

Teaching Pack: *When We Were Birds*

Cambridge IGCSE™ / IGCSE (9–1)
Literature in English 0475 / 0992

Cambridge O Level
Literature in English 2010

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Introduction

This *Teaching Pack* supports teachers and learners when studying Cambridge IGCSE / IGCSE (9–1) and O Level Literature in English set texts.

Set texts regularly rotate on the syllabus and may change from one year of examination to the next. Before you begin teaching, check the set text list for the year in which your candidates will take their examinations.

Teachers may use this teaching pack to engage their learners when introducing a set text, or as a revision tool.

The content of these set text resources will need to be expanded on to cover what candidates are expected to know and be able to comment on in an examination.

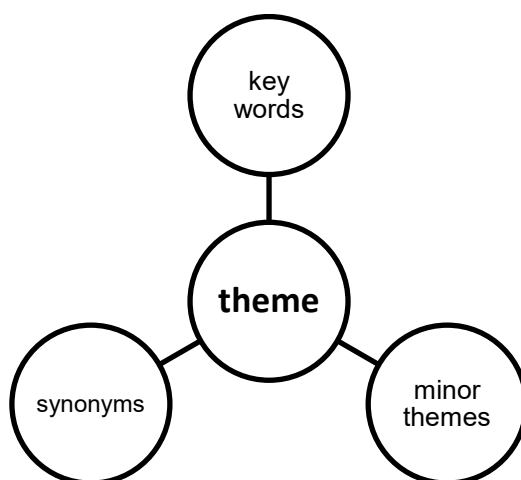
To increase learners' understanding and appreciation of the set text we recommend learners to set up a **reading log**, which could include:

- brief synopses of chapters/acts (in no more than a couple of sentences in their own words)
- a timeline of events (useful when a narrative is arranged non-chronologically)
- a list or diagram of characters and their relationships with each other
- first impressions of main characters
- initial thoughts about the main themes or ideas in the text.

The teaching pack aims to help learners to understand and think about the themes of the text, key quotations and their meanings, the significance of character behaviour, relationships and actions and how characters are depicted in the set text being studied.

The key words we use for the themes in this *Teaching Pack* are not exhaustive.

We suggest teachers discuss synonyms and alternative key words for themes that are identified for a text. Create key major theme mind maps and then from each of those key themes map connected and subsidiary/minor themes.



Lesson resources



Included in this pack are some resources to use with your learners. You may ask your learners to create their own worksheets similar to these, around another text, which they are studying:

Character summaries and quotations – learners create their own character summaries including quotations.

Reflection and activities – after reading the text, learners reflect, consider and explore.

Quiz – a fun quiz to test the learners' knowledge of the text before or after watching the videos.

1. Themes and text summary

Some of the themes Lloyd Banwo explores include:

- love
- death
- inheritance
- belonging.

When We Were Birds is a captivating novel about Yejide, a young woman who must inherit her mother's supernatural duty of guiding the dead to their place of rest, and Darwin, a kindly gravedigger. An unusual connection unites them as they navigate the challenges of love, ancestry and the supernatural.

The novel starts in the past with Yejide's Granny Catherine telling her stories of death and ancestry. The opening speech 'The first thing you have to remember...' (Chapter 1) suggests to the reader that Yejide's life will be shaped by experiences that she has not chosen. Her ancestors, the Marlee matriarchs have always held the power of guiding the dead, transforming into birds to help the spirits move on successfully to the afterlife. Yejide's mother is the current Marlee matriarch, and her role will fall to Yejide when she dies, yet Yejide resists this path, wanting a normal life.

Yejide's mother, Petronella is ill and growing weaker, yet she refuses to properly pass on the ancestral knowledge that Yejide will need to take up her new role. Yejide desperately wants her mother's recognition, but at the same time feels anger towards her; Petronella is a cold and hard parent figure. As Petronella gets weaker, Yejide feels the pull of the dead getting stronger and she starts to experience strange events and a constant feeling of her 'twisting' insides (Chapter 9). Yejide is scared and resentful of the role she is expected to take.

Yejide's grief is strong and confusing after her mother dies and she 'barely recognise herself' (Chapter 16). She can now see death all around her and she can see the time that death will come to claim people. Nature seems to respond to Yejide's new power, and it springs up around her, white moths are drawn in the hundreds to her and to the home. The reader realises how closely she is now tied to the natural and supernatural world. She understands that this 'gift' has cursed all the Marlee women before her, and it will now curse her.

