

# **The Garden of Evening Mists Study Guide**

**The Garden of Evening Mists by Tan Twan Eng**

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# Plot Summary

This guide is based on the Kindle edition of the book, copyrighted 2012.

Judge Teoh Yun Ling announces her retirement earlier than her peers expect. She is one of the first women appointed to a seat on Malay's Supreme Court. She does not tell any of her coworkers that she has been diagnosed with a neurological disorder. She begins to forget words and knows the disease will progress to the point that she is unable to express herself or understand verbal and written words.

Ling is the third child of a Malaysian family that was affluent until Japan declared war on their country. She reminisces on the war, looking back at the years before her judgeship. The Japanese invaded Malaysia shortly before attacking Pearl Harbor. Ling, her sister Yun Hong, and their parents fled the city, hoping to be safe from the Japanese army. Soldiers caught them, beat the girls' parents, and took Ling and Hong captive along with many others.

Life in the prison camp was brutal. Hong was beautiful and was immediately chosen to work in the camp brothel where she was raped daily by the Japanese soldiers. Ling soon realized that the key to survival was to play a role. She managed to get herself assigned to the camp kitchen where she was able to sneak food out to Yun Hong and to the other women in the camp. She was caught one day and an officer cut off two of her fingers. Together, Ling and her sister mentally created a Japanese garden such as they'd seen during a visit to Japan. They used that as a means of escaping the cruelties of their lives.

Another officer, Tominaga Noburu, made Ling his personal interpreter after the previous interpreter died. The prisoners dug deep into the mountain and boxes of items were stored there. Tominaga was kinder than most Japanese officers. When it became obvious that Japan was going to lose the war, Tominaga took Ling from the prison camp. He gave her food and water, then told her to follow the river to a town where she would find help. She refused to leave Yun Hong and returned to the camp but saw Tominaga blow up the face of the cave. She then heard a series of explosions in the distance and knew that the prisoners were all dead.

An aboriginal boy found Ling and helped her to safety, making her the only prisoner to survive the camp. Ling spent the next years working in the judicial system while Japanese officers were tried for their war crimes. She fruitlessly hoped to find an officer who could help her locate the prison camp in order to properly bury the prisoners.

Later, Ling visited friends who owned a tea plantation and met a Japanese man named Aritomo. He had an extensive garden called Yugiri and was the Japanese Emperor's former gardener. Ling asked him to create a garden in honor of Yun Hong's memory. He refused, but agreed to teach Ling so that she could do it herself. Gradually, Ling and Aritomo became friends. One day, he asked Ling's permission to create a horimono, an elaborate tattoo that would cover Ling's entire back. She agreed. Soon after it was



finished, Aritomo went for a walk in the jungle and never returned. Ling remained in the house for some time until she left to pursue her legal career.

Returning to her present, Ling's first act after retirement is to return to Yugiri. Professor Yoshikawa Tatsuji, a respected Japanese writer, asks to write a book about Aritomo's wood carvings. Ling agrees though she has routinely turned everyone away from the gardens and has never talked about Aritomo or their relationship. Over the weeks of Tatsuji's visit, he tells Ling that he knows about Aritomo's life, including the fact that the Japanese government sent him to Malaya to oversee the hiding place of stolen valuables. Gradually, Ling realizes that Tatsuji's theories are correct, and that the tattoo on her back is a map of the hiding place. Yugiri is the key to understanding the map and Ling knows that she needs to change the garden so that no one will ever be able to follow the map. She does, realizing that the new garden will be a memorial to both Aritomo and Yun Hong and that she will someday walk into the jungle and disappear, just as both Aritomo and Yun Hong had done.



# Chapters 1 - 2

## Summary

In Chapter 1, Yun Ling describes the circumstances that brought her to know Nakamura Aritomo, a Japanese gardener who had once served the Japanese Emperor. Ling's sister, Yun Hong, told Ling about this man who had "left his home on the rim of the sunrise" to live in Malaya. Ling was 17 when she heard the story and a decade later she met Aritomo. Thirty-six years pass to bring the story to the present moment in Ling's life.

She has returned to Yugiri where she lived for a time as an adult. The housekeeper, Ah Cheong, knocks on her door. Ling puts on a dressing gown and her gloves. Ah Cheong has brought chilled papaya for her breakfast. Ling goes onto the verandah and the property's dilapidated appearance shocks her.

Just before her retirement as a judge on the Malayan Supreme Court, Ling attended a ceremony celebrating her retirement. A colleague spoke about her, saying, "Judge Teoh was only the second woman to be appointed to the Supreme Court." (4) He mentioned that the Japanese held her prisoner during the war. He spoke of her accomplishments, but Ling barely listened.

Ling returned to her chambers for the final time. She took the watercolor painted by her sister, Yun Hong, from the wall. It was the only one of Yun Hong's paintings she owned. She then called the Majuba Tea Estate and told her friend, Frederik, that she was returning to Yugiri. She asked him to instruct Ah Cheong to have the house ready for her arrival, but Frederik said the house was always ready.

Ling arrived at the garden, noting the garden's name in Japanese characters with the English translation, "Evening Mists," below it. She had not been here in 35 years, but walked into the garden remembering her way. Frederik was there to meet her. They talked only briefly before he left, promising to return the next day.

Back in the present, Frederik arrives and asks permission to use the image of one of Aritomo's wood carvings on his newest tea packages. He is surprised when Ling agrees. He apologizes for the dilapidated state of the garden, saying he lacks the time or the interest to properly oversee the work. He says he is changing the gardens at his own estate to use the indigenous plants of the region. Ling is scornful of the plan.

Ling then tells him she is meeting with Professor Yoshikawa Tatsuji, a Japanese historian, who wants to do a book about Aritomo's wood carvings. Frederik reluctantly agrees to attend the meeting.

In Chapter 2, Tatsuji arrives. Ling says she decided to meet with him because of his reputation to write the truth about the Japanese, even when it puts the Japanese in a poor light. Tatsuji says some Japanese hate him for it. Ling asks why he is interested in Aritomo's work. He says he had a friend who owned some of Aritomo's work. Ling asks



to see them but Tatsuji says they were destroyed in an air raid. Tatsuji then says he believes Aritomo was also a horoshi, a tattoo artist. Ling says Tatsuji can see the wood carvings, but will not mention tattoos in his book. They argue, but Ling stands firm. She promises to get the carvings together.

After Tatsuji leaves, Frederik says Ling should let some other historians see Aritomo's work. She explains that she has a neurological illness and will soon lose the ability to communicate at all. They argue briefly about that before Frederik leaves.

Ling walks in the garden. She knows that Frederik's workers are not trained to maintain the garden correctly and sees a lot of work that needs to be done. She knows that her illness is going to progress and fears what will become of her once she loses the ability to communicate. She also fears what will happen if she loses all her memories. Frederik says she should write down her memories before she loses the ability to communicate. After her meeting with Tatsuji, she walks in the garden before returning to the house, and decides to follow Frederik's advice.

## Analysis

Over the coming chapters, the reader will discover that gardens are very important to Ling, but the order of presentation makes it difficult to fully grasp the meaning of some details. For example, Ling stops in the garden of the court building as she is leaving for the final time. She had often spent time in the garden as she pondered cases brought before her but now she is thinking about her life from this moment forward. She looked around the small garden and felt there was something missing. She saw a pile of leaves the gardener had raked up, and picked up a few, scattering them on the ground. This act seems random and almost rude until the reader learns a similar scene that happened years earlier. The author does not present that scene until much later in the novel. By then, most casual readers will have forgotten Ling's action.

Frederik does not understand the depth of Ling's illness. When she tells him about it, they argue briefly. Frederik says that he understands the judgments that she published and that he can read them to her. She grows angry, saying that she will not be able to understand the words. Frederik says there is bound to be a cure. Ling accepts the coming changes. What the reader does not yet know is that Frederik is in love with Ling and feels that he has already lost her once. He does not want to lose her again and is grasping at any possibility that they can remain together.

Ling fears losing her memories and she wonders what she will feel if that happens. The reader does not yet know about her relationship with Aritomo, but Ling seems to have questions about their relationship. She will have more questions in the coming days as she learns more about Aritomo.

On the surface, the structure of the novel seems almost random. The reader begins with Ling in the house at Yugiri, then drops back in time to her retirement, then back to the present in the house, and finally back in time. The casual reader may have trouble



keeping track of story's temporality, but the author presents scenes in either the present or the past tense. The reader should also remember that Ling is writing most of the scenes from the past as a means of helping herself remember her past.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Describe what you know about Ling and Aritomo up to this point in the story. Keep the information and add to it as new details are revealed.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Who is Frederik? What is his reaction when Ling announces that she is ill? Why does he react this way?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Where does Ling go after her retirement? What is the name of the garden? Why do you think the gardener chose this name?

## **Vocabulary**

resonant, fracturing, floes, hoard, oblivion, languid, laudatory, incontinent, lorries, tapers, indigenous, voluptuous



## Chapters 3 - 5

### Summary

In Chapter 3, Ling recounted her story. Teoh Yun Ling was born in 1923 in Malaya. Her family spoke English and she studied in England. She arrived at the Majuba Tea Estate, owned by Magnus Pretorius, in 1951. The Malayan Communist Party had rebelled against the government, causing unrest. Soldiers escorted Ling and Magnus from the train station to the plantation. They traveled through the village of Tanah Rata. Magnus and Ling talk about wars. Magnus lost his eye during the Boer War. He was in prison then. During World War II, Magnus and his wife were basically held hostage on their plantation.

There was a fence around the plantation for the safety of the residents and the workers. Inside the house, Magnus's wife, Emily, greeted Ling. They asked about Ling's mother. Ling said her mother no longer recognized anyone. For awhile, Ling's mother had constantly asked about her other daughter, Yun Hong, to the point that Ling had come to dread their visits.

Ling worked with the War Crimes Tribune for sometime and realized that she had yet to get over her own imprisonment. Magnus was appalled that she had witnessed some of the Japanese officers' hangings. He took her to the garden and showed her a statue of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. A second statue was Mnemosyne's twin sister, the goddess of forgetting. Appropriately, no one could remember her name.

They talked briefly about the war and Ling's decision to leave the law. She said she felt her job was a waste of time, especially after the peace treaty was signed with Japan. That treaty did not require the Japanese to pay any reparation to war victims. Ling then admitted that she had been vocal about her disapproval of the government and was fired.

In Chapter 4, Ling and Magnus talked about the Japanese garden Ling wanted to create in Yun Hong's memory, and the possibility that Magnus's neighbor, Nakamura Aritomo, could help Ling made it clear that she hated the Japanese. Magnus responded that Aritomo did not actively participate in the war, and that he employed many people to save them from being taken prisoner by the Japanese. Ling and Magnus argued about holding onto the hatred of those who imprisoned them. Ling was obviously filled with anger, but Magnus said that much anger would have killed him. Ling held up her hand, which is missing two fingers. Magnus pointed out that his eye "didn't fall out by itself."  
(43)

When Ling arrived in Aritomo's garden, he was practicing archery. Ling explained to him about her desire to make a garden in honor of Yun Hong. Aritomo asked why she had participated in the War Crimes Tribunal, but refused to accept her standard answer that she was eager to see justice served. She admitted that she was looking for anyone who





could help her find the prison camp where she was held in the hope that she could give Yun Hong a proper burial.

Aritomo said he was “uncomfortable” with the fact that the garden was for a woman who had been killed by the Japanese. The conversation continued with Aritomo saying British soldiers beat him and put him in prison, but never charged him with war crimes. He then invited her to see “part of the garden.” (50) Ling soon stepped in to interpret his instructions to the men working in the garden. He said the changes he was making would take at least a year, and that he would not take on the job of designing Ling's garden. Their conversation was interrupted when Frederik Pretorius arrived with the news that the high commissioner was murdered, which meant there might be heightened unrest.

Chapter 5 revealed that Ling's father and Magnus had been in the rubber business together until Magnus started his own tea estate. The relationship between Magnus and Ling's father suffered after the split.

Ling and Frederik returned to the estate as Magnus and Emily were hosting a get-together. Ling's anti-Japanese sentiments came through again, but Magnus pointed out that Aritomo had some 30 people working for him and that all of them and their families survived the war. Magnus then revealed that he had invited Ling's father to stay with them prior to the Japanese invasion. Ling was furious at her father's “obdurate pride,” which ultimately cost Yun Hong her life (57). The talk turned to politics and ethnicity until Emily changed the subject. Magnus learned that the rebels had burned a village in the region, prompting a 6 p.m. curfew, which put an end to the gathering.

