# Kitchen Study Guide

## Kitchen by Banana Yoshimoto

BOOKRAGS

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# Introduction

*Kitchen* is the title of a novella by Mahoko ("Banana") Yoshimoto, and it is also the name of the book containing that novella along with the novella *Moonlight Shadow.* When the book was published in Japan in 1988, it was an immediate success, propelling its author to a superstar status in the literary world that she has managed to maintain since then, due in part to her tremendous output, averaging a book a year. With the English release of *Kitchen* in 1992, her U.S. publisher gambled a fortune on pre-publication publicity, having posters of the author plastered on walls in major American cities. The book went on to be a major best-seller and "Banana-mania" eventually spread across the globe. Yoshimoto's fans tend to be fanatical in their ardor, exchanging testimonials and gossip about the author on the Internet and anxiously speculating about which novel will be the next one translated into their own language.

In the novella *Kitchen,* the elements of a typical Banana Yoshimoto work can be found. Death, the occult, sexual ambiguity, love, physical beauty, and the trials and tribulations of young adults living in the big city are themes that present themselves, to varying degrees, in most of her works of fiction. It is Yoshimoto's penchant for exploring the same territory time and again, along with her self-professed goal of providing an upbeat ending, that lead to criticism of her work as derivative and saccharine. Yet it is plain to see, from the wide range of her readership and the intensity of their devotion, that Banana Yoshimoto is a writer who has earned respect and serious consideration.

# Author Biography

Banana Yoshimoto is a worldwide phenomenon, with millions of fans falling in love with her novels and waiting eagerly for the next one—a circumstance referred to on the many web pages dedicated to her as "Banana-mania." Her rise to fame came quickly and early in her life. She was born Mahoko Yoshimoto in Tokyo in 1964. Her father, Takaaki Yoshimoto, was a famous literary critic, poet, and commentator; his works were extremely influential on Japan's radical youth movement in the 1960s. She majored in arts and literature at Nihon University in Tokyo, graduating in 1987. While there, she won the Izuini Kyoka Prize, which is Nihon's Department of Arts Award, for the novella *Moonlight Shadow,* which has been published in the same volume as *Kitchen.*

In 1987, *Kitchen* was awarded the prestigious Kaien Magazine New Writers' Prize. Upon the book's first publication in 1988, it was an instant hit, selling more than two million copies and earning its author literary awards in Italy and Japan. She was twenty-four, and took the pen name "Banana" because she thought it was cute. For the U.S. edition of *Kitchen* in 1992, her publisher staged a full-out marketing blitz, which turned out to be a great success, landing the book on the best-seller lists. The book has had over sixty printings in Japan since it premiered, and has been adapted into movies twice: the first version in 1989 was quick and cheap, so in 1997 famed Chinese director Yim Ho created an art-house version that moved the story to Hong Kong and made the male lead the narrator.

Yoshimoto has had eleven novels published in Japan so far, and four have been translated into English: *Kitchen, NP, Lizard, and Amrita.* Her fans are devoted, but so are her detractors, calling her work slick, superficial, and driven by a standard formula. The author herself denies that her novels follow any set recipe in an attempt to keep up with her early fame. Many of the themes found in her books such as androgyny and psychic phenomena are familiar fixtures in the Japanese literary form known as magna, which are graphic novels similar to the comic books published in America. In Japan, magna account for a third of all works published. Yoshimoto explains that she does not write for editors or readers, that she does not really have anyone in mind when she writes her novels. Her influences, she says, are literary, including Truman Capote and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

# Plot Summary

## Section 1: Kitchen

The first half of the story starts with Mikage's praise for kitchens of all kinds, clean or dirty, large or small. This becomes a description of her situation: with the death of her grandmother "the other day," Mikage is alone in the world. That situation, however, lasts only briefly, for the first plot twist appears a few pages into the novella, with the appearance of Yuichi Tanabe at her front door. Mikage does not know Yuichi, but she remembers having seen him at her grandmother's funeral, and she later remembers her grandmother having mentioned him as the nice boy who worked in the flower shop she went to every day. "I just stopped by to ask you something," he explains. "I was talking to my mother, and we were thinking that you ought to come to our house for a while." Mikage agrees to come for supper that night, and while she is there she falls in love with their kitchen and becomes fascinated with Yuichi's mother, Eriko, who was his father before having a sex-change operation. "Dumbfounded, I couldn't take my eyes off her," she says of their first meeting, before knowing of Eriko's male past. She finds that she sleeps well on the sofa, which is next to the kitchen, and the next day when Eriko asks her to come and live in the apartment with her and Yuichi, Mikage accepts.

Once, while removing things from her old apartment, she receives a phone call from Sotaro, her old boyfriend. When they meet, he says that he knows she is living with "that Tanabe guy," that everyone knows it at the school she has dropped out of, that Yuichi's girlfriend slapped him during a loud, jealous argument in the cafeteria. Mikage does not think that it is the big deal that the others do, and when she later asks Yuichi if he doesn't think her living there is "a little weird," he assures her it's not.

Mikage has a dream that is recounted in detail, about her and Yuichi cleaning her old apartment as a final step for her leaving it. In the dream, they sing a love song together, and then Yuichi, who "was suddenly revealed to be a prince," says, "After we finish cleaning up here, I really feel like stopping at the ramen noodle stand in the park." Waking from the dream, Mikage goes into the kitchen and runs into Yuichi, who woke in the night with a hunger for ramen noodles. He correctly guesses the color of the floor tile in the kitchen of the old apartment, indicating that they both had the same dream at the same time. The first section ends with Mikage content and happy with living in the Tanabe apartment, just vaguely aware that she will have to move out some day.

## Section 2: Full Moon

The second half of the novella opens with Mikage describing the circumstances under which Eriko died: she was stalked by a patron of the nightclub that she owned, and when he found out that she had once been a man, he stabbed her, although she managed to beat him to death with a barbell before she died. After relating these events, Mikage, as narrator, explains that she had not been living at the Tanabe

apartment for months at the time of the murder; in fact, she had found her own apartment and was working as an assistant at a cooking school. Yuichi's call to break the news about Eriko's death comes long after her funeral. Mikage races over to be with him that night and finds that since Eriko's death he has withdrawn into himself, much as she had after her grandmother's death in the beginning of the story. They stay up all night talking about Eriko, and the next morning, before he leaves for school, they decide to have a magnificent meal together, "a dinner to end all dinners," that evening. When he brings home the groceries for the meal, they notice the beauty of the nearlyfull moon and speculate about how it affects one's cooking in a non-mystical, "human" sense.

After the meal they discuss the possibility of Mikage moving back into the apartment again, but neither of them can decide if it would be as Yuichi's lover or his friend. In the morning, Mikage is wakened by the phone, but the caller hangs up when she answers, and she assumes it is a jealous girl. Yuichi's old girlfriend Okuno visits her at the cooking school where she works to tell her to stay away from Yuichi: "You say you're not his girlfriend, yet you go over there whenever you want, you spend the night, you do what you please, don't you?" she says with angry tears. "That's worse than living together." Unsure of her relationship with Yuichi, Mikage arranges to go on a business trip in order to avoid deciding which apartment she will live in.

Before leaving, though, she receives a call from Chika, who was one of Eriko's friends. They meet for lunch, at which Chika expresses amusement that Yuichi and Mikage do not realize that they are in love with each other, even though it is obvious. One night on her trip, Mikage phones Yuichi at an inn in Isehara. They complain to each other about the dull food that they have been served at the inns they are staying at, and when Mikage hangs up the phone, she eats some *katsudon* at the diner she phoned from and finds it delicious. So she gets a take-out order and takes a cab to Isehara, sixty miles away, dropping off the food and then leaving just as mysteriously as she came: "A matter of love, is it?" the cab driver asks, and she responds, "Something along those lines." On the last day of her trip, Yuichi phones Mikage at her hotel. He is over his grief and has returned to Tokyo, and he arranges to pick her up at the train station when she arrives the next day.

# Part 1, Kitchen

## Part 1, Kitchen Summary

Two different, yet similarly themed titles comprise Kitchen, Banana Yoshimoto's debut literary effort. The first, the titular Kitchen, is the tale of Mikage Sakurai, a girl who, having recently lost her grandmother and having no other living relatives, moves in with the Tanabe family; Yuichi and his transsexual 'mother'. The second story chronicles the suffering of a young woman, Satsuki, after her lover is killed in a car accident.

Three days after the funeral, Mikage is still trying to come to terms with loss of her grandmother. She is listless, inconsolable and has moved her futon into the kitchen, the one place she is able to find peace; the hum of the refrigerator, she says, keeps her from thinking about her loneliness. The kitchen, she confesses in the opening line of the book, is the place in the world she likes best.

One afternoon she is visited by Yuichi Tanabe, who invites her to come stay with himself and his mother, Eriko. He gives her directions to their apartment and asks her to come around that night at seven. Though she barely knew him, Yuichi Tanabe, she remembers, had worked part-time at a flower shop her grandmother had frequented and he had often helped carry her purchases home. So too, he had helped a great deal with the funeral arrangements, seeming at the time almost more distraught about her grandmother's death than Mikage herself.

At the apartment that evening, she falls in love with the kitchen and Yuichi again asks her to move in with them. Just then, Eriko arrives, greets Mikage and apologizes, saying that she cannot stay because the club where she works is very busy. Mikage is stunned by Eriko's beauty who expresses her hope that Mikage will stay the night. Yuichi offers to drive her back to the club and leaves, telling Mikage to watch TV or something until he gets back.

