo.



When they get home, Ruth May's sisters help her cut her food and get dressed. Ruth May thinks this is the best thing that has ever happened. She can still climb trees, even with the cast. She shows Leah where the alligator pear tree is and they wait in the tree. They see the Belgium Army right after lunch time, singing in French. The Jimmy Crow boys are harder to see, since they only have meetings every once in a while. Leah says that she heard that the Jimmy Crow boys want to take over the whole country and throw out the whites.

Book 2, The Things We Learned (101-124) Analysis

Leah observes a number of things about the villagers and the village in this chapter. It serves again to show the differences between the Prices and the villagers. Yet, Ruth May's actions also bridge the gap in many ways. As the youngest, Ruth May has less inhibitions than her sisters and given a chance, she draws in the village children. Ruth May's strong will proves troublesome for both her and her family in the chapters to come.

Out of Ruth May's games comes Pascal, who becomes friends with Leah. It is not insignificant that Pascal brings a small change in Leah. She has, for the first time, a stirring of anger for her father and she becomes more aware of the differences in race in the Congo. As Leah has been most like her father, wanting to follow in his footsteps, this is a significant, if small, change on her part. Whereas Nathan continues to see everything through self-righteous eyes, Leah's are opened a bit more to the complexities and inequalities of life.

Ruth May continues her childlike observations about the Congo. Although she doesn't quite understand, her words about the African Communist Boy Scouts again point to larger troubles in the Congo. As the country moves toward independence, it becomes a place more fraught with danger and uncertainty. At some level, Ruth May recognizes that this group isn't like the other and that there is something going on with it.



Book 2, The Things We Learned (125-141)

Book 2, The Things We Learned (125-141) Summary

Rachel is excited that there is company for dinner and he's an eligible bachelor. Anatole, the schoolteacher, is twenty-four and is the local idea of a heartthrob. He's not in Rachel's color category but Rachel thinks that even if she were Congolese, she'd have to pass because of the scars he has all over his face. They aren't accident scars but ones done on purpose, like a tattoo. He speaks French and English and runs the school by himself. Only boys go to school here. Anatole is an orphan and worked in the diamond mines for a while.

The small talk goes on so long that Rachel thinks she's going to croak. Then, Anatole says that Tata Ndu is concerned about the moral decline of the village since so many people are going to church. Tata Ndu is concerned that the gods and ancestors will be ignored. Anatole says that those who are going to church are those that have shamed themselves or have some sort of bad luck happen to them. They come to church because they feel their gods have abandoned them, although they still worship them at home. Tata Ndu thinks that Father is leading the people in corrupt ways. Father asks Anatole if he believes that as well. He is angry with Anatole even though Anatole tries to stay neutral.

The girls stare at the two men. Mother gets up and says that she needs the girls to help her clear the table and wash up. Rachel doesn't leave, however. She thinks that this is the most exciting thing that has happened since Ruth May fell out of the tree. Tata Kuvudundu is the respected priest of traditions and Anatole tries to tell Father that he's no competition. Anatole also says that people remembered the missionary times. The word "remembered" gets Father really upset. He gets very still and his face changes. Although his words to Anatole sound nice, Rachel knows that he really thinks that Anatole and the rest of the villagers don't really know anything. Anatole leaves.

Mother makes the comment that Father'd better hope that no lightening strikes here in the next six months, meaning that they'd be blamed for it. Father takes the china plate and slams it on the table. It cracks into two pieces. He says that she has gotten too attached to the plate and that he's ashamed because she has devotion to worldly things. He mocks her cooking, but she continues to look at him. Finally, he turns away.

Earlier, Leah and Adah are sent to get water. Adah has trouble carrying the heavy pail and she goes slowly. She recites sentences forward and backward. The forest path goes a little farther for Adah every day. They have heard stories about where it goes from people in the village: a waterfall, clear pools, a bridge, another village, or all the way to Cairo. Adah thinks that some of these must be true and she decides to walk to find out which ones are and which ones aren't. She tries to go a few more steps of the



path each day. She has already found the pools and the log bridge. Even moving at her slow pace, she discovers many sights. She sees little forest elephants and bands of Pygmies. She finds the cemetery of witch doctors and a bird called the paradise flycatcher.

She also follows Methuselah as he moves around in spirals. He roosts in the latrine. He has no muscle in his wings from being caged so long. She leaves him guava and avocado. In following him, Adah discovers the boys and men practicing drills. She learns that Anatole is more than a schoolteacher. Once he reads aloud a letter to the men about the Belgians creating a timetable for the Congo independence. He reads the date 1964 and the men all laugh.

Adah does not fear walking alone. Their mother does not allow it, particularly if it is close to getting dark, but she does not realize that sending Adah and Leah anywhere means Adah walks back alone. Leah goes ahead again with the water. Adah feels she is being followed. She doesn't feel afraid, because she knows that it's useless to do so. She cannot run away anyway. She stops and turns. The movement behind her stops. Each time Adah stops, the movement behind her stops. It takes her a long time to get home.

When Adah reaches the house, it is dark already. She slips into a hammock at the end of the porch, because the family presumes that she has been home minding her own business for hours. A short bit later, Tata Ndu, the chief in the village, appears and says that lion tracks were spotted on the path from the river. The lion tracks are fresh and they cover the tracks of the girl who drags her right foot. There are signs of stalking, a pounce, and a smear of fresh blood going into the bushes. This is how they know that the crooked white child has been eaten. Tata Ndu looks almost pleased. He tells the Prices that he's sent a party out to look for the body of the girl.

Adah finds that she has trouble breathing as she watches her family receive the news. Her sisters don't seem to understand but Mother does. Adah sees affliction on her face. Father rises and says that they must pray. Tata Ndu raises his head proudly and Adah realizes that he has come personally to tell them that the gods of the village do not take kindly to corruption. He thinks he has won. Adah makes herself come forward. Tata Ndu leaves. The next morning they hear that the search party found a yearling bushbuck that the lion killed.

Book 2, The Things We Learned (125-141) Analysis

The reader knows that one of the girls will die in Africa, creating a certain degree of suspense within the novel. On the surface, this chapter appears at first as if it could answer the question of which daughter will die. However, Adah continues to narrate how her "death" is related to her family, proving that she survives this narrow escape. What the chapter shows is the contention between the village and Nathan Price. Both Nathan Price and Tata Ndu see the situation as a competition of sorts. These ill-feelings and

desire to "win" the village will continue to plague the family and will lead to the death of one of the girls.



Book 2, The Things We Learned (142-158)

Book 2, The Things We Learned (142-158) Summary

Some people send a note after coming to dinner. Anatole sends a boy named Nelson. The family is to feed him, let him sleep in the chicken house, and give him a basket of eggs each week that he can sell to start saving up for a wife. In return, Nelson will gather firewood, boil pots of manioc, and bring food back from the forest. Anatole chooses Nelson because Nelson is an orphan. Nelson concocts a headache remedy for Mother. He identifies snakes according to the categories of death they inflict. He constructs a frame for Rachel's mirror so that it can be hung on the wall. Nelson quickly learns English.

Leah imagines walking with Anatole on the path to the river. She asks him about the scars on his face and he tells her about the rubber plantations. In her imagination, she and Anatole speak English.

The family is confused about why Anatole is so kind to send them Nelson. Mother cries the first time Nelson fetches water. Leah thinks that maybe Anatole sees all of the books in the household and thinks Nelson can read some of them this way.

Around Thanksgiving, Mother begins to pray out loud for God to please deliver them out of the Congo in one piece. Father doesn't care for this and tells her so. Adah and Leah are given the Verse after Adah's near death brush. The villagers begin getting sick and Mother tries keeping the girls inside the house so they won't catch it. Leah misses her freedom. She also thinks that Eben Axelroot is up to something and wants to keep an eye on him.

For Christmas, Mother gives all the girls needlework things. She tells the girls that their idle time can be used to work on their hope chests. Leah focuses on a cross-stitch tablecloth and thinks this may be a waste of time. She can't picture herself as anything but a missionary or a teacher. Father says that a girl who doesn't marry is veering from God's plan and that's why he is against college for girls. Adah and Leah take their projects to the front porch so they can see what's going on. They watch Nelson with envy as he goes where he wants. The hope chest project doesn't last long before the girls begin to run out of steam.

Ruth May tries to see Nelson naked although she isn't sure why she wants to. When Nelson gets up in the morning, he washes his face and puts his pants and shirt on. He puts a hex on his clothes before putting them on. The chicken house is made of sticks and has little holes in it. Sometimes Ruth May prays to Jesus to make her good but Baby Jesus doesn't.



More people are coming to church now. Nelson tells Ruth May that it's because the lion tried to eat Adah but Jesus turned her into a bushbuck at the last minute. He says that everyone has their own God here to protect them. They wear a little thing around their neck made out of sticks and shells and other things.

Mother marks some eggs with an X and they leave these in the chicken house. They are going to become baby chickens. Ruth May checks every day to see if the babies hatch and she is the first one to find them. All hatch except for one, which gets squashed.

Nelson gets mad at Ruth May for saying "snake" when it is dark. He says that the snake can hear you call its name and it comes for you. They have to say "string" instead when it's dark. He also gets mad at Leah for keeping a baby owl as a pet. Nelson gets Anatole, who tells them that the Congolese don't like owls, thinking that they fly around at night eating up the souls of dead people. There have been too many deaths around the village lately for the people to excuse keeping an owl. Leah goes into the jungle to turn the owl loose and she doesn't come back for a while. Everyone is scared and they stay up waiting for Leah, even though Father tells them to go to bed. They jump up and down when she gets home.

Book 2, The Things We Learned (142-158) Analysis

Anatole sends the family a boy to help them with their daily tasks. Although it is unclear why exactly he does this, Leah thinks that it might be to help Nelson, who might then have access to their books. Leah begins to think about Anatole differently, foreshadowing her later involvement with him. She is still her father's daughter at this point in the novel, still believing that he knows best and wanting to follow him. Yet, her attraction to Anatole and her desire to learn about him and from him signal a small change in her. Her crush is one that her father would not understand or welcome, yet this doesn't stop Leah from nurturing it to a certain degree.

Ruth May's voice in the novel is one of childish wonder and observation. Although she doesn't always understand what is happening, she takes it all in and tries to make some sense of it. As she is the most innocent and adventuresome of the daughters, Ruth May picks up much of the Congo and melds it together with her American upbringing. She experiences less cultural shock and more of a cultural blending than the others in the family. Through her, Kingsolver also introduces the use of some animals as symbols for death, including owls and snakes.



Book 2, The Things We Learned (159-186)

Book 2, The Things We Learned (159-186) Summary

In January, the Underdowns show up, coming in Mr. Axelroot's plane. Rachel thinks that they are plain Janes if she's ever seen any. Frank and Janna even look alike to her. Mrs. Underdown tries to make friends with mother by complaining about her houseboy in Leopoldville, but Mother seems uninterested. The girls are excused but they are curious about the Underdowns and want to stay. Rachel lingers in the room, checking her hair and tidying up. She finally joins her sisters on the veranda where they listen in.

Rachel picks up a paper that they've brought and reads that the Russian Khrushchev wants to take over the Congo. She thinks that he can have it if he wants it. The article also says that the Belgians often interrupt cannibal natives in the villages. The Underdowns tell Father and Mother that the Congo is going to have a big election in May and declare their independence from Belgium in June. Mother and Father are shocked. Father acts like it won't happen and that he knows all about it. The Underdowns go on to say that there have been riots in Leopoldville and Stanleyville and they remind the Prices that they advised them not to come to the Congo. Mother is confused and Mr. Underdown says that the stipend from the Mission League is out of kindness and will probably end now.

Rachel prays to go home. If the problem here is big enough, they'll have to go home. Father begins to talk about how the people here don't know anything about the outside world and how an election will never work. Mrs. Underdown says that they should prepare to leave immediately. Father declares that his contract is until July to welcome the next missionaries. The Underdowns say that as there is to be no transition period in the new government, it could be years before the mission in the village continues.

Everyone waits to see what will happen next. Every day another person dies in the village. Pascal doesn't come to play anymore because his brother dies and he is needed at home. According to Adah's Baptist Sunday school teachers, a child is denied entrance to heaven because they are from the Congo. This is a sticking point for Adah. She doesn't see how entrance to heaven should be luck of the draw and where someone is born. She brings this up once in Sunday school but no one else agrees. Her teacher sends her to the corner to pray while kneeling on uncooked rice. When Adah finally gets up, she finds that she doesn't believe in God anymore.

Adah notices that everyone knows more about hygiene in the village than they do. The family has also offended almost all the village gods in various ways and Adah wonders what new sins they commit each day. Anatole is preparing the village for the election. Candidates will be represented by a symbol and each person will throw a pebble into the big clay bowl of the person they wished to vote for.



Father flies with Eeben Axelroot to Stanleyville. He goes in part to get more quinine pills since they are almost out. Rachel knows that Ruth May doesn't swallow her pills all the time. She sees Ruth May hide it in her mouth and then stick it on the wall behind her cot one time. Rachel always swallows hers since she doesn't want to go home with some disease.

