

# The Fortune Men

by Nadifa Mohamed

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**Finalist for the Booker Prize and the Costa Novel Award**

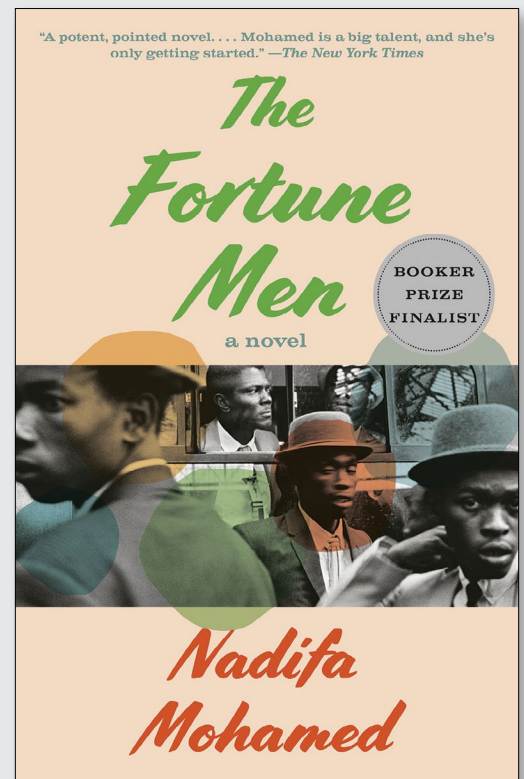
*“The Fortune Men is that rare novel that breaks your heart and, in so doing, gives you life. Nadifa Mohamed is a revelation—she writes with the fierce compassionate lightning of a truth-teller, lays bare the ghastly colonial condition that afflicts so many of us, where truth cannot overcome injustice. If a novel can be an avenger then *The Fortune Men* is the one we’ve all been waiting for.”—Junot Díaz, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao**

## INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

In *The Fortune Men*, Nadifa Mohamed tells the harrowing story of Mahmood Hussein Mattan, a twenty-eight-year-old Somali sailor living in Cardiff, Wales, who in 1952 was wrongfully convicted and subsequently executed for the murder of Lily Volpert. Found guilty on the account of a single shaky prosecution witness in a jury deliberation that lasted less than two hours, Mattan became the last man hanged in Cardiff, Wales. Some five decades later his case would become the first miscarriage of justice rectified by the British legal system. Mohamed’s novel provocatively stages how subtle and violent racial prejudices affects every aspect of sociopolitical life from the criminal justice system to the intimacies of marriage. How does the past bear on the present, and what consequences does illuminating this relationship hold for any meaningful discussion of agency and choice? What redemptive possibilities, if any, does love offer? These questions animate the novel. The following guide is designed to enable students to develop a rigorous and

## Teacher’s Guide

**INCLUDES: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,  
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES,  
AND LINKS TO RESOURCES**



## INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL (CONTINUED)

analytic relationship to the text, to practice close reading, and to experiment with the techniques of literary criticism. It includes classroom activities, discussion questions, supplementary materials, and prompts for writing assignments.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**NADIFA MOHAMED** was born in 1981 in Hargeisa, Somaliland. At the age of four she moved with her family to London. She is the author of *Black Mamba Boy* and *The Orchard of Lost Souls*. She has received both The Betty Trask Award and the Somerset Maugham Award, and in 2013, she was named as one of *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists. Her work appears regularly in *The Guardian* and the BBC. A fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, she lives in London.

## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

*The Fortune Men* includes strong explicit language, including dehumanizing racial slurs. While the use of this language is historically situated and is intended to show the readers the pervasive nature of racist language in the characters' milieu, these might be difficult passages for your students to encounter. It might be helpful to give your students a gentle warning in advance of reading the novel. It is also advised that to ensure an equitable, just pedagogical environment, the teacher instructs as well as models for the students not to repeat certain slurs in discussions about the novel.

## BUILD CONTEXT: PLACE

Encourage students to situate the novel in time and place. The story could have taken place anywhere, anytime, so why does it matter that it takes place in post-War Tiger Bay, the oldest multiethnic community in Wales? Through the practice of close reading and engagement with supplementary materials, students can appreciate how the setting of the novel functions almost like a main character in the novel.

