

# **My Year of Meats Study Guide**

**My Year of Meats by Ruth Ozeki**

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# Plot Summary

*My Year of Meats* is the first novel by award-winning writer, Ruth L. Ozeki. In this novel, Jane Takagi-Little takes a job as a producer on a Japanese reality show designed to encourage Japanese housewives to cook more beef. Jane is responsible for finding American housewives who are wholesome and attractive who will open her home to the cameras and make a meal whose centerpiece is some kind of beef dish. As Jane becomes more involved in the show, she begins to learn things about the beef industry that cause her to doubt her commitment to the show. At the same time, Akiko Ueno, the wife of the advertising executive who oversees the show's production, watches and learns that there is more to life than subservient obedience to a husband that she never loved. *My Year of Meats* is not only a closer look into the controversial practices of the beef industry but also a story of self-discovery in the lives of two very different women.

Jane Takagi-Little is living the life of a starving artist when she is offered a job producing a Japanese reality show to promote American beef. Jane is grateful for the job and quickly jumps into it despite a disastrous beginning with the first housewife that she features on the show. At the same time, Akiko Ueno, the wife of a Japanese advertising executive who is in charge of the production of *My American Wife!*, is given the chore of watching the show, cooking the dishes featured, and rating its overall wholesomeness and authenticity.

Jane constantly butts heads with the Japanese producers as she attempts to include a variety of American housewives on the show and not just the attractive white women they would prefer. Jane also wants to direct the show but again the Japanese want a Japanese director who will understand the standards by which the Japanese live. However, on the rare occasions when Jane gets her way, Akiko gives the show higher ratings in comparison to the shows that her husband finds more appropriate.

During one day of filming, the director from Japan has a bad reaction to the meat he is eating at the home of a featured housewife. Jane learns that this reaction is caused by the man's severe allergy to antibiotics. Jane learns from the doctor that all beef has some residual antibiotic in it from the antibiotics given to the cows at the feedlots to keep them from getting sick. All Jane cares about at this point, however, is the fact that the director's illness allows her to step in in his place.

Jane begins searching out more unusual housewives, such as a woman in Louisiana who has adopted ten Korean children with her chef husband. Unfortunately, the ad executive, John Ueno, does not like this episode because Jane allows the husband to cook the meal. However, Ueno's wife finds this episode to be more wholesome than some of the others. Another controversial episode Jane films is one that centers around vegetarian lesbians. This episode causes a great deal of stress for John Ueno but his wife finds it inspiring, making her see how unhappy she is in her life.

At the same time Jane is working on the show, pushing her bosses to their limits, she begins an affair with a musician. Jane believes she cannot get pregnant because of



infertility experienced during her marriage a few years previously. However, Jane is shocked to learn she has in fact gotten pregnant. This pregnancy is unwanted initially but Jane quickly realizes she wants the baby.

Across the ocean, Akiko has struggled with her own infertility issues. However, she has recently begun menstruating again and knows that a pregnancy is possible. Akiko thinks about the episode of *My American Wife!* with the lesbians and realizes she cannot find happiness with her husband. As Akiko reaches this conclusion, her husband's occasional abuse toward her reaches a fevered pitch. John Ueno rapes his wife and leaves her badly injured, an injury that leads to hospitalization a few days later.

Jane knows she needs her job but she also wants to expose the truth she has learned about DES to the public. Jane arranges to film a show with a family that owns a feedlot. Jane films the manager of the feedlot feeding the cows and his employees injecting new arrivals. During this visit, Jane comes into contact with some hormones and begins to fear for the health of her unborn child. The following day, Jane and her crew go to the slaughterhouse to film the process. Jane is injured when she accidentally falls against the knockout pen. When Jane wakes in the hospital, she learns that she has lost her baby.

Akiko leaves her husband and goes to America. Once there, Akiko befriends Jane and visits some of the families who made the biggest impact on her through *My American Wife!* At the same time, Jane makes a documentary out of her footage of the feedlot in the aftermath of the accident that caused her to lose her job. This documentary sells to hundreds of media outlets in the aftermath of the revelation that the feedlot in question was using DES. At the same time, Jane reconnects with her lover and looks forward to a happier future.



# Prologue and Chapter 1, The Sprouting Month

## Prologue and Chapter 1, The Sprouting Month Summary

Ruth L. Ozeki is a documentarian like her main character in her first novel. As a result, the authenticity of the main character is clear, leaving the reader with a sense of reality that flows through her fictional scenarios.

In the prologue, the Japanese crew has a great deal of trouble filming the American housewife for the first episode of *My American Wife!* However, the shot finally comes together and the cameraman gets a good shot of the American couple sharing an intimate moment.

