Kaffir Boy

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARK MATHABANE

Mark Mathabane was born in South Africa in 1960, the oldest of seven children. As a black child in South Africa, Mathabane felt the full weight of apartheid's oppression throughout his childhood. As detailed in *Kaffir Boy*, his autobiography, Mathabane excelled in school, but his education was constantly challenged by poverty, racism, police brutality, and gang violence. He took up tennis as a teenager, and mentors and coaches soon recognized his athletic potential. He formed positive relationships with several white foreigners in South Africa who did not abide by apartheid's strictures, which gave him glimpses of the outside world and the freedom it offered. Mathabane's profile in South African tennis steadily rose, though it was disrupted for several months when he participated in the Soweto Uprising in 1976, a student protest movement against the apartheid government's forcing of the Afrikaans language on black students. White police opened fire on unarmed students, turning the protest movement into months of angry mobs, riots, and violence, in which an estimated 700 people died—mostly at the hands of police. After graduating secondary school, tennis star Stan Smith helped Mathabane get an athletic scholarship to a college in South Carolina, though he changed schools twice before graduating with an economics degree in 1983. Although Mathabane eventually worked as a lecturer and college professor, his literary success began shortly after college. In 1986, Mathabane published *Kaffir Boy*, which became a national best-seller and garnered him interviews with Oprah Winfrey and President Bill Clinton at the White House. Mathabane wrote his follow-up autobiography *Kaffir Boy in America* in 1989, as well as several biographies about his family members, and two novels, *Ubuntu* and *The Proud Liberal*. Mathabane lives with his wife and children in Portland, Oregon.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although racial segregation already existed in South Africa, where *Kaffir Boy* takes place, in 1948 the ruling National Party strengthened its legal enforcement and widened its scope with their new battery of laws called "apartheid," which is Afrikaans for "separateness." Apartheid aimed to consolidate land, wealth, and power within the white minority, at the expense of the black majority. In 1950, the government passed The Group Areas Act, which banned certain races from living, travelling, or working within certain zones, partitioning sections of land for each race. This was the first of the three Lands Acts, completed in 1955, which gave white people full ownership of over 80 percent of South Africa's land, despite being a very small minority. To enforce this segregation and prohibit black people from traveling on white land, the government enacted several "pass laws," requiring every black citizen to carry government identification on them at all times that dictated where they were or were not allowed to live, travel, and work. Between 1959 and 1970, when Mathabane grew up, the National Party passed a series of acts that established 10 tribal "homelands," called Bantustans, and declared every black South African to be a citizen of one of the Bantustans, regardless of whether they truly were or not. By making every black person a citizen of a Bantustan rather than South Africa proper, the National Party completely eliminated the black majority population's ability to vote. Resistance to apartheid policy by both black and white people lasted for decades. Internally, South African police met protestors and insurgents with brutal violence, opening fire on thousands of unarmed adults and children at several events. Internationally, many countries condemned South Africa's racial policies and called for apartheid's abolition, forcing the country to withdraw from the British Commonwealth, forgo participating in international sports, and become increasingly insular rather than give up the white minority's authoritarian rule. In 1990, the white president F.W. de Klerk began dismantling apartheid's legislative authority, allowing people of any race to run for public office, though much segregation remained and heavily disadvantaged the black population. In 1994, anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela was elected South Africa's first black president and led the coalition government in finally disbanding all of apartheid's legal strictures. However, many of apartheid's social and economic effects remain to this day.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Mathabane wrote several books that continue his account of his life and experiences as a black man, both in South Africa and America. His second autobiography, *Kaffir Boy in America*, describes his early years in America experiencing both American freedom and American prejudice. Mathabane also wrote *Love in Black and White*, exploring the dynamics and social taboos of his marrying a white woman named Gail Ernsberger. His biographies *Miriam's Song* and *African Women* tell the stories of his sister, mother, and grandmother, exploring the burden of apartheid from female perspectives. Beyond Mathabane's writing, Alan Paton's novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, is widely considered one of the most significant pieces of literature concerning apartheid—Mathabane references it multiple times in *Kaffir Boy*. Published in the same year that apartheid law became established, Paton's novel depicts a priest, Stephen Kumalo, as he travels Johannesburg searching for his son and

grieving the economic and social disparities that gave rise to apartheid. Additionally, Nelson Mandela's landmark autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, tells his own story of coming of age under South African apartheid, including his long imprisonment for speaking against it. Since apartheid was primarily the conflict between native African and encroaching Europeans, Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is also of value. Though concerning Nigeria rather than South Africa, it reflects on the same conflict between Europeans and Africans, and describes white people's incursion into Nigeria in the late 19th century and the disruptions they caused.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa
- **When Written:** New York
- **Where Written:** 1984-1985
- **When Published:** 1986
- **Literary Period:** contemporary
- **Genre:** Autobiography
- **Setting:** South Africa
- **Climax:** Mathabane receives athletic scholarships from several American universities and is able to escape apartheid South Africa for the U.S.
- **Antagonist:** Apartheid
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Banned in the U.S.A. *Kaffir Boy* is banned in several American schools due to the scene depicting child prostitution, which some critics deemed "pornographic."

PLOT SUMMARY

Johannes Mark Mathabane begins his story when he is five years old, living under apartheid in South Africa. He wakes up to the police raiding the ghetto in Alexandra—a sub-section of Johannesburg, South Africa—looking for black adults without their **passbooks** in order to arrest or extort them. Every time the police arrives, Mathabane's mother flees, leaving him and his siblings alone. His father is often arrested. As a young boy, Mathabane becomes conditioned to the constant threat of police; they hover in his mind.

When Mathabane is six, his father loses his job. The police arrest him for unemployment, even though he is looking for work, and throw him in jail for almost a year. During that time, Mathabane's family lives on the brink of starvation, surviving by digging for food scraps at a local dump. When his father returns, Mathabane sees that prison changed him, turned him into a "brute." Mathabane's father gets his old job back, but spends much of his wages on drinking and gambling; the family remains desperately poor. Mathabane starts spending his days with a gang of boys his age. They often sell empty bottles to buy tickets into a local cinema where they watch violent films made by white people. Mathabane believes that the white world must be as violent as the films. Although his parents believe in tribal ancestors and voodoo, Mathabane's family visits a Christian evangelism meeting. The black preacher insults tribal beliefs and claims they must all follow the white man's religion. Mathabane and his father both leave with a bitter hatred of Christianity.

Food prices, rent, and bus fare rise, but Mathabane's father's wages remain the same. His mother starts looking for work, but struggles to find any. Starving, Mathabane follows a group of young boys into a Zulu warrior barracks where they say they can get him food, until he realizes that these boys prostitute themselves to grown men in exchange for food and money. Mathabane flees, untouched, but horrified.

After Mathabane's father loses his job again, Mathabane and his father travel to his father's tribal homeland to see a witch doctor who will give his father a talisman for good fortune. Mathabane is struck by how destitute the tribal reserve is. When his father suggests he'll leave Mathabane there so he can grow up to be a proper tribal man, Mathabane says that he'd rather die, so his father desists. When they return to Alexandra, Mathabane's mother has another baby. They learn that the government plans to demolish their section of Alexandra, so they move to a new part of the ghetto full of migrant workers from the tribal reserves. Between his parents and his neighborhood, Mathabane grows up believing in voodoo magic and his father's tribal religion, though he starts to have doubts about these beliefs by the time he is seven years old.

For months, Mathabane's mother and Granny try to get him a birth certificate and all the proper paperwork so he can be registered for school. The overly-bureaucratic process takes nearly a year. However, Mathabane finally enrolls, and though he hates his first few days, gradually begins to grow fond of education and learning. In his first year, the principal recognizes him as the top-ranked student in his class of over 200. Although he continues to perform well academically, his family struggles to pay for his uniforms, books, and tuition, and his teachers beat him for not paying his fees. When Mathabane tries to get expelled by being truant for a month, the principal sends older boys to tie him up with rope and haul him back to school. His mother tells his teachers to beat him so badly that he is bed-ridden for an entire week.

When Mathabane is 10 years old, he witnesses a gruesome murder of an unarmed man. He starts to feel hopeless, that the world offers him no future as a black man. Mathabane tries to commit suicide, but his mother finds out before he carries it out. She helps Mathabane to realize how many people love and

depend on him, like his younger siblings, and he decides to struggle on, rather than end his life.

Granny takes a gardening job for a white family named the Smiths, and Mrs. Smith starts giving Granny secondhand clothing and comic books for Mathabane. Mathabane goes with Granny to meet them one day, and though he is terrified of white people, discovers that Mrs. Smith is kind, though her son Clyde is terribly racist. Mrs. Smith starts giving Mathabane English literature and he falls in love with the stories, which rekindle his passion for learning and drives him to try to master English. When Mathabane is 13, Mrs. Smith gives him a tennis racket and introduces him to the sport. One day, a Coloured man named Scaramouche notices Mathabane practicing against the wall and thinks he shows promise. He decides to become Mathabane's coach.

Mathabane loves tennis and finds a "surrogate father" in Scaramouche. Between his actual mother and father, Mathabane usually takes his mother's side, although he detests her Christianity. His father hates that Mathabane spends all of his time on "white man's education" and tennis, so he brings two men to try to kidnap Mathabane and send him to a tribal school in the mountains, but Mathabane threatens them with a knife and they leave him alone. Shortly after, Mathabane moves from primary school to secondary school and scores so well on his placement exam that the government gives him a scholarship to a good English-speaking school. His success brings honor and joy to his family. He leans into his study and practicing tennis, and meets a player who connects him with a tennis "ranch" owned by a white German liberal named Wilfred, who hates apartheid and offers to help Mathabane train. Wilfred helps him to excel, and just two years after picking up the sport, Mathabane wins his first tournament. He plays in additional tournaments and performs well.

Mathabane's school starts requiring students to hold debates in Afrikaans, which all black students hate since it is the language of apartheid's defenders. In 1976, the government declares that all Bantu schools must teach primarily in Afrikaans, rather than English, prompting widespread outrage. Ten thousand students hold a peaceful protest in Soweto, but white policemen open fire on the gathering, murdering hundreds of children and teenagers. Violence erupts, spreading not only across Soweto but also the ghettos in Alexandra and around the country. Schools shut down, and Mathabane spends all his time participating in protests and demonstrations. As police violence increases, the protests turn to angry and violent mobs, rioting and looting. "Anarchy reign[s] in the ghetto." Mathabane is torn between recognizing the "senselessness" of the violence and "euphoria" at seeing black people take possessions and have supplemental food for the first time in their lives. After three months, the South African military suppresses the rebellion. Mathabane returns to Wilfred's tennis ranch and shares what he's seen with the white people there, who realize that their government suppressed most of the news about violence and riots.

Mathabane starts receiving anonymous death threats, warning him to stop associating with white people or playing tennis, which is considered a white sport. However, Mathabane becomes friends with Andre Zietsman, a white South African who has just returned from America. Andre tells Mathabane about the racial equality of American society, which makes Mathabane long to go there. Mathabane continues playing in higher level tournaments and enters the South African-hosted international tournament, the SAB Open. Though he quickly disqualifies, he meets American tennis legend Stan Smith, and quickly becomes friends with him and his wife, Marjory. Stan promises to try to line up tennis scholarships with American universities for Mathabane and gives him a large sum of money so that Mathabane can travel and continue competing in South African tennis tournaments. He plays in the national Sugar Circuit, though he doesn't place well.

Mathabane finishes secondary school, and as months pass he anxiously awaits word from Stan about scholarships. He grows hopeless and desperate for a time, but takes a lucrative job for a bank to start helping his family. However, only a few months after he begins, Mathabane receives scholarship offers from a number of American universities and chooses a school in South Carolina. At the end of the story, he bids his family goodbye and drives to the airport, the first black person to escape South African apartheid on a tennis scholarship.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Johannes Mark Mathabane – Johannes Mark Mathabane is the protagonist and narrator of his autobiography. Mathabane grows up as a black person in the midst of apartheid, and his childhood is defined by struggle against social, structural, and personal prejudice and disadvantages. As a young boy, Mathabane becomes conditioned to police violence, especially during their frequent raids in which they often arrest his father. Although Mathabane's father tries to raise Mathabane and his siblings—George, Florah, Merriam, and Linah—in the tribal tradition, by the time he is seven years old Mathabane privately rejects his father's tribal religions and customs. This becomes a source of constant conflict between them, especially when Mathabane begins his education, which his mother sees as invaluable, but his father considers a mark of the white man. When Mathabane is 13, his Granny's employer Mrs. Smith gives Mathabane an old tennis racket, introducing him to the sport. A Coloured man named Scaramouche takes notice of Mathabane and decides to take him under his wing. Through Scaramouche, Mathabane meets the white German liberal Wilfred, who owns a tennis club and invites Mathabane to play

there. Wilfred hates apartheid and the Afrikaners' racism, and demonstrates to Mathabane that not all white people are hateful racists. However, this belief is tested for several months during the Soweto Uprising, when black student protesters are gunned down by white police, launching several months of violent riots, looting, and military action. Through Wilfred's influence and social sphere, Mathabane meets other white liberals, including the American tennis legend Stan Smith, who is in South Africa playing in a tournament. Stan promises to help Mathabane fulfill his dream of reaching America by trying to arrange a tennis scholarship for him. Though it takes several months, Stan makes good on his word— Mathabane accepts an athletic scholarship to a college in South Carolina, which gives him the opportunity to escape apartheid and live in a free country.

Mathabane's Father (Jackson) – Mathabane, George, Florah, Merriam, and Linah's father. Mathabane's father grew up in the tribal reserves and maintains a deep reverence for his Venda tribal traditions. As such, he insists on running his household in strict accordance with tribal law and values, meaning that he opposes modern education and Christianity. In his eyes, he owns his wife and children outright. Mathabane's father is arrested several times for not having his **passbook** in order, and the white government throws him in a horrible prison for nearly a year, leaving him with a deep rage against white people and culture. Despite his insistence on traditional values, Mathabane's father drinks and gambles much of the family's money away, worsening their perpetual poverty. He is angry, abusive, and often drunk. Mathabane's father hates Mathabane's academic and tennis pursuits, both of which he sees as trappings of the white world. However, Mathabane recognizes that his father's insistence on traditional values comes from his longing for a bygone era, before white people invaded Africa. As Mathabane sees it, the modern world has no place for people like his father to thrive, and he ultimately pities him. Although Mathabane's father is opposed to his son's tennis and study, when Mathabane leaves for America, his father cries and tells him to write often, suggesting that he truly does leave his son, despite his stoicism, anger, and inability to show affection.

Mathabane's Mother (Magdalene) – Mathabane, George, Florah, Merriam, and Linah's mother. Mathabane's mother does not share her husband's devotion to tribalism, but since he owns her by tribal law, she follows his lead for much of their marriage. However, when she develops an interest in Christianity—despite her husband strictly forbidding it—Mathabane's mother begins opposing his father more and more, challenging his opinions and authority. Mathabane's mother is Mathabane's strongest support throughout his upbringing, taking on extra work to fund his education since she never had the opportunity to learn herself. She states several times that she places all her hopes and dreams in Mathabane. Although Mathabane's mother starts as a "nominal Christian" and maintains her belief in voodoo for her whole life, she becomes heavily invested in a local church and constantly tries to pull Mathabane into Christianity. Although Mathabane's mother is proud of her son's academic prowess, she does not understand the value of tennis, and remains skeptical that it will lead to anything good until he finally receives an athletic scholarship to an American college. Mathabane's mother is the antithesis of his father: supportive rather than opposing, gentle rather than angry, and open to the possibility that some white people are kind rather than evil.

Granny (Ellen) – Mathabane describes his maternal grandmother as an "indomitable matriarch." After her husband leaves her, Granny is left to raise her two younger children, Uncle Piet and Aunt Bushy, alone. To support herself and fund their educations, she works a number of gardening jobs, including for Mrs. Smith. When Granny realizes that Mrs. Smith is a kind woman who values black people nearly as equals, she introduces Mathabane to her, giving him the chance to occasionally earn an income and receive secondhand books and clothing from her. Despite Granny's own hardships, she gives Mathabane's family money whenever she can. However, she is unable to keep on Uncle Piet and Aunt Bushy's school fees, and they both eventually drop out to work in factories and help support her.

Scaramouche – Scaramouche is a Coloured man who decides to become Mathabane's tennis coach after he sees him practicing and recognizes his potential. Although Scaramouche does not play an outsized role in the story, Mathabane recognizes him as an important figure in his life, particularly as a "confidant" and "surrogate father," since Mathabane's relationship with his own father is so strained. Scaramouche encourages Mathabane throughout his tennis career, pushing him to compete and play with more advanced athletes whenever possible.

Wilfred – Wilfred is a white liberal from Germany who owns a "tennis ranch." Wilfred befriends Mathabane and helps train him, gifting him with athletic equipment that Mathabane can't afford otherwise. Wilfred hates apartheid and compares white South Africans' racial superiority to Nazism. Wilfred thus plays an important role in Mathabane's life, not only as a tennis mentor but as evidence to Mathabane that many white people see the evils of white supremacy and are not racists themselves. Wilfred learns from Mathabane as well, since Mathabane speaks frankly about the government's awful treatment of black people—especially during the Soweto Uprising—which the government normally tries to hide from white people.

Helmut – Like Wilfred, Helmut is a white liberal from Germany, though he is only in South Africa on a temporary work contract. Helmut forms a close friendship with Mathabane and also considers apartheid akin to Nazism, going so far as to compare

it to a second Holocaust in its systematic subjugation of black people. Helmut finds South Africa's segregation laws so horrendous that he states he could never live there, and he gleefully thwarts these rules in his relationship with Mathabane. Helmut plays tennis with Mathabane on whites-only courts and tries to dine with him in whites-only restaurants, picking fights with managers whenever they refuse service. Despite his impish nature, Helmut offers Mathabane and his family whatever help he can give, even if it means risking his life.

Andre Zietsman – Andre Zietsman is a wealthy South African and fellow tennis player. Mathabane meets Andre shortly after Andre returns from university in America. Although as an Afrikaner, Andre was raised to believe that black people are subordinate to white people, his experiences in America shift his paradigms—he learns to recognize black people as equals. As Andre and Mathabane discuss Andre's change of heart, the conversations not only fuel Mathabane's desire to go to America but enlighten him to the way Afrikaners are socially conditioned to be racists and white supremacists. Later on, when Mathabane needs a job, Andre gives him a connection at Barclays Bank.

Mrs. Smith – Mrs. Smith is Granny's employer, a kind white English woman who believes apartheid is horrible. Mrs. Smith demonstrates to Mathabane that not all white people are evil, and she give Mathabane clothing and books to read, kindling his love for English literature. Most importantly, Mrs. Smith introduces Mathabane to tennis when she gives him an old wooden racket.

Uncle Piet – Uncle Piet is Mathabane's uncle, Aunt Bushy's brother, and Granny's son, though he's not much older than Mathabane. Uncle Piet attends school until Granny cannot afford the fees. He drops out and starts working in a factory, using his income to help Granny and to fund some of Mathabane's education.

Stan Smith – Stan Smith is a white professional tennis player from America who befriends Mathabane at the SAB Open tournament. Although they are only together a few days, Stan and his wife, Marjory, instantly take a liking to Mathabane. Mathabane is struck by how such people, whom he's just met, could already treat him like an equal. Stan funds Mathabane's entrance into the Sugar Circuit tournaments and arranges a tennis scholarship for him in America.

MINOR CHARACTERS

David – David is one of Mathabane's closest friends, a fellow student and tennis player. David is not often mentioned in the story, though he teaches Mathabane about the ANC liberation movement and they are together during the early days of the Soweto Uprising.

Clyde – Clyde is Mrs. Smith's chubby, racist son. Although Mrs. Smith is kind and respectful, Clyde's white teachers tell him that black people are unintelligent and inferior. He calls Mathabane "kaffir," an extremely offensive racist slur.

Aunt Bushy – Aunt Bushy is Mathabane's aunt, Uncle Piet's sister, and Granny's daughter, though she is not much older than Mathabane. Aunt Bushy attends school until Granny can't afford the fees. She accidentally becomes pregnant when she is 18.

Marjory Smith – Marjory Smith is Stan's wife. She meets Mathabane with Stan at the SAB Open, and asks many questions about Mathabane's experiences as a young black man living under apartheid.

Owen Williams – Owen Williams is a white liberal administrator for the Black Tennis Foundation, who helps Mathabane register in several tournaments and work out his travel arrangements to America.

Jarvas – Jarvas is the leader of Mathabane's old gang, who hates Mathabane for quitting.

Limela – Limela is a migrant worker who hates Christianity.

George Mathabane – George is Mathabane's younger brother.

Florah Mathabane – Florah is Mathabane's younger sister.

Merriam Mathabane – Merriam is Mathabane's younger sister.

Linah Mathabane – Linah is Mathabane's younger sister.

Mpandhlani A thirteen-year-old from Mathabane's town. He leads a crew of boys who engage in child prostitution in exchange for food.

Maria Mathabane's baby sister.

TERMS

Kaffir – an extremely offensive South African term for a black person, comparable to the N-word in the U.S.

Tsotsis – African gangsters, often involved with organized crime.

Bantu – People from Sub-Saharan Africa who speak the Ntu languages. In apartheid South Africa, the term commonly refers to black people more broadly.

Apartheid – South Africa's system of laws that enforced strict racial segregation, benefiting white people and disenfranchising black people, that existed from 1948 until the mid-1990s.

Coloured – A term for a person of mixed European (white) and African (black) ancestry) used in South Africa during the apartheid.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

APARTHEID'S STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION

Mark Mathabane's autobiography, *Kaffir Boy*, is an account of Mathabane's childhood growing up as a black person under apartheid, South Africa's set of segregation laws installed in 1948 by white Afrikaners (Dutch, German, and French Europeans who settled in South Africa). He describes how every aspect of apartheid is designed to maintain a strict racial hierarchy, with the minority of white Europeans at the very top and black Africans at the very bottom. The government grants each person different rights and freedoms depending on their race. For Mathabane, overcoming the many disadvantages he experiences as a black person under apartheid is the greatest struggle of his childhood. *Kaffir Boy*'s description of apartheid demonstrates how its deliberately racist hierarchy and structural inequalities dehumanize black people and hold them back from fulfilling their potential, ultimately arguing that it is a baseless and oppressive system.

Mathabane describes how apartheid is built on an "arbitrary racial classification," arguing that such an arbitrary system has no basis in reality. Apartheid dictates that each race fits within a legal hierarchy which determines their rights in society: white people are at the top, allowed to own property, and marry or not marry as they so choose, and speak against the government. Black people are at the bottom, not allowed to own property, often not allowed to marry or live with their spouse, or speak against the government. Although a person's position in the racial hierarchy governs what they can and can't do, Mathabane argues that the racial hierarchy itself is pointedly "arbitrary": for no particular reason, Chinese people are considered "black" and Japanese people are "white." Wealthy black people from America are considered "honorary white." Indians and "Coloureds," a category that denotes mixed black and white ancestry, and are considered below white people but marginally above black people. Mathabane remarks that black people's position at the bottom of the racial hierarchy casts them as "the dregs of society, aliens in the land of their birth." In other words, although black people are the country's original inhabitants, apartheid grants them the least opportunity to live and thrive. Thus, as Mathabane and many black people recognize, the nonsensical organization of races within the hierarchy lacks any true logic, suggesting that the fundamental principle of apartheid has no basis in reality.

Mathabane and his family's constant struggle against apartheid's laws and regulations suggests that its systems are designed to repress black people and hold them back from their full potential. The white ruling class in South Africa uses numerous schemes to arrest and punish black people. For example, the government requires every black adult to carry a "**passbook**" containing their government ID, proof that they've paid all of the various taxes, proof of employment, and the permits to live in a given area, to live with their spouse, so on. If a police officer finds any issue with a black person's passbook—which they always do—the person is either extorted for a bribe or arrested on the spot. Throughout Mathabane's childhood, police officers frequently conduct night raids on "the black ghetto" to check passbooks, and his parents are always at risk of being arrested for not having the right permits in their books, demonstrating one way that apartheid's laws plague black people's daily lives with the constant threat of arrest and punishment. The apartheid government also uses bureaucracy to disadvantage black people. When Mathabane applies for his passbook as a young adult, a government official refuses to give him one because he is unemployed, even though he cannot look for work without a passbook. Mathabane explains this contradiction, but the official simply tells him, "That's your own problem," and refuses to help. Mathabane's struggle to even abide by apartheid's unjust laws suggests that the entire system intentionally disadvantages black people, setting them up for unavoidable failure.

Such disadvantages predictably result in widespread poverty among South Africa's black population, which in turn limits the potential of many exceptional young black people. Mathabane's cousins and many of his peers cannot afford school fees and drop out to take menial factory jobs to survive. However, they would be capable of far more if they had the means to continue their education, which could result in better work and greater earning potential. Similarly, as a competitive junior tennis player, Mathabane recognizes that although there are many exceptional black athletes in South Africa, the black tennis community lacks the resources to push such players to their full potential. One of Mathabane's tennis coaches tells him, "You know, my boy, if we blacks had half the money and coaches as white people, we would long ago have produced several Arthur Ashes, Althea Gibsons and Evonne Goolagongs [legendary tennis players]." This suggests that the lack of resources that apartheid inflicts on the black community holds exceptional black people back from realizing their true potential as intellectuals, athletes, or professionals.

