

The Girl with the White Flag Study Guide

The Girl with the White Flag by Tomiko Higa

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Plot Summary

"The Girl With the White Flag" is the autobiographical account of Tomiko Higa's childhood on the war-torn island of Okinawa during World War II.

Tomiko's family has lived on the island of Okinawa for a long time. She is the youngest of nine children, and her family is well-respected because it descended from the samurai in service to the king. Tomiko's mother dies in 1944, when Tomiko is just six. Two of Tomiko's sisters are married. One brother lives on the mainland while the other is serving with the Japanese army in China.

Over the next year, her father rears her and teaches her many important things, such as how to farm, what plants to eat, and so on. He is a strict but kind man. Tomiko gets along well with her two sisters, Yoshiko and Hatsuke, and plays with her older brother, whom she calls Nini. When war does at last come to the island, their father does not return home from his duties bringing food to the military signal corps station.

Yoshiko, Hatsuke, Nini, and Tomiko decide that they will flee south at the recommendation of the army. Along the way, they encounter the horrors of war, from dead soldiers and dead civilians, to bombed-out houses and a destroyed landscape. Nini is later killed while the children spend the night on the shore. While on a road choked with refugees heading south, Tomiko becomes separated from her sisters.

She heads off on her own, scavenging for food from vegetable plots and the haversacks of dead soldiers. She meets a number of animals, and is almost killed by Japanese soldiers. Tomiko believes that God, her mother, her father, and her brother have intervened numerous times to save her life throughout her ordeal.

Eventually, Tomiko comes to stay in a cave with an elderly couple, whom she lovingly comes to call Granny and Grandpa. They help feed her, and she helps to care for them, for Granny is blind and Grandpa is a quadruple amputee. They tell Tomiko that she must go on and live a long and happy life, for her entire life is truly ahead of her. On June 25, 1945, the three hear the voices of Americans speaking in Japanese, telling the civilians to come out and that the Americans will not hurt them. The old couple make a white flag for Tomiko to carry out of the cave. She comes across three American soldiers, one of whom is taking photos. She comes to discover the Americans are kind and friendly.

Years after the war, Tomiko comes across the photo of herself and a white flag in a history book. The photo becomes well-known, and Tomiko, with the urging of her husband, writes about her experiences, and decides to seek out the soldier with the camera. She tracks him down to Texas with the help of the soldier's unit commander, and a television film crew. The photographer, John Hendrickson, is very happy to see Tomiko. He takes a photo of her with the same camera that he used forty-three years previously.



Chapters 1 -3

Chapters 1 -3 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 1, Tomiko Higa is born in Shuri, on the Japanese island of Okinawa, the last of nine children. Her family is descended from the samurai, and Tomiko's father commands much respect for his family's ancestry, and is very strict raising his children. They live and work on a farm and raise various kinds of animals. On March 19, 1944, Tomiko's mother, Kame, passes away. Tomiko is only six. Four of her siblings are away (two are married, one is in the army, one is on the mainland). Tomiko's father soon after cuts her hair short, for reasons unknown to Tomiko. She theorizes that her hair either reminded her father of her mother's hair; or, with war coming, short hair would be easier to manage and would make her look like a boy.

Tomiko's father, Chokusho, is a man of many talents. He sings, and is an excellent calligrapher. His abilities are widely sought by people of the village and the surrounding countryside. He is also a skilled basket maker. Tomiko recalls with humor when her father had had too much to drink, that he would let all of the animals out of their stalls and they would all wander around the yard together, even coming into the house. When Tomiko's older siblings begin school, she is left alone in the house, and is required to bring her father lunch in the fields. She learns early on how to fry vegetables and boil potatoes. Her father, though he has a wristwatch, teaches Tomiko how to tell the time by the position of the sun, a skill she uses to know when to bring lunch. Tomiko's father also brings her out into the fields, to show her how to harvest vegetables, clean them, and eat them.

Tomiko recalls an incident where she roasts beans and eats them, only to be punished by her father by hanging her up in a net. The beans, her father explains, were to plant the following year's crops. He explains that they must be planted and not eaten. Tomiko apologizes. She also recalls that her father would go out to the garden at night and gaze at the moon, for he misses his wife terribly. Tomiko, reflecting on the beans incident, resolves never to do anything to upset her father again because he is so sad.

