

# **The Sheltering Sky Study Guide**

## **The Sheltering Sky by Paul Bowles**

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Sheltering Sky Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 1-4.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 5-6.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 7-9.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 10-12.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 13-15.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 16-17.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapters 18-19.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapters 20-21.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 22.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 23.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 24-25.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Book 3, The Sky: Chapter 26.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Book 3, The Sky: Chapter 27.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Book 3, The Sky: Chapters 28-30.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">38</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">42</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">45</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">48</a>

# Plot Summary

The *Sheltering Sky* by Paul Bowles is a story of innocents abroad in an unfamiliar land. It follows three American travelers as they move farther from "civilization" in post-war Africa. They find themselves cut off from the certainties of home and are all but destroyed by what they experience.

Port and Kit Moresby and George Tunner have just arrived in Oran, Algeria. Port prides himself on his commitment to his nomadic existence, but Kit is plagued by fear that every odd occurrence on their journey is an omen of impending doom. Tunner is largely along for the ride, and he hopes to seduce Kit. Port suspects this, and one night he excuses himself to take a walk, ending up in bed with an Arab girl who robs him. In Oran, the Moresbys make the acquaintance of Eric and Mrs. Lyle, an obnoxious mother and son from Australia. They offer Port a ride in their car to Boussif, leaving Kit and Tunner to take the train. En route, Kit surrenders to Tunner's amorous advances.

From Boussif, the three Americans - with the Lyles in tow - make their way to Ain Krorfa, a hellish wasteland of refuse and flies. Tunner is particularly appalled, and Port - intending to separate Tunner from Kit - arranges for him to leave for Messad with the Lyles. The Moresbys, meanwhile, head to Bou Noura by bus. In Bou Noura, Port discovers that his passport is missing. Lieutenant D'Armagnac, commander of the local military post, discovers that it has been sold on the black market in Messad. Port realizes that Eric Lyle is the thief. D'Armagnac arranges for Tunner to return to Bou Noura with it. Port, now growing ill, insists to Kit that they must leave for El Ga'a immediately to avoid Tunner.

On the bus ride to El Ga'a, Port's condition deteriorates to the point that he cannot walk. When they arrive, Kit discovers that a meningitis epidemic has shut down the local hotel. They pay a driver to take them to nearby Sba. There, Port is admitted to the military infirmary and diagnosed with typhoid. Kit attends to him, under the watchful eye of the puritanical Captain Broussard. Port is clearly dying, and one night Kit sneaks out of camp to meet Tunner, who is arriving from Bou Noura. That night, Port dies.

Distraught and confused, Kit wanders into the desert and is picked up by a trading caravan. She becomes the lover of Belqassim, a Sudanese trader, who marries her and imprisons her in his house in the Sudan. She is drugged to stop her leaving and is antagonized by Belqassim's other wives. One night she escapes and wanders the streets. A local who speaks French helps her, but later he robs her. Kit is found catatonic and is taken in by the American consulate. She is returned to the consulate in Oran, shaken and unresponsive. An aid takes her to the local where Tunner, presumably, is waiting for her. While the aide is distracted, Kit disappears into the streets.

# Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 1-4

## Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 1-4 Summary

The Sheltering Sky by Paul Bowles is a story of innocents abroad in an unfamiliar land. It follows three American travelers as they move farther from civilization in post-war Africa. They find themselves cut off from the certainties of home and are all but destroyed by what they experience.

In Chapter 1, Port Moresby, an American traveler, wakes from an afternoon nap in his hotel room in Oran, Algeria. Still reeling from his dream, Port momentarily does not know where he is. As he gets his bearings, he hears his wife, Kit, moving around in the next room.

In Chapter 2, Port and Kit sit on the terrace of a café. Port is looking at maps with their friend, Tunner. They have been traveling since before World War II, and their intention in coming here was to avoid places effected by the war. Kit complains that North Africa, like Europe, has been homogenized by the War. Port begins to tell Tunner about his dream, and Kit tries to stop him. Port ignores her and continues. He dreamed he was on a train that was about to crash, and he has the senses that he can begin his life again if he chooses. He is too late in deciding, however, and before the crash he rips his teeth out of his head. As he tells this story, Kit begins to cry and walks out of the café.

In Chapter 3, Kit and Port are back in their room. While he's reading in bed she asks him why he insisted on telling Tunner the dream. Port asks her why she cares, and she responds that she does not trust Tunner. The air is tense and Port announces that he is going to take a late walk.

In Chapter 4, Port is walking the narrow streets of Oman. Although he is growing tired, he decides to keep walking, until at last he finds himself on a dune on the outskirts of the town. There he meets a strange Arab man, Smail, who invites him to have tea. Port is initially wary of going with him, but he is lost after his long walk and agrees to a drink. Smail leads him back into town to a recessed café, entirely filled with Arabs. As they drink, Smail comments that Port looks sad. He invites him to meet a young woman - not a prostitute, he says - who would be willing to entertain him for a small fee. Again, Port is hesitant, but he soon agrees, and they leave.

## Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 1-4 Analysis

The first four chapters introduce us to the Moresbys. They are travelers, not tourists, as Port explains. They belong wherever they are. They have no home to yearn for as they move from place to place. Port acts on impulse, and the story of *The Sheltering Sky*, until his death at the end of Book 2, is a series of moves from town to town that he decides upon at a moment's notice. Conversely, Kit is stymied by a perpetual terror.

Every occurrence is an omen to her. Thus, when Port insists on recounting a dream in which he is about to die, she bursts into tears and leaves the room.

We also meet George Tunner in these chapters. He is either more of an enigma or infinitely shallower than the Moresbys. Tunner is a tourist who is unlikely to stay the course in Africa as long as Port or Kit. He's handsome, charming, and unconcerned with anything besides friendship, sex, and having a good time. In this respect, he will have the rudest awakening as events turn south for the three. He will become last remaining traveler to set affairs in order after the Moresbys' tragedy.

The central action of these chapters concerns Port and Kit's argument over Port's dream. Port disappears into the streets of Oran, where he meets the strange, insinuating Smail, a sort of gatekeeper to the Arab world's hedonistic underworld. Port is ostensibly a writer, but one has the impression that he is not traveling abroad for any artistic reasons. He will expound at length, later in the novel, about the spiritual fulfillment he finds in Africa, but the reader suspects he is equally enthralled by the experiences men like Smail offer.

# Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 5-6

## Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 5-6 Summary

In Chapter 5, Smail leads Port back into the outskirts of Oran, past any semblance of civilization. Port grows concerned and asks where they are going. Smail is evasive, but he tells Port that they are going to an old fortress. Upon arriving, Smail guides him down a treacherous flight of stairs to a couple of tents. In one, Port can hear men talking. Smail excuses himself to the other tent. While Port waits, he gets the feeling that Tunner may be sleeping with Kit. He is about to leave the fortress when Smail returns.

Inside the filthy tent, Smail introduces Port to Marhnia, a young Arab girl. She does not speak French or English, and Smail serves as an interpreter. He tells Port a fable Marhnia learned on her adolescent retreat. It is the story of three prostitutes who long to drink tea in the Sahara. They save their money, but they grow old waiting. Finally, they decide they need to go to the Sahara or they will die waiting. They go to the desert and spend an entire night wandering the dunes searching for the perfect spot to make their tea. As the sun comes up, the three women fall asleep and die on the dune with sand in their cups.

As the night progresses, Port insists that Smail set a price for Marhnia, but Smail insists that she is not a prostitute. Smail leaves and Port has sex with Marhnia. Afterward, she tries to steal his wallet and he pushes her down. She cries out, and the men from the other tent come out. Port runs out of the fortress, followed by the men. He is running through the dunes as day breaks when he realizes that he no longer has his wallet.

In Chapter 6, Kit awakes in the morning to find Port still gone. Kit is a firm believer in omens. In fact, she lives her life forever fretting some sign of impending doom or that the lack of such sign meant to throw her off her guard. She is also tortured by her marriage to Port. After ten years, Kit feels that he has no need for her, that he lives entirely for himself. Kit is also aware of Tunner's attraction to her, which she cannot bring herself to reciprocate.

Tunner knocks on her door and she begrudgingly answers. She musses Port's bed to give Tunner the impression that he stayed the night. Tunner, meanwhile, insists that Kit join him for a walk while Port is out. He excuses himself to Port's room so she can get dressed. Suddenly, Port returns, filthy, exhausted, and demanding to know what Kit is up to. Port storms into his room to find Tunner. After Tunner and Kit leave, Port lies down and falls asleep.

## Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 5-6 Analysis

Chapter 5 follows Port into the dark underworld of Oran, where he meets Marhnia, a young prostitute. Marhnia tells the strange story of the three women of M'Zab who die in the desert after years in search of a single dream: to have tea in the Sahara. This, of

course, is also the title of the first book of the novel, and the story, we sense, is an allegory for what lies ahead for the Moresbys. It is a genuine omen, of the type that terrifies Kit.

The episode with Marhnia also provides our first example of a Westerner attempting to expedite a conversation in the Arab world. The hour is late, and Port wants to settle a price with the girl and be done with it. Smail, however, insists firstly that Port is paying her for her time - she is not a prostitute - and also that they must listen to her story and have tea before anything else can happen. In the end, of course, the whole episode is a scam; Marhnia, Smail, and the men in the other tent intend to rob Port. He ends up walking through the desert in the scorching heat and arriving filthy and tired back at the hotel

Chapter 6 confirms that Tunner does in fact want Kit. Kit, however, does not want him. She is estranged emotionally from Port, feeling that he does not need her and secretly surprised when he returns to her at day's end. He did not last night. Kit wants to desire Tunner as a relief from the neglect she suffers from Port. When Tunner shows up at her door and Port returns to find them together in her room, we see the tense emotional triangle that will become unbearable for all three. It is this tension that will drive the Moresbys farther south in Africa as the story continues, away from Tunner.

# Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 7-9

## Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 7-9 Summary

In Chapter 7, Port wakes up in the evening after sleeping all day. Kit is not in the room; so he goes down to the hotel bar, where a young Englishman named Eric Lyle is sitting. His abrasive mother enters and begins to berate him for drinking. Port is amused by the ridiculous dynamic. Later, Port eats dinner with Kit, and the Lyles are seated nearby, bickering. Port and Kit make fun of them until Port asks her what happened that morning with Tunner. She insists that nothing did happen and throws back that she doesn't care what he thinks or does. She half-jokingly insists that Port not invite the Lyles to join them on their travels.

