

Kira-Kira Study Guide

Kira-Kira by Cynthia Kadohata

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Introduction

Cynthia Kadohata's *Kira-Kira*, published in 2004, is the story of a young Japanese American girl growing up in the 1950s. This is Kadohata's first book for young adults, following several adult novels. It highlights the work and life experiences of Japanese Americans in the pre-Civil Rights era, as well as their struggles to achieve the American dream. The novel explores the relationship between individual and community identity. In *Kira-Kira*, community helps to define the individual. The main character, Katie, develops her sense of self through her experiences and relationships with others—friends and family, neighbors, teachers, and peers.

Katie chronicles her family's life in the United States. In her first-person narration she emphasizes the lessons in honesty, love, disappointment, and hope that her sister, brother, and parents teach her. Although the novel recounts the many hardships the family endures—back-breaking work, poverty, racism, illness, and death—it also focuses on those moments in life that are *kira-kira*, which means "glittering" in Japanese. These are the moments when the characters of the novel experience the things that make life worth living: beauty, happiness, and hope.

Author Biography

Cynthia Kadohata was born in 1956 in Evanston, Illinois, the daughter of Japanese American parents. She has a journalism degree from the University of Southern California and attended graduate writing programs at Columbia University and the University of Pittsburgh. Kadohata believes her writing has been shaped by her family's experience as Japanese Americans, which included frequent moves across the United States in search of work. Kadohata drew on her family's experience for *Kira-Kira*, her novel for young readers which received the 2004 Newbery Medal.

Kadohata was hailed as a new voice in American fiction in 1989, with the publication of her first book, *The Floating World*. Like *Kira-Kira*, this book also features a young girl's first-person narration of her family's moves throughout the United States. *The Floating World* was widely reviewed and praised for its masterful writing. Kadohata also published *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* (1992), set in the futuristic Los Angeles of 2052. She has frequently contributed short stories to periodicals such as *The New Yorker*, *Grand Street*, *Ploughshares*, and the *Pennsylvania Review*.

Kadohata has received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Whiting Writer's Award from the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation. In 2006, Kadohata will publish *Weedflower*, another novel for young readers. *Weedflower* tells the story of a friendship between a young Japanese American girl living in an internment camp and a young Mojave boy living on the reservation. In *Weedflower*, as in *Kira-Kira*, Kadohata draws on her family's experiences. Kadohata's father was interned with his parents, in a camp that was on the Colorado River Indian Reservation in Arizona.

Although she derives material from her Japanese American background, Kadohata does not like to be regarded only as an Asian American writer. She believes this label limits her ability to go beyond preconceived ideas that some readers may have about Asian Americans.



Plot Summary

Kira-Kira is a novel about a young Japanese girl, Katie Takeshima, growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Though she lives in a volatile time, she is oblivious to everything around her except the security of her family's love. That cocoon of love is slowly shattered, however, beginning with a move that takes her family from the familiar cornfields of Iowa to Georgia.

At five, Katie believes Georgia is a foreign land where everyone speaks with such a strong southern accent that she will never be able to understand a word they have to say. Imagine her surprise when, within a few short months, she finds herself speaking with that same thick accent as though she had been born there.

Life is much different in Georgia for Katie and her family. In order to save for a home of their own, Katie's parents must work long, hard hours. Her father quite often spends the night at the poultry hatchery where he works as a chicken sexer. Katie hardly ever gets to see her parents anymore. She spends most of her days with one of their Japanese neighbors, waiting only for the moment when her sister Lynn will come home from school and play with her. When she herself is old enough to start school, Katie hates every moment of it, unsure what is so special about reading and figuring out math problems all day long. Not only that, but the year she starts first grade, Katie's mother gives birth to another child. Now Katie is not the youngest child any longer, but suddenly a big sister expected to help care for her new little brother, Sammy.

Dislike of school or not, Katie soon learns to accept this new world her parents have brought her to. Time flies by, first grade turning into second, then third and fourth. Pretty soon, it is Katie's tenth birthday and Lynn has a new best friend. At first, Katie accepts this with all the generosity of a child who admires and loves her older sister. It's not so easy to understand, though, when Lynn and Amber begin walking around the living room with books on their heads, giggling and whispering about boys all the time. Katie is glad Lynn has a friend, but sometimes she wishes that Lynn had more time to just be silly with Katie.

It is soon after Amber enters their lives that Lynn starts to become ill. At first, she is simply tired all the time. The doctor comes and gives Lynn iron pills and Katie's parents say she just needs to rest and eat more liver. Lynn is sick so often that summer, Katie and Sammy have to go to work with their mother because there is no one else to watch after them. At first, sitting alone in the car all day long is hot and boring. That is, until Katie meets Silly. Maybe now Katie can have a best friend of her own.

Meeting Silly is not the only exciting thing to happen that summer. Since it is Lynn who has always harbored the secret wish to have a home of her own, Katie's parents go to the bank and take out a loan in order to buy a house sooner than originally planned. Lynn feels so much better once they are moved into the new house; she and Katie plan a picnic to celebrate. They find a nice field on unfenced property in town, owned by the owner of the poultry plant and the hatchery, Mr. Lyndon, to share doughnuts and root



beer. After lunch, Sammy wanders off to explore the woods and he steps into an animal trap. The jaw of the trap has huge teeth that grab onto Sammy's ankle until Katie is sure it has been cut off. She runs into town to get help when it is clear she and Lynn cannot carry him out on their own. Fortunately, Sammy has not broken any bones and he will be fine.

If only Lynn were not sick so much. Lynn has to go into the hospital the October after Katie's eleventh birthday. Katie spends that fall with Sammy and her father at the hatchery instead of in school, which is okay with her. When Lynn finally comes home, Katie spends every minute she can taking care of her, and when she isn't taking care of her, she is thinking of new ways she can help Lynn.

It is the day after New Year's and Katie has gotten up early to watch the sunrise alone outside their little house. She falls asleep and the next thing she is aware of is her father carrying her into the house. "She is gone," her father simply says.

After they come and take Lynn's body away, Katie's father becomes very agitated as he watches Sammy limp across the kitchen after dinner. He decides to take Katie and find the trap that hurt his son. They drive to the middle of the field and Katie waits a long time while her father searches the woods. Finally, he comes back. Instead of going home, though, he drives up to Mr. Lyndon's house and breaks the windshield of his Cadillac with a two-by-four. Afterward they drive until they reach the next town, then Katie's father pulls over. Seconds later, a police car comes up behind them and a cop asks Katie's father what they are doing. "Going to get tacos," Katie tells him. The cop tells them what happened at Mr. Lyndon's house. It is clear he believes it is Katie's father who broke the car's window, but his car is not the same color as the one a witness saw. When Katie tells him what happened to her sister, the cop lets them go.

Katie is asked to make a speech at Lynn's funeral. She is very nervous. She has never understood the concept of theme as it applies to literature, but she wants very much to understand what it means when applied to her sister's life. When she stands up in front of all those people, she is even more nervous, feeling as if she will never make it through. She tells the crowd about her sister's dream of living in California beside the sea. She tells them how much Lynn had wanted to be a rocket scientist or a great writer. She tells them how Lynn would be the greatest at everything and how she would take her family with her. This, Katie says, is the theme of Lynn's life.

Katie talks to her Uncle Katsuhisa after the funeral. She feels guilty because one night when Lynn was very sick, they fought and Katie said that she hated her. Uncle Katsuhisa tells her not to worry because Lynn knew she didn't mean it. Besides, he says, when someone is that ill, it makes you do things you would not normally do. He knows because he and Aunt Fumi once had an infant that was very sick. He once had terrible thoughts about hurting the baby, but he did not do it. It was only his grief talking.

Uncle Katsuhisa helps Katie build an altar for Lynn. Katie takes care of it every day. Her family believes Lynn's spirit will remain on earth for forty-nine days after her body died. On the forty-ninth day, Katie closes her eyes and tries to feel Lynn's spirit before it goes.



When she opens her eyes after her wish, she sees a leaf stick to the window above the desk. That is a sign from Lynn, she thinks. Katie prays for Lynn not to worry about her anymore. She knows it is not possible for Lynn to come back to life, so she does not wish for that.

Slowly life begins to return to normal. The union people had been trying to organize at the poultry processing plant is voted in. Katie's mother and father go back to their crazy work schedules. One day, Uncle Katsuhisa finds out that Mr. Lyndon has decided not to give his workers a raise that year. When he tells Katie's father, Katie says maybe her father should break Mr. Lyndon's car window again. Father takes Katie to Mr. Lyndon's house and he admits to him that he had broken the windshield. Mr. Lyndon fires Katie's father. Katie is upset because this is very bad news for her struggling family. Her father says it's okay; it's time to move on anyway. Besides, a person should never be afraid to apologize for something he did.

That summer, the Takeshima family takes a vacation to California. As Katie stands on the beach, she remembers Lynn. "Kira-kira," she can hear her call. "Kira-kira."



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

This novel opens with the happy recollections of a young girl, Katie, who looks back on her childhood with her older sister, Lynn. She remembers learning the meaning of the Japanese word, *kira-kira*, "glittering." She remembers her sister repeating it over and over, encouraging her to use it to describe the objects around her.

Katie also recalls the day her sister saved her life. That day Katie is almost five and Lynn almost nine. They are sitting in the middle of their empty road staring up at a clear, summer sky outside their home in Iowa, when a dog leaps from a cornfield growling and snarling, its long yellow teeth bared. The dog grabs Katie by her pant leg, her leg saved by a vicious bite only when Lynn pulls the dog's tail and yells for her to run. The dog then attacks Lynn. Thinking fast, Katie runs into the house and grabs a bottle of milk to throw at the dog. She misses, but the bottle breaks and spills milk across the road. This attracts the dog and saves Lynn. Lynn, afraid the dog will cut its tongue on the broken glass, grabs the water hose and scares the dog away. Later that night she writes in her diary how Katie saved her life when Katie had thought it was Lynn who saved her.

Katie asks Lynn one day if she is a genius. Lynn answers yes. The day their father taught Lynn to play chess, she won her first game. She promises when she grows up she will use her genius to make lots of money and buy a big house for the four of them to live in. Katie believes her parents will buy a wonderful house long before then, especially after Lynn shows her the eleven one-hundred dollar bills hidden under the refrigerator. They live in a rent house now, but very soon, she knows they will have a home of their own.

Their parents own an Asian grocery store. Unfortunately, there are very few Asian people where they live. Shortly after Lynn shows Katie the money, their parents are forced to close their business. Their father's brother, Uncle Katsuhisa, lives in Georgia where he works in a poultry hatchery. He says he could get their father a job there and their mother a job in the poultry-processing factory. It takes their father a long time to decide, long enough for the hidden money to dwindle to just six one-hundred dollar bills, but he agrees to move to Georgia.

Uncle Katsuhisa comes to Iowa to drive the family to Georgia. It is a hot day when he arrives in his old truck, excited to see his small nieces, more excited to see his brother and sister-in-law. Their mother is worried the truck will not make it all the way back to Georgia. Their father is not worried. "He's my brother," is all he has to say about it.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Katie is a small child, viewing the world through the innocence of childhood. The reader knows the parents must be frightened about this change that will uproot their whole

family and the precariousness of their financial state. The reader doesn't see that. Instead, we see a child about to go on an adventure, a child who cannot imagine anything wrong in the world as long as her big sister is by her side. Knowing that she relies on her sister so closely and that her earliest memory is of a day when Lynn saved her life makes one wonder how Katie could survive without her.

There is a strong family base in this novel, a mother and father who clearly care about each other and their children. The fact that they have saved so much money but then did not entrust it to a bank might suggest a deep distrust of the Anglo community. However, those trust issues do not extend to family, including extended family, as seen when the father pounds his chest and refuses to admit his brother's noisy, old truck might not make the trip to Georgia.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Father and Uncle Katsuhisa spend the day before the move loading boxes into the truck. Uncle Katsuhisa sees Lynn and Katie play soldier with the chess set and boasts that he is the best chess player in the world. Then he challenges Lynn to a game. Lynn beats him in fifteen minutes, only to have him challenge her again and again despite the work that waits to be done. Uncle Katsuhisa is not happy to be beat in chess by a little girl. After he loses three times, he stands and spits on the tree.

That night, the men sit outside and talk until very late. Katie lies in bed and listens; she wonders what it is they talk about. She realizes she misses her stuffed toy, a mix between rabbit and dog that her mother has packed for the move. She cannot sleep without it.

The next morning they are late in their move because Katie is still missing Bera-bera (her toy), Lynn misses a favorite sweater that is also packed and Uncle Katsuhisa has overslept after a long night of talking and spitting out in the yard. Finally, when it is time to leave, the girls ride with Uncle Katsuhisa in the truck but he does not want to ride with them when they will not stop crying. The girls move to their parents' car only to be moved once more when they will not stop crying again. Uncle Katsuhisa offers to show Lynn and Katie how to spit. This encourages them to be quiet. Soon they are all laughing and Uncle Katsuhisa sings popular songs by replacing the better-known verses with Katie and Lynn's names.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Lynn appears very mature in the beginning of the chapter. She plays her Uncle Katsuhisa at chess and wins three times. He is the one who acts like a child, climbing from his seat to spit on the tree. The tables turn quickly the next morning, however, when Lynn cries just as loudly as Katie does over her lost possession. It seems the possessions in question here, a stuffed toy and a sweater, are not the true cause of the tears, but perhaps the idea of leaving all that is familiar to the small children.

No move ever goes off quite as planned. This move is no exception. The family leaves their old home for their new home much later than originally planned. This episode might be a little bit of foreshadowing. Perhaps things will not go as smoothly as planned in the future for this family.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The drive to Georgia takes the Takeshima family through several large cities, including St. Louis where they stop so the adults can pick up a few supplies. Lynn and Katie are told to stay at the car. To pass the time, they plan the future. Lynn says she would like Katie to go to college where she attends graduate school so they can get an apartment together. Then they sit on the hood of the car and swing their legs, acting like the women their mother calls floozies. They stop before their mother comes back, they do not want to make their mother upset or cause their father to worry.