Tomiko and her brother, Nini, often play together, including around the turtle-shaped tombs of the island. They are taught to fish for eels by hand by their father. Tomiko's father is also responsible for providing food and supplies to the signal corps unit on the island, which is when he learns that war will soon be coming their way. He calls together Nini, Yoshiko, Hatsuko, Chokuyu (Nini), and Tomiko, to tell them to be prepared for war. The siblings help their father bring supplies and food to the signal corps unit when he is busy. Tomiko meets and befriends a soldier, but one day, he is no longer around, for he has died, and is cremated.

In Chapter 2, on April 1, 1945, American forces land on Okinawa. Within a month, they advancing over the island, and bombing raids are occurring regularly. Tomiko and her family take to their bomb shelter frequently. Food becomes scarce, as most of it is sent



to the Japanese troops. Because he is supposed to provide food for the signal corps, Tomiko's father is not required to join the civilian defense force. He therefore uses his time to tell his children that the fighting, if it is to come their way, will mean the children must take care of themselves if something happens to him and he can't get back. The fighting does indeed come their way, and Yoshiko -the oldest sibling at 17- goes to find out what has happened, and he is told to flee south. When she returns home, she advises everyone to pack a few things, and that they would head south. They travel as fast as they can, and spend their nights in natural caves near Makabe, where their father had gone to gather livestock. Tomiko recalls a scene from hell, where she discovers a dead woman torn apart and bloody, and her infant baby, still alive, sucking at the mother's breast, but drinking only blood.

As they continue south, the fighting also continues further south. The four siblings sleep on the shore near Komesu, in shallow holes they have dug to protect themselves from bombs. A short time later, the children are awoken, being told that the fighting is getting closer. When they try to wake Nini, they discover he has been killed in his sleep. Tomiko and her sisters then bury Nini. Yoshiko tells Tomiko that she is a little girl, and will have a long life, and because of this, she must come back for Nini's body, to bury in the family tomb. Nini agrees. After the burial of Nini, the soldiers tell the children to move on.

The roads south are choked with refugees, and Tomiko recounts clutching her sister's clothing -only to realize later that she is no longer with her sisters, but a strange woman. Tomiko has somehow lost her sisters. She frantically searches for them, but cannot find them. Using the skills her father has taught her, she scavenges for sweet potatoes and carrots. She continues on down the road, but a burst of machine gun fire shatters some rocks to her side, and she runs for cover while the other refugees keep running. As she travels around, she sees many dead Japanese soldiers still gripping their weapons, having fought to the death.

Years later, studying her movements on a map, and the American records of the battle, Tomiko discovers she was unknowingly walking in a circle, heading back towards the fighting, rather than away from it.

Chapter 3 - My Animal Friends - Tomiko begins traveling alone, seeking out roads not used by refugees. She feels more comfortable at night while traveling, because during the day, she presents a perfect target. But food is scarce. Tomiko spends the night in a hole, during which time she finds a string of ants which she follows to a dead soldier's haversack. Inside, she finds sugar drops Tomiko thanks the ants and the soldier, and leaves behind some sugar drops for the ants. Tomiko takes to scavenging food from dead soldiers, using rocks to open canned items. She moves around quickly, afraid to die, but then recalls her father telling her that if she is fated to die, it will not matter where she is. She then calms down considerably. A startled rat drops a sweet potato, which Tomiko then cleans and eats.

She continues on, going into a hole to hide, and there meets a friendly rabbit. She pets the rabbit, and falls asleep. She dreams of her brother, Nini, who tells her to eat a particular kind of weed. When Tomiko awakes, she realizes she and the rabbit don't



have any food, so she decides to leave the burrow to search for some. She finds the weed her brother had shown her in her dream, and eats it, discovering it is full of sweet juice. She feeds some to the rabbit, whom she decides to call Nini, believing her mother sent her brother to her in the guise of a rabbit. Tomiko decides she wants to find some carrots for Nini. As she travels, she comes across two Japanese soldiers, one helping the other commit hara-kiri. When Tomiko returns to the hole, she cannot find the rabbit, and so goes looking for him. No sooner does she do this than the area is destroyed by a bomb. She credits Nini the rabbit with saving her life.



