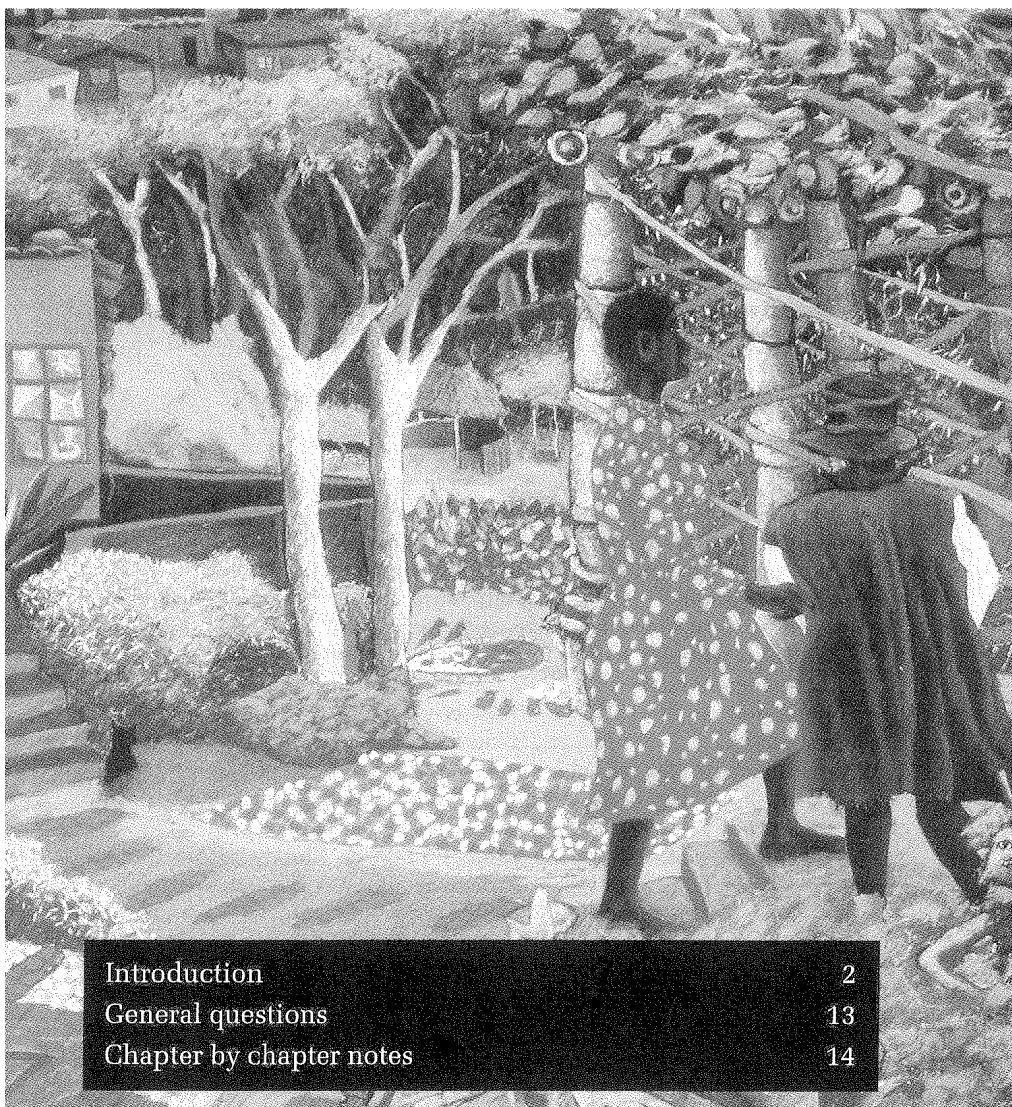


WAYS OF DYING

STUDY NOTES

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INTRODUCTION

Why the novel is important

Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995) can be seen as a breakthrough in the history of the English novel by black South Africans. It is ground-breaking both in terms of its themes and its form.

- In its uniquely South African themes and its contemporary concerns it gives an authentic picture of the experience of political transition, and also stands as an allegory of the contemporary life of Africans. ('Allegory' is a story in which characters and actions stand for bigger general truths.)
- In the formal sense, the novel is new and different because:
 - It finds a way of suggesting multilingualism through English. Mda translates African idioms directly into English. For example, in the second paragraph on page 3 he writes 'how this child saw his death' instead of 'met his death'.
 - It uses magic realism.
 - It adapts traditional oral techniques of storytelling to the requirements of the written novel.

Ways of Dying speaks to contemporary South Africa in a contemporary language and a relevant tone and style.

Should literature be 'relevant'?

Some critics used to blame writing in English by black South African writers for being 'too political'. This issue was hotly debated during the 1980s and the early 1990s. One group regarded culture in general and literature in particular as a weapon of the struggle for liberation, and so insisted on relevance, commitment and engagement on behalf of the oppressed masses. To the other group, such literature was no more than extended political slogans or journalistic reports.

This is the complex background against which the 'literature of transition' in general and *Ways of Dying* in particular were produced. On the one hand, too much explicit political engagement was becoming monotonous, unattractive and lacking creative imagination. On the other hand, the apartheid monster was more spectacular, urgent and devastating in its final death-kicks than before. There was clear evidence of this in the political violence of the early 1990s.

The story is set in the period following F W de Klerk's famous 2 February 1990 speech, which prepared the way for the removal of apartheid.

- In the months and years following the speech, the mini civil war, which had been confined to the province of KwaZulu-Natal between the 'comrades' and war-lords loyal to Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, escalated and spilled over to Gauteng with alarming speed and devastation.

- A sinister 'third force', comprising high-ranking government security personnel, was also active in fanning the flames of violence across the country.
- Vigilantes were used to destabilise communities.
- Groups of assassins were trained to eliminate community leaders and terrorise the people.
- Controversial army battalions were secretly deployed in anti-government areas to massacre these communities.
- Faceless murderers were deployed in urban trains to kill commuters.
- Rival taxi groups were infiltrated and bloody taxi wars became the norm.
- White supremacist organisations formed paramilitary units whose objective was to resist change through violence.
- To complicate matters, the ultra left wing, represented by the Pan Africanist Congress, rejected the compromise solution and intensified their brutal attacks on white targets.
- The community self-defence units also exceeded their bounds and, instead of being a solution, became part of the problem with their jungle justice.
- Perhaps the most striking dramatisation of suffering can be found in the depiction of the hospital ward in which Shadrack is admitted after the 'hell-ride'. (See p. 131.)

It is against this complicated backdrop of political violence that the action takes place. As the characters' lives are directly affected by the devastation around them, they have to choose between despair (which is a form of death) and survival (which is life). The main characters, Toloki and Noria, both choose survival.