Although apartheid's defenders claim that such segregation is "God-ordained" and necessary, the absurdity of its hierarchy and its repression of the black population clearly indicate that it is only a tool for maintaining white people's dominance. After experiencing apartheid's oppression throughout his childhood, Mathabane states, "Apartheid was purely and simply a scheme

to perpetuate white dominance, greed and privilege," suggesting that the system serves no purpose beyond enriching white people and exploiting black people. As a teenager, Mathabane meets Helmut, a white German man who hates apartheid and compares it to Hitler and Nazism for its ideology of racial superiority and brutal oppression. Helmut surmises that just as Hitler left Germany with a "feeling of guilt and shame that can never go away," so too will apartheid be a permanent scar on South Africa's history. Mathabane published his autobiography in 1986 and dedicated it to those still suffering under apartheid's oppression. Apartheid fell less than a decade later, but Mathabane's story remains an important insight into an oppressive and absurd era that remains one of modern history's greatest injustices.

PERSONAL PREJUDICE

As Mark Mathabane describes it, South African society is replete with prejudice and racism on an individual level, which both contribute to apartheid and are exacerbated by it. As an oppressed black child, Mathabane spends most of his childhood hating and fearing all white people. However, as he grows up and begins to meet "white liberals" who value him as an equal human being, Mathabane begins to realize that his own prejudices are ill-founded. Mathabane's battle with his own personal prejudice suggests that such prejudice is based on ignorance and fear and can be counteracted by personal relationships with people who are different from oneself.

Mathabane recounts that, as a child, his entire worldview was dominated by race, suggesting that South Africa's segregation laws create deep-seated personal prejudice between groups of people. White Afrikaners are taught in school that black people are stupid and beastly. A white child, Clyde, calls Mathabane "Kaffir"—the South African equivalent of the N-word in America—and says, "My teacher tells us that Kaffirs can't read, speak or write English like white people because they have smaller brains […] you're not people like us, because you belong to a jungle civilization." Clyde's malevolent racism shows how white prejudice toward black people is propagated by South Africa's education system. Just as white Afrikaners are prejudiced toward black people, Mathabane and the people he grows up amongst bear similar prejudice against white people. Mathabane's mother tells him, "To the black man and woman in the streets all whites are the same. All they know is the white man who's making their lives hell and whom they hate so much they would kill at the first opportunity." This prejudice is so strong that most black people despise other black people who have any association with white people, such as migrants who work in the Afrikaners' gold mines or even Mathabane himself when he starts playing tennis with white foreigners. The black community's hostility toward the white population suggests that an intense personal prejudice between the two groups runs in both directions, even though the structural oppression of apartheid only oppresses black people. Mathabane recalls, "My conception of the world, of life, was wholly in racial terms; and that conception was not mine alone. It was echoed by all the black people I had come across." Mathabane's observation suggests that alongside apartheid's systemic injustice, personal racial prejudice also dominates South African society during this time.

However, as Mathabane grows up, he comes to realize that much of his own prejudice is based on a long-held fear of white people and ignorance of their world, suggesting that personal prejudice is often rooted in one's fear of an unknown people or culture. Because of night raids and police violence, Mathabane and his siblings learn to fear white people from a very young age—from as young as five years old, Mathabane envisions any white person as a "bogeyman," and contact with a white person evokes a "naked terror" in him. As a youth, Mathabane watches violent white films in the cinema about gladiators, mobsters, and soldiers, all of whom are usually killing people with swords or guns or tanks. With no other image of the white world, Mathabane comes to believe that the movies represent "the stark reality of a world I was forbidden to enter," full of "bloody murders and savage beatings and indiscriminate shootings," fueling his fear of white people and prejudice against them. Mathabane's misconceptions about the white world reinforce his belief that "white people had no hearts […] they were to be feared and hated." Although Mathabane does suffer violence from white police officers, his ignorance and fear about white people overall lead him to generalize from these experiences and believe that *all* white people are menacing. Mathabane's experiences suggest that not only his but also many white people's prejudice may be driven by ignorance and fear of people who are different as well.

As Mathabane's junior tennis career introduces him to a variety of white people, he begins to realize that not all white people are equally prejudiced, showing how exposure to people who are different can help one to see other people as individuals, rather than as a monolithic group. As Mathabane rises to prominence in South Africa's tennis scene, white expatriates (non-Afrikaners living in South Africa) invite him to play at their tennis clubs so he can train against more talented athletes. Through this avenue, Mathabane meets white people like the German Wilfred, who hates the Afrikaners' racism and encourages Mathabane to tell white people about his suffering under apartheid, and who gives Mathabane clothing and tennis equipment he wouldn't be able to afford otherwise. One of Mathabane's most significant relationships is with Stan and Marjory, wealthy white Americans who meet Mathabane during a tennis tournament in South Africa and immediately befriend him, eventually sponsoring his tennis career with thousands of dollars. In the first day that Mathabane spends with them, he realizes, "Stan and Marjory treated me as an

equal, a human being [...] treating me as if we had known each other for years, as if we were brothers and sisters." Their friendship helps him to realize that some white people are friendly, generous, and loving, rather than prejudiced. Mathabane's relationships with kind-hearted, unprejudiced white people challenge his old beliefs that all white people are heartless, ruthless, and selfish. He realizes that "whites were not monolithic, not all racists to be hated and destroyed," suggesting that his exposure to white people helps him to see them as individuals, rather than as a single, unified, evil group. However, this sets Mathabane at odds with the majority of his black friends, who still believe that "no [good] white man exists in South Africa."

While both structural racism and individual prejudice remain powerful in Mathabane's story, the changes in his perspective over time suggest that relationships with people who are different from oneself are critical to deconstructing prejudice between groups.

TRIBAL IDENTITY VS. MODERN EDUCATION

Mark Mathabane's father is a member of the Venda tribe—some of whom still live on a tribal reserve—who grew up on tribal lands before poverty forced him to emigrate to Johannesburg. As his eldest son, Mathabane's life is framed by two opposing influences. On one side, his father demands the family live by tribal law and beliefs, submitting themselves to their ancestral heritage. On the other, Mathabane recognizes that society is changing, and modern education is the key to success in the quickly developing world. The two are at odds, as the tribal beliefs and rules do not fit with what Mathabane learns from his progressive education. Mathabane ultimately decides to eschew his father's tribal identity for the sake of a modern education, suggesting that to succeed in the modern world, one may have to let go of familial tradition and history.

Mathabane's father raises him to strictly respect tribal laws and wisdom, suggesting that a child's early understanding of the world is shaped by their father's sense of identity. Mathabane's father believes that "tribal traditions were a way of life" and that "someday all white people would disappear from South Africa, and black people would revert to their old ways of living." His father thus raises their family under strict tribal rules and beliefs, hoping to "mould [Mathabane] in his image" and raises his son to share his tribal identity. When Mathabane is a young child, his father raises him to believe in witch doctors, witches who ride baboons across their roof, and voodoo magic. Mathabane believes that illness or misfortune are the result of curses, demonstrating his early understanding of reality is framed by his father's tribal beliefs. Mathabane's father bases his ideas of manliness—which he passes onto his son—on what it meant for his tribe before they lived in Johannesburg. According to Mathabane's father, men must never cry or show emotions other than anger; they must never admit weakness to their wives. Even as a five-year-old child, Mathabane feels pressured to emulate his father's rigid stoicism. This suggests that not only is Mathabane's early view of the world shaped by his father's identity and beliefs, but even his view of how he ought to behave as a man.

However, as Mathabane grows he realizes that tribal traditions do not help him succeed in the modern world, but rather hold him back, suggesting that a tribal identity may be as much a hindrance as a help. By the age of seven, Mathabane begins to recognize that his father's tribal beliefs seem dubious at best, and often counter-productive to succeeding in the modern world. Mathabane cannot find any "concrete" evidence of voodoo magic, and he despises many aspects of tribal law, such as the fact that his father outright owns his mother and their children—when Mathabane's mother angers him, he spitefully refers to her as "the woman he bought" and freely beats her. What's more, Mathabane's father teaches him that Mathabane has "no free will, no control over [his] own destiny" and his fate is entirely controlled by ancestral spirits, indicating that he is trapped by fate and cannot take steps to succeed in the world. Additionally, despite Mathabane's father's insistence on manhood and tribal values, his father is constantly unemployed and drinks and gambles away their family's money, which suggests that all of the tribal values do not actually make him more responsible or capable. Mathabane's father hates the idea of modern education, since it challenges his tribal beliefs. However, Mathabane's mother encourages Mathabane to study hard in school, telling him, "Contrary to what your father says, school is the only means to a future. I don't want you growing up to be like your father." She encourages him, "Education will open doors where none seem to exist [...] it'll make you somebody in this world." In contrast to the poverty and helplessness that Mathabane's father's tribal values seem to offer, his mother suggests that modern education offers the hope of escaping such hardships.

Mathabane ultimately decides to leave his father's tribal traditions behind so he can succeed and rise from poverty, suggesting that one may need to leave tradition behind to adapt to a changing world. However, this tragically suggests that tradition-bound people like his father have no place to thrive in modern society. As a teenager, Mathabane realizes that "tribal indoctrination" holds black people back from rising in the modern world, dissuading them from higher education and trapping them in a low socioeconomic bracket, which ultimately keeps them subservient to white people. Mathabane pities his father, seeing that he is caught between a fading world, which gave him his identity, and the future, which has no place for him. He reflects, "The thick veil of tribalism which so covered his eyes and mind and heart was of absolutely no use to me, for I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that black life

would never revert to the past." He adds, "Everything [my father] wholeheartedly embraced, I rejected with every fibre of my being," suggesting that he is letting go of any tribal identity to become an active participant in the modern world. However, Mathabane recognizes that in rejecting his father's tribal identity, he threatens his own sense of self as well. In his Preface, Mathabane recounts, "I instinctively understood that in order [...] to achieve according to my aspirations and dreams [...] I had to reject this brand of tribalism, and that in the rejection I ran the risk of losing my heritage. I took the plunge." This ultimately suggests that, although Mathabane risks losing his sense of personal identity, succeeding in the modern world is worth the risk.

ANGER, HATRED, AND VIOLENCE

In Mark Mathabane's experience of apartheid in South Africa, the black population is rife with anger and hatred as a result of their severe oppression. Although this hatred is primarily directed toward their white oppressors, it also deflects toward the people around them, even those who suffer alongside them. Even for people like Mathabane who try to live peaceably, festering anger and hatred inevitably erupt into acts of violence. Through the anger of his childhood and community and the violent eruption of the Soweto Uprising, Mathabane demonstrates how the strain of living under oppression causes anger and hatred to fester until they erupt into violence that can cause harm in any direction.

Mathabane and other black people feel constant anger at the injustice and strain of surviving under apartheid, demonstrating how such festering anger becomes a permanent fixture for oppressed people. At five years old, as Mathabane watches police officers demean his father in the middle of the night and prod his naked body with their weapons, he feels "hate and anger rage with a furious intensity" inside himself, "branded into my five-year-old mind, branded to remain until I die." The rise of such anger at such a young age suggests that anger at injustice and dehumanization becomes a permanent fixture in an oppressed person's world, even shaping their childhood. Mathabane describes all black South Africans, denied basic rights and welfare in their own country, as "an angry and embittered lot." This anger runs so deep that it not only targets white people, but also any black person who cooperates with the white government. An old man bitterly tells Mathabane, "If all these years that vermin [black men who work for white people] hadn't been licking the white man's ass, boy [...] we would have long had political rights in this country." Beyond the individual, this suggests that as a community, severe oppression can even make the oppressed hate the people alongside them, who still share their oppression.

Mathabane's anger festers into hatred and a desire for violence, suggesting that long years of oppression can give even a non-violent person a hateful nature. At one point, Mathabane states that he "could not understand the cruelty and satanic impulses that drove people to kill others," suggesting that he is not violent at heart. However, when he is a young teenager Mathabane's anger grows until he "yearned for the day when armies of black peasants would invade the white world, and butcher, guillotine, hang, machine-gun, bury alive and drown in hot lead every bad white man alive." Such fantasies about racially motivated violence suggest that Mathabane's constant oppression and long-held anger fester into powerful hatred, even though he once opposed violence.

As Mathabane and the rest of the black community's anger deepens into outright hatred, violence erupts both within their community and outside of it, suggesting that oppressed people will inevitably lash out in violence, either toward their oppressors or toward each other—or both. The greatest eruption of violence in Mathabane's life occurs when he is a teenage student. Mathabane reflects that, at the time, violence seems inevitable: "All the hate, bitterness, frustration and anger [...] crystallized into a powder keg in the minds of black students, waiting for a single igniting spark." When white police officers open fire on a black student protest movement, killing numerous children, weeks of violent protests, riots, and looting ensue in an event that's now known as the Soweto Uprising. Although Mathabane once detested the thought of violence, he finds himself swept into not only the protests but also the violent riots and looting. He reflects, "Each day I found myself in the company of bloodthirsty mobs. I had lost control of myself and seemed possessed by a sinister force." In every face of the people participating in the violence, Mathabane sees his own "poverty of hate and anger," suggesting that this explosion of violence is an expression of many years of hardship, oppression, and pain, even for people who are not predisposed to violent action. The hatred is aimed primarily at white people, but since white families are protected by walls and military, many of the mobs take to looting and killing Indian, Chinese, and mixed-race people instead—who live alongside the black community—since they receive marginally better treatment by the apartheid government. As Mathabane helps smash and rob a Chinese man's shop, he reflects, "For an instant I became aware of the senselessness of what we were doing. But those misgivings gave way to euphoria as I saw black peasants making off with plundered goods." Mathabane later describes this attack of non-white people as an attack on "symbols of oppression and collaborators with the system [which] are convenient and necessary targets for our anger." In other words, when the oppressed cannot act out their hatred directly toward their oppressors, that violence turns sideways toward the people and communities around them.

Mathabane never explicitly condemns the violence of the Soweto Uprising, depicting it as an inevitable outcome of decades of oppression and injustice. However, in the last page of his autobiography, he fears for his younger brother, George:

"How would he deal with the fear, the frustration, the hate, the anger that were the lot of every black child? Would he stay out of trouble long enough to become a man, to realize his dreams, whatever they might be?" Mathabane's fears for his brother ultimately suggest that such hatred, which inevitably leads to violence, threatens the future of any who are drawn into it.

CHRISTIANITY

While Mark Mathabane's father remains committed to his tribal beliefs and traditions, Mathabane's mother begins to explore Christianity, going to evangelism meetings, church groups, and baptizing her children against her husband's will. In the same way that Mathabane is skeptical of his father's tribal beliefs, he is equally skeptical of Christianity's place in South Africa. As he grows up and interacts with his mother's new religion, Mathabane suggests that Christianity in South Africa occupies a complex position: though it is most often used to support the ruling class and racial segregation, Christianity can also be a source of compassion and goodwill, supporting the value of all people and promoting black liberation.

Mathabane and his father's initial antipathy toward Christianity demonstrates how many black South Africans see it as the white man's religion, used to justify racial segregation and violence and pacify black protest. Mathabane and his mother first encounter Christianity at a meeting put on by black evangelists. Although the singing and spectacle initially intrigue Mathabane, that intrigue vanishes when the leader declares that black people should thank white people for bringing them the Christian Gospel. The leader goes on to declare that tribal beliefs are "sheer nonsense and hogwash" and must be abandoned for the sake of the white God. Although Mathabane himself does not care for tribal traditions, the evangelist's argument suggests to him that the Christian religion is yet another way that white people try to force their authority and their lifestyle upon the black population. At Christian friends' homes, Mathabane sees paintings of God as a majestic white man and Satan as an ugly black man, which suggests to him that Christianity teaches that to be black is to be evil. This belief is further confirmed when Mathabane learns that many Christians teach that black skin is the curse God placed on one of Noah's wayward sons as a shameful mark of evil behavior. The white government even claims that "God had given whites the divine right to rule over blacks, that our subservience was the most natural and heavenly condition to be in." Such pictures and teachings suggest that Christianity is an oppressive tool white people use to justify and reinforce their own ideas of racial superiority. In spite of such manipulative and racist teachings, what Mathabane views as Christianity's worst effect is that it makes many of its black followers ready "to accept their lot as God's will, [with] a willingness to disparage their own blackness and heritage as inferior to the white man's Christianity." That is, Christianity creates a defeatism in many black people, reducing their will to fight for freedom and independence and equal treatment, and instead making them content to suffer and "hope that faith in Christ would miraculously make everything turn out right."

However, Mathabane meets some people who find in Christianity the motivation to stand up, love others, and denounce hatred, suggesting that there is something valuable at its core when it's not being used as a tool of oppression. As Mathabane's mother becomes more involved with Christianity, she begins asserting her own will and standing up to her abusive and domineering husband. When she defies Mathabane's father by declaring that she and her children will become part of a local church, Mathabane realizes that "a change had come over my mother [...] she seemed no longer prepared to be ruled by my father." This suggests that Christianity—especially in contrast to tribal laws, which declare that a wife is her husband's property—encourages his mother to assert more control over her own life. Additionally, according to the Christian interpretation of Mathabane's Granny and her white employer Mrs. Smith, the religion does not teach that black people should be dominated, but rather liberated. When Granny asks Mrs. Smith if the Bible says that all people are "God's children" regardless of race, Mrs. Smith agrees. She states, "I do believe in the Bible. That's why I cannot accept the laws of this country. We white people are hypocrites. We call ourselves Christians, yet our deeds make the Devil look like a saint." Mrs. Smith's words suggest that although Christianity is used to uphold apartheid, this is actually an abuse of the religion rather than a faithful expression of it.

Despite his skepticism, in the aftermath of the Soweto Uprising, Mathabane begins to take comfort from Christian practice and prayer, suggesting that although it is historically a tool of oppression in South Africa, Christianity can be repurposed to support the fight for liberation. Mathabane cannot understand why God, if he exists, would not protect the students killed by police in the Soweto Uprising, nor the ones the police still constantly arrest. Even so, he is touched by the strength his mother's faith gives her and finds himself attending church because he "felt somewhat safe there." As he does, Mathabane gradually begins to read the Bible to bolster his "strength and courage," suggesting that Christian practice can at least offer a sense of safety and stability during a chaotic time. Mathabane roams from church to church and hears many preachers begin using the Bible to fiercely call for liberation. When the apartheid government calls students killed in protests "terrorists," the preachers counter by calling them "heroes" and "martyrs." The preachers' use of Christianity's language and platform to venerate the students who died for freedom suggests that the religion cannot only offer hope, but can also provide tools to encourage the fight for liberation. While Christianity's prominent role in apartheid is undeniable,

Mathabane's depiction of Christianity suggests that it can also be used to fight for liberation, thus making it a complex and powerful tool, both for good and for evil.

SUFFERING, SURVIVAL, AND TRAUMA

Between the ages of five and 10, Mark Mathabane experiences severe suffering and trauma as a result of his family's poverty and the environment that they live in, all of which ultimately stem from apartheid. Before he can become an accomplished student or rising athlete, Mathabane's first struggle is merely to survive—to endure his family's suffering with his will to live intact. Mathabane's early childhood demonstrates the trauma suffered by people in abject poverty, and suggests that one can only survive such suffering if they find a reason to live, such as other people's love and dependence on them.

Mathabane's early childhood is filled with hellish scenes that demonstrate the suffering a person experiences in abject poverty, especially under a brutally oppressive system such as apartheid. By the time he is five years old, Mathabane has already been severely beaten by adult police officers several times during their night raids. On top of his growing fear of police officers and white people generally, Mathabane becomes so accustomed to the danger of night raids that whenever his mother wakes him up, he assumes that the police are coming to hurt them. Such behavior not only demonstrates Mathabane's suffering as a young child but also suggests that these experiences traumatize him and condition his behavior from an early age. When his father is arrested and disappears for nearly a year, Mathabane, his mother, and his younger siblings grow so poor that they nearly starve to death. Still only a young child, Mathabane spends days rooting through garbage dumps for food—one day finding a dead baby girl instead—and survives by drinking cow's blood from a slaughterhouse and eating worms that resemble leeches. As the oldest child, he spends hours fanning flies off of his young siblings, who are so malnourished and ill that they are nearly catatonic. Meanwhile, Mathabane grows so hungry that he hallucinates. Although Mathabane's recollections are horrific, his depiction of their ghetto in Johannesburg suggests that such suffering is common amongst poor black families, especially those broken up by apartheid. Mathabane's childhood is also filled with scenes of grotesque violence. When he is six, Mathabane joins a group of destitute boys around his age who survive by prostituting themselves to soldiers. Although Mathabane escapes when he realizes what is happening, the event leaves him scarred and confused, barely able to speak. When he is 10, he watches from a bush as local gangsters butcher an unarmed man in broad daylight, cutting him with machetes and tomahawks until his entrails spill out of his torso. As with his family's near-starvation, Mathabane reflects that both child prostitution and wanton murder are common occurrences in black South Africa, "constitut[ing] the only world I knew, the only reality," again demonstrating the horrific suffering that children like himself experience growing up.

Mathabane's experiences of suffering leave him so traumatized that he questions whether life is worth living at all, suggesting that such trauma can eliminate one's will to live. After watching gangsters disembowel a man, Mathabane recounts that he "developed a fatalistic resignation from life" and begins "withdrawing into myself." The brutality of the murder causes him to "spend days brooding over my helplessness and senselessness of the broken cycle of pain." Mathabane's horrific experiences to this point, capped by the murder, leave him so traumatized that can no longer cope with living in such a suffering world. He adds, "My sensitivity to the world around me made me soak in all its suffering like a sponge [...] Soon my mind was saturated," suggesting that he has reached the limits of his own capacity to comprehend or endure suffering. A few months after seeing the murder, Mathabane starts thinking of suicide. Though he was always a fighter like his mother, he feels that the world "hold[s] out nothing to me but hunger, pain, violence, and death," and he is "weary of being hungry all the time, weary of being beaten all the time," again suggesting that he can no longer endure any more suffering. The fact that he considers suicide at such a young age reiterates how such suffering and trauma can eliminate one's will to live, especially in a seemingly hopeless system such as apartheid.

When Mathabane's mother finds him with a knife, ready to kill himself, she helps him to endure his suffering by understanding how his life impacts others. Her intervention shows him that recognizing one's value to other people, rather than only oneself, helps one persevere through such trauma. Mathabane's mother reminds him of how much his younger siblings depend on him, and how they'll need an older brother to look up to throughout their lives. She continues, "I too would want to die if you were to die. You're the only hope I have." Mathabane is "very much touched by what she said" and realizes she is right; even if life is full of suffering, other people still depend on him and love him, so he still has something to live for. Mathabane closes this episode by saying, "Whenever the troubles of the world seem too much, it helps to have someone loving and understanding to share those troubles with; and life takes its true meaning in proportion to one's daily battles against suffering." This suggests that recognizing the people who love and depend on oneself is vital to enduring and surviving such traumatic suffering. Mathabane's decision to live rather than to die ultimately sets him on course to be a successful student and competitive athlete, accomplishing far more than he could possibly have envisioned as a weary 10-year-old. His life trajectory ultimately suggests that the future is never certain, and is always worth living for.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

PASSBOOKS

The passbooks that each black adult in South Africa must carry represents apartheid's dominion over black peoples lives. By apartheid law, every adult must always have their passbook with them, complete with every stamp and form that proves their right to exist; Mathabane calls it "the black man's passport to existence." If someone's passbook is not in order, the police arrest them and either extort a bribe or throw them in jail, regardless of reason or cause. The arbitrariness of such a crime as not having the right stamps reflects the arbitrary power white people wield over black people under apartheid. Similarly, due to bureaucracy and unrealistic expectations, it is nearly impossible for someone to have their passbook completely in order, regardless of how hard they try, reflecting the near-impossibility of black people succeeding in life under apartheid. Mathabane resists getting a passbook for as long as possible, reflecting his resistance of apartheid's rule over his life in general. He thinks that if he gets a passbook, "the system will have succeeded in shackling my being with a chain that I would never be able to unloose." However, he ultimately gets a passbook to take a job and receive his passport, suggesting that even he must work within the system to ultimately rise above it.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Touchstone edition of *Kaffir Boy* published in 1986.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ In South Africa there's a saying that to be black is to be at the end of the line when anything of significance is to be had. So these people were considered and treated as the dregs of society, aliens in the land of their birth. Such labelling and treatment made them an angry and embittered lot.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In opening the story, Mathabane describes the Alexandra ghetto and the black population that lives there, explaining that apartheid has made them the lowest class of people in society. This statement addresses multiple major themes at once, pointing out apartheid's structural oppression of black people, the racial prejudice that drives this system, and the deep-seated anger that this treatment creates in the black community. The statement that apartheid makes black people "aliens in the land of their birth" is particularly poignant, aptly summing up the awful irony of colonization. Though the black people are by far the majority in South Africa, and though they have lived in the land the longest, the white Afrikaners dictate that black people are the least welcome in South Africa and have the least right to thrive. "Aliens in the land of their birth" summons the image of one person moving into another's house and subsequently making them a slave, treating them like an unwanted foreign guest. The image suggests that black people are entirely excluded from operating their own country because white people arrived and decided they wanted it instead. As Mathabane hints, this produces a swelling anger among Alexandra's black population that will eventually explode.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ For the first time in my life I felt hate and anger rage with furious intensity inside me. What I felt was no ordinary hate or anger; it was something much deeper, much darker, frightening, something even I couldn't understand. As I stood there watching, I could feel that hate and anger being branded into my five-year-old brain, branded to remain until I die.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), Mathabane's Father (Jackson)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22-23

Explanation and Analysis

When the police raid Mathabane's house in the night and catch his father, naked having just woken up from sleep, the officers sexually harass and demean him. Witnessing this humiliation, Mathabane feels rage flare up toward all white people and the black people who cooperate with them. Recognizing the rise of permanent rage at such a young age is shocking, and reveals the true depth of anger among black South Africans toward the white population. As Mathabane later tells, such anger festers into hatred until it explodes into the Soweto Uprising, a burst of violence that goes on for months. Although the rioting and looting that follow the Soweto Uprising are stunning, Mathabane's description of

his own instilled hatred suggests that such violence is inevitable, the natural and unavoidable consequence of a people group oppressed and humiliated for so long. Any violence instigated by black people is merely the long-awaited retaliation of men and women who've suffered ruthless police violence for decades, and thus should not come as such a surprise.