Frederik and Ling were outside later when an airplane dropped pieces of paper. Frederik explained that the papers promised safety for any rebel who surrendered. Ling went to her room. She thought about the criminals she helped convict. She had a letter in her possession from a war criminal and remembered that she had promised to mail it.

## Analysis

There are many clues about upcoming events in this set of chapters. Magnus talked about the fact that Ling had worked for the War Crimes Tribunal, and that he was shocked that her father allowed it. Ling's role and her reason for working on that panel is explained in detail later in the novel. Ling answered Magnus by saying that her father barely recognized her after the war, and that she was “a ghost to him.” (34) Her explanation is important in understanding how their relationship changed from that of a traditional Chinese family of this time period.

For her entire life, Ling struggles with the memories of her time in the Japanese prison camp. Smells, sounds, and events prompt memories that make her alternately sad or angry. She saw bats flying around and remembered a time when hungry prisoners had caught a bat and ate it. When she witnessed a public demonstration that was supposed



to “appease” the spirits of those slain by the Japanese, she found herself angry all over again. These are more of the effects of war, which is one of the novel's themes.

Ling's anger was evident to Magnus and he told her that she had to find a way to let go of that anger. She asked if he had forgiven the British. Magnus responded that the British were not able to kill him during the war nor were they able to kill him in the prison camp, but that holding onto his anger for years following the war would have killed him. Magnus never said that he had forgiven, but only that he had learned to live with what happened to him. This is a lesson that Ling struggles with for many years.

The relationship between Magnus and Ling's family was damaged when Magnus sold his share of their joined business to Ling's father. Shortly after that deal was made, the industry experienced a slump. Ling's father never forgave Magnus for the timing of the deal. It is not clear if he felt Magnus had made the deal at that time because he knew something or if Ling's father just hated that he had experienced such bad luck.

Ling did not want anything to do with anyone who was Japanese because of what the Japanese did to her people. Interestingly, Aritomo had similar reservations about dealing with Ling. He said he was uncomfortable with the situation. He did not want to work with Ling because of what the Japanese people did to people like Ling and her sister. The limited perspective means the reader only knows what Ling knows and Aritomo never fully explained his reason. He never directly apologized to Ling but it seems clear that he felt the Japanese were wrong.

Ling had a letter from one of the war criminals she helped convict. The story of the criminal is presented much later in the novel, but the letter is mentioned while Ling was visiting Magnus in Chapter 5.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Describe the unrest in the country. How did the political situation affect the everyday lives of people like Magnus?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How were Magnus and Ling similar with regard to their past experiences in war? How were they different?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What did Magnus say about Aritomo's actions during the Japanese occupation?

## Vocabulary

plinths, disparaging, acuity, tautened, congealed, deprivations, inert, cursory, foraged, semaphores



## Chapters 6 - 8

### Summary

In Chapter 6, Frederik and Magnus oversaw increased security measures, including repairing the fence that surrounded the estate. Ling spent some time with Emily, looking at the medical clinic on the estate. Emily said the fighting had affected the people in rural areas much more than people in the cities. She then said that at least Magnus and his friends were no longer spending every Sunday in search of treasure.

Magnus took Ling on a tour of the estate and they talked about the business, including that Magnus gave his workers permission to leave when the Japanese arrived, and gave the jobs back to any of them who returned after the war.

Magnus continued working and Ling headed back to the estate. She encountered a young girl who was obviously frightened. The girl insisted Ling go with her and Ling discovered dead bodies in the girl's hut. Ling took the girl to the estate and reported the deaths. Magnus was furious, knowing that Ling could have been walking into an ambush herself.

That evening, Ling visited Aritomo again. She went directly to Yun Hong's painting and examined it closely. She asked Aritomo to sell it to her. Aritomo did not answer, but offered to teach Ling to build a Japanese garden for Yun Hong. He said it was a huge obligation on his part. Ling was hesitant, partly because Aritomo was Japanese. They talked about the first Japanese gardens Yun Hong and Ling had seen and their reactions. Aritomo asked if the girl who walked in the gardens with Yun Hong was still inside Ling. He predicted that she was.

In Chapter 7, Ling announced her intention to remain in the area and her plan to study under Aritomo. Magnus and Emily were happy she was staying but were upset when she insisted that she would live on her own. They finally agreed to let her rent a bungalow on the estate property. Ling arrived for her first day working with Aritomo. He refused to let her write anything she learned, saying the "garden will remember it for you." (84) She quickly realized that she would have to get past her hatred of Japanese in general if she was going to learn. She also realized that she had not gotten over her time as a prisoner of war. She worked through the day but had to rest often because her body had never recovered from the deprivations of her time in prison.

In Chapter 8, Ling finished her first week of work. Frederik helped her move into the bungalow, named Magersfontein Cottage. He then took her to the village where she bought supplies and they shared a meal. They talk about his life, his first visit to the tea estate, and his work as a soldier. He asked how she faced Aritomo – a Japanese. She said she had so much work to do that she had no time to think about it. When they returned to her cottage, Ling invited him inside.



One day, Ling and Aritomo were walking in the garden. He showed her a water wheel that had been a gift from the emperor. Monks inscribed a prayer on each paddle of the wheel. Ling asked if Aritomo believed the prayers were really effective at protecting his garden, and Aritomo responded that the garden was untouched during the war.

## Analysis

Emily briefly mentions the treasure that she says Magnus and his friends are hunting. At this point, Emily only says there were rumors that the Japanese buried treasure somewhere in the jungle. That treasure later becomes an important aspect of the story and Ling will eventually learn that she had actually been held at a prison camp where some of that treasure was hidden.

There are some graphic scenes in the novel that some readers may find disturbing. Chapter 6 contains one such scene. Magnus described seeing a field covered with sheep that the English forces had torn apart during a war when he was a young man.

Magnus mentioned the ironies that occur in life. He said that the first of his tea plants had come from an estate where Magnus had been held as a prisoner of war. Those tea plants now made a living for Magnus and his family and provided employment for a large group of workers. Ling will experience that same kind of coincidence later in the story when she discovers connections with Aritomo that she had not known existed.

Ling invited Frederik inside when they returned to her cottage from their trip to town. She said only that she needed his help applying some medicine to a scrape, but the implication is that she wanted to have sex with him. This seems out of character for the time and place because young girls faced the likelihood that their families would reject them for this behavior. Ling said that she had been surprised when men found her attractive and she had indulged in random sexual encounters. She believed it was because she was more in control of those situations than the men were, which was a direct difference to her lack of control in the prison camp.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe the water wheel in Aritomo's garden. Why does he consider it important?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe how Ling came to be apprenticed to Aritomo. Do you believe she can learn from a Japanese man? Support your answer.



## Discussion Question 3

Describe Ling's attitude about sex. Why does she have this attitude? Why is it unusual for a woman of her time and place?

## Vocabulary

muster, veldt, macabre, sublime, asceticism, palpable, striations, constricted, strenuous, languidly, felicitations, tonsured



# Chapters 9 - 10

## Summary

In Chapter 9, Ling wakes in the present. For a moment, she cannot remember who she is. The doctors have assured her that memory loss is not part of her illness, but the episodes continue to occur. She wonders how much of her writing is accurate, but feels that it does not really matter. Ling meets with Tatsuji and shows him Aritomo's prints. She says she believes he sold some of them as a means of supporting himself. There are 36 left in Ling's possession. Tatsuji remarks that all 36 are scenes of Malaya, and that none of them are from Japan.

Ling then says she heard that Tatsuji collects and preserves tattoos. He says he does not advertise that side of his business though there are collectors who like to own pieces of work by famous horimono masters, or tattoo artists. She asks what sparked Tatsuji's interest. He says a friend has a tattoo created by Aritomo, and that he seeks another. Ling says that Tatsuji cannot mention tattoos in his book about Aritomo's wood carvings. Together, they look at the wood carvings. Ling says she will have a place available for Tatsuji to work. He says this will be his final book before his retirement.

Later, Ling goes to visit Emily. The house on the tea estate is just as it was when Ling visited all those years earlier. Frederik greets her and Emily joins them for dinner, but Ling can tell the effort takes a toll. After Emily goes to bed, Frederick says he is looking into some specialists who can help Ling. She tells him to stop, saying she does not want to see any more. Ling says she wants to restore the garden. A woman named Vimalya is working on Frederik's garden and Ling asks Frederik to speak to her about taking on Ling's job as well. Frederik says Ling should not be worrying about the garden, but Ling counters, saying the garden will soon be "the only thing that will still be able to speak to me." (117)

In Chapter 10, the story reverts to the years when Ling was working in Aritomo's garden. Ling left Aritomo's house after work and found Emily praying near the grave of Emily's infant daughter. Magnus had wanted to marry Ling's mother, but her family was wealthy and she "couldn't see herself" with a poor farmer (123). Ling immediately realized this explains the difficulties between Magnus and Ling's father, and the reason Emily was initially ill at ease with Ling.

One day a local police officer said the Communist rebels knew she was involved in the prosecution of other Communists and that her father was outspoken in his quest for independence for Malaya. He said she was not safe and urged her to leave. She refused and also refused Magnus's suggestion that she move back to the main house. That evening, Aritomo and Ling attended a gathering at the main house. Aritomo provided rice paper lanterns for the guests to light during the event. Afterward, he burned them all. He then walked Ling back to her cottage.



## Analysis

Ling is obviously torn about Tatsuji's interest in Aritomo's tattoos. The modern-day American reader has to understand the culture and the level of artistry in these tattoos. The horimono of this era and culture was an artist who worked without the modern-day equipment. Most people who had tattoos hid them and a reputable person would never have a tattoo. Ling says that Aritomo's reputation would be ruined if people knew he was a horimono. The tattoo aspect of the story seems incidental but becomes important later, when Ling reveals that she has one of Aritomo's tattoos.

There are complicated dynamics between Ling's family and Magnus though these do not play a very important role in the main story line. Ling's mother and Magnus met when they were young and there was apparently some connection between them. Magnus had not yet established himself and he was relatively poor. Ling's mother was from a wealthy family and she refused to consider him as a suitor. The situation created some tension and made it almost unbelievable that Ling's father and Magnus later went into business together. The reader learns that Emily was somewhat distant when Ling first came into her life and that seems to be connected to the fact that Emily's only daughter died when she was still an infant. Emily likely looked at Ling as the daughter Magnus could have had if he had married Ling's mother. Emily ached for her dead child and probably saw Ling as a reminder of that loss.

Ling continues to struggle with her illness. The author goes so far as to give it a name and the symptoms seem to focus on Ling's ability to communicate. Her memory loss is never explained, but it is obvious that it increases in intensity as the novel nears the end, and that Ling expects it to culminate in a complete loss of memory.

During the time Ling was studying with Aritomo, she lived in a cottage on the tea plantation estate. That decision was in direct conflict with the cultural expectations of the time. Young women typically lived with their parents until they married. Ling is bucking tradition by insisting on living alone. By this point in her life, she is in her late twenties and has begun to take control of her own life, probably more than she would if she had not been held in the prison camp.

The political climate was dangerous during the years Ling studied with Aritomo. Communist rebels routinely attacked anyone who dared object to their ideology and did not hesitate to murder those who stood in their way. Ling was a prime target because her father had begun to work toward ensuring that Malaya became an independent nation. Ling's past in the judiciary system made her an even bigger target. Despite the warnings, Ling refused to leave or even to move into the main house. She may not have felt the danger was real or she may have simply refused to give in to fears because of her years as a prisoner of war.

## Discussion Question 1

What is Tatsuji's interest in Aritomo?





## Discussion Question 2

Describe some of the cultural limitations and expectations of the time periods on the novel. What are Ling's attitudes about these?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Magnus worried about Ling living alone? Do you think Ling is being selfish by ignoring the warnings that she is not safe?

## Vocabulary

snare, succession, surpassed, iconic, endemic, nimbus, conceded, strident, stance, embers



# Chapters 11 - 12

## Summary

In Chapter 11, Ling sometimes stopped to watch Aritomo practicing his archery. One morning, she asked to learn the skill. He was skeptical but gave in when she pointed out that the ancient gardening text she had studied cited the need for gardeners to take up “other arts” as well. (135) He agreed and began teaching her.

