Aftermath Study Guide

Aftermath by Mary Yukari Waters

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Mary Yukari Waters's "Aftermath" was first published in the journal *Manoa* in 2001 and is found in her first short story collection, *The Laws of Evening*, published by Scribner in 2003. The short story was also included in the anthology *The Best American Short Stories 2002*. As of 2005, *The Laws of Evening* remains Waters's only published book.

Like most of the stories in *The Laws of Evening*, "Aftermath" focuses on the life of an individual trying to cope with dramatic change in Japan after the end of World War II. The story's main character Makiko is a young Japanese widow, whose husband was killed while fighting American forces during the war. Following Japan's surrender to the Allied forces, Makiko struggles to raise their seven-year-old son Toshi in the years right after World War II, as the United States occupies Japan and subsidizes its recovery from the war. Makiko tries to instill traditional Japanese values and habits in Toshi, as he inevitably takes in the influences of American culture and Japan modernizes. Makiko also grapples with her memories of the pre-war period and how Japan then contrasts with the more complex and difficult world she lives in now. In addition to exploring the tension between tradition and change, the story focuses on themes of loss, memory, and grief and how individuals come to terms with those phenomena.

Author Biography

Mary Yukari Waters was born in 1965 in Kyoto, Japan. The daughter of a Japanese homemaker and an Irish American physicist, Waters lived in Kyoto until the age of nine, when her family moved to a small logging town in Northern California, where she spent the rest of her childhood and adolescence. Although she lived in the United States after the age of nine, Waters frequently visited relatives in Japan after moving to California. After studying economics in college, Waters worked as a certified public accountant in Los Angeles for many years, before starting to write fiction at the age of 30.

In 2003, Waters published her first collection of short stories entitled *The Laws of Evening*, in which "Aftermath" appears. The short stories in *The Laws of Evening* focus on the lives of people living in Japan after World War II, and although the stories are not autobiographical, Waters has said that she drew on the experiences of her grandmother and other elderly people she knew while growing up to write about Japanese culture during the time in which the book is set.

Most of the short stories in *The Laws of Evening* were previously published in literary journals such as *Shenandoah*, *Triquarterly*, *The Missouri Review*, and *Zoetrope: All-Story*. "Aftermath" was first published in the journal *Manoa* and was also reprinted in the collection *The Best American Short Stories 2002*. Other short stories in Waters' collection have appeared in the anthologies *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2002*, *The Pushcart Book of Short Stories: The Best Short Stories from a Quarter-Century of the Pushcart Prize*, and *The Best American Short Stories 2003*.

Waters earned her master of fine arts degree in creative writing from the University of California at Irvine. She is the recipient of a 2002 National Endowment for the Arts literature grant and a 2004 Kiriyama Prize Notable Book Award.

Plot Summary

"Aftermath" begins with the protagonist Makiko watching her seven-year-old son Toshi playing dodge-ball in Imamiya Park. As she watches Toshi play the "new American" game, Makiko thinks about how fast Toshi is growing and worries about how quickly Japan is becoming Americanized in the years after Japan's defeat in World War II. She particularly worries about how Toshi is being influenced by this process of modernization, including eating American food at school, which is provided by the American government that is now supporting Japan's recovery from the war.

As she continues to watch her son play, Makiko also recalls Toshi's toddler years, when her husband Yoshitsune was still alive. With sadness, she remembers a playful routine Toshi and Yoshitsune used to enact. As she reminisces, Makiko compares days gone by with her current life, which is marked by the presence of American Army jeeps and soldiers, who are occupying Japan. She thinks about how the day before, she had gotten angry with Toshi for accepting candy from an American soldier and how she'd struck the pieces of candy out of Toshi's hand, reminding him that American soldiers had killed his father. Feeling remorseful, Makiko comes to the park with caramels for Toshi in an effort to redirect his desire for sweets toward her. When Toshi is finally hit in the dodge-ball game, Makiko thinks about how easily the children switch sides in the game, without allegiance to a particular team.

The next section of the story begins with Makiko encouraging Toshi to remember his father in a nightly prayer ceremony. She lets Toshi light the incense before a family altar that displays photographs of Yoshitsune and other things that belonged to her husband such as letters and scented silk bags. Makiko rotates the items on the altar in an effort to engage her son's interest in memories of Yoshitsune. Although he enjoys lighting the matches, Toshi resists his mother's attempts to get him to think about his deceased father, and Makiko scolds him. Makiko thinks about how Toshi's only memory of his father is of being carried by him on one arm before a sunny window.