Uncle Katsuhisa stops in Nashville to buy a chess set at a pawnshop when they start out again. He is determined to beat Lynn at chess.

They stop at a hotel that night. Katie goes with her father when he pays for the rooms. A woman with black hair and white roots ignores them when they first enter the office. While Katie's father fills out the registration card, the woman says Indians must stay in the back. Katie says they are not Indians. The woman says Mexicans must stay in the back. Katie says they are not Mexican. The woman asks Katie if she has trouble written across her forehead. Katie does not understand, until her father explains that the woman is a bad lady.

That night Uncle Katsuhisa spends a lot of time locked in the bathroom with the chess set. Eventually, he asks Lynn to play with him. He takes a lot of time deciding each of his moves. Lynn decides quickly. Lynn wins and Uncle Katsuhisa walks outside and spits. Lynn asks Katie if she should let him win once. Katie says no. Later when she wakes in the middle of the night, however, Uncle Katsuhisa is locked in the bathroom with the chess set again.

They arrive in Georgia and it does not seem much different to Katie from Iowa. Lynn reads many signs to her that claim Georgia has the best barbecue in the world, the best peaches and the best peanuts. They even see some antebellum homes. Lynn explains means they were there before the Civil War and that rich people once lived in them and owned slaves. Lynn knows a lot of stuff like that because she once tried to sit down and read the whole dictionary.

Katie falls asleep before they arrive at Uncle Katsuhisa's house and wets her pants. She hopes no one will notice, but as soon as Aunt Fumiko, Uncle Katsuhisa's second wife, sees her, she starts screaming at the top of her lungs, "Katie wet her pants!" Katie bursts into tears and everyone laughs.

Later, they have a great big dinner with all six of the other Japanese families who live in their new town, Chesterfield. While everyone eats, the grownups talk about the poultry business. Katie's father tells everyone what it means to be a chicken sexer. It is his job



to separate the male chicks from the female chicks. The male chicks are killed. They are useless since they cannot lay eggs, Uncle Katsuhisa tells Katie. It may seem sad, but Katie has to learn to be like other farm kids-farm kids understand the meaning of death.

When Katie goes to bed that night, she makes a list of all the things she misses in Iowa: the view from her bedroom window; The Iowa State Japanese-American bowling league; Mrs. Chan, their Chinese neighbor who can remove her teeth; snow; and her parents. Here in Georgia, her parents will have to leave for work before Katie and Lynn are even up. She misses them already.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The tone of this chapter is much different from the previous chapter. Katie and Lynn are more playful, purposely playing in a manner they know their mother would not approve of. Then there is Uncle Katsuhisa, who is acting more like a child than the children do when he cannot win a simple game of chess against a nine-year-old child. There are points in this chapter when one has to wonder who the child is and who the adult is.

The first hint of trouble in Katie's perfect world is the rudeness of the clerk at the hotel. Katie has never known prejudice before and does not understand why her father does not argue with the woman. She herself argues, more confused than upset by the woman mistaking them for Indians or Mexicans. What is wrong with Indians, she wonders later. There were Indians in Japan and Katie admires the way the female Ainu wore mustaches even though her mother thinks it is less than feminine. Her father is very docile. He pays the extra two dollars the clerk demands for the back rooms despite the fact that Katie-a five-year-old child-does not think it is fair.

Later, when the adults are discussing the poultry hatchery and Uncle Katsuhisa suggests the children will have to toughen up and be more like farm children, Katie is confused by his statements and she is more confused when Aunt Fumi quickly moves to hush him. It is Lynn who saves Katie from this discussion, calling to Katie to join her and the older children at play. These events seem to hint to something a bit more dramatic in Katie's future. What that might be, however, is still unclear.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The Takeshima family moves into their new apartment the next day. It is much smaller than the house they rented in Iowa with moldy walls in the bathroom and dirty, peeling wallpaper in the kitchen. Katie's mother does not like it and that makes Katie's father unhappy. He tries to cheer her up by saying they can make her a sewing area in the living room. Katie's mother says that is not possible. They will have to put Katie's desk there when she starts school.

Katie starts kindergarten, but she cries and screams so much her parents decide it would be better to wait for her to begin school in first grade. Katie spends her days with a Japanese neighbor, Mrs. Kanagawa, and waits every afternoon for Lynn to come home from school to play with her. Mrs. Kanagawa says Katie is like Lynn's pet dog.

Katie and Lynn quickly become good friends with the other kids in the apartments. Lynn becomes the leader of the kids, always organizing games for them to play. At night, Katie and Lynn make wishes. They make selfish wishes and good wishes. Katie wishes for sixteen crayons instead of eight. Lynn wishes to go to college and to have a house of their own someday. Katie wishes Lynn could have a home of her own someday, too.

Katie and Lynn's father gives them a nickel every weekday so they can get themselves a treat. Lynn decides they should start saving them so they can help their mother and father buy a house. Katie does not want to give up her treats, but she will if it makes Lynn happy.

Lynn reads to Katie when it is too hot to play. Sometimes she reads *Silas Marner*, Katie's favorite book, and sometimes she reads from *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Lynn could read it because she was such a genius). The Takeshimas own the P volume of the encyclopedia because someone left it behind in their rent house.

The day before Katie starts first grade, Lynn sits her down for a serious talk. Lynn begins by promising Katie that when the two of them grow up they will live in houses side by side in California next to the sea. Katie agrees just because she wants to be close to Lynn always. Then Lynn becomes more serious and asks Katie, "Have you noticed that sometimes people won't say hello to Mom when we're out shopping?" When Katie says no, Lynn explains that the other kids at school might not say hello to her, either. There are only thirty-one Japanese people in their town. They keep to themselves because the rest of the people out-number them and treat them like ants. Katie does not understand, but she tells Lynn she does.

When Katie gets to school, she does not understand what all the fuss has been about. She is overdressed. All the other kids are wearing jumpers and plain skirts, but Katie is wearing her best dress. Lynn walks her to her line and she is the only one without a



friend. One of the girls asks her if Katie is Japanese or Chinese and what her native name is. Another girl asks what is wrong with her hair (her mother cut and curled it, which is a local Japanese tradition). When the teacher appears, she asks if Katie is going to a party. Katie wants to go home then but she does not want to leave without Lynn.

While Katie is in first grade, her mother gives birth to a baby boy named Samson Ichiro Takeshima, or Sammy for short. All the nurses at the hospital come to her mother's hospital room to see the beautiful Japanese baby because they have never seen one before. They ignore Katie's mother, but they greatly admire the pretty baby.

Katie's mother returns to work soon after the baby is born, so Mrs. Kanagawa watches Sammy during the day and Lynn and Katie watch over him at night. Katie and Lynn take him outside and stare up at the stars, chanting *kira-kira, kira-kira*, just like when they were little and lived in Iowa.

At night, Katie likes to put baby Sammy on her bed so she can protect him from the *oni*—the ogres who guard the gates of hell. When Sammy is one-year old, Katie remembers she hasn't seen Bera-Bera, her stuffed toy, in a very long time. She doesn't miss him.

Chapter 4 Analysis

At the beginning of this chapter, the reader sees a small child who is so afraid of the world outside, it is decided she should not start school until she is older. At the end of the chapter, the reader sees a young girl who has taken charge of her infant brother and lost interest in a toy that was once very important to her. There is a touch of the theme of the book here, a child coming of age. Katie has ceased being the infant and instead has become the big sister to a new infant.

Again we see a little of the troubling racism that is such a strong part of the time period in which this novel is set. Though it does not seem to affect Katie very much now, the reader must wonder if this is a symbol for the turbulence that will soon befall Katie.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Time passes for the Takeshima family. Katie finds school boring and looks forward to being at home with her brother and sister. Lynn keeps track of the passing time in her diary and begins to write short stories in it as well. Most of her stories are about the sea. Katie figures her love of the sea is one thing that will never change about Lynn.

One winter afternoon when Katie is ten and a half, Lynn is hit in the chest by a ball while the kids are playing dodge ball. She is stunned and goes straight to bed that night. The next day she stays home from school which is very unusual for Lynn. A doctor comes and puts Lynn on iron pills. Katie's father thinks Lynn's illness is simply because she is delicate like her mother. When Katie and Lynn's mother was young, she once spent a whole year in bed.

Later that night, Lynn has a nightmare that makes her cry. Katie has never seen Lynn cry. Lynn says the nightmare was about her swimming happily in the ocean. Katie said that sounded nice, so why was Lynn crying? Lynn says it is because it was only her spirit swimming.

The other big event that winter happens when Amber, a popular girl at Lynn's school, breaks ranks and becomes Lynn's best friend. Amber starts going everywhere with Katie and Lynn, and the two older girls start painting their nails and walking around the living room with books on their heads to practice for when they become models. Suddenly Lynn is all about femininity and she is critical of Katie when she does things that are less than ladylike. Lynn even changes her opinion of things like camping when Amber says she does not like them.

As if all that wasn't enough, now Lynn likes boys too. One weekend, she and Amber find out that two boys they like are going camping. Lynn talks Uncle Katsuhisa into taking them camping to the same place the boys will be. At the campsite, Katie tries to light the fire and instead lights a sleeping bag on fire. Amber and Lynn are too busy to notice, so Katie and her cousin David try to hide it behind a tent. Luckily, Uncle Katsuhisa finds it and stomps it out.

Uncle Katsuhisa decides to hunt some rabbits for dinner. He takes a bow and arrow and says Aunt Fumi and the kids can follow behind and watch. Uncle Katsuhisa comes up on a rabbit and quietly begins to stalk it. Suddenly, Katie yells out, "But Bera-Bera is half-rabbit!" Katie is not sure why she says this. She doesn't even know where Bera-Bera is anymore. A little while later, Uncle Katsuhisa shoots a rabbit with his arrow. Katie looks at it and she passes out.



Chapter 5 Analysis

In this chapter, the writer drops a lot of hints about the story that is beginning to unfold. First, we have Lynn's illness. She is only injured on the ball field, but becomes so fatigued she cannot go to school, which she obviously enjoys. An illness of this degree does not have the feel of something passing, something that will go away and not come back.

Second, we have Lynn's dream. She dreams she is in the ocean, a place of great pleasure for her. However, in the dream she senses that she is not whole, that it is only her spirit swimming. This might suggest that on some level Lynn knows she might soon die.

Fi, we have Katie's reaction to the dead rabbit. Katie cries out a statement regarding Bera-Bera, a toy she had abandoned when her brother's birth spawned a bit of maturity. Bera-Bera was a symbol of all that is safe and comfort to Katie. Comparing the death of the rabbit to her symbolic toy suggests that somewhere down the road Katie will lose something of great importance to her.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

When Katie wakes, two teenage boys have joined them. Lynn tries to console her by reminding her that Bera-Bera is safe in the closet at home. Katie is too embarrassed to take comfort from her words.

One of the boys asks Amber if she can shoot the bow and arrow. Amber says she's willing to learn. Uncle Katsuhisa reluctantly shows her and nearly dies when she trips at the same moment she releases the arrow and narrowly misses planting the arrow in his head. Instead, she kills a bird. The boys are impressed with her skills and invite her and Lynn to join them at their campsite for dinner.

Katie stays at the campsite to eat rabbit and listen to Uncle Katsuhisa tell stories. Most of his stories never seem to come to a point. One is about a legendary tornado he saw with his first wife, one about shooting cans, and one about some money a friend of his found and returned. Katie wonders what Lynn is doing with those boys and remembers when Lynn told her about something some girls do with boys called French kissing. She wants to have a boyfriend someday. In her fantasies, her true love is a good-looking boy named Joe-John Abondondalarama. They will meet when she is seventeen and he saves her from falling over the railing at the Grand Canyon or, in another fantasy, in the bathroom at a party. Eventually they will have seven children.

Lynn and Amber come back and invite Katie to pull her sleeping bag up close to theirs. Lynn says that she kissed one of the boys and Amber almost kissed the other. Then Amber asked Katie if she has a boyfriend. Katie decides to tell them about Joe-John even though she has never told anyone about him. Lynn and Amber think she is making it up just to entertain them and they tell her what a funny story it is. At first, Katie thinks they are laughing at her, but then she realizes they are laughing with her. Katie basks in the pride of their compliments, but inside she feels like a phony. She wishes she had friends of her own.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Death seems to be a theme that is interlaced through most of the chapter. First, there is Katie's continued reaction to the slaughter of the rabbits for dinner. Then Amber nearly kills Uncle Katsuhisa when he shows her how to use the bow and arrow. This scene is topped off by Lynn leaving the bosom of the family to spend time with a couple of young boys. This is a little more symbolism. There is death on the reader's mind and then Lynn is gone.

Katie is beginning to show how mature she is becoming. Her fantasies are surprisingly tender and adult, her understanding of romance sweet. When her sister and Amber

make fun of her fantasy, she handles it well. Her desire to have a friend of her own is poignant and maybe a touch of foreshadowing.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Summer has arrived. The first week Lynn spends at Amber's house. Mrs. Kanagawa cannot watch Sammy and Katie, so Katie's mother decides they will have to go to work with her. They cannot go inside the building, so they will have to sit in the car for the entire eight-hour shift and the three hours of overtime their mother works.

Katie sits in the dark of the car while they drive to the plant, a full hour from their apartment. She thinks about Mr. Lyndon, the man who owns the plant and the poultry hatchery her father works at. He is very rich, but also somewhat of a mystery because no one has ever really seen him. He is an invisible legend in the county, a rich man who inherited all his money from his great-great-grandfather. They pass the local swamp, called "Brenda's Swamp" for a little girl who died there back before Katie was born. They say her ghost lives in the swamp. Katie tries to see if she can catch a glimpse of her.

Poultry is one of the biggest industries in Georgia. That does not stop those who do not work in the industry from looking down on those who do. Even in the plant itself, there is discrimination. The workers in the clean sections, where there are no blood and guts, no feathers, look down on those who work in the dirty sections. Katie's mother started out in the dirty section, but she was recently promoted to the clean section.

