

# THE NATIVE COMMISSIONER

Shaun Johnson

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For Grade 12

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## FOREWORD

*Whether I have told it just as it happened – whether, in that sense, it is true – I do not know. It is my version, anyway, and if nothing else, I now know more about how I came to be here. (p.278)*

***The Native Commissioner*** is the story of an ordinary man named George Jameson and his son, Sam. It is the story of a father and husband, whose own haunting sense of failure and powerlessness is a lesson to the next generation. It is the story of an ambitious idealist, who, at odds with the system that he is a part of is desperate to enact kindnesses that will lessen the harm he is causing. It is the story of one man, his family and their nation.

### THE VALUE OF LITERATURE

Over the years, many have questioned whether art has a purpose beyond aesthetic enjoyment. While some might urge you to enjoy art for art's sake, many others contend that art can – and should – serve a social function. These antagonists argue that art has both the ability and the responsibility to expose the inequalities of society, as well as to contemplate the range of possible solutions to these failings.

The narrator, Sam Jameson, says at the conclusion of ***The Native Commissioner*** that his family's unwillingness to face their family secret is "a very un-African response, I think now, to true trauma" (p.280). The true African response, this implies, is to unveil every aspect of the trauma to the clear eye of judgment – and of acceptance. Art has, throughout our cultural history, proven to hold an invaluable role in this process.

Perhaps more than any other medium, literature fulfills its social responsibility by presenting different, and often contradictory, perspectives. It does this by embodying ideas in characters and then allowing them to speak for themselves. It also does this by representing ideas as symbols and themes, which we, as readers, digest and assimilate into our world views. In essence, literature functions by developing our sense of empathy.

In South Africa, our various art forms have had to shoulder the burden of centuries of informal segregation and three and a half decades of legalised oppression. During apartheid, literature stood its ground as a form of resistance, even though many works were censored and some banned. Since the demise of apartheid, literature has perhaps had to work even harder, to foster understanding between peoples and to bring a sense of respect to our shared history.

### READING THE NATIVE COMMISSIONER

***The Native Commissioner*** is a novel that values history, and that inculcates this appreciation in its readers. Sam thinks, as he prepares to embark on the final and most challenging portion of his quest for truth, that "my country respects history and, as weighty and comprehensive was my mother's box, still there was more if you had a reason and the will to keep digging" (p.167). The novel lends us both a reason and the will.

By revisiting history through the eyes of an ordinary man invested with idealistic principles and values, the novel brings that history into our living rooms. It is no longer the stuff of classrooms and textbooks, far removed from our own daily lives, but a history that we too have experienced and, in a sense, through which we have lived.

The novel also represents issues that are pertinent to modern South Africans struggling with the contradictions of a young democracy. It interrogates our sense of identity, in the light of our past, present and future, and it contemplates how we go about building a present and future of which we can all be proud. You cannot help but wonder what you contribute to the process of national rebuilding as you read this novel.

On a personal level, *The Native Commissioner* is also the story of a man contending with a real, but often misunderstood, illness, namely, depression. Unwilling to burden his loved ones with his daily struggle or to seek understanding among his peers, George unknowingly allows the illness to take hold in the crevices of his being, anchoring itself in his most intimate anxieties and desires. Ultimately, the disease will cost him his life, but unnecessarily so.

By contrast, George's son, Sam, demonstrates a different means of dealing with his illness. With the support of his wife and family, Sam traces the steps of George's journey in search of answers. In his quest, he leaves no stone unturned and pursues every lead, no matter how emotionally draining or time-consuming. In doing so, Sam comes to a better understanding of himself and his own condition.

These arguments about the value of literature in general and of *The Native Commissioner* in particular, although persuasive, are unnecessary. Shaun Johnson has written a novel that is gentle yet powerful, intimate yet historical. Its characters will endear themselves to you and its insights will leave traces in your own thinking. The novel will embed in you a love for places you have never visited and an understanding of struggles you have never faced.

