Say You're One of Them Study Guide

Say You're One of Them by Uwem Akpan

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Plot Summary

Say You're One of Them is a collection of three short stories and two novellas set in varying countries in Africa, all told through the narration of vulnerable children during moments of extreme upheaval in their lives. "An Ex-Mas Feast" tells the story of eight-year-old Jigana's family struggle to deal with the extreme poverty that has forced them into street begging and sends their twelve-year-old daughter into a life of child prostitution. The story revolves around the family's decision to sacrifice their twelve-year-old to ensure that Jigana will be able to attend school and give the family a brighter future. Jigana is overwhelmed with guilt that his sister must work full-time as a prostitute for his own benefit and by the end of the story, he removes himself completely from the family - in the hopes that it will also remove him from the guilt - by running away.

"Fattening for Gabon" is told through the eyes of ten-year-old narrator Kotchikpa. At the opening of the story, Kotchikpa's uncle Fofo has just received a new motorcycle from a wealthy benefactor. The same benefactor wants to make donations for Kotchikpa and his five-year-old sister, Yewa, to attend school. The benefactor, who soon come be called Mama and Papa by the children, ensure that the children are always well-fed, have new clothes, and that Fofo has plenty of new luxuries. Fearing that all this will be stolen, Fofo rebuilds the family hut and keeps all his belongings under strict lock and key, rarely taking them from storage and enjoying them. Fofo begins holding informal lessons for the children, drilling them about fictional facts about their background in case they should be quizzed about their pasts by police officers on their way to Gabon with Mama and Papa. It soon becomes clear that Fofo is preparing to sell the children into slavery, and that Mama and Papa are human traffickers. By the end of the story, Fofo has had a change of heart and attempts to escape with the children, but is eventually killed. The children are held under lock and key, but miraculously, Kotchikpa manages to escape, although he will be forever haunted by the screams of the sister he was forced to leave behind.

"What Language is That" is a short story about two girls growing up in Ethiopia during the arbitrary divide between Christian and Muslim territory. The girls, who are both six years old, grew up very close, almost as sisters. The Muslim girl, Selam, was encouraged to eat whatever she felt comfortable with while at her best friends' home. There was no tension or conflict about religion, so it comes as a shock to everyone, including the reader, when the best friends are separated during the divide and told they are no longer allowed to play together. Despite this ban, the girls escape to their balconies and mime messages to each other, proving that the heart speaks louder than words.

"Luxurious Hearses" is the story of a terrified Muslim boy traveling from the North to the South of Nigeria during the civil war between the Muslims and the Christians. He has been forced to make this trek after Muslim friends who owe him money accused him of being Christian so they could get out of their debt. They beat him and stone him until he was near death. In the moments before they lit his battered body on fire, Jubril, the protagonist, rallied his strength and managed to run away. He passed out in a field and

was rescued by a Muslim man who hid him in his house, even when Christian rebels threatened to light his house on fire, and eventually did, the man did not reveal Jubril's hiding place. After the wave of destruction, the man released Jubril, giving him money and a disguise to make his way to the South aboard a bus full of Christian refugees. Jubril would have to hide his Muslim identity - most notably his amputated hand, which would immediately identify him as a Muslim - and his Northern accent. Aboard the bus, Jubril is terrified, knowing that at any moment, he could be killed by this mob if his Muslim identity is made known. His troubles first begin when an old tribal chief is sitting in Jubril's assigned seat and refuses to give it over. Various other occurrences, such as the forceful removal of a man with malaria, police threats, spiritual possession, and interactions with his fellow passengers threatens to reveal Jubril's secret, but he survives for many hours, before the bus even begins its long journey. After hours of avoiding the television sets that beam Western images into the bus, Jubril relents and sees an image of a mosque burning. The image is so powerful, he begins to weep, and forgetting where he is, uses his stump of a hand to wipe away the tears. His error is immediately spotted and he is taken outside of the bus and murdered.

"My Parents' Bedroom" is the harrowing story of a nine-year-old girl's experience during the Rwandan genocide. At the opening of the story, the girl's mother, Maman, leaves her in charge of her one-year-old brother while she goes out for the night, making the girl promise that if anyone comes, she'll say that no one is home and that she's one of them. That night, a mob of people, lead by her Uncle, break into the house in search of her Papa. When they cannot find them, an old man rapes the nine-year-old girl. Her parents return in the morning, agitated and short-tempered. The girl hears tiny sneezes and thinks there is a ghost in her house. That night, the mob returns and the Uncle forces the Papa to kill Maman because she is a Tutsi. He does, and simply walks blankly out of the house without acknowledging his children. The girl gathers up her brother and walks through the streets, full of corpses, not knowing where she's going, but that she must keep them safe. The last thing she sees is her parents' house up in flames, and knows that all the Tutsi people her parents had been hiding in the attic, keeping them safe from the genocide, have been killed.

An Ex-Mas Feast (Kenya)

An Ex-Mas Feast (Kenya) Summary

"An Ex-Mas Feast" opens with the eight-year-old narrator, Jigana describing his twelve-year-old sister, Maisha. Maisha has recently become a prostitute for many reasons, but mostly because her parents live in the slums of Kenya and cannot afford basic things for their family like food and education. She has taken it upon herself to support the family. The narrator states that Maisha is already training her ten-year-old sister, Naema, about life as a prostitute, letting the young girl try on her high heels, and giving her tips about what Johns to stay away from.

Jigana lives in a rickety slum house where his entire family, Mama, Baba, Maisha, Naema, twins Otieno and Atieno, and Baby sleep together on the floor. The family wakes on Christmas morning and Mama, who is an alcoholic, rummages through her belongings for the small amounts of cash she has stashed away. She cannot afford to feed her family on Christmas, so she gives all the children glue to sniff to stave off their hunger while she awaits Maisha's return from her night's work, hopefully bringing food for the family's holiday feast. For most of the morning, Mama busies herself with the dog she's taken it. The dog is very pregnant, and Mama is hoping she can sell the puppies to help raise extra money for Jigana's school textbooks. Jigana hands over his money from the previous day's begging. Although people are more generous around Christmastime, he knows the family's real bait is Baby. Each of the older children takes turns walking through traffic with the infant, begging for spare change. Only Maisha refuses to beg. Now that she's a prostitute, she hopes her work will prevent the younger children, like Baby, from a life on the streets. Mama is annoyed that Maisha won't beg anymore, and takes out her frustration on Maisha's trunk, a wooden box that holds all Maisha's belongings. It's locked with a combination lock, and she won't let any of her family members know what's inside. Mama is often so frustrated that she tries to break into the trunk, but Jigana stops her. This time, Mama scratches at his face until it bleeds, but he prevents her from breaking into the trunk.

Mama downs a bottle of glue, even though it is usually reserved for the children. Jigana questions what the family will give to the neighbors for Christmas, and is embarrassed when Mama suggests half a liter of petrol, which is not nearly as valuable as the sniffing glue. Before Jigana can object, he hears two drunk neighbors making their way toward the family shack. He knows they have probably come for the money owed to them. Mama shouts out the window that her husband is not home, a lie. Jigana's family has owed the neighbors money for four years, and they come sniffing around the shack whenever they think the family has come into some money, like during the holidays, for example. This time, however, the drunk neighbors shout that the debt has been forgiven. Maisha has taken care of it. Mama is so pleased she runs out into the street and embraces the neighbors, promising to never pound on Maisha's trunk again. Jigana is so pleased with his sister that he wants to run into the streets to find her, but Mama

forbids him to leave the house on Christmas. The neighbors are very pleased to hear that Jigana will be headed back to school, and exalt him as the hope for his family.

Months before, Jigana had been hanging out with Maisha on the streets while she was working. Jigana was the only sibling Maisha allowed to spend time with her on the streets, because he wouldn't be competition for her business, like Naema might, and he wasn't yet old enough to scare away her customers. When Maisha is turned down by a customer in a chauffeured Volvo, she laments that she wants to get a full-time job and quit hustling. Jigana knows that this means Maisha is thinking about joining a brothel. He doesn't want this to happen because he doesn't want Maisha to move away, but she reasons that this may be the only way for their family to afford his school fees. When Jigana tries to convince her otherwise, he accidentally says, "Maisha, our parents..." which outrages and shames Maisha in front of the other prostitutes. Now they know her real name, and that she and Jigana are related (p. 15).

Back on Christmas morning, Mama takes out the family Bible and reads the names of their ancestors to celebrate the day. Each name brings out another memory of street life for Jigana, who recalls his uncle teaching him how to shower in the city fountains without being whipped by police officers, and of his other aunt and uncle who begged his family for school fees, and all the family members who had died too young from heart attacks, and street crime, and illness. While she is reading, Naema comes home with Baby after their day of begging. She has wrapped Baby in plastic bags to keep him dry. When Mama sees that Naema is eating a chicken leg, she raises her hand to slap the girl, thinking she bought the food with the begging money, but Naema blurts out that it was a gift from her boyfriend, a known gang leader in their neighborhood. Naema says that she heard on the street that Maisha will be moving "full time." Jigana feels terrible, overwhelmed with guilt. Had he joined a street gang like so many of the boys in his neighborhood do, maybe he would have been able to help support the family. He feels guilty that his family works so hard to send him to school. Maybe if the family didn't have that extreme financial pressure, there would be peace between them. He fantasizes about confronting some of the white tourist who "rent" his sister and stabbing them with his knife. He doesn't care that the knife is old and dull, his passion to harm them would draw blood. He is so angry, and so certain that his family is breaking up because of him, Jigana swears that he does not want to go to school anymore, not ever. His father is outraged, both by Jigana's insult - he has looked his father in the eye - and by the fact that he overslept from alcohol on Christmas Day and has missed his chance to beg from the white tourists. Meanwhile, Jigana sniffs glue until he becomes so drunk he hallucinates. Then everyone goes to bed, waiting for Maisha to return.

Jigana wakes Baba a few hours later, at dawn, when he hears a car pulling up to their shanty. Baba has been imagining that it will be an American tourist in a Jaguar asking him for Maisha's marital hand. Maisha returns home in an old taxi that needs pliers to open the backdoor, where Maisha is slouched into the seat. Jigana remembers that Maisha had looked so beautiful when she left for work a few days ago, with a freshly applied perm, long artificial fingernails, and newly bleached skin. Now, her hair is patchy in parts, burned away by the chemicals. Her nails look like talons and her skin has begun to peel. She is clearly exhausted, and possibly drunk. When Baba carries

Maisha's bags inside, the taxi driver begins frisking himself, as if scratching at ants. He shouts that someone has stolen his money. Maisha charges forward and grabs the wad of cash from Baba's hands and returns it to the driver. Inside, Maisha snaps at Jigana for trying to wish her good night. Baba refuses to allow Maisha to leave and Mama thanks Maisha for clearing their debt. She is rewarded by a smile from Maisha, which is so shocking, Mama falls to her knees, weeping, kissing Maisha's hands and thanking her for everything she's done. The two women stare at each other and something like forgiveness passes between their eyes. Mama sprays down the entire house with insecticide, prompting everyone into a fit of coughing. Baba tears the door off the shack and uses it as a fan to swat the chemicals out of the house. Mama allows Maisha to sleep under the mosquito net - they only have one because Baba sold the other nets for food and drugs. Naema bursts out of the house holding the bags of food Maisha brought home the night before. The first think Jigana notices is how light her skin is from using Maisha's creams. The family digs into the food, eating so much they vomit, and then eating again. Even the two-year-old twins drink beer until they are sick. While they are eating, Maisha exits the house, dragging her trunk behind her. Mama bursts out crying, and Baba helps her load her box into the waiting taxi. Jigana rushes inside and grabs his school supplies. He breaks all the new pencils and tears up his new uniform. Then he swallows a bottle of glue and runs away, not once looking back at his family.