Katie's mother pulls into the parking lot and rushes out of the car. "Keep the doors locked," she tells Katie as she rushes to make her shower time. Katie wants to know why they cannot go into the plant with her. Her mother says they are afraid Katie might steal a chicken.

Katie sits in the back seat with her brother while he sleeps. She sees a little girl get out of a car with a woman. The girl comes to her window and says hi. She tells Katie she does the laundry in the plant to make money for her school clothes. Katie asks about a man she sees walking the parking lot. "He's a thug," the girl tells her. He is there to keep the employees from congregating in the parking lot and talking about the union.

After the girl goes, Katie falls asleep. When she wakes, her mother comes out to check on them. She moves the car into the shade and turns on the air conditioning. She tells Katie not to talk to that little girl again and that organizing a union will only cause trouble for the workers. Then she falls asleep. Katie is not sure if she should wake her, but doesn't want her to get in trouble. When she finally does, her mother runs back into the plant without saying goodbye.

When Sammy finally wakes, they have lunch and play a few games, read a few books. They are tired when their mother finally comes to drive them home. She smells funny. The workers are not allowed to take unscheduled breaks, so they wear pads in their



underwear in case they have to go to the bathroom. Katie decides when she is older she will buy the factory and let the workers go to the bathroom whenever they want.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The reader again sees a little of the racism that was such a part of this time period. Not only is Katie's mother looked down on for the job that she does, but also her own employer will not allow her to use the bathroom while she is working. Not only that, but she works twelve hours a day and has nowhere to take her children while she is working.

There is a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel, however, the coming organization of a union. To the modern reader this seems like a good thing, but to Katie's mother it is something to be feared. She has a good job; why anger the bosses and give them cause to fire her? The union is a symbol of hope and safety to those who want it, but a symbol of danger to workers like Katie's mother. This is reinforced by the thug paid to patrol the parking lot and keep the employees from discussing it on company time.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

When Katie, her mother, and Sammy return home, Lynn is in bed sick. Katie's mother is upset when Katie comments on the green pallor of Lynn's skin. She relegates the younger children to the living room to sleep that night in case the illness is contagious.

Katie takes care of Sammy, taking him to watch TV at the Muramotos,' feeding him his dinner, bathing him, and then putting him to bed on the couch, leaving the floor for herself, which annoys her. Katie is so annoyed; she does not wipe the ring out of the bathtub after her own bath. Her mother tells her to clean it up. She does not want to, but then even her father gets angry with her, and her father hardly ever gets angry with her. Katie does what she is told, wondering the whole time why she can't sleep in her own bed. If the illness is contagious, she will get it anyway because they live in the same house.

She goes to the bedroom and asks Lynn what is wrong with her. Lynn says the doctors do not know. Katie goes back to the living room and thinks of a time when she was sick and Lynn used to sneak into the bedroom to be with her. Katie reaches up to check Sammy's forehead for any signs of illness. The next morning, Katie's mother again makes Katie and Sammy go with her to work while Aunt Fumi comes to stay with Lynn. Katie stares out at the swamp again. This time she sees Brenda in the swamp. She is a pale girl in a white dress with a dog at her side.

Mother tells her not to talk to the girl again, but when she comes to the window and says hi, Katie does not want to be rude. The girl says her name is Silly, short for Sylvia. They talk for a few minutes, and then Silly has to go to work. Katie sleeps for a while, feeds Sammy, and watches him go back to sleep. Finally, she is too bored and decides to go explore. She peeks through a window of the plant and watches her mother cut the legs and thighs off the chickens. Then the garbage can she stands on cracks and she falls to the ground. The thug catches her and she thinks she is going to be in trouble, but Silly appears with her uncle and the uncle tells the thug Katie is with them. She goes back to the car and locks the doors.

Over the next few days, Silly tries to work fast so they can talk for a little while. She gives Katie and Sammy sandwiches. Sammy has never had bread and he finds it very entertaining. Silly tells Katie how her father died when she was a baby and how she does not have school clothes or a bicycle. Silly makes Katie feel lazy and she realizes how lucky she is. Katie's parents can afford to buy her those things.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Katie's parents are very agitated when Lynn becomes ill this time. This illness is becoming very serious, but Katie only sees how unfair they are being to her. She thinks



of Lynn as tired all the time, not sickly. To Katie, nothing can ever change the way her world is right now. The reader, though, through the reaction of the parents, can see things are beginning to change.

Katie passes the swamp and believes she sees the ghost of the little girl who is rumored to have died there. This corresponds with the dream Lynn had in Chapter 5, of floating in the sea as a spirit. Perhaps this is another hint that death will soon be a factor in Katie's life.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Lynn gets better and stays well for so long even Katie's parents begin to relax. On Katie's eleventh birthday, Katie is allowed to invite Silly. Katie bakes a cake for herself and she and Silly spend all day pretending to be a music group called the Shirondas. Amber comes over too and says Katie and Silly are stupid. Lynn thinks they are cuter than words. When Silly leaves, she fills several large water jugs because she lives in a part of town that has no running water. Mrs. Kilgore, Silly's mother, tells Katie's mother there is a union meeting later that week. Katie's mother lies and says she is too busy to attend. Katie wants to know why and her mother says Mrs. Kilgore causes too much trouble. Then her mother lectures Katie on doing better in school.

Katie struggles with her homework, trying to figure out what the theme of a short story is until Lynn tells her. Later, Lynn confides that the boy she likes is moving away. Katie listens and remembers when once Lynn would wake her in the middle of the night and talk about her hopes for the future, especially about going to college. She doesn't do that anymore. Katie also thinks that lately Lynn has been making her feel very immature when she does talk to her.

The next day, Lynn is too tired to eat. Katie's mother decides to take her to the hospital so Uncle Katsuhisa comes with Aunt Fumi and their twins to watch Katie and Sammy. They decide to play Scrabble. Scrabble is not a game Katie is good at. She goes first and irritates Uncle Katsuhisa so much he starts yelling at her. When the phone rings, Aunt Fumi answers and then runs into the other room. Uncle Katsuhisa goes to her; he hugs and rocks her for a long time. Finally, Katie asks if that was her mother on the phone. Yes, Aunt Fumi tells her. "Don't worry, sweetheart. She told me to tell you that."

Chapter 9 Analysis

Lynn and Amber have a difference of opinion for the first time since their friendship began. Lynn, as Katie noted in Chapter 5, always seems to have the same opinion as Amber even if it is in direct contradiction of the opinion she had before she met Amber. Could there be trouble brewing here?

Lynn does not want to talk about the future with Katie anymore and she has stopped dreaming about college. It seems Lynn has lost the hope she once had of living an exciting life in the near future. Lynn is not terribly upset about the boy she likes moving away, either. It appears Lynn has lost some of the spark of life she once had.

Uncle Katsuhisa is very agitated while the family plays Scrabble. The phone call Aunt Fumi receives seems to agitate her too, only she reacts with tears instead of anger. The phone call is from Katie's mother. The reader could deduce from these reactions that

the news from the doctors was not good, yet the adults choose not to tell Katie, her cousins, or Sammy at this time.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

When Lynn returns home from the hospital, Katie's mother insists she is fine. It is only her anemia acting up; she just needs more liver. Katie feeds her every day and gives Lynn her pills, even when she does not want them. Sometimes she shoves them down her throat and holds her mouth closed until she swallows. Katie also gives extra liver to Sammy so he won't get anemia too.

One night, Katie is asleep in the living room on the new cot her parents bought her. She rolls over and Lynn is kneeling on the floor beside her cot. She tells Katie that Amber decided not to be her friend anymore. The next day, Katie sees Amber after summer school with some of her other friends. Amber and Katie call each other names and Katie pushes Amber. Then Katie tells her parents about Amber and Lynn. At first, Katie thinks it might be a mistake because they are sad about it, but then her parents decide they are going to the bank to take out a loan so they can buy Lynn a house.

The night before they go to the bank, Lynn, Katie and Sammy give their parents the money Katie and Lynn had been saving for so long. They have managed to save \$100. Their mother is so happy; she starts to cry and runs out of the room. The next day they go to the bank and a few weeks later their loan is approved. The same day, they take Lynn to pick out a house. She finds one the first day, a sky blue one. When Katie was little, Lynn said she wished for a sky blue house.

The house is a lot like the apartment, only it has a small dining room and a small alcove off the living room. The alcove is where they will put Lynn and Katie's desks. One window looks out on the old apartment down the street and the other looks out on a big magnolia tree. Katie picks the bad view so Lynn can look out at the beautiful tree.

Lynn gets better every day. Everyone thinks it is the house healing her. Katie and Lynn decide to go on a picnic. Their father gives them a whole dollar to buy food. They buy root beer and doughnuts, and then ride their bikes out to Mr. Lyndon's unfenced property. They walk for a long time to find the perfect spot. After they eat, Katie falls asleep. When she wakes, Sammy is screaming a terrible scream. Katie runs to him, faster than Lynn, and finds him with his ankle trapped inside an animal trap.

Katie quickly figures out how to release Sammy's foot. She carries him piggyback to the blanket, and then she and Lynn try to carry him back to their bikes on the blanket. Lynn gets tired quickly and pretty soon, she drops Sammy. Lynn says Katie has to run into town and get help.

Reluctantly, Katie runs off alone. She cannot remember which way to go, but soon she runs into a little neighborhood. She knocks on the first house that looks most like the kind of house her mother would like to have. A woman answers and takes her across



the street to another house. Here a kind, good-looking man loads her up in his truck when he learns what has happened and takes her back to where Lynn and Sammy wait.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The suggestion that Lynn is fine, only a little anemic, when she comes home from the hospital is not suspect until Katie's mother and father decide to go to the bank and ask for a loan to buy a house. Back in Chapter 1, it is suggested the Takeshima parents are weary of banks because they hide their money under the refrigerator instead of putting it in the bank. The reader should feel a little suspicion here even though Katie explains this sudden change in strategy to the fact that Lynn's best friend, Amber, has dumped her.

Buying the house seems to have done the trick, however. Lynn is feeling better, well enough to enjoy a picnic. To have this little trip end in disaster, with Sammy getting caught in the trap, is another touch of foreshadowing. Everything good that could happen to Katie and her family has happened. Then we have this tragedy, a family member horribly injured. This could be a sign that even though Lynn is doing so much better, tragedy could still be waiting around the corner.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Hank Garvin, the kind, good-looking man, tells the girls to get in the back of the truck while he puts Sammy in the front. Katie watches Sammy through the glass windshield, scared by the redness in his face and the fear in his eyes. Lynn does not look much better herself, green and tired. They get to the hospital and Hank stays with the girls even though the hospital has called their parents. He even gets crayons for Katie to color with even though she's too old for that.

Hank stays after Katie's parents arrive. The doctor tells them that Sammy will be fine; there are no broken bones. Katie's mother keeps asking what can be done, and the doctor tells her it is all under control. Hank stays until they are allowed to take Sammy home. Katie is quite amazed by this white man and his concern for her family.

At home, Lynn is sick again, so both she and Sammy get to sleep in the bedroom. Katie's mother tells Katie she has to buy Mr. Garvin a gift for everything he did for them. Katie has no money saved, but she agrees. Then she remembers her and Lynn's bicycles, still sitting on the curb outside Mr. Lyndon's property where they left them. Katie's father goes to get them, but they are gone before he gets to them.

Katie lies on her cot that night and listens to her parents talk about Lynn, Sammy and herself. They talk about all the things they need to do for them and all the things they cannot.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Hank Garvin is an angel to Katie. This is the first time she's had this kind of experience with a person outside the small Japanese community she lives in. It reinforces to her and to the reader that not all people during this time period were bad or full of misguided hatred. He is also a symbol of something good coming out of something bad.

Katie's mother seems to feel very inadequate when Sammy is injured. Even Katie notes how often she asks if there is anything to be done even though the doctor has already assured her that everything is taken care of. This powerlessness is explored again later in the chapter when Katie's father cannot find their bicycles and then Katie overhears them discussing all the things they cannot do for the children. Life is out of their hands no matter how hard they work to provide for their family. This symbolizes the frustration any parent would feel when faced with a child suffering a terminal illness. Even Katie, who is thus far unaware how bad her sister's illness is, can see the suffering these poor people are going through.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Lynn does not return to school in the fall. Katie is told it is her anemia, but when she looks it up in the dictionary, she does not see how anemia alone could make Lynn this ill.

In October, Lynn is hospitalized in a nearby, bigger town. Since Katie's mother elects to stay with Lynn most days and some nights, Katie and Sammy must go to the hatchery with their father. Most days, Katie's father will not allow them to go to school because he wants them with him where they were safe. Katie does not mind. She still does not like school.

Katie and Sammy are free to come and go in the hatchery, unlike the processing plant. Katie likes it because of all the baby chicks. One of the sexers talks Katie into serving them coffee and snacks while they work. Katie and Sammy like this job since they can be where the action is and be close to their father, too. Katie also meets the inoculators who give shots to the female chicks to make sure they are healthy. She asks if it hurts them and they say no, unless you accidentally break their necks. Katie sees a few dead chicks in the trash and keeps Sammy from seeing them.

Katie's father comes to sleep with all the other sexers and Katie and Sammy at night, but he can only sleep a few hours until the chicks hatch. Then they have to separate them as quickly as possible. One night while Katie is there, there is a big thunderstorm. The power goes out and the back up generators do not come on. They have to keep the chicks warm in the incubators or they will die. The manager calls Mr. Lyndon and he sends a man to fix the generator with a sheriff's deputy to escort him. Katie thinks what a powerful man Mr. Lyndon must be to do that.

Katie has a lot of time to think while she is at the hatchery. She thinks about the people she used to know, about a boy at school she likes, and about Lynn and why she is sick. She does not understand why Lynn is so sick and why she won't get better. Katie thinks Lynn has a bright future and she will do everything she ever wished for someday. Later she steals two male chicks and lets them go free in a field.