Chapters 4 - 6

Chapters 4 - 6 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 4, Tomiko misses her sisters, and is determined to find them once more. She discovers a small valley full of caves, around which are dead Japanese soldiers. She discovers a little girl and some people in the cave, none of which are her sister. They are sealing the cave to blow themselves up with a bomb. Tomiko flees the cave in horror, and behind her, the explosion can be heard. At one cave, a Japanese soldier threatens to kill Tomiko, and tries to, chasing her to the edge of a cliff. There, the rocks on which Tomiko stands, crumble, and she falls down and loses consciousness.

When she wakes up, Tomiko realizes she has been saved by a tree growing halfway out of the cliff. Her work pants have snared on the tree, saving her. She now knows that God, her brother, her mother, and her father have all conspired to save her. As she tries to free herself, the old tree falls to the floor of the valley with her. She is bruised and battered, but alive, and goes to sleep. She wakes to the sound of running water, and is happy to be in pain with no broken bones. She goes to a river to see many people drinking from it, only to discover they are actually dead. She follows the river until there are no more corpses polluting it, and drinks.

In Chapter 5, Tomiko is losing hope. Death and destruction are all around, and she cannot find her sisters. She begins avoiding caves, sticking to marshes, and avoiding soldiers. Judging from American records, Tomiko is able to determine in retrospect that she had been away from home for five weeks, and had not eaten for three days. She finally heads back to a cave, and discovers a plant growing near it that her father had always told her to eat to be strong. The plant tastes bitter, and even though Tomiko wants to die, decides she is thirsty. She comes across a wonderful smell, and descends into a cave. There is an old man there, who invites her in, as well as an old woman who is blind. The man is a recent quadruple amputee. The old man asks about Tomiko's journey, and she tells him of how she had to leave home, and has journeyed over the island. He offers Tomiko the ability to stay with them.

Tomiko studies the cave. Most of it is natural, but shelves holding supplies have been built in. Tomiko helps to care for the old man, sprinkling salt into his wounds, and picking maggots off of him. She comes to call the old couple Granny and Grandpa. Tomiko prepares food for all of them. and the old man tells her that she has saved his life. For the first time in weeks, Tomiko feels safe, even with the war raging around them. Till, Tomiko continues looking for her siblings. She recalls an incident where Japanese soldiers refuse to let a young mother and her infant hide with them, and kill her and her baby. She also comes across Japanese soldiers killing their wounded, so the cries of the wounded will not invite attention. It horrifies Tomiko.

Granny and Grandpa encourage Tomiko to not give up, to keep on living, because she is young and has an entire lifetime ahead of her. Tomiko wants to die in the cave with



them, but they won't let her. They tell her that it is her duty to see to it that the blood of her mother and father, which flows in her veins, must live on. But Tomiko still does not want to leave.

In Chapter 6, while in the cave in the ground, Tomiko, Granny, and Grandpa hear a strange, mechanical voice. It urges the civilians to come out of hiding, and tells them that the American military does not kill civilians, and that the war is over. Using part of his white loincloth, Grandpa has Granny make a white flag, and has it tied to a tree branch. They tell her the white flag is a symbol understood all over the world, and means she will be safe. They have her carry out the flag. Tomiko makes her way away from the cave, and holds the white flag high up in the air. As Tomiko comes over a hill, she sees three American soldiers, one of them with a camera. She reflects on the evil rumors spread by the Japanese soldiers, telling them that Americans enjoyed killed civilians. Tomiko continues on bravely, as the soldier with the camera -who has rosy cheeks- takes a series of photographs. Tomiko realizes there is nothing evil or hostile about the American soldiers at all and becomes much more comfortable. The white flag, Tomiko realizes, is truly an emblem of safety.