After dinner, Kit goes back to the room, and Port wanders the hotel a bit before returning to the bar. There, he sees Eric Lyle and introduces himself. Eric says he is a world traveler himself and that his mother writes travel guides. Port, intending to flatter him, asks him for advice about the area. Eric launches into a long and exaggerated soliloquy about his experiences in Africa. Port says he'd like to meet Eric's mother, but Eric says that they are going to Boussif for a few days.

That night, in Chapter 8, Port tells Kit that the Lyles will likely invite them to drive to Boussif. She is infuriated because she thinks the Lyles are horrid in every way. The next morning, Eric comes to Port's room and, after snooping openly around the luggage, asks if the Moresbys will join them on their drive to Boussif. Port asks if Tunner can also join, but Eric insists there is not enough room. Port tells Kit and suggests that Tunner could ride the train - a much longer trip - and meet them. Kit, enraged, insists that she will go with Tunner on the train and meet Port there.

Kit goes to Tunner's room and asks him to join her on the train. Tunner is openly delighted. He has always found his charm to be irresistible, but the Moresbys are not easily won over. He considers them a challenge as friends, and Kit a particular challenge as a potential lover. Kit gets her hair done and meets Tunner in the lobby. He buys some champagne for the trip.

In Chapter 9, Port meets the Lyles in front of the hotel. Mrs. Lyle is shouting at the desk clerk over the bill. They leave the city and enter the desert, and Mrs. Lyle berates Eric for never having a job, though he enumerates a long list of jobs he claims to have held. Port is amused listening to Mrs. Lyle's screeds against the French, Arabs, and Jews, but eventually she grows tiresome to him. Upon arriving at Boussif, Mrs. Lyle orders Eric to arrange rooms while she prepares tea.

## Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 7-9 Analysis

In this section, we meet the Lyles, a grotesque mother and son from Australia. Eric Lyle, in particular, will serve as a catalyst in the final passages of Port Moresby's life.



Moreover, the ambiguous relationship between Eric and Mrs. Lyle serves as a bit of licentious perversity always on the periphery of the story.

No one in the novel likes the Lyles. They are sponges, racists, unbearably dense, and ultimately thieves, but they have an automobile, and Africa is a continent with transportation of varying quality and reliability. Port welcomes the possibility of driving to the next destination on the itinerary, Boussif. Kit wants nothing to do with the awful pair and announces that she will take the eleven-hour train ride with Tunner and meet her husband in Boussif. Port's proximity to the Lyles and Kit's proximity to Tunner in the ensuing days will ultimately doom the Moresbys.

The Lyles are an insidious element, but Chapter 8 makes clear that George Tunner is not. He considers himself likable and intelligent; yet the Moresbys seem remote from him, and he knows they are much smarter than he. Indeed, he wants to sleep with Kit, but at heart he wants most to be accepted into the Moresby's confidence. They are his attraction during the trip, as opposed to any particular destination. As the story continues, Tunner -though largely unperturbed by his dalliance with Kit - displays fidelity to his friends. He travels town to town with Port's passport, and after Port dies, Tunner sees him buried and waits in Bou Noura sending dily telegrams to the American consulate until Kit emerges from the desert.

# Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 10-12

## Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 10-12 Summary

In Chapter 10, Kit is in a train compartment with Tunner, and the rocking and noise makes her very anxious. She gets a magazine to relieve her tension, while Tunner gives her a sandwich and opens the champagne. She cannot bring herself to eat the sandwich, but she is happy for the drink. Her nerves and the wine are making her tipsy, and Tunner is growing on her. He moves to sit beside her and puts his arm around her. After a moment, she gets up and leaves, telling Tunner she will return in a second.

Kit moves down the car, collecting herself, and across to the fourth-class cabin. She finds the cabin crowded with Arabs. Inside and unable to move, she is terrified by what she sees: a man eating locusts, someone holding a severed sheep's head, a man with no nose. Trying to escape, Kit gets caught in the rain between cars. Before returning to Tunner, she makes herself up in the first-class toilet. When she returns to the compartment, Tunner is shocked to see her so wet and disheveled. He gives her a robe to put on, and while he is out of the compartment, she takes off her wet clothes and gulps down three glasses of champagne. In the compartment, Tunner gives Kit a foot massage and then kisses her. They make love.

The next morning, in Chapter 11, Port is having breakfast at the Bousiff hotel and waiting for the sunrise. Kit is still asleep. Mrs. Lyle enters and begins to talk to him about her plans. Eric has left with a letter of introduction to a prominent local. Mrs. Lyle is concerned about her son; he has contracted a venereal disease from an Arab girl. After Mrs. Lyle leaves, Port considers her motivation for wanting him along. He assumes it is fear of the natives, but he cannot be sure. Port goes to Kit's room, but he hears nothing inside and assumes she's asleep. He walks to a nearby café.

In Chapter 12, Kit wakes up in bed with Tunner, in his room. Panicking, she wakes him and forces him out with his luggage, demanding a bottle of champagne on the way out. She drinks the whole bottle, dresses, and has the maid clean the room. Port, meanwhile, goes to the room he reserved for Kit and finds Tunner. Tunner tells him they mixed up the rooms last night. Tunner, Port, and Kit have lunch together. Port and Kit return to her room, where Port orders some coffee. They talk about the Lyles. Evidently, Eric showed Kit their passports, and he listed him as a student. Kit cannot believe that is the case. She goes to sleep, asking Port to wake her in a while so they can ride bicycles together.

## Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 10-12 Analysis

Until Chapter 10, Kit Moresby seems removed entirely from day to day life in Africa. Paralyzed by fear of impending disaster and her dwindling marriage with Port, she often observes life rather than live it. Until this point in the story, she has barely left the hotel in Oran. On the train to Boussif, she makes a choice that will prove to be one of the most destructive she could have made. She has sex with Tunner.

In reality, she does not choose this so much as choose not to stop its happening. Kit tolerates Tunner's cloying personality but is not attracted to him. She is nervous traveling in trains, and she becomes easily drunk. Tunner has brought a bottle of champagne along. Once, Kit catches herself acceding to Tunner's overtures, fleeing to the fourth-class car. Her hellish experience in that car repels her back to the compartment she shares with Tunner. When later in the novel Tunner mentions their time together on this train, all Kit can remember is the fourth-class menagerie.

Kit has to drink three cups of champagne to sedate herself in preparation for Tunner. When she gives over to him, her sensation is that of "nearness and warmth of a being that did not frighten her" (80). Tunner is a sedative unto himself, for her. He is a safe haven for a day, removed from the desperation of her marriage. This is a habit of Kit's for the first two books in the novel, before she abandons herself to the whims of the desert. Every time she has to make a bold choice, she chooses the safest possible option. In her own mind, she needs to break away emotionally from Port; so she chooses the puppy-like Tunner. After Port's death in Sba, She has to flee the scene; so she goes to the house of a kind old man she met recently.

The guilt of this brief indiscretion will follow Kit until Port's death. They separate themselves from the world as his health declines. Kit sits by his deathbed, emotions ranging for hysterical panic, remorse, and apathy. After, she enters a state of dementia, wandering into the sands of the desert. The incident with Tunner on the train is the beginning of her decline.

# Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 13-15

## Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 13-15 Summary

In Chapter 13, Port and Kit ride bicycles out of Boussif. They pass into the plains and through a small village, continuing until they reach a high ridge. They climb up the ridge, until they reach a precipice overlooking a grand plain where a solitary man mediates in complete stillness. The sun is setting, and Port talks about the sadness of daybreak and the vastness of the sky. For him the sky is a sheltering canopy, protecting them from the darkness behind. Kit feels that she will never be able to join Port in his contemplation of the infinite, which terrifies her. Kit sleeps a while, and they ride back to Boussif. After she goes to her room, Port returns to the bicycle vendor and asks for another bicycle. He returns to the precipice alone.

Two days later, in Chapter 14, Port, Kit, and Tunner take the night bus to Ain Krorfa, farther south into the Sahara. As Kit sleeps on Port's shoulder, he considers how he wants to develop a deeper intimacy with her in the coming weeks. That had been one reason for planning their travels out of New York from the beginning, but at the last moment, Port had invited Tunner to join them. In recent days, Tunner has been forever accompanying the Moresbys. The one day Tunner was not there, Eric Lyle insisted on joining their walk. Kit feigned illness to get out of the walk, and as Port and Eric hiked, Eric asked him for to borrow some money. Now on the bus, Port is excited to be heading farther south, despite travel warnings. The bus stops at a bordj, and the three travelers get out. The next morning, the bus continues on, and Port immediately falls asleep on board.

The bus approaches Ain Krorfa in Chapter 15, and the air around the city is infested with flies. They attack Port, Tunner, and Kit, and the driver says the next bus out of the city in the direction they're heading does not leave for four days. The only hotel in town is a filthy old building with no sewage and piles of refuse. They get rooms and attempt to eat, but their soup is full of bug carcasses. Tunner storms off, and returns an hour later to find that the Lyles have arrived at the hotel.

Mrs. Lyle insists that the Moresbys join them for tea in their room. They hesitantly accept, and afterward Port and Kit walk around the city. Port wonders aloud whether it would be possible to be happy in the region, and Kit insists that she can be happy in a place if it makes Port happy. They return to the hotel and wash up for bed. Eric Lyle knocks at Port's door and says he wants to pay back the money he owes. He only has a thousand franc not and needs change, saying he and his mother will be driving to Messad in the morning. Port, seeing an opportunity, tells Eric that Tunner was hoping to get to Messad as soon as possible and would probably like to join them. Leaving Eric in his room, Port walk to Tunner's, where Tunner is naked, dousing insecticide on his bedbug-ridden mattress. Port tells Tunner about the Lyle's drive to Messad, saying he

and Kit will meet up with him in a week in Bou Noura. Tunner agrees, and Port returns to his room and goes to sleep. He wakes up sobbing in the middle of the night.

## **Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 13-15 Analysis**

This section begins with Kit and Port sitting on a summit, discussing the infinite as they look at a great desolate plain and a huge sky. For Port, the sky is an enduring symbol of the unknowable. It tantalizes him, and he imagines a small portal in it through which one travels into the afterlife. Kit, understandably, is terrified by this. Her fear mars Port's moment of transcendence; so, after they return their bicycles in Boussif, he goes back to the same summit alone.

The Moresbys are acknowledging to each other the alienation they feel from each other. They both want to remedy it, but the presence of intrusive Tunner and the Lyles renders that all but impossible.

The travelers' arrival in Ain Krorfa in Chapter 15 signals the beginning of their severance from all Western civilization. Port and Kit disdain the idea that they are tourists, but their desire for modern convenience becomes more apparent as they relinquish European amenities: running water, sanitation, mass transit, modern medicine. Ain Krorfa is a rude awakening with its swarming flies, piles of trash, and sewage stench.