Writing about the contemporary life of Africans in the South Africa of the 1990s, Mda had to show how the political turmoil affected the lives of ordinary people. To do this in a well-rounded way and to show how complex it all was, he had to open up his focus on urban township dwellers to explore the problems of the rural communities, as well as the very poorest urban dwellers, the informal or shack communities. Mda was the first writer to realise that the story of Africans in the transition from apartheid could not be complete without representing all these communities.

Ways of Dying attempts to grapple with the complex issues facing people during the turbulent time of transition. Mda recognises that, as a novelist, his task is to explore the effects of a political situation on people's lives in human or universal terms.

Mda avoids naming places, political organisations or leaders, nor are dates ever mentioned. This makes the story more universal, and also makes us re-examine things which have become mere words through too much media coverage.

The novel's themes

It is not only politics that acts as a driving force behind the world and characters of *Ways of Dying*. Other important factors are:

- tradition
- modernisation
- greed and ignorance
- social stratification.

Modernisation

In South Africa, modernisation has meant the increasing influence of the Western lifestyle on the traditional rural African lifestyle. In its extreme consequences, modernisation means the destruction or corruption of that traditional lifestyle; while its subtle form results in hybrid (mixed) forms of culture.

Central to the modernisation process is the proletarianisation of the African rural masses. (The 'proletariat' is the urban working class who earn wages for unskilled labour.) Because of colonisation and apartheid, the rural peasant communities had their land taken away, and so were forced into extreme poverty. In order to earn a living, they were compelled to rely on their physical labour, which they could sell cheaply to the capitalists in cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town.

All the major characters – Toloki, Noria, Nefolovhodwe, Napu, Xesibe, Jwara and That Mountain Woman – have strong rural roots. Their different destinies show the varying effects of modernisation, and capture the struggles of individuals, communities and the whole nation grappling with the aftermath of colonial subordination.

In contrast to the deteriorating rural life, the cities and towns seem to be an exuberant exhibition of wealth. The consequence is the mass migration to the urban centres of rural people, especially the frustrated youth and those aspiring to join the middle class.

Most of them, like Noria, are lured by the stereotypical picture of the city as the glamorous place of bright lights, sparkling diamonds and glistening gold, but, like her, they have a 'rude awakening'. When Noria arrives in the city, we are told, 'There were no diamonds, nor was there gold. Only mud and open sewers' (p. 126). Like her, they cannot go back because they feel that they have 'nothing to return to in the village' (p. 126). They are ultimately 'chewed, and then spewed' (p. 135).

Mda does not simply describe the way in which masses of African people have been illegitimately 'chewed and spewed' by a host of destructive forces acting together. He explores ways of engaging with these problems. He also acknowledges that the effects of modernisation are contradictory: there is, at one and the same time, deprivation and development.

This complex relationship between

- the *city* and the *village*,
- *tradition* and *modernity*,
- the *Christian church* and *traditional customs*, etc.,

is the central theme in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*. It is as if Mda is saying that the complex ways in which these different and sometimes opposing elements clash is the fundamental cause of the predicament in which contemporary Africans find themselves.

The traditional and the Western

Besides consciously reviving the traditional oral storytelling technique, Mda also brings traditional African cosmology into the Western form of the written novel. (Cosmology is the way we look at our universe.) In this way he captures the predicament of the modern African in whose mind both traditional and Western exist side by side, and who can therefore choose either or both, as suits the situation.

For example, many African urban dwellers go to church on Sundays but do not forget the importance of traditional ceremonies such as rites of passage and circumcision for their children. These ceremonies are either undertaken in the urban areas in which they have settled or back in the rural areas from which they come. In this way, the line connecting Africans in the urban areas and their relatives in the rural areas has never been completely broken.

The migrant work system has also strengthened this tie. The derogatory term *amagoduka* which is applied to amaXhosa migrants literally means 'those who go home frequently', home being the rural areas.

That Mda is close to the rhythm of modern African life is clearly shown by his emphasis on this unbroken link between the traditional and the Western, without which the story of Africans in contemporary South Africa would not have been complete.

The power of magic

Like any other group facing life challenges, the African has an array of both offensive and defensive mechanisms at his or her disposal. In South Africa, the liberation struggle used numerous offensive strategies, including the armed struggle, civil disobedience, boycotts and strikes. Equally, there are many defensive strategies that can be found in African cosmology. Africa has complex sets of beliefs, values and religions which helped (and continue to help) sustain the people's spirit of survival in the face of harsh environments. Belief in supernatural and magical forces is not unique to Africa, but its importance and function in African perceptions should not be dismissed.

Magic realism

The role and effect of magic in real life is a controversial issue and the term 'magic realism' captures the contradiction. How does such a concept empower or disempower people in real-life situations? Surely it would be naive and suicidal to expect solutions to real life from magical powers. But it is unwise to dismiss the importance of magic in the African belief system.

'Magic realism' is portraying the imaginary, the improbable, or the fantastic in a realistic or rational manner.

Oxford Concise Companion to English Literature

Noria's 'magic'

Born of a mother who was a distinguished traditional herbalist, Noria has magical powers from an early age.

- Her mysterious song has a powerful effect on Jwara's artistic abilities: 'Noria had all this power to change mediocre artisans into artists of genius' (p. 26).
- Later the same effect is experienced by Toloki.
- We also learn that in the village the young Noria was popular for her beautiful laughter, which transmitted her joyous mood to others.
- Jwara and Toloki both assert that she is a goddess.
- In addition, her second son is conceived in a fantastic manner.

Toloki's 'magic'

Toloki also has a measure of magic about him.

- Even though he was a talented artist he did not draw people, and once 'he was asked to draw a picture of a person, but his hand refused to move' (p. 27).
- In the initial phase of his life as a professional mourner, Toloki's power to dream is highlighted. (See pp. 10-11.)

The 'magic' in other characters

Other characters also have fantastic experiences:

- Nefolovhodwe is nagged by persistent dreams of Jwara, who he believes is responsible for the death of his prize fleas.
- Jwara dies in a fantastic way.

The magic in the shack

The most gripping episode in the novel is when Toloki and Noria step out of the reality of the poverty of their shack into the luxurious life of lush gardens and beautiful homes depicted in the pages of furniture catalogues and copies of *Home and Garden*. The relief that such episodes of enchantment bring is temporary. They do not make any permanent or effective difference to real life, but, rather, the 'temporary magic' heals the wounded souls of the protagonists.

Rebuilding the future

Ways of Dying is a tale of South Africa not only directed to the world but also, and more importantly, to South Africans themselves. It is a story that depicts urgent contemporary problems and concerns, and does so with the aim of encouraging the victims to move on, to choose life over death, even when death seems to have the upper hand.