Tomiko continues on, seeing more and more American soldiers. She is directed one way to a large group of civilians who have gathered. Among them are Yoshiko and Hatsuko. They are thrilled to find one another. Yoshiko is unharmed, but Hatsuko has been wounded in the arm, and is recovering. A rumor arises that the civilians are going to be burned alive by the Americans, but it is a rumor quickly done away with. Tomiko hopes that Granny and Grandpa will live as long as they can. It is June 25, 1945.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 7, after the war, Tomiko goes through countless books, seeking the photograph of her that had been taken. She discovers the photo in a book in a foreign bookshop in Okinawa City, in 1977. In the 1980s, the "Foot of Film" fund begins, and the citizens of Okinawa purchase film, foot by foot, from the United States Army, to make a documentary film about the horror of war. As they watch the program, Tomiko's husband observes a girl with a white flag, who resembles his wife. She admits it is her, but tells no one else. She doesn't want a search to be conducted for the old couple she has lived with, fearing their remains will be cremated and dumped somewhere.

The girl with the white flag sparks a number of books and public attention, including people who claim to have made the flag, and people who tell their story about the white flag. Tomiko's husband convinces her to set down in writing her experiences. She is also determined to find the American photographer. She knows she will have to go to America, and in 1988, a chance presents itself. She journeys to New York as part of an Okinawan group for a Peace March on the United Nations to reduce arms. On June 21, 1988, Tomiko brings a sign around with her, and dresses in traditional Okinawan clothing to attract attention to herself. Many wish her well on her journey to find the photographer.

God intervenes, and Fuji Television makes a documentary about Tomiko. They are in touch with the commander of the film unit. The cameraman is dead, but his wife is still alive. She leaves Okinawa on July 3 to meet the widow and the commander of the unit and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Rothstein. Rothstein directs them to John Hendrickson, now seventy, and living in Texas. Hendrickson was the combat still photographer. Tomiko travels to Texas to meet him with a camera crew, and she is welcomed warmly. Hendrickson still has the same rosy cheeks. He was twenty-seven at the time the photograph was taken. Hendrickson brings out the old camera, and he takes another photo of Tomiko. Tomiko at long last feels as if a 43 year-old weight has been lifted from her shoulders. The meeting convinces Tomiko to write of her experiences in the war.



Characters

Tomiko Higa

Tomiko Higa is the main figure and narrator of the autobiography, "The Girl With the White Flag." At the time, Tomiko is only six years old, and has endured the death of her mother. Tomiko lives on the island of Okinawa, off the southern tip of mainland Japan. Okinawa is described as a bucolic, peaceful island, full of villagers who respect her family for its history with the samurai.

Tomiko gets along well with her siblings, playing all over the countryside with her brother, Nini. Tomiko loves and respects her father, who is strict but kind. He teaches her how to pick vegetables, and what plants are good to eat, and what those plants can do for her. Tomiko is an intelligent and thoughtful child, absorbing all of the information her father gives her.

When the war at last comes to Okinawa and Tomiko's father does not come home after bringing supplies to the signal corps station, Tomiko's older sister, Yoshiko, decides that they will head south at the advice of the soldiers. They travel light, and spend one evening on the beach, during which time Nini is killed. They bury him in the sand, and continue on their way. Shortly thereafter, the siblings become separated.

Tomiko then spends the next few weeks on her own, dodging angry Japanese soldiers, living in caves, and scavenging for food. She almost dies on several occasions, and credits God and the spirits of her mother, father, and brother with her survival. She comes to stay with an old couple, whom she fondly calls Granny and Grandpa, in their cave. When the battle and the war end, Tomiko leaves the cave at the urging of Granny and Grandpa, and she carries a white flag toward the American lines. An American photographer takes her picture, and Tomiko comes to discover the Americans are kind and caring. She ultimately reunites with her family.

After the war, Tomiko tracks down the American combat photographer, John Hendrickson, who lives in Texas. She goes to visit him as he is now seventy, and he takes another photograph of her with the same camera that he used to photograph her forty-three years previously.

Chokusho Matsukawa

Chokusho Matsukawa is the father of Tomiko and her siblings, and the widower of Kame. Chokusho is kind but strict, gentle, but firm. He is well-respected, for he is descended from the samurai. He raises his children to be capable and competent people, and helps to prepare them to handle the war he knows is coming.

Chokusho is a good singer, an expert calligrapher, and an adept basket weaver. His talents are sought out by many in the village. Chokusho tends to his family and his farm.



He also has the responsibility of bringing food to the army signal corps station. After the battle begins, he never returns.

Kame Matsukawa

Kame Matsukawa is the wife of Chokusho, and mother of Tomiko and her siblings. Kame is described as kind and caring, with beautiful, long black hair. She dies in 1944, when Tomiko is just six.