Naturally, Tunner is the most adamant that the accommodations are unacceptable. He wants to leave immediately, and Port seizes the opportunity. Eric Lyle has become something of a leech to Port, borrowing money and hanging around his room. The Lyles are leaving for Messad the next day, and Port volunteers Tunner as a guest in their car. This conversation with Eric yields two unexpected consequences. Firstly, Port's charade to get rid of Tunner will send him out of their next destination, Bou Noura, prematurely at a time when Port's health is failing. Secondly, when Port goes to Tunner's room to confirm the arrangement, Eric Lyle steals his passport. These two choices will eventually place the Moresby's in an infirmary in Sba, where Port will die.

# Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 16-17

## Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 16-17 Summary

In Chapter 16, Kit feels guilty about Port's casting off Tunner, not because he is gone but because she worries they will not catch up with him as promised. She spends most of the day in bed reading, while Port wanders the streets of Ain Krorfa. He returns to tell her that they will be having evening tea with a local shopkeeper, M. Chaoui.

When they arrive at his house that evening, he greets them with elaborate praise for New York and denigration of his hometown. They sit down to tea, and a musician with a lute plays for them. Kit interrupts the conversation to compliment the music, and Chaoui is shocked by her brazenness. Port and Kit excuse themselves for the night, and on the way home he tells her he does not blame her for the awkward moment. Still, there is tension between them.

The next day, Port feels unaccountably nervous and goes for a walk outside the town. As he walks he considers his current marital situation. Now that Tunner is out of the picture, Port knows he must make a move to begin repairing his relations with Kit. Still, he feels that he cannot force his way through the problems between them. Returning to the hotel, he has dinner with Kit. She finds rabbit fur in her stew and becomes outraged about Africa and Port whole attitude toward her during the trip.

Chapter 17 takes place on the evening before Port and Kit leave for Bou Noura. Kit is packing, and Port is sitting in the hotel restaurant. Mohammed, the hotel concierge, asks him if he is finished. Mohammed offers to take him to a popular brothel. Port agrees, and they he walk for an hour to a series of houses around a courtyard. Mohammed and Port take tea with two young women, neither of whom interest. He goes into the courtyard and watches a beautiful blind woman performing a strange trance-like dance. Port immediately asks Mohammed to find out if she is available, but Mohammed takes a long time inquiring and gets distracted smoking hashish with friends. The girl has left. Port frantically searches the neighborhood for her, unsuccessfully. He is disconsolate.

Port decides to retrieve his bottle of whiskey from the hotel and return to the brothel for some tea. He returns in the early morning hours to find that there is no tea left. He pays an old woman 200 francs and enjoys a whiskey and tea as the sun is coming up. He is very tired and on his way out when he runs into Mohammed. Mohammed laughs at him and reveals that Eric and Mrs. Lyle are not mother and son. He walked in on them together in bed.

## Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapters 16-17 Analysis

In this section, Port considers his marriage Kit. He wants to bridge the divide that has grown between them, and he is aware that to do this, the effort must come entirely from him. On the other hand, he figures the absence of Tunner will allow them to relax. Perhaps the tension will relieve itself. Kit, meanwhile, feels immensely guilty for leaving Tunner in the care of the Lyles. She stays in bed most of the day and lashes out at the minor aggravations of travel: the misogyny of M. Chaoui, the inedible soup at the hotel. Port makes no effort to speak with Kit about their marriage. Beginning in Chapter 16, he feels unaccountably nervous. This is due to the early states of his typhoid. He does not want to have a serious conversation with Kit while he feels nervous, fearing he will say the wrong thing.

Consequently, Port follows the hotel's concierge, Mohammed, to a brothel as a sort of diversion. At the brothel, he becomes enamored of a blind dancer, and when it becomes clear that he cannot have her, he goes to great lengths to get a whiskey and tea simply because he wants it. This incident at the brothel illustrates an aspect of Port that makes him unknowable, even to Kit. He must go about life on his own terms. Earlier in the day, he informs Kit that they will be having tea with a M. Chaoui. She marvels that he expects her to submit to his schedule while he never pays mind to anyone else's. Kit is cognizant of everything that happens around her, because she fears the consequences of lapsed vigilance. Port, on the other hand, is oblivious to everything except what he wants.

Book 1 ends with a strange revelation. Mohammed reveals to Port that he walked in on Eric and Mrs. Lyle in bed together. This is not that last secret revealed about the Lyles, but it dredges up many possibilities for their relationship. Are they con artist lovers posing as mother and son? Does Mrs. Lyle force Eric to have sex with her for his allowance?

## **Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapters 18-19**

### **Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapters 18-19 Summary**

Chapter 18 introduces Lieutenant D'Armagnac, the commander of the military post in Bou Noura. His wife lives in Bordeaux, France, and he is in the process of building a new room onto his house for her arrival when a dog is spotted on the outskirts of town with a baby's corpse in its teeth. D'Armagnac traces the child back to a young native woman, Yamina, whom he locks up in his prison. Yamina is stung by a scorpion that night and dies. Rumors spread throughout the Arab population that Yamina was raped by D'Armagnac and his battalion and murdered as a matter of convenience. As a result, all of his native servants and contractors quit and his superiors question his ability to lead.

One day, Lieutenant D'Armagnac's corporal comes to his lodging to inform him that an American staying at the local hotel has lost his passport and has accused the hotel's proprietor, M. Abdelkader, of stealing it. D'Armagnac is concerned, because Abdelkader is a popular local player, famous for extending credit to residents all over Bou Noura. Lieutenant D'Armagnac has no interest in speaking with the American, whom he suspects is a doltish bully. However, he recognizes that convincing the tourist to retract his complaint against Abdelkader would help him win over the Arab population. D'Armagnac sends his servant, Jacqueline, to inform the American he should appear that afternoon.

In Chapter 19, Port arrives at Lieutenant D'Armagnac's lodging to explain his predicament. Port left his suitcase open in his room and went to the bathroom, and when he returned he found Abdelkader in his room and his passport gone. D'Armagnac explains that it is unlikely that a native took it, as there is no market for passports in Bou Noura. He makes a deal with Port: Port retracts the complaint against Abdelkader, and D'Armagnac will inquire about an American passport in Messad. There is a market for passports there. Port agrees. D'Armagnac recognizes that he is ill and pours him some cognac to warm him up.

As Port returns to the hotel, he curtly tells Abdelkader that he is retracting his complaint. When he gets to the room, he finds that Kit has lain out her belongings across the bed. She says she wants to look at them now that they're settled. A porter arrives, delivering whiskey to them. Port is now convinced that Eric Lyle has stolen his passport, which explains why the Lyle's current passports seem so incongruous to their holders. Eric is not actually a student, nor the racist Mrs. Lyle a travel writer. Port still has a chill, and he asks Kit to go with him to El Ga'a, which is supposed to be warmer. Port grows drunk and surly. He begins to make little jabs and criticisms about Kit. She leaves him in the room, ranting in bed.



## **Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapters 18-19 Analysis**

Throughout Book 1, Port is by and large in control of his life, save his relationship with Kit. His machinations banish Tunner to Messad with the Lyles. He goes where he wants, and engages in activities unafraid of the consequences. In Chapter 19, Events begin to turn against him.

We are introduced, at the beginning of Book 2, to Lieutenant D'Armagnac, a French military man who, like Port, is used to being in control. He has live in Bou Noura a long time and is used to local supporters, many Arab mistresses, and comfortable living. Of late, his life has become considerably more difficult, with the death of a local girl inciting native dissent. He is desperate to repair relations before his wife comes to live with him. In this state, he first meets Port Moresby.

Port has discovered his passport is missing, and he needs the Lieutenant's help to find it. Port, for the first time, feels helpless. He initially accuses the hotel's owner, but he soon realizes that the culprit is Eric Lyle. Moreover, Port is growing more ill. He has a chill and a constant sense of fatigue. The Lieutenant extends him courtesy, but he is distracted and borderline unhinged.

At the end of Chapter 19, Port and Kit drink in her room. He gets very drunk and begins to attack her, to the point that she leaves. He calls her an alcohol and says he has been sick since they married her. Port has been biding his time since Tunner left, waiting for the right moment when he is in the right state of mind. What he doesn't realize is that his state of mind and body are in permanent decline. In a day, he will be entirely reliant on Kit for his survival, but for now he is frustrated, dejected, and abusive.

# **Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapters 20-21**

## **Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapters 20-21 Summary**

In Chapter 20, Port is gathering information about El Ga'a. The only people likely to have such information are D'Armagnac and Abdelkader, and he has no interest in seeing either of them. He is in a sauna one day, trying to relieve his chill, when Ahmed, a servant of D'Armagnac, arrives to fetch him for the lieutenant. When Port arrives at D'Armagnac's house, the lieutenant informs him that his passport has been found. It was discovered in Messad along with Tunner's, and Tunner is willing to bring it to Bou Noura with Port's consent. Port gives it, but he decides privately that since the only bus for a week to El Ga'a leaves that night, he will have to go without his passport. D'Armagnac asks the Moresbys to dinner, and Port agrees to attend, though he knows he will not.

Leaving the lieutenant's lodging, Port immediately goes to the bus station, only to find that that night's bus is sold out. Port tells the vendor that his wife is very ill and bribes him to bump two passengers. He rushes back to the hotel and tells Kit to pack. He throws his belongings together and meets her in the lobby for a brief supper. She is confused by her husband's lack of concern for his passport. He has not told her it was found or that Tunner is traveling to Bou Noura with it. After they finish, he settles with Abdelkader, tacitly apologizing for the earlier misunderstanding.

Port and Kit arrive at the bus station, and Port whispers to her that she needs to act ill when they get on board. Kit is annoyed and privately wishes they had gone to Italy. On board, Kit realizes that they have not left word for Tunner. She is about to say something but decides not to. The journey is bumpy, and Port's health is declining. His teeth are chattering, so Kit wraps him in his jacket.

The bus stops at a bordj in Chapter 21, and Port does not want to get out. Kit forces him to drink some coffee to warm up as the bus pulls away. He does get out a while later when the bus stops at another bordj. There, Kit notices a tall young Arab man, and before the bus leaves Port is wracked with a massive cramp. Kit holds the bus while Port runs to a filthy stone latrine. The tall Arab man and Kit help him back to the bus. On the last leg of the trip, Kit and the tall Arab talk about El Ga'a. As they do, the stony landscape gives way to sand. When they arrive, Kit is struck by how untouched by the West the thriving ancient town is. As the bus clears, she asks the tall Arab how far the hotel is. It is on the other side of town.

