

# **The Buddha in the Attic Study Guide**

**The Buddha in the Attic by Julie Otsuka**

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## Plot Summary

The image of a laughing Buddha left behind in an attic symbolizes the experiences of several Japanese women and their families in early twentieth century America. The novel "The Buddha in the Attic" by Julie Otsuka follows the lives of a group of young women as they travel by boat to America. All are hoping for a better life. They work hard beside their husbands to make a place for themselves in America. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, however, the American dream turns into a nightmare as the Japanese are forced to leave behind the things for which they have worked so hard. They are sent to live in interment camps.

The book is composed of eight different significant scenes in the lives of this group of women. They first travel to America by boat as picture wives. Their first disappointment comes when they arrive in America to learn that the husbands to whom they were promised were not the attractive, financially secure men they advertised themselves to be. A second scene of significance included in the novel is the women's first night with their husbands.

A third chapter describes the treatment the Japanese receive from the white people for whom they work. A fourth and fifth chapter describe the numerous babies born to the Japanese women and the way these children try to fit into the American culture. The rumors that abound after the bombing of Pearl Harbor are the main focus of the book's sixth chapter. Japanese men are arrested without notice and little cause and taken from their families. The chapter concludes with all people of Japanese descent being given orders to evacuate to interment camps.

The seventh chapter describes the variety of mindsets of the people and their children as they are forced to leave all of the things for which they have worked so hard. In the final chapter of the novel, the Americans react when they realize the Japanese people have disappeared from their town. Although they'd never really given the people much thought, they miss them now that they are gone and courser, less civilized people are taking their places.



# Come, Japanese!

## Summary

A group of young Japanese girls, mostly virgins, are on a boat bound for America. They compared photographs of the husbands to whom they have been promised. The photos showed good looking men in nice clothes with a house or vehicle in the background. During their journey, the women slept in the steerage area of the boat on makeshift beds and dreamed of the wealth they believed they would have in America. They believed they had been taught everything they needed to know in order to be good wives.

At night the girls discussed what they'd heard about America and the people who lived there. They worried how the people there would treat them, but they believed their lives in America would be better than what they could have had in Japan. They turned to a girl who was once a dancer in Nagoya for answers to their questions about sex. The girls had brought trunks with them that contained everything they believed they would need for their new life. Even though they complained during their time on the boat, the girls were happy. They had received many letters from their husbands telling them about their good jobs and their wealth. They kept the pictures of their husbands with them at all times. Some of the women who were going to America were going for their own secret reasons, such as tracking down a loved one or escaping the reputation they had created for themselves because they got pregnant out of wedlock.

During their time on the boat they watched the other passengers. They started a friendship with an Englishman who spoke Japanese. They were able to ask him questions about the rumors they'd heard about Americans. He taught them how to dance in American fashion. When they asked, he told the women he believed they would be happy in America. Also while on the boat, some of the women fell in love with the deckhands during their journey. They even allowed the deckhands to see them alone. One got pregnant by a deckhand while another committed suicide because she couldn't stay with the deckhand with whom she'd fallen in love.

During their journey, the girls sometimes thought about the opportunities they'd left behind in Japan. They talked to each other about the things they missed from their homes. Some of them had lesbian relationships.

While they were still on the boat, the women had no way to know that they would not recognize the men who were their husbands when they reached America. They would be met by men wearing shabby clothes because the photos they had been sent were taken 20 years before that time. The letters had been written by professional letter writers. Even though their husbands wouldn't be what they expected, the women would still go with them believing that because they were in America, there was no reason for them to worry.



## Analysis

This is a work of historical fiction based on the early twentieth century when Japanese women traveled by boat hoping for better lives in America. They had been promised in marriage to Japanese men already living in America. Although the circumstances behind the novel are historical, none of the characters or their stories are true. They were created by the author.

One of the first things the reader will notice about this novel is that it is told in the first person plural point of view. The point of view makes it appear that the women don't see themselves as individuals, but part of a larger group. In this point of view there are no specific main characters, only groups of characters. The main players in this section of the novel are the young women from Japan and the men to whom they've been pledged to marry. There are only two people who stand out as individuals in this section of the book. The first is Charles, the Englishman from who the girls seek verification about the rumors they have heard about the strange behaviors of Americans. The second is the dancing girl from Nagoya. This girl is never given a name; but, she is an important character because the other girls turn to her for information about sex.

One of the major themes in the novel is the girls' idea that their lives will be better in America than they were in Japan. They have promised themselves to men they had only seen in pictures and have undertaken a long journey by boat in extremely bad conditions because they believed their lives would be better when they got to America. In this section notice that the girls had nightmares that they had been sold to geisha houses like their prettier sisters. It was a common practice for girls to be sold to houses of prostitution in Japan. The girls on the boat believed any future was better than that of a prostitute. Even when they reached America and learned their husbands were not the attractive young men in the pictures, nor were they the attractive young men in the pictures 20 years prior, the women still believed that because they were in America, their lives would turn out okay.

Another theme in the novel is that of marriage. These women are basically mail order brides or picture brides. Their marriages were arranged by matchmakers. Notice that once the women arrived in America, their husbands looked nothing like the men in the photographs. They also have none of the things with which they were photographed and don't have the good earning jobs they'd told their future brides they had. The women believed they had been properly prepped for marriage because they could cook, sew, and write poems. They believed they were going to be the wives of gentlemen. They had no idea what sort of life awaited them in America. In particular, they believed that in America they would not be made to work in the fields.

There are many rumors the girls have heard about the Americans. It is in this section that the girls meet Charles and question him. The Americans were said to eat only meat, a practice they found disgusting. As Buddhists, the Japanese did not eat meat. They were also intrigued by the idea that Americans had hair all over their bodies. The women heard that all things, including the American women, were bigger in America.



Another important theme in this novel is the idea of intercultural relationships between the Americans and the Japanese. The women were already worried about whether or not they would fit in with the strange Americans among whom they will live. They were concerned they would be laughed at and scorned.

Also introduced during this section of the novel are several oddities of the Japanese culture. One of the cultural practices mentioned is that of the fathers selling off their pretty daughters to houses of prostitution for the money. Keep in mind that many of these picture brides on the boat to America have also in essence been “sold” for the betrothal money. Regardless, the women believe their lives will be better in America than they ever could have been in Japan. The reader also learns that the Japanese are Buddhists. A final aspect of the Japanese culture that is described in this section is that of the fate to which a woman was doomed if she were to have a child out of wedlock. Some of the women have gone to America to marry men who do not know that they have a child. Japanese women who stayed in Japan were very unlikely to get married if they already had a baby by another man. One heartbreaking image that is described in the novel is a mother leaving behind her three year old daughter. The woman dreams of the daughter every night.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of the pictures the women had been sent of their husbands. Why did they cling to these pictures so tightly? What did they do when they learned the pictures were not good representations of their husbands?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the tone of the novel as it is presented thus far. Also discuss the author’s use of the first person plural point of view.

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the differences between the cultures of the Japanese and Americans as presented in this section of the novel.

