The Songlines Study Guide

The Songlines by Bruce Chatwin

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

THE SONGLINES records the visit Bruce Chatwin makes to Australia as a student of cultures, languages and the evolutions of humanity in all its forms. He has come to study the Aboriginal Songlines out of a fascination that began in his childhood with Aboriginal culture and an adult fascination with their similarity to other transient people groups, having studied Bedouins, gypsies, and the writings of several thinkers who believe walking the earth is the way men are best suited to experience it.

His guide as he travels the Outback in search of anyone who will teach him is Arkady Volchok, an Australian-born man of Russian descent. Arkady has befriended Aboriginals since his youth and committed himself to preserving their sacred places and making sure those protections are reflected in the laws that govern all Australia. Arkady takes Chatwin from one Aboriginal settlement to the next, helping him find people, native or otherwise, who can answer his questions and help him better understand the history and experience of this group of people. Chatwin comes in to each conversation purely to learn the most untainted and historic version of the experiences and traditions of the Aboriginal people. He has an honest enough understanding of their spirituality that he is a student worthy of the respect of the Aboriginals with the most intimate perspectives on the culture.

Chatwin learns about the Aboriginal idea of Songlines, the tracks of music the Aboriginal Ancestors left as they walked from place to place singing creation into existence, naming things and attaching stories to their sacred places. Chatwin is intrigued with the idea that Australian Aboriginals have much in common with other cultures that evolved in far reaches of the globe, as there are common ingredients to the human experience. Each Aboriginal is associated with an animal, or totemic family, who sang his Songline, and considers that association as even more sacred than the one he has with his blood family. Some Aboriginals have transferred Songlines to canvases as maps that become art pieces white people buy, as a way of providing a living to the Aboriginals. Other white people make little effort to get to know or celebrate the Aboriginal culture, and Chatwin encounters both kinds of people.

As the story progresses deeper into Aboriginal culture and land, Arkady is asked to settle a dispute between two Aboriginal groups. The trip to settle the dispute provides Chatwin the opportunity to spend time with Rolf and Wendy, two more intellectuals there to learn from the Aboriginals about their culture and to record his reflections on Aboriginal culture as a human phenomenon. Chapters 30-36 contain those musings, including the literary and academic resources he uses to inform his hypotheses. He concludes that men are born to be peaceful wanderers with language based in song, and settling into civilizations and sedentary lifestyles have made us violently territorial and disconnected us from the earth, its rhythms and the songs of our souls.

The story culminates with the return of an Aboriginal man to his totemic conception place and the origin of his Dreaming. The man sings the songs that named that place and sees the landscape as if he has seen it throughout his whole life, having learned its

names since birth. The man also meets three of his totemic brothers who are dying in that place.

Chapters 1-4

Chapters 1-4 Summary and Analysis

The first chapter is dedicated to the author's introduction to Arkady Volchok, the Australian who had worked as a teacher for the Aboriginals in a settlement in Walbiri country and who became Chatwin's first teacher of the Aboriginal Songlines. Volchok had admired the character of the natives and so dedicated himself to learning from them everything he could about their Aboriginal version of creation in which they sang the things they saw into existence. He was eventually allowed to learn their most secret rites and later was betrayed by an anthropologist who exposed those secrets out of jealousy of Volchok's friendship with the natives. Volchok left his position as an Aboriginal teacher to explore the world. He fell in love while he was in Europe but began to see the world away from the Aboriginals as shallow, so he made his way home with his new Greek bride. The new task he devised for himself was to translate Aboriginal law into English so they could be harmonized with the policies of the Crown. Chatwin meets Arkady when Arkady is documenting the course a railroad would take through the Aboriginal bush, in order to move the natives out of the way and identify which are their sacred sites.

In chapter two, Chatwin identifies the origin of his fascination with the Aboriginal world as his great-aunt Ruth's enormous library. He explains that his first five years were spent traveling back and forth with his mother to see family and friends while his father was away in the Navy, and so he identified with the little Aboriginal boy on one trip, who was walking with his mother. The aunts were Katie, the well-traveled painter and Ruth, who had traveled only once, but loved to read. He explains that all the men in his family were either very accomplished or wanderers who left never to return from their adventures; the same wanderlust may have haunted Ruth. He also describes in this chapter both the fear he had of Napoleon Bonaparte coming to punish his mischief and his taking on the task of guarding Shakespeare's grave at Stratford on Avon where the aunts lived. His exposure to Walt Whitman and Ernest Thomas Seton reinforced his own wanderlust and thus began his fascination with the Aboriginal Walkabout.

The third chapter returns to the first meeting with Arkady in which Arkady begins to explain what he has learned about Aboriginal culture and their understanding of creation, since Chatwin wanted to learn for himself instead of from books. Arkady explains how they sang the things they saw, and thereby brought then into existence. They believe that they formed themselves out of clay according to their totemic species, so people are associated with their totems like family, being brothers with the animal of their totem and every other member of that totem group, or Dreaming. Then, each totemic ancestor is said to have dropped musical notes and words on his way from one place to another, and now those Songlines are sacred paths. But even if they are transected by railroads, Arkady explains that the Aboriginals are very tough-minded, and will just sing the railroad into existence the way they have adapted to every other change so far.

In chapter four, Chatwin describes to Arkady, who wonders about the reason for Chatwin's curiosity and the time he spent in the deserts of the Sudan. Chatwin explored the cities and observed the different tribes about their lives with a geologist who was more familiar with the world of the nomads. Chatwin learned how to track and about the rock paintings that recorded their histories and mythologies. He muses at the end of the chapter that nomadic tribes have given the world all of their monotheistic religions, and so these isolated and simple people are "the crank handles of history."

Chapters 5-9

Chapters 5-9 Summary and Analysis

In the fifth chapter, Bruce meets Arkady's friend Stan, a Pintupi elder, and his son Albert when they come to a coffee shop to sell one of Stan's paintings to Mrs. Lacey. He learns that the Pintupi are one of the last tribes to be introduced to civilization, and that they were nomadic, and so less violent in their rituals than the sedentary tribes. Their women tell creation stories with drawings on the ground and then cover them and end with a symbol like a letter Q to symbolize the deity going "back in" after finishing their creation. Those illustrations became the inspiration for the idea of allowing the Pintupi to make a living with paintings.

Chapter Six explains the relationship Mrs. Enid Lacey of the Frazer Arms had with the Pintupi painters, paying them more than the galleries would and selling them with great success to tourists. In this chapter, we also learn that the Aboriginal painters never paint their own totem, only those of others, and that the paintings are maps of each totem's Songline: the path the Ancestor walked the first time their song was sung. In this meeting, Mrs. Lacey sells a painting Stan has brought in to an American couple, and they commission more work for Gideon, another painter, to ship to their home in the States, after some slick talking from Mrs. Lacey about the superiority of his work. Mrs. Lacey explains about the songlines that go all over Australia, and the American couple is enchanted.