On his return, Mikage tells Yuichi that she's never seen a woman as beautiful as his mother, and he admits that she has had plastic surgery, and that, in fact, she used to be a man – his father, Yuji. His real mother had died when he was still little. Yuichi's father, he reveals, was taken in by Yuichi's mother's family and that his father and her had grown up together. They eloped, married, and after Yuichi's mother died, Yuji quit his job, had the operation and bought a nightclub.

Mikage expresses her gratitude to Yuichi for allowing her to stay, and that night, sleeping on the sofa next to the kitchen, she is, for the first time since the funeral, at peace. The next morning she awakes to find Eriko in the kitchen, busy contemplating ordering take-out. Mikage offers to cook instead. It is midday by the time they eat – cucumber salad and soupy rice with eggs. They speak openly and Eriko tells Mikage that she is a good kid, that having her around truly makes her happy and that she should stay with them and not worry about anything. Mikage is deeply touched.

Mikage gave herself permission to be lazy until May. During that time she continued working at her part-time job and would clean the house, bake cakes and watch TV. Slowly, her spirits began to lift. She was happy. One day, back at her old apartment to take care of her remaining things, she receives a call from Sotaro, her ex-boyfriend, and they decide to meet.

Sotaro had always loved parks and the outdoors and so they meet in a large coffee shop near the park, as they had often done while dating. He tells her that he's heard she's living with Yuichi and says that it's the talk of the university. Also, Yuichi's girlfriend, upon hearing the news, had slapped Yuichi. On the way home they walk through the park where Mikage points out the Tanabe's apartment, and before they part she wonders if he has any feelings left for her. His eyes, she decides, reveals he does not.

That night, Yuichi returns home carrying a large box. He had bought a word processor and insists that Mikage type change-of-address cards. While they work, she asks Yuichi about his being slapped by his girlfriend. He makes a joke about it and the conversation strays off subject.

Mikage sees in him a deep sadness and thinks of how Sotaro told her that Yuichi's girlfriend, despite having been going out with him for a year, felt that she didn't understand the slightest thing about him. Mikage decides that she has to move out. Just then, Eriko arrives back home, carrying a juicer she had just bought and a moving-in present for Mikage – a glass decorated with a banana motif. She is touched, almost to the point of tears.

The following day she clears out the last of her stuff from the apartment and pays a visit to the landlord. Sitting in his office drinking tea, as she had often done as a child, she feels strange, suddenly keenly aware of just how old the man had become. By the time she leaves the apartment it is already evening.

On the bus home she sees a grandmother and her young granddaughter, and despite her best efforts not to, she starts to cry. Embarrassed, she gets off the bus and, hiding in an alley, sobs uncontrollably. Above her, the sounds of a busy kitchen can be heard and this lifts her spirits. At home, in bed, she dreams that she is back in her old apartment, scrubbing the sink. Yuichi is with her, cleaning the floor. They take a break and drink tea and Yuichi tells her not to move out from the Tanabe's place. Then, as she washes the tea things Yuichi starts to sing a song. She joins in and they sing together. Suddenly, she starts, and worries that they may have woken her grandmother. Yuichi suggests that they stop at the ramen stand in the park.

It is two o' clock in the morning when she wakes and fetches a glass of water from the kitchen. Yuichi comes into the kitchen and says that he is hungry and wants to make ramen. Mikage mentions to him that he wanted ramen in her dream too. He is flabbergasted. He too, it appears, had the same dream.

# Part 1, Kitchen Analysis

Death and love are major themes throughout the novella and are, in fact, the prevailing factors in each of the character's lives. Oftentimes, the two motifs are almost inextricably linked, the one occurring as a consequence of the other. Mikage, for her part, is no stranger to death, having lost both her parents as a child and her grandfather before entering high school. The death of her grandmother, her last remaining relative, is at first more than she can bear but it is through this event that Yuichi Tanabe, who had thus far remained periphery to her existence, enters her life. Mikage even admits to having barely known him before the funeral. Here, Yoshimoto uses death as a catalyst for love; it is through their mutual despair that ultimately these two will find one another.

Despite their eccentricities, the love and care offered by the Tanabe family is just what Mikage needs to remove the despair that had all but paralyzed her in the days following the funeral. So too, in spite of the perverse abnormality of the Tanabe's existence, living with them brings routine and a sense of normalcy to Mikage's life. It is not quite a nuclear family, but in a strange way, they are a family nonetheless. It is because she does not love him that Mikage says she is able to understand Yuichi, but at the same time it is clear that her feelings for him are growing and the love that will blossom between them is foreshadowed.

The scene on the bus is pivotal because it is here that, for the first time, she truly cries for the loss of her grandmother and all the events in her life that have led to this point. Seeing the girl with her grandmother is more than Mikage can bear, and all the pent-up emotion bubbles to the surface. Her crying is cathartic, and once again at the end of it all, it is a kitchen that brightens her mood.

To Mikage the kitchen is symbolic of happiness, it is the one constant in her life, and the embodiment of all that is good in it. Furthermore, each kitchen she finds herself in represents a different stage of her life. At the end of the chapter she mentions that whether in her heart or in real life, there will be many more kitchens for her. What she means by this is that her life will go on, she will see and do many more things. The kitchen is even prevalent in her dreams and it is here that the first happy, truly fun moment – albeit only a dream – between her and Yuichi takes place.

Other themes presented in the book include, among others, destiny and spirituality. That Yuichi and Mikage share the same dream indicates an ethereal connection between the two and foreshadows the fact that they are destined to be together.

Sexual ambiguity, portrayed quite clearly by the character Eriko, is a subject Yoshimoto explores throughout both stories in the novella. Whether or not this is an indictment of the fact that for all their differences, men and women are, at their core, the same or simply an endearing quirkiness that Yoshimoto manages to infuse in her characters is not entirely self-evident.

# Part 2, Full Moon

## Part 2, Full Moon Summary

The second half of the story opens with the death of Eriko, who is killed in late autumn by a man obsessed with her. He had become infatuated with her, but upon discovering that she worked in a gay bar, he followed and attacked her with a knife. She had been at work at the time and grabbed a barbell off the bar (part of the club's decor) and beat him to death with it before succumbing to her wounds.

Having already moved out, Mikage learns of Eriko's death only in the winter when, one night, she receives a call from Yuichi. He apologizes for not telling her sooner and begs her to forgive him. Thinking back, Mikage remembers that Eriko had been somewhat tearful when she left; it was early fall when she left university for good and found a job as an assistant in a cooking school. The last time she had seen Eriko, however, was at an all-night minimart a month previously.

Unable to sleep, Mikage had gone into the store for a pudding cup. Outside, she met Eriko and other 'girls' from the club drinking coffee and eating fish balls in broth. They had joked and Mikage had promised to come visit her. After packing an overnight bag, Mikage makes her way to Yuichi's apartment, and as she does so is overcome by a great sadness. She wants to give up living, but for now is determined only to see Yuichi.

In spite of the circumstances, Mikage is happy to see Yuichi and cannot repress a smile when he opens the door to the apartment. He explains that tonight, for the first time since the funeral, he had been able to think clearly and that's why he phoned Mikage. He had thought of her, he says, the entire time though. Yuichi mentions that Eriko's funeral had been as weird as her life; the murderer's wife and children had come and the girls from the club didn't take kindly to their presence. While also dealing with his grief, Yuichi had to calm the entire situation down. Yuichi gives her Eriko's will and goes to bed.

Among other things, the will reveals how deeply Eriko had cared for Mikage, saying that she, too, was a precious child of Eriko's. Eriko leaves everything but the club to Yuichi. Stretched out on the sofa, Mikage feels an overwhelming sense of nostalgia and begins to cry.

They both sleep into the afternoon of the following day. Finally awake, Yuichi asks Mikage to make him a professional dinner, a task which she tackles enthusiastically. She gives him a shopping list and tells him the sooner he gets back the sooner he'll be able to eat. Alone in the apartment, Mikage is saddened by her memories of Eriko whom she misses greatly. She realizes how important Eriko had become to her in the six months they lived together, how she had been there for her and spoiled her. She is sleepy, but sleep, she realizes, will only bring bad dreams so she goes into the kitchen, and upon seeing it quite dirty, sets about scrubbing and cleaning it.

As she works, she remembers the summer past and how during it she had taught herself to cook. She had bought three books that she read everywhere – on the bus, in bed, on the sofa – and every spare minute she had, she cooked. She poured all her earnings from her part-time job into cooking and would cook things again and again until she got them right. Because of her cooking, herself, Eriko and Yuichi had eaten together often that summer. It had been a good summer, she recalls, and getting the job as assistant to a cooking teacher who also did important television and magazine work, was the culmination of it.

Yuichi arrives back that evening, having bought so many items that he needs Mikage's help to carry everything from the car. As they make their way up to the apartment in the elevator, Mikage experiences a moment where she thinks that if Yuichi is with her, she needs nothing else.

Mikage prepares a variety of dishes, and after two hours of preparation they sit down to eat. Yuichi, she realizes, is very drunk, uncharacteristically so. Ostensibly, he had drunk an entire bottle of wine whilst Mikage had prepared dinner. He reveals that he had been drinking consistently over the course of the past month and that he had often thought of phoning Mikage, even to the point where he would be about to dial her number and then give up. He had thought Mikage would be angry with him and that she would never want to see him again. Yuichi asks her to move back in and in the midst of a drunken rambling, falls asleep.

Just then, Mikage imagines the two of them climbing a narrow ladder in jet-black gloom. They stare into the cauldron of hell, and though they are closer than ever before, do not join hands. She feels that they are in a place too dreadful to create a life together. Snapping out of her daydream, she gets up, puts a quilt over Yuichi and as she washes the dishes, cries and cries.

