

## *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*

### Discussion Questions

#### **Culture**

1. According to Chewa customs, daughters do not eat with their fathers and sons do not eat with their mothers. In fact, they eat in separate rooms. In addition, daughters never hug their fathers and sons never hug their mothers. Such behavior would be considered immoral. Nevertheless, because of the famine and the need to save kerosene and make the most of the little food that was available, the whole family ate together for the first time. Can you think of any changes of customs that your family had to implement in order to respond to an economic or political condition? Do you think that once these changes are made – even as temporary measures – they may end up being permanent changes?
2. William and his sisters were surprised that their parents had a new baby to feed: Tiyamike (meaning “Thank God”). This is because in Chewa culture, it is impolite to ask any questions about the body. So, even if a mother is getting heavier, there would be no way of asking after her health because of the weight gain. Are there any similar taboos about the body in your culture? If so, what are they? Can you imagine how this custom in Malawi would affect life in America?
3. When William’s sister Annie surprised the family with her elopement, she gave up not only the rest of her secondary school education, for which her father had scraped together money in order to keep her in school, but also her right to be able to live at home again (i.e. if she didn’t get married and the arrangement with her boyfriend failed). What would happen in your culture? Would a daughter’s elopement dirty the family name and bring shame to the family?
4. How are male children treated in the Malawian family as compared to the way female children are treated? What does that tell you about the Malawian culture? In general, are male and female children in the U.S. treated differently from each other?
5. How is dating different in Malawi than in the U.S.?
6. Could you imagine living without electricity? What would your life be like? Describe William’s life and compare it to American teenagers’ and even your own.
7. How did the villagers compensate for not having electricity, telephones, or most of the modern conveniences we take for granted?
8. What is the role of magic in the story? What about education? Contrast the two. Is there room for both in a culture? What about education and religion? How do the two impact each other? How did William’s religion influence his outlook?
9. William writes of the corruption, greed, nonexistent services, and lack of empathy that turned the drought into a disaster for average people like him and his family. Can you see any similarities with our own culture, both past and present? Think about the American Depression. How did that compare to Malawi’s drought?

## Poverty

1. Malawi is an extremely poor nation. What are the causes of this poverty and what exacerbates it? How might these causes and influences be overcome?
2. Most people in Malawi are farmers. What problems did they face? Are there similarities to American farmers even though we have an abundance of technology to help?
3. In chapter two, William talks about two energy problems Malawians have, with electricity and deforestation. How are these energy problems interrelated? Do you know of other regions in the world that have similar problems? What is being done to address them?
4. “Some men are blind,’ my father replied. ‘But this one [the President of Malawi] just chooses not to see.’ ... That afternoon, the ways of the world suddenly became more clear. Whereas I was still confused as to how the hunger had been allowed to happen, this much was certain. Every man for himself. We were on our own” (p.139). How does William’s father’s remark about the President of the country reflect his wisdom? Are the “ways of the world” teaching William a good lesson? Why or why not? Should it be “every man for himself” or “every man watching out for the needs of the other” when a country is crippled by the effects of a famine?
5. “No magic could save us now. Starving was a cruel kind of science ... My father must’ve been thinking about this, because he turned to my mother and said: ‘My family is mine to look after. If we’re supposed to die, then we die together. These are my principles. God is on my side’” (p.151-152). The rivalry between science and magic comes to a head during the famine. If starving is a “cruel kind of science,” what would you call a “kind” kind of science? William’s father brings another value system into the discussion: religion. Where do you believe religion fits in the “continuum” that exists between magic and science?
6. “Meanwhile, out in the maize fields, the stalks were now as high as my father’s chest. The first ears had begun to form, revealing traces of reddish silk on their heads. The deep green leaves had begun their fade to yellow, along with the stem. While men withered and died all around, our plants were looking fat and strong” (p.154). Malawians were subject to this kind of irony when the crops started to grow. Where else in the world might this kind of irony have persisted in a similar situation?
7. “Should we kill them?” I asked. “Perhaps call the police?” My father shook his head. “We’re not killing anyone,” he said. “Even if I called the police, those men would only starve to death in jail. Everyone has the same hunger, son. We must learn to forgive.” (p.159) How does William’s father become his “moral compass” during his childhood? Do you agree with his principles and his way of living in the world? Why or why not? Do you have a person you would call your “moral compass”?
8. “We all laughed about it [the famine] now, because it was only during the better times that we truly acknowledged the bad ones.” (p.185). Isn’t this so true in our lives as well? When have you experienced this and what helps you during those bad times?
9. Why did the villagers blame William when the country started to fall into famine again? Who/what should they have been blaming? And why was it easy to blame it on the windmill? (p. 239-243)