Ling always went home for lunch but one day Aritomo invited her to eat with him, saving herself the time it took to trek home and back. He was constructing a new pavilion in the garden and asked her to choose a name for it. She suggested the Pavilion of Heaven. Aritomo grimaced, thinking it was a cliché name with no thought. Ling then quoted from one of Yun Hong's favorite poem. The lines included a passage about the pavilion of Heaven and how the author rises to “unbuild it again.” (138)

Over lunch, Aritomo talked about gardening, including the art of borrowed scenery. He listed examples, such as using features outside the garden to enhance the garden. Ling said it sounded like deception and Aritomo said all gardening was a form of deception. He compared that practice to a person's tendency to hold onto memories in order to feel less lonely.

Aritomo then talked about his life. His father sent him to live on his own for a year in order for Aritomo to learn about nature. He talked about becoming an imperial gardener and of fighting with a client over a design which resulted in Aritomo leaving. Aritomo had a drawing his father had done. While they talked about it, he told Ling that “the palest ink will endure beyond the memories of men” (144).

In Chapter 12, five months passed after the high commissioner's murder. Gerald Templer was appointed to take his place. Aritomo and Ling continued their archery practice. When it rained too much to work in the garden, Aritomo and Ling stayed inside and he taught her about gardening. Sometimes they talked about Aritomo's other arts. One day, the talk turned to tattoos. She told him that Magnus had a tattoo. He asked how she knew.

Ling, her parents, and Yun Hong met Magnus for a meal once. It was quickly evident that her parents were not comfortable with Magnus, but Ling did not know why. A waiter spilled hot liquid on Ling and some of it splashed on Magnus. Ling was not hurt but she saw the colors of Magnus's tattoo blooming through his wet shirt. She said her parents could not believe that he had a tattoo. Aritomo ended the session after her story.

One day, Ah Cheong arrived at Ling's cottage. He said his half brother, Kwai Hoon, was a member of the Communist rebels. He wanted Ling to broker his surrender. Ah Cheong said Kwai Hoon trusted Ling to make the right deal for him. She reluctantly agreed. He arrived and said he was disillusioned with the organization. He told her that a Japanese



soldier had told him about treasure hidden in the jungle. He said rumors about the treasure had been around for years, and that there had been a formal effort to find it.

Ling celebrated the Chinese New Year with Magnus, Emily, Frederik, and Aritomo.

## Analysis

Ling's decision to take up archery seemed unplanned. Aritomo tried to dissuade her. He said she did not have the proper clothes but she said he surely had an extra set of old clothes she could alter. When she cited the ancient book about gardening that encouraged gardeners to take up one of the other arts as they studied gardening, Aritomo relented. Their relationship seemed to change quickly after that point. Ling seemed to begin giving up her general hatred of Japanese and of things that controlled her. She accepted that she had to follow a prescribed set of rituals as she prepared to practice, and that she had to accept Aritomo's instructions. At one point, he told her that her mind was like "flypaper" because it caught hold of every thought that passed by, holding onto it to the point that she could not concentrate on the archery.

The tattoos become a topic again during this section, but this time it is Aritomo and Ling who talk about them. Ling mentions that Magnus has a tattoo and Aritomo obviously wants her to tell him how she knew that. She related the story about the spilled liquid on his shirt that allowed the colors to show through. Aritomo does not tell her that he is the person who gave Magnus the tattoo. Ling's parents were horrified that Magnus had a tattoo. This is one of the examples of the cultural expectations of the time. Ling's parents already had reservations about Magnus, but this solidified their idea that he was not a decent person.

The high commissioner's murder is another sign of the unrest of the time period. People learned that the rebels had attacked his car and he walked away. Some people thought that was a foolish thing for him to do, but he was actually drawing fire away from the car because his wife was inside, and he was trying to save her. The murder had an unsettling effect on the people of the area, making the rebels more active and making the other people nervous.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the reaction of Ling's parents when Ling comments on Magnus's tattoo? Why do they react in this way?

## Discussion Question 2

How did the high commissioner die? What was the effect of his death?



## Discussion Question 3

What reason did Ling give for wanting to learn archery? Think of alternative reasons for her request.

## Vocabulary

semblance, nocked, tainted, obeisance, incredulity, prostrating, putrefying, arduous, relinquishing, plummeted, purging, pragmatism, filial



# Chapters 13 - 14

## Summary

Chapter 13 returns to the present. Ling and Ah Cheong move around the house, looking for a room for Tatsuji to use as he examines the wood carvings. While Aritomo left a will and enough money to maintain the house and garden, Ling has used her own money to pay the bills in recent years. There are repairs that need immediate attention but she has never thought about selling the property. After seeing to the room, she goes to the garden and sees Aritomo's bow. She thinks about their lessons.

Frederik's gardener, Vimalya Chin arrives one morning and agrees to take on the repairs and changes to Aritomo's garden, though she says she does not see a "unifying theme" for the overall garden (162).

Soon after that, Ling is looking at the letter written by the prisoner who was about to hang. Suddenly, she cannot recognize any of the letters. She tries to write something else, but it does not make sense. She goes into the hall and finds herself completely disoriented. She finds her way to the kitchen before the moment passes and she is able to recognize letters again. She tells Ah Cheong to put up a sign a gate to discourage anyone who wants to visit the gardens. She knows people will still come.

Ling meets Emily for tea. Emily says that Ling's sudden reappearance can only mean that Ling is ill. As they part, Emily says the head nun of a temple wants to see Ling. Ling hesitates, but then agrees.

Back home, Ling takes Tatsuji into the garden. They talk about Aritomo. It has been almost 34 years since he disappeared into the jungle. Tatsuji says he was surprised to find "an entire cottage industry" devoted to Aritomo, ranging from beer mugs to books (169). Ling explains why she visited Aritomo the first time. She says she always felt he had some ulterior motive for teaching her about gardening, but they never discussed it.

Tatsuji says he is almost finished making notes for his book. Their conversation turns to Aritomo. Tatsuji says Aritomo was fired as an imperial gardener for his argument over a garden in Japan. Tatsuji says he has talked to some people in Japan and believes that Aritomo was working for the emperor when the Japanese invaded Malaya as a means of redeeming himself. Ling argues that the Japanese spies who were in place before the invasion were living in places of strategic importance. She also points out that he never returned to Japan. If he had been working for the emperor, he could have gone home.

Ling then asks Tatsuji about his role in the war. He says he was a navy pilot in Malaya. He recounts a group of boys who beat an escaped prisoner of war to death, then admits he was one of them. Then he bows and says he is sorry for what the Japanese people did to Ling's people. He says the Japanese did not know about the atrocities of the Japanese military at the time. He began to write the truth about the war because those



secrets were stifling every family of his generation. Ling wants to be angry, but discovers that she is actually sad for Tatsuji.

Chapter 14 reverts to the past. Ling continued to learn from Aritomo. One day, Ah Cheong brought her a newspaper clipping about his brother who had turned himself in and helped police capture members of the rebels. With his reward, Ah Cheong's brother planned to open a restaurant. Ling laughingly told Ah Cheong that she expected the best dishes, including shark fin soup and abalone. She then went to Aritomo who gave her Yun Hong's painting.

When she returned home, Magnus said the new high commissioner was coming for a visit. Ling asked Magnus about his tattoo. He opened his shirt to reveal a tattoo of an eye, confirming that Aritomo created it. He said Aritomo did the tattoo during a visit to the estate, and that he fell in love with the region, which was why he remained.

The next morning, Aritomo woke Ling early to go into the jungle with him. They traveled to a cave where some people were collecting swiftlets' nests. The nests, made of solidified saliva, were edible and one of Aritomo's favorite foods. The collectors were angry that Ling was with Aritomo and insisted that she never return. During their walk back, Ling asked Aritomo if the mountains went on forever. He said they, like all things, fade away.

## Analysis

Frederik and Ling have very different ideas about gardens. Ling has always holds to Aritomo's teachings and she remains focused on the true Japanese gardens. When she returns to Yugiri, she learns that Frederik is busy tearing out all the traditional gardens at the tea estate and has hired a gardener to rebuild it, using only indigenous plants. Frederik says that Aritomo's garden uses all those plants that came from other parts of the world. They argue briefly about that but Ling insists that gardening is all about changing a person's perception. In an interesting twist, Ling hires Frederik's gardener to carry out her instructions in the Japanese garden. Frederik predicts that the woman will only in building gardens from indigenous plants but she becomes very interested in traditional Japanese gardens and asks Ling to recommend books on the subject.

The reader will soon learn that Aritomo walked into the jungle one day and never returned. The anniversary of that date is approaching and Ling notes that there is always a renewed interest in Aritomo's work, especially his garden, around this time of year. She has always kept her relationship with him private, refusing interviews to talk about him. Aritomo allowed only the occasional guest to visit his garden while he was there, and then he insisted that Ling be the one to show them around. Ling has apparently refused all requests to see the garden in the years she had possession of the property.

Ling remains shaken by the few minutes during which she could not read words. The neurosurgeons warned her that the events would become more frequent but said she



was lucky because some people have no warning. They simply fall into that state and never emerge. Her fears about this push her to work harder toward repairing the garden and to make some decisions regarding the future of the garden.

Magnus's tattoo is symbolic of the eye he lost as a young prisoner of war. Aritomo created an eye with an iris that very nearly matched the color of Magnus's remaining eye. His loss is similar to Ling's loss of two fingers. There are several scenes up to this point about her missing finger and the reader will learn in coming chapters how that happened. Loss is a theme seen throughout the novel and it drives some of the action, including Ling's original desire to build a garden.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why do you believe people remain interested in Aritomo, even more than three decades after he disappeared into the jungle?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why do you think Ling has always kept Yugiri? Keep your answers and compare them with ideas presented later in the novel.

## **Discussion Question 3**

What information is revealed about Tatsuji at this point? Do you believe he is sincere in his desire to write about Aritomo's art?

## **Vocabulary**

scathing, chide, discretion, charlatans, plausible, voracious, spiraling, obliterate, coveting, itinerary, monochromatic, ululated



# Chapters 16 -17

## Summary

In Chapter 15, the new high commissioner arrived and toured the tea plantation. Chief Inspector Thomas Aldrich introduced himself to Ling. He believed someone on the tea plantation was helping rebels and asked Ling to look for information. After the tour of the tea plantation, Ling gave the visitors a tour of Aritomo's garden. They asked Aritomo what name he had chosen for the pavilion. Ling was surprised when he said it was called Pavilion of Heaven. Aldrich told Aritomo that a Japanese group was traveling the area. He asked if Aritomo had heard from them. Ling sensed a heightened interest but Aritomo said he had not.

Later, Ling thought about her real reason for working on the War Crimes Tribunal. She had been seeking information that would lead her to Yun Hong's burial place. One of the Japanese criminals she prosecuted was Captain Hideyoshi Mamoru. Ling promised to mail a letter for him if he told her about the camp where she was held. He said there were rumors about the camp and that it was called Golden Lily, but he had no more information. He wrote a letter to tell his son that he loved him, but knew Ling would not mail it.

One night, Ling and Aritomo were talking in the garden when they saw a meteor shower. Aritomo said he had never personally known anyone who had lost family members or friends during the Japanese occupation until he met Ling. He touched her cheek and she kissed him. Then went together into his house.

Chapter 16 returns to the present. Ling continues to write though some of the memories make her uncomfortable. One morning, Tatsuji tells Ling about his time as a navy pilot. His flight instructor, Colonel Teruzen, dealt with Tatsuji's father long before Tatsuji became involved in the war. His father manufactured airplanes and Teruzen pushed him to create planes suitable for kamikaze pilots. Tatsuji had gone home to visit his father just before leaving for the base where he would be assigned a kamikaze mission. His father said it was appropriate that his own son would die because he had built the planes that took the lives of so many other young men. Tatsuji's father then committed suicide.

Teruzen had a tattoo of two herons and Tatsuji learned that Aritomo had been the tattoo artist. Tatsuji was with a group of pilots headed for a kamikaze mission when his plane had problems. He had to land and found Teruzen there. When his plane was repaired, he went on to the place where he was to wait for his final orders. Teruzen followed him and they spent time together over the coming days. They talked about building a house in a specific place where they would live out their lives. On the morning he was to make his kamikaze flight, Teruzen took his plane and completed the flight, leaving Tatsuji without a plane and saving his life. As he watched Teruzen fly away, the sky changed





color. Tatsuji later learned that the Americans had dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan.