Woken the next day by a ringing telephone, Mikage answers, only to have the caller slam down the phone on her. She gets dressed and goes to her job. Due to the large amount of preparation work that needs to be completed before the three 'o' clock classes, Mikage's boss asks her to help and then tells her that she may leave when that task is completed. Also, she tells Mikage that she wishes her to come with them to the Izu Peninsula to do some research on the local specialties. They would leave the day after next and be gone for three nights. Mikage, thinking it a good opportunity to get away from Yuichi so that she can think, agrees to go.

In the cooking class, Mikage sees her fellow assistants, Nori and Kuri, her seniors on the job by a year, but two girls whom she likes immensely. Just after two 'o' clock, someone knocks on the door. It is a girl, Okuno, who wishes to speak with Mikage. Mikage, however, says that she is working and asks the girl to call her at home later that night. She is a classmate of Yuichi's at the university and asks Mikage to stay out of Yuichi's life. She is angry with Mikage and reveals how she had comforted Yuichi when his mother died and that, in her own way, she loved him. They argue for a while, and when the girl has left, Kuri and Nori console Mikage, saying that she has done nothing wrong.

Mikage returns to the Tanabe apartment to fetch her toothbrush and towel, and makes herself some instant curry. Yuichi returns home and Mikage tells him about her trip to Izu and that she wishes to sleep at her own apartment that night. He offers her a ride home. In the car, she suggests they go have some tea and he agrees. Drinking tea in the café, they realize that it is the first time they have been out together. He opens the car door for her, and she tells him that she thinks it's great. He retorts that Eriko had taught him to do it, that she wouldn't get in the car if he didn't. In the car, on the way home, Mikage realizes that he's probably opened the car door for Okuno as well, and feels, for the first time, a small pang of jealousy.

When they arrive at her apartment, they chat for a while, and when a cold wind rises up, Mikage buries her face in his arm, exclaiming how cold she is. It is the first time they have touched one another. Back home, alone, she remembers Eriko once more. It is her saddest memory of Eriko: Yuichi was away for the night and Eriko and Mikage were alone in the apartment. Eriko tells her of the time when she had still been a man. His wife was dying of cancer and he had visited her in hospital whenever he could; before and after work. His wife had said one day how she had wished for something 'living' in the room so he rushed out, and not knowing what to buy, purchased a pineapple plant.

His wife was delighted with the present, but one night, as she was getting closer to the end, she asked him to take it away. She begged him to take it away, before it became 'infused with death' and so, having no choice, he did. He left and because he was crying couldn't take a taxi home. It was the first time he realized he didn't like being a man. His wife died shortly thereafter, and the pineapple plant as well. It is this that leads him to a realization and then to the decision to become a woman.

The next morning, Mikage receives a call from Chika, the head girl at Eriko's club and to whom the club had been given upon Eriko's death. She asks Mikage to come to Sarashina, the soba noodle shop at the train station for lunch. Once there, Chika tells Mikage that Yuichi had come into the club the night before and that he was very melancholy, and had wanted Chika to go out with him to do something together. She couldn't and instead gave him the name of an inn and jokingly told him to take Mikage instead. He replied that she had to go to Izu for her job.

It was then, Chika says, that she realized he and Mikage were in love. Chika gives Mikage the name and number of the inn and tells her to go after him. They speak of Eriko's death and Chika begins to sob. Mikage walks her to a turnstile in the station and watching her leave, realizes that Chika has shown her that the human heart is something very precious.

The next day, Mikage, along with the rest of their small group – her boss, several staff members and a cameraman – set off for Izu. She reflects on her relationship with Yuichi and thinks of how much she has matured and grown and how the experiences of the last half-year have changed her. That evening, having had little to eat because the food was not to her liking, Mikage leaves the inn in search of food. Spotting a small, almost empty eatery, she enters, and orders *Katsudon* – deep-fried pork in broth over rice. As she waits for her dinner she uses the pink telephone in the eatery to call Yuichi. Yuichi

admits to not liking the food (which consists mostly of tofu) where he is staying either and says that he, too, is hungry. At that moment, Mikage felt as though they were coming to a critical juncture in their relationship, one that would determine whether they stayed friends or became something more.

The *Katsudon* arrives and it is delicious. On a whim, she decides to order another 'to-go' and take it to Yuichi. Despite the expense, she takes a taxi to Isehara, where Yuichi is staying. On arrival, she discovers the front entrance to the inn locked as well as the emergency exit. It being midnight, no-one answers the phone either. Although guided by little more than intuition, serendipity if you will, she walks around to the back of the inn and decides that Yuichi's room is on the second floor in the near corner. She scrambles onto an ornamental ledge and for a moment hangs there, unable to pull herself up. Eventually she manages to roll herself up and onto the roof, but cuts her right arm in the process.

She knocks on the window and after an interminably long time Yuichi comes to investigate the noise. Although surprised to see her, he lets her in. She tells him she has brought him food and Yuichi wonders aloud if this isn't like the dream they had shared before. She asks him to make them some tea then confronts him, telling him that she knows he doesn't really want to go back and that he's trying to run away from his life. He notices her wound, but she says it's nothing and tells him to eat before the food gets cold.

She remembers various memories from their time together; her, Eriko and Yuichi. Whereas before she had felt the mood darken in the absence of Eriko, she felt that things were okay between the two of them once again, even with Eriko gone. Mikage tells him that she came because she did not want to lose him and that she wants them to face whatever comes in their life, be it happiness or more sadness, together. He admits that he's been cold and that he only wanted her to see him when he felt stronger, manlier. They say goodbye and she leaves.

Mikage is woken the next morning and seeing the snow-covered landscape, realizes at last that no matter what happens in the future, between her and Yuichi or otherwise, she would never see Eriko again. In other words, life goes on. On the last day of the trip they had gone to Shimoda to sample French cuisine and after a fabulous banquet that evening, she walks to the beach alone. After returning from the beach, she showers and is sitting in bed waiting for the tea water to boil when she receives a call from Yuichi. He tells her that he's back in Tokyo and asks her what time and what platform she'd be on when they returned the next day, because he wants to pick her up from the station.

# Part 2, Full Moon Analysis

Having moved out, found a job and seemingly having gotten on with her life, Mikage is pulled back into the quagmire of despair by the death of Eriko. After the scene in the alleyway she had begged the gods to let her live, but now, as she makes her way to the

Tanabe's apartment, she wants only to die, feeling more alone than at any other time in her life.

Cleaning the kitchen – as Mikage does in her dream with Yuichi, as well as before making him that large meal – represents new beginnings. She is, in a way, removing the past and making way for the future. Making her way up to the apartment in the elevator, Mikage first thinks that she may be in love with Yuichi. Similarly, in his drunken stupor, Yuichi reveals just how important Mikage is to him. The imagery of the two of them standing before a sea of fire can be construed as a sign that their relationship is doomed to failure or conversely, that they can face anything together.

At one point, in Izu, as she searches for an eatery, Mikage says that she wishes she could spend the rest of her life traveling from place to place. This is indicative of her mood, that she doesn't want to face her problems and would instead rather just run away from life, always moving forward, never worrying about the past. Yuichi too, is running away, staying at an inn for as long as his money will hold out, trying to separate himself from his everyday existence and all the pain and heartache associated with it.

The theme of destiny is once more revealed as Mikage, having climbed onto the second floor of the inn, thinks that people believe they can choose their own path, but instead, these choices, she believes, are made unconsciously. Once inside the room, she is overwhelmed by a sense of foreboding and feels as though she has been pulled into Yuichi's nightmare. Although the tone of much of the novella is downcast, and somewhat somber, here, towards the end, it turns into one of hope. Eriko is gone, but the days go on nonetheless. The story concludes on a happy note: Yuichi is back in Tokyo and it seems he and Mikage are going to have a future together.

# Moonlight Shadow

## Moonlight Shadow Summary

They met while serving on the same committee for the sophomore-class field trip, and for four years, Hitoshi and Satsuki were very much in love. As a result of their differing schedules, the only time they spent together during that early time was the ride on the bullet train. On the platform, almost as an afterthought, Satsuki had given Hitoshi a small bell that had fallen from her cat as a present. Although little more than a trinket, he had treasured it and this touched Satsuki. He kept it in a small case which he carried everywhere, and whenever he took out the case the bell would jingle. In time, it became a powerful symbol of their relationship and to Satsuki it seemed that sometimes she could even hear it when he wasn't there.

However, one night, at the age of twenty, Hitoshi is killed in a car accident. His death devastated Satsuki; she had loved him more than life itself. Tormented by dreams of Hitoshi, and finding no solace in waking, she took to jogging. For two months after his death, every morning at dawn she would jog to the bridge on which she had always met Hitoshi (for the river divided the town almost in half and Hitoshi lived on the other side), and there she would rest and drink hot tea while leaning over the railing and staring at the river before setting off back home. Returning home, she would wash her clothes and help her mother make breakfast, before going back to bed for a while. In the evenings she would get together with friends or watch videos; anything to keep busy. The only thing she truly wanted though was to see Hitoshi.

Then, one morning at the bridge, she encounters a beautiful young woman named Urara. She comes up from behind and speaking aloud, startles Satsuki, who drops her small aluminum thermos into the river. Urara says she will buy her a new one. Having only the cup she had just poured left, Satsuki takes a sip and offers the rest to Urara. They talk a while and Urara mentions that on this spot there will be something to see that happens only once in a hundred years. She also says that she cannot tell Satsuki yet, but that she will at some point because Satsuki had shared her tea with her. Satsuki says goodbye and while running turns to look back at Urara. Satsuki is struck by the expression of sadness on her face. She looked nothing like the ebullient girl she had met a moment before.

