

# **The Housekeeper and the Professor Study Guide**

**The Housekeeper and the Professor by Yoko Ogawa**

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# Plot Summary

“The Housekeeper and the Professor” is a contemporary novel by Yoko Ogawa in which the young single mother, the Housekeeper, comes to care for the elderly and amnesiac Professor with her son, Root, learning much about life and mathematics in the process. The novel takes place in the spring, summer, and autumn of 1992, when the Housekeeper is 28 and her son is 10. The Housekeeper is part of the Akebono Housekeeping Agency, and has been assigned to the Professor. The Professor is nominally cared for, and financially provided for, by his widowed sister-in-law. The Professor, having suffered a serious brain injury in an auto accident in 1975, now cannot remember anything past 1975 for longer than about 80 minutes, while his memory of events before, and knowledge of all things relating to mathematics, is exact.

The Housekeeper comes quickly to admire and befriend the Professor, though she must reintroduce herself each day. She quickly learns that the Professor is a mathematical genius, and leaves notes all over his house reminding himself of his 80-minute memory, and important things relating to his daily life. He has even pinned many of these notes to his own suit, which he wears each day. When the Professor learns that the Housekeeper has a son, he encourages her to let her son visit so that she, too, may have more time with her son. The Professor comes to call the Housekeeper’s son “Root” because the boy’s flat haircut reminds him of a square root sign. During the days the Housekeeper spends with the Professor, and the hours after school that Root spends with the Professor, the Professor opens their eyes to the world of mathematics and numbers. The professor explains that numbers are all around them, and no matter what practical applications math may have, the goal of the math has always been the truth. Math, for example, is able to prove conclusively that God exists, and understanding mathematics is like looking into the notebook of God and tapping into reality itself.

The Housekeeper comes to look at the world around her with a wonder she never had before. She also comes to grow closer to the Professor, realizing he is a human being worthy of patience, dignity, and kindness – things which previous housekeepers have not afforded him. The Professor also quickly bonds with Root over a common love of baseball, and a growing love of math on the part of Root. The Housekeeper and Root bring the Professor out of his house for a baseball game, but the exertion causes the Professor to contract a fever. The Housekeeper and her son spend the night with the Professor to make sure he is alright. The sister-in-law does not like this, however, and has the Housekeeper fired. Root continues to visit the Professor, which the sister-in-law does not like, either. Only when the Professor speaks out does the sister-in-law have the Agency send back the Housekeeper.

The Housekeeper and Root continue to be fixtures in the Professor’s life, going through great lengths to find a premium Enatsu glove card for his collection. They also discover the Professor’s thesis tucked away among his cards from when he was 29. In the thesis is an old photo of the Professor as a young man with his sister-in-law. Although never clearly stated in the novel, it is apparent the Professor and his sister-in-law were in love,

but whether this love began as an affair or after the death of the Professor's brother is unclear. The Professor celebrates Root's eleventh birthday with the Housekeeper. Two days later, the Professor is suddenly moved into a nursing home by the sister-in-law, citing his worsening memory and the explanation that this was a long time in coming. For the next 11 years until the Professor dies, the Housekeeper and Root visit the Professor. Root himself ultimately becomes a math teacher, something which the Professor is thrilled to learn.



# Chapters 1 – 3

## Summary

Chapter 1 – It is March, 1992. The narrator, a young housekeeper with Akebono Housekeeping Agency, has come to work for the Professor. The Professor is a hunchbacked, 64-year-old former university expert in number theory. He wears only suits and ties, and leaves hundreds of notes around the house of things he doesn't want to forget. Some of the notes he sticks to his clothes. The Professor's sister-in-law arranges the job, telling the narrator (the Housekeeper) that none of the other housekeepers have lasted long. The Professor lives in a small cottage behind his sister-in-law's main house. The sister-in-law explains that the Professor was involved in an auto accident in 1975 that paralyzed his ability to learn anything new. His new memories last about only eighty minutes. The Housekeeper wonders how anyone can only live with 80 minutes of new memories. Still, she is very patient with the Professor, knowing that each day she comes to work, it is like they are meeting for the first time. Each day, the Professor points out the wonderful things in numbers around the Housekeeper, such as noting that her phone number is the total of the primes between one and one-hundred-million.

The Housekeeper comes to learn that the Professor's sister-in-law is widowed, and that she now lives off of rent money collected from her property. For 17 years, the Professor has lived off of his sister-in-law, unable to provide for himself. The Professor spends his days thinking, dealing with numbers, and sending in answers to mathematical puzzles featured in journals and magazines. The Professor comes to call the Housekeeper's young son "Root", because the flat top of her son's head reminds the Professor of a square root sign. The Professor loves mathematics and puzzles, and enjoys speaking to the Housekeeper and Root about these things. The Professor believes there is a right and wrong answer for everything, yet he believes that even mistakes can be as revealing as the correct answer. The Professor is also vastly interested in things about which he knows little, and in such situations, he is happy to be the student. The Professor speaks to the Housekeeper of the beauty of proofs, and finds it interesting that the Housekeeper's birthday is February 20, or 220. The Professor, as a student many years before, won a beautiful watch for his thesis on transcendent number theory. On the back of the watch is the number 284. The factors of 220 and 284 both add up to 284, making them "amicable numbers", and making them extremely rare.

Chapter 2 – That night at home after putting Root to bed, the Housekeeper tries to find other amicable numbers, but cannot find any. She does find, however, that the sum of the factors of 28 is 28. It is through the Professor that the Housekeeper, who hated math in school, has finally come to appreciate the subject. The Professor explains that humans merely discovered numbers, and that numbers had been around long before people.



The Housekeeper reflects on how the Professor felt badly that the Housekeeper should be cooking meals for him while her son sat home alone, therein urging the Housekeeper to bring her son along as well. The Housekeeper remembers how quickly her son warmed up to the Professor, who becomes something of a grandfather figure to Root. The Housekeeper, who was raised by a single mother, reflects as well on having given birth to Root when she was only 18. The Housekeeper reveals that Root's father was a college student who was intelligent and cultured but irresponsible. In the present, Root believes he is made smarter when he is at the Professor's house. The Professor helps strengthen Root in his studies, especially in math. Root asks the Professor to get his radio fixed in exchange for solving a math problem assigned by the Professor, as the pennant race for baseball is approaching. This causes the Professor to name Yutaka Enatsu the best pitcher of all time, and to murmur some things to himself.

Chapter 3 – The Housekeeper brings the Professor out of his cottage for a walk in the park and a haircut. The Professor explains that his work in mathematics at the university consisted of studying whole numbers, and the relationships between them. The Professor relates it to copying truths from God's notebook. The Housekeeper explains her study of the number 28, of which the Professor approves and reveals is a perfect number. The Professor explains that such numbers are incredibly rare. He goes on to speak of deficient and abundant numbers, and notes that no one has ever found an abundant numbers just one smaller than the sum of theirs. The Professor explains the answer is written in God's notebook. At home, the Professor considers Root's answer to his problem of the day before, which the Professor does not remember assigning. The Professor, the Housekeeper explains, is fully aware of his faulty memory, but would rather figure things out on his own than ask someone to recall things for him. The Professor explains to Root that a problem isn't finished just because the right answer has been found. He encourages Root to find a way to add up all the natural numbers between 1 and 10 a different way.

The Professor and Root speak of baseball. The Professor is happy to have the radio fixed, but is stunned to learn that Enatsu was traded and is now retired. This deeply upsets him. Root feels badly about this on the way home with his mother. The Housekeeper tells Root not to feel bad, because things will be back to normal by the next morning. Over the next few days, the Housekeeper does her best to assist Root in finding ways to add up all the numbers between 1 and 10. At first, the Housekeeper merely wants to help her son and make the Professor happy, but eventually, solving the problem simply becomes a battle between the Housekeeper and the problem itself. Root suggests removing 10 because it has double-digits, and so that 5 will occupy the center spot in the line of numbers. It is like a revelation to the Housekeeper.