Chapter 5 Quotes

My father existed under the illusion, formed as much by a strange innate pride as by a blindness to everything but his own will, that someday all white people would disappear from South Africa, and black people would revert tot their old ways of living.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), Mathabane's Father (Jackson)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31-32

Explanation and Analysis

Mathabane explains why his father rules the family's household according to strict tribal law, tolerating no deviation, even though their family lives in urban Alexandra. Mathabane's childhood is heavily influenced by his father's tribal identity, which he tries to force upon Mathabane as well. The implied tragedy of Mathabane's father's belief is that it stops him from doing anything to fight apartheid in the present. Rather than believe that the future is his to change, Mathabane's father waits passively, hoping that the course of history will somehow right itself and his tribal identity will become relevant once again. If anything, these beliefs strengthen apartheid's hold, since it makes men like Mathabane's father stop fighting the system, and simply try to hide from it for a long enough period. Thus, by rejecting such identity and beliefs, Mathabane preserves his own sense of agency and ability to make change, which ultimately allows him to rise from poverty through education and athletics. Interestingly, though Mathabane's father hates Christianity, his own tribal beliefs create the same passivity that Mathabane recognizes in black Christians, who decided to simply "suffer their lot" and hope that God will mercifully or magically change their position in life.

Chapter 7 Quotes

My father was now a completely changed man; so changed that he now began drinking and gambling excessively, and from time to time quarreling with my mother over money matters and over what he called my mother's streak of insubordination not befitting "the woman he bought." But he still tried, in his own way, to be a father and a husband.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), Mathabane's Mother (Magdalene), Mathabane's Father (Jackson)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

After Mathabane's father spends a year in a brutal, maximum-security prison that uses its inmates as slaves, he comes back a changed man and falls into sullenness, anger, and irresponsible behavior. Mathabane's father's descent demonstrates how poverty and suffering can crush a person's spirit until they stoop so low that they become a burden on everyone else. His drinking and gambling represents a desire to escape from reality, even though that escapism spends money that the family desperately needs for food and basic necessities. Additionally, Mathabane's father's phrase, "the woman he bought," suggests that under tribal law, he fully owns Mathabane's mother. This reveals much of the antiquated misogyny inherent to such tribal beliefs, casting them in a negative light—and justifying Mathabane's mother's wish to be rid of them. This demonstrates yet another way that Mathabane's father's antiquated view of the world no longer suits reality. He pines for a time before apartheid, when he had power and control; now he has none.

Chapter 8 Quotes

From my experiences with white policemen, I had come to develop a deep-seated fear of white people; and seeing the bloody murders and savage beatings and indiscriminate shootings in the movies, that fear was fueled to phobic proportions. I vowed that never would I enter such a world, and I thanked the law for making sure I could not do so without a permit.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Mathabane reflects on his terror of white people, fueled equally by experiences with police brutality and the violent white films he watches at the cinema. Mathabane's fear gives way to so much of his prejudice that he even believes segregation is a good and protective thing. However, this fear is based primarily in Mathabane's ignorance of any part of the white world. He naively believes that the violent films truly represent the way things are in white South Africa, since they are the only images he's even seen of white society. This suggests that Mathabane's prejudice is based largely in a naïve fear of the unknown and people he does not understand. That such fear can even cause him to be thankful for oppressive segregation is a dark thought, though it implies that like Mathabane's anti-white sentiments, the white prejudice that upholds apartheid's segregation is largely based in fear as well. This suggests, then, that one solution for slowly chipping away at the rampant racial prejudice in South Africa is to help white people and black people truly understand each other.

Chapter 10 Quotes

"You and Papa should not have had me. I'm not happy in this world."

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), Mathabane's Mother (Magdalene)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

At seven years old, Mathabane tells his mother he wishes he'd never been born. Although it will be three more years before Mathabane tries to commit suicide, this moment marks the beginning of Mathabane's rejection of his own life that occurs during his childhood. At seven years old, Mathabane should be enjoying his childhood, not wishing that he'd never had one. A statement like this from such a young person suggests that the weight of the suffering Mathabane experiences under apartheid outweighs any happiness he finds in his family or childhood. The fact that Mathabane says this as a child, rather than as an adult, increases the emotional weight of it. This, then, becomes its own anecdotal critique of apartheid, suggesting that through its various methods of oppression and exploitation, the system robs black children of their chance to lead healthy, happy, productive lives. If such a fate were imposed on the children of apartheid's defenders, they would likely dismantle the system overnight.

Throughout the years that I lived in South Africa, people were to call me a fool for refusing to live life the way they did and by doing the things they did. Little did they realize that in our world, the black world, one could only survive if one played the fool, and bided his time.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

After Mathabane refuses to prostitute himself to the grown Zulu men, the boys who do, and who are well-fed and given money in return, call Mathabane a fool for valuing his autonomy over survival. Although the boys who prostitute themselves "survive" in the technical sense of the word, Mathabane is concerned with the survival of his soul and mind along with his physical being. His claim that one must "play the fool" suggests that black people's lives under apartheid are so hard that most survive by falling into various ways of coping or demeaning methods of getting by, such as drinking, gambling, or prostituting oneself. Mathabane suggests that his survival and escape from poverty is specifically due to the fact that he refuses to debase himself in such ways, even though it means more suffering in the short term. While others are fed or too drunk to care, Mathabane still hovers on the brink of starvation. However, by biding his time, exercising his own willpower, and refusing anything that will hold him down in the future, Mathabane maintains his own potential and does not let Alexandra's poverty or apartheid's oppression take his future away from him.

Chapter 12 Quotes

As we had no nursery rhymes nor storybooks, and, besides, as no one in the house knew how to read, my mother's stories served as a kind of library, a golden fountain of knowledge where we children learned about right and wrong, about good and evil.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), Mathabane's Mother (Magdalene)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout Mathabane's younger years, his mother tells him and his siblings traditional folk tales, legends, riddles, and tribal myths, which entertain them and communicate moral messages. Although Mathabane's mother later mourns the fact that she never learned how to read, Mathabane's description of his mother's wealth of stories sounds like a collection of literature in itself. This "library" that she carries inside her head suggests that, though she cannot read, Mathabane's mother has an oral literacy that serves a similar purpose as written literature. Although she cannot as easily ingest new stories, she is still able to pass down her own culture and traditions and beliefs to her children. These early stories appear to be foundational in developing Mathabane's later love of written literature and the way that stories can communicate ideals and moral lessons as well. Despite not being able to read, his mother is his first teacher.

Chapter 16 Quotes

My conception of the world, of life, was wholly in racial terms; and that conception was not mine alone. It was echoed by all black people I had come across. There were two worlds as far as we were concerned, separated in absolutely every sense. But somehow […] they had everything to do with each other; […] one could not be without the other, and their dependency was that of master and slave.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Mathabane reflects that racial prejudice pervades every aspect of his world, and touches every single part of black people's lives. Although apartheid is certainly the manifestation of white racism toward black people, Mathabane's reflection suggests that black people hold just as much racism toward white people on account of how much they've suffered by them. Although the suffering of both parties is in nowhere near equal—white people aren't structurally oppressed and don't suffer from apartheid economically or socially—this still suggests that apartheid hurts all parties involved, increasing their own personal prejudice and stunted view of other people in the world. Although it takes Mathabane a long time to realize it, he also suggests that apartheid is not simply a system where one group thrives, and another suffers. Rather, it is a codependent system where white people thrive purely through exploiting black people, and black people define their own realities purely in opposition to white oppression. This suggests that despite black and white people's racism toward each other and segregation, the two are mutually connected, locking each other into apartheid's broken and hateful system.

But all of this I passively accepted as a way of life, for I knew no other. The house, the yard, the neighborhood and Alexandra were at the hub of my existence. They constituted the only world I knew, the only reality.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

After describing the abject poverty he and his family live in (a derelict house, rats and bats climbing through the walls, little food, and so on) Mathabane states that he simply accepts such living as natural, since he has nothing else to compare it to. All the other black people in Alexandra live more or less the same way. Mathabane's acceptance of such a lifestyle suggests that strict segregation allows apartheid to continue largely unchallenged, since many black people simply don't realize how much better the white population's quality of life is than there own. Conversely, apartheid spares white people the guilt of knowing how much suffering the black population endures at their hands, since they too are segregated away, kept ignorant of how other people live. This suggests that apartheid thrives on keeping people in the dark, and leans on the fact that most people simply accept the way the world is and think little of changing it. With apartheid's reliance on people's ignorance, his eventual education becomes even more important for Mathabane, since it shows him other parts of the world where black people live with freedom and dignity. Good education challenges systems like apartheid simply by demonstrating that such suffering is not inherent to the world, but artificially created and upheld by exploitative rulers.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ [Uncle Piet] had been released—without being charged—and given a warning that he better get himself a pass soon, for he was getting too tall and was beginning to wear long pants, factors which alone made him adult enough to carry a pass.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), Uncle Piet

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Although Uncle Piet is only 13 and thus not required to carry a passbook for several more years, police arrest him for not carrying one simply because he is tall, and looks somewhat like an adult. Carrying a passbook requires permits, stamps, and taxes, all of which cost money and represents apartheid's dominion over a black adult's life. That Uncle Piet should be required to carry a passbook simply because he looks like an adult suggests that apartheid's "pass laws" are based as much on appearances as anything else—rather than the passbooks being based on age and responsibility, Uncle Piet can be arrested for the absurd and inexplicable crime of simply looking older than he is. This further suggests that the execution of apartheid law is based purely on the police's perceptions of black people. One police officer might recognize Uncle Piet is still just a child; another might decide he looks like an adult and thus a criminal without his passbook, and choose to arrest or attack him. All of this demonstrates apartheid law's arbitrary nature, which subjects black people to unwinnable legal battles and situations. The entire system appears groundless and predatory.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ They, like myself, had grown up in an environment where the value of an education was never emphasized, where the first thing a child learned was not how to read and write and spell, but how to fight and steal and rebel; where the money to send children to school was grossly lacking, for survival was first priority.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

When he is young, Mathabane looks up to group of older boys who joined a gang early in life rather than attending school. Although Mathabane eventually does go to school, his reflection suggests that he is in the minority of black South African children who do so. Faced with extreme poverty and hunger, schooling is a lower priority, since education is not worth anything if one still starves to death. Mathabane's reflection suggests, then, that an environment like Alexandra primes children to grow up as gangsters or criminals, forcing them into such a lifestyle by necessity, rather than some moral deficiency. The crime-ridden black communities that the white people decry are of their own making—by forcing abject poverty and oppression on black people, the white people force many of them to become criminals to survive. This seems to make crime and racism a self-perpetuating loop. The white people, in their racism, subjugate the black people into poverty. Thus, many black people take to crime and fighting merely to avoid starvation. Then, in witnessing this crime, white people confirm and further entrench their own racist views of black people.

❝ "Education will open doors where none seem to exist. It'll make people talk to you, listen to you and help you; people who otherwise wouldn't bother. It will make you soar, like a bird lifting up into the endless blue sky, and leave poverty, hunger, and suffering behind. [...] Above all, it'll make you a somebody in this world."

Related Characters: Mathabane's Mother (Magdalene) (speaker), Mathabane's Father (Jackson), Johannes Mark Mathabane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

When Mathabane doesn't want to begin school, his mother pleads with him to go, since she doesn't want him to turn out like his father and she believes education will give him a chance to succeed in life. Mathabane's mother's speech foreshadows many of the events that happen in his future, specifically as a result of his education. In particular, school fosters Mathabane's intellect and mastery of English, which in turn allows him to build fortuitous relationships that help

him rise through the tennis world until he ultimately leaves South Africa for the U.S. on an athletic scholarship. Contrary to Mathabane's father's entrenched tribalism and rejection of modern education, his mother's plea for him to attend school demonstrates that she fully believes in the power of modern education, over and above her husband's traditional tribal values. This conversation not only marks the beginning of Mathabane's belief in education, but also the beginning of the opposition between his parents, a conflict that pulls Mathabane in two separate directions.

Chapter 25 Quotes

"And oh, how I yearned for the day when armies of black peasants would invade the white world and butcher, guillotine, hang, machine-gun, bury alive and drown in hot lead every bad white man alive.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

Johannes imagines that white people must rule over black people because they have all the bombs, tanks, and guns (just like in the movies). He fantasizes about black people taking those weapons and having their vengeance. Mathabane's fantasy about racial violence is surprising, given that he himself is not a particularly violent person. However, it suggests that decades of brutal oppression by white people cause anger to fester into hatred within the black community, even amongst those who are not normally inclined to acts of violence. Such anger and hatred seems to be the unavoidable outcome—a rational person's response to long years of racist abuse and violence. However, despite his anger, Mathabane's fantasy also reflects his ignorance about what white people are truly like. Within his fantasy, he imagines slaughtering every white person, lumping all white people together in a monolithic group. The positive relationships with white liberals he will form over the next several years condemns such a uniform concept of the white race, as Mathabane will realize that all though most white South Africans are deeply prejudiced, many white people are good and recognize apartheid for the evil that it is.

Chapter 30 Quotes

"Yes, I do believe in the Bible. That's why I cannot accept the laws of this country. We white people are hypocrites. We call ourselves Christians, yet our deeds make the Devil look like a saint. I sometimes wish I hadn't left England."

Related Characters: Mrs. Smith (speaker), Granny (Ellen), Johannes Mark Mathabane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

When Granny brings Mathabane to meet the Smiths, the family for which she works, Mrs. Smith states that the Bible teaches all people are God's children and thus equal with each other. Mrs. Smith is the first white person Mathabane meets who is not overtly racist and does not support apartheid, suggesting to him that his previous concept of all white people as malignant racists is false. Although Christianity has thus far been shown to support apartheid and white supremacy, Mrs. Smith's claim that the Bible teaches equality suggests that, although apartheid certainly utilizes Christianity, such usage may be an abuse of the religion, rather than a faithful practice of it. This, again, is significant for Mathabane since it is the first time he hears Christianity offered in support of black people's rights, rather than used to take them away. Mrs. Smith's claims that white people are more like the Devil pointedly recalls Mathabane's earlier memories of Christian paintings that portrayed God as the white man and the Devil as the black man. In their horrible treatment of black people, Mrs. Smith suggests that it is white people who are the real devils.

Chapter 32 Quotes

"It struck me that [Granny] could not read, like millions of other blacks who worked for whites? How did they function normally in a world totally ruled by signs?

Thus my consciousness was awakened to the pervasiveness of "petty partied," and everywhere I went in the white world, I was met by invisible guards of racial segregation.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), Granny (Ellen)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

After Mathabane accidentally gets on a white bus instead of a black bus, Granny rages at him until he understands that every place and amenity in South African society is segregated for black people and white people, and that defying segregation is the most serious crime a black person can commit. Mathabane's realization that Granny and other black people can't even read the segregation signs suggests that they are constantly in danger of accidentally breaking segregation law, which under apartheid can come with grave consequences. This once again adds to the large stack of disadvantages facing black South Africans and adds yet another element of fragility and danger to their day-to-day lives. The "pervasiveness" of such signs and rules suggests that at every moment of their day, black people like Granny and Mathabane are reminded that they are less than human in the eyes of South Africa's apartheid government. Their environment constantly reinforces their inferior position in society.

❝ To me, and many blacks, whites were a race peculiarly obsessed with creating contradictions that they, and they alone, could understand—if indeed they really could understand them in the strict sense of the word.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

On a school trip to the white-owned Johannesburg Zoo—which black students have to get a special permit to visit—Mathabane and his friends wonder why the entrances to the zoo are segregated, even though the white and black people still mingle together once they are inside. Although white defenders of apartheid offer all sorts of reasons why black and white people must be militantly segregated, all of those reasons make as much sense as segregated entrances to the same zoo. Mathabane's reflection on the white obsession with contradictions implies that apartheid itself is one massive contradiction, a system of complex and carefully-wrought rules that actually make little sense at all. As with the segregated entrances, many of apartheid's firm laws seem to serve no other purpose than to obstruct black people in their daily lives and remind them that, even when they are able to go to white-controlled sections of the city, the government and white society still view them as sub-human beings, intrinsically devalued and unsupported compared to white people.

Chapter 33 Quotes

❝ The thick veil of tribalism which so covered [my father's] eyes and mind and heart was of absolutely no use to me, for I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that black life would never revert to the past, that the clock would never turn back to a time centuries ago when black people had lived in peace and contentment before the white man.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), Granny (Ellen), Mathabane's Father (Jackson)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

After Mathabane openly defies his father and moves in with Granny, Mathabane reflects on the futility of his father's obsession with tribalism and the old ways, stating that they are only relics of a past that would never return to South Africa. This moment represents a turning point in Mathabane's personal development when he firmly eschews his father's world in order to pursue a modern education and participate in the Westernized world. Although Mathabane often hates his father, this reflection casts his father as a tragic figure as well. Along with being a bitter, vengeful old man, Mathabane depicts his father as a man watching the world change quickly around him and realizing that everything he knows, everything he was raised to believe, is quickly becoming obsolete. Although his father hopes that South Africa will magically return to its tribal roots, Mathabane's reflection suggests not only will it not, but that this new modern world has no place for people like his father—trapped in the past—to thrive.

Chapter 34 Quotes

❝ The government generally treated Coloureds slightly better by giving them better jobs, better housing and better education than blacks. As a result most of the Coloureds were ashamed of their black blood, and often their prejudice against blacks was fiercer than the white man's. But a new generation of young Coloureds, which saw itself as more black than white, was emerging, and it embraced the entire range of black aspirations.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), Scaramouche

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

When Mathabane meets the Coloured man Scaramouche, he briefly explains where Coloured people sit in the racial hierarchy: because this category encompasses people who are of mixed black and white heritage, they rank above black people but below white people in society. This brief glimpse of apartheid's racist hierarchy demonstrates how arbitrary it truly is. The fact that Coloured people identify themselves variously as white, black, both, or neither suggests that the racial categories are not nearly so clear-cut as the apartheid government claims, suggesting that such a racial hierarchy is based on a flimsy idea in the first place. However, the fact that many Coloured people act even more cruelly toward black people than white people do suggests that, within that hierarchy, people tend to lash out toward those below them—perhaps to signify that they are not at the bottom of the social order themselves. This suggest, then, that such a hierarchy breaks oppressed groups apart and turns them against each other, rather than allowing them to unite against white South Africans, who are ultimately responsible for both groups' suffering.

Chapter 36 Quotes

❝ Worst of all, I found among members of some churches a readiness to accept their lot as God's will, a willingness to disparage their own blackness and heritage as inferior to the white man's Christianity, a readiness to give up fighting to make things just in this world, in the hope that God's justice would prevail in the hereafter.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), Mathabane's Mother (Magdalene)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

Although Mathabane unites with his mother against his father's "tyranny," he still vehemently opposes her Christianity for many reasons. Mathabane argues that among its exploitative practices and history of abuse, Christianity creates a contented defeatism in many of its practitioners, which parallels the submission to tribal ancestors and fate that his father believes in. In both cases, one is not encouraged to fight, but to simply accept their suffering as the way the world is and hope that things may change. The defeatism in both value systems suggests that it is a possible result of any subscription to a higher power, where one believes that their own destiny is at least partially beyond their control. Although that sense of defeatism may be some comfort (if the person believes in a "hereafter") it also arguably serves the aims of apartheid by further pacifying oppressed black people and discouraging them from protesting or revolting. Christianity or tribalism thus can be useful tools for the apartheid government's control of the black majority population.

Chapter 42 Quotes

❝ While student leaders argued about what to do to diffuse the situation, the police suddenly opened fire. Momentarily the crowd stood dazed, thinking that the bullets were plastic and had been fired into the air. But when several small children began dropping down like swatted flies, their white uniforms soaked in red blood, pandemonium broke out.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

When 10,000 unarmed black students protest the South African government's move to replace English with Afrikaans education, white police officers open fire on them, triggering what comes to be known as the Soweto Uprising. This horrific scene embodies the contentious relationship apartheid creates between the white government and black population. The police shootings of unarmed, peacefully protesting children is beyond appalling—the crowd's momentary daze suggests that even they do not think it is possible. Such unhesitant violence demonstrates how little dissension the apartheid government tolerates. Its use of deadly force against unarmed youths and its crushing of dissenting voices makes apartheid South Africa appear no less than a totalitarian regime, bent on keeping black people subjugated at any cost. This scene is particularly disturbing when one recognizes that this was not an event that happened centuries ago, but only a few decades past, suggesting that if such atrocities occurred so recently in the modern era, they could certainly occur again.

For an instant I became aware of the senselessness of what we were doing. But those misgivings gave way to euphoria as I saw black peasants making off with plundered goods. I joined in.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

As the Soweto Uprising spreads across South Africa, Alexandra erupts into a chaos of rioting and looting mobs. Mathabane joins in as black people smash and loot Indian and Chinese stores, feeling swept up in the moment. The festering anger and hatred of the black community turns the rebellion from a simple protest to a widespread reclaiming of wealth and goods. While Mathabane never explicitly condemns the riots and the looting, his sense that it's all senseless suggests that he feels they are putting their energy into the wrong struggle. However, this feeling is counter-balanced by the classist thrill of seeing poor black people take wealth for themselves that was stripped away from them decades before. This makes the issue of rioting and looting far more complex than a simple moral decree that each event was either good or bad. Rather, as Mathabane explores, such violence seems the natural and inevitably outcome of a people oppressed for so many long years. Each year of suffering added to the building pressure, until it finally explodes in a pure expression of anger, frustration, and hatred.

Chapter 43 Quotes

Out of touch with sane whites, I began to hate all whites. Why weren't liberal whites doing something to stop the slaughter of innocent black children? Why weren't they demanding investigations into the brutal and indiscriminate use of force by police? [...] The loud silence of the white electorate turned many black moderates into radicals and radicals into revolutionaries.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

During the months of the Soweto Uprising, Mathabane feels his bitterness and hatred toward white people return. Just as Mathabane's exposure to different people reduced his hatred and personal prejudice toward another group, his returning hatred suggests that isolation from those who are different can rekindle and regrow such prejudice. Although Mathabane eventually learns that the government repressed most news of the unrest and number of black people dying in the streets, his anger toward white liberals for not speaking up carries an important point. Mathabane suggests that white liberals need to rise in support of black people to prove that they care, otherwise black moderates will take their silence to mean white people are apathetic toward black suffering. This in turn radicalizes the black community, generating more anger, more violence, and presumably more fear within the white community, pushing racial tensions even higher. This suggests that, although white people may want to stay silent, refusing to speak out about black people's suffering only creates more animosity between the two groups and proves to the sufferers that white people don't acknowledge or respect their pain.

Chapter 44 Quotes

"You know [...] this whole thing reminds me of what Hitler did to my country. His madness left us Germans with a feeling of guilt and shame that can never go away. The very same forces of racial superiority of that idiot and madman I see at work right here. There could yet be another Holocaust in the world."

Related Characters: Helmut (speaker), Johannes Mark Mathabane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

After the violence quells enough that Mathabane can return to his white liberal friends, he explains to Helmut all that has happened, especially the police's brutality. Helmut shakes with rage. Helmut's equivocation of apartheid with Nazism suggests just as the Germans were blinded by their own sense of self-superiority, white South Africans are similarly blinded and unable to recognize the grotesque weight of their oppression of the black population. Additionally, Helmut's comparison suggests that just as Nazism remains the enduring shame of Germany, so apartheid will be a permanent scar on South African history which it's white population will never be absolved of. The comparison between South African apartheid and the Jewish Holocaust is apt, especially since both involved systematically

oppressing an ethnic group, using an intricate network of laws, logistics, and brutal violence. While apartheid was not aimed at systematic extermination the same way the Holocaust was, it lasted a total of five decades, and the sheer length of its oppressive rule likely makes the the number of deaths it caused directly and indirectly quite comparable.

Chapter 47 Quotes

If four years of attending college in America had awakened Andre to the brutal reality of how wrong his race was in subjugating blacks [...] then I had hope that some day the rest of his race could similarly awaken—if they wanted to.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), Andre Zietsman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

Mathabane befriends Andre Zietsman, a white South African who studied in America and realized, through the country's contrast with South Africa, that the Afrikaners' racism and apartheid rule are horrific and evil. Andre embodies the quintessential Afrikaner, having been indoctrinated with apartheid's racist ideals through his early education and having even been taught how to "lord over" black people in secondary school. His transition from an entrenched racist to an anti-apartheid figure therefore represents the hope that anyone with severe personal prejudices could learn to let them go. Andre's personal change comes as a result of living in the U.S., a country where black people are legally equal to him, and by living and studying and working alongside black men and women. This suggests that, just as Mathabane's exposure to white people taught him to see them as individuals, rather than a hateful monolith, Andre's firsthand experiences with black people teach him to see each person for their own merits and what they can offer, rather than what his society taught him to believe. This once again suggests that the biggest step to eliminating personal prejudice is forming relationships with people who are different from oneself.