## Vocabulary

kimonos, unblemished, steerage, berths, stupor, melancholy, unfathomably, reluctantly, dialect, betrothal, invalid, translucent, calligraphy, pungent, aloofness, incessant, sutra, savage, emerge



# First Night

## Summary

The men consummated their marriages to the young Japanese women in a variety of manners and places. Some of the men were kind, but most were violent and cruel. Some of the women didn't even know what to expect from the men. Some of the men had been with other women, some had not. Some were angry when they learned their new wives were not virgins. Regardless, when the women woke the next day, they belonged to their new husbands.

## Analysis

The variety of ways in which many of these Japanese women had their first sexual encounters with their new husbands are described in this section of the novel. The major aspect of note in this shortest section of the novel is the expectation the men had that the women they were getting were virgins. In most cases the matchmakers had promised the girls had not had sexual relations. The narration indicates that even though some of the men were virgins and didn't know what they were doing, many appeared to have a good deal of sexual experience. The men didn't have to promise to be virgins, but the women did. Often times where there was no blood on the sheets after their first encounter with their new wife, the men would be angry because the blood indicated the woman's hymen had been broken, something that generally doesn't happen until their first sexual encounter. If there was no blood, the men assumed they'd been lied to about the women. Ironically, the men do not seem to take into consideration that they had lied about their ages, professions, and financial positions to the women. Instead, the men feel gyped and angry when they learn their women weren't the virgins they expected.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is the consummation of the marriage so important that the author dedicates one entire, albeit short, chapter to this act?

## Discussion Question 2

How did the women share their first nights with their husbands? Do you think the first night was representative of the rest of their marriage? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Why was it so important to the men that their women were virgins?

## Vocabulary

assumed, matchmakers, exquisite, resist, entail, frenziedly





# Whites

## Summary

Some whites would let the Japanese settle on the outskirts of their towns, but some indicated the Japanese were not welcome there. The Japanese brides and their new husbands traveled from place to place, working the white people's fields. They learned the word "water" as their first English word so they could call for a drink if they felt faint from the heat while working in the field. They did not have homes. They slept in bunkhouses or tents wherever there were crops for them to gather.

They wondered constantly about the Americans among whom they lived. The women were warned to stay away from the Americans. They were told to be wary of the Americans but at the same time to be polite and to appear eager to please. Even the horses and plows were bigger in America. The women soon learned the animals would not respond to their Japanese commands and had to learn English words to make the horses do their bidding.

Even though they knew the ABC's, the women could not read English nor could they understand the spoken language. Their husbands told the wives to leave the talking to them. Most of the women worked quickly, all for various reasons, but some worked slowly. They sang or chanted or cried while they worked. They tried to imagine they were back in Japan because they knew that if they'd known the truth about their husbands before they came to America, they would never have left their homes.

The Japanese were admired because they worked hard and had few bad habits. By day they worked; but at night they dreamed they were back at home. They were surprised each morning to wake next to their strange husband in America. Sometimes their husbands would notice they were sad and promise them things would get better. Sometimes they just looked right through their wives like they didn't see them at all.

On Sundays the Japanese were allowed to rest. The men would go to gamble while the women wrote home to their mothers. They all wished they could be rescued from their husbands. They thought of the men with whom they were really in love. Sometimes these men followed through with their promises and bought the women from their husbands. Sometimes the bosses on the farms where the women were working would walk up behind them making clear what he wanted from them. Some workers would offer the women money for sex. Sometimes the women agreed; sometimes they didn't.

The narrator goes on to describe the different jobs the women did. Some were the wives of sharecroppers. They had a shack with a dirt floor and a hole in the ground for a toilet. They knew they shouldn't have left home but tried to make the best of what they had. Some years they made money; some years they lost money and their husbands had to sell their tools to keep them alive. Even so, the women knew their fate was better than those who were maids in the cities.



The Americans did not like the Japanese because they were taking over so many farming markets that it was feared they would take over the Western United States. For this reason, Americans often attacked the homes of the Japanese at night. Sometimes crops were set on fire. The sheriff wouldn't even look into the fires even though matches were found at the scene. Their husbands changed after those experiences. The women slept with hatchets by the bed while the men slept sitting up with their guns in their laps. The women became numb to everything but work. They felt as if they had disappeared and no one, not even their husbands, had noticed.

Some of the women became servants for the Americans who lived in the cities. The men were gardeners while the women were house servants. They identified with the elderly of these families who had come to America as immigrants themselves. The American women taught the Japanese women what they needed to know to survive. These included skills like how to work a faucet, light a stove and answer a telephone. The Americans also taught the Japanese how to be wives. The Japanese wished they could be more like the American women. After they finished working the Japanese couples would talk about their day and then go to bed dreaming of the time when their lives would be better.

The Americans gave the Japanese women American names. They bragged about how good their workers were. They even told their Japanese maids their darkest secrets. The Japanese women complimented them and hid their affairs from their husbands. The narrator describes the types of people who hired the Japanese as workers. Some even went so far as to enroll their workers in English classes or teach them English themselves. One of them even left her maid a fortune when she died.

It was only when the families were gone and the Japanese women were alone in the huge houses that they felt like themselves. Some of the workers began stealing from their employers. Others were rewarded for their honesty. Some Japanese women were fired for no good reason. Some were fired because they misunderstood the English their employers spoke. Sometimes the men of the women for whom the Japanese women worked would pressure them for sex. The men asked the women to speak Japanese to them. These men would make the women feel like they were alive. The narrator relates the outcomes of some stories where the Japanese women fell in love with the American men.

Some of the Japanese women became prostitutes. They ran away from their husbands. They thought maybe they could earn the money for a trip back to Japan through their work. One woman in the brothel was married to a new husband and lived in a fine house but still thought about her first husband.

Some of the new Japanese brides found themselves employed in laundries and scrubbing the Americans' dirty things. They lived in the back of the laundries. They knew that if they went home they would disgrace their family. For this reason, they stayed in J-town where they rarely saw the Americans. In J-town all the people were Japanese. There were boardinghouses, shops, grocers and doctors.



When they did leave J-town, the women tried not to draw attention to themselves. Still the Americans made fun of the Japanese and treated them badly. The women promised themselves that someday they would leave and go to a country where they were respected. They wanted to make enough money so they could go back to their parents and help them live a comfortable life. Until then, they continued to work in America.

## Analysis

This longest chapter describes the variety of lives the Japanese women lived with their husbands in America. It appears that most of them found themselves working in the fields with their husbands, the very kind of work they believed they would avoid by coming to America. They were also cooks, dishwashers, wives of sharecroppers, maids, nannies, prostitutes, and laundry workers.

The chapter also addresses the theme of intercultural relationships between the Japanese and the whites. Many of the Americans did not want the Japanese settling in or near their towns and had discrete but firm ways of telling the Japanese they were not welcome. Notice that the women's husbands warned them to stay away from the white people. They were taught to be wary of the Americans. Although the whites didn't appear to like the Japanese or want them around, the Japanese were admired and desired as workers because they worked hard and asked for little in return. The chapter also notes that the Americans thought of the Japanese as cheap labor and criticized them as being interested only in money. Some Americans were downright mean to the Japanese. They would set the crops of the Japanese on fire, causing them to lose the money they'd hoped to earn. To make matters worse, the American sheriffs would look the other way and do nothing even when the fires were obviously arson.