The value of studying Shaun Johnson's work should be self-evident to any insightful reader. *The Native Commissioner* is a work of great sensitivity that also takes seriously its role as social mirror.

## THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE

The publisher of this study guide, The English Experience, is committed to combatting the scarcity of genuinely fresh and complete English educational resources that are presently available.

In the following pages, you will discover insights into a novel that ranks highly in the canon of contemporary South African literature. These insights range from factual comments on historical context and the author's background to detailed literary analysis and comment, including pertinent questions that will guide you step by step through the text.

Our hope is that your journey through the novel and through this study guide will reveal some of the aspects we have discussed in this foreword. We wish you the best of luck on this journey.

## INTERVIEW WITH SHAUN JOHNSON

### FREEING OUR CHILDREN FROM THE BURDEN OF GUILT: A Q&A WITH SHAUN JOHNSON

Author Shaun Johnson talks to The English Experience about his debut novel *The Native Commissioner*. He candidly shares his ideas on what students might gain from reading the novel, what it was like to write, how autobiographical it is and what he meant when he said that one of the novel's themes was, "this generation absolving the next one from guilt".

**THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE:** How does it feel to know that your novel has been listed as a set work?

**SHAUN JOHNSON:** The book has had an extremely fortunate run and a wonderful reception right from the time of its launch, but the news that it has been chosen as a set work is the best thing that has happened. It has given *The Native Commissioner* another life, in a way.

**EE:** How do you think high school students will respond to it?

**SJ:** I would expect there will be a range of responses, which is as it should be in such a diverse country, but I hope it will at least bring alive for them the complexity of a little-discussed aspect and period of South Africa's history.

**EE:** What would you like them to gain from the novel as people labelled 'South African' (whether born here or migrant)?

**SJ:** Among other things that, as Mr Mandela has said, history is not just about the 'kings and generals', but also about ordinary people trying to do their best in extraordinary situations.

**EE:** ...and as youngsters with their own family issues?

**SJ:** That speaking honestly and openly within a family is the best way of confronting the unavoidable and sometimes unbearable difficulties of life.

**EE:** ...and as scholars about to enter the workforce or start a career?

**SJ:** That no job is worth doing if it is in conflict with your own principles and beliefs.

**EE:** What message do you have for children/young adults desperate for jobs?

**SJ:** That if they choose a field about which they are passionate, even if they have to start in the lowliest of roles, they will eventually succeed.

**EE:** You have said the novel represents a move to write about ordinary people. Given that, how do you situate the novel within the context of South African literature and what do you think about the state of South African literature at present?

**SJ:** I think it is up to academics more qualified than I am to give the novel a place in South African literature, whatever place that might be. At its most simple, I suppose it falls into the category of novels set in a specific historical past, which are using the freedoms of fiction to try to understand that past better. JM Coetzee kindly said of *The Native Commissioner* that it is, “a welcome step toward the reconstitution of the South African past”, and I appreciate that assessment. Regarding the state of literature in our country at the moment, I think we are living through the most exciting phase in a long time with a whole new generation of writers at work and a vast choice of new novels of every type.

**EE:** You have also said that a theme of the novel is, “this generation absolving the next one from guilt” – could you elaborate on this?

**SJ:** This is a very personal feeling that I was trying to explore as one layer of the novel – whether the conscious actions of individuals of my generation (which has lived through apartheid and its aftermath) might free our children from the burden of guilt about a past in which they played no part. I had my young daughter in mind.

**EE:** How long did it take you to write the novel?

**SJ:** I worked on it, very much part-time, for about two years from 2004 to 2006, I think, but I guess I had been thinking about the themes and the story for a lifetime.

**EE:** Were there any other novels (local or international) that influenced its writing?

**SJ:** I have been an avid reader of literary fiction all my adult life – it is one of my greatest joys to read the good writing of others – and so I have been influenced by any number of writers and books, South African and otherwise. But in *The Native Commissioner* I strove for my own voice and style, and so any similarities to the work of others will have been unintentional!