The Arab and Kit help Port out of the bus, but they only get a short distance before Port cannot go any farther. They set him down in a stable, and Kit and the Arab continue on to get a room and return for him. The streets are labyrinthine and crowded, and it takes

a long while before they find the heavy door to the hotel. The tall Arab knocks a long time at the door, and an old woman answers. They talk at length, and the old woman disappears. Kit panicky and knocks until the old woman returns. The hotel is not taking any visitors as the city of El Ga'a is swept with a meningitis epidemic. Kit is devastated, and the two go back to Port.

Kit stays with the unconscious Port while the tall Arab finds a car or truck leaving for another town. He negotiates a deal with a fruit truck leaving that night for Sba. For an exorbitant fee, they will carry Port and Kit in the back. That night, the tall Arab and some friends carry Port and the luggage to the truck. Kit leaves the Arab behind when the truck departs. On the ride, Kit looks at her purse's contents, a bit of comforting familiarity. She worries that she may have meningitis and does not know what Port has. He is cold, so she holds him and falls asleep.

## **Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapters 20-21 Analysis**

In this section, Port - ever the controller of his own fate - makes the final decision that precipitates his death. He is not feeling well, and he does not know why. Lieutenant D'Armagnac gives him word that his passport has been found, and Tunner is en route to deliver it to Bou Noura. Such news should be welcome, but Port has no desire to see his old friend. He makes the split-second decision to leave Bou Noura for a city about which he knows nothing.

Among the things he does not know is that it is facing a meningitis epidemic which has closed the only hotel. Earlier in the novel, Kit reasons that she will do whatever Port decides. Africa was his decision, and she figures that a refusal on her part will result in his abandoning her. Now, she finds it odd that Port seems suddenly unconcerned with his passport and wants to leave Bou Noura immediately. Previously he had mentioned El Ga'a to her, that it is one of the great African cities and that it is warmer and will suit his chill better. Again, she reasons that she had best acquiesce to his will.

This agreement to leave immediately for El Ga'a is the last time that Kit can cede decision to someone else. On the bus trip, Port grows much worse. He is freezing, and he can barely muster the energy to leave the bus when it stops. Kit must negotiate with the driver to hold the bus while Port writhes. She befriends a local who agrees to show her through El Ga'a in search of the hotel. When she discovers the hotel is not admitting visitors, she tells herself that "This is a crisis. There are only a certain number of them in life. I must be calm, and think" (186).

In this chapter, Kit becomes the protagonist of the novel. Until this moment, all decisions have been Port's, and our viewpoint has most often focused on him. Kit has been static and allowed events to happen around and occasionally to her. Outside the bolted hotel door in El Ga'a, she steels herself to get her sick husband to the next town. In the back of a produce truck, huddled with Port, Kit feels helpless and numb, but her journey into the desert is only beginning.

# Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 22

## Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 22 Summary

In Chapter 22, Kit and Port have arrived at Sba, and the officious Captain Broussard is taking down Port's information to admit him to the military hospital. He has typhoid and peritonitis. Broussard says nothing can be done but wait and give Port a pill every two hours to relieve his fever. Port, reeling and semi-unconscious, is on the only cot in the hospital, and Broussard has sent for an old mattress from his house. He advises Kit that Zina, the cook, should regularly bring in soup for Port. After the captain leaves, Kit tries to speak with Port, with no response. She reads a few pages of a French novel. Port wakes momentarily as the mattress is brought in, and he is moved onto it. Kit lies on the floor next to the mattress and drifts off.

She is woken a few hours later by Zina with the soup. Kit realizes she is late giving Port his pill. She wanders around the room to stay awake, not believing she is in this situation. She gives Port his pill. In the darkness, he begins to sob. Zina returns with tea for Kit, who follows her out asking for a tin of milk for Port. Captain Broussard interrupts her, saying that milk is rationed and would do no good anyway.

The next day, Port wakes and comments that he does not know if he'll survive. Kit cannot take it and walks to the town. There, she meets Daoud Zozeph, a Jewish shopkeeper who invites her in to talk. She tells him about her situation, and he responds with sympathy that shocks her. She tells him about her omens and fears, and he responds that fear is natural but the world is a benevolent place. Before she leaves, he gives her two tins of milk. They were rationed to him and his wife for their baby, who was stillborn.

When Kit returns to the hospital, she finds that Port's temperature is up despite the pills. He wakes and tells her that he realizes now that he has lived for her. He clearly believes he is about to die. He groans and rasps uncontrollably. Kit is horrified. Zina arrives with soup, which she tries to feed to Port. He refuses. Later, he begs Kit not to leave him. He grasps for her hand, which he kisses over and over. He tries to get out of bed, but Kit stops him. They hold each other as all of her fears for him break loose in sobs.

## Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 22 Analysis

In this chapter, we are introduced to Captain Broussard, a sort of foil to Lieutenant D'Armagnac. Whereas D'Armagnac enjoys his time in Bou Noura - the fine house, the servants, the mistresses - Broussard is a dictator in his tiny world outside of Sba. He is fiercely protective of this world and does not suffer duplicity within its walls. As such, he is particularly wary around the two filthy American stowaways requesting asylum at his

hospital. As time goes on, his attitude toward Kit will grow to resemble that of a warden to his prisoner. Broussard is pragmatic about Port's chances of survival, limiting his medical assistance and informing Kit that all they can do is wait.

Kit has been repressing her fears about Port's health until she arrives in Sba. The cold comfort she receives from Broussard makes her recognize for the first time that Port may not make it. She walks back and forth, reads a book, and focuses on giving Port his pills. She marvels that sometimes she can forget what is happening. Captain Broussard is shocked at her seeming apathy to the fate of her supposed husband. He notices every time she leaves or attempts to leave the camp, his impatience with her building.

This is why Kit is so affected by her meeting with the Jewish shopkeeper Daoud Zozeph. He is a man who has suffered greatly in Africa with daily abuse from customers and the death of his child, but he shows sympathy for her. He listens, and Kit has been in a predominantly unsympathetic world both from the locals and her husband. He is the first person she reveals all her fears and anxieties to, and he responds to them not with incredulity like Port or Broussard but with comforting words. When she returns to the hospital, too, she is met with unexpected tenderness from Port, who in his last hours tearfully professes genuine love for her.

# Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge:

## Chapter 23

### Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 23 Summary

Chapter 23 opens back in Bou Noura with Lieutenant D'Armagnac entertaining Turner at his lodging. The day after he informed Port that his passport had been found, he received word from his servant Ahmed that the Moresbys had left town. D'Armagnac now has word from his friend Captain Broussard in Sba that Port and Kit are there and that Port is suffering from typhoid. D'Armagnac tells Turner that there is no rush getting to Sba and invites him to dinner.

In Sba, Port is losing hold of reality. He is clinging to bits of information that he can confirm: what city he is in, the contents of his room. He is losing his use of words and fears that if he lets his mind wander he will lose consciousness and die. Kit, meanwhile, has grown numb and apathetic to the situation. She tries to wake Port for his pill, but he does not wake up. Broussard offers her some noncommittal words of comfort. At supper, Zina cannot convince Kit to eat, and she reports as much to the Captain. Later that night, he requests that Kit join him for an aperitif. She does so, and he informs her he needs to see her and Port's passports. She tells him that Port's was stolen, and Broussard is convinced the two are not actually married. He accuses her as such, and she tries to corroborate the story, telling him about Lieutenant D'Armagnac. He insists he must report the irregularity.

Kit eats and checks in on Port before going to the courtyard, where she watches the stars in the sky. She feels she can almost see them moving. Port, meanwhile, is enraged by the room, which he sees as an adversary. He hears a screaming in his ears. In reality, it is his own screams, which rouse the entire camp. An enraged Captain Broussard injects him with morphine and orders a servant to watch him. Broussard is livid that Kit is nowhere to be found, and the front gate is open.

Kit realizes that the truck from Bou Noura is arriving that night and decides to meet it. She sneaks out the front gate and arrives at the market to see the travelers - mostly Arab - disembarking. Turner is among them. Kit embraces him, and the two sit in the courtyard of a mosque, where Kit cries in his lap.

All the while, Port is dreaming that he is impaled against a wall by a runaway car in a crowded market. Kit and Turner find that they are locked out of the military encampment. They climb up a ridge and tumble back down together in the sand. Turner assures her that Port will be alright. Kit fires back that they have abandoned him for hours, that he might be dead already. She declares how much she loves Port. Inside the hospital, Port dies.

## Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 23 Analysis

In the main part of this chapter, our omniscient narrator shifts focus among Kit, Port, and Captain Boussard. The effect is a survey among varying levels of frenzy in the final moments of Port's life.

Port, of course, is the most frenzied of the three. His sensory world is completely removed from reality, trying to weigh out the several spheres of understanding he can intake: the objects of the hospital, memories of the past, Kit. All of these exist for him as individual notions with which he must wrestle. As he puts it:

For there were so many other parts of the world, so many other moments in time to be visited; he was never certain that the way back would really be there. Counting was impossible. How many hours had he been like this ... (215)

Port is entering a world of delusion that immediately precedes his death and he is afraid that every lucid moment will be his last before dying. Later, he will see himself impaled on a crowded street. Soon thereafter, he will envision his own journey into death.

The other end of the spectrum is Captain Broussard, who is certain that Kit is not Port's wife. Her numbness to his situation and her desperation to leave the hospital strikes him as callous. He is viewing the situation from an investigative point of view. He wants to confirm his suspicions, so he invites Kit to his lodging and demands both of their papers. When she cannot produce Port's, Broussard is openly triumphant. His cockiness subsides later that evening when Port enters the terminal stages of his illness, and Kit is missing. He is livid, sequestering himself from his men to regain his composure

Meanwhile, Kit's hysteria is ebbing throughout this chapter. What Broussard mistakes for callousness is in fact an incredible fatigue in the face of disaster. Kit knows what is coming, and she has been facing it for days. Now, Port's death is near, and she has to escape. Going into town, serendipity places her by the mosque where Tunner is being dropped off. His presence reminds her of the guilt of her infidelity. She brays at Tunner that she loves Port, that she is afraid of his dying. This howl of despair - and her discovery of Port's body the next morning - is a cathartic moment to Kit. It begins the process of transforming her into someone else.