An Ex-Mas Feast (Kenya) Analysis

The short story "Ex-Mas Feast" is a very difficult story for some readers to read, primarily because it shows the dark side of families who live in poverty, including drug addiction, starvation, gangs, and child prostitution. Jigana clearly represents hope for the family who would sacrifice anything, even their daughters' innocence, to ensure that he is given a good future. Unfortunately, because only one child in the family can be chosen to have a future, the rest much suffer a life of feeling as if they are worthless. The two daughters, who are the eldest of the remaining children, take this knowledge in different strides. Maisha, the oldest, feels the pressure to ensure Jigana's success. She becomes a prostitute at an early age in part to exert some independence from her overbearing parents, and in part to help support them. Maisha's character is extremely complex. She is a child but she is forced to deal with very adult issues, and is often seen as more responsible than her actual parents. Although she is only twelve-years-old, she manages to keep the family in their home, take care of their debts, enroll Jigana into school, and bring home a feast for Christmas. Despite all that she does for her family, her parents seem to resent that she is able to make a living on her own, a resentment that likely comes from the knowledge that soon, Maisha will move out of the family home and they will run the risk of losing her money. Baba clings to a strange fantasy that one of Maisha's customers, a rich white tourist, will come to the shantytown to request Maisha's hand in marriage and that he will pay a dowry to take her away from the slums. He seems genuinely surprised when Maisha comes home from work in a rented taxi. The fact that the taxi is so rundown it needs a pair of pliers to open the back door symbolizes Baba's broken dream and Maisha's broken future. For the reader, it is clear in this moment that Maisha will not have a happy ending. There will be no prince to rescue her from the slums. Her life will always be as broken down and ugly as this

cab. It is also interesting to note Maisha's physicality when she returns home. Jigana remembers her leaving for work looking beautiful, with freshly bleached skin and a new perm. But when she comes home, her skin is peeling and the chemicals from her perm have burned holes in her hair. This is also symbolic of Maisha's stolen innocence, symbolized by her beauty. It is disturbing to read about Maisha teaching her ten-year-old sister the ways of the streets, but it should not be surprising. Naema's soon to be lost innocence is symbolic of the cyclic nature of despair in poverty. Maisha will not be the only sacrifice to keep the family alive.

The despair of the family can be seen in many other ways, most notably, the drug addiction. Not only do Mama and Baba turn a blind-eye to their children's addictions to sniffing glue and drinking beer, they encourage it, with Mama doling out sniffing glue for the children to stave off their hunger when she cannot afford food. Likewise, even the two-year-old twins are given beer until they vomit on Christmas Day. When Baba eyes the bottle of glue - which was given as a gift for such purposes by the neighbor - Mama warns him off it, reminding him that glue should be for children only. Although their parenting is seriously misdirected, there are moments of tenderness within the wild family. For example, when Maisha comes home from work, she and her mother share an emotionally raw moment, in which Mama is on her knees, weeping, thanking Maisha for taking care of the family's debt. The emotion is so great that it is clear Mama is thanking Maisha for much more: for sacrificing her innocence, her childhood, her virginity for the sake of the family. That same night, Mama takes the mosquito netting from Baby and wraps it around Maisha so she can get a good night's sleep, even though she knows her daughter will be leaving them in the morning. This act of kindness can be seen as a final apology for the lengths Maisha must go through for the family's sake. It is also interesting to note that while Mama gives the two-year-old twins ice cream and beer for breakfast, she also breastfeeds them. This could be seen as a preservation of family food - breast milk is free, after all, but it could also be seen as an act of tenderness and connection to her children, despite the fact that Mama breastfeeds while she is drunk and high.

Finally, the relationship between Jigana and Maisha is integral to understanding the story. The two siblings are obviously very close, and Maisha only allows Jigana to meet with her while she is working, but the two joke about things that are hugely inappropriate, like buying sex and incest. In scenes like this, it appears that Maisha only knows how to relate to males, even her own brother, by seducing them. Clearly the only value Maisha has of herself is based on how much money she can earn. On the other hand, the topics of discussion for the two children are directly related to their surroundings. It is likely that Maisha and Jigana don't know of other ways to relate to each other. They have never been allowed to live as normal children, only as objects to make money for their parents. Despite the strange relationship, it is clear that Jigana looks up to his sister while simultaneously wanting to protect her. Even at eight-years-old, Jigana knows that it would be disastrous - both for Maisha and for his family - if Maisha were to move into a brothel. When he grows angry about Maisha moving away, his anger is directed toward the rich white men, whom he believe are seducing his sister. When she decides to move anyway, Jigana feels that his family is being torn apart, and that it is his own fault. He is overwhelmed with guilt at not being able to

support his family, and overwhelmed that his family should sacrifice everything for his individual success. In the end, Jigana tears up his school items, symbolizing the family's shredded dreams and condemned future. In this moment, Jigana realizes that even with an education, he will never be able to save his family from their sins, from the devastation they have caused on the lives of his siblings, mainly Maisha. His final act of running away not only cleanses his soul from the guilt of Maisha and Naema's future degradation. His future is far less bright now that he will be living on the streets, but at least the sins will be on his own back, not the backs of his siblings. The final image Jigana has of his family is of the twins burping and giggling on their Christmas feast, symbolic of the fact that what little happiness he had is now behind him.

Fattening for Gabon (Benin)

Fattening for Gabon (Benin) Summary

"Fattening for Gabon" opens with the line "Selling your child or nephew could be more difficult than selling other kids" (p. 33) setting up the horrifying story of an uncle prepared to sell his niece and nephew into slavery. Fofo Kpee had spent the majority of his life in Gabon working as a tout, helping illegal immigrants escape across the Gabon border. A horrifying run-in at the border had left the man terribly scarred, leaving a perpetual sneer on his face, making it appear as if he were smiling at everything. A month before the novel's setting, Fofo Kpee had purchased a brand-new Nanfang motorcycle to ferry people across the border into Nigeria. A wiry man brought the motorcycle to Fofo Kpee's house where ten-year-old narrator Kotchikpa and his five-year-old sister Yewa stare at the bike in stunned pride. The man cryptically complains that there are only two children at the abode - Kotchikpa and Yewa - but Fofo Kpee ignores the comment, ushering the man inside for a drink. The man, whom Fofo Kpee calls Big Guy, insists that there are supposed to be five children, and demands to know where the other three are. He is clearly angry, but struggling to control it. A nervous Fofo Kpee refuses to look him in the eyes and nervously avoids his questions. The children, particularly the narrator, are confused by this exchange, but as they are quite young, focus their energies on the new motorcycle, the likes of which they have only seen in advertisements. They can't believe such an expensive machine would be in their village, let alone their own house! When Big Guy leaves, Fofo Kpee insists that they have been given the motorcycle as a reward from God for their faithfulness. He locks up the tiny house so tightly that the smell of the motorcycle's newness makes the children lightheaded. They eat a merry dinner, with Fofo Kpee even handing out small cones of nuts and cups of fruit juice, extravagances the children haven't tasted in years. They do not question the treats, and assume that they are celebrating the Nanfang. In the days that follow, Fofo Kpee offers to buy the children many things, including rare school books and crayons, but Yewa especially des not want any of it. She simply wants to be near the Nanfang, wants to sleep next to it each night, and does not want to attend school, as it would take her away from the beloved machine. The children beg to be driven on the motorcycle to Braffe, where their parents live, and Fofo Kpee promises to take them once he's learned how to drive the machine. The children have not seen their parents in nearly two years, not since the parents were diagnosed with AIDS and were forced to send their two youngest children to live with their Uncle (Fofo) Kpee. Whenever the children ask about their parents, Fofo Kpee insists that they are recovering, and Kotchikpa creates elaborate fantasies about what it will be like to return to Braffe someday to be reunited with his family.

Fofo Kpee has begun drinking from a huge bottle of gin, and often gives the children shots of alcohol to quiet them when they insist on riding the Nanfang, visiting their family, or sleeping outside of their bedrooms. The main room of the house now houses the motorcycle fulltime, along with the rest of the treasure store that has been purchased since "the sudden change in our lifestyle" (p. 44). It is unclear how or why

Fofo Kpee is suddenly wealthy enough to purchase all these luxuries, but he guards them with fierce determination. In fact, when Kotchikpa cleans the house each day, a stuffy thickness often invades his nose and lungs, but Fofo Kpee refuses to let him open a window to clear the air. He is terrified that jealous villagers will see their luxuries and attempt to steal them in the night. A few days later, Big Guy returns to teach Fofo Kpee how to drive the Nanfang. The children watch from inside the house, laughing hysterically at Fofo Kpee's inability to master the machine. Eventually he does, and he offers to drive the children to church on Sunday for their first ride. The villagers cheer as the Nanfang makes its way to the tiny local church, and Kotchikpa's heart swells with pride. At church, Big Guy immediately asks where the rest of the children are. He is not as angry as he had been the first time he asked, but an uneasy silence clearly passes between the two men. Fofo shouts that Big Guy's antics are going to ruin his family's Thanksgiving - they have come to the church to give thanks for the new motorcycle - and when a crowd forms to see if a fight is going to break out, Big Guy laughs, saying that he was just joking. Big Guy turns to the children and comments on how beautiful they are, insisting that they go to school become smart adults. Even Yewa, who hates the idea of school, excitedly agrees. While the rest of the church dances exuberantly with thanksgiving for the Nanfang, Kotchikpa wonders why Fofo simply raises his arms and legs gingerly, as if his new crisp suit doesn't allow him to dance properly. After the traditional dance, the church takes up a thanksgiving offering. The children, who normally hold up N1 coins for offering proudly wave around N20 bills, showing off their new wealth to the congregation. Kotchikpa turns around and blushes when he sees Fofo holding a N100 bill. When the preacher sees the bill, his prayer becomes more animated, even going so far as to call-out other church members to give higher donations saying that their N1 coins are an insult to God: "You get from the Lord what you give ... If you change your ways tomorrow the Lord could bless you too, with a Nanfang. Poverty is a curse from Satan" (p. 49). Some members of the congregation hold up higher denomination bills, and Big Guy gives Fofo a CFA10,000 bill, which brings tears to Fofo's eyes. After church, Fofo hosts a massive celebration with catered food. There, he claims that his riches have come as a reward from the children's parents, who are living abroad, to thank them for taking such good care of their young ones. Kotchikpa is shocked. He knows that his parents are not living abroad, and that even while they were in good health, they could barely afford to care for themselves, let alone to take care of Fofo and his extravagances. He convinces himself that he heard Fofo wrong, and continues to stuff himself with food.

A week later, Fofo comes home early from work, wringing his hands, obviously wanting to tell the children something. He asks them how they are doing with school, and says that the children's godparents will be happy to hear of their progress. The children have never even heard of their godparents before. Fofo explains that the children are very lucky to have generous new godparents who want to adopt them. Fofo claims that the children's godparents work for a nongovernmental organization (NGO) helping poor children all around the world. Fofo continues to drink gin, frequently offering sips to the children, telling them about their godparents, whom he insists the children should start calling Papa and Mama, a thought that infuriates Yewa who desperately misses her real parents. To lighten the children's somber mood, Fofo continues to give them gin, then turns off the lights and starts a pillow fight with them. Soon, everyone is uproariously

laughing and the idea of having a new Papa and Mama isn't as scary. This whole idea is fun, after all. That night, the children pray fervently, thanking God for their new benefactors, their godparents. The next day, the new Papa and Mama are scheduled to arrive with new siblings for the children. Fofo is anxious, frequently shouting at the children and threatening them with physical violence if they embarrass him. When the new parents arrive, Mama is a tall, beautiful black woman who welcomes the children into her open arms with a massive hug. Yewa seems indifferent to the woman, but Kotchikpa wishes he could hold onto her forever. Yewa insists that Big Guy is the one driving the car that brought Papa and Mama, but no one will listen to her. Mama takes the children inside the house and showers them with affection. She holds Yewa on her lap, rocking her and stroking her face, which makes Kotchikpa profoundly jealous. On the porch, Kotchikpa overhears Fofo saying that he is traveling to Braffe soon to collect the other children. Kotchikpa is overwhelmed with joy thinking that he is going to be reunited with his real siblings, and that maybe his godparents will bestow the same generosity on them. Thinking about all the generous gifts he and Yewa have been given, Kotchikpa is suddenly struck with guilt. His family is not the poorest family in the village, so why did the NGO choose them? The preacher said that good deeds are rewarded with gifts from God, but he is sure that he and Yewa have acted more foolishly and have been naughtier this year than any other year. Mama shakes Kotchikpa out of his thoughts by saying, "Hey, Pascal, how was school today?" Kotchikpa is shocked by the name, as he has no idea who Pascal is. He looks around for another child, which makes Mama giggle. She calls him Pascal again, and asks if it would be alright to call him that from now on, as it's a much easier name to pronounce. Desperate for Mama's affection, Kotchikpa agrees, and is rewarded with a big kiss and cuddle, something he hasn't had since leaving his parents in the village two years ago. Yewa, however, is not so quick to accept her new name, Mary, so Mama bribes her with a can of Coke, saying "Would you like more, Mary?" and only pouring the liquid into Yewa's open mouth when she responds to the new name.

