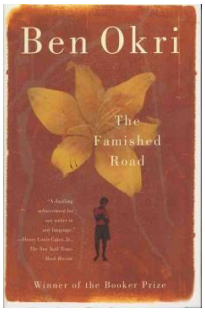


The Famished Road

by Ben Okri

Summary

Spoiler Alert: The following summary and discussion questions reveal plot information that some readers may prefer to encounter as surprises.

The Famished Road unfolds from the perspective of a unique young boy: Azaro's name derives from *Lazaro*, or the biblical Lazarus, due to his having been given up for dead and then recovering as a young child. He is an *abiku*, or spirit child, a creature from Yoruba mythology who exists between the spirit and human worlds. He sees things — visions, bizarre and often nightmarish creatures — that others cannot. The reader sees through his eyes, in which the "real" and fantastic worlds often intertwine.

The novel follows the life of Azaro and his family. His parents, like so many of the working poor in Nigeria, struggle to make ends meet. Azaro explores the world around him, coming into contact with some of the adults in the community, including Madame Koto, the proprietor of the local bar, famous for her palm wine and peppersoup; and a local photographer who tries to document life in the village. Their stories unfold, always from Azaro's unique point of view. A political conflict finds its way to the village during an election, with both the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor vying for votes. Parisian divisions within the community lead to violence. The photographer, who documents a violent political demonstration, is severely beaten by one party's thugs. Madame Koto emerges as a local leader, gaining wealth and political clout even as she is accused of witchcraft.

Azaro's father, a physically powerful man, struggles to support his family, resorting to menial manual labor while contemplating a career as a boxer. As these normal human stories unfold around him, Azaro also encounters denizens of the spirit realm who react to him in various ways (most often with hostility. During a serious illness, he comes to understand his position and the things he can do because of it.

After Azaro's illness, reality and the fantastic become more difficult to distinguish. Even his level-headed father encounters the spiritual in the course of several boxing matches; he falls ill after defeating an opponent they later learn had been dead for some years. During his illness, he experiences visions very similar to those that plague Azaro. When he awakens, Azaro's father embarks upon a political career with the help of money he won boxing. He and Madame Koto continue their descent into politics. After winning a fight in Madame Koto's bar with a man who seems to have supernatural powers, he is badly shaken; his wife takes him home and attempts to help his body and spirit recover.

He spends three days recovering from his fight, during which he has dreams about the problems and redemption of the world. Azaro and several other characters continue to have strange visions of a bizarre spiritual realm, and Azaro offers further explanation as to the nature and meaning of the spirit children. Madame Koto's witchcraft and politics blur, as political battles take on a supernatural dimension. Madame Koto herself becomes more malevolent, draining power from people's dreams and attempting to renew herself with Azaro's blood. The novel ends with Azaro's father recounting his dreams and the revelations they contain to his family, before Azaro's perspective shifts once again.

Discussion Questions

The following discussion prompts and notes should spark discussion, but are not all there is to say. Readers bring differing viewpoints to the story's characters, events, and what it all means; sharing those insights is what makes book groups rewarding. Enjoy your discussion -- starting with these ideas!

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

What is the significance of the title, *The Famished Road*?

From the very beginning, the novel establishes the titular road as a sentient, supernatural entity. The opening passage of the novel describes the road in terms many readers will find eerily familiar:

> In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road, and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry.
> In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries.... There was not one among us who looked forward to being born. (p. 1)

The first phrase and the rhythm of the whole passage evoke the timelessness of the creation story as retold in the prologue to the Gospel of John, in the New Testament:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.
> (John 1:1-5, New International Version)

The road, once a river, has existed since the beginning, giving it a quality outside of time. It is a powerful entity that connects all life, whether in the spirit world or the mundane, with great creative power and destructive potential — an embodiment of opposites reflected in its origin as the road-that-was-once-a-river. Its power also takes on a more specific identity as the "king," who appears in different guises, but often as a large cat: "He had been born uncountable times and was a legend in all worlds, known by a hundred different names. . . . He always lived the most extraordinary of lives" (p. 1). Seeming both to echo the Gospel of John and to universalize the concept of Jesus into a great, timeless being who interacts with all creatures, the novel's opening sets the story in a much vaster context than the mundane village where Azaro lives. Though Azaro seems to be the narrator, this is the road's story, and that story extends beyond time and worlds.