Assign the following supplementary materials simultaneously with the first few chapters of the novel:

- A short newspaper article that covers the history, disappearance, and multiple resurrections of Tiger Bay (<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/news-opinion/history-really-matters-tiger-bay-18372569>)
- Shirley Bassey, DBE song "A Girl from Tiger Bay"
- During class either individually or in a group ask the students to spend time with the following two passage and answer the accompanying questions:

### PASSAGE 1

"The docks and Butetown cover only a square mile but for [Mattan] and his neighbors it's a metropolis. Raised up from marshland the century before, a Scottish aristocrat built the docks and named the streets after his relatives. Mahmood had heard a rumour that the world's first million-pound cheque was signed at the Coal Exchange. Even now, in the morning, a different caliber of men come bowler-hatted to work at the Mercantile Marine Office or the Custom House. At both the Marine Office and Seaman's Union you know which door to use if you don't want trouble, and this goes for the labouring white men as well as black. Beyond the financial district, the

**BUILD CONTEXT: PLACE**

(CONTINUED)

neighborhood is for everyone, all of them hemmed in and pushed close by the railway tracks and canals cutting them off from the rest of Cardiff. A maze of short bridges, canal locks and tramlines confuse the new visitor; just before his time, Somali sailors would wear the address of their lodging house on a board around their neck so that passers-by could help navigate them. The canals are a playground to young children and once, when two went missing, Mahmood had spent a blue, insomniac night searching the muddy water for any sight of them. They had been found in the morning—one white, one black, both drowned. But his boys are still too young to go wandering, *alhamdulillah*. One day, when they are older, he will show them around this port town with its Norwegian Church and kosher abattoir, its cranes, booms and smoking chimneys, its timber ponds, creosote works and cattle yards, its three broad thoroughfares—Bute Street, James Street, Stuart Street—criss-crossed with ever-narrowing terraces. The flags and funnels of the world's shipping fleets crowding the pierheads and sprawling across the dock basins" (6–7).

**PASSAGE 2**

Diana watches from the bus stop outside the shop as the main Eid al-Adha procession troops down from the canal all the way around Loudoun Square and ends at the *zawiya* on Peel Street, while Sheikh Hassan's competing but smaller group dawdle up from the docks, Children dressed in Yemeni *thobes* and headdresses, with tin discs and red embroidery on the bodices, lead the adults in song and step. Even Christians, Buddhist and Jewish children have joined their friends, dressed in nativity costumes of Mary blue and shepherd check, miming the verses of the Arabic *nasheeds* and raising their voices at the choruses, "Ya Allah, Ya Allah, Ya Allah kareem" (65).

**QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PASSAGE**

1. Who are the residents of Tiger Bay? How do these two passages offer the reader information about the class status, racial demographics, political tensions, local economies, weather, etc?
2. What are the benefits of living in this community? What are the risks?
3. How does either of the passage corroborate, expand, or contradict the information offered in the article above?

**BUILD CONTEXT:  
SOMALIS IN TWENTIETH-  
CENTURY ENGLAND**

Ask your students to briefly note their first impressions of the Somalis they meet in the very first scenes of the novel. How do they imagine their arrival to the United Kingdom? Given the dominant narrative about Somalis in contemporary media, many students might assume the characters in the café to be refugees or asylum seekers fleeing war, political persecution, and/or other desperate circumstances. And while that might have been the case for Somalis immigrating after the start of the Somali civil war in the late 1980s, the Somali community of Tiger Bay in the first half of the twentieth century were a product of a different history.

**BUILD CONTEXT:**  
**SOMALIS IN TWENTIETH-**  
**CENTURY ENGLAND**  
 (CONTINUED)

- Somalis are one of the oldest African immigrant communities in Great Britain, their arrival dating back to the late nineteenth century as dock workers and sailors on British ships.
- Many Somalis were also recruited or conscripted to fight in both World War I and World War II as colonial subjects.
- Due the shortage of workers in the aftermath of War World Two, Somali men were recruited as seafarers and dock workers in English port towns.
- In 1894, an act of parliament restricted Somali residency to the port towns and shipping hubs. Restrictions were not lifted until 1950s.
- These historical moments reveal not only the long presence of Somalis in Great Britain, but also how these presences were inextricably linked to the exploits and racial politics of the British Empire.
- How does the text in its very first scene asking us to perceive this colonial relationship?