Considering the theme of intercultural relationships, the Japanese women were the ones who worked in town with the rich whites. These women were envious of their American counterparts. They wished they could be more like them and tried to learn all they could from them. The women who worked as maids often turned into the best friends and confidants of the American women. These Japanese maids not only tended the white children but also knew and kept the white women's darkest secrets. They knew if the woman was having an affair and would cover for her. They would comfort the American women if they got scared at night while their husbands were away.

A different section of this chapter is dedicated to the women who lived in a place called J-town, a portion of town where only the Japanese lived. They preferred to stay among their own because the Americans treated them so badly when they went to other parts of town. At movie theaters they were allowed only to sit in the sections of the theater where the blacks were allowed to sit. Only the black barbers would cut their hair. In the streets people would make fun of their speech. American women would ask the Japanese women to move away from them on the trolleys.

The theme of the American Dream is demonstrated in this section. Despite the criticism of the Japanese people, these farmers were quickly overtaking the farming industries. It



is noted that if the progress of the Japanese was not stopped, there was a danger of them overtaking the western United States. One precept of the American dream is that in America if a person is willing to work hard enough, they can make a better life for themselves. It appears that even though the Japanese are not welcomed warmly by the Americans, their work does pay off for them.

The English language was a stumbling block for many of the Japanese women. As a lifesaving technique, those women who worked in the fields were taught to call for water if they felt faint during their work. Water was the first word of English many of them knew. Other words they learned were giddyap, back, easy, and whoa so they could drive the horses as they plowed the field.

The theme of marriages is explored also in this section. The women were faithful to their husbands even though they had no home or place to call their own. They followed these men through the fields as they planted, pulled weeds, and harvested crops. The women came to resent the men because of the amount of sex they wanted. It was mentioned that sometimes the husbands would tell their wives things would get better. This didn't seem to be a common occurrence as many of the women felt as if they had disappeared. Notice also that the narrator indicates on the part of all the women that they hoped they would be rescued from their new husbands regardless of how good or bad they were. Some had fallen in love with other men. Notice also the women faced sexual harassment from their field bosses, the husbands of their employers if they worked as maids in a household, and their coworkers. There was little they could do about the way they were treated but were often approached by other men looking for sexual favors.

Marriages for the women who worked in the towns were somewhat different. The Japanese learned from the American women how to cajole and tease their husbands. They learned how to tantalize them. When they were alone together, the husbands and wives would try to imagine themselves as their employers and wondered how those couples had sex.

Japanese culture is examined. The women who were hired as maids didn't share this information with their families and friends back home. In Japan, the job of a maid was the lowest one that a woman could have. Basically they were ashamed of the work they did and chose instead to tell their family nice lies about how well they were doing in their new home.

In the final section of this chapter it is noted that some of the women who ran away from their husbands became prostitutes. Interestingly it was one of these women who turned out to have the best life of all of the women. It is noted that one of the well to do men actually married that woman and she lived as the mistress of a large estate. Despite her good fortune, it is noted that this woman still thought about the man from whom she'd run away when she first came to America.



## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the idea that the women often believed they were disappearing. In what ways were they disappearing? Why was this significant?

## Discussion Question 2

Even though the women's experiences in America were not turning out as they had hoped, they chose to remain instead of going home. Why did they do this?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the different ways in which the Japanese people were treated by the Americans.

## Vocabulary

profusely, furrow, stamina, docile, arrogant, sly, import, monopoly, obsessed, thoracic, piazza, tantalize, deceive, endearing, inept, seedier, brothel



# Babies

## Summary

The narrator describes the poor circumstances under which the new Japanese wives gave birth to their first babies. Some gave birth in barns and fields while some were at clinics or hospitals. Some of the women's husbands even wanted sex right after the babies were born. Some women went back to work the day after their babies were born. All these babies were American citizens. Along with the healthy babies, the Japanese women sometimes gave birth to sick or deformed babies. They had babies regularly for years and asked their husbands to stop; but, the babies kept coming. They tried to make themselves miscarry and sometimes failed. Some of the babies died. One in particular was buried by a stream, but the family had moved so many times since she was buried that they could no longer remember where the baby's burial spot was located.

## Analysis

It is in this fourth section of the novel that the narrator begins describing the babies who begin to be born to the Japanese women. They gave birth under a variety of different circumstances in a variety of different settings from outdoors in the field to inside in hospitals. There were still births, babies who died soon after they were born and babies with deformities in addition to the babies who were born healthy.

Concerning the theme of the American dream, notice that the author notes that since they were born in America, the babies were considered American citizens. It was with the birth of these babies that the families could finally lease land, even though the land had to be leased in the child's name. In this way, the children brought the parents closer to realizing the dream that things would one day be better for them.

In the theme of Japanese culture notice that the women had brought their superstitions from Japan with them. They believed twins were bad luck so their midwife was instructed to kill one of the babies. Babies with extra fingers were subjected to amputation of these fingers at birth.

Because the women had no forms of birth control and the men's sexual appetites seemed insatiable, one even initiating sex just after his wife had given birth to a baby, the women often turned to home remedies to try to keep themselves from having more babies. They tried to avoid sex when possible; but, they also depended upon their midwives' remedies to make them have abortions. Sometimes these remedies didn't work. They also did things like jumping off their porches to bring on premature labor.



## **Discussion Question 1**

What did the babies mean to the Japanese families?

## **Discussion Question 2**

If babies were so important to the Japanese, why did their mothers sometimes try to keep from having children?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the different circumstances under which the Japanese women had their babies.

## **Vocabulary**

translucent, remote, midwife, paddies, conceive



# The Children

## Summary

The babies and small children were taken to the fields when the women went back to work. They entertained themselves or slept. Each of the women had a favorite among their children. They often cared more for their sons than their daughters, just as their mothers had done. They knew it was their sons who would be responsible for taking care of them in their old age. Their husbands left all of the child care and housework to the women.

As soon as the children were old enough, they went to work in the fields as well. Their mothers sometimes wondered if they'd been right to bring the children into such a world. The children, however, played with whatever they found, just as their mothers had in Japan. The children began to learn about the American children who lived beyond their farms. The Japanese women tried to teach their children manners as they grew.

Some of the children got sick and didn't grow up. A few of the women were not able to have children at all. Those who did survive learned their parents' trades. At school they were seated in the back of the classrooms with the Mexicans. They soon began to read and speak English. They began to forget how to speak Japanese. They gave themselves American names that their parents could barely pronounce.

The children grew to be taller and heavier than their parents. They acted like Americans. They were ashamed of their parents. They tried to brush off the slights they suffered because of being Japanese Americans. They knew they would never fit in. They learned which restaurants they could eat at and which barbers would cut their hair. Despite their hard lives they dreamed their lives would get better. Even though their mothers knew what life had in store for their children, they still let them dream.

## Analysis

The children of the Japanese mothers grew up in the fields with their parents. Notice there was no division of labor between the mothers and fathers. The fathers did not help care for the children or take care of anything around the house. All of the housework and the care of the children were left to the mothers, even though they worked all day in the field just as the men did.

The American Dream is explored in this section. The parents had been allowed to lease land, so they must continue to work hard in order to pay off the lease. Once the children were old enough they were given jobs to do to help their parents on the farms. Some of the children were happy and eager to help while others were lazy and complained. Just like their parents, the children dreamed of a better world. Even though their parents couldn't even buy them one toy, they dreamed of the things they could buy themselves





when they got out into the world on their own. This is the perpetuation of the American dream. The children hoped for better lives than what their parents had.