# **Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 24-25**

## **Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 24-25 Summary**

Chapter 24 begins the next day, when Kit enters the military hospital to discover that Port is dead. She is shocked and spends the entire morning pacing the room, uncertain what to do. In the afternoon, Tunner knocks on the infirmary door, and Kit answers that Port is fine and she will meet Tunner that evening. She then sets about packing away all of her money into her carrying bag and sends it off to Daoud Zozeph's shop. Pulling herself together, she strolls out of the military post, brushing aside the guard who tries to hold her.

Upon arriving at Daoud's shop, Kit implores him to let her sleep in his house for the night. Daoud acquiesces, and that night he and his wife entertain Kit at a meager supper. They then show her to their tiny spare room, with a solitary bed and a hen to guard her from scorpions. That night, Kit cannot sleep. She slips out of the Zozeph's house and wanders the streets, in search of drums and dancing coming from the black section of Sba. As she wanders the streets, Kit happens upon a garden with a pool of water. Without thinking, she undresses and bathes in the pool. For the first time she can remember, she is acting in the moment, without fear. After she bathes, she redresses and begins walking out of town.

Chapter 25 is weeks later, in Bou Noura. Tunner is in Lieutenant D'Armagnac's study for his daily update on the search for Kit. By now, Port has been buried in a Catholic ceremony by order of Captain Broussard. Tunner is insistent upon remaining in Bou Noura until Kit turns up, fearing reaction in the States if he came back without her. D'Armagnac likes Tunner and wants to cheer him up, insisting that they visit a couple of his old Arab mistresses. Tunner faint-heartedly agrees.

Returning to the hotel, Tunner realizes much to his dismay that the Lyles have just checked in. He has not put together that they stole his passport in Messad. He runs into Eric in the hall, who inquires about the Mosebys. Tunner does not tell him what has transpired. That evening, Tunner is playing chess with Abdelkader - the two have become friends in recent days - but he is unable to concentrate. Finishing early, he returns to his room to find Eric snooping in his bag with a flashlight. Tunner assaults him, letting all his aggression out on the apparently aroused boy. The next morning, the Lyle's have checked out.



## Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 24-25 Analysis

Port's death has such a profound impact upon Kit that it changes her into another person. These moments are known as liminal experiences. They occur when one gets married, takes the vows of a priest, any time a worldly event alters your identity permanently. To many, a baptism is a liminal experience.

After Kit flees the military post, leaving Port's body locked in the hospital, she goes directly to the home of Daoud Zozeph. She can trust him and feel safe in his house. He is a good alternative to dealing with Port's body, Tunner and Captain Broussard. This decision is at once cavalier and very safe. Neither Tunner nor Captain Broussard could understand what is going through Kit's mind, but she needs security from the impending doom. In Zozeph's house, however, Kit cannot sleep. The house is not safe from what she is fleeing. Without knowing quite why, she wanders the streets of Sba looking for a distant drum beat. She happens upon a garden with a pool of water, where she removes her clothes and bathes. Like a baptism, this marks her transition from a woman guided by fear of the future to a woman wandering into it.

Chapter 25 gives us the eventual fate of Eric Lyle, who has the lack of fortune to happen upon Tunner again. A profoundly stupid, perhaps self-destructive individual, Eric tempts fate by again trying to rob the oblivious Tunner. When Tunner catches him, he grabs hold of the boy but hesitates a moment. Eric last words that we heard before he disappears from the novel are as ambiguous and creepy as the man himself: "Hit me" (257).

# Book 3, The Sky: Chapter 26

## Book 3, The Sky: Chapter 26 Summary

Chapter 26 begins as Kit wakes up in the desert, cold and slowly remembering what happened the previous day. She sees a caravan of men and goods on camel-back. Without thinking, Kit rushes in front of the caravan with her bag. She insists that they take her along and joins a young man on his mount. They stop after riding all day and eat. She lies on a rug between her young rider, Belqassim, and an older merchant. Belqassim begins touching her, but he is rebuffed by his superior. She falls asleep and is woken later by the older man. She follows him to another rug where Belqassim assails her. She acquiesces, finding herself enjoying it, and the two have sex. Afterward, the older merchant also has sex with her.

They travel for days on end, the two men alternately having sex with Kit. As time goes on, Belqassim grows more protective of her, causing tension between him and his employer. Kit, for her part, is growing attached to Belqassim. One day, Kit is frightened by an animal in the desert, and Belqassim consoles her. Then, he suddenly throws her to the ground and has sex with her in a nest of brambles, causing welts all over her body. Another time, he dresses her in the garments of a young Arab man. They laugh, and he takes her in to a small village, where the locals think she is a boy. A beggar assaults her, causing the older merchant in the caravan to castigate Belqassim.

The next day, the caravan arrives at a huge city, the end of their trip. Belqassim guides Kit through the crowded streets to his house, a huge, mazy structure with many rooms. He guides her to a small room on the roof with a bed, where he locks her in. Kit looks out her window across the roof line of the city.

## Book 3, The Sky: Chapter 26 Analysis

Following Port's death, Kit Moresby transforms into a figure diametrically opposite of the Kit we met at the beginning of the novel. Far from timid and frightened, she acts entirely on impulse. As she puts it, she intends to become the omen that she once feared.

Her first major decision is to join the merchant caravan that passes her in the desert. The price of transportation is her body, but one of the men, Belqassim, entices her, and she can numb herself with the other. Little by little, Belqassim becomes enamored and protective of her. Kit is fully aware that she is being treated as a piece of property, but she chooses not to dwell on it. She is acting first and becoming aware after the fact. She enjoys her time with Belqassim; so she sees no reason to fight against the events that are occurring, even when he disguises her, smuggles her into his house, and locks her in a room.

From Chapter 26 until the end of the novel, Kit's relationship to the events of the plot is greatly changed. She ceases being an observer and occasional participant and

becomes, as Paul Bowles puts it in his preface, an object. Things are done to her, by the old merchant and Belqassim, and later by Belqassim's wives and Amar. She is the protagonist of the story, but she does not affect it. It affects her, pulling her this way and that, satisfying her, and taking from her.

# Book 3, The Sky: Chapter 27

## Book 3, The Sky: Chapter 27 Summary

In Chapter 26, Kit is still in the room in Belqassim's large house. He visits her every day in the late afternoon to make love. She is fed by an old servant woman four times a day. Belqassim has four wives, she discovers — three living in the same house. Everyone in the house believes that Kit is a young man what Belqassim rescued on this last caravan. Kit realizes that his other three wives must be growing jealous of the new visitor who is taking up so much of their husband's time and possibly engaging in intimacies with him.

One day, the three wives send a young slave boy, Othman, to talk to Kit. He performs acrobatic tricks and sits next to her on the bed. His hand grazes her breast and he retreats from the room grinning. Kit is terrified and refuses to eat. The old servant decides to impel her to do so with a strange chant and a whip covered in dung. The result is that Kit is reduced to tears, and the old servant is interrupted in the middle of her ritual by Belqassim's wives. They storm the room, tearing off Kit's turban and shirt and beating her. She fights back, kicking and biting, but Belqassim eventually comes in to rescue her. Enraged, he marries a disconsolate Kit in front of the three women, demanding that they sing in her honor and giving Kit their jewelry. Kit realizes that she will soon become the permanent object of their scorn. She bursts into tears, and Belqassim drags her to a lavish bedroom where he savagely has sex with her.

Kit is kept in the bedroom by a large woman who holds guard at her door. She is fed primarily lamb fat, and every day or so, Belqassim comes to her. She grows depressed and hysteric on days when he does not, and the large slave woman gives her a sedative drink to calm her. She becomes paranoid, thinking the drink is poisoned. Eventually she decides that she must escape. The large slave woman is asleep, and Kit slips quietly out of the room with her bag, leaving all of the jewelry behind.

After much wandering, she finds the main door to the house, but the bolt is too heavy for her. The three wives appear and snatch Kit's bag, which they tear through in search of their jewelry. Desperate, Kit offers them her makeup in return for their help escaping. They send a slave to Kit's room to confirm that the jewelry is there. After a brief caucus, they agree to help her escape. They fetch the porter, who opens the bolt for them, and all four women cross the courtyard. Kit thanks them and escapes into the streets.

## Book 3, The Sky: Chapter 27 Analysis

In this chapter, Kit completely relinquishes her identity as a Western woman. She is held as Belqassim's concubine for days, disguised as an Arab boy. She never leaves her room and is fed by a servant. When Belqassim's three wives discover her, they assault

her, and Belqassim marries her in revenge. She is moved to a more lavish room, given the other wives' jewels, and drugged into a constant stupor.

Only at this point does Kit consider what she has lost, recognizing that "any creature even remotely resembling Belqassim would please her quite as much a Belqassim himself" (287-288). This comes as a shock to her, since in recent she has grown dependent on his increasingly infrequent visits to her bed. At certain points throughout Kit's journey in the novel, she feels the need to look at her items from America: clothes, brushes, make-up. They are like relics from a past life, and in this bedroom prison, they remind her of the pieces of herself she has lost in Africa.

Her makeup, in fact, serves a double-purpose for Kit in this chapter since it is her bribe to the other wives to help her escape. When she rushes from Belqassim's house, unsure even of what city she is in, she has nothing with her to denote her as an American besides a valise and a passport.

## Book 3, The Sky: Chapters 28-30

### Book 3, The Sky: Chapters 28-30 Summary

In Chapter 28, Kit is dreaming that she lies on a precipice, watching the waves crash. She dares herself to let go and fall forward. As she does so, she wakes up. Kit walks into town, heading to the market where she buys a jar of buttermilk. She attempts to pay the seller with a thousand franc note, but the woman will not accept it. A skirmish breaks out, with the woman and Kit shouting and a crowd gathering. Amar, an African man dressed in somewhat European garb interjects, paying the seller and speaking to Kit in French. He whisks her off to a hotel, where the desk clerk mistakes her for a native. Kit, for her part, wants no help. She is petrified of being caught by those undoubtedly searching for her. Amar gives her some coffee to calm her down and excuses himself to speak with his friend Atallah. While he is out, Kit hurriedly writes an enigmatic telegraph and flees the hotel. Amar catches her in the street and attempts to reason with her. Her Algerian francs, he explains, are not good in the Sudan. She asks to go to his house, but he protests that he has a family. He takes her back to Atallah's hotel, which he assures will accept her money. Once in a room, Kit kisses Amar, and they make love.

In the evening, Amar and Kit are holding each other. Kit tells him that she loves him. She is still very afraid, she says. Amar counsels her that she should not let fear cripple her, and he tells her to get some sleep. Hours later, Kit wakes up to find Amar and Atallah taking all of her money.

