The Friends Short Guide

The Friends by Rosa Guy

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Overview

Three slightly out of step twelve-year-old boys living in the suburbs of Tokyo in modern Japan try to divert their anxieties about taking school exams that will decide their future success by spending the summer spying on an old man in their neighborhood. They learn a great deal about themselves, their families and their own fears about death and the future as they make friends with this lonely, troubled fellow. At the end of their sixth-grade year, one of the three attends the funeral of his grandmother and this gets all of them thinking about death and about their uncertain futures. This work addresses children's fears about their families, their futures and their own deaths, and readers who are not Japanese also get a personal view of a very different social and educational system and the responsibilities it places on its children.

About the Author

Kazumi Yumoto is a developing writer, with only three novels currently to her credit. She was born in Tokyo in 1959 and still resides there. Her first interest was music, and she studied composition at Tokyo University of Music, testing her writing skills with study texts for operas. After graduation, she wrote radio play endings and film scripts for television.

In her Boston Globe-Horn Book Award speech, she lists two writers who have had an influence on her development, mentioning Stephen King's story "The Dead Body" and Carson McCullers's books about children. She also emphasizes the importance of reading as a way of understanding the world as well as the writer's craft. She spent a fairly normal childhood in Tokyo, but was a lonely child who did not like school and spent much of her time with a little sparrow she had rescued. By the age of seven she was reading voraciously and her current interest in writing goes back to her attempts to understand her world, and later her interest in understanding her memories of important events in her life.

Her first young adult novel, The Friends (1992) gained her much notoriety inside her own country. As reported by the online book service Nagel & Kimche, the wellknown Japanese producer Shinji Somai filmed The Friends in 1994 and there was also a 1994 radio play version. In 1996 it was published in English by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. The Friends won Yumoto the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for fiction in 1997, the Hungry Mind Children's Books of Distinction Award in 1997 and, to Cathy Hirano's credit, the Mildred L. Batchelder Award for translation in 1997. Yumoto was nominated for the Hawaii's Nene Award in 2002. Friends was also named an ALA Notable Children's The Friends 173 Book and won the Recommended Book Prize from Japan School Library Book Club.

Her second novel, The Spring Tone, was nominated for the Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize in 1999. Her third, The Letters, has just appeared but promises to be as strong as the others. She is assisted by the able translations of Cathy Hirano and has been published in many languages including Dutch, English, French and German. It is likely that we can expect many more novels from this careful and thoughtful author.

Setting

The time and place are never specifically identified with a real location, but they are carefully described as part of Kiyama's daily experiences. The exotic life of a small community in Japan, cram schools (a place where Japanese kids go to study for entrance exams for college, high school, or even junior high school) for twelve year olds, and local scenery are made familiar to a wide range of readers.

A small neighborhood in an outlying area of Tokyo, Japan in the 1990s forms the backdrop for this story of three boys, their family, and friends. The narrative strays very little from the daily life of three twelveyear-old boys during the spring and summer before they must take exams to decide which junior high school will admit them.

This is a very important stage in a Japanese child's life, as it determines whether he or she will be prepared for college and a profession or be eligible for strictly technical or manual labor, and therefore is a source of great anxiety. Scenes in the story are set in a regular sixth grade class at school, the evening and summer cram school they attend, the pool where they spend their hot summer afternoons, and Kiyama's home. While the reader never visits the cram school classroom, it hangs like a cloud over the boys in the spring and summer. They must attend after school during the year, and during part of the day all summer long. As the summer progresses, readers can almost feel their tension mounting, and the boys report anxious dreams to each other that are centered around their fears of death and of ghosts. These ghostly manifestations of Kiyama's anxieties about his future come to the foreground when the boys are away from home at soccer camp, and this unfamiliar setting seems to be a turning point where all three boys rethink their fears.

Still, it is clear they are partly substituting one anxiety for another. It is after one of their sessions reporting on their anxious dreams that they decide to spy on an elderly man who lives close to the school.