In Chapter Seven, Arkady introduces Bruce to the members of the Pintupi Council, his tongue-in-cheek name for the group of story-tellers and activists who gathered at the Frazer Arms. The most noteworthy are the Chairman who commanded the most attention for his stories about stealing cattle; the urban activist who tells Bruce anyone from anywhere else had no right to be in Australia and should go home; the Gym Bore who fancies himself a friend of the Aboriginals charged with defending their secrets from invaders like Bruce, and Marian, who was there from Walbiri working on a women's land claim. In the end, Bruce buys the Gym Bore a drink to make peace, and he reluctantly shakes Bruce's hand.

Chapter Eight tells the story of Bruce's evening in Katherine, a tourist stopover on the way to the Gorge National Park. There, he sees both the prostitutes' interactions with the locals and tourists who are there, and a seemingly reluctant fight between two Aboriginals that greatly excites the others gathered at the bar. He finds out as he watches them lie in the street, bleeding and having knocked each other out, that they are best friends.

In Chapter Nine, Bruce gains another level of insight into Arkady's family and past. Arkady is showing him pictures while they wait for the Land Cruiser they will take outbush, and Bruce sees Arkady's parents. They are Russian, and when Bruce asks about Von Pannwitz's Cossack Brigade who fought the Russians with the Germans in

WWI, Arkady tells the story of his father being interrogated for a week by a British officer in Austria who was convinced he was working for Von Pannwitz. It was as a result of being shipped around after that encounter that they found work in Australia to get away from what was a murderous Europe at the time. Ivan Volchock, Arkady's father, worked himself to exhaustion repairing sleepers on the train line, until it was discovered that he had a weak heart, so Arkady's mother started what became a successful fruit and vegetable business. When he went nearly mad missing home, they arranged to send him back so he could see it before he died. They buried him there in the Soviet village of Gornyatskiye, and Arkady talks about how much he wants to go back, too. Bruce found some common ground with Arkady when Bruce talked about his affection for the humility of the Russian people.

Chapters 10-12

Chapters 10-12 Summary and Analysis

In the beginning of Chapter Ten, Arkady takes Bruce to a party attended by people of every manner of profession and acquaintance with Aboriginal history, and there they run again into the Bym Bore. He learns that his name is Kidder, and that he is just a pilot messenger, but fancies himself an advocate for the return of Aboriginal history and knowledge to the Aboriginal owners of that information. Bruce challenges the notion by asking who decides who the owners are, and whether the methods of finding out are Aboriginal or just Kidder's ways. He learns that this is Kidder's crusade, and that Kidder doesn't even hold himself to the standards for initiation to which he would hold Bruce. In the next section of the chapter, Bruce, Marian and Arkady make plans to go to Middle Bore, where the sites specific to the Aboriginal women are. Bruce has a conversation with a barrister from New Zealand named Hughie who told him how the Aboriginal truckies depend on amphetamines to keep them awake as they cross the outback, and as a result lose it occasionally in ways that make them appear to be drunk. He closes with a story about the land not being suitable for people, as evidenced by a German girl who took a bike to the outback and let herself be cooked and picked clean. Then, as they part, Arkady prepares to introduce Bruce to the Father Dan Flynn, who Bruce has heard about from the hermit Father Terrence.

Chapter Eleven chronicles both the history of Father Flynn, a precocious Aboriginal boy identified to be suited for the cloth, and of Bruce's meeting with him. He was the first Aboriginal to be given his own mission; the men who were to teach him before he was left on his own were Fathers Subiros and Villaverde. Villaverde was a harsh leader, determined to make the Aboriginals love horses and European sports and abandon their own rituals and history. Naturally, he was very hard on Father Flynn and blamed him when the Aboriginals demonstrated any willfulness at all. He hated him even more for besting him physically while everyone else held back to humor him. Telling the story of the three tribes that lived near the mission, Bruce tells about Tribes B and C fighting while Villaverde let them as it suited his interests to be occasional peacemaker. Then the lawman from Tribe C, Cheekybugger Tabagee, decided instead of allowing their land to fall out of existence by being unsung, to teach his songs to the enemy tribe, committing both tribes to perpetual peace, with Flynn as mediator. When Villaverde tried to beak up the meeting, Flynn held him by the wrist to keep him from getting there, provoking him to write a storm of letters to superiors about the assault. Subiros, however, advised him not to send them, since stirring up tribal warfare would be the inevitable accusation leveled at them if anyone looked at the case. Instead, Flynn was allowed to take the mission he was assigned, but when the previous Father refused to meet him, he "went tribal" and allowed the mission to be pillaged. Dan Flynn then took to a girl named Goldie, wrote in flawless Latin his request to be released from his vows and moved to Alice Springs to get involved in Aboriginal politics.

In Chapter Twelve, Bruce gains the confidence of Father Flynn by pointing out the ways in which Aboriginals and their language are like the Gypsies, in that their language is largely song, and white settlers are their meat. Flynn explained that the Aboriginal word for "country" is the same as their word for "line," explaining that the white people couldn't fathom a system of land ownership that was not hemmed in, but made up of ways through. Survival for Aboriginals meant moving to where the rain, and therefore the food were — feeling at home depended on being able to leave. Songlines were trade routes, and songs could be shared, but never sold. The verses must always be sung in order when everyone was gathered together, since disrupting the order was disrupting the path, and thereby creation. Bruce also learned that one's identity and ability to find welcome in a place depended on the ability to sing the tunes associated with the Songline he was on, until the geographic place where his song stopped. Flynn defined the concept of dual paternity as the idea that each child has one physical father and one spiritual father who fertilized her child with his song when she stepped on his Songline, allowing for members of each family to have different totems.

Chapters 13-16

Chapters 13-16 Summary and Analysis

Bruce reunites with Father Terrence in Chapter Thirteen; Father Terrence begins to explain to Bruce the difference in Father Flynn between knowledge of theology and belief. He describes his trying to link Aboriginal thought about paths of ancestors to Jesus' saying "I am the Way." Terrence explains that there is too much darkness in Aboriginal thought — too much murder — for them to have any alternative to jail other than modeling themselves after Jesus. Having missed the Awakening in the East that brought us Buddha, the Hindu Upanishads, and Jesus, the Aboriginal tribes had only their ancestral stories to guide them. The story of Jesus' birth in a stable was the point at which Terrence believes Flynn disconnected. Terrence explains that he is living just the way Jesus did: nomadic, poor and dedicated to teaching and service, and he shows him the nature that surrounds him. He closes their meeting crying "Fear not!" when a shark circled, and the words repeat themselves to Bruce as he woke the following morning.