Interestingly, the story commences on Christmas Day when Toloki and Noria, the protagonists (the main characters), meet. They come from a village where they were playmates and their families were friendly neighbours. This chance Christmas meeting is occasioned by the funeral of Noria's second son, Vutha the Second. So, as the birth of one child is celebrated, a second child dies and is buried.

Toloki and Noria continue to see each other after this chance funeral meeting and the story takes us through their journey as they explore their circumstances and discover life, hope, beauty and love amid the misery engulfing their lives as well as their surroundings. Death is evidence of this suffering and also a metaphor for it (hence the title of the novel).

Toloki finds Noria homeless and stranded in the 'squatter-camp', her house having been mysteriously burnt down after her son's killing. He helps her rebuild it and ultimately moves in with her.

The notion of 'rebuilding' is symbolic and profoundly significant among the themes of the book. After centuries of colonial exploitation, as well as the devastation caused by decades of apartheid oppression and counter-revolutionary violence, the contemporary South African scene was dominated by a call, led by Nelson Mandela, to rebuild, to reconcile, and to restore the principles of *ubuntu* – humanity. Mda, however, does not just swallow and then preach this reconciliation rhetoric.

Instead, he proposes a rebuilding based on specific social functions, responsibilities and attitudes. Mda's notion of *ubuntu* is well encapsulated in Toloki's kindness, which is based on the principle, 'Your need is greater than mine' (pp. 46, 58). Neither Toloki nor Noria's good-neighbours expect any reward for helping out. As Toloki notes: 'Your laughter is enough thanks for me' (p. 87). It is therefore symbolically appropriate that the story begins on Christmas Day and ends on New Year's Day, thus spanning the season of charity and hope.

The narrative techniques

The main narrator

The main narrator of the story is an omniscient (all-knowing) narrator, who knows everything that happened and can see into the minds of the characters. This kind of narrator does not usually refer to himself or herself. However, Mda's main narrator uses the first person plural pronoun 'we'. This makes the narration of the events, the world, and the characters authentic (they come across as 'the real thing'), and it also universalises

their experiences. The tragedies that befall 'them' are 'ours', as 'we' are part of a big communal family and the still bigger human race. The narrator says about the protagonists, 'We were happy when they were happy. And felt the pain when they were hurt' (p. 8).

Accordingly, 'we', the narrator, is both a storyteller and a participant in this fictional world. This the narrator says is possible because of the oral tradition: 'We are the all-seeing eye of the village gossip. When in our orature the storyteller begins the story, "They say it once happened...", we are the "they". No individual owns any story.' The narrator refers to 'the communal voice that tells this story' (p. 8). ('Orature' is the oral tradition of storytelling; the oral equivalent of 'literature'.)

This narrator is confident enough to explain the choice of the pronoun 'we', aware that it does not conform to usual Western literary practice. And so we are alerted to the African oral tradition as a technique used in the novel. Also, notice how the narrator uses another important oral technique by talking directly to us, the readers, addressing us as 'you'.

Other narrators

Beneath the narrator, the narrative is mainly divided between Toloki's dominant point of view and that of Noria, which follows it. This simply means that we see the events of the fictional world from their perspectives, through their eyes.

The technique of flashbacks

The narrative is set in the city but, through the flashbacks of the omniscient narrator and the two protagonists, it moves back and forth in time and place, into the distant past of the village and the early city life to the immediate past and present of city life.

Within these flashbacks we are treated to an array of stories-within-stories as one digression leads to another digression. This technique is another prominent feature in orature.

- In Chapter 8, for example, Toloki sits on the mound of the grave of the murdered patriarch and reminisces about his first evening and morning in Noria's shack.
- Even the Nurse at this particular funeral digresses from the particulars of the patriarch's death and tells the tragic story of Bhut'Shaddy.

Suspense

These flashbacks also enable the writer to build and maintain suspense, which is important in the 'oral novel'. Important events are introduced to excite our expectations, only to be shelved for a later stage while the narrator digresses to other incidents. To take just one random example:

- In Chapter 2, Toloki wakes up on Boxing Day, intending to visit Noria.
- A few lines into the second paragraph we move into a whole series of lengthy digressions.
- It is only twenty-three pages later, at the beginning of Chapter 3, that we finally get to their meeting.

The characters in the novel

The responsibility of the individual in society

The political situation is obviously central to the problems encountered by the characters in *Ways of Dying*, but that does not exclude individual human weaknesses and follies which make their condition worse. Socio-economic deprivation gives birth to human evils such as greed, jealousy, dishonesty and hatred.

So, Mda believes it is important for the victims to look into themselves. He exposes cultural practices that are anti-social and self-destructive. He exposes male chauvinism and male sloth, and condemns both the older generation and the youth for their lack of responsibility.

The men in the novel

Significantly, it is men who are destroying the country by senseless violence.

The notorious migrants loyal to their chief, the gangsters, the vigilantes, the army, the police, the young tigers, the war-lords and the taxi men are all groups of men at war.

In sharp contrast to the industriousness of women, the characteristic sloth of the village men who sit around drinking beer and playing morabaraba continues in the cities. (See p. 164.)

Jwara

Jwara's household crumbles and dies because he allows his passion to override his reason.

- Jwara is a cruel, autocratic rural patriarch.
- He despises his son Toloki for no reason other than his belief that his son is ugly and stupid.
- His muse (his artistic inspiration) is the young Noria, on whom he spends his precious money, buying her gifts and sweets while his family goes without food.
- His character is captured when he confronts Mother of Toloki with this taunt: 'If you want to be the man of the house, take these pants and wear them' (p. 36).
- Jwara is also a strikingly complex figure: he is clearly a villain but, as an artist, he exhibits admirable dedication to his art, for which he lives and ultimately dies. His association with Noria genuinely affects his artistry and his life.
- Also important to consider in this respect is the ironic fact that it is his figurines that ultimately ensure the happiness of Toloki and Noria. They bring 'happiness and laughter to the children' (p. 198). We may take this as Jwara's contribution to the rebuilding of two lives he destroyed while he was alive. It is his way of asking for forgiveness and reconciliation. Like Toloki, we can try to come to terms with him as a misunderstood artist living, as Noria suggests, in the wrong time and place.

Napu

Napu is another ambivalent male character. ('Ambivalent' means you can view him in more than one way.) Is he a villain?

- Initially, he accepts his responsibility for making Noria pregnant.
- His protection of Noria and the unborn child, Vutha the First, is admirable.
- He is a working man, full of confidence and promise.
- He argues against oppressive customs and traditions, and this is one of the most significant developments in the novel.
- The strength of his character is dramatised in his confrontations with That Mountain Woman and her husband Xesibe.
- Napu represents the radical attitudes of the figure of the worker.
- Unfortunately, Napu soon succumbs to the destructive effects of contemporary South African urban life.
- He abducts Vutha and disappears with him in the city, where he tortures him until he dies the most horrific death in the novel's catalogue of deaths.