Chapter 51 Quotes

Many blacks believed that such arbitrary racial classification was blatant proof that the government had created apartheid not because God so ordained, or that the races were so radically different they could not coexist as one nation, as white supporters of racial segregation claimed. Apartheid was purely and simply a scheme to perpetuate white dominance, greed, and privilege.

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

Mathabane reflects on how some black people are classified as "honorary whites" for various reasons, how Japanese people are considered white while Chinese people are considered black, and so on. Mathabane's entire childhood and all his experiences of white violence, exploitation, and greed support his statement that apartheid is unequivocally a racist scheme, rather than any sort of necessary or just governmental measure. Mathabane's many positive relationships with white people suggest that the two races can coexist peacefully and even benefit from each other's diversity. Christianity's changing role as a force for compassion and liberation rather suggest that God does not "ordain" apartheid's racial segregation or black subservience to white people. All of these things together argue that apartheid is a wicked, groundless, unjustifiable system that must be abolished for the sake of all people in South Africa—black, white, and otherwise.

Chapter 54 Quotes

How would he deal with the fear, the frustration, the hate, the anger that were the lot of every black child? Would he stay out of trouble long enough to become a man, to realize his dreams, whatever they might be?

Related Characters: Johannes Mark Mathabane (speaker), George Mathabane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 350

Explanation and Analysis

As Mathabane leaves his home and family to study in America, he rejoices that he is escaping apartheid but

worries for his younger brother, George. Although Mathabane survived his childhood with his aspirations and hope intact, and although his continued successes will ease his family's financial woes, his worries for George suggest that George will have to face the pain and hardship of being a black child under apartheid's thumb as well. Through Mathabane's childhood, the horrific violence he witnessed led to a hatred of white people, which was only alleviated when he began to befriend liberal, non-racist white people through his tennis career. Mathabane's recognition of the hate and anger that he felt and that every other black child feels suggests that he only narrowly avoided being consumed by it as his father was, and remaining hopeful rather than cynical in the midst of that will be one of George's greatest struggles as a black man living under apartheid.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

A sign proclaims that it stands on "Bantu" land, and anyone traveling without a permit will be prosecuted. Mathabane reflects that because of such signs "and a conscience racked with guilt," white people in South Africa largely don't know what life is like for black people. He intends to tell them.

Mathabane's opening suggests that his story will be defined by racial segregation, which increases personal prejudice between groups, since neither truly understand the experiences of others.

When Mathabane is growing up in the 1960s, Alexandra is a shantytown that occupies one square mile and houses over 100,000 black people, Coloured people (those with mixed black and white heritage), and Indians. Nearby, white people enjoy one of the highest living standards in the world. Most of the black families in Alexandra are tribal descendants, one or two generations removed from an entirely different way of life. Mathabane's father belongs to the Venda tribe, and his mother is Tsonga. They met and married and moved into a tiny shack in Alexandra, where Mathabane was born. A few months later, policemen shot 69 unarmed black protesters dead in the street for protesting newly appointed "pass laws."

White South Africans' high standard of living immediately contrasts with the black community's densely-packed shantytown, demonstrating the extreme disparity between the two groups. This, along with the mention of white police brutality, immediately establishes the tension between the two groups. Mathabane's description of his parents' tribal heritage suggests that their tribal identity, which contrasts with an urban city, will also play a significant role in his life's story.

CHAPTER 2

On an early winter morning in 1965, when Mathabane is five and his sister Florah is three, Mathabane wakes to see his father leaving for work while it is still dark. His mother steps out to use the bathroom but rushes back in, yelling that Mathabane and his sister need to wake up. Outside he hears sirens, dogs, glass shattering, and men yelling and stomping in heavy boots. His mother tells him, "Peri-Urban is here." Even at five, Mathabane recognizes the name of the police force; it fills him with terror.

Mathabane begins his direct narration with a long, detailed scene of violence and terror from his early childhood. This not only establishes the hellish environment apartheid creates for children, but also suggests that the trauma and terror of such instances shape his early childhood memories, which will, in turn, shape his development as an adult.

Outside, Mathabane hears gunshots—it sounds like "the world [i]s somehow coming to an end." His mother lights a candle so he can dress, but keeps it away from the window. She looks frantically for her **passbook** until Mathabane remembers that he'd hid it under the table, beneath the cardboard he sleeps on. A shaft of light shoots through the window and Mathabane's mother hides behind the door until it's gone. Mathabane's infant brother, George, cries from the next room and Mathabane knows he must go quiet him, but he feels frozen with terror. Mathabane's mother inches out the door and tells Mathabane that she'll be back soon. He's terrified by the prospect of being alone, but she leaves him with George and Florah.

As Mathabane recognizes, this scene has an almost apocalyptic air to it, suggesting that at his young age, a violent police raid truly feels like the world is crumbling around him. The responsibility that Mathabane bears on his shoulders—watching after his younger siblings when he is only five, quieting his infant brother so the police don't find him—indicates that suffering under apartheid will force him to grow up far faster than he would in a safer environment.

As soon as his mother leaves, Mathabane bolts the door shut and barricades it with furniture so the police cannot kick it in. George and Florah are both hysterical, and Mathabane tries to quiet them by slapping them and yelling at them, though he too is gripped with fear. He holds a blanket over George's head to muffle his screaming, unaware that the baby could suffocate. The screams stop. Mathabane creeps back to the window and sees black policemen, directed by a white man, rounding up naked black men and women in the yard.

The image of five-year-old Mathabane beating his younger siblings to quiet them not only suggests that he is too young to handle such responsibility, but also suggests that violence frames his entire world. Outside, the police inflict violence onto his neighbors, possibly his parents. Inside their home, desperation and fear drives Mathabane to inflict violence on his little siblings.

Three of the policemen walk toward Mathabane's shack. He hears them say there are probably no gangsters in this shack, but at least they can extort a bribe. However, George rolls off a bench in the next room and gashes his forehead open, howling with pain. When the policemen hear the infant screaming, they decide it's only children in there so it isn't worth their time. Mathabane stems the bleeding from George's head while they wait three hours for their mother to return home.

The policemen's frank admission that they will try to extort money suggests that not only is apartheid oppressive and racist, but the people who enforce it are utterly corrupt. Such corruption only adds to the disadvantages facing black people under apartheid, from which it seems nearly impossible to rise.

CHAPTER 3

Rumor spreads through the ghetto that another raid is coming that same day. Two subsequent raids mark the beginning of the annual "Operation Clean-Up Month," during which police sift through Alexandra to arrest people for having their **passbooks** out of order. Just after midnight, the police arrive again, banging on the locked door of Mathabane's shack. Mathabane waits awhile, but then opens it for them. Since he didn't open the door last time, the police beat him up.

Mathabane's violent past experiences with police suggest that for black people under apartheid, the police have no association with protection or rule of law—rather, they exercise authority with fear, prejudice, and danger. The fact that they would beat an innocent child suggests that they are ruthless and corrupt.

Two police burst through the door, and one of them kicks Mathabane against the wall. He kicks Mathabane again while he is on the floor, knocking his head into a crate and against a blunted axe blade on the floor. Blood streams from Mathabane's face and several of his teeth are loose. He begs for mercy, and Florah screams hysterically when one of the policemen threatens her. They find Mathabane's father, naked since he was sleeping, hiding under the bed and drag him out. The flip through his **passbook**, demanding to know why certain taxes aren't paid. Mathabane's fathers stands helpless, sheepish, while one of the police pokes at his penis with a truncheon. Mathabane "gasp[s] with horror."

The policeman's senseless violence against a young child not only depicts the police as an oppressive force, but also indicates that they don't see a small black child like Mathabane as having any human value that's worthy of respect or protection. The policeman's humiliation and sexual harassment of Mathabane's father suggests that they take perverse enjoyment in exerting their power over others, again depicting them as cruel and corrupt.

Mathabane finds it strange to see his father so powerless and defeated, since normally he is strong-willed and powerful. The sight makes Mathabane burn with hatred, which imprints in his five-year-old brain. When his father can't pay the policemen their bribe, they arrest him, handcuffing him and dragging him outside. Mathabane wonders what his father could have done wrong to deserve such wretched treatment. He fears the police as if they are "monsters," but realizes that he hates them more powerfully than he fears them. Mathabane follows his father outside and sees him climb onto a prison bus with many other black men and women. As the bus drives away, the children remain in the yard, speaking to each other about which parents they lost.

Although Mathabane's hatred of the police certainly seems justified, such hatred within a five-year-old child again suggest that the trauma of life under apartheid forces him to grow up far too fast and grapple with real-world concepts he should not be exposed to yet. Both his hatred and perception of the police as monsters suggests that, within his own suffering, his prejudice and anger are beginning to formulate, demonstrating how such feelings can be developed over a person's entire life.

Mathabane remembers that the police didn't find his mother, and realizes she must be hiding in the house somewhere. He rushes inside and hears her voice from inside their wardrobe. His mother tells him to let her out, but the wardrobe is locked, and they worry that Mathabane's father accidentally took the key. Mathabane wants to break down the door with the axe, but his mother screams at him not to do it. Eventually, frantically, Mathabane finds the key hidden between two bricks. His mother emerges and begins putting their ransacked house back together.

Mathabane's desire to axe his way through a cabinet his mother is hiding in is an obviously dangerous idea, which underscores the fact that he is only a five-year-old boy, still developing his critical thinking and good judgment. This reinforces the horror and injustice of Mathabane's childhood, reminding the reader that he is still early in his childhood development, yet forced to endure such suffering.

CHAPTER 4

After Mathabane's last encounter with the Peri-Urban police, they becomes a constant presence in his life. By 1966, when he is not quite six years old, police raids occur in Alexandra on a weekly basis. His mother starts having premonitions about which days and hours the police will arrive, and often she is right. However, though she and the other woman flee and escape, most of the men think it "cowardly and unmanly to run away from other men" and are often captured. If they can pay bribes, they are released, otherwise the police throw them in a "notorious" black prison in the city. Repeat offenders are taken to Modderbee, a maximum-security jail that turns decent men into "brutes."

Mathabane's constant expectation of police raids suggests that repeated traumatic experiences condition his behavior and shape his childhood. The men's refusal to save themselves and avoid extortion or prison indicates that their own ideals of masculinity play a powerful role in their behavior, even when it causes further disruptions to their or their family's lives. This indicates that such ideals of manliness and masculinity will feature in Mathabane's retelling of his childhood.

Despite constant raids, life in the ghetto runs on a "predictable, monotonous course." People like Mathabane's parents work all week and struggle to survive. On payday, tsotsis (gangsters) come to extort some of their money. Over the weekends, black people in Alexandra drink away what's left in order to "forget the troubles and hardships of black life," and then, hung over, begin again.

The cycle of suffering, corruption, and alcohol to cope suggests that black people's pain under apartheid feels endless, "monotonous." Such a cycle demonstrates how difficult it is for someone like Mathabane to rise from poverty and overcome the obstacles apartheid thrusts in this path.

CHAPTER 5

One night, Mathabane's family's shack collapses, forcing them to move to a new one. Shortly after the move, Mathabane's mother weans George by smearing red pepper on her breasts so that each time he tries to suckle, his mouth burns with pain until he no longer tries anymore. As soon as George is weaned, his father starts teaching him the "tribal ways of life," just as he teaches them to Mathabane. His father is one of a number of patriarchs in Alexandra who adhere religiously to tribal tradition, believing that someday all the white people will leave, and Africa will revert to a tribal society. However, while Mathabane's father "force-feed[s] us tribalism" Mathabane is mingling with Western culture through his friends and their less-traditional parents.

The contrast between Mathabane's tribal home life and his friends' Westernizing families establishes the thematic conflict between tribal identity and a modernizing world. Although respecting one's heritage is valuable, Mathabane's father's belief that the tribal lifestyle will return to Africa suggests that his tribalism is not merely a remembrance of the past, but an obsession with it.

Mathabane's father's tribal rituals cover everything from warding off spirits and dark magic to daily religious practices. Once, Mathabane's father furiously beats him for speaking while eating, which breaks tribal tradition. This harsh treatment makes Mathabane begin to hate his father, and he vows to kill him when he is grown. His mother tells him that his father grew up in the tribes, and it's difficult for him to live as if he weren't still there, rather than in the city. However, Mathabane continues to resent his father's rituals. After his father learns that Mathabane is speaking languages other than Venda around his friends, he gets so furious he threatens to cut out his son's tongue.

Mathabane's father's violence and Mathabane's own hatred of him demonstrates how the violence of life under apartheid seeps into their family as well. His mother's argument that his father cannot transition to their new lifestyle in the city suggests that Mathabane's father is fighting a losing battle, trying to resurrect and preserve a lifestyle that modernization has already made obsolete.

CHAPTER 6

In the end of 1966, Mathabane's father's employer lays him off. His father decides he needs a new job, so he goes to the Bantu Affairs Department to get the permit that allows him to look for work. However, a policeman arrests him on his way there for having a stamp in his **passbook** that signifies he has no job. "His crime, unemployment, [i]s one of the worst a black man could commit." Mathabane and his mother hope that his father will return in four weeks, the usual sentence. When he does not, they fear he's gone to Modderbee. Without his father's income, Mathabane's family goes hungry. He realizes that his hunger makes him love and miss his father, rather than resent him.

Mathabane's father's arrest demonstrates how apartheid uses bureaucracy to structurally oppress black people, trapping them in catch-22 situations and then unjustly imprisoning them for it. Although Mathabane's father lost his job through no fault of his own, and though he's trying to find a new one, the police arrest him for trying to adhere to the law. Such a system suggests that apartheid's laws are written exclusively to oppress black people and hold them back from their full potential, rather than serve any actual administrative function.

After two months of his father's absence, Mathabane asks his mother why his father is arrested so often. His mother explains that his father's **passbook** is not in order, nor can it ever be, and that every black person must always carry their passbook with all the particular permits. She shows Mathabane her own and the sight of it fills him with dread. Later, Mathabane learns that the passbook is "the black man's passport to existence."

The passbooks symbolize apartheid's dominion over black people's lives. Just as they must always carry their passbooks, they must always carry the burden and fear of apartheid as well, since they can be arrested at any time for nearly any conceivable reason. Just as it's virtually impossible to have one's passbook in order, succeeding under apartheid as a black person seems similarly impossible.

As months go by, Mathabane's family grows desperate. He is so hungry he often passes out. His mother struggles to pay rent on their shack. Zulu men arrive with spears and machetes, demanding payment for some unknown reason, and take all of the furniture as collateral. George and Florah come down with a "mysterious illness" that nearly kills them, leaving them "emaciated and lethargic." Although few people in Alexandra are Christians, everyone celebrates Christmas each year by buying cheap new clothes from an Indian shop and cookies and Kool-Aid for the children. However, Mathabane's mother announces that they won't celebrate Christmas, and Mathabane and Florah are crushed.

Mathabane's family's near-starvation embodies the suffering they endure simply to survive. Their lack of a Christmas celebration demonstrates how such suffering and poverty—ultimately caused by apartheid law—negatively impact their social lives as well. On top of the family's hunger, Zulu men (who are also black and oppressed) extort them for even more money, suggesting that oppression and violence from their fellow sufferers adds to their struggle to survive under apartheid. This unfortunate situation thus demonstrates the many layers of disadvantages facing people like Mathabane and his family.

January, February, and March pass without Mathabane's father returning home. His mother's personality darkens, and she starts drinking heavily. Mathabane himself grows irritable and angry, picking fights with other kids and "abus[ing]" his siblings. To calm his restlessness, his mother starts making him help with the housework. Mathabane notices that, though he grows skinnier by the day, his mother's stomach is expanding. He believes she is stealing food, and asks her about it one day, but she reveals that she's just pregnant.

Although Mathabane's mother later becomes a sweet and loving mentor, her struggles in this period turns her dark and sullen, suggesting that long suffering can have a drastic impact on one's personality. Mathabane's misunderstanding of his mother's pregnancy reiterates how young and naïve he is, in spite of having already faced such heavy and prolonged suffering himself.

CHAPTER 7

Mathabane's maternal grandmother, Granny, helps pay some of their rent. Mathabane asks his mother why they don't just move in with Granny until his father returns, but his mother explains that his father's family will not allow it—by tribal law, his wife and children are his property, and thus not allowed to live under someone else's roof. The family finds some hope when a shopkeeper agrees to pay their rent if Mathabane's mother will clean for him on the weekends. Additionally, a new garbage dump opens in Alexandra where Mathabane's family and many other desperate people can go to look for food scraps.

Tribal law's restriction on Mathabane's family seems to defy reason, especially when such a move might help them to survive. This suggests that, like apartheid, much of tribal law is pointedly arbitrary, creating artificial obstacles to survival that need not exist.

Mathabane, his mother, and his siblings leave early each morning to meet the garbage trucks at the dump, then dig until sundown collecting food scraps and useful items that white people threw away. One day, Mathabane finds something soft, which he imagines must be food, buried in a large package. His mother takes the package and begins to unwrap it but jumps back, shrieking. Inside lies a dead black baby girl, "beginning to rot." As they go home that day, Mathabane's mother explains how some black women, afraid they'll lose their jobs for white families due to "accidental pregnancy," smother their newborns and put them in garbage bins. Mathabane asks why they aren't arrested for murder, but his mother tells him, "Police don't arrest black people for killing black people."

The image of Mathabane's family surviving by digging through white people's trash highlights the severe economic disparity between black and white people in South Africa. The episode of Mathabane's mother finding a dead baby girl not only demonstrates the horror of living in such extreme poverty, but also the desperation it drives some people to, where they'll murder their own children in order to survive. Mathabane's mother's comment that the police don't care about black deaths again suggests that they do not protect or serve black people in any way, but merely oppress them.

After nearly a year of absence, when his family has essentially written him off as dead, Mathabane's father returns. His demeanor is dark and cruel, like "that of a black man being changed into a brute." He tells Mathabane's mother about the slave-like labor he did on white farms, building white roads, and shares his "vindictive hatred for white people." Mathabane hopes that his father's return will mean food for the family once again, but this isn't the case. His father needs a new **passbook**, and although he leaves before sunrise every day to get one from the administrative office, the officials keep refusing him, giving him "the runaround" and insisting that he needs this or that form.

Mathabane's father's transformation in prison suggests that extreme suffering and oppression can fill any person with hatred, hardening their prejudice toward others. Once again, Mathabane's father's inability to get a new passbook, despite trying to go through the official process, demonstrates how apartheid uses endless bureaucracy to hold black people back, rather than set them up for success, suggesting that it is a structurally oppressive system.

Mathabane grows so hungry that he begins to hate his newborn sister, Maria, for nursing at his mother's breast, since she gets to eat while he does not. One day, he's so hungry that he hallucinates that their shack is spinning around him and all of the furniture is laughing. He falls against the brazier and shrieks that he is on fire, even though his mother tells him he is fine. His mother swaddles him tightly in a blanket and sings to him until he falls asleep.

Mathabane's hatred toward his nursing sister is obviously irrational, though it stems from Mathabane's own desperation, rather than a lack of character. Like Mathabane's father, such a transformation suggests that extreme suffering can cause hate and anger to fester inside a person, to the point that they hate not only their oppressor, but anyone who does not suffer as much as they do.

Mathabane's father eventually gets his old job back, but even with the new income the family feels a "sense of insecurity and helplessness." Mathabane's father drinks and gambles much of their income away, and often fights with Mathabane's mother, referring to her as "the woman he bought." However, one evening his father stumbles home drunk with a bag of chicken parts for them to eat, and Mathabane remembers it as one of his family's few happy moments together.

Mathabane's family's continued hunger on account of his father's irresponsibility demonstrates how suffering tends to perpetuate itself and become multilayered. Not only must Mathabane face systemic racism and oppression, but also his father's own interference, demonstrating how a person in Mathabane's position can be faced with seemingly insurmountable disadvantages.

CHAPTER 8

To avoid chores at home, Mathabane starts spending time roaming Alexandra with a "gang" of boys between six and eight years old. They admire the tsotsis in their sharp suits and shiny shoes, and sometimes hunt for empty beer bottles to sell to illicit bars. Whenever the boys have money, they use it to watch violent white films at a local cinema, full of gladiators, mobsters, and soldiers killing each other. With no other knowledge of the white world, Mathabane imagines that it must all be full of gladiators, guns, and rampant violence. He begins to think that segregation is a good thing if it keeps him separate and safe from such a world.

Mathabane's initial involvement with his gang arises simply from a desire to escape work, demonstrating how innocently gang affiliation can arise. His belief that the violent films are accurate depictions of the white world—which thus increases his fear of white people—suggests that ignorance and fear contribute heavily to one's personal prejudice, creating such antagonism that an awful practice like segregation can seem reasonable.

CHAPTER 9

One day, Mathabane sees black evangelists wearing white frocks, pitching a giant tent and inviting people to come back and see them tonight. He also sees two white men with them, who Mathabane believes are policemen until his mother tells him that they're just Christians. Mathabane wants to go see the evangelists, and his mother is already planning to take their family there. Although the family has made sacrifices to tribal gods, they're still desperately poor, and Mathabane's mother wants to give a new religion a try.

Mathabane's perception of Christianity throughout his childhood is always conditioned by his current circumstances. In this instance, his and his mother's interest in the religion is fueled by their hunger and poverty, suggesting that they hope they can gain some material benefit from it. However, the presence of two white people hints at the fact that Christianity will be presented as the white man's religion.

Mathabane's father doesn't like Christianity, but understands Mathabane's mother's point and agrees to take the family to the night meeting. At the meeting, a black evangelist arrogantly declares that all black people should be thankful that the white missionaries brought them the Gospel, and that they must all abandon their filthy tribal religions to "board God's glory train" so that the "horned black man" does not trap them in hell. Mathabane's father and many men in the tent are furious, clenching their fists. The men shout at the evangelists, calling them "black traitors" and one man tries to attack the speaker, before someone else restrains him. Mathabane's father takes his family and storms out of the tent, along with many others.

The black evangelist's concept of Christianity is blatantly racist, demonstrating how the religion can be weaponized to spread the concept of white supremacy and black inferiority. The description of the "horned black man" is an obvious reference to the devil, suggesting that in this interpretation of Christianity, while white skin is regarded as good, black skin is regarded as the root of all evil. This demonstrates how racist beliefs may integrate into a religion—even one that claims to be pursuing righteousness.

At home, Mathabane's mother tells his father that there must be more to Christianity; they left too early to find out. His father is still furious and forbids his family from speaking to the evangelists. However, Mathabane's mother takes him back to the tent the next day while his father is at work, and they discuss what they know of Christianity. Mathabane sympathizes with his father, partly because he's seen Christian paintings that depict God as a white man and the devil as a black man. His mother explains that some Christians teach that black skin was a curse from God on one of Noah's sons, condemning black people "to be forever servants of the white man."

Like the evangelist's message, the Christian painting suggests that white skin is symbolic of godliness and righteousness, while black skin is the mark of evil, demonstrating how Christianity can be utilized to reinforce white supremacy and racism. For people like Mathabane's mother, who are interested in Christianity despite its overt racism, such depictions could reasonably lead them to develop an inferior, denigrated view of their own value as black people.

Mathabane privately vows to never submit to Christianity, but realizes that he enjoys some of the stories in the Bible. He decides they must be nice folklore, like their own tribal stories, but certainly not true. When Mathabane's father realizes that Mathabane and his mother are still discussing Christianity, he threatens to cut out their tongues, which pushes Mathabane further away from the religion.

Mathabane's hatred of Christianity's racist dogma, yet interest in its stories foreshadows the conflict he will have with the religion throughout his childhood, as he finds himself both repelled by it and inexplicably drawn to it.

CHAPTER 10

Food prices, rent, and bus fares all go up, but Mathabane's father's wages remain the same. The family again grows desperate for food, so they begin finding cheap alternatives to groceries, including black worms that resemble leeches, weeds that grow near lavatories, and cattle blood, which they get for free from a nearby slaughterhouse. Mathabane hates all of it. They stop drinking blood when the men at the slaughterhouse start charging for it.

Mathabane's father's wage stagnation demonstrates yet another way that poor black people suffer under apartheid, as the cost of living rises despite their income remaining the same. Eating leeches and drinking cattle blood typifies the suffering and desperation that define Mathabane's early childhood.

One day Mathabane sits in the yard, watching after his siblings while his mother looks for work in town. As he watches stray dogs sniff at a rotting cat's carcass, he wonders if there's any way for him to safely get meat from the carcass and avoid the worms that are eating it. Maria, still an infant, smears her own feces on herself because it makes the dogs lick her, tickling her. Mathabane kicks the dogs away and drags Maria to the yard's communal water tap to clean her. His mother returns home; she couldn't find a job.

Mathabane's description of their daily life again demonstrates his extreme destitution under apartheid. Such a scene is particularly awful when the reader recalls that white people in the same city enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world, demonstrating the severe economic disparity between races in South Africa.