In Chapter 1, Jane Takagi-Little is wondering where the money for her rent will come from when she gets a call from a friend in Japan in the middle of the night. The call is from a television producer who wants to offer Jane a job producing a Japanese reality show that will showcase a different American housewife each week in order to promote the consuming of beef in Japan. Immediately after accepting the job, Jane is presented with a list of criteria for each housewife that will be featured on the show. Jane is put off by the apparently racist bend to the criteria, finding herself forced to explain the thought process of the Japanese producers to her American employees.

## Prologue and Chapter 1, The Sprouting Month Analysis

Jane Takagi-Little is a documentarian who has had difficulty finding work since returning to America after spending a great deal of time in Japan. Jane is half-Japanese and half-American, causing her to feel something of a culture shock as she moves between the two cultures. However, this gives Jane the unique skills necessary to produce a Japanese reality show in America. Jane's job is to find wholesome American housewives to make beef dishes on camera in order to encourage Japanese housewives to buy more beef. Jane is thrilled to have a job after months of unemployment and initially, she is not concerned about the apparent biased slant of the show at first. However, the reader suspects Jane might find a reason to change this opinion as the plot continues to develop.



# Chapter 2, The Clothes Lining Month and Chapter 3, The Ever-Growing Month

## Chapter 2, The Clothes Lining Month and Chapter 3, The Ever-Growing Month Summary

In Chapter 2, Akiko Ueno sits in front of the television watching the first episode of the new show, *My American Wife!* Akiko's husband has asked her to watch the shows, cook the recipes, and then fill out a questionnaire about them. This came about the same time when Akiko's periods had stopped coming because she was too thin for her body to sustain them. Akiko's husband wants to have children, so he has been encouraging her to eat more meat in order to gain the weight needed to reestablish her fertility.

The end of *My American Wife!* has a sociological survey in which the producer asks questions and the housewife, her family, and friends answer with cards that have yes or no written on them. One of the questions is, "Have you ever had an extramarital affair?" The husband of Suzie Flowers, the first featured housewife, answered yes. Suzie's husband tells her about the cocktail waitress that he has been seeing and walks out on her. Suzie spends the next few days in bed crying. Jane stops by to see her on the way out of town and promises to send her a copy of the show on tape. However, when Jane watches it in her production offices in New York, she realizes the director used sound and graphics to make fun of Suzie's reaction to her husband's confession and so she decides not to send a tape to her.

In Chapter 3, Jane is getting to know her crew well. Suzuki and Oh are fans of American alcohol, pornography, and Walmart. At the same time, Jane finds it difficult to find the appropriate candidates for the show and feels guilty about some of the things that have gone wrong, including the fiasco that appears to have ended Suzie Flowers' marriage. In Japan, Akiko is bored with her days since she has nothing to do except to write an article about pregnancy that she does not want to write. Akiko had a job working for a manga publisher before her marriage but her husband insists that all she should write about is motherhood and pregnancy to help her focus on what is most important. Akiko is a fan of the Japanese writer Shonagon and so she begins her own *Pillow Book*. Akiko also fills out her questionnaire about the show but her husband is unhappy with her opinions and berates her over them.

Jane learns that Joichi Ueno, the ad executive, is coming to oversee the production of the show. Jane, who nicknamed Joichi "John" the last time that they met, assigns her a production assistant to go pick him up at the airport. Jane also knows that Ueno is a big fan of strip clubs and liquor and so she has the PA take him to a strip club on his arrival with the hopes that he will be too hung over the following day to interfere with production. Back in Japan, Akiko recalls the days soon after her marriage when her husband instructed her to buy condoms for him until they were ready to begin having



children. Akiko was so mortified that she bought condoms out of a vending machine near their apartment building.

## **Chapter 2, The Clothes Lining Month and Chapter 3, The Ever-Growing Month Analysis**

Akiko Ueno is introduced in these chapters. Akiko is a timid Japanese housewife and the kind of woman *My American Wife!* targets. Akiko dutifully watches the show and makes the meals, but she does this out of a sense of expectation rather than because it is something she wants. As the reader gets to know Akiko, the reader realizes that most of what she does in her life is because it is something that is expected by someone, whether it be her relatives, her husband, or her boss. Akiko does little simply because she wants to. In fact, the one thing Akiko does for herself is writing in a Pillow Book much like the one Japanese writer Shonagon. However, Akiko feels the need to hide this book from her husband. At the same time, Akiko's husband wants a child and Akiko appears confused on this issue. Akiko knows her husband is angry with her for being infertile, but she continues to find it impossible to gain weight in order to fulfill his desire, suggesting that Akiko needs to control this one aspect of her life to feel like a person separate from those controlling her life.