When he finishes his story, Tatsuji tells Ling that he has bought a piece of land on the beach where he and Teruzen spent time together, and that he plans to build a house there now. He says he will rise every morning and look toward the spot where he last saw Teruzen's plane.

In Chapter 17, the story reverts to the time Ling was Aritomo's apprentice. The rebel attacks slacked off then grew in intensity. One night, Ling returned from the garden to find rebels in her house. They brutally attacked her, stabbing her in the leg and beating her. She woke in the hospital. The police told her it was retaliation for helping Ah Cheong's brother. Magnus was furious, saying Ling had put everyone at risk and that she never told him about it. He pushed her to go home but she refused.

Ling talked to her father by phone. He was angry that she was working for a Japanese gardener and said he would send a driver to pick her up. She grew angry in return, saying that he could have saved their family by going to the safety of Magnus's tea estate.

Ling woke later to find Aritomo at her bedside. She said she was not leaving. One day, Aritomo told her Ah Cheong was getting married. He gave her food provided by Ah Cheong's brother, who was catering the wedding. The food included abalone, lobster, and shark fin soup.

On the day before Ling was to be released, Magnus arrived. Ling's father was pressuring him to get Ling to go home. Magnus said she could no longer stay alone in the cottage. Aritomo said Ling could stay with him. She felt safe at Yugiri. One day, Ah Cheong said there were visitors. The group called itself The Association to Bring Home the Emperor's Fallen Warriors. There were three men and a woman. One man introduced himself as Sekigawa Hisato. The others were Matsumoto Ken, Ishiro Juro, and Maruki Yoko. Ling was uneasy with the group. They said their mission was to find the major battle sites and to take pieces of bone from each site, giving the families something they can bury in the place of their sons, brothers, and fathers.

Ling became angry. She said she could show the group many places where the Japanese soldiers slaughter the Malayan people, and that they should be trying to help the survivors. When the Japanese guests seemed angry, Aritomo said Ling was his apprentice and would be treated with respect. Sekigawa gave Aritomo an envelope and said he would wait for Aritomo's answer. Aritomo opened the envelope and read the letter. Sekigawa congratulated him on being reappointed to his position as a gardener to the emperor. Aritomo said his work on his own garden was not finished. Sekigawa counters, saying the letter makes it clear that Aritomo had been "forgiven for what happened between you and Tominaga Noburu" (234). He went on to say that Tominaga had killed himself.



Ling was shocked. Tominaga was the only other person from the camp who Ling believed could still be alive. The Japanese offered to remain in the area to let Aritomo reconsider but Aritomo said they should not. They asked to see the garden but Aritomo politely refused.

After the Japanese leave, Ling looks for reassurance that Aritomo will not return to Japan. He said he would go to a temple in the jungle the following day to pray for Tominaga.

## Analysis

The conversation between Chief Inspector Aldrich and Ling is filled with threats. He cites the fact that she is the only survivor of a prison camp, and that the location of the camp remains unknown. His tone implies that he does not fully believe the report she gave once she found her way to civilization. Aldrich says that officials were interested in both Magnus and Aritomo. Ling refused to cooperate but she was afraid. This reaction is interesting because she admitted to doing the same thing to former prisoners of the Japanese in order to get them to cooperate while she was part of the War Crimes Tribunal. She tried to talk them into providing information, but was willing to do whatever it took to get the information she needed.

The lack of chronological order makes the novel somewhat difficult to follow because pieces of information are presented with more details presented much later in the story line. In other cases, characters tell stories that are also out of chronological order. One example is seen in this chapter. Tatsuji begins to tell Ling about his career as a navy pilot. He begins by telling Ling that he was supposed to die that day but his flight instructor told him the weather would keep him grounded. Then he drops back in the story to tell how he came to be at that base. Then he drops back even farther to tell how he first met his flight instructor. His story follows a rough chronological order from that point, eventually coming back to the day the instructor told him he was grounded for the day and going on to the following days.

By the time Tatsuji was supposed to take his kamikaze flight, Japan had really already lost the war. Tatsuji said that all the fighting still taking place was useless, but that no one knew what to do except to keep on fighting. This explains why there were kamikaze pilots. The Japanese had few resources available and the kamikazes were one of the few weapons the Japanese still had. Tatsuji said the plane he was flying was so basic that there were no radios to contact other pilots in his group when he experienced problems. Tatsuji's plane was the only one available, which is why Teruzen saved his life by taking his plane.

The police had mentioned to Aritomo the group that called itself The Association to Bring Home the Emperor's Fallen Warriors. He denied having met the group but they showed up at his house after Ling moved in with him. This group seems incidental to the story at this point, but the visit will prove significant later.



Ling's attitude toward the Japanese seems justified, considering that the Japanese had killed many, including Ling's sister, and had terrorized her country. However, the reader should remember that her actions would have been considered impossibly rude during this time in this culture. Ling had grown up in a house where manners were required, as evidenced in several previous scenes. Aritomo supported her while the Japanese were in his home, saying that she was due respect from them even though she did not show any respect toward them. Once they left, Ling continued her rant and Aritomo called her on it, but not because she was being rude or even because she was ranting about his countrymen. As always, it came back to the garden. Aritomo said Ling would never become a good gardener until she learned to let go of her anger.

There was a piece of foreshadowing in this section, one of many literary tools seen throughout the novel. Ling noted that she did not fully trust the Japanese group that asked Aritomo for help searching for dead Japanese soldiers. The group was not being truthful but Ling did not figure out that they were really searching for treasure until many years later.

## Discussion Question 1

What did Chief Inspector Aldrich want from Ling? What was her reaction? What was the irony of the situation?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe the meeting between Aritomo and the Japanese group. What was Ling's reaction?

## Discussion Question 3

How are relationships changing during this section of the book? Include the relationship between Aritomo and Ling, between Ling and Magnus, and between Ling and her father.

## Vocabulary

intermittently, eccentric, grandiose, uncorroborated, tenacity, cajoled, luminance, deluge, cryptic, teeming, converge, efficacy



# Chapters 18 - 19

## Summary

In Chapter 18, Aritomo and Ling walked to the Temple of Clouds. The climb was brutal and Ling was disappointed when they arrived at a group of buildings falling into disrepair. Aritomo pointed out the face of a rock and when the sun appeared from being some clouds, Ling saw that the rock was covered with shimmering butterflies that began to fly away in small groups. When they flew through a rainbow, their colors seemed even more vibrant. Ling saw a nun of undetermined age. It was obvious that the nuns recognized Aritomo. He told Ling the story of a thief who was sent to hell, then given a chance to escape but wound up back in hell. He then said he wanted to know about Ling's time in the prison camp.

Chapter 19 reverts to Ling's story of her life before the Japanese invasion and goes through her time at the prison camp. Her father was an anglophile who greatly admired the British. The family spoke only English at home. Her father followed the request of the Kuomintang – the ruling Chinese political party of the time – to make a trip to Japan, ostensibly to consider selling rubber to the Japanese. He did not go through with the sale and did not realize that the Japanese would hold that against him. When Japan invaded Malaya, Ling's father was furious that the British evacuated their own people and did nothing to help those who remained. When their home was threatened, the family went with a neighbor to a remote durian plantation where they lived in primitive conditions.

One day, the Japanese arrived, beat Ling's father and mother, and took Ling, Yun Hong, and others prisoner. They traveled for a long way in horrible conditions, first by train and then by truck. They arrived at a jungle camp and Yun Hong was taken away. Ling later discovered that she was being forced to have sex with the Japanese soldiers. There were some 300 people in the camp. All had relatives who had worked against the Japanese in some manner.

The prisoners were forced to excavate caves. Periodically, trucks arrived with the Red Cross emblem. Boxes were unloaded and stashed in the caves. Ling discovered that her best chance at survival was to work in the kitchen and she managed to get assigned there. She smuggled food out for her sister and the women who lived in Ling's shelter. She moved with relative freedom, sometimes managing to visit Yun Hong. They began to talk about the Japanese gardens. They imagined the garden they would create, down to the smallest details, as a means of escaping their harsh reality. Yun Hong said her life was finished because she would never live down the shame of what she was forced to do in the prison camp. Ling promised they would survive and would never speak of it again, but Yun Hong did not agree. She made Ling promise that she would take any chance to escape without returning for Yun Hong.



One day, Ling was crossing the compound. She had stolen some chicken feet from the kitchen and an officer found them. He chopped off two of the fingers on her left hand as punishment.

There was a doctor in the camp who served as an interpreter for a man named Tominaga Noburu. Ling took the doctor's place even when Tominaga discovered she was not fluent in Japanese. They spent a lot of time together and even talked about gardening. Tominaga knew Aritomo and Ling had heard of him. Ling began to pump Yun Hong for more information about gardening so she could talk to Tominaga about it. Ling battled her feelings about Tominaga's kindness, which sometimes lulled her into forgetting that he was one of her captors.

One day, Ling saw Tominaga go to the hut where Yun Hong and the other girls were kept for sex. She was furious with him but knew she should not have expected anything different. Later, he told her he had visited Yun Hong and gave her a note. Ling recognized her sister's handwriting. The note reminded Ling of her promise to run away if she had the chance. Tominaga blindfolded Ling and put her in a van. He drove them out of the camp. Ling silently vowed to return for Yun Hong. When the van stopped, Tominaga gave Ling some food and water and told her to follow the river out of the jungle. He said the war was near an end and the Japanese would be defeated. He then said they would not release any of the prisoners and refused to tell her anything about the camp.

Instead of leaving, Ling rushed to follow the trail back toward the camp. She was soon disoriented but found the camp. Everything was gone, including the fences and huts. She saw Tominaga blow up the side of a mountain, obscuring the opening of the caves. She then heard faint sounds that she knew were more explosions. She tried to find where the prisoners had been taken but could not.

She would have died without finding her way out of the jungle except an aboriginal boy found her. She was taken to their camp where she recovered. When it was time for her to leave, the boy took her on a winding route that ensured she could never find her way back to their village.

## Analysis

While Ling and Aritomo were in the Temple of Clouds, Aritomo told Ling a story his mother had told him. The moral of the story was related to the punishment for disobedience. Aritomo said a thief was sent to hell for his crimes. Buddha watched the man and noticed a spider spinning a web. Buddha took the web and lowered it into hell, giving the man a chance to climb out. But others grabbed onto the web as well and it failed to hold up all their weight, dropping them all back into hell. Aritomo admitted that the story disturbed him. This is one of the stories that might have been used to make children understand the consequences of their actions. Not only was the man punished for his actions, but all those who tried to climb out of hell were punished for their selfishness so that none of them escaped.



There are a number of events in the novel that seem to be coincidences. Some are explained, but others appear to be fate or chance. The fact that Ling and Yun Hong saw some of Aritomo's gardens and that Yun Hong became so interested in gardening is one of those. Ling later met Aritomo who was reportedly sent from Japan after arguing with a client, and Ling later discovers that client was Tominaga.

Ling's time as a prisoner during the war was brutal on many levels. She was forced to live with the knowledge that the Japanese soldiers were raping her sister. Their lives were slightly better than the other prisoners because they were given better food and some medical care. However, the girls forced into that role knew their lives were over. They would never be able to return to their families because their roles as sex slaves would make them a disgrace, even if they had no choice. The modern-day American reader will likely look at this from an educated perspective. The modern reader tends to view victims differently than the Chinese of this time. The reader may tend to think that Yun Hong is exaggerating, but Ling will encounter a young woman in a coming chapter who proves that Yun Hong's fears were founded.

Tominaga insisted on calling Ling by the Japanese translation of her name – Kumomori. Ling was resistant to anything that gave the Japanese power over her and that name would have done that, but then she embraced the idea that she could become someone else. From that point, she allowed herself to be Kumomori when she was facing the horrible conditions of the camp which meant that her true self – Ling – could escape to the imaginary gardens, thereby avoiding the realities of her life. This idea of a split personality may not seem healthy, but there are countless stories of people who survived horrible situations by creating an alternative personality. Unlike some modern pop culture phenomena, Ling did not have any trouble leaving Kumomori behind once she left the prison camp.

Ling had no trouble with her emotions while all the Japanese were cruel people who treated all the prisoners badly. She did, however, encounter some emotional issues on that front when she began working with Tominaga. He was not as cruel as the soldiers and even kept Ling working for him after he discovered that her Japanese language skills were sorely lacking. They talked about gardening and he seemed to confide more information to her than was prudent. It's important to remember that Tominaga was not a soldier and Ling never really knew what his role was. She did have to remind herself sometimes that "they" were the Japanese and that she was still a prisoner who could be tortured or executed at any moment.