After quickly finishing the prayer ceremony, Toshi heads for the dinner table. Since her previous reprimand of him is so recent, Makiko resists scolding Toshi again and allows him to eat his dinner, which is meager. Like everybody else living in Japan during the postwar years, Makiko receives food rations that are given out by the government, since food supplies are scarce. At the end of dinner, Toshi asks Makiko a question about forgetting the past, and Makiko assures him that from now on, he'll remember everything.

In the next scene, Makiko wakes from a dream in which Yoshitsune is hitting her with a flyswatter. Disturbed by the dream, Makiko thinks about how since his death, she has recalled other small injustices from her life with Yoshitsune, and she wonders what to do with those memories. She struggles with the need to create a positive legacy of Yoshitsune for Toshi and her ambivalent feelings about the past.

Following the dream scene, Makiko and Toshi anticipate going to Tanabata Day, a traditional Japanese festival. Also called the "star festival," Tanabata takes place once a year on either the seventh of July or August and is celebrated throughout Japan with colorful activities. The festival honors the Chinese legend of two stars, Altair and Vega, which though usually separated by the Milky Way, are allowed to meet on the day of Tanabata. One custom is to write names on pieces of paper and hang the paper on bamboo trees in the hope of having wishes come true.

On the evening of the festival, Makiko's younger brother Noboru comes by to accompany Makiko and Toshi to the event. A student at the local university, Noboru teases Makiko about her place being too clean. As they walk to the festival, Makiko is struck by a mixture of nostalgic odors that come from a neighbor's open door, and as they walk, Noboru talks about how Japan needs to reinvent itself to keep pace with the modern world and free itself from the American occupation. Makiko warns Toshi to not run too far ahead. As Makiko comments that the changes are taking place too quickly, they pass Mr. Watanabe, an elderly neighbor watering his plants, who mistakes Noboru for Yoshitsune. Mr. Watanabe's mistake makes Makiko recall a pleasant memory of strolling with her husband on a summer evening. Makiko again tells Toshi to slow down and ruminates about her future.

Upon arriving at the festival, Makiko is disappointed to see how different the festival appears from those of her youth. Unlike the colorful festivals of her childhood, the current Tanabata festival sports tattered lanterns and makeshift canopies and grills for roasting corn. The surroundings make Makiko feel ashamed about Japan's defeat in the war. As Toshi tries to run off to meet a friend, Makiko grabs him. Noboru applauds the festival's efforts, as his date, a young female classmate from the university approaches them. Buying two small ears of corn with her ration stamps, Makiko finds herself crying as she eats the corn, which tastes exactly the way it did during previous festivals. After Toshi devours his corn, Makiko gives him the rest of hers, and Noboru teases Toshi for being a piglet. Noboru and his date discuss the legend of the stars honored by the Tanabata festival.

After the festival, Makiko stands on her veranda at home, fanning herself with a paper fan. While Toshi sleeps, she thinks about what a pleasant surprise the festival turned out to be. In spite of its shabbiness, Makiko enjoyed the event more and more as night descended and children lit sparklers over the water, and she attributes her enjoyment of the festivities to her memories of previous celebrations' charms. She hopes that Toshi will remember the festival fondly and recall other memories from his childhood as well.

Characters

A Girl

An unnamed girl is Noboru's date for the Tanabata Day festival. Like him, she is a university student who embraces the changes wrought by the modernization of Japan.

Makiko

The protagonist of the story, Makiko is a young Japanese widow living in Kyoto, Japan after World War II. She struggles to raise her son Toshi to abide by and respect traditional Japanese values, as Japan becomes more and more Americanized during the post-war period. Makiko is also determined to make Toshi remember his father Yoshitsune, who was killed while fighting American soldiers during the war. Throughout the story, Makiko comes to terms with her own pre-war memories and nostalgia for easier and less complicated times.

Noboru

Noboru is Makiko's younger brother and Toshi's uncle. An energetic second-year student at the local university, Noboru openly embraces the American-driven process of modernizing Japan. He argues with Makiko about this process, telling her that Japan needs to adapt to the modern world.