“The King is dead. Long live the Queen,” is the novel’s first line. It is uttered inside an immigrant working-class café where patrons jovially and ironically deliberate the impending transformations of the British Empire.

- Spend a few minutes on how the tone and the setting of this opening scene is subtly communicating a complex, uneven imperial relationship.
- How are the patrons of Berlin’s café aware of their identities as colonial subjects residing in the metropole?
- How does the following exchange between three Somali men display the anxieties and expectations of the novel’s period?
- Ismail, a Somali patron of the café, predicts the imminent arrival of independence. “India is gone, what can they say to the rest?” he offers. Berlin responds: “They say we got you by the balls, darkie! We own your land, your trains, your rivers, your school, the coffee grains at the bottom of your cup.” Mahmood, in turn, “smirks at the exchange; he cares nothing for politics” (4).
- How does the novel gesture towards other colonial forces impacting the lives of Somalis living in Tiger Bay? Point the students to the following passage where Diana remarks to Violet about the peculiar gambling habits of one of her patrons:

“Oh, that is poor Tahir, he’s not right in the head. One of the sailors told me that he was ‘misused’ as they say, by Italian soldiers in Africa. He tells me he’s the King of Somalia and killed thousands of men in the war” (8).

- Alert the students to these dynamics early on and encourage them to track the theme of empire, conquest, and liberations as they make their way through the novel.

## THEMATIC CONSIDERATIONS

In the novel race affects more than the criminal justice system and, instead, infects every aspect of social life, including religious life, love, work, and friendship. In the following sections of the guide, students are encouraged to explore how race and racism act as shaping forces in the characters' lives.

Point students to the following passages to examine how Mattan experiences his Blackness.

1. How is he aware of the ways in which racial identity is at once rigid and elastic?
2. How does he try to survive and resist the lethal consequences of racial prejudice?

“Mahmood stumbles over a loose cobblestone and corrects his balance self-consciously, looking left and right. He is paranoid that his steps look strange, flat-footed. . . . You cannot look like prey here. You cannot show weakness or your days are numbered, like those of the Somali drunk the police beat to death last year. Mahmood had learnt to do the black man's walk early one in Cardiff: to walk with his shoulders high, his elbows pointed out, his feet sliding slowly over the ground, his chin buried deep in his collar and his hat low over his face, to give nothing away apart from his masculinity, a human silhouette in motion” (23).

“[Mattan] was a self-anointed king, far beyond being just a Reer Gedid youth, a Sacad Muse clansman, a Somali, a Muslim, a Black. Those labels so hollow they echoed around him, not stirring any part of his mind or heart. . . . But now those labels are pinned into his flesh: his clan matters because they are few in Cardiff; his Somalihood matters to the West Africans and West Indians who take him for an Arab rather than one of them; his faith matters to the sheikh and the others at Noor ul-Islam who think he turned *kuffar* long ago. And his blackness? Forget it. That was the one he was mad to think he could ever outrun” (262–3).

3. Why is “Somali-ness” represented as an ambiguous, fluid racial category? What consequences does this hold for Mattan and other Somali residents of Tiger Bay?
4. How is the Somali clan system represented in the novel and how does it compare to religious and racial stratification?

Mattan recalls being detained in Northern Rhodesia once when “a Somali butcher from my clan, his name Haji Ali, heard that I was in jail in Lusaka and he put up twenty-five pounds bail, he don't know me from Adam but he bailed me out and I was deported south” (103).

Somali clan system is a large complex family networks and patrilineal lineages that trace their ancestry to the House of the Prophet. In addition to many minority clans, there are five main clans that divide into subclans, sub-subclans, and so forth. Traditionally the clan system affected major sectors of Somali socio-political life from presidential elections to marriage alliances. Pages 11–14 of this report based on a lecture by Dr. Joakim Gundel offers a nice overview: [refworld.org/pdfid/4b29f5e82.pdf](https://refworld.org/pdfid/4b29f5e82.pdf).

## RACE AND RELIGION

1. What parallels does Mohamed draw between Islamophobia and antisemitism?
2. How does racial prejudice shape the lives of Violet and Diana?