Father is mad at the Underdowns. They send a letter saying that they are sending a plane on June 28 for the family evacuation. Father wants to stay on. Mother tries to tell him that he is putting the family in jeopardy. When he returns from Stanleyville, he is full of news. The Congolese have had their election and a man named Patrice Lumumba won. He will be the new Prime Minister of the Congo.

After Father goes away on the plane, Mother goes to bed and doesn't get up. The plane isn't Mr. Axelroot's but a charter plane that the Underdowns send to get the Prices out of the Congo. Father doesn't allow this though. He and Leah go off, but they are coming back. Rachel tries to get on the plane, but Father flings her back. Only Ruth May and Mother go to watch the plane take off. Ruth May crawls in bed with Mama.

Leah and her father patch things up. He lets her go to Leopoldville with him. They watch the independence ceremonies. The white men speak of the glorious days of the previous king of Belgium. Mrs. Underdown translates everything for Leah. She tells Leah that Nathan must not be right in the mind because he is making them all stay. Leah defends her father. After the white men, Patrice Lumumba is inaugurated. He tells the crowd to remember the day. He also tells the crowd that the Belgians despoiled the land and used the Congolese as slaves. He says that colonial oppression is finished and that he wants to make the Congo a place of justice and peace.

Book 2, The Things We Learned (159-186) Analysis

Nathan Price chooses to keep his family in the Congo despite the dangers present. This action will eventually break the family apart. Nathan continues to deny the situation around him. He is blinded by his zealous self-righteousness, thinking that his way is the correct one. He ignores both the danger he places his family in and the reality that the Congolese don't really want him there. He symbolizes for them the oppression that they have already endured under white men.

The situation in the Congo becomes more tenuous. The Congo moves toward independence and a new government without a transition from the old one. There are riots and strikes in the cities. The Belgians, including the Underdowns, are preparing to evacuate. They tell the Prices that they too should get ready to leave. The impending crisis foreshadows later developments as the election happens and the Congo is left in chaos. The chapter foreshadows also several more dangers for the family. The family also faces potential danger from the fact that Ruth May isn't taking her quinine pills. The reader is aware that one of the daughters will die in the Congo. Both political turmoil and disease present a threat to the family.

Leah, despite some doubts at times, believes in Nathan Price and his ability to lead the family. She defends him to Mrs. Underdown, arguing that they are doing God's work and will be protected. Her attitude and beliefs will change in the coming chapters as the family unravels in the face of numerous threats.



Book 3, Orleanna Price (191-201)

Book 3, Orleanna Price (191-201) Summary

Orleanna thinks that she has nothing: no money, no friends, and no way to overrule the powers in their lives. She is an inferior force. She believed that God was on Nathan's side. She feared him, but still loved him.

She was a child of the Depression. As a pretty child, she has her own way in the world. Her father is an eye doctor and they live on the outskirts of Jackson, Mississippi, in a town called Pearl. She meets Nathan as a seventeen year old girl. She and friends go to a tent revival. Their courtship creeps up on her since she does not recognize it as such. Nathan comes to the house and reads to her from the Bible. They marry and spend their honeymoon picking cotton for the war effort. Nathan is drafted. He is gone for less than three months. He is injured in the Philippines and the rest of his company is killed in the Bataan death march. He changes after that. They choose Bethlehem, Georgia off a map when she is pregnant with Rachel. He hits her for the first time soon after. He is embarrassed by her pregnancies, feeling that they are unearned blessings.

Nathan believes that God notices righteousness and rewards it. If the family suffers, it is a sign that one of them has committed a sin of some sort. Orleanna finds her own spirit less and less. It takes her a long time to see the awful price she has paid. She cowers like Methuselah, with no wings to fly. She asks that she not have to relate how she earned them back for the story is too unbearable.

Book 3, Orleanna Price (191-201) Analysis

Orleanna's voice is again one of regret and guilt, looking from the present into the past of their life in the Congo. This places a context around the girls' voices which tell of the events in the Congo. From Orleanna, the reader gets a greater vision of Nathan Price and of his relationship to the family. For all his religious zeal, Nathan treats his family with both indifference and cruelty. The problems that they encounter, he believes are due to their own failures and sins. This attitude will continue with the family in the Congo. Their survival becomes almost a test for Nathan. When negative things happen to the family, he blames Orleanna or the girls, arguing that they must have brought on whatever it is by their actions or lack of faith.



Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (205-222)

Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (205-222) Summary

Leah and her father fly back to Kilanga. They bring twenty pounds of dry goods that the Underdowns cannot take with them when they flee. Leah feels dread when they touch down. Leah thinks about how they used to get fifty dollars a month and now they'll be getting nothing.

Soon after, the women of the village figure out that the family has no money and they stop coming to the house to sell meat or fish. All the money they had left was given to Axelroot to fly Leah and Father back to Kilanga. Mama Mwanza is the only woman to feel sorry for them, bringing them oranges. Mother is taking life hard, wandering around the house in her nightgown when she gets out of bed. Ruth May also spends most of her time in bed. Nelson says that someone must have put a curse on them. He thinks that Rachel will be tested next.

Adah is pleased that in the Congo, there is no difference between living people, dead people, children not yet born, and gods. Nelson tells her that children are not alive until they are named. Adah wonders how she and Leah, who came from a single seed, have two different lives. Now she knows it's because they have two names.

Adah explains to Nelson that she and Leah are twins. Nelson jumps away, saying that any woman who has two babies should take them to the forest and leave them there. The gods would be furious at a woman who kept twins and might flood the whole village or kill everyone. Adah tells him that nothing happened in their village when her mother didn't leave her and Leah. Nelson says that half of Nathan Price's congregation is relatives of dead twins who think that they might have twins again and not have to abandon them now. Adah thinks the church has become the Church of the Lost Cause. Her father fails to notice that every family who loses a child quietly goes back to ancestor worship. She thinks that her father has a bone to pick with the world and that he picks it like a sore. Adah thinks it is difficult and dangerous to name things and she knows that her father and her family get things wrong in Kilanga all the time.

Adah thinks that God works in mysterious ways: first, sending down torrents of rain and then sending a drought. After Independence, Mother and Ruth May get sick. Father seems unconcerned about it, going ahead with his mission work, and leaving the older three girls to take care of the household. Their neighbors also seem indifferent. "Our childhood had passed over into history overnight. The transition was unnoticed by anyone but ourselves" (pg. 218). Finding food is up to the girls and they all often feel like going to bed themselves. They had not understood what their mother had gone through in the last year to keep them all fed.



In less than a month, the family falls into chaos. Father's rage increases and after one incident where he hits the girls, they sit down and figure things out. Rachel says that they need to keep boiling the water. The pantry shelves still have some food and fruits grow nearby at different times. Leah appoints herself in charge of finding fruit. They also have the chickens and Adah is put in charge of the chicken decisions. Since Nelson gets half the eggs as pay, the girls discuss whether they need Nelson or the eggs more. They vote unanimously to keep him.

Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (205-222) Analysis

In the face of Nathan Price's decision to stay in the Congo despite being advised to leave, the family begins a downward spiral that will eventually split it apart. When Leah and her father arrive back in the village, they find Mother and Ruth May spending most of their time in bed. Leah recognizes that both have lost interest in life. Mother is depressed about Nathan's decision to stay in the Congo and she feels helpless to do anything to change that.

Adah again is the daughter who most realizes how the family gets everything wrong in Kilanga. Her father uses words in his sermons that confound the villagers and make the stories entirely different just by his pronunciation of the words. The church draws in people who think that their other gods have abandoned them or who are looking for a magical solution to some problem. Nathan Price continues to think that he is "saving" them and making a huge difference in their lives when in reality, the villagers leave the church when bad things continue to happen to them.



Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (223-244)

Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (223-244) Summary

Leah makes Ruth May get out of bed after three weeks. There isn't much she can do about Mother, but she thinks she can help Ruth May. She takes Ruth May outside for some sunshine, but the little girl slumps wherever Leah puts her. She tries to get her interested in the ant lions and then sits her in the swing. Leah sees Anatole watching them.

Anatole brings them a jungle rabbit. Leah realizes that she likes Anatole. Anatole has come to talk to their father but Leah says that he isn't there. He tells Leah that there is bad business going on in the Katanga Province. The leader there, Moise Tshombe, has declared the province separate from the Republic of Congo. This way he can make his own business with the Belgians and Americans with the minerals and diamonds there. Lumumba doesn't want to give way the resources that the Congo has and his loyalty is to his countrymen. If the United Nations does not help, Lumumba has threatened to ask Khrushchev for help. Anatole thinks this is a bluff though.

Ruth May imagines that little black faces peer at her in the night, wanting to play Mother May I? Ruth May says that they can't because she's lying with Mama and you can't play in the dark. Sometimes she wakes up and hears Mama and Father talking. Mama begs Father to take them home. She says that in Stanleyville they went after white girls, making them stand naked on their roof and shooting some of them. Father says the meek shall inherit the earth.

Ruth May knows that the last shall be first and the meek will inherit. The tribes of Ham were last and she wonders if they'll be first now. In their family, Adah is next to last and Mama is last, because something inside her is hurt worse than Adah. Nelson comes to Ruth May and gives her a matchbox with a picture of a lion on the outside. He takes out something that looks like a chicken bone with string on it. There is a tiny hole on the side and a tiny peg that fits in the hole. He tells her to put her spirit inside the hole by breathing into it. He puts the tiny peg into the hole when she's finished, telling her that she's now safe. If she gets ready to die, she just has to hold tight to it and she'll disappear. She has to think of the place she wants to go every day so her spirit will know where to go to.

Although Ruth May remains sick, Mother begins pulling herself together. Leah is reminded of Adah as she sees Ruth May and Mother in the same bed, one getting stronger while the other is getting weaker. She wonders if she made Adah the way she is.



One day, Rachel burns an egg omelet. Mother gets up and tells Rachel that she'll serve it to Father and that tomorrow, she'll start teaching Rachel how to cook. When Mother gets up the next morning, she gets up changed. Now, she says whatever she wants. She declares that she's taking the girls out of there as soon as she can find a way to do it. Leah is shocked to see her challenge Father's authority, but she also feels something similar stirring in herself. She doubts his judgment in keeping them there. She thinks that if it's up to him to decide their fate, he should protect them as well and he didn't protect Mother and Ruth May. "All my life I've tried to set my shoes squarely into his footprints, believing if only I stayed close enough to him those same clean, simple laws would rule my life as well. That the Lord would see my goodness and fill me with light. Yet with each passing day I find myself farther away" (pg. 244). She wonders what else he might be wrong about if he is wrong to keep them in Kilanga.

Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (223-244) Analysis

Mirroring the trouble in the family is the trouble in the country itself. Since Independence, political factions have asserted power in different ways and now one province secedes. This province's secession is linked to foreign interests, particularly the Belgians and Americans, bringing racial issues to the forefront once again. Within the family, Mother and Ruth May are still depressed, staying in bed and having no interest in life.

Ruth May reveals continuing trouble in the Congo. Orleanna begs Nathan to let them go home so that they will be safe. From Orleanna's sections in the book, the reader is already aware that not all of the family will leave the Congo. Nathan's decision to stay in the Congo despite the dangers and his own ineffectiveness puts the family in even greater danger than before. Even though their contract has terminated and they've remained in the Congo longer than originally planned, Nathan continues on, determined to stay until another missionary family arrives. He is oblivious to the problems that the family faces, choosing not to help them gather food or help them leave.

The family cracks a bit more apart. When Orleanna gets up from her bed, she openly defies Nathan, choosing her own road and voice over him. She wants to protect her children. Like the Congo, she is rising up in independence from his oppression. Leah is also experiencing something similar, doubting that Nathan has made the right choice in keeping them in the Congo. Her blind admiration of her father has turned to doubts and questions about him and his choices. Leah will no longer accept unquestioningly what he says or does.



Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (245-273)

Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (245-273) Summary

Brother Fowles and his family come to the village. He is married to a Congolese woman. He has a white beard and Rachel thinks he looks like Santa Claus. Mother invites them in and sends Rachel to squeeze some orange juice. When Rachel gets back, Mother and the Fowles family are talking about people in the village. Ruth May, who has been out of bed for only a few days, sits at his feet, enthralled. Brother Fowles and Leah debate about the Congo and whether their gods were pagan or not. Their family lives on a little boat, using it as a home base for collecting, studying, ministering, and doing some public health. Brother Fowles was the minister in the mission before them and is rumored to have gotten kicked out for consorting with the natives.

Father comes home. He tries to one up Brother Fowles, but Brother Fowles stays with him. When Father brings up Biblical translations, Brother Fowles says that he's heard many mispronunciations in his years in the Congo and thinks that Biblical translations also probably have some translation issues. Father eventually stomps off and the Fowles don't stay for dinner. They come back before sunset and invite Mother and the girls to go see their boat. They bring food, books, and other gifts off the boat and give them to the Prices. Rachel thinks about slipping them a note, begging them to help her get out of the Congo, but their boat already looks filled to the brim.

In August, Ruth May's health declines again. Her fever rises and rises. August also brings a special week which begins with a market day and ends with a market day with Sundays on either side like parentheses. Tata Ndu comes to the house each day during this week, bringing a gift each time. Father tries to talk scripture and Tata Ndu tries to steer the conversation back to village talk. Tata Ndu's visits cease for a few days and when he returns, the gifts are more personal. Nelson finally tells the family that Tata Ndu wants a new wife. He's heard that the Prices have no money for food and he thinks that he can use this to marry Rachel.