Papa enters the room now, and Kotchikpa is startled by how old he looks. He doesn't understand how such an ugly old man could have such a beautiful wife in Mama. He convinces himself that Papa must be rich and powerful, which is why he's been able to be so generous. He brings with him two new siblings for Kotchikpa and Yewa, a big-boned girl called Antoinette and a sickly looking boy, older than Kotchikpa, called Paul. Papa and Mama want the children all to interact, but Antoinette is rude and Paul is too weak and weepy to speak. Kotchikpa doesn't understand why Paul cries the whole time, begging to go back home. Isn't he excited to travel to Gabon? Kotchikpa also watches the way Fofo interacts with Papa and Mama. He doesn't understand why Fofo sulks in the corner like a slave in his own home. Usually he is the life of the party, but today, Fofo looks nervous and eager to please. Soon after bringing in Antoinette and Paul, who remains ill the entire time, even vomiting in the corner, Papa and Mama pack up the buffet announcing that they still have two more villages to visit that night. They encourage Fofo to keep the children in good health until they arrive to take them to Gabon. The next day, Fofo takes the children to school and reregisters them under their new names, Pascal and Mary. Meanwhile, Fofo continues to renovate the hut, making it more secure for all his expensive possessions. Since he has sealed up all the windows, there is now no breeze to cool the children down at night, and they lay in bed, nearly

naked, sweating into their sheets. When Fofo fears that one of them might die from the heat in the night, he has tiny windows drilled into the sides of the house - small enough so that no man or child could slip through them - so high above the ground that barely any sunlight peeks through. Still, in the evenings, the heat is stifling. When the children beg to be let outside for some fresh air, Fofo refuses, saying they must get used to living in discomfort incase their homes in Gabon aren't as comfortable as the one they're living in now.

In the days that follow, Fofo holds rudimentary "school" for the children to teach them about their future life in Gabon. He runs through facts over and over with the children in case they should be stopped by the police, or by the navy during their journey. At school, a few of the teachers, including the physical education teacher, Monsieur Abraham, question Kotchikpa about his new home lifestyle, wondering if Fofo is treating him well. Each night, the lessons with Fofo grow more intense, and the children are asked to memorize pages of intricate facts and fictional back-stories about their personal histories. Fofo quizzes the children endlessly, stuffing them with food and drink when they get answers correct. The children have even begun to adopt their new stories, seeming to confuse reality and fantasy, truly believing that their made-up relatives are real, and that they have relationships with them. It is not just the children who are changing, Fofo has become restless, almost an insomniac, obsessed with the children's acquisition of facts. He has also started having nightmares on the rare nights that he finds sleep and often wakes up screaming. One evening, the children are startled when, standing next to them, he drops off his loin cloth and is stark naked. The children can immediately tell that Fofo is unsure of how they will react, and they wonder if he is drunk: "Fofo looked like a man in pain, a man who couldn't take the heat anymore" (p. 94). Crazed, Fofo begins to dance, shaking around his genitals. He asks Mary if she would like to touch it. She refuses. He asks if she would like to touch a white man's penis. He asks Kotchikpa if he would like white women. The children are terrified and do not know how to react when Fofo masturbates in front of them before crawling into bed.

Soon after "the bad night," Fofo becomes increasingly irritable. One evening, he runs into the house like a madman being chased and quickly locks up his belongings. He's talking to himself, but the children listen as he says, "If I must sell you to be free, I shall!" The children think he is talking to the motorcycle rather than to them. Kotchikpa no longer desires to travel to Gabon with Mama and Papa, and has begun to grow suspicious of the entire process. Yewa, however, is still allured by the prospect of Western food and cans of Coke. Kotchikpa considers telling Monsieur Abraham about his fears, but worries it will bring shame on Fofo. He tries to convince Yewa that Gabon is going to be a dangerous place, but she does not listen to him. That night, Big Guy arrives unexpectedly, and Fofo sits up as if he will have to protect himself. Big Guy says that the children will be traveling soon, within the week, and he demands to know where the other three children are. Fofo begins babbling about how he no longer wants to go through with the deal, and that he will pay Big Guy back for everything. Big Guy takes Fofo outside and begins to shake him, screaming and shouting. A crowd gathers, and soon, the police arrive. They immediately side with Big Guy, who has more money, and Fofo is sent back into the house with his head hanging low. He tells the children that it is

no longer safe for them to attend school. One evening, a few days after Big Guy's visit, Fofo shakes Kotchikpa awake and tells him that they must escape. Kotchikpa is thrilled as he had been planning an escape from Fofo since "the bad night." Fofo tells Kotchikpa the truth, as much as he can muster, that Mama and Papa are bad people like Big Guy. Kotchikpa had known Big Guy was bad all along, and feels shamed that he was duped by Mama's affection and Papa's elaborate feast. One week later, Fofo rouses the children in the middle of the night and together they silently push the Nanfang out of the hut, hop on, and begin to ride toward Braffe. After a few moments, Kotchikpa spots two bright lights headed toward them, coming closer and closer. Kotchikpa is terrified. The other motorcyclists soon catch up to Fofo and the children, and Kotchikpa immediately recognizes the two pursuers: Big Guy and Monsieur Abraham. He is shocked to realize the Monsieur Abraham had been in on the plot all along. Although Fofo does his best to speed away, the motorcycle hits a pothole and throws everyone overboard. The men quickly pick up the children and take them back to the house, where they are locked in the bedroom. Fofo's body, nearly unconscious, is tossed unceremoniously on the kitchen floor. A guard is sent in to watch over the children, and he periodically brings food to them, instructing them to eat everything on their plate. The children hide in the dark bedroom, only wanting to see if Fofo is still alive. The guard makes no qualms about what is happening, saying that the children are to be sold. He doesn't want to sell another man's children, but this is his job. Kotchikpa treats the guard with utmost respect, hoping that he can gain a little control of the situation by pretending to like the man.

In the days that follow, the guard continues to bring the children food, forcing them to eat it in the hopes of fattening them up before their trip to Gabon. Fofo's groans have grown weaker and weaker as the days progress, and the children only see glimpses of him when the guard opens the door to bring them more food. Because Fofo is terribly injured, the guard takes over questioning them about their stories. He also forces the children to drink salt water, preparing their bodies for their time at sea when salt water might be the only thing they have to drink. The guard tells them that in a few days, the other children will arrive. Kotchikpa realizes that their hut is going to be the housing center for the trafficked children, and is horrified. That night, he hears the guards digging a shallow grave out back. He climbs up to the tiny window in time to see Big Guy dropping Fofo's body into the grave. He hears Big Guy telling the gravediggers that they will be given the Nanfang in return for their work. Kotchikpa knows that he and Yewa must escape as soon as possible. He manages to convince the guard to let them out of the locked bedroom for one lesson, knowing where Fofo always hid his spare set of keys. The guard agrees. Kotchikpa pretends to have seen a rat, and runs into the wardrobe, quickly rifling through Fofo's old clothes and silently pocketing the spare set of keys. That night, Kotchikpa waits until both Yewa and the guard are sound asleep before shakily making his way to the one padlocked window in the bedroom. When he has the window open, Kotchikpa quickly wakes Yewa and tells her that they're going to visit Fofo in the hospital. She is sleepy and confused, and lets a scream escape from her lips, rousing the guard. Kotchikpa screams for Yewa to jump out the window, that the guard is going to kill them, but she doesn't understand what is happening. Knowing that there is no time left, Kotchikpa jumps through the window and runs toward the trees, knowing he will never be able to outrun the sounds of sister's screaming.

Fattening for Gabon (Benin) Analysis

The main purpose of the story "Fattening for Gabon" is to depict the manipulation of children by human traffickers in Africa where thousands of children are still trafficked each year. This story attempts to create a complex web of reasons why human trafficking occurs - the children in this story have been personally impacted by AIDS and poverty - and in the end, the reader almost feels bad for everyone involved, from the children to the adults. Many critics have complained that the story opens with a line that reveals that Kotchikpa and Yewa are to be sold, claiming that the otherwise masterful story is undermined by the early revelation, preventing the reader from being fully manipulated alongside the children.

When the story opens, Fofo has just received his new motorcycle, payment for his promise to secure five children for the trafficker, Big Guy. The children have been sent to live with their uncle after their parents contract AIDS, and Big Guy decides to sell the children off once he learns that their parents have died. None of this information is known to the young children who genuinely believe that their good fortunes have come as a result of pious living. This is a particularly interesting rationalization as Kotchikpa himself admits that Fofo is an unlawful man, making his living smuggling people across the border, and that he and his sister have been naughtier this year than any other year. The belief that good deeds bring monetary rewards is pervasive in the African village where this story is set, and is seen most vividly during the Nanfang Thanksgiving church service, during which the pastor encourages patrons to give more money to erase their sins. It is no wonder, then, that Kotchikpa would believe the Nanfang, along with the other monetary luxuries, are rewards from God. The Nanfang itself is an interesting symbol throughout the story. When they first receive it, no one in the family really knows what to do with it, so they fill their days cleaning and polishing the machine. Fofo only drives the machine once or twice before he attempts to escape on it, which highlights the story's materialistic theme. As he gathers valuable goods, Fofo becomes more and more withdrawn, fearful that if he flashes his goods outside the hut, they will be stolen. He stores everything in large piles in the bedroom, rendering them useless and therefore, worthless. The only truly valuable item that Fofo receives is money for the children's education and books, although eventually, this too is stopped when Fofo fears it is too dangerous for the children to attend school. Although Fofo drives the Nanfang a few times, as he grows more depressed about his role in the human trafficking plot, he begins to withdraw from the bike and the rest of his belongings, keeping it covered with a sheet in the corner of a dark room, not cleaning it, and certainly not driving it around town.

Although he was once an adamant supporter of selling off his niece and nephew, Fofo seems to have a turning point in his character after "the bad night" when he masturbates in front of the children. This is undoubtedly the darkest scene in the novel, with Fofo preparing the children for what will certainly be a life of sexual exploitation in Gabon. Throughout the story, Fofo seems to justify his behaviors and decisions through Bible verses, often quoting biblical text to the confused children. All this changes after "the bad night" and Fofo begins having terrible nightmares, has stopped drinking, and

begins reading the Bible diligently. He warns Kotchikpa that Big Guy, the godparents, and many more adults in the village are bad people, and that they need to escape. Fofo even offers to pay Big Guy back for the motorcycle, food, and other luxuries, but it is clear to the reader, and to Big Guy, that such a payback would be impossible. Fofo would never be able to make back as much money as what had already been spent. Eventually, when Fofo insists that the Gabon deal is off - he will not sell the two young children, nor will be return to Braffe to steal any more - he pays with his life. Although Fofo was a hugely flawed character, and there will always be discussion about whether he should be considered a "good guy" or a "bad guy," he ends up paying for his sins with his own life, murdered by Big Guy.