Mathabane asks his mother why their father can't provide for them, but she has no real answer. When he asks if he and his siblings truly are his father's children—something he hears his father insinuate when angry at his mother—his mother smacks him hard across the mouth. She quickly apologizes and explains her nerves are brittle because of their poverty, and Mathabane sees how sad she is and forgives her. He accepts that hunger is always with him, present in his days and his dreams. During the days, he finds soccer games to play in the street, so that he can think of something besides food. This is how he develops a love of sports.

Mathabane's question of whether he and his siblings are really his father's children foreshadows his later conflict about how to regard his father as their familial situation continues to worsen. Just as the police are a constant fear for Mathabane, hunger forms a constant presence in his mind, suggesting that ongoing suffering influences his behavior much like acute trauma does. Mathabane's use of soccer to ignore his hunger suggests that sport can be a an effective method of escape from one's suffering.

In Mathabane's neighborhood, there is a compound that houses migrant workers from the tribal reserves. One day, he sees a group of boys around his age—between five and seven years old—accompanied by a 13-year-old named Mpandhlani. The boys ask Mathabane if he wants to get food and money, but Mpandhlani tells them that they'll have to wait until tomorrow. Mathabane joins them the next day, eager to see how they'll get food and money, and Mpandhlani leads them into the compound, past a grinning guard keeping watch at the gate.

This episode in Mathabane's life demonstrates the degree that many young black people go to survive apartheid's oppressive poverty. Although it's unclear at this point what the boys are doing to earn money, given that Mpandhlani is much older than them, the reader can guess that he is preying on the younger boys' desperation. On the other hand, the fact that Mpandhlani is only 13 himself suggests that in such an environment, one may begin exploiting others at a very young age in order to survive.

Inside the compound, grown Zulu warriors practice fighting in the yard. One of them winks at the young boys as they walk past. Mathabane feels an inexplicable urge to flee, but all the warriors in the yard make him too afraid to try. Mpandhlani leads the boys into a building in the back of the compound, full of bunks and shirtless men. It smells ghastly. The boys walk to a group of men in the back, who are stoking fires and cooking lots of food and invite the young boys to eat their fill, saying, "The food is free." There are eight men and 10 boys.

Although everyone in Alexandra seems to suffer, the wealth of food in the barracks contrasts with Mathabane's family's struggle to feed themselves at all. This suggests that along with the economic disparity between white and black people, there is also significant disparity within the ghetto in Alexandra and the black community itself.

Mathabane refuses to eat, which bothers the men, but Mpandhlani explains that "he's new." After the other boys eat their fill, the grown men give them each a handful of coins to keep, except for Mathabane since this is his first time. All of the boys strip naked and line up, touching their toes, while the men smear Vaseline on the boys' anuses and their own penises. One of the men reassures Mathabane that it's just "a game" the men and boys play together. Mathabane still doesn't completely understand what is happening, but panics and flees, sprinting out the building, across the compound, and through the gate before any of the men can catch him.

Although this scene is horrific—and has gotten autobiography banned in several high schools—it candidly reflects the horror and desperation of many black people's lives as they struggle under apartheid. In this case, the boys are willing to prostitute themselves to older men in order to earn food and money. The other boys have clearly done this before, suggesting that they habitually endure such suffering and sexual assault so they can survive. Exposure to such evil at his young age suggests that Mathabane is losing his innocence far earlier than what is normal and healthy.

Mathabane never tells anyone about what he saw, afraid that the Zulu warriors will react with violence if the police come for them. Later, Mathabane learns that child prostitution is common practice in Alexandra and that the police never stop it. On occasion, Mathabane sees Mpandhlani and his crew of young boys, all well-fed. They call Mathabane "a fool" when they see him, as many will throughout his life for not living the way most black people in South Africa do. Mathabane reflects that such foolishness is the only way to truly survive.

Mathabane's reflection that he must be a fool to truly survive suggests that life under apartheid encourages people to give in to their desperation and do whatever it takes to ease their pain, whether drinking or prostituting. However, his reflection suggests that in doing so, they trap themselves in the impoverished lifestyle instead; one can only escape by refusing to submit to their own desperation.

CHAPTER 11

Mathabane's mother and father believe in witchcraft, that any misfortune that befalls them is the result of "bad voodoo." One day, his mother is arrested for not having the permit to live with her husband, and their father has to spend all their money on a bribe to free her. They both risk deportation back to the tribal reserves and have to live "the lives of perpetual fugitives" in order to keep their family together and remain in Alexandra, where all of their children were born. Mathabane's mother is desperate for work and realizes that witchcraft is not helping, so she tells local evangelists that she'll become a Christian if God gives her a job. His father demands that she never speak to the evangelists again, but in secret, she takes her children to church a month later to be baptized.

Mathabane's father must use all of the family's money to get his wife out of jail, which sets them back where they started, rather than being able to invest that money into paying rent or stocking up on food. This demonstrates how apartheid's structural oppression holds black families in poverty. When they could be saving or slowly investing in a better life, the government routinely takes that money from them through fees, bribes, and fines, keeping them locked in the lowest socioeconomic bracket possible.

CHAPTER 12

After Mathabane, his mother, and his siblings become "nominal Christians," his mother continues looking for work to no avail. However, in the evenings she tells her children tribal stories and riddles. Although Mathabane also heard these tales when he was young, he now realizes that the stories about spirits, chieftains, and animals carry moral lessons as well, and he is captivated by the ideas hidden in them. Since nobody in the family reads, Mathabane sees his mother's vast collection of stories as "a kind of library, a fountain of knowledge" that teaches about virtue and vice, good and evil, peace and war, sensitivity, patience, and creativity.

Rather than throw off tribal beliefs as the evangelist demanded, Mathabane's mother combines her Christian faith with ancestral traditions and stories, demonstrating how Christianity can be used dynamically, adapted by different people in different environments. Although Mathabane's mother later admits she never attended school, her wealth of virtuous stories and riddles suggest that she possesses her own form of wisdom, passed down orally from her to her children.

CHAPTER 13

That winter, Mathabane's mother uses a burning brazier to fight off the bitter cold in their shack. However, one night she forgets to put it outside before falling asleep. Mathabane wakes to Florah rolling on the floor, screaming that she is on fire. Mathabane realizes that he can't breathe at all, as if someone is strangling him. Their mother rushes in, pats Florah to extinguish the flames, and drags Mathabane outside into the pouring rain, where the air rushes back into his lungs. His mother tells him that he was lucky Florah cried out so loud. Brazier smoke kills many poor people each winter.

This passage demonstrates how easily someone in abject poverty can die from a simple mistake. Since Mathabane's family is too poor to afford any safe heating measures, they are forced to use an unsafe measure that can possibly kill them, demonstrating yet another way that apartheid-induced poverty threatens the people who suffer it.

CHAPTER 14

Maria falls ill, so Mathabane's mother takes her, George, and Florah, to a clinic, leaving Mathabane home alone. He spends the day doing chores and in the evening goes out to the road to join his friends in jeering at the "shit-men," migrant workers who empty the outhouses in each neighborhood every two weeks. Because of their role, other black people look down on the shit-men. When their truck arrives and the workers see the boys laughing at them, they chase them down, catching Mathabane.

Although apartheid oppresses black people by placing them at the bottom of the race hierarchy, the abuse that the "shit-men" suffer indicates that black people form their own hierarchy within their community, suggesting that they imitate the cruel oppression they receive from white people, passing it on to others as well.

Mathabane howls with terror, but the shit-men make him show them where he lives. When they realize know one is home, they place a large bucket of human waste on the ground and force Mathabane to climb into it. They laugh as Mathabane does so, and threaten to make him eat some of it, but decide to let him go. After Mathabane climbs out of the bucket, the men dump its contents at his family's door and leave. When his mother gets home, she chides him for making fun of people stuck in a job they don't want to do, and states that Mathabane is lucky they weren't harder on him. From that day on, he resolves never to "jeer" at anyone ever again.

Mathabane's mother's lack of sympathy implies that she despises mimicking apartheid's oppressive hierarchy within their own community. Her tough-love attitude toward her son's humiliation suggests that for black people like themselves to be treated equitably by the people above them (white people), they themselves must treat the people below them (such as the shit-men) equitably as well. Mathabane's new resolution marks this as an important moment in his personal development.

CHAPTER 15

Mathabane's father is laid off once again. He wants to go to the tribal reserves to visit a witch doctor and get a "talisman to guarantee him perpetual employment," so he rations the family's food for two months until he can afford the trip. He decides to take Mathabane with him. The prospect excites Mathabane, since he's never left Alexandra before, They hire a truck driver to hide them under a pile of furniture for 24 hours and smuggle them into Venda tribal land.

Mathabane's father's rationing so he can claim a tribal remedy suggests that his tribal beliefs disrupt his family's wellbeing. Although he may believe that a talisman will fix his problems in the long term, he pushes his family nearer to the brink of starvation for a full two months to achieve this.

When they arrive, Mathabane sees that the tribal land is dry and infertile, and the people there seem even poorer than in Alexandra. He thinks, "Most were a pathetic lot." However, they crowd around Mathabane to hear any information he has about the cities, which makes him feel "superior to the lot of them." Mathabane's father tells him that someday the white people will force all black people to come back and live on this land, but it will be a better place for Mathabane to become a proper Venda boy than the city is. Mathabane suspects that his father means to leave him here and return to Alexandra alone.

Despite Mathabane's resolution never to "jeer" at anyone ever again, his self-superiority toward the tribal people implies that he still internalizes apartheid's hierarchy. This suggests that such an oppressive system affects not only one's physical well-being but even their psyche, encouraging them to imitate its prejudice toward other people. The general poverty in tribal lands suggests that his father's loyalty to tribal values can lead only to ruin.

At the end of the week, Mathabane and his father go to meet the witch doctor in his cave at the base of a mountain. Mathabane thinks it all looks like something out of a "Tarzan movie." His father tells the witch doctor all of his problems and needs (health, stable employment, winning at dice, and so on). The witch doctor reads a small set of bones and decides that the ancestors are mad at Mathabane's father, so he must sacrifice a chicken to them twice a year and drink blood from a goat's neck as an "ablution ceremony." When they leave, Mathabane's father "seem[s] a new man," though Mathabane finds it strange that his father should so easily submit to the witch doctors instructions and ceremonies.

Mathabane's father's wishes for the witch doctor mix his family's wellbeing and his own personal desires (winning at dice), suggesting that the trip is at least partially selfish, rising from his father's desire to win rather than to support the wellbeing of his family. In light of this, denying his family food for two months and spending so much money on the trip depicts Mathabane's father as a primarily selfish person, putting his own pride and desires above the basic needs of his growing family.

The day before Mathabane and his father return to Alexandra, his father suggests he should leave his son in Venda, to let him grow up proper. Mathabane firmly tells him he'll run away; he'd rather die than live here. His father doesn't bring it up again. Before they leave, Mathabane asks a young boy why there are no adult men in the village, and he tells Mathabane that every father is away, working in the mines. The boy hasn't seen his own father in seven years.

Mathabane's father's wish to leave his son behind is perhaps less motivated by the desire for Mathabane to grow up a particular way than by his desire to be rid of one child, and thus have a little bit less financial pressure. This further characterizes Mathabane's father as a selfish person.

CHAPTER 16

The day that Mathabane and his father arrive back home, Mathabane's mother gives birth to yet another daughter and names her Merriam. Money becomes even tighter. Six months later, the government announces that it will demolish Alexandra because it is a "black spot" on the city. Families with permits may relocate to Soweto or Tembisa—all others will be deported to the tribal reserves. Every night, Mathabane's family expects bulldozers arrive to destroy their house, and his parents don't know what to do. However, after a few weeks the government announces it will only raze part of Alexandra for now, and the Mathabanes are able to find a new shack in a section of town safe from demolition.

Along with poverty and bureaucracy, Alexandra's inhabitants must worry about losing their homes as well. The government's failure to follow through on its project suggests that it didn't particularly care about demolishing Alexandra in the first place. Once again, this demonstrates the many ways that apartheid structurally oppresses black people, burdening them with unnecessary fears and concerns so that they do not advance in life but remain powerless and repressed.

In their new shack and new neighborhood, Mathabane finds a piece of a magazine with pictures of big beautiful houses inside. He tells his mother that he will build her a house like that, but she tells him that even if he is rich, black people are not allowed to own land. Mathabane protests that that is unfair, but his mother tells him it's just the way the laws work, since white people run the country. Mathabane reflects that in this moment he understands that white people are "the authors of apartheid," and he understands the world "wholly in racial terms." All black people think this way. The world is split into two worlds, utterly separate, though codependent as "master and slave."

Since Mathabane's whole life is defined by their suffering under apartheid, it follows that he views the world in explicitly racial terms, with white people as "the authors" of all its suffering and evil. This demonstrates how apartheid's injustice increases personal prejudice—not only white people's prejudice of black people, but also black people's prejudice of white people. Although it's true that apartheid unfairly oppresses black people, in Mathabane's mind, every single white person embodies apartheid's evil, which does not fit reality.

Mathabane gets to know his new neighborhood, which is stinking, filthy, and overrun with rats. Even so, he and the other children play in the yards, digging for "hidden treasure" in piles of refuse. They crush glass bottles into "diamonds" and sail bottle-top boats in the rivers of urine that surround the lavatory. His family's shack's ceiling starts to crumble and its doorways rot and let cold air through. Animals crawl through holes in the wall. Mathabane accepts these conditions without complaint, though, because it's the only way of life he knows.

Mathabane's acceptance of his abject poverty suggests that many people do not fight for a different reality because they don't realize that one exists. This further suggests that apartheid keeps people like Mathabane in a subservient, repressed position by keeping them ignorant of the outside world, where such racism and oppression are unacceptable practices.

CHAPTER 17

Mathabane learns within a few months that his whole neighborhood is full of "refugees" like his parents, black people without their **passbooks** in order. His father is arrested again, and the family again goes hungry. Mathabane starts begging for food, which infuriates his mother. When she catches him begging, she tries to beat him, but he is too quick for her. Instead, she tells him that witches live all around them and might give him "voodooed food" that will poison him. This story terrifies Mathabane so much that he stops begging or taking food from strangers.

Despite Mathabane's mother's growing Christian faith and Mathabane's own resistance to tribal customs, his terror indicates that such beliefs and traditions still exert a powerful control over him, shaping his view of the world. This also suggests that such beliefs are useful for parents, allowing them to wield control over their children through fear and superstition.

CHAPTER 18

Mathabane's father returns after a few months, but Mathabane realizes that a police raid can "shatter[]" the fragile "normalcy" for their family at any moment. He sees his own future as a black man played out in his father's constant arrests, and the realization leaves him feeling hopeless, questioning whether "black life" is worth living at all.

The constant possibility of his father being arrested demonstrates the way that apartheid keeps black families vulnerable, at risk of losing half or all of their income at any point, and making simple survival such a burden that there is little hope of rising out of poverty.

More migrants enter their neighborhood ghetto and bring more tribal beliefs with them. Mathabane grows more aware of witches and voodoo all around them: shooting stars are flying witches, creaking roofs mean witches are riding baboons across them, and every misfortune is a sign of bad voodoo. Mathabane's father tells him that he has no "free will" or agency in his life, but that every event is controlled and ordained by his ancestors.

Mathabane's internalized belief that he has no agency contributes to apartheid's goal of keeping him repressed and powerless to change his position in life. Interestingly, Mathabane will later criticize Christianity for a parallel belief, making its adherents passive and helpless, rather than active shapers of their own destinies.

However, by the time Mathabane is seven, he begins to have quiet doubts about his parents' view of the world. He realizes he will need to ask questions and discern reality for himself, though vocally opposing his father's tribal beliefs is out of the question.

Mathabane's skepticism about his father's beliefs marks an important moment in his personal development—he chooses to understand the world as he actually sees it, rather than simply accepting what he is told.

CHAPTER 19

After three years of "constant police terror," every time Mathabane's mother wakes him at night he assumes the police are raiding their neighborhood. However, one day she wakes him early on a winter morning without police and says they must travel but will not tell him where they are going. She dresses Mathabane's siblings and they leave the shack without breakfast before sunrise. They go to Granny's home, where they find the "indomitable matriarch" anxiously waiting. Peri-Urban police have just arrested her 13-year-old son, Mathabane's Uncle Piet. Granny had sent him to the store before school to buy some bread, but the police picked him up for not having a **passbook**, since he is unusually tall and can pass as an adult.

Mathabane's constant suspicion that the police are raiding their home suggests that his experiences with them have sufficiently traumatized him, conditioning his behavior and making him (justifiably) paranoid. The police's arrest of 13-year-old Uncle Piet for not having a passbook, when he does not legally need one as a child, suggests that apartheid's laws and executors have nothing to do with justice. Rather, the police only intend to harass black people in every way possible and inhibit their chances for personal success.

Mathabane's mother and Granny resolve to get Uncle Piet out of jail, otherwise he may be sent to a potato farm where black men are "flogged, tortured, starved, and hung from trees." Mathabane's mother spends the day asking relatives for money. The next day they pawn some of Granny's things to get the money. The court warns Uncle Piet that he needs a **passbook** now that he looks like an adult, even though he wears a school uniform. The principal of his school signs and stamps a note to verify that he's only a child, but policemen arrest Uncle Piet several more times regardless.

The description of the potato farm's treatment of black people sounds medieval, yet the story takes place in the mid-20th century, reiterating how gruesome and oppressive the apartheid system is. Uncle Piet's continued arrests again suggests that apartheid's laws having nothing to do with justice or safety, but simply provide the police with the legal premise to harass and intimidate black people.

CHAPTER 20

A few weeks later, Mathabane's mother takes him to the superintendent's office to apply for papers, though she won't tell him what the papers are for. They arrive at his office at five in the morning, but a long line has already gathered.

Mathabane's mother's arrival at the office at such an early hour confirms that she is dedicated to getting the right papers for her son, which emphasizes the injustice when she is turned away.

Mathabane's feet are frozen, so his mother lets him sit with a group of men around a trash fire. The older men talk about their struggles to find permits, to avoid police, to fight injustice in the Bantu courts. A truck convoy passes by filled with grim black men wrapped in heavy blankets. Mathabane asks who those men are, but one of the men around the fire says they're not men, they're "leeches" coming from the tribal lands to work in the white man's gold mines. Another bitterly adds that if those men "hadn't been licking the white man's ass" then black people might already have equal rights in South Africa. Mathabane recognizes the same "anger and hatred" in these men that he sees in his father, and wonders what creates it.

Like the "shit-men," the migrant workers are hated by most other black people, suggesting that an apartheid-like hierarchy exists even within the black South Africans' own oppressed community. That community's anger and hatred toward white people is so strong that they aim it at any black person who even associates with white people. Mathabane's recognition of the same hatred that burns inside his father indicates that after decades of ruthless oppression, anger festers into hatred within nearly all black people in South Africa.

Mathabane and his mother wait seven hours in line, and then several more as various offices send them this way or that to fetch different paperwork. They finally get a meeting with the superintendent, but the official's black clerk announces he decided to go home early, though it's only the middle of the afternoon. The clerk tells Mathabane's mother to try again in a month. She starts to complain, but he cuts her off and says the superintendent can do whatever he wants.

Despite being at the office at five in the morning, the superintendent's office traps Mathabane's mother in a mire of bureaucracy, again demonstrating how apartheid's overly-complex laws prevent black people from even legally following the law and taking steps to better themselves.

They try again in a month, on a Friday. Mathabane sees people singing with happiness because it is payday. He asks his mother why his father never sings. His father has grown even more sullen—although Mathabane and his siblings want to love him, whenever his sisters try to hug or kiss him he shoves them roughly away. Mathabane's mother insists that his father simply has many worries because of his work.

Mathabane's father's sullenness arises from his oppression under apartheid, which in turn gives way to his failure to be a parent. This string of effects suggests that apartheid oppresses black people not only economically, but emotionally and socially as well, burdening them so much that it is difficult to be a proper parent, spouse, or friend.

Mathabane and his mother finally meet with the white superintendent, but Mathabane cowers with fear as soon as he sees him—the white man was one of the policemen directing the night raids years ago. When Mathabane mentions this to his mother, she warns him to keep quiet. The official grills Mathabane's mother on where he was born and whether or not he is "a bastard" or her rightful child. The superintendent claims that he can't give issue paperwork because they have no birth certificate on record. Mathabane's mother explains that the clinic won't give them a certificate because Mathabane was born at home, but the official refuses to help unless she can show a birth certificate. He gives her a note to show to the clinic, assuring her that they'll provide the birth certificate now—but Mathabane's mother cannot read.

Mathabane's terror at seeing the white man not only demonstrates his general fear of white people, which is considerable, but his enduring trauma from years of night raids. Meanwhile, the superintendent's aggressive and rude questions toward Mathabane's mother demonstrates his own racial prejudice against black people, whom he seems intent on disrespecting. The convoluted process and demands that the superintendent makes again demonstrate how apartheid structurally oppresses black people by trapping them with layers of complex laws and bureaucracy.

The following Monday, Mathabane and his mother take the note to the clinic and again wait in line for hours. Mathabane stares with horror at all manner of grisly illnesses and wounds, with nowhere near enough doctors or nurses to provide treatment. When his mother gives the superintendent's note to a black clerk, the clerk explains that the note only says that she has a problem but does not specify what—it is not useful in any way. A guard forces his mother out of line. However, Mathabane's mother catches hold of a white nun as she is passing by. The nun listens to her story, growing more enraged with each detail, and accosts the clerk until he writes up a birth certificate. Mathabane's mother tells him this is proof that "not all white people are bad."

The superintendent's useless note suggests that he actively does not want Mathabane's mother to get the proper papers for Mathabane; he seems to take some perverse pleasure in seeing black people fail, demonstrating a malicious racial prejudice. However, the white nun, the first kind white person in the story, shows legitimate compassion. She not only demonstrates that not all white people bear personal prejudice, but also that not all Christians are exploitative or white supremacists either.

CHAPTER 21

When Mathabane's mother starts hinting that Mathabane be attending school soon, he vows to never go. He runs with a gang of older boys who thinks school is a waste of time, unnecessary for survival in their world, and he believes them. One morning, his mother wakes him at four in the morning and forces him to bathe, which he almost never does. Granny arrives and she and his mother dress Mathabane in his father's clothes, folding and tucking them to fit his small frame. When Granny lets slip that they're taking him to school, Mathabane fights and tries to escape, so Granny takes a length of rope and ties his hands and feet. They carry Mathabane to school, meeting a woman on the way who remarks that she wishes she'd hauled her own son to school; instead he became a tsotsi. Now he's dead.

In addition to the violence Mathabane suffers from his father, the police, and gangs, Mathabane's mother and teachers often use violence to enforce good behavior as well, such as going to school. While this doesn't advocate for corporal punishment, it does suggest that violence is so commonplace in Mathabane's world that it seems the only thing many children will respond to. The woman who lost her son confirms the necessity of binding and physically hauling Mathabane to school against his will, since the alternative is much worse.

They meet the principal at school, who warmly greets Mathabane's mother and says that he's heard much about Mathabane already. His mother tells the principal it took nearly a year to get the birth certificate and all the paperwork in order, but Mathabane is finally ready. The principal sympathizes that the paperwork is horrible, but as important for children as **passbooks** are for adults. Looking through the paperwork, the principal raises the concern that Mathabane is half-Venda, and this is not a Venda school. When his mother tells the principal that the family speaks Shangaan when Mathabane's father is not present, the principal agrees to make an exception.

Despite her hard work, the fact that it takes Mathabane's mother nearly a year just to acquire the paperwork to enroll her son demonstrates the scale of disadvantages facing black children. Beyond paying for tuition, getting good grades, finding opportunities, the difficulty of even enrolling a black child suggests that under apartheid, it is monumentally difficult for someone to rise from poverty, even through education.

With registration settled, Mathabane's mother and Granny take him home, and Mathabane leaves to play soccer with friends. Part of him wants to run away and never attend school, but he remembers the woman grieving her lost son and thinks perhaps he ought to. When he gets home, a neighbor tells him that his parents were fighting. Mathabane's father won't let him inside and threatens to come out and kill him. Mathabane says he'll kill his father too, and then runs to Granny's house, where he finds his mother with a bruised and swollen face.

This scene marks a major transition in Mathabane's story where his parents become opposing influences in his life. In the thematic conflict between tribal identity and modern education, Mathabane's father represents tribalism and a loyalty to one's roots, even at the cost of one's own personal development; his mother represents change and modern education.

Mathabane's mother doesn't want to talk about the fight, but Granny pushes her to tell Mathabane what caused it. Mathabane's father is furious that Mathabane's mother enrolled him in a "useless white man's education," and Mathabane's father doesn't want his mother to work to pay the school fees, since it makes his father look bad. Granny mentions that, technically, Mathabane's father does own his mother, since he paid the "bride price" for her, but his mother wants to leave his father. Mathabane's mother tells him that she wants him to go to school because so he can "have a future" rather than turn out like his father. She assures Mathabane that education "will open doors where none seem to exist" and make him "a somebody in this world."

Mathabane's father's ownership of his family under tribal law limits both Mathabane and his mother's freedoms, indicating that aspects of his father's tribal identity are misogynistic and restrictive. His mother's hope that Mathabane will "have a future" rather than be like his father suggests that she sees no value in Mathabane's father's obsessive tribalism, but rather understands the importance of leaving it behind for the sake of modern education and a chance to succeed in the modern, Westernizing world.