However, Yejide cannot guide the dead alone, she feels the pull of the Fidelis Cemetery and she knows she must come to this place to help her transform into her new self. It is here she meets Emmanuel Darwin, a young gravedigger.

Darwin's story interweaves Yejide's story until they meet. Darwin is a Rastafarian who has been brought up strictly to not 'deal with the dead'. Unemployed, he strikes lucky when the Wharton government employment office gives him the chance of work in Port Angeles. He takes the grave digging job at Fidelis because there is nothing else; initially it's a six-week contract and his story starts with him hitching a ride in the 'beat-up white Bedford' (Chapter 2) to the city.

The city quickly overwhelms Darwin with its 'blaring car horns' and 'woman giggling'; it's like 'nothing he can imagine.' (Chapter 3). Darwin has been brought up in a strict household in rural Trinidad. He is shy and quiet and feels different to the fast-moving crowds of people outside fast-food restaurants and shops. Eventually Darwin arrives at 'the wrought iron gate' of Fidelis Cemetery.

As soon as Darwin enters the cemetery, he feels that it is a place of wrongdoing. The men are hostile and mock him and the place has an oppressive and dark atmosphere. He wants to leave and return to the employment office, but he knows that he needs to support his family at home; his mother needs medication for her arthritis and the water only comes twice a week. He tells the men that he can work hard, if given the chance.

From the moment Darwin meets Errol he understands that Fidelis is a place of the dead but also a place of corruption. He has entered a world where superstition, exploitation, danger and

darkness are combined. His co-workers drink alcohol while working, steal from graves, and accept bribes. Darwin refuses to join in, but his honesty isolates him from them.

Over time Darwin manages to get along with his co-workers, but he shies away from their corrupt behaviours and their drinking. He begins to feel the cemetery changing him as he lives 'his life always half in shadow' (Chapter 17), suggesting that the boundaries between living and dead are starting to blur. He feels the presence of the restless spirits at Fidelis; these are experiences that he is not prepared for.

One evening Darwin meets Yejide in Fidelis, and is immediately drawn to her. She requests that Petronella be buried next to her twin sister, but Darwin knows it is difficult for a new grave to be so close to an old grave. Errol suggests that they just grant her wishes but warns Darwin to 'leave that woman alone' (Chapter 20) as she is not his people. However, Darwin cannot forget her. He is troubled by vivid dreams of Yejide in different threatening scenarios, and he wakes with her name on his lips. He wants to warn her not to bury her mother in Fidelis for fear that her body is desecrated by Errol and his boys. He feels lost in their world of corruption, knowing that Yejide, can help him. One day he sees her on the street as he passes in a taxi and knows he must find her.

Their first real connection comes unexpectedly when Yejide is overwhelmed by her mother's approaching funeral. She drives by Darwin as he approaches Fidelis and asks him to accompany her as she does not want to be alone. They drive out of the city and into the mountains. Darwin takes Yejide's hand on this drive and their two worlds collide. Yejide is the woman who guides the dead and Darwin is the man who digs their graves and now they are connected. On the drive Yejide considers the bright green vitality of Darwin and how much his life calls to her, but she also wonders if she would be able to watch this life dim over time, until the point that she would know that death was coming for him. Yejide is caught between the lure of this wonderful man and the duty of her ancestors. She hears her mother's words echo in her head, 'Take your man, take yourself and run.' (Chapter 25). After Yejide tells Darwin the history of her people and her home, he kisses her and they are united. They return to Yejide's home and make love in her mother's room, now hers; 'they fly' together and their power 'scorches the earth below' (Chapter 27).

The day of Yejide's mother's funeral Darwin digs the new grave close to Petronella's sister's grave, as Yejide requested. After he finishes digging, a warning from Errol reminds Darwin of the danger that exists in this world, yet he reassures himself that he and Yejide can escape as soon as the funeral is over. He feels reckless with joy and anticipates a new life.

The funeral is difficult for Yejide. She is comically confused by the eulogy descriptions of a mother she never knew. The graveside is also horrific; she feels the keening and moaning of the dead pulling at her feet and the mourning of her relatives at her side. Darwin comforts her as well as he can and holds her hand until it is over.