The road has a will of its own, and it is hungry both in the spirit world and in the mundane. Characters other than Azaro seem aware of it. When the photographer's rat poison proves extremely effective, leaving the whole house full of dead vermin, it takes a long time to dispose of them all. Azaro's father

tells a long story about how the King — a voracious giant — became the Road, eating many people who tried to travel it (pp. 258-261). After telling this story, he instructs Azaro to "Go and throw out some dead rats for the road to eat" (p. 261). Through this command he evokes both the book's title and the animal-like nature of the road.

There are several other examples of this nature, but here are two more: Early in the novel, Azaro flees some mysterious women and helps a grieving mother escape across a river whose waters seem to oppose their efforts to row back to shore (p. 14). Even more graphic is the death later on of the white engineer who has been sent to help build the road. During a flood, he is whisked away by the mud and water:

> The earth gave way in clumps and covered him as he disappeared. I didn't hear his cry. The log rolled over, and a moment's flash completed the hallucination. I began to shout. Workers rushed out of the forest. They rushed down the side of the pit to try and find him. They dug up his helmet, his binoculars, his eyeglasses, a boot, some of his papers, but his body was not found. The pit was half-filled with water. Three workers volunteered to dive in and search for him. They never returned. The pit that had helped create the road had swallowed them all. (p. 288)

This pit, which is part of the road, has claimed four human victims, almost like an animal devouring its prey. Their effects remain while all the bodies disappear as the road seeks something to sate its hunger.

How does the novel convey Azaro's point of view as he straddles both the spirit and material worlds?

All narrative points of view are subjective, but Azaro's is even more complicated, as he is both trapped between the spiritual and material worlds, and a small child. This renders him an engaging but unreliable narrator, as he perceives things so differently than the other characters around him.

It is often clear when Azaro is interacting with the mundane world, and when the spiritual realm intrudes into his life. There are many scenes of him interacting normally with his family. On the other hand, he encounters frightening, bizarre, and often malevolent entities that are clearly supernatural. However, some of the most interesting moments of the novel occur when these viewpoints start to blend, and it becomes unclear what it is he is actually seeing. Azaro is a small child living in a world full of adults making complex decisions about difficult situations. Things often appear distorted or strange to him that might make more sense to an adult. This comes through when he witnesses a political rally, in which a small riot starts over the free milk being given away. His description is full of the same imagery with which he describes the supernatural horrors he often witnesses:

> Soon the whole street, in a frightening tide of buckets and basins, of clanging pots and rancorous voices, rocked the van. The landlord looked sick with fright. Sweat broke out on his face and he struggled to take off his agbada, but it got caught in the outstretched clawing hands of all the struggling hungry people. . . . On the other side I saw Madame Koto engaged in negotiations with the man at the megaphone, pointing vigorously in the direction of her bar. All around her the crowd hustled. The women's kerchiefs were torn off, shirts were ripped apart,

> milk spilt everywhere and powdered the faces of women and children. With their sweating, milk-powdered faces they looked like starving spirits. (p. 124)

Earlier, Azaro heard the megaphone announcing the event, and wondered at the amplified, crackling voice: "I felt I was imagining them, that they were another manifestation of the spirits" (p. 122). Both of these passages describe real-world (if frightening) events. However, as a small child, Azaro sees the mundane in the same way that he does the surreal visions he receives from the spirits. While a reader may want to impose a clear distinction on the spiritual and mundane events which fill the novel, Azaro does not do so. The line is not clear for him, and his point of view blurs the demarcation between the mundane world and the supernatural.

What does the novel have to say about life in Nigeria?