Hiiragi, Hitoshi's younger brother (who was to turn eighteen this month) and Satsuki had arranged to meet in a coffee shop after he got out of school for the day. Satsuki is mortified to see him come walking in wearing a sailor-style girl's high school uniform. He had lost his girlfriend, Yumiko, in the same car crash that killed his brother; Hitoshi had been taking Yumiko to the train station when the accident occurred. The four of them had been pretty close and often hung out together. It is Yumiko's uniform that Hiiragi is wearing.

Satsuki asks why he is wearing her uniform and he says that it makes him feel better. She asks him if people aren't saying things about him at school and he replies that he is getting a lot of sympathy from the girls, who are all crazy about him. Satsuki realizes that his wearing the sailor outfit is the same as her jogging – a way to kill time, to keep their minds busy. Not as eccentric as he, she is satisfied with merely jogging.

He suggests that they go to an eatery near his house. Satsuki agrees but mentions that she should call home first. Satsuki remembers back to the time when Hiroshi first told her about his brother and that he was a little 'weird'. As they walk to the eatery, Hiiragi's uniform hidden underneath his coat, Satsuki mentions her encounter with Urara and thinks to herself how should would like to see her again. They come to a large intersection – the scene of Hitoshi's accident – and Satsuki is overcome with a sense of solemnity. She wonders what he felt, and if he thought of her when it happened. At the eatery, Satsuki feels that she may never escape her own darkness, but she is prepared to accept it. She wants Hiiragi to be happy though, to be the way he was.

One day, in bed with a cold, Satsuki receives a call from Urara who asks her to meet her at a department store. Satsuki is baffled as to how Urara had gotten her phone number, but Urara merely says that it had come to her naturally. Feverish, but driven by her curiosity, Satsuki makes her way to the store. There, she meets Urara who asks Satsuki to pick out a new bottle to replace the one she lost. Afterwards, drinking tea in a nearby rooftop garden tea shop, Urara gives Satsuki a number of small packets, containing a variety of teas.

Satsuki asks her how she *really* got her phone number and Urara says that she was telling the truth before, that she simply sensed it, that when she thought about the number, her fingers just dialed it. Urara tells Satsuki to get over her cold by the day after next, because that is when they will be able to see the 'something' Urara had spoken of that first time at the bridge.

Satsuki remembers a perfect day she had, had with Hitoshi and how they parted ways on the bridge, Hitoshi's black jacket and the sound of the bell fading into the darkness. She had cried over that scene time and time again and often dreamt that she called to him not to go and that he replied that he didn't die because she had stopped him. She hoped that the *something* to see on the bridge would be Hitoshi, but even if she saw nothing, she decides, and just stood there with Urara, it would feel good.

After leaving Urara, Satsuki is walking to the station where she had left her bike when she sees Hiiragi walking ahead of her, dressed in his regular clothes. She wants to call out to him, but has a 'bad feeling' about it, so she remains silent. Eventually, he stops and stares into the window of a tennis shop – Yumiko had been an ace tennis player and Satsuki remembers the time she had gone to watch one of her matches.

That night she has a dream of Hitoshi and waking up, still with a fever, she feels a terrible loneliness. Not having the energy to go running she makes herself some tea and then returns to her room to gaze out of her window. She sees Urara who had ostensibly been walking home. She gives Satsuki some Vitamin C candy, they chat for a while and

then she leaves. Satsuki is overjoyed that Urara had come to her at the end of a long night of misery. Eventually, she falls asleep. When she wakes, she wonders if Urara had really come to see her or if it had been a dream. She had slept through to evening and is drying her hair when Hiiragi arrives, having brought her a get-well present; food from Kentucky Fried. He tells her that he hates to see her so sad and asks her to call him whenever she feels down, and that they'll do something together. After he leaves, she goes back to sleep.

The next day before dawn, although having not recovered fully, Satsuki goes jogging. At the bridge Urara tells her that it's almost time and that no matter what happens Satsuki mustn't say anything or try to cross the bridge. Then, as dawn breaks, she looks to her side and Urara is gone. Satsuki hears the bell she had given Hitoshi and then, looking across the river, she sees Hitoshi. He stares back, his hands in his pockets. Then, before her eyes, he starts to grow faint. She panics and seeing this, he smiles and waves at her. She waves back, tears flowing down her face. She tries to memorize the moment and then he is gone. She can see Urara again.

At a doughnut shop that had just opened, Urara reveals that she too had lost her lover to an early death and the she had come in the hopes of saying a last goodbye. She explains a bit more about the phenomenon, saying that it really does happen only once ever hundred years and that the conditions must all be just right; it is called, she says, 'The Weaver Festival Phenomenon.'

As they leave the doughnut shop, Satsuki asks Urara where she will go now and she replies that they will see each other again someday. Two days later, she takes Hiiragi a birthday present during the lunch hour at his school. He tells her that two days previously he had seen something. Yumiko, he says, had come into his room and taken the sailor uniform out of his closet, waved goodbye and left. He had thought it a dream, but says that the sailor outfit is now gone. Satsuki wonders if Hiiragi didn't perhaps have the power to draw an even to himself that should only happen at the river. He asks her if he is losing his mind and Satsuki replies, jokingly, that she recommends jogging when he feels like that. The story ends with Satsuki, in soliloquy, thanking Hitoshi for waving good-bye.

## Moonlight Shadow Analysis

As in Kitchen, the themes of death and love are predominant throughout Moonlight Shadow, which, Yoshimoto admits, was inspired by Mike Oldfield's song of the same name. Unlike Kitchen, however, it is a story of lost love, and the pain and heartache that goes along with it. While Mikage and Yuichi lost family members, they had each other. Satsuki, on the other hand loses her lover and feels as though her entire world has come to an end.

Hitoshi, Satsuki felt, had always exuded a kind of transparency, as though he was never really there. She had often even felt compelled to put her ear to his heart as he slept, to

make sure he was still there. This forebodes his death, and is almost a preternatural insight by Satsuki.

Spirituality and the supernatural play a significant role in the story, the most obvious example of which is the unexplainable phenomenon that Urara calls 'The Weaver Festival Phenomenon' that enables Satsuki to say goodbye to Hitoshi. Another example of this is when Urara is able to divine Satsuki's number. The entire narrative is suffused with a dream-like quality, and often Satsuki is not sure whether she is dreaming or actually experiencing something.

As in Kitchen, the subject of sexual ambiguity is explored here, though in a considerably more playful, innocent way than in that story. Hiiragi is not a transvestite, he derives no pleasure from wearing women's clothing. His wearing Yumiko's uniform is simply a coping mechanism, albeit a rather quirky one. Just as Satsuki has taken to jogging to keep her mind occupied, and therein finds a measure of solace, Hiiragi finds comfort in wearing Yumiko's uniform.

The bridge and the river in the story are symbolic of the divide that now exists between Satsuki and her deceased lover. When he was alive he had always met her on the bridge, but in death he remains on one side while she must stay on the other.

Moreso than Kitchen, the tone of Moonlight Shadow is exceptionally dark, with very little humor or light-heartedness. A means, perhaps, of illustrating to the reader how suffused with grief is Satsuki's existence. The climax is bitter-sweet in that it gives Satsuki a modicum of closure, and in turn the reader, but the fact remains that she must go on living without Hitoshi.

# Characters

## Chika

The head "girl" at Eriko's club, Chika has more masculine features than Eriko because she is a transvestite who has not had her gender changed surgically. The only thing that Eriko does not leave to Yuichi after her death is the nightclub, which she leaves to Chika. Late in the story, Chika calls Mikage to meet her and tell her something urgent. Chika tells her that she knows that Yuichi and Mikage are in love with one another, even though neither one of them admit it.

## Kuri

One of Mikage's colleagues, Kuri's sunny disposition gives her "an appealing cuteness." She is Nori's best friend.

## Nori

Nori is described as "a beauty of the 'proper young lady' variety." She works with Mikage as an assistant to the cooking teacher. Mikage admires her open and loving relationship with her mother.

## Okuno

Okuno thinks of herself as Yuichi's girlfriend. She claims to have been the one who comforted Yuichi when Eriko died, although Yuichi never mentions any such thing to Mikage. When she finds out that Mikage has spent the night at Yuichi's apartment, Okuno confronts Mikage at work and threatens her, telling her to stay away from him.

## Mikage Sakurai

The protagonist and narrator of *Kitchen* is Mikage, a young student in Tokyo. Her parents died when she was young and she was raised by her grandmother, whose death leaves her depressed, listless, and unable to face the world. When Yuichi Tanabe comes to her door and asks her to move in with his mother and him, she is surprised, because she does not know much about them. Despite this fact, she accepts an invitation to dinner.

At the Tanabe house, she finds comfort, and she falls in love with the kitchen "at first sight." She is overwhelmed upon meeting Eriko, and the feelings that she has are expressed in terms that border on romance: "Still, she was stunning. She made me want to be with her again. There was a warm light, like her afterimage, softly glowing in

my heart. That must be what they mean by 'charm.'" In spite of this, she is only slightly shaken by the news that Eriko is a transsexual. Mikage discovers that she is able to sleep well on the couch at the Tanabe home, in part because it is next to the kitchen. She moves in with them, partly because of her loneliness over the death of her grandmother, partly because of her enchantment with Eriko, and partly because she recognizes that Yuichi, raised by Eriko alone as she was raised by her grandmother, has much in common with her.

By the end of the novella, Mikage seems to have found the courage to face life again. After Eriko's death, she moves out of the apartment and finds a job. However, she remains confused about her feelings for Yuichi; are they friends, or are they in love with each other? For all her growth she still needs a third party to tell her what everyone already knows: she is in love with Yuichi. Although the resolution is unclear, the reader does have reason to hope that they will unite and embark on a relationship.