Xesibe

Xesibe is stuck with a shrew of a wife, That Mountain Woman, foul-mouthed and aggressive.

- Roles in Xesibe's household are a direct reversal of the pattern in Jwara's. Xesibe accepts his subordinate role.
- His wife shows him no respect in public and denies him any role in the raising of their daughter, Noria.
- Like Napu, he is consistently ridiculed as a *koata*. His wife asks, 'Are you a man or just something that someone left behind when they squatted in the donga?' (p. 73).
- However, Xesibe's position as a wealthy member of the community guarantees him a respectable social standing.
- His refusal to support his grandchild and his attempt to rape Noria's servant debase him to the level of the other male villains in the novel.

The two village families are contrasted as extreme examples of marriage. Jwara's family has an autocratic patriarch while Xesibe's family is run by a matriarchal dictator. Both families crumble in their different ways. The implicit moral is that both extremes are unhealthy; and balance, mutual respect and equality should be the ideal.

Nefolovhodwe

Aside from Noria, the most significant relationship in Toloki's life is his ambiguous relationship with Nefolovhodwe.

- In the village, Jwara's friend Nefolovhodwe is one of the two people who are sympathetic to Toloki, the other being his own mother.
- Nefolovhodwe moves to the city where he becomes a very wealthy coffin manufacturer. It is at this point that he breaks all his ties with his rural family and friends.

- Toloki seeks help from his father's friend. He is told, 'The master does not remember you' (p. 119).
- After much begging, Toloki manages to secure a job from Nefolovhodwe. But ironically this new Nefolovhodwe treats Toloki as badly as Jwara did.
- This last in a series of rejections persuades Toloki to break all ties with living people.

Mda's presentation of Toloki and Nefolovhodwe develops into an interesting contrast of attitudes among contemporary Africans.

- The self-centred and snobbish tendencies of the group represented by Nefolovhodwe are well documented in the book. They are the few successful Africans who, by virtue of their wealth or education or status, exploit and undermine other Africans and hinder their development and welfare instead of actively encouraging them.
- Mda captures this division and the subsequent clash of interests within the African community in the symbolic traffic 'stalemate' between the funeral and wedding processions (p. 6).
- The individual greed of this group is strikingly caught in Nefolovhodwe, who spends his money on foolish things, such as luxury cars and fleas, while his immediate family and his community are suffering because of poverty.

Toloki

Contrasted to this self-centredness is Toloki, with his humility and kindness.

- As a professional mourner he has to live off the money of the mourning family but he is not greedy; he takes whatever payment the bereaved family can afford.
- The service offered by Toloki is not materialistic. His relationship with death is spiritual; it is a vocation that is the equal of other noble vocations. (See p. 106.)
- His interesting self-created vocation is also a symbolic spiritual gift to a nation that has become used to death and has forgotten the significance of mourning: peace, introspection, solidarity and recovery.

The women in the novel

One of the most important issues in the modern world is the recognition of the equal status and role of women in society.

- Women are always the most oppressed group in patriarchal societies, including our own.
- Oppression is sustained by ideology: concepts and ideas are formulated to present the oppression as the natural order of things and as common sense.
- One of the most effective ways to make women seem less important is to represent them as the stereotypical mother figure whose role is confined to the kitchen while men are represented as lords and masters elsewhere in the home as well as in the world beyond.

Noria and That Mountain Woman

In his two main female characters, Noria and her mother, Mda presents the two stereotypes of the woman – as the Virgin Mary or as a whore – in order to raise questions about both these notions.

- That Mountain Woman is the backbone of the community as the traditional healer but she is also a shameless woman who slept with another man while she was pregnant. She is also dictatorial in her dealings with people.
- Similarly, Noria has a history of promiscuity, which culminates in her life as a prostitute. But she is also a 'goddess'.
- Significantly, both are beyond the sphere of patriarchal control, suggesting some degree of independence.
- However, their responses to the patriarchal situation are shown as misdirected, isolated and ineffective.

Noria realises later that her struggle can only be overcome in conjunction with other women, and her happiness can only be complete by acquiring a partner who, like Toloki, can 'see things with a fresh eye' (p. 164).

SOME GENERAL QUESTIONS

- 1 You have to send someone a postcard telling them what *Ways of Dying* is about. You may not use more than 50 words.
- 2 Before you do this exercise: Do *not* read what is printed on the back cover of the book!

A 'blurb' is a short description of a book, usually printed on the back cover. It is usually written by the publisher, not the writer. Its purpose is to interest casual readers enough to make them buy the book or take it out of the library to read.

- What should go into a blurb? Should it say anything about, for instance, the events, the characters, the flavour of the writing?
 - Write your own blurb for this novel.
 - Now read the blurb on the back cover. Is it a good blurb? Why or why not?
 - Is your blurb better? Why or why not?
 - In groups, share your blurbs.
- 3 Reread the final few pages of the novel, the ending.
 - Now you write the last-page-plus-one. In other words, how do you imagine the story would go on?
 - Has Zakes Mda in fact ended the story at the right moment?
 - Is your continuation interesting enough to carry the story any further?
 - What do you imagine made Mda stop where he did?

CHAPTER ONE

- 1 Look at the opening sentence of this novel:

‘There are many ways of dying!’ the Nurse shouts at us.

- Is that a good opening sentence? Why or why not?

Now look at the opening sentences of some other South African novels:

- a Something terrible happened. (Nadine Gordimer’s *The House Gun*)
- b So, when she and I walked into the house after we had been in the street for so long, I knew that another time was coming when we would have to be in the street again. (Mongane Wally Serote’s *To Every Birth Its Blood*)
- c My son killed your daughter. (Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother*)
- d Mzi stepped down from the Pietersburg train at Park Station. (Sipho Sepamla’s *A Ride on the Whirlwind*)
- e Sergeant Konyana clears his throat with his characteristic forced cough. (Gomolemo Mokae’s *The Secret in My Bosom*)

- Which of those opening sentences do you think are good ways to start a novel?
- In each case, why do you think that?
- From just the opening sentence (and, to a certain extent, from the title), can you guess what sort of a novel each will be, or what each will be about?

- 2 In groups of five or six, play out the scene where Toloki persuades the wedding procession to give way.
 - Read pp. 6-7 for the general atmosphere.
 - Make use of the little bit of dialogue Mda has given, but add your own.
 - Give each of the members of the two groups a distinctive character, based on what Mda tells us of the two different groups.
 - How can you effectively stage this short scene? What can you do to make it seem as if the people involved are moving (or not moving!) in cars?