Jane is an independent woman who is clearly the opposite of Akiko and her difficult marriage. However, Jane too is being controlled by powerful Japanese men. Jane wants to produce her reality show in the way that she sees it, which is the way that she feels America should be represented to Japan. However, the Japanese producers, John Ueno in particular, continuously exert control over the show and force Jane to work it the way they want it. All Jane really wants is to direct and to show the real America, but as an American and a Japanese woman of mixed blood, Jane is not respected by the Japanese men and therefore stands little chance of taking control of the show.



# Chapter 4, The Deutzia Month

## Chapter 4, The Deutzia Month Summary

During the first few months of production on *My American Wife!*, Jane began having a love affair via the telephone and fax machine with a musician from Chicago. These phone calls were often ardent. When Sloan makes a surprise appearance in Nebraska, he and Jane spend a long, passionate night in her hotel room. When Jane wakes the following morning, she slips out of the hotel room to go to work. Upon her return, Sloan is gone. However, he promises to see her again. Jane worries briefly that Sloan's frequent arrivals at the cities where she is working will cause trouble, but the crew does not seem to notice how often Sloan appears.

Jane wants to make an episode of *My American Wife!* featuring a Hispanic housewife and her family because they have a tragic yet uplifting all-American story to tell. However, the director shoots her down. Instead they go to the home of a German housewife living in Oklahoma to do a show centered around her Sooner Schnitzel made with veal. Unfortunately for the director, he has a severe allergy to antibiotics. When the director eats the veal, he goes into anaphylactic shock. The doctor explains that residue of the antibiotics given to animals in feedlots sometimes remains in the meat, which is what must have happened in this case. This leaves the show without a director, so the Japanese producer gives Jane her opportunity. Jane immediately returns the focus of the show to the Hispanic family. When the show airs in Japan, who is suffering a hangover from a night of solo drinking in her husband's absence, finds the show authentic and emotional.

Back in New York, Jane learns the show featuring the Hispanic family earned the highest rating thus far. Jane pitches the next show which is to feature a family from Louisiana who have two biological children and have adopted ten children from Korea. The husband, Vern, is a chef who works in his own restaurant. Their oldest child, Alison, is in her late teens and expecting her first child. The show will center around the family and the small town where they live, showcasing some of the customs and traditions of the bayou. The show will also discuss how Vern and his wife, Grace, met and their decision to adopt rather than continue to have more of their own children. Finally, the show will showcase baby back ribs cooked by Vern rather than his wife, Grace, despite the format of the show. Jane and her crew have a good time filming this episode of the show in part because of the personalities of the various children. While there, Suzuki shows Vern how to make starch from the kudzu, a plant native to Japan that was once planted in the southern states in order to keep the soil from washing away.

In Japan, Akiko watches the show featuring Vern and Grace. Akiko falls in love with the blue grass and country music featured on these how. Akiko immediately goes out and buys a CD of Bobby Joe Creely's music, listening to it constantly despite the fact that she does not understand the lyrics. Soon after, Akiko goes to see a fertility specialist that her husband has arranged for her to visit. The doctor finds nothing wrong with Akiko





and admonishes her for causing her own infertility. Back in Louisiana, Grace wakes from a nap and thinks about her children, especially Joy. Grace worries that Joy is a little too fascinated by Alison's new baby boy.

## Chapter 4, The Deutzia Month Analysis

Jane wants to direct *My American Wife!* so that she can expand her resume in her desire to be a documentarian and so that she can offer a more diverse group of housewives to the show. This dream comes true when a director has an allergic reaction to some meat. This episode gives Jane what she wants, so she glosses over the fact that it also is her first introduction into some of the dangers inherent in the American beef industry. The antibiotics in the meat that causes the director's illness is just the beginning of Jane's introduction into the practices of the meat industry, introducing a new theme to the reader before Jane herself begins to take note.

Important as well in this chapter is the love affair Jane has begun with musician Sloan Rankin. This affair began over the phone and through faxes, but quickly becomes a very physical relationship. The reader sees Jane's reaction to Sloan's first visit to her on the road and wonders if the relationship is really as casual as she wants the reader to believe. The savvy reader can see Jane's quickly growing reliance on Sloan's actions and can guess that this relationship will become more important as the plot continues to develop.

Akiko continues to be a typical Japanese wife, submitting to her husband's every whim even when it means seeing a doctor who is verbally abusive and unconcerned with Akiko's welfare. At the same time, Akiko continues to watch *My American Wife!* and begins to learn from it, embracing the emotion and the culture of some of the show's featured families. This shows the reader that Akiko is determined to become her own person rather than spend the rest of her life in her husband's shadow.