Diana refers to the news of Kristallnacht—the Night of the Broken Glass when the Nazis burned synagogues, destroyed Jewish homes and businesses, and sent thousands of Jews to concentration camps—to be the most important event of her married life. “Ben and Diana listened, waited for the British government to react to his barbarism, but only the Americans recalled their ambassador. The British wring out their ornate condemnations and wagged a half-hearted finger at Herr Hitler” (114)

3. Why do Diana and her husband enlist in the army during World War Two? Is it out of loyalty to Great Britain, fidelity to her father’s legacy, or for some other reason?

Why does Diana give her family’s survival of the 1919 race riots in which white British workers dissatisfied with high unemployment rates targeted the lives, businesses, and homes of workers of color in many English seaport towns as the reason she enlists in the army?

4. What does it mean that even as she and her husband decide to fight on behalf of the British Empire, there lays on her kitchen table “that morning’s copy of the *Daily Mail*, its headline screeching ‘ALIEN JEWS FLOODING IN!’” bewailing “Jewish refugees taking British jobs while the native population languished on the dole” (115).
5. What does “THERE WILL ALWAYS BE A TIGER BAY” slogan written on “roof-slate-strewn pavement” after the blitz mean?
6. Why does Diana feel comforted and emboldened by it?
7. Why does Mohamed dedicate the book to both Mahmood Mattan and Lily Volpert? What equivalences or comparisons is she drawing between their respective deaths?
8. In the beginning the novel sets up the expectation that the text will follow the parallel and intersecting lives of the Volperts and the Mattans. But after the trial, the text does not return to Diana and Grace? How does the reader experience and cope with this unevenness?
9. What role does religion play in the novel?
10. Why is Mattan’s relationship to local mosques strained?
11. Why are there tensions between the Yemenis and the Somalis?
12. How does Mattan’s religiosity evolve through the course of the novel?
13. What does the “vision” that Mattan has about the afterlife mean? Why does he call for his mother?

## RACE AND GENDER

This section of the guide explores the intersection between race and gender, with an emphasis on how race and racism impact the characters' intimate relationships.

### SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The following material is intended to help students situate Laura and Mattan's fraught relationship in its unique historical context.

While interracial unions were legal in the United Kingdom much earlier than in the United States, they were still in the minority for much of the twentieth century and often met with discrimination and hostility.

- The opposition to interracial unions were rooted in the logics of eugenics and anxieties about racial purity. The British Eugenics Society sought to curtail what they saw as the dangerous of "race crossing." And yet areas like Tiger Bay where there was high racial diversity, led to interracial marriages and a tenuous tolerance, though not entirely harmonious communities. How do we witness that in the novel?
- Assign the 2016 film *A United Kingdom*, which tells the extraordinary true love story of Ruth Williams, a white British woman, and Prince Seretse Khama, heir to the kingdom of Bechuanaland, then a British colony. Khama and Williams marriage in 1948 became an international incident both in the UK and abroad. The apartheid government of South African, for instance, made trade with United Kingdom contingent on it stopping the marriage.
- At the time of the novel's events over half of the states in the United States had laws banning interracial marriages. This short article from *The Atlantic* succinctly contextualizes the landmark case of *Loving v. Virginia* which in 1967 declared state bans on inter-racial marriages unconstitutional (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/06/loving-v-virginia-marks-its-fiftieth-anniversary/529929/>)
- Mattan remarks on the humiliation he was subjected to while docked in New Orleans, "where even black and white shit had to be separated, and where any white woman could make you carry her bags, or have you killed for catching her eye" (63). At this moment, it might be worth reflecting on Emmitt Till, a 14-year-old Black boy who in 1955, a mere three years after Mattan's execution, was abducted, lynched, and murdered by two white men for allegedly flirting with a white woman. Till's killers were acquitted of all charges by an all-white jury, an egregious miscarriage of justice that would spur the Civil Rights Movement.
- And yet, while it is crucial to situate Laura and Mattan's relationship in their distinct historical context, they are not archetypes nor convenient stand-ins for historical forces. Instead, encourage the students to explore the complexities of their love, carefully deciphering the layers of desire, contempt, love, and fear that undergird Laura and Mattan's relationship, and how these emotions are mediated by race and gender.

**RACE AND GENDER**

(CONTINUED)

**TEXT-BASED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Either individually or in groups of 2-3, ask students to consider the fears, anxieties, histories as well as internalized prejudices that are expressed in the following passages:

**I. Intersections of Internalized Racism and Patriarchy**

1. Why is Mattan angry at Laura? Is his anger justified?

Mattan recalls how on their wedding night, he might have hurt Laura because “he had been an angrier man then; he was using her body to avenge himself of every laugh, nigger, and slammed door” (63).

