My Brother, My Sister, and I Short Guide

My Brother, My Sister, and I by Yoko Kawashima Watkins

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Overview

In this sequel to Watkins' fictionalized autobiography So Far from the Bamboo Grove, thirteen-year-old Yoko, her sister Ko, and her brother Hideyo live together in postWorld War II Japan, struggling to make a life for themselves after their harrowing escape from Korea. Yoko's family was stationed in North Korea during World War II while Yoko's father worked as a Japanese government official in nearby Manchuria, but they were forced to flee the country when Russian and Korean Communists escalated their war against Japan and drove the Japanese people out of Korea. Yoko and her sister Ko escaped with their mother, who later died, and Hideyo escaped alone and later reunited with his sisters in Kyoto.

Yoko's father remained behind, working in Manchuria, and is now imprisoned in Siberia.

Like So Far from the Bamboo Grove, My Brother, My Sister, and I paints a picture of courageous young adults struggling against poverty and prejudice to make a place for themselves in the world. It is a story of survival, and Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo conquer hardship after hardship by relying on each other for love and support, and by helping each other tap their own strength.

During their life in Kyoto, the children endure both physical pain and mental anguish, and they fall prey to false accusations of arson and murder. But their story is more about love than about hardship, and it is more about fortitude than misfortune.

At the end of the novel, we cannot help but rejoice in their accomplishments and marvel at their fortunate change of events. Their father returns to them, battered but whole after his years as a prisoner of war, and Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo make a warm, comfortable home, finish their education, and eventually marry and lead happy, successful lives.

About the Author

Yoko Kawashima Watkins is of Japanese ancestry but was born in Harbin, Manchuria in 1933, then moved to North Korea where she lived with her family while her father worked as a Japanese government official during World War II. She lived in a bamboo grove in Nanam until 1945, when the Russian and Korean Communist forces, angered at years of Japanese oppression, escalated their warfare and drove hordes of Japanese people out of the country. Yoko lived a comfortable life in the bamboo grove until the age of eleven, when she, her mother, and her sister Ko were forced to flee to Japan and leave her father and brother Hideyo behind. After her harrowing ordeal as a refugee she learned how to survive and persevere. Watkins worked hard, became educated in Kyoto, and learned English well enough to work as a translator at an American air force base. She married an American pilot named Donald Watkins in 1953, moved with him to America in 1958, then settled in Massachusetts and raised six children, two of them Taiwanese orphans. In 1976, thirty-one years after her escape from Korea, Watkins began writing her story. She published So Far from the Bamboo Grove in 1986, then continued her story in My Brother, My Sister, and I, which she published in 1994. Watkins' vivid portrayal of life as a Korean refugee won her praise as a young adult writer, and she won numerous awards for both books. She also wrote a book of Japanese folk tales, and she continues to educate young people about the horrors of war by lecturing about her experiences.

Setting

The book is set in Kyoto, Japan in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The war is over, and though Kyoto escaped the demolition that Tokyo and other Japanese cities suffered, it did not escape the poverty. Watkins takes us to Kyoto's back streets where the homeless roam hungry and cold and dig through garbage for food and seek shelter in warehouses and under bridges. This world contrasts greatly with the world Yoko and her family knew in Nanam, Korea, before their escape, where Watkins says she lived in "a beautiful big house . . surrounded by a graceful bamboo grove." The war devastated both the land and the people, and Watkins' vivid descriptions of Yoko's world in post-war Kyoto makes the desolation of war painfully obvious.

The places Yoko calls home include a cold, drafty clog warehouse with couple of futons for beds and an apple box for a table, a hospital with an iron cot for Ko and no place for Yoko to sleep but underneath the cot, and a lean-to shack under a bridge with no protection from cold weather or burglars. When the Minatos, a kindly couple who rescue Yoko and her family from under the bridge, invite them to share their small house in the Tanaka area, Yoko feels blessed. But Yoko's cruel classmate points out that Burakumin live in the Tanaka area.

Burakumin, Watkins explains, are social outcasts, labeled by some as four-legged animals or dirty people. By order of the Shogun in twelfth-century Japan, they were forced out of the village communities and into small shacks, relegated to jobs such as digging graves and butchering animals, and excluded from attending prestigious schools or marrying outside their social stratum.