- 3 Read the account on pp. 16-17 of the interrupted funeral in the 'distant town'. Draw a cartoon of four frames (four separate pictures side by side, each one leading to the next) to cover the events. Work carefully at what the written words would be in each frame. There would be few words, and they could be general narrative text, setting the scene, or they could be words written inside 'speech-bubbles' or 'thought-bubbles' attached to particular characters. Your last frame and its text should be similar to the punchline at the end of a joke. Select some of the finished cartoons to display on the walls of your classroom.
- 4 Working in small groups, produce joint written answers to the following questions:
 - a Explain the idea of the Nurse, and the role the Nurse plays.
 - b Does the Nurse serve a useful function? Why or why not?
 - c What does paragraph 3 on p. 3 tell us about the Nurse?
 - d What is the significance, rather than just the literal meaning, of the last two sentences in paragraph 3 on p. 3?
 - e What can you expect from the stories that Nurses tell at funerals?
- 5 Divide into at least seven small groups (more if you like or depending on numbers). Number the groups from 1 to 7 (if you have more groups, start again from 1). Each group should tackle the question below that is headed by their number. If time allows, move on to some of the other questions. Leave time for all the groups to come together and have a report-back on each question, so that everyone hears all the group reactions.

A Study of Toloki in Chapter One

- 1 What do we learn about Toloki at the beginning of the novel: his age, his appearance, his clothes, his likes and dislikes?
- 2 Discuss Toloki's profession, referring closely to the text.
- 3 Describe where Toloki stays in the city.
- 4 What do you learn about Toloki from the reason he gives for liking his favourite delicacy?
- 5 What is the relationship between Toloki and the Eastern monks?
- 6 What makes it possible for Toloki to know and experience the lives of the monks?
- 7 What is the significance of the sleeping position adopted by Toloki versus that adopted by Nefolovhodwe?

CHAPTER TWO

- 1 Look at this sentence in the middle of p. 20:

‘The street committee, or whoever is in charge of the lives of the squatter-camp dwellers, could have refused, but they acceded to her wish.’

Use that statement as the basis of a general group debate.

- First, formulate a motion, the issue to be debated. This can either be specific, e.g. ‘That squatter-camp dwellers need to be organised and their lives regulated’, or it could be more general, e.g. ‘That human beings must be left to decide things for themselves.’
 - Then decide who will argue for the motion (a proposer and a seconder), and who will argue against it (an opposer and a seconder).
 - Prepare detailed notes for the speeches on either side. Those who are not the main speakers should also do this, to be ready to contribute ‘from the floor’.
 - When everyone is well prepared, stage a full and formal debate, observing the procedures and discipline of debating.
- 2 ‘Politics has destroyed this country’ (p. 22). This could be the title for an argumentative essay, one in which you argue for or against something, or present both sides of an argument.
 - Write such an essay.
 - 3 Treat this as a detailed written exercise. Obviously, you will find a dictionary very useful. Read only the first five lines of the new section that starts on p. 23, and then answer the following questions in full detailed sentences:
 - a What is ‘yellow-ochre’?
 - b What is the ‘landscape’?
 - c What is the landscape being contrasted to?
 - d Both the ‘landscape’ and the ‘canvas’ are metaphors. Can you explain how they work: what is being compared with what, and what do they have in common?
 - e Describe the meaning and the effect of the words: ‘dull’, ‘distant’, ‘misty’ and ‘grey’.
 - f What is meant by the sentence: ‘Now, however, it is all coming back’?

- 4 Take the scene between That Mountain Woman and the health assistant, and play it out in different ways:
 - First, as farce (fast-moving, cartoon-like physical comedy).
 - Then, very seriously as a tragic, unhappy situation.
 - Change that to soppy romantic, as in a TV soap-opera.
 - Try any other styles you can think of.

- 5 Perhaps in small circle groups, make brief comments on the following:
 - Jwara's relationship with Noria
 - the relationship between Jwara and Toloki
 - your impressions, so far, of That Mountain Woman
 - your impressions of the young Noria
 - Toloki's reaction to winning the national art prize
 - Jwara's reaction to Toloki's success
 - the relationship between Noria's parents

- 6 'Police bullets have a strange way of ricocheting off the walls of township houses, and when they do, there is bound to be a child about whom they never miss' (p. 40).
 - Write a poem about a child hit by such a bullet.

- 7 Imagine that you are a public figure of some kind (a government minister, an archbishop, or the captain of the national soccer team) visiting an informal settlement. While you are addressing the people, someone asks you the question that appears on p. 42:

'How can we be squatters on our own land, in our own country?'

 - How will you answer them, what will you say?
 - You could try this orally, or as a written exercise.

CHAPTER THREE

- 1 On p. 47 Shadrack tells how his son was killed by the hostel dwellers shooting at him to test their guns. He then explains how the tribal chiefs use ethnicity as part of the exercise of their power. Imagine that the son's death has been reported in the local newspaper.
 - Write a letter to the editor in which you advance the argument that hostel-related deaths in the townships have their origin in the power of the rural chiefs.
- 2 Take these three clusters of words, drawn from two different paragraphs on pp. 48-9, and use the words to build up a picture of these two aspects of township life. Write two well-shaped paragraphs:
 - hostels – alienated – despised – country bumpkins – uncivilised
 - taxi association – luxury house – township – informal settlement
- 3 Read what Zakes Mda has to say about the *amagoduka* on pp. 48-9. Then try to find the following two poems and see if they present a different or a similar viewpoint:
 - Chris Zithulele Mann: 'Cookhouse Station'
(Mann suggests 'the migrant worker with his blankets' goes unnoticed, is almost invisible.)
 - Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali: 'Amagoduka at Glencoe Station'
(Mtshali has the *amagoduka* saying: 'Oh! beloved black gods of our forefathers / What have we done to you / Why have you forsaken us?')
- 4 Use diagrams (on the blackboard, on an overhead projector, on paper) to explain exactly how the following people are inter-connected:
 - the chairperson of the taxi association
 - the chief
 - the police.What is it that connects them?