Later that night Darwin has an encounter in Fidelis with a man he comes to realise is his father, Levi. They discuss the past and Levi's abandonment of the family, but when Darwin asks him to come for food and to talk, Levi reveals that he is dead and his resting place is Fidelis. Levi did not abandon his family; he simply could not return to them because 'police don't care when you never come home. (Chapter 30).

After the funeral is over, Yejide returns to the family home to pack her belongings. Whilst packing she argues with her 'sister' Seema who scolds her for neglecting her ancestral duties to focus on Darwin. She is insulted that Yejide brought him back to the bed in their home without mentioning it, like it was not important. During their argument Yejide feels an alarming pull from Fidelis and she knows she must go there immediately, the voices are calling to her 'find us, find us' (Chapter 33).

While Yejide drives to Fidelis, Darwin is engaged in a fight with Errol as the forces of good and bad collide. As they fight, Darwin feels the storm that is Yejide rushing towards him. Yejide runs into Fidelis with 'the rage of the unclaimed dead' (Chapter 33) determined to find Darwin. She runs down the main path and finds the slumped bodies of both Errol and Darwin; Darwin is conscious. Yejide tries to save both men, but the dead rise from their graves to take them.

Yejide claims Darwin as her own and the dead take Errol down with them as the storm rages around them.

Yejide and Darwin return to Morne Marie and the family home. Darwin heals slowly. Yejide has accepted her ancestral role as guide to the dead, but she has also accepted that Darwin is her gift, her 'anchor' in life. (Chapter 35). Darwin believes that Yejide has saved him and finally the novel ends with his letter to his mother, to tell her that his father, Levi, never truly left them.

2. Character summaries and quotation analysis

Yejide St Bernard

From the start of the novel, Yejide is set up to be shaped by the traditions and the responsibilities that have been the ancestral duty of women in her family for generations. The reader learns that Yejide will inherit an ancestral duty from her mother, Petronella. The women of the St Bernard family are responsible for guiding the dead onto the afterlife. This role is imposed upon Yejide and is not something she wants. Yejide doesn't understand this role as Petronella has refused to pass on the teachings and knowledge to her daughter. Yejide's character is defined by confusion and fear of a future that she does not understand and cannot escape from. The novel opens with Granny Catherine telling the young Yejide 'The first thing you have to remember is...' (Chapter 1) suggesting that Yejide has grown up in a world of rules, duty and lessons to be learned. It also suggests to the reader that the forces that exist around Yejide are much bigger than her, as the role existed 'before' and is much older than God. Yejide will not be free to choose her own path; it has already been chosen for her.

In the first half of the novel Yejide's personality is defined by her difficult relationship with her mother Petronella. The reader is made aware of Yejide's desires to gain her mother's love and approval but feels that she comes in second place to her mother's (now dead) twin sister Geraldene. Petronella is a 'cold and distant' (Chapter 9) mother and Yejide remembers her voice to be constantly 'twisting her insides' (Chapter 9). This tells the reader how hurt Yejide is by her mother's distance. Yejide feels unloved and misunderstood and it is this that makes her even more determined to run away from her ancestral duty. She does not want to become like her mother, a woman who shuts out love.

Following her mother's death, Yejide suffers and struggles to adapt to her new role. Meeting Darwin is the turning point in this suffering. Yejide is isolated, lonely and confused and it is this that draws her to Darwin, a young man who is also suffering from dislocation. Their relationship starts slowly prior to her mother's funeral and develops slowly and tenderly through brief meetings. It is through her relationship with Darwin that Yejide grows stronger as she starts to unite the world of the living with the world of the dead and realises that she does not have to face her duty alone. Darwin acknowledges that their relationship will be complex, and Yejide herself wonders whether she is strong enough to bear the pain of watching the 'cool green glow' (Chapter 25) around Darwin darken over time until she can see his death. Yejide decides that she needs Darwin and so, unlike her mother, she will face the pain of loving in the mortal realm.

Yejide's defining moment is the novel's climax in Chapter 33 when she faces the dead and claims Darwin for the 'world of the living', shouting 'You cannot have him. I claim him mine.' Yejide is described to be held by 'terror' yet her choices and her determination are clear; she will protect the man that she loves and she will have him as her own. This is a shift in Yejide's character, she has accepted her duty, but she is also making her own choices; she will love and be loved.