The children have very interesting roles to play in the story, and have uniquely different reactions to the events unfolding around them. Experiencing the events of the story through the children's eyes allow for the reader to be manipulated alongside the children. Despite the fact that the story's opening line reveals that the children will be sold into slavery, the extend to which they are manipulated will shock many readers. When the story opens, Yewa is a realistic, untrusting child who seems to see the flaws of the adult characters. Kotchikpa, on the other hand, is fantasy-minded, and, worried about impressing the adults, will do anything to please them. Because the story is narrated from Kotchikpa's perspective, the reader sees how desperately the boy wants a true family. Although he clearly sees the flaws happening around him, he is very forgiving of the sinful adults, always coming up with elaborate motivations for their bad actions, and he always finds a way to forgive what has happened to him, never giving up his indomitable hope that things are going to turn out alright. Kotchikpa is an alert and quick-thinking boy who, once he realizes the gravity of the situation he is in, adapts to give himself a better chance of survival. This is most clearly seen through his interactions with the guard at the end of the novel. Even though he knows the guard is dangerous, and even after watching him bury Fofo, Kotchikpa knows that acting as if they are friends - acting as if he is in on the plot, as if he is "one of them" - may be his only hope of survival. In this way, Kotchikpa shows that he is just as cunning and manipulative as the adults. Unfortunately, he is not able to save his sister from her fate, and knows, even then, that he will forever be haunted by her screaming.

The story title comes from the insistence that the children, who were previously living in poverty, be fattened up for their trip to Gabon. There are many possible reasons why the traffickers may have been so adamant that the children eat well. First of all, the children would have a very difficult journey ahead of them on their way to Gabon. They would have been hidden in truck beds for very long journeys, and perhaps even strung off the side of a boat sailing to Gabon - hence why they were taught to drink salt water to survive - and the extra layer of fat on their bodies would have ensured safe delivery, even if they were not given much food during the lengthy journey. Another possible reason is that fatter children look healthier than skinny children. If the children were sent into manual labor, tourists would be less likely to suspect that the children were being mistreated if they looked healthy, and would therefore be less likely to involve the officials. If the children were sold into sexual slavery - which was probably more likely, given Fofo's behavior - patrons would believe the children were healthier (ie, clean of sexual diseases) and would be more likely to hire them for sexual services. Whatever

the reason for ensuring the children's weight gain, it fits well into the story's materialistic theme that money equals happiness. The image of fattening the children before sending them off to slavery also conjures images of biblical lambs being fattened up before being sacrificed at an altar offering. It is no doubt that the children in this story should symbolically be seen as sacrificial lambs, sent off to slaughter for the monetary gain of the adults - the same adults who have been taught by their pastor that wealth comes as a gift from God.

What Language is That? (Ethiopia)

What Language is That? (Ethiopia) Summary

"What Language is That?" is the shortest story in the collection, clocking in at just 10 pages. The story opens with the narrator describing her best friend, Selam and their close relationship. The two girls do everything together, even vacation with the narrator's family. During one vacation, Selam asks if hamburger is pork, claiming that another girl at the school, Hadiya, told her it was, and that she couldn't eat it. The narrator screams at Selam, saying that she told her to never speak to Hadiya and now they can no longer be friends. When Selam begins to cry, the narrator's father interjects, saying, "Best friends don't quarrel" (p. 145). The narrator's father says Selam should eat whatever she feels comfortable with while she is with them, but seems relieved when Selam says her parents have given her permission to eat pork.

Then one day, the narrator's parents inform her that she can no longer spend time with Selam. The narrator immediately smells that the entire apartment smells of smoke and she sees that the streets are empty. School has been cancelled. The narrator's parents no longer want her to play with Selam because she is Muslim, and riots have broken out in the neighborhood and it is no longer safe for the two girls to play together. The narrator doesn't understand why she can't see her best friend, she is only six-years-old after all. The narrator spends the next three days watching the blinds at Selah's apartment, waiting for them to open. Finally, one evening, she sees Selah climbing out to her balcony across the street. The narrator rushes to her balcony to meet her friend. The two girls stare at each other but do not speak. Selah waves slowly and the narrator waves back. Both girls open their mouths, smiling with all their teeth, then mime hugging each other. Suddenly, Selah rushes away before her mother can catch her on the balcony. Inside her apartment, the narrator smiles, knowing that she and her best friend have found a new language.

What Language is That? (Ethiopia) Analysis

The main point of the story "What Language is That?" is to show, on an innocent level, the pains of the arbitrary divide in Ethiopia between the Muslims and the Christians. Interestingly, the story is told through second-person narration, meaning that the protagonist of the story being "you." It is clear that Akpan has made this choice to draw readers into the intimacy of the two young girls at the center of the story, and to force the reader to recognize the languages shared in their own intimate relationships - be it with friends, family members or lovers. This closeness brings deeper meaning and resonance to the reader, as the emotions are reflected in the reader's own thoughts and memories. Through the use of "you" in the narration, it is as if the reader himself is losing his best friend, which makes the emotion in the loss much stronger. The two girls at the center of the story are only six-years-old, so they don't understand the political and religious implications of the country's divide; they only see that suddenly, arbitrarily,

they cannot be friends any more. Every reader will recognize the way that best friends, family members, and romantic lovers, invent secret-languages with which to communicate in relationships. Two people who share a close bond are able to communicate messages to each other, both verbally and nonverbally. This story, unlike many of the other stories in this collection, is full of hope. Although the two girls in this story have been banned from spending time together, they find a way of communicating their love, proving that at times, the heart speaks louder than words.

Luxurious Hearses (Nigeria)

Luxurious Hearses (Nigeria) Summary

This novella-length short story opens with the acknowledgement that it takes place in the days before the Nigerian government places a ban on the transportation of bodies from one end of the country to another. The protagonist, Jubril, has fought hard to survive the last two days, and has secured a ticket on one of the last buses, called Luxurious Buses, out of the city toward his father's village. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Christian Nigerians are attempting to escape from the Muslim attack, so Jubril, a Muslim boy himself, must disguise his religious identity by pretending to be Christian. He does so by wearing a Christian talisman around his neck, augmenting his speech (and therefore his accent), and always keeping his hand, which has been amputated at the wrist, firmly placed in his pocket to hide the fact that it is nothing more than a stump. In the traditional Muslim punishment, Jubril recently had his hand chopped off when he was found guilty of stealing a goat. Revealing his hand would unequivocally be seen as revealing his identity to the strangers on the bus, which, in this delicate political time, would mean certain death. Being a devout Muslim, there are many issues that spring from being surrounded by Christians. First, Jubril is uneasy around women in general, let alone women in Western dress and uncovered heads. He is also weary of the television sets set up as entertainment in the bus, knowing that they will show Western images that have been created to tempt man. He prays silently to Allah for strength, hoping a divine intervention will keep him from revealing his true identity to the enemies. As soon as Jubril manages to climb aboard the bus - which his difficult because there are hundreds of refugees outside the bus clamoring and begging to be let aboard - he finds that a traditional old village chief has taken his reserved seat. The man pompously refuses to give the seat up to its rightful owner and is violently offended that Jubril would even have the audacity to speak to him! Nearby, a sick man hacks into his blanket, and two women fight about storage space for their suitcases.

The Chief shouts at Jubril for even daring to address him, let alone to correct what Jubril interprets as a mistake. Desperately trying to hide his accent, Jubril can't bring himself to answer many of The Chief's demanding questions, which leads the old man to think Jubril is stupid. He shouts at him for this, too, before finally leaving the boy alone. Jubril just wants to melt into the background, close his eyes, and wait to arrive in his father's village. The problem with this is that there is not yet a driver for the bus, so the passengers, crammed together in the heat, impatiently wait for him to arrive. With nowhere else to sit, Jubril joins the long line of refugees waiting to use the toilet at the end of the bus, and slumps against a wall next to a pregnant women whom he refuses to make eye contact with. Meanwhile, two passengers, an old woman named Madame Aneima - whom Jubril feels a strange connection to - and a man named Emeka care for a man suffering from malaria. Emeka has given the sick man three times the recommended dosage of malaria medication hoping it will kick-start his body into fighting the disease. The rest of the passengers begin to argue about what they will do with the man's body if he is to die on the trip. The government has made it illegal to

transport corpses, so lawfully, they should throw his body out of the bus once he dies, but it would go against Christian burial rituals. One woman shouts that a man who suggests they simply get rid of the boy is a Muslim, a horrible accusation. The Chief stands to quiet the crowd, making everyone agree that no one will mention the word "Muslim" again on this trip. Everyone is immediately endeared to the Chief for bringing order amidst the chaos. Jubril is shaking where he stands, still sure someone is going to pull his hand from his pocket, revealing who he truly is.

While waiting for the bus driver to arrive, Jubril thinks back on his religious journey. His father was a Christian and his mother was a Muslim. They were married in Nigeria, and everyone thought the marriage would bring peace between the religiously feuding villages. Jubril and his brother, Yusuf, were baptized Christian at birth. When Jubril's father struggled to find work in the tiny southern village, he began to leave for weeks, even months at a time. Soon after, Jubril's mother took her children and fled to her father's village in the north. Jubril's father refused to follow, fearing recurring religious and ethnic cleansing. Jubril's mother reverted to her Islamic faith, and raised the boys as devout Muslims - although Jubril always feared that his soul was Christian due to his infant baptism. Over the years, Yusuf began to ask questions about his father, clearly missing his life in the southern village. As soon as he was old enough, he rejoined his father in the south and became a devout follower of the Deeper Life Christian Bible Church. When he returned to his mother's village in the north, he carried a Bible with him at all times, spoke in tongues, and attempted to convert his neighbors. As a result, he was stoned to death by the Muslims, and Jubril, a strict and devout Muslim, did nothing to help save him. Soon after, Jubril was tending to his cows in the fields when he noticed that there were no other farmers around. He took his cows to water and was further alarmed that he found no other cowherds there. Quickly, he realized that riots had broken out in his village, and that the Muslims were pushing out the Christians. Two of his Muslim friends approached him in the streets and began questioning him for his ties to Yusuf. These two friends owed Jubril money and were clearly using this riot as an opportunity to threaten Jubril into removing their debt. The friends turned on Jubril and began accusing him of being an infidel. They threw stones at him and beat him until he passed out from the pain. When he awoke, he saw his friends preparing a can of gasoline and a packet of matches. He knew that the men planned to burn his body. With what little strength he could muster, Jubril pulled himself up and frantically ran away with the men chasing after him.

Jubril is pulled from his thoughts when two policemen enter the Luxurious Bus to remove the sick man, promising the protesting people that they'll make sure he's placed on the next bus, although they're clearly lying. Emeka is very concerned by who should receive the sick man's seat, and demands to know what is going on - Nigeria is a democracy now! As Jubril watches this scene unfold, the TVs on the bus suddenly flicker on and he quickly averts his eyes to avoid seeing Western images. Everyone on the bus quiets down as they watch the TVs. One woman notices that Jubril is not watching TV and demands to know why. Of course, Jubril cannot answer her. He turns his head in the direction of the TVs but keeps his eyes closed, which seems to appease the nosy woman. Suddenly, the programming is interrupted with scenes of the riots that have broken out in a northern Nigerian village. The people aboard the bus shout and

scream as they recognizes villagers - both soldiers and corpses. Emeka is particularly loud, as he has recognized both his best friend and his cousin fighting against the "pagan Muslims". In the chaos, Jubril accidentally brushes against The Chief's soldier, which outrages the old man. He stands up and curses Jubril for daring to touch him, demanding to know the boy's name. Shocked, Jubril accidentally gives him his true Muslim name, Jubril, instead of his adopted Christian name, Gabriel. Panicked, Jubril attempts to correct his error, and luckily, the Chief is too outraged to have taken notice. Jubril silently thanks Allah for protecting him. The moment is interrupted by the police who have once again joined the bus and pulled the cable from the television. Emeka is stunned, pleading with the police, promising them any sum of money, to return the feed to the TVs. He is desperate to see if his best friend and cousin have survived the riots. Emeka is in tears, but the police officers refuse the 10-naira note he offers, claiming they want much, mush more. The police say that "the toilet people" have caused trouble for the bus, so now there is a mandatory 200-naira fee for anyone wanting to use the toilet. The police officers also deliver the terrible news that this bus probably won't be leaving tonight, as no one can find the driver. The people are outraged, but Jubril has no energy to join in their complaints. He realizes that he hasn't eaten anything in nearly three days, and that he has spent the majority of that time on the run. Cruelly, the Chief offers Jubril some crackers, but only if he accepts them with his right hand, the hand Jubril has stuffed in his pocked. Of course, Jubril is forced to refuse, knowing it's a trap. Another man intercedes and tells the Chief to stop taunting Jubril and to give the boy his seat. The Chief is absolutely incensed that this man would dare speak to him in such an informal, accusing way. When the people demand to see the Chief's ticket, he does not have one to show them. The other passengers immediately side with Jubril, but out of respect, no one forces the Chief out of his seat. Still, Jubril is overwhelmed with happiness. These passengers believe that he is one of them, and that is better than any seat on a bus. It ensures his safety.