# Chapter 5, The Rice-Sprouting Month

## Chapter 5, The Rice-Sprouting Month Summary

As Jane continues to work on *My American Housewife!*, she also continues to see Sloan. They meet again in Fly, Oregon. Jane asks Sloan about his compulsive need to wear two condoms when they are together. Sloan tells her he is terrified about contracting some terrible disease like AIDS. When Jane assures him that she is clean and that she learned she was infertile during her marriage several years before, Sloan asks if they could have unprotected sex. Afterward, Jane begins to think that Sloan might want a deeper relationship but discovers that it was simply an experiment for Sloan.

Akiko recalls how her boss at the manga publication company set her up with John Ueno when Ueno's boss asked him if he knew anyone who might be compatible for his prize employee. Akiko remembers being pushed into the initial date and spending the entire night in uncomfortable silence. Akiko's boss was shocked when Ueno wanted a second date but he pushed Akiko into going without even asking what she wanted from life. Akiko then recalls John's angry reaction to the doctor's diagnoses a few weeks before and the push that left her with an angry gash over her eye. The only thing good that seems to have come out of the visit to the doctor is that the injuries have caused Akiko to be locked in the apartment until they heal, so John has become a more compassionate husband to make up for the inconvenience.

Jane is in Mississippi with John Ueno attending the church of a potential housewife for the show. This woman, Miss Helen, is a black woman who wants to make chitterlings for the show. As part of the background, Jane wants to film in Miss Helen's church, but Miss Helen insisted that Jane get the congregations' permission first, which is why she is in church. Ueno surprised her by showing up several nights before. Last night, Jane took Ueno drinking in the hopes that he would not be able to focus on the interview with Miss Helen. Afterward, Ueno tried to rape Jane, so she gets him back by not warning him that he will be expected to stand and introduce himself during church service. Ueno is embarrassed. However, Ueno makes up for it during the service when he appears to give himself up to God during the prayers.

Jane and Ueno spend the entire day with Miss Helen and her family, learning about their background and their lifestyle. Miss Helen's husband, Purcell, tells them how they used to buy discarded chicken parts from the chicken factory, but then Purcell began growing a bust and his voice changed. The doctor told them it was hormones in the meat. When Purcell stopped eating the chicken parts, the problem disappeared. Jane likes Miss Helen and her family, but Ueno insists that chitterlings is not the type of meat they are trying to promote in Japan, so he insists that Jane go with another family who plan on making a beef dish.



## Chapter 5, The Rice-Sprouting Month Analysis

In this chapter, Jane's relationship with Sloan appears to deepen, but then Jane gets the impression Sloan was using her because of her revelation that she cannot bear children. This episode not only shows the reader that Jane has always been serious about this supposedly causal affair, but that she is not the type of person to enter into a relationship of this sort without some hope of a commitment. Jane is a stubborn and determined person who will keep fighting until she gets what she wants. While these characteristics do not appear to work well for Jane in romance, they do seem to be paying off in her professional life. Jane has become the director of *My American Wife!* and she is beginning to attempt to feature families that are not as wholesome as the Japanese producers have told her they want. However, the shows Jane has gotten past the producers have been some of the highest rated thus far, making it clear that Jane knows exactly what Japanese housewives want even if Japanese men do not.

Akiko continues to live her quiet, unassuming life. John has become abusive toward her however. John hits Akiko after she sees the fertility doctor, accusing her just as the doctor did of not wanting to have a child. Akiko is left with bruises and cuts that keep her locked in the house. The only up side to this is that John becomes somewhat more compassionate, perhaps only because it saves him from embarrassment. Akiko is still unhappy in her life and it is apparent to the reader that John's abuse will only get worse. The reader can only hope that Akiko's rebellious side grows stronger so that she might stand up for herself.



# Chapter 6, The Water Month and Chapter 7, The Poem-Composing Month

## Chapter 6, The Water Month and Chapter 7, The Poem-Composing Month Summary

In Chapter 6, Jane does research on a hormone known as diethylstilbestrol or DES. This is a hormone that was used in cows in the fifties to promote growth. The drug was also given to pregnant women to help prevent miscarriages. When men began having similar symptoms to those that Purcell experienced, the FDA outlawed the use of the hormone in cows. Similarly, it is now known that DES caused defects of the sexual organs in female children born to women who took DES.

Akiko gives bad marks to the episode of *My American Wife!* that features the Thayer family. John becomes upset, accusing her of not understanding the concept his agency is trying to promote. John tells Akiko he no longer wants her to fill out questionnaires about the show. When Akiko goes to collect herself in the restroom, John yells at her for closing the door because he is afraid she has returned to purging her meals.