At the end of the novel, as she heals Darwin slowly and tenderly, the reader understands that Yejide has now accepted both sides of herself. Her role as Marlee matriarch is important and necessary but she can also be her own woman.

| Quotation | This suggests... |
|---|--|
| <p>'The first thing you have to remember is...' Chapter 1</p> | <p>This suggests that Yejide is being instructed, in this case by Granny Catherine. It also suggests that Yejide's life will be one that is ruled by duty and obligation. The modal verb 'have to' also suggests obligation, inevitability and a lack of choice; Yejide's future is already destined. These are the opening words of the novel and they establish a sense of responsibility and duty very early in Yejide's life, setting the tone for the novel to follow.</p> |
| <p>'Her mother's voice again, twisting her insides.' Chapter 9</p> | <p>This suggests that Petronella had a profound emotional and physical effect on Yejide. The verb 'twisting' is full of pain and hints at the constant torment Yejide endured as she sought to gain her mother's approval and love. The repetition suggested by 'again' suggests the frequency with which Yejide is reminded of her ancestral duty and the weight of this obligation. The noun 'insides' tells the reader that the ancestral duty cuts right to the core of her; the pull of the dead is something she physically feels in her body as well as in her intellect and emotions.</p> |
| <p>'You cannot have him. I name him mine. He is for the living. Terror hold her and the determination in her voice raw.' Chapter 33</p> | <p>This suggests that Yejide is growing into her ancestral role. The repeated and short declarative sentences suggest a power and a defiance within Yejide as she commands the dead. The verb 'name' has spiritual importance; Yejide is using her ancestral power to simultaneously guide the dead and to protect Darwin. The contrast created by the reference to 'the living' demonstrates how Yejide stands between two worlds, the worlds of the living and the dead. The personification of 'Terror' holding her shows the immense danger of the supernatural world, yet Yejide remains defiant and confident, highlighting her acceptance of her ancestral duty to guide and protect.</p> |
| Lesson focus | |
| <p>Analyse how Yejide is presented through key quotations. Explore how inheritance, memory, and the dead shape her character. Develop a clear, evidence-based interpretation (exam-style)</p> | |

Emmanuel Darwin

Darwin is the central male character in the novel. He is a straight-forward, honest and gentle young man who is searching to find his place in a difficult world. He has grown up with his mother and has now left his home to search for work to support his family back home. He wants to do the right thing for his family, even if it means making his own world uncomfortable and difficult. His move to the city of Port Angeles has made him feel isolated and scared.

As a child and young man, Darwin has been shaped by his family's strict Rastafarian beliefs; mixing in affairs of the dead is considered to be a sin and is not condoned. For Darwin, this creates his first conflict: he must have a job to support his family, yet the only job offer is as a grave digger, strictly forbidden. Darwin feels guilty, but his sense of responsibility is stronger. He tells the men at Fidelis 'I need to work.' (Chapter 4) showing his determination to do the right thing and his strength of character.

As Darwin's time passes at the Fidelis Cemetery, he comes to recognise the place as 'shadow', a world of death, corruption and danger. Darwin keeps himself separate from his co-workers' activities, operating quietly and without violence and as a result isolates himself further. He feels lost and like he is living 'half in shadow' (Chapter 17), he even starts to lose his sense of time passing as 'Fidelis have a different kind of time' (Chapter 17). Darwin's quiet gentleness stands in contrast to the dark world of corruption of Fidelis Cemetery.

Darwin's relationship is an important part of his character development. He falls in love with Yejide from a distance, carefully and respectfully navigating their complex connection. His gentle love is revealed in quiet tender moments such as their first car ride into the mountains, where he supports and comforts Yejide. The way that Darwin 'stroke the soft skin of her throat' (Chapter 26) reflects his tender and respectful manner in their relationship. He is not forceful with her; he slowly moves with her to cultivate a reciprocal love where they can support each other. She needs his human connection to the mortal realm, and he can 'feel brave' with her.

Darwin is a young man of great moral strength and instinct. He is frightened by the dark world around him, yet he stays faithful to his goodness. Working at Fidelis, Darwin is surrounded by corruption, but he refuses to join the men and shuns the drinking and bribes. Even after meeting his father's ghost at Fidelis and realising that injustice has marked his life, he is not hardened by this experience. He does not react with violence, just steadfast resilience and acceptance, even when it puts his life in danger from the other Fidelis workers.