Thus, the three boys also spend a lot of time on the streets and in the yard and home of the, at first mysterious, elderly man. These are modern Japanese children who, as Yumoto herself notes, experience and exhibit many of the anxieties of young people anywhere about death, identity, family and destiny. They also typify the difficulties of modern children in Japan, where competition for good schools starts very early and is taken seriously by children and their parents, where the pathway to a career and successful adulthood is hampered by the faulty economy. This is very much a novel about a specific time and place, even if the suburb is never named. The familiar haunts of a young person stand out vividly, so much so that you can almost smell the fish market, the mustiness of an old seed store, the garbage in the elderly neighbor's lawn, or the dry goods in a local market. You can feel the heat of high-summer as the boys go off to and return from cram school, as they are waiting for the bus in the hot sun, sweating as they work in the yard of the old man, while they eat watermelon with their shirts off and start to notice the physical and mental changes they experience over a long, hot, anxious summer. Their fears of failure, and of ghosts, ghostly dreams and

death become a familiar part of the landscape of that time and place in a young person's development, as well as a more specific picture of the problems Japanese youth face every day.

Social Sensitivity

Yumoto makes it very clear in her Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards speech that she wrote this novel while thinking about several kinds of problems experienced by adolescents. For example, she describes the difficulties of Japanese children today.

"Five years have passed since I wrote it [The Friends], and in those five years, the issues facing children in Japan have grown ever more serious. Bullying, teenage prostitution, suicide, and increase in vicious juvenile crime." She especially reflects the bullying and harshness that are part of every school child's life in The Friends. But more interesting to her are the effects that changes in modern Japanese culture have had on human relationships. She describes how Japanese children do not seem to value life because they see very few future possibilities for themselves as individuals. "Many of them are filled with a sense of helplessness and despair and consequently seem to live only for the moment." In this book, she looks at one reason for this phenomenon: "One aspect is the fact that over the course of the last thirty years or so, we have been less likely to experience death as a work of nature, to share the last moments of life with elderly people who are dear to us."

She claims that her own characters are motivated by their curiosity born from a fear of death and the uncertainty of life and she hopes that her writing can help others to understand the cycle of death and life so that they, like her characters, no longer fear it.

While she does not openly condemn Japanese society or indeed societies around the world, for their apparent inability to help children deal realistically with death and therefore appreciate their own and others' lives, she has clearly identified this as one of the major problems that preoccupy children. However, her use of many specific references to common Japanese folktales and ghost stories demonstrate how children use their imaginations when other avenues of acquiring knowledge are closed to them. In effect, she is also identifying fiction as a way of helping them with some of their problems. All three of her current novels address adolescents' efforts to understand their family problems and their responsibilities in the family and the community.

Literary Qualities

The most striking literary device in this story is the first-person narration of Kiyama, a twelve-year-old boy in contemporary Japan. Yumoto has been much noted for her portrayal of three interesting boys, all a little strange when measured against their peers, but all lovingly drawn through Kiyama's descriptions of their appearance and their actions. The boys are each characterized by some physical feature that makes them feel odd, and their families possess problems they compelled to resolve. So Kiyama is growing too fast and has an alcoholic mother. Yamashita is overweight and his parents disagree about his future, while his desire to work with his father is ignored. Kawabe has very poor eyesight and a bad temper, and is ashamed that he doesn't have a father. They are all regularly portrayed as outsiders in their school groups, but this is also why they stick together.

Kiyama's own description of their budding friendship begins with his rescue of Kawabe from the bully, Sugita when they were in fifth grade. "I'll never forget Kawabe's face. He was furious. Grinding his teeth, he glared at Sugita so hard that I thought his glasses would fly off his chalk-white face.

Even his customary jiggling was stilled. I feel a little guilty about that incident, because when Kawabe leaped at Sugita, I grabbed him from behind and held him back." But he also notes that this is when they became close friends. Yamashita joins them a little later.

