Bitter Eden
By Tatamkhulu Afrika

1) Why does Tom refer to camp as a “Bitter Eden?” What does this phrase, which is at first glance an oxymoron, indicate about life in those circumstances?

2) Many groups of people—Jerries, Ites, wogs, poms, Krauts, gays as “creeps” and “goons”—are generalized and described as having collective traits in the book. Yet individuals are often shown to display behaviors that break down stereotypes. What are some examples of this, and what does Afrika seem to be saying about human nature?

3) Tom says “I’m no hero” early on in the novel. Do you think that he’s right? What does Tony mean when he tells Tom: “You are such a waste… Nice body, trying-to-be-nice heart trying to be loyal” (56)? What do you make of Camel’s drawing of Tom’s squint eye (59)?

4) What does Tony mean when he says of Douglas: “He is like a sister who has left the tribe” (57)? Does Douglas love Tom as a mother figure, or as a lover?

5) Why does Tom lie to Douglas about his interactions with Danny? What makes him so certain that Douglas will be angry? What other foreshadowing is present of the demise of Tom and Douglas’s relationship (see page 72, with the reference to the straw-stuffed Madonna)?

6) Danny is demanding, while Douglas is (usually) forgiving and accommodating. Yet Tom’s reaction is to desire Danny more while bristling at Douglas’s every action. Were you rooting for Douglas and Tom to remain friends? Did you change your mind, and if so, at what point?

7) Does Tom owe it to Douglas to stick by him? What are their obligations to each other after so many months? Does Tom bear some responsibility for what eventually happens to Douglas?

8) After Tom realizes he has romantic feelings for Danny, he seems to feel as though he has to wait for Danny to make an overture because of Danny’s traditionally masculine behavior and outward homophobia. How does Tom try out traditionally feminine behaviors in an attempt to get Danny to see him as a potential lover?

9) Why does Tom agree to play Lady Macbeth? He asks himself whether a subconscious side of him that was always lurking is being set free, or whether he actually has calculative motives, much like the character. Which do you think is the case?
10) Does Tony have an inkling of what could happen when he encourages Tom to speak to Douglas alone? Does Tony believe Tom should pay a price for “dumping” Douglas, or did Tony only want to help? What do you think occurred when Danny confronted Tony after the incident?

11) How does Danny’s acceptance and investment in the final play about rape and revenge embolden Tom and allow him to hope for their relationship to become more? Why does Tom feel so jealous of the actor playing the native woman?

12) Why does Tom hesitate to visit Danny while he is waiting for passage back home? Why does he never come back to him again after their happy day together and near-consummation of their desire? Do the suspicions Tom brings up about Danny at the very end sound like excuses—or legitimate issues he should have considered earlier?

**About the Author**

Tatamkhulu Afrika was born in Egypt in 1920 of an Arab father and a Turkish mother. He was brought to South Africa in 1923, orphaned, and raised by Christian foster parents. He served in World War II in the North African Campaign, and was a POW for three years in Italy and Germany. At the age of seventeen he published a novel in Great Britain entitled *Broken Earth*, but did not write again for fifty years. *Bitter Eden* was first published when he was eighty years old. He died in December 2002.