2. How is this reading complicated, if at all, by the fact that their marriage took place shortly after his return from the United States where he faced extreme racial discrimination?

3. How do racialized acts of microaggression affect Mattan's relationship with Laura?

The first time Mattan steals, he describes it as “an act of mischief, of tiny revenge,” a restitution for the fact that “his dignity had been taken too lightly” by the women who would always presume him suspect (193).

4. How does Mattan's attitude towards white women impact his relationship with Laura?

5. Why does Mattan make a point about specifically pursuing white women? Why does Mohamed use deliberately predatory language to describe Mattan's pursuit of white women?

“He'd treated it like a game, like a cat stalking mice, he'd follow girls into bars and back out again, smiling as they walked away and told him giggling that, 'I'm not allowed to talk to black boys.' ...Their words said no but their eyes said yes, so he'd pick up his step and keep thinking the next one, the next one. The coloured girls had stopped having the same effect, it was too easy. 'You don't come all this way for a skirt that looks just like your mamma back home,' that's what the West Indian fellas said. The black women knew they had been pushed aside and hated it” (188).

6. Ask the students if they are familiar with the concept of internalized oppression and racism?

Here is a brief accessible article outlining the causes and effects of internalized oppression (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2022/01/28/exploring-the-ways-internalized-oppression-shows-up-in-the-workplace/?sh=4257831c5f09>)



## RACE AND GENDER

(CONTINUED)

## II. The Role of Anger and Fear in Mattan and Laura's Relationship

1. Does Mattan regret marrying Laura?

Mattan admits to not inviting any of his Somali friends because he feared they would judge him for marrying a white woman who would one day hurt him or abandon him and/or feed his children pork? (35)?

Mattan “found his boys sat around the table, eating boiled pig’s trotters. Almost retching at the slick oil on his sons’ lips, he’d got so angry that he’d picked up their plates and thrown them into the backyard, *akhas!*” (65).

2. Why does Mattan suspect that he had been locked up because “these white *shayaadiin* hate that he got one of theirs. That is what it all boils down to, right? He took one of their women, and for that they gotta punish him. ‘The blacks take our jobs and take our women’” (187).

3. Why is Mattan frightened when Laura gets pregnant? Is he afraid that she won’t care for his Black children or that she would somehow “taint” their pure Somali *abtiris* paternal line?

He remembers the “irrational panic that this white body contained something so precious to him, that his sixteen-generation *abtiris* would be passed down to a child mingled with the blood of Welsh miners and Irish refugees” (63).

4. Spend some time with the following passage in which Mattan displays extreme anger, resentment, and possessiveness towards Laura.

“Awake in his cold bed at Doc’s place, hearing her voice telling him no, no, no: to getting back together, to trying for a girl, to moving to London. He cannot accept the possibility that another man might one day be pawing at her, filling her with his seed, desecrating his temple. Everyone laughing at her, saying she’s too stretched out for a decent white man; and her moving from black man to black man, like they do, growing slack and pliant. Falling for someone who might beat her or pimp her out. Using black men like knives to hurt herself with, like some end-of-the-line white girls did, proof of how far they had fallen from redemption. No, she isn’t that type, he reminds himself; if anything, she is the blade that he has cut himself on.” (64)

5. Can you identify the fear that lies beneath this outburst? Is it possible Mattan biggest fear is that one day Laura would abandon him, and that this fear fuels his anger? What does Laura think of their marriage?
6. Why does Mattan think that “their marriage was a kind of death” for Laura? Why does she need “time to grieve”? (64).
7. Are there differences between the way that Laura speaks about herself and their marriage and the ways that Mattan describes her?
8. Encourage students to put pressure on the free and indirect discourse in the above passages. Do we know if this how Laura feels? Or are they a better representation of Mattan’s fears? What evidence is there in the passage that Mattan is himself aware of this disconnect?

## RACE AND GENDER (CONTINUED)

9. How does Laura subtly understand and, therefore, challenge Mattan's negative thoughts?

After speculating that his imprisonment is punishment for marrying a white woman, Mattan realizes that "he can't look Laura in the eye now, she'll see what he's thinking, she always could see into him" (188).