The environment where Yoko lives helps reinforce Watkins' message that she felt like a social outcast—forced out of her home in Korea and condemned to a life far removed from that of her classmates and shunned by the upper classes. Watkins' descriptions of her "home" under the bridge and her experiences on the streets makes us understand where this woman gained her humility, and how she came to view the Minato's small house as a palace, and a fresh piece of cake as a treat worthy of queens. The impoverished world in which Yoko lives teaches her that home is where the heart is. She learns to value love, to appreciate simple pleasures, to rejoice in small comforts, and to respect kind, hardworking people who give selflessly and expect nothing in return.

Social Sensitivity

Anyone who reads about Watkins' experiences understands how deeply they must have molded her values and changed her outlook on life. As both a refugee fleeing from Korea and as an indigent scraping by in Kyoto she was an outcast, yet she managed to hold her head high, finish her schooling, and become the successful and confident woman she is today. The hardships Watkins faced were likely more severe than any those of us will ever know, yet we all face hardship. The stories she tells gives us hope that with determination, we can survive the most difficult of times.

In My Brother, My Sister, and I, Watkins continues to relay her message from So Far from the Bamboo Grove: that love and kindness is important, that values are important, and that with strength and willpower, we can overcome adversity. In So Far from the Bamboo Grove Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo survive their hellish escape from Korea, and in My Brother, My Sister, and I they survive the hardship of living in poverty with no parents and little money with which to buy food. What money they do make is hard-earned, and they suffer the humiliation of others who see them not for the upstanding and hard-working people they are, but as street bums, unworthy of consideration and respect. Yoko is ostracized by her classmates, yet she must face them every day in order to continue her schooling and improve her position in life. Though not many of us can relate to the pain Yoko suffered, some of us have experienced poverty and prejudice. Watkins story gives us hope that we can rise above it and conquer it, and move on to be successful, happy people.

Readers of Watkins' novels understand that hardship breeds strength, and that those who suffer hardship learn the value of love and support from others. Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo support each other every step of the way, and they never take for granted the kindness of others. It may amaze us to learn how grateful these children are for small kindnesses that we so easily take for granted.

A pair of shoes, a pile of wilted greens, a piece of cake from a neighbor—these are all gifts that touch the children greatly; they are thankful for small favors and appreciative of anyone who helps them. Perhaps Yoko knows, even as she faces the cruel children at school each day, that these children have a distorted view of life, that they have their priorities reversed, and that they would never know the value of sharing.

Amazingly, Yoko never loses sight of her values or loses faith in herself, even as she suffers with poverty and humiliation. She has the love and support of Ko and Hideyo always, and that love gives her the strength she needs to cope.

Watkins paints a vivid picture of sibling relationships as she details the tensions that complicate the bond between Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo. They argue and find fault with each other as any siblings do, but their love is strong in ways we will never know. We can understand Yoko's fear when she thinks that Ko might die and leave her, but can we truly understand her desperation? This is a young girl who lives a brutal existence and

has lost everything dear to her except her brother and sister. Yoko loves Ko and Hideyo more than anything in the world.

The Japanese culture places high value on family bonds, and the bond Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo share is strengthened tenfold by the severity of their struggle. Watkins lets us marvel at the unconditional love these children show each other as they fight for life's most basic needs. Watkins' book teaches us lessons about the importance of working together and about acting generously and selflessly toward others. It would have been easy for any of the three of them to give up trying—to withdraw from school, to lash out at the people who ridicule and humiliate them, or to engage in dishonest practices to get what they need. But these three young people have high standards, and Watkins conveys the message that they help each other hold onto their values. They encourage each other to carry on, tackle adversity, and tap their stores of courage and strength. They know it's not easy, but they have each other. This makes them more determined than ever to succeed.

Literary Qualities

It must be difficult for three young people living alone on the streets to retain their cultural identity and to hold on to family traditions. Yet through all their suffering, the Kawashimas dig deep into their past and find comfort in the life they once knew.

Watkins recounts incidents from happier times to help us understand the strength of their family bonds. She uses flashbacks to recount the horrific story of her struggle, but she also uses them to relay pieces of advice her father and sister once gave her—words of wisdom that impressed her when she was young, and that helped her carry the Kawashima pride and develop a set of values later in life. She also recounts instances when Ko and Hideyo imitate gestures or actions they learned from their parents, or instances when she imitates actions she learned from Ko. Watkins includes these incidents to show us how much she was influenced by her family, their values, and their philosophy of life.