## Sotaro

Sotaro is Mikage's old boyfriend. He has always been very cheerful, and when they were together they made a "picture-perfect" couple, but they broke up when her grandmother became seriously ill. He tells her about Yuichi's former girlfriend confronting him in the school cafeteria. Reflecting on Sotaro, Mikage says, "I loved his hearty robustness, I thirsted after it, but in spite of that I couldn't keep pace with it, and it made me hate myself." She realizes, though, that she just is not attracted to Sotaro, and when they part, they part as friends.

## Eriko Tanabe

Eriko is Yuichi's mother—actually, she is his biological father, but she had a sex-change operation after her young wife's death, and she lives as a woman. She is the owner of a gay nightclub.

When Eriko was young, she was taken in to live with a family and became very attached to the daughter of the family. They eloped when she was young. After her death, Eriko knew she would never love again, and that was when she decided to change over to the female sex. As a woman, Eriko is strong-willed, active, impulsive, and incredibly beautiful. It is her idea to have Mikage move in with Yuichi and her—in light of her past history, she probably recognized the possibility that they could have a romance like she and her dead wife once had. Her life is not easy, but, as she explains to Mikage, she accepts the difficulties that she encounters as a necessary part of the growth process: "But if a person hasn't ever experienced true despair, she grows old never knowing how to evaluate where she is in life; never understanding what joy really is. I'm grateful for it."

Eriko suffers a sudden, violent death. A stalker follows her on the street and becomes fascinated with her. He finds out that she was once a man and, in a rage, stabs her with a knife. Eriko beats him to death before she dies herself. The letter that she leaves

behind for Yuichi is full of humor and selfsatisfaction with the accomplishments of her life. After her death, Mikage remembers a story that Eriko told her about her wife's death, of how Eriko had brought a pineapple plant to her hospital room to cheer her up but the dying woman, when her time was near, asked that the plant be taken away. Eriko realized from this that the world was unyielding, that nothing could change the unpleasantness we face: "It was clear that the best thing to do was to adopt a sort of muddled cheerfulness. So I became a woman, and here I am."

## Yuichi Tanabe

When Yuichi first comes to Mikage to invite her to live with the Tanabes, she remembers him from her grandmother's funeral; initially, she wonders if he was the old woman's lover, because the funeral upset him so much. Then she remembers that he worked at the flower shop that her grandmother had gone to every day.

Yuichi's mother died when he was a child, and Eriko was both mother and father to him. He attaches himself to Mikage, as he had to her grandmother, with total devotion, although he seems incapable of romantic love; the girl that he went out with for a year and then dropped suddenly "said that Yuichi was incapable of caring more for a girl than he did for a fountain pen." Yuichi does not contact Mikage about Eriko's death until a long time after the event because he is so distraught. He does not specifically blame himself for what happened to Eriko, but he does note the fact that there has been a lot of death in his family, as in Mikage's, and he suggests that they go into business as carriers of death— "destruction workers."

Even when he realizes that their relationship is not just friendship, or the brother-and-sister bond that it was when Eriko was alive, he does not change his aloof demeanor. Nor does she. But in the end, when he arranges to pick her up at Tokyo station, it is clear to see that they are in love, even though nothing to that effect is explicitly said.

## Yuji Tanabe

*See* Eriko Tanabe

# Themes

## Sex Roles

One of the most notable facets of the story *Kitchen* is the calm and subtle treatment that it gives to Eriko's gender. When Mikage first meets Eriko, she is smitten with the beauty that she sees. Her fascination indicates a sexual attraction, but as she explains that she came to understand the word "charm" for the first time, it becomes clear that her attraction is not physical, that it is more like magic. When Yuichi tells her that Eriko is actually his biological father, that she has changed her sex, Mikage expresses some surprise— "I just stared at him in wide-eyed silence. I didn't know what to say" — but she is not overwhelmed, and her surprise soon fades as she becomes involved in a conversation about Yuichi's family history.

Raised by Eriko, Yuichi is kind; this can be seen in the way that he treats Mikage and her grandmother. He is a special case, though, and there are only two other males in the book to compare him to: Mikage's old boyfriend Sotaro, who is sensitive to the beauty of plants but ignorant of Mikage (his parting words to her are "Chin up, kid!"), and the anonymous stalker who murders Eriko, "screaming that he has been made a fool of." If Yuichi is shown to have a good balance of male and female characteristics, it is because Eriko went before him and blazed a path; if Mikage is also well-balanced, it is because her suffering and loneliness have introduced her to the harsher elements of masculinity.

## Death

To say that death is a catalyst for change in this story would be an understatement. This point is made most obvious in the fact that Yuji/Eriko Tanabe, distraught over the death of his wife after a lingering illness, decided to become a woman, to flee what he had been when she was alive. By becoming a woman he feels closer to her.

Mikage's way of dealing with the loss of her grandmother is similar, if not so extreme; instead, she slides into a state of inertia, unable to respond to the world or deal with the simplest decisions. When Yuichi arrives on her doorstep offering a chance to live in a new place—to in effect become somebody different—it does not take much to convince her to go along.

The first effect of Eriko's death is that Mikage and Yuichi see themselves marked by death, surrounded by bad luck: "So I've become an orphan," Yuichi says, and Mikage responds with, "That goes double for me." Their grief brings them together, as Mikage, who suffered through similar circum- stances with the recent loss of her grandmother, takes up the job of nursing Yuichi. She does that by cooking for him but also, less noticeably, just with her loving presence. It is this nurturing relationship that obscures

their true romantic love from both of them until the end, when their separation from one another makes their feelings clearer.

## Friendship

The issue at the center of this story, from the beginning to the end, is whether Mikage and Yuichi will become lovers, or if the special bond between them is limited to friendship. This question is raised in the story's first real scene, with Yuichi arriving at Mikage's doorstep and asking her to come and live in his home. In the absence of any preexisting friendship between them, she is confused as to the source of the bond she feels for him. "I saw a straight road leading from me to him," she says of their first encounter. "He seemed to glow with white light. That was the effect he had on me."

She later feels a similar attraction to Eriko, his mother/father, and the delight that all three of them find in each other makes their relationship seem like a very strong friendship. Mikage deflects her old boyfriend's suspicion that she and Yuichi are having an affair by pointing out that his mother lives with them, as proof that their living arrangement is nonsexual. Still, the supernatural aspect of their relationship indicates that they are more than friends, except that Mikage does not allow herself to see it as supernatural at all. After they both have the same dream at the same time, she acknowledges its implausibility at the same time that she denies that there is anything magical about it: "While what had happened was utterly amazing," she says, "it didn't seem so out of the ordinary, really. It was at once a miracle and the most natural thing in the world." For the purposes of this novel, the same miraculous quality can be ascribed to love, while friendship is "the most natural thing in the world."

When Mikage returns to Yuichi after Eriko's death, he asks her to move back into the apartment, and she wonders openly about their relationship for once, questioning whether they would be lovers or friends. He has no answer, though: "You mean, should we sell the sofa and buy a double bed?," he asks. "I myself don't even know." Mikage needs to be told by the transvestite Chika that she is in love with Yuichi, and he with her, before she is able to understand their relationship.

# Style

## Symbolism

In the opening pages of the novella the significance of the kitchen is explained. Mikage introduces herself and explains that she has been sleeping in the kitchen after her grandmother's death, indicating that the association with warmth and food was what she needed to comfort her worried soul. There is even a reference to Linus, the character in the *Peanuts* cartoon who carries a "security blanket" that provides him with psychological support against the furies of the world. The symbol of the kitchen makes sporadic, but significant, appearances throughout this novella.

Mikage establishes herself at the Tanabe residence by forming a special bond with their kitchen; her love of the kitchen, or perhaps her love of Eriko and Yuichi, prompts her to understand cooking. This understanding leads her to find her place in the outside world, among the likes of Nori and Kuri and their *Sensei,* or teacher. Most of the other major symbols in the story have to do with the kitchen too. At Mikage's moment of lowest despair in the first half, after she has been watching a dirigible float away with all her hope, she is brought back to happiness by the sight of a kitchen outside of the bus window. Later in the story the *katsudon* that breaks down the emotional barriers is only vaguely reminiscent of kitchens, capturing the sense of nurturing that food has without bringing in the kitchen's various physical qualities.

## Narrator

Much of the drama in this story is due to the narration of this particular first-person narrator, Mikage. Another narrator would have emphasized different events—the strangeness of the dream that Mikage and Yuichi have simultaneously, for instance, or even the fact of Eriko's sex change. To Mikage, these events are no more or less mystifying than the juicer that Eriko brings home or the great taste of the *katsudon* at the late-night diner. She is young enough to be delighted with small, unexpected treats, yet old enough, having lived with her old grandmother, to recognize the joys of traditional, home-based values. She is urbane, both in the sense that she is a product of city life and because she accepts different cultural practices easily, having moved among all of the different sorts of people that compose a metropolis like Tokyo.

Mikage undergoes a huge change from the first part of the novella to the second. In Part 1, "Kitchen," she is consumed by grief, and so is a more passive narrator, observing the things around her without taking a hand in her fate. The Tanabe household is clearly a happier place than before her arrival—both Eriko and Yuichi say so—but life goes on pretty much as it had before. Something, probably the fading of her grief, happens to Mikage between the first part and the second part, called "Full Moon": When she reappears after Eriko's death she is more in charge of her surroundings. She has an apartment and a job. The Mikage of Part 1 may have admired kitchens for their

comforting emotional associations, but she would not have trained herself to work in the kitchen the way that the Mikage who appears in the second part has done.

## Resolution

*Kitchen* does not come to a definitive resolution. The main character's problem is not solved by the end of the story, at least not in any way that gives readers confidence that she will not wake up tomorrow faced with the same problems that she felt free of today. She does come to an implied realization regarding Yuichi.