Although the Japanese parents wanted better lives for their children and worked hard, even in America the babies didn't always live to grow up. Some died because of diseases while others wandered off and were never found. Some died because of farm accidents. Many drowned. One was kidnapped.

Notice also the Japanese culture's preference for the male children comes through in the way the women treat their children. They know that the males will be better help on the farm. Also, according to Japanese culture, it was the males who were in charge of taking care of their parents in their old age. For these reasons it was in the best interests of the family to look after the male children and see that they got the best food and best medical care. The mothers were sorrowful when their children started to prefer English to their own language and even began to forget the Japanese they learned as babies. In addition to the loss of their native language, the mothers also grieved their children's loss of the principals of Japanese culture like the forgetting of the names of the gods and the words to prayers.

It was in school that the children began to learn the differences between themselves and the white children. The Japanese were forced to sit in the back of the classrooms with those of Mexican descent. As they stayed in school, however, the children began to learn English, a language their mothers never mastered. The children also showed their desire to fit in with the Americans by choosing American names for themselves. They realized their Japanese names set them apart. They wanted to have names like the other children.

The reader can see a divide between the Japanese parents and their American born children that is different from that found in the typical parent/child relationship. The Japanese children were ashamed of the way their parents talked with their heavy Japanese accents and inability to pronounce their l's and r's. They were ashamed of the work their parents did even though it was the only sort of work they were allowed to do when they came to live in America. They hated their crowded and often ramshackle homes.

An important part of the growing up process for the Japanese children that the author notes was their need to learn the unspoken rules of America as far as what they could do and what they couldn't do. They learned to be submissive to the Americans and pretend it didn't matter when they were made fun of. They also learned not to show their anger. Most importantly, they learned not to travel alone for fear of being bullied or beaten.

At the end of the chapter, the narrator lists a number of dreams the children had. At the conclusion, it is said that the children were allowed to dream even though the parents knew what the future held for them. This pessimism on the mothers' parts not only gives the ending of the chapter a foreboding tone but also foreshadows a future of which neither the parents nor their children could dream.



## **Discussion Question 1**

How did the children of the Japanese immigrants fit into life in America? How were they like their parents? How were they different?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is it significant that the Japanese children decided to take American names?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why did the Japanese mothers often prefer and take better care of their sons as opposed to their daughters?

## **Vocabulary**

rambunctious, serene, inseparable, gangrenous, rebuffed, eluded, photographic, coolies



# Traitors

## Summary

The second day of the war, the Japanese began hearing rumors of a list. The people whose names were on this list were in danger of being arrested and carried away. At first the Japanese stayed inside and hid. In December, they began going outside to work again. They gathered in the evenings to share any news they had heard. One woman went so far as to pack a bag for her husband in case he was arrested.

What they knew about the list of people wanted for arrest was varied and contradictory. They began getting letters telling them their husbands were next to be arrested. They were threatened and their things damaged. The Americans began to treat them differently. Longtime customers stopped buying from them. Business people refused to sell to them. They realized they had suddenly become the enemy.

Newspaper stories accused the Japanese in America of helping to orchestrate the attack on Pearl Harbor. They believed the Japanese were members of an underground army set to activate against the Americans. Because of the rumors the Japanese began burning anything that would cause the Americans to be suspicious of them. They believed they had made the Americans hate them because they had stuck with their Japanese ways.

More and more Japanese men were disappearing. The men developed different rituals because of the threat they might be next to disappear. Even though the families went through their normal rituals, everything felt different. They read the papers and listened to the news for word of their fate. A prominent berry grower was taken out of his home at 3 a.m. He was the first person known by that community of Japanese to be taken away. Soon, other men were missing. The men tried to determine what they might have done that would have caused them to be on the list.

In January, the Japanese had to register with the government and turn in all their weapons. Next their travel was restricted. The husbands of the women began to give them instructions on what to do if they disappeared. On the news, officials began to talk about mass removals of the Japanese. They would be held under protective custody until the end of the war. The women began trying to think positive thoughts and made up rituals they believed would save their husbands and families.

In February, more men were missing. Chizko, one of the women whose husband was missing, said the hardest part of the whole ordeal was not knowing the whereabouts of her husband. Meanwhile, the other women felt closer to their husbands and treated them better than they ever had. They worried about what they would do if their husbands were taken away from them. The Japanese women also began to realize there were people of Japanese descent who were working as informers.



In spring, men were still disappearing. The women continued to work just as they had been doing. When they went to town, they didn't talk to anyone. Even in J-town they were careful about what they said as they didn't know who might betray them. They heard of an entire town of Japanese arrested on a blanket warrant.

Some of the women were relieved when the evacuation orders were finally posted. The women prepared as best they could for the evacuation and told their younger children it would only be temporary. Older children began quitting their jobs or dropping out of school to help their parents find people to run their businesses, sell their stock, or bring in a final harvest. They kept hoping something would happen and they wouldn't have to go. The chapter ends with the Japanese taking one last look over their property before leaving. A mention is made of a looter breaking in the front door of one of the houses. The women knew that soon any sign they were there would be gone.

## Analysis

The theme of rumors, particularly the unreliable nature of the information shared through rumors, becomes important in this section of the novel. The events of this chapter take place after Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed the American naval base at Pearl Harbor. Some Americans believed that all Japanese were against the Americans and that those who were living in America intended to rise up against them. The Japanese, on the other hand, were wary of the Americans because they had heard rumors of a list of Japanese people who were being sought by the American government for arrest. The women of J-town believed it was all talk and rumors until people they knew began to disappear. They gathered each evening to discuss the news they'd heard even though some of it was rumors and not truth. The author indicates that even though they knew much of what they were hearing was rumor, they couldn't help but pass what they'd heard along.

While the Japanese believe rumors they are told about what the Americans are planning with their list of people to be arrested, the Americans also believe the rumors they hear about the Japanese intending to rise up against them. They believed the Japanese living in America somehow signaled to the fighters who attacked the base. They believed the Japanese in America knew the attack was coming and didn't do anything to warn anyone or stop it. They believed people who said that school children had bragged about something big that would soon be happening and assumed they were talking about the attack.

Pertaining to the theme of intercultural relationships, the Japanese women blamed themselves for keeping themselves segregated from the whites. They believed they must have done something to make the Americans hate them. Some of the women believed in particular that it was the Japanese attempts to cling to their own culture that drove the Americans away. In order to try to make themselves seem less strange to their fellow Americans and to destroy any cause for their arrest, the Japanese begin burning the things they owned that would connect them to Japan. These things included family photographs, letters, and religious paraphernalia.



About a month after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the American government ordered the Japanese to give up anything that could be used as a weapon. They were given a curfew and were placed under travel restrictions. The intercultural relationships become worse when the Americans begin threatening the Japanese and raiding their property. The Japanese soon heard that they would be evacuated to the interior United States.

In addition to the threats the Japanese faced from the Americans, they also feared their own people in this section of the novel. Note that the author points out that there were Japanese willing to turn in their fellow Japanese in order to earn money for each person whom they turned in. Wives turned in husbands, children turned in fathers. The people were wary even of each other.

