

# The Dream of Water Short Guide

## The Dream of Water by Kyoko Mori

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Dream of Water Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles/Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>

## Overview

The Dream of Water is Kyoko Mori's sequel to her first novel, *Shizuko's Daughter*.

This second book is a memoir of her true experience of returning to Japan after living in America for twenty years and building a new life as an adult. Like Yuki in *Shizuko's Daughter*, Kyoko had a tortured childhood and was forced into living her young life with her cold and cruel father and his new wife. The death of Kyoko's mother was a devastating loss; Kyoko was only twelve years old at the time and she suffered the loss of the most important relationship in her life. Like Shizuko, Kyoko's mother, Takako, committed suicide, unable to continue living a life of misery and helpless to move out of the circumstances that she felt bound her to a futile existence. *Shizuko's Daughter* is an autobiographical novel chronicling the time of Yuki's youth, the time when she lived in Japan and the experiences that led her to abandon her culture and leave the country. *The Dream of Water* chronicles Kyoko's life during that time, but in flashback, told from Kyoko's perspective after surviving those years and succeeding in building for herself a happy, productive life. By 1990, at the start of the story, Kyoko has married, become a naturalized American citizen, and established a life for herself in Wisconsin as an English professor and a teacher of creative writing.

She returns to Japan to retrace the path she took to get where she is today and to try to come to terms with the painful circumstances in which she grew up.

## About the Author

Kyoko Mori was born in Kobe, Japan, in 1957 and immigrated to the United States in 1977, at the age of twenty. She got her bachelor's degree in English from Rockford College in Illinois, her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee and she now works as an Associate Professor of English and creative writing at St.

Norbert's College in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Mori is a naturalized American citizen, and is disdainful of the social restrictions against women in Japan. She considers herself "more American than Japanese," and she shuns the Japanese cultural mores that she believes bind women in a constant struggle for self-satisfaction.

Mori had a hard life growing up in Japan.

At the age of twelve, her mother committed suicide and left her to work through her grief alone, getting no love or sympathy from her father or from his new wife. Kyoko was abused emotionally and physically, and forbidden to see her grandparents who truly did love her. Mori published her first novel, *Shizuko's Daughter*, in 1993, which is an autobiographical work based on her own tortured childhood. She followed this novel with *The Dream of Water*, a memoir, which further recounts the difficult life she led following her mother's death. Both of these books, as well as the ones that followed, attest to Mori's strength and her ability to persevere. At the age of eighteen, she left her father and stepmother to study art in Nagasaki, then moved to America, married, and settled in Green Bay to begin life as a writer and teacher. In 1993, *Shizuko's Daughter* won the New York Times Notable Book of the Year, an American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults citation, a Publishers Weekly Editor's Choice Award, the Council of Wisconsin Writer's Best Novel, and the Wisconsin Library Association's Elizabeth Burr Award for best children's book of the year. *One Bird* also won several awards. These two novels as well as *The Dream of Water* and her book of essays, entitled *Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures*, were widely acclaimed for their poignant and perceptive comparison of life and women's experiences in Japan and in America. Mori has also published poetry and short stories and she frequently makes comments for Japanese magazines and newspapers on the role of women in both American and Japanese Society.



## Setting

The Dream of Water is set in Japan, the country of Mori's birth, and it flashes between Japan of the 1970s when Mori was young, to Japan of 1990, the year she decided to return to her homeland and deal with her painful childhood memories. Mori uses the Japanese setting to emphasize how deeply Japanese beliefs molded her viewpoint on life, and she uses the natural features of the land to emphasize the mix of beauty and pain that tie her forever to her.

culture. Mori travels to her old home and to her grandparents' home, and she wanders the familiar streets hoping for some sort of resolution. Feeling like an outsider in her own land, she stays with friends rather than with her father, and she gains new insights into the "foreign" world she left behind.

Touching down in Japan after twenty years in America was a difficult experience for Mori. Mimicking the subtitle of her book of essays, she says she is a woman "caught between cultures," with a need to reconcile her Japanese and American selves before she can move along further in life. In traveling to the country of her past, she discovers what her world is all about and she gains insights on how she came to be the person she is today. The familiar sights and sounds of Japan trigger past memories that she must now face, however painful—memories that both forced her to leave and beckoned her to return.

Mori's use of nature imagery reveals how she recognized forces at work in the world that helped her find meaning in life.

The Japanese people have recognized spirit in the natural world since antiquity, and as Mori moves through her childhood grief, she derives comfort from the life force she finds in nature. Mori grew up in the suburbs of Kobe, an area close to nature, with beautiful walking trails and blossoming flowers, and she spent summers at her grandmother's house in the country and was surrounded by the beauty of the land.