News of brush fires north of Adelaide greet him when he goes downstairs at the beginning of the fourteenth chapter, but he learns that everyone in their circle is unharmed. He spends the day reading Ted Strehlow's "Songs of Central Australia" and explains a bit of the story of the author's life. He was the son of a Lutheran pastor near Alice Springs, who advocated for the Aboriginals against British settlers. Ted's nurse was Aranda, so he spoke the language fluently and recorded Aranda stories told him by university friends. In his book, "Aranda Traditions," he proposed the unpopular view that "primitive" was in no way inferior and later struck on the idea of linking the stories in Aboriginal tradition to those in classical literature to prove his point. That is today's book, and inspires him to write, thinking about the complex and sophisticated morality that appears in Strehlow's transliterations, putting Aboriginal morality on par with that of the New Testament. What he writes is a short creation story called "In the Beginning...", of how the ancestors lay in primordial pools, waiting for the earth to give birth to the sun and stars. When it does, the ancestors emerge from their pools, smaller versions of themselves being birthed from them. They sing creation into being, and when everything is named, the earth is wrapped in song, and they go back in to the earth.

Chapter Fifteen takes Bruce along on a land rights dispute Arkady has been asked to mediate. On this particular day, the two learn that the Aboriginals believe that an Ancestor had incorrectly performed a ritual, and maggots took over the countryside, stripping it of vegetation. He trapped them all under a rock of interest to the railroad, and they believe that if the rock is cut, all the maggots will escape in a huge explosion and cover the land with poison. Arkady and Bruce conclude that they are referring to the effects of a nuclear bomb, and that they must have seen one before.

Jim Hanlon is the man Arkady recommends to answer the question of how many died when the British tested their H-Bomb at Maralinga, and the sixteenth chapter tells about

that interview. Hanlon is cheery at first, eager to entertain and full of literary allusions and philosophy. He offers dinner and beer, and asks Bruce about the book he's writing, offering to let him stay and write it there in the guest quarters. When Bruce turns him down, his loneliness and quirks get the best of him, and his mood darkens. Arkady steers the conversation to Maralinga, and Hanlon explains that the wind changed from what the English had predicted, and instead of the cloud blowing out to sea, it blew inland, spreading its radiation across Queensland, all so Sir Anthony could brag to Comrade Nikita about his bomb.

Chapters 17-20

Chapters 17-20 Summary and Analysis

The seventeenth chapter finds Arkady and Bruce setting out for Middle Bore but stopping to pick up Timmy, a Kaititj elder, at Skull Creek Camp. The camp is ramshackle and the Aboriginals living there are poor and crass. Timmy's wife, Mavis, is particularly surly but confesses she would like to come if she had thongs. Bruce volunteers his extra pair, and she snatches them from him to join the men, as well as Topsy and Gladys from Curtis Springs. Big Tom and his wife, Ruby are their last recruits, and on their way out, they pass a younger man being massaged by several women, as Bruce explains he is married to one of them.

Chapter Eighteen chronicles an encounter with a policeman investigating a hit-and-run in which a white man was killed, making it a much bigger deal than if it had been a black man, and a stop for gas at Burnt Flat, owned by a grumpy fellow named Bruce. Arkady wants Bruce to see the local color, so sends him in after drinks for everyone. Inside, he finds pictures of fat naked people and notes about no credit on the walls and sees a half-breed have to joke about skin problems to avoid abuse and discrimination by the white people inside. He learns that the man who used to run the bar shot an Aboriginal through the base of the skull, but got off because Aboriginals refuse to hear dead men named, so don't testify in court.

The group arrives at Middle Bore in Chapter nineteen, and Bruce is presented for the first time with the concept of a kirda and a kurungulu. Alan, the first man they meet, is the kirda, or the owner of the land they want to see. He manages everything that happens there, and his kurungulu is his nephew, as the relationship between kirda and kurungulu is always inter-generational and within the same physical family, but between different totems, so each totemic clan is represented in the decisions made. In this case, the two are worried that the resting place of the Lizard Ancestor is going to be destroyed.

In the twentieth chapter, the two meet the kurungulu, introduced as the man in blue. They meet over the map of the proposed route, and the man in blue points to areas of concern. Soon Frank Olsen, the owner of Middle Bore Station drives up and looks in to see what the railroad is proposing, and after a short discussion of the drought, invites Arkady and Bruce for tea the following day. In the second half of the chapter, Marian arrives, and Bruce learns that the reason for her ignoring his attempts at conversation is to maintain the trust of the Aboriginal women.

Chapters 21-24

Chapters 21-24 Summary and Analysis

In the twenty-first chapter, the group gathers around fires to settle in for the night, and the man in blue tells about the deception and death of the lizard. Bruce records the story of the lizard and his fair-skinned wife traveling to another part of the country, and a man from that southern region seduces and steals the lizard's wife, sending him home with a disguised replacement. Arkady explains that the melodies of songs like this one are uniform according to region, even if they are sung in different languages from tribe to tribe, because the melodies are determined by the geography of the land. Even tribes that have never met sing the same melodies to describe the same areas of land. Bruce closes the chapter remembering another story he had heard that was acted out with the same gestures as the ones the man in blue used in telling his story and ends the chapter proclaiming the name, "Lorenz!"

Konrad Lorenz was a man who Bruce had met before his trip to Australia, near Vienna. He had written a book called "On Aggression," and the twenty-second chapter is dedicated to the stories of his flawless impersonations of the animals about which he wrote. The theory he presents in his book had been that aggression was instinctual to every species as a way of evenly distributing populations among land and resources. Man is the only creature who allows his aggression to go to the point of killing his competitor. Artificial weapons and a lack of inhibition is what Lorenz blames for that fact. The few cultures in which aggression is not a dominant part of culture are only that way because, in cases like Orinoco, the people have instead ritualized gift-giving to replace aggression, and if the gift-giving stopped, violence would resume.

In Chapter Twenty-three, the group sets out with Alan in the Land Cruisers to look at the land the railroad wants to use. As they drive, Alan tells them the story of the Babies, the fruit of a Bandicoot man who ate a bandicoot, who are symbolized by rocks that sit at the lake they ran to as they were dying of thirst. Arkady assures him the Babies will be protected, but as they drive on, they see the earth-movers clearing the land for the railroad a few miles away. The Aboriginals are heartbroken at the sight of the broken trees. Returning to camp, Bruce reads a bit from Ovid's Metamorphoses and hypothesizes that the stories there are very like the song maps the Aboriginals maintained. Marian makes plans at the end of the chapter to return the women to their camp, as she had promised them. Just as Arkady remembers their promise to stop to see Frank Olsen, they learn that he has gone to attend to Jim Hanlon, who collapsed that night at the pub.