Toshi

Toshi is Makiko's seven-year-old son. He attends an elementary school subsidized by the American government. In spite of his mother's instructions and wishes, Toshi inevitably absorbs the process of Americanization, eating snacks that the American government and soldiers give him and playing dodge-ball with his classmates.

Mr. Watanabe

A minor character, Mr. Watanabe is an elderly neighbor of Makiko and Toshi, whom they encounter briefly on the way to the Tanabata Day festival.

Yoshitsune

Yoshitsune is Makiko's deceased husband, a Japanese soldier who was killed while fighting the Allied forces during World War II. Yoshitsune appears in the story only

through Makiko's memories of him, which focus on their brief marriage and his relations with Toshi.

Themes

Memory

One of the major themes of the story is memory, particularly how memory influences the present and how individuals hold onto and let go of memories. The main character Makiko is preoccupied with retaining memories of the pre-war years, and she tries to recall specific events and feelings from the time her husband was alive. She also encourages Toshi to recall memories of his father, and she is disappointed by the fact that he only remembers one moment when his father was carrying him by a window. Makiko attempts to prod more memories of Yoshitsune out of Toshi by having him honor Yoshitsune's memory in a prayer ceremony each evening and by asking him questions about his father. Makiko wants to instill positive images of Yoshitsune in Toshi's mind, and she tries to preserve "good" memories of the past, while leaving behind less pleasant ones.

For Makiko, memory is also tied to preserving a past that no longer exists, since Japan has changed so dramatically in the wake of World War II. In her eyes, the current situation compares unfavorably with her memories of pre-war Japan, in which traditions and cultural habits were strong. At the Tanabata festival, Makiko is at first distressed by the shabby appearance of the fair, since in her memory past festivals were so much more glorious. However, by the end of the festival, Makiko changes her mind, enjoying the new situation, and she believes that her pleasure derives from the fact that her old memories have given the present a kind of luster, even as those memories are dissolving. As she acknowledges the elusiveness of memory, Makiko wishes for Toshi to remember the evening and other pleasant memories from that time.

Postwar Society

The story takes place in Japan right after the end of World War II, at the end of which Japan surrendered to the Allied forces, led by the United States. Following its defeat, Japan was occupied by American troops, who were part of the process of rebuilding the nation. The presence of U.S. Army personnel creates tension in the story, as the locals are warned to "Keep your young women indoors," and Makiko observes the "American Army jeeps with beefy red arms dangling out the windows roar down Kagane Boulevard, the main thoroughfare just east of Toshi's school." She particularly resents how American soldiers give Toshi candy, when she can barely afford to feed him on the rations everybody is living on, and she scolds Toshi for accepting chocolates from an American soldier, telling Toshi that those men killed his father. She is likewise distressed by the fact that Toshi eats American food at school, as the school is being subsidized by the American government, and she fears that Toshi will become more and more Americanized, forgetting Japanese traditions. Throughout the story, the difficulty of life in postwar Japan is emphasized, as Waters highlights how scarce food is for Japanese

civilians who live on meager rations and how their enemy had so quickly become their ally.

Loss

Related to the theme of memory, the theme of loss also informs the story, as Makiko grapples with several losses. Throughout the story, she grieves the loss of her husband, who was killed during the war. In addition, she mourns the loss of the world and culture she knew before the war. Makiko's obsessive efforts to preserve memories and traditional rituals such as the prayer ceremony are her attempts to overcome the sense of loss she feels in the face of enormous changes in her personal and social worlds. Unlike her brother Noboru who embraces the process of modernization as a way for Japan to get on its feet again, Makiko wants to hold onto her memories and the traditional ways, since they are what remains for her in the wake of loss.

Customs and Traditions

Several Japanese customs and traditions make an appearance in the story, including the Tanabata festival, the prayer ceremony, and the ball game Makiko tries to teach Toshi at the beginning of the story while chanting a traditional Japanese song. These customs and traditions serve to both illustrate Makiko's desire to preserve the past and to show how much things have changed in postwar Japan. The Tanabata festival points up how impoverished the town has become after the war, with faded lanterns trotted out and makeshift barrels used for the festivities. However, the festival also highlights how old traditions and enjoyments persist even in the face of defeat and the process of Americanization.