By the end of the novel, Darwin has matured into a brave man who understands death, love, life and responsibility. He has learned that power comes from the courage to remain light in a dark world.

| Quotation | This suggests... |
|---|---|
| 'I need to work. I could work hard.' Chapter 4 | This suggests that there is a simple directness and honesty to Darwin. The short sentences reveal his honest and direct nature, while the modal verbs 'could' and 'need' show the urgency and determination in him. The phrase 'work hard' emphasises his reliability and his responsibility for his family. The short nature of the utterances also suggests his shyness. He does not boast about his ability, simply says what he is capable of without exaggeration. |
| '... his life always half in shadow.' Chapter 17 | This powerful metaphor suggests that Darwin is affected by and now drawn into the supernatural world. His existence is split between the dark and the light. The noun 'shadow' suggests that the darkness falls upon him, meaning that he is essentially a good person who is exposed to corruption. The imagery presents Darwin as a sensitive and good man who is now exposed to darker forces. |
| 'And before he lose his nerve, he stroke the soft skin of her throat, pulse beating faster, lean in and kiss her – ' Chapter 26 | This suggests that there is a timidity to Darwin. He is sensitive and vulnerable himself and his closeness to Yejide reinforces this. The verb 'stroke' suggests a tenderness and a care for Yejide. He is sensitive to her, not impulsive and rushed. The sibilance of her 'soft skin' heightens the intimacy of the encounter and the adverb 'faster' to describe Darwin's pulse heightens the readers anticipation as he kisses Yejide. |
| Lesson focus | |
| <p>How does Banwo present Darwin as a conflicted character? Beliefs versus actions. Add quotations and explain contradictions.</p> <p>How does Darwin's identity change across the novel? Track character development and build analytical thinking.</p> <p>What does Darwin's reaction to death reveal about him?</p> <p>How are Darwin and Yejide similar/different? Write a comparative paragraph.</p> | |

Petronella St Bernard

Petronella is the Marlee matriarch, the woman who is responsible for guiding the dead into the afterlife. This duty has been passed down through generations of the St Bernard women, each mother passing down the knowledge to her daughter through generations and generations. Petronella has lived under this heavy burden and now that her time of passing is close, she must pass that burden to her daughter Yejide.

The coldness and distance that Yejide reports of her mother, is not simply because she does not love her daughter, it is the result of the burden that she has carried her whole life. The matriarch's role is demanding and all-consuming and it isolates the Marlee women from living a normal life. This duty has hardened Petronella to the world of the living and the world of love. She interacts with her daughter transactionally, suggesting that she sees their relationship as practical: she will pass the duty to her daughter. She does not teach Yejide the burden she must inherit, she pushes her away, perhaps because she does not want to pass the burden on and does not want her daughter to suffer as she has. This leads to confusion and fear in Yejide and increases the distance between the two women.

Petronella's illness also reveals her character. Her refusal to simply die, becoming more distant as she weakens, perhaps suggests that she does not want to pass the burden to her daughter. Yejide recalls an argument between Petronella and her sister where Petronella shrieks that all she has to do is 'stay alive' (Chapter 8) rather than teach her daughter what she must inherit. The closest that Petronella comes to showing conventional love is when she warns her daughter 'take your man, take yourself and run.' (Chapter 25) This final warning shows that some part of her wants her daughter to escape the burden that she has carried her whole life.

Petronella is a tragic character. Her life of duty has been defined by limitation, isolation and fear. It has been a life of endurance.

| Quotation | This suggests... |
|--|---|
| 'She would remember her mother as she was in life – cold and distant...' Chapter 9 | This suggests that Petronella's mothering lacks warmth and emotion. The adjectives 'cold and distant' suggest a separation from her daughter. The comparative phrase 'as she was in life' is significant as it suggests that death has not been able to soften Yejide's memory of her mother, suggesting that lasting emotional damage has been done. |
| 'When I go from this place it will pass to you... We take care of them and they take care of us. Exchange.' Chapter 13 | The euphemistic language of 'when I go from this place' suggests that although Petronella is resigned to it, she does not want to openly address her impending death. The modal verb 'will' suggests the inevitability of ancestral duty which 'will' pass to Yejide whether she wants it to or not. The short declarative 'Exchange' reduces the ancestral duty to a transactional obligation. |