The family now has a problem as Tata Ndu will be offended if Father turns his offer down. Tata Ndu also represents the village in many ways. Anatole has been explaining to Leah the native system of government. He tells her that people like to have a consensus about decisions. Rachel is in a frenzy and Mother promises her that they aren't going to sell her to Tata Ndu. The family can't refuse visits from the chief of the village so Rachel begins to act oddly whenever he is around. Violence is still happening between blacks and whites around the country, but Leah thinks that Independence passed over their village as nothing seems different.



Ruth May is now getting rashes all over her body and she still has a fever. She spends most nights sleeping at the foot of her parents' bed. They move her cot out into the main room so that she is with them during the day. When the girls move the cot away from the wall, they find her partly melted malaria pills stuck to the wall. Mother takes the pills off the wall and they count sixty-one pills. That is exactly the number of weeks that the family has been in the Congo.

Rachel is angry about the situation with Tata Ndu. She tries to act retarded when he comes around. Father and Anatole hatch a plan to get Rachel out of marrying Tata Ndu without hurting his feelings. They decide to make it look like Rachel is already engaged to Eben Axelroot. Rachel isn't happy about this either. The first time she is alone with him for a few seconds, he tries to get fresh. Rachel thinks that if she can butter him up a bit, maybe he'll change his mind and fly them out of the Congo. Mother offers him her wedding ring and a thousand dollars in credit but Axelroot does not want it. Axelroot claims that he's working for the U.S. government and that he's important in the Congo.

Ruth May knows that Mama found the pills she hid behind her bed. She didn't want to take them because they tasted bad and she thinks that they stuck on the wall better than they went in her mouth. Ruth May went to the doctor when her arm was broken and when it was fixed. When she went the first time, she saw the diamonds that Mr. Axelroot had in his plane, but he didn't like her spying on him and said that if she told anyone, her Mama and Daddy would get sick and die. Now Ruth May is sick instead of Mama and Daddy. "I broke my arm because I was spying and Mama told me not to. This time I got sick because Baby Jesus can see ever what I do and I wasn't good. I tore up some of Adah's pictures and I lied to mama four times and I tried to see Nelson naked. And hit Leah on the leg with a stick and saw Mr. Axelroot's diamonds. That is a lot of bad things. If I die I will disappear and I know where I'll come back. I'll be right up there in the tree, same color, same everything. I will look down on you. But you won't see me" (pg. 273).

Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (245-273) Analysis

This section of the book contrasts Brother Fowles and Nathan Price, showing again Nathan's rigidness and self-righteousness. Brother Fowles respects the villagers in Kilanga, accepting them as they are and caring for them, even as he brought the Bible to them. Nathan, in contrast, tries to beat the gospel down the villagers' throats. He believes that his way is the only way and that if the villagers aren't following his example, then they are inferior and wrong.

Ruth May's sickness recalls the foreshadowing earlier in the book that one of the girls will die in the Congo. She is the daughter who seems to encounter the greatest amount of danger, mainly through her own curiosity. Ruth May's feeling that if she dies she will come back in the tree looking down on everyone foreshadows later events as well.



Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (274-298)

Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (274-298) Summary

Rachel turns seventeen. Mother gives Rachel a pair of her own earrings and matching bracelet of cut glass. Rachel thinks that Leah has been acting all high and mighty since Anatole asked her to teach at the school. Rachel doesn't know how Leah can be excited about something like that.

More and more, Father is trying to speak Congolese in his sermons since he distrusts the interpreters. He ends every sermon with "Tata Jesus is Bangala" (pg. 276) Bangala means something precious and dear but the way that Father pronounces it means the poisonwood tree. While he preaches of the poisonwood tree, Ruth May is raised from the dead because Mother makes her eat the malaria pills that she'd hid. Father doesn't seem to notice that Ruth May is better.

Only Father remains the same as he did before they arrived. The Congo has changed everyone else. Ruth May is better but she has lost interest in life. Nelson thinks that an owl stole her soul. Rachel plays at being engaged and then throws tantrums about it. Mother lets the girls run around now, sometimes slipping her shoes off in the clearing by the river. Leah has taken an interest in French and Kikongo languages because they are taught to her by Anatole. She is even learning bow hunting. Nelson views her bow and arrows as a positive development and has taken to supervising her training with them. Leah and Adah have become even more distant from one another.

Leah thinks that Anatole's profile looks like a Pharaoh or an Egyptian god. She wants to ask him about all the horrifying stories they hear about whites being slaughtered. Most of all she wants to ask him if he hates her for being white. Instead, she asks him why some of the boys dislike her. She tells him about home and how her father thinks that the Congo is just lagging behind and that he can help it rise. She tells Anatole how she used to pray to become like her father.

The day after Rachel's birthday, Axelroot comes to see her and they go for a walk. She thinks that he almost looks handsome in his pilot sunglasses and khakis. He gives her a cigarette and they kiss later. He tells her that Patrice Lumumba, the President, is going to die. Rachel thinks he is making this up.

Adah spies on Axelroot, listening to the radio in his shack. A man comes to see Axelroot. They say that Patrice Lumumba is as good as dead. Adah is shocked but the surprise wears off in the morning. She goes back and hears that someone on the radio say that they have a poison which will look like a Congolese disease.



Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (274-298) Analysis

Adah makes the observation that only her father has remained the same in the Congo. Rather than adapting or seeing the world around him for what it is, he still believes that he knows best and that the villagers should follow his lead. He remains wrapped in his own knowledge and world, denying the world around him. He is oblivious to the suffering of his family, focusing instead on his religion and "mission" to the villagers. Orleanna suffers the brunt of his inattention as she tries to keep the girls safe and food on their table. Even Leah, once her father's daughter, is beginning to view her father in a negative way for his inattention and for his belief that he alone is right.

The political situation also worsens. Events in this section suggest that Lumumba will be killed, throwing the Congo into even more turmoil. Race will again play a role in this as his assassination will be at the hands of whites who believe that they know what is best for the Congo and that the situation in the Congo should benefit them.



Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (299-311)

Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (299-311) Summary

The ants arrive at night, like a nightmare. Nelson bangs at the back door, waking them. Leah finds herself being pulled along, still half-asleep. Every surface is covered with ants and the path to the river is like black flowing lava. Hardly anyone speaks as they run. "Crowded together we moved down the road like a rushing stream, ran till we reached the river, and there we stopped. All of us shifting from foot to foot, slapping, some people moaning in pain but only the babies shrieking and wailing out loud" (pg. 299-300). Anatole asks Leah where her family is, but she doesn't know. He says that he will go back to find them. Leah feels horrible that she left Adah.

While everyone is running to the river, Rachel runs around the house trying to decide what to save. She has only enough time to grab her mirror from the wall. Then she runs as fast as she can down the road, amid the melee of shoving. She can hear Father nearby yelling about Moses and the Egyptians. The crowd forces her along, but she remembers reading that you should stick your elbows out and raise your feet if you are ever in a crowded theater with a fire. She tries it and it works. As soon as the crowd stops, the ants are all over them again. Rachel realizes that people are climbing into boats and escaping. She screams for help but no one stops. She wades out into the river and her precious mirror cracks when she falls into the mud.

Mama carries Ruth May tightly. They run along until they get to the river. Mama puts Ruth May over her shoulder and they step into a boat. The ant bites hurt. They see Adah and Mama begins to cry. Someone else has Ruth May now, but she can't get down no matter how hard she tries. She remembers that Nelson has told her to think of a good place to go when it comes time to die, because then she'll go there instead of dying. Although Nelson told her to think about it everyday, Ruth May hasn't. Now she puts her fingers in her ears and thinks of a safe place. She thinks of a green mamba snake high up in a tree. She doesn't need to be afraid of the snake anymore because she is one. They lie still on the branch and it's quiet. Ruth May thinks that this would be the perfect place to go: where she can look down and see the whole world.

Adah looks back, thinking that she should have been devoured in her bed. One minute she is alive and the next, left behind. They all were tugged from their beds and her sisters leapt up and ran. Adah drags herself out into the moonlight, unable to make a sound because of the ants in her throat. Mother stands holding Ruth May. She says that Father went ahead. Adah asks please, but Mother turns away. She yells at Adah to follow. Adah tries to stay close behind, but she falls in the crowd. She feels herself being trampled underneath the crowd's feet and covered with ants. She finds a way to get up again. Although she doesn't know it at the time, Anatole lifts her over the crowd and puts



her in the canoe with her mother. Adah wonders that night why her mother didn't help her, but now she doesn't wonder about it at all. She finds it amazing that she thought herself worth saving, grasping for life. Even the crooked girl believed her life worth saving.

Leah is pushed into a boat. Anatole climbs in beside her with Ruth May over his shoulder. Anatole tells her that everyone is safe and that her father is giving a sermon about Pharaoh's army and the plagues. Leah watches the ants move off her legs, hardly feeling any pain now. She tells Anatole that Adah heard a plot to kill Lumumba on Axelroot's radio. Anatole doesn't respond and Leah tries to get him to say something. When she says that no one cares about them here but him, Anatole tells her that others have her family on their boats and that Mama Mwanza sometimes slips eggs under their chickens. Leah feels stupid for not realizing this, particularly since food sometimes showed up in the kitchen when nothing was there the night before. She begins to cry and tells Anatole that she loves him. He tells her never to say that again.

Book 3, The Things We Didn't Know (299-311) Analysis

The night of the ants brings about a number of shifts within the novel while other aspects remain the same. Once again the family is placed in danger and any of the daughters might die. Once again, Nathan Price seems oblivious to this. Rather than helping his wife and children escape the dangers, he moves on his own and then begins preaching to a crowd, struggling to also get away from danger. Rather than serving others by helping his family and the villagers, he chooses to remain someone who talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk.

Ruth May's death is foreshadowed once again in this book. She thinks back to Nelson's advice to think of a safe place to go to when she gets close to dying. She has decided that the safest place she can think of would be to become a green mamba that lives in the trees and looks down on everyone else. Her choice of this not only reflects her personality, including her love of spying on people, but also foreshadows the way that she will eventually die. Snakes symbolize both literal and imagined death.

Leah reveals several things in this section. First, she tells Anatole that she loves him. Although it is unclear at this point whether she really loves him or is just infatuated with him, her feelings for him have been building for a while, foreshadowing her later relationship with him. They have been spending more and more time together and Leah seems to be replacing her devotion to her father with a devotion to Anatole. She also states that she feels that God abandoned her during the night with the ants. This represents a large change for Leah, who at the beginning of the book wanted nothing more than to be a small version of her father. She begins to question, not only her father but also her faith.



Book 4, Orleanna Price (pages 317-324)

Book 4, Orleanna Price (pages 317-324) Summary

Orleanna later reads as much as she can about the events in the Congo. Fifteen years after the Congo's independence, some senators looked into the secret operations that the United States participated in. They find notes from secret meetings. President Eisenhower and the National Security Council viewed Patrice Lumumba as dangerous to the safety of the world. Orleanna doesn't understand this.

In August 1960, the head of the CIA sends a message to his Congolese station chief suggesting that he replace the Congolese government as early as possible. A coup is suggested as the action of the United States must be kept secret. Money is offered for soldiers and a scientist hired to make a poison.

On this same day, all Orleanna knows is the pain in her household. Ruth May is slipping into her fever and Rachel turns seventeen. Yet, on this day, Eisenhower makes the decision. The Congo has been independent for fifty-one days. The United States provides one million dollars in UN money to buy loyalty and the State Department completes its plans for a coup. On September 14, the army takes control of the government under Mobutu and Lumumba was placed under house arrest.

Orleanna remembers having a picture of Eisenhower hung in the kitchen house. She thought then that he looked so trustworthy and kind. On November 27, Lumumba escapes. Orleanna hears nothing of this beyond some faint rumors that Lumumba was in trouble. Lumumba's party is halted by a flat tire and then they can't get the car to move. They are rescued and brought to Bulunga. He gives an impromptu speech there but someone in the crowd owns a radio and sends the message that Lumumba has escaped. The army recaptures him less than fifty miles from Kilanga. He was taken to Thysville prison, flown to Katanga Province, and then beaten so badly that his body cannot be returned to his wife for fear of international embarrassment.

Fifteen years after the event, Orleanna sits by her radio in Atlanta listening to the special committee hearings about the Congo. On the awful day that Lumumba died so did Orleanna. "Strange to say, when it came I felt as if I'd been waiting for it my whole married life. Waiting for that ax to fall so I could walk away with no forgiveness in my heart...I've spent too many years backing over that muddy road: If only I hadn't let the children out of my sight that morning. If I hadn't let Nathan take us to Kilanga in the first place. If the Baptists hadn't taken upon themselves the religious conversion of the Congolese. What if the Americans, and the Belgians before them, hadn't tasted blood and money in Africa? If the world of white men had never touched the Congo at all?" (pg. 323-324).