**EE:** Where did you begin with researching the novel?

**SJ:** With papers relating to my father’s life that my late mother had given to me. I fictionalised and rather embellished this process in the novel, as a narrative device.

**EE:** What criticism have you received about either the content or the style of the novel?

**SJ:** I was fortunate in that *The Native Commissioner* received only two negative reviews out of the dozens that were published around the world. These critics found aspects of the novel unconvincing or implausible, which is, of course, their right, and, indeed, that of any reader. There is no such thing as a perfect novel and I am mindful that this was my first foray into fiction, so no doubt it could have been improved. Hopefully, these improvements will come with practice.

**EE:** Do you see this novel as a film or a play?

**SJ:** I would have loved to see it adapted for the cinema or theatre, but, sadly, I haven't received any calls on the subject! I guess it would fall into the category of 'books that are difficult to film', because it is more about atmosphere than action, but properly done I do think it could be compelling.

**EE:** In the novel, George Jameson demonstrates his ease with various languages. Do you speak any other languages?

**SJ:** I am very comfortable in Afrikaans, and sometimes enjoy reading Afrikaans novels in their original form rather than in translation. One of my great regrets is that, having spent my early years in the Transkei, where I learned to speak Xhosa before English, I did not maintain my facility in the language when our family moved elsewhere. I'm very pleased that my daughter is learning Afrikaans and Xhosa at her primary school.

**EE:** Why are you hesitant to call this novel autobiographical?

**SJ:** Because that would imply that everything in it is 'true' in the sense that it actually happened that way, which is most definitely not the case. I've been quite clear in saying that the 'DNA' for the story and the characters come from my own exploration of the life of the father I never really knew, but I felt that the story would be told much more powerfully and readably if I were free to utilise the elements of fictionalisation and imagination.

**EE:** Do you blame your father or bear any resentment towards him for any decision he made?

**SJ:** I am at peace with him now.

**EE:** Why were you never told of your father's suicide?

**SJ:** It was not that we weren't told of it, but that my family's coping mechanism at that time, and in our cultural context, was never to discuss it.

**EE:** How does your family view this novel?

**SJ:** My brothers were a little alarmed when I first told them what I was doing, but they helped and encouraged me and I think they are now pleased that I did it.

**EE:** Is another book or poetry perhaps imminent?

**SJ:** I am quite far advanced on a second novel, which deals with a very different character and very different period. I hope it will be read with enjoyment by people who don't know anything about *The Native Commissioner*, but there will be rewarding connections and echoes for those who do. That's if it turns out the way I think it will at the moment ... fiction takes on a life of its own and can end up taking a writer to places they'd never imagined.



# CHARACTER ANALYSIS

## SAM JAMESON

*Like my father, I wonder whether mine has been a worthwhile life. Like him, I am not sure, and I don't know by what standards I should judge myself. (p.279)*

Sam Jameson is the narrator of the novel. He is, when we first meet him, a lawyer in his 40s, married with a son and a baby daughter. With a young family of his own, he has decided the time is right to face the “family secret” (p.4) that haunts him.

Through his mother, we learn that eight-year-old Sam “lives in his own imagination much of the time” (p.40). He creates scrapbooks in which each member of his family is famous, about which his mother muses that “[p]erhaps in his mind we need to be what we are not” (p.40). This need to catalogue his experience is revived in the act of going through the box and weaving a story around its contents. The account we are reading is his latest family scrapbook.

Part of Sam’s obsessive desire to revisit his family’s past may be attributed to his similarity with his father. The novel draws a number of parallels between the two characters. The most obvious is the fact that both father and son suffer from depression, which often manifests as a hereditary condition. We learn about Sam’s depression early in the novel, through his wife’s concern, and later discover that it too is episodic, but “not nearly as catastrophic” (p.280) as his father’s.