Style

Setting

The short story takes place in Kyoto, Japan, shortly after the end of World War II. When the story opens, Toshi is playing dodge-ball in a city park called Imamiya, and other scenes in the story take place in Makiko and Toshi's home and on the grounds of the Tanabata Day festival in the city. Although Kyoto was spared bombings and severe damage during the war due to its historic value as a center for art, Kyoto was occupied like other Japanese cities by American troops after World War II, and the occupation informs the story's setting, creating an atmosphere of tension and forced intrusion.

Point of View and Conflict

The story is told from the third person point of view, emphasizing the protagonist Makiko's thoughts, feelings, and observations. The primary conflict in the story is internal, with Makiko struggling to come to terms with her own feelings of loss and nostalgia, as she tries to preserve what she has known in the face of inevitable change. At the end of the story, the conflict is resolved by Makiko's newly found pleasure in current activities that remind her of her pre-war life. Most of the story is propelled by Makiko's thoughts and feelings, as no highly dramatic events occur in the story.

Flashback

Several times in "Aftermath" Waters uses the device of flashback to present action that occurred before the beginning of the story. The first flashback occurs while Makiko watches Toshi playing dodge-ball: she recalls how Yoshitsune would affectionately tease Toshi by asking if he was a man, when Toshi was only a toddler. The second flashback occurs after Makiko dreams of Yoshitsune swatting her with a flyswatter, and she wakes to recall other unpleasant memories such as the time Yoshitsune grabbed and shook her in anger. Other smaller incidents from Makiko's past resurface throughout the story, as current events remind her of past ones. The flashbacks give the reader information about Makiko's life with Yoshitsune before the war and also reinforce the theme of memory and how memory both haunts and eludes individuals.

Motifs

Waters uses the motifs of light and water throughout the story. Sun and sunlight convey a sense of nostalgia, representing the golden light of the pre-war past. As Makiko tries to recall the time Yoshitsune held up Toshi on one arm by a sunny window, she conjures the picture of "How the afternoon sun would seep in through the nursery window, golden, almost amber, advancing with the slow, viscous quality of Tendai honey, overtaking sluggish dust motes and even sound." At the end of the story, Waters again

invokes light as a positive force from the past, as Makiko attributes the Tanabata Day's success to previous celebrations that "emit[ted] a lingering phosphorescence through tonight's surface."

The motif of water, on the other hand, represents the movement of the present. From the beginning of the story, Waters likens Makiko's situation to being caught up in a wave, as Makiko "feels unmoored, buffeted among invisible forces that surge up all around her." The water motif occurs again later in the story, after Makiko wakes from the bad dream about Yoshitsune, and Waters has Makiko thinking, "Tonight she senses how far beneath the surface her own past has sunk, its outline distorted by deceptively clear waters." Here, the present is compared to a pool that appears calm but is not. The water motif reinforces the sense that the present is constantly in motion, since water is an element that moves and, unlike earth, is inherently unstable. As Makiko is the character who invokes water imagery repeatedly, the motif also points up how distressed Makiko feels in the midst of dramatic and constant change.

Historical Context

Although Waters published "Aftermath" in 2001, the work is set in Japan right after the end of World War II. On August 14, 1945, following several military defeats and the United States' dropping of an atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan's emperor Hirohito surrendered unconditionally to the Allied powers, which included the United States, France, and Great Britain. Japan had been devastated during the war, with all its major cities except for Kyoto suffering from severe bombing damage. Following Japan's surrender, the Allied powers led by the United States occupied Japan from August 1945 through April 1952. General Douglas A. MacArthur was the first supreme commander of the occupation.

In 1947, a new Japanese constitution went into effect, with the emperor losing all political and military power and becoming instead a figurehead (a head of state without real power). The constitution forbade Japan from maintaining an army or leading another war. MacArthur and other American leaders instituted other rules during the occupation to break up strongholds of economic and religious power in Japanese society. American occupiers imposed a series of social reforms, including a reorganization of the educational system. In addition, the Allied forces censored Japanese media during the occupation, forbidding any anti-American statements and topics deemed controversial from being discussed.