Ling described the arrival of Red Cross vehicles at the camp but she did not know what was in them. The description, like many others, seems incidental until more details are revealed. What Ling described is in keeping with the possibility that the Japanese were hiding valuables in the caves the prisoners were digging.

Ling's final view of the camp was when she saw Tominaga blow up the side of the mountain, obscuring the entrance of the cave. She also heard some detonations in the distance. She seemed to accept that those sounds heralded the death of her sister and the other prisoners, but she did not say that when she was relating the story to Aritomo.



It is later revealed that the soldiers and the prisoners were buried alive in other caves, meaning Tominaga and Ling were the only two people who walked away from that camp.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe Ling's life in the prison camp.

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Ling agrees to tell Aritomo her story? What does this say about their relationship?

## Discussion Question 3

Make a list of events that seem to be coincidences. Keep the list and add to it as more are revealed in the coming chapters.

## Vocabulary

escarpment, riven, arduous, placid, anglophile, garnished, differentiated, maimed, morose, sheared, lucid, concoction





## Chapters 20 - 23

### Summary

In Chapter 20, Ling was not relieved after telling Aritomo her story. Aritomo then said it was an argument with Tominaga that resulted in Aritomo leaving Japan. Aritomo said Tominaga was so rigid that it was surprising he went against the rules and helped Ling escape. Ling said she has never told anyone the full story of her time in prison. He asked Ling what she thought were in the boxes. She once thought it might be weapons, but that made no sense because the Japanese were losing the war. Aritomo then said that Tominaga visited him shortly before the war. He brought the water wheel as a gift from the emperor. He also said that was certain Tominaga did not force Yun Hong into having sex because he always preferred men.

Their relationship began to change. Aritomo had always bowed to a picture of the emperor when he entered a specific room in the house. After Ling talked about her time in the prison camp, she saw that the picture was gone and Aritomo ceased to bow. Ling felt she had betrayed Yun Hong's memory by telling Aritomo the story. One day, Aritomo pointed out that the monsoon season had begun. Ling's apprenticeship was supposed to end now, but Aritomo did not ask her to leave.

One day, Aritomo asked Ling to allow him to tattoo her. He said he had never had the opportunity to create a horimono and wanted to be certain he would complete the project. Aritomo explained the process, including the pain and that it would take up to six months to complete. She agreed to let him tattoo her entire back and wondered at how easily she made the decision.

In Chapter 21, Ling and Aritomo attended Magnus's 73rd birthday party. Ling remembered the last time she had seen Yun Hong, when she had discovered Yun Hong had been pregnant and had undergone an abortion. Frederik arrived at the party and argued with Ling. He criticized Aritomo's artificial garden and she defended it. He was obviously angry because she was living with Aritomo. She confirmed that they were sleeping together.

Aritomo began the tattoo and Ling fought the pain. She recalled that one of the Japanese soldiers in the prison camp had collected photos and sketches of tattoos. He once asked her to translate the meaning of words on a prisoner's tattoo. She told him the tattoo said "God Save the King," and the soldiers beat the prisoner to death.

In Chapter 22, Ling said she wanted to increase the amount of time they were spending on the horimono. One day, Ling and Aritomo were talking and he asked what she did to survive the prison camp. She said she told on other prisoners, including those who were hiding things or making a radio. In return she got medicine and better food. Yun Hong told her to stop but she continued.





One day, Ling woke to the sound of gunfire. She got dressed and went outside with Aritomo. Men rushed to search the house and then took Aritomo and Ling back to the tea estate. There were some dead bodies outside and others who were beaten and under guard. Magnus and Emily were in the kitchen. One of the men said he wanted to know where the Japanese hid the treasure they stole during the war. Aritomo denied knowing anything. When they threatened to shoot Ling, Magnus said a soldier named Colonel Hayashi told him the treasure was hidden in a place called Blue Valley. Magnus said he would take the soldiers there. Emily grew frantic. Magnus whispered something to her, kissed her, and left with the soldiers.

Someone had seen the trouble and alerted police, so they arrived soon after Magnus leaves. Emily and Aritomo had a heated exchange. Ling learned that Aritomo had paid the rebels to leave Yugiri and the tea estate alone. She sent Aritomo home and remained with Emily. Officials later found Magnus's body. The funeral was held that Saturday. At dusk, people all over the valley lit lanterns Aritomo made and released them in Magnus's honor.

Chapter 23 reverts to the present. Ling continues to write her memories. The nun Emily mentioned arrives. She reminds Ling that they met the day Ling and Aritomo visited the Temple of Clouds. The nun tells Ling some of her own story. She was repeatedly raped by the Japanese soldiers during the war. After her release, her family and friends turned their backs on her. Even when she went to a new town, people somehow found out about her past. She found refuge in the Temple of Clouds. The nun says she really came to see a specific painting Aritomo mentioned to her. She recites the Tao Te Ching, saying that, "When the work is done, it is time to leave." Ling counters, saying that Aritomo's work was not yet finished. The nun asks how Ling can be sure.

Tatsuji arrives. Ling says he was right in assuming that Aritomo created tattoos. It takes a moment for him to realize that she has a horimono. She says she wants him to preserve the tattoo after her death.

Tatsuji reveals that he has some questions about Aritomo because some aspects of his life seem manufactured to fit the circumstances. Aritomo and Tominaga were friends all their lives until that argument. He then reveals a program called the Golden Lily. Ling denies having heard the phrase before. He says the Japanese stole items of value but knew it was too dangerous to take them directly to Japan. They used registered hospital ships as a means of transporting at least some of the items to the Philippines. Tatsuji says his flight instructor, Teruzen, gave him the first hints about Golden Lily.

Tatsuji says he has talked to an engineer who worked on the Golden Lily program. The engineer oversaw prisoners who were digging mines to be used to hide some of the treasure. They then brought in experts to seal the mines and to plant natural plants that would quickly hide the presence of the mines. The engineer told Tatsuji that the prisoners were forced into another mine some distance away and the entrances to those were sealed. The soldiers were also killed so that no one could reveal the information. The engineer was blindfolded so he could not find the mine. Tatsuji says Tominaga was in charge of one arm of Golden Lily and that he was in Malaya from 1938



through 1945. Tatsuji says everyone had to join Japan's war efforts, indicating that Aritomo might also have had a role to play on behalf of the emperor. Ling insists that Aritomo did not tell her anything about the treasure. Tatsuji says Aritomo would have done his duty, "All the way to the end" (303).

Ling meets Frederik at the new tea house on the estate grounds. She thinks about Tatsuji's theories and knows they are true. That evening, she goes for a walk in the jungle.

## Analysis

There is no doubt that Ling had survivor's guilt, made even more intense by the fact that her sister was among those who died. To further enhance her guilt, Yun Hong made Ling promise that she would run away if she ever got the chance. When Ling was talking to Aritomo about it later, she told him that she abandoned Yun Hong. He countered, saying she had done exactly what she promised Yun Hong she would do.

In a previous scene of the novel, a man arrived and fought with Aritomo. Aritomo was a skilled fighter and quickly brought the man to the ground using a magazine as a weapon. But when the rebels were holding Aritomo and Ling at the tea plantation, Aritomo did not stand up for Ling. At one point, he said that he was a gardener, not a soldier, indicating that he would not fight. It seemed that their relationship had moved to a deeper level and that there might even be something akin to love between them. However, Aritomo's action denies that impression. When later details are revealed, including Aritomo's role in Golden Lily, it seems that he might still have been more devoted to his country than to anything else, including Ling.

Changing relationships is one of the book's themes. Ling's relationship with Aritomo changed after she told him about her time in the prison camp. He removed the photo of the emperor from his wall. Ling once told Yun Hong that she would never tell anyone what happened to them. She made that promise to assure Yun Hong that no one would have to know that Yun Hong was repeatedly raped. After she told Aritomo the story, she felt that she had betrayed that promise, and had therefore betrayed Yun Hong or at least Yun Hong's memory. It's noteworthy that Ling was vocal about the atrocities the Japanese soldiers executed on her people, but Yun Hong's rape is so horrible to her that she cannot talk about it. This shows the cultural norms of the time and place.

Aritomo warned that the tattooing process could be addictive for both people. As the artist, he became anxious to work on it more often but knew that it was too painful a process for Ling to endure lengthy sessions close together. However, Ling soon found ways to deal with the pain and also became anxious for the work to progress. The modern reader has to remember that the process was different then. The artist made small incisions and inserted ink under the skin. The process was not done with small needles and it scabbed over as Aritomo worked.



Ling becomes angry when Tatsuji tells her about the process of transferring items from Malaya to the Philippines in hospital ships. Ling goes on a tirade then, furious that Japan's enemies accepted that the hospital ships were truly transporting wounded people and left it alone while the Japanese had bombed hospital transports, killing all on board or leaving them to drown. The cruelties of the Japanese during World War II are legendary though much of the anger against them has calmed over the decades. The modern reader may not fully understand Ling's anger or Tatsuji's reaction. He is one of the Japanese who refuses to condone what his country did. Even faced with Ling's anger, he does not grow angry in return or try to excuse the actions of the Japanese, including himself.

Ling's relationship with Frederik is not at the heart of the novel, but it does provide an underlying tension. Frederik and Ling had a brief, sexual relationship before Ling moved in with Aritomo. It becomes obvious that Frederik loved Ling and that he never entered into a serious relationship because he could not have Ling. Ling, however, loved Aritomo and never entered into a serious relationship because she lost him. At this point in the novel, it seems reasonable to expect that Ling and Frederik will find peace with each other and that they will begin a life together.

## Discussion Question 1

Think of examples of taboo subjects in today's society. How do these compare with the things Ling could not talk about during her early life, including Yun Hong's rape?

## Discussion Question 2

What is Golden Lily? What is Tatsuji's theory about the program and about Aritomo's involvement?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you consider the most important theme of the novel? Why?

## Vocabulary

frequently, discordant, siphoning, distrustful, convoy, strafed, imperial, coherent, hordes, preposterous, judiciary, credentials, broods, perforate



# Chapters 24 - 26

## Summary

In Chapter 24, the story reverts to the time when Ling was apprenticed to Aritomo. The rains ended and work on the garden resumed. One day, Ling was finishing up some work. She said the garden seemed to be complete and perfect. Aritomo answered by taking a few leaves from her bag and scattered them. One evening, he announced that the tattoo was complete. Ling looked in the mirror and noted a small blank spot. Aritomo said every horimono had a blank to indicate that it would never be perfect and never finished.

Work continued each day, doing general maintenance on the garden. Each evening, Ah Cheong waited on the verandah with Aritomo's walking stick just as he and Ling set out for their daily walk. One day, Aritomo handed the walking stick to Ling and said he wanted to spend some time alone. She never saw him again. She reported him missing the next morning and police responded. The media eventually picked up on the story and interest grew over the coming weeks.

A week into the search, a Japanese man Sekigawa arrived. He asked if Aritomo had left a letter for anyone. Ling replied that he did not leave anything because he did not intend to get lost in the jungle. Ling was looking through a notebook she kept about the war and saw the letter written by the war criminal to his son. She decided to have Ah Cheong mail it.

Chapter 25 moves to the present. Frederik arrives and Ling shows him an original copy of Suikoden, an ancient book. Frederik points out that it must be very valuable. She explains that the book impacted the art of tattoos, changing them from crude renderings to beautiful works of art. Ling reveals that Aritomo gave her a tattoo and that she wants to have it preserved. Frederik is furious, comparing it to having an animal skinned. Ling says she wants him to be present when she shows the tattoo to Tatsuji. He refuses but she says there is no one else she can ask and he gives in.

Tatsuji arrives. Frederik says the tattoo is "grotesque." Tatsuji is transfixed. The next day, Tatsuji returns with a contract for the book. He then reveals that he has mapped the garden and believes it fits perfectly in the blank spot on her tattoo, with the garden paths joining the paths on her tattoo. That makes it a map of the region.

The next night, Ling has dinner with Frederik and Emily. Emily gives her one of Aritomo's paper lanterns that she saved for years. Ling and Frederik talk and Frederik offers to take care of Ling once her illness progresses. She says that is not the reason she returned. Emily dies during the night.