As to the marriages, notice that it is indicated that the women felt closer to their husbands than they ever had at this point in their lives together. It appears some of them had grown to love the men for whom they came to America so many years ago. They worried that their husbands would be taken away and they wouldn't ever see them again. They began to treat their husbands with more respect and care. It could be argued that the women treated their husbands better only because they are afraid of losing their source of income. If they still hated their husbands and wanted them away from them, they would perhaps be pleased with the idea that their husbands might be taken away. In contrast, however, these women have come to learn that even though their husbands didn't have the physical looks that they had expected, the men were hard workers who supported their families. Even if the women have not begun to love their husbands, they have found some respect for them.

It is in this section of the novel that another character is singled out for identification. This woman is Chizuko. She is described as always wanting to be prepared to the point that she packed a suitcase for her husband in case he was taken. When her husband was arrested, he left behind the suitcase his wife had packed.

Notice also in this section that even as the Japanese were preparing to leave they hoped something would happen to change their circumstances. They hoped someone in their town would intervene on their behalf. Instead, the neighbors only seemed interested in buying things cheaply from the Japanese as they prepared to follow the evacuation orders they'd been given.

## Discussion Question 1

In this section do you believe there is proof that the women have learned how to love their husbands? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the wife who packed a bag for her husband? What does it mean that he left that bag behind?



## Discussion Question 3

At this point in the evacuation of the Japanese, how do the Americans react to the idea the Japanese are being forced to leave? What do the Japanese hope might happen?

## Vocabulary

emerge, furrows, confiscated, collaborators, deported, vague, incontestable, indelible, figment, tainted, jaloopies, apprehended, levee, scrutinized, prominent, impostor, obscure, disgruntled, denounce, liquidating, sluice, subversive, shanties, tenants, flue



# Last Day

## Summary

The Japanese left wearing the white identification tags they had been issued. Crowds gathered to watch them go. The narrator describes what some of the people were wearing or carrying when they left and in what disposition they were in when they left. Most of them left in a hurry. There were women whose husbands had already been arrested. There were also women who had sent their children back to Japan. It had been twenty-three years since the women had come to America on the boat. They left with mementos from the lives they had made for themselves in America.

## Analysis

In this section of the novel the author paints a picture of despair and betrayal as the Japanese people left the lives and the things for which they had worked so hard. They left with very little and had no idea of where they are going or what future awaited them. Even the children who were born American citizens were forced to leave their jobs, schools, and homes. One particular sentence on page 105 indicates that the people spoke only English as they left. Even up until the last minute, the Japanese people were trying not to offend the Americans, or make up for some way in which they had offended the Americans.

Included in this section of the novel is the image of a laughing brass Buddha hidden in an attic. Some believed a laughing Buddha was a symbol of wealth or happiness. Because the man left the Buddha behind, it symbolized that he was leaving behind his chances for wealth and happiness. Because the Buddha is tucked away in the attic and not displayed openly, it could indicate the man had given up long ago on the idea of ever being happy or wealthy.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the image of the young girl at the end of the chapter who left without looking back. Why is this image significant?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the image of the Buddha laughing in the attic. How is that image significant?



## Discussion Question 3

Why do the Japanese speak only English when they leave town? Since the worst has happened to them, why are they still worried about offending the Americans?

## Vocabulary

purify, venereal, valet, gabardine, valedictorian, canteen





# A Disappearance

## Summary

The homes of the Japanese are empty and boarded up. Their businesses are shuttered or opening under new management. It occurs to the Americans that the Japanese are gone. The town's mayor says they are in a safe place. They wonder if their town was not safe enough for them. Rumors circulate about where the Japanese have gone. The evacuation notices are still nailed to the telephone poles but are nearly illegible. The people can't remember what the directions were for the Japanese as they hadn't really paid attention. They blame the misbehavior of their children on the disappearance of the Japanese. These children wonder what has happened to their Japanese classmates and worry about what they might be doing.

Some people are happy the Japanese are gone. They believe the rumors that they had hidden weapons and intended to attack the Americans. Most believe the Japanese in their town did not pose a threat. They adopt the animals the Japanese families left behind. One morning when the last of the eviction notices finally disappears from the telephone poles, the people of the town feel it is as if the Japanese had never been there at all.

People begin taking plants and bushes from the property that once belonged to the Japanese. Soon they are breaking into houses and stealing things. Merchandise from Japan begins to appear in pawn shops and second hand stores. One woman who wears chopsticks as ornaments in her hair says she tries not to think about where they came from.

The people from the town expect the Japanese to return. They wonder if they should have done something to keep the Japanese in their town. If there was something they could have done to help them. They begin getting letters from the Japanese. The people of the town finally begin to ask questions about the situation the Japanese faced. Some believe the Japanese are plotting the demise of the Americans. The mayor promises them all is well with the Japanese.

When the summer comes the people in the town begin looking for replacements to their Japanese workers. The people begin feeling the pinch of the war as they grow victory gardens and deal with shortages in staples like gasoline and tin foil. New people begin moving into the houses abandoned by the Japanese. They are poor vagrants, not the kind of people the residents of the town like. They are loud and they stay up late at night drinking and smoking on their porches. The townspeople wish the quiet Japanese were back.

They begin to hear stories of the Japanese being taken away on trains. In autumn there are none of the festivals the Japanese once celebrated. By the time the frosts come, the people of the town have begun to forget what the Japanese looked like or what their



names were. After a year the town is almost free from any sign the Japanese once lived there. They still don't know what has happened to the Japanese people who once lived among them. They hope they are okay but know they will probably never see them again.

## Analysis

Notice the shift both in tense and point of view in this final chapter of the novel. The tense changes from past to present tense. The point of view remains in the first person plural, but the Americans who lived in the town near J-town take over the narration in the place of the Japanese women.

The major theme discussed in this section of the novel is that of the intercultural relationships between the Japanese and the Americans. It appears that most of the white people who lived near J-town did not resent and were not afraid of the Japanese who lived among them. In fact, it appears they thought little of them. They depended on them to do their laundry, sell them groceries, and cook their food. However, they hadn't ever really considered they'd be made to leave. Compare this with the treatment the Japanese women reported getting in the previous sections. They indicated their white neighbors raided their barns and threatened them after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Notice that even though the white people pretend to be outraged that the Japanese have been forced to leave, and some even pretended not to know they'd been ordered to leave, they had in a previous section taken advantage of the Japanese people's need to liquidate their things by buying them at prices that were so low it was unfair to the Japanese. After the Japanese people left, the Americans continued to show how little respect they had for those people. They broke into their houses, took their things, and sold them for cash. The same Japanese people who had burned their things from Japan because they believed it was the mementos from their unfamiliar culture that had made the Americans hate them would be surprised to know that those Americans had purchased and were displaying their Japanese things in their homes. One woman wears chopsticks in her hair that she knows were stolen from the Japanese. She says she has to keep herself from thinking about where they came from in order to wear them. This woman and her attitude seem to symbolize the shallowness of the Americans. They didn't appreciate their quiet, hardworking neighbors while they were there and did nothing to make it so they could stay in their town. The people who moved into the houses the Japanese had abandoned were noisy, and the Americans suddenly wished they had their quiet neighbors back.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the change in tense and point of view in this section of the novel.



## Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that the Americans did not do anything to keep the Japanese in their town until it was too late?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the symbolism of the Americans' acts of looting the homes of the Japanese and selling their things or displaying them in their own homes.

## Vocabulary

abound, directive, caches, materialize, intervene, remorse, demise, rancor, unruly, refugee, dispossessed, vagrants, squatters, pensioner, elude, reservoir



# Characters

## The Husbands

These men were chosen as husbands for the young women who came to America from Japan hoping for a better life. The marriages were arranged by matchmakers. The husbands were represented as being young, handsome, and as having good jobs. When the women finally met their husbands they realized the pictures they'd been sent were as much as twenty years old and that the men did not have the good jobs they said they had. These husbands took their wives with them so they could help with work in the fields. The husbands also kept their wives pregnant but did not help with child care or housekeeping. After Pearl Harbor, the husbands were often arrested without warning because the Americans believed they were guilty of conspiring with the Japanese who attacked the United States.

## The Americans

The Americans make up another large group of characters in the novel. The Americans who lived in the town where J-town was located are the narrators for the last chapter of the novel. It was only after the Japanese were taken to the internment camps that the people in that town realized that they missed the Japanese and wished that they were back. In the sections of the novel that are narrated by the Japanese women, it seems that most of the Americans don't seem to like the Japanese. They make fun of them, criticize them for working hard and being concerned only about money, and indicate to them they don't want the Japanese living anywhere near them. Some of the Americans are pleased with the Japanese because they are good workers and require little oversight.

## The Children

The children make up another large group of characters in the novel. These children are the babies of the women who came from Japan. Since they were born in America, these children are American citizens. Using their children's names, the parents are finally able to lease land. The children try to fit in with the Americans. They learn English at school and change their names to English names. Some of them excel in school and even get jobs. Some of the children are still underage, while some are adults by the time they and their families are put in internment camps.

## The Japanese Women

The Japanese women who came to America from Japan as picture brides are the main characters and narrators of the novel. The stories of their lives are traced through their trip on the boat to America, their first meeting with their husbands, their hard work to



make a life for themselves and their families in America to their evacuation to the interment camps after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

## The American Husbands

The husbands of the American women for whom the Japanese women work as maids, cooks, and nannies make up another large group of characters included in the novel. These husbands are significant characters because they often entice the Japanese women to have affairs with them.

## The Bosses

The bosses of the farms and ranches at which the Japanese people work make up another large group of characters in the novel. These bosses are significant because they, like the husbands of the Americans for whom some of the Japanese work as maids and nannies, sexually harass the Japanese women as they work in the fields.

## Charles

Charles was an English professor whom the young Japanese girls met on the boat on their way to America. The girls could talk to him and use him as a way to get information about the land to which they were headed because he spoke perfect Japanese. He was also married to a Japanese woman. Although Charles does give them some good information about Americans, he seems to be either a fraud or uneducated about the lives the women will lead when he told them they would be happy in America.

## Chizuko

Chizuko is one of the few Japanese wives that is mentioned by name and is mentioned more than once in the novel. She is the wife who packed a bag for her husband in case that he was arrested by the Americans. When the man was arrested, he forgot to take the suitcase with him. Chizuko told the other women the worst part of having her husband taken was not knowing where he was.

## The Mayor

The mayor of the town that included J-town assures the people that the Japanese have gone somewhere where they will be safe. He will not tell them where they have gone because he tells them if they knew, the place wouldn't be safe. He tells them the Japanese left willingly.

## **The Dancing Girl from Nagoya**

This girl is never given a name, but she is important in the novel because it was to her that the other Japanese girls on the boat went for answers to their questions about sex and how they should behave on their first nights with their husbands.

# Symbols and Symbolism

## Husband's Pictures

These pictures are the most important items the Japanese women bring with them on the boat. They show off these pictures to the other women on the boat before they do anything else. These pictures represent the hopes that the women have for their lives in America.

## Trunks

The women bring these trunks full of Japanese clothes and other household necessities with them on the boat to America. The trunks represent the women's lives in Japan. Later, when the Japanese decide they need to blend in more with the Americans, they burn the things in their trunks in an attempt to destroy their Japanese lives and culture.

## Letters

After they docked in San Francisco, the Japanese women realized that the men who were to be their husbands had not written the letters they had received. The letters symbolized another way in which the men lied to the women about who they were.

## Hatchets Beside Our Beds

During some of the times when the Japanese women most feared for their safety, they slept with hatchets by their beds in the case that they Americans attacked them. These hatchets represent the division and the fear that exists between the Americans and the Japanese.

## White Paper Lanterns

These white paper lanterns that the Japanese would light at gravestones on the day of the Feast of the Dead symbolically led the souls of the dead back to Earth for one day. Later, the people would float these lanterns down the river, a way of symbolically leading the souls back to Buddha.

## American Names

The children born to the Japanese immigrants took American names for themselves in order to appear more American. The taking of these names symbolized their desire to belong in the American culture. Later, after the Japanese were sent to the interment



camp, some of the children took back their Japanese names. This taking back of the Japanese names symbolized the children's desire to separate themselves from the Americans they had once aspired to be like.

## The List

The Japanese had heard rumors of a list that contained all of the names of the men who were under suspicion and were in danger of being arrested by the Americans. The list was symbolic of the threat that the Americans believed the Japanese represented to them.

## A Packed Suitcase

This packed suitcase represents one Japanese woman's desire to make sure her husband had the things he might need if he were to be arrested. Even with her preparation, however, when her husband was taken, he did not take the suitcase with him.

## Official Notices

These official notices that inform the Japanese that they must evacuate to internment camps became symbolic of the Japanese people themselves to the Americans. The Americans never really paid attention to the signs or what they said until the Japanese were gone. When the last of the official notices disappeared from the telephone poles to which they'd been attached, the Americans believed it was if all of the Japanese were all finally gone.

## Chopstick Hair Ornaments

After the Japanese were forced to leave J-town and their houses were raided, the Americans began to display items from Japan in their homes. It is insinuated that these things were taken from the homes of the Japanese people. One woman wearing chopstick hair ornaments indicates she has to not think about where the chopsticks came from in order to be able to wear them. Her statement about the chopsticks makes her appear to be shallow and unsympathetic to the Japanese. The chopsticks and other items taken from the Japanese homes symbolize the lives the Japanese left behind while the Americans' acts of stealing the items symbolize their lack of guilt when it came to taking advantage of the Japanese.



# Settings

## The Boat

The boat on which the young Japanese women sailed from Japan to American is the setting for the first chapter of the novel.

## San Francisco

It was at the port in the city of San Francisco that the Japanese women met their husbands for the first time and realized they had been told lies about the men's ages as well as their occupations.

## Various Fields and Ranches

While trying to make a living for themselves the Japanese women and their new husbands wandered from farm to farm where help was needed to bring in crops and work the fields.

## City of Paris Department Store

It was at this department store that one American woman would take her Japanese maid regularly to let her pick out a new piece of clothing.

## J-town

J-town was the name for the portion of town occupied by the Japanese. The Japanese rarely ventured out of this four block section.

## Interment Camps

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Japanese were forced to move from their homes and live in interment camps.