Book 4, Orleanna Price (pages 317-324) Analysis

Orleanna again looks back from the present to the events taking place in the Congo when her family was there. In this section, she highlights the growing political turmoil in the Congo, as the United States decides to stage a coup to wrest control of the government from Lumumba. Race again figures as the theme in this section as the political situation rests on a predominately white nation deciding to act within a predominately black nation. Although whites do not control the government as they did when the Belgians were in power, the United States seeks to control it from behind the scenes, believing that they know what is best and right for the world.

Orleanna once again foreshadows the death of one of her children. She relates how as Lumumba dies, her own family is thrown into turmoil with the Congo. She also foreshadows the family's breakup, stating that she thinks she was always waiting for a moment when she could walk away from her marriage.



Book 4, What We Lost (pages 325-342)

Book 4, What We Lost (pages 325-342) Summary

Leah thinks that it has been a terrible time, from the drought to the ants to the worst tragedy of all. Anatole says that you can find reasons but you'll go crazy if you think it's punishment for your sins. Leah thinks the collapsing of things began in October with the vote in the church. They should have left when the congregation held an election to see if they should accept Jesus or not.

It is hot that day and the drought is getting bad. They hear rumors of rain in the west. Tata Ndu sits on the front bench of the church. He rarely comes and he doesn't appear to be paying much attention to the sermon. Earlier in the month, Father tells the congregation to repent of their sins and God will reward them with rain. Yet, the rain has not come. Today, Father preaches on Bel in the temple from the Apocrypha. He is going on with the story when Tata Ndu stands up, saying that it is time for the people to have an election. The women take pebbles and give one to each person. Clay voting bowls are set up in front of the altar, one for Jesus and one against Jesus. Father tries to interrupt the proceedings by saying the Jesus is exempt from elections, but the people are excited to vote.

Father becomes very angry, saying that they are applying the logic of children to this and that they are ignorant. Tata Ndu responds, "You believe we are *mwana*, your children, who knew nothing until you came here. Tata Price, I am an old man who learned from other old men. I could tell you the name of the great chief who instructed my father, and all the ones before him, but you would have to know how to sit down and listen. There are one hundred twenty-two. Since the time of our *mankulu* we have made our laws without help from white men" (pg. 333). He goes on to say how the white men are destroying the old ways where elders have more say than young men. Ruth May is the only one in the family who votes. She marches up and votes for Jesus. Jesus loses, eleven to fifty-six.

Rachel thinks that Leah is the cause of all the problems. Leah begins to talk back to Father and stops being polite to him. It starts when she declares she is going hunting with her bow and arrow. There is little food anywhere since the ants came and ate everything. Tata Ndu announces that the whole village has to go on a big hunt. Nelson explains that the whole village will form a big circle around the hill behind the village. They will light the grass on fire and when the animals try to escape, the men will shoot them. The kids and old folks will walk behind and pick up what got burned. Leah wants to go with the men and shoot things with her bow and arrows. Anatole and Nelson vouch for her at the village meeting. Tata Ndu and all the other men are against her doing this.

Father has his own agenda for the meeting, trying to turn the hunt into a prayer meeting with animal shooting at the end. Nobody listens to him though. Tata Ndu, Tata



Kuvudundu, and Anatole do most of the talking. The meeting divides between the young and the old. Leah has to sit in the front without saying anything. At the end, it turns into a showdown about whether to have another vote or not. Anatole thinks that they should discuss Leah's participation and agree on it properly. Tata Ndu, however, wants a vote and he sets it up. Fifty-one stones go into the bowl by Leah's bow and arrow and forty-five go into the other. Tata Kuvudundu is not happy at all.

When the family gets to their house, Father confronts Leah. He says that he is the head of the household and that Leah shouldn't go hunt with the men. He forbids her to participate but she says that she's going anyway. She marches out of the house. Father goes after her but she's already disappeared. The girls go into their room and Mother helps them move the beds around so the door is blocked. They are afraid of what Father will do now that one of them has disobeyed him and they go to sleep with kitchen utensils and knives in case they have to protect themselves. Mother sleeps in Leah's bed. Leah comes in the window before dawn and whispers to Mother for a while.

The next morning, Father acts like nothing happened. He has cuts and poisonwood boils all over his arms from thrashing around in the bushes. Leah makes herself scarce, staying at the school or in the woods with Nelson.

The night before the hunt, Nelson says that Anatole found an evil sign outside his hut. Nelson doesn't say what the evil sign is, just that it's a sign of a bad curse put on Anatole. The next morning, Anatole finds a green mamba snake curled up by his cot. For some reason, instead of getting up early, Anatole decides to light his lamp and read in bed for a while. He sees the snake then.

Book 4, What We Lost (pages 325-342) Analysis

As the political situation in the Congo becomes more perilous so does the situation in the village for the Prices. The leaders in the village are increasingly hostile to Nathan Price and his mission. His attitude toward them aggravates already uneasy race relations. In many ways, he treats the villagers like children who need to be guided and told what to do. Leah's desire to hunt with the men also disrupts the village as the chief and the witch doctor oppose her inclusion in the hunt. The increasing tensions between the Prices and the village will have dire consequences for the family. Anatole's experience with the green mamba foreshadows more encounters with this deadly snake and the measures that the village leaders will take to silence opposition.



Book 4, What We Lost (pages 343-375)

Book 4, What We Lost (pages 343-375) Summary

Before first light, everyone gathers at the edge of the village. They march into a field of elephant grass. The men lay the grass down with sticks, beating at it in unison. Men with bows and arrows go ahead while women and children follow carrying baskets. At a signal from Tata Ndu, the single file line curved to either side of the hill, forming a circle around the hill. The fire starters begin the fire with their torches. The women fan out, picking up dead insects. Mother stays with Ruth May and Adah.

The fire runs ahead. As the ring burns smaller and smaller, Adah catches sight of the other side. She sees the shapes of animals inside and watches as the arrows begin to fly at them. For every animal that falls, a cry of jubilation rises. Women kneel to skin the animals. On this day, Rachel becomes a vegetarian for a short time. Leah and Ruth May become hunter and gatherer respectively. Adah becomes something different as she realizes that all animals kill to survive.

Leah kills her first game: a young impala. She crouches near Nelson, watching. She waits for the impala and when he leaps toward her, she shoots. She does not know she hit him until she sees the spray of blood. She chases the impala toward the forest, but he falls. Leah sees two arrows in its flank, but neither has fletched red as hers had. Tata Ndu's oldest son calls her a thief but Nelson shouts that Leah killed the impala. Leah is commanded to skin the impala and bring the meat to the village. Nelson helps her.

When the hunt ends, instead of celebration there is fighting. Men shout into each other's faces. Leah's argument with Gbenye, Tata Ndu's son, becomes a shouting match between those who voted for and against her. Tata Ndu slices off part of the impala's hindquarter and throws it at Leah. She throws the leg back at Gbenye. Tata Kuvudundu claims again that the animals and nature are rising up against them.

When the family gets home, Mother builds a fire and roasts the impala meat. Leah and Father argue at dinner. Nelson runs in and says that he's seen an evil sign outside the chicken house where he sleeps. Father tells Mother that if she lets Nelson inside she'll be playing into the hands of idol worshipers. Nelson whimpers to be let in. Leah decides to go help him and Adah also gets up. The girls decide to lay a trap. Nelson rakes ashes outside the chicken house and they arrange it so that they'll see a footprint if anything gets close. Nelson goes to Anatole's house to sleep and he promises to come back before daybreak.

The girls wake before dawn and wait for Nelson. They wonder what they have caught in their trap. When Nelson arrives, they slip out of the house while their parents still sleep. Just as Nelson thinks, there is a green mamba curled around the two hens in the back of the chicken house. Nelson raises a long pole and hits the wall above the nest. The snake turns toward them and opens its mouth, showing the bright blue color inside.



Suddenly, it flies toward the pole and shoots past them out the door. They drop their eyes to the ground and see footprints, with six toes on the left prints.

Leah remembers hearing a gulp, a sob, and a scream, all at once. Leah kneels beside Ruth May to comfort her. Nelson also kneels. They watch Ruth May's face change to a pale blue. Nelson rips open her shirt and yells for the others to get Mama Nguza and milk. Leah can't move but can only stare at the two red puncture marks on Ruth May's left shoulder.

Ruth May dies and Adah thinks that she moved backward out of this world. Leah doesn't cry at first, but then falls apart at the thought of having to tell Mother. "The whole world would change then, and nothing would ever be all right again. Not for our family. All the other people in the whole wide world might go on about their business, but for us it would never be normal again" (pg. 366). No one can move. Rachel thinks that until that moment she believed that she could go home and pretend the Congo never happened.

Mother behaves like someone has already told her. She dresses, ties back her hair, and begins her chores. She takes down the mosquito netting from their beds first. Father seems unable to grasp what has happened, saying that Ruth May isn't baptized yet. At that moment, Leah thinks that her father is a simple, ugly man. Mother washes Ruth May's body, where it lies on the dining table. She hums quietly. After she finishes, she begins stitching together the mosquito netting for shroud. They bring the table and then Ruth May outside. Nelson weaves together palm fronds for a funeral arch of leaves and flowers. Women from the village come and they begin to shriek the mourning song. Mother begins moving all of the furniture into the yard and begins offering their goods and furniture to the women. It begins to rain and Father comes out and begins baptizing the village children.

Book 4, What We Lost (pages 343-375) Analysis

The event which has been foreshadowed throughout the book so far happens. One of the girls dies. The green mamba becomes a symbol of death as someone in the village places green mambas in areas where certain people will be. Nelson's superstitions save him from death, but Ruth May is bitten as the snake leaves the chicken house. As the most innocent of the Prices and the one that embraced the Congo the most, Ruth May's death is even more poignant. After Nelson's guidance, Ruth May had decided that she would think of being a green mamba in a tree if she were ever faced with death. Now, she has been killed by the very thing that was to make her safe.

The situation in the village comes to a head, as someone places snakes where Anatole and Nelson sleep. This six-toed person wishes both of them harm and this likely stems from their actions surrounding the hunt. The Prices have been outsiders since their arrival and Nathan Price's actions, in particular, continue to push them from the village. His ethnocentrism and self-righteousness keep him from being the husband and father that the family needs and keep him from seeing the good in the villagers.



Book 5, Orleanna Price (pages 381-385)

Book 5, Orleanna Price (pages 381-385) Summary

As long as Orleanna keeps moving, her grief streams out behind her. She thinks now that a mother's body remembers her babies but that it's the last baby that overtakes a mother. She was frazzled with the first three, all coming so close together. The last one is the baby you can't put down.

Orleanna stays alive by instinct rather than by will. She tries to flee from her grief and motion becomes her only purpose. When there is nothing left to move out of the house, Orleanna walks to the edge of the village and just keeps going. She didn't set out to leave Nathan, even though she should have long before. It never occurs to her to leave him out of unhappiness. He is something that happened to them. She thinks that his kind will always lose in the end because they stand still.

Book 5, Orleanna Price (pages 381-385) Analysis

This section foreshadows the final breakup of the family. With Ruth May's death, Orleanna has to find some way to live. She does so by walking away from the village and from her husband. Her voice in the section is full of grief and longing for her youngest daughter, even though she is looking back on the event with many years in between. Ruth May's death is real and present for her and she feels a great amount of guilt about it.



Book 5, What We Carried Out (pages 386-439)

Book 5, What We Carried Out (pages 386-439) Summary

They only take what they can carry. Mother never turns to see if the girls are following. Mama Mwanza's daughters run up and give the girls oranges and water. It continues to rain, soaking them all. Leah looks around for Ruth May once, only to realize that Ruth May is no longer with them. Her mind wanders to Anatole and all the things that she wants to tell him. They arrive in the small village of Kiala after dark and they all shake from exhaustion.

They do not reach Bulungu before they come down with a fever, surrendering to the mosquitoes. Leah thinks that she can feel the malaria move through her veins. They walk on. She has no memory of arriving in Bulungu, although she's told that some men carried her on a pallet. Anatole comes.

Leah can't say how many weeks it's been since Mother left them. She stays in a hut that belongs to Anatole's pupil. When Mother and Adah left, Leah goes with them for a while to say goodbye. Rachel has already left and Leah cannot leave yet because of the malaria. She thinks that love changes everything. She craves Anatole now. Anatole says that it's not time for her to become his wife as she is still in mourning. She's well enough to travel now but it is easy to stay on with Anatole.

Rachel has spent a year in Johannesburg, South Africa now. She leaves the Congo with Eben Axelroot. He tells her that they cannot get married right away, but now she thinks that he is avoiding marriage. Axelroot has been in the process of getting set up in South Africa, having a new position in the gold-mining industry. Rachel is determined to make the best of the situation though. She starts going by the name Rachel Axelroot and she is friends with the best people.

Adah decides to speak, as this becomes a matter of self-defense. Mother seems to have gone mute and Adah needs to get away from Bethlehem. Mother moves into a plywood cabin on the outskirts of town. She doesn't hook up a telephone, but instead, takes a hoe and begins cultivating flowers and vegetables. Adah begins looking at the catalog for Emory University. She rides down to Atlanta and limps into the admissions office. The man she interviews with sets her up with entrance exams and government benefits since she's the child of a veteran. She takes the bus back on weekends to see Mother. They never talk much. She wonders about Mother's reasons for saving her.