Yoshiko Matsukawa

Yoshiko Matsukawa is the older sister of Tomiko. Yoshiko is seventeen, strong-willed, and brave. Yoshiko determines her family will flee south when the fighting nears. Yoshiko makes Tomiko promise her that she will return to bury the body of their brother, Nini, after the war ends. Tomiko agrees. Soon after, Tomiko becomes separated from her sisters, and they reunite at the southern tip of the island when the battle ends.

Chokuyu (Nini) Matsukawa

Chokuyu (Nini) Matsukawa is the older brother of Tomiko, and the younger brother of Yoshiko and Hatsuke. He is described as being playful, rambunctious, and freespirited. He flees south with his sister, and during the night, while sleeping in a hole on the beach, is killed. He is buried in the sand.

Hatsuke Matsukawa

Hatsuke Matsukawa is the younger sister of Yoshiko, and the older sister of Tomiko and Nini. She flees south with her family when the fighting nears, and has her arm injured by shrapnel. She reunites with her sisters when the battle ends.

Angry Japanese Soldier

The angry Japanese soldier is staying in a cave that Tomiko attempts to enter. When he sees her, he vows to kill her, and chases her to the edge of a cliff with his sword. When he tries to kill her, the cliff breaks, and Tomiko plunges down, until she is caught by a tree.

John Hendrickson

John Hendrickson is the kind and caring army photographer with rosy cheeks whom took the photo of Tomiko with her white flag. Twenty-seven at the end of the war, Hendrickson is seventy when Tomiko goes to seek him out in Texas. He takes a photo



of the adult Tomiko with his camera, the same camera he used to photograph her as a child years before.

Arthur Rothstein

Arthur Rothstein is an American soldier, and the commander of the combat photography unit in which John Hendrickson serves. He helps Tomiko get in touch with Hendrickson.

Granny

Granny is married to Grandpa, and is a blind old woman living in a cave with Grandpa. She and Grandpa invite Tomiko to stay with them in their cave through the end of the battle.

Grandpa

Grandpa is a quadruple amputee who is staying in a cave with his wife, Granny. The two of them invited Tomiko to stay with them through the end of the battle. It is Grandpa who sends Tomiko out under a white flag of truce, knowing that the Americans will honor the symbol.



Objects/Places

Japan

Japan is the nation to which the island of Okinawa belongs. Tomiko, and her family, are all Japanese citizens. Japan is preparing for invasion from the American forces.

Okinawa

Okinawa is an island at the southern tip of Japan, which must be taken in order to invade the mainland. Okinawa is the home to the village of Shuri, where Tomiko and her family live. Okinawa is described as a beautiful and quiet place, with a rich history.

Shuri

Shuri is the village on the island of Okinawa where Tomiko and her siblings are born and raised. It is the town from which Tomiko and her family flee following the invasion of the island.

Signal Corps Station

The signal corps station is manned by Imperial Japanese troops. It is where Tomiko's father goes daily, to bring the soldiers supplies and food. After heading to the station, Tomiko's father is not heard from again, encouraging his children to flee south.

Komesu Beach

Komesu Beach is a part of the island of Okinawa where Tomiko and her siblings encamp for the night. It is where Nini is killed and buried.

Camera

A camera is what American combat photographer John Hendrickson uses to photograph Tomiko and her white flag. At their reunion, Hendrickson uses the same camera to photograph Tomiko once more.

Sweet Potatoes

Sweet potatoes are grown by Tomiko's father, and many other villagers and farmers on Okinawa. Tomiko survives her journey in part by eating sweet potatoes.



Sugar Drops

Sugar Drops are given to the Japanese soldiers, who carry them in their haversacks. They are also sought out from dead soldiers by Tomiko, to eat so she can survive.

Carrots

Carrots are grown by Tomiko's father, and many other farmers on Okinawa. Tomiko survives in part by scavenging for food such as carrots.

The White Flag

The white flag, fashioned from part of Grandpa's loincloth, is attached to a branch and given to Tomiko to head to the American lines. The white flag is a symbol of peace, one that is vigorously honored and upheld by the American soldiers.