The twenty-fourth chapter takes place in a pub while they wait to hear about Jim, and they encounter the policeman they had met when he was investigating the hit-and-run, and another man with a purple birth mark. The policeman talks to Bruce about the book title of which he is so proud, and his plot about having a train hit an Aboriginal. The other man joins in and talks about how differently Aboriginals must be plumbed, since

they can't hold their liquor, and whether they also have different brains, since they are so childlike and incapable of progress. Bruce doesn't try to hide his disdain for the officer or his story idea, and Arkady has to work to contain his fury as he explains that intelligence can easily be measured by seeing how a culture handles language, and in that way, Aboriginals are some of the most complex people in the world. He also points out that while white men are always trying to shape the world to their own tastes, training themselves to be dependent on those systems, the Aboriginals have learned to adapt to the world and survive in it just the way it is. The two of them are instantly discredited by the men when they discover that Arkady's father was Russian, so neither of them are "real Australians."

Chapters 25-28

Chapters 25-28 Summary and Analysis

Chapter Twenty-five opens with an encounter Arkady and Bruce have with a woman whose husband, they discover, has been having an affair with another woman. Arkady chalks it up as the same pastoral ethic that shows itself the world over. When they leave him, they pass a woman and her young son waiting by a truck on the side of the road. Her husband has gone for parts and has been gone for three days, so they get her a sandwich, and move on to a discussion about how different Australia would be if Russians, or someone more accustomed to open spaces had settled it, instead of English islanders who see no value in the space, and so sell it off. Changing the subject, Arkady asks whether Bruce had ever traveled with a hunting people, and so Bruce tells about his time with the Nemadi in Mauritania in the western Sahara. He had to ask his host for three days to let him visit them and only got permission if he took a policeman with him and didn't let them hunt, since it was against the law of the republic. Instead, he bought them a goat so they could eat it, which they did with great pleasure, and they became friends. They were blue-eyed, fair-haired people who were very good with dogs, and viewed hunting with firearms as sacrilege. Bruce ends with the story of Mahfould, his Nemadi host, introducing him to the hundred-year-old deaf woman who smiled so sweetly and so long, and the black boy the tribe adopted — the child of the Swiss ethnologist from whom Bruce had learned about the Nemadi. The two conclude at the end of the chapter that if humanity has any future, it is with an ascetic renunciation of ownership and personal wealth; to live like the tribes.

Chapter twenty-six tells about the pair's short stop at the police station where they go to ask a policeman named Red whether he knows where Stan is, since they want to take Stan with them to settle a dispute between Titus and the Amadeus Gang. They learn that Stan went walkabout, but they could ask Lydia, a local schoolteacher. While they are at the police station, they witness the very informal oaths of citizenship two young Aboriginal girls take before they are allowed to sign for welfare. Red is a muscled and well-studied man, who Arkady points out is fond of "The Ethics of Spinoza" above all other books, and speaks Aranda and Pintupi like a native.

The twenty-seventh chapter tells about their meeting with Lydia, and her depiction of the story of Graham, her former half-breed assistant at the school. They arrive to find her at her wits' end, a capable but spread-thin teacher of wild aboriginal students. They take her home and put her feet up so they can clean her kitchen and make her soup and tea. When she is calm, she tells the story of Graham, who they had seen outside their hotel just days before. He was a talented musician, as all Pintupi are, and had started a band with other Aboriginals, spending ever-increasing lengths of time outbush with them. She worried that he would get in deeper than he would be able to escape, and so talked to him one night, causing him to reveal his desire that Aboriginals be given free reign of their own land without white interference. She told him it would be no different than South Africa's apartheid, and he fled. He returned to tell her their band had made it to

number three on the charts, and they had a concert that he feigned having forgotten was on the same date as his tribal initiation with another band member. They arranged for the initiation to happen early, but the wound from his friend's circumcision became infected when he rehearsed in tight jeans, and Graham panicked. He and the other band members escaped in the middle of the night, and a mob of angry tribesmen circled Lydia's house threatening her for hiding fugitives until they were convinced that the boys were not there. She never heard from him again.

On their way out, the two encounter a truckie named Stumpy Jones who, with his truck just crossed a dangerously flooded river. He wishes them luck, and they arrive in Mount Liebler, a town of shacks and 400 souls, where they set out to find Rolf Niehart. He is a book-lover and linguist who has an extensive collection of books in three languages, and whose girlfriend, Wendy, is another linguist in the midst of making a Pintupi dictionary. He was a well-kept fellow and offered them their own caravan in which to shower and sleep. He tells them the story of his getting the store he owns when its former owner, a grumpy fellow named Bruce, antagonized an Aboriginal too harshly and got a skull-splitting boomerang to the back of the head. He lived, but was forever altered. When they go the following morning to the store to see him, it is dark, and a mess of shoppers and spilled and open groceries. He shoos the shoppers out, telling them they've had all day to shop, and they go home to meet Wendy who, much to Bruce's chagrin, is another charming woman.

Chapters 29-30

Chapters 29-30 Summary and Analysis

In chapter twenty-nine, the pair finally meets up with Titus, whose quarrel they have come to settle. While Arkady meets with Titus, Bruce fixes the roof of a shop, and then Arkady sets him up with Joshua, an Aboriginal performer who tells him Dreamings as they drive around the countryside. He is witty and light-hearted, and the two enjoy their explorations. Bruce is as happy to ask questions as Joshua is to tell stories. The longest Dreaming in the chapter is one Joshua wrote about a "big fly one" bigger than a bird, and Bruce only comes to understand with time that it is a Qantas dreaming about Joshua's trip to Europe, tracing his flight, the route through the airport, his taxi ride, and the time he spent with electrodes measuring his brainwaves as he, a Catholic monk, a Tibetan llama and an African tribesman all sang their sacred songs for the scientists.

Chapter Thirty is divided into two sections: one that continues the story of Bruce's time with Rolf while Arkady is away, and the other that starts the section of the book devoted to entries from his travel journals. In the first half, Titus tells Arkady about another tribe's changing land deeds to make it appear as if they owned land that Titus' tribe owned, and Arkady's heart is broken at the idea that this pure people whom he has defended has turned to deceit in a way he hasn't seen the Aboriginals behave, setting a terrifying precedent. Meanwhile, Bruce embarks on a project of compiling on paper a history of human restlessness. The stories are interspersed with quotes that extol the virtues of travel, walking and life in motion. He includes stories from his travels in Africa and Europe, each one revealing some of the flavor of the places and their people, and drawing in other examples of cultures whose languages evolved through song and imitations of animal sounds, as well as from lives spent wandering. He selects several passages that discuss the stories of Cain and Abel, drawing out their metaphor to the farming, settling, metal-working people contrasted with the herding, nomadic, tent-dwelling people and how their mythologies, religions and lifestyles have developed at odds with each other. Some of the nomadic excerpts advocate the belief that man is made to be happiest, healthiest and most morally pure when he lives as a nomad. Others describe the cruelty of raids, in which nomads sweep through a settlement and steal, kill and destroy only to ride off again, never to be found. Their proverbs describe raids as their agriculture, and nearly universal enmity, with survival their highest priority. The chapter closes with explorations of the idea that man was his most pure in earliest history, when he was closest to God and nature, and there was no distinction between divine thought and instinct-driven action.