With no relatives living or available to help give the children a sense of cultural identity, the Kawashimas still manage to retain their identity, and one way Watkins divulges this is by revealing the bond with nature that characterizes Japanese culture.

When Watkins uses nature imagery she shows how deeply this philosophy permeates their lives. Yoko says "the sun goes to sleep quickly in winter," to explain the darkness, and she speaks of the winter wind behaving itself. Hideyo, in trying to teach a lesson in patience says, "Remember, for today, today's wind blows, and for tomorrow, tomorrow's wind blows." "Why do you worry when you cannot do much?"

The Japanese are in awe of nature; they believe spirit manifests itself in natural wonders. Yoko marvels at the flowers. "I could be like the humble wildflowers that grew along the stream bank during the spring, summer, and fall," she says. "If tramped on, they would always spring back, and give a bit of pleasure to the passersby."

Perhaps the most poignant reference to nature's wonder is Watkins' explanation of a silkworm project she is assigned in school for biology class. Mr. Iwai, the biology teacher, asked Yoko to watch the worms grow, write a report about their growth and transformation, cook the cocoons and spin silk thread, and exhibit her project at the city science fair. Watkins realizes that she gained important life perspective while observing the silkworms, and she uses the development of the silkworms as a metaphor for the development of her own character. Watching the silkworms reinforced her hope for a better future. "I took a peek at the worms," she said. "They were very ugly. Still, they had accepted their burden and lived as best they could. From the worms would come beautiful, strong, pure white threads! Will I be a beautiful person if I, too, accept and endure burdens and go through life calmly? I wondered. If a silkworm can, then I, as a human being, certainly can!" Yoko always had the ability to realize her potential, as did Ko and Hideyo, and all of them strove to internalize the beauty in the world. Using nature imagery once again, Hideyo said that though they could not change their past,

they could strive for a better future. "The Kawashima children can become a few drops of water in the ocean," he said, "and make ripples that will spread humanity."

Themes and Characters

In this sequel to So Far from the Bamboo Grove, Watkins chronicles Yoko's maturation process as she recounts the story of her struggle to survive in Kyoto with her brother Hideyo and her sister Ko. Yoko is thirteen now, and she is trying to make it in the world with meager possessions and little money. Ko works as a seamstress sewing aprons and kimonos, Hideyo works as a laborer, and Yoko finds work wherever she can and must attend school as well. Their mother is dead and their father is a prisoner of war in Siberia. We understand the fear and longing these children must have experienced during this time of their lives. They survived the war, but they lost their mother, have no idea if they will ever see their father again, and they must constantly worry whether or not they will be able to make enough money for food and clothing. They have only themselves to rely on, and they succeed admirably, even as hardship after hardship challenge their strength and resolve time and time again.

When the Kawashimas first arrive in Kyoto they have hope for the future. They made it out of Korea alive, and they look forward to a happy reunion with their family. But shortly after arriving in Japan, they learn that their grandparents were killed and their home destroyed. Then they experience the death of their own mother, who expires in the train station after learning the devastating news of her parents' death.

Alone and frightened, the children feel fortunate when they meet the Masudas at the train station and are offered a place to live in a clog warehouse in return for guarding the place against burglars. They settle in a small room there and begin their daily struggle to survive.

Early in the novel, the Kawashimas do encounter a burglar in the warehouse, and shortly after that, fire breaks out and destroys their home. Braving smoke and flames, Ko races upstairs to retrieve their few precious possessions and suffers a terrible accident. She falls from the top of the stairs onto the concrete floor. Yoko hears her sister's bones crack, and she fears that Ko might die. Ko does not die, but her right knee is shattered, her left leg broken in three places, and her right wrist and three ribs are broken. She must remain in the hospital for months. Leaving their home once again, Yoko and Hideyo pick up what belongings they have, move them into the doctor's shed, and set their sights on helping their sister.

Life gets harder for the Kawashimas after Ko's accident. Ko is in terrible pain and can no longer work, Hideyo must struggle to pay hospital bills, and Yoko must suspend her schooling to care for her sister.