- 5 On p. 52 you will find the statement ‘To steal is better than to beg’.
- Do you agree with that statement? Explain why or why not.
 - Does it apply only in the urban setting?
 - Would you have expected to hear such a statement in a rural village before the effects of urbanisation were felt?
 - Would you expect to hear it in a rural village now?
- 6 Quick-fire quiz questions. Divide up into a number of groups. Each group sits together. Someone fires these questions. Each group records its answers. In the end, the correct answers are given and the scores added up. Answer quickly, without searching in the text.
- 1 Who comes from the same clan as Shadrack?
 - 2 Who tells Noria about Toloki’s city life?
 - 3 What do they say about his vocation?
 - 4 How long did Toloki travel during his journey to the city?
 - 5 What is a synonym of ‘alms’?
 - 6 What is a *malayisha*’s job?
 - 7 What is an ‘odyssey’?
 - 8 What is a ‘crony’?
 - 9 How many people were burned alive by the villagers?
 - 10 The villagers took on the three functions of the justice system and became ... (i) ... , ... (ii) ... and ... (iii)

CHAPTER FOUR

- 1 On pp. 62-3 Noria has to make a choice between Shadrack and Toloki. Draw up a kind of inventory of the positives and negatives of each character, as Noria sees them:

TOLOKI	SHADRACK
Positives	Positives
1	1
2	2
<i>etc</i>	<i>etc</i>
Negatives	Negatives
1	1
2	2
<i>etc</i>	<i>etc</i>

- 2 On p. 64 the narrator says: 'We were not sure whether it was Jwara who started her on this road.'
 - To whom does 'we' refer?
 - To whom does 'her' refer?
 - Which 'road' is being referred to?
 - Why are we not sure about Jwara's role?
 - Who else can be blamed for 'starting her on this road'?
- 3 In small groups of three or four, talk about Napu:
 - a What is the meaning of the word 'scrawny'?
 - b What does the description of Napu tell us about his background?
 - c What is a labourer?
 - d Why does That Mountain Woman object to Noria's relationship with Napu?
 - e Comment on Noria's father's reaction to the affair.
 - f Are there grounds for Noria's suspicions about Napu's grandmother?
 - g What is strange about Noria's pregnancy?
 - h What explanations can you offer for this bizarre pregnancy?

- i At the time of her marriage, what are Noria's feelings for Napu?
 - j Why does Xesibe object to the marriage?
 - k What do you think of Napu's reactions to Noria's parents?
- 4 In the Introduction to these notes, the discussion of the narrator deliberately did not indicate the gender of the narrator in any way.
- Did you think the narrator was male or female? Why?
 - There is a strong suggestion somewhere in this chapter that the narrator is female. Can you find the lines that support this?
- NB It is always important not to confuse the *writer* and the *narrator*, or to assume that they are one and the same, or to assume that the narrator is the same gender as the writer.
- 5 Who is given which three names by which three people? What does each name tell you about the giver of the name?
- 6 At the top of p. 81 we learn that prostitution allowed Noria to look after her son Vutha, to give him new clothes, a school uniform, to enrol him at a private school, and to employ a woman to look after him.
- In her particular circumstances, was prostitution therefore the right course of action for Noria to take?
 - What alternatives did she have?
 - What did you think of prostitution before reading this?
 - Has reading this changed your mind in any way?
- 7 At the bottom of p. 89 the title-words appear:
- ‘Death lives with us every day. Indeed our ways of dying are our ways of living. Or should I say our ways of living are our ways of dying?’
- Expand on this and what you think it means, in any way you choose.
 - It could be an essay, or a poem, or a speech, or an entry in your own private journal or diary.
 - Perhaps it could be a letter addressed to Zakes Mda himself.

CHAPTER FIVE

- 1 The start of this chapter finds Toloki in high spirits. What is meant by the following words or phrases on p. 91?
 - ‘gawpers’
 - ‘a jig of exhilaration’
 - ‘a nifty cart-wheel that is actualised only in his imagination’
 - ‘effervescent mood’
- 2 ‘Satire’ (the adjective is ‘satirical’, the verb is ‘to satirise’) is making fun of someone or something by making it ridiculous. Usually this is done by taking some aspect of the subject and exaggerating it out of all proportion (the way a cartoonist might treat, say, a politician’s nose). In this chapter, the satire is directed at the Christian church, both the Methodist Church (pp. 94-5) and the Apostolic Blessed Church of the Holly Zion on the Mountain Top (pp. 96-8).
 - List the ways in which each is satirised. (This will require reading the text carefully, and spotting when Mda takes things ‘off-centre’, beyond the normal reality, or exaggerates to cause us to laugh at the subject.)
 - Spend some time looking at your impressions of the Archbishop, the juxtaposition (putting side by side) of the Archbishop and That Mountain Woman, and the confrontation between the Archbishop and Toloki.
- 3 In the middle of p. 95 there is a scene of extreme violence inflicted on Toloki by his father Jwara.
 - What do you think of Jwara’s actions?
 - What do you think of Mother of Toloki’s reaction?
 - Why do you think Mda puts in scenes of such violence?
- 4 The ten words defined below are all words used in this chapter, and they can be found in the word puzzle that follows. Can you find them? (Words can go up or down, from left to right or from right to left, or diagonally.)
 - 1 an embodiment
 - 2 a shifty, quiet, unpleasant laugh
 - 3 a quiet laugh of pleasure and satisfaction
 - 4 the act of washing oneself
 - 5 someone who wastes time doing nothing

- 6 thinking oneself to be important
- 7 short and fat or chubby
- 8 silently bad-tempered and unhappy
- 9 argument over something unimportant
- 10 worthless badly behaved people

I	A	B	M	C	D	Y	G	D	U	P
L	N	K	J	O	I	H	G	F	F	O
M	O	C	H	O	R	T	L	E	F	M
E	I	R	A	Q	P	O	O	N	A	P
L	T	S	T	R	S	U	S	V	R	O
B	U	A	Z	Y	N	X	W	E	F	U
B	L	B	C	D	I	A	E	F	F	S
A	B	L	K	J	C	I	T	H	I	G
U	A	M	N	O	K	P	Q	I	R	R
Q	U	Y	X	W	E	V	U	T	O	S
S	Z	A	B	C	R	E	L	D	I	N

- 5 Someone has asked you to explain what ‘magic realism’ is. First, read the section that deals with it in the Introduction to these notes, then answer the following questions and use your answers to come to a full explanation.
 - Why does Toloki bring copies of *Home and Garden* and the furniture catalogues for Noria?
 - What is the significance of this whole episode?
 - How does Toloki enter the world of the catalogues and *Home and Garden*?
 - What sort of imagery does the garden call up in your imagination?
- 6 You are a peace monitor in the township. You have to write a report on the spaza shop dispute that led to the deaths of five people (p. 100). You have to:
 - summarise what occurred (try to make the links between cause and effect clear)
 - state who is to blame (is this easy to do? is it clear who is to blame, and for what?)
- 7 Reread the last paragraph of the chapter (pp. 106-7). Try to analyse the thoughts going through Toloki’s mind. What implications do they hold for him in the future?

CHAPTER SIX

- 1 At the start of the chapter, from the end of p. 108 to the top of p. 109, Toloki shares his sleeping quarters with a drunk man. The writer has built this little scene around *sounds* and *smells*.
 - Draw up a catalogue of words that convey these.
 - Beside each word, say how effective it is in building the atmosphere.