Jubril has not felt this safe since he was attacked by his friends in the village. After passing out in a field, Jubril awoke in a strange man's house, and realized that he had been saved by a Muslim good Samaritan. The man had hidden Jubril under his family's prayer mats, and when the Christian rebels came searching the house, he refused to give up Jubril's hiding place. The rebels beat the Muslim man and threatened to burn down his house, even going so far as to pour gasoline over all the man's belongings, including the rugs under which Jubril was hiding. Back on the bus, Jubril has decided that the best way to get his seat back from the chief is to bring the police on board to settle the matter once and for all. When they hear this, the other passengers turn on Jubril saying that he invites rapists to meet their daughters. Once again, the Chief stands and says that he will ensure the police do not come. Just like that, the people once again side with the Chief and Jubril is on the outside. As a sort of payment for taking away Jubril's favor, the Chief drops a handful of crackers into Jubril's lap, which he stuffs into his mouth immediately. Jubril's opinion of the Chief slowly begins to change as he realizes that the Chief is a man of great power and influence, and that he may be able to help him once they reach the southern village. In his mind, he equates the Chief to a Muslim emir, a holy man, and his reverence for the Chief grows. From then on, he goes out of way to show the Chief respect, listens to the Chief's long stories of suffering, and no longer pressures the old man to give up his seat. Suddenly, a new

man arrives on the bus. He is a soldier carrying a very sick dog. The passengers demand that the man leave immediately, but he refuses, saying that he has purchased a ticket from the police men outside: the sick man's ticket. When he tries to show the people his ticket, the Chief intervenes saying that this bus is a democracy, like the new Nigerian government, and the people have decided that aboard this bus, no one will look at anyone else's ticket. The soldier has clearly gone mad from his fighting days, and he refuses to leave the bus, claiming that he must get home to save his sick dog. He recounts horrible stories of limbs being cut off children in the battlefield, which only reminds Jubril of the horrible day when his hand was lopped off as punishment for stealing a goat. The passengers still refuse to believe the soldier's story, blaming him for the governmental corruption that has stolen the wealth and oil from their land. In his defense, the soldier claims that he has no money from the government and that he simply wants to return to village life, supporting himself as a farmer or a fisherman. The passengers balk at this, saying that there is no farmland left - it has all been torched - and there is no fresh water to fish in - it has all been polluted by the oil companies. The soldier is out of touch with the plight of village life, and the passengers have no sympathy for his story. A massive battle of word breaks out between the Chief and the soldier as the Chief demands that the soldier leave due to the democratic vote of the people. The mentally deranged soldier shoots imaginary machine guns into the air, curses the passengers, and threatens to kill someone if he is forced to leave the bus. Madam Aniema intercedes by taking a water bottle - which she claims contains Catholic holy water - and sprinkles the contents on the soldier who immediately quiets down. Suddenly, Emeka begins to tremble, and raises his hands if they do not belong to him. He begins babbling in tongues and is clearly possessed by a spirit. He shouts that there is traitor on the bus, that someone here does not belong. Certain that Emeka is talking about the soldier, everyone waits breathlessly for Emeka to lay his hands on the man, but they are shocked when his hands clamp down on Jubril's shoulders. Jubril is terrified as Emeka shouts and screams that Jubril is the enemy, that he is not a man of Christ, and he desperately struggles to hold his bandaged wrist in his pocket, lest it be exposed to the enthralled audience. Suddenly, the soldier jumps from his seat and attacks Emeka, freeing Jubril from his grip. The two men tousle, and eventually, Emeka is thrown from the bus. The rest of the passengers feel terribly for Jubril, who is still only a boy, and one woman offers him her seat. The Chief sits calmly stroking the soldier's dog, talking to him in the same patient way he once spoke to Jubril. The Chief points to Jubril and says, "He's refused to remove his hand from the pocket...in spite of our pleas. He and his parents are the type of useless people we would have given to the white man in those days" (p. 243). Jubril knows that he will never be truly safe, and he no longer knows who he can trust.

Outside, the weather has turned cold, and the refugees still waiting for transport huddle together to stay warm. In the distance, they see another Luxurious Bus making its way toward the parking lot and they cheer with excitement. Many take out large wads of cash and wave it around, prepared to pay any price to get safely to the south. When the bus stops, they are horrified to see that it is full of bloody corpses. The police try, unsuccessfully, to coerce the refugees onto the bus, saying that it will take them south. Eventually, a few weeping people - some having blindfolded their children - board the bus to be taken south. Jubril is horrified by this, but does not know what he would do if

he were in their situation. Eventually, the police rouse the driver for Jubril's bus and they finally take off. Jubril's heart soars. He feels so relaxed he even brings himself to watch a few moments of television. Some of the passengers are terrified that their bus will be intercepted by police along the way and they vow that if anyone dies along the way, they will immediately dispose of the body, regardless of religious tradition. When Jubril brings his sight back to the television, he is heartbroken to see images of his old village engulfed in flames. When he sees a beautiful mosque being firebombed by the Christians, he breaks into tears and, forgetting where he is, brings his right hand from his pocket to wipe away his tears. His mistake is immediately spotted. The passengers turn on him, pulling him from his seat, accusing him of being a Muslim, a rebel, one of the soldiers they have seen on TV persecuting the Christians. Even the Chief disowns the boy, washing his hands of him. Only the crazed soldier comes to Jubril's defense, attempting to save him from the violent mob. But in the end, he is unsuccessful. Both the soldier and Jubril are dragged from the bus and their throats are slit. Their bodies are left in bloody heap by the side of the road as the bus continues on toward its destination.

Luxurious Hearses (Nigeria) Analysis

"Luxurious Hearses" is the longest story in the entire collection, and many readers will feel that its slow pace impedes the story's message. The story focuses on young Jubril, a Muslim teenager forced to hide his identity to survive on a bus full of Christian refugees during the Civil War in Nigeria. Although most of the violent action takes place off-stage from the story, understanding the riots in the villages is integral to understanding the deeper messages of this story, and to understanding many of the characters, including Jubril's, actions. In short, the Nigerian villages were torn between two religions, Christianity (including Catholicism) and Islam, and riots often broke out in the villages with factions striving to prove that their God, and therefore their religion, was stronger than the other. There were also villages that still followed traditional tribal (called Pagan) religions, and The Chief appears to have been a traditional spiritual leader. When the Nigerian government became a democracy, many of these traditional religions were thought of as old-fashioned as the Nigerian people sought to exert their individual voice and power rather than adhering to the voice and power of their spiritual leaders. This conflict is seen many times in the short story as The Chief demands utmost respect from the passengers who refuse to give it to him in this new democracy.

Many conflicts arise during the hours-long wait for the Luxurious Bus driver to arrive, some petty and some major, but the unifying thread of these conflicts lies in the passengers' inability to work together as a unit to overcome obstacles. Everyone wants their voice to be heard - it is a new freedom, after all - and this leads to chaos and upheaval about trivial matters, such as where people should sit and where they should stow their luggage. Burning at the base of all these trivial conflicts is the real conflict between the Muslims and the Christians, through which hundreds of thousands of Nigerians are being decimated as both groups fight for religious cleansing in the villages. The passengers aboard this bus have all escaped terrible bloodshed and most have lost everything. They know that they are safe only for a few hours, possibly days,

and that they must escape the war-torn villages immediately. This sense of urgency has pushed many of the refugees to their breaking points and some, such as Colonel Usenetok and Monica have gone mad.

Despite the fact that there is a new democratic government meant to protect its people, the nation is crippled by violence and corruption, as seen through the behaviors of the police officers on the bus. The police officer remove the sick man, suffering from malaria, from the bus and promise to put him on the next bus to the south, although this is clearly a lie. The police officers know that once there is a free seat on a bus, they can sell the ticket for an exorbitant price and pocket the income. The sick man is delirious and cannot protest his place. Although the passengers on the Luxurious Bus rally to protect the sick man, they know that there is only so much they can do. If they draw too much attention to themselves, the police will focus on them, and will torment, or possibly even kill, them. This fear is highlighted again when the police make ridiculous financial demands on the people who want to watch television or use the bathroom. These are basic, free services that have been provided by the bus line, but they have been exploited by the police. Fear has been instilled in the passengers, who know that if they refuse the police demands, or try to fight against them, they will be killed. The police officers know that these passengers are refugees and have lost everything, and are therefore unable to pay the exorbitant fees, but they raise the rates anyway. In this way, the extortion highlights the struggle between the people, who have fought for a democracy, and the corrupt government. Because there are few human rights laws, that many societies in the West are protected from, police still kill anyone who dares to question their authority. Although the people have won the right to question their government, and they often do so in private, no one would dare to do so in public because it would almost certainly equal death.

The various conflicts that arise on the bus are symbolic of the chaotic and fractured state of an unorganized Nigeria. Throughout the long wait for the driver, everyone, including Jubril, flip-flop on their views, siding with a passenger one moment, just to accuse him the next: "Jubril was uncomfortable with the way his fellow passengers were switching sides on every issue" (Page 236). Most of the flip-flops happen when an individual realizes that another person may be able to help/harm them. The reader sees this most clearly with Jubril and his relationship with the Chief. At first, he loathes the Chief and even threatens to call the police to have him forcibly removed from the bus, but once he realizes that Chief is a well-respected and powerful man, he hopes that befriending him will lead to protection later on in the journey. Likewise, the Chief is kind to Jubril when he has the sympathies of his fellow passengers, but once Jubril draws negative attention to himself, the Chief once again turns his back on the boy. This is indicative of the political situation in Nigeria, with every man out for himself, including the men in charge. The reader sees echoes of the flip-flop of loyalty in the actions of Jubril's village friends who would rather kill him than make good on their debt. Strangely, the only two characters with any sense of integrity are the addle-minded soldier who comes to Jubril's defense when the passengers threaten to throw him off the bus (he believes Jubril's hand has been amputated as a result of one of the previous Civil Wars he fought in, rather than from theft), and Madam Aniema, a devoutly religious woman. It is interesting to note that these two characters have the most integrity because, despite

their sometimes violate actions, they are steadfast in their beliefs, not wavering to suit their social gain. As a result, both of these characters have been deemed "crazy" by the rest of the passengers.

While the rest of the passengers augment who they are and what they believe in for their own protection, and sometimes for their own social gain, in the end, Jubril sticks to his personal beliefs and remains loyal to Allah. Because of Jubril's desperate desire to hide his Muslim identity from his fellow passengers, many readers may believe that it is his story that prompts the collection's title, Say You're One of Them. Indeed, many times during his journey, Jubril must pretend to be "one of them," meaning that he must pretend to be one of the Christians in order to survive. As the story progresses, however, the reader sees that Jubril did not have a choice if he wanted to live, and that he never fully turned his back on Allah. In the end, when it is clear that he is going to die, Jubril acknowledges the God that he believes has been with him, protecting him, all along: Allah. In the end, the story's message is not about pretending to be someone else, but to stand firm in your beliefs, not compromising them for anyone. At the end of the novel, both Jubril and Colonel Usenetok are dead, solely for standing up for what they believe in. But when considering the torment that the living Nigerians have to go through, perhaps death is not the worst thing. As witnessed by the passengers' prideful reactions to the death of their family members who stood up for their villages - they view these slaved loved ones as martyrs for their beliefs - it could be said that Jubril's death, although mindless and horrifying, makes him a martyr for his religion. The "still-twitching, protesting stump" could be seen as a symbol for Jubril's eternal life. Although his body is dead, his Muslim beliefs as symbolized by the amputated arm live on past his death.