Leah stays in a convent with nuns. She is smuggled in under darkness and given refuge during Anatole's imprisonment. Leah realizes after begging to stay with him that she was a liability to Anatole. Plans are made for the two of them to leave. Tata Boanda



brought them money and some of the girls' things that Leah cannot believe were saved. The news of Father is not good. He is living alone and the house has burned. Father lives in a hut, wild-haired and struggling with malnutrition. Tata Boanda also tells Leah that Ruth May is mourned in the village and Tata Ndu threatened to exile Tata Kuvudundu for planting the snake. When Leah and Anatole move to Stanleyville, her white skin is even more of a liability. They leave the city and Anatole delivers Leah to the mission, deep in the jungle. Anatole works with the Lumumbists, hoping to reassemble the fallen leader's plans, and is detained and imprisoned. Leah now stays at the mission. She gets letters every few weeks from Anatole and has become passably fluent in Lingala, the language spoken throughout northern Congo.

Rachel thinks that if she knew what marriage would be like, she'd have tied together all her hope-chest linens and hung herself. She doesn't mind living in South Africa and her overall surroundings are good. She thinks that she has put the past behind her. Her discontent comes from her marriage to Eeben Axelroot, who treats her like a slave and leaves her alone for long periods of time. She thinks that she has a chance at Daniel, the First Attachy for the French in South Africa. Rachel thinks that Daniel's wife will never hack it and Axelroot is cheating on Rachel anyway. She believes that she will soon be Mrs. Daniel Attachy-to-the-Ambassador DuPree.

January 17 chills Leah to the bone, as it's the day that Ruth May died. Leah kills a snake this morning. This is a day that Leah and Anatole simply get through, their grief very different. She holds on to Ruth May while he mourns for lost Independence and a leader. She watches him pack his book bag and walk off toward the school. They have been lucky, as most dissidents have been executed. When they reunited last fall, they chose Bikoki to move to, thinking that Anatole will know people there, but most are dead or gone. His mother's younger sister, Aunt Elisabet, lives there though. Her old friend Pascal and many of Anatole's old students have been murdered by the army. Father has left Kilanga, vanishing into the forest.

Book 5, What We Carried Out (pages 386-439) Analysis

This section traces what happens to the family for the first several years after Ruth May's death. The green mamba signifies death not only for the family's youngest member but also for the family itself. Orleanna walks away from the village and her husband, with her three remaining daughters trailing behind. The family's disintegration mirrors the Congo's. At the same time that someone in the village plots harm for the family, Patrice Lumumba is killed as people inside his country and outside his country plot against him.

The years after Ruth May's death bring drastic changes for the family. Leah marries Anatole and remains in the Congo. Adah begins her college education at Emory. Rachel moves to South Africa and marries Eeben Axelroot. Orleanna moves back to Bethlehem, living in a small shack at the outskirts of town. The Congo and the family's experience there haunt each of them.



Book 5, What We Carried Out (pages 440-506)

Book 5, What We Carried Out (pages 440-506) Summary

Adah is losing her slant. She is in medical school now and has befriended a neurologist who believes that an injury to the brain as early as Adah's should have no lasting effects on physical mobility. She submitted her body to an experimental program, mostly to prove the man wrong. For six months, he had her stop walking altogether. Now, Adah finds that she can toddle in a straight line.

Leah is in Atlanta with Anatole and their son Pascal. She is pregnant with another child. Leah is taking classes and the family is making an attempt to become Americans, but Adah thinks that it won't last. Adah finds a kindred spirit in Anatole, both of them marked. They see a good deal of Mother. She moved last year to an apartment in Atlanta and she marches for civil rights. Adah asks her why she chose to take her from the Congo. Mother answers that a mother takes care of her children from the bottom up. After Ruth May, Adah is the youngest.

All of the old town names in the Congo have been erased and even the Congo is now called Zaire. Leah lives in Kinshasa, Zaire. There are six people in the house now: Leah, Anatole, their sons Pascal, Patrice, and Martin-Lothaire, Aunt Elisabet, and her daughter Christiane. She hears from Mother and Adah maybe twice a year because of the crumbling postal service. She knows that they send more but they don't get through. In every package, there is some oddball thing from Adah that Leah thinks are secret messages to her. Adah writes that there is talk of an investigation in the United States' role in past wrongdoings in the Congo. Mobutu is rumored to be building a castle near Brussels and takes all the foreign aid for himself. The latest news is that Mobutu is bringing two American boxers, Ali and Foreman, to fight in Kinshasa.

Leah thinks that she survives on outrage. They eat mostly manioc and rice and soy meal when they can get it. Yet, they have the option of leaving. Leah thinks in the back of her mind that they could try Atlanta again. She thinks that she and her family are luckier than most in the Congo. She thinks back to when her family was missionaries and realizes that even at their low points they were wealthier than any other family in Kilanga. Leah signs on to teach at a special school in a compound for Americans. The Americans came to work on the Inga-Shaba power line. She teaches grammar and literature to the children. She quits at the end of the second term. She's glad, learning that in order to build the power line, the World Bank loaned the Congo more than a billion dollars which will be repaid in cobalt and diamonds forever. Whatever hasn't left the country is in the hands of Mobutu.



Rachel thinks that people shouldn't believe in fairy tales because they never tell you the rest of the story. She marries a diplomat and she feels like Cinderella for a time, but she learns that a man who leaves his wife for a mistress is not a good catch. Her third husband is older and very devoted. He dies and leaves her the Equatorial, the nicest hotel for businessmen along the northern route from Brazzaville to Owando. The hotel is on an old plantation and is surrounded by orange trees and coconut palms. It has a restaurant for paying guests. Her proudest achievements are the swimming pool, patio, and garden. Rachel thinks that she needs to keep everything locked down though, because her help will steal everything otherwise. She also thinks that she'll get very rich before anyone in the family comes to visit her here. She doesn't understand why Leah can't come to visit, seeing as though she isn't very far away. She wonders why her father hasn't come because he doesn't have anything better to do. She believes that her family doesn't come because they'd have to respect her now if they did. She thinks that they like thinking of her as the dumb blonde. The family just seemed to fall apart after Ruth May's death. She refuses to take any responsibility for what happened in the Congo. Rachel ends the day by closing down the bar by herself and then sitting in the dark with a nightcap and a cigarette.

Anatole is in prison again. Leah forces herself to get out of bed and take care of the children. Anatole believes that the only honorable government work is bringing it down. Now Leah has lost the companionship of his ideas. She always believed that they could just fly to America if things got bad, but she's made three trips back now and feels more and more a stranger there. The boys alternated between homesickness and frenzy. Americans regarded Anatole and the children as freaks or primitives. So, they came back. Anatole's passport was confiscated. The next morning, they came for Anatole and took him to Thysville. Leah found a house for her and children and she is aware of her whiteness now more than ever. She thinks that they all gave their heart and soul to Africa in one way or another.

Rachel thinks that this is the last time she participates in a reunion with any of her sisters. Leah was the organizer of the trip, saying that if she didn't do something the last month before Anatole got out of prison, she'd go crazy. The last time he was about to get out, they made him stay another year. Leah's older two boys are in Atlanta going to school and her youngest is staying with Mother for the summer. Rachel thinks the reunion is just an excuse to get a Land Rover from America to Kinshasa. She only goes because a friend of hers has recently died and she's feeling at loose ends. The plan is for Adah to go with the Land Rover on a boat to Spain and then she'll drive it to West Africa where Rachel and Leah will meet her. They'll spend a few weeks together before Adah flies home and Rachel and Leah drive back as far as Brazzaville together. Anatole meets them in Brazzaville and then he and Leah are off, even though they are only a half days drive from Rachel's hotel and she doesn't understand why they don't come to see it. This solves Rachel's dilemma because she cannot make an exception and allow Anatole upstairs at the hotel.

The girls start arguing almost as soon as they all get together in Senegal. Rachel is shocked to see Adah's transformation and she thinks how alike Leah and Adah look now. They talk about Father. Leah says that he'd been up around Lusambo for the last



five years and that this summer she'd run into someone who'd been working up there and he told her that Father is dead. He'd still been trying to baptize children but he hid from people. He'd gotten a reputation of turning into a crocodile and eating children. There was a horrible accident on the river and a boat full of kids died and Father was blamed. They set the tower he was in on fire and he died. Leah also tells them about the people in Kilanga and what has happened to them over the years.

Adah thinks that Rachel seems incapable of remorse and Leah takes it all in and makes hair shirt from it. Mother has moved to the Georgia coast to a brick house on Sanderling Island. She stays outdoors a lot and when Adah visits she often finds Mother staring out over the ocean in a standoff with Africa. Adah walks without her slant and it has taken her years to get used to this. No one seems to miss the old Adah, except Adah. Adah doesn't know how to explain that she believes that her two unmatched halves made up more than one whole.

As soon as Adah gets back to America, she goes to see Mother. They look at Adah's photographs of Africa. She tells Mother that Father died. Mother just gets up and goes to plant flowers, saying that she doesn't care what Father would have wanted. She says that no one in Bethlehem asked her how Ruth May died and when she worked in the civil rights movement, they never talked about her crazy husband who lived in the Congo. Adah says that she hated Father the most when he made fun of her books and when he hit any of them.

Leah has four sons, all named after men they lost to the war: Pascal, Patrice, Martin-Lothaire, and Nataniel. Nataniel is her miracle, born last year while they were moving to the farm in Kimvula District. It was less than a year after Anatole had been released from prison. Nathaniel was weak and born early. Leah had been terrified to put him down in case he slipped away. Pascal studies petroleum engineering in Luanda. Patrice wants to be a Minister of Justice in a different Africa. Martin-Lothaire broods and writes poetry. Leah and the family work with farmers on a soybean project, hoping to establish a cooperative. Anatole has reorganized the secondary school and Leah is busy with Nataniel. Life feels provisional however as they plan to move to Angola as soon as possible.

Book 5, What We Carried Out (pages 440-506) Analysis

The rest of Book 5 continues to relate what happens to the family after Ruth May's death. The girls meet twenty years after their youngest sister died in the Congo, looking to reunite family bonds and to share their experiences. Yet, as Rachel points out, their lives are very different, but each has been touched and scarred in some way by the events in the Congo. Rachel fails to understand either of her sisters' lives, particularly Leah's, who lives in the Congo in poverty and political instability. Adah feels disconnected from herself now that she now longer limps. Leah struggles with Anatole's imprisonment, the political situation, and her own guilt.



The section also emphasizes how Americans react to Orleanna when she returns from the Congo and Leah when she comes to visit. The narrative illustrates the ethnocentrism permeating the United State's decision to influence the politics in the Congo in the first place. Africa and the people there are regarded as different and primitive. Anatole and the boys are looked down upon because of their appearance and language.



Book 6, Song of the Three Children

Book 6, Song of the Three Children Summary

Rachel is turning fifty and she thinks that it is hard work to look as good as she does for her age. She thinks that at least she can look around and see what she's accomplished. She calls the shots in her domain. She misses life in the United States every day but she thinks that it's too late to go back now. She should have gone home when things soured with Axelroot because she didn't have anything tying her to Africa then. Now she has the hotel. She was always afraid that she wouldn't fit in if she went back and she'd never be popular there again. She regrets never being able to have children, but there is never a dull moment at the Equatorial. She is amazed at what she's been through and been able to survive. Her advice is to let others do the pushing and shoving while you just ride along.

Leah and Anatole have been living in Angola for ten years, on an agricultural station. They aren't far from the border and the people here remind Leah of Kilanga. She keeps expecting to see someone from Kilanga coming round a corner. Yet, she also notices that there are few children in the village, the war killing many of them. Leah teaches nutrition, sanitation, and soybeans classes to women. She thinks that if she could reach into the past and give Father one gift it would be the relief of knowing you've done something wrong and can live through it. She believes that he never caught on. She looks at her four boys and understands that time erases whiteness.

Adah swore to uphold the Hippocratic oath but she doesn't think loss of life is always unwelcome. She thinks that for every life saved by vaccination or food relief in the world, another is lost to starvation or war. Her work is to discover the life histories of viruses and she is good at it. She's made important discoveries about the AIDS and Ebola viruses. Her life is ordinary and satisfying. She works and visits her Mother once a month at the beach where they pass mostly without speaking. Mother waits for forgiveness and she still suffers from the effects of several diseases that she picked up while in the Congo. Mother never marries again. Adah also does not marry. She thinks that any man who would admire her body now is a traitor to the old Adah. She still loves to read and lately, she's begun collecting old books that are famous for their misprints. The Bibles with the misprints are fascinating to her and she wonders what Bible her father wrote in Africa. She thinks again of him standing in front of the congregation, pronouncing words so that it came out "Tata Jesus is poisonwood." "We are the balance of our damage and our transgressions. He was my father. I own half his genes, and all of his history. Believe this: the mistakes are part of the story. I am born of a man who believed he could tell nothing but the truth, while he set down from all time the Poisonwood Bible" (pg. 533).



Book 6, Song of the Three Children Analysis

The daughters' stories continue in this chapter as Kingsolver explains what has happened to them all. Their personalities and choices remain similar to what they have chosen throughout the novel. Rachel remains self-centered and ethnocentric. She thinks that it is best to let others do the pushing and to just ride along. With this, she takes little responsibility for her own actions. Leah and Anatole continue with their desire to see a better Africa emerge. Adah remains somewhat cynical, but thoughtful as she was in Africa.