Nigeria in the novel is a nation fraught with civil conflict; with poverty and political violence. Azaro and his family encounter various kinds of strife. Their neighbors are not afraid to resort to violence in order to secure what they want. This is especially true for anyone with any degree of power. Their landlord, for instance, is willing to employ extreme violence to keep his tenants in line. When they threaten to leave and find new places to live, he takes such action:

He hurried away and returned an hour later with three policemen. They fell on us and flogged with whips and cracked our skulls with batons. We fought them back. We beat them with sticks and ropes. We tore their colonial uniforms and sent them packing. They came back with reinforcements. Dad lured two of them down a side street and gave them a severe thrashing. More came at him. He was such a dervish of fury that it took six policemen to subdue him and bundle him off to the police station. The reinforcements meanwhile lashed out at everything in sight, unleashing mayhem in a drunken fever. When they had finished fifteen men, three children, four women, two goats, and a dog lay wounded along the battleground of our area. (p. 10)

This is a horrific scene of violence and abuse of power which may be alien to many Western readers, but is realistic in the world of the novel. Many of the characters experience this sort of thing as part of their daily lives.

The novel also contains examples of political violence. The two principle parties, the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor, are desperate to control as many votes as possible, engaging in political violence and using hired thugs to intimidate or assault supporters of the opposition. As one man recounts to Azaro's father:

> They are all corrupt. In my home-town they killed a man because he wouldn't support them. They too are trying to rig the elections. They have thugs who beat up people in the markets. They take bribes and they help only themselves. (p. 211)

Once again, the violent behavior in the novel may be shocking to a Western reader. Politics and its institutions, which in the West are expected to support civil discourse and help society run smoothly, are in this case an excuse for thuggery and violence on all levels.

How and where does hunger appear?

Hunger represents many different things, though several of the key ideas remain consistent. Hunger, or the lack thereof, sometimes indicates a character's level of social power, or change in social status. Azaro and his family live with hunger as a constant part of their lives. Money is short. Through much of the novel, Azaro's father is looking for work to support his family, and he often must accept demeaning manual labor for very little pay. Azaro, his family, and their neighbors are all in the same financial straits, and are often described physically as lean, bony, angular. By contrast, as Madame Koto grows richer and gains more political influence, her appearance changes as well:

> In the midst of all this Madame Koto grew bigger and fatter till she couldn't get in through the back door. The door had to be broken down and widened. We saw her in gowns, and yellow hats, waving a fan of blue feathers, with expensive bangles of silver and gold weighing her arms, and necklaces of pearl and jade round her neck. When she walked all her jewelry clattered on her, announcing her eminence in advance. (pp. 373-374)

Not too long after this description, Madame Koto obtains what is apparently the ultimate sign of wealth in her world: an automobile of her own. It is, however, "too small for her" (p. 379). Her growing physical girth represents her increase in wealth and status, even if it makes it difficult for her to enjoy some of the luxuries they bring.

Hunger also appears in Azaro's encounters with the spirit world. Some of the supernatural entities are described as hungry for various things. More curiously, Azaro's own hunger becomes a means by which he accesses and understands his connection to the spiritual side of the world:

> I refused to eat. And I stayed in bed, growing in stature, full of vengeance. That was how I went into a curious state of being. I began to feed on my hunger. I fed well and had a mighty appetite. I dipped into myself and found other worlds waiting. I chose a world and lingered. There were no spirits here. It was a world of wraiths. A world of famine, famishment and drought. (p. 325)

Azaro's journeys grow more extensive, taking him into increasingly more bizarre spiritual realms. The spirit world reverses expectations of the real world: lack of hunger may indicate human power and success, while in the spiritual realm hunger is important both as motivation and as a means of entry into other worlds.

What is the function of visions?

As the novel opens, Azaro appears to be alone in his spiritual maelstrom. Walking the line between the mundane and the supernatural as a spirit child, he experiences the supernatural and spiritual worlds more directly than most people. However, as the novel progresses, many of the other characters begin to have their own dreams and visions, which serve different purposes in the narrative. Some exist to advance the plot, or to create tension, as when the old blind man predicts death and destruction. Others, though, offer commentary on the world beyond the novel, addressing issues of contemporary African life.