At the Professor's, Root and the Professor listen to the game. Root pretends that Enatsu is further back in the rotation to avoid troubling the Professor again. Root learns that Enatsu's uniform number was 28 – a perfect number. The Housekeeper and Root then reveal their solution to the 1 to 10 problem: adding up the numbers 1 through 9 and dividing by 9 gives 5.  $5 \times 9 = 45$ , plus 10 equals 55. The Professor is thrilled and congratulates Root. The Housekeeper herself is amazed with the beauty of the answer's formula.



## Analysis

“The Housekeeper and the Professor” is a contemporary novel by Yoko Ogawa in which the young single mother, the Housekeeper, comes to care for the elderly and amnesiac Professor with her son, Root, learning much about life and mathematics in the process. The themes of life and math become central to the novel from the very first chapter, as the Housekeeper recounts how she came to work for the Professor as just another part of a life that hasn’t gone exactly how she has planned. While the Housekeeper deeply loves her son, she never intended to be a single mother at 18, and did not expect that her life career would consist of housekeeping. Still, the Housekeeper does not complain. This is how life has turned out for her, and she is determined to do what she must in order to provide a better life for her son.

It is also clear that life has not turned out the way that the Professor has expected. Once a well-respected and established member of his field, the Professor, following an accident, has been paralyzed with an 80-minute memory after the year 1975. This forces him out of the public eye and into a cottage at the rear of his sister-in-law’s house. Apart from the prizes the Professor wins by solving math problems in the Journal of Mathematics, he is completely dependent upon his sister-in-law for financial support. Likewise, it is also apparent that neither the Professor, nor the Housekeeper (or even her son) expected to encounter in one another the very people in their lives they are lacking.

Here, the theme of family becomes essential. As already noted, the young single mother Housekeeper is determined to do what she must in order to give her son a better life. But without parents of her own, much of the future is uncertain for the Housekeeper because she has no one to rely on for advice. The Housekeeper, perhaps because she is a mother, comes to have supreme patience and gentleness with the Professor, when other housekeepers have been unable to handle his quickly-erased new memories. This gentle patience is exactly what the Professor needs, for the Housekeeper’s ability to get the Professor to warm up to her so quickly each day – and to be so personable and comfortable with her by the end of the day – is charming and something which the Professor did not previously have. In many ways, the Professor becomes something of a father figure to the Housekeeper, for he begins to teach her about math – and indirectly, about life.

Math becomes crucially important here, as the Professor begins not only to teach the Housekeeper about math, but Root as well. Math comes into play not only as the Professor’s special field of study, but as the very core of his life and reality at large. By urging the Housekeeper and her son to consider math, they come to consider the world in ways they had not previously considered it by seeking out the numbers in the world around them. Even this is a departure from the usual, for the mundane drudgery of everyday life has been replaced for the Housekeeper with a penchant for wonder at numbers around her. These mathematically-precise facts and figures hold deeper metaphorical and philosophical truths, for the Professor explains that numbers order the universe, and understanding numbers brings one closer to God. God has all the



answers in His notebook, and the answers that God has add up to Truth. And truth, the Professor explains later in the novel, is the ultimate goal of math. The reader should remember the idea of God's notebook, for it will reappear throughout the novel.

What is interesting to note here is the idea of memory – the things recalled from the past. Memory becomes an important theme through the Professor. As noted already, the Professor has only an 80-minute memory following his 1975 accident, while he can recall with perfectly clarity anything that occurred before the accident. The Housekeeper wonders how the Professor can survive and bear to live with only 80 minutes of memory – something made painfully apparent by the notes which the Professor leaves around his house and pins to his own clothing to remind himself of things. But the answer for how the Professor can survive is simple: math.

Math is as true and precise and clear in memory to the Professor now as it was in 1975. Math is the one thing which is as true in the past as it is in the present. Math bridges the gap between past and present, between the known and the unknown. The Professor may not be able to remember what he had for dinner the night before, but the Professor can remember everything about numbers, since he knew them before the accident and can still use them now. Math, like God, is timeless. It is not rooted in physical reality, has always existed, and will always exist whether or not anyone is around to understand it or seek to understand it. By helping the Housekeeper and Root to better understand math, the Professor is not only helping them to see the world in a new light, but he is paving the way for mathematics of the future. (Incidentally, the reader should note that 28 is considered a perfect number – and the Housekeeper is 28. This represents the fact that she is only beginning to move into the best part of her life, where as being 28 was the last full year the Professor had of his own memory - when things for him were perfect.)

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe the Housekeeper has been so successful in staying with the Professor when the other housekeepers have all been unable to stay? Why does the Housekeeper treat the Professor with such patience and respect in her caring for him?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways has life turned out unexpectedly for the Housekeeper and the Professor? Why is this so? How do the Housekeeper and the Professor handle the challenges that life has thrown at them?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the Professor inspire the Housekeeper to look at life differently, especially through math? Why do you believe the Housekeeper is so perceptive to looking at the world in such a fashion?



## Vocabulary

miscalculation, tentative, theorem, senile, factorial, invariably, haggard, incessant, amicable numbers, nonchalant, reticence, bewildered, dejectedly, ensconced



## Chapters 4 – 5

### Summary

Chapter 4 – The Housekeeper comes to learn that prime numbers are the Professor's favorite numbers, and are his favorite thing in the world. The Professor loves to speak of prime numbers, though he often repeats himself. The Housekeeper comes to admire the Professor's humility, saying very clearly when something about mathematics is not known. The Housekeeper comes to love prime numbers too, for the reason that she can never predict when one will appear. The Professor speaks of twin primes, prime numbers that come in pairs, such as 17 and 19, and 41 and 43. The larger numbers get, the Professor explains, means prime numbers are harder to find. The Housekeeper comes to learn that the Professor hates crowds and the public, for such things are random compared to the pure beauty and certainty of mathematics. For him, this is true peace. The Professor's highest compliment is to describe something as peaceful.

One day, the Housekeeper must run an errand, so she leaves Root alone with the Professor, worried about the Professor's mental state. Root receives a small, accidental cut from using a knife on an apple while the Housekeeper is out. The Professor blames himself for the cut, even though the cut had nothing to do with him. Root is taken to a doctor's office for stitches. While waiting, the Professor calms down some, then begins to speak of triangular numbers, explaining they are the sum of all natural numbers between 1 and a certain number, and that all sums of all natural numbers can be found by lining up numbers as dots in a triangle. The Professor then begins crying. The Housekeeper assures the Professor that everything will be alright. Seconds later, Root emerges from the doctor, good as new. At home that night, however, Root begins crying, saying he will never forgive his mother for not trusting the Professor's mental capabilities. The next day, the Professor remembers none of it. The Housekeeper explains that the Professor helped Root in a bad situation, and then taught her about triangular numbers. The Professor is saddened remembering that his memory lasts only 80 minutes.

Chapter 5 – The Housekeeper apologizes to her son for not trusting the Professor's mental competence. As time passes, the Housekeeper discovers that the Professor has many unique talents, such as being able to instantly reverse the syllables in phrases, and to repeat them backwards, such as "a nut for a jar of tuna". The Professor explains it is merely the same as solving a mathematical problem. Root is especially amazed by this, and compliments the Professor for it. The Professor is also able to find the first sign of the evening star. While cleaning the Professor's study, she comes across old notebooks which contain work from his younger days. She notices notes in the margins of the notebooks, such as reminders about meetings and comments on his own work.