Jane and her crew visit the home of the Bukowskys, a family whose daughter was tragically injured in a car versus bike accident. Christina suffered a terrible head injury that left her in a catatonic like condition. The parents refused to give up on her, however. They invited all their neighbors to sign up to spend time with her and to share with her the one thing they most loved. After eight months Christina came out of her catatonic state and has blossomed into a beautiful sixteen year old girl. As a result, the Bukowskys opened their home to other children like Christina, eventually opening an entire hospital devoted to treating injured children with hope. The taping of the *My American Wife!* Episode coincides with Christine's sixteenth birthday party featuring her favorite food, Hallelujah Lamb Chops. When the show airs, Akiko makes the chops like she is expected to do. However, this time John becomes angry and throws the chops across the room.

In Chapter 7, Jane takes a break because she is feeling tired and worn down. While there, Jane remembers a book she once checked out from the library that was blatantly prejudiced against all races except whites. While doing research in this book, however, young Jane found herself planning the children she would one day have. Many years later, while studying Shonagon in Japan, Jane met a man whom she married. Their marriage was happy until they began attempting to have a child. After several years of infertility, Jane learned she had a precancerous condition on her cervix. After the surgery to remove the cancer cells, the doctor did an X-ray that revealed Jane's uterus was misshapen. The doctor told Jane that she would never be able to carry a pregnancy to term. Now, however, Jane visits a clinic near her mother's home and learns she is pregnant. While discussing the pregnancy with her mother, Jane begins to wonder if her mother took DES and that is why her uterus is so misshapen.



Jane spends a lot of time thinking about her future. Jane is afraid to tell Sloan because she believes their relationship is only casual, on his part at least. Jane returns to the office and finds that Ueno is in a bad mood about Jane's decision to showcase a pork dish on the show. Later Sloan comes to town, but Jane decides not to tell him about the pregnancy.

## **Chapter 6, The Water Month and Chapter 7, The Poem-Composing Month Analysis**

The role of DES becomes a focus for Jane as she begins to learn about the things it can do to men who are exposed to it as well as human fetuses whose mother took it during pregnancy. Jane believes her own mother took the drug even as she learns that she is pregnant herself after years of infertility. Jane's misshapen uterus spells disaster for this pregnancy even as Jane wonders if she even wants to have a baby. The reader fears that Jane will decide to keep the baby only to suffer the effects of her mother's decision to take a drug that was deemed safe at the time.

Jane's decisions regarding the show are making the show a huge hit in Japan, but John Ueno is growing more and more unsatisfied with Jane's choices. Ueno wants Jane to use white, wholesome housewives that only cook beef. However, Jane wants to show a snapshot of America, to include minorities and other types of meat. This is building tension between Jane and Ueno that spells disaster should Jane choose not to follow Ueno's instructions. The reader has already seen Jane's stubborn streak, therefore the reader will not be surprised if Jane does not follow these instructions as the plot continues to develop.

Akiko continues to be subservient to John, which includes not throwing up her meals as she did from the beginning of her marriage until recently. Akiko is losing the control over her own body now that John refuses to allow her the privacy of the bathroom after meals. Now Akiko has regained her fertility, causing the reader to wonder if Akiko will submit to becoming a mother just as she has submitted to everything else in her adult life.



## Chapter 8, The Leaf Month

### Chapter 8, The Leaf Month Summary

Akiko is lying to John about her fertility. Jane begins work on another show. This one will feature Lara and Dyann, vegetarian lesbians. Jane knows that Ueno will not like this show, so she waits until the last minute to send it to Japan with the hopes that they will have no choice but to air it. When the episode arrives in Japan, Jane immediately receives a fax from Ueno's office letting her know that they do not approve of the episode and it will not be shown. However, the network shows the episode anyway and it gets higher ratings than any of the previous shows. Jane is forced to present future ideas to Ueno before filming the episodes.

Akiko sees the episode featuring the lesbians and is deeply touched by the words Dyann speaks at the end of the show about finding happiness she never thought she would find. Akiko does not make the featured meal, however, but makes the beef burritos from a previous show with a few modifications of her own making. One day Akiko decides that she wants to have a baby, she just does not want John. Akiko buys a pornographic magazine and dresses like the models inside in the hopes of seducing John. However, when John comes home he is less than interested in his wife. In fact, they argue. Akiko bites John's finger and he attempts to force himself on her but cannot achieve an erection. Instead, John walks out on her.

Jane is arrested in Montana because someone mistakes her and her crew for Mexican terrorists. While in jail, Jane calls Sloan and tells him that she is pregnant. Out of shock, Sloan agrees to pay for half of the abortion. Later, Jane tells her crew about her pregnancy. The following day, Jane walks through a cemetery and makes notes of the names on the graves, thinking about names for her baby.

### Chapter 8, The Leaf Month Analysis

Jane does an episode with vegetarian lesbians, going completely against the purpose of *My American Wife!* This causes John Ueno to become very angry with her and to attempt to remove her as director. However, someone pulls strings and saves her job, but Jane is forced to clear every episode in the future by Ueno. This ties Jane's hands, but the reader continues to expect that she will not allow Ueno to control her creative instincts for long.