Like his father, Sam’s first affiliation is not with English. While George grew up with a love of Zulu that would last his life, we are told that “[t]he first sentences the little boy [Sam] spoke were in Xhosa” (p.147). Both characters also possess a keen insight that causes them to question themselves and the world around them. A young Sam’s observation that “there were very many black people, a very few white people, and although they lived in different places they all cared a great deal about cattle” (p.148) is comparable with George’s own philosophy of racial equality.

After his quest is complete, Sam makes a key distinction between himself and his father that, upon reflection, is an important theme of the novel. “I have... had a lot more luck in my life than he did in his,” he says (p.280).

Although Sam’s quest to tell his father’s story is driven by a personal desire, it comes to represent the means by which his country has attempted to come to terms with an oppressive past. There is a strand of thinking that believes trauma is best addressed by coming face to face with it – by talking about it and reviewing it from all angles. By unpacking the box and supplementing its evidence with research and his own memory, Sam recreates the method by which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission dealt with a democratic South Africa’s traumatic past.

## QUESTIONS

1. What does the description of Sam as a child, particularly as provided by his mother in the first section of the novel tell us about the narrator as an adult? Respond in three to four paragraphs that explore this topic. (8)

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INTRODUCTION  
TO THE NOVEL  
AND ITS AUTHOR

LITERARY  
ANALYSIS

ESSAY SECTION

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2. Despite the title, *The Native Commissioner*, this book is more about Sam than it is about George. Summarise Sam's role in the novel. (4)

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3. a. How is Sam similar to his father? As you answer this question, consider how these similarities prompt Sam's quest. (5)

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b. How is Sam different from his father? Quote from the text to support your answer. (3)

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4. For most of the novel, Sam is telling a story of which he has no first-hand knowledge. Even when he reaches the part of the story that he remembers, his memory is that of a young boy who could not fully comprehend the situation. Does any of this mean that the story is less truthful? You can use your opinion to answer this question, but remember to justify it with evidence from the text. (5)

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5. In some parts of the novel, Sam refers to himself in the first person, while in the rest of the novel, he writes in the third person. Why do you think he shifts between the two and do you think this narrative structure is successful? Please refer closely to the text to support your response. (8)

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**SAM’S FAMILY**

*My family felt the brunt of the compulsion. My wife was worried but said she understood what was driving me... (p.52)*

His children provide added motivation for his quest. At the end of the novel, Sam wonders whether his story “will one day help my own son and daughter to understand their lives and identities better” or whether it will “just make things more complicated” (p.280). He then packs another box filled with his documents – “my magpie’s work” (p.283) – and there is the implication that this box will also serve to provide closure for his own children.

**?** QUESTIONS

1. Sam packs his own box at the end of the novel for his children to unpack one day. What symbol is inferred by the act of packing and unpacking a box? (3)

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## SYMBOLISM

*On the morning it all started, I woke and sat in one movement. I remember the feeling clearly; it was as if I'd been propelled upright by a forklift. (p. 1)*

**The Native Commissioner** is rich in symbols that communicate and enhance the many themes of the novel. Some of these themes include the evil of the bureaucratic apartheid state, despair and depression, the sins of the father and secrecy.

### THE BOX

*Inside was a rotting, fused mound of carefully ordered paper and memory trinkets kept closed for an adult life, her magpie's work, capable of calling back the unknown dead. (p. 4)*

The box in which Jean collects a lifetime of memories and which Sam excavates in his search for the truth, is perhaps the most important symbol in the text. It stands for the past and for the family secret that they have kept hidden for years.

Shortly before the family's relocation to Johannesburg, Jean goes in search of the "biggest and sturdiest cardboard box" (p.272) that she can find. She explains to the store manager, "It is going to have to carry a lot". She is speaking not only literally here – of the many documents with which it is filled – but also metaphorically, of the burden of the family secret.

Perhaps Jean also refers metaphorically to the burden of traumatic pasts in general. We have discussed, elsewhere in this resource, that Sam mimics the process by which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission attempted to confront and thereby lessen the power of the past trauma. If not dealt with, a traumatic past is likely to overwhelm those in the present and, ultimately, to repeat the cycle of intimidation and oppression. As Sam reveals when he packs his own box at the end of the novel, however, the process is an ongoing one that needs to be repeated with each generation.