The Housekeeper buys three tickets on the third base line to a local game for the Tigers. Root worries about how the Professor will respond because none of the players the Professor knew are still on the Tigers. When the plans are revealed to the Professor,



he is a little apprehensive but agrees to go. Root and his mother pretend that Enatsu simply won't be pitching that day. The Professor seems thrilled by the game, speaking of the numbers he sees all around him, from their seat numbers to the measurements of the baseball diamond. The attendees around them are impressed by the Professor's mathematics. The Professor also has numerous questions for Root about the game, from the contents of the rosin bag to how the catcher backs up the throw.

## Analysis

As time passes, the Housekeeper and her son grow closer to the Professor. The Professor truly does become a father and grandfather figure to the Housekeeper and Root, filling in a missing part of their lives – family. The Housekeeper and her son come to fill a part of the Professor's life that has been missing – family. It is obvious that because of the accident, the Professor was never able to have a family; yet, it is clear that the Professor very much enjoys having the Housekeeper and Root around. Their admiration and love for the Professor grow to the point that they begin to include him in family activities, and to plan things involving the Professor directly – such as going to see a baseball game. These are things neither the Professor, nor the Housekeeper and her son, ever expected in life.

The Professor continues to inspire the Housekeeper and Root to think about life through mathematics. The Housekeeper continues to look for numbers in the world around her, and contemplates the relationship between these numbers, and between the numbers and life in general. As the Housekeeper tends to the cottage, she also uncovers things about the Professor's past, including the work done when he was a younger man. (The reader should also pay attention to the personal notes in the margins of the Professor's notebooks, which demonstrate that he once had a life beyond mathematics.) It is obvious that brilliance of the Professor is nothing compared to what it was before the accident, and in keeping with the theme of life, the Housekeeper – and the reader – can only wonder what the Professor's life might now be like should he have kept all his mental faculties.

Still, the Professor is quite capable of care and compassion. When Root injures himself with a knife, the Professor breaks down in tears, believing that he has somehow failed Root. The grandfatherly concern that the Professor exhibits is telling, while the anger that Root expresses at his mother for not trusting the Professor's mental capabilities is also telling of the grandfather-grandson bond that has come to exist between them. This is the family none of them have ever had, and what is perhaps most painful is that the good memories being made will only ever be recalled by the Housekeeper and her son. This perhaps makes the time spent with the Professor all the more important, because then they can only truly live in the moment.



## Discussion Question 1

What is the Housekeeper able to determine based on her perusal of the Professor's old notebooks? Why is this especially touching and saddening to her?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Root seem to become so angry with his mother regarding her concern about the Professor's mental abilities? Can it be argued that both the Housekeeper's concerns about, and Root's defense of the Professor are justified? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

In this section of the novel, the Professor, the Housekeeper, and Root truly form something akin to family. In what ways do they seem very much like a family? Why do you think this is?

## Vocabulary

astute, mercilessly, fundamentally, incompatible, premonition, palindromes, vigorous, indelibly



## Chapters 6 – 7

### Summary

Chapter 6 – The Housekeeper and Root drop the Professor off at home for the evening. It is apparent the Professor has enjoyed himself, but now has a fever. The Housekeeper and Root decide to spend the night to care for the Professor. The Housekeeper notes how thin and frail the Professor appears without a suit on, which makes her realize that the Professor pursues mathematics at the expense of his own health. Around noon the next day, the Professor wakes up but remembers nothing of the day before. A few days later, the Professor returns to normal. A short time later, the Director of Akebono calls the Housekeeper in because there has been a complaint filed against her for spending the night at the Professor's house. The Housekeeper explains what happened, and that the Professor was ill. The Director explains the Professor's sister-in-law is the one who filed the complaint, and wants the Housekeeper fired. The Housekeeper is stunned and angered.

The Housekeeper's new clients run a tax consulting service, and work late. As a result, the Housekeeper must work late, and Root must spend more time on his own at home. The Housekeeper misses the Professor, and knows what hurts the most is that the Professor won't even remember her and Root being there. She also worries about whether the Professor is being properly and patiently cared for by his new housekeeper. A few weeks later, on the anniversary of her mother's death, the Housekeeper and Root go to visit her grave. They find a dead fawn behind the grave. The next day, the Housekeeper learns from a news article that Root's father has won a prize for his research. The Housekeeper throws out the article, then retrieves it and stores it away with Root's baby box.

Chapter 7 – Everywhere the Housekeeper goes, she thinks of the Professor, and of numbers. She begins carrying a pencil and notepad to write down these numbers and the relationships she finds between them. The Housekeeper reflects on how the Professor once told her that mathematics has no true bearing in real life, that it won't make life easier though it may sometimes have practical applications. She remembers the Professor telling her that the uses of mathematics – such as determining planet orbits – isn't the goal of mathematics. The goal is truth. A month after leaving the Professor's cottage, the Housekeeper is called back by the Director. The Professor, the Professor's sister-in-law, and a middle-aged woman (presumably the new maid) are waiting with Root in the Professor's cottage. Root explains he wanted to visit the Professor, something which the sister-in-law can't understand. She thinks the Housekeeper must be looking for a way to cheat the Professor out of money. At this, the new maid excuses herself and heads home. The Housekeeper insists that her son is merely visiting a friend. The sister-in-law says the Professor has no friends, to which the Housekeeper counters that he does. The Professor then tells his sister-in-law to leave the boy alone, and scribbles down a mathematical formula on a piece of paper for her. The Housekeeper then realizes the sister-in-law also understands mathematics.



A few days later, the Housekeeper is rehired by the sister-in-law. The Housekeeper begins work again on July 7. When she can, she does her best to decipher the formula the Professor had shown his sister-in-law. Absorbed in books about math, the Housekeeper can picture God sitting in the corner of the universe, weaving all of existence into being with patterns of numbers. While in the library, the Housekeeper also goes into the news archives and reads a story from September 24, 1975, about an auto accident the day before. The story reveals a truck had crossed the line on the National Highway, colliding head on with the Professor's car, wherein the sister-in-law was in the passenger's seat. Further studying the note from the Professor, the Housekeeper realizes it is Euler's formula, which always equals zero when one is added. Only when 1 is added does the world change from an endless cycle of numbers into something different. The Housekeeper comes to realize that the Professor cares so for Root because he considers children to be like prime numbers. While numbers are the foundation of everything in existence, children are the foundation of everything worthwhile in the world of adults.

## Analysis

Life throws yet another unexpected challenge at the Housekeeper. The sister-in-law has complained of the Housekeeper spending the night with the Professor. She claims that her concern merely has to do with the Housekeeper somehow being interested in money, but there is little explanation given to the sister-in-law's reasoning. As noted by the Housekeeper earlier, the sister-in-law seems strangely involved and detached from the Professor's life, and the sister-in-law's current reaction to the Housekeeper having spent the night for purely genuine reasons seems largely overblown. However, the reader and the Housekeeper slowly begin to suspect that perhaps the sister-in-law may just be in love with the Professor – a thought which will be further explored in future chapters of the novel.

In her own care for the Professor, the Housekeeper is unnerved to see how thin and frail the Professor seems without his suit on. She realizes that this because the Professor spends so much of his time absorbed in mathematics. Math remains an important theme not only in the novel, but in the Professor's life as well. As the reader deduces, the reason why the Professor spends so much time involved with math is because it is the one thing in the present day and age which still makes sense to him. The Professor has a note pinned to his sleeve which reminds him that his memory lasts only 80 minutes; but his understanding of math, like the reason, order, logic, and truth of math itself, is timeless. It only makes sense that the Professor should devote so much time to something which makes sense – something which has not let him down like his memory. He may not be able to recall his memories, but he can always seek to explore the truth in numbers.