# Historical Context

In 1988 the Japanese economy was in the middle of the longest financial boom it had experienced since World War II. After Japan lost the war, the American army occupied the defeated country, taking control of the government and steering it toward a new political and economic structure. The Emperor remained on the throne because the Americans wanted to use his presence to oppose the rise of Communism in southern Asia, but political control was shifted into the hands of elected officials. A new Japanese constitution came into effect in 1946, renouncing war forever and adapting a parliamentary democracy. Sovereignty was restored to the Japanese in 1952, in exchange for Japan's withdrawing from countries it had invaded during the war and paying reparations.

After that, Japan grew in economic stature. The first big boost was the Korean War (1950 to 1953) during which Japan provided the U.S. Army with many of its vehicles, from jeeps to tanks. Japan established itself as a leader in electronics in the late 1950s and early 1960s, becoming almost synonymous with transistor technology. By the time that Tokyo hosted the Olympic Games in 1964, the year of Banana Yoshimoto's birth, Japan led the world in economic growth.

Much of its growth was due to foreign trade; in fact, by 1971 Japan was the world's thirdleading exporting nation in the world. The Japanese automobile industry expanded even as the rest of the economy suffered in 1973, when a cartel of Arab oil-producing countries raised gasoline prices around the world dramatically. Almost overnight, American-made "gas-*guzzlers"* went out of fashion and smaller, fuel-efficient models by Nissan, Toyota, and Honda were in demand. Prime Minister Yasuhiro Makasome, who held office from 1982 to 1987, oversaw an economic surge that made Japan a feared economic rival to many Americans.

As the world converted to a global economy in the 1980s, many industrial companies left America in search of a cheaper labor base. Most of these jobs did not go to Japan. American resentment at this situation often focused on Japan and its success in the international economy. In the 1990s, after Nakasome was out of office, the economic expansion in Japan was over. The government was unable to help, suffering through a series of scandals, with the Prime Ministers resigning in 1989 and 1994. For most of the decade, the country was in recession, and in 1998, when the Japanese economy was beginning to stabilize, the collapse of several economies around southeast Asia negatively impacted the recovering Japanese economy.

# Critical Overview

In Japan, Yoshimoto's books have earned critical and popular success since her first one, *Kitchen,* was published in 1988. Western reviewers have attempted to explain her immense popularity when they consider her works. "Like comic books for businessmen and green-tea ice cream," David Galef wrote in *The New York Times Book Review,* "Banana Yoshimoto is a Japanese phenomenon that Americans find difficult to understand."

As much as Yoshimoto's writing may leave many American reviewers unimpressed, she has made a deep impression on millions of readers around the world. Reviewers trying to account for the fact that Yoshimoto is hugely popular both in Japan and with the book-buying public have frequently adjusted their critical standards to compensate for their understanding of her audience. Some have been able to appreciate Yoshimoto by looking at her from someone else's perspective, while other critics simply have not been able to see what all the noise around this author is all about.

Nick Hornsby, reviewing *Kitchen* for *The Times Literary Supplement,* appreciated the subtlety of Yoshimoto's work while allowing that it would be easy to misunderstand the true craft involved. "Her stories possess a clarity and simplicity that can seem lightweight," he wrote, going on to speculate that the difficulty of translating Japanese might account for some of the book's lack of artistry. Scott Shibuya Brown, writing for *Book World,* also saw "a delicacy" in the novella that remained *"Kitchen's* most beguiling charm." He put the book in the context of the past 120 years of Japanese literature, finding it to be, in contrast to the ultra-modern look at contemporary Japan that many reviewers saw in it, a book that instead was "shaped by the most traditional of aesthetics." To Brown, the Japanese tradition of "beauty as an ever-transitory, perpetually fading bittersweet phenomenon" is something that makes Westerners' experience of this novella incomplete.

While some reviewers have adjusted their expectations of the book to account for its Japanese roots, others have emphasized the youthfulness of the audience that it is aimed for. A review in the *New York Times Book Review* identified Mikage as the novella's "kooky young woman protagonist," while Deborah Garrison, writing in *The New Yorker,* appreciated the book as "a tangy, imperfect little snack" that was released in America with "a small but irresistible fanfare of cuteness." Her review goes on to describe Mikage's bright personality: "She keeps telling you she's depressed, listless, and tearful, but she can't hide her essentially sunny nature."

The duality that is noticeable in Garrison's tone—mocking but also fond of the story's harmless pleasantness—can be found in quite a few reviews by writers who like the story but cannot approve of it as art. There have also been reviews by writers who could see the book's appeal but were not willing to let themselves be drawn in by it. Todd Grimson held to the hard line in his 1983 review for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review: "Kitchen* is light as an invisible pancake," he wrote, "charming and forgettable, showing every sign of having been written when the author was only 23." Grimson

described himself as a fan of recent Japanese literature, but he was clearly no fan of Banana Yoshimoto after reading the novella: "The release of information to the reader seems unskilled, or immature, weak in narrative or plot."

Throughout the years, as Yoshimoto's fame has grown, attention has shifted from her works to her celebrity status. In a December 1998 *Christian Science Monitor review* of *Honeymoon,* a book not yet available in America, Nichile Gaouette discussed the author, her worldview, and the chronology of her "reader-friendly books" that are "chatty, breezy affairs." It was only after the celebrity profile was done that the book was mentioned. Yoshimoto's detractors depict her as a kind of fiction machine, churning out one novel after another by combining and recombining a few standard elements in a mostly meaningless way. Her fans tend to characterize her detractors as the sort of spoil-sports who would find fault with any popular work just because it is popular, regardless of its true merit.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

# Critical Essay #1

*Kelly is a literature and creative writing instructor at Oakton Community College and College of Lake County in Illinois. In this essay, he considers whether Kitchen's happy resolutions constitute shallowness or a legitimate representation of this story's vision.*

I think that a lot of the critics who dismiss *Kitchen* as "lightweight" do so because its characters are just too happy, just as a lot of the novella's devoted fans dismiss the critics as grouches who disliked the story because they have a thing against happiness. The truth, as it always does, must lie somewhere in between.

There is no denying that there is a tendency throughout the story to break up moments of sober reflection with a cheerful shake of the head, an uncaused burst of enthusiasm for whatever life has to offer next. It is also pretty well established that, for reasons I will get into later, writers cannot have their characters just turn on a pin, go from one mood to another with the start of a new sentence— they can do it, that is, just as they can toss in singing toasters and invisible spaceships and anything else they can imagine that does not exist in the common world, but just because they can think it up does not mean it is good artistry. The suspicious thing about a book that always turns happy like this is that happiness is such a crowd-pleaser. If Yoshimoto had turned to misery at the end of every upbeat scene, we might worry about her mental hygiene, but we would be less likely to think she does it for popularity's sake than we are when she gives the public what it wants time and again.

On the other hand, this is not a book that takes place in the reality that anybody lives in, even after we adjust for the cultural differences. This is a fantasy land, where people dream concurrently and the dying go down heroically swinging barbells and cab drivers say "Okay, then, let's get going" when they find out that the hundred-mile trip in the middle of the night is for love. Why should this novella be responsible for maintaining its characters' emotional consistency when it breaks almost all other rules of behavior without blushing? Isn't it allowed to set its own rules, as long as it sticks to them?

"Yuichi went to the refrigerator and got out a couple of grapefruits, then happily took the juicer from its box." That "happily," among all the other happy actions in the book, gets me most. First, because it seems so superfluous there, thrown into the middle of an action that isn't, itself, the sort of thing that makes one happy unless one really likes juice and has a really powerful thirst. A lot of what goes on in the story is like this, spiked with a little burst of enthusiasm. I imagine being able to watch from my window as Yuichi or Mikage comes up the street, and I'm certain that neither one of them could walk for half a block without sneaking in a little skip or a shuffle, forgetting for one step that they are not dancing through life. These people are full of joy. But look at the context in which Yuichi happily takes the juicer from its box, and you have to wonder if there's *nothing* that can quiet his joy for a few minutes. It is the middle of the night; he has just woken up from a weird dream; he is hungry; and he has just found out that Mikage was experiencing the same dream that he was, at the same time. I think it is fair to say that

most of us would be curious about this. I'm not saying that there is an appropriate emotion, such as, oh, terror, required by this paranormal turn of events.

Mikage and Yuichi are so well-suited for each other that they are probably right in being happy to find that they can spend those nighttime, sleeping hours together, eating well and singing, as well as the day. But if there is ever a time when being just "happy" seems like a weak, insensitive reaction, this is it. What is the point of putting something astounding in a novella, if the characters are incapable of reacting to it? When they start to realize that they actually have been experiencing the same dream, Mikage says, "I □ I don't believe this." When it is confirmed, she tells the reader, "That was strange," and Yuichi changes the subject. Who is unable to think of the words to address what has happened—the characters, or the author?

The other happy event that stands out is the episode on the bus, with the little girl, her grandmother, and the dirigible. This comes right before the coincidental dream in the story, but it has the opposite structure to it: While Yuichi's happiness when he is reaching for the juicer seemed like an afterthought, like something Yoshimoto felt she should throw in just in case we were distracted by the possibility of a more complex emotion, the whole *point* of the dirigible scene is that it dissolves into happiness. This scene is slathered with symbolism: The little girl and her grandmother reflect, of course, Mikage and her recently deceased grandmother; the dirigible is happiness, which Mikage vows to keep in sight just moments before she starts crying. It is the last time that she is leaving the apartment that she and her grandmother shared, and Mikage is torn between grief and that big airborne puff of happiness, and just as grief starts winning, and the tears start falling on her blouse, happiness rallies and presents itself to her in the form of good cooking in the kitchen that the bus is passing at that moment.