Chapters 31-34

Chapters 31-34 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter Thirty-one, Bruce remembers the beauty and grace with which a hunter he had read about in Sir George Gray moved and interacted with his prey, so Bruce wants to hunt with a native in Australia. After several tries, Rolf finally finds a man named Donkey-Donk who takes him out in his truck in exchange for gas and other slave labor. The experience is horrifying, as he and Rolf cringe in painful disgust as the hunting party repeatedly rams a mother kangaroo with their truck, and render it helpless before they finally shoot it in the head. Then, they try and fail to cut off the tail, and leave the animal to rot. His journal writings following that experience are themed with the question of whether mankind is mad, or whether its impulse to fight and kill is some remnant of past stages of his evolution. He includes writings from "The Art of War" and "On Aggression," and considers Lorenz' hypotheses in "On Aggression" about instinct's misguiding humanity into misplacing its old aggression, concluding that instinct is in fact what keeps humanity moral. He examines what makes a hero, and concludes that regardless of circumstance, in myth, it is never desirable for a man to kill another man in cold blood. He compares the temperaments in which people kill other people — whether out of passion or in cold blood — and concludes that some people have found peace by appeasing their enemies with gifts, and others seek it by destroying them and making either themselves or their enemies into beasts.

The thirty-second chapter finds Bruce on a walk, observing the pointillist colors of the landscape and its incredible dryness; Bruce wonders if Aboriginal rites are so bloody and violent because there are no predators whose defeat provides a tangible transition to manhood. His journaling at the end of this chapter continues on the theme of mankind's primal need to walk. Even babies are happiest when they are being walked. Writers throughout the centuries have said that the best thing for mental and physical health is to walk some distance every day. He even wonders whether sedentary cultures like Westerners and the ancient Egyptians put so much emphasis on the journeys of the afterlife because there is something in them that recognizes that they haven't traveled enough in this life. He closes with excerpts that suggest that our homes can be the mementos we carry with us, and even our deepest, youngest fears can be traced to lives spent as transient wanderers, when lions might attack in the night at any moment.

In Chapter Thirty-three, Bruce and Rolf find the missing grader, having been abandoned after an adventurous ride. They rig it back to working condition, and Bruce continues in his journal. He begins with a discussion of a Professor Dart, who supposed that all the bones left in an excavated cave were bludgeons for cannibalistic killings. Another scientist named Bob Brain later clearly demonstrated by the hunting patterns of cats that what anthropologists had previously imagined to have been gruesome child murders by bludgeoning were really the neck-bite kill of carnivorous cats. He further discovers that, based on writings like that of Dr. Livingstone in Africa, the brain doesn't

allow the body to feel pain when it is being eaten, allowing the hunted to pass quite peacefully into death. Continuing the discussion, he cites scientist Elizabeth Vrba, who discusses the jumps in evolution that humanity has experienced, making tremendous leaps at the same time as great shifts in earth's climate. Further, there is evidence in Brain's research for a man-eating beast, dinofelis, who only ate humans, contemporary with the saber tooth tiger and the leopard, but much more efficiently built, but that mankind apparently defeated the animal.

The thirty-fourth chapter chronicles the meeting between Aboriginal art dealer Eileen Houston and painter Winston, who had learned without her knowing that she had been charging multiple thousands for his paintings, while only paying him a few hundred. She is impatient and condescending, even while she is obviously pleased with his efforts, and Winston is minimally helpful, until the end of their conversation, when he demands more pay for his work. The journal excerpts that follow center on the battles men have had with beasts and what has distinguished the man from the beast. He points to thinkers like Democritus who points out ways in which animals have been teachers of men, when the challenges presented by the animal kingdom have brought about tremendous ingenuity, strength and imagination in mankind. The selections close with the story of a woman whose glamorous accessories and cosmetics became the decorations for two young Bororo men on the day of their initiations into manhood. They decorated themselves and hit each other hard in the stomach, becoming thereby blood brothers, and men. It is another example of a culture in which, when survival no longer depends on strength or skill at hunting, other means of violence must become the rites of passage into manhood.

Chapters 35-39

Chapters 35-39 Summary and Analysis

Chapter Thirty-five finds Wendy and Old Alex recording plant names for her dictionary in Alex's language. She explains to Bruce when Alex tires and goes away that the fact of the diversity of languages among Aboriginals makes her wonder about the myth of the Tower of Babel; why when Aboriginal language had been so uniform, there had been 200 languages in Australia. She points out that people only know the names of plants they have in their part of the country, so their languages grow out of the places where they live. They conclude as they talk both that the basis for one universal language can never have existed, and that the gift the Aboriginal parents leave their children in their language is the land itself, and all its secrets for thriving. The excerpts here focus on the themes of poetry as early language, both among children and primitive civilizations, and on the ready laughter that remains a part of transient cultures. The last story is of a homeless Irish veteran who had traveled the world and was committed to the journey instead of ever settling down. His home, he explained, was a street in Nice on which an English gentleman had carried on an hour's stimulating conversation with him, and gave him a 10,000 franc note in thanks for the pleasure.

The thirty-fifth chapter opens with a brief episode in which Rolf and Bruce learn that Alex's prized possession, a pearl pendant he wears on a string between his legs, is something he got by trading his tjuringa, on which are recorded his sacred songs, his most sacred possession, equal to his soul, in order to get. The journal excerpts that follow that are themed on the sacred songs of the Aboriginals and the ways in which songs become geographic and universal memory for them, tying them back to the first moment of their existence. These are the last of the journal excerpts.

Chapter Thirty-seven tells the story of the return of Arkady and Marion, who got married while Arkady was negotiating peace, since his divorce papers came, and he was finally free. The beauty of their romance is beautifully summed up when Bruce writes, "They were two people made in heaven for each other. They had been hopelessly in love since the day they met, yet had gradually crept into their shells, glancing away, deliberately, in despair, as if it were too good, never to be, until suddenly the reticence and the anguish had melted and what should have been, long ago, now was."