Azaro's father becomes obsessed with politics, particularly after a supernatural encounter with a ghostly boxer. His visions tend to address the state of his nation, and of the world beyond. This

culminates, in the final pages of the novel, with a grand vision of the problems besetting humanity, and the vast impending changes that may resolve them:

> A single thought of ours could change the universe. We human beings are only small things. Life is a great thing. As I am talking now they are holding elections in heaven and under the sea. We are entering a new age. We must be prepared. There are strange bombs in the world. Great powers in space are fighting to control our destiny. Machines and poisons and selfish dreams will eat us up. I entered a space ship and found myself on another planet. People who look like human beings are not human beings. Strange people live amongst us. We must be careful. Our lives are changing. Our gods are silent. Our ancestors are silent. A great something is going to come from the sky and change the face of the earth. (pp. 497-498)

He goes on to present a sweeping, redemptive dream for the future, in which the potential of his people, and of all people everywhere, will be tapped in order to create a new golden age. His vision seems to mesh with an earlier one, experienced by Azaro's young friend Ade. This other spirit child describes his country's situation thus: "Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong. I won't see it" (p. 478). The time period of the novel is undefined, but it seems to take place in Nigeria around the time of independence. Many of these visions may represent both expectation and fears about the future after independence.

How does the spirit world relate to the everyday world?

The Famished Road presents the spiritual realm as intimately intertwined with the everyday world. Azaro encounters this early in the story. During a trip to the market, he notices that some of the people wandering through its stalls are not, strictly speaking, people, and he realizes something else about them and their behavior:

> I shut my eyes and when I opened them again I saw people who walked backwards, a dwarf who got about on two fingers, men upside-down with baskets of fish on their feet, women who had breasts on their backs, and beautiful children with three arms. I saw a girl amongst them who had eyes at the side of her face, bangles of blue copper round her neck, and who was more lovely than forest flowers. (p. 15)

These strange entities, roaming the market alongside normal human beings, become agitated when they realize Azaro can see them. He ignores them till they leave him alone, but concludes:

> That was the first time I realized it wasn't just humans who came to the marketplaces of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too. They buy and sell, browse and investigate. They wander amongst the fruits of the earth and sea. (p. 16)

Thus, not only do spirits mingle among human populations, but they have reasons for doing so. While curiosity may lead them to "investigate" the activities of mankind, the buying and selling implies that they need or want things humans have.

Encounters with the supernatural are not restricted to Azaro or other *abiku*. When people are ill, herbalists are often consulted and may suggest a supernatural cure. Several characters are accused of witchcraft, including Madame Koto. All in all, the characters who people *The Famished Road* seem willing to accept the supernatural as both a presence in their world and an explanation for some of its events. Nevertheless, it is still frightening when it happens. Azaro's father has an encounter with another boxer, Yellow Jaguar, who later turns out to be more than human. After Azaro's father defeats him in a surreal nighttime match, Yellow Jaguar falls to the ground and something unusual happens:

> And when he hit the earth with an unnatural thud, the strangest thing happened. The man disappeared. Into the earth. Into the darkness. I have no way of telling. Steam, tinged with yellow, like low-burning sulfur, rose from the wet earth. The gathered lights had all gone. The night was silent. (p. 357)

Azaro and his normally level-headed father both witness this event. They later learn that "Yellow Jaguar" was the name of a famous local boxer who had died three years earlier. Once again the lines between the mundane and the supernatural blur, and not just for Azaro. This event profoundly affects his father, sending the older man off on a career as a boxer, and later as a politician.

How does the novel present history and the different ways in which people understand it?