In Chapter 29, Kit is at the American consulate in the Sudan. Amar left her only her passport, and several consulate aids are trying to figure out where to send her. She refuses to open her eyes, imagining that she has not left Amar's arms. The aids are advised to send her to the consulate in Oran, which will pay her way. By now, Kit is catatonic. She has to be dressed by one of the aids. She fights all the way to the plane, to which she is dragged by the men attending her. They only get as far as Tessalit. The next day, they make it to Andar. By now, Kit is complacent but helpless. She soils herself on the flight.

In Chapter 30, Miss Ferry from the consulate in Oran arrives at the airport to pick up Kit. She has no desire to do this and frankly cannot understand Americans who find themselves stranded in the Sudan. Kit is motionless and unresponsive. In the cab on the way to the hotel, Miss Ferry attempts to commiserate with her about the miserable state of Africa. She receives no response. Miss Ferry informs her that Tunner is likely waiting at the hotel for her. When they arrive, Kit will not move. Miss Ferry goes inside to check with the desk, and while she is gone Kit leaves the cab, disappearing into the crowds.

## Book 3, The Sky: Chapters 28-30 Analysis

The Kit that we follow in the three concluding chapters of the novel has lost touch with reality. She has progressed before our eyes from a woman who fears omens, to a woman who acts in the face of terrible consequences, and finally, to a woman reeling from the realization of her worst fears.

Having escaped Belqassim's house, Kit wanders the streets, not so much in search of anything as in flight from unseen pursuers. Her only desire is escape, and in escaping, she throws herself into the arms of the first man who seems decent, Amar. He, too, betrays her, robbing her of her money and leaving her in the hands of the consulate. There, Kit has lost even the ability to communicate and clean herself. By the time she is back in Oran at the American consulate, her mind is a tight weave of unknown doubts and fears. She flees once more into obscurity. Whether the knowledge of Tunner's presence in Oran or some other real or imagined terror is the catalyst, we can not know.

In the end, Port and Kit Moresby are travelers in search of home. They carry their hopes and fears with them from place to place, and they are so preoccupied with this baggage that they are not wary of the enemy without. Port pays for this with his life. Kit loses her sanity. In the eyes of Miss Ferry, Kit Moresby is no different from any other American tourist who got in over her head in the Sahara.

# Characters

## Porter (Port) Moseby

Port Moresby is one of two main characters in *The Sheltering Sky* and the one the plot follows through the first two books. He is an American writer who travels throughout Africa with his wife, Kit, and their friend, Tunner.

When Port arrives in Oran, Algeria, he and Kit are all but estranged from each other. They sleep in separate rooms, and she generally succumbs to his since he always gets his way in the end. One night in Oran, after a fight, Port follows an Arab acquaintance outside the city and has sex with a young prostitute who robs him.

After this, Port grows tired of Oran and insists the group move to Boussif, to which he drives with two disgusting Australians, the Lyles. From there, they head to Ain Krorfa, where Port - tired of the cloying Tunner - concocts a ruse to enlist the Lyles to drive Tunner to another town. By now, Port is starting to feel ill but longs to rekindle his marriage. Kit and he travel to Bou Noura, where he discovers that his passport has been stolen by Eric Lyle. The local French Lieutenant arranges for Tunner to bring it to Bou Noura, but Port has no wish to see his old friend. Instead, Port buys a bus ticket to El Ga'a and hurries Kit to pack at once.

On the bus to El Ga'a, Port's condition deteriorates. He loses consciousness, suffers waves of nausea and chills, and is fatigued. He cannot make it to the hotel when they arrive at El Ga'a; so, Kit leaves him in a stable and goes ahead to get a room. As it happens, the only hotel is closed due to a meningitis epidemic. Kit has Port carried to a produce truck bound for nearby Sba, where he is admitted to the local military infirmary. He is diagnosed with typhoid, and after several day of agony, he dies. Kit leaves the body and flees to the desert. Captain Broussard of Sba has Port buried in a Catholic ceremony.

Port prides himself on being a traveler, not a tourist. He lives by his whims, only ever staying in one place as long as it pleases him to do so. Africa holds a wonderful mystery for Port, who is obsessed with the infinite.

## Katherine (Kit) Moresby

Kit Moresby is the other main character of the novel, becoming the central protagonist in Book 3. She is an American expatriate married to Port, who travels with Tunner and him throughout Africa.

Kit is obsessed with omens of impending doom, which she sees everywhere and which forever keep her on her guard. She cannot stand the ominous - be it a nightmare or a ride of a train - and she has an inclination to drink herself into sedation. Kit and Port are emotionally distanced from each other after ten years of marriage, and the indecisive Kit





has taken to acquiescing to his every whim. When Port arranges travel with the Lyles from Oran to Bou Noura, however, she refuses to leave Tunner to take the train alone. She senses Tunner wants her, and on the train they share a bottle of champagne and have sex.

In Boussif, Kit and Port share a tender moment watching the sky together on a ridge. Port begins to ruminate on the idea of infinity, but Kit is frightened by it. After moving from Boussif to Ain Krorfa, Port arranges for Tunner to go ahead of them, and Kit is happy to be away from him. Tunner's constant presence brings about a fair amount of guilt in her. Later she travels with Port to Bou Noura and then to El Ga'a, where he falls ill. Kit tends to him in the crowded El Ga'a, attempting to find a room and later paying a driver to take them to Sba, where she and Port stay in the local military outpost.

In Sba, Kit is held captive with her sick husband in the infirmary by the ascetic Captain Broussard. She is driven to hysteria by Port's ranting and deteriorating condition. The night that he dies, Kit slips out of the camp to walk to town, running into Tunner, who has just arrived. The next morning, Kit returns to the hospital to find her husband's body. She locks Port in the hospital and quietly slips out of the post with a bag full of money.

Kit disappears into the desert, joining a caravan of traders heading south. Among them is Belqassim, a young merchant who takes her as a lover and later as his fifth wife. He imprisons her in his house, where she is drugged and plotted against by Belqassim's other wives. Kit eventually escapes into the streets of the surrounding Sudanese city. She befriends a local man who speaks French, Amar. They make love in a hotel, and then he steals her remaining money. She is taken in by the local American consulate, catatonic and frightened. They transfer her back to Oran, where Tunner is waiting for her. As she is being transported to the hotel, Kit slips out of the cab and disappears into the crowd.

## Geroge Tunner

Tunner is a friend of the Moresbys' who joins them on their journeys in Africa. Unlike either Kit or Port, Tunner does not consider himself a traveler; he is simply along for the ride. He is drawn to the Moresbys' because of their intelligence and imperviousness to his usually irresistible charm.

In Oran, he presses Kit to spend more time with him, asking her on walks and showing up at her room frequently. When Port arranges to drive to Boussif with the Lyles, Tunner and Kit share a train compartment. Tunner brings some champagne along, and the two have sex on the way down to Boussif. Once there, Tunner becomes a regular fixture around the Moresbys, much to Port's annoyance. Tunner accompanies the couple to Ain Krorfa and is disgusted by the filthy conditions. Port arranges for Tunner to leave immediately with the Lyles for Messad.

In Messad, Eric Lyle steals Tunner's passport, unbeknownst to Tunner himself. It is recovered, along with Port's, and Tunner heads to Bou Noura to deliver it to him.



Arriving, he finds that the Moresbys have already left. The saturnine Lieutenant D'Armagnac assists him in confirming that they are in Sba, and the Port has fallen ill. Tunner makes his way to Sba by truck, and Kit meets him in the city. They spend the night together outside of the Sba military post. Tunner assures Kit that Port will be fine. The next day, Port dies, and Kit disappears.

Tunner sees Port buried in Sba and returns to Bou Noura. Daily, D'Armagnac has drinks with him and informs him that Kit has not been found. One day, the Lyles check in to the hotel at Bou Noura. That night, Tunner discovers Eric Lyle in his room, rifling through his suitcase. Tunner assaults him, beating him and throwing him from the room.

When Kit is returned to Oran at the end of the novel, Tunner is presumably waiting in the hotel for her.

## Eric Lyle

Eric Lyle is a young Australian man of a slimy disposition who travels with his "mother" throughout Africa. He carries a passport with him that designates him as a student, but he is a thief who likely stole the papers. Eric makes wild claims about past jobs and experiences in Africa, and he regularly asks strangers for money. A concierge in Ain Krorfa claims to have found Eric in the throes of sex with his mother.

Eric meets Port in a bar in Oran. Port humors him, letting him go on about his experiences abroad. Kit is repulsed by Eric and his mother and refuses when Port delivers the news that Eric has offered to drive them to Boussif. While in Boussif, Eric asks Port to lend him some money, and Port gives him a small amount. Eric reconnects with Port in Ain Krorfa with the pretense of paying him back. He mentions that his mother and he are going to Messad, and Port suggests they take Tunner along. While Port is out of the room, confirming with Tunner, Eric steals his passport.

After Port dies and Tunner is waiting for Kit in Bou Noura, the Lyles check into the same hotel as him. Eric meets Tunner in the hall and tries to talk to him. Tunner begs him off and that night discovers him in his room, rummaging in his suitcase. Tunner beats Eric and throws him out of the room, evidently arousing Eric in some way.

## Mrs. Lyle

Mrs. Lyle is Eric Lyle's "mother." She is ostensibly a travelogue reporter, but this is suspect given her aversion to foreigners and the fact that her son steals passports. She and Eric travel through Africa along the same route as the Moresbys.

We first meet Mrs. Lyle as she and Eric enter the same hotel as Port and Kit. She is verbally abusing Eric, as she always does when they are together. When Port rides with her and Eric to Boussif, she expounds at length about the disgusting qualities of Arabs, Frenchmen, and Jews. Mrs. Lyle takes photos throughout the novel which she sells along her journey. Evidently, she occasionally has sex with her "son" Eric.



## Belqassim

Belqassim is a young Sudanese merchant in the trade caravan that picks Kit up in the desert after Port's death. He is young and handsome and shares Kit with the older merchant in the caravan throughout their route. After a time, though, Belqassim grows enamored of Kit and protects her from the advances of the older man. He dresses her as a young Arab man and smuggles her into his house when the caravan arrives at his hometown. He locks her in a room, visiting her once a day to make love. Eventually, three of Belqassim's wives discover Kit and beat her. Belqassim is furious and punishes them by taking Kit as his wife and giving her all of his other wives' jewelry. He grows much more savage with her and keeps her drugged in a large bed, visiting her every few days. Kit eventually escapes from Belqassim's house with the help of his other wives.

## Lieutenant D'Armagnac

Lieutenant D'Armagnac is the saturnine commander of the French military post in Bou Noura. He has a wife in Bordeaux who will be arriving soon to Bou Noura. D'Armagnac is well-liked by the native population until a young woman dies in his jail, and rumors swirl that she was raped and murdered by French soldiers.