When Mathabane's mother tells him that she never had the chance to go to school, though she always wanted to, he vows to attend school "forever." Mathabane realizes that the family is now firmly divided into two sides: his mother who wants him educated versus his father who wants him to remain ignorant. He chooses his mother's side.

Mathabane's summary of his parents' convictions suggests that tribalism, though it upholds one's heritage, is the opposite of progress—it cannot offer the same freedom in the future as a modern education can.

CHAPTER 22

Mathabane attends his first real day of school two weeks later, which turns out to be "a nightmare." Hundreds of the children are packed into a small courtyard for an assembly. The principal shouts over crying, screaming children to announce that this is Bovet Community School and tries to explain the rules and expectations on students. The courtyard is so cramped and hot that several small children faint. Amidst a long list of rules, the principal observes that the children "embody[] the hope for a meaningful future for black people." The principal prays, the assembly sings a hymn, and everyone is dismissed.

The overcrowding at Mathabane's school suggests that black schools in Alexandra are underfunded and understaffed, adding yet another disadvantage to young black people as they try to succeed in the world and rise from apartheid's poverty. This again demonstrates how apartheid structurally oppresses black people by making it exceedingly difficult for them to get an education.

Over 200 first-year children pack into one classroom while their teacher, a teenage girl, shouts from the front of the room and tries to quiet everyone down. Eventually she loses her patience and begins striking students at random with her cane. The principal comes in and realizes that there are two classes' worth of children there and separates them out. The rest of the day, Mathabane and his classmates learn vowels, how to count to 20 in Tsonga, and how to stand and sit when told. All the children hate it. Mathabane's mother tells him that if he learns something, then "it's worth it."

Once again, the single under-qualified teacher for 200 children suggests that Mathabane's school—which it took his mother a year to get him into—is so under-resourced that it barely functions, adding yet again another obstacle that Mathabane must overcome to learn and succeed as a black person under apartheid.

CHAPTER 23

Mathabane slowly grows fonder of school, even though he often receives beatings for being unkempt, making noise, or not having his school fees. However, the young teacher quits after a "severe nervous breakdown" and a kind older woman takes her place. Mathabane makes many new friends, many from wealthier families. He can buy lunch each day at school for four pennies. Most importantly, the new words and numbers and songs make Mathabane constantly want to learn more, especially as he begins to learn English and not just Tsonga.

Mathabane's world is framed by violence, even from people who presumably want to help him succeed, such as his teachers. Mathabane's introduction to English marks another critical milestone in his personal development, as it begins to open the white world up to him, which will ultimately provide him with opportunities to succeed and address his own personal prejudices.

At the end of the term in December, the principal holds a school-wide assembly to recognize academic achievements. To Mathabane's complete surprise, the principal announces that he is the top-ranked student in his grade. All of the teachers and many of Mathabane's peers congratulate him on his excellent work. The principal dismisses the assembly and Mathabane realizes that he's sad he'll be away from school and friends for the two holiday months.

Mathabane's sadness at being away from school and friends suggests that his attitude toward school has reversed: where he once hated it, he now enjoys both the learning and camaraderie. Additionally, his academic achievement suggests that, in the world of education and progress, he can excel and achieve more than he would in his father's tribal world.

Mathabane's achievement makes his father proud. His father asks him how much the books and slates he need for school costs. When Mathabane tells him, his father is irritated that it is so much and briefly quarrels with Mathabane's mother. However, Mathabane's father gives him the full sum, shocking Mathabane. He wants to kiss his father. His father tells him he won't pay for everything, and after Mathabane can read and write, he must quit school.

Mathabane's father's pride represents a rare moment of affection between father and son. Although Mathabane's father will continue to oppose his modern education, this moment suggests that some part of his father also recognizes its value, especially if Mathabane distinguishes himself as a scholar.

When Florah turns six, her mother enrolls her in school as well, doubling the fees their family must pay. Mathabane's teachers constantly beat him for not having his fees, books, or uniform even though he can't afford them. They often shame him in front of his peers for not finding the money. Mathabane finds himself "hating all the teachers," and begins to doubt how useful school is for him.

Although Mathabane's teachers use violence to reinforce good behavior, his disenchantment with school after being repeatedly beaten for events beyond his control suggests that such beatings can have a negative impact as well.

When Mathabane tells his mother he wants to quit school, she begs him to stay and promises that when she finds a job, she'll use her first wages to buy books and uniforms. His mother does find a job, but his father uses this as an excuse to stop paying for the family's groceries. Mathabane's mother has to delay buying him books since she has to buy groceries now as well. However, she buys a box of books in a flea market, hoping that they'll work for school. But when Mathabane looks at them, he sees that they're all in the wrong languages. However, a friendly neighbor with some education offers to buy the correct school books and trade Mathabane's mother for the ones she found.

Mathabane's father's decision to no longer pay for groceries depicts him as a selfish individual, since the reader knows he spends his money on drinking and gambling. Mathabane's father is thus a destructive force within their family, adding another obstacle that Mathabane must overcome in order to rise from poverty and succeed in the modern world. Mathabane's father's selfishness implies that his tribal values do not necessarily lead to stronger character.

CHAPTER 24

Although he now has books and uniforms and continues to outperform his peers, Mathabane still doesn't understand the point of his education. He wonders if it truly is just a tool to make black people more like white people so they can be their servants. One afternoon, Mathabane sees a chanting crown marching down the street, shouting "ALI! ALI! ALI!" He goes to investigate and some of the marchers tell him about how the black boxer Muhammad Ali just beat a white boxer in America. People talk of nothing else, and all week boys pretend their Ali. Mathabane dreams of being such a fighter and beating "all the white men I could lay my hands on."

Muhammad Ali's victory brings joy to black people in South Africa, since it proves that a black person can compete and succeed over white people. This suggests that for black people under apartheid, sports victories like Ali's represent black capability, which apartheid's defenders deny. However, in spite of this great victory, Mathabane's vision of beating every white person suggests that he carries a deeply-rooted hatred and rage inside of him, directed at all white people.

Mathabane and his friends find a boxing club in Alexandra and tell the owner they want to learn to box. The owner starts by having Mathabane box an older, experienced boy. Although all his friends call Mathabane "Ali" and chant encouragements, Mathabane is beaten badly. The club owner tells Mathabane that he fought well and should come back again, but Mathabane decides, "To hell with Ali."

Although Mathabane winds up in fights a few times throughout the story, his aversion to boxing suggests that he is not naturally inclined to violence. Although violence might provide an outlet for his anger, Mathabane decides it is not for him.

CHAPTER 25

In 1968, Mathabane wakes to find his whole neighborhood in mourning, speaking of a black man named King that the white people killed in America. The other boys at school don't know why this black man was more important than all the others white people have killed. His mother says she heard King was fighting for equal rights for black people in America. Mathabane asks if black people have equal rights in South Africa and his mother says they don't. Privately, Mathabane longs for the "day when armies of black peasants would invade the white world" and kill every white person in sight. He promises his mother that he'll fight for his own rights some day, but his mother remains silent.

It is ironic that Martin Luther King Jr.'s death should inspire Mathabane's longing for bloody vengeance, since King himself preached non-violent resistance. However, Mathabane's hatred and rage toward white people, especially coming from someone who is not naturally violent, suggests that such anger and rage are unavoidable consequences of black people's long and severe oppression under the white apartheid government.

CHAPTER 26

After Mathabane's teachers beat him several months in a row, he decides to quit school by being truant for a month, so that he'll be expelled. Each day he lies to his mother that he's going to school and then spends the day with the other kids in his gang instead, watching films at the cinema or hanging out in junkyards. However, his mother knows about this and contacts the school. The principal sends his four biggest students to fetch Mathabane. When the rest of his gang sees the four big students, they flee. The older boys catch Mathabane, tie him up with a rope, and carry him back to school. His mother and teachers are there, waiting for him. His mother tells the teachers to whip him good, and Mathabane is bedridden for the next week, recovering from his injuries.

Although violence is most often a negative feature of Mathabane's life, episodes like this one suggest that sometimes it can be used to an ultimately beneficial effect. If Mathabane's principal had not sent the boys to hunt Mathabane down, it seems likely that he would've successfully dropped out of school and become a tsotsi or another low-skilled, low-paid laborer like his parents. Although grim and severe, the beatings Mathabane receives from his teachers ultimately help him to succeed in life, complicating the ethics of such treatment.

CHAPTER 27

Mathabane turns 10 years old, but after all that he's seen in Alexandra he feels "emotionally" far older than that. Life in Alexandra continues with school and soccer and suffering. Near that end of that year, Mathabane witnesses a murder. As he is walking home one afternoon, he sees six tsotsis chasing two unarmed men. At the sight of gangsters, Mathabane quickly hides himself in some tall grass.

Once again, Mathabane's traumatic childhood forces him to grow up and face a harsh world far sooner than he should need to, as a child. This suggests that such an environment, filled with poverty, suffering, and oppression, strips one's innocence away from them.

One of the men escapes, but the tsotsis corner the other in a yard and begin "carving" him with knives, machetes, and tomahawks, grinning with glee at the man's pained screams. Although bleeding heavily from several wounds, the victim briefly breaks away and runs past where Mathabane is hiding. Mathabane sees his entrails spilling through his clothing. The tsotsis easily catch the man and finish their work. They rifle through the dead man's clothing and leave his body in a pool of blood. After he's sure the gangsters are gone, Mathabane sprints home and faints on his doorstep until his mother revives him.

Like the scene of child prostitution, the image of the victim's inner organs spilling out of his chest as he flees reflects the horrific violence that pervades Mathabane's world. Such suffering would be a burden for anyone to bear, but is especially troubling for a 10-year-old kid, who should be enjoying his childhood rather than living in fear of being cut to pieces or murdered by police.

Mathabane tries to tell his mother what he saw, but cannot speak and faints again, waking the next day in his house. The memory of what he saw comes back to him. Mathabane starts "withdrawing" from the world and having nightmares about the murder. He cannot "understand the morbid cruelty and satanic impulses that drove people to kill others." Life seems hopeless and he feels alone in the world.

Mathabane's confusion at the grotesque violence suggests that the experience deeply traumatizes him, and also again suggests that he is not violent by nature. Although this is not Mathabane's first witness of suffering, this instance seems to finally unleash all the years of pent-up horror in his mind.

CHAPTER 28

A few months later, Mathabane decides that he wants to die. The world seems too full of suffering and the future seems to hold no hope for him. Although he's always been a fighter like his mother, on a particular winter afternoon he feels "unloved, unwanted, abandoned, and betrayed" by the world. Mathabane takes a long butterfly knife and contemplates how he will kill himself, thinking he will run himself through like a gladiator in a movie. As he thinks about this, doubts linger. His mother finds him, and though he tries to hide the knife from her, she's already seen it.

Mathabane's suicide attempt arises from his feeling that he has no future as a black man under apartheid, other than one filled with suffering and death. In addition to the structural and familial challenges of surviving apartheid, this suggests that black people must also face great psychological challenges as they try to cope and find a reason to live in the face of endless suffering.


In a fearful voice, Mathabane asks if anyone will miss him if he dies. His mother reminds him of how much his sisters and brother need an older sibling to look out for them, to care for and protect them. Mathabane realizes she is right. His mother tells him that most of all, she would miss him. He is her greatest hope in the world, and she would want to die if he died. Mathabane's mother hugs him and he gives her the knife. She pays close attention to his moods from that day forward.

Mathabane's mother reminds him of the people in his life who love him and depend on him, suggesting that the key to surviving such trauma and hopelessness is recognizing one's position among their family and community—an individual's suicide affects not only them, but the people around them as well.

CHAPTER 29

Granny takes a gardening job working for an English-speaking white family, the Smiths. Before long, Granny starts bringing comic books home for Mathabane that the Smiths give her. The Smiths have a boy about Mathabane's age and Granny told them about her clever grandson, so they pass on old books and toys as well. This confuses Mathabane, since white people usually never give things to black people, but he pores over the comics, books, and games. He learns stories and rhymes that his teachers don't even know and renews his love for school and learning.

Mathabane's confusion as to why white people would give things to a black child suggests that he does not view them as human beings in the way he sees himself or his mother, but only as soulless, racist antagonists. Mathabane's experience with Mrs. Smith thus not only reveals his own blind prejudice to him, but also suggests that not all white people are racist believers in apartheid.


When one of Mathabane's teachers asks what sort of work his Granny does, he is ashamed to admit that she is a gardener, since it seems lowly. However, the teacher tells him that his grandmother was a gardener too. Mathabane never again feels ashamed of his family or their poverty.

Mathabane's shame that Granny is a gardener suggests that, even in a community with widespread poverty, he feels social stigma over his family's struggle to get by.

One night, Mathabane's father suggests to his mother that they use their savings to brew beer and join a "stockvel," an arrangement between several families to run an unlicensed bar out of their homes. His mother only wants to use their money for schooling, and a fight erupts between them. Mathabane's mother is angry at her husband for drinking and gambling their money away, while father is angry at his wife for not being docile enough.

Mathabane's parents' fight shows that his mother is becoming bolder, more willing to challenge his father's behavior and opinions. This implies that Mathabane's mother is rejecting her husband's tribal values to a steadily-growing degree.

After the fight dies down, Mathabane's father offers to quit gambling and buying alcohol if Mathabane's mother will agree to start selling beer. Privately, Mathabane hopes they try it, since stockvel families have far more money than they do. Mathabane's mother continues to refuse until his father says that some of the profits can help pay for education as well, and offers her his whole week's paycheck as a down payment. Mathabane begs his mother to agree, and she finally relents.

Mathabane's parents' business venture disproves the apartheid notion that black people are lazy or unintelligent. Their business (though illegal) demonstrates that in spite of their lack of education, many people undertake creative endeavors to establish some level of stable income.

Although the liquor business does not solve all their family's problems, it does turn a profit. Mathabane's father brings his whole paycheck home each week, and rather than staying out to drink, his friends drink at their home with him instead. Mathabane's parents pay him to keep the books, and when word gets out that he can write, he starts offering a letter-writing service to his father's customers as well. The letters are usually to and from migrant workers from the tribal reserves, containing news about their families. More often than not, the news is tragic. Because of Influx Control Laws, the migrant workers are not allowed to live with their families in "white South Africa," and remain separated from them for years at a time.

Mathabane's ability to keep the books for his parents' business already demonstrates a modern education's benefit to not only the student, but their family and community as well. In the thematic conflict between his father's tribal identity and his own desire for a modern education, Mathabane's newfound usefulness to the family business suggests that the education is more valuable. Meanwhile, Influx Control Laws demonstrate another way that apartheid structurally oppresses black people by breaking up families.

CHAPTER 30

Granny moves into a smaller shack and worries that she won't be able to pay for Uncle Piet or his sister Aunt Bushy's education much longer, since tuition rises while Granny's wage stay the same. Mathabane spends as many evenings as possible with Granny and she treats him as her favorite grandchild. One day, Granny excitedly tells Mathabane and his mother that the Smiths gave her permission to bring Mathabane to work with her so they can meet him. Mathabane is terrified by the idea and does not want to meet a white family, hurting Granny's feelings, but his mother declares its far too great an opportunity to "throw away."

Mathabane's terror at the thought of meeting a white family suggests that, although his personal prejudice is slowly being challenged, his traumatic experiences with white police and general anger toward the white population still dominate his perception of the world. Along with the many obstacles that apartheid lays before him, Mathabane's own blind prejudice toward white people represents another challenge for him to overcome.

The day before he meets the Smiths, Mathabane's mother informs the principal why he'll be gone and scrubs Mathabane furiously, even though he normally bathes himself. She claims that white people are "the cleanest people on earth" and won't want a "filthy black boy contaminating their home." The next day, Mathabane and Granny take an overcrowded bus into Johannesburg. The size of the buildings and mansions and the general wealth awes Mathabane. The bus stops for a group of white schoolchildren crossing the street, and Mathabane notes that black children have to run across the street, dodging traffic.

Mathabane's mother's comment about him being a "filthy black boy" who can "contaminate" others suggests that she internalizes white South Africa's disdain for black people, viewing her own fellow sufferers—indeed, her own family—as "filthy" people. This self-contempt represents yet another way that apartheid oppresses black people, reinforcing low notions about their own human value so that they will accept their oppression.

Mathabane and Granny get off at their stop and walk to a large house, where Granny calls out to Mrs. Smith from the gate. Mrs. Smith comes out to meet them—a small white woman dressed in white pants, shirt, and hat. Mathabane is nervous, but there is a warmth to Mrs. Smith's voice that is instantly calming. She greets Mathabane and marvels at how smart he is when he introduces himself at length in English. Mrs. Smith remarks to her black servant that black children are so smart they'll soon run the country. Mrs. Smith states that she is about to go play tennis. When Mathabane asks her what tennis is, she tells him she'll find him an old racket to use.

Although the majority of white people support apartheid since it benefits them, Mrs. Smith's kindness and respect demonstrates—both to Mathabane and the reader—that not all white people in South Africa support it. Mrs. Smith's comment that black children will run the country suggests that she hopes for a different, liberated future for South Africa in which the black majority can participate in running their own government.

A school bus stops in front of the house and a chubby white boy gets off—Mrs. Smith's son Clyde. Clyde doesn't like that Mathabane is there and calls him a "Kaffir," but Mrs. Smith scolds him. She remarks to Granny that she hates how white people treat black people in South Africa; the Bible says all should be equal, so white people are hypocrites.

Despite Mrs. Smith's kindness, Clyde's racism suggests that such behavior is more easily absorbed by children. Granny and Mrs. Smith's conversation about the Bible suggests that, though the government uses Christianity to reinforce apartheid, they are abusing the religion rather than faithfully exercising its values.

Clyde shows Mathabane around the house, and Mathabane is struck by all the things that Clyde has that Mathabane himself does not: toys, clothes, and mountains of books. Clyde gives Mathabane an advanced textbook and tells him to read it. When Mathabane can't, Clyde calls him "retarded" and says that his teachers claim that "Kaffirs can't read, speak, or write English like white people because they have smaller brains." Mrs. Smith walks into the room as Clyde is saying this and scolds him again, saying that not everything white people teach in school is true, especially their version of South African history. Clyde's insult makes Mathabane determined to "master English." At the end of the day, after Mathabane helps Granny garden, Mrs. Smith gives him some secondhand clothing and a copy of *Treasure Island* to keep.

Clyde's cruelty contrasts sharply with Mrs. Smith's kindness. His statement that his teachers taught him that black people are unintelligent suggests that much of his racism—since it clearly wasn't passed down by his parents—is instilled in him through the white education system. Although the government teaching children to be racist is disturbing, it also conversely suggests that racism is not necessarily inherent to human beings, but is a learned attitude that must be taught and can therefore be overcome with further education.

CHAPTER 31

Reading *Treasure Island* fuels Mathabane's desire to master English even more. He is entranced by the adventurous tale, though he wonders why his school's library does not have such books. Mathabane's teachers tell him that, under Bantu Education law, black students are supposed to be prepared for tribal life, not made into "imitation whites." The English that they learn in school is relegated to "servanthood English." Even so, Mathabane reads and rereads every book that Granny brings home, and starts reading daily newspapers and doing the crosswords with his father's brother, Uncle Pietrus, which develops his vocabulary.

The government's desire to not create "imitation whites" suggests that both white and black education reinforce apartheid segregation, which further implies that the apartheid government uses every avenue at its disposal to keep black people trapped in subservience to whites. The intricately designed systems that uphold apartheid are all the more disturbing given how carefully thought out they appear to be.

Mathabane's new passion for reading means he spends less time with his gang, which angers them. The gang leader, Jarvas, and several "henchmen" accost Mathabane one afternoon and demand that he fights alongside them next weekend or they'll beat him up. Mathabane reluctantly agrees to fight, though he doesn't want to. The following Saturday, Mathabane joins his gang as they face off against a rival gang, each boy armed with machete or knife or bottle or slingshot. As the fighting starts, a rock from a slingshot whistles past Mathabane's head and gouges out a boy's eye behind him. Seeing the boy's crushed eye socket, Mathabane decides that it's all futile and quits the gang for good. Jarvas warns him that he'll pay, but his mother is proud of his decision.

Once again, though Mathabane is coerced into fighting by his friends and environment, his sudden and final decision to leave gang life behind suggests that he is not a naturally violent person, and it seems unlikely that he would be involved in any of it in a more stable environment. As Mathabane recognizes, gang violence is senseless, not in pursuit of any constructive goal—but the consequences can be life-long, such as permanently losing an eye.

CHAPTER 32

Leaving the gang gives Mathabane more time to read and study, and he continues to excel in school. His teachers think he will go far in life, though he knows he'll be limited by money. Many of his classmates, though talented, are dropping out because they can't afford tuition.

Mathabane's classmates dropping out for financial reasons suggests that, even though many black children like him are intelligent and capable, their lack of resources prevents them from achieving at the same level as white students.

Mathabane grows more comfortable around white people after helping Granny at the Smiths' house several times. One day, after a long day of cleaning and gardening, Granny and Mathabane wait at the black bus stop for the bus back to Alexandra. Granny walks away to buy something from a store quickly, but while she is gone a bus stops some distance down the sidewalk. Mathabane thinks they will miss their bus, so he runs and boards it, realizing too late that it is a white bus.

Mathabane's growing sense of ease in the white world suggests that exposure can help an individual to alleviate his or her fears of people different than themselves. This suggests that at least some of the white people's prejudice is motivated by ignorance, by fear of the unknown, and can thus potentially be overcome through experience and relationships.

The driver is furious and chases Mathabane back down the steps. Mathabane expects to be attacked but Granny appears behind him and grovels to the white driver, insisting that Mathabane is mentally disabled. As the bus pulls away, Granny furiously berates Mathabane for such a mistake, calling him a "black imp." When she calms down, she apologizes but explains that crossing segregation lines is a serious crime. From that day on, Mathabane realizes that the marks of segregation are everywhere, denoted usually by written signs which illiterate people like Granny can't even read.

While Granny's groveling appeases the white driver's anger and prevents further punishment, the act suggests that black people in South Africa must debase and humiliate themselves in order to survive. Granny's fury at Mathabane for accidentally crossing segregation lines suggests that even in her mind, doing so is an unpardonable sin. Sadly, Granny's reference to Mathabane as a "black imp" recalls the racist paintings of the black devil, suggesting that Granny internalizes South Africa's racist prejudice and turns it against herself and her grandson.

Mathabane starts working as a paperboy in the mornings for extra income and so that he can read all the newspapers. With his extra income, he is able to attend the annual school trips into the city. On one trip, he and his classmates take a bus to the Johannesburg Zoo, which black people can only visit with special permits. The entrances to the zoo are segregated even though everyone mixes once they are inside. When Mathabane and his friends go to see the spider monkeys, a group of Afrikaner students mock and jeer at them in Afrikaans. Mathabane's friends respond in Afrikaans and then mock the white boys in Tsonga. The Afrikaners know they are being harassed, but are so confounded by the language that they don't know how to respond and leave.

Mathabane and his friends' small victory over the Afrikaners suggests that language is powerful, especially when one group has the power of a language that another group does not know. This demonstrates the value of modern education. However, for those black people without an education and who cannot speak English or Afrikaans, this suggests yet another disadvantage that they face, as the government officials and police can wield their foreign language over them.

CHAPTER 33

"Constant police raids" run Mathabane's family's liquor business out of operation, and they close it a year after it opened. Mathabane's father starts drinking and gambling their money away once again. Aunt Bushy and Uncle Piet both drop out of school to help Granny, but Aunt Bushy becomes pregnant soon after, with no husband to provide for her. Mathabane's mother gets pregnant as well, and when the baby girl, Linah, is born, "the family [is] dead broke" and can't afford what they need for the baby.

Mathabane's family swings between periods of severe poverty and brief respite, though never manage to permanently improve their fortunes. This demonstrates the fragility of life in poverty, where any setback becomes a major crisis that compounds with additional problems.

One morning, Mathabane's father wakes him to ask for money for his bus-fare, since he gambled away all of his own. Mathabane refuses, since he needs his money for "books and baby food." When his father screams that he is the man of the house, Mathabane screams back. His father demands that he give him money or leave his house, so Mathabane dresses, packs his things, and leaves. His father shouts that he'll send Mathabane "to the mountain school back in the homelands." Mathabane knows that he and his father are bound for conflict. He values education; his father hates it. His father believes in the value of tribalism, while Mathabane sees it as a dead end, a nostalgic longing for a way of life that is never coming back to Africa.

As Mathabane grows up, his view of his father falls further and further. As Mathabane matures, his father occupies less of a fatherly role than a hindrance to Mathabane's success in life. This parallels his father's gradual fall into obscurity as the world progresses without him, leaving him and his tribal values behind. Mathabane's belief that his father's tribalism is a dead end suggests that he will readily give it up in order to pursue modern education and success.

CHAPTER 34

When Mathabane is not quite 14, Mrs. Smith gives him an old wooden tennis racket and tells him she wants him to become the next Arthur Ashe. Mathabane doesn't know the rules or how he'll train, but he begins playing against a wall and enjoys the solitary nature of it.

This marks a new chapter in Mathabane's life. Arthur Ashe was a legendary black tennis player from the U.S., and Mrs. Smith's encouragement of Mathabane to emulate this athlete shows just how much confidence she has in Mathabane's ability to succeed. Although Mathabane is an excellent student, tennis arguably opens as many doors as education, specifically since it creates opportunities for him to form relationships with supportive white liberals.