My Parents' Bedroom (Rwanda)

My Parents' Bedroom (Rwanda) Summary

The final story in the collection focuses on a nine-year-old girl living in Rwanda with her Papa, Maman, and one-year-old brother, Jean. When the story opens, Maman is getting ready for a night out, putting on a short dress and dark, red lipstick. The narrator, Monique, is confused because her Maman always told her that only bad women go out at night. Maman barely looks at her daughter, giving her instructions such as "Don't open the door for anyone. Your papa is not home, I'm not home, nobody is home," "You have to learn how to take care of Jean," and most importantly, "When they ask you, say you're one of them" (p. 266). Monique doesn't understand any of this, but when she tries to ask her mother questions, she shouts and the girl, which she never does normally, silencing her. Maman's hands shake as she takes out her trademark perfume and, instead of spraying herself, sprays Jean. Monique follows her mother into the parlor where she stops Jean from playing with the bright crucifix that hangs on the wall. Monique is very proud of the crucifix, especially because Papa has promised that it will be hers when he dies, even though daughters almost never inherit anything. She wonders how her Uncle, Tonton Andre and his wife, Tantine Annette will treat their expected child if it is born a girl. Suddenly, Maman stands and reminds Monique to lock all the doors and then she is gone.

That night, Monique - whose nickname is Shenge - is awoken by Tonton Andre's shouts at the front door. He begs her to let him in. When Monique rushes to the door, she is terrified to see machete blades thwacking their way through the plywood as strange voices shout for Papa and Maman. Then her uncle's voice comes through quietly, saying that all the bad men have gone now and it's safe to open the door. Monique obeys, but Tonton Andre still stands there with the armed mob. As soon as the door is open, they push past Monique demanding to know where her parents are. Monique is terrified and can honestly say that she does not know. Her great uncle, known as the Wizard because of his pale skin, walks up to the crucifix and begins smashing it with his walking stick. Jesus' body breaks off the cross and rolls toward Monique's feet. Quickly, she picks it up and hides it in her pajamas. The Wizard demands to know where Jesus went, demands to know if Monique has Jesus, but she shakes her head, mute with fear. The Wizard finds Jesus hidden in the pajamas and slips it into his pocket. When Monique hears noises in her parents' bedroom, she runs toward the room and finds two men rifling through her parents' belongings. One of the men, an old man in yellow trousers, spots Monique, who tries to hide under her parents' bed, pulls her out, and rapes her. The Wizard tries to protect Monique, saying that she is one of them, and when the man finishes with her, carries her to the parlor. There, Tonton Andre is irate, saying that if he doesn't find his brother he will kill the children instead. Before the crowd leaves, the Wizard comes close to Monique and tells her that if she wants to live, she won't leave this house: "Ghosts are all over our land. Bad ghosts" (p. 273). The angry mob leaves, and an exhausted Monique falls asleep cradling Jean in her arms.

In the morning, Monique wakes to find her parents force-feeding Jean, who shrieks and cries, fighting the food. Monique is relieved to see her parents, but they are both acting strangely, practically ignoring her. Papa fluctuates between shouting at Monique, telling her to take care of her brother, and weeping into his hands. Monique immediately notices that her father's fingernails are caked with black mud, but she doesn't understand what projects he could have been working on. Maman sits like a statue on the couch, refusing to look at or touch her children. Monique hears a small sneeze coming from the kitchen. No one is there, and her parent's don't acknowledge the noise. As she stares at her mother's face, Monique thinks about the time when she visited her mother's family and they commented on how it was dangerous that Monique looked so much like her mother. She didn't understand what this meant. Monique picks up her parents' wedding photo, which also shows a beaming Tonton Andre, and attempts to scratch his face out of the picture. Maman slaps her hand away and tells her to take a shower. Monique is too scared to take a shower on her own, so Papa comes with her, weeping into his mud-stained hands. Before Papa leads her to the bathroom, Monique looks up and sees dirty water dripping down the white walls. The dark water trickles slowly at first, and then builds to a steady stream. Monique touches the liquid with her fingertip and realizes that it's not water; it's blood. She screams, "Ghost! Ghost!" and jumps into her father's arms. He continues to cry, making speaking difficult, but he manages to choke out that they're good ghosts. He takes her to the bath, but makes her wash herself in private. When Monique climbs out of the bath, Papa is talking to Maman. She is making him promise to do something he swears he cannot do. Maman insists that he must do it so their children can live.

That night, Monique hears the sneezing of the ghosts again, above the bedroom. She hears raspy breathing coming from the ceiling of her room. Papa comes into the room with a bottle of holy water, as if he is there to comfort the ghosts, not Monique. He and Monique listen together as the ghost's raspy breathing comes further and further apart. Then Papa and the rest of the ghosts moan, and there are tears in Papa's eyes. Monique hears wailing coming from the houses in the distance, and can hear the angry mob making their way back to her house. Papa and Maman are growing more and more erratic. Maman opens the door, as if to let the mob into her home, but Papa races over and slams it shut again. Both of Monique's parents are shaking and crying. Maman makes Papa promise that he won't betray the people that have come to him for help, but Monique doesn't understand who she is talking about. Suddenly, there is a light knocking at the door, followed by faint crying. Without hesitating, Maman opens the door and scoops up Helene, a neighborhood Tutsi girl, whose foot has been nearly hacked off by a machete. She and Papa quickly tend to Helene's injuries before Maman opens the hatch to the ceiling above Monique's bed and shoves her in. Immediately, Monique understands that it is not ghosts hiding above her bed; it is Tutsi people escaping the genocide. The mob approaches Monique's house. At the door, she sees the man in the yellow trousers, although now they are stained dark with blood. The mob corners Maman in the bedroom and then gives Papa a huge machete. Tonton Andre is screaming for Papa to kill Maman, like he made Tonton Andre kill his own pregnant wife the night before. Papa's hands are shaking, and Maman whispers that he promised he would do it. Monique stands in shock, watching as Papa brings the machete down on

Maman's head, slicing it open. Blood overflows in the bedroom. Without looking at his children, Papa turns and leaves the house with the mob.

Although she knows that her mother is dead, she has just seen her murdered, Monique can't reconcile that her mother, or her Tantine Annette, is actually gone. She imagines that the women are just hiding in the ceiling, with the rest of the Tutsi refugees, and that when the coast is clear, they will climb down and smother her with kisses. Above her head, Monique can hear the people weeping. Some call down to her, promising to take care of her and her brother, begging her for forgiveness. "I'm waiting for Maman," Monique calls back to the voices (p. 287). Someone tells her that Maman is gone. Another tells her that Maman is with them, but she's sleeping because she's had a very long day. Another says that the ceiling is going to cave in because of the weight, and if Monique doesn't want her Maman to topple down on top of her, she needs to get out of the house now, with Jean, and never come back. Monique grabs Jean and picks her way through the destroyed house. She picks up the broken crucifix and hurries outside. There are corpses everywhere, blood running like tiny streams in the streets. Monique sees a smaller mob coming toward her and her brother. This mob is full of Tutsis, including some of Maman's relatives. She wants to run to them for protection, but she is afraid. Her Tonton Andre, a Hutu, made her father kill her mother. What will her Tutsi relatives make her do? She slips into the brush with Jean and waits for the mob to pass. Monique watches in horror as the mob sets her home alight, and she knows that the people hiding the attic will never have time to escape. In the dark, Jean plays with the light from the crucifix, babbling Maman's name.

My Parents' Bedroom (Rwanda) Analysis

As Maman gets ready for her night out, nine-year-old Monique's thoughts deftly create a firm foundation of conflict for the reader, although most readers will not fully understand what they are reading until the story comes to a close. This veil of information - when the reader knows something the narrator does not - is an incredibly difficult literary tool to master, and Akpan has done so flawlessly. While Monique watches her mother dress, she notes that her mother is a beautiful Tutsi woman. She describes common Tutsi qualities such as the high cheekbones, narrow nose, sweet mouth, big eyes, and lean frame. She immediately contrasts this with Papa's Hutu look: very black, with lips full as bananas, and a wide nose. Monique and the reader are confused when relatives begin saying that it will be dangerous for Monique since she looks so much like her mother. As the story progresses, however, it becomes clear that genocide is happening, with the Hutus wiping out nearly one million Tutsis in less than four months. As the story harrowingly depicts, many of these Tutsis were killed by neighbors, or even loved ones. As time passes, it will become dangerous for Monique because she looks Tutsi like her mother even though her father is Hutu. This danger is realized when the man with yellow trousers rapes Monique, thinking she is a Tutsi child. The only reason why his penetration doesn't tear open her womb is because Monique's great-uncle, the wizard, stops him from defiling her by saying, "No, Shenge is one of us!" (Page 267). Because the reader sees the events through the eyes of a nine-year-old child, there is much mystery and surprise in the unfolding events. There is also a deeper sadness, as

Monique has not lost her childhood innocence. She does not realize that her father's hands are caked with blood, not mud. Nor does she understand that it is blood, not water, pouring from the ceiling above her bed. She believes the voices that she hears in the night are ghosts, and in a way, the voices are ghosts, ghosts of the undead. It is a harrowing and powerful symbolism to refer to these refugees as ghosts, and makes clear that although they are hiding, there is no hope for their survival. The reader sees this realized when the mob sets Monique's childhood home alight, leaving no time for the injured Tutsis hiding in the ceiling to escape. There is no question that they were all burned alive.

Although themes of camouflage and pretending can be seen in each of the stories in this collection, the collection gets its name from "My Parents' Bedroom" in one line of Maman's instructions to Monique: "When they ask, say you're one of them." Maman knows that her death is imminent and there is nothing she, or her family, can do to stop it. She attempts to save herself by hiding in the ceiling with the rest of the Tutsi refugees, but realizes that the mob will never stop looking for her, and that if she is found, the rest of the hiding Tutsis and her children will be killed. In order to save them, Maman sacrifices herself to the mob, hoping that it will be enough to keep her children safe. As soon as she makes this decision, Maman becomes withdrawn from the children, distancing herself perhaps to prepare them for a life without her, and perhaps because it will simply be too painful to say a proper goodbye. Likewise, Papa seems to resent Maman's sacrifice for the children, and takes his terror out on them by shouting at Monique that she is complicating his life. When he says this, many readers may be taken aback by his misplaced anger, but when they realize what Maman has asked him to do - kill her to save their children - much sympathy can be found for him. After Papa kills Maman, he cannot bring himself to look at his children. Perhaps he blames them for Maman's sacrifice, or perhaps he knows that he will no longer be able to protect them. The children are on their own now.

Maman's sacrifice is symbolized by the crucifix that hangs in the family's parlor. When the Wizard comes and bashes the crucifix with his walking stick, he breaks the body of Jesus, which is a clear foreshadowing to the way that Maman will have her body broken for the safety of her children. This is an obvious but powerful symbolism. Maman is murdered for the safety of her children, and Christians believe that Jesus was murdered for the spiritual salvation of his children, humanity. Jesus' body can also be seen as a symbol of hope - his death promises believers eternal life. As long as Monique has Jesus' body, she has hope. Some readers have interpreted the Wizard pocketing Jesus' body as the Wizard snuffing out Monique's hope. Historically, the Hutus killed one million Tutsis, so the chances of two small children making it out of the genocide unharmed are quite slim. In the story however, Maman, like Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice, so other readers may still cling to that action as giving the children hope for survival. The final image of the story is of Jean clutching the crucifix, babbling Maman's name, which reminds the reader one final time of Maman's sacrifice and her parallel to Jesus.