The novel is presented from the cultural perspective of one ethnic group on the outskirts of a nameless Nigerian city. Their own understanding of their history often comes through in the context of their contact with the European world. As one might guess, the African characters have a very different memory of their first contact with the Europeans. Azaro's mother recounts it to him thus:

> 'When white people first came to our land,' she said, as if she were talking to the wind, 'we had already gone to the moon and all the great stars. In the olden days they used to come and learn from us. My father used to tell me that we taught them how to count. We taught them about the stars. We gave them some of our gods. We shared our knowledge with them. We welcomed them. But they forgot all this. They forgot many things. They forgot that we are all brothers and sisters and that black people are the ancestors of the human race. The second time they came they brought guns. They took our lands, burned our gods, and they carried away many of our people to become slaves across the sea.' (p. 282)

A traditionally Eurocentric understanding of history would recall the same events very differently. In deference to the "White Man's Burden," many Europeans in the 19th and 20th centuries would claim that they brought civilization and learning to Africa, and that colonialism was a means by which to advance the people already living there. The African understanding of history, which Azaro's mother relates here, reaches further back to show how, at one time, Africa gave civilization to the rest of the world, serving as a source of learning and wisdom.

Later in the novel, the dissonance between the African and European understandings of history and the roots of civilization becomes a source of anger and conflict. Azaro's father addresses this when listing some of the troubles that plague his country:

> He saw our people drowning in poverty, in famine, in drought, in divisiveness and the blood of war. He saw our people always preyed upon by other powers, manipulated by the Western world, our history and achievements rigged out of existence. He saw the rich of our country, he saw the array of our politicians, how corruptible they were, how blind to our future, how greedy they had become, how deaf to the cries of the people. . . . (p. 492)

The negation of the history of his people is as much a sin in his mind as the poverty and political corruption wracking the nation. Deprived of their history, and thus a key part of their pride and identity, they wander aimlessly through a cycle of violence and famine.

How do Europeans appear in *The Famished Road*?

Very few European or white characters appear in *The Famished Road*, but the African characters discuss the influence of Europeans and their culture and the ways in which life in Africa has changed as a result. By and large, the reviews are negative. European intervention in Africa is presented as inherently harmful, and is blamed for a multitude of things. At one point, Azaro's bad behavior gets the attention of a group of people from his community, including a local chief. When Madame Koto chastises him, the bystanders discuss the event in terms of a cultural breakdown:

> The chief, satisfied with the tribute, smiled, and went on drinking. The noises resumed. Some of the people commented on my behavior and lamented the way children no longer respected their elders and blamed it all on the white man's way of life which was spoiling the values of Africa. (p. 40)

Azaro's neighbors are not the first people to blame their children's behavior on a corrupting foreign influence. However, their choice of scapegoat is a key to some underlying attitudes toward Europe and its people. The novel further develops the idea through other characters. Azaro's mother explains her story about the origin of the world, how civilization rose in Africa, and how the Europeans came and violently destroyed so many of their accomplishments (p. 282). Later, in a violent speech, a local spiritual leader decries the European influence in Africa, and the ways in which European ideas about "modernization “have affected local life:

> Too many roads! Things are CHANGING TOO FAST! No new WILL. COWARDICE everywhere! SELFISHNESS is EATING UP the WORLD! THEY ARE DESTROYING AFRICA! They are DESTROYING the WORLD and the HOME and the SHRINES and the GODS! THEY are DESTROYING LOVE TOO. (p. 382)

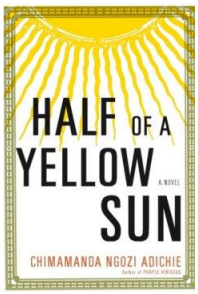
The novel's view of European influence in Africa is negative. However, with this speech it becomes less about history, or culture, and more about modernization and its effect on traditional values and social order. The European idea of "modern" — greedy, self-centered, disaffected — is taking the place of a more communal and spiritual way of life.

About the Author

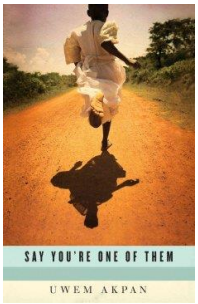
Born in Nigeria in 1959, Ben Okri spent his early childhood in London before his family returned to their native country. He later returned to England, earning a degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Essex. From 1983 until 1986 he served as the poetry editor for *West Africa* magazine; Okri

published his first novel, *Flowers and Shadows*, in 1980. He followed it with *The Landscapes Within* in 1981. Both are set in Nigeria, and both respond to the social chaos and violence that Okri observed engulfing that nation. Okri's novels -- often drawn from his own experiences -- ranged in setting from Africa to London. Okri is considered one of the foremost authors in the post-modern and post-colonial traditions, best known for character-driven literary novels of magical realism tinged with African myth and religion. *The Famished Road* received the 1991 Booker Prize for Fiction.