Book 7, The Eyes in the Trees

Book 7, The Eyes in the Trees Summary

The mouth is sky blue and the belly glides on a branch. They are accomplices to the fall, but the child moves untouched now through the forest.

Down a path comes a woman with four girls. At the river, they eat their picnic lunch and then move downstream to play in the cool water. They startle a young okapi. "Every life is different because you passed this way and touched history. Even the child Ruth May touched history. Everyone is complicit" (pg. 538). Being dead is no worse than being alive. It is just different, the view larger.

Another day, the same woman leads her children through a market. Now she has white hair and there are only three daughters behind her. None of them limps and they do not stay in a line as they did before. They are surprised to be there. They have not been together in one place since the death of the youngest daughter. They have come to say goodbye to Ruth May and they wish to find her grave. In truth, the daughters have come to say goodbye to their mother, whom they love. They stand out in the crowd as visitors to the market are rare.

The woman and her daughters are looking for something that they will not find. They want to find a way to Kilanga and find the sister's grave. The mother wants to put a grave marker there. Yet, it is impossible to cross the border. In the six months since they planned the trip, the Congo has been swept up in war.

The woman and her daughters stop short, thinking that they recognize someone. It is not the woman herself but the style of her dress and her benevolence. They cross the street to her. She speaks Kikongo and when one of the daughters answers her in the same language, the woman doesn't seem surprised. She gives the mother a carved okapi. Orleanna pockets it. The woman is from Bulungu but she is unable to recall any village named Kilanga.

Book 7, The Eyes in the Trees Analysis

Orleanna and her daughters return to Africa in an attempt to visit Ruth May's grave. The narrative in this chapter comes from above: Ruth May as a green mamba snake. The chapter mixes the symbolism and culture of both Africa and the United States. The western mother and daughters seek to find the grave of their fallen sister to pay their respects and remember. Ruth May has become a part of Africa and the Congo, her spirit changing into the green mamba as Nelson had told her it could. In a broader sense, Ruth May symbolizes the fall of the Congo along with the other dead children. She alludes to the complicity of the western world in their dealings with the Congo and the individual sins that each person carries. Yet, her lingering voice and spirit represent a hope for forgiveness and renewal.



Characters

Orleanna Price

Orleanna is the wife of Nathan and the mother to Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May. She has dark hair. She is kind and does the best that she can in taking care of her family in trying circumstances. She feels trapped by Nathan but can't find a way to leave him until Ruth May dies. He came back from World War II a changed man, but by then she was already married to him. She cares for her daughters a great deal, but the situation that she finds herself in in the Congo leaves her exhausted most of the time. Nathan leaves her with almost total responsibility over the girls' day to day lives and the household.

When Ruth May dies, Orleanna takes her remaining three daughters out of Kilanga. She and Adah return to the United States. Orleanna lives on the outskirts of Bethlehem, Georgia for a while, keeping her distance from other people. In time, she moves to Sanderling Island, where she spends time looking out over the ocean toward Africa. She lives alone and does not remarry.

In the sections where Orleanna narrates it is clear that she blames herself for Ruth May's death and the way things turned out. She thinks that if she had found a way to get them out earlier that Ruth May would have survived. She feels guilt and sadness over her daughter's death and tries to punish herself for it. Yet, Orleanna is a good mother to her daughters. She cares deeply for them and tries to protect them as best she can from Nathan and from the dangers around them. She tries to make things better for the girls in the Congo, although these attempts were often thwarted by unexpected events.

Rachel Price

Rachel is the oldest daughter of the Price's. She is fifteen when the family goes to the Congo. She has blond hair, blue eyes, and is very pretty. She often cares more about her clothes and how she looks than anything else. She also tends to be judgmental about the villagers in Kilanga and her sisters after they leave.

After Ruth May's death, Rachel flies with Eeben Axelroot to South Africa where she lives with him for several years. She tries to pretend that they are married and tries to make friends with the important people in town. She marries an attachy to the ambassador named Daniel. Her third husband, Remy, is an older man who leaves her a hotel when he dies. Rachel continues to run the hotel.

Rachel is a selfish, self-centered woman. She is most concerned about how she looks and how events will affect her. In the Congo, she looks down on the villagers because of the way they look and what they wear. After leaving, she remains concerned mostly about herself and trying to better her situation, regardless of how it affects others. She is



upset that her family does not come to visit her in South Africa, but does not do anything herself to connect with them.

Leah Price

Leah is Adah's twin. She has dark hair and eyes. At first, Leah is very much her father's daughter. She wants him to love and recognize her and so she tries to spend more time with him than inside with her mother and sisters. Gradually, however, Leah begins to see her father's self-righteousness. She becomes much more independent, wanting to experience the world on her own terms. She is a tomboy and in Kilanga, she learns to shoot a bow and arrow. She participates in the big hunt, which causes a great uproar in the village because some of the leaders don't think a woman should hunt.

When her mother and Adah leave the Congo, Leah remains behind to recover from malaria. She marries Anatole and lives in hiding at a convent when he is later arrested and sent to prison. They eventually move to Angola with their children to work on an agricultural station. Leah teaches classes on nutrition and sanitation

Leah undergoes a great deal of change in the novel. In the beginning, she believes in her father and wants to win his approval. She tries to follow in his footsteps and looks up to him as a role model. As time in the Congo passes, Leah sees her father's faults and begins to have doubts about his attitudes and beliefs. She starts to view the people in the Congo differently and comes to care about them. She falls in love with Anatole and adopts Africa as her homeland.

Adah Price

Adah is one of the Price's twin daughters. Her right side drags, making her limp on that side. She was also born with half her brain deprived of blood, but she is still very smart and gifted. Although she can speak, Adah chooses to remain silent. She has dark hair and eyes. In the Congo, she spends a great deal of time observing and describing what is happening around the village and her family.

After Ruth May dies, Adah goes back to the United States with Orleana. She attends Emory University and becomes a doctor. She meets a doctor who believes that the brain can be retrained to end her limping and Adah undergoes therapy which cures her of her slant and limp. She eventually studies the history of viruses, trying to find a cure for them.

Adah is in many ways an outsider. Her disabilities and her decision not to speak make her different than the people around her. Because of this, she learns to watch and observe, seeing the things that other people don't notice. She is highly intelligent and analyzes the world around her. Adah is accepting of others, perhaps because of her own status of an outsider.



Ruth May Price

Ruth May is the youngest child in the family and she is five when they go to the Congo. She has blond curly hair. Her sisters think she is stubborn. She thinks that sometimes she does bad things, like trying to see Nelson naked and spying on the Jimmy Crow boys. She dies after being bitten by a green mamba that has been placed in the family's chicken house by a villager.

Ruth May is a precocious little girl who is always getting into trouble because of her curiosity. She spies on Eeben Axelroot and on the African Communist Boy Scouts. Of the sisters, she is the most accepting of Africa and the people there. She is the first to make friends with the village children. She takes on some of their customs, such as not saying "snake" at night

Nathan Price

Nathan is a Baptist minister. He is married to Orleanna and is the father of Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May. He takes the family to Africa as missionaries without the full blessing of the Mission League, who end up giving him a small stipend but not the regular pay. Kingsolver portrays Nathan as a hard man who is so entrenched in his own self-righteousness that he can't see reality around him.

Nathan's prominent characteristics are his self-righteousness, ethnocentrism, and his being oblivious of his family and their needs. He believes that he alone knows the right way to do things and that he lives life the way his god would want him to live it. He expects in others, whether his family or the villagers, a strict obedience to what he tells them to do. Orleanna says that he couldn't abide to back down or lose. He is stubborn and unwilling to change. Although the novel does not explicitly discuss it, Kingsolver suggests that he has hit Orleanna and the girls in the past.

When the family is advised to leave the Congo, Nathan refuses. He states that the family will stay until a replacement arrives, although there is no one planning to come. After Ruth May dies, Orleanna and the girls leave him in the village. Leah later hears that he was killed when a watchtower was set on fire. The villagers who did so believed that Nathan could turn himself into a crocodile to attack their children.

Anatole Ngemba

Anatole is the schoolteacher in Kilanga. He is twenty-four and an orphan. He was born near Stanleyville and after his parents died, he worked on a rubber plantation and in a diamond mine. He has scars all over his face, like tattoos. He tries to act as a mediator between Nathan Price and the village leaders but Nathan will not listen to him. He also sends Nelson to help the Prices.



Anatole marries Leah, some time after Ruth May's death. He is arrested and sent to prison several times for his political beliefs and actions. He remains committed to making Africa a better place. He and Leah have four sons. They eventually move to Angola to work on an agricultural station.

Anatole is intelligent and kind. He tries to mediate for the Prices in the village even though Nathan Price is unkind and patronizing towards him and the other villagers. He is also idealistic in regards to Africa and the Congo, in particular. He believes that he can make a difference, but this also puts him and his family at risk.

Eeben Axelroot

Axelroot is a pilot who works in the Congo. He brings the Prices to Kilanga and brings supplies to them after that, for a price. He lives by the landing strip in Kilanga in a shack. He travels often, sometimes transporting supplies for large prices. He seems to be involved in some shady dealings and in the death of the prime minister.

After Ruth May dies, Axelroot takes Rachel to South Africa with him. They live together for a while until Rachel leaves him. She sees Axelroot as unbearable to live with and mean to her. He is out for himself and doesn't really care who he uses or steps on to get the things that he wants.

Tata Ndu

Tata Ndu is the village chief. He wears glasses which have no lenses. His face is broad and he has muscular arms. He has a number of wives and at one point, wants to marry Rachel as well. He tries to make peace with Nathan Price about the church at first, but Nathan refuses to give any ground. Tata Ndu remains against the church because of this.

Tata Ndu engineers a vote in the church about Jesus. The village votes against him. He plans a big hunt for the village when the drought is making it difficult to find food. He also argues that Leah should not hunt with the men in the big village hunt.

Nelson

Anatole sends Nelson to live with the Prices and help them. He sleeps in the chicken house and receives a basket of eggs each week to sell at the market. His skin is many tones of brown and his front teeth are all but gone. His hair is cut short and he has a round scar on the back of his neck. Nelson is a twelve-year old orphan and because of his family's deaths, he places great stock in signs and superstitions. He wears brown pants and a red t-shirt. Leah learns later that Nelson marries and has several children.



Mama Mwanza

Mama Mwanza lives near the Prices. Her legs were burned off in a fire so she walks on her hands. She carries her things in a basket on her head. After the Prices no longer have an income, she continues to bring them food. She is kind and giving even though she doesn't have to be, especially in her dealings with the Prices.

Brother Fowles

Brother Fowles ran the mission in Kilanga before the Prices. He is old and skinny, with a white beard and blue eyes. He is married to a Congolese woman and they travel by houseboat on the river to villages in the Congo. He cares a great deal about the people of the Congo and in contrast to Nathan Price, he respects them and tries to learn from them. He wants to help improve the situation in the country but does so in a way that is not patronizing or oppressing for the people involved.

Tata Kuvudundu

Tata Kuvudundu is the witch doctor in Kilanga. He has six toes on one of his feet. He is against Leah being able to participate in the big hunt and threatens that the animals will rise up against everyone. He places snakes in both Anatole's hut and in the Price's chicken house. The snake in the chicken house kills Ruth May.

Mama Bekwa Tataba

Mama Tataba is a small, jet-black woman who helps the Prices when they arrive in Kilanga. She lives with them and earns a small stipend by cooking for them. She carries their water from the river, lights the lamps, and builds the fire as well. She has one blind eye. She eventually leaves after arguing with Nathan about baptism.

Pascal

Pascal is the girls' first friend in the Congo. He plays with Ruth May and sticks around when the other children gradually leave. He tells Leah the names of everything that they see. He is killed by the blue-helmets near Bulungu. Leah and Anatole name their first son after him.

Patrice Lumumba

Lumumba is a tall, distinguished looking man who wears real eyeglasses and has a beard. He is elected the first president of the newly independent Congo. The United States, along with some people in the Congo, conspire against him. Lumumba is put under house arrest. He escapes, but is later captured and beaten to death.



Rev. and Mrs. Underdown

Rev. and Mrs. Underdown oversee the financial affairs for the Mission League. They have two children and live in Leopoldville. When the Congo is poised for Independence, the Underdowns leave the Congo, after urging the Prices to do the same.

Tata Boanda

Tata Boanda is a fisherman in Kilanga. He goes out every morning in bright red pants. He has two wives. He tries to help Anatole and Leah escape the Congo soon after Ruth May's death. He also brings news to Leah about her father and how the villagers mourn Ruth May.

Mama Boanda

Mama Boanda wears a black skirt with a pink star across her bottom. She comes across Orleanna and the girls after Ruth May's death and invites them to stay in her parent's house in Kiala.

Aunt Elisabet

Aunt Elisabet is Anatole's aunt. She looks for for him after his parents are killed but cannot find him after he works in the diamond mines. She has a daughter. Anatole and Leah stay with her at various points in the novel. She is kind to Leah and they help each other when they can.

Pascal Ngemba

Pascal is Anatole and Leah's oldest son. He is named after the boy that Leah played with in Kilanga who was killed. He studies petroleum engineering in Luanda. He is cheerful and happy.