Themes

War

War is one of the three major, dominant, and over-arching themes of the Tomiko Higa's autobiographical account of war-torn Okinawa, "The Girl with the White Flag". It influences every single aspect of the book, and helps to drive on events that are out of Tomiko's control.

When Tomiko begins her account, Okinawa is untouched by war, except for the presence of Japanese troops. Life is splendid and simple, and the island is beautiful. The villages are peaceful, and citizens come and go. But despite the idyllic setting, the people know that war is coming. Sooner or later, there will be fighting on the island. The civilians of the island are organized into a defense force. Tomiko's father has the assignment of bringing food and supplies to the signal corps station. Tomiko's father also carefully instructs Tomiko on how to pick vegetables, and what sorts of plants can be eaten, and why.

When war does come at last, Tomiko's family flees south, away from the fighting after their father doesn't come home. The costs of war are all around them: homes are destroyed, the roads are choked with refugees, and dead soldiers and civilians cover the island. The landscape has been destroyed, and the Japanese soldiers turn on their own people. Tomiko is separated from her sisters, only to be reunited with them in the end under the protection of the American forces.

Family

Family is one of the three major, dominant, and overarching themes of "The Girl With the White Flag", the autobiography of Tomiko Higa. Family, thematically, includes a sense of unconditional love and unity between family members, sometimes blood-related, sometimes not. In this case, Tomiko's family is blood-related.

Family is especially important when it comes to Tomiko. She idolizes her mother and her father, finding her mother to be warm and beautiful, and her father strict and honorable. Indeed, Tomiko's family commands enormous respect from the village and the surrounding farms, because the family is descended from faithful samurai. Tomiko's whole world consists of her parents, her siblings, and the family farm. She is therefore imbued with a sense of importance about family, and the activities of a family -such as working together.

When the war does finally come, the disappearance of Tomiko's father encourages his children to flee south. Even when Tomiko's father tells them, before, that they will each be responsible for their own survival, Tomiko and her siblings stick together. The travel together, eat together, and find shelter together. The love they have for one another is clear and consistent. After Tomiko is separated from her sisters, her love for them, and



her desire to reunite with them, are what drives her on to be brave and courageous, even with a battle raging around her. Tomiko is therefore overjoyed when she is reunited with her sisters.

Coming of Age

Coming of age is a dominant, major, and overarching theme in the book "The Girl with the White Flag" by Tomiko Higa. The theme of coming of age includes the moral, ethical, and character growth of an individual, as he or she encounters dramatic and life-changing events, often beyond their control. This is true of Tomika Higa, who is forced to endure the Battle of Okinawa in 1945.

When the novel begins, Tomiko is like any typical six year-old child. She plays with her siblings, goes exploring, and helps with chores around the house. She leads an idyllic, peaceful life, admiring her parents and her farm. She is told that Japanese soldiers are good, while American soldiers are evil.

But things quickly change for Tomiko. The death of her mother means that Tomiko has experienced death at an early, tender age; and it also means that the days of her childhood are numbered. She quickly becomes the chef for her father's lunches while he is out working in the fields. She is taught how to pick vegetables, and how to eat the right kinds of plants. As the war comes, she is forced beyond the boundaries of her world, and sees horrible sights -from broken and bloodied bodies, to people being killed. Tomiko is almost killed herself on numerous occasions. Having never been away from her family, Tomiko has been separated and must journey alone. She must rely on herself, and the things she has been taught, to survive. She also discovers along the way that the American soldiers are not evil at all, and that Japanese soldiers are quick to turn on their own civilians.

By the time Tomiko has been reunited with her sisters, she has experienced enough death and destruction to last her a lifetime. She has also become much more wise in the ways of the world, and her strength and moral character shine through.

Style

Perspective

Tomiko Higa tells her book "The Girl With the White Flag" from her own perspective, in the first-person narrative mode. This is done for at least three reasons. The first is that the book is an autobiography, and autobiographies are usually written in the first person. The second is that the experiences Tomiko described are best related told by her, rather than by a third-person narrator, because the experiences described happened to her. Third, telling a story in the first-person makes the story much more intimate and close, as though the story is being recounted by a close friend. This also allows for the individual's thoughts, feelings, and emotions to factor in on a much more personal level, making the story that much more personal.