When she visits him in prison, she tells him, "I am not one of them, right? I am not one of *them*. You have no reason to hate me" (197). Who is *them*?

10. What problems of ownership are represented in the text when Mattan threatens to kill Laura if ever sees her with another man?

He insists he did not mean it, and nonetheless asserts "but love can drive a man to madness. This place, too, had a way of making you demented" (66).

## THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN THE NOVEL

1. Why does Mohamed translate most of the non-English words in the text? What is gained and lost in the homogenizing gesture of the translations? What does it say about the intended and/or imagined audiences?
2. Moreover, non-English words in the novel are italicized. The practice of italicizing "foreign" words in literature has become a controversial debate in literary circles. The following article is a good introduction to these debates. (<https://lithub.com/on-the-politics-of-italics/>)
3. How does the novel resist linguistic hegemony, broadly defined as the process by which minority languages and/or non-standard varieties of the dominant language are subjugated to dominant linguistic practice?

4. How does the novel replicate linguistic hegemony?
5. How does linguistic hegemony affect the criminal justice system?

Mattan feels alienated from his barrister, a feeling he specifically connects to the language gap. He observes he is among the "gentlemen with signet rings and inherited watches, who speak in a language far removed from his English of engine rooms, factories, quarries, street fights and pillow talk" (170).

6. How does the novel explicitly connect the politics of language to the question of freedom and liberation?

Mattan laments, "one second he can understand everything, then they change frequency, like a fuzzy wireless, and go into their university talk, leaving him with only isolated words to hold on to. They think a man is stupid because he talks with an accent, but he wants to shout, 'I teach myself five languages, I know how to say "fuck you!" in Hindi and "love me" in Swahili, give me a chance and speak plain'" (171).

7. How does Mattan's speech differ from that of the omniscient narrator? How does the novel introduce a tension between standard English and non-standard English?

**THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE  
IN THE NOVEL**  
(CONTINUED)

8. Why does Mattan reason, after his sentencing, that “English is like barbed wire to him now, a lethal language that he needs to keep outta his mouth” (254).
9. Why does Mattan insist on correcting his sons when they call him “Daddy” instead of “Aabbo”?
10. What is the significance of Mattan being a polyglot who is illiterate?

**JUSTICE AND CRIMINALITY  
IN THE NOVEL**

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITY**

In the beginning of class, ask students to free write for 3–5 minutes on what they think justice is. How did they arrive at their answers? Afterwards, ask them to share their answers, maybe putting them on the board to visualize common themes and threads. Refer back to this list as you make your way through the novel, noticing how the novel corroborates, challenges, and/or expands on how we imagine justice?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. The prison guard tells Mattan to believe in the system. “There isn’t justice anywhere in the world that is more stringent than the one we have here. I know you claim your innocence, Mattan, and I want to reassure you that the court will give you a fair a hearing as any duke. That is the British way” (194). What does the novel convey in the earnestness with which the guard speaks about the British justice system?
2. Is justice the same thing as law and legality?
3. Why does the investigating detective pre-determine Mattan’s guilt before the case goes to trial? The following passage can spark discussion about the assumed guilt of Mattan even before any evidence is gathered against him:

When Diana and Diana and Grace are unable to identify Mattan in the police lineup, “Detective Powell seemed disappointed in them and led them back out to the street with a request they think hard about what they actually remembered” (117).

When the detective asks Diana and Grace to testify, he reminds them that “they have built a strong case against the Somali,” and that “they need to try harder to remember the attacker’s face because all the evidence was pointing to the Somali” (179).

4. Why does Mohamed choose to narrate the trial exclusively from the verbatim transcript?
5. How does Mattan undermine his own defense? In court, Mattan insists that he is under no obligation to share with the jury (or with the detectives) the interactions between him and his wife (232).
6. Why is Mattan’s relationship with his defense solicitor strained?

**JUSTICE AND CRIMINALITY  
IN THE NOVEL  
(CONTINUED)**

7. In his closing remarks why does he try to win the jury's sympathies by calling Mattan "half child of nature" and "half semi-civilized savage"?

Later, the solicitor reproaches Mattan for sabotaging his own case by not being truly forthcoming about his whereabouts the night of the murder and "[coming] across as belligerent and shifty" (251). Is the solicitor justified in his anger? Isn't it true that Mattan hadn't been honest with the jury or his solicitor?