Patrice Ngemba

Patrice is Anatole and Leah's second son. He is named from Patrice Lumumba. He is studious and sober. Leah thinks that he is like Anatole. He wants to study government and be a Minister of Justice.



Martin-Lothaire Ngemba

Martin-Lothaire is Leah and Anatole's third son. He is the darkest of the boys in temperament and complexion. He broods and writes poetry. Leah thinks that he reminds her of Adah.

Nathaniel Ngemba

Nathaniel, or 'Taniel, is Leah and Anatole's fourth and last son. He is born along a road as the family moves to the border between the Congo and Angola.



Objects/Places

Kilanga

Kilanga is the village that the Prices move to in the Congo.

The Church Building

The church in Kilanga is an open dirt floor building.

The Price Home

The Price's home in the Congo is located in the village of Kilanga. It is larger than the other houses in the village and has a front room, two bedrooms, and a veranda.

Bethlehem, Georgia

Bethlehem is the town that the Prices live in before they leave for the Congo.

Kitchen House

The Price's kitchen is separate from their house. Orleanna has put up pictures in it, including one of President Eisenhower.

Kwilu River

This river runs along the Kilanga village. Nathan Price keeps trying to baptize people here but the women, in particular, resist because of the threat of crocodiles.

Methuselah

Methuselah is an African Grey parrot who is in the Price house when they arrive. He used to belong to Brother Fowles. Nathan Price doesn't like that the bird swears and sets him loose one day. The parrot hangs around the house after that.

The Chicken House

The Price's chicken house is located in the back of the house. Nelson sleeps there after he comes to live with the Prices.



Leopoldville

This city is where the Underdowns live in the Congo.

Bulungu

Bulungu is the town in the Congo that Orleanna, Rachel, Leah, and Adah walk to after Ruth May dies. Leah remains here with Anatole.

Johannesburg, South Africa

When Rachel leaves the Congo, she moves to Johannesburg with Eeben Axelroot.

Emory University

Adah goes to school and earns a medical degree here after she returns from the Congo.

Mission Notre Dame de Douleur

When Anatole is imprisoned, Leah lives in the mission as a nun in order to stay safe. Leah works in the clinic.

Bikoki Station

Leah and Anatole move here after he is released from prison.

Kinshasa

Leah and Anatole live here for a while with Aunt Elizabeth and the children.

Equatorial

Rachel inherits this hotel from one of her husbands. The land that the hotel sits on used to be a plantation and it has groves of orange trees and coconut palms. There are some guest rooms and a restaurant.

Sanderling Island, Georgia

Orleanna moves to this island after she lives in Atlanta. She gardens and often stares out over the ocean toward Africa. Adah visits her there often.

Sanza Pombo, Angola

Leah and Anatole move to Sanza Pombo to work on an agricultural station. Leah teaches classes here.



Social Sensitivity

The Poisonwood Bible, Barbara Kingsolver's most ambitious novel to date, tells the story of a missionary family's experiences in the Belgian Congo (now known as Zaire) in 1959-61, just as that nation was claiming its independence from colonial rule. The experience of living in Africa leaves an indelible mark on each member of the family, and their stories are carried forward into the present day.

The Reverend Nathan Price is a Baptist preacher who is determined to save the souls of the native population of the village of Kilanga. So strong is his zeal that his mission is not even sanctioned by the missionary society that oversees the area. Thus, the Price family are not given the kind of training and essential information they normally would have received—a circumstance that proves tragic. The novel is alternately narrated by the women of the family: Nathan's wife Orleanna, who recounts her experiences in the past tense, and their four daughters, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May, who speak of events as they are happening.

The Prices arrive in Kilanga woefully unprepared and loaded down with items ridiculously useless in the Congo, such as pinking shears and boxed cake mixes. Their lack of understanding of the local culture, language, and climate leads them into disasters great and small. Nathan, who usually preaches to the Congolese using a translator, sometimes attempts to speak Kikongo—a highly inflected language with many similar words. The word for "precious", when pronounced slightly differently means "poisonwood" so the villagers believe Nathan is telling them that Jesus is poisonous. The very real danger posed by river crocodiles is a never-resolved problem with Nathan's pressure for total-immersion baptism.

As the Congo moves toward independence from Belgium, the Prices' situation grows increasingly dangerous. After decades of colonial exploitation, resentment against whites is high, and the Prices are urged to leave. But Nathan, who is emotionally and physically scarred from an experience in the Second World War in which he feels he displayed cowardice, refuses to abandon what he considers God's mission.

Leah, who at first admired and believed in her father, begins to rebel, in part through the influence of her friend Anatole, a young pro-independence Congolese schoolteacher. Rachel, a self-centered teenager, attracts the attention of the village chief, who offers to marry her. To deflect his advances, Nathan has Rachel pretend to be engaged to Eeben Axelroot, the bush pilot who brings them supplies. Axelroot is also a CIA operative who is working to undermine the new democratically elected government of Patrice Lumumba, opposed by the U.S. due to supposed ties to the Soviet Union.

Tragedies unfold in rapid succession: Lumumba is deposed and killed, and his government is replaced with the U.S.-backed, but corrupt, rule of Joseph Mobutu; the villagers of Kilanga vote to follow their native gods rather than Jesus; a traditional hunt degenerates into an angry melee; and Ruth May, the youngest daughter, is killed by a poisonous snake. Orleanna, who to this point had pleaded with Nathan to leave but still



bent to his will, takes matters into her own hands to remove herself and her daughters from Kilanga. Rachel flies off to South Africa with Axelroot. Leah, who is too ill with malaria to leave the country, remains with Anatole and eventually marries him. It is only her silent, physically handicapped twin Adah who returns to America with Orleanna.

As the story unfolds, we learn of each woman's fate and of how her life has been irreparably changed by Africa. Orleanna works for civil rights and retreats to a country house and a garden. Rachel becomes an oft-married social climber, hotel proprietor, and right-wing apologist for the white man's presence and behavior in Africa. Leah works to help Africans in nutrition and agriculture. Adah becomes a scientist and overcomes her handicap, at the same time losing her unique "slant" on the world. We hear secondhand that Nathan disappeared into the jungle, later to die a death of biblical proportions. The last voice we hear is Ruth May's: her spirit still in Africa, her eyes observing her mother and sisters as they try, in vain, to find her grave, the lost village of Kilanga, and what they left behind in Africa.

More than any of Kingsolver's previous novels, *The Poisonwood Bible* is a novel of social criticism. The effect of colonialism on Africa is seen through the eyes of the Price family, each of whom has a slightly different take on their experiences, but are never able to escape the impact their seventeen months in the jungle had on their lives. We hear how Europeans and Americans exploited Africa's riches for decades: plundering the gold and diamonds while forcing native populations into labor and cutting off their hands for punishment. We hear how President Eisenhower sought to remove Lumumba from power because of the threat of Communism, and how Mobutu's regime, supported by the U.S., kept money, food, and political freedom from the residents of what became known as Zaire.

Also at issue is the clash of cultures, personalized by the experiences of one American family in the Congo, but representative of white presence in Africa as a whole. The Prices know little about the culture of the village they are about to inhabit. Though their intention is to impose their belief system and ideas of "civilized culture" on the residents of Kilanga, even Rachel is perceptive enough to realize that it was her family who was changed instead.

American ideas of religion, politics, agriculture, and economics, viewed by Nathan and other whites as superior, are illogical or unworkable in the daily life of the Congolese. For example, the Western idea of a democratic election, while seemingly fair, only brings turmoil to a village where, traditionally, issues were discussed at length until everyone agreed. Now, those holding a minority viewpoint have resentment that brings discord to the harmony of the village.

Feminism comes into play as the traditional family breaks down about midway through the novel. Nathan holds all the power in the family, and at times is physically abusive to his wife and daughters and dismissive of their desires and opinions.

Leah breaks gender taboos of both white and African cultures by using a weapon and wishing to participate actively in the hunt. Orleanna loses respect for Nathan through

the ordeal in Africa and leaves him, taking their remaining daughters with her. Rachel uses marriage as a tool to break into elevated levels of society and becomes a successful businesswoman. Adah chooses not to commit herself to a relationship with a man. Only Leah has a long-term romantic relationship, and her marriage to Anatole, though beset with many struggles, is a mutually supportive and egalitarian one.

Techniques

The riskiest, but ultimately most successful, literary technique that Kingsolver uses in *The Poisonwood Bible* is the multiple narrative structure. Rather than a single protagonist, there are several, each of whom is affected by the events of the novel in different ways. From the outset, the voices of the five women are easily distinguishable, and each woman's story is equally compelling.

Appropriately, biblical allusion is prevalent in the novel. Many of the seven books which make up the novel allude to books of the Bible, and images of gardens teeming with life and serpents clearly point to the creation story and man's fall from grace.

The girls' biblical names provide insight into their characters and their roles in the family, and Kilanga suffers a plague of driver ants. Several other animals, such as a parrot, a lion, and an okapi (a cud-chewing jungle animal that is much smaller than its grasslands cousin the giraffe), have meanings deeper than their plot implications.

Another important set of metaphors is the previously mentioned depiction of Nathan as the colonizer and oppressor of his family.

The plot structure is also riskier than in Kingsolver's previous novels. The first four books of *The Poisonwood Bible*, aside from Orleanna's flashbacks, tell of the seventeen months the Prices spend in the Congo. Book Five ("Exodus") leaps forward rapidly in time, tracing the women's divergent paths.

Some of the book's immediacy and emotional power is lost as entire lifetimes are summarized. However, the final two sections resonate with meaning and poignancy. Book Six ("Song of the Three Children") allows the surviving Price daughters to tell the readers what they learned. Book Seven ("The Eyes in the Trees") closely parallels Orleanna's opening chapter, bringing the story to a satisfying, if bittersweet, end.



Themes

Themes

The major theme is an indictment of colonialism. Against the backdrop of colonial Africa, the Price family itself is a metaphor of a colonized society. Nathan is the oppressor, who rules his family with "a strong hand, tightly clenched." Orleanna refers to him as "occupying a foreign country." Colonizers are similarly referred to in the novel as ruling "with a fatherly hand."

Nathan exploits his wife and daughters to further his own agenda and wrestle with his personal demons, and does not seem to care if he sacrifices their well-being in the process. As the strongest driving force for their presence in Africa, Nathan also has the least understanding of the people he's trying to convert of anyone in his family. To varying degrees, the Price women adapt to their surroundings, learn about the Congolese, and rally in order to survive against their harsh conditions. As the Congolese move toward independence, and the women in Nathan's family lose their faith in and respect for him as a provider, they begin to take on added responsibilities. They become self-sufficient, though they are never able to escape the repercussions of their time in Africa. Similarly, African nations are unable to fully recover from European exploitation, though now more in charge of their own destinies.

Also, an important theme is the collision of the Congolese versus the Christian view of religion. Book One opens with a verse from Genesis: "And God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." The Western ideal is to dominate and suppress the earth, whereas the villagers of Kilanga have learned to live in harmony with nature and their particular environment. The people of the village have many gods, and religion is a part of their daily lives, rather than something separate and sacred. Nathan was outraged at the idea that the church building could be used for purposes other than worship, whereas from the perspective of Tata Ndu, Kilanga's chief, it was wasteful to have a building used only for praying. When the hunt, so important for the village's survival both physically and spiritually, results in disagreements and turmoil, the Prices are blamed for bringing the anger of the gods down onto Kilanga.

Race

Race plays an important part in the novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. It is central to understanding the dynamics of the events at the national level and in the village of Kilanga between the villagers and the Prices. The tension between blacks and whites within the novel creates a certain degree of suspense over the possibility of violence. The narrative also explores the dynamics of the various relationships between the black villagers and the white missionary family.



During colonial rule, whites from Belgium control the government of the Congo. The decisions made benefit these individuals while they exploit the native black population. Many of the immigrant whites, including missionaries like the Underdowns and Nathan Price, believe that blacks are inferior because of their skin color and culture. Not surprisingly, blacks resent this and want to control their own country and destinies.

In Kilanga, race is also an issue. Nathan Price views the villagers with a great deal of prejudice, even though he has supposedly come to the Congo to help them. He believes that he is better than the others in the village because of his religious beliefs. He sees the villagers as uncivilized and sinful, and disregards the culture and customs of the village. This leads to a great deal of tension between him and the leaders of Kilanga.

However, the novel also shows the start of a different approach to race relations. Leah, Adah, and Ruth May all exhibit a willingness to learn from the culture and the villagers. They look beyond the skin color of the people that they come into contact. Although they struggle with the racism they grew up hearing in the United States and from their father, they attempt in their own ways to see others as similar to themselves and not inferior. They see the differences in people, but view these as things to learn from and appreciate.

Oppression

Oppression in the novel occurs at both a national and personal level. In many ways, the events within the Price family mirror the events in the Congo. As the Congo experiences violence and upheaval, so too do the Prices as the family disintegrates around Ruth May's death. Yet, before these events take place, both the Congo and the Prices endure oppression and the lack of freedom and choice.