Jean gives the box to her son with the exhortation to "Open it when you are ready" (p.4). When Sam reopens the box, he implies that the time is finally right. Describing the state of the box, he says, "I had the sudden impression of a scuffed overused passport, no longer valid for travel" (p.3). A short while later he says, "I had an overpowering sense of something having been rescued arbitrarily, at the instant before its predestined oblivion" (p.4).

The time is right because Sam is an established lawyer with a family that cares for him. He is also nearing the age at which his father succumbed to his depression, which he describes as "an unsettling assignation" (p.279). "I have also come to the surprising stage in life where I find myself thinking of retirement... and in a sense, the prospect is a relief."

There is, however, a sense of danger attached to opening the box. Although Sam's mother encouraged Sam to open it when he is ready, it has been sealed "with vigour... as if to discourage any thought of reopening" (p.2). The reason for this is perhaps because "the box could not be resealed" (p.51) once opened. Of course, it could be resealed literally, but Sam is speaking metaphorically of the power of the quest which dominates his life for almost three years.



## GEORGE'S BREAKDOWNS

*He shook his head and his tongue felt thick and swollen, too big for his mouth... I think I have had a bang in my head, he said at last. (p.136)*

The depression that leads to George's first breakdown is symbolised by a "shadow" that "had crept across his face and stayed there" (p.135). This shadow traps him "as if in a field of electrical current"; however, this is not the first time he has felt its presence: "He had been fending off its flurries. Several times he had found himself suddenly and unexpectedly immobilised – at his desk, driving his car, in a meeting, on waking in the middle of the night" (p.137).

These breakdowns are foreshadowed early in the text, after the court case that led to *Ntabaka's Question*. George's uncertainties are compared to "a constant and ravaging illness" and he describes the sense that overwhelms him as "a sense of hopelessness and purposelessness that weighed a ton" (p.105). He then says the words that he will repeat before giving in to his depression: "It's all wrong."

George insists that his illness has a physical cause, rather than a psychological or emotional one. He can think of no other reason that he might have to be unhappy. Although "he was a disappointed man and anguished about the work of his life" (p.138), he feels he has worked through his issues with the support of his wife. He wonders briefly whether his illness might be genetic.

George's last two breakdowns are framed by his work as Native Affairs Commissioner for Witbank. There is the implication that his breakdowns are at least partly caused by the tension between his role in the workings of the apartheid state and his own beliefs in the equality of man; so, in a sense, George's illness and his ultimate demise come to symbolise the malaise of apartheid and its incompatibility with the beliefs of reasonable men.

Today we understand that depression is an illness and is often hereditary. Treatment ranges from relatively simple lifestyle and behaviour changes to pharmaceutical drugs and institutionalisation. However, when George was diagnosed, depression was still highly stigmatised, preventing many sufferers from talking about it with family, close friends and even doctors.

At first George describes his episodes as "a bang in my head" (p.136). This is a very childlike response that captures his inability to cope with his illness. This description comes to embody the way a tragic event such as this filters down through successive generations. When Ryan finds his father's body "[s]omething bangs in his head too" (p.243) and when Sam sees into the room "[s]omething bangs in the head of yet another Jameson just then" (p.244).

## RURAL VERSUS URBAN LANDSCAPES

*With the bilious belching smokestacks... and great tides of new arrivals like advancing divisions in wartime, my father says the scene makes him think of Dante's bleakest passages... transposed on to an African plain. (p.174)*

In the section on Setting, we will argue that the differences between the descriptions of the rural and urban areas to which the Jamesons travel, represent two South Africas. The first, rural South Africa is characterised by the beauty of its landscape, its people, and their languages and histories. The second, urban South Africa reveals the evil intentions of the apartheid state.

The setting comes to symbolise the distinction between the latent potential of the country, as released by a free and democratic South Africa, and its oppression under an apartheid government. This government functioned by restricting the rights of black citizens, thereby not only attempting to remove their citizenship, but also to strip them of their humanity.