Jane tells Sloan about the baby from jail and he is shocked. Jane takes it as affirmation that he does not want to be committed to her now or in the future. Jane tells him she will have an abortion, but almost immediately she decides she wants to keep the baby. This causes a conundrum for Jane that only complicates her life.

At the same time, Akiko has decided she wants to have a baby but she does not want to remain with John. This leaves the reader wondering if Akiko will finally become her own

person and find a life outside of marriage and the control of her husband. The American reader does not understand why Akiko stays with John, but in Japan it is typical of a woman to remain subservient to her husband. Akiko is beginning to show signs that she would like to adopt the culture of American women, leaving John and finding herself.



# Chapter 9, The Long Month

## Chapter 9, The Long Month Summary

Jane begins to plot to show the truth behind the beef industry in her next episode for My American Wife! Jane contacts Dyann and asks her to help her find out more truths about the beef industry. Dyann sends Jane some articles she wrote on the use of pharmaceuticals in feedlots. Jane then picks two new families, one in which the husband works in a meat processing plant and another where the husband owns a feedlot. Jane sends information on these families to Ueno, emphasizing the family over their occupations to hide her true intentions.

Akiko writes a note to Jane asking for her help in learning where she might go if she were to search for the happiness Dyann talked about in her episode of My American Wife! Akiko goes to a neighborhood copy store to have the letter faxed.

Jane goes to Sloan's apartment at his request and they begin to talk about the baby. Jane tells Sloan that she believes he does not want a committed relationship with her. Sloan denies this. They argue until they finally come to the understanding that they both want the baby and they both want a relationship.

Over dinner the same night that Akiko sent Jane her fax, she and John discuss the show. Akiko accidentally lets it slip to John that she knows about the hormones in meat through information that Jane faxed to him. Akiko admits the dry cleaner found the fax and gave it to her. John's ego inflates when he comes to believe that Akiko read the fax out of jealousy regarding his relationship with Jane.

Jane returns to New York and receives the fax from Akiko. Jane is outraged that John Ueno beats his wife. Jane writes to Akiko offering her help but does not send it until she is able to call Akiko and learn of a time when John will not be there to intercept the fax. A few days later, Jane spends a romantic evening with Sloan. The baby moves for the first time and they both share in the magic of knowing their baby is alive and well. In Japan on that same night, John Ueno has found the fax that Jane sent to Akiko. Angry, John goes out drinking. When he returns to the apartment, he forces himself on Akiko, beating her badly and raping her. John then passes out. Akiko waits until he is asleep before checking her wounds. Akiko also checks John's wallet and discovers that he plans to go to Colorado to supervise Jane's crew at the next My American Wife! shoot. Akiko calls and warns Jane.

## Chapter 9, The Long Month Analysis

While Jane's personal life seems to have found some meaning and tranquility, her professional life continues to spin out of control. Jane learns more and more about the practices of the meat industry and decides she wants to expose it to the Japanese housewife. The reader understands Jane's outrage, especially with the knowledge that





Jane believes she has been damaged by DES herself. However, her target audience is questionable and the fact that she is sure to lose her job if she continues in this way raises the suspense of the plot. Finally, Jane's courage and determination is commendable, making her a heroine any reader can admire.

Akiko continues to be subservient to her husband, but she also begins to exhibit little moments of defiance. First Akiko begins listening to country music, then she refuses to tell her husband that her fertility has returned. Now Akiko finds a fax from Jane to her husband and she uses it to reach out to Jane, the only strong woman she knows who might be able to offer her help. Jane does just that, but Akiko suffers the consequences of her actions. Akiko takes John's treatment of her with complaint, showing that she is also a very strong character despite her subservient appearance. The reader has hope that Akiko will escape her self-imposed prison and survive.



# Chapter 10, The Gods-Absent Month

## Chapter 10, The Gods-Absent Month Summary

Jane and her crew arrive in Colorado. Jane hires a driver to take them to their destination. This driver, Dave, turns out to be a farmer who is well acquainted with the horrors of soil erosion, hormone, and antibiotic use on feedlots, and the dangers of over grazing and methane gas emissions. As Jane and her crew arrive at the Dunn home, Akiko passes out on the floor of her bathroom from a severe loss of blood. Back in Colorado, Jane and her crew meet Bunny Dunn, her husband John, and their five year old daughter, Rose. Bunny and John drive the crew to the feedlot where Gale, John's son from his first marriage, is waiting. Gale shows them around, speaking to the camera about the feed given to their cows and the advances being made daily. Jane finds herself asking questions that only offend and annoy Gale, but she cannot help her desire to know about the chemicals Gale gives to the cows. When they reach the barn where the cows are housed, Jane finds a vial of Lutalyse in the trash. A warning on the bottle's insert warns that the chemical can be absorbed through the skin and cause miscarriages. Jane panics and quickly washes her hands.