At a national level, the Congo and the people within are ruled and controlled by an outside force. Belgium rules over the Congo and they, along with other countries including the United States, exploit the resources and people of the Congo. The Congolese are oppressed by these forces, putting them into a submissive position where they have little say in what is happening to their country and culture. Many of the Belgians and other whites in the Congo believe that the Congolese are inferior and need saving from themselves. This can be seen through the attitudes of the Underdowns and Nathan Price in regards to the native people in the village. They believe that they know more about everything than the people of the village. Even after independence is reached, these forces continued to reach out and influence events in the Congo. The United States is involved in the assassination of the newly elected President in order to continue to exploit the natural and human resources in the country.

Oppression also occurs within the Price family, paralleling the events in the Congo. Nathan Price seeks to maintain control over his family, limiting their activities and prescribing their lives for them. He makes decisions for the family with no input from Orleanna. Although it may appear the he leaves the household decisions up to



Orleanna, in reality he is still exerting control over these matters by his disapproval or anger when things aren't the way that he wants them.

Guilt

Throughout the second half of the novel, the theme of guilt enters into the narratives of all of the characters. Ruth May's death presents a dramatic turning point for the family and each family member deals with her death in different ways. In the last section of the novel, Ruth May's voice returns to bring a message to her family, particularly her mother, about their guilt.

Orleanna's narrative in *The Poisonwood Bible* is full of guilt and remorse, creating foreshadowing for the events that will take place. Orleanna blames herself for Ruth May's death and the other events in the Congo. She believes that she should have been stronger and more protective of her family. Years after the events took place, she is still filled with regrets and questions about how things would be different if she had acted differently. She thinks that she could have saved Ruth May if she only would have left Nathan sooner, found a way to get her daughters out of the Congo sooner, or been stronger herself. Her guilt over Ruth May's death and regrets over her marriage have continued for years, eating away at her and in many ways, keeping Orleanna from living her life to the fullest. She has retreated into her own world and kept others at arm's length. She punishes herself for Ruth May's death, believing that she is to blame.

The daughters deal with Ruth May's death in different ways from each other and from Orleanna. Although they each feel a degree of guilt over her death, believing that they should have protected their youngest sister, none of them punishes themselves to the degree that Orleanna does. Both Leah and Adah feel guilt, but they also use the event to push themselves on with their lives. They miss Ruth May and mourn for her, accepting the guilt that they feel as part of their mourning. They try in their own ways to improve the lives of others. Rachel, in contrast to the twins, refuses to accept any blame or guilt over Ruth May's death. In her own selfish way, she transfers the guilt that revolves around her onto others. Whatever happened or continues to happen to members of her family is the fault of others. She thinks that she is innocent of any negative action. In this way, her self-centeredness and denial separate her from the other members of her family.

At the end of the novel, Ruth May's voice returns through the image of the mamba to tell her mother to forgive herself and move on. She speaks of them all as accomplices in her death, in the events of the Congo, and in the demise of the family. All of their actions influenced events in various ways, yet what is done is done and she urges her mother to forgive. She says that forgiving and moving forward will not cause Orleanna to forget her or what happened, as Orleanna fears.

Style

Points of View

The Poisonwood Bible is written in a first person point of view from five different characters. The characters' narratives rotate from part to part, allowing the reader to see people and events from multiple perspectives. Orleanna's narratives begin each book. They are set in the present as she looks back on what happened. The remaining sections of each book rotate between the four daughters' voices and take place while the family is in Africa and after they leave.

The multiple voices that Kingsolver makes use of serve two functions. First, using a first person point of view for several characters allows the reader to better understand the thoughts and motives for these characters. Like a singular first person perspective, the character narrating is more open to the reader, sharing thoughts, observations, and fears. The reader is better able to understand the personalities of the characters through their own voices.

Kingsolver's use of multiple first person points of view allow her to more fully explore the events and people within the novel. Although the characters are not omniscient, the triangulation of voices allows for a fuller understanding of what is happening. Many of the events take on a different light from the various perspectives of the characters due to their social roles and personalities. For example, Adah sees Africa in very different ways than Rachel does. They both observe different things about the Congo and the people there.

Setting

The majority of *The Poisonwood Bible* is set in the village of Kilanga in the Congo. The family travels to this part of Africa from Georgia to become missionaries there. In the second half of the novel, the daughters each go their own way. Leah remains in the Congo at first, and then moves to Angola. Rachel moves to South Africa and eventually owns and runs a hotel there. Orleanna and Adah return to the United States.

The setting plays an important part in the novel. In many ways, Africa, and in particular, the Congo, exist as another character in the novel. The events in the Congo mirror the disintegration of the family and of the disruption in Kilanga. Through the setting, important themes of race, oppression, and difference are examined.

The novel is set in both present time and in the past, starting in 1959. Orleanna's narrative is from the present, looking back at the events that happened in the Congo. The daughters' narratives begin in 1959 with the family's arrival in Africa and focus on the next several years. Then several chapters focus on the time between the early 1960s and the present, as the daughters move from the Congo and begin other lives.



Language and Meaning

Kingsolver uses easy to understand language. Although the vast majority of the novel takes place in Africa, the novel uses almost exclusively the English language and when African languages are used, Kingsolver translates the words and phrases. The novel does not contain any crude or vulgar language.

Violence is present in the novel in indirect ways. Although the Congo experiences a bloody civil war during the time that the novel takes places, this violence is not described in detail and remains, although present, abstract in most cases. As the novel deals with this political upheaval, as well as topics such as death, the novel may be better suited for adult readers.

Structure

The Poisonwood Bible consists of seven books, most containing multiple parts. Kingsolver also includes an author's note and a bibliography of works that she used for her research. The subparts within each book are relatively short and fast-paced. Each book is titled with a reference to something that will happen within that section. For example, the book entitled "Exodus" tells about how Orleanna and her daughters leave the village of Kilanga and Africa. Each of the subsections is titled with the name of the character who is narrating that specific part. So, when Ruth May is narrating, the section is titled "Ruth May."

The narrative follows the family as they arrive in the Congo and try to adjust to their new surroundings. After Ruth May's death, the family separates and the daughters voices' come from different settings. In the final chapter, Orleanna and her daughters reunite in Africa.



Quotes

"Let me claim that Africa and I kept company for a while and then parted ways, as if we were both party to relations with a failed outcome. Or say that I was afflicted with Africa like a bout of a rare disease, from which I have not managed a full recovery." Book 1, pg. 9.

"This is our permanent order: Leah, Ruth May, Rachel, Adah. Neither chronological nor alphabetical but it rarely varies, unless Ruth May gets distracted and falls out of line." Book 1, pg. 62.

"I could see that the whole idea and business of Childhood was nothing guaranteed. It seemed to me, in fact, like something more or less invented by white people and stuck onto the front end of grown-up life like a frill on a dress. For the first time ever I felt a stirring of anger against my father for making me a white preacher's child from Georgia." Book 2, pg. 114-115.

"Some people will send a bread-and-butter note after you have them over to dinner. Well, Anatole sent us a boy." Book 2, pg. 142.

"Only God knows when our relief may arrive. But God does know. And in His benevolent service we will stay." Book 2, pg. 169.

"Our childhood had passed over into history overnight. The transition was unnoticed by anyone but ourselves." Book 3, pg. 218.

"If his decision to keep us here in the Congo wasn't right, then what else might he be wrong about? It has opened up in my heart a sickening world of doubts and possibilities, where before I had only faith in my father and love for the Lord. Without that rock of certainty underfoot, the Congo is a fearsome place to have to sink or swim." Book 3, pg. 244.

"*Bangala* means something precious and dear. But the way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree. Praise the Lord, hallelujah, my friends! for Jesus will make you itch like nobody's business. And while Our Father was preaching the gospel of the poisonwood, his own daughter Ruth May rose from the dead. Our Father did not particularly notice." Book 3, pg. 276.

"Nelson says to think of a good place to go, so when it comes time to die I won't, I'll disappear and go to that place. He said think of that place every day and night so my spirit will know the way." Book 3, pg. 303.

"Strange to say, when it came I felt as if I'd been waiting for it my whole married life. Waiting for that ax to fall so I could walk away with no forgiveness in my heart." Book 4, pg. 323.



"We should have been good sports and lit out of the Congo right then. How could Father not have seen his mistake? The congregation of his very own church interrupted the sermon to hold an election on whether or not to accept Jesus Christ as the personal Saviour of Kilanga." Book 4, pg. 327.

"I could only stare at Ruth May's bare left shoulder, where two red puncture wounds stood out like red beads on her flesh. Two dots an inch apart, as small and tidy as punctuation marks at the end of a sentence none of us could read. The sentence would have started somewhere just above her heart." Book 4, pg. 364.

"There is not justice in this world. Father, forgive me wherever you are, but this world has brought one vile abomination after another down on the heads of the gentle, and I'll not live to see the meek inherit anything." Book 6, pg. 522.

"We are the balance of our damage and our transgressions. He was my father. I own half his genes, and all of his history. Believe this: the mistakes are part of the story. I am born of a man who believed he could tell nothing but the truth, while he set down for all time the Poisonwood Bible." Book 6, pg. 533.

"Mother, you can still hold on but forgive, forgive and give for long as long as we both shall live I forgive you, Mother. *I shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.* The teeth at your bones are your own, the hunger is yours, forgiveness is yours. The sins of the fathers belong to you and the forest and even to the ones in iron bracelets, and here you stand, remembering their songs. Listen. Slide the weight from your shoulders and move forward. You are afraid you might forget, but you never will. You will forgive and remember. Think of the vine that curls from the small square plot that was once my heart. That is the only marker you need. Move on. Walk forward into the light." Book 7, pg. 543.

Adaptations

Available in an unabridged audiotape version from Brilliance Corporation, read by Dean Robertson.



Key Questions

In *The Poisonwood Bible* Kingsolver focuses on a missionary family's experiences in the Belgian Congo (now known as Zaire), just as that nation was claiming its independence from colonial rule, and how those experiences shaped their lives.

1. Compare the character of Anatole Ngemba with Loyd Peregrina in *Animal Dreams* and Estevan in *The Bean Trees*. How does each man function in the narrative of the novel in which they appear? Is Anatole an idealized character? Why or why not?
2. What does Methuselah, the parrot, symbolize? What is the significance, if any, of his biblical name?
3. Compare the missionary styles of Nathan Price, the Underdowns, and Brother Fowles. What are their attitudes toward the Africans? How does this affect their success as missionaries?
4. Discuss the difficulties Nathan has in growing a garden in Kilanga. How does this parallel the Prices' experiences in Africa?
5. Explain the cultural significance of the hunt in the lives of the people of Kilanga.

What factors cause the hunt to be a failure, and how is this related to the larger themes of the book?

6. Where did Rachel learn to "stick out [her] elbows and hold [her]self up?"

How does she apply this philosophy in her own life, both literally and figuratively?

7. Compare and contrast Leah and Adah.

How do their characters relate to Jacob and Esau in the Bible? They are both considered "gifted"—what "gifts" do they display throughout the novel? How do the Congolese view twins?

8. Why is Orleanna more closely attached to Ruth May than to her other daughters? Describe the evolution of the relationship between Orleanna and Adah.



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the parallels between the situation in the Congo and in the Price family. How do the events in each of these realms mirror each other?

Kingsolver has Orleanna's narrative looking back on events rather than a narrative as the events take place, as she does with the girls' narratives. Why do you think she chose to do this? What does this accomplish in the novel?

What do you think the title, *The Poisonwood Bible*, means at both a literal and symbolic level? Why do you think Kingsolver chose this title?

Describe how each daughter views the Congo and the people there before Ruth May's death. What do their views reveal about each of their personalities?

Kingsolver uses animals to symbolize various things throughout the novel. Describe some of these instances and explain how she creates this symbolism.

Nathan Price is the only member of the Price family that does not have a narrative in the novel. Why do you think this is? How do you think this may change how he is viewed? Do you think having a first person narrative from Nathan's perspective would change how you see him?

Discuss the theme of guilt in the novel. Which characters feel guilt and what do they feel guilt over? If Kingsolver has a message about guilt, what is it?

Literary Precedents

White men traveling to the jungle and discovering the dark side of human nature has been a common literary theme, from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to Paul Theroux's *The Mosquito Coast*. As a depiction of a dysfunctional family employing multiple narrators, *The Poisonwood Bible* has been compared to *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner. As Kingsolver has mentioned Faulkner as an early literary influence, this comparison is particularly apt.

The subtitle of Book One—"The Things We Carried"—alludes to Tim O'Brien's award-winning short story "The Things They Carried." Like the American soldiers in Vietnam in O'Brien's story, the Prices carry both physical items and emotional baggage into the jungle, and they are weighed down by both.

Related Titles

Though bearing some similarities to her previous work, particularly in its juxtaposition of the personal and political, *The Poisonwood Bible* is so different from Barbara Kingsolver's other novels that it could almost have been written by a different person. The familiar Southwestern setting is gone, as are the folksy characters and smart-alecky dialogue. Though there is humor in *The Poisonwood Bible*, it is almost always dark-tinged and ironic. The pat endings and overall feeling of "niceness" Kingsolver's critics have taken aim at are nowhere to be found. Though there is resolution at the novel's end, the Price's story, like Africa's, is ultimately tragic, and in no way a traditional "happy ending."



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994