Kiyama accumulates stories about ghosts, dreams and death that Yumoto skillfully inserts into conversations with his young friends and the elderly neighbor. Kiyama is also revealed to us through a series of interior monologues where he discusses his fears. These dreams, fears of ghosts and death and talks with the elderly neighbor create a background for the series of epiphanies that help Kiyama deal with this difficult year, his fears of death, his family problems and his anxieties about his future.

He and his two friends realize that death is a part of life and that the dead live on in the memories of those they love, as does the elderly man in the memories of the three boys.

While a few passages in the novel outline Kiyama's growing awareness of his mother's drinking and his father's neglect, many more of his observations concern dreams and ghosts. He recounts a recurring nightmare that resurfaces when he has heard about the death of Yamashita's grandmother. "They are always together. One is tall and thin, the other short and fat, a typical comic duo." And yet he acknowledges that they scare him by chasing him in his dreams and haunting him while he is awake. He identifies them as ghosts. Later, his friend Yamashita brings up the Buddhist story about hungry ghosts that one hears about in both Japanese and Chinese culture. In responding to the elderly man's tale about killing a poor pregnant village woman, he mentions, "What if that woman becomes a ghost. She'll haunt the old man, holding a baby in her arms." This legend is alluded to in Amy Tan's Joy Luck Club also and would be common knowledge

to a Japanese or Chinese child. At soccer camp, there is the miso-licking ghost that haunts their nights. But the real scare comes with the coach's grandmother, who serves food to the boys. She tells the story of a wife who left her husband's mistress in a locked storeroom to die, starting out with the provocative phrase: "You see, a woman died here."

This entertaining story gives her as much enjoyment as it does the boys, even though her son tells her to stop spreading her stories. The point of all these references to ghosts and dead people, of course, is to exemplify what Japanese children would and would not know about death. Although their enemy, Sugita, asserts "When you die, that is the end," he is also afraid to go to the bathroom alone at night. In both surviving his bullying and working through their own fears, the boys come to accept death as a part of life. And readers learn a little more about being twelve years old, about being a boy in Japan and about why we might fear ghosts and death.

Kiyama is very good at describing the mundane locales of daily life in school, on the streets and at home. The descriptions are striking in their amount of detail and pull the reader into their experiences, especially those surrounding their friendship with the old man and at soccer camp inland from Tokyo. For example, Kiyama gives us a fairly complete picture of the old man's disgusting yard and dilapidated house: "Half the wooden siding is coming off, flapping in the wind." Then he notes: "The place is surrounded by piles of unidentifiable junk, bundles of old newspapers, bags of garbage, and a big pickling vat that looks like it hasn't been used in years." He also details the process by which the three boys start to clean up the yard and house, how they meet the old man, and decide to help him plant flowers. By the time they return from camp at the end of the novel, "We had been gone only four days but our Cosmos had grown." They quickly discover that helping the troubled elderly man makes them feel better, as if they have control over at least part of their lives. Kiyama also describes the park in which the old man sits, the grocery store the old man shops at, the buses and streets to and from school and the weather throughout the summer, so that his readers can share the sights, sounds and feelings in the boys lives.

Themes and Characters

The narrator, Kiyama, is a twelve-yearold Japanese boy who is self-conscious about how fast his slender body is growing. He is anxious to succeed and get into a good school, and has many dreams in which he displaces this anxiety onto a fear of death.

Part of his problem stems from an uncertain family life. He has a mother who drinks too much and a father who never seems to be home. He is not a popular boy at school and seems to cope by staying in the background.