8. Given how "circumstantial" the prosecution's case is, what is the significance of the duration of the jury's deliberation?
9. After he is convicted and his pardon appeal is denied, Mattan states, "so far as I am concerned, I am a black man and nobody like my favor because my life is buy cheap. . . . Suppose I got a whiter skin, I don't be hanged today for this case, because nobody been hanged for the word 'if' before" (284).
10. What contrasts does the novel want to draw between how the British legal system and the informal Somali clan systems conceive of the practice of justice?

The British, for instance, intervene in a case where a young Somali stabbed another in Hargeisa, and insist on subjecting him to British justice. "Usually, it would be a matter of time, of cooling blood, then the negotiations of a suitable *dija* payment, but now the British wanted to be the sole adjudicators of murder cases. They said they wanted to teach Somalis the sanctity of life, even if it meant learning it at the end of a hangman's noose" (140). The elders oppose to the execution because it was "against the very spirit of Islam to cold-bloodedly kill a man when there was still some chance of peace and restitution" (141).

11. Why does Haji tell Mattan that British people cannot conceive of freedom?
- "[The British] people are peasants, satisfied working their lords' lands, who cannot understand *xorriyadda*, our love of freedom. I know them, they are never happier than when they meet someone more important than themselves" (141). Why does Haji think the British and the Somalis have different understandings of freedom and justice?

**"YOU WILL HEAR MY WORD  
AND WRITE IT DOWN":  
POLITICS OF TESTIMONY  
IN THE NOVEL**

1. Why doesn't Mattan divulge the truth of where he was on the night of the murder?

There is a gap of several hours in Mattan's whereabouts on the night of the murder. He alludes to this omission several times, but each time insists that it is "too late" to divulge his activities during those critical hours.

2. How do we make sense of this reticence given the magnitude of what is at stake? Why doesn't he set ever the record straight?

After his sentencing he requests the lead detective to take one last statement, declaring, "you will hear my word and write it down. You don't write my history for my sons or nobody else" (283). But then he does not tell the full truth to the detective.

Mattan dictates a second letter to one of the prison guards, and alludes once more to possessing the evidence that would exonerate him. But when the guard

**“YOU WILL HEAR MY WORD  
AND WRITE IT DOWN”:  
POLITICS OF TESTIMONY  
IN THE NOVEL  
(CONTINUED)**

asks if he wants to share such evidence, Mattan “shakes his head” and declares it “waste of time” (286).

3. Do we find Mattan’s reasoning that it “would only embarrass him now and achieve nothing to say that all of this had happened partly because he had gone to see the Russian woman and he didn’t want Laura to find out” compelling (286). Whose pride is being prioritized and protected?
4. How do we make sense of the dissonance and discontinuities between Mattan’s motives and his actions?

He possesses a keen sense of history and historical inheritance: He laments how his sons, “will not even have his body, which the courts want to keep here, as some kind of punishment or prize. The only substantial inheritance they will have are his stories, parcelled out by Laura or Berlin and covered in their own fingerprints” (260). And yet, he makes Berlin and Laura promise to tell his mother and his sons that he died at sea.

**ADDITIONAL PASSAGES  
TO GENERATE DISCUSSION**

1. Why does the state insist on keeping Mattan healthy and active while he awaits execution?
2. Right before his execution, Mattan looks back at Perkins and Wilkinson, his prison guards with whom he built an uneasy rapport “for some kind of recognition but they give none” (297). What is the recognition that Mattan is looking for in those last few seconds of his life?
3. Why educational and cultural value does the cinema hold for Mattan?
4. Why, in the following passage, does Mattan take a cinematic view of his life?

It’s not that Mahmood believes himself important, the few months have torn away that illusion, but he is extraordinary, his life has been extraordinary. The things he has got away with, the things he has been punished for, the things he has seen, the way that it had once seemed possible to for him to bend, with great force, everything to his will. His life was, is, one long film with mobs of extras and exotic, expensive sets. Long reams of film and miles of dialogue extending back as he struts from one scene to another. He can imagine how his movie looks even now: the camera zooming in from above on to the cobblestone prison yard and then merging into a close-up of his thoughtful upturned face, smoke billowing out from the corner of his dark lips. A colour film, it must be that. It has everything: comedy, music, dance, travel, murder, the wrong man caught, a crooked trial, a race against time and then the happy ending, the wife swept up in the hero’s arms as he walks out, one sun-filled day, to freedom. The image stretches Mahmood’s mouth into a smile” (259).