Characters

Jubril

Jubril is the sixteen-year-old protagonist in the story "Luxurious Hearses." Jubril is described as looking mature for his age, even though he is a teenager. He is fair-skinned and lanky, with brilliant bit eyes and sharp nose. Jubril was baptized a Christian as an infant, but was raised Muslim by his mother. Jubril has never felt a sense of conflict about his religious identity until a civil war between the Christians and the Muslims breaks out in Nigeria. Jubril is an adamant supporter of the Islamic party and even participates in bombing the homes of Christians, and setting Christian churches ablaze. All this changes, however, when some of Jubril's Muslim friends, who owe him money, turn against him and accuse him of being an infidel (a Christian). It is clear that the friends turn against him in the hopes of having their debts erased, but soon the situation spins out of control and they are stoning Jubril, beating him to the point of unconsciousness. When Jubril awakes, he sees his "friends" fumbling with a can of gasoline and a packet of matches and knows that they are going to set him alight. With what little strength he can muster, Jubril manages to run away before passing out in a field. When he awakens for the second time, he finds that he has been taken in by a Muslim good Samaritan. The Christian rebels seek the man out and burn down his house, but not before he, once again, helps Jubril escape. He gives Jubril money and clothing to disguise his Muslim appearance, and tells him to board a Luxury Bus to the south where he will be safe. Aboard the bus, Jubril encounters many struggles that impede his disguised identity, including many occurrences in which people attempt to view his hand, which has been amputated at the wrist, which he keeps firmly hidden in his pocket. Throughout the journey, Jubril struggles to maintain his Muslim identity, while keeping it hidden from the rest of the passengers, so speaking with women and watching TV present complex moral dilemmas for the young boy. At the very end of his journey, after an hours-long wait for the bus driver, Jubril accidentally reveals his amputated hand by wiping tears from his eyes. He is promptly removed from the bus and his throat is slit.

Jigana

Jigana is the eight-year-old narrator of the story "Ex-Mas Feast." He has grown up in the slums of Kenya and is thought to be the only hope for his family's future. He is overwhelmed with guilt that his family, particularly his sister Maisha, have give up their lives for his education. When Maisha moves away to join a brothel full-time, Jigana tears up all his school supplies and runs away from home.

Maisha

Maisha is a twelve-year-old prostitute in the story "Ex-Mas Feast." She began prostituting when she was eleven, and now has a strong customer list of white tourists. She wears artificial fingernails and bleaches her skin in the hopes of attracting older men. She is also teaching her ten-year-old sister Naema about life on the streets. She is a complex character who is full of anger toward her family, but who gives everything in the hopes of making their lives better. At the end of the story, Maisha joins a brothel full-time to help pay for her younger brother's education.

Kotchikpa

Kotchikpa is the ten-year-old narrator of the story "Fattening for Gabon." At the beginning of the story, he is a somewhat naïve boy, believing that the riches poured upon his family by generous benefactors are rewards from God for their piety. As the story progresses, he realizes that he and his sister are going to be sold into slavery, and that he cannot trust any of the adults in his life. He manipulates the guards by befriending them and eventually escapes, although he is forced to leave behind his five-year-old sister.

Fofo Kpee

Fofo Kpee is the uncle of Kotchikpa and Yewa in the story "Fattening for Gabon." He makes the decision to sell his niece and nephew into slavery in exchange for a new motorcycle and various other luxuries. Halfway through the story, after masturbating in front of the children, Fofo Kpee seems to have a change of heart and unsuccessfully attempts to escape with the children. He is murdered for attempting to betray his business partners, and is buried in a shallow grave behind his hut while Kotchikpa watches. Throughout the story, he is sometimes referred to as "Smiley Kpee" because of a scar that his left a permanent sneer on his face.

Big Guy

Big Guy is the human trafficker at work in the story "Fattening for Gabon." He is the middleman between the kidnappers - such as Fofo Kpee - and the traffickers that will eventually sell the children for profit. Big Guy is a frighteningly violent man, responsible for hunting Fofo Kpee down and killing him, although he masks this violence behind a manipulative kindness that fools many people.

The Chief

The Chief is the old man who steals Jubril's reserved seat in the story "Luxurious Hearses." The Chief represents many things in the story. First, he represents the old

tribal way of life that dominated Nigeria before the government was changed to a democracy. Although the government has changed, the Chief refuses to accept this and still demands old-school respect and is outraged when anyone dares to question his authority on the bus. The Chief also represents the fickle nature of the Nigerian people as his favor toward Jubril changes frequently to suit his own personal gain during the journey.

Colonel Usenetok

Colonel Usenetok is the crazed soldier that boards the Luxurious Bus in the story of the same name, after the man weakened by malaria has been taken off. Colonel Usenetok boards the bus with his dog, Nduese, whom he cares for as if the dog is a fellow injured soldier. Although Colonel Usenetok is met with much hostility aboard the bus, he manages to keep his seat. At the end of the story, Colonel Usenetok believes that Jubril has lost his hand as a war crime in one of the Civil Wars and jumps to defend him. The fellow passengers reward him by slitting his throat.

Monique

Monique is the nine-year-old narrator of the story "My Parents' Bedroom." As the story is told through Monique's eyes during the Rwandan genocide, the reader is given a plethora of information that does not make sense until the final passages of the story, which gives the events a much deeper impact and emotional resonance. In the story, Monique is charged with caring for her one-year-old brother Jean while her parents, essentially, prepare to die. She watches in horror as her Hutu father is forced by an angry mob to murder her Tutsi mother. She also discovers that her parents have been hiding Tutsi refugees in their attic to protect them from the bloodshed. At the end of the story, Monique is forced to walk through bloody streets full of corpses to find safety with her baby brother.

Objects/Places

The Trunk

The trunk is the place where Maisha stores her belongings in the story, "An Ex-Mas Feast." Maisha has been forced to become a prostitute, and the only control she feels she has over her young life is her control over the trunk, which she locks with a padlock every time she leaves home. Her poor family is desperate to get into the box and steal Maisha's belongings, but they never succeed. This is symbolic of the way that they will never succeed in stealing Maisha's determination.

The Nanfang

The Nanfang is a motorcycle purchased for Fofo Kpee in the story "Fattening for Gabon." The bike was purchased for Fofof Kpee when he agreed to sell off his five nieces and nephews to human traffickers. The bike, which Fofo never truly learned how to drive, is symbolic of the materialistic nature that plagues parts of Africa. It is also the escape vehicle that Fofo uses when he attempts to back out of his deal with the traffickers and escape with his niece and nephew. At the end of the story, the Nanfang is used as payment to the gravediggers that dig Fofo's grave after he is murdered.

The Luxurious Bus

The Luxurious Bus is a bus service hired to transport Christian refugees to their homes in the southern villages. The bus itself has seats for around one hundred passengers, but this Luxurious Bus is rammed full with nearly two hundred passengers, crammed into all the aisles. Everything "luxurious" about the bus - the cable TVs and free bathrooms - have been exploited by the extortionate police and of course, there is nothing truly luxurious about refugee travel.

The TVs

The TVs are the largest source of temptation for Jubril on his journey from northern to Southern Nigeria in the story "Luxurious Hearses." The TVs stream Western images aimed to tempt good Islamic men from Allah, so Jubril goes out of his way not to look at the sin-boxes. At the end of the novel, however, Jubril feels so comfortable that he watches TV reportage of the riots in southern Nigeria, and sees images of a mosque being burned. The image is so moving that Jubril begins to cry and he accidentally reveals his amputated hand. As a result, Jubril is killed.

ECOMOG Soldiers

The ECOMOG soldiers were the soldiers sent out by the Nigerian government to aid in the country's civil war. In the story "Luxurious Hearses," Jubril has a deep respect for these soldiers. When Colonel Usenetok joins the bus, Jubril cannot stand the man until he learns that Usenetok is an ECOMOG soldier. Then, his entire view of the man changes, and he sides with him even with the rest of the bus has turned against him.

Nduese

Nduese is Colonel Usenetok's dog in the story "Luxurious Hearses." The dog is small enough to fit in someone's lap and is so sick that it often coughs up blood. Since the war, Colonel Usenetok has devoted his life to caring for this dog, and his devotion is a sign of his depleting mental faculties as a result of his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The Crucifix

The Crucifix is Monique's prized possession in the story "My Parents' Bedroom." It is a symbol of both hope and sacrifice for the young girl, who has been promised to inherit the icon when her father dies. In the story, the crucifix is broken by a pagan wizard, who steals the body of Jesus. When she escapes with her baby brother, Monique takes only the empty crucifix, which Jean clutches in his hands, babbling his mother's name.

Kenya

Kenya is the country in which the story "An Ex-Mas Feast" is set.

Benin

Benin is the country in which the story "Fattening for Gabon" is set.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia is the country in which the story "What Language is That?" is set during the partition between the Christians and the Muslims.

NIgeria

Nigeria is the country in which the story "Luxurious Hearses" is set during the Civil War between the Christians and the Muslims.

Rwanda

Rwanda is the country in which the story "My Parents' Bedroom" is set during the Hutu genocide of the Tutsi people.

Themes

Camouflage (Say You're One of Them)

Throughout many of the stories in this collection, the children learn to survive by blending in with their surroundings, whether or not they can control them. The reader sees this first in the story "Fattening for Gabon" when Kotchikpa realizes that his only way of escaping child slavery might be by pretending to befriend the guard sent to watch over him at night. In this way, Kotchikpa pretends to be part of the plot, pretends to be working alongside the guard instead of against him: "I found some solace in the fact that I could make him believe I liked him...I felt I had a bit of control over how things might turn out" (p. 118). This theme is repeated in the story "Luxurious Hearses" when Jubril realizes that he must disguise his true Islamic identity in order to survive the bus ride to the southern Nigerian villages. Although he hides his amputated hand and his northern accent, and adopts the Christian name "Gabriel," Jubril never truly sheds his Muslim identity. Although he fools the rest of the passengers that he has changed, he never fools himself, and the reader sees this at the end of the story that Jubril has never doubted Allah or Allah's protection over him. The actual title of the collection, Say You're One of Them, comes from a line in the final story, "My Parents' Bedroom" in which Monique's mother instructs her nine-year-old daughter to "say you're of them" when they come to the house. Monique doesn't know what her mother is talking about, and Maman refuses to go into further detail. The instruction to "say you're one of them" is fully revealed with the Hutu mob invades her house. Thinking that Monique is a Tutsi child, an old man rapes her. It becomes clear then that in order to survive, Monique must forget her mother's Tutsi family, and focus only on her father's Hutu paternal line. Although the theme of lying to survive is seen in all of the stories, the theme is seen most clearly, and most overtly in "My Parents' Bedroom."

Betrayal

The sad thread that ties all the stories in this collection together is the harrowing stories of the collection is that each of the children in the collection have, in some way, been betrayed by the adults that were meant to protect and nurture them. In the story "An Ex-Mas Feast," Jigana and his siblings have been forced into a life of street begging by their alcohol and drug addicted parents. They have no choice but to lean on each other for support, even if that means entering the dark life of the streets - through gang crime and prostitution - to give each other a brighter future. In the story "Fattening for Gabon," the betrayal is much starker: Fofo Kpee has been entrusted with the care of his niece and nephew after their parents fell ill with AIDS. Instead of caring for them, and nurturing their education as he promised to do, he sells them to human traffickers. The betrayal is echoed in the trust Mama and Papa build with the children when they arrive. Although their betrayal never reaches fruition, it is clear that Mama and Papa were the traffickers, and that their acts of kindness were only to trick the children into leaving the village with them without a fight. In a way, Kotchikpa is forced to betray his sister,

leaving her to the fate of the traffickers, when he runs away and has no time to take his sister with him. In the story "Luxurious Hearses," the betrayal of Jubril is far more complicated. He is betrayed by various passengers who build up his trust, making the boy believe that he will be protected, only to go back on their word, breaking his trust later. This flip-flopping of opinions if reflective of the political strain on the country during the Civil War, when the mentality is "every man for himself." Unfortunately, this fluctuation between trust and betrayal ultimately leads to Jubril's death. In the final story of the collection, Monique is betrayed by her Tonton Andre, who brings a mob into the girl's home to kill her parents, an act that, ultimately, results in Monique's rape. Her parents have no choice but to abandon their children - it is the only hope for the children's survival - which in a way is yet another form of betrayal.