The Housekeeper and Root ultimately return to the Professor's cottage when the sister-in-law consents. It should not be noted that this occurs in conjunction with the visit that the Housekeeper and her son pay to her mother's grave. The Housekeeper never truly knew her father, so her sense of family with the Professor is incredibly important



because as something of a surrogate father, the Professor is still alive while her biological mother is dead. It should also be noted that a dead fawn is found behind her mother's grave. This is symbolic in two very important ways. First, the fawn represents the death of life in its early stages: a fawn is not a full-grown deer, and the Housekeeper's mother died long before her natural lifespan would have ended. Second, as the fawn is not a fully-grown deer and has died before its own lifespan, it comes to represent the life of the Professor in a figurative death: the Professor's life ended in a sense on September 24, 1975, the day of the accident. He was cut off from life in his prime beginning back when he was 29. The reader should note that 29 is a prime number.

## Discussion Question 1

Why, following the Professor's accident, has he devoted so much of his time to mathematics – far more than when he was fully in command of his mind?

## Discussion Question 2

Although it is not precisely explained, following her dismissal of the Housekeeper, the sister-in-law has the Housekeeper brought back to work. Why do you believe this is?

## Discussion Question 3

Why are the Housekeeper and her son so devastated when the Housekeeper is fired from working for the Professor? What is their return like for them? What is their return for the Professor like?

## Vocabulary

expounding, omen, preamble, liquefied, stifled, unfounded, esoteric, indescribably, methodical, disarray, impenetrable, bedeviling



## Chapters 8 – 9

### Summary

Chapter 8 – As the summer comes on in full swing, the Professor is hard at work on the most difficult math problem ever published in the Journal of Mathematics, which promises the biggest cash prize ever. The Housekeeper comes to understand that math, since the day of the accident, has truly become the Professor's life. The Professor takes breaks from his work to watch the Housekeeper cook, saying he simply likes to watch her cook. This fills the Housekeeper with a sense of satisfaction. On Friday, July 31, the Professor finishes the proof, and the Housekeeper rushes to get it in the mail.

The first week of August, Root goes away on a camping trip with friends. The Housekeeper continues to care for the Professor. A summer thunderstorm comes on, which worries the Housekeeper, but the Professor tells her that Root will be fine. The Housekeeper says she doesn't feel right when Root is not around. The Professor expresses this as zero, and notes that an unidentified Indian mathematician first discovered zero. The Professor explains that zero really is a number that brings order to calculations. When Root returns home later, he reveals he had a wonderful time. He, the Professor, and the Housekeeper then resume their schedule of listening to baseball games on the radio.

Chapter 9 – The Housekeeper must take the Professor to the dentist. When he leaves the exam room, he looks very unhappy, and heads out on his own. The Housekeeper rushes to catch up, and follows him home. She imagines something must have gone wrong, or perhaps the 80-minute period has changed for the day. At home, the Professor's mood returns to normal. He asks the Housekeeper to throw out all of his old Journal of Mathematics issues, but she refuses because his name as prizewinner is printed in some of them. Word soon comes that the Professor has won first prize for his July entry, which the Professor does not remember at all. The Housekeeper reminds him, and says they must celebrate. They will also celebrate Root's eleventh birthday, as 11 is an excellent prime number.

Looking through the Professor's old tin of baseball cards, Root and his mother discover a secret compartment with a thesis from the Professor from 1957, when he was 29. A photograph is tucked away in the thesis, which features the Professor as a young man with a beautiful young woman identified as "N" beside him. It is the Professor's sister-in-law, and the thesis is dedicated to her with love. The Housekeeper and her son decide they will add to the Professor's baseball card collection by finding an Enatsu card worthy of the collection. They look for weeks, but seem destined to fail. The Housekeeper decides that the Professor could use a new pair of shoes. The Housekeeper then learns from a coworker that she has been looking to get rid of old baseball cards included with candy kept by her mother in a stock shed from years before. It is Root who discovers among them a premium Enatsu card – one limited edition card containing a fragment of Enatsu's glove.





## Analysis

As the Housekeeper and her son return to a routine with the Professor, their sense of family grows greatly. The Housekeeper and Root grow closer together because they have the Professor in common, and because so much of their lives have come to include the Professor. The Professor, in turn, is able to venture outside of mathematics to provide life advice, and compassion and comfort to the Housekeeper when least expected. For example, his simple approval of the Housekeeper's talent in cooking is a huge boost to her confidence, a kind of fatherly encouragement. When Root goes away on a camping trip, the Housekeeper reveals just how much her son means to her, and notes how much she misses him. It is the Professor who offers her gentle support and patience, calming her worries about her son being away.

As the Professor notes, and as the Housekeeper discovers, the formula written to his sister-in-law ultimately works out to zero, breaking a repeating pattern by the addition of 1. Zero brings order to things. The addition of 1 to the Professor's life – by way of the Housekeeper – has broken the monotony and endless repetition of his life. The addition of 1 more to the Professor's life – by way of Root – further brings greater order to things. The Professor, who is able to remind himself of his faulty memory through the use of notes, knows that his life has been disorganized and chaotic since the accident – and knows that the Housekeeper and her son have brought stability to his life. His notes to remind himself of who the Housekeeper and Root are, are demonstrative of this, and of the love he has come to have for them.

As the Housekeeper comes to discover, life did not work out for the sister-in-law, either. She did not expect her husband to die so young, and never expected to be in a car accident that would result in the Professor becoming (in her mind) an invalid to be sequestered in a cottage at the back of her property. While it is unclear when it happened – presumably after his brother had died – the Professor and the sister-in-law clearly fell in love. It now makes sense why the sister-in-law should be so enraged about the Housekeeper spending the night with the Professor. The sister-in-law is no longer the young woman she once was and who the Professor was in love with – a fact she is reminded of by the Housekeeper's own youth and beauty. Yet, why the sister-in-law has distanced herself from the Professor while remaining so possessive of him is unknown, but can be surmised in the final chapters of the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the importance of the conversation that the Professor and the Housekeeper have regarding the number zero? How is this extrapolated to the life situation in which the Professor finds himself?



## Discussion Question 2

What information about the Professor's past – including his sister-in-law – does the Housekeeper uncover? How does this information explain recent events?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the Professor bring order, stability, and the role of a father to the Housekeeper's life? Why does this matter so much to the Housekeeper?

## Vocabulary

vaporize, compensate, stoicism, exasperation, negligence, placate, incantations, ambitious, indifferent, syllabary



# Chapters 10 – 11

## Summary

Chapter 10 – The Housekeeper reveals that Root's eleventh birthday is the last time all three of them – herself, the Professor, and Root – spent together in the cottage. When it comes time for the cake, the Housekeeper realizes the baker has forgotten to put in the candles, so Root runs out to retrieve them before the Housekeeper can leave to get them. Some time passes, which worries the Professor because the bakery is only around the corner. The Housekeeper decides to go look for Root. She finds him at a different bakery, because the closest bakery is already closed. When they return to the Professor's house, they discover the Professor has accidentally dropped the cake. Half is still edible, though.

Chapter 11 – The Professor is thrilled with his gift from Root and the Housekeeper. He comes to wear it around his neck on a string. Root is thrilled with his birthday gift from the professor – an official Little League leather baseball glove. The sister-in-law, it is later revealed to the Housekeeper, had gone out for the glove on behalf of the Professor. Two days later, the Professor is moved into a retirement home. It is a move that has been planned for some time, says the sister-in-law, since the Professor's memory has gotten worse than it was to the point that he can't remember one minute to the next. For the next 11 years, the Housekeeper and Root drive out to the home to visit the Professor each month until he dies. There, Root plays catch with the Professor, while the Professor teaches them more about numbers. It is revealed that Root goes to school for teaching and mathematics, ultimately becoming a math teacher.

## Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, the Housekeeper celebrates both the Professor's prize for solving the most complicated puzzle the Journal of Mathematics has ever published, and Root's eleventh birthday. 11, the Professor notes previously, is an important prime number. Root is clearly in the prime of his childhood, while the Professor is at his zenith in the solving of the Journal problem. In a sense, he is in his prime in his current stage in life. And the prime of one's life can never last. Such happy occasions are only memories, and again, tragically, the Professor will not be able to recall such things. Root and the Housekeeper, however, can – including how the Professor made sure his sister-in-law obtained a birthday gift for Root on his behalf.

But clearly, the sister-in-law has become concerned with how much closer the Professor and the Housekeeper and her son seem to be getting. The Professor is sent to a retirement home. While the sister-in-law says that this was some time in coming, and that the Professor's memory was only lasting a few moments – something which the Housekeeper knows to be untrue. It is clear that the move of the Professor to a far-away retirement home is an act of jealousy and cruelty on the part of the sister-in-law. Her



cruel statement that at least the Professor will remember her is illustrative of her jealousy. Yet, it is also ironic. Yes, the Professor will remember the sister-in-law from the past, but he will not remember her from the present, either – and he will not recognize her in the present.

But this does not matter to Root and his mother, who continue to visit the Professor for the rest of his life. Indeed, this occurs for another 11 years –a prime number. The Professor has become family to the Housekeeper and her son, and so it goes without saying why they would want to continue to visit him. He has changed their lives for the better. Indeed, he has been such an inspiration to Root that Root has gone on to study education and math in college so that he may become a teacher of mathematics –just like the Professor.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe the sister-in-law has the Professor sent to a retirement home? Do you believe her decision is understandable or defensible? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do the Housekeeper and Root continue to visit the Professor even after he is committed to a nursing home? Why does it matter so much to the Housekeeper and Root that they do this, even if the Professor cannot remember any of it?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways has the Professor come to influence Root's life? Why do you believe that the Professor has been able to influence Root in such a fashion?

## Vocabulary

extravagant, elegant, legible, foreseen, proposition, reluctant



# Characters

## The Housekeeper

The never-named Housekeeper is the narrator and one of two main characters of the novel “The Housekeeper and the Professor”. At 28 years old, the Housekeeper is the single mother of Root. She is very kind, very patient, and very pretty. Having grown up as the daughter of a single mother, the Housekeeper never wanted to be in the same position as a mother. But the man with whom she fell in love did not take to his responsibilities as a father. The Housekeeper then went straight to work at 18 in housekeeping. Her life has only been work, and has been focused around providing for her son.

When she is assigned to the Professor, she believes it will just be another job. But the Professor quickly becomes a friend and father-figure to her, encouraging her to look at the world in new ways and to consider the idea of math. Only through the Professor does the Housekeeper come to realize there is more to life than work, while the Housekeeper reminds the Professor that the accident he endured is not the end of his life. Even after the Professor is committed to a retirement home, the Housekeeper continues to visit him until his death. Likewise, she is very proud of her son, who has gone on to become a math teacher.

## The Professor

The Professor is one of the two main characters of the novel, “The Housekeeper and the Professor”. At 67 years old, the Professor is thin, hunched, and a brilliant mathematician. The Professor was well-known and at the forefront of his field before the auto-accident which cost him his short-term memory in 1975. As a result, the Professor can only remember the previous 80 minutes of his life, plus everything prior to the accident. He is cared for nominally and financially by his sister-in-law with whom he was once in love. The Professor now focuses only on math in his life, because math is the one constant thing that makes sense to him, past or present.

The Professor is delighted when the Housekeeper comes to work for him, and delighted when Root comes along as well. The Professor comes to see them, in his lucid moments, as a daughter and a grandson. While he inspires them to look at the world in new, mathematical ways, they inspire him in the reminder that life, despite what he thinks, is never truly over.

## Root

Root is the 10-year-old son of the Housekeeper. Root is a bright, intelligent boy who comes to spend time with his mother at the Professor’s house while she works there. Root and the Professor quickly bond over a common love of baseball, and later, math.



The Professor becomes a grandfather figure to Root, something he has never known. He becomes fiercely defensive of the Professor, and continues to visit the Professor after the Housekeeper is fired. When his mother is rehired, Root continues to spend time with the Professor, going through great lengths to find a suitable birthday present for him. Through the next 11 years, Root and his mother visit the Professor at his retirement home until the Professor dies. By then, Root has become a teacher of mathematics.

## **The sister-in-law**

The Professor's sister-in-law lives in the main house on the family property. She provides for the Professor financially, but has little day-to-day interaction with him. She keeps him at a distance, but jealously guards him against all others because she is in love with him. Whether the relationship she and the Professor had began before or after the death of her husband is left unclear. What is clear, however, is that the sister-in-law becomes very jealous of the closeness of the Professor and the Housekeeper, the latter of whom apparently reminds the sister-in-law of herself at that young age. She fires the Housekeeper, but later hires her back at the insistence of the Professor. The sister-in-law ultimately moves the Professor to a retirement home, cruelly telling the Housekeeper that the Professor will not remember her, but that he will always remember the sister-in-law.

## **The Director**

The Director of the Akebono Housekeeping Agency is a strict, no-nonsense, business-oriented man. He is patient, but will not allow anything to endanger the business. When he learns that the sister-in-law wishes the Housekeeper to be fired, the Director complies immediately, calls in the Housekeeper to explain herself, and reassigns her.

## **The temporary housekeeper**

The temporary housekeeper is a woman who appears to be in her thirties, and comes to work for the Professor after the Housekeeper is fired. The temporary housekeeper appears kind, neat, and orderly, and does not wish to be around more than she has to. It is clear that the Professor does not warm up to her the way he does with the Housekeeper, for to the temporary housekeeper, her work is only that – just a job.

## **Root's father**

Root's father is an educated, cultured academic who is very irresponsible when it comes to his personal life. While in college, Root's father met the Housekeeper, and the two had a relationship of an unspecified length. Root's father, however, did not wish to stick around and take care of his son. He went on to a stellar career in academia, cutting off all contact with the Housekeeper and Root. A story in the paper appears



about Root's father winning a prize. The Housekeeper considers trashing it, but decides not to, putting it away in a box full of Root's baby things as a way for her son to know about his father.

## **The Housekeeper's Mother**

The Housekeeper's Mother is a sweet and kind woman who raised the Housekeeper on her own. While the Housekeeper's Mother worked long hours to support herself and her daughter, the Housekeeper tended their home –something which would one day translate into work. The absence of a parental figure in her the Housekeeper's life is among the reasons that the Housekeeper becomes so close with the Professor.

## **Enatsu**

Yutaka Enatsu is a famous baseball player and pitcher for the Tigers. He is the Professor's favorite player, and the one that stands out among all others in the Professor's mind from before 1975. Enatsu becomes a common ground that the Professor and Root share, which begins their grandfather-grandson relationship.

## **The truck driver**

The truck driver is only briefly mentioned in the novel, but serves as the catalyst for the events of the novel. It was the truck driver who unintentionally caused an auto accident which resulted in the memory issues of the Professor, and the limp of the sister-in-law. The truck driver fell asleep at the wheel, causing his truck to cross lanes and hit the professor's car.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Prime numbers

Prime numbers are natural numbers divisible only by one and itself, such as 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, and so on. Prime numbers are the Professor's favorite kinds of numbers in the novel because they are unique, rare, and are so foundationally important to mathematics. He sees prime numbers as children because they have so much potential. Prime numbers in the novel become symbolic of the prime of one's life. For example, at age 11, Root is in the prime of his childhood while at the age of 29, the Professor was in the prime of his own life.

## 1975

1975 is year in which the Professor's auto accident occurs. It is the last year has any solid, long-term memory of, and he remembers everything before the accident with clarity. However, anything that has occurred since the accident in 1975 can only be remembered for 80 minutes at most. 1975 proves to be the dividing line between the present and the past, and the insurmountable gap which only mathematics can traverse.