But though Mori portrays the world of nature as a captivating place, she emphasizes the difficulty it often takes to discover beauty in life and the struggle that Japanese women must go through to add meaning to their world. The unhappiness in Takako's life forces her to choose death over life, but the vivid colors and growth in the natural world attest to the fact that life goes on.

Nature offers the promise of renewal.



# Social Sensitivity

Kyoko was born into a changing world, yet she remained tied to a traditional culture where most people shun modern ideas that recognize a woman's need for independence. Whereas women of the younger generation had more of a chance to transcend the boundaries of their culture, women of the older generation did not feel they had that chance. Takako felt that her only way out was death, and Kyoko's stepmother became bitter and cruel. In *Shizuko's Daughter*, Mori described the thoughts and feelings of women of three generations, and through their thoughts and feelings she revealed how the cultural restrictions of Japan affected these women in different ways. Kyoko's mother and stepmother took different paths, but they were both slaves to the same rules and regulations. Kyoko broke free of them. But she will never be totally free, however, because her cultural past is a part of her, and she will always have to deal with the effect that living in such a culture had on her life.

According to Mori, the Japanese culture is one that shuns intelligence and creativity in women. Mori conveys the message that the people of her country considered her intelligence a weakness rather than a strength, something that would prevent her from ever being able to conform to traditional Japanese society. Mori seems hostile to Japanese society, but she does not condemn it outright. Rather her condemnation is subtle and disguised, masking the anger and hurt she has always felt. Mori, we must remember, views Japan in part through the eyes of an emotionally distraught child from a dysfunctional family, and in part through the eyes of someone who has been removed from Japan for quite some time. *The Dream of Water* is both a social commentary on the oppression that molds a woman's life in Japanese culture and a modern day Cinderella story.

For Mori, traveling back to Japan is part of a healing process that will take a lifetime.

She must come to an understanding of the pressures placed on women to discount their feelings and conform to set social codes and she must come to an understanding of how easily such pressures can lead to a sense of hopelessness. In *Shizuko's Daughter*, a thinly disguised memoir, Mori emphasizes the restrictive role of Japanese women in the first chapter of the book.

Shizuko, like Takako, felt burdened by being a woman and considered the burden too big to bear. Kyoko, like Yuki of the *Shizuko's Daughter*, would grow beyond that, and her mother knew that she would.

Takako gave her daughter the tools she needed to survive and be strong, even though she was unable to use those same tools herself. Mori recognizes this finally, and in her books, she gives herself and the Japanese women she identifies with depth and substance. The protagonists in all her books are complex and intelligent, and they tap into their stores of inner strength to help them move through devastating ordeals.

## Literary Qualities

Mori learned English as a teenager, and she became comfortable enough with the language to write her books in English; in fact, she says that she felt more comfortable with English than she did with her native Japanese. Mori's books are full of imagery and symbols. In speaking about her writing style, she says that she likes for her images to speak for themselves. She stated in *Something about the Author* that she likes to "get to the edge of saying it all and then hold back," letting her images tell the story. It takes quite a command over the English language to achieve such precision, and Mori does it well. She complains that she never felt comfortable speaking Japanese. It was like "in the dark without a headlight."

Mori's narrative alternates between the past and the present. The story begins in the past, in March of 1969, on the day of Takako's death, then moves twenty one years ahead, to May of 1990, when Kyoko is taking a trip to Japan for the first time in thirteen years.

She makes a point to call it "a trip," rather than a return to her homeland. She is not going back home, for Japan never felt like home. She felt displaced in own homeland, just as she did with the language, so she tells her story as an outsider, one who is finally able to distance herself enough to deal with the painful circumstances of her past.

Like *Shizuko's Daughter*, Mori's first novel, *The Dream of Water* was written as an outlet—to express anger toward her father, to come to terms with her mother's death, and to identify and face all the circumstances that molded her into the person she had become. The memoir is both a physical journey to her native Japan and an emotional journey toward some sort of resolution in her life, and Mori is finally able to take that journey because she is now removed enough from it to contemplate it rationally. She knows she can only move forward by looking back at her past.



## Themes and Characters

The story begins with Kyoko's trip back to Japan after having moved to America and abandoning her Japanese culture. She returns to Kobe, her hometown, to try to come to terms with her tortured childhood and the experiences that molded her into the person she is today. The theme that emerges in the first chapter of the memoir is how deeply cultural roots influence a person's adult self, even a person who becomes assimilated into another culture. Mori never felt totally at home in either setting—Japan or America—but both play an important role in determining who she ultimately became.