The Loss of Innocence

Because each of the stories is set during wartime in Africa, and is told through the eyes of children, it should be no surprise that each of the stories is steeped in the loss of innocence. The loss of innocence starts out gradually in the collection before reaching its boiling point in the collection's final story. With the opening story, "An Ex-Mas Feast," the children are forced to live adult lives - the eldest daughter is a prostitute and the younger children are street beggars - but they maintain an element of childishness in the way they interact and play with each other. This idea is repeated in the story "Fattening for Gabon" with the children maintaining an element of childishness that prevents them from fully understanding the events unfolding around them. Because Yewa is left in the hands of the human traffickers at the story's closing, it is almost certain that she will lose her childish innocence in the days that follow the story's closing, but these events will take place off stage of the story's main events. Likewise, through his escape, Kotchikpa will be forced into an adult life quite early, although the reader does not see this evolution either. Jubril's loss of innocence is similar to Kotchikpa's in that the reader does not see it happening. At the time of the story's setting, Jubril is sixteen-years-old, which may seem very young to Western readers, but he is seen as an adult in the story "Luxurious Hearses." The reader does not necessarily see Jubril's loss of innocence, but it is reflected in the scene in which the children are forced to board a bus full of corpses. The parents make the children gawk at the bloody bodies to get used to the sight of them in order to survive the long journey to the south. This gruesome image prepares the readers for the final story in the collection, "My Parents' Bedroom" which shows firsthand Monique's loss of childhood innocence. It is the most clear-cut theme in the novel, as Monique narrates the story with very childish innocence, not understand the horrors of the genocide that unfold around her. Monique does her best to hold fast to this innocence even after her rape and her mother's murder. In the end, Monique realizes that she is no longer a child and that it is her responsibility to ensure her own survival and the survival of her baby brother.

Style

Point of View

Each of the stories in "Say You're One of Them" is told from the perspective of a vulnerable child living in Africa. In the story "An Ex-Mas Feast," the narrator is an eight-year-old boy living in the slums of Nigeria with his poverty-stricken family. The boy is far too wise for his years, which only highlights the family's desperate situation for the reader. Much of the story is told through exposition, filtered through Jigana's thoughts, with bits of dialogue used almost solely to characterize the secondary characters and their family dynamics.

"Fattening for Gabon" is told through the first-person narration of Kotchikpa, a ten-year-old boy living in Benin with his sister and uncle. Kotchikpa's narration is particularly interesting because he is very naïve to the events unfolding around him. Without the opening line of the story, which reveals to the reader that Kotchikpa and his sister are to be sold into slavery, the reader likely would be as surprised as the children are when their uncle betrays them. Knowing that the children are to be sold into slavery, however, allows for the reader to see and understand the manipulation of these vulnerable children on a chilling level.

"What Language is That?" is the shortest story in the collection, clocking in at just 10 pages. Interestingly, the story is told through second-person narration, meaning that the protagonist of the story being "you." It is clear that Akpan has made this choice to draw readers into the intimacy of the two young girls at the center of the story, and to force the reader to recognize the languages shared in their own intimate relationships - be it with friends, family members or lovers. This closeness brings deeper meaning and resonance to the reader, as the emotions are reflected in the reader's own thoughts and memories. Through the use of "you" in the narration, it is as if the reader himself is losing his best friend, which makes the emotion in the loss much stronger.

"Luxurious Hearses" is told through the perspective of sixteen-year-old Muslim boy Jubril, who is hiding out on a bus of Christian refugees. The point-of-view of this story stays very close to Jubril and the reader is given direct access to the boy's thoughts, fears, and desires. This is extremely important to the reader's understanding of the story as Jubril is doing his best to hide his identity from the passengers around him. Without access to Jubril's thoughts, the reader wouldn't understand the boy's conflict, which surrounds his fears of being found out. Because the reader knows how desperately Jubril is trying to keep his identity a secret, the tension in the story builds every time he is forced to speak with a fellow passenger. Since the conflict is given apt space to reach its pinnacle within the boys' thoughts, the reader will be horrifically surprised by the story's outcome, which wouldn't have been achieved if the reader did not have access to Jubril's most intimate thoughts.

"My Parents' Bedroom" is told through the first-person narration of nine-year-old Monique. The point-of-view is interesting because the reader learns facts about the horrific genocide through the innocent eyes of a child. Because the reader sees the events through the eyes of a nine-year-old child, there is much mystery and surprise in the unfolding events. There is also a deeper sadness, as Monique has not lost her childhood innocence. She does not realize that her father's hands are caked with blood, not mud. Nor does she understand that it is blood, not water, pouring from the ceiling above her bed. She believes the voices that she hears in the night are ghosts and in a way, the voices are ghosts - ghosts of the undead.

Setting

Each of the stories in Say You're One of Them is set in a different country in Africa. "An Ex-Mas Feast" is set in the slums of Nigeria. The entire story unfolds within the four walls of Jigana's family shack. The entire family sleeps in one room, with their belongings stacked in piles like rats around them. At the center of the room is Maisha's trunk of belongings, which she keeps under lock and key, which she earned through her work as a child prostitute. The shack the family lives in serves as symbolism for the destitute life they live, and the family's dirty desperation.

"Fattening for Gabon" is set in the tiny African country of Benin. Narrator Kotchikpa, his sister Yewa, and their Uncle Fofo live in a tiny hut in a poor village. As the story progresses, Fofo begins collecting valuable items which he stores, like a hoarder, in the tiny hut. The hut itself undergoes a massive transition, with Fofo rebuilding the walls and windows to ensure proper security for his amassed goods. By the end of the story, the tiny hut is literally a prison.

"Luxurious Hearses" is set in northern Nigeria during the civil war between Muslims and Christians. More specifically, this short story is set entirely in the tiny confines of "luxury" bus hired to transport Christian refugees to their homes in the southern villages. The bus itself has seats for around one hundred passengers, but this Luxurious Bus is rammed full with nearly two hundred passengers, crammed into all the aisles. Everything "luxurious" about the bus - the cable TVs and free bathrooms - have been exploited by the extortionate police, and of course, there is nothing truly luxurious about refugee travel. Throughout the story, it becomes clear that the bus provides a microcosmic study of all the conflicts of Nigeria and the civil war is symbolized by the actions of all the passengers aboard this bus.

Finally, "My Parents' Bedroom" is set in Rwanda during the Hutu genocide of the Tutsi people. The divide the country is reflected in the divide of Monique's home, with her Hutu father being forced to murder her Tutsi mother.

Language and Meaning

As each of the stories in Say You're One of Them is set in a different African country, each of the stories highlights a different African language, so it makes sense that the

language of each story tends to characterize the different cultures and characters involved. The integration of traditional languages throughout the stories is sometimes successful, and sometimes distracting. In the story "Fattening for Gabon," for example, the story is littered with italicized phrases in four colloquial languages: English, French Idaatcha and Egun, sometimes in the same paragraph. Many readers may find this extremely confusing, and will struggle to understand the dialogue of the main characters as little context is given for the foreign phrases. Other readers will find that this intermingling provides a sense of realism and verisimilitude, highlighting the ways different cultures have linguistically impacted some African villages. Other stories in the collection, such as "An Ex-Mas Feast" and "My Parents' Bedroom" do a better job of smoothly integrating different languages into the overall flow of narration

Structure

This collection is structured as three short stories and two long novellas. Each story has a title that refers to a theme or emotional message that will play into the story's moral. Each title is also followed by the name of the country in which the story is set. Akapan wisely chooses to start the collection with a short story to engage the reader in the themes of the collection, followed by a 136-page novella, then the shortest story in the collection (ten pages long) perhaps to give the reader a breath of fresh air before diving into another 136-page long novella. The collection closes with, arguably, the most powerful and violent stories in the collection. Placing "My Parents' Bedroom" last, ensures that the emotionality of the story will resonate with the reader long after reading is complete, and that the impact will not be forgotten as the reader engages with another story. Akpan may also have chosen to place "My Parents' Bedroom" last in the collection because it is the bloodiest and most overtly violent story. Many readers many not have continued with the collection if they thought the entire novel would be as gruesome.

Quotes

"Mama's face lit up with surprise; she was so used to being ignored. She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Finally, she sobbed the words 'Asante, Maisha, asante for everything!' and bowed repeatedly, her hands held before her, as if in prayer" (p. 26).

"But we make sure your intelligence no lead you in de wrong direction. Remember, only de fly without direction dat go follow de corpse enter grave. You understand?" (p. 57).

"Though he was tense as we awaited our godparents' arrival, I had hoped he would start acting the fool, the way he did during the party after the Nanfang Thanksgiving. But he didn't. We were in his house, but he didn't even welcome the guests or introduce them to us. Now, he stood around like a new servant who had to rely on an older one, Big Guy" (p. 71).

"He carried Yewa on his back, went into the inner room, and wheeled out the Nanfang. He set it outside, smiled at it. In those difficult months, it seemed the machine was a source of stability for him, something he could always be proud of, something he would still have when we left for Gabon" (p. 80-81).

"Maybe I should have been the one who was beaten, instead of Fofo. I hated myself and began to consider myself as bad as Big Guy and our godparents and our games master. I felt I had learned evil from them. I had learned to smile and be angry at the same time" (p. 130).

"Even now he knew nothing about the place. But with this paper, he felt like one on the verge of discovering something very important, something that could give him the identity his troubled nation failed to provide" (p. 158).

"While others found peace in things external, his own came from deep within: the triumph of finding a way to maintain his tradition, his uniqueness, in a strange world" (p. 190).

"This was not the time to think about Islam or Christianity or God too much, he thought. It was a time just to be a human being and to celebrate that. What mattered now was how to get people to lay down their weapons and biases, how to live together" (p. 207).

"When they ask, say you're one of them" (p. 266).

Topics for Discussion

Do you think the parents in "An Ex-Mas Feast" are good or bad parents to their children? In what ways are they trapped in their negative behaviors? What other options are available for families like this, living in the slums? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Why do you think Jigana runs away from his family at the end of the story "An Ex-Mas Feast?" Do you think Jigana has any hope for a future away from his family? Why or why not? In what ways did Jigana's family tie up their own hopes and dreams in Jigana's future? How do you think Jigana's abandonment will affect the rest of his family? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Which of Fofo's character traits lead him to make the horrible decision to sell his niece and nephew into slavery in the story "Fattening for Gabon"? What lies does he construct to cover up his true motivations? Do Fofo's pangs of guilt and his final acts to save the children redeem his character for you? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What role does religion play in the story "Fattening for Gabon?" How do the evil adults, particularly Fofo and Big Guy, justify their terrible treatment of children through biblical text? How does the church scene during the Nanfang Thanksgiving depict the way religion is perceived in Benin? When considering this, how can the children be seen as religious symbols? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

How does your relationship with your best friend compare / contrast to the relationship between the two girls in the story "What Language is That?" What message do you think Akpan is sending to the reader about love and friendship through the relationship of these six-year-old girls? How does this message relate to the rest of the collection? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

How does the bus in the story "Luxurious Hearses" function as a microcosm of the conflicts in Nigeria? How do the individual passengers represent the groups - both the minority and majority - in the country's Civil War? On a large scale, what lessons can be learned about society through the small-scale interactions of the passengers? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

In the story "Luxurious Hearses," do you think Jubril betrays Allah by attempting to hide his Muslim identity in order to survive? Do you think Allah was protecting Jubril? Why do you think he allowed Jubril to be killed at the end of the story? In your opinion, what is the religious significance of Jubril's vibrating stump, both before and after his death? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe the sacrifice that Maman makes in the story "My Parents' Bedroom." Do you agree with her decision? Why or why not? How does Maman's sacrifice relate to the

final image in the story, with Jean clutching the crucifix, babbling his mother's name? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Why does Monique believe there are ghosts living in her bedroom in the story "My Parents' Bedroom"? How do her parents explain the strange noises to her? is there comfort in her parent's explanation? Why or why not? How does Monique discover the truth about the ghosts in her room? Do you think "ghost" is an appropriate name for the source of the noise? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.