## LIGHTNING BOLT

*I still can't quite believe the lightning struck our roof the very day after poor George was taken away – such a horrible, violent, portent [sic] (p.30).*

The day after George is taken to a nursing home in Durban to treat his episodes, there is a violent storm in Witbank and lightning hits the Jamesons' home at 9 Mountbatten Avenue. Jean describes the event as a sign of national collapse: "it felt as if the whole country might explode, just like he [George] says in his darkest moods" (p.30).

The lightning bolt comes to symbolise the tragedy that will strike the Jameson family. It is linked to George's depression as part of the chapter at the beginning of the novel titled 'Just Before Then' and George's description of one of his episodes as being trapped 'in a field of electrical current' (p.135). The use of this symbol contributes to the build up of tension towards the climax, and links the beginning of the novel to its conclusion.

## QUESTIONS

1. a. What is symbolism? Use an example from the novel to explain your answer. (3)

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b. How does symbolism contribute to the themes of a novel? (1)

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2. a. Compare a description of Witbank with the description of any of the rural areas visited by the Jamesons. (6)

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b. What does Witbank come to symbolise? Offer a reason for your response. (2)

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3. There are a few symbols that relate to George's breakdowns, including the idea of a 'shadow' and the lightning bolt. How do these symbols contribute to the build-up of tension in the novel? Support your answer by referring directly to the text.(3)

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4. Can you think of a symbol from the novel that has not been discussed in the body of this resource? Identify it and explain how it works. (4)

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5. Re-read the first few pages of the book, in which Sam retrieves the box. Pay close attention to the various descriptions of the box. Choose the two descriptions you like best and decide what they mean both literally and metaphorically. Write a separate paragraph for the analysis of each description. (10)

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6. The idea of symbolism can also be used to analyse the cover of a novel. The image and its relationship to the different elements of a cover, such as the title, usually visually summarise the themes of a novel. What does the image on the cover of your edition of *The Native Commissioner* symbolise? (4)

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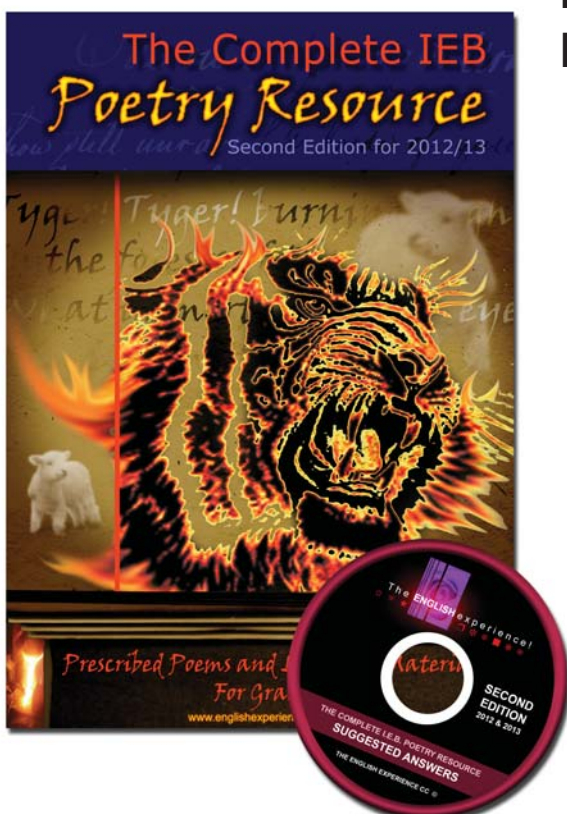


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**“I AM REALLY IMPRESSED AND HONOURED BY THE EXPERT ATTENTION GIVEN BY THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE TO THE NATIVE COMMISSIONER, WHICH SHOULD MAKE FOR A MORE REWARDING READING BY THOSE WHO CHOOSE TO STUDY IT.”**

- SHAUN JOHNSON

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