The first chapter begins as a flashback, to March of 1969, on the day of Kyoko's mother's death. She committed suicide in her own kitchen, placing a plastic bag over her head, unhooking the gas line from the stove, and breathing in the gas. The funeral arrangements were made quickly, a Buddhist priest presided, and Kyoko and her family performed all the formalities that people were supposed to perform at the death of a loved one. But what was missing from the ceremony was a true sense of feeling. The title of Mori's book *Polite Lies* captures the severity of this loss. Kyoko was not permitted to feel pain at her mother's funeral. She was expected to act brave and properly. She was expected to mourn—but out of respect not out of true misery. Shows of emotion were simply polite lies that lacked depth and masked true feelings. This, Kyoko came to believe, kept her and many other Japanese women locked in an impossible world, forever searching for resolutions that would never come.

Any feelings Kyoko's father Hiroshi may have had for his wife Takako or for his daughter, Kyoko, he hid from them. Kyoko knows him as cold and cruel, but he too has been conditioned to mask his feelings, conditioned to be hard and tough in a maledominated society intent on keeping up appearances. Hiroshi could not have shown affection to Kyoko even if he felt it. But after his wife's death, he became cruel and strict.

The conversation that takes place between Kyoko and Hiroshi shortly after Takako's death sets the tone for the relationship to come. Hiroshi tells Kyoko that her mother's cousin Takeshi had also killed himself and that he did not die of a heart attack as Kyoko was led to believe. This meant, in Hiroshi's eyes, that mental illness stigmatized his family. Her mother had manic depression, Hiroshi said, just as Takeshi did. He said that such bad blood was hereditary, and that he would now insure that she would not fall prey to the same illness.

He would be strict with his children, and not spoil them as their mother had.

Kyoko knew that her mother did not spoil her, but rather gave her the kind of attention that made her feel loved. The mother-daughter relationship is of primary importance in *The Dream of Water*. Takako and Kyoko had a deep bond. They shared an interest in art and an awe of nature. They shared a need for independence and a disdain for Japanese social restrictions. The loss Kyoko feels after her mother's suicide becomes painfully clear when we realize the depth of the bond these two women shared. But it is





precisely this bond that gives Kyoko the strength to go on. The love Takako gave to Kyoko enables her to continue living and to strive to become the independent woman Takako could never become.

While Takako's relationship with Kyoko empowered her, Hiroshi's relationship with Kyoko stifled her. Hiroshi was unkind and unloving from the very beginning. But after his wife's death he became cruel. At the time of Takako's funeral when Kyoko needed love and support, he offered her nothing.

He never consoled Kyoko or her brother, Jumpei, and never indicated that he mourned for his wife. Her death was simply an embarrassment to him. Instability in the family was an embarrassment to him, an indication that his wife had failed him, rather than the other way around. In the Japanese culture, the man was not expected to make his wife happy; it was taken for granted that he made her happy simply by supporting her. The woman assumed the responsibility of providing for the man's emotional needs, and she assumed the responsibility of maintaining the image of happiness. By taking her life, Takako brought shame to Hiroshi. He blamed her for this, and he took his anger out on Kyoko.

Mori succeeds in painting a clear picture of the Japanese patriarchal society, a society in which any woman wishing to achieve independence has difficulty. Kyoko and her mother were both feminists, in a sense, but Takako was unable to express her feminist side because she had been so conditioned to accept submission. In fact, she did not accept it; she removed herself from it—by placing a plastic bag over her head and breathing in the lethal gas. Kyoko removed herself from her condition too, but thanks to her mother, was able to choose life rather than death in order to do so. It is ironic how Takako gave her daughter the power to live by choosing to die herself. Kyoko became strong and determined to move forward and achieve the independence her mother never had, and her mother knew that Kyoko had what it took to do just that.

Mori makes the quest for freedom a primary theme in her book. She does not intentionally advance this theme as such, but she simply tells her story how she sees it. She reveals truths about the Japanese culture that eventually led her to forsake it. As the book moves on, we learn what Kyoko eventually learned. In order to achieve freedom, Kyoko had to leave her homeland, leave the home of her father, and break free from the bonds that kept her locked in the prison her childhood became after her mother's death.

She left home as a junior in high school to attend school in Mesa, Arizona, as an exchange student and it was there that she got a taste of the freedom she had been denied in Japan. She left Japan for good as soon as she was able. She was angry and bruised from her mother's death, and she blamed everyone for denying her the freedom to feel that pain. She was not able to feel the pain until she went back to Japan years later, and she wrote her memoir in order to release her anger.

Kyoko prepared to gain her independence and freedom just as her friends in Japan prepared to lose theirs. She had always felt displaced in Japanese society, needing the



independence she knew she could never achieve as a woman in Japan, and desperately desiring to live her own life.