His two best friends are Yamashita and Kawabe. They also feel like outsiders and this fate brings the three together and the friendships form. Yamashita is a chubby boy of the same age whose family runs a fish store. He would like to work there as an adult but his mother would prefer that he go into another profession. Yamashita's absence from school at the beginning of the story is due to his grandmother's death, and he arouses his friends' curiosity about death, causing them to have bad dreams and see ghosts. This becomes the motivation for much of the story. The third major character, their friend Kawabe, has poor eyesight. He really needs his glasses to function and this becomes a source of conflict as he is teased and bullied by other children. Kawabe's troubles are further exacerbated by his father's absence. He believes that his father is either dead or has abandoned him and his mother. The fact that his father in not around is a source of shame for him. He knows that his mother is always worried about money and he makes up stories about his father in an effort to disguise his absence. As the story develops, we find out that he knows where his father lives, that his father is married to another woman and has several children, and that it is difficult for him to understand what he sees as his father's rejection. Each of the boys seems to understand that their lives will be changing very soon but none can predict what those changes will be and how much they will depend on their success with the junior high entrance exams.

The story focuses, through Kiyama's voice, on these three boys and on an old man they decide to follow around throughout the summer as they focus on the fear of death and the experience of dying or losing someone close to them. The old man they choose to spy on becomes a major influence on their lives as he confronts them and involves them in his own fears of life and death. He is a World War II veteran with a haunted past and they try to make his life a little better, almost by accident, until he dies peacefully in his own bed while the boys are away at soccer camp. It is through this loss that they realize death is a part of life and that the dead live on in the memories of those who loved them as the memory of the elderly man lives on in them.

It is clear that the boys' anxieties about death are also anxieties about their own futures. The book begins with the end of a school year and the beginning of the summer holidays. This does not mean that Kiyama, Yamashita and Kawabe are free of studies. It means only that they go to cram school in the morning and have part of the afternoon free. Kawabe is often working at his family's fish shop, but this is the time they devote first to spying on and then to helping the old man in Kawabe's neighborhood. It is also this time that their friendships begin to break up. By the beginning of the new school

year, Yamashita knows that he will be going to a public junior high and will end up helping his father in the fish shop instead of going to college. Kawabe's mother has married a man whom he gets along with and they decide to move to Romania so he will not have to take the dreaded exams. Kiyama has dealt with the elderly neighbor's death, his mother and father's problems, and receives good grades on his junior high entry tests so that he will be able to go to a private school and get into a good college. All three see the old man as "their friend in the next world." Like many summers of our youth, what seems the endless time of childhood is only a few fleeting months and the boys say goodbye to their friendship for each other, the old man who has died in August of the same year, and their innocent youth.

A few other characters, especially the two more popular twelve-year-old boys, Sugita and Matsushita, present the worst characteristics of classroom bullies both during the end of the sixth grade school year while they are with the old man and the boys' time at soccer camp. There are a few teachers who help the friends overcome their fears and insecurities. The most notable is their soccer coach who tries to make sure all the boys profit from their involvement in sports and provides a much-appreciated holiday for fourth, fifth and sixth grade players every year.

The themes of belief in an afterlife, ghosts that appear in dreams and perhaps in life, and difficulties in generational communication recur in the novel. They clearly address the boys' anxieties about death and the future, which they see reflected in their parents' lives. Kiyama cannot discuss his fears or anxieties with his mother, who only wants to watch him eat and talks little. His father is always gone, so he's left to face his fears alone. The gap between these two generations, parents and children, is emphasized by the many contrasts between how the boys are unsuccessful in communicating with their families but communicate well with other people whom they meet.

For example, they tell their elderly neighbor about fears and hopes they cannot communicate to their own parents. Yamashita cannot seem to tell his mother or his father that he would rather work in the fish store when he graduates from high school than go on to a professional degree, but he can talk to the old man. What is perhaps even more important, the boys feel that he needs them. They feel empowered to act on his behalf and gratified when they are able to help, a form of human relationship that is denied them at home. They arouse the sympathy of an elderly lady in a seed store who gives them a bag full of cosmos seeds even though they cannot pay for all of them and who agrees to come and visit the old man as if she were his lost wife. Even their athletic coach and his elderly mother are more involved in the lives of these boys than their parents are. The coach knows how to cheer them up, to get them working together and break up their fights. His aged mother knows how to entice them with frightening stories about a Miso Soup ghost.