Sound words	How effective?
1	1
2	2
<i>etc</i>	<i>etc</i>
Smell words	How effective?
1	1
2	2
<i>etc</i>	<i>etc</i>

- 2 Divide into groups of eight people. Each person is to take one of the following eight questions. Spend some time putting together a good answer to the question. Then come together, and go through the answers in sequence.
 - 1 What is the role of the Young Tigers?
 - 2 Define the role of the street committee.
 - 3 Why is Toloki afraid of the Young Tigers?
 - 4 Describe and comment on Noria's and Madimbhaza's community project.
 - 5 Describe some examples of community projects in your home area.
 - 6 What does commitment to a community project tell you about the individuals who make the commitment?
 - 7 What does it tell us about Noria and Madimbhaza?
 - 8 Does the fact that they are women make this contribution to society in any way special? Why or why not?
- 3 Take a close look at the section which begins at the bottom of p. 111 with the words 'When Toloki arrived ...' (Note that the section ends on p. 125.)

- a Where is Toloki when the section begins?
 - b How many years have elapsed since the events that open this section?
 - c Who is reliving these events? Whose experience do they capture?
 - d Can you find any irony in the names of the coffins? (Irony is something unexpected or the opposite of the expected.)
 - e Discuss the effects of wealth on Nefolovhodwe.
 - f 'To Toloki, Nefolovhodwe's transformation is noticeable even in his language.' If someone said this to you, how would you react? Examine the way Nefolovhodwe uses language. Is it possible to detect any differences from his former language?
 - g Discuss the falling out between Nefolovhodwe and Toloki. Who is to blame?
 - h What effect does this bad experience have on Toloki's future?
- 4 Imagine that you work as a copy-writer in an advertising agency. Nefolovhodwe is a new client who wants you to produce a half-page ad for the Sunday newspapers, extolling the virtues of his various coffins, bearing in mind their different target-markets. Write this ad, and indicate any artwork you might use. Remember, to earn your salary, you have to be persuasive! And you have to use language cleverly!
 - 5 Play out the scenes between Toloki and the security guard, and then between Toloki and Nefolovhodwe (pp. 119-21).
 - What will you do, in voice and in movement, to get the differences in social class across?
 - Would you be inclined to play Nefolovhodwe as a caricature of the newly rich? (A 'caricature' is almost a cartoon-figure, not a real person.)
 - 6 Imagine that you are a film director. Take just the moment on p. 129 when Napu returns to the bridge and finds the dead Vutha. Write out the numbered sequence of shots you would use, indicating where the camera is placed, what the camera is directed at, and the kind of shot to be used. You will need terms like 'long shot', 'medium shot', 'head shot', 'close-up', 'wide-angle', 'narrow-angle', 'shot from below', 'shot from above'.

CHAPTER SEVEN

- 1 In the historical context of these events, describe and define who these people are (they are all mentioned in this chapter):
 - casualties of the war (p. 131)
 - war-lords (p. 131)
 - the boers (p. 131)
 - right-wing supremacists (p. 132)
 - kidnappers (p. 132)
 - human rights lawyers (p. 133)
 - vigilantes (p. 136)
- 2 On p. 133 Mda tells us that Shadrack was writing a statement at the police station, giving the details of his experience at the hands of some members of the police.
 - Reread the few pages before this.
 - Then write Shadrack's statement.
 - Write it in the first person, i.e. use 'I' and not 'he' for Shadrack.
- 3 You can choose to do this exercise either in small groups as a joint piece of text-analysis, or individually, working on your own. Either way, end up with a polished piece of writing.
 - a In your own words, can you recreate the hospital ward in which we find Shadrack?
 - b With close reference to the text, discuss the causes of this suffering.
 - c Why do you think Shadrack insists on telling his story even though he is in extreme pain and Noria pleads with him to tell them later?
 - d Why does Shadrack say what he does in paragraph 2 on p. 134?
 - e Why does Noria choose Toloki instead of Shadrack?
- 4 This tender moment occurs at the top of p. 142:

'You are a beautiful person, Toloki. That is why I want you to teach me how to live. And how to forgive.'

'You are the one who will teach me, Noria.'

What does each of them, in fact, mean by what they say? Try to be as detailed in your response as possible, and try to refer closely to the text. (You don't need to confine yourself to this chapter.)

- 5 What on earth do you think Toloki means by these three related statements about himself, all of which appear on p. 141?
- I must find a funeral.
 - My body needs to mourn.
 - I am an addict, Noria!
- 6 Word puzzle. Find thirteen words that are used in this chapter (three are names, and three are hyphenated). Remember, words can go up or down, sideways in either direction, or diagonally.

R	I	G	H	T	W	I	N	G	V
A	H	T	B	C	N	O	R	I	A
W	E	O	G	A	F	E	G	D	C
A	L	L	H	S	R	I	I	E	J
R	L	O	M	U	L	M	L	C	K
L	R	K	C	A	H	S	Y	I	N
O	I	I	N	L	R	Q	P	L	O
R	D	T	S	T	S	R	E	O	B
D	E	Y	X	I	W	V	U	P	T
S	Z	A	B	E	A	H	T	U	V
D	C	H	O	S	P	I	T	A	L

Answers		
army	Noria	vigilantes
boers	police	Vutha
casualties	right-wing	war-lords
hell-ride	shack	
hospital	Toloki	

CHAPTER EIGHT

- 1 The Nurse reminisces about his 'age-mate, this our brother' who is being buried. Their biographies are told in these few words:
 - a calves – cattle posts – mountain school
 - b mines – city – harboursLook back over the Introduction to these notes and give these two lives a historical context; in other words, say how it is that the words above conjure up the lives of many thousands of male South Africans.
- 2 Social class differences are even reflected in the food served after some township funerals. What do the following groups of people have served to them (p. 151)?
 - 'pillars of the community'
 - 'fairly important' people
 - 'the rabble'How does it happen that, as the narrator assures us, no one has to tell people which group they belong to?
- 3 It is no accident that Mda writes about Madimbhaza straight after Nefolovhodwe.
 - They are both products of the townships, but in what ways are they different?
 - What could have caused them to be so different in outlook and behaviour?
 - In pairs play out a scene where these two characters meet. Think up a good situation in which they confront one another and where their different attitudes and outlooks will surface.
- 4 In the middle of p. 157 (and again on pp. 170-1) there is a reference to a 'recent massacre', the circumstances of which are very close to those of Boipatong on 17 June 1992, where at least 45 people were killed.
 - Why does Mda not refer to this incident as Boipatong?
 - Why is the coastal city where the story takes place not named anywhere in the book?
 - Why does Mda not tell us which village Toloki and Noria come from?
 - What is gained and what is lost by not being specific about place-names and dates and events?