Lynn comes home in November. The whole family creates a routine that revolves around her. They all sit in her bedroom and listen to Katie read to her every night. Katie will sit with her after and talk about the places they will live and the houses they will buy. Sometimes she will play hooky from school and stay with Lynn. Lynn tells her she would like some pink nail polish one day, so Katie goes to the five and dime and steals some. Lynn likes it, so Katie thinks it was worth it. Then the woman from the store comes and tells Katie's mother what she has done. Katie's mother pays for it and Katie's father makes Katie go to the store and apologize to the owner.



Katie is struggling with her schoolwork. Again, she struggles to find a theme for a literary work. This time, though, Lynn is not well enough to help her. Katie's father sits her down and tells her that, yes, Lynn has anemia. She also has something called lymphoma. Katie goes to the dictionary and looks it up. This is how she finds out Lynn might die.

Katie begins sneaking into the bedroom at night to be close to Lynn even though her mother tells her not to. She wants to be close to her. Some days Lynn is well enough to get out of bed and eat with her family. On nights when she is not, Katie and her mother put her on a sheet and take her out to the front yard to enjoy the cool air. Most days when she looks up at the sky, her eyes are bright, like she belongs to the sky. Only one night, it seems it no longer matters to Lynn. The next day is the same.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Katie has become the protective big sister that Lynn has always been for her. In the hatchery, she is once again exposed to death in the form of the dead chicks the inoculators accidentally killed. Katie protects Sammy from the sight of those chicks without any adult suggesting to her that she should.

Mr. Lyndon is a very powerful man. Katie gets to see just how powerful when the storm hits the hatchery. He seems to be the exact opposite of Mr. Garvin and yet, he has enough power to do so much more than Mr. Garvin. These two people symbolize good and evil in Katie's little world.

When Lynn comes home from the hospital, it is clear just how ill the girl is. Katie still believes she will get better. If only Katie could do enough for her, could give her everything she needs. She steals the nail polish because it is what Lynn wants and she will do anything to get Lynn what she wants. The nail polish symbolizes Katie's hope for Lynn.

Finally, Katie learns the truth about her sister's illness. Lynn might die and Katie takes this news calmly. Lynn still eats dinner with the family, still talks to Katie about her dreams. It is not until Katie sees the happiness leave Lynn's eyes when she and her mother take her outside that the reader even gets a hint that Katie is beginning to understand the precariousness of Lynn's condition.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The entire Takeshima family is exhausted. Katie's parents must work harder to pay Lynn's medical bills and keep up with the mortgage. Katie must take care of both Sammy and Lynn and continue going to school. Lynn always needs something and sometimes she doesn't know what it is she needs. Katie does not sleep soundly anymore in case Lynn needs her in the night. She is so tired some mornings that she makes herself coffee.

One night Lynn wakes her and asks for milk. However, she does not want milk, so she asks for water. She spills both the water and the milk on the floor in frustration. Katie tells her she hates her. Lynn says she hates her too. Katie tries to sleep but Lynn makes funny breathing sounds. Katie listens, too angry to do anything to help. As Katie listens to her sister, even as she feels her anger toward Lynn, she is still thinking of things she can do to make her more comfortable.

Thanksgiving weekend, Katie's parents make Katie and Sammy go camping with Uncle Katsuhisa and his family, even though Katie does not want to go. Katie invites Silly to go too. They ride with Uncle Katsuhisa and he gets lost because he has never been to this campground before. He drives his old truck up to a cliff and they get stuck. Uncle Katsuhisa makes Katie and Silly get in back to weigh down the truck while he tries to back up. It does not work. He tries to get Katie to learn the clutch so she can back it up with him and Silly in the back, but Katie does not understand and accidentally goes forward. This frightens Uncle Katsuhisa, who quickly pulls her out of there. Instead, he has Silly back the truck up. Silly saves them.

At the campground, Katie and Silly play hunter and hunted with Daniel and David. Daniel and David are the hunters first. They catch Katie but not Silly. When it is Katie and Silly's turn to be hunters, they let the boys hide, then they go back to camp and play cards. The boys are not happy about this, but Katie feels freer than she has since Lynn came home from the hospital.

Later they listen to Uncle Katsuhisa's friend, Jedda-Boy, tell stories about land surveying. It sounds very exciting. Katie asks Uncle Katsuhisa why he does not get a job doing land surveys since he is trained for it. Aunt Fumi says no one will hire a Japanese man to do a job like that. Aunt Fumi says it's okay because the world is changing and maybe someday her boys will be able to have a job like that one.

It is New Year's. Mrs. Muramoto has a big party and Katie's parents go. Katie goes to the party for a little while and then goes home to be with Lynn. Lynn wakes and makes Katie promise to do better in school and to go to college. Then she tells Katie to take care of their parents and Sammy. After a while, Lynn asks Katie to open a window.



When she does, a small brown moth comes inside. Lynn watches it and Katie wonders what she is thinking.

The next morning, Katie goes outside with a lawn chair to watch the sunrise. She makes a list of all the sounds she can hear—an old piece of newspaper fluttering, a mechanical whirring, a bird chirping and the bug light at the tire store. She makes a list of the things she sees—the tire store, a lonely tree, a gray sky and a crow. Katie cries for a while thinking she hates her parents and then because she loves them. Katie thinks of how sad she is and how she is the only sad person in the world. Then she thinks there must be other people sadder than her and thinks this thought makes her no longer a little girl but a big girl. Katie falls asleep and when she wakes, her father is carrying her into the house. He tells her Lynn is gone.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Katie fights with Lynn even though somewhere in her child's maturity she understands that Lynn does not mean to be so difficult. Even as she smolders in her anger, she is thinking of all the things she can do for her sister. Katie has been given a great deal of responsibility and she lives up to the responsibility admirably. Katie's parents must see this because they send her off on a little vacation that is clearly a much-needed reprieve.

Once again, Uncle Katsuhisa comes very close to being killed on a camping trip. Death is strongly interwoven in this novel. Perhaps instead of death, maybe it is the realization of human mortality that is interlaced through these pages, a sense of the precariousness of life. Twice Uncle Katsuhisa almost dies, and twice he is saved by pure luck.

Katie is given the chance to save the day by learning to drive a clutch and reversing the truck to pull away from a cliff. The symbol of she and two people close to her hanging over a cliff is very powerful, especially in light of what is going on in her life. The cliff could be the lymphoma her sister suffers and her chance to reverse the truck a symbol of her power to reverse her sister's situation. However, she fails in her task only to have her new friend, Silly, rise to the occasion. After all, she is powerless in this battle.

We also see a reinforcement of the times in which the novel takes place. By mentioning Uncle Katsuhisa's inability to find a job as a land surveyor, the writer is reminding us of the turbulent times this novel is set in and reminds Katie of how difficult life is for the adults around her. However, the times are changing, Aunt Fumi reminds her. This is a small spark of hope in a novel full of sadness.

Katie has an epiphany as she watches the sunrise the day after New Year's. Katie realizes she is not the only sad person in the world and that this knowledge makes her a big girl. What that means, she isn't sure. This touches on another theme of the novel, Katie's growth and maturity.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Katie goes to her sister's bedroom and finds her parents there crying at her sister's bedside. They are quiet for a moment, and then Katie's mother grabs a mirror and puts it under Lynn's nose, searching for any sign of breath. There is none.

There is a frenzy of activity later as everyone prepares for the funeral. Katie's mother wants everything Lynn touched to be saved, so Katie runs through the house looking for everything, even goes out to the driveway and searches through the trash bags. Katie also clips Lynn's fingernails for her mother to keep.

Before they take Lynn's body, Katie cuts a lock of her own hair and ties it on a string around her sister's neck. Then she lies on the bed and cries, suddenly angry that nobody could fix Lynn. All she can do is cry.

Katie's father becomes very agitated as he watches Sammy limp across the kitchen after dinner. He decides to take Katie and find the trap that hurt his son. They drive to the middle of the field and Katie waits a long time while her father searches the woods. Finally, he comes back. Instead of going home, though, he drives up to Mr. Lyndon's house and breaks the windshield of his Cadillac with a two by four. They drive until they reach the next town, then Katie's father pulls over. Just then, a police car comes up behind them and a cop asks Katie's father what they are doing. "Going to get tacos," Katie tells him. The cop lets them go after telling about what happened at Mr. Lyndon's house. Katie eats five tacos.

That night Katie can't sleep, so she does the dishes. She has never done the dishes without being told. Then Katie lies in bed and sees the moth Lynn had been fascinated by the night before. Katie realizes what Lynn had been thinking. Lynn had wished she could be that moth. Maybe it was the last wish she ever wished.

Chapter 14 Analysis

All the foreshadowing has come together in Lynn's death. It is very difficult, but it all plays out just as the writer has promised. Katie is very sad, but she handles it much better than one could expect. She handles it even better than her own father does. Katie's father, so torn by his grief, takes out his anger on the one person he can reasonably hold responsible, Mr. Lyndon.

This is the man whose unfair labor practices have forced Katie's father to work so many hours he couldn't be with his dying child as often as he would have liked and can't have as much time off work as he would like to grieve. Lyndon is the man who probably placed the trap that injured his young son. Katie's father could have gone to jail for this moment of grief, if not for Katie's quick thinking and the police officer's sympathy for



their situation. This is a reversal of roles: Katie's maturity versus her father's debilitating grief. This is the second time grief has caused one of the Takeshimas to break the law.

That night, Katie sees the moth again. The symbolism here is simple and heart-wrenching. It is almost as if Lynn knew she was about to die and wished to fly away like the moth.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Katie is asked to give one of the eulogies at her sister's funeral. Katie is nervous, afraid she will not do a good job. Her mother wants her to end with a good memory of Lynn, but all she can think of is how to sum up the theme of Lynn's life. Katie does not want to disappoint Lynn. Finally she tells how Lynn wanted to be a rocket scientist or a great writer and how she wanted to take her family with her. This is the theme of Lynn's life, Katie says. She forgets to mention a good memory.

At the cemetery, everyone throws flowers into the hole where they will plant the urn. Katie's father throws a white rose, but he misses. When Uncle Katsuhisa picks up the rose and puts it in the hole, Katie's father begins to cry. It scares Katie to see him cry.

After the funeral, Katie talks to Uncle Katsuhisa about the fight she and Lynn had. Uncle Katsuhisa tells her not to worry about it, that Lynn understands now. Then he tells her about a baby he and Aunt Fumi had that was very sick. Grief makes bad thoughts, he tells her, but it does not mean anything afterward. Then he tells her how Buddhists believe the spirit leaves the earth forty-nine days after the body dies. He says he will make a box for her to keep Lynn's things. This will be Lynn's altar.

Katie writes an essay about Lynn for school that tells of a time when Lynn and she threw Kleenex from the top of the house and watched it float. Katie says Lynn could take simple things and make them beautiful. This, too, is the theme of Lynn's life.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Katie learns about theme when Lynn is still alive and feeling well. She takes this concept when it is time to eulogize Lynn and tries to find meaning in Lynn's life. This is a very mature, if simplistic, way to look at the concept of mortality. This is what changes one of the themes of this novel from death to mortality.

Uncle Katsuhisa talks about grief in his own life. This symbolizes to the reader that grief can be experienced and can be overcome as well. Uncle Katsuhisa went through one of the most horrible losses a person can experience and faces the world now as a happy man. This is the embodiment of hope.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Katie sets up the box Uncle Katsuhisa built for her on Lynn's desk. Inside she places the fingernail clippings, a lock of Lynn's hair and several objects Lynn owned. Every day she sets out a fresh glass of water and a bowl of rice for Lynn.

Katie takes over the cleaning and cooking because her parents are like zombies, working all the time. Katie takes care of Lynn's altar and on the forty-ninth day, she tries to feel Lynn's spirit. She opens her eyes and sees a leaf stuck on the window. Katie thinks that is a sign from Lynn. Katie cries and thinks about how sad Lynn would be if she could see her. Katie hopes Lynn will go away now and forget about Katie so she will not be hurt. She does not want Lynn to worry anymore.

Katie tries harder at school and brings some of her grades up. Katie even gets an A on a math test, which makes her parents very happy. She also spends lots of time with Silly, pretending to be the Shirondas. They go to the cemetery and perform for Lynn. Katie's father laughs a little, an act that surprises them all.

Katie's father decides that Katie and Sammy need more room in the bedroom, so he decides to have Uncle Katsuhisa take Lynn's bed to his house. When Uncle Katsuhisa comes over, he tells Katie's father that Mr. Lyndon will not be giving raises that year. Katie says her father should break his car window again. Father takes Katie to Mr. Lyndon's house and he admits it was he who broke the windshield, and that he is sorry. Mr. Lyndon fires him. Katie is upset because this is very bad news for her struggling family. Her father says it's okay; it's time to move on anyway. Besides, a person should never be afraid to apologize for something he did.

At the end of the summer, Silly's mother has a union rally at her house. Katie goes to help and is surprised to see her mother and father there. Afterward, her mother asks about a girl there in a blue dress that has no hair. She has cancer, Katie tells her. Later, when the union passes by one vote, Katie's mother seems pleased despite her original fear. Perhaps, Katie thinks, she realizes it would help the family of that little girl even though it is too late for Katie's mother.

Katie's father suggests they take a vacation the following year. Katie suggests California since Lynn had always wanted to go there. Before they go, Katie's father gives Katie Lynn's diary. The last entry in the diary is a will that gives the diary to Katie. Katie's parents kept it from her because they thought they were protecting her. Katie had thought she was protecting them.

The Takeshima family is in California on vacation. Katie walks on the beach and remembers how badly Lynn had wanted to be there. Here on the beach she thinks she can hear Lynn say "kira-kira." "Kira-kira."