While religion is never specifically mentioned in the novel, a careful reader infers that the boys have been exposed to major Buddhist beliefs in reincarnation and revenge, such as those of hungry and avenging ghosts. Yamashita has participated in a Buddhist burial ritual at the beginning of the book, symbolized only by his mention of chanting at his grandmother's funeral.

We know that the boys believe in an afterlife, as their young enemy, Sugita, tries to belittle their beliefs. Sugita says, "Spirits, heaven, hell-these are just ideas made up by weak and cowardly people." Sugita may be trying to convince himself that ghosts and life after death do not exist, but all three of the friends still believe. For example, after their elderly friend has died, they all confess to thinking about the old man as if he is somehow still present. Kawabe mentions this, and Kiyama observes. "I often think about what the old man would say.

And when I do, the answer comes to me much more easily than if I had pondered over it myself." But more importantly, they have learned to see their own parents as human, and to communicate with them on some very basic levels, as seen in Kiyama's descriptions of his mother in the hospital and his father asking him about career choices. The old man has become one of the friends and he has helped all three friends to begin the long growing-up process, beginning with the acceptance of death, uncertainty and responsibility towards those around them.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why do you think Kiyama characterizes himself and his friends as outsiders? Do you think they are? Are they any different than most young people their age? Since they live in a different culture, how would you be able to tell if they were different, given that you mostly have Kiyama's point of view?

2. Societies exist because people agree, over long periods of time, on how they will treat each other. Each society has rules and expectations, some that change and some that stay the same, which children learn as they grow up. But each society also has its problems, areas where the customs or institutions don't help individuals as well as they could. Do you think, as Yumoto has indicated, that Kiyama's modern Japan has failed him in some way? Why do you think his mother drinks?

3. The educational system in Japan is a little different than in America. How do you feel about this system where decisions are made about your future at the age of thirteen? Is this too young? Does it happen in American schools in a less institutionalized way? If so, how?

4. Yumoto provides incidences of bullying and harmful teasing in the lives of Kiyama, Yamashita and Kawabe. Is this any different than in American schools?

Do we handle it any differently?

5. There are many narrations about the death of a pet, relative, or friend in this novel. What are your experiences with death? Do you think it is harder or easier for these boys to talk about than for you and your classmates? How does our society deal with the death of a loved one?

6. Why is death such a difficult topic to discuss in modern society? We know that everyone and everything must die at some point, but most people do not seem to want to think about it or prepare for it. Is this true of your family and friends? If so, why? If not, what do your family and friends do to deal with the emotions of loss that go with the death of a loved one?

7. Many ghost stories are threaded throughout this narrative. They are often narrated in the context of some disturbing experience, like the death of a family member or pet, or being away from home. What do you think of the various ghost stories? Do you like to hear ghost stories? Do you believe any of them? Are the stories in this novel any different from the ones you are familiar with? Do they reflect Japanese rather than American culture?

8. While its major theme is death, this novel also deals with death as a part of life and a part of human relationships.

The whole story is precipitated by Yamashita's grandmother's funeral. He and his friends want to know somebody alive just before they die. Why do you think this is the case?

9. What are some of the important relationships in this novel, besides the major one between the three boys and the old man?

10. The old man finally tells the boys a terrible story about his experiences in World War II, and how his killing of a woman and her baby made him decide to not ever see his wife again. Do you think what he did was wrong? What do you think you would do in such a situation? Do you think the rules are any different during wartime? What is different about the old man's killing of innocent civilians and the My Lai massacre from the U.S. experience of the Vietnam War?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the major Japanese funeral and burial customs? What religions and social codes dictate these customs? How has the modern world changed them?

Is cremation as common in the U.S. as in Japan? Why or why not?

2. Do you think Americans have an easier time dealing with the death of relatives than do the modern Japanese children in this book? Pick two religions prac180 The Friends ticed by Americans and look at their funeral customs. Them compare them to Buddhism as practiced today in Japan.

