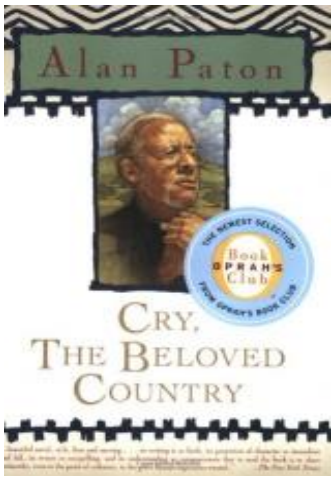
Cry, The Beloved Country

by Alan Paton



About the Book

Cry, the Beloved Country is a beautifully told and profoundly compassionate story of the Zulu pastor Stephen Kumalo and his son Absalom, set in the troubled and changing South Africa of the 1940s.

The book is written with such keen empathy and understanding that to read it is to share fully in the gravity of the characters' situations. It both touches your heart deeply and inspires a renewed faith in the dignity of mankind. **Cry, the Beloved Country** is a classic tale, passionately African, timeless and universal, and beyond all, selfless.

Discussion Guide

1. How is **Cry, the Beloved Country** part story, part prophecy, and part psalm? How does the story resemble the biblical parable of the prodigal son? How does it mirror another biblical parable, Absalom? What is the significance of Kumalo's son being named Absalom? Where else does the Bible inform the story?

2. There are many paradoxes in this novel: a priest's son commits murder; a white man who fights for the dignity of South African blacks is senselessly murdered; the father of the murdered son helps the father of the son who murdered to keep a disintegrating native tribe together. How do you reconcile these paradoxes? How do they contribute to the richness of the story? Why might Paton have made this choice?

3. Msimangu says, "I see only one hope for our country, and that is when white men and black men, desiring neither power or money, but desiring only the good of their country, come together to work for it." The book was written in 1948. Some forty-odd years later, has Msimangu's prophecy come to pass? If so, in what ways? If not, why?

4. How does apartheid manifest itself in **Cry, the Beloved Country**? Describe or characterize the separate worlds inhabited by blacks and whites. Where do black and white lives touch?

5. Jarvis is unable to physically comfort Kumalo. Paton writes, "And because he spoke with compassion, the old man wept, and Jarvis sat embarrassed on his horse. Indeed he might have come down from it, but such a thing is not lightly done." But yet, when the people of Ndotsheni are in grave trouble, Jarvis provides milk and irrigation vital to their survival, and later a new church. Why is he capable of one and not the other? Exactly what is it that is not lightly done? How and why does such duality exist? What do you feel about such codes of behavior?

6. **Cry, the Beloved Country** is, in part, a story about those who stayed and those who left. What happens to the people who stayed in the tribal villages? What happens to those who left and went to Johannesburg? What is Paton's point of view of this mass migration? Does he feel it was necessary? Inevitable? What is your opinion?

7. Arthur Jarvis says "It was permissible to allow the destruction of a tribal system that impeded the growth of the country. It was permissible to believe that its destruction was inevitable. But it is not permissible to watch its destruction, and to replace it with nothing, or by so little, that a whole people deteriorates, physically and morally." What events in the novel illustrate the breakup of the tribal system? How is the tribal system destroyed? What is done to replace it?

8. An unidentified white person in the novel offers, "Which do we suffer, a law-abiding, industrious and purposeful native people, or a lawless, idle and purposeless people? The truth is, that we do not know, for we fear them both." What is it that the white man fears in both instances? Which does the white man suffer in this novel? What might be Paton's point of view? What is your opinion and why?

9. Throughout the story, Kumalo experiences the absence of God and momentary losses of faith. He suffers through periods where it feels as if God has deserted him. What other characters experience the absence of God? Does Kumalo ever experience the presence of God? If so, when? Is God basically absent or present in Paton's novel? If so, in what way does God manifest Himself?

10. Describe the role of faith in the novel. How does it serve Kumalo and Msimangu, the people of Ndotsheni? Was it faith that inspired Arthur Jarvis, and hence his father? What about Absalom? Is there any indication that faith impedes or injures any of the characters?