Along with playing tennis, Mathabane continues working to pay for school and baby food. He tells his mother that he wants to drop out at the end of the year to work in a factory and help her, but his mother insists that is the last thing she wants. She says that she'll work herself to death to keep him Mathabane in school until he finishes his education. Mathabane knows she's right, but it pains him to see her so exhausted all the time.

Although Mathabane can just barely afford to remain in school, his pain at seeing his exhausted mother suggests that along with the significant financial burden of school for poor people, there is an emotional burden as well when one watches their loved ones labor to fund their education.

When work becomes scarce, Mathabane spends more time practicing tennis against the wall. One day, a Coloured man named Scaramouche notices him and starts critiquing his form and offering tips. Since Coloured people are mixed race, they get slightly better treatment than black people and move a bit more freely. As such, Scaramouche has connections in both black and white tennis circles. He thinks Mathabane has potential, but needs training, so he decides to be his coach.

Scaramouche's position in South Africa as a Coloured person reiterates apartheid's obsession with maintaining its strict racial hierarchy, while also pointing to its arbitrary nature. Scaramouche is neither black nor white, so the government must create a classification in between the races, which, rather than separating him, lets him interact with both worlds.

CHAPTER 35

Tennis quickly becomes Mathabane's favorite sport, and Scaramouche proves himself a valuable mentor, both as a coach and a "surrogate father." Scaramouche often states that if black athletes had the same resources as white athletes in South Africa, they would be producing many champions. Mathabane's mother worries that tennis distracts him from his studies. Mathabane's father thinks tennis is white and womanly, and threatens to "cure" Mathabane of his "white man's behavior."

Scaramouche's claim suggests that, like education, black people's lack of resources—which directly results from apartheid's unjust laws—prevents them from reaching their full potential in athletics. This thereby stops them from making the same achievements as white people and contributes to the racist notion that black people are physically or intellectually inferior.

CHAPTER 36

Although Mathabane takes his mother's side on most things, he completely disagrees with her about religion. His mother is now a devout Christian, but Mathabane considers Christianity abusive and exploitative and resents the way it makes black people content to accept their fate rather than fight for a better life. Still, Mathabane thinks some higher power must exist. He often shares his antagonism toward Christianity with a migrant worker named Limela, who rages against the religion as a "clever ploy though which whites [seek] to keep blacks forever slaves."

Mathabane's belief that Christianity makes people weak, content to suffer their lot rather than fight for change, echoes his father's tribal teaching that he has no free will. Although Mathabane's view of Christianity slowly changes, it is worth pointing out that his current criticisms are true—the apartheid government often uses Christianity as an exploitative tool to uphold its regime.

One evening, while Mathabane is sitting with Limela in his shack, a preacher and one his followers invite themselves in. Limela furiously argues with them. Mathabane enjoys the conflict and joins in, charging that the Bible is only "speculation." When the preacher tells Mathabane he'll burn in hell for blasphemy, Mathabane counters that his life already is a hell, so one more won't make a difference. Limela cheers him on. When they finally argue the priest away, he leaves a few religious pamphlets for them to read. Mathabane and Limela make a fire of them in the yard.

Though cynical, Mathabane's argument rightly suggests that for people who suffer hellish conditions on Earth—as he already has—the threat of another hell holds far less significance than for a white person who has known peace and comfort all of his or her life. Threatening pain and suffering against someone whose whole life has been pain and suffering has little effect.

CHAPTER 37

One evening, Mathabane's father bursts into the house with two large Venda men to kidnap Mathabane and take him to "the mountain school" in the tribal reserves. His father states that he wants Mathabane to be a man like him, but Mathabane counters that all his father does is drink and gamble—he'd rather die than be like him. Mathabane threatens the two men with a knife. They leave, saying they'll come back tomorrow, so Mathabane moves in with Granny for two weeks. The issue never arises again.

Mathabane's claim that his father is not a man to emulate condemns not only his father, but his father's tribal way of life. If the result of a fierce loyalty to tribal custom is to behave selfishly like his father, Mathabane and his family will both be better off if he leaves such beliefs behind.

Mathabane is stressed about the conflict with his father and expects to do poorly on his upcoming exam, which will determine his placement in a secondary school. To his relief, he receives first-class marks and the government awards him a scholarship to attend a good English-speaking school. The family celebrates. Although his tuition is paid for, Mathabane still has to come up with money for uniforms and books. The family pitches in, even Aunt Bushy and Uncle Piet—Uncle Piet tells Mathabane that his academic success is bringing them all honor in their community.

Mathabane's academic success honors not only him, but his whole family as well. While this is certainly something to be proud of, it also suggests that Mathabane carries the weight of his family's hopes and expectations on his shoulders. As the only person in his family to make it this far through an education, Mathabane faces a tremendous amount of pressure to do well and lead his family out of poverty.

With financial help to pay for school, Mathabane devotes more time to tennis practice and adopts a strict regimen of yoga, jogging, and abstinence. His game begins improving to the point that he even beats Scaramouche on occasion. Mathabane becomes the captain of a local tennis team and leads the team to several victories.

Mathabane's disciplined behavior contrasts severely with his father's selfishness and drunkenness, suggesting that such discipline plays a large part in their differing outcomes in life.

During this time, Mathabane meets a Zulu player named Tom who is outfitted with nice equipment. Tom tells him about a white-owned tennis club that sometimes sponsors him, which is owned by a German man named Wilfred, a white liberal who treats black people well because he thinks apartheid is comparable to Nazism. Tom is leaving for another tennis club, so he introduces Mathabane to Wilfred to take his place. Wilfred and Mathabane form an "immediate" friendship, but Wilfred is horrified to hear Mathabane's account of what the ghettos caused by apartheid are actually like. Wilfred invites Mathabane to play at his "ranch" and asks if he'll educate Wilfred and his friends on apartheid's true nature.

Just as Mathabane's relationship with Mrs. Smith helps him to see white people as human beings and individuals, Mathabane's relationship with Wilfred helps Wilfred to understand the full scope of apartheid's oppression. The manner in which Mathabane learns from Mrs. Smith and Wilfred learns from Mathabane suggests that personal relationships with people different from oneself are critical to bridging the gaps between segregated groups and letting go of one's own personal prejudice.

CHAPTER 38

Although the South African government forbids Arthur Ashe from entering the country for six years for making critical remarks about apartheid, in November 1973, they allow him to come play in a tournament. As they anticipate Ashe's arrival, Mathabane becomes friends with a fellow player and sharp Zulu student named David. David remarks that if Ashe had made such critical remarks in South Africa, he likely would've numbered among the ranks of black activists who mysteriously "commit suicide" in prison, under the supervision of white authorities.

South Africa's banning of Arthur Ashe demonstrates how little dissent the apartheid government tolerates from black people. Additionally, the rash of mysterious suicides clearly implies that the white government routinely murders black activists and leaders while they are in prison, suggesting that apartheid's defenders are not only ruthless, but murderous.

Since schools are not allowed to teach black history, David teaches Mathabane about the African National Congress (ANC) liberation movement. The ANC movement began in 1912 and sought the peaceful liberation of all black people in South Africa, following the example of Gandhi. However, the apartheid government refused to even negotiate, and many ANC leaders were driven underground. In Mathabane's generation, tensions between the government and the ANC run high.

The government's refusal to teach relevant periods of history not only demonstrates how much control it exerts over black education, but also suggests that the government fears black students having a full knowledge of such history, as it could lead to liberation movements or even revolution.

Even Wilfred is excited about Arthur Ashe's arrival to South Africa. At the same time, another black boxer named Bob Foster beats a white opponent and, for the first time, the apartheid government allows photos of the fight to be published in the newspapers. However, Mathabane has no interest in boxing and he hates Bob Foster. Unlike Ashe, Foster refuses to speak out against apartheid, criticize the white government, or visit the ghettos, and many black people see him as a traitor, an "Uncle Tom."

Mathabane's hatred toward Foster suggests that many black people regard anyone's refusal to condemn apartheid as an implicit cooperation with it instead. "Uncle Tom" (a reference to Uncle Tom's Cabin*) is a common insult in the latter half of the story, and insinuates that a person hides or betrays their black skin in order to fit into mainstream society.*

On the first day of Ashe's tournament, Mathabane watches him win all of his matches in a packed stadium in Johannesburg. The minority of black spectators are ecstatic, and the mood in the black bus on the way home is overjoyed and energetic.

Like Muhammad Ali's victory over a white opponent, Ashe's victories symbolize black people's ability to achieve and win, even against a white opponent.

However, as the bus drives back into the ghetto toward Alexandra, Mathabane can feel everyone's spirits fall as they see the rundown buildings and tired faces of black workers. Mathabane wonders how black Americans came to be so successful, and if they are somehow different than black South Africans. He thinks of all the famous black American athletes, writers, musicians, who descended from a slavery more extreme and severe than anything South Africans experienced. Somehow, black South Africans seem stunted as a people, unable to dream or achieve in the same way, which only perpetuates racist ideals of "white supremacy." Mathabane realizes that he will never be able to truly rise to Ashe's level of skill as long as he stays in South Africa.

Mathabane's feeling that black South Africans have been stunted suggests that apartheid's structural oppression is so effective that it holds an entire majority population from truly expressing itself or demonstrating its capability. Ominously, this suggests that apartheid operates like a fine-tuned machine, a perfect example of calculated and carefully administered racial prejudice. As long as such a system stands, it seems unlikely that Mathabane or other aspiring black people will reach their true height.

Ashe wins his next several days of tournament games, seemingly aware that his performance will reflect on all black athletes' ability in the minds of white Afrikaners. Mathabane is stuck by Ashe's confidence while speaking to white people—if someone asks him a question he considers beneath him, he "dismisses" it and says what he wants to say.

Ashe's ability to dismiss infantile or unimportant questions suggests that he is confident in himself as an intelligent human being who has just as much value as anyone else. Thus, he asserts himself as deserving of white people's full respect—an attitude that is virtually unheard of in apartheid South Africa.

At the end of the week, Ashe holds a tennis clinic in Soweto for black tennis players. Although Mathabane is not invited as an athlete, Wilfred gives him the fare to go to Soweto anyway to try to see Ashe once again. The train is so packed that people hang out the windows or ride on the roof, which results in several of them being electrocuted or falling to their death. According to the passengers, this is typical—the train is always packed. When Mathabane gets off the train and starts walking to the clinic, he sees a gang of tsotsis robbing and murdering a man "in broad daylight," so he backtracks and takes a longer route instead.

Mathabane's trip involves several violent or grotesque deaths, yet he recalls it with with an air of indifference that suggests such horrors are commonplace in South Africa. Where witnessing a murder once caused Mathabane to contemplate suicide, now such deaths seem nearly mundane. Mathabane and everyone else's indifference suggests that societally, black lives are attributed little value, and the loss of one or two seems insignificant even to black people themselves.

On Mathabane's way to the clinic, a drunk on the street claims that Arthur Ashe is "a gift," and Mathabane reflects that he seems a "black messiah sent from strange shores to come liberate us," to show black people what they can accomplish if they don't let apartheid tell them who they are. However, when Mathabane finds Ashe standing on a stage, giving a speech, some black protesters tell the athlete to go home—even though they love him, they believe his "presence legitimizes the system." Ashe loses his last match in South Africa to a white man, but before he leaves, he petitions government leaders to end apartheid in sports, or else international teams will boycott the country. He also states that "black patience" is running out quickly, and that "black moderates [are] turning into radicals and revolutionaries."

Once again, simply by proving that black people can be exceptional and excel in their field, Ashe becomes a symbol and beacon of hope for black people in South Africa, living proof that they can succeed too. However, the protesters' belief that Ashe's "presence legitimizes the system" suggests that they view any interaction with the government at all as implicit cooperation with the apartheid rulers. Ashe's warning that moderates are radicalizing suggests that the anger of the black community is growing and can only be contained and repressed for so long.

When Ashe leaves, he forms the Black Tennis Foundation (BTF) which entices corporate sponsors to fund and promote black tennis leagues in South Africa. Hoping to get to America, Mathabane writes several letters to Ashe but hears no reply. Several younger players start seeing Mathabane as their role model, but many in Alexandra start to hate and threaten Mathabane for spending time in white communities and playing a white sport, calling him "Uncle Tom." Mathabane starts being more cautious, but refuses to quit tennis or give up his white friends.

Mathabane's position as both a role model to some and an "Uncle Tom" to others suggests that the black community is divided. Some, like Mathabane and his mother, see the embrace of certain white institutions like education and sport as inevitable progress. Others, like his father and those who protested Ashe, see any participation in such institutions as a betrayal of the black community. Ironically, those who view Mathabane as a race traitor are implicitly arguing for their own form of segregation from white society and culture.

CHAPTER 39

In 1974, after two and half years of playing tennis, Mathabane wins his first tournament. Wilfred displays the trophy in the bar at his ranch, and Mathabane becomes the pride of his school. He continues developing friendships with white liberals and speaking to them as equals, on a first-name basis. However, such freedom ends each day as soon as Mathabane leaves the tennis club and returns to the reality of apartheid law. The two worlds make him feel like "Jekyll and Hyde" and he realizes that he struggles more and more to go back to living a repressed, subservient existence whenever he goes home.

Wilfred's ranch offers Mathabane his first taste of freedom and being recognized as a full human being, valued on his merits rather than his skin color. Although Mathabane once said that the ghetto and its suffering was the only world he knew, his experience of being treated like a real person at Wilfred's ranch ironically highlights the low value he has in the eyes of apartheid law, and how destitute such a life is.

One day, Mathabane's mother tells him that she's joined a new church filled with truly godly people. She starts attending not only on Sundays, but on almost every other day of the week as well. Mathabane notices that his mother's demeanor changes: she never angers or lashes out, and she starts visiting sickle people and bringing derelicts and poor people home to eat with their family.

Mathabane's mother's change in character suggests that her growing devotion to Christianity has a positive impact on her life, and that rather than being exploitative, Christianity can be a force for good, encouraging people toward compassion and generosity.

Still, Mathabane worries about his mother, so one Sunday he goes to church with her, ready to denounce it if he sees anything suspicious. The people in the church seem as passionate and happy as his mother. During the service, his mother starts speaking in tongues and shaking. Mathabane doesn't understand it, nor does he understand the interpretation that the preacher gives, but leaves feeling that his mother is not crazy; she has a connection with God. However, Mathabane doesn't think he could ever believe as she does, especially when God ignores black suffering and seems to favor white people.

The question of why God should allow white people to profit off of black people's suffering is never resolved in Mathabane's autobiography, and it hangs over the narrative's treatment of Christianity. This lingering question creates a nuanced depiction of Christianity—the book ends neither overwhelmingly supportive of it nor overwhelmingly critical of the religion, but rather recognizes both its strengths and its contradictions.

CHAPTER 40

Mathabane plays in the Annual National Junior Tennis Championships in Pretoria. Meeting players from all over the country, he realizes that every black tennis club is under-resourced and needs better coaching if black tennis will ever advance. A week after the tournament, Mathabane's eyes start hurting and his vision starts to fail until he is nearly blind. He goes to several hospitals, but they won't admit him fast enough. His mother decides someone is practicing voodoo against him and takes him to a witch doctor. Mathabane is skeptical until the witch doctor starts speaking about his life in far more detail than seems possible.

Mathabane's observation suggests that white tennis players will always have an edge over black players as long as the white clubs can outspend black clubs. This suggests that, even if everyone in South Africa were equally free, the economic disparity between white and black populations would continue to be a barrier to true equality and integration. As long as they have the money, white athletes will likely continue to dominate and feel superior as a result.

The witch doctor claims that rivals are trying to blind Mathabane, to end his success in school and sports. She tells him to stop reading and writing letters for people—this is how they bewitch him—and gives him a complicated treatment along with medicine to take home. Afterward, Mathabane visits a doctor who tells him that his eyes are fine, just over-strained; he needs to take eye drops and stop reading in low light. Mathabane takes the eye drops and the witch doctor's medicine for several weeks, and due to one or the other (or both), his eyes recover.

By stating that either Western medicine, the witch doctor, or both heal his eyes, Mathabane holds the two types of treatment on an equal plane with each other. Although Mathabane largely rejects his father's traditional values, his continued openness to the witch doctor's healing ability suggests that the beliefs he grew up with still have some bearing on his thinking as a young adult.

Although Mathabane stops writing letters for migrant workers, he tries to help in other ways. A migrant breaks Influx Control Law by harboring his family in Alexandra to save them from a drought in the homelands. When the white superintendent summons the man, Mathabane goes with him. The superintendent speaks harshly with the migrant and threatens punishment. However, Mathabane converses with the official in Afrikaans, charming him so much that he allows the migrant worker to go free and to keep his family in Alexandra until conditions at home improve.

Once again, Mathabane's education proves its worth through the power of language. Mathabane's ability to charm the superintendent and set him at ease by speaking his language suggests that language can be a powerful bridge between individuals from different backgrounds, even individuals who are normally opposed to each other.

CHAPTER 41

Mathabane's school starts requiring upper-level students to debate in Afrikaans, even though all black students hate Afrikaans as the oppressors' language. Mathabane reads and studies so much that the principal advises him to slow down, and even to lower his aspirations. However, Mathabane explains that after all he's read of freedom, he'll never be happy under apartheid where he cannot think or speak as he pleases. The principal admires Mathabane's passion and suggests that the fight to end apartheid is spreading to Mathabane's generation, who are younger, more zealous, and willing to sacrifice for freedom. The principal cautions Mathabane not to try to become a white person, but Mathabane insists that he's proud to be black, though he once hated it. Not all people understand Mathabane's hope, though, including his father.

Mathabane's principal's desire to pass on the struggle for black freedom suggests that that struggle must find its place among the young people, who have the most life left to live and thus the most to fight for. Mathabane's claim that he does not want to become a white person suggests that he wants to forge his own way as a successful black scholar and athlete, rather than just imitate those who are already successful. His admission that he once hated his own blackness suggests that he internalized apartheid's denigration of black people and resented his own people until he learned to counteract that feeling.

Mathabane confidently absorbs any English literature he reads, until his teacher gives him Shakespeare. He and his classmates struggle to understand the form until, listening to a transistor radio Uncle Piet gave him, he hears a broadcast performance of one of Shakespeare's plays and recognizes the poetic quality of it. From then on, he listens to the English radio station constantly, which exposes him to classical music. Through the radio station and Wilfred's encouragement, Mathabane develops a love for classical music, though this earns him his father's ire and mockery from his friends.

Much of Mathabane's education involves introducing him to literature, music, and art from around the world, which shows him that other people from other countries (including white people) have made things of value. This suggests that all white people are not merely heartless racists, since many of them create powerful works of art and literature. They are, at the very least, complex and dynamic individuals.

CHAPTER 42

Violence is inevitable as black frustration and anger with apartheid "crystallized into a powder keg." In 1976, the white government declares that all black schools must teach Afrikaans rather than English as their primary language. On June 16, 10,000 students hold a peaceful protest march in Soweto. Hundreds of police officers meet them in the street and open fire, killing hundreds of children. Mathabane cries when he reads the story in the paper, and realizes that his life is at an inescapable turning point. His classmates declare that they will not sit idly in school while their fellows die to police brutality, and they devote all of their time to protests and organizing.

The police's shooting of unarmed children reiterates how totalitarian and ruthless apartheid's defenders can be. The police presence and assault suggests that the government will not tolerate even peaceful black dissension from apartheid rule. Such suppression, backed by violence, casts the South African government as a totalitarian regime, bent on keeping its majority population subjugated, silent, and afraid.

A rally of hundreds of students forms—joined even by children who aren't students—and marches to the local stadium to protest. Black adults cheer them on as they pass. A police brigade arrives with weapons and charges into the body of students. Gunshots ring, and chaos ensues. As Mathabane and David escape and try to return to Alexandra, they notice that white people are fleeing. White soldiers with automatic rifles hold them up and say that no buses are allowed into Alexandra—they must walk. "The rebellion ha[s] begun in Alexandra."

The presence of soldiers with automatic weapons suggests that the South African government is deploying its military against its own people, against children. This again depicts the apartheid rulers as brutal dictators who crush rebellion by any means necessary. The flood of white people out of the city shows they fear the black majority uprising.

All over the country, ghettos erupt into looting and violence. Black mobs destroy buildings and raid shops owned by Indian and Chinese families. Hundreds die in clashes with police. White families flee the country or buy weapons. Mathabane finds himself swept into "bloodthirsty mobs" and feels "possessed by a sinister force." He loots and smashes shops, and momentarily recognizes the nihilism of it all but is overcome with "euphoria as I saw black peasants making off with plundered goods." He sees the "poverty of hate and anger" in the faces around him.

The explosion of violence and Mathabane's temporary cognizance of its senselessness suggests that black anger and hatred have swelled to their breaking point; such violence is the inevitable manifestation of decades of suppressed pain and anger. It is, however, both ironic and tragic that black looters destroy Indian and Chinese shops, since both of these ethnic groups are also oppressed by the white government.

The army arrives, firing bullets and tear gas into the crowds of black people. One of Mathabane's neighbors, a girl he grew up with, is shot dead and the police drag her body away. The police make her parents buy her corpse back so they can bury her. As they bury her that weekend, Mathabane cries and thinks to himself that Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.'s doctrines of nonviolence don't work in South Africa. Freedom can only be won through bloodshed. But Mathabane isn't sure if he has the will to kill another human being.

The white police's demand that the parents buy their daughter's body from them so they can bury their child seems utterly inhumane. This instance reveals the depth of apartheid's depravity and suggests that the white authorities are entirely apathetic to black people's pain and suffering. If anything, they seem to enjoy it.

CHAPTER 43

The rebellion continues in Alexandra. "Anarchy reign[s] in the ghetto." The white government claims that Communist agitators are responsible for the uprising and as soon as they are dealt with, peace will return to South Africa. Many of Mathabane's friends talk about leaving the country to join the ANC's revolutionary militia, returning to South Africa as guerilla fighters. Mathabane expresses this desire to a man from his neighborhood with contacts amongst the "freedom fighters." However, the neighbor doesn't think that Mathabane is a killer and encourages him to fight with his intellect instead. The movement will need lawyers, doctors, teachers to lead the way.

The white government's accusation that the black protesters are Communist agitators puts forth the claim that there is no black protest at all—that black people are content with their lot, and that the disruption is a foreign conspiracy. Rather than listen to the black community's complaints, the apartheid rulers pretend that such unrest doesn't exist, again suggesting that they have no interest in listening to the black community, only quashing the rebellion and maintaining power.

By October, the apartheid government ruthlessly but successfully quells most of the rebellion. Hundreds of protesters are dead, and hundreds of black professionals are detained for encouraging the movement. Thousands of students flee the country to avoid arrest. The white government negotiates with "puppet black leaders," who argue that Afrikaans should still be the primary language even if the government doesn't demand it. Worse yet, many black people, including one of Mathabane's teachers, work as informants for the white police. Mathabane returns to school after nearly six months, but no longer has a passion for learning. Many of his classmates are dead or detained. Most of the school buildings are destroyed.

The tragedy of these several months of unrest, which come to be known as the Soweto Uprising, is that the black community in South Africa is no better off than when they began. After much fighting and bloodshed, no progress is made toward black liberation. This seems to suggest that Mathabane's earlier view that freedom can only come through bloodshed does not hold true, since the white government controls all military assets, and violent resistance only makes them respond with violence in turn.

CHAPTER 44

After South African schools reopen, travel restrictions are eased enough that Mathabane can return to Wilfred's tennis ranch after months away. Wilfred is relieved to see him—he'd thought Mathabane was dead or detained. Mathabane tells him about all the violence and police brutality. Wilfred is shocked and angered; the government suppressed most of this news from the white population, apparently trying to hide "police excesses" and the full scope of the rebellion. After Mathabane finishes speaking, Wilfred asks if he'll speak to all the white people in the bar tonight, to explain his full story to them. Mathabane is nervous about the idea, but Wilfred promises he'll deal with anyone who poses a problem.

The government's suppression of news from its white population suggests that it fears their outrage as well, especially if they begin to voice opposition to the police's violent repression of dissenters. With the government trying to keep both its white and black populations ignorant about how each other lives or feels, it seems unlikely that apartheid could have lasted longer than it did. Although many white people support apartheid, white resistance to it seems to be growing.

That evening, Mathabane stands on the bar and tells a roomful of white people about the violence and misery of black life in South Africa, including everything that happened in the rebellion. Everyone looks shocked and dismayed. He explains that, since the mobs couldn't reach the actual white people, they attacked police collaborators and other groups instead as "symbols of oppression." Some know families in the "black middle class" who are successful, but Mathabane explains that those are a small minority of people who submit themselves to the system. He says that black people don't want to rule white people, only to live as equals alongside them. One white man listening to Mathabane is furious, claiming that black people are white people's "eternal enemies" and "bloodthirsty" cannibals. Mathabane's calm and confident response gains the approval of the room. That evening, someone drives him all the way back to Alexandra.

Just as Mathabane deconstructed his own personal prejudice by forming relationships with white people, Wilfred's white friends have the chance to take apart their own prejudice by listening to the honest experiences of a black person. This again suggests that exposure and personal relationships are critical to tearing down people's personal prejudice, as ignorance and fear of the unknown begins to vanish. Mathabane's talk about attacking "symbols of oppression" suggests that when anger and hatred rise to a certain level, violence will erupt toward the people around oneself if they cannot reach the actual oppressors.