They then learn that the Masudas died in the fire, and Junko Masuda, their niece, accuses the Kawashimas of setting fire to the factory, killing her aunt and uncle, and stealing their cash box. Yoko is outraged at these accusations and deeply insulted that her integrity is in question. Watkins makes clear Yoko's pride. We are "at the bottom of the bottom," she says, but "the Kawashima children would never steal, harm or destroy

things that belong to others." Nevertheless, Junko Masuda reports the children to the police, and an investigation begins.

When we read Watkins' story we marvel at the fact that anyone can maintain their resolve after suffering so many setbacks. Just when they appear to conquer one setback, another one slaps them in the face; yet they manage to conquer and keep their goals in sight. The children get frustrated with life and with each other, but they never give up hope for a better future. All three children find work wherever they can, whether it be cleaning toilets, shining shoes, or collecting cans—and they manage to scrape up enough money for Yoko's schooling and Ko's hospital bills. They learn to prioritize, and they look after each other's needs. When Yoko gets money from selling aprons and kimonos, she must choose between buying toothpaste and three toothbrushes or a bottle of calcium pills for Ko. She decides that the pills are more important. We listen to Yoko contemplate this decision and ask herself, "which is the more important thing now?"

We realize then that she has learned to think and act responsibly. We also realize that she has learned to act selflessly. Yoko knows that Ko needs the calcium pills for her bones to heal properly so she does not hesitate to spend her hard-earned money on them. From the minute they left Korea, Ko tended to Yoko's needs and now Yoko returns the gift. It is this supportive attitude that sees them through the most difficult times.

Ko is deeply touched when Yoko gives her the calcium pills, but at first she lashes out at her, complaining that Yoko she must learn to manage money. This is often how Ko reacts when Yoko makes a sacrifice for Ko. But we know that these children never consider their kindnesses sacrifices. Ko acts angry, but then cries, deeply touched. She remembers a time during their escape from Korea when Yoko was whining and complaining and Ko had blurted out that she wished Yoko were dead. Ko feels ashamed of herself. But Yoko knows that her sister loves her more than anything and that their bond is unbreakable, their support for each other never-ending. Yoko soothes her sister's guilt by telling her that she knew Ko did not mean what she said. "War makes people mean and ugly," she explains, "and robs everyone's gentle heart."

In both of her books, Watkins intends to convey the futility of war, but perhaps the strongest message she conveys is the power of pride and determination. The Kawashimas refuse to let war rob their gentle hearts.

Watkins makes it clear that the children help each other hold on to their pride and their determination, and that the love and support they give each other makes even the most challenging situations surmountable.

But Ko bosses Yoko around and Yoko resents it. Ko calls Yoko a spoiled brat. They experience the same tensions other siblings experience. We know that whatever spats they have, however, the Kawashimas love and depend on each other more than anything in the world. Readers can relate to the dual nature of their relationship, the conflicting emotions of sibling love. These sisters experience love and hate, joy and

anger, jealousy and adoration; but they stick together, and that is what counts. In the face of adversity, neither of them is ever alone.

This bond gets them through the worst of times.

Watkins hints at the horrors the Kawashimas experienced together during their escape from Korea (she covers this in detail in her first book, So Far from the Bamboo Grove), but here in Kyoto they face new horrors. That these children survived their escape at all seems miraculous, and that they survive the poverty and humiliation they suffer in Kyoto attests to their resolve. Yoko attends classes at the Sagano Girls' School, and her classmates ridicule her for living in poverty and call her names such as "Rag Doll" and "Trash Picker."

That hurts her deeply, but when they unjustly accuse her of stealing a watch, it humiliates her. "I pitied myself," she said.

"I wondered which was worse. Walking on the bombshell? The awful trek on an empty stomach? Being wounded by bombing? Or was it worse being constantly picked on by the girls in the school, accused of things I knew nothing about?" The problems at school continue, but Yoko comes to realize that however hurtful, these people can not undermine her resolve or shake the Kawashima pride. They knew nothing about love. Once, after seeing a picture the girls at school hung on the bulletin board to ridicule Yoko, she realizes that these girls know nothing about being hungry and homeless, or about missing a father they fear they may never see again. "As I looked at the drawing, I wanted to yank it down," Yoko said.

"Then, standing there, I suddenly realized that in spite of our cruel condition, Hideyo, Ko, and I were helping one another live day by day. We kept the hope of Father's return alive. I had absolutely nothing material, but I had a brother and a sister who gave me their love. They were teaching me the value of human life. We had not done anything to be ashamed of. I was proud of what we'd been doing."