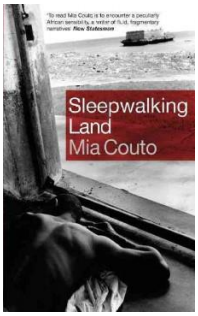
Further Reading



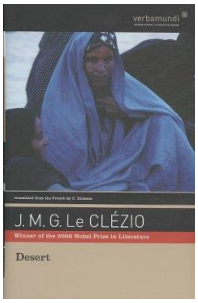
Half of a yellow sun
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
Re-creates the 1960s struggle of Biafra to establish an independent republic in Nigeria, following the intertwined lives of the characters through a military coup, the Biafran secession, and the resulting civil war. Like The Famished Road, Half of a Yellow Sun portrays the effects of conflict on people in Nigeria; the former uses magical realism to describe the period around independence, while the latter deals with the Biafran war in traditional style.



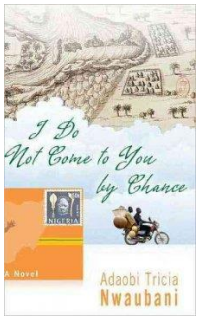
Say you're one of them
Uwem Akpan
A Nigerian-born Jesuit priest, Akpan's collection of short stories presents the gritty details of the difficulties faced by young people in war-torn parts of Africa. Poverty, child prostitution, religious conflict, and displacement are some of the many hardships that plague the lives of the characters. Akpan examines these problems with insight, tenderness, and the special sense of humor about the world seen through the eyes of a child.



Sleepwalking land
Mia Couto
Mia Coutou's most widely translated novel takes place in his native Mozambique during a devastating civil war. Two refugees, an old man and a young boy, take shelter in a burned-out bus. Among the possessions of one of the dead passengers, they find a collection of notebooks in which the deceased recorded the story of his life. As they boy reads the story to the old man, they find themselves drawn into the narrative in surprising ways.



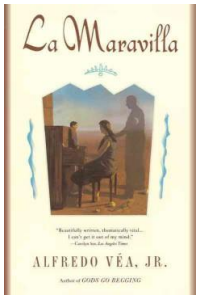
Desert
J. M. G. Le Clezio
Nobel laureate Le Clézio's dreamlike novel spans most of the 20th century and occurs on two continents. The story transitions seamlessly back and forth between two parallel narratives: a group of desert nomads rebelling against French rule in the early 20th century, and the story of one of their descendents, a young woman named Lalla living in a shanty town on the Moroccan coast in the years following the Second World War. Le Clézio's poetic language carries the reader on a sweeping journey through both stories as they evolve and intertwine.



I do not come to you by chance

Adaobi Nwaubani

Nwaubani's first novel is an entertaining look into the world of Nigerian internet scammers. Kingsley Ibe is a young Nigerian man, an engineering school graduate who has difficulty finding a job. Via his Uncle Boniface (better known to his business associates as "Cash Daddy") Kingsley enters the world of the internet scam, conning complete strangers out of huge amounts of money. However, as Cash Daddy's ambitions grow, Kingsley is forced to make a choice between a potential fortune and the accompanying danger and moral decay. The novel strongly portrays the effects of change and modernization on contemporary Nigerian culture.



La maravilla

Alfredo Vea

A unique, fantastic story, Véa's novel offers a surreal take on a poor community on the outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona in the late 1950s. Seen through the eyes of nine-year-old half-Indian, half-Mexican boy, *La Maravilla* explores the lives, loves, and stories of its characters as they unfold in unexpected ways. It also offers a trip into the spirit world that changes the boy's life.

This NoveList Book Discussion Guide was originally developed by Michael Jenkins, a writer, community activist, and avid vegetable gardener in Wilmington, NC. Revisions by NoveList Readers' Advisory Librarian, Kimberly Burton.