Police units start raiding classrooms to arrest students over their involvement in the rebellion, so Mathabane stops going to school again. Through Wilfred, he meets another German man named Helmut who asks if Mathabane will play tennis with him, even though Helmut is not very good. Helmut is in South Africa on a temporary work contract and hates apartheid's race laws, so he and Mathabane purposefully flaunt them by playing together on whites-only tennis courts. Whenever a restaurant owner refuses to serve Helmut and Mathabane together, Helmut rages at them. Helmut also teaches Mathabane about the Holocaust, and when he is finished they agree that apartheid is effectively a second Holocaust—the world watches on without doing anything, just as it did in the 1940s.

Helmut's opinion that apartheid parallels Nazism suggests that just as Germany still bears tremendous shame over its actions in World War II, apartheid will be a permanent scar on South Africa's history. Helmut's deliberate breaking of race laws constitutes its own form of protest, since it signals that he, as a white man, will not be bullied by the government or allow apartheid's authors to define whom he can and cannot be friends with.

As other black people see Mathabane spending time with Helmut, they again call him a "traitor to the struggle" and an "Uncle Tom." Mathabane feels pulled between his own world and the belief that not all white people are "monolithic" or "racists." Helmut offers to be any help he can to Mathabane; he'd even risk his life for him. In increasing boldness, Helmut starts driving Mathabane all the way to his street in Alexandra, even though Mathabane warns him that black people might catch him and kill him. However, one night while Mathabane is walking home, Jarvas and his old gang—who've grown far more violent—surround him and accuse him of being an informant. The attack Mathabane, but he manages to break free and escape, running home.

Like his conflict between his mother and father, Mathabane again finds himself caught between worlds. Ironically, the black people who think him a traitor for spending time with white people are leaning as heavily into their own racial prejudice. Their demand that Mathabane only spend time with black people doing black things echoes the refrain of segregation, which is the root cause of all of their suffering. Mathabane's decision to live between worlds, to integrate his life, seems the only true path forward, away from racism.

When Mathabane's mother hears about the attack, she tries to convince Mathabane to stop seeing his white friends. Even if some white people are good, black people like his father, who've only ever suffered, will never understand.

This again suggests that, although black people suffer under apartheid's racism, they bear their own racial prejudice toward white people by believing that no white person can possibly be good.

A few weeks later, Mathabane can see clouds of smoke in the distance and hears gunshots. Youths come from that direction carrying boxes of government rations, exclaiming that someone rammed a bus through the wall of a Coloured school, where the government was storing food. The boys tell Mathabane that they set fire to the books. The thought of so many pieces of classic literature burning pains Mathabane, so he goes to the school himself to see if he can rescue any. Most are burned, but he finds a few that survived. However, an army truck arrives, and soldiers emerge. Mathabane hides himself in a ditch for hours, knowing he'll be killed on sight if they find him. He returns home after they've left, and he and George retrieve the books that afternoon.

Once again, Mathabane's knowledge that soldiers will kill him on sight suggests that the government's forces are acting as authoritarians, killing indiscriminately and without trial or defense. Mathabane's decision to retrieve books rather than food suggests that he recognizes education's longer-lasting value. Food will only nourish for a few days, whereas books can sharpen one's mind and benefit an individual for the rest of his or her life.

CHAPTER 45

Mathabane qualifies for an elite junior tennis team in Soweto. Since Mathabane's school is still closed, he spends his days training with Scaramouche in preparation for the championship. Thought the government considers canceling the tournament due to protests, as unrest subsides, the government allows the championship to proceed and Mathabane's team wins it. Simultaneously, Arthur Ashe wins Wimbledon overseas, and the entire black population of South Africa is euphoric. Ashe has proven that a black man can be the best in the world at a white man's sport. The news makes Mathabane desire to travel to America even more.

Mathabane's victory in Soweto and Ashe's victory at Wimbledon parallel each other. For Mathabane, his victory is confirmation that he can succeed and excel as an individual, even as a black person. For all black South Africans, Ashe's victory suggests that each of them has as much capability as any other human being, regardless of race.

Schools open in August, though many of Mathabane's classmates are still missing, either captured or having fled the country. Many joined a guerilla movement and trained in neighboring countries before re-infiltrating South Africa with machine guns and bombs. Military officers constantly raid classrooms and seize students, many of whom are not guilty of any crime. Mathabane grows paranoid to the point that his health deteriorates, and learning becomes difficult. Mathabane's mother prays that God will protect him, though he can't understand why God didn't protect all the students who died. Even so, he starts attending church merely because it feels safe, and realizes that many of the Bible's stories offer strength and comfort. As Mathabane samples different churches, he hears many pastors calling for liberation and venerating the dead students as "martyrs" and "heroes."

Even when Mathabane is not under physical danger, the strain that paranoia puts on his health and studies suggests that apartheid always has a negative impact—whether physically or psychologically—on black people's ability to reach their full potential. The black preachers calling for liberation and naming lost students as martyrs suggests that, although Christianity has been a weapon for apartheid, it can also be used by black people to give voice to their fight for freedom. This suggests that Christianity is a dynamic religion, able to be powerfully used for both good and evil pursuits, depending upon who wields it.

CHAPTER 46

Scaramouche introduces Mathabane to Andre Zietsman, a white tennis player from South African who has just returned from a tennis scholarship in America. Mathabane and Andre form a fast friendship and begin playing together, secretly, at a white park, running a considerable risk for both of them. As they grow more comfortable, Andre describes what America is like, including what a shock it was for him to suddenly live in a society where black people are equal with white people, rather than subordinate. It conflicted with Andre's early education in South Africa, where he was taught to "lord over blacks." The thought of black people existing equally alongside white people in one society stuns Mathabane. He thinks of it as "the Promised Land."

Andre's experience living and studying with black people as equals challenged his own learned racism, again suggesting that personal relationships with diverse people is critical to counteracting one's personal prejudice. For Mathabane, Andre represents the hope that people, even white Afrikaners, can change their racist ways.

CHAPTER 47

Mathabane's friendship with Andre deepens. Andre's four years in America showed him how awful apartheid truly is, and Mathabane feels hopeful that if Andre could change, perhaps other white people can too. When Mathabane struggles to find work—white people don't want him for menial labor now that he is educated beyond what they're comfortable with—Andre gives Mathabane's family money and clothes to help them get by. Mathabane's tennis improves from playing against Andre as well, and he wins his second solo tennis championship.

The fact that white people don't want to hire a well-educated black man is revealing, suggesting that they know that black people with education will threaten the awful systems they have built. This furthers suggests white people's exploitation of black people depends heavily on black people remaining ignorant, unable to organize or tell the rest of the world how they truly suffer.

Mathabane continues to score well in his exams and receives a well-paying sales job offer from a food company, which now pays its black managers the same as its white managers. His family members want him to take the job, and he is tempted to, but deep in his heart Mathabane knows that success is not the same as freedom and he longs to experience a society like America where he can be a truly equal person.

The fact that a food company enacts a non-discrimination policy suggests that even in white South Africa, things are beginning to change, and some white businesses are beginning to challenge apartheid. Even so, Mathabane's reticence suggests that wealthy or not, he will never be free until he is recognized as a full human being, equal to any other.

CHAPTER 48

In 1977, a black movement leader named Steven Biko dies in police custody, prompting a wave of protests and international condemnations. The apartheid government responds by becoming more militaristic, naming numerous liberation organizations and Christian movements as Communist fronts to be rooted out and destroyed. Military vehicles maintain constant presence in Alexandra. The government creates more black informants within the ghettos. The government bans gatherings of more than three black people at any time, for any reason. The military creates false conspiracies as pretense to kidnap and torture black people. At the same time, black youths talk about how to get guns and grenades so they can storm white kindergartens and slaughter. Mathabane feels consuming anger of his own, but no one seems to have a reasonable way to fight.

The government's rising brutality is paralleled by black revolutionaries' yearning for violence and vengeance, suggesting that one fuels the other and two will continue escalating. While Mathabane was previously skeptical of Gandhi and King's non-violence campaigns, they do seem preferable to a scenario where the government kidnaps and tortures its own people while rebels scheme about murdering kindergartners. Mathabane's own anger again suggests that such feelings are inevitable and need some sort of outlet, though certainly such gruesome fighting cannot be it.

CHAPTER 49

Mathabane is desperate to reach America. In 1973, Helmut advises him to enter the South African Breweries (SAB) Open, one of the biggest international tournaments in the world. He implies that he has a way to get Mathabane into the qualifier. However, the black tennis leagues forbid any black players from participating in tournaments until national tennis officials, under international pressure, completely eliminate any ban on mixed-race competitions. Helmut admits that, although it's a "political" move, it's also an excellent opportunity for Mathabane—he might have the chance to play American tennis legend Stan Smith. Mathabane agrees.

Mathabane's decision to play in the SAB Open defies the black tennis community's wishes, suggesting that it is a move that benefits himself more than his community. Although it certainly pays off for Mathabane in the long run and creates an integrated tournament, it is impossible to say whether this was the right decision. By heeding Helmut's wish over the black tennis community's, Mathabane unintentionally places a white person's desires in front of his own community's, which echoes the structure of apartheid.

With only two weeks until the tournament, Mathabane undertakes an aggressive training regimen. The black tennis leagues order that he withdraw from the SAB Open or "be banned for life from black tennis." He receives threatening anonymous letters telling him to quit. Scaramouche and Wilfred advise Mathabane to play the tournament, while Mathabane's mother advises him to quit. One week out, Mathabane calls Owen Williams, an organizer, and tells him he wants to quit. Williams says the death threats are "a bluff" and promises that if Mathabane gets banned from black tennis, he'll get him into a white tennis club instead so he can show the white people how a black South African can play. Mathabane says he'll think about it, but already knows he'll play in the SAB Open.

Although Mathabane defies the black tennis community, he does give South Africans the chance to see a black tennis player compete in one of their major tournaments. For the sake of integrating and exposing prejudiced people to people from other groups, Mathabane's decision to play in the SAB Open ultimately appears justified, especially since the same people demanding he not have white friends seem to be the ones demanding he not play white tennis.

CHAPTER 50

Mathabane is nervous during the first qualifying match of the SAB Open and loses due to foolish mistakes. The spectators sympathetically tell Mathabane that he played well, but he is crushed. He keeps going to the tournament to see others play, but on the way home afternoon, he sees in the paper that the black tennis leagues banned him for life. Mathabane approaches Owen Williams about joining a club, but Williams tells him to wait until after the SAB Open, and Mathabane wonders if Williams will go back on his word.

On top of playing in a high-level tournament, Mathabane also plays as the single black contestant, which suggests that he is under far more pressure and scrutiny than any other player. The black tennis league's lifetime ban on Mathabane suggests that his fate is now tied to the white tennis world.

One afternoon, when Mathabane is feeling particularly listless, he watches Stan Smith and Bob Lutz—the best tennis doubles team in the world—practice together. Bob Lutz decides he's done for the day, but Stan asks Mathabane if he wants to play awhile. Mathabane is thrilled and volleys with Stan while Stan gives him advice from across the net. A crowd of people gather to watch. When they are finished, several young people ask Mathabane for his autograph.

Stan's invitation for Mathabane to volley with him directly defies apartheid law, since Stan is white and Mathabane is black. This suggests that Stan has no interest in abiding by apartheid segregation and feels free to play and associate with whomever he wants.

Stan and his wife, Marjory, invite Mathabane to join them in the Players' Lounge, and speak animatedly with him while they walk, asking questions about his life and family and goals. At the lounge, which is full of white wealthy people, Stan and Marjory introduce Mathabane as their personal friend. Marjory asks many questions about apartheid and how it holds black people back so effectively. Mathabane tells her about the anger, frustration, and self-hatred that arises from being treated as sub-humans for decades.

Stan and Marjory instantly treat Mathabane as a friend and equal, suggesting that they do not share apartheid South Africa's low view of black people. Marjory's many questions suggests that she truly wants to understand Mathabane's life and experiences under apartheid, and that she honestly cares about his struggles as a human being.

Mathabane feels "uplifted" after he parts with Stan and Marjory, and spends the next several days with them and their friends. When the tournament ends and they prepare to leave for America, Mathabane cries at the thought of losing such good friends. Stan and Marjory promise to write, and Stan says he'll try to connect Mathabane with some schools that offer tennis scholarships in America. Stan tells Mathabane that it would be good for him to have more competitive experience in the meantime, so he coordinates with Owen Williams to have Mathabane entered into a national series called the Sugar Circuit. Stan pays for all of Mathabane's tournament expenses. The sum is more than Mathabane's father could make in a year, and it emphasizes the many advantages white athletes have over black athletes. Nevertheless, Mathabane is thankful.

Mathabane's mother's earlier claim that education will help Mathabane find people to help him seems nearly prophetic, since Mathabane's intelligence and mastery of English ultimately facilitate this opportunity for Mathabane to meet Stan, who now sponsors his career. However, the massive amount of money that Stan is able to provide underscores the economic disparity between white and black athletes and suggests that as long as that disparity exists, black athletes will still struggle to achieve over white athletes—not due to lack of talent, but lack of finances.

CHAPTER 51

News that Stan sponsored Mathabane's entry into the Sugar Circuit infuriates many, including the black tennis leagues who regard Mathabane as a "traitor." For the first matches in Cape Town, Mathabane will stay with a Transkeian diplomat's family, whose diplomatic position make them "honorary whites" and allows them to live in the white part of town, proving that apartheid's race laws are groundless.

The existence of "honorary whites" suggests that apartheid's racial hierarchy has no basis in reality. And if apartheid's hierarchy has no basis, then neither can it's segregation, suggesting that all of the pain apartheid causes is purely to keep the white minority in power over the black majority.

In December 1977, Mathabane boards a plane for the first time in his life. In the middle of the flight, he panics when he needs the bathroom but cannot figure out which toilet is for black people until he discovers the toilets are not segregated. When the plane lands, a taxi takes him to a five-star hotel where he's "treated like a dignitary." Although luxurious, the hotel angers Mathabane for how different it is from the conditions his parents live in. The black hotel staff refer to him "master" or "sir" even when he tells them not to, because they are afraid of losing their jobs. Guests in the hotel usually assume that Mathabane is a black American. However, he is not allowed to visit the white beaches near the hotel.

The hotel staff's fine treatment of Mathabane and other guests' assumption that he is a black American suggests that apartheid's racism is specifically aimed at black South Africans, not black people in general. Additionally, while Mathabane grew up in desperate poverty, constantly on the brink of starvation, it was all he knew and thus did not seem so bad. Now, seeing how other people live, Mathabane's anger suggests that he is fully realizing the injustice of his family's poverty while white people possess such exorbitant wealth.

Mathabane loses his matches in Port Elizabeth and he flies to Cape Town to meet the Transkeian family. However, his first evening there he steps in a pothole and sprains his ankle, causing him to lose his next match and forfeit the ones after that. Mathabane feels terrible and imagines that the world will judge all black athletes based on his failure. To use the rest of his time, Mathabane sets up a tennis clinic in one of Cape Town's ghettos. He meets several young players who show promise, but knows that without coaching and resources they'll fall out of the sport.

Mathabane's feeling that all black athletes will be judged by his failure may be accurate, but it seems far too great a burden for one teenager to carry. While athletes like Ali or Ashe can win a victory for all black people, the lack of black athletes in South African sport suggests that each failure feels like a failure for all black people as well. This seems especially true when white Afrikaners watch, hoping to see a black athlete lose so as to justify their views of white supremacy.

The Sugar Circuit teaches Mathabane that he won't improve his game without good competition from elite white players. With Scaramouche, Andre, and Wilfred's support, Mathabane decides to apply for membership at the Wanderer's Club. When he arrives, he asks a black security guard to direct him to the club owner's office. The guard refuses. Mathabane finds a different entrance and runs into a white woman in tennis garb. He asks her for help and she gives him directions to the right office immediately.

The fact that Mathabane receives more racism from a black security guard than a white tennis player suggests that some black people absorb apartheid's prejudice toward other black people, especially when they work for white institutions. This tragically suggests that the oppressed may internalize their oppressor's low view of themselves in order to fit in.

When Mathabane explains his case to the owner, Mr. Ferguson, Ferguson states that he would like Mathabane to be a member in their club, but apartheid policy dictates they'd have to build separate amenities just for him, since he's the only black member. Ferguson thinks this unlikely, but says Mathabane can play in their tournaments as long as he's willing to use the servant's bathroom. Mathabane is frustrated by this "white man's version of integrated sports," but tells Ferguson he'll think about it. He hasn't seen his final matriculation score yet, but he's certainly passed. Now that he's done with school, his only options are university and work, and he has yet to hear anything from Stan.

The "white man's version of integrated sports" that Ferguson offers Mathabane reiterates his belief that regardless of success, he'll never be truly free or treated as an equal in South Africa. However, even if Ferguson sincerely wants Mathabane to play in his club, the complicated legal and logistical hurdles that apartheid invokes suggests that dismantling such a system's hold over sports will take a long time, perhaps even years.

CHAPTER 52

When the matriculation results come out, Mathabane and several of his academic peers receive third-class marks—effectively a failing grade. They are outraged, and they and their teachers suspect that the government sabotaged the results. After several complaints, the Bantu Education Department changes them to second-class marks, which are still too low. Mathabane broods and sinks into depression. His mother pushes him to forget America for the time being and get himself a **passbook** so he can take the job for the food company. Mathabane doesn't want one, though—it "represent[s] too much emotional pain."

The government's potential sabotage of students' exam scores suggests that it does not want black students to excel in academics, perhaps because they could further challenge the system. For Mathabane, obtaining a passbook symbolizes submitting to apartheid law and accepting the unnecessary burden of stamps, permits, and every bureaucratic hurdle the government uses to disadvantage black people.

Mathabane hopes that Stan will write to him and call him to America so that he won't need a **passbook**, but come February he has neither a letter nor a job. Andre arranges for Mathabane to play on an all-white, top-level junior tennis squad. At first Mathabane is self-conscious as the only black teammate, but the white boys start opening up to him and making jokes, and as he grows comfortable he quickly rises to their level. He spends eight weeks playing with them, but then the squad disbands for the season while individual players go to tournaments in Europe and America. The coach tells Mathabane that he needs to keep playing upper-level players, but the trip costs five times his father's annual income. Mathabane is desperate to go to America.

Mathabane's continued ability to make friends with white people not only suggests that he is growing as a person, but that apartheid's influence over white people is beginning to weaken. Mathabane's quick rise in skill after playing with better athletes underscores how critical it is for an individual to be in an environment that challenges them. However, Mathabane's lack of money to play in international tournaments suggests that finding such challenging environments is difficult for black South Africans, who lack the resources to seek out such opportunities.

CHAPTER 53

One evening, the police arrest Mathabane for not having a **passbook**, but let him off with a warning. Mathabane gathers all his papers and goes to the administrative office to apply for a passbook, but the clerk refuses—first because Mathabane's parents don't have the right permit to live in Alexandra, and then because Mathabane is unemployed. When Mathabane explains that he can't look for work without a passbook, the clerk says it's not his problem and brushes Mathabane aside. Mathabane does not know what to do. His parents pressure him to find work. He still receives anonymous death threats for his relationships with white people. Mathabane starts to wonder if America is a foolish dream, and realizes he is being selfish thinking only of himself and his tennis career.

Mathabane can't get a passbook without a job, yet can't look for work without a passbook, which is obviously an unwinnable situation. However, the clerk's dismissal of it as Mathabane's problem, not his own, suggests that it is yet another intentional measure that apartheid uses to oppress black people and obstruct their progress through endless and absurd bureaucracy. This further suggests that apartheid uses all manner of obstructive measures to hold black South Africans back from self-sufficiency.

Mathabane mentions to Andre that he's looking for work, and Andre connects him with Barclays Bank, where his father is an executive. Barclays is non-discriminatory and pays a handsome salary, and can even help line up a **passbook** for Mathabane. After a successful interview, an associate at Barclays gives Mathabane a formal letter that qualifies him for a passbook, regardless of paperwork. Mathabane goes to the passbook office where he's sent through an hours-long, bureaucratic process involving mountains of paperwork, physicals, chest X-rays, genital exams, and blood tests. All of these procedures are performed by impatient and derisive white and black clerks. Mathabane finds the entire process infuriating and demeaning.

A white executive's ability to quickly qualify Mathabane for a passbook suggests the system is not actually concerned with what paperwork he does or doesn't have, but merely aims to make life as difficult as possible for black people. Likewise, the long and invasive series of exams he must endure seems specifically designed to humiliate black people, again suggesting that many of apartheid's systems are simply designed to be as obstructive and demeaning as possible.

Mathabane takes the job at Barclays Bank, still holding out hope that he'll receive a scholarship offer from America. He starts in the checking department but quickly moves up positions until his bosses are considering him for a management role. In the afternoons and on weekends, Mathabane continues playing tennis. The first month of Mathabane's job, his salary is triple what his parents make combined. His family is overjoyed and immediately wants to buy all sorts of things and move out of Alexandra, but Mathabane is determined to stay. Mathabane plays in weekend tournaments whenever he can, including an illustrious Grand Prix, though he's eliminated early.

Mathabane's huge salary is a direct result of his education, which proves right his mother's early claims that education will take him further in the world than anything else. Even if Mathabane were never to make it to America, his fight for his modern education has already taken him farther than his father's tribalism ever could, suggesting that modern education is worth letting go of tribal identity for.

Finally, Mathabane hears from American universities, starting with Princeton, which offers to underwrite all fees and tuition. He asks for letters of recommendation from Wilfred and Owen Williams and writes a letter to thank Stan. However, aside from his family, Mathabane keeps the news a secret, since the South African government often tries to prevent black citizens from leaving the country, most likely so they can't testify about the true nature of apartheid to countries like America.

South Africa's attempt to keep black people from leaving the country or sharing their experiences suggest they know apartheid is an unacceptable practice that the world will condemn them for. This, too, suggests that apartheid is not a necessary or justified system, but merely a way for white people to cruelly exploit and profit off of black people.

A month after Mathabane sends his full application to Princeton, they send word that he is accepted and can begin in six months' time. His mother is proud of him, but sad that he'll be leaving. One of Mathabane's sisters lets slip to her friends that he's going to university in America, and Mathabane starts receiving even more anonymous threats. Mathabane receives another letter from a college in South Carolina, offering a full scholarship and competitive tennis as long as he can be there in two months, allowing a quicker escape. Mathabane is overjoyed, as are his family and Wilfred. Owen Williams arranges to help him get his passport in time and notifies Stan that Mathabane is going to America.

The threats that Mathabane receives suggests that not only the apartheid government, but also his own black community does not want him to leave South Africa and find his success in America. Curiously, this suggests that people in oppression often do not want to see their peers rise from that oppression and leave them behind. In this way, both apartheid and the black community cooperate to hold young aspiring people like Mathabane down, even when they possess true talent and potential.

One of Owen William's friends takes Mathabane to get a passport, but the government refuses to issue one for at least three months—too late for Mathabane to begin school on time. Stan suggests that they ask the American consulate in Pretoria for help, and once Mathabane explains his case, the Americans award him a visa even without his passport. After showing the South African government the American visa and plane tickets to South Carolina, the government gives Mathabane his passport within two weeks. When the passport arrives, Mathabane quits his banking jobs and spends his last months practicing tennis and being with family and friends.

The Americans' willingness to give Mathabane a visa even without a passport suggests that they recognize South Africa's attempt to hold Mathabane back. Likewise, the fact that the South African government gives Mathabane a passport in two weeks after the American consulate grants him a visa suggests that their initial claim—that it would take three months—is yet another demonstration of apartheid's attempts to keep exceptional black people from realizing their true potential.

CHAPTER 54

At four in the morning, Mathabane's family rises to watch him pack and see him off—a driver will take him to the airport. Mathabane is about to "become the first black boy ever to leave South Africa on a tennis scholarship." It seems a "miracle." Mathabane hugs and kisses his mother and each of his siblings. His father stands impassively against the wall. He pities his father, watching his oldest son embark on a life entirely foreign to his own. Even so, and despite all the abuse, Mathabane realizes he still loves his father. Mathabane kisses him, and his father begins to cry and tells him to take care of himself and write the family often. Mathabane takes it as confirmation that his father loves him as well, and he curses apartheid for preventing them from leading normal lives with healthy relationships.

Mathabane's position as the first black person to leave South Africa on a tennis scholarship suggests that he's achieved something historic. Like Ali, Mathabane's success proves that any black person can rise from poverty and overcome apartheid's oppression, though not without great difficulty. Mathabane's father's tears suggest that his father did love him, despite all of the anger and abuse, he simply did not know how to show it, especially as Mathabane pushed away from his tribal values.

Mathabane wonders if America is worth leaving his family behind for, but in his heart he knows it is. He feels a burden of responsibility to use his life for a meaningful purpose—not only for his family, but for his country and his race. Mathabane worries about his siblings, though, growing up under apartheid's hardship. He especially worries for George, because he sees the early signs of the same hatred Mathabane carried in himself for so long. As Mathabane drives away, he feels he is going toward "destiny."

Although Mathabane escapes apartheid, his fears for George and his sisters suggests that they will have to endure the same hardships and pains that he did. Even so, Mathabane's success proves that despite all of apartheid's methods of inflicting suffering and repressing black people, they can still overcome their oppression and succeed in life.

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