Kyoko had qualities that doomed her to life as an outsider had she remained in the country. She was smart and talented and rebellious, unwilling and unable to conform to a world where she had to abandon respecting herself in order to be respected by others. By leaving Japan and becoming "American," Kyoko gained some measure of freedom, but she still had to deal with her mother's death and adjust to life in a new country as well as struggle against circumstances that will always bind her to her past. She had no choice but to accept what happened in her life and make the adjustment. Had she remained in Japan, she likely would never have been able to put her life in perspective.

Mori had to become an outsider in her own land in order to realize that she had always been an outsider. This is what made her different from her mother and from all the other Japanese women. These women, in essence, chose death over life. They may not have chosen physical death as Takako did, but they chose emotional death—simply by accepting their fate as women empowered only by the expectations placed on them to keep up appearances and to keep the lives of their men running smoothly.

Mori intends to convey the importance of letting go of circumstances that bind you, and the necessity of coming to terms with your past in order to release guilt and move on with life. *The Dream of Water* is both a tale of anguish and a tale of hope. Mori says that *Shizuko's Daughter* began as a series of stories that she came to realize were connected.

So she wrote her story, first as a novel and then as a memoir. Perhaps she had to fictionalize her life first before she could accept the reality of her situation. *The Dream of Water* is therefore a book of healing, her journey back to Japan a crucial step in the process. She had to go back to Japan to put her past behind her and to gain a sense of balance in her life.

# Topics for Discussion

1. What is the meaning of the title?
2. Elaborate on some of the ways Mori seems hostile to Japanese culture?
3. How does Mori feel when she touches down on Japanese ground after twenty years?
4. Do you think that Mori derives any comfort from her Japanese culture?
5. Do you think that Kyoko will ever be able to have a relationship with her father?
6. What importance does Mori attribute to the landscape in telling her story?
7. How do you perceive the relationship between Kyoko and her husband?
8. What does Mori recognize about the relationship between her father and stepmother?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research and write about the role of women in Japanese society today.
2. Elaborate on the ways Mori taps into her strength to find her way through life in general, and her trip back to Japan in particular.
3. Compare and contrast the views that Mori came to embrace with the views she was expected to embrace had she remained in the role of a traditional Japanese wife.
4. Discuss the ways Mori derives comfort from the Japanese landscape.
5. Describe how the experience of being motherless affected Mori's views later in life?
6. Elaborate on the differences in the way Japanese women and American women define happiness.
7. Does Mori come to terms with her mother's suicide after her visit back to Japan? How did her perspective on the suicide change after this visit?
8. Compare and contrast the notion of family in Japanese and American society.
9. Mori entitled her book of essays *Polite Lies*. After reading *The Dream of Water*, elaborate on the kinds of scenarios Mori recognized as masking true thoughts and feelings.

## For Further Reference

Crew, Hilary S. "Mori, Kyoko." In *St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers*, Detroit: St. James Press, 1999. An essay describing Mori's life and works.

"Kyoko Mori." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults, Volume 25*. Detroit: Gale, 2000. An illustrated biographical essay with descriptions of Mori's work.

"Mori, Kyoko." In *Contemporary Authors, Volume 153*. Detroit: Gale, 1997. An essay that provides information about Mori's life and commentary on some of her work.

"Mori, Kyoko." In *Something About the Author Autobiography Series, Volume 26*. Detroit: Gale, 1998. An essay by Mori describing her life and writing.

"Mori, Kyoko." In *Something About the Author, Volume 122*. Detroit: Gale, 2001. A biographical sketch that describes Mori's life and her books.

*Publishers Weekly* (November 7, 1994): 54. A review of *The Dream of Water*.

Schwartz, John Burnham. *New York Times Book Review* (February 5, 1995): 13. A review of *The Dream of Water*.

Seaman, Donna. *Booklist* (January 1, 1995): 794. A review of *The Dream of Water*.

Simms-Burton, Michele L. *School Library Journal* (June 1995): 145. A review of *The Dream of Water*.

Taylor, John. *Sewanee Review* (fall 1995): 114-115. A review of *The Dream of Water*.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

Mori's two novels, *Shizuko's Daughter* and *One Bird*, are fictionalized accounts of the turmoil Mori herself experienced as a young girl coming of age after having been abandoned by a loving mother. *Shizuko's Daughter* is autobiographical, and tells the story of Yuki, whose mother Shizuko commits suicide, and *One Bird* tells the story of Megumi, whose mother leaves home and leaves her daughter behind. Both of these mothers are unable to cope with life as a wife in Japanese society, and both of these daughters feel restricted in such a society and must struggle with their own feelings of displacement while they strive to achieve an identity in the face of devastating loss.

Mori's book of essays, entitled *Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures*, serves as a commentary on Japanese social life and a comparison of how the social mores differ for women in America and women in Japan.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996