The crew follows Gale out of the barn and watch as workers inject new arrivals. After this, they pack up and head back to the hotel. Jane only wants a bath, but Oh tells her he has something he needs to show her, so they arrange to meet in his rooms. When Jane arrives, Oh shows her and the others footage he took of Gale and his half-sister Rose. The picture clearly shows that the five year old girl has breasts. Later, when the crew goes to the Dunn home to film the family over evening cocktails, Jane gets Bunny alone and tells her what they saw. Bunny asks her to return late in the evening. When Jane and her crew returns, Bunny allows them to take footage of Rose's naked body, showing the five year old's breast and pubic hair. Bunny then gives an interview that reveals that Rose has also had menstrual periods. The following morning, Jane tells Gale about this and informs him that she believes that it is caused by exposure to DES. Jane also suggests that Gale himself has been exposed and is beginning to show signs of estrogen poisoning as well. Gale does not take this well.

Jane and her crew go to the slaughter house to take footage of the cows. While walking through the preliminary rooms, Jane and her crew become aware of the knockout tank. They go over to watch as a worker lifts a cow by its hind legs and then hits it over the head. The worker then slices the cow's throat. Oh, shocked by the sudden spray of blood backs up, moves in to Jane who is forced to back into a hanging cow and bounce off, hitting her head on the side of the tank.

## Chapter 10, The Gods-Absent Month Analysis

Even as Akiko lies dying on her bathroom floor, Jane pushes the boundaries of her job title and begins filming at a feedlot. What Jane finds there is shocking and she becomes



frightened for the life of her child. In fact, Jane discovers that the manager of the feedlot, Gale Dunn, has been using hormones he should not be using and they have caused his half-sister, a frequent visitor to the lot, to begin to mature sexually much faster than she should. This is a side effect of estrogen poisoning, leaving the child not only with confusing and disfiguring development but with the possibility of contracting cancer. Jane is heartbroken over this situation and it quickly becomes her motivation to expose the illegal practices of the meat industry.

Jane has an accident and is rushed to the hospital. Aware that her baby's survival is precarious to begin with because of her own exposure to DES, Jane is even more frightened by the chemicals her fetus has been exposed to in the feedlot. Again the suspense of the novel continues to increase, leaving the reader frightened for Jane and her child.



# Chapter 11, The Frost Month

## Chapter 11, The Frost Month Summary

Akiko wakes in the hospital and a kind nurse comes to check on her. The nurse tells Akiko that she lost a lot of blood but that she is going to be alright. The nurse also suggests that she knows that Akiko's husband injured her, but Akiko refuses to confirm this assumption. The nurse gives Akiko a note from John that tells her he has gone to America and that he expects her to be quiet about how she received her injuries. Jane too wakes in the hospital and learns that she has a concussion. Bunny also tells her that she has lost the baby. Jane receives visits from her crew and a doctor. The doctor tells Jane that her miscarriage was most likely caused by her deformed uterus and not her time at the feedlot. Then Jane gets a call from Kenji. Kenji tells her that she has been fired from My American Wife! When Sloan calls, Jane tells him about the baby. Sloan assumes the miscarriage was caused by her negligence. Jane goes home and spends some time with her mother. Jane's mother tries to console her by telling her about the many miscarriages she had before Jane arrived.

Akiko becomes friends with the nurse, Tomoko. Nurse Tomoko stands up for Akiko with the doctors and arranges for Akiko to remain in the hospital a little longer to protect her from John and his mother. When Akiko finally returns home, she learns that John will be remaining in America for several weeks. Akiko arranges to fly to America the day before John is scheduled to be home. Before she leaves, Akiko has dinner with Tomoko and tells her she is pregnant. Akiko also empties out most of hers and John's bank account. Finally Akiko flies to America, imagining John flying the other way and passing her plane somewhere over Alaska.

## Chapter 11, The Frost Month Analysis

Jane lost both her baby and her job. The reader has known from the beginning of the book that both were possible but still feels grief for Jane. It seems that all the fight has gone out of Jane and she is content to sit back and let life unfold around her without putting up any effort. It seems Jane has earned some downtime, but the reader fears she might end up like Akiko was in the beginning of the novel, subservient and timid.

Akiko, on the other hand, has taken her life into her own hands. Akiko packs up and moves to America without telling anyone except for the nurse she befriended in the hospital. Akiko faces an uncertain future, but she looks to it with optimism as she flies quickly toward her new life in America. Jane and Akiko have switched places but they both seem to be strong women who can deal with lives ups and down in their own unique ways.