Yoko's classmates show her no mercy and no kindness, but she manages to live with their cruelty and finish her schooling— and even graduate with top honors. Her classmates still ostracize her, and they do not want her in the school photo. Again, Yoko feels humiliated, but she does not wallow in self-pity. She knows that she has succeeded in ways these children never will. She has learned how to be courageous, strong, and proud. She has experienced a side of life that made her recognize what is truly important; "the value of human life," she said. She has gained insights that these rich, spoiled children will never learn.

Watkins contrasts Yoko's depth with her classmates shallowness. The classmates may have material wealth, but the Kawashimas have spiritual wealth. Because of this, they are able to preserve their moral character and hold their head high.

Previously published plot summaries of My Brother, My Sister, and I mention that Watkins builds suspense as to who set fire to the warehouse and how the children are going to exonerate themselves. But as one reviewer points out, "the mystery of who set

fire to the factory and killed the owners seems almost tangential to the more central mystery of how Yoko will find enough food to stay alive and enough fortitude to fight the prejudice she suffers at school because of her poverty." (Hearne 1994) Yoko survives because she and her brother and sister have all the qualities they need to survive. They are strong. They are courageous.

They are forthright. And they have spiritual resolve. When Yoko's shoes are destroyed in the fire, Hideyo sends the shoes down the river, says a prayer for them, and tells them to send a message to their father.

The Kawashimas all have an amazing ability to turn adversity to opportunity, and to find hope in desperate situations. By the end of the novel, things start looking up for Yoko and her siblings, and we know that however tragic their life has been, they feel truly blessed. Their father returns from his imprisonment. They have a warm, comfortable home with the Minatos, with bamboo growing all around it. Ko is getting better, Yoko is continuing with school, and all signs point to emergence from the depths of despair. "My brother, my sister, and I emerged from the depth because we simply cooperated, accepted our responsibilities, and kept our dreams and hopes alive," Watkins explains. Yoko learns that true contentment comes not from material wealth but from love and kindness, and from sharing your life with people who give that same love and kindness in return.

Topics for Discussion

1. When Yoko first sees her father at the train station, she does not recognize him. Why do you suppose that in a few short minutes she no longer sees him as the "a tired, worn old man," she saw when he arrived, but as "a strong, wise, kind father?"

2. Why do you suppose Junko Masuda accused the Kawashimas of arson, theft, and murder?

3. Why does Ko act angry when Yoko surprises her with touching kindnesses?

4. What do you think bothers Yoko more: the constant humiliation of her peers or the accusations of arson, theft, and murder?

5. When Kyoko accuses Yoko of stealing her watch, the teacher takes Kyoko's accusation seriously and strip searches Yoko. Do you think if Yoko accused Kyoko of stealing the teacher would have taken Yoko seriously? Why or why not?

6. What do the children's efforts to find their father say about their character?

7. Give instances from the story that show how the Mr. and Mrs. Kawashima instilled values in their children.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write a paper using the development of a silkworm as a metaphor to explain Yoko's development into a strong, selfless person.

2. Write a paper on homelessness and how Yoko's outlook helped her manage on the streets.

3. Watkins points out that Burakumin have been discriminated against since the twelfth century and that they have carried their burden from generation to generation. Compare and contrast the discrimination the Burakumin suffer in Japan to the kind of discrimination that occurs today in America.

4. Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo survive and persevere because they never give up. Discuss some of the ways each of them persisted to chase their dreams, despite their hardships.

5. The Japanese people traditionally have a strong sense of family pride. Using instances from the story, discuss the family pride Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo feel and the ways in which they exhibit it.

6. Discuss several instances in the novel that reveal the Kawashima's qualities of determination, courage, and selflessness.

7. There are several instances in the novel when Watkins recalls wise words, or advice, from her father. Discuss these wise words and how Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo follow their father's advice in their lives alone in Kyoto.

8. Write a paper to support Watkins' message that "home is where the heart is."

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Yoko Kawashima Watkins began telling the story of her childhood experiences in So Far from the Bamboo Grove (1986), a fictionalized account of her harrowing escape from Korea with her mother and sister and their subsequent arrival in Kyoto.

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