- 5 Eighteen questions follow, concerning incidents in this chapter. You decide:
- how many to deal with orally
 - how many to answer as written exercises
 - how many to handle in small groups
 - how many to tackle individually
- 1 What is implied by the fact that people have to take their baths in public in the informal settlement?
 - 2 What is a washerwoman?
 - 3 What do the comments made by Malehlohonolo and by the people who pass by Noria's shack tell you about the people of the settlement?
 - 4 What are the 'dirty thoughts' referred to in paragraph 1 on p. 146?
 - 5 What is a patriarch?
 - 6 What is ironic in the Nurse's report about the death of the eldest son of the old man whose funeral they are attending?
 - 7 Briefly discuss the circumstances in which the patriarch meets his death.
 - 8 In what way is his tragic death related to traditional customs?
 - 9 Can you think of any other customary practices that are viewed critically in the novel?
 - 10 Are there any customary practices that you yourself are critical of?
 - 11 What happens to the sons of the patriarch?
 - 12 What does the fact that Noria attends a funeral with Toloki and Toloki later attends a women's meeting with Noria suggest about their relationship?
 - 13 Do they have disagreements? How do they handle them?
 - 14 Who is the 'leupa lizard' referred to in the second-last paragraph on p. 154?
 - 15 Why does the narrator say she had a heart of gold?
 - 16 Describe the circumstances in which Toloki learns of his father's death.
 - 17 Can you list five reasons why Toloki loses his respect for Nefolovhodwe?
 - 18 What are the categories of children living in the 'dumping ground'?

CHAPTER NINE

- 1 Toloki 'sees things with a fresh eye', we are told in a paragraph on p. 164. If he had lived inside a community of people, things may have been different. What are the dangers for human beings in social groups that lie within phrases such as these, used in the same paragraph?
 - 'taken for granted'
 - 'assume'
 - 'normal'
 - '(things) were meant to be'
- 2 In her sorrow and hurt, Noria says, 'I feel so betrayed!' (p. 166). Try to analyse, as fully as you can, her sense of betrayal:
 - by whom
 - exactly how
 - and why she feels betrayed
- 3 In a few paragraphs that could form part of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, give an account of the movement outlined on p. 172 from 'the Young Tigers' to 'defence units' to 'neighbourhood patrols'. What potential dangers are there in this progression, what could go wrong?
- 4 Look at how this chapter is structured. There are three sections, but they all concern one event and its consequence: Vutha the Second's death and the subsequent treatment of his mother Noria.

Five clusters of questions follow. Treat the questions in each section as belonging together. You may want to combine the answers in each section into a mini-essay. See if you can give each section a 'heading', a topic-title.

 - 1 a What is the name popularly given to the Young Tigers' 'call and response chant' and the dance that goes with it? (paragraph 1, p. 159)
 - b What is the contradiction in the women's singing? (same paragraph)
 - c Why are the women happy to welcome Toloki to their meeting?
 - d What is the occasion for which the women are preparing?

- 2
 - a Who are the leaders in the Mercedes Benz?
 - b Who are in the small cars?
 - c What are the main topics on the agenda of the meeting?
 - d What does Toloki observe about the roles of men and women in the meeting?

- 3
 - a What are his observations of these gender groups in the settlement as a whole?
 - b Are his observations accurate?
 - c Does the group of leaders reflect this reality?
 - d What does this whole issue tell us about the condition of women in society?

- 4
 - a What issues are resolved in the meeting?
 - b Point out an example of insincerity on the part of the visiting officials.
 - c What does Noria receive instead of a full public apology?
 - d Why do the leaders backtrack on the initial arrangement?
 - e Why do you think Noria is elected to the strike committee?
 - f Is this election fair to her? Why or why not?
 - g What do you notice about Toloki as he observes the condition of women and their social relations with men?

- 5
 - a Briefly describe Vutha the Second.
 - b Discuss his relationship with the Young Tigers.
 - c How does he meet his death?
 - d How did the self defence units come about?
 - e Who is to blame for Vutha's death?
 - f Why is Noria's house burnt down?
 - g Who is suspected of this arson?

CHAPTER TEN

- 1 Answer the questions set out below, but not in a normal conventional way. Using large sheets of cardboard, or newsprint, make up a collage of photographs, pictures from magazines, drawings, materials, and your written answers, to display on the walls of your classroom.
 - a What happens to Toloki's mood between Monday evening and Tuesday morning?
 - b What is commonly referred to as 'the CBD'? (You will find the answer on p. 183.)
 - c Describe the carnival atmosphere in the city in which the story is set.
 - d Has anyone seen such a festival or celebration? Tell the others about it.
 - e What does the narrator say is the effect of this carnival atmosphere?
 - f There are now a number of 'waterfronts' around the country. Someone explain what they're like.
 - g What concerns the tourists when they meet Toloki?
 - h What are the implications of the last line of paragraph 3 on p. 183?
- 2 Write an essay with the title 'Toloki Draws Again!' Perhaps treat the following points in your essay:
 - What is the significance of Toloki's taking up drawing again?
 - Explain the symbolic significance of Noria's song and its effect on Toloki.
 - In your opinion, what is the meaning of the drawings?
- 3 Take Noria's statement 'It is not dirty to have dreams. It is beautiful. It shows that you are human' (p. 188). What does the statement say about the dream aspects or fantastical experiences in the novel? Try to recall specific examples and comment on them.
- 4 Jwara's figurines are inspected and evaluated by an art dealer and a trustee of an art gallery. What do the following words mean (p. 196)?
 - 'kitsch' and 'kitschy'
 - 'folksy'

- 'the "in" thing'
- 'trendy'

Go a step beyond the novel and try to consult an up-to-the-minute dictionary or current magazines to define the following words:

- 'kewl'
- 'funky'
- 'trendoids'
- 'waitrons'

The hooter of Nefolovhodwe's limousine 'produces a few bars of a hymn'. Which of the above eight words would you use to describe this hooter?

- 5 What do you think of the last four lines of the novel?
- 6 Write a personal letter to Zakes Mda in which you tell him your feelings about the final chapter of the novel. Do you like it or not? What about it works and what doesn't? Tell him what you think about the following:
 - Toloki's and Noria's relationship being mirrored by their parents' getting together.
 - The image of gold which was used when Noria first arrives in the city and which now resurfaces in the glow of the figurines.
 - The image of the smell of burning tyres, previously encountered in Vutha the Second's death, now resurfacing as part of the celebration of the New Year.

If you want to send your letter to Zakes Mda, address it to him c/o Oxford University Press Southern Africa, Box 12119, N1 City, 7463. They will forward it to him.

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