One day, Ah Cheong brings joss sticks, used to pay homage to the dead, as Ling requested. He also has the walking stick, as he had always provided for Aritomo, and



she accepts it for the first time. She goes to Emily's grave, lighting sticks for Emily, Magnus, and for their daughter. She discovers a stone dedicated to Aritomo and lights sticks there as well.

In the house, Ling says that Frederik should have told her about the stone. He says he did. Ling loses her train of thought for a moment. Ling tells Frederik about Tatsuji's theory about her tattoo. She says that it is apparently a map of the region and that it could lead her to the prison camp where Yun Hong is buried. Ling says that finding the camp will not change the past nor will it change Ling's guilt. Ling says no one can be allowed to use the tattoo as a map to find the camp. Frederik says Ling needs to change the garden so that no one else will figure it out. Ling says she was never able to complete a garden for Yun Hong. Frederik points out that Aritomo named the Pavilion because of Yun Hong's favorite poem, and that Ling's work at Yugiri means that she has made a garden for her sister.

In Chapter 26, Tatsuji arrives to pack up the wood carvings. Ling announces that she is changing the garden to look as it did before Aritomo made changes. Tatsuji gives Ling a book of poetry he almost always carries with him. He invites her to visit him when he's completed his new house. She knows they will never see each other again.

Ling is practicing her archery when she loses her sight. She panics for a moment, then hears Aritomo telling her to become calm. It takes time, but she does. Remembering everything he taught her, she takes the shot and knows the aim is true, in spite of the fact that she cannot see. She remains still until her sight returns. That night, she lights the lantern Emily gave her and sets it free. She writes through the night.

She remembers a dream she'd had for a time after Aritomo's disappearance. She was carrying a bow as she followed Aritomo through the jungle. He stopped and turned toward her, and she released the bow string. There was no arrow, but he fell.

Ling comes to some decisions. She decides she will restore the garden to its previous state, and that she will include plaques with information about Aritomo and Yun Hong. She wants to ensure that Yun Hong's life is remembered, even when Ling no longer has any memories. She also knows that she has to destroy her tattoo, and that she cannot leave anyone with that responsibility, including Frederik. She decides that she will have to do that as well.

Ling thinks about the coming days. She will continue to work in the garden. She knows she and Frederik will spend time together, and that they will laugh and cry. She knows that Ah Cheong will take care of her and will always offer her the walking stick. And she knows that one day, she will refuse the stick as she sets out for her walk.

## Analysis

The tattoo repulses Frederick, but that may have partly been because he was still jealous of the fact that Ling cared about Aritomo. He later asks if anyone else has ever seen the tattoo. She responds that only her doctors have seen it. He asks about lovers



but she says she has never been with anyone after Aritomo. Frederik latches onto the idea that Ling might be ashamed of the tattoo. He says it does not matter if other people find out that she has a tattoo because she has already stepped down from her position as judge. He uses that argument to again insist that she see more doctors to try to figure out a cure for her illness, but she again refuses.

Ling spent years as a young woman trying to find the prison camp where she and Yun Hong were held. When she realizes that Aritomo left her a map to the camp, she has no excuse to stay away. She could have chosen to go there immediately but she accepts that there is no longer any reason for her to return. More than 40 years have passed since Yun Hong died. There would be nothing left of her body by now. In addition, it seems unlikely that Ling could actually dig into the mountain where Yun Hong's body was buried. There were rumors about booby traps, including cyanide in the soil that would kill anyone who did not know exactly where to dig.

Another important aspect of this situation is that Ling now accepts that she will never get over her guilt and that nothing will change Yun Hong's fate. She cannot bring her sister back to life or even change the fact that Yun Hong died while Ling lived.

Ling also decides that she has to ensure that no one will ever figure out where the mines are located. With that decision, she decides that she will not preserve the tattoo after all. Not only that, but she decides that she will have to ensure that it is destroyed upon her death. Ling seems to plan to kill herself or disappear into the jungle, just as Aritomo did. She does not reveal any specifics, but it seems there are flaws in her plan. She might begin to lose her memory sooner than she expects, meaning she will not remember the plan. She also might get lost in the jungle and die, but someone might find her body. The reader can assume that she has worked through these details, or can assume that Ling is leaving it all up to fate or chance.

The novel ends without explaining Aritomo's fate. Tatsuji believes that Aritomo actually disappeared twice – once when he left Japan and no one knew where he was until he turned up in Malaya, and a second time when he disappeared into the jungle. It could be that Aritomo simply walked into the jungle and somehow moved into some other life. If that's the case, Ling apparently never hears from him again.

The walking stick becomes a symbol of returning and the meaning is not very subtle. Aritomo always took the walking stick with him on the days he walks with Ling, but on that particular day he disappeared, he refused it. Ling has begun carrying the walking stick as well and knows that one day soon, she will decline to take it with her. The implication is that she will disappear into the jungle and never be seen again.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Ling decide not to return to the prison camp?



## Discussion Question 2

What do you think Ling plans to do to ensure that the tattoo is never used as a map to the prison camp?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Ling plan to do with the garden and what are her long-term plans for it?

## Vocabulary

banished, scrutinized, squandered, caul, tinctured, doused, tyranny, resonated, regime, stigma, barbaric, subversive





# Characters

## Judge Teoh Yun Ling

Yun Ling is a retired judge by the time she begins telling the story of her life. She has recently been diagnosed with a neurological disease that will take her memories and her ability to communicate. With those thoughts in mind, she decides to write down details about her life and to set her affairs in order.

The Japanese took Ling and her sister, Yun Hong, prisoner when they were young. Both were brutalized and tortured by the Japanese, but Ling became close to a Japanese officer and was set free while all the other prisoners, including Yun Hong, were killed. Ling never forgave herself for surviving while her sister died. She spent a lot of time as an adult trying to find the prison camp in the hope that she could give the prisoners a proper burial. It wasn't until she retired and faced her own mortality that she realized the quest was futile.

Ling was filled with hatred for the Japanese because of her time in the prison camp but she connected with Aritomo while he taught her about gardening. She learned that the hatred was unproductive and learned to put it aside, at least to the point that she was able to move on with her life, though she is never quiet in her opinions about the level of cruelty her people experienced at the hands of the Japanese. Her love of nature and gardens is a large part of her personality as an older woman. For the sake of clarity, she is referred to as Ling throughout this guide.

## Nakamura Aritomo

Aritomo was a Japanese man who studied the art of creating traditional Japanese gardens from his youth. He was talented in the art of gardening and in other areas of art. He created impressive wood carvings that generated interest well past his disappearance. He was a strong man who valued his privacy, but he took on many workers as a means of saving them from the Japanese army. He was friends with people of various races though his relationships changed as opinions about the Japanese changed over time.

Aritomo told Ling that he had resigned as imperial gardener because he argued with a client. On the surface, he seemed to be a genuine person who had severed ties with Japan and the Japanese government. It is only as Ling talks with Professor Yoshikawa Tatsuji that she begins to question the truth of Aritomo's stories. Ling begins to believe that he was actually working for the Japanese government as he worked on his garden. He was apparently overseeing the Japanese plan to hide valuable items stolen as the Japanese ransacked the country. Aritomo created a tattoo on Ling's back that she accepted as an elaborate work of art. It is only long after his disappearance that she discovers that it is actually a map to the prison camp where Yun Hong died.





## Frederik Pretorius

Frederik is the nephew of Magnus and Emily Pretorius. He was in the military when he and Ling first met. They had a brief romantic connection and he never got over her. When Ling returns to Yugiri after her retirement and reveals her illness, he urges her to seek treatment. It is obvious that he hates the idea of losing her in such a permanent way, though they have not kept in close contact in recent years. Frederick is a businessman and a kind person. He is a likeable character and is obviously willing to do whatever he can for Ling.

## Magnus Pretorius

Magnus was the owner of a large tea plantation and Frederik's uncle. He was a strong character with strong opinions, especially related to politics, governments, and war. He refused to change those opinions, even when a high-ranking government official visited the tea plantation. He tended to want to protect others and probably died trying to save Ling and Emily.

## Yun Hong

Yun Hong was Yun Ling's older sister. She was taken prisoner by the Japanese and held in the same camp where Ling was held. She was immediately taken to a separate hut where she and some other girls were forced to have sex with the Japanese soldiers and officers. She tried to kill herself, which is an example of her level of desperation, but was told Ling would be forced to take her place if she succeeded. She knew she could never return home because she would be ashamed of her life in the prison camp.

As a means of dealing with the cruelty they faced, Ling and Yun Hong spent time talking about the beautiful gardens they'd seen on a visit to Japan. They created an imaginary garden of their own, escaping to it when their lives were too harsh. When Yun Hong learned that Ling might have a chance to escape, she sent her a note, urging her to take it. Yun Hong died in the prison camp along with all the other prisoners.

## Professor Yoshikawa Tatsuji

Tatsuji is a Japanese Scholar and former pilot for the Japanese military. He is interested in writing a book about Aritomo's carvings and is the first person Ling tells about the tattoo on her back. He has a great deal of information about Aritomo and Ling initially dismisses most of it but eventually has to face the fact that Tatsuji's information is correct.



## Ah Cheong

Ah Cheong is the housekeeper at Aritomo's home. He continues to work after Aritomo's disappearance, serving Ling. He was highly devoted to both Aritomo and continues that devotion to Ling. He provided for their needs, sometimes before they even made a request. For example, he waited with a walking stick at the edge of the veranda each evening as Aritomo prepared for his daily walk. When Ling returned and took up the habit, he offered her the walking stick as well, even though she never asked him to.

## Tominaga Noburu

Tominaga was a Japanese man who was heavily involved in the work at the prison camp where Ling and Yun Hong were held. He was not nearly as cruel as the soldiers, though he did little to stop the ongoing torture. When he learned that Japan was certainly going to be forced to surrender, he managed to get Ling out of the prison camp which allowed her to survive. Aritomo also knew Tominaga, which supports the theory that Aritomo was still active in the Japanese government during the years when Ling was in prison.

## Colonel Teruzen

Colonel Teruzen was Tatsuji's flight instructor during the war. He felt that the pilots who were killing themselves as kamikazes were a total waste. When Tatsuji was about to fly off to his death, Teruzen took his place. The action saved Tatsuji's life because there was not another plane available.

## Emily Pretorius

Emily is Magnus's wife and Frederik's aunt. She is a likeable character who has suffered loss and heartache, but never became bitter. She realizes that there is something wrong with Ling because of Ling's return to Yugiri after an extended absence. Emily dies peacefully in her sleep after giving Ling one of Aritomo's paper lanterns.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Ling's Tattoo

Ling's tattoo is symbolic on several levels, including her trust in the Japanese artist, Aritomo. The tattoo also symbolizes the region as Aritomo saw it, complete with directions to the prison camp where Ling was held. The tattoo also came to symbolize Ling's effort to come to peace with the years of imprisonment, Yun Hong's death, and the people who failed to protect her.

## Yun Hong's Garden

Yun Hong's imaginary garden symbolized a peaceful place where she could escape from the harsh realities of the Japanese prison camp. Ling helped create the imaginary garden and used it herself as a means of escape. Ling later felt the need to actually create the garden as a way of honoring Yun Hong, but she was not able to do so until she returned to Yugiri after her retirement.

## Magnus's Eye

Magnus wore an eye patch over one eye and the missing eye is a symbol of the fact that he felt a deep sense of loss. The feeling was not because it was a handicap. He never mentioned being able to see less clearly or to have problems doing any particular task. Instead, he felt that people looked at him differently because of the eye patch. He said he felt a sense of loss. Aritomo gave him a tattoo of an eye on his upper chest as a means of helping Magnus deal with the feelings.

## The Nun

The nun from the Temple of Clouds symbolizes the young women who the Japanese raped and disgraced. Ling first sees the nun at the Temple of the Clouds when she and Aritomo went there to pray for Tominaga. When the nun visited Ling at Yugiri, she reveals that she was raped by the Japanese soldiers during their occupation of Malaya. Her family considered her a disgrace and that stigma followed her wherever she went, prompting her to go to the Temple of the Clouds. The significance is that Yun Hong feared she would face that same fate if she survived the prison camp.

## Golden Lily

Golden Lily was the code name for a Japanese program and it symbolizes all the things the Japanese stole from the Malayan people. Tatsuji is the first person to mention that term and to put details on the rumors that the Japanese buried treasure in the Malayan



jungle. From his description, Ling realizes that she was in one of the prison camps where the treasure was buried.