This is the situation he faces when Port enters his orbit. Port has accused a popular local businessman of stealing his passport, and D'Armagnac brokers a deal to find the passport in return for Port's dropping the charges. D'Armagnac's defense of the popular local endears him to the Arab population once again, and he finds the passport in Messad the next day. D'Armagnac arranges for Tunner to return the papers to Bou Noura and invites the Moresbys to dinner at his lodging. Port agrees, but that night he leaves for El Ga'a with Kit.

After Port dies, D'Armagnac has daily meetings with Tunner to update him on the search for Kit. D'Armagnac likes Tunner more than he did Port. He feels sorry for the man and offers to take him to his favorite brothel.

## Captain Broussard

Captain Broussard is the severe, ascetic commander of the French military post at Sba. He receives the Moresbys at his infirmary when Port is in the final throes of typhoid. He is thorough in his questioning of Kit, because he suspects that the two are not actually married. Once the Moresbys are admitted, Broussard is insistent that she remain in camp while her husband is ill. He refuses her milk rations for Port and demands to see papers confirming their relationship. When she leaves to meet Tunner in town, he is furious that she would abandon a dying man in his care. After Port dies, Broussard insists that he is buried - despite Tunner's objections - in a Catholic ceremony.



## Amar

Amar is a Sudanese man who can speak French and assists Kit after she escapes Belqassim's house. Amar happens upon her in the street as she tries to pay a street vendor with Algerian francs. He pays the vendor and takes Kit to a hotel to calm her and help her send a telegraph. Amar leaves her for a moment to speak with his friend who runs the hotel. The paranoid Kit tries to escape, but Amar stops her. He helps her check into a small room where they make love. When she falls asleep, Amar steals her money.

## Smail

Smail is a mysterious Arab man that Port meets on the outskirts of Oran. Smail insists Port join him in a small tearoom. There, he suggests Port join him in visiting a young prostitute just outside of town. Smail takes him on a winding journey throughout Oran to a fortress under which there is a tent. There, he introduces Marhnia, a young woman who speaks no English. Smail sits with them and translates. After a while, he leaves them to their business. Presumably, Smail is complicit in the robbery of Port that occurs later that night.

## Marhnia

Marhnia is a young woman who works as a prostitute in a fortress outside of Oman. One night, Port Moresby and Smail, who works as a sort of pander of her, come to her tent. She fixes tea for them and tells him a parable about three women who long to drink tea in the Sahara. They save their money for years only to die in the desert of old age before they can drink their tea. After Smail leaves, Marhnia and Port have sex, and Marhnia tries to steal his wallet. He pushes her back, making her scream. The men in the tent next to hers chase Port into the desert.

## Miss Ferry

Miss Ferry is an American woman who works for the American consulate in Oran. One day, she is enlisted to pick up Kit Moresby after she emerges from the desert. Kit is filthy and unresponsive as Miss Ferry rides with her in a cab to the hotel. Miss Ferry has no patience for rich Americans who get in over their heads in Africa, but she is shocked by the condition of her charge. Miss Ferry leaves the catatonic Kit in the cab when she goes into the hotel to arrange a room. When she returns, Kit has disappeared.

## Daoud Zozeph

Daoud Zozeph is a Jewish shopkeeper living in Sba. Being a Jew in Africa means that he suffers torrents of abuse from his customers. One day, a distraught Kit enters his shop. She tells him about Port's illness, Daoud listens to her story with sympathy. He

give her some tins of milk that had been ration for his child that was stillborn. After Port dies, Kit flees the military post and asks Daoud if she can sleep in his home for the night. He agrees, and his garrulous wife cooks dinner for Kit. They eat together and then Kit goes to bed, with Daoud leaving a hen by her bed to clear away scorpions. That night, Kit cannot sleep, and she sneaks out of the Zozeph house.



# Objects/Places

## Oran

Oran is a city in Algeria. It is the first city that the Moresbys and Tunner visit in Africa. In French-occupied Algeria, this city has most of the amenities that Europeans require when traveling abroad.

## Boussif

Boussif is another Algerian city that the Moresbys and Tunner visit. Farther afield than Oran, it is sprawling and lively and has some of the last "civilized" amenities, like sewage and garbage disposal, before one enters the hinterland.

## Ain Krorfa

Ain Krorfa is a filthy town that the Moresbys and Tunner visit. Even miles outside of town, the air is infested with a dense cloud of flies. The only hotel in town has piles of refuse in its lobby and an overwhelming odor of sewage throughout.

## Bou Noura

Bou Noura is a small town in Algeria with a French military outpost. Lieutenant D'Armagnac is the commander of this post, which has fallen out of favor with the local population since the death of a native girl.

## El Ga'a

El Ga'a is a grand ancient city in the desert. The streets of the city have built through the buildings, creating a cave-like labyrinth, crowded with people. When Kit and Port arrive, the city is in the midst of a meningitis epidemic.

## Sba

Sba is a small border town with a French military outpost headed by Captain Broussard. Transit in and out of Sba is infrequent and generally involves stowing away and delivery trucks.

## **Ksar**

A ksar is a small collective of huts with a communal food supply, often located outside of a city.

## **Algerian franc**

The novel takes place mainly in post-war Algerian, then under French colonial occupation. Throughout towns, then, the unit of currency is the franc.

## **Mehara**

The mehara is camel used by travelers and merchants for transportation across the desert.

## **The Sky**

The sky, particularly vast in the open desert regions of the novel, take on a mystical quality for the Moresbys, Port in particular. He views it as something solid, a canopy protecting him from the unknown.

# Themes

## Fear and Regret

Both Kit and Port Moresby are driven largely by the dual catalysts of fear and regret, and these impulses drive them to catastrophe. For Port, a fear that his marriage is dissolving sends him into flight to the least hospitable regions of the Sahara. For Kit, a fear of some unnamed doom combined with guilt over her one-time infidelity with Tunner sends her spiraling into madness.

Port is a man of incredible control. This excursion into Africa was his devising. He chooses the route, and he determines when it is time to leave one place for another. Port loves Kit, but after ten years he is inclined to cheat, as he does in Oman with Marhnia and tries to in Ain Krorfa with the blind dancer. He longs for something outside of this life, but the only happiness he feels is in sharing his adventures with Kit. As such, when he suspects that Tunner is trying to seduce her, he flies into a panic, sending Tunner on a separate route to Messad while he and Kit head deeper in to the Sahara. In his haste to rid himself of Tunner, Port does not even realize that Eric Lyle is stealing his passport. When Port falls ill, his fear of losing Kit is transformed into a deep regret. He realizes that he has always lived for her, but he never realized it until his death.

Kit, meanwhile, is driven by an intense paranoia surrounding perceived omens. Every even minutely ominous happening - a dream, an unpleasant visitor, a chaotic train trip - is indicative of some impending disaster, and a pleasant day with no omens is merely an attempt by the heavens to throw her off her guard. At the beginning of the story, Kit is all but certain that Port will one day leave her, and she gives in to Tunner's seduction on the train to Boussif. After Port removes Tunner from the equation, Kit is wracked with guilt. She senses Port's desire to reconcile, but she is now unwilling to accept it. His neglect drove her to Tunner, and even by Port's deathbed as he declares his love for her, she cannot accept it. Only when she is in the sands with Tunner after being locked out of the Sba military hospital can Kit admit her love for Port. By then he is dead, though, and Kit's descent into madness in the desert has just begun.

For the Moresbys, a harrowing journey through Africa is a staging ground for an emotional battle that began in America. In a land of typhoid and ownership of women, the crumbling of their marriage under the twin burdens of regret and fear yields tragic consequences.

## "Civilization" and Chaos

Early in the novel, Port Moresby states that another important difference between tourist and traveler is that the former accepts his own civilization without question; not so the traveler, who compares it with others, and rejects those elements he finds not to his liking. (6)





With such a sentiment as a central philosophy in their travels, the Moresbys think of themselves as enlightened nomads. They belong to no country; they exist in the entire world. They are disgusted by people like the Lyles, who learn nothing but prejudice in foreign lands and carry their own tea.

Despite their claims of global citizenship, the Moresbys have a subconscious yearning for the West. Port disguises it the best, but he seems to pick and choose the aspects of Africa to admire. He loves the vastness of the desert but detests the crowding of the city. He loves the danger of being robbed by a prostitute in Oran, but he lashes out at an Arab shopkeeper in Bou Noura when his passport disappears. Kit is less effective at hiding her wariness of their surroundings. She has a regular ritual of laying out her things from America and looking at them, reminding herself that "civilization" exists.

The plot of the novel is a transition from European-style "civilization" to the relative chaos of the desert. Kit, Port, and Tunner begin their journey in Oran, Algeria, a city so infused with French culture as to be nearly European. Port insists they head south, but as they do so, their Western niceties disappear: plumbing, clean food, regular transport. Port openly questions whether anyone could be happy in Ain Krorfa - a filthy trash heap of a town. Kit responds that she could be happy if he was with her. In the end, Africa destroys Port and benumbs Kit. She is returned to her home Oran, changed and unable to the other world - the United States - that she and Port sought to reject.

## The Infinite

Port Moresby comes to Africa to find Heaven. He is not religious - Tunner cannot suggest an appropriate prayer for his burial - but he believes that understanding eternity is possible, given the right setting. Kit is more interested in Europe, but she goes along with him out of habit. For Port, Africa - a land relatively untouched by World War II - is a pristine continent where one can find the infinite and the unknowable. For him, God should be found in the desert.

As Port sits on a precipice outside of Boussif with Kit, he look up to the vast sky and tells Kit that he envisions it as a canopy, protecting them from what is behind it. When she asks what is behind, Port is unsure. He envisions darkness. Port is not sure what he believes about the hereafter, but he feels that this place is where he will find it. Weeks later, as he is dying in Sba, Port imagines himself passing through a portal in the sky, beyond the knowable.

Kit, meanwhile, fears the unknown. Port's idea of the sky as a shelter from and passage to the darkness does not sit well with her. She fears the infinite, but she cannot flee it. The unknowable will destroy her marriage, and she will walk in to the desert that so enthralls and terrifies her.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view in *The Sheltering Sky* is third person omniscient. Our narrator has knowledge of the thoughts and emotions of the characters. Most of this introspective commentary is focused on Port, Kit, and Tunner. This is important, because the novel is most concerned with the reaction of these Americans in a foreign land, one for which they are unprepared.