In the thirty-eighth chapter, Titus and the man from the Amadeus Mob make peace and agree that the tjuringas will be returned to their rightful owners. Chatwin reiterates how sacred the objects are and points out that something like them — sacred stones that remain sacred into the afterlife — appear in the story of Gilgamesh's journey to the Underworld. Titus makes everyone laugh with stories about how Aboriginals would give their tjuringas to missionaries so they wouldn't be lost or stolen, and then lobbyists who thought they knew what was best tried to take them back and given them to the Aboriginals, not knowing the difference between one tribe and another, or who to give them back to, and other stories about developers he had to set straight.

The final chapter of the book documents the stop Bruce, Arkady, and Marion take on their way back to Alice Springs, so they can take an Aboriginal named Limpy to his totemic home, the place of his spiritual conception, and where three of his totemic brothers were dying. He has never been there, so Chatwin thrills to the telling of his enraptured observation of every geographic detail, knowing them already by heart, and singing every single one. He guides them to where the men are lying in their beds, and they smile toothless grins, completely contented to be lying in the place of their ancestors, with whom they are now reunited, and have re-become themselves, being in their totemic home.

Characters

Bruce Chatwin

The author of the book and explorer of the world, Bruce spent time before his Australian exploration with the Bedouins in Africa and the Middle East, then follows a childhood fascination with the Aboriginals to Australia to learn about their history, lifestyles and mythologies. He has come to Australia to learn about the Songlines, a curiosity born in him when he was a little boy, and in which he sees similarities with other nomadic cultures' mythologies. He is a well-read and willing student and uses his background to ask questions of his would-be-teachers in ways that earn their trust and keep him on the side of those whose wish is to preserve and protect the integrity and tradition of the Aboriginals. He strives to apply the lessons he learns about Aboriginal culture to some fundamental questions about humanity as a whole, like whether Pascal is right in surmising that man's troubles come from his inability to sit quietly in a room, or whether man is meant to keep moving from place to place throughout his lifetime. He wonders about the origins of civilization and of the human tendency to violence and draws on the writings of literary and academic thinkers to inform and guide his contemplation.

Arkady Volchok

An Australian of Russian descent who has made a study of Aboriginal religious mythology and practice, having lived among them as a teacher and gained their trust over several years. He was allowed to see secret rituals and hear their stories in intimate detail during that time, but he was betrayed by a traveling anthropologist and so left that position. Since then, he dedicated himself to translating Aboriginal law into English, in order that it might be reflected and protected in Australian law. To Bruce, he serves as a guide, teacher and key to a social network that allows Bruce to connect with several other insightful teachers on the subject of Aboriginal history and lore. The direction of the story is largely guided by his being called to settle a dispute between two tribes, one of whom committed a serious crime regarding the tjuringas of the other tribe. It is through Arkady that Bruce meets everyone he meets and learns of their significances and the lessons they can teach.

Marian

Arkady's beautiful and smart girlfriend, a constant source of insight into the culture of Aboriginal women and a physical fascination for Bruce.

Aunt Ruth & Aunt Katie

Aunt Ruth is Bruce's well-traveled, painting aunt, and Katie is the quieter, less traveled aunt with the fascinating library.

Mahmoud

Bruce's guide in the Sudan who taught him to read footprints and about the history reflected in the rock paintings.

Stan

The Pintupi painter of dreamings and father of Albert.

Mrs. Enid Lacey

Mrs. Lacey is the owner of Frazer Arms, where the Pintupi bring in their paintings of Songlines. She sells them, paying them more than other art dealers, and treating the tribesmen very well.

Jim Hanlon

The lonely old man who tells Bruce about the radiation cloud when the British tested their nuclear weapon in Queensland and misjudged the direction of the wind.

Father Dan Flynn

The Aboriginal boy who was chosen to be the first Aboriginal to have his own Catholic mission, smart, but unwilling to succumb to the corrupt authority of Father Villaverde. He left the Church before he gets his mission and moves away with a girl named Goldie to become an advocate for Aboriginal rights.

Father Villaverde

The conquistador-like priest who served his own ego more than the good of the Aboriginals in his mission and turned Father Flynn off of the idea of holy orders.

Father Subiros

The good-hearted priest who served with Father Villaverde and encouraged him not to send his letters of complaint about Father Flynn, allowing him to resign his oath of his own will and with dignity.

Father Terrence

The priest who had told Bruce about Father Flynn and who explains after Bruce's meeting Flynn about the parts of his background and personality that made it impossible for him to remain in the Catholic Church. He also explains how Aboriginal spiritual thought evolved outside the influence of the Awakening happening in the rest of the world when people like the Buddha and Jesus lived, and the Hindu Upanishads were being written.

Ted Strehlow

The author of "Songs of Central Australia" and "Aranda Traditions," and a significant source of insight for Bruce into the culture and stories of the Aboriginals.

Mavis

Timmy's wife at Skull Creek Camp, who borrowed Bruce's green thongs to wear to Middle Bore. Big Tom and his wife Ruby also joined them.

Timmy

A Kaititj elder Arkady wanted to take to Middle Bore to discuss the surveyor's map of the rail line.

Alan & the man in blue

At Middle Bore, Alan is the kirda, or owner, of the land the railroad was thinking of laying line through next. The man in blue was his kurungulu, or policeman, with whom he consulted on all his decisions, and who told the story of the lizard and his wife.

Rolf

The short, spirited bookseller who becomes Bruce's guide when Arkady is making peace between the two tribes, Titus' and the Amadeus Mob in the final ten chapters of the book.

Wendy

Rolf's love interest, and a scientist who is compiling a dictionary of Aboriginal names for things, and a good friend to Bruce.

Old Alex

The Aboriginal who lives in the same town as Rolf and Wendy and helps Wendy with her dictionary terms.

Konrad Lorenz

"The Father of Ethnology" and author of the book, "On Aggression." Bruce met him when he wanted to interview him for a newspaper near Vienna.

Lydia

The teacher who had raised an Aboriginal boy, Graham, who ran away after his initiation into his tribe to become a rock star.

Objects/Places

Alice Springs

A city in Australia where Bruce meets Arkady which becomes the home-base for Bruce's time in Australia.

Songlines

The paths the Aboriginal tribes believe their Ancestors walked as they sang the world into creation, moving from one geographic feature or group of people to the next.

Tjuringas

The carved oval pieces that contain the songs of an Aboriginal's totem and becomes synonymous to their soul.

Sudan

The desert in Africa where Chatwin first lived with and watched the lives of the Bedouin nomads.

Desert Bookstore

Mrs. Enid Lacey's shop, from which she sold the Pintupi paintings.

Books by Ted Strehlow

Books by Ted Strehlow helped form Chatwin's ideas about Aboriginal culture.

H-Bomb

England tested a hydrogen bomb in Queensland, but misjudged the direction of the wind, and instead of blowing out to sea, the fallout fell into the Outback.

Toyota Land Cruisers

The vehicles that take people through the Outback.