During the occupation, Japanese industries and transportation networks that had been destroyed during the war had to be rebuilt. Food shortages and rationing programs continued for many years after the end of World War II. Although the occupation went relatively smoothly due to cooperation between Japanese and Allied forces, criticism of the American occupation increased as the situation continued. The occupation ended in 1952, after the signing of a peace treaty between Japan and the Allied forces in 1951.

Critical Overview

The Laws of Evening, the collection that includes "Aftermath" has received much acclaim from critics, who have noted the precision and elegance of Waters's stories. Many reviewers have praised Waters for creating stories that give a human face to the generation that lived in postwar Japan. As Edel Coffey noted in the preface to an interview with Waters in Ireland's *Sunday Tribune*, "Indeed the stories certainly surpass the usual images we are offered of Japanese culture and Yukari Waters manages to show the humanity behind the societal rules." Similarly, an anonymous reviewer writing in *Publishers Weekly* lauded Waters's collection noting its sad but hopeful tone: "Wistful yet optimistic, these tales of inevitable cultural mutation, and of the unspoken fear and shame of an older generation wrenched from its prewar world, herald the arrival of a brave new voice that, like the characters herein, speaks with a serenity from a 'limbo for which there are no words.'"

While praising the collection overall, other reviewers such as Mary Park, who reviewed the book for the *New York Times*, have pointed out the lack of dramatic plots in the stories, stating that reading the collection requires a certain amount of patience. Some critics have offered a mixture of positive and negative criticism, as an anonymous reviewer in *Kirkus Reviews* did who noted that "Waters relies heavily on nostalgia and predictions of a future that has already come to pass, and clings to a habit of melodrama (.' . . skimming her consciousness like skipped pebbles over water'), but her stories are as finely wrought as miniature Japanese sculptures in balsa wood."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hong is a writer-in-residence at the Richard Hugo House in Seattle. Nominated for a 2004 Pushcart Prize, she has published poems in numerous journals and is the editor of the fiction and memoir anthology Growing Up Asian American *published by William Morrow and Avon Books. In the following essay, Hong discusses Waters's use of water and light motifs to reinforce the themes of memory and loss.*

Like many of the stories in Waters's acclaimed collection *The Laws of Evening*, "Aftermath" focuses on the life of an individual dealing with post—World War II conditions in Japan. The protagonist, Makiko, is a young widow whose husband has been killed while fighting the Allied forces during the war, and the plot is driven by Makiko's attempts to hold onto her pre-war past in the face of rapid modernization. Makiko is particularly concerned with preserving memories and traditional customs as a way to provide a legacy for her seven-year-old son Toshi, who seems to become more and more Americanized, as she raises him in the years right after the war. Waters uses the motifs of light and water to convey Makiko's sense of distress over her situation and to elucidate the story's central theme of memory and how memory influences people coping with difficult pasts.

Throughout the story, much of the dramatic conflict centers around Makiko's attempts to preserve memories of Yoshitsune, her deceased husband, for herself and for Toshi. Makiko is disturbed by the fact that Toshi only recalls one memory of his father, and she encourages him to remember more by asking him questions and having him participate in a nightly prayer ceremony to honor the memory of his father. To keep Toshi engaged with the ritual, Makiko rotates the items associated with Yoshitsune, sometimes displaying letters or different photographs. However, although Toshi enjoys lighting the incense on the prayer altar, he hurries through the ceremony, so that he can eat his dinner sooner, much to Makiko's dismay. Obsessed with preserving the past, Makiko scolds Toshi for rushing, telling him that "A man who forgets his past . . . stays at the level of an animal" while she scoops rice into his bowl.

Through her portrayal of Makiko, Waters conveys that memory is a slippery and uncontrollable process. Although Makiko doggedly tries to preserve "good" memories of her pre-war life with Yoshitsune, dwelling on the times when her husband affectionately interacted with their son, she also attempts to banish less pleasant memories, but with little success. In one scene, Makiko wakes up from a dream in which Yoshitsune is hitting her with a flyswatter, and she then recalls other disagreeable memories such as the time during the early years of their marriage when Yoshitsune shook her in anger. This scene illustrates how all types of memories persist and influence Makiko's current post-war life, even as she attempts to control what kinds of memories get through. Waters emphasizes Makiko's distress, as she describes her at the end of this scene: "She has tried so hard to remain true to the past. But the weight of her need must have been too great: her need to be comforted, her need to provide a legacy for a small, fatherless boy. Tonight she senses how far beneath the surface her own past has sunk, its outline distorted by deceptively clear waters."