3. K-12 educational systems around the world are based on very different models, and the Japanese system is largely based on the English education system of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. What are some major differences between American and Japanese systems of public education?

4. All three boys are studying at cram schools, which are special private schools set up to help children prepare for their important exams at the sixth grade level.

Look into the history of cram schools. Is there anything like them in the United States? Are they a regional or a national phenomenon in the United States?

5. One problem with the Japanese system is that there are not enough places in good schools for all Japanese children.

There is a system of private as well as public education. Look into private education systems in Japan and how they compare to America.

6. At one point, Kiyama and one of his enemies are told to stand on their desks.

At another, one of the boys is rapped on the head by his coach. Does this happen in American schools?

7. Yumoto also alludes to the economic difficulties in Japan in the amount of time that Kiyama's father spends at work and the anxieties of all the children about their futures. What has happened to the Japanese economy in the last ten years, from about 1990 to 2000?

8. The U.S. and Japan were on different sides in World War II, which is referred to in this novel through the old man's story of his desertion. When did the U.S. and Japan become involved in World War II and why?

9. What happened in Japan after the allies (England, U.S., non-Vichy France, etc.)

won World War II? How long were American troops in Tokyo. You might want to look at

some old films such as Sayonara to find out how Americans and Japanese got along.

10. The three boys live in an outlying community near the major city of Tokyo.

What would be different about their lives as Japanese boys if they lived elsewhere in the country?

For Further Reference

Edwards, Carol. "Book Review: The Friends."

School Library Journal, vol. 42 (December 1996): 124-125. Praising the author's ability to portray childish logic in the young Japanese boys as they try to find out about death, Edwards here calls attention to the readable vocabulary of the translation by Ms. Hirani.

Farber, Susan R. Review of The Friends.

Voice of Youth Advocates (April 1, 1997): 35. Farber states that Yumoto's book is "charming and gentle" in reference to the ways that her three heroes are transformed from mischievous boys into friends of an elderly and lonely man.

Rochman, Hazel. Review of The Friends.

Booklist (October 15, 1996): 425. Rochman concentrates on the outsider feelings of Kiyama and his two friends and praises Ms. Hirani, the translator of this novel.

Yumoto, Kazumi. "Awards Speech." Horn Book, vol. 74 (January/February 1998): 44-49. In her awards speech for the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for fiction, Yumoto describes her interests in writing fiction and some of her own concerns about the difficulties faced by young people in modern Japan. She also reveals an interest in dreams and ghosts that appear in this novel.

Related Titles/Adaptations

For further exploration of young adults growing up in Japan readers might want to read Kyoko Mori's Shizuko's Daughter (1993).

Yuki is a young girl in Japan who returns home to find her mother has committed suicide. Her mother's advice in a suicide note starts her on the path to independent thinking. Mori has also received praise for One Bird (1993). Like the boys in The Friends, Megumi is a teenager who must face losing one of her parents. At fifteen, she finds she must stay behind with her father when her mother leaves. In order to recover from her loneliness and isolation, she rescues a bird and cares for it as she wishes her mother could care for her. This helps her to accept her situation and devise ways to stay in touch with her mother. Readers might also like Amy Tan's adult book Joy Luck Club (1989), which tells the stories of three mothers and three daughters. While Lawrence Yep writes about Chinese and ChineseAmerican children, he like Yumoto, introduces a very different culture to American readers. In Child of the Owl (1977), a young girl learns to respect her Chinese heritage when she finds herself living with her grandmother in Chinatown in the 1960s. She learns to sort out her confused feelings for a father who is not very dependable as well as acknowledges that she is both Chinese and The Friends 181 American. Barbara Park, in Mick Harte Was Here, addresses young peoples' deep feelings about death as well as the death of a family member. As an eighth-grader, Phoebe narrates her own story of how she dealt with a death in her family and with her own survival. Like the boys in The Friends, she learns to see death as a part of living.

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