## 80-minute memory

The Professor, due to his accident in 1975, is plagued by an 80-minute memory. This short-term memory means the Professor cannot remember anything beyond 80 minutes at most. This means that anything he wishes to remind himself of, he must write down on notes which he must then leave around the house, or must affix to his own clothing. The 80-minute memory means the Housekeeper must reintroduce herself each morning to the Professor, and they must become acquainted as though they were meeting for the first time before the Professor warms up to the Housekeeper.

## Old notebooks

Old notebooks full of important mathematical work are kept by the Professor from his younger days in his study. The old notebooks are discovered later in the novel by the Housekeeper. The notebooks demonstrate the true depth and brilliance of the Professor, and strike a tragic tone as to what might have been had the accident never happened.





## **The Notebook of God**

The notebook of God is a metaphor used by the Professor to speak about the nature of truth and the existence of God. Math and numbers are absolute and eternal truths which not only prove the existence of God, but also have existed long before – and will exist long after – man has come and gone. Accessing mathematics, the Professor explains, is like accessing the notebook of God – it is a glimpse into truth and reality.

## **The Journal of Mathematics**

The Journal of Mathematics features math puzzles, problems, and theorems in addition to the latest mathematical research, stories, articles, and essays about mathematics. The Professor eagerly awaits each issue of the Journal to work on the puzzles, which he then has sent into the Journal by mail. The Professor usually wins cash prizes for these efforts. The puzzles are a way for the Professor to keep his mind as active as possible, and to focus on something which made sense to him before the accident, as well as after the accident.

## **The Professor's thesis**

The Professor's thesis is kept in a secret compartment at the bottom of his baseball tin. The thesis is about transcendent number theory, was so eloquent that it won the Professor a beautiful watch as a prize. The Housekeeper and her son discover the thesis, carefully kept hidden away, and containing an old photograph of the Professor and the sister-in-law.

## **Old photograph**

An old photograph of the Professor and his sister-in-law is discovered tucked into a copy of the Professor's thesis, which itself is hidden away in an old baseball tin. The photograph features a much younger, and much happier Professor and sister-in-law. It is clear from the photograph that the two are in love, and reveals that the Professor and the sister-in-law have had a romantic relationship in the past.

## **Newspaper article**

A newspaper article recounting the auto accident the Professor was involved in is discovered by the Housekeeper in the library. The newspaper account is dated September 25, 1975, and recounts the accident of the day before. The article reveals that a truck driver fell asleep at the wheel, and veered over into oncoming traffic – the Professor's car. The article also reveals that the sister-in-law was in the passenger's seat, and was also injured in the resulting crash.



## Dead fawn

A dead fawn is discovered by the Housekeeper and her son behind the grave of the Housekeeper's mother. The fawn represents the death of life in its early stages: a fawn is not a full-grown deer, and the Housekeeper's mother died long before her natural lifespan would have ended. Additionally, as the fawn is not a fully-grown deer and has died before its own lifespan, it comes to represent the life of the Professor in a figurative death: the Professor's life ended in a sense on September 24, 1975, the day of the accident. He was cut off from life in his prime when he was 29. The reader should note that 29 is a prime number.

## Baseball glove

An official Little League baseball glove is purchased by the sister-in-law on behalf of the Professor for Root. It is a gift that Root treasures and keeps for the rest of his life because it came from the Professor. It is Root's first real baseball glove, and to him demonstrates the strong grandfather-grandson bond that has developed between him and the Professor.

## Enatsu card

A premium Enatsu baseball card is hunted down by the Housekeeper and Root. The card has a fragment of one of Enatsu's baseball gloves affixed, making it incredibly rare and extremely valuable. The card is found in a stack of old store stock in a coworker's mother's shed. The Professor is thrilled to receive the gift, and comes to wear it around his neck for the rest of his life.



# Settings

## Inland Sea town

The main setting of the novel is a never-named Inland Sea town in Japan. The town is large enough in size to accommodate a train station, numerous stores, a library, and public transportation, but is not too large to be dangerous –thus allowing Root to wander around at will and stay home alone as needed. It is in this town that the sister-in-law takes a house with a cottage at the back of the property where the Professor comes to live. It is also in this town that the Housekeeper and her son live, and where the Housekeeper works while Root attends school.

## The cottage

The cottage is located at the back of the property of the sister-in-law. It is a small but cozy, and is noted as being strewn with reminding notes and dust. The cottage features a bedroom, a bathroom, a kitchen, a living room and sitting area, and an outdoor patio. Most importantly, the cottage contains the Professor's study. The cottage is where the Housekeeper and her son come to spend much of their time not only for the Housekeeper to clean, but for her and Root to simply spend time with the Professor as well. The Housekeeper realizes that the cottage is the Professor's refuge from the world, and from his own mind, for he surrounds himself with mathematics and order.

## The study

The Professor's study is located in the cottage in which the Professor lives. While the cottage may serve as the Professor's refuge from the rest of the world and his failing memory, his study serves as his sanctuary. There, the Professor can be wholly surrounded by numbers, by mathematics, and by the things of which he was as sure in the past as he is in the present. The Professor does not like to be disturbed in his study except for important things, because he is always working when he is in his study. It is in the Professor's study that the Housekeeper and Root discover the Professor's thesis, and learn more about who he was in the past by way of his notebooks and old notes.

## The retirement home

The retirement home is located forty minutes from the Professor's cottage, and is the retirement home to which the Professor is sent by his sister. The retirement home is behind an old airport, and does not have a very nice view. The retirement home is seen as out of the way, much the way the Professor was kept by his sister-in-law in the cottage behind her house. The Housekeeper and Root travel to visit the Professor at his

retirement home each month for the next 11 years. There, Root plays catch with the Professor on the lawn each year until the Professor is no longer able to do so.

## **The cemetery**

The cemetery is located just beyond the town in which the Housekeeper and her son live. The cemetery is where the Housekeeper's mother is buried. The location is relatively wooded and pastoral, for wild animals as large as deer frequent the area. This is demonstrated by the dead fawn found in the cemetery by the Housekeeper and Root. The fawn itself comes to represent the death of life, and the end of the primacy of life.



# Themes and Motifs

## Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “The Housekeeper and the Professor” by Yoko Ogawa. Family, thematically, involves the love, compassion, loyalty, encouragement, and support of and between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who act in accord with the traditional family unit. Family proves to be tremendously influential in the novel, not only to the Housekeeper and Root, but to the Professor as well.

When the novel begins, the only family that the Housekeeper has is her son, whom she loves dearly. Root, in turn, loves his mother dearly. The Housekeeper’s entire life is devoted to work for her son so that her son may have a better life than what she had growing up. The Professor, meanwhile, has only nominal family through his sister-in-law who keeps him at arm’s length, but nearby. She provides for him financially, but has little to do with the Professor on a day-to-day basis. The Professor lacks any real family, while beyond themselves, the Housekeeper and Root have no family to speak of.

The Professor describes his current situation as a an endless pattern that is only broken up by 1, which when added, brings about balance and a new lease on life. The addition of the Housekeeper (as 1) and Root (as another 1) brings about a new experience for the Professor, breaking the pattern of his living and simply getting along. In the Housekeeper and Root, the Professor finds not only a daughter and grandson figure, but people who genuinely care about him and want to be in his life despite his memory issues. Likewise, the Housekeeper and Root quickly warm up to the Professor, seeing in him a father and a grandfather figure, respectively.