Although this scene is sort of adrift in the novella because it could have been wedged in at practically any place in the story, it has a few things going for it that make it more central than the dream. It has a sequence of events—the dirigible causes happiness, the granddaughter causes reminiscence, reminiscence causes sorrow, and food smells cause happiness again—that reflects the general rhythm of cause and effect in this piece. Also, it allows the kitchen to have an integral, active role, while the fact that they ended up in the kitchen within the dream and then after it shows the hand of the author forcing the issue. In the one case, we are led step-by-step to Mikage's happiness, and we have to take it seriously, while in the other case Yuichi's happiness is thrown at us, and it doesn't stick.

In real life, emotions *do* seem to pop up out of nowhere, although psychiatry is the science of denying this. I'm sure that this would be used as a sort of defense for the incomplete emotional exchanges that take place in this story, usually leading to a hollow happiness. A reader feeling blue doesn't have to worry, happiness will pop up regularly, regardless of what is going on in the story. It announces itself as the replacement for the ignored, unfinished dream; in Mikage's exclamation, upon getting her special glass—"'Wow,' I said on the verge of tears. 'I'm so happy!'"; in the sight of Nori and Kuri giggling in their white aprons that makes Mikage happy ("Working side by side with them was a pleasure that put me at peace with the world"); or in its earliest case, where the narrator

drags readers to the brink of despair ("Steeped in a sadness so great I could barely cry, shuffling softly in a gentle drowsiness, I pulled my futon into the deathly silent, gleaming kitchen") and then pops a champagne cork of delight ("However, I couldn't exist like that. Reality is wonderful.") Maybe happiness does show up like this—sometimes.

The unpredictability of life, though, is no excuse for unpredictability in fiction. I often wonder why anyone uses "That's the way it is in life!" as a defense of something that happens in fiction. Fiction isn't life. It certainly would be great to turn from any of life's low points with a feeling that reality is wonderful, the way Mikage does, although to tell you the truth, if I met anyone this happy this often I would bet that they are suppressing something in a most unhealthy way.

I do not think that the constant turns toward happiness in *Kitchen* reflect life as we live it, nor do I mind that they don't: Fiction's job is to reflect the world in an unreal, fictitious way. The problem is that they draw attention to the teller of the tale, making me wonder why Banana Yoshimoto wants so desperately, even when circumstances do not warrant it, for everything to come out okay. If there is anything worse than fiction that announces to its reader that "The world presented here is unlikely," it's fiction that seems to have some reason, other than basic, unmanageable truth, for wanting you to think one way or another. I sort of like the idea that *Kitchen* is promoting happiness—or, rather, I would like the idea if I thought there was nothing else needing to be examined, if I thought that happiness in itself was a good thing. The way that potentially grim situations resolve in this novella, though, leaves me with the uneasy feeling that the author is playing with loaded dice.

**Source:** David J. Kelly, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999.

# Critical Essay #2

*In the following review, Carter offers a brief introduction to* Kitchen.

This small volume contains two stories, *Kitchen,* a novella of about 100 pages and "Moonlight Shadows," a short story of 40. The latter won a prize upon its original publication in 1986, and the former won a magazine prize in 1987 before book publication in 1988. *Kitchen* has been wildly popular in Japan, selling millions of copies in some 57 printings.

Why is this author popular and why are these tales printed together? Yoshimoto is a young author (b. 1964) with an ear for young people's issues, conflicts, and yearnings. She also writes in a jazzy and often surprising style. The two stories work well as different ways of talking about love, both romantic and familial.

*Kitchen* begins: "The place I like best in this world is the kitchen." Our narrator, one Mikage Sakurai, is a young woman, an orphan. Symbolically, she is an abandoned child of modern Tokyo, that massive and complex city; a novice, she tries to find her own way, yearning for sustenance of food and love. Fortuitously, Mikage is taken in by a family, who are delighted that she loves to shop, cook, and "make the house a home," we might say. But what on the surface seems an attractive mother and son soon evolves into yet another urban oddity: Mikage learns that the mother is a transsexual —formerly the father. This unusual parent runs a nightclub, largely staffed by transsexuals, until she is murdered by a deranged admirer.

In this difficult world, young Mikage feels loneliness, anomie, even despair. Overcome by grief for her recently dead grandmother, she cries on a public street, but suddenly hears "the sound of a happy voice at work, soup boiling, knives and pots and pans clanging." Yes, it is a kitchen, that symbol of hope, order, and sustenance. She even gets a job as an assistant to a cooking teacher.

Meanwhile Mikage and the young man circle each other, neither declaring love nor even romantic interest. They attempt to fabricate their lives in the modern mixtures of Japanese and international culture, a world of takeout food, backpacks, warmup suits, *Bewitched* on TV, computer games, and an international range of cooking. It is the old standard, *katsudon* (a fried pork dish), however, that our young heroine takes on a taxi ride of some 100 miles to her mourning friend and, later (we assume), lover.

The style is breezy, whimsical, lyric, maybe even a bit goofy, but it is an appropriate style for a young person dealing with disruptions of family, culture, and love. The first-person narration is reminiscent of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye,* but without the trenchant satire.

The other story, "Moonlight Shadow," also deals with young love and death; this time the female narrator's boyfriend has been killed in a traffic accident. Through a mysterious woman figure— something like a good fairy—the narrator has a vision of her dead

boyfriend, a vision that allows her to say a proper goodbye and continue on with her life. She concludes:

One caravan has stopped, another starts up. There are people I have yet to meet, others I'll never see again. People who are gone before you know it, people who are just passing through. Even as we exchange hellos, they seem to grow transparent. I must keep living with the flowing river before my eyes.

Even this brief quotation suggests the mixtures of realism and fantasy, simple diction and poetic image that give Yoshimoto's writing freshness and novelty.

**Source:** Albert Howard Carter III, a review of *Kitchen, in Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 30, No. 4, Fall, 1993, pp. 614-15.

# Critical Essay #3

*In the following review, Garrison introduces Banana Yoshimoto to American readers and describes Kitchen as a "tangy, imperfect little snack."*

Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* is a tangy, imperfect little snack. The book, though it appears to be a short novel, is really a pair of stories—the first, called Kitchen, is just long enough, at a hundred and three pages, to be classed as a novella. A literary prize-winner and long-running best-seller in Japan a few years ago, it arrives here translated, somewhat doggedly, by Megan Backus and attended by a small but irresistible fanfare of cuteness. There's a photograph on the mint-and-darkpeach jacket of a bright-eyed Japanese girl in a white eyelet dress, her hair stylishly longer on one side than the other —someone it might be fun to know. She's not Banana, but the packaging doesn't entirely lie. The author was only twentyfour when *Kitchen* was first published, and reading it, along with its less ambitious companion, "Moonlight Shadow," gives you the sense that you're meeting a real young woman, who is, among other things, cute. Both stories are told by a naïve, occasionally goofy first-person narrator, whose bursts of energetic resolve are as girlish as her cries of passionate despair.

What makes this girlishness palatable—what counterbalances it—is the author's preoccupation with grief. "When my grandmother died the other day, I was taken by surprise," Mikage, the twentyish heroine of *Kitchen,* explains at the start of her strange tale. "The fact that time continued to pass in the usual way in this apartment where I grew up, even though now I was here all alone, amazed me. It was total science fiction. The blackness of the cosmos." An only child whose parents died when she was little, Mikage was brought up by her grandmother. But her musings on her plight are mostly uplifting and practical in nature. She acknowledges, for example, the relief: "To live alone with an old person is terribly nerve-racking, and the healthier he or she is, the more one worries." She confesses the battier aspects of her search for comfort: "Steeped in a sadness so great I could barely cry I pulled my futon into the deathly silent, gleaming kitchen" —and she sleeps there, curled like a forlorn family pet at the base of the refrigerator.

"However!" she continues. "I couldn't exist like that. Reality is wonderful." She's the opposite of the depressive who masks pain under a noisy (and transparent) cheerfulness; she keeps telling you she's depressed, listless, and tearful, but she can't hide her essentially sunny nature.

Yoshimoto's writing isn't itself very complex; it skips lightly over the surface of even Mikage's darkest hours. But what she's trying to describe— happiness—*is* complex, and is much trickier to evoke convincingly than misery, maybe because the sources of true contentment are more obscure. Obviously, reality isn't as wonderful as Mikage claims: she is utterly without family, and she has to find a way to manage on her skimpy inheritance. But she is graced with the stubborn happiness of the survivor, which can crop up out of nowhere after a death in the family and thrive like a weed.

What also crops up out of nowhere for Mikage is an invitation to live, rent-free, at the Tanabe residence. Yuichi Tanabe, a reserved young man about Mikage's age, visits her after her grandmother's funeral and proposes that she come to live with him and his mother. (Yoshimoto's way of effecting this and all transitions is so matter-of-fact you can't decide whether it's charming or dopey. *"Dingdong.* Suddenly the doorbell rang," she writes.) Mikage's reaction to Yuichi's polite appearance on her threshold— "I couldn't take my eyes off him. I think I heard a spirit call my name" —is a bizarre blend of teeny-bopper and Zen: love at first sight, non-Western style. Mikage also takes an instant liking to Yuichi's stunningly pretty mother, who turns out, to the reader's baffled delight, to be a man. Yuichi delicately introduces the subject to Mikage with "Guess what else□" His mother was his father—before plastic surgery. This is a wonderful touch, not because it's played for laughs (it isn't) or because it's a big surprise (strangely, it's not that, either) but because it's a piece of superfluous inventiveness on the author's part; it lends everything around it an air of cheerful unreality that mirrors Mikage's state of mind.