Here, as elsewhere in the story, Waters uses the motif of water to describe Makiko's present, likening Makiko's current life to a pool, which appears calm but is roiling with memories below the surface. The comparison of Makiko's life to a body of water occurs again when her younger brother Noboru teases her for being so zealously clean, invoking the expression, "Nothing grows in a sterile pond" and then jokingly extolling the virtues of dirt.

Earlier in the story, Waters compares Makiko's situation to being pushed around in a wave, as Makiko "feels unmoored, buffeted among invisible forces that surge up all around her." By associating water with Makiko's life in post-war Japan, Waters conveys the idea that the present is constantly shifting, as the element of water is□unlike wood or earth□always moving. In using this motif, Waters also points up Makiko's sense of fear regarding how quickly things are changing, as water is an inherently unstable element that threatens to obscure or wash away what is left of the past.

Makiko's relentless efforts to preserve memories and rituals such as the prayer ceremony can be seen as her attempts to hold onto something definite in the face of enormous personal and cultural changes. In addition to grieving her husband, Makiko also mourns the loss of an entire way of life, as she sees traditional Japanese customs and values disappear when Japan embraces the process of modernization during the American occupation. Waters contrasts Makiko's reactions to the situation with those of Noboru, who heartily welcomes industrialization as a way for Japan to recover, rebuild, and free itself from U.S. occupation. Makiko, by contrast, resists these changes, wishes that her son and her culture were not growing so rapidly. She longs for a time when her life and Japanese society as a whole were undisturbed by the trauma of war and by recovery from its aftermath.

Waters uses light to show how nostalgically Makiko sees the past, casting her memories of the pre-war years in a golden sunlight. Although she herself cannot recall Toshi's one memory of his father□a seemingly inconsequential moment when Yoshitsune carries him on one arm next to a sunny window□Makiko imagines, "How the afternoon sun would seep in through the nursery window, golden, almost amber, advancing with the slow, viscous quality of Tendai honey, overtaking sluggish dust motes and even sound." Sunlight also imbues the present with a kind of nostalgic quality. On the way to the Tanabata festival, Makiko notices the setting sun "casting a pink and orange glow on the charred wooden lattices where shadows reach" and Toshi's "long shadow sweeping the sunlit fence as sparrows flutter up from charred palings." In these descriptions, Waters conveys how Makiko's focus on the past affects her perceptions of the present, giving even current events a sad, lovely, and fleeting feeling. In these ways, Waters uses sunlight to convey a sense of nostalgia and Makiko's particular longings for a less complicated earlier life.

At the end of the story, however, as night descends, and the softer glow of moonlight emerges, Waters alters the motif slightly. Following the Tanabata festival, Makiko stands alone on her veranda thinking about the night's festivities and feeling happy for the first time within the time frame of this story. After noticing the moon and how bright and strong it is "awash with light, pulsing with light," Makiko attributes her contentedness to

the fact that, for her, it is the past and her memories of former festivals of her youth that have imparted a sense of joy to her recent experiences at the new Tanabata festival. She thinks: "Surely tonight's festival owed its luster to all that lay beneath, to all those other evenings of her past that emit a lingering phosphorescence through tonight's surface." In this description, moonlight leads her to consider memory as a transformative force that imbues the shabby, difficult present with a kind of beauty that Makiko finds consoling. In this final scene, memories of the past have become less haunting and more reassuring, as the protagonist finds a way to envision her future.

In the last few paragraphs of the story, Waters also mixes the motifs of water and light, with the reference to "tonight's surface" referring back to the pond motif that is used earlier in the work. In addition, Makiko acknowledges that her beloved memories are "dissolving in her consciousness" like liquid beads, reinforcing the idea that memory is uncontrollable in spite of her fervent efforts. And in the last paragraph, Waters employs the light motif once again, as she describes Makiko hoping that Toshi will recall their life when he is older: "Perhaps Toshi will remember this night. Perhaps it will rise up again, once he is grown, via some smell, some glint of light, bringing indefinable texture and emotion to a future summer evening." By drawing on both of the major motifs of the story in these concluding descriptions of Makiko's shifting perceptions, Waters conveys how the character has experienced a moment of happiness and a reprieve from grieving, as she is able to feel how the light of the past informs her uncertain present and will continue to glimmer into the future.