## Mnemosyne and Her Twin Sister

Mnemosyne is the goddess of memory and her twin sister, the goddess of forgetting, has no name. Together they symbolize what is happening to Ling as she faces the illness that is taking her ability to communicate and her memories.

## Kumomori

Kumomori was the Japanese translation of Ling's name and it symbolizes her captivity. Tominaga insisted on using Kumomori instead of Ling, which angered Ling on one level but that gave her a means of escape on another. She could literally use this as an alternative personality, leaving Kumomori to endure the harsh realities of the prison camp while Ling escaped to the imaginary garden she and Yun Hong created. .

## The Walking Stick

The walking stick is symbolic of leaving Yugiri. When Aritomo left Yugiri for a walk before disappearing forever into the jungle, Ah Cheong handed him the walking stick, as usual. Aritomo took it but then gave it to Ling and said he wanted to walk alone that day. She never saw him again. Ling imagines that there will come a day when she tells Ah Cheong that she does not need the walking stick for her daily walk. That seems to signal the day when she will also disappear.

## Yugiri

While Yugiri is a place, it is also symbolic of several relationships, of dedication, and of continuity. Frederik says that the garden symbolizes the distance between him and Ling, and the reason they could never be together as a couple. The garden also symbolizes how Lin and Aritomo became closer with each overcoming obstacles that kept them from living their lives to the fullest. Finally, the garden represented Ling's dedication to Yun Hong, especially considering her decision to finally renovate the garden and open it in Yun Hong's memory.

## The Picture of the Japanese Emperor

Aritomo had a picture of the Japanese Emperor in his home and he bowed to it each time he entered. For him, that picture symbolized the Japanese culture, his homeland, and his devotion to the country he left behind. To Ling, the picture symbolized the terror and brutality of the Japanese soldiers, and the loss she suffered under their control.

After Ling told Aritomo about her time in the prison camp, he removed the picture but never explained why.



# Settings

## Yugiri

Yugiri is the name of the garden at the property Aritomo owned until his death. The word translates to “evening mists” in English. The garden is extensive with stone lanterns, a pond, and assorted plants. A key component in the garden is the water wheel, which was a gift from the Japanese emperor during Aritomo's early years in Malaya. By the time Ling returns to the garden, the water wheel is deteriorating. The garden “borrows” from the area. For example, the pond reflects the sky. A hedge is opened slightly so the person in the garden gets a glimpse of the mountains beyond.

An important point about Yugiri is that Aritomo was not harassed by the Japanese soldiers during the war and the gardeners he employed were spared from becoming Japanese prisoners. Aritomo employed many people and created an elaborate garden, saving many lives.

## The Prison Camp

Ling and Yun Hong were held in an unnamed prison camp deep in the jungle and far from their home. The camp included a fence, bamboo huts, and a large cave where the Japanese hid boxes. The prisoners worked to expand the cave, making more room for boxes, but none of them knew what was in the boxes. When Japan surrendered, every piece of the camp was dismantled and removed, then a Japanese officer collapsed the hill at the front of the cave so the boxes were hidden. Ling eventually discovers that the boxes held treasure the Japanese stole during their occupation of Malaya.

## Majuba Tea Estate

Magnus and Emily owned a large tea plantation in Malay and Ling went to visit them in order to meet Aritomo. The plantation property was extensive and Magnus did a lot to keep the family and workers safe from the frequent attacks by communist rebels. It was not enough and the rebels broke into the property, killing several people and taking Magnus hostage. The plantation passed to Frederik, who continued to work it until the time when Ling returns to Yugiri. By that time, he has made some changes, including turning a worker's hut into a tea house.

## Malaya

The novel is set in the country of Malaya. The country exists and the author seems to keep the settings realistic. There are several specific settings within the country, each with its own topography, weather, and details. The country as a whole is important only



because it serves as a historic backdrop for the events that take place, including the Japanese and British occupations.

## The Temple of Clouds

The Temple of Clouds is literally a run-down temple where a few religious people live and where a few people go to pray. The temple has several levels of symbolism, including as a place of refuge. Aritomo and Ling visited the Temple of Clouds after they learned of Tominaga's death. Ling discovered that a nun at the temple had arrived there after everyone shunned her because she was raped during the war. Yun Hong had also been raped and feared that she would not be welcome anywhere, which makes Ling happy that the temple serves as a refuge. The temple is also symbolic of endurance. While it is in disrepair when Ling and Aritomo visit, it is still in operation more than 30 years later when Ling returns to Yugiri.



# Themes and Motifs

## The Effects of War

Many of the characters face the psychological and physical effects of war. The effects vary from one person to another, but it is clear that everyone pays a price. An officer cut off two of Ling's fingers as punishment and she carried that deformity for her entire life. She wore gloves to cover the fingers from those who would stare, but the loss remained a constant reminder of the war.

Ling lived with her parents, sister, and a brother before the Japanese invaded Malaya. She lived a typical teenage life in Malaya and was happy. Her father had placed a great deal of faith in the British and was bitterly disappointed when the British left Malaya, leaving the native people to deal with the Japanese invasion on their own. Ling's father chose to move to a remote plantation with his wife and two daughters, believing he could escape the war. When the Japanese soldiers arrived, they brutally beat Ling's parents and took Ling and her sister, Yun Hong, captive. This event tore her family apart and they were never whole again.

While in the prison camp, Yun Hong knew she would not be accepted back into normal society because the Japanese soldiers sexually abused her. Ling assured Yun Hong that they would never speak of that again, but Yun Hong knew it would not matter. One young woman in the camp hanged herself because she saw suicide as her only escape. Other women, like the young nun who went to the Temple of Clouds, faced the same realities. She said her family shunned her and she was not even able to begin a new life in another town. Somehow, people always learned that the Japanese had raped her.

After the war, the War Crimes Tribunal tried and hanged many Japanese officers for their actions during the war. Ling felt the Japanese should have paid restitution to the people of Malaya. She was furious when the British signed a peace treaty with Japan that made it impossible for any Malayan to demand that the Japanese pay for the damage, including deaths. Ling held onto that anger for many years. She was vocal in her hatred of the Japanese. Observers saw remark upon how her anger controlled her life.

War changed Magnus's life twice. The Japanese took him prisoner as a young man and he lost his eye during that time. As an adult, they held him captive on his tea plantation. If not for his utility in maintaining his tea plantation, they would have taken him as a true prisoner of war.

War affects not only the Malaysians, but also the Japanese soldiers. The Japanese soldiers who were guarding Ling's prison camp all died so that they could never tell the location of the camp or the secrets of the treasure buried there. Tatsuji talked about his flight instructor who was sickened by the young pilots ordered to kill themselves in





kamikaze attacks. He also mentioned a commanding officer who was known to be drunk all the time, hinting that it was because he was also sick of all the death.

## Changing Attitudes

Several of the characters change their attitudes about themselves, the world around them, and each other. These changes, especially Ling's maturation, drive the action.

Ling hated being controlled, but that changed while she was studying under Aritomo. The gardening was one aspect of the change as she listened to him and learned from his experience. The archery was another, and in some ways, more important example. While Ling wanted to learn gardening and set out to soak up as much information as possible, her decision to learn archery was a snap decision. As she studied archery, she discovered that she had to mimic Aritomo. She also had to take his directives at face value and obey them. Up to this point, Ling had sought to control all aspects of her life. Suddenly, she was willing to let Aritomo tell her what to do with regard to something other than gardening. She began to look forward to the ritualized steps related to archery, which required that she give up control. She was not free to insert her own ideas and desires into the equation, but was forced to go through the prescribed steps.

Ling always hated the Japanese, but Aritomo taught her that her hatred interfered with her life. Magnus made a similar comment. He lost his eye during another war. Magnus indicated that he no longer hated the people who maimed him. He said that holding onto that hatred for so many years would have killed him.

Aritomo's teachings further change Ling. At first, she seemed to be studying only because she wanted to learn to build a garden for Yun Hong. As she opened herself to the information Aritomo offered, she saw a bigger picture. She learned about nature and about herself. These lessons fundamentally changed her. Gradually, she discovered that her life was better for her time with Aritomo, regardless of whether she learned about gardening, archery, or just about herself.

Aritomo's attitudes also changed, though he was not vocal about the changes. Aritomo had a picture of the emperor hanging in his house. Each time he entered that room, he bowed to the emperor. One day, Ling told him about her time in the prison camp. She soon noticed that Aritomo stopped bowing and that the picture was gone. No one else could have removed the picture, indicating that Aritomo's attitude had changed. He never voiced that change to anyone and it is left to the reader to decide the significance.

Frederik's attitude about Ling is constant, though their relationship changes. In this way, Frederik becomes an antithesis of the theme. He falls in love with Ling, but never reveals his feelings. He is angry with her when she moves in with Aritomo, but his feelings never change. When she returns, he wants to do everything he can to save her from the illness and to take care of her.



## Yugiri

Yugiri plays a role in many lives over the course of the novel and impacts the lives of many. When Ling was just learning about Aritomo and the garden, she discovered that the garden saved many lives during the war. Aritomo was Japanese and he hired people from the area to work on Yugiri. His status as a Japanese man made it possible for him to keep those people from being taken prisoner. Many of the Malayan men were forced into prison camps to do manual labor, including working on mines and building a railroad. Through his employment of these men in the garden, Aritomo saved them from that fate.

The garden represented a real-life image of what Ling wanted to build to memorialize Yun Hong. She saw it as an example of what Aritomo could do and tried to hire him to create a garden for her, but she wound up studying under him instead. With his guidance, Ling began to feel ownership of the garden, even though there was no mention of Aritomo bequeathing her the property. When Frederik criticized the garden, Ling took it personally. This reaction displayed the level of her devotion to the garden, even during her first months there.

Frederik admits to Ling that he hates the garden because it symbolizes the distance between them. He never says that he loves her, but it is apparent from his actions. He sees the garden as the main thing that keeps them apart because she meets Aritomo, became Aritomo's lover, and returned to the area, all because of the garden. Frederik resents that Ling makes no decisions with his feelings in mind.

For Ling, the garden represents a safe place. When the rebels beat her, she moves in with Aritomo instead of going home. She talks about the security she felt when she lived at the garden. When she faces the illness that eventually takes her ability to communicate, she returns to Yugiri.

The garden also represents Ling's desire to honor Yun Hong's memory with a garden. She planned to create one of her own during her youth, but never accomplished it. It is not until she retires from her career that Frederik points out that Yugiri has always been Ling's tribute to her sister. With that realization, Ling becomes determined to open the garden to the public – something that has never been done before. She plans to erect plaques to tell about the lives of Yun Hong and Aritomo, leaving the garden for everyone to enjoy as a tribute to the two people who were important to her.

Yugiri also represents Aritomo's work. While it was not the only thing he accomplished during his life, he points out to Ling that it was the only place that remained as he created it. While he changed it over the course of his last years, the garden was everything he wanted. Ling tried to find more of Aritomo's gardens, but none of them inspired the feeling she gets from Yugiri, which made her certain that they had been changed and were no longer truly Aritomo's gardens.



## Family Dynamics

Ling's relationship with her family was apparently fairly typical before the war. Her mother reprimanded her at one point for her manners, indicating that she took her role seriously. When the Japanese soldiers took Ling and Yun Hong prisoner, their mother tried to intervene. The soldiers beat her severely and Ling was not even certain that her mother survived. Her mother never recovered and lost her mind. When Ling returned home, her mother asked for Yun Hong each time she saw Ling. Ling said she was relieved when her mother stopped recognizing her altogether.

Her father did not stop her from becoming part of the War Crimes Tribunal because she was "a ghost to him." (34) He had probably given up on seeing either of his daughters again by the time Ling returned home. He was an influential man and could probably have kept Ling from becoming part of that tribunal, but he did not act. This reluctance indicates that his attitude toward her altered so much that he did not act as he would have before the war.

Ling's relationship with her father changes even further. Ling discovers that Magnus invited them to stay at the tea plantation where they might have been safer, but her father dismissed the idea. That decision led to Yun Hong and Ling being captured and to Yun Hong's death. Ling pointed that out to her father once, saying that he had caused her sister's death and her mother's state of mind.

