Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky

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The collection and the exam

- What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky (2017) is Lesley Nneka Arimah's first book: 12 short stories, most about Nigerian women and girls, in Nigeria and in the United States. For Cambridge 2027 it is a Paper 1 prose text: you answer a passage question or an essay on it.
- Arimah was born in London in 1983 and grew up in Nigeria and Britain, moving to the USA as a teenager. The collection won the Kirkus Prize. 'Light' won the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (Africa region) in 2015 and 'Glory' an O. Henry Prize; 'Who Will Greet You at Home' was shortlisted for the Caine Prize.
- Some stories are realistic, and some are speculative: **fables**, myths and science fiction where magic is treated as normal. The book opens with 'The Future Looks Good' and ends with 'Redemption'.
- Big themes: mothers and daughters, family and inheritance, grief, gender expectations, class, migration, and the shadow of the Nigeria–Biafra war.

Families and the past

- 'The Future Looks Good': Ezinma is about to open a door, unaware that the family's past is rushing up behind her. The story moves back through earlier generations of women, like a set of nesting dolls, until past and present collide in a shocking ending.
- 'War Stories': a father plays chess with his teenage daughter, who has become his confidante, and tells her about his experiences in the Nigeria–Biafra war. It shows how war leaves hidden scars that are passed on.
- 'Wild': Ada, a teenager from America, is sent to Nigeria to be straightened out by her aunt, and clashes with her cousin Chinyere, who is just as reckless. It explores mothers, daughters and the idea that the grass is greener elsewhere.

- 'Light': a father raises his eleven-year-old daughter while her mother has gone abroad, and tries to protect her spirit and boldness. It reverses the usual migration story, in which the father leaves.
- 'Second Chances': a mother who has been dead for eight years steps out of an old photograph and back into family life. Her younger daughter welcomes her, but the elder, Uche, is cold, with anger hiding sadness.
- 'Buchi's Girls': after the deaths of the father and son, a widowed mother and her two daughters live in her sister's house and must make hard choices to survive. A daughter sees her mother as an ordinary, fallible person.

Speculative stories

- 'Who Will Greet You at Home': in a world where women make babies from materials, which an older woman then blesses into life, the material shows your class: porcelain for the rich, mud, raffia or hair for the poor. Ogechi, who works in a hair salon, makes a baby from hair, and the blessing comes at a terrible cost.
- 'What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky' (the title story): in a flooded future where Europe and America are under water and their people are refugees in Africa, mathematicians use a Formula to calculate and remove people's grief. Nneoma, a mathematician in Nigeria, takes on others' pain, but the Formula that seemed perfect turns out to have flaws.
- 'Windfalls': a mother uses her daughter in scams, staging falls from the age of six so they can sue companies. It shows exploitation and a cycle of abuse disguised as love.
- 'What Is a Volcano?': a myth about the feud between River, a goddess, and Ant, a god, after River loses a daughter. Ant hides his being in a small blue stone, and the secret is passed down to girls who obey.

Women, choices and how to write about the stories

- 'Glory': Glorybetogod, called Glory, almost 30 and single, believes she was born unlucky. Her luck seems to change with a new man, Thomas, but she must decide whether to keep tricking fate. The ending is ambiguous.
- 'Redemption': Mayowa, a house-help, makes another girl question the obedience expected of girls in a patriarchal society.
- Methods: Arimah mixes realism with magic presented as ordinary; uses shocking or open endings; switches between first and third person; and often tells stories through mother–daughter pairs.
- In an essay, compare how two stories handle one theme, such as mothers and daughters ('Second Chances', 'Windfalls', 'Wild') or the cost of power and grief ('Who Will Greet You at Home', the title story).

Key terms

Speculative fiction	Stories that imagine worlds with magic, myth or future science.

Your notes

Magical realism	A realistic world in which magic happens as if it were normal.
Dystopia	An imagined society, often in the future, that is frightening or unjust.
Diaspora	People living away from their family's homeland.
Fable	A short story with a moral, often with gods, animals or magic.

Your notes

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. How many stories are in What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky?
2. Which story won the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (Africa region) in 2015?
3. In 'Who Will Greet You at Home', what are babies made from?
4. What material does Ogechi use for her baby?
5. In the title story, what does the Formula do?
6. In the title story, which parts of the world are flooded?
7. In 'War Stories', what game do the father and daughter play?
8. Which war does the father talk about in 'War Stories'?

Answers

1. 12
2. Light
3. Materials such as porcelain, mud, raffia or hair
4. Hair
5. Calculates and removes people's grief
6. Europe and America
7. Chess
8. The Nigeria–Biafra war

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

Free revision for GCSE and KS3 at lycolearn.co.uk. Some notes are for one exam board only, and say so in brackets.