11. There is much mention of secrets in this novel, secrets with no answers. Father Vincent tells Kumalo, "Yes, I said pray and rest. Even if it is only words that you pray, and even if your resting is only a lying on the bed. And do not pray for yourself, and do not pray to understand the ways of God. For they are a secret. Who knows what life is, for life is a secret." How does this notion of secret permeate the novel? What does it give the novel? What effect do Father Vincent's words have on Kumalo? How do they affect you?

12. Although Kumalo is a priest and often has the highest intentions, he sometimes does things which are contrary. For example, when he visits his son's wife-to-be, in his efforts to hurt her, he asks if she would take him if he desired her. Where else do we see Kumalo falter? How do you reconcile these two sides of Kumalo? How do you relate to him? Do any of the other characters falter? If so, who? What is it that makes Paton's characters so realistic?

13. Kumalo and the demonstrator have very different opinions about the white man. Kumalo says, "Where would we be

without the white man's milk? Where would we be without all that this white man has done for us? Where would you be also? Would you be working for him here?" And the demonstrator answers, "It was the white man who gave us so little land, it was the white man who took us away from the land to go to work. And we were ignorant also. It is all these things together that have made this valley desolate. Therefore, what this good white man does is only repayment." How do Kumalo and the demonstrator reconcile their different points of view? How might the other characters in the book feel? What is your point of view?

14. The last few sentences Arthur Jarvis wrote before his death are: "The truth is that our civilization is not Christian; it is a tragic compound of great ideal and fearful practice, of high assurance and desperate anxiety, of loving charity and fearful clutching of possessions." Where in this novel do we see a split between high ideals and narrow self-interest? Do the characters embody one or the other, or are they morally mixed? Do you think what Jarvis feels applies to present-day South Africa? If so, how? If not, how have things changed?

15. What is Paton's vision of the world? Does he express the view that human beings are immutable or capable of transformation? Are we left with any kind of message, any vision for mankind? If so, what is it?

Author Bio

Alan Paton, a native son of South Africa, was born in Pietermaritzburg, in the province of Natal, in 1903. While his mother was a third-generation South African, his father was a Scots Presbyterian who arrived in South Africa just before the Boer War.

Alan Paton attended college in Pietermaritzburg where he studied science and wrote poetry in his off-hours. After graduating, he wrote two novels and then promptly destroyed them. He devoted himself to writing poetry once again, and later, in his middle years, he wrote serious essays for liberal South African magazines, much the same way his character, Arthur Jarvis, does in **Cry, the Beloved Country**.

Paton's initial career was spent teaching in schools for the sons of rich, white South Africans, But at thirty, when he was teaching in Pietermaritzburg, he suffered a severe attack of enteric fever, and in the time he had to reflect upon his life, he decided that he did not want to spend his life teaching the sons of the rich.

Paton was a great admirer of Hofmeyr, a man who dared to tell his fellow Afrikaners that they must give up "thinking with the blood," and "maintain the essential value of human personality as something independent of race or color." Paton wrote to Hofmeyr and asked him for a job. To his surprise, he was offered a job as principal of Diepkloof Reformatory, a huge prison school for delinquent black boys, on the edge of Johannesburg. It was a penitentiary, with barbed wire and barred cells, and under Hofmeyr's inspiring leadership, Paton transformed it. Geraniums replaced the barbed wire, the bars were torn down, and soon the feeling in the place changed.

He worked at Diepkloof for ten years, and though it was certainly a fertile period, at the end of it Paton felt so strongly that he needed a change, that he sold his life insurance policies to finance a prison-study trip that took him to Scandinavia, England, and the United States. It was during this time that he unexpectedly wrote his first published novel, **Cry, the Beloved Country**

. It was in Norway that he began it, after a friendly stranger had taken him to see the rose window in the cathedral of Trondheim by torchlight, Paton, no doubt inspired, sat down in his hotel room and wrote the whole first chapter. He had no idea what the rest of the story would be, but it formed itself while he traveled. Parts were written in Stockholm, Trondheim, Oslo, London, and the United States. It was finished in San Francisco. **Cry, the Beloved Country** was first published in 1948 by Charles Scribner's Sons. It stands as the single most important novel in South African literature.

Alan Paton died in 1988 in South Africa.

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Publication Date: January 28, 2013
Paperback: 316 pages
Publisher: Scribner
ISBN-10: 0743262174
ISBN-13: 9780743262170