Ling and Yun Hong were close before the war, but that relationship changed while they were in prison. Ling was the younger of the two. In this culture during this time, she would be programmed to accept Yun Hong as a person to be obeyed, though there was still a level of sibling rivalry between them. While they were in prison, Ling stole food whenever she could. She also turned in other prisoners who were disobeying the rules in order to get better treatment, better food, and medicine. Yun Hong told her to stop, but she refused. Yun Hong also told Ling that she should run away if she ever got the chance and that she could not hesitate. When Tominaga took Ling out of the prison camp, she immediately returned in search of Yun Hong. While it would not have been the same as disobeying her parents, it would have been out of character for Ling to disregard her older sister's instructions.

When Ling stopped visiting her home, her family dynamic changed again. Her parents taught her that family was the most important part of life. In her culture, a grown child always returned home for the Chinese New Year celebrations. To refuse was to deny family, which was a major offense. After staying at the tea plantation for a few months, Ling declined to return home. This signifies the changing dynamics in her family.

## Cultural Expectations

The cultural expectations of the Malayan setting affect many of the characters. These effects range from the mild to the extreme and, in some ways, drive many of the characters' actions.



Yun Hong encapsulates this theme. She was a pretty young woman. Upon her arrival at the prison camp, she was immediately chosen to have sex with the Japanese soldiers. The soldiers repeatedly raped her. At one point, she tried to hang herself, but a Japanese soldier saved her life. The soldiers told her that Ling would be forced to take her place if she managed to kill herself, which stopped her from trying again. Yun Hong was a victim, but she knew that would not matter if she managed to leave the prison camp alive. She knew that her family would never accept her because they would always consider her a sullied woman. That same attitude would prevail throughout society. After Ling's retirement, she meets with a nun who had faced the same situation. She moved to the Temple of Clouds to escape the constant derision.

Tattoos are another example of this theme. Tattoos are taboo in Ling's culture, but several people have them. They are never displayed openly and those in polite society generally consider them vulgar. When Ling and her family were having a meal with Magnus, a waiter spilled liquid on Magnus's shirt. Ling saw the colors of the tattoo and remarked on it, though she knew it was rude to do so. Ling's parents were horrified upon learning that Magnus had the tattoo. Later, Ling asked to see the tattoo. She learned that it was an eye, meant to help Magnus deal with the loss of his real eye.

Ling allowed Aritomo to give her a tattoo that covered her entire back. She was not particularly interested in the cultural dictates of the time, though she did once say that it would have ruined her career if people knew about the tattoo on her back. Frederik believed that might be the reason she refused to see specialists about her illness, knowing that people would judge her tattoo.

Ling also chose to live with Aritomo, which also went against the cultural dictates. An unmarried man and woman living together risked being shunned by the community. That did not happen to Ling and Aritomo, but Ling was aware that some people were not very friendly during a gathering for Magnus's birthday. Her father was also angry that she got media attention after Aritomo's disappearance, which made it clear that Ling had been living with him.

Other cultural norms include the requirement that women remain under the rule and protection of men and that children honor and obey their parents. Ling went against both of these dictates. On the surface, it seems she simply does not care about the social requirements, but it is more likely that the years in the prison camp affected her in such a way that she refused to allow others to control her.

# Styles

## Point of View

Tan Twan Eng writes in the first person, limited perspective of Yun Ling. The limited perspective is vital in keeping the twist a secret until the end of the novel. Through the limited perspective, the reader only learns things as Ling learns them. It is not until she spends time with Professor Yoshikawa Tatsuji that Ling begins to question what she believes about Aritomo, especially his relationship with the Japanese government.

Aritomo told Ling that he was sacked from his position as a gardener for the Emperor because he argued with a client. Tatsuji believes Aritomo was sent to Malay to oversee the project of hiding the items Japanese soldiers stole during their time in the country. Ling begins to believe the prison camp where she and her sister were held was one place the Japanese were hiding valuables. Ling remains skeptical until she discovers that the tattoo on her back is a map that leads her directly to the prison camp where she and her sister were held.

Overall, Ling seems to be a reliable narrator, willing to share all the details she can remember. For example, she was a young woman during a time when her family and friends would have shunned her for an open sexual relationship outside marriage. She makes no effort to hide the fact that she had sex with Frederik and was living with Aritomo. Despite her willingness to share her life, time fogs her memory. She admits at one point that she is not certain whether a specific event happened on the day of another event or on some other day entirely. In addition, she has the illness that is already affecting her ability to write and understand language, though the effects are not yet severe.

## Language and Meaning

Tan Twan Eng writes in modern-day English though there are many foreign words and phrases that make some details difficult to understand. For example, in Chapter 14, Magnus visits Ling at the cabin she is using on his property. She offers him a “gin pahit.” He responds by saying that is a “lekker” offer. It seems obvious that “pahit” is some sort of beverage. Since Ling uses that word, it could be Malayan in origin. Magnus uses the Dutch word to respond. General meanings for both of these words can be discerned by their contexts, but the English-speaking reader can only be certain by checking the foreign words and phrases. In most scenes, there are only a scattering of words and phrases that are not English.

There are many elaborate, descriptive phrases. Some phrases use metaphors and similes, while others depend on imagery to make a point. In the opening paragraph, Ling describes the “rim of the sunrise.” Later in Chapter 1, she says her memories have “begun to break free, like shards of ice fracturing off an arctic shelf.” (1) She describes

some elderly Englishmen who “had the forgotten air of pages torn from an old and forgotten book.” (5) Eng uses this kind of imagery throughout the novel.

The author explains historical references for the casual reader. For example, the Malayan Communist Party plays an important role in the novel. This group terrorizes the people around the tea plantation while Ling is living there as a young adult. They attack Ling and kill many others, including Magnus. The novel includes only very general information about the group.

## Structure

The novel is not presented in chronological order. Ling, a woman who has recently retired from her position on the Malay Supreme Court, narrates the main storyline. The majority of this line of the novel is her current situation and this part of the story occurs in the present tense. The rest of the novel is her effort to write down her memories. This recounting becomes increasingly important as she struggles with the knowledge that a neurological disease means she will eventually lose the ability to communicate at all. These memories occur in past tense. This differentiation in tense is vital to keeping track of the timeline.

The chapters are titled by number only so the reader has no clue about what to expect in that chapter. There are 26 chapters of varying lengths. Some cover a specific time or event. For example, Chapter 19 begins with Ling's life prior to being captured by the Japanese and covers her time in the Japanese prison camp. The chapter ends after the Aboriginal tribe helps her recover and sends her to safety. Other chapters include jumps in the time from Ling's life after retirement and her life as a prisoner, to her time as Aritomo's apprentice.

The Kindle version of the novel includes a list of books and information the author used in writing the novel. The author makes it clear that the historical information is accurate, but that the specific events in the novel are fictional. These fictional events include meetings between the fictional characters and the historical people.



## Quotes

He is in his mid-sixties, dressed in a light gray linen suit, a white cotton shirt and a pale blue tie. Old enough to have fought in the war, I think, an almost subconscious assessment I apply to every Japanese man I have ever met.”

-- Ling (chapter 2 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Ling has just met Tatsuji for the first time. This “subconscious assessment” she makes is an indication that she still thinks about the war constantly, and that it continues to make an impact on her life.

So you see, Magnus, the British made certain that no one – not a single man or woman or child who had been tortured and imprisoned or massacred by the Japs – none of them or their families can demand any form of financial reparation from the Japanese.”

-- Ling (chapter 3 paragraph 94)

**Importance:** Ling is furious that the peace treaty brokered with the Japanese basically says that the Japanese should pay reparations, but does not order them to make any restitution for their war crimes against the people of Malaya. Ling's family was torn apart by the Japanese soldiers and she knows she is one of many who were harmed. The effects of the war is one of the main themes in the novel.

I felt a sudden fury at my father's obdurate pride. Magnus was right – things would have turned out differently: I would be unharmed, my mother would not be lost inside her mind, and Yun Hong would still be alive.”

-- Ling (chapter 5 paragraph 30)

**Importance:** Magnus had just told Ling that he invited Ling's family to stay with them on the tea estate when the Japanese invaded. Ling's family was torn apart because of her father's decision to turn down that offer. Ling was certain that her father refused only because of his pride.

The practice of designing gardens had originated in the temples of China, where the work was done by monks. Gardens were created to approximate the idea of a paradise in the afterlife.”

-- Ling (chapter 7 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Ling had just decided that she would accept Aritomo's offer to teach her about creating a Japanese garden and had begun reading a translation from an ancient text about gardening. The idea that the garden is supposed to represent paradise is accurate for people like Ling and Aritomo, who truly feel the harmony of a well-planned garden.

That afternoon at Magnus's braai, after Frederik drove me back from Yugiri – it stands out with such clarity in my mind that I wonder if it actually took place, if the people there actually said what I think I remember. But does it matter?”





-- Ling (chapter 9 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Ling, following Frederik's advice, has begun to write down the things she remembers, knowing that the time will come when she will no longer be able to do so. At this point, she has begun to question her memories, but counters with the thought that most of the people have died, so it does not really matter if her memories are correct.

Every detail of the eight formal steps in the process of shooting was prescribed, even down to the sequence of breathing, and I felt a satisfaction in conforming to the precise and ritualized movements.”

-- Ling (chapter 12 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** Ling was learning the art of archery under Aritomo's instruction. Up to this point, she had always refused to let the Japanese dictate rule how she would act but she is beginning to move past that, as evidenced by the fact that she embraces the rituals of archery.

It was odd how Aritomo's life seemed to glance off mine; we were like two leaves falling from a tree, touching each other now and again as they spiraled to the forest floor.”

-- Ling (chapter 14 paragraph 60)

**Importance:** Ling had begun to see how she and Aritomo were connected by a series of events, including that she and Yun Hong had heard about Aritomo years earlier. The two girls had used an imaginary garden as a means of escaping the brutality of their captivity, which prompted Ling to seek out Aritomo's help in creating a garden in Yun Hong's memory. The coincidence continued to pile up in the coming years, culminating with the theory that Aritomo had been involved with the Japanese program Golden Lily, and that Ling's prison camp was one part of that program.

People would talk and I knew gossip would reach my father within days, but from the moment I moved into Yugiri I felt insulated from the world beyond its borders. Despite the killings going on all across the country, it was the first time in years that I felt at peace.”

-- Ling (chapter 17 paragraph 75)

**Importance:** Ling had moved in with Aritomo after the rebels attacked her. She defied the cultural dictates of the day to do so and knew that her father would soon learn about her rebellion. Ling had battled to find peace since the war and it is noteworthy that she found it in the home of a Japanese gardener.

The first stone of my life had been set down years ago, when I had heard of Aritomo's garden. Everything that had happened since then had brought me to this place in the mountains, this moment in time.”

-- Ling (chapter 18 paragraph 42)

**Importance:** Ling and Aritomo were at the Temple of Clouds and Aritomo had asked her to tell him about her time as a prisoner. She had never told anyone else the details so





her decision to tell Aritomo about it is significant. She compared her arrival at that moment in time to the art of creating a rock garden. The stones were set deeply in the ground to create the desired effect. Her next sentence is that she was afraid of the fact that fate had such a tight control on her life.

We never spoke about what the Japanese were making her do. She would distract herself – and me – by talking about the gardens in Kyoto we had visited, describing them in detail in a dreamy voice.”

-- Ling (chapter 19 paragraph 52)

**Importance:** Yun Hong was being forced to submit to sex with the Japanese soldiers, which meant her life is basically over even if she managed to survive the prison camp. They created an imaginary garden like the one they had seen when they visited Japan, and they imagined themselves there to avoid the harsh realities of the prison camp. It was literally how Ling survived, which is why she wanted to make a garden in Yun Hong's memory.

It was true what he said – I had begun to anticipate what he would put on my body, and I had even started to enjoy the pain, because for those hours when his needles tracked across my skin, the clamor in my mind was deadened.”

-- Ling (chapter 22 paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Aritomo had been working on the tattoo for awhile at this point and, as he predicted, Ling began to want the work to go faster. She had not made demands about exactly what the tattoo would be, which explained her anticipation to see what he would create. An important aspect of this quote is that Ling continued to struggle with her thoughts and emotions after the war, and she found that she can escape them by focusing only on the pain of the tattoo.

The nun turns to me, and smiles – not at me, but at the world itself. 'Ahhh...Can you be certain of that?'"

-- The Nun (chapter 23 paragraph 36)

**Importance:** Ling had just told the nun that Aritomo's work was not yet completed when he disappeared. The nun's response could prompt the reader to wonder if Aritomo had left on purpose, and to consider reasons for his decision, if it was a premeditated plan.