Source: Anna Maria Hong, Critical Essay on "Aftermath," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

An interview with Waters by Stewart Wachs in *Kyoto Journal*, Vol. 56, appears online at www.kyotojournal.org/kjselections/waters.html under the title "The Clarity of Double Vision: An Interview with Mary Yukari Waters."

The University of California at Los Angeles Asia Institute online magazine *Asia Pacific Arts* features a textual and real video interview with Waters at www.asiaarts.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=12287 under the title "The Laws of Mary Yukari Waters."

Topics for Further Study

Consult and read magazines, newspapers, and other media sources to research theories of how memory works. Prepare and deliver a presentation on different theories of memory, using diagrams and pictures to aid your presentation.

Imagine that it is 1947 and you are living in Japan, Italy, or Germany. Write a short journal entry that describes what your life is like on a typical day. Be creative, and try to use details that show what daily life is like. You may need to research what was going on in the country of your choice before you write.

Research how Japan developed its modern industries during the late twentieth century. Pick one industry such as automobile manufacturing and write and then give a speech explaining how that industry transformed the Japanese economy into the world power that it is in the early 2000s. Use supplementary photos, charts, or other information graphics, if possible.

Find some poems by Japanese poets from the Edo Period such as Basho or Buson. Read their poems and create sketches based on the poems. Present your drawings to the class and read the poems aloud.

Research festivals in Japan such as the Tanabata Day festival. Pick one festival and write a play that takes place during the festival. Include details such as time of year, the food eaten and activities engaged in by participants. Perform the play or do a staged reading, with different people reading different parts.

Compare and Contrast

Postwar Japan: The economy and infrastructure of the nation are in ruins. Whole cities have been destroyed and need to be rebuilt from the ground up. Civilians suffer from food shortages and rely on rationing to get food and other necessities.

Today: Japan is the leading industrial state of East Asia and supports one of the most advanced economies in the world. Following its crushing defeat in World War II, Japan created the fastest growing economy in the postwar period from 1955 to 1990. A world power in the early 2000s, Japan is outproduced only by the United States.

Postwar Japan: From 1945 to 1952, Japan is occupied by Allied forces led by the U.S. military.

Today: Japan is an independent nation and world power known for its peacetime economic might.

Postwar Japan: Individuals in Japanese cities and in the countryside experience the effects of modernization, as the American occupation continues and Japan develops the modern industries that will make it a world power.

Today: With rapid industrialization, Japan has become a thoroughly modern culture. One of the most urbanized countries in the world, Japan supports numerous metropolises such as Tokyo, one of the largest cities in the world. City dwellers use modern conveniences such as commuter trains, cars, and appliances. However, along with embracing technological advances and other emblems of modern life, Japan maintains traditional customs and culture, with modern and traditional values existing side by side.

What Do I Read Next?

Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle: A Novel* (1998) traces the story of Toru Okada, an ordinary Japanese man who experiences a strange, unsettling journey when his cat and his wife disappear and he goes searching for them. Murakami is one of Japan's most highly regarded contemporary fiction writers, known for his imaginative stories.

Cynthia Kadohata's novel *The Floating World* (1989) tells the story of a Japanese American family traveling around the United States during the 1950s in search of work and a home. Narrated by the twelve-year-old Olivia, the novel depicts family dynamics against a backdrop of the "floating world" of menial jobs and shifting locales that the family inhabits.

In *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (2001), Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami gives a riveting non-fiction account of the tragic events that took place in Tokyo on March 20, 1995, when followers of the religious cult Aum Shinrikyo unleashed deadly sarin gas into the Tokyo subway system, killing and injuring many commuters.

Mary Yamamoto's *Grassroots Pacifism in Post-war Japan: The Rebirth of a Nation* (2004) discusses the peace movement led by Japanese workers and housewives during the years after World War II.

Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (1989) provides a comprehensive history of the contributions and struggles of different Asian Pacific Islander American groups, including Japanese Americans in the United States from the early 1800s through the twentieth century.

Further Study

Henshall, Kenneth G., *A History of Japan: From Stone Age to Superpower*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

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