On occasion, our narrator enters the thought process of a tertiary character, most notably Lieutenant D'Armagnac and Captain Broussard. These characters are always reacting to some action committed by the Moresbys, as when Port accuses a local of Bou Noura of theft or when Kit leaves Port's body in Sba and wanders into the desert. They are reliable observers of the strange events of the story.

Our narrator very pointedly neglects the thoughts of the more unsavory and lascivious characters in the story, such as Smail, Belgassim, and the Lyles. This heightens the sense of danger in the world of the novel. Most tantalizing, perhaps, is the question of what drives the Lyles in their actions. We envision the most horrendous Oedipal arrangements, because we have so little information outside of their observed actions. The result is that we are firmly invested in the lives of the Moresbys and Tunner while still acutely aware of the madness of their journey as it descends into cataclysm.

## Setting

The novel takes place in Northern Africa. The Moresbys' tour of Africa begins in Oran, Algeria, and ends somewhere in the Sudan. At the end of the novel, Kit is returned to Oran, though she does not remember the city.

Setting plays an important role in *The Sheltering Sky*. It is an element to be contended with, and the fact that the Moresbys are not entirely up to the challenge drives key passages in the story. The transition from the heavily French-infused Algerian towns to the undeveloped deserts of the later books is also very important to the story. Port, Kit, and Tunner are bored and listless in Oran, a city of relative comfort for them, but as they enter less sanitary conditions in Ain Krorfa, everyone begins making less wise decisions in the face of incredible discomfort.

As the landscape changes from rock to sand, Port and Kit enter a setting that is clearly survivalist. No longer is the issue for them merely discomfort; it is illness with no medicine and a society they do not understand. In this region - with only slight French presence - a man can die of a treatable disease and an American woman can become a concubine without realizing so until it is too late.

The world of *The Sheltering Sky* is a character unto itself, affecting our protagonists and speaking to the reader about one of the central conflicts in the story: civilization versus chaos.

## Language and Meaning

Paul Bowles' language is simple, unadorned, and uniformly precise throughout the novel. This is interesting, because although Bowles was embraced and idolized by the beat movement of the fifties - Kerouac, Burroughs, Kesey - he is not one of them. He has an ear for poetry and rhythm (Bowles was also a composer) and a merciless understanding of human psychology, but his writing is decidedly mannered and literary. He rarely slips into poetic language, and he never lets his verbiage slip in to the stream-of-consciousness vein, even as Port is slipping free from reality in the end of the second book.

This passage, in particular, shows Bowles' preference for narrative writing. Port has lost control of his senses. He knows where he is, but as he tries to figure out everything else in his mind - memories, emotions, theories about the afterlife - he fear he will lose hold of his bearings in the room. Bowles gives us Port's linear understanding of his dementia, not the dementia itself. The same happens in Book 3, when Kit is held captive and drugged in Belqassim's house. Never has drug-induced paranoia seemed so linear and yet so perfect.

The precision of Bowles writing also reflects his familiarity with his story. At the age of 23, he first went to Tangiers, and by middle-age he had settled there never to return to the United States. Bowles knows the region about which he is writing, and his clear prose speaks to that. *The Sheltering Sky* is a watershed work, rooted in the literary traditions of Hemingway and Sinclair Lewis but inching toward the humanistic work of the fifties and sixties.

## Structure

*The Sheltering Sky* is comprised of 30 chapters, divided among three books: *Tea in the Sahara*, *The Earth's Sharp Edge*, and *The Sky*. The novel tells a straight-forward narrative, primarily focusing on three American travelers in Africa, Port and Kit Moresby, and George Tunner. On brief occasions, the story shifts to a tertiary character that invariably crosses paths with one of the protagonists.

Each book opens with an epigram having to do with the theme of that book. For example, the first book - which deals primarily with the travelers' arrival in Africa and their disparate intentions there - opens with a quote from Eduardo Mallea about how a person's journey is only personal because of the experience that came before it. This first book is the simplest in its narrative, exclusively detailing what happens to our protagonists and why.

The second book, *The Earth's Sharp Edge*, opens with a quote from Valery about a dying man. This book focuses on the last days of Port's life, during which both he and Kit slip into madness. In this section, the narrator is freer switching between characters and long sections exist in the protagonists' thoughts.

The last book, *The Sky*, exists almost separately from the story of the first two. Opening with a Kafka quote about the point of no return, these harrowing, somewhat lurid, five chapters deal with Kit's sexual slavery in the desert. Though the point of view remains third person, the third book exists almost entirely in Kit's mind. The prose remains clear and narrative, but the story has a wild unpredictable quality not seen in the first half of the book. This completes the novel's transition from order to madness.

## Quotes

"He did not think of himself as a tourist; he was a traveler. The difference was partly one of time, he would explain. Whereas the tourist generally hurries back home at the end of a few weeks or months, the traveler, belonging no more to one place than the next, moves slowly, over periods of years, from one part of the earth to another."

Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapter 2, p. 7

"Tunner himself was an essentially simple individual irresistibly attracted by whatever remained just beyond his intellectual grasp."

Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapter 8, p. 59

"No one's going to open the door." [Tunner] kissed her. Over and over in her head she heard the slow wheels on the rails saying: "Not now not now, not now not now ..." And underneath she imagined the deep chasms in the rain, swollen with water. She reached up and caressed the back of his head, but she said nothing.

Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapter 10, p. 80

"And she's down as a journalist and [Eric Lyle] as a student. Isn't that ridiculous? I'm sure he's never opened a book in his life."

Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapter 12, p. 90

"It was such places as this, such moments that he loved all else in life; she knew that, and she also knew that he more if she could be there to experience them with him. And although he was aware that the very silences that and emptinesses that touched his soul terrified her, he could not bear to be reminded of that. It was as if always he held the fresh hope that she, too, would be touched in the same way as he by solitude and the proximity to infinite things"

Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapter 13, p. 93

"You know," said Port ... "the sky here's very strange. I often have the sensation when I look at it that it's a solid thing up there, protecting us from what's behind."

Kit shuddered slightly as she said: "From what's behind?"

"Yes."

"But what's behind?" Her voice was very small.

"Nothing, I suppose. Just darkness. Absolute night."

Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapter 13, p. 94

"Tunner was gone, Kit and he were alone. Everything now depended on him. He could make the right gesture, or the wrong one, but he could not know beforehand which was which. Experience had taught him that reason count not be counted on in such situations."

Book 1, Tea in the Sahara: Chapter 16, p. 124

"What in God's name are you doing?" he cried.

"Looking at my things," she said innocently. "I haven't seen them in a long time. Ever

since the boat I've been living in one bag. I'm sick of it ... I felt I'd simply die if I didn't see something civilized soon."

Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 19, p. 155

"On the surface of her mind, in words, she was thinking: ' typical of him, to be dead to the world, when I'm wide awake and bored.'" But the formation of the words was a screen to hide the fear beneath — the fear that he might be really ill."

Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 20, p. 174

"As the morning passes, the landscape took on a gaiety and softness that were no quite like anything Kit had ever seen. Suddenly she realized that it was because in good part sand had replaced rock."

Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 21, p. 179

"The mistake you make is in being afraid. That is the great mistake. The signs are given us for our good, not for our harm. But when you are afraid you read them wrong and make bad things where good ones were meant to be."

Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 22, p. 206

"It was an existence of exile from the world. [Port] never saw a human face or figure, nor even an animal; there were no familiar objects along the way, there was no ground below, nor sky above ... it was all utterly familiar and wholly horrible — existence unmodifiable, not to be questioned, that must be borne. It would never occur to him to cry out."

Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 23, pp. 216-217

"A black star appears, a point of darkness in the night sky's clarity. Point of darkness and gateway to repose. Reach out, pierce the fine fabric of the sheltering sky, take repose."

Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 23, p. 229

"Even Port's death by itself would be difficult enough to account for ... But to go back leaving Kit lost was unthinkable from every point of view."

Book 2, The Earth's Sharp Edge: Chapter 25, p. 249

"Even as she saw these two men she knew that she would accompany them, and the certainty gave her an unexpected sense of power: instead of feeling the omens, she would make them, be them herself."

Book 3, The Sky: Chapter 26, pp. 262-263

"But it was quite clear that Belqassim had made up his mind, that no threat or prophecy of which his companion was capable would succeed in altering the decision he had made. At the same time Belqassim was adopting an increasingly proprietary attitude toward Kit."

Book 3, The Sky: Chapter 26, p. 269

"Damned old fool!" she said to herself. This is not the first time she had been sent to be officially kind to a sick and stranded female compatriot. About once a year the task fell

to her, and she disliked it intensely ... She asked herself what possible attraction to the parched interior of Africa could have for any civilized person."

Book 3, The Sky: Chapter 30, p. 308

## Topics for Discussion

To what extent do the Moresbys embrace the Africa they tour? What moments do they cherish, and what elements do they criticize? How often do they contradict Tunner in his consistent pessimism toward Algerian culture?

Discuss the Moresbys' marriage at the beginning of the novel. What estranges them beyond Port's infidelity? How do their viewpoints regarding life and travel reflect unresolved differences between Kit and Port?

Discuss Tunner's motivation throughout the story. Near the beginning he holds little hope of seducing Kit, and near the end he denies being in love with her? Is this true? Why did he come on the trip, and why does he stay after Port dies?

Discuss spiritual fulfillment through nature. Port finds solace in the vast sky of the desert. What other examples of nature as a spiritual force can you think of in this and in other works?

Port and Kit choose to travel Africa because of its relative seclusion from the Second World War. They believe the war has tainted the human experience of the places it has touched. What do you think is meant by this? Do the residual effects of war cheapen the humanity or a culture even after it ends?

The French military presence in Africa is a persistent and ambiguous reality throughout the novel. Discuss the idea of foreign occupation — both in Algeria and in other nations — and how it can affect a culture both negatively or positively.

What attitude does the novel take towards the African people. Compare and contrast the characters of Marhnia, the tall Arab whom Kit meets en route to El Ga'a, and Belgassim.

Why does Kit abandon Port's body after he dies? Discuss what she hopes to gain and what she experiences when she walks in to the desert in Book 3.

Miss Ferry is incredibly contemptuous of Kit in the final chapter. She considers her another rich American tourist who got in over her head in Africa. How correct is she in her assessment? Are Kit and Port ultimately travelers, or just tourists?

To what extent does Port's dream at the beginning of the novel reflect the experiences he will have in Africa? What about Marhnia's story about the women drinking tea in the Sahara?

Why do you think Kit chooses to flee Miss Ferry? Do you think that it is a reaction to the possibility of Tunner being at the hotel, the prospect of returning to the States, or something less concrete?