# Themes and Motifs

## American Dream

A major theme in this novel is the pursuit of the American dream. Those who believe in the American dream believe that those who work hard can earn a better life for themselves. It was this better life that many of the women who came to America from Japan hoped they would be able to enjoy. After a life of work, however, the Japanese lost all of the things for which they'd worked when they were forced to move to interment camps shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

The Japanese women came to America believing that their lives would be better than what they would have had in Japan. They believed they were marrying well to do gentlemen who could take care of them. Even when they realized they had been lied to and that the husbands were really farmers, the women still believed no harm could come to them in America. They worked hard by their husbands' sides and made a life for themselves and their children.

Despite the disappointments they'd had in America, the Japanese mothers still let their children dream that they could do better for themselves than their parents. They want to go to school and get high paying jobs. In this way they are carrying on the idea of the American dream. They believe they can work hard, just like their parents, and continue to move ahead.

The American dream falls apart for both the parents and their children when they are forced to go to interment camps shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Even though the parents have worked hard and built lives for themselves, they are forced to walk away from the fruits of their labor. Children are forced to quit jobs and drop out of school in order to go to the camps. For these Japanese, the American dream has not turned out to be the bright future for which they were hoping.

## Rumors

Rumors and the way that people are affected by rumors is another major topic of this novel. The first rumors that are mentioned in the novel are those shared by the girls as they travel to America. They share with each other the stories they have heard about the American people. Rumors also abound both about the Japanese and the Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. In all cases, the rumors only work to spread hatred and distrust between the Americans and Japanese.

In this first instance of shared rumors, the girls on the boat talk to one another about the things they've heard about the physical appearance and behavior of Americans. Some of this information is contradictory and some of it is just wrong. The girls depend on an English gentleman to help them discern if the things they've heard about Americans are real or not.



Another major instance of rumors abounding happens after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Both the Japanese and the Americans hear and spread rumors about each other during this time period. The rumors that upset the Japanese the most are the stories of a list of names of Japanese men, all of whom will be arrested by the Americans. The Japanese women have heard a variety of different, contradictory stories about this list. Even though they aren't sure if the stories they've heard are correct or not, the women can't help but pass them along once they hear them.

Just as the Japanese were hearing rumors that there was a list of people to be arrested, the Americans were hearing that the Japanese living in America were somehow responsible for the attack on Pearl Harbor. It was rumored that the Japanese sent signals to the enemy, showing them where to attack. Other rumors indicate the Japanese living in America had secret stashes of weapons hidden in their homes and were under orders to begin a war against America within the country's borders.

## Intercultural Relationships

The intercultural relationships between the Japanese and Americans make up another major theme in the novel. Although some of the interactions between the people of these two different cultures are described as being positive, it seems that most are negative in nature. Most of the Americans don't want the Japanese around their towns and let them know clearly that they aren't welcome. The Japanese, meanwhile, are scared of the Americans and only want to be left alone by them.

At several different points in the novel there are instances of extreme discrimination against the Japanese. These acts of discrimination include the burning of the crops the Japanese had grown even though the people in charge of the cruelty had to know they were destroying the people's livelihood. When the Japanese men reported these acts of arson to the authorities, their claims were not taken seriously. The Japanese were not allowed to eat in certain restaurants and were made to sit in the same section as the blacks in the movie theaters. Perhaps, the greatest act of discrimination against the Japanese came when they were ordered to leave their homes and go to interment camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

On the other side of the coin, the American people appeared to be shocked when they realized the Japanese had been forced to leave their town. At first, they missed their quiet neighbors and the good job that the Japanese did at any task they were given. Soon, however, it appears they took the disappearance of the Japanese in stride. Some Americans thought the Japanese represented a threat to the country, while some believed they were no threat.

## Marriage

Marriage is another topic that is discussed frequently in this novel. Most significant in this theme is how the picture brides went from resenting the men to whom they'd been promised in marriage to showing signs of having grown to love these men in the days



after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The women had come to America believing that they would be married to gentlemen who would make them a good living. When they first arrived they realized the men were not the business men they'd been promised. They were farmers. At this point many women ran away from their new husbands. Despite the fact they'd been lied to, some women chose to stay with their husbands because they knew they couldn't go back to Japan without embarrassing their families.

Through much of the novel the idea that the women couldn't go back home seems to be the main reason that keeps them with their husbands. Even though they have to work hard by their husbands' sides and have more babies than they wanted, these women stick with their husbands because they know they can't go back home. At the end of the novel, however, when their husbands begin disappearing the women seem to have developed a new appreciation for their husbands. They realize they are treating them better and respecting them more. The signs show that even for all they have been through with their husbands, the women have learned to love them.

## Japanese Culture

Even though the Japanese women and their husbands live in America, there are aspects of their culture that continue to affect their lives. On the boat on the way to America, for instance, the women sometimes dreamed that they, like their prettier sisters, had been sold to a geisha house as a prostitute. It was not uncommon for Japanese fathers to sell their daughters as prostitutes in order to make money. Another aspect of the Japanese culture that haunted the women when they found jobs for themselves in America was that working as a maid was the lowest job a woman could do. Since the women were hired to work as maids, they would not tell their families what they were doing so that they would not be scorned.

Even after they'd move to America, the Japanese still celebrate the festival days as they'd done in Japan. They still light paper lanterns on the day of the Feast of the Dead. They also celebrate the Buddhist harvest festival. They try to send their children to Buddhist churches to keep them speaking Japanese and to keep them in touch with their culture. However, the children aren't interested in keeping their culture alive. These children want to blend in with the Americans as much as possible. They even change their names to American names so they won't feel so strange among the white people. Interestingly, some of these same children who change their names to American names change them back to their Japanese name once they are ordered to go to the interment camps. They have learned that they may not necessarily want to fit in with American culture as much as they had thought at first.

# Styles

## Point of View

This novel is told from the third person plural point of view. The narrators for the first seven chapters of the novel are the Japanese women who come to America as picture brides. The narrators for the final chapter of the novel are the Americans who lived in the town in which J-town was located. Since the story is told from the view point of groups of characters, there is mostly exposition with very little dialogue. The dialogue that does exist is presented most in snippets encapsulated in the paragraphs of exposition. These quotes are not credited to any character in particular but seem to serve to back up a thought included in the exposition. The quotes can be differentiated because they are in italics and are often in the present tense, while the remainder of the exposition is written in the past tense.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is almost poetic in nature as there is a good deal of repetition of phrases throughout paragraphs and sections. In the first chapter of the novel, for instance, almost every one of the paragraphs begins with the phrase "On the boat." As the narrator begins describing the differences between the lives of the individual Japanese women, she begins using the phrase "Some of us" to begin each sentence. In the section about the women's first nights with their new husbands, many of the sentences start with the phrase "They took us." The following quote is an example: "They took us with grunts. They took us with groans. They took us with shouts and long-drawn-out moans." Notice not only the parallel nature of the beginning of each sentence but also the rhythm of the sentences and rhyming scheme.

## Structure

This 129-page novel is divided into eight different sections. These sections outline the major highlights of the lives of several women who came to America from Japan as picture brides. Each section is dedicated to one step in the women's lives. For instance there is a chapter dedicated to their trip on the boat, one to the first nights with their husbands, and one to the raising of their children. The sections range in length from the longest at 32 pages. This longest section describes the relationship between the whites and Japanese. The shortest section is four pages long. It describes the first night that the women spent with their new husbands.

