



Summary of the Novel

The novel is set in the 1950s, in a township on the outskirts of Johannesburg, South Africa. It starts with the story of a gangster, Tsotsi, and his gang of Boston, Die Aap and Butcher, who ruthlessly murder a miner, Gumboot Dhlamini, for his pay-packet on a Friday evening.

At Soekie's tavern, Boston, plagued by the violence of the deed, becomes physically ill. He taunts Tsotsi about his conscience and lack of soul. When he starts to pressurise Tsotsi about his identity, Tsotsi lashes out violently, beating Boston close to death. Tsotsi runs away, but stops to rest, in a grove of bluegum trees. There he comes across a young woman whom he attempts to attack. She shoves a shoebox containing a new-born baby into his hands and flees.

In an ironic twist of fate, as prophesised by Boston, Tsotsi finds himself responsible for a vulnerable baby. The decision to care for the baby begins Tsotsi's journey to find himself, as he has no recollection of his past and is without identity and history.

He takes the baby to his room, where he tries to care for the baby, feeding it condensed milk and hiding it in the ruins; but the baby is ill and needs the care of a mother. Tsotsi at gunpoint, forces Miriam, a woman with a baby of her own, to feed the baby.

The baby triggers the awakening of his long-suppressed memories. His flashback takes us to his life as a 10 year old, David Madondo. He remembers the love of his mother and the safety of his home. He remembers the night she was arrested in a police raid, and the violence associated with his father's return from prison. His father brutally kicks the family dog to death, when he cannot find his wife, and David witnesses his dog's agonised suffering and the stillbirth of her litter.

This traumatic experience results in him fleeing his home and suppressing any memories that define him. He meets Petah, and joins his gang of street children, living in irrigation pipes. To sever any connection with his past, he takes on a new identity, and embarks on a new life of killing and robbing to survive.



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The baby is also a catalyst for his spiritual journey. His gang and his life of criminal activity are forgotten as he focuses on caring for the child. He is unable to rob a cripple, Morris Tshabalala. He chooses to question him about the meaning of life. His newly awakened feelings of compassion and decency prompt him to find Boston and care for him. He questions Boston about the change within him, and questions him on God. Tsotsi visits the Church of Christ the Redeemer and meets Isaiah who invites him to an evening church service.

Tsotsi dies in a desperate attempt to save the baby from being crushed when bulldozers come to demolish the ruins where the baby has been hidden. The novel ends on a tragic note as Tsotsi dies just when he claims his identity, as the newly reborn David Madondo. The journey with the baby spans 3 days. This can have relevance to the resurrection and rebirth of Christ, the redeemer, after his crucifixion.

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