Chapter 16 Analysis

Katie's father tells Mr. Lyndon about what he did to his car. The reader might puzzle this out and come up with several different reasons why. To teach Katie a lesson seems to be the most obvious. To overcome the suppression the time period placed on minorities is another reason. There are many reasons. This is a symbol of all that is morally right about Katie's father. No matter how hard life is for him, no matter what his motivations, it is clear he believes in morals and wants Katie to believe them too. Katie's mother and her vote for the union is a symbol of her own personal growth. No matter how old a person gets, they are still capable of change.



Characters

Katherine (Katie) Natsuko Takeshima

At the beginning of the novel, Katie is a five-year-old girl who looks at the world through the eyes of one who believes nothing bad could ever befall her, as long as her big sister is at her side. She follows the older girl around like a puppy on a leash, absorbing everything the older girl does or says. She believes herself to be a bad child, constantly full of bad thoughts and displaying bad behaviors that draw the dark looks of her beloved mother. In reality, she is a normal child who is eager to please and just as eager to test her parental boundaries.

As the story progresses, we see Katie growing a little more independent, slowly forming her own opinions on the world. Her dependence on Lynn begins to fade when the older girl finds friendship outside the family. Katie is still eager to act in somewhat immature and tomboyish ways as opposed to Lynn's growing maturity and femininity.

When Lynn becomes ill, her daily care falls to Katie. Katie is still a child and finds the responsibility of caring for her sister overwhelming at times. A lot of responsibility is thrown on this child who should be enjoying the carefree moments of childhood. She is instead forced to be a mother to Sammy, her brother, and a nurse to her dying sister Lynn. Katie rises to the responsibility and the reader is witness to incredible growth in a person too young to face the obstacles she must face.

Lynn Akiko Takeshima

Lynn is a young nine years old when the story begins, but she seems much older than her years. She is a self-proclaimed genius, a master of chess and a prolific journal writer. Of all these things, the most important thing to Lynn seems to be the molding of her young sister. She spends her every waking morning with her sister, teaching her words from their native language and explaining to her how the world works.

Lynn is a model of maturity, always the leader, always available with an answer to any question. It is only when she becomes ill that the reader sees the child she really is. There are moments of fear, moments of anger and despair. Lynn is afraid of what will become of her family and afraid of missing out on all the things she has wished for in her short time.

Father Takeshima

Lynn and Katie's father is a tall, lanky man, born in the United States but educated in Japan. He is a hard working, dedicated man who would be perfectly happy to be the sole support of his family despite his wife's determination to work herself so that they can save up to buy a house. He is quiet, much too quiet, always lost in his own little



world especially when there is a big decision to make. He is full of dignity despite his station in life, a man who accepts discrimination as a part of life and does not allow it to color his world. He does have a breaking point, like any man, but when he reaches it, he also stands up for what he did and takes all responsibility no matter the cost.

Mother Takeshima

A tiny, petite woman, Lynn and Katie's mother desperately wants a house she can call her own. She works hard, often staying at the poultry processing plant until she can barely move her wrists. She is the disciplinarian, with a soft face that can turn hard and glasslike until it seems it will shatter to pieces. At five, Katie believes her mother can read her mind, so she often thinks nonsense thoughts to keep her mother from seeing anything bad that might have been there before.

Mother Takeshima does not believe in gossiping, she believes in information. She is a delicate flower, as her husband calls her. He often reminds the children to be quiet so she can enjoy a bath or a cup of tea. So delicate is she, she once fell from a single step and broke her leg. All this can be deceiving. Like her husband, Mother Takeshima is dignified, aware of the hatred and prejudices around her but she refuses to play into it and allow it to affect her life. She is a caring soul, a woman who loves her family with a fierce pride, a woman capable of empathy.

Samson (Sammy) Ichiro Takeshima

Sammy is Katie and Lynn's baby brother. Sammy is five years old when Lynn becomes ill. Since the entire family is wrapped up in Lynn's care, it falls to Katie to take care of all of Sammy's needs. She feeds him, bathes him and puts him to bed on the couch—the bedroom has been reserved for Lynn, she needs solitude to get better—while Katie herself sleeps on the floor.

Katsuhisa Takeshima

Katsu means triumph in Japanese, but Katie believes at five that it means trumpet because her uncle often sounds like a trumpet. Though he can on occasion act like a child, he is an intelligent man who has seen a lot of loss and grief in his life. Uncle Katsuhisa refuses to let prejudice hold him down, just like his brother. He is a trained land surveyor, but no one will ever allow a Japanese man to hold such a prestigious job. This does not get him down, however, because the world is changing and maybe someday his children can be everything he cannot.

Fumiko Takeshima

Katsuhisa's wife, she is a woman who appears rough and uncaring in the beginning. It does not give her pause to announce to a crowd of family and friend's that Katie wet her



pants, quite an embarrassing moment for the young girl. Yet, as the story progresses, it is often Aunt Fumi who comes to the rescue of the young girl. She has a deep love for her husband and her family, and she is a strong, defiant woman, much like her sister-in-law.

Mr. Lyndon

Mr. Lyndon owns both the poultry hatchery where Katie's father works and the poultry processing plant where Katie's mother works. He is a very rich man who inherited his money, a fact that is often debated by the hard-working people he employs. Most of those people do not believe he is worthy of all he has because he never had to work for it. He is also somewhat of an enigma to the people in Chesterfield. Very few people have ever seen him. Whenever there is a problem at one of his plants, he sends an assistant to take care of it. No one has ever seen him set foot inside either of his plants.

Amber

Amber is a popular girl at the school Lynn attends. She breaks ranks with the in crowd in order to become Lynn's best friend. She is ultra-feminine, more concerned about her posture and nail polish than just about anything else. Her biggest regret in life is that she was born without the blue eyes that she believes are the height of beauty. The only things more important to Amber than nail polish and makeup are boys.

Sylvia (Silly) Kilgore

Silly's father died when she was a baby and she is being raised by a single mother. Her mother works long hours at the same poultry processing plant where Katie's mother works. They are so poor that Silly works in the laundry at the plant so that she can have money to buy her school clothes and every time she goes to visit Katie at her home, she brings several large water jugs to fill because where she and her mother live, they have no running water.



Objects/Places

Lynn's Diary

Lynn started keeping a diary almost as soon as she could write. In this diary, she has kept an accurate accounting of the lives of Katie and Sam since their births. It is this diary from which Katie draws many of her earliest memories and takes hope from after Lynn's death.

Bera-Bera

Bera-Bera is a stuffed animal that is half rabbit and half dog. He talks to Katie quite often, sometimes so much she has to ask him to be quiet.

Glittery Pink Nail Polish

Katie steals glittery pink nail polish from the five and dime store because Lynn says she would like to have some.

Lynn's Desk

This is where Katie sets an altar to honor Lynn's spirit the forty-nine days her family believes her spirit will remain on earth.

Lynn's altar

This is a wooden box where Katie keeps many of Lynn's belongings so her family can pay homage to the dead girl while her spirit remains on earth.

Uncle Katsuhisa's Truck

It is in the truck that Katie and Lynn travel to Georgia. The truck is the first vehicle in which Katie is allowed to sit in the front seat. It is also in the truck Katie nearly kills herself, Silly, and Uncle Katsuhisa when Uncle Katsuhisa accidentally gets lost on the way to a camp ground and sets the truck on the edge of a cliff, then asks Katie to back it up.

Mother's Car

Katie and Sammy are forced to sit in Mother's car all day for a week one summer because there is no one to watch them. It is during this time that Katie meets Silly.



Iowa

When the story opens, Katie and her family live in a small rent house among the cornfields of Iowa.

Chesterfield, Georgia Apartments

The place where Katie and her family live along with all six of the other Japanese families who live in this small Georgia town, it is a small U shaped building. The Takeshimas live in a tiny two-bedroom apartment with mold growing on the bathroom walls and no space for Mother's sewing area or a desk for the girls to do their homework on.

Lynn's House

The house Lynn and Katie's parents buy after Lynn becomes ill, hoping it will help her raise her spirits. Lynn picks a sky blue house because she remembers Katie saying she wanted a sky blue house.

Poultry Plant

The poultry plant is the large industrial plant where Katie's mother works. It is supposed to be the cleanest poultry plant in all of Georgia.

Poultry Hatchery

This is where Katie's father works and where Katie and Sammy spend several weeks while Lynn is in the hospital.

Mr. Lyndon's property

Mr. Lyndon is the owner of both the poultry hatchery and the poultry processing plant. His house sits on a large amount of unfenced land in Chesterfield where children often go to play and to picnic. It is here that Sammy steps into an animal trap and injures his ankle.



Themes

Coming of Age

In the novel, *Kira-Kira*, we watch Katie grow from a tiny nearly five year old into a heartbroken, mature eleven years old. In the beginning, the world seems new and fresh to her, a place where nothing could possibly go wrong as long as her sister, her favorite stuffed animal, and her parents are within easy reach. She trusts that if anything bad should happen, Lynn would be there to rescue her as she did when the dog attacked. As she grows older, forced into a sort of accelerated maturity by Lynn's recurring illness, Katie quickly learns to rely on herself. It is also in caring for her baby brother she shares the lessons Lynn taught her and becomes a more responsible child.

In the beginning of Lynn's illness, Katie's parents attempt to protect her by not telling her of the severity of the disease. At first, the frequent bouts of illness are worrisome only in the idea that Sammy might catch the disease and become ill as well. Lynn is still there, still her confidant, still the responsible child. As the illness progresses, Katie takes more and more of Lynn and Sammy's daily care upon herself, trying hard to stay out of her parents' way and make sure Lynn is comfortable. Her whole world quickly becomes about taking care of Lynn. It is a responsibility that is far too heavy for a child her age, but she rises to the challenge well. Only once does Katie show any resentment toward Lynn, and Katie quickly regrets it. This shows an amazing amount of growth in a child so young.

Following her sister's death, not only does Katie take care of her own needs and those of her brother, but she also becomes the caregiver of the entire family. Katie takes over the evening meals, borrowing a cookbook from a neighbor to cook her family more than the two meals she already knows how to prepare. Katie is only eleven when her sister dies, a few months short of her twelfth birthday, and yet she behaves like a person twice her age.

Katie also jumps in and saves her father from certain arrest when he breaks the windshield of Mr. Lyndon's car. When the cop pulls them over, it is Katie's quick thinking and fast excuse, the tears on her face and the truth about their grief, which brings quick sympathy from the cop who pulls them over. The question whether she did the right thing is later answered by her father's decision to admit the truth rather than allow his daughter to think he had done the right thing that night. This, however, is much later, at a time when grief has become a bearable burden to the already overburdened man. Perhaps this shows growth more in the father than in Katie. It is a child's instinct to protect herself from punishment, a father's instinct to protect his family. Maybe Mr. Takeshima always knew this and was only misdirected by his grief.

Finally, not only do we see growth in Katie and perhaps her father, but we also see growth in Katie's mother. She is terrified of a union. Union talk is trouble, she tells Katie on several occasions. Those who speak it are asking for trouble. That is, until she sees



a little girl as ill as her own child had once been. It is possible if the union is voted in, this child's family could have a little job security, more time off and health care coverage. If the Takeshimas had had all of those things, it would have been much different for Lynn and for them. At least by voting it in now, that girl's family will have a better chance at a different outcome. Katie's mother has learned empathy and compassion. This is growth just as profound as the growth we see in Katie.

Sisterhood/Siblings/Family

Another theme that runs through this novel is the special bond between family members, especially siblings. It is clear from the first page that Lynn adores her sister. She has taken it upon herself to teach the girl all there is to know about growing up in the world they live in. At times, it is Lynn and Katie against the adults in their lives, their parents and Uncle Katsuhisa. Lynn teaches Katie how to think nonsense words when Mother stares sternly at them just in case Mother can read Katie's mind. It is Lynn who tells Katie how hard their parents are working toward saving for a house, so they should do all they can to help including saving the few precious nickels Father gives them for treats in order to help. When Uncle Katsuhisa is so obviously upset at losing every chess game to Lynn, it is Lynn who turns to Katie for advice.

There also is a special bond between Lynn, Katie and Sammy. From the moment Sammy is born, Katie and Lynn take charge of his care without being told by their parents simply because he is one of them and it seems the natural order of things. Katie especially enjoys caring for her tiny brother, even though many of the chores she performs for him are chores she might not have otherwise volunteered to do. When Sammy is injured by the animal trap, it is Katie who is first at his side and Katie who runs to find help. When Lynn becomes ill, it is Katie who thinks first of the little boy and the possibility of him catching the disease from Lynn. Katie is so wrapped up in her devotion to her tiny brother; she outgrows her favorite stuffed animal without ever noticing. Sibling rivalry is non-existent in this family. Lynn is clearly the leader and Katie, initially only a follower, quickly steps in to fill her shoes when their roles become reversed by illness.

Mortality/Love and Loss

With the foreshadowing of Lynn's death interlaced throughout a majority of the chapters, it is hard to ignore the theme of death. Death, however, is not the appropriate choice of word for this particular novel. It is not about Lynn's death in the end, but about the frailty of life and the loved ones she has left behind. It is mortality: the knowledge that one will eventually die but not the actual act of dying.

Katie struggles throughout the novel to understand what the word theme means and how to interpret it through a work of literature. When Lynn dies and Katie is assigned the task of speaking at her funeral, she wants to make Lynn proud of her by writing a speech that contains an accurate description of the theme of Lynn's own life. Already



she is mature enough to see there is no point in wishing Lynn could come back to life or to be angry at the briefness of Lynn's life. Instead, she looks back on the time they spent together and finds meaning in her sister's short life. This is the ultimate expression of love between one human being and another.

Racism

Set mostly in pre—Civil Rights era Georgia, the novel accurately portrays the treatment of Japanese Americans in the United States in the 1950s. Though they are U.S. citizens, the Japanese American characters in *Kira-Kira* are continuously treated as outsiders and excluded from mainstream society. In several instances, the Takeshimas encounter people who do not even recognize them as Japanese; at the motel, the front-desk woman assumes they are Indian or Mexican, and when Katie starts school the other students ask if she is Chinese or Japanese. They cannot compete with whites for the same jobs, they are relegated to special sections for "colored people," and are generally regarded with suspicion. The characters experience others' racism as alienating and isolating. Interestingly, even though much of the novel is set in the South, there is no mention of African Americans or any other ethnic groups who might share similar life experiences with the Japanese Americans. Although the novel does not express any direct opinions about whites as a group, the characters who are not Japanese are viewed with suspicion and often portrayed as less caring or thoughtful than the Japanese characters.