The story of the Japanese women is told in a linear fashion beginning with their trip on the boat to America and ending with the Americans' reactions to the missing Japanese. The first seven sections of the novel are told in the past tense while the final chapter is in the present tense. The plot is fairly simple as it details the challenges the Japanese women face when they come to America to make new lives for themselves.



## Quotes

We dreamed of our older and prettier sisters who had been sold to the geisha houses by our fathers so that the rest of us might eat, and when we woke we were gasping for air. For a second I thought I was her.”

-- Narrator (Come, Japanese! paragraph 4)

**Importance:** As the young Japanese women sailed toward their new lives in America, they still had nightmares that their fathers had sold them, as they had their prettier sisters, to work at a house of prostitution. It was a common practice in Japan for fathers to sell their daughters to become prostitutes in order to make money.

That the photographs we had been sent were twenty years old. That the letters we had been written had been written to us by people other than our husbands, professional people with beautiful handwriting whose job it was to tell lies and win hearts.”

-- Narrator (Come, Japanese! paragraph 24)

**Importance:** Once the Japanese women arrived in America, they realized the men to whom they had been promised were not who they appeared to be in their photographs. The photographs they were sent of the men were often many years old. The letters they'd received had been written by professionals, not actually the men themselves.

This is America, we would say to ourselves, there is no need to worry. And we would be wrong.”

-- Narrator (Come, Japanese! paragraph 24)

**Importance:** This quote relates to the theme of the American dream. Even though the Japanese women have learned that the men intended to be their husbands had misrepresented themselves, the women still believed that no harm could come to them in America. Foreshadowing their eventual futures, it is indicated that the women were wrong to put their faith in a country and people they knew so little about.

They took us with apologies for their rough, callused hands, and we knew at once that they were farmers and not bankers.”

-- Narrator (First Night paragraph 1)

**Importance:** For many of the women, it was during their first night of sexual relations with their husbands when they felt their work worn hands that they realized they were not bankers or business men. Instead, they were farmers, just like their fathers had been.

And we knew we never should have left home. But no matter how loudly we called out for our mother we knew she could not hear us, so we tried to make the best of what we had.”

-- Narrator (Whites paragraph 15)



**Importance:** After they began to realize the reality of their lives in America, the Japanese women called out for their mothers, wanting to go back home. Because they knew they couldn't go back, they chose to make the best of their lives in America.

We were an unbeatable, unstoppable economic machine and if our progress was not checked the entire western United States would soon become the next Asiatic outpost and colony.”

-- Narrator (Whites paragraph 16)

**Importance:** Since the Japanese were such hard workers, they threatened to take over parts of the agricultural economy in the western part of the United States.

We forgot about Buddha. We forgot about God. We developed a coldness inside us that still has not thawed.”

-- Narrator (Whites paragraph 18)

**Importance:** Because of the way that many of the Japanese families were treated in America the women became hard and their spirits died.

And when we were finished we pulled up the covers and closed our eyes and dreamed of better times to come.”

-- Narrator (Whites paragraph 22)

**Importance:** The couples who worked as house servants would talk about what they had done during the day. They, like the other Japanese, would dream of times when things would be better.

We gave birth to babies that were American citizens and in whose names we could finally lease land.”

-- Narrator (Babies paragraph 1)

**Importance:** When the Japanese woman and their husband had babies they earned for themselves the ability to lease land. The land, however, had to be leased in the names of their children.

Because we knew that our daughters would leave us the moment they married, but our sons would provide for us in our old age.”

-- Narrator (The Children paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Even though they are in America, the Japanese women continue to value their male children more than their female children. The male children will be the caregivers when their mothers get old.

The rumors began to reach us on the second day of the war.”

-- Narrator (Traitors paragraph 1)

**Importance:** It was not long after the attack on Pearl Harbor that the Japanese began





to hear rumors that the Americans were scared of them and believed they were conspiring against the Americans.

And we wondered why we had insisted for so long on clinging to our strange, foreign ways. We've made them hate us."

-- Narrator (Traitors paragraph 9)

**Importance:** The Japanese people clutched at straws trying to determine why the Americans disliked them so much. They finally decided it had something to do with the Japanese people's continued practice of their old habits and refusal to be more integrated into the American society.

In January we were ordered to register with the authorities and turn over all items of contraband to our local police: guns, bombs, dynamite, cameras, binoculars, knives with blades longer than six inches, signaling devices such as flashlights and flares, anything that might be used to assist the enemy in the event of an attack."

-- Narrator (Traitors paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Just a month after the attack on Pearl Harbor the Japanese people were ordered to give all of their weapons and signaling devices to the police so that they couldn't attack the Americans or signal the Japanese enemies.

A startled cat dove under a bed in one of our houses as looters began to break down the front door. Curtains ripped. Glass shattered. Wedding dishes smashed to the floor. And we knew it would only be a matter of time until all traces of us were gone."

-- Narrator (Traitors paragraph 33)

**Importance:** The narrators indicated that it was before they were even out of town that the townspeople began to break into and loot their houses.

Most of us left speaking only English, so as not to anger the crowds that had gathered to watch us go. Many of us had lost everything and left saying nothing at all. All of us left wearing white numbered identification tags tied to our collars and lapels."

-- Narrator (Last Day paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The Japanese people left behind all that they had spent their lives working for when they were forced by the American government to go to the internment camps. They wore identification tags, like animals, when they left their homes.

Haruko left a tiny laughing brass Buddha up high, in a corner of the attic, where he is still laughing to this day."

-- Narrator (Last Day paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The laughing Buddha can be taken as a symbol of wealth or happiness. The Buddha, like the Japanese population's desire for a better life in America, is left behind when the people are forced to leave everything that they had worked for in this country.





But what place could be safer, some of us ask, than right here, in our own town?"  
-- The Whites (A Disappearance paragraph 3)

**Importance:** The white people in the town where a group of the Japanese lived comment that the Japanese would have been just as safe living in their town as they would be in interment camps.

It is our children who seem to have taken the disappearance of the Japanese most to heart."

-- Narrator (A Disappearance paragraph 6)

**Importance:** The white people indicate that it is their children who seem to miss the Japanese more than the adults.

I try not to think about where they came from,' says one mother as she rocks her baby back and forth on a bench in the shade. 'Sometimes it's better not to know.'"

-- A white mother (A Disappearance paragraph 11)

**Importance:** A woman who wears chopsticks in her hair tells another woman that she must keep herself from thinking about where the chopsticks came from in order to be able to wear them. Her answer makes her seem very shallow and unsympathetic.

Their disappearance, he suggests, is a ruse. Our day of reckoning, he warns, is yet to come."

-- Narrator (A Disappearance paragraph 14)

**Importance:** Although some people missed their Japanese neighbors, some people believed they were better off because the Japanese had been sent away. They believed the Japanese posed a threat to them.

And on the weekends, when they sit out on their porches smoking and drinking until late in the night, we begin to long for our old neighbors, the quiet Japanese."

-- Narrator (A Disappearance paragraph 18)

**Importance:** When the noisy vagrants and squatters moved into the houses left by the Japanese, the Americans missed the quiet Japanese who kept to themselves and didn't bother anyone.