The Professor encourages and inspires the Housekeeper and her son to look at the world in entirely new ways through mathematics, meaning that life is no longer a question of working just to live, but living to wonder as well. The Professor, in turn, realizes that his own life – of math – isn’t all there is to life, and that his memory issues do not define his life. The Professor comes to encourage the Housekeeper in her work and her role as a mother – an approval which means a lot to the Housekeeper because she never had a father to compliment her or support her. The Professor and Root bond over baseball and math, and while the outing to the baseball game results in a fever, the Professor is still glad to have gone. In the Housekeeper and in Root, the Professor finds love and acceptance for who he is, just as any family should.

## Life's Unpredictability

Life is an important theme in the novel “The Housekeeper and the Professor” by Yoko Ogawa. Life, thematically, involves the ups, downs, good things, bad things, successes, failures, triumphs, and defeats in human existence. A human life is composed of many



things, and the lives of the Professor, the Housekeeper, and Root all change for their meeting.

Life does not always turn out as expected. This much is clear early on in the novel. The Housekeeper's mother never expected to be a single mother, while the Housekeeper herself never expected to be a single mother, either. Likewise, the Professor never expected to be involved in an accident that would strip him of his memory faculties post-1975. The Professor's sister-in-law never expected that her husband would die, or that she would come to be the primary financial provider for her brother-in-law. Likewise, neither the Professor, nor the Housekeeper and her son, ever expected to cross paths with one another in their lives.

The Professor believes that his life will be lived out in his cottage with a fraction of the memories he should have, and surrounded by mathematics. However, the Housekeeper and her son remind the Professor that his life is not over as he suspects, but has merely entered a new phase. The Professor, meanwhile, reminds the Housekeeper that life is not merely mundane and about work, but is about love, wonder, and finding the deeper truth to things. The Professor even ends up inspiring Root to become a math teacher. Triumphs in life – such as the Professor solving puzzles and winning prizes – are celebrated, while tragedies – no matter how small, such as Root cutting himself with a knife on accident – are rallied around to be handled.

Even then, life does not end up as expected. The Housekeeper is stunned to be suddenly fired by the sister-in-law on trumped-up reasons. The Housekeeper is then amazed to be rehired through the efforts of the Professor. She is later shocked to learn that the sister-in-law will be committing the Professor to a retirement home – something which neither the Housekeeper nor the Professor expected to happen. Despite this challenge of life, the Housekeeper and Root continue to visit the Professor for the next eleven years of his life, until his death. This is done partly as a matter of family, respect and human decency, and as a matter of recognizing the Professor is a person who had an amazing past life as a professor of mathematics.

## Math

Math is an important theme in the novel “The Housekeeper and the Professor” by Yoko Ogawa. Mathematics – the study of numbers and their relations – perforates both the novel and the lives of the characters in the novel. Math affects the novel in important ways, touching on everything from God to life in general.

The Professor's special field is mathematics, specifically transcendent numbers. He studied in, and then taught mathematics as young man. His thesis was so well-received and so brilliant that it won the Professor a prize. Following the 1975 accident, mathematics are the only thing the Professor has that he can keep in the present from his past life, because his memory only lasts 80 minutes. Mathematics thus becomes a bridge between the past and the present for the Professor, so he buries himself in math because it is the only thing that he is sure of.



For the Housekeeper, math is merely a bother at first, something she did not do well with in school. But, as she comes to learn through the Professor, math and numbers are absolute and eternal truths that not only prove the existence of God, but also have existed long before – and will exist long after – man has come and gone. Accessing mathematics, the Professor explains, is like accessing the notebook of God – it is a glimpse into truth and reality. Math is peace and perfection, like God – and this compels the Housekeeper not only to take an interest in math, but to look at the world and at life in new and wondrous ways.

Root takes an especial interest in math, not only because the Professor is so passionate about math and teaches it well, but because the Professor himself is so passionate about math. Root looks at the Professor as a grandfather figure. What interests the grandfather and the father is often interesting to the son and grandson. Root therein not only finds the math fascinating, but finds it fascinating that the Professor finds math fascinating. The Professor serves as a role model for Root, who ends up becoming a math teacher by the end of the novel.

## Memory

Memory is an important theme in the novel “The Housekeeper and the Professor” by Yoko Ogawa. Memory involves those things recalled from one’s past. Memory is one of the most precious, sacred, and delicate aspects of human existence. It is essential to human life, and helps people to understand their past, their present, and their future.

In the novel, memory chiefly concerns the Professor. It is around the Professor that memory truly becomes important, for the Professor’s own memories are fleeting. Having gotten into an accident in 1975, the Professor cannot recall anything longer than 80 minutes past 1975, though he can recall with great clarity anything that occurred before the accident, or anything he learned before the accident, such as math. This is why math is so important to the Professor, for it serves as a bridge between his long-term memories and his lack of short-term memories.

The 80-minute memory of the Professor has affected him to such a degree that he must live in a small cottage at the back of his sister-in-law’s property. His sister-in-law seemingly bothers little about him, leaving the Professor up to his own devices. The Housekeeper, on the other hand, finds it sad and tragic that the Professor can only keep 80 minutes of memory. This means he must be constantly cared for by Housekeeper, and it means he is unable to keep anything beautiful, happy, or wonderful that he experiences in the present time. It means that each day, when the Housekeeper and her son arrive, introductions must be made all over again, and a process of getting to know one another must daily occur.

By the end of the novel, the sister-in-law, jealous of the closeness of the Professor and the Housekeeper and Root, exaggerates the Professor’s memory worsening, and has him committed to a retirement facility. She cruelly tells the Housekeeper that, while the Professor will not remember the Housekeeper, he will remember her because she knew



the Professor before the accident. Yet, ironically, the Professor does not recognize the sister-in-law for long in the present, for she is no longer physically the same as she once was in his surviving memories.

## Love

Love is an important theme in the novel “The Housekeeper and the Professor” by Yoko Ogawa. Love in the novel exists in three primary forms: familial love, romantic love, and the love of study. All three forms of love influence the novel in important ways, and revolve heavily around the Professor, the Housekeeper, Root, and the sister-in-law.

Familial love matters greatly because it has been something that Root and his mother, apart from each other, have been so long without. Beyond their mother-son relationship, they have no family to speak of. Beyond his sister-in-law, who only marginally cares for the Professor, the Professor has no real family to speak of. The meeting of the three of them – the Professor, the Housekeeper, and Root – means that, in one another respectively, they find a daughter, a grandson, a father, and a grandfather. In other words, they find family. Their care soon turns to love, for Root continues to visit the Professor after his mother is fired; and the Housekeeper and Root continue to visit the Professor after he has been committed to a nursing home.

Romantic love also appears faintly in the novel, more as a memory and part of the past than anything solid and physically discernible in the present. In the past, the Professor and his sister-in-law had a romantic relationship that blossomed into love. Whether this relationship began before or after the death of the Professor’s brother is left unclear. Evidence of this love can be found in the photograph discovered in the Professor’s old thesis. However, what is also clear is that the sister-in-law still retains some sort of love for the Professor, for she wants to keep him out of reach of the Housekeeper, whom she sees herself in as a younger woman.

The love of study is also an important kind of love that comes into play in the novel. For the Professor, the love of math is his love of study. He has devoted his professional life to the study of mathematics. Even following the death of his short-term memory abilities, the Professor continues to study math, not merely because it is a bridge in the gap of his memory and the present and the past, but because it is something that he loves to do. This in turn inspires Root to take up teaching math for his own career – a lasting effect that the Professor will have long after his death.



# Styles

## Point of View

Yoko Ogawa tells her novel “The Housekeeper and the Professor” from the first-person reflective point of view from the perspective of main character, the Housekeeper. The Housekeeper is relating her story to the reader some years after the majority of the novel has occurred in 1992. She directly addresses the reader, talking about events that occurred back then, noting that it was indeed March of 1992 when things began. The novel includes the Professor’s death 11 years later, in 2003, and even then, the Housekeeper speaks about these events as if they have occurred in the past. As a result, the novel is a reflection on past events personally experienced by the Housekeeper. The Housekeeper is thus able to describe not only her experiences, but her thoughts and feelings based on those experiences – such as her reaction to the Professor’s 80-minute memory, and how her mind and heart are opened to wonder at the world around her through mathematics.