Identity

The novel is concerned with the question of identity on many levels. Katie and her family are Japanese Americans living in the American South of the 1950s. Although she was born and raised in the United States, Katie often struggles to reconcile her Japanese upbringing with the customs and traditions of her native country. The question of identity is also explored in regard to gender roles—in Katie's case, the question of what it means to be a woman. Katie's mother often berates her and her sister for not being feminine enough because they are growing up in the United States. She tells them that she will send them to Japan to become properly feminine, and she curls Katie's hair in pin curls and dresses her in a party dress on the first day of school. Katie, who is changing from a young girl to an adolescent, wonders about what it means to be feminine. She is annoyed by Amber and Lynn's preening and gossiping about boys, but she also wants to be a part of it.

Identity is also explored in terms of the role that a person occupies within a family. Even though Katie is a middle child whom others sometimes see as irresponsible or childish, she lifts the family out of the depression caused by Lynn's death. It is she who takes over housekeeping and cooking chores while her parents are working overtime to pay the mortgage and Lynn's medical bills, and she takes care of Sammy just as well as Lynn took care of her. Various definitions of identity evolve throughout the novel; its meaning changes according to the life experiences of the characters.



Love and Kinship

Despite the many hardships the Takeshimas endure in the novel, their love for one another maintains a strong spirit and a willingness to continue living. Love is primarily expressed in the relations between the family members, communicated in the ways they make sacrifices and care for one another, the lessons they teach each other, and even in the legacies they leave behind. The Takeshimas also show love in their ability to see beauty and good in the world, even when the dark and unpleasant side of life seems most prominent. Mr. Takehima works tirelessly at two jobs to support the family, but he never questions whether the sacrifice is worth it. The children save the nickels their father gives them for snacks, planning to help pay for the house and eventually saving one hundred dollars. Uncle Katsuhisa shares his secret grief over a lost infant son to help Katie gain perspective on the loss of her sister. The characters also perceive love as a saving force. At the beginning of the novel when Katie is chased by a dog, Lynn protects her and is attacked by the dog. Katie comes to her rescue by throwing a bottle of milk at the dog. In the sisters' different accounts of the story, each speaks of the other girl's bravery. The love each has for the other saves them both.

The American Dream

The American dream is the idea—some might say myth—that hard work and determination result in economic prosperity and social mobility. As immigrants and members of a minority, Katie's family struggles to achieve the elusive American dream. Even though Katie's parents work long hours to buy a house, an act that they believe might save Katie's sister Lynn, they are plagued by medical bills and mortgage payments. The novel shows the Takeshima family achieving limited success; the success they do achieve sometimes requires that they sacrifice long-held beliefs. For example, Katie's mother realizes that her antiunion view is hurting not only her own family, but other plant workers' families as well. At the same time, the novel's focus on economic inequality and racism demonstrates how these forces could make it impossible to satisfy an immigrant family's basic material needs and desires in 1950s America. Katie's description of Mr. Lyndon's house, which "seemed as big as a castle," illustrates the economic disparities between workers and management. His sense of entitlement and ruthless treatment of his workers further confirms this unfairness. However, Mr. Takehima's apology to Mr. Lyndon illustrates people can maintain their dignity and integrity even though the material prosperity of the American dream may remain beyond their reach. Ultimately, the novel's focus on discriminatory social practices presents a critique of the idea that hard work brings economic prosperity. The family's emphasis on *kira-kira* shows that perhaps not everyone's goal should be to achieve wealth. However, the tragedies and hardships that the family endures demonstrate the importance of access to fair wages and equal opportunities.



Hope

Kira-Kira is undeniably a story about hope and the power of dreams. Hope is the mechanism that drives the Takeshima family, both as a group and as individuals. No matter how desperate or difficult the situation, the Takeshimas see an opportunity for hope and a chance for something better, something *kira-kira*. The promise of a better livelihood leads the Takeshimas from Iowa to a small town in Georgia. Mr. and Mrs. Takeshima work around the clock at exhausting jobs, persisting because it offers the hope of owning a home. After Lynn dies, Katie and Sammy become their parents' source of hope and their reason to continue their hard work: "[Mr. Takeshima] needed to think about his children who were still alive, because he was honor-bound to think of the living before the dead." Lynn's hopes for she and Katie as college students and her dream of them living by the sea come to shape Katie's aspirations. The Takeshimas trip to the coast at the end of the novel fills Katie with hope, as "the water started to make [her] feel happy again."



Style

Point of View

Cynthia Kadohata's *Kira-kira* is written in the first person point of view of Katie Takeshima. We see the entire novel through Katie's eyes except for the occasional excerpt from Lynn's diary, in which case we see Lynn's words, but we still interpret them through Katie's thoughts and actions.

The point of view also has elements of an unreliable narrator. There are sections of the book where Katie sees events and interprets them in her own way, a way which a more mature reader will understand is untrue, however, understanding the narrator's age, we know this is not an intentional mistake. Take, for instance, Chapter 6. Katie and her cousin David discuss the reason why her aunt and uncle need to spend a few uninterrupted moments alone together while camping with the children. The boy confides that they are trying to make another baby. Katie, in all her innocence, mentions that when her parents were making Sam, Lynn said she should not disturb them but did not mention she shouldn't listen at their door. "...so I knew trying to make a baby was hard work that required a lot of effort and grunting."

It is clear Katie doesn't understand what is happening between her parents and she passes this misunderstanding on to the reader. There are also points during Lynn's illness where it is obvious to the reader that Lynn is desperately ill, but Katie still clings to the idea that she is not ill but simply tired, that she still has a future. This is a child's interpretation of an adult world and is highly appropriate for the character narrating them.

This novel is written in a voice that makes the reader feel as if they are sitting in a room with a woman listening to her tell stories of her childhood as one might sit and listen to their mother or grandmother talk. Many of the passages are simply explained rather than shown, jumping from scene to scene quickly, but not so quickly that the reader gets lost. There is little dialogue, but what dialogue there is, is effective and entertaining.

Setting

The novel *Kira-kira* is set in the 1950-1960's in the Deep South of Georgia. This was a very turbulent time and geographical location in American history. During this time, there were civil rights battles going on, riots, sit-ins and protests. In the south, restaurants and public buildings were still segregated. Asians, no matter what country they came from or whether they were born in the United States, were discriminated against as harshly as were blacks, and in some cases much worse due to the implications of World War II. Poverty was an accepted fact for these minorities.

However, the turbulent times seem to be nothing but a backdrop to young Katie. She is aware of what happens around her on occasion, but this is an adult concern, not



something young Katie worries about to any large extent. It does, however affect her in ways of which she is not aware. It is the reason the hotel clerk so blatantly discriminated against them, it is the reason her parents work so hard she rarely is able to spend time with them, and it is the reason her Uncle will never be a land surveyor.

This setting seems at first unexplored. Cynthia Kadohata appears to have picked a decade that is lost on her characters. She never introduces a black character, never shows any outright cruelty perpetrated on the family beyond the unkind hotel clerk, never talks about the civil rights protests and legislation going on all around them. However, it quickly becomes clear that no matter how unaware Katie herself is of the world around her, it does affect every aspect of her life, from family life to school to her ability to make friends.

Language and Meaning

This book is intended for the middle-grade (pre-teen) reader. Cynthia Kadohata, with that in mind, uses short, easy sentences and language that is almost lyrical in its simplicity. It is clear that the writer has a firm understanding not only of her audience, but of the maturity of her point of view character. Most of the chapters are short and to the point, the novel long enough to tell the story but short enough to keep the interest of even the most undisciplined pre-teen.

The use of Japanese words is also well done. The words appear often enough that you do not forget the common use of them in Katie's life, but not so often that the reader feels as though they must run out and buy a Japanese/English dictionary in order to understand the story.

Katie believes herself to be unintelligent, inarticulate. The reader finds that although Katie uses simple words in her narrations and the occasional lists and essays she shares with the reader, she is not as inarticulate as she believes. Through the use of language, Kadohata shows us how intelligent a child Katie really is and also, as the novel progresses and the length of the sentences increase, we see how Katie matures throughout the novel.

Structure

Kira-kira is made up of sixteen chapters. The plot is linear, taking place over a period of about seven years. The majority of the book takes place in Georgia even though it begins in Iowa. Over the years, we watch Katie mature, moving from a small child into her early adolescent years, her sister from a mature nine to her late teens. The focus of the novel is on Katie and her relationships with the people around her, especially her relationship with her sister Lynn.

Kadohata includes diary excerpts from Lynn's diary occasionally throughout the novel as well as lists Katie has made and essays she has written for school. These passages break up blocks of text in a pleasing way that the reader finds entertaining. It's almost



like stealing a peek at your older sister's diary when Katie allows us to read passages from Lynn's diary, an event that almost feels bad in the most exciting of ways.

Foreign Language

Beginning with the title of the novel, Japanese words and their English translations appear throughout the narration. The use of foreign words has a critical function; Japanese terms and the cultural meanings they connote are woven into the very fabric of Katie's American life. They show the two halves of her existence: her cultural Japanese roots and her American lifestyle. Whenever a Japanese word is used, its English definition is also provided, allowing readers who are not Japanese to participate fully in the story. Words such as *kira-kira* (glittering), *katsu* (triumph), *ochazuke* (green tea mixed with rice), *shizukami* (hush), and *hatsu-yume* (first dream of the New Year), name and translate the Japanese and American characteristics of Katie's life, for both Katie and the reader.

Point of View

The novel is entirely composed of a first-person narration by the main character, Katie Takeshima. The reader thus learns about events, relationships, feelings, and ideas only through Katie's eyes. Additionally, Katie is telling this story from a distance, some years after the events have occurred. Because she is somewhat removed from the story, she can use hindsight to understand and communicate some events more clearly. The first-person narrative style expresses one of the main goals of the novel: to show life events filtered through the eyes of a young girl just beginning to discover the world around her.

Realism

Realism is a method of depicting events accurately and realistically in art and literature, without idealizing or romanticizing what is happening. Realism allows readers to relate to events and emotions and to connect with characters. Description is one of the ways to accomplish a realistic portrayal of a time and place. Much of this novel is dedicated to describing events and environments as they really are, such as people's physical characteristics, nature, and the minute details of a house's interior space. Lynn's death, for example, is not peaceful and lovely with everyone relieved that she is out of pain; instead, it is a messy, life-shattering event in the Takeshima family. Before her death, Lynn's "breath [was] catching heartbreakingly, as if breathing had become a hardship for her body. Her hair had grown stringy." Though it would have been poetic to have had Lynn die surrounded by her family and uttering final farewells, Cynthia Kadohata instead approaches her death realistically, as it could possibly have happened in a busy family on a holiday night: Lynn died when no one was in the room. "'Who was with her?' [Katie] asked. [Her] father's voice broke as he said, 'Nobody.'"



Symbol

A symbol suggests or stands for something else without losing its original identity. In literature, symbols combine their literal meaning with the suggestion of an abstract concept. In this novel, the house serves as a symbol of realizing the American dream. A house means stability and a reward for sacrifices. Katie's parents work grueling hours doing demeaning work to save enough money to buy a house. Even the children save their allowances, to give the money back to their parents as a contribution toward this goal. When Lynn becomes ill, the house is considered a source of happiness and even seems to contain the possibility of a cure. They believe Lynn will recover when they buy the house because she will be so happy.

Another symbol in the novel is the road, which represents the family's quest for a better life as well as each character's search for his or her own identity. The road is thus a symbol of the space that must be traveled—through life experiences and relationships with others—to get to the desired destination. The Takeshima family travels by car from Iowa to Georgia, and on vacation from Georgia to California. Katie's mother and father must spend over an hour driving to work each day. When Katie and Sammy have to go with their mother to the processing plant early in the morning, Katie says, "The road was empty, like so many roads we had driven on in my life." After Mr. Takeshima loses his job at the hatchery, he knows that there are more opportunities down the road: "I've heard there's an opening at a hatchery in Missouri. If it's time to move on, it's time to move on." The road, as a physical space, is where Lynn and Katie often lie in their pajamas as young children in order to look at the stars. It symbolizes the space of imagination and aspiration.



Historical Context

Post-world War II American and Japanese Society

The United States entered World War II after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in 1941. In 1942, the U.S. government decreed that all Japanese people residing in the United States, including second- and third-generation American citizens, should be placed in internment camps, because it was thought that they might engage in treasonous activities against the United States. Japanese Americans were held prisoner, forced to leave their jobs, property, and possessions until the end of the war in 1945. Millions of dollars in property were lost. Some years later, the Japanese who were interned were compensated at ten cents for every dollar lost. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988, signed into law by President George H. Bush, apologized for the internment and offered reparations to thousands of Japanese Americans who were denied their civil and constitutional rights by the U.S. government during World War II. Though neither Katie nor her parents were held in internment camps, they were still subject to the lingering social distrust toward Japanese Americans after the war. Additionally, in many areas of the South, if a person was not Caucasian he or she was considered to be "colored" regardless of ethnicity and therefore subject to discriminatory Jim Crow laws.

Asian-american Literature

Amy Ling notes in "Teaching Asian American Literature" that Asian American literature often has several broad aims:

to remember the past, give voice to a hitherto silent people with an ignored and therefore unknown history, to correct stereotypes of an exotic or foreign experience and thus, as [writer Maxine] Hong Kingston says, to claim America for the thousands of Americans whose Asian faces too frequently deny them a legitimate place in the country of their birth.

Asian-American literature cannot be fully appreciated without some background information on the historical and cultural contexts of Asians in the United States. Nor can the term "Asian American" be understood as a single entity, for it contains myriad nationalities and languages, dozens of religions, and a multitude of races as originating sources.