| Quotation | This suggests... |
|--|---|
| 'Take your man, take yourself and run.' Chapter 25 | This suggests an urgency and danger. The three imperatives and the repetition of 'take' heighten the power of the warning. Petronella shows a moment of softness towards her daughter, a moment where she urges her to take a path different to the path that has trapped generations of women in this family. The last imperative 'run' has a primal feel to it and a directness that contrasts with her earlier euphemistic and guarded language. |
| Lesson focus | |
| <p><i>'Petronella is more a victim of inheritance than a bearer of it.'</i> To what extent do you agree?</p> <p>Evaluate how Banwo presents family legacy as both powerful and damaging.</p> <p>How does Petronella embody the boundary between the living and the dead?</p> <p>Explore how Petronella represents the burden of inheritance, grief, and resistance to tradition.</p> | |

| Quotation | This suggests... |
|-----------|------------------|
| | |
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4. Quiz

1. What do the opening stories by Granny Catherine suggest?

- A) Yejide must refuse the power of her ancestors.
- B) Yejide's life will be shaped by forces outside of her control.
- C) Yejide will lead a normal life.
- D) Yejide will have to travel far from home.

2. Which of these statements is false?

- A) Petronella grows weaker with illness.
- B) Petronella refuses to pass on the ancestral knowledge.
- C) Petronella is a cold and hard mother.
- D) Petronella understands her daughter's fear.

3. What do the white moths around Yejide symbolise?

- A) Her rejection of her ancestry.
- B) Her desire to be free.
- C) Her growing connection to nature.
- D) Her new beginning.

4. Which of these statements is true?

- A) Darwin takes the job at Fidelis Cemetery because he wants to study the dead.
- B) Darwin takes the job at Fidelis Cemetery because his Rastafarian faith encourages it.
- C) Darwin takes the job at Fidelis Cemetery because he feels it pulling him.
- D) Darwin takes the job at Fidelis Cemetery because there is nothing else on offer.

5. What does Darwin notice about the atmosphere at Fidelis Cemetery?

- A) It is abandoned and silent.
- B) It is oppressive and full of wrongdoing.
- C) It is calm and spiritual.
- D) It is friendly and welcoming.

6. What isolates Darwin from his co-workers at Fidelis Cemetery?

- A) His honesty.
- B) His superstition.
- C) His past.
- D) His corruption.

7. What happens during Darwin and Yejide's drive into the mountains?

- A) They discuss Darwin's past.
- B) They encounter a storm.
- C) They hold hands.
- D) They make a plan to leave.

8. What important truth does Darwin learn from Levi when he meets him in Fidelis?

- A) Levi is alive and living in Port Angeles.
- B) A Rastafarian should not deal with the dead.
- C) Levi died; he didn't abandon his family.
- D) A woman like Yejide is dangerous.

9. What happens during the final confrontation at Fidelis?

- A) The dead rise and claim both men despite Yejide's protest.
- B) Darwin kills Errol.
- C) The dead claim Errol; Yejide claims Darwin.
- D) Errol kills Darwin.

10. Which statement is false about the end of the novel?

- A) Yejide and Darwin return to Moine Marne.
- B) Darwin writes to his father about the past.
- C) Yejide accepts her ancestral role in guiding the dead.
- D) Darwin heals with the help of Yejide.

Quiz answers

1. What do the novel's opening stories by Granny Catherine suggest?

B) Yejide's life will be shaped by forces outside of her control.

2. Which of these statements is false?

D) Petronella understands her daughter's fear.

3. What do the white moths around Yejide symbolise?

C) Her growing connection to nature.

4. Which of these statements is true?

D) Darwin takes the job at Fidelis Cemetery because there is nothing else on offer.

5. What does Darwin notice about the atmosphere at Fidelis Cemetery?

B) It is oppressive and full of wrongdoing.

6. What isolates Darwin from his coworkers at Fidelis Cemetery?

A) His honesty.

7. What happens during Darwin and Yejide's drive into the mountains?

C) They hold hands.

8. What important truth does Darwin learn from Levi when he meets him in Fidelis?

C) Levi died; he didn't abandon his family.

9. What happens during the final confrontation at Fidelis?

C) The dead rise and claim Errol; Yejide claims Darwin.

10. Which statement is false about the end of the novel?

B) Darwin writes to his father about the past.

Cambridge International Education
The Triangle Building, Shaftsbury Road, Cambridge, CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
t: +44 1223 553554
e: info@cambridgeinternational.org www.cambridgeinternational.org

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