## Language and Meaning

Yoko Ogawa tells her novel “The Housekeeper and the Professor” in language that is simple and straightforward with great symbolism and metaphorical allusion, in addition to being perforated by mathematic equations and vocabulary. The simple and straightforward language is reflective both of the simplicity and beauty of the Japanese language, and of the fact that the narrator – the Housekeeper – never achieved anything more than a high school-level education. This simple language also provides for great symbolism, metaphors, and exploration of deeper truths made easily understandable to the reader, from the dead fawn representing the loss of life, to the notebook of God and the quest for greater truth through the study of math. Because the novel deals so centrally with mathematics, mathematics become a core part of the novel, ranging from specific elements of math (such as prime numbers) to illustrative examples of math in action (such as triangular numbers). This helps the reader to not only more deeply understand mathematics, but the role of mathematics in the novel, and the beauty of mathematics in the real world.

## Structure

Yoko Ogawa divides her novel “The Housekeeper and the Professor” into eleven linear, numbered chapters from 1 to 11. This simple and straightforward approach to the novel’s construction is reflective of the simple beauty of the Japanese language, and the simple elegance of numbers themselves. Likewise, the reader should note the number of chapters – eleven – as being a prime number, reflective of the important foundational aspect of numbers. Eleven chapters serve therein as the important foundational number

of chapters to the novel as a whole. They are also reflective of the importance of math to the plot of the novel.



## Quotes

He had a special feeling for what he called the 'correct miscalculation,' for he believed that mistakes were often as revealing as the right answers.

-- The Housekeeper (Chapter 1 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** As the Housekeeper comes to work for the Professor, the Professor teaches her and Root about mathematics. The Housekeeper explains that the Professor even loves wrong answers, because wrong answers can be as revealing as the right answers. This has much more to do than with just math. While the wrong answer in math can lead to the right answer in math, the wrong answers in life can sometimes ultimately lead to the right place in life.

But it's not something you can put into words – explaining why a formula is beautiful is like trying to explain why the stars are beautiful.

-- The Professor (Chapter 1 paragraph 82)

**Importance:** Here, the Professor speaks to the Housekeeper about math and creating proofs to solve mathematical problems. He explains that a proof can be ugly – utilitarian and basic – or it can be beautiful – flowing and elegant. But these things are difficult to put into words because things are sometimes beautiful without description, like stars or a human life. This will become incredibly important to the Housekeeper – and her son – as the novel continues.

It's like copying truths from God's notebook, though we aren't always sure where to find this notebook or when it will be open.

-- The Professor (Chapter 3 paragraph 26)

**Importance:** The Professor explains to the Housekeeper that the work he engaged in while at the university included the relationships between whole numbers. Through numbers, there is a higher truth that can be seen about the world. Tapping into these numbers, the Professor explains, is like tapping into the greater truth of God. Numbers are an eternal mystery that constantly need to be considered – just like life in general.

The answer is written in God's notebook.

-- The Professor (Chapter 3 paragraph 40)

**Importance:** The Professor, speaking to the Housekeeper of perfect, deficient, and abundant numbers, notes that that no one has ever found an abundant numbers just one smaller than the sum of theirs. The Professor explains the answer is written in God's notebook. This reveals that the Professor does indeed believe not only in a higher truth to things, but in the idea that everything has an answer, whether it is known or unknown. Such is life.

A problem isn't finished just because you've found the right answer.

-- The Professor (Chapter 3 paragraph 67)



**Importance:** Here, the Professor encourages Root to find alternate ways of adding up all the natural numbers between 1 and 10. He explains there are different ways to handle the problem, even though at least one right answer has already been found. The Professor's words are, as usual, loaded with a deeper meaning. In this case, the problems of life have more than one answer; and more specifically, how the Housekeeper and Root approach the Professor and his tricky memory.

Math has proven the existence of God, because it is absolute and without contradiction; but the devil must exist as well, because we cannot prove it.' The Professor's body had been consumed by the devil of mathematics.

-- The Professor (Chapter 6 paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Here, following a baseball game, the Professor falls ill with a fever and is tended to by the Housekeeper. The Housekeeper notes how frail and thin the Professor seems without his customary suit on. This makes her realize that the Professor is so consumed with mathematics, that he is unable to focus on even important simple things, such as properly eating and caring for himself. For the Professor, the devil is undeterred mathematics.

And that was how I came to leave my job at the Professor's house."

-- The Housekeeper (Chapter 6 paragraph 59)

**Importance:** After the baseball game, the fever, and the Housekeeper's spending the night at the Professor's to tend to the Professor, his sister-in-law files a complaint. As such, the Housekeeper is brought in for questioning before the Director of the Agency, and is reassigned. This is annoying, saddening, and infuriating to the Housekeeper, who only sought to help the Professor.

Then Root and I are his first friends!

-- The Housekeeper (Chapter 7 paragraph 56)

**Importance:** Following the Housekeeper's being fired from the Professor's by his sister-in-law, Root continues to visit the Professor. The sister-in-law learns about this, and becomes angered by it, believing that the Professor has no friends so all the Housekeeper could possibly want is money. The Housekeeper explains this is not true, and that she and Root are genuinely friends with the Professor.

Since the accident, math was his life...

-- The Housekeeper (Chapter 8 paragraph 13)

**Importance:** The Housekeeper marvels at how the Professor is able to focus on solving mathematic problems printed in the Journal of Mathematics. She realizes that the Professor is able to do this because, since the day of the accident, numbers have become his life. But the Housekeeper's thoughts have a deeper meaning as well. Since the accident, the Professor has stopped truly living because his memory lasts only 80 minutes, and he forgets everything quickly. But numbers, he knows. Numbers remain



the same before the accident as they do after the accident. As a result, mathematics are the way that the Professor is able to keep living his life. They are the one thing he can remember extensively in the present.

Despite what the Greeks might have thought, zero doesn't disturb the rules of calculation; on the contrary, it brings greater order to them.

-- The Professor (Chapter 8 paragraph 96)

**Importance:** After the Housekeeper returns to work for the Professor, the summer comes on and Root goes away on a camping trip. The Housekeeper confesses to the Professor that she misses her son, and the Professor expresses this as a zero. The zero, the Professor explains, brings greater order to calculations. In other words, it makes better sense of things. With Root gone, it gives the Housekeeper a chance to reflect on how important Root is to her, and how fast he is growing up. Her life has only made sense with Root in it. In many ways, the Professor's life only makes sense with the Housekeeper and Root in it.

It was special because we celebrated it with the Professor, and because it turned out to be the last evening the three of us would ever spend together in the cottage."

-- The Housekeeper (Chapter 10 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** To celebrate Root's eleventh birthday, and to celebrate the Professor winning the prize from the Journal of Mathematics, the Housekeeper holds a party for them. She explains that it is the last time that she, the Professor, and Root ever spend together in the cottage. This is because the Professor's memory has gotten worse, and will be moved into a retirement home.

You see, my brother-in-law can never remember you, but he can never forget me.

-- The Sister-in-Law (Chapter 11 paragraph 25)

**Importance:** Because his memory has been deteriorating, the Professor is moved into a retirement home. According to the sister-in-law, this has been planned for some time. The Housekeeper offers to continue looking after the Professor in the home, but the sister-in-law says this is not necessary. Cruelly, jealously, and truthfully, the sister-in-law explains the sad truth that the Professor will always have a memory of her, but not of the two people who came to mean so very much to him late in life. Still, the Housekeeper and her son continue to visit the Professor for years afterwards, until he passes away.