Asian-American literature is considered one of the subdivisions of multicultural or multiethnic literature. According to Gonzalo Ramirez and Jan Lee, there are two kinds of multicultural literature: multiethnic children's literature and melting pot literature. Multiethnic children's literature usually addresses the following themes: heritage, the battle against racism and discrimination, everyday experiences, urban civilization, friendship, and family relationships. Cultural problems arise as the protagonist is caught between two cultures and must learn to survive. Melting pot books do not address racial

issues but emphasize that Asian Americans have the same lifestyle as any other American.

Asian-American literature first emerged in the 1940s, but at that time it was generally non-Asians who wrote books about Asia or Asian Americans. After the end of World War II, there were many Japanese Americans who wrote autobiographies about their experiences in the internment camps in the United States. The first Chinese author to achieve financial success in the United States, C. Y. Lee, was a mentor to many other Asian writers. He wrote *The Flower Drum Song* in 1955. In the 1970s, criticism began to emerge about the way that Asians were depicted in literature. Critics argued that the literature lacked diverse illustrations and characterization, and that most illustrations of Asians were drawn in exactly the same way, without regard for cultural or physical distinctions. These illustrations rarely portrayed Asians living in the contemporary United States, wearing modern clothing and living in modern housing. Instead, they offered a stereotyped and unrealistic picture of Asian-American life. There was a call for Asians to write about their experiences and for illustrators to create more accurate representations of Asian Americans. Since that time, many Asian-American authors have met with mainstream success, and authors and illustrators have created a more accurate picture of the Asian-American experience.

Critical Overview

Although *Kira-Kira* is Cynthia Kadohata's first novel for young readers, the issues she raises and her narrative style bear many similarities to her previously published works of adult fiction, especially *The Floating World*. Critics often read her works in the context of Asian American literature published in the United States since the 1990s, especially in reference to gender, nationality, and identity. Kadohata's first novel, *The Floating World* (1989), is a kind of road drama featuring a Japanese American family's attempt to find a place of their own. Like *Kira-Kira*, *The Floating World* is set in the 1950s and narrated by a Japanese American girl, who recounts her family's experiences while traveling through the United States in search of good jobs and a home. While they are always included within the Asian American canon, other critics have read Kadohata's works as postmodern texts because of their emphasis on how gender affects society. Critics note that Kadohata utilizes mother-daughter relationships to emphasize changing views on womanhood in the Asian American community, like other Asian American writers such as Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and R. A. Sasaki.

Critics often cite Kadohata's approachable writing style and characterization as an important reason for the uniform critical and popular success of *Kira-Kira*. A review in *The Christian Century* called Kadohata's writing "extraordinary." In *School Library Journal*, Ashley Larsen notes, "All of the characters are believable and well developed, especially Katie.... Girls will relate to and empathize with the appealing protagonist." Hazel Rochman of *Booklist* includes *Kira-Kira* among her top ten historical novels for children and young adults, citing its "plain, beautiful prose." Winner of the 2005 John Newbery Medal for outstanding writing, *Kira-Kira* was praised by Award Committee Chair Susan Faust in Kadohata, Henkes win Newbery, Caldecott Medals" as "a narrative that radiates hope from the inside out."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3



Critical Essay #1

Menard teaches comparative literature. In this essay, Menard considers Kadohata's book in relation to current debates within American and multi cultural literature.

Although it is a novel intended for young readers, Kadohata's *Kira-Kira* can be read within the author's entire body of work, which consists primarily of novels for an adult audience. *Kira-Kira* explores many of the same themes and issues that are present in all of Kadohata's novels. It is also representative of the debates occurring within American and multicultural literature.

In the 1960s, American literature began to move toward inclusion of ethnic, religious, and racial groups that had been left out of a traditionally "white" canon. As a result of the experiences of World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights Movement, Americans looked for ways to redefine themselves. African Americans, Jewish Americans, and other groups whose experiences had largely been absent from the literary scene began to appear as both authors and characters to tell their stories. Many of these stories focused on the exclusion minorities had endured and their integration into the wider American community. According to Gilbert H. Muller in *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction*, the Immigration Act of 1965 was part of a body of legislation and other social forces that helped to rewrite "the epic of America" in ways that emphasized the "polyglot, multicultural, and transnational" (quoted in Klinkowitz). This new epic was an idealized vision of an integrated nation—America as a melting pot of languages, traditions, customs, and ideologies.

By the 1970s and 1980s, however, some critics began to question this melting-pot model. These critics saw the multicultural vision as problematic not only because it supposed that the melting pot experience was possible, but because it also made the very notions of identity and difference hard to sustain. If integration relies on the idea of an all-encompassing American identity, what happens to the differences that excluded groups have used to define themselves? That is, what happens to the distinctive features—such as languages, traditions, customs, and religious practices—that made those groups' differences visible, unique, and valuable? The ambiguities that emerge in the effort to rewrite American literature and make it more inclusive require us to think again and more carefully about what it means to be an American.

The issues surrounding American ethnic literature are also tied to broader debates in postcolonial studies, a school of criticism that analyzes clashes between cultures and examines mechanisms of oppression and resistance. This school of thought argues that people do not necessarily identify themselves in terms of the places in which they live. For example, in *Kira-Kira*, Mrs. Muramoto holds a New Year's Eve party that features traditional Japanese customs and rituals. Katie says, "New Year's is the biggest holiday of the year for the Japanese." Though Mrs. Muramoto and the Takeshimas live in America and adopt many "American" ways of life, they identify themselves culturally as Japanese and maintain important Japanese traditions in their American lives.



Kira-Kira illustrates many of the ambiguities present in the debates mentioned above. The narrator is a young girl born in Iowa, but her frame of reference—the way in which she views the world—is colored by the language, traditions, and customs of Japan. This is largely because her parents are *kibei*, which means that they were born in the United States but educated in Japan. The characters of Japanese descent in the novel are defined primarily in cultural terms, that is, they are described in the context of their customs, traditions, myths, and folklore. However, the American characters are defined exclusively in racial terms as white. There are no other non-white ethnicities in *Kira-Kira*. Because race is the only feature used to describe the other American characters, the novel lacks the cultural components that would define what it means to be anything but a Japanese American. There is never any mention in the novel of "white" traditions, customs, or history; there are only descriptions of how, with few exceptions, whites exclude or look down upon those who are not white. Lynn, the narrator's sister, presents the conflict concisely as "us versus them":

"Haven't you noticed that Mom and Dad's only friends are Japanese?... That's because the rest of the people are ignoring them. They think we're like doormats—or ants or something!" Now she was really angry.... She suddenly reached out and hugged [Katie] to her. "You tell me if anybody treats you like that, and I'll take care of it!"

Lynn's statement illustrates the way that the Japanese characters in *Kira-Kira* view white people as a homogenous force threatening their existence as Japanese Americans. According to Katie's sister, Japanese people do not exist for white people, or if they do, they occupy a low position in the social hierarchy. This dynamic makes it difficult to group *Kira-Kira* within so-called multicultural texts, given that it is only the Japanese who are given a central and valued place in the cultural context of the novel, and the rest of the characters are viewed largely as a menace.

When whites are portrayed in a positive manner in the novel, there is often mention of what makes them different from and less admirable than the Japanese characters. The reader can see this as Katie recounts her friendship with Silly, a girl she meets when she accompanies her mother to the processing plant. Silly works part-time at the poultry plant because her uncle makes her earn her own money for school clothes. Katie thinks this is strange and reflects that even though her own parents are poor, they buy her all the school clothes she needs. In pointing out this difference, the narrative implies a judgment about families that fail to help their children in this way. By comparison, Katie's family stands out as exemplary.

Silly's case also points to the question of class differences in the novel. The discussion of class is based on extremes and stereotypes: the rich characters are evil, while the poor characters are morally upright and worthy of esteem. This characterization of class differences is further complicated by the fact that the rich characters are mostly white. The only white character who cannot be explained in these simplistic terms is Hank Garvin, the man who helps Katie take Sammy to the hospital after he catches his foot in an animal trap. The treatment of class in the novel suffers as a result of this idea that poverty is synonymous with moral virtue. This presupposition threatens the very



premise of the novel: a family's quest for the American dream, which presupposes social and economic advancement.

Criticism that favors a multicultural perspective is also concerned with the treatment of gender in literature. Gender-based criticism focuses on how males and females are represented, the places they occupy in the community, and their views on sexuality. Before multicultural perspectives became more common, Asian women were often portrayed as exotic objects without voices of their own, and the male point of view predominated. *Kira-Kira* dismantles this idea. The novel shows how different life experiences lead all the women in the novel to acquire voices of their own and become independent individuals who do not depend on men to determine their destinies. Mrs. Takeshima, the mother, exemplifies this point. At the beginning of the novel she is described in stereotypical terms as a "delicate, rare, and beautiful flower," a fragile person who wishes only for quiet. As the novel progresses, her life-changing experiences—being forced to work under humiliating conditions to support her family, living through the illness and death of her eldest child, and adapting to life in Georgia—teach Mrs. Takeshima to speak for herself. This change has a significant impact on her family and community. Mrs. Takeshima's transformation is spurred by the prospect of unionization at the poultry processing plant where she works. Initially, she vehemently opposes unionization and sides with the owners because she is afraid of losing her job. However, Mrs. Takeshima attends a union meeting at the end of the novel after Katie tells her:

"The union wants to give the factory workers three days off with pay for grief leave, like if a family member dies." [Mrs. Takeshima] pursed her lips and looked at me severely. "It's a little late for that," she said. My mother didn't say anything more. But when the union vote was held the next week, the union won by one vote. That was a surprise, because everyone had expected it to lose by one vote. My mother seemed pleased that the union had won, so I knew how she'd voted.

Mrs. Takeshima's new-found voice mirrors the changed status that Katie, the narrator, acquires after her sister's death. At the beginning of the novel, Katie happily lives in Lynn's shadow and is willing to follow her sister anywhere. Katie is devastated when Lynn dies, but handles her grief by assuming a new role as the oldest daughter and sister in the family:

I was worried that her spirit was watching me every time I cried. I was worried that if she saw me crying, she would be very unhappy and maybe she wouldn't be able to leave the earth the way she was supposed to. So even though I wanted her to keep watching me, I wished she would forget about me and never see me crying and never worry about me anymore, even if that meant I was now alone.

Katie assumes the role of family caretaker in the wake of Lynn's death. After her parents give her Lynn's diary, she discovers that they waited to give it to her because they thought it would be too upsetting. Katie says, "It was odd to hear them say that, because I'd thought it was I who'd taken care of them after Lynn died. But they seemed to think that *they* had taken care of me."



The whole family is grief-stricken and each blames him or herself for not being able to save Lynn; it is Katie who assumes responsibility for realizing Lynn's dream to visit the California coast. In fulfilling her sister's wish she is able to both mourn and celebrate her, giving her and her family the willpower to go on living. The transformation that she undergoes presents a clear challenge to stereotypical views of Asian women.

In spite of its broad generalizations, challenges to stereotypical American identity are the beating heart of *Kira-Kira*. As the debate over America's literary canon continues, it is clear that contributions like *Kira-Kira* are helping to rewrite the "epic of America."

Source: Peter Menard, Critical Essay on *Kira-Kira*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.



Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Wood reviews Kira-Kira, and asserts that Kadohata's fiction style is similar to that of a memoir.

Kira-Kira is a Japanese word that describes things that glitter. It is Katie Takeshima's first word taught to her by her older sister Lynn as they lie in the empty road outside their house looking at the stars. Lynn teaches Katie everything worth knowing. When their family moves from their Japanese community in Iowa to Georgia, Lynn is the one who must explain why some of the other children won't talk to them at school.

The setting is 1950s Georgia. Katie's parents are American-born Japanese, but that doesn't change attitudes toward the family. Her mom and dad work in a poultry processing plant, in conditions typical of factories in the mid-1950s. Factory workers wear thick pads beneath their uniforms because they aren't allowed to take breaks to use the bathroom. Workers suffer permanent injury from long hours of performing the same tasks. They aren't given time off for sickness or family emergencies. Attempts to organize a union lead to beatings and other repercussions.

When Katie asks her mother about unions, her mother responds, "A union is when all the workers get together and fight the very people who have provided them with a job ... It's wrong to fight the people who are trying to help you." Katie's mother is afraid of losing one of the few jobs available to Japanese-Americans.

Through the family's struggle to raise money for a home, it is Lynn who is always providing the link between the old and the new and helping the family to understand the process of assimilation. But when she gets sick, the family begins to fall apart. It is up to Katie to take on the role of big sister and eldest daughter.

Cynthia Kadohata is clearly a gifted writer. Her prose sparkles with a specificity that makes *Kira-Kira* read more like a memoir than fiction. There are many things in the book that are true. The conditions in post-war factories are true; in some places they still exist. The struggles of an American-born Japanese family are true, and the limitations placed on the family are still experienced by many immigrant families in this country. And the relationships in this book are true, especially the bond between Katie and her sister Lynn.

Early in the book Lynn tells her sister, "The blue of the sky is one of the most special colors in the world, because the color is deep but see-through both at the same time." She adds that water and people's eyes have the same quality. Good fiction can also have this quality of depth and transparency; *Kira-Kira* certainly does.

Source: Sarah A Wood, "Review: *Kira-Kira*," in *KidsReeds.com*, February 2004, p. 1.



Critical Essay #3

In this excerpt, Faust talks to Kadohata about how her experience as a Japanese-American growing up in the South influenced her writing and her Newbery Award-winning novel, Kira-Kira.

It was four in the morning on the West Coast, and Cynthia Kadohata's phone was ringing. This had better not be bad news or a crank caller. Kadohata's boyfriend grabbed the receiver, listened to the excited librarian on the line from Boston, and passed the phone to her. The next moment, Kadohata was leaping up and down: her first children's book, *Kira-Kira* (S & S, 2004), had just won the Newbery Medal, the nation's most prestigious award for young people's literature.