The railroad

The next infrastructure project that has the potential to destroy sacred Aboriginal sites, and that Arkady has determined to hold accountable to respecting the Aboriginal land rights.

Dreamings

The episodes the Ancestors dreamed, and that come to associate each member of an Aboriginal family with a particular totem.

Skull Creek Camp

The camp at which Bruce and Arkady pick up Timmy and Mavis on their way to Middle Bore — the more run-down of the camps Bruce sees.

Middle Bore

The camp where Bruce and Arkady meet the kirda and the kutungurlu and asked them whether they could survey the land.

Eskis

Coolers that kept water cool that people packed with them to go into the Outback

Popanji

The town where Bruce and Arkady meet Rolf and Wendy, and where Bruce does his journaling while Arkady negotiates between the feuding Amadeus Mob and Titus.

Themes

The Value of a Life in Motion

The journal excerpts at the end of the book in particular, and moments throughout the book in general, serve as testament to how ardently Chatwin adheres to the belief that a human life is best lived in motion. He lauds the virtues of walking through literary quotations and testimony from scientists who observe that even in our infancy, people desire the motion of walking. Our bodies and minds are healthier for it, and we are able to shake off the diseases and psychoses that come from a stagnant, sedentary existence.

Chatwin even hypothesizes that entire cultures improve as well, as the lifestyle of motion is adopted by its members, as demonstrated by the fact that the sedentary tribes' initiation rites are much more violent than those of the tribes whose lives have been spent forging their survival from ever-changing places, with ever-changing predators and dangers. He surmises that if life is too easy to present challenges that satisfy a man's soul, he will invent trials and dangers by which he can prove himself even as he lives a life sheltered by stillness.

His idea that cultures improve with motion is reiterated through several examples in the book, allowing him to draw in examples from all over the globe, including ancient Jews wandering through the desert, the Bedouin tribes who live in the desert because their wives insist it keeps them healthy, the European gypsies who consider their meat the people they encounter and whatever money they can make off them, and the Aboriginals themselves, who are only at home in a place as they are free to leave it to pursue survival elsewhere as conditions warrant. Some of the best examples of the virtue of this kind of lifestyle come from the migration of birds, in which they understand that their own survival hinges on their ability to live harmoniously with the other birds and animals that share their food sources and so don't compete for territory in any way, but share it willingly.

Man is by Nature a Peaceful, Singing Creature

Chatwin cites examples throughout his storytelling of civilizations whose languages began with songs, and who lived harmoniously with nature and cultures around them before they settled down into one geographic location and started competing against other groups of people for dominion over territory. Conjoined with the idea that man is instinctively and most naturally a wanderer, Chatwin posits that man is celebratory and peaceful by nature, most himself when he is following game and the growing seasons of plants, peacefully trading with other groups of people and intermarrying. He only gets violent when he is defending some territory against use by other groups or, as Chatwin points out in the contrast between nomadic and sedentary Aboriginal tribes, the sedentary tribes need to prove their strength, which isn't satisfied by hunting rites of

passage so tribe members incorporate violence into initiation ceremonies. Violence is the aberration according to Chatwin, grown out of a life from which the physical challenges of survival have been removed from a culture.

He cites the example of the gypsies, whose language began with song, and who had a very similar belief to the Aboriginal idea of singing creation into existence, and points to the primitive records of poems and songs as the very earliest human language. Those tendencies he sees as characteristics basic to the fundamental human brain before it is tainted by any cultural or environmental definitions of normalcy. That is why children sing and talk in rhyme in their earliest stages of speech. Citing Hesiod's "Work and Days," he reinforces these ideas with the idea of man's declining creativity, peacefulness and intelligence with each advance of technology. In the beginning of man's existence, there was little distinction between his instinct and divine nature, and he lived in harmony with the gods. It is with the advancing of technological dependence and sedentary life that man's worst characteristics have evolved.

The Importance of Inter-Cultural Understanding

In episode after episode as Chatwin moves through Australia, examples emerge of white people making up their minds about Aboriginal ideals and needs before taking the time to get to know them. Aboriginals, likewise, distrust the white people based on the actions of a few white people whose actions displeased them. One of the earliest examples is the white man Bruce nick-names the Gym Bore, who has appointed himself as guardian of Aboriginal knowledge because he has flown messages and supplies to and from Aboriginal tribes. He talks to Bruce as if he is an authority, not realizing how much more knowledgeable Bruce already is, and how respectfully he intends to conduct his research among the Aboriginals. Another example is of the men in the bar where the white men refuse to serve Aboriginals, believing that they are in some way less human than white men. Chatwin contends that primitive minds are no less intelligent than civilized minds, particularly since they so consistently demonstrate the ability to survive in nature the way it is, instead of requiring civilizations that make every place look like every other place.

The reverse is true in the case of the Aboriginals who emulate the worst habits of white men, giving themselves to drink instead of realizing the detriment it is to their health and culture. The two fighting best friends are a good example. Instead of learning about each other's strengths, cooperating to become literate in each other's languages and skills, and to raise their cooperative standards of living, they make up their minds against each other and stunt their own cultural growth.

Style

Perspective

The book is written as a first-person narrative, and Chatwin's perspective is that of a citizen of the world and a student of cultures. He is particularly fascinated with primitive and nomadic cultures and wishes to observe them at their most pure, as demonstrated by the time he wants to see a hunter interacting gracefully with an animal using only his spear and his own feet. His narrative honesty, however, compels him to tell the reader both his previous knowledge and preconceptions about a culture, as well as his actual experiences of them when he encountered them, however changed they might have been by the evolutions of history. He continuously draws on the things he has learned from other cultures as he learns about the Aboriginal culture, so that his perspectives inform his narrative, and the reader benefits from all of his other study. At the end of the book, he draws on the points of view on the topics about which he is most passionate, like living in motion, song as language, and the primitive parts of man's psyche, in the form of excerpts from literary and academic works on those topics. Poets, historians, scientists and philosophers are all heard as he examines the questions that form the last ten chapters of the book.

Tone

The narrative is set in the Australia of the 1970s, after white men have been there for about two hundred years, and their infrastructure and law have had a marked effect on the landscape and lives of the Aboriginal cultures. Chatwin keeps himself to the rural places where the most Aboriginal culture can still be found and so remains insulated from the most structured parts of the country; in the Outback things are as undisturbed as possible. The characters he encounters are as much a part of the landscape as the spinifex and the rocks themselves, since they point out to him what are the landmarks of their heritage, and the stories those physical places tell to the Aboriginals who encounter them. The land becomes a book of history for him as he learns which ancestors came across the land first, and what they attached to it in the way of stories and significances. From the Aboriginal perspective, the land is their songbook, and the legacy given them by their most ancient ancestors, serving as their link to their totemic families, trade routes, and sacred places. Instead of being fixed points for Aboriginals, their homes are their Songlines transecting all of Australia.