5. But then, in the end, why does Mattan grieve not for his adventurous spirit but for his mortal body?

“Feeling the wet curls on his head, the short flickering lashes of his eyes, the upturned nose and dark wide lips he has inherited from his mother, Mahmood is full of grief for this body that will soon cease to function and

**ADDITIONAL PASSAGES  
TO GENERATE DISCUSSION**  
(CONTINUED)

begin to rot. This body that has served him so well, that gifted him all five senses and a perfect bill of health. This body that has been weighed, measured, poked, beaten, despised and now is scheduled for destruction, like an old tramper tugged to the breaker's yard" (290).

6. Why does Mattan leave Hargeisa in the first place? What is his relationship with his family?
7. Mattan's schoolteacher tells him that "becoming a man was like turning wood into charcoal: a process of destruction until something pure and fiercely incandescent emerged. Tears softened the soul while pain toughened it" (137). What effect if any does this have on Mattan's life trajectory?
8. Why does Berlin accept the nickname given his experiences in Germany?
9. Why does Mohamed reference the nineteenth-century phenomenon of "human zoos" in the novel?

Berlin recalls: "We stay in that garden for a few days and in the end we can see more white faces than leaves on the trees. We are ambushed but we are told to live normally, as if back in Africa. Africa? Where is that? I ask. I had never heard of that place. We had a hidden area to do our business, but what do we find? Deutsch boys my age, and men who should have known better, climbing up trees to watch us as we did it" (30).

Students can read this piece in *The New York Times* on the pervasive presence of "human zoos" in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and their role in the advancement of scientific racism. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/29/arts/design/human-zoos-africa-museum.html>)

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT  
PROMPTS**

These assignments could be adopted and adjusted for different levels.

**PROMPT #1: CREATIVE WRITING**

In *The Fortune Men*, Nadifa Mohamed chooses to render the momentous trial at the heart of the novel in the form of a verbatim transcript with virtually no access to the interiority of Mattan or any of the other characters not part of the record. In this assignment, ask the students to re-write the trial scenes from the perspectives of a character who is not Mattan. What are the stakes of the trial for this character? Where do their motivations and sympathies lie? What is their relationship to Mattan and to Tiger Bay? If the chosen character has testified in the trial, what do they think about the trial and their role in it? This is a creative assignment, so exploration and experimentation are highly encouraged. In addition to a re-imagined scene, ask students to turn in a short reflection outlining why they chose their character, what did they want to communicate through the scene, and how did they went about deducing the character's point of view? Did they choose first-person narration or third-person? If third-person, is it a close third or an omniscient narrator? How did the writing this scene change their understanding of the trial and the novel?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT  
PROMPTS  
(CONTINUED)

**PROMPT #2: CLOSE READING**

Nadifa Mohamed opens the novel with two epigraphs: one from revered Somali musician and poet, Ahmed Ismail Hussein Hudeidi written in 1964 while he was detained in French Somaliland (present-day Djibouti). The other epigraph is a poem by celebrated Tiger Bay sailor and poet, Harry Cooke. Pick one of the epigraphs and read it in relation to a single scene from the novel. Make a case for how the epigraph is functioning in the scene. How does the scene inform your reading of the epigraph and vice versa?

**PROMPT #3: RESEARCH PAPER**

*The Fortune Men* contributes to the rise of the historical novel in contemporary fiction. Here is an article in which ten working writers briefly reflect on the affordances of historical fiction: <https://lithub.com/historical-fiction-is-more-important-than-ever-10-writers-weigh-in/>.

*The Fortune Men* references many historical events, including colonialism, anti-colonial struggle, history of the British Empire, World War II, the history of Tiger Bay, and migration, among others. In this assignment, pick one historical event invoked in the novel and track its effect throughout the novel. What are the subtle and explicit ways in which the chosen historical event continues to shape characters' lives? This will require outside research and an engagement with secondary sources. Engagement with the suggested supplementary material over the course of reading the novel should prepare the students for undertaking this assignment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR  
OF THIS GUIDE

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