Since Kadohata began writing fiction in 1981, her career has had more ups and downs than the Grand Tetons. Her short stories appeared in *The New Yorker*. *The New York Times* praised the "beautiful, clean yet lyrical prose" of her first novel, *The Floating World* (Viking, 1989). And two years later, she won a Whiting Writers' Award, a \$30,000 grant given to a writer of exceptional promise.

Then, suddenly, her career hit the skids. Kadohata's second novel, *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* (Viking, 1992), met with mixed reviews. Her third, *The Glass Mountains* (White Wolf, 1995), was virtually snubbed. By the late-'90s, the one-time wunderkind was all but forgotten, working as a secretary at a food-processing plant and struggling to write screenplays. An old friend suggested she write for kids. Kadohata resisted, but her friend—Caitlyn Dlouhy, now an editor at Simon & Schuster's Atheneum Books for Young Readers—persisted. Giving in to Dlouhy's suggestion turned out to be the best career move Kadohata ever made.

Kira-Kira ("glittering" in Japanese) tells the tender story of a Japanese-American family that moves from Iowa to rural Georgia in the 1950s. The quiet novel radiates hope as its narrator, young Katie Takeshima, recounts her parents' struggles to earn a living and her older sister's battle with lymphoma. Like Katie, Kadohata was born in the Midwest to Japanese-American parents. She grew up in small-town Arkansas and Georgia, where her father, like Katie's, worked long hours in a chicken-processing plant. Kadohata spent her teen years in Los Angeles and studied journalism at the University of Southern California and creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh and Columbia University. Now 48, she and her 20-month-old son, Sammy (whom she adopted from Kazakhstan), live in Long Beach, CA, where we caught up with her.

What was your reaction when you found out that *Kira-Kira* had won?

It was just complete, pure, uncomplicated joy. I kept screaming. I'm in my pajamas and robe, and I'm jumping up and down. Sammy didn't know what was going on. Caitlyn called shortly after I hung up, and then we both screamed.



I heard she convinced you to write for kids by sending you a box of children's books. Why were you so resistant?

I didn't really think that I could do it. It seemed like a whole other world. And then when I read the books, I realized that it's exactly the same process whether you're writing for kids or grown-ups. I thought, "Hey, I should try this."

How did the idea for *Kira-Kira* originate?

Maybe with my father, because he worked really hard and many, many long hours. Then came the voice of the girl, Katie. When I'm writing a first-person novel, that "I"—that word alone—feels like it does something in my brain; it makes it seem like it's really me.

What events in the story are based on your own life?

The feeling of intensity in the family was very real. There are also a few details that are true. Everybody in the hospital did come to see my brother when he was born, because they had never seen a Japanese baby before. And I had a very heavy Southern accent when I was a little girl. I used to be a really huge taco eater. There's one point in the story when the sister dies, and Katie eats five tacos. That was definitely something I would have done as a child.

Do you have an older sister?

I do, and she is still alive. She took care of us a lot, even though she is only a year and a half older than me. She had a maternal quality about her even then. So I always looked up to her. When I told her what the book was about, she got mad at me. I guess she thought that I was "secretly hostile toward her." Then, after she read it, she was happy.

What was it like to be Japanese American in the South during the 1950s and '60s?

We fit in by not fitting into it, by being part of a very small community. When we went to a party, it was almost always with a group of other Japanese or Japanese Americans who worked as chicken sexers, separating male and female chicks in the hatchery. I remember a little girl asking me something like, "Are you black or white?" I really stumbled for an answer. I said, "I don't know."

Do you remember the first story you ever wrote?

When I was 17, I wrote the most idiotic story in the world. It was about all these ducks that had only one leg. They lived on another planet and were a metaphor for humans. I actually sent that story to *The Atlantic Monthly* and, of course, immediately got a rejection. I don't think I wrote anything again until I was in college, when I wrote for the school newspaper.

When did you get serious about writing fiction?



In 1981 or 1982, I started sending short stories to both *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*. I wrote 20 to 40 stories, and I got rejections for all of them. But I got letters back that were encouraging, so I kept writing. I remember in 1986, right before I sold my first story to *The New Yorker*, I told a friend that I didn't think I was ever going to sell a story; I wondered if I should stop writing. About three weeks later, I got a phone call from an editor at *The New Yorker*.

How did you come up with the title *Kira-Kira*?

Actually, the first title was "I Wish." Then I played around with another Japanese word, *pika-pika*. It basically means "glittering," as well, but a slightly different kind of glittering. It sounds sharper, and so at some point, I thought it just wasn't the right word. I didn't know the word *kira-kira*. Someone who was born in Japan ran a bunch of words by me, and that was one of them. Some people said that either *pika-pika* or *kira-kira* would do fine. Then I heard about a commercial in Japan about a toilet-bowl cleaner that goes *pika-pika*. The toilet gets so clean that it's shining. That was the beginning of the end for *pika-pika*.

What do you think of when you hear the word *kira-kira*?

Stars. Fireflies. I think the title itself stands for hope in the end. It's definitely the right word.

Source: Susan Faust, "The Comeback Kid," in *School Library Journal*, May 1, 2005, p. 38.



Quotes

"I loved that word! When I grew older, I used kira-kira to describe everything I liked: the beautiful blue sky, puppies, kittens, butterflies, colored Kleenex. My mother said we were misusing the word; you could not call a Kleenex kira-kira. She was dismayed over how un-Japanese we were..." Chapter 1, pgs. 1-2

"I did not see why we had to move to a southern state where my father said you could not understand a word people say because of their southern accents. I did not see why we had to leave our house for a small apartment." Chapter 2, pgs. 20-21

"Uncle Katsuhisa said that it might seem sad to kill them (chickens), but eventually, we would learn to be kind of like farm kids—farm kids understood the meaning of death. They understood how death was part of life." Chapter 3, pg. 39

"Lynn's face darkened. That was kind of unusual. 'Haven't you noticed that Mom and Dad's only friends are Japanese?'

'I guess so.'

'That's because the rest of the people are ignoring them. They think we're like doormats—or ants or something!'" Chapter 4, pgs. 50-51

"The next day, however, she didn't even go to school. Even when she was sick, she usually begged our mother to let her go to school. This was the first time I'd ever seen her happy to stay home." Chapter 5, pg. 63

"When Lynn first became friends with Amber, she told me a lot of stuff, including that some girls did something called french kissing with boys—something to do with tongues. It sounded a little complicated to kiss with your lips and your tongue. I was not good at doing two things at once." Chapter 6, pg. 79

"The road was empty, like so many roads we had driven on in my life." Chapter 7, pg. 87

"Lynn got tired more often lately. My parents talked about her a lot. Meanwhile, they scolded me, and even Sammy, more and more often. Our parents didn't really have time for us anymore because they liked to spend all their extra energy thinking about Lynn." Chapter 8, pg. 99

"Lynn slept most of the day. By evening, when I tried to feed her, the food just fell out of her mouth. She didn't have the energy to chew. I even offered to chew it for her, but she said, 'Gross.'" Chapter 9, pg. 121

"We had saved a hundred dollars. Sammy still got treats because he was just a little boy, but Lynn and I hadn't bought candy in a long time.



The night before we went to the bank with our parents to apply for a loan, Lynn, Sammy, and I handed them a pink envelope with our money in it. Our note just said, From Lynn, Katie, and Sam. We had put Sammy's name on it too because we were a threesome." Chapter 10, pg. 133

"Someone had set a trap in the field, the metal kind that bites an animal until the animal is forced the chew off its own leg. The teeth dug through Sam's skin, making a circle of red on his thin ankle. For some reason his face was red, as if someone were squeezing his neck. He looked at me pleadingly. 'Help me,' he said. For a second I thought his foot was cut off."

Chapter 10, pg. 142

"The factory workers weren't allowed to take unscheduled breaks, so they all wore pads in case they needed to use the bathroom. It smelled like my mother had used hers." Chapter 7, pg. 97

"I found myself embarrassed at the smells emanating from my mother. Back in Sam's room the doctor had sniffed once at the air and looked around for the source of the smell."

Chapter 10, pg. 154

Later on I lay in bed and saw the happy little moth, still alive, flitting from the night-light up the wall and back to the night-light. And it occurred to me what I had seen in Lynn's eyes the night before: She was wishing she were that moth. Maybe that was the last thing she ever wished." Chapter 14, pg. 215

"Lynn could take a simple, everyday object like a box of Kleenex and use it to prove how amazing the world is. She could prove this in many different ways, with Kleenex or soap bubbles or maybe even a blade of grass. This is the main theme of my sister's life."

Chapter 15, pg. 224

"My mother seemed pleased that the union had won, so I knew how she'd voted. I don't think it was any of the speeches she'd heard that made her vote for the union.

Before Lynn died, my mother would have done anything for her own family, but she would not have done much for another family. I think it was a combination of Lynn dying and seeing the little girl in the blue dress that changed my mother's vote. It was a little late for my mother, but if she voted yes, she knew it would not be too late for the next family suffering grief."

Chapter 16, pgs. 237-238

Adaptations

- *Kira-Kira* was released in an unabridged version on audio CD by Listening Library in 2005. It is narrated by Elaina Erika Davis.

What Do I Read Next?

- Sherry Garland's *Shadow of the Dragon* (1993) is the story of Danny Vo, a high school sophomore trying to resolve the conflict between his Vietnamese refugee family's values and his new American way of life.
- Kadohata's first novel, *The Floating World* (1989), is a young girl's story of her family's travels across the United States in search of work. The experiences of Japanese Americans in the 1950s are the principal focus of this book.
- *Finding My Voice* (1992), by Marie G. Lee, focuses on Ellen, a young woman who is growing up in a small Minnesota town. Her Korean parents pressure her to go to Harvard, while her classmates and some teachers create pressure with their racism, both subtle and overt. Ellen must learn to cope with these challenges.
- Lois Lowry's *A Summer to Die* (1984) also deals with the death of an older sister and a younger sibling's struggle to cope with the situation.
- Allen Say's *Grandfather's Journey* (1993) won the 1994 Caldecott Award. In this novel, a Japanese American man recounts his grandfather's journey to America and explores the feeling of being torn between two countries.
- Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) is the story of eight Chinese women. Four are mothers, each forced to leave China for a different reason; the other four are their daughters, each of whom faces a different set of problems in her everyday life. Each chapter is presented from a different woman's point of view. The most important character is Jing Mei "June" Woo, the daughter of the woman who started the Joy Luck Club. She is asked to join the club and play mah jong with her adoptive aunts after her mother dies.
- *Child of the Owl* (1977), by Laurence Yep, is the story of a young girl named Casey, who has lived on the road with her gambling father. She is eventually forced to move in with her grandmother in Chinatown. Although she is Chinese American, she knows nothing about her Chinese heritage, and her grandmother begins to teach her about the Chinese culture and way of life. Casey learns about Chinese culture, her dead mother's life, and her own personal history.



Topics for Discussion

Discuss how it would change the tone of the novel if instead of being written in the first person through the character of Katie it were written in the third person omniscient or through the first person of Lynn, Mother, or Uncle Katsuhisa.

How would the novel be different if instead of being set in the 1950-1960's, it were set in modern times? Would Katie and Lynn's relationship be different if the parents were able to keep their grocery store open and work regular hours?

Discuss the decision of the parents not to tell Katie the nature of Lynn's illness. Why don't they tell her? How would it change the story if they told her in the beginning? Would it change the way Katie relates to Lynn during the early stages of the disease?

Why does Katie steal the nail polish? Is it wrong? Should her parents punish her?

Discuss the role of sibling relationships as a theme to this story. How different would the story be if Katie disliked Lynn? If Lynn disliked Katie? If both Lynn and Katie resented the birth of their younger brother, Sammy?

Discuss the altar Katie and Uncle Katsuhisa make for Lynn. Why does Katie's mother insist on finding and saving everything Lynn touched after her death?

Why does Katie's father decide to tell Mr. Lyndon what he did to his car? Is it the right decision?

- Research the U.S. labor movement in the twentieth century. What segments of the population joined unions? Did some ethnic groups participate in the unions more than others? What were women's roles in the unions? Write a five-paragraph paper detailing the pros and cons of joining a union. Tell the reader whether you would join one, and include the reasons for your decision.
- Keep a diary for a week, and write down your activities, thoughts, impressions of other people, opinions about ideas and news that you heard during the week, and things you would like to do in the future. Write a three-paragraph paper describing anything you learned about yourself from keeping a diary.
- Interview family members, friends, and people in your community about their thoughts on identity. Ask your interviewees how they define the term "identity." Does it refer to family heritage, to nationality, to the language(s) they speak, to gender, or to something else? Write a three-page report detailing your findings and include your own definition of identity in your report. Consider the age, gender, and religious background of the people you interview.
- Research an ethnic group in the United States other than your own. What country did they emigrate from, where have they settled geographically, what kind of general experiences have they had in the United States, what are their traditions and customs, and what languages do they speak? Write a two-page essay detailing your findings.



- Write a two-page short story in which the narrator is a young girl or boy whose parents were not born in the United States. Write the story using a first-person narrator. Imagine his or her thoughts, feelings, relationships, and activities regarding American culture. Explore differences and similarities between American culture and the culture of your narrator's parents. How does your narrator cope with these differences?

Further Study

Brown Diggs, Nancy, *Steel Butterflies*, State University of New York Press, 1998.

This book compares women's roles in Japan with women's roles in the United States. The topics discussed include education, ethics, life in the United States, and the past and future status of women in Japan. The book examines family life, women's responsibilities in the home, women's community involvement in the United States and in Japan, aspects of Japanese culture that have been kept alive in America, and the experiences of Japanese-American children.

Zia, Helen, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

This is a detailed and personal account of the formation of the Asian American community, which extends from the first major wave of immigration to Gold Mountain (as the Chinese dubbed America during the gold rush) to the recent influx of Southeast Asians, who have nearly doubled the Asian American population in America since 1975.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently



studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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