Yoshimoto, for all her narrative exuberance, understands the one-step-forward, two-steps-back emotional indirectness of a young person in crisis. The death of Mikage's grandmother is only the prelude to the more shocking, untimely death of Yuichi's mother, and the news of it causes Mikage, who has since moved into her own place, to appreciate the powerful solace of her days at the Tanabes': of sleeping on their couch and hearing Yuichi's mom clatter in on her heels, humming a tune; of perfecting her cooking skills in their underutilized kitchen; of waking up in the middle of the night at the same time as Yuichi and comparing dreams with him. The reader learns of these moments only in retrospect because it is only in retrospect that Mikage comes into full possession of their significance. Most of *Kitchen* occurs not in real time but in mental hyperspace—the virtual rather than chronological aftermath in which events are digested and understanding is gained.

But the story finally seizes on a down-to-earth matter: whether Mikage and Yuichi, in their shared orphanhood, should become lovers or remain fast, sibling-like friends. Yoshimoto can't render it a very compelling question: the intimate rapport between Mikage and Yuichi simply fails to be as interesting as the lively, perfectly achieved completeness of Mikage taken by herself. Her outburst following a good long cry over her grandmother ("I implored the gods: Please, let me live"); her remark at the sight of clouds blowing around in a strong wind ("In this world there is no place for sadness") —these rarities will stay with the reader.

Mikage is, throughout, a little bit weird, and so are the other characters. Yoshimoto's attraction to weirdness and her unpretentious approach to it— she's not trying to be hip, just faithful to her sense of people as they are—are what might make Western readers want more of her. (Two novels and two collections of essays have come out in Japan since *Kitchen.*) And Banana Yoshimoto herself seems an odd one; it's hard to know what genus to put her in. She can't be called a Japanese counterpart of members of the American literary brat pack. She's not jaded enough—she's too adorably nerdy, and she's way too friendly. She's not a brat. In fact, she makes you wonder if bounce-and-shine is still a standard feature in the artistic youth of other nations; you just don't see

too much of it around here. Yoshimoto even includes an afterword to the American edition of Kitchen, in which she expresses the hope that the book will be a balm to those who have known setbacks in their lives; there's a generous, therapeutic impulse somewhere inside this fiction writer. "Surely we will meet someday," she closes her message to the reader, "and until that day, I pray that you will live happily." Such graciousness feels weird, too—it's foreign, anyway. But why be wary of a kind wish?

**Source:** Deborah Garrison, "Dayo!," in *The New Yorker,* Vol. LXVIII, No. 49, January 25, 1993, pp. 109-110.

# Critical Essay #4

*In the following review, Hanson offers a mixed assessment of* Kitchen.

A Japanese maxim warns that "A gentleman does not go near a kitchen." Traditionally a cramped, dingy place—even in an otherwise wellappointed home—the old-fashioned kitchen revealed the low status of the women who spent much of their time there. Yet today, though still small by American standards and still largely the domain of women, kitchens are the showcases of Japanese consumer affluence.

Banana Yoshimoto's first novel evokes this modern opulence even in its title, which uses the trendy English loan-word *kitchin* rather than the Japanese term, *daidokoro.* Ms. Yoshimoto was all of 24 years old when *Kitchen* was published in Japan in 1988; with its kooky young woman protagonist, Mikage Sakurai, the novel—a best-seller that is now in its 57th printing—clearly has spoken to the author's contemporaries.

"The place I like best in this world is the kitchen," Mikage announces in the very first line. "I love even incredibly dirty kitchens to distraction —vegetable droppings all over the floor, so dirty your slippers turn black on the bottom." Left alone in the world when her grandmother dies, Mikage finds that her saddest moods are dispelled by the chance to scrub a refrigerator or even glimpse a busy kitchen from the window of a bus. She is befriended by a young man, Yuichi Tanabe, and his glamorous transsexual "mother," Eriko, and in this household finds some peace—at least for a time.

"Moonlight Shadow," the less satisfying story that fills out this volume, tells of a mysterious stranger who leads the young woman narrator— her voice sounds exactly like that of Mikage Sakurai —to a reunion with her deceased boyfriend.

Unfortunately, the endearing characters and amusing scenes in Ms. Yoshimoto's work do not compensate for frequent bouts of sentimentality. The English text feels choppy—this may be due to the author's style rather than the translation—and the translator, Megan Backus, uses Americanisms that sometimes sound odd coming from the mouths of Japanese characters.

For English-language readers, the appeal of *Kitchen* lies in its portrayal of the lives of young Japanese. Here are characters who disdain traditional meals made of tofu and pickled vegetables and instead tuck into doughnuts, sandwiches from Kentucky Fried Chicken and pudding cups from the local mini-mart. Yuichi and Eriko offer Mikage a huge sofa to sleep on, not a futon, and gleefully fill their apartment with electronic gadgets. And Mikage herself typifies the confusion of young Japanese women, attracted as she is to kitchens and cooking as symbols of comfort and womanliness, yet trying to live independently.

Observing the women pupils at a cooking school, Mikage feels how different she is: "Those women lived their lives happily. They had been taught, probably by caring parents, not to exceed the boundaries of their happiness regardless of what they were

doing.□ What I mean by 'their happiness' is living a life untouched as much as possible by the knowledge that we are really, all of us, alone."

**Source:** Elizabeth Hanson, "Hold the Tofu," in *The New York Times,* January 17, 1993.

# Topics for Further Study

What do you think Eriko's transsexuality adds to this story? Explain how you think Mikage's and Yuichi's love affair would have been different if Eriko had just been a mother who worked at a nightclub.

Make a list of foods that you think would be comforting in a time of grief, and why. Try to determine if there is any physiological basis for your hunch.

This book has been made into a movie twice in Japan. What problems do you think the scriptwriters would have encountered while adapting it? What scenes would be most effective on the screen? What key scenes would not translate well to movies?

Write a short story explaining what life is like for Mikage and Yuichi one year, five years, or fifteen years into the future. You can write it from Mikage's point of view, as the book is, or from Yuichi's.

# Compare and Contrast

**1988:** Hirohito, who had been Emperor of Japan since 1926, fell violently ill. He died the next year at the age of 87.

**Today:** In part because of Hirohito's participation in World War II (1939-1945), the Emperor of Japan, Akihito, has mostly symbolic powers, with the real governing done by an elected democracy.

**1988:** George Bush, who was vice-president for eight years during the administration of Ronald Reagan, was elected President of the United States.

**Today:** Bush's one-term administration is remembered as a time of economic weakness, due in large part to the economic troubles that were inherited from the Reagan administration.

**1988:** Polish workers went out on strike to demand the return of the labor union Solidarity, which had been outlawed since 1981. After three weeks their demand was met.

**1990:** A new government was elected in Poland, with Lech Walesa, a leader of the Solidarity movement, as president.

**1991:** Following Poland's lead, a number of countries in the Soviet Union demanded independence. The Soviet Union was dissolved on December 31, 1991.

# What Do I Read Next?

Many readers have found that Yoshimoto's novels remind them of Mexican writer Laura Esquivel's best-selling novel *Like Water for Chocolate,* published by Doubleday in 1992. As in *Kitchen,* food is the primary cure for love and loss in this book, which is structured like a cookbook.

At the same time that Banana Yoshimoto's writing was capturing international attention for its portrayals of women in modern Tokyo, Tama Janowitz was establishing the same sort of reputation for her characters in New York City. Her 1986 collection of short stories, *Slaves of New York,* offers a vastly different look at the other side of the world.

One of the most famous Japanese novelists to be printed in English is Tanizaki Junichiro, whose novels mainly explored the struggle between traditional values and modern culture. His most famous novel, *Some Prefer Nettles,* concerns an unhappy marriage in which a westernized wife and a traditional husband try to stay together despite their differences. Published in Japan in 1929, it became an international success when the translation was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1955.

Kenzaburo Oe is a Japanese author who was the recipient of the 1994 Nobel Prize for Literature. Like Yoshimoto, he became famous while still quite young. He received national attention when he was twenty-three, with the publication in 1958 of the novella *Shiiku,* which translates to English as "The Catch." It is available in the collection The Shadow of Sunrise, published in 1966 by Palo Alto Press.

The dust jacket of *Kitchen* compares the work to the early writings of French novelist Marguerite Duras, which also create an eerie mood from their tight prose. Her best works can be found in Four Novels by *Marguerite Duras,* published in 1965.

The differences between eastern and western cultures have been explored recently in the work of Japanese-American author Ruth Ozeki. Her 1998 novel *My Year of Meats,* concerns a Japanese couple trying to have a child and contrasts contemporary trends like agribusiness and food additives with Japanese tradition.

# Further Study

Anne Allison, *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club,* The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

This sociological study provides a wonderful understanding of Eriko's character.

Donald Keene, *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature,* Columbia University Press, 1988.

Keene is considered by some to be the leading interpreter of Japanese literature to the West, a frequent translator of criticism and literature. This recent, short book gives a good background on the culture that produced *Kitchen.*

Jonathan Rauch, *The Outnation: A Search for the Soul of Japan,* Harvard Business School Press, 1992.

The author of this book was young, still in his twenties, when he traveled to Japan in 1990. His insights into the culture provide wonderful, intelligent background.

Edward Seidensticker, *Tokyo Rising: The City since the Great Earthquake,* Alfred A. Knopf, 1990.

The earthquake of the title is the one that destroyed most of the city in 1923. His research is thorough, but academic.

Rex Shelley, *Culture Shock:* Japan, Graphic Arts Center Publishing Co., 1993.

This book, part of a series of guidebooks aimed mainly at business travelers, gives a good sense of contemporary Japanese lifestyles, customs, and expectations.

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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.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

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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