# Chapter 12, The End of the Year, and Epilogue, January

## Chapter 12, The End of the Year, and Epilogue, January Summary

In Chapter 12, Jane hides out in her apartment for a while after losing her job. When Jane receives the footage from the feedlot that her crew smuggled out for her, she begins to look through it, trying to decide how to edit it. One night, Akiko calls from an airplane. Jane picks her up at the airport and invites her to stay with her as long as necessary. Akiko tells Jane that she would like to visit the family in Louisiana that were featured on *My American Wife!* Jane arranges the trip. In fact, Grace and her family welcome Akiko and Grace is thrilled when Jane promises to reach out to Joy when she comes to New York.

Jane calls Lara and Dyann and tell them everything about the program and about her attempts to expose the beef industry. Lara and Dyann are supportive of Jane's attempts to do this and enjoyed the edited footage she sent them of her time on the feedlot. Lara and Dyann also agree to take in Akiko and help her through her pregnancy. A short time later, Akiko moves into her own apartment near Lara and Dyann's home.

Jane meets with Oh and Suzuki. They ask her about Sloan and tell her that he is performing at a local jazz club. Jane goes to see him, but he has already moved on to another gig. Jane jumps a plane and arrives to catch Sloan's final set. When Sloan sees her, he drags her outside and they argue. This argument clears the air and they return to her hotel room where they spend the evening reconnecting and working out their differences.

In the Epilogue, Bunny Dunn shows Jane's documentary to her husband to prove to him that Rose is suffering estrogen poisoning. John confronts his son and forces him to confess to the USDA. When the press began calling, Bunny gave them Jane's number. Jane finds herself inundated with hundreds of calls from the press. Jane begins selling sections of her documentary to various media outlets, including whole portions to Japanese companies. At the same time, John Ueno shows his episode of *My American Wife!* with the Dunns as the news of the Dunns illegal use of DES hits the airwaves. Ueno is demoted and the show is pulled off the air. Also during this time, Jane learns that Suzie Flowers and her husband have reunited despite Jane's fears that her intrusion into their home ruined their marriage.



## Chapter 12, The End of the Year, and Epilogue, January Analysis

Jane makes a documentary out of her time on the feedlot and it ends up becoming quite popular. Rose's condition forces Gale Dunn to reveal his illegal use of DES. Jane has finally reached the position in her career that she has always wanted, becoming a documentarian. Despite the loss of her baby, Jane makes up with Sloan, gets her career, and finds the happiness she has always wanted.

Akiko runs away from her husband and finds acceptance in Jane, a woman she has never met but whom she has forged a connection with through a reality television show. Akiko visits the families from the show who touched her life through the show, ending up with the couple who touched her the most, Lara and Dyann. Akiko finds happiness in Dyann's ability to have found a happiness that she never thought she could achieve. This has given Akiko the strength to do what she needs to do, which is to start her new life in a new country. Akiko is a survivor, just like Jane, despite their diverse backgrounds.



# Characters

## Jane Takagi-Little

Jane Takagi-Little is the daughter of a Japanese woman and an American father. Jane grew up in Minnesota but she moved to Japan as an adult to study the famous Japanese writer Shonagon. During her time in Japan, Jane met and married an African scholar. Their marriage was a good one until they began having trouble conceiving. In the end, they decided to split up. Jane has returned to New York to pursue her desired career as a documentarian. However, jobs have been scarce and Jane is struggling to meet the rent. When a friend from Japan calls to offer a job producing a Japanese reality show showcasing American housewives making beef-centered meals, Jane accepts.

As Jane works on *My American Wife!*, she begins to learn things about the American beef industry that she had never thought about before. One of these things is the use of a hormone called DES to promote growth in cows at the feedlot. Jane not only learns that this drug caused feminine features in men who ate the meat or were around the feedlots, but it also drove a lot of small ranchers out of business such as her grandparents dairy farm. Jane also learned that this drug was offered to pregnant women to help prevent miscarriage. Jane suspects her own mother took this drug, explaining the deformation of Jane's uterus that has left her unable to conceive. As a documentarian, Jane wants to show the world what she has learned about the beef industry, but her bosses in Japan are unwilling to allow her to have a free hand. Jane goes around them and gets the footage she needs, but she loses her job in the process.

## Akiko Ueno

Akiko Ueno is a housewife in Japan. Akiko is the kind of woman that *My American Wife!* is designed for. Akiko watches the show faithfully every week, preparing the beef dishes after each show. Akiko finds the meals unappetizing. In fact, Akiko has found everything unappetizing since she was forced into marriage to Joichi Ueno, an ad executive that represents the same beef industry organization that produces