Tone

The setting of Tomiko Higa's book "The Girl with the White Flag" is that of the island of Okinawa, on the southern tip of Japan. Okinawa is described as tranquil and beautiful, making the impact of war that much more jolting and disconcerting. Okinawa is one of the costliest battles for Japanese forces in World War II, and the death and destruction that follow occurs on a massive scale. Okinawa is where Tomiko Higa was born and grew up, and so her experiences of the war on the island are dutifully recorded in her book.

Structure

Tomiko Higa divides her autobiography "The Girl with the White Flag" into seven consecutive chapters, each one titled after a specific, seminal event in her journey south through Okinawa. Though the book is full of dozens of anecdotes, Tomiko devotes the main parts of chapters, as well as their titles, to specific events that impacted her greatly. For example, her chapter "My Animal Friends" deals with Tomiko's experiences with animals, and the blessings those encounters brought to her. Her chapter "Fulfilling My Duty" deals with her descent to the American lines, with a white flag raised high above her head, thus helping to complete her journey across the island.



Quotes

"Ours was a highly respected household, and villagers going by on their way to or from the fields would seldom pass by without stopping to inquire about my father's health" (Chapter 1, p. 14).

"Now I want you all to listen carefully. There's going to be fighting here in Okinawa very soon. Life's not going to be peaceful for us any more. You must be prepared, so that when the time comes, you'll be able to keep your head and know what to do" (Chapter 1, p. 36).

"It was a scene straight out of hell. There is no other way to describe it. And sad and painful though it was, we could not afford to linger, and so we set off again trekking south" (Chapter 2, p. 48).

"I could not wait for the night to fall, and left my place of hiding. I ran from cave to cave calling out "Sister! Sister!" only to be shooed away by the cave's denizens the way you would shoo away an unwanted cat or dog" (Chapter 2, p. 53).

"If you are fated to die, it doesn't matter where you go, you're bound to die. And if you're meant to live, you'll survive all sorts of dangers" (Chapter 3, p. 61-62).

"I was flabbergasted. My father, and the soldiers at the Signal Corps unit had always told me that soldiers were there to protect us, and here was one raising his sword to kill me" (Chapter 4, p. 73).

"It was strange, but I saw no enemy ships on the sea, nor any airplanes in the sky. Perhaps it was just that for those few moments none happened to enter my field of vision. The sea looked so peaceful it was hard to believe that it was part of a battle hell" (Chapter 5, p. 82).

"Yet it seemed unthinkable to me that one of our own soldiers could kill a defenseless mother, a small child like me, or a baby, just to save his own skin. War makes people crazy" (Chapter 5, p. 94).

"Tomiko, as long as you're holding that, you'll be quite safe," said the old man. "It's a symbol understood all over the world. You'll be absolutely safe" (Chapter 6, p. 104).

"But the Okinawa war was not over for me yet. I resolved then and there to write about my experiences in the hope that such suffering might never be repeated" (Chapter 7, p. 127).



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the theme of war in Tomiko Higa's book, "The Girl with the White Flag." How does Tomiko present war? How does war affect the island of Okinawa, and her family? What is the cost of war to Tomiko's family in particular?

Why do you believe that Japanese troops were so quick to turn on their own people? What reasons could they have had? What reasons does Tomiko give as possibilities? Are any of these reasons justifiable? Why or why not?

Discuss the theme of family in Tomiko Higa's autobiography "The Girl with the White Flag". What is Tomika's family like? What is her opinion of her family? How does family affect the course of Tomiko's experiences?

Why was it so important for Tomiko Higa to track down and find John Hendrickson? What spurred her on? What was their meeting like? Was it satisfying to Tomiko? Why or why not?

Discuss the theme of coming of age in Tomiko Higa's book, "The Girl with the White Flag". What is the theme of coming of age? How does Tomiko come of age during her experiences? What events must she contend with? How do these events help her to grow as a person?

During the book, Tomiko frequently draws on the examples and wisdom of her father. Why does she do this? Why has Tomiko's father imparted his wisdom to all of his daughters? How does this affect them as the war comes to Okinawa?

Why does Tomika's husband urge her to write about her experiences? What else prompts Tomika to write about her experiences? Why is this important? What does Tomiko hope to do with her account of Okinawa?