Incorporated into that set of stories are stories that provide background and comparison, set in the Sudan and Russia, and in Gypsy caravans across Europe. Those stories allow for context as Chatwin explains the similarities among transient people groups, and in their song origins of language and history-keeping.

Structure

The book is organized chronologically, so it reads like a novel, but with the occasional inclusion of narrated flashbacks to clarify a character or provide background insight into Chatwin's own experience. Chatwin includes Arkady's life story in that way, for example, and the story of his own childhood and time in the Sudanese desert. Otherwise, chapters are short, and each contains an episode with a new setting and set of characters, although the main characters appear and reappear throughout. There is a structural change in the final ten chapters of the book, as Chatwin changes his focus from taking in information about the Aboriginal mythologies and traditions to hypothesizing on the evolution of humanity's psychology, cultures, languages and neuroses. In this section of the book, he designates the first half of each chapter to narrative, and the second half to the excerpts from his journals, poetic works, academic books and literature that helps him examine the questions the recorded episodes raise in his mind. The arc of the story is in no way disrupted by the inclusion of those excerpts, however, but it allows instead for his focus to be sharpened and the reader to view the episodes in the beginnings of the chapters through similar lenses, having access to the thinkers that influence Chatwin's thoughts as he writes about them.

Quotes

"'To wound the earth,' he answered earnestly, 'is to wound yourself, and if others wound the earth, they are wounding you. The land should be left untouched: as it was in the Dreamtime when the Ancestors sang the world into existence.'" Chapter 3, page 11

"He went on to explain how each totemic ancestor, while traveling around the country, was thought to have scattered a trail of words and musical notes along the lines of his footprints, and how these Dreaming-tracks lay over the land as 'ways' of communication between the most far-flung tribes." Chapter 3, page 13

"'A sacred board,' I said. 'And Aboriginal's "holy of holies". Or, if you like, his "soul".'
A tjuringa is usually an oval-ended plaque, carved from stone or mulga wood, and covered with patterns which represent the wanderings of its owner's Dreamtime Ancestor. In Aboriginal law, no uninitiated person was ever allowed to look on one." Chapter 10, page 43

"In Aboriginal belief, an unsung land is a dead land: since, if the songs are forgotten, the land itself will die. To allow that to happen was the worst of all possible crimes, and it was with this bitter thought that Cheekybugger decided to pass his songs to the enemy — thereby committing his people to perpetual peace, which, of course, was a far, far graver decision than conniving at perpetual war." Chapter 11, page 52

"Today, he said, more than ever before, men had to learn to live without things. Things filled men with fear: the more things they had, the more they had to fear. Things had a way of riveting themselves on to the soul and then telling the soul what to do." Chapter 13, page 64

"And it struck me, from what I now knew of the Songlines, that the whole of Classical mythology might represent the relics of a gigantic 'song map': that all the to-ing and fro-ing of gods and goddesses, the caves and sacred springs, the sphinxes and chimaeras, and all the men and women who became nightingales or ravens, echoes or narcissi, stones or stars — could all be interpreted in terms of totemic geography." Chapter 23, page 117

"The smile, I said, was like a message from the Golden Age. It had taught me to reject out of hand all arguments for the nastiness of human nature. The idea of returning to an 'original simplicity' was not naive or unscientific or out of touch with reality.
"'Renunciation', I said, 'even at this late date, can work.'
"'I'd agree with that,' said Arkady. 'The world, if it has a future, has an ascetic future.'" Chapter 25, page 133

"I should set down on paper a resume of the ideas, quotations and encounters which had amused and obsessed me; and which I had hoped would shed light on what is, for me, the question of questions: the nature of human restlessness." Chapter 30, page 161

"'Our nature lies in movement; complete calm is death.' Pascal, Penses" Chapter 30, page 163

"Above all, do not lose your desire to walk: every day, I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it... but by sitting still, and the more one sits still, the closer one comes to feeling ill... Thus if one just keeps on walking, everything will be alright." Chapter 30, page 171

"He believed, like Vico, that the world's first languages were in song. Early man, he said, had learnt to speak by imitating the calls of animals and birds, and had lived in musical harmony with the rest of creation." Chapter 30, page 176

"The names of the brothers are a matched pair of opposites. Abel comes from the Hebrew 'hebel', meaning 'breath' or 'vapor': anything that lives and moves and is transient, including his own life. The root of 'Cain' appears to be the verb 'kanah': to 'acquire', 'get', 'own property', and so 'rule' or 'subjugate'.
'Cain' also means 'metal-smith'. And since, in several languages — even Chinese — the words for 'violence' and 'subjugation' are linked to the discovery of metal, it is perhaps the destiny of Cain and his descendants to practice the black arts of technology." Chapter 30, page 193

"Most of us, not being heroes, dawdle through life, mis-time our cues, and end up in our various emotional messes. The Hero does not. The Hero — and this is why we hail him as a hero — takes each ordeal as it comes, and chalks up point after point." Chapter 31, page 216

"Every normal baby will scream if left alone; and the best way of silencing these screams is for the mother to take it in her arms and rock or 'walk' it back to contentment." Chapter 32, page 227

"The most sublime labour or poetry is to give sense and passion to insensate things; and it is characteristic of children to take inanimate things in their hands and talk to them in play as if they were living persons... This philological-philosophical axiom proves to us that in the world's childhood men were by nature sublime poets... Giambattista Vico, The New Science, XXXVII" Chapter 35, page 269

Topics for Discussion

Do you agree with Chatwin's hypothesis that mankind is restless and wandering by nature? What evidence from literature or your own experiences leads you to agree or disagree?

What are the social ills that would be avoided if man had remained or became again nomadic? In what ways could Aboriginal law inform such a world?

Based on your reading of the book, what do you think Chatwin's ideal world would look like? What would be its values? Who would be its leaders?

Chatwin points out that monotheism came to the world by way of nomadic cultures. How do you think one relates to the other? As highly as Chatwin regards the nomadic lifestyle, do you think he sees that particular offering as a benefit to the world at large or not? Explain.

There is a section in Chapter Thirty in which Chatwin cites several writings that decry the cruelty of a nomadic culture that comes to pillage and kill and leaves with no remorse. Discuss his explanation of the origin of the rift between nomadic and sedentary people and whether you see any means for their peaceful coexistence.

Compare the ideas of instinct and religion as contrasted on page 214, where Chatwin points to Dostoevsky's hypothesis that without religion, everything would be permissible, and says that without instinct, everything would be equally permissible.

Develop the hypothesis Chatwin introduces with the story of the dinofelis about the catalysts for the evolutions of man.

What do you consider the most valuable lesson of the Aboriginal way of life? Explain.