## Motivation and Support

1. Bullying is common among both US and Malawi cultures. What did William do to cope when he was bullied? What lessons do we learn from his experiences?
2. What motivates William? What motivates you?
3. Why was William afraid he could end up like those “grooving through life”? (p. 224) Do you think he could have ever ended up this way? Do you think you could end up this way?
4. Finally, we get to the building of the windmill! Gilbert is obviously very influential in making William’s dream come true. Who else helped make it a reality? How much was dependent on just the ingenuity of a young boy and how much from his supporters? Do we ever accomplish anything on our own?
5. People worried that William would get in trouble for building the windmill. What was William’s attitude about getting in trouble? (p. 227) What is your attitude toward it?
6. What did William mean when he said “It was a glorious light and it was absolutely mine?” (p. 203) Have you ever felt this way about something? When?
7. William talks about sharing his life’s goals with Tom (p. 269). What are his two goals? Do you think that they are big goals or small? What are two of your goals?
8. Compare William to his father and to his mother. How are they alike? How did his parents shape William’s outlook? How do your parents shape your outlook?
9. What motivates people like William to attempt the unthinkable? How would you describe him to someone who’s never heard of his achievement?
10. Imagine what a group of Williams with some encouragement and financial backing from government and private sources might accomplish. Offer some ideas. What might you accomplish?

## Education

1. “‘Here at Kachokolo,’ he said, ‘you’ll be given the knowledge to help your country and make it proud.’ We certainly were a fine bunch, all of us eager to learn and squirming with excitement. At that moment, I was certain I was experiencing the greatest day of my life. I couldn’t stop smiling” (p.129). How does William’s joy on the first day of high school reflect the value he places on education? Have you ever felt this joy when going to school? Why or why not?
2. Why was William embarrassed on the first day of school? Would a student from the U.S. be likely to respond the same way? Why was William ultimately forced to drop out of school? Would that happen in the U.S?
3. “No more skipping breakfast; no more dropping out of school. With a windmill, we’d finally release ourselves from the troubles of darkness and hunger. In Malawi, the wind was one of the few consistent things given to us by God, blowing in the treetops day and night. A windmill meant more than just power, it was freedom. Standing there looking at this book

[*Using Energy*], I decided I would build my own windmill. I'd never built anything like it before, but I knew if windmills existed on the cover of that book, it meant another person had built them. After looking at it that way, I felt confident that I could build one, too" (p. 169). William first gets the idea to build the windmill from the book *Using Energy*. William says the "windmill meant more than just power, it was freedom." How was the book the source of "power" and "freedom"? Would you define education that way, too? Why or why not?

4. What did William pack to take to his new school? Compare this to what an American packs to go away to college. (p. 259)
5. William was desperate to stay in school but could not because of money. Think about American students. Why do you think, with all the opportunities for schooling, some students are disinterested in learning? In your opinion, what accounts for the differences between William and his American counterparts?
6. Many Americans criticize public schools and some even question the need for them. Others argue that money doesn't matter when it comes to education. How does William's experience address our own debates on the subject? Think about his school, and compare it to American schools. Might William's life be different if he had access to education without having to pay? How so?

### **Other/General**

1. What lessons did you take away from William's story?
2. Let's start with the title, Harnessing the Wind is generally considered impossible, what do you think of this as a title for the story? Appropriate? Did it pull you in? Notice the subtitle: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope...thoughts?
3. The windmill makes a huge change in the way William's family lives and survives – in their actual quality of life. Can you think of anything in your life that has had such an impact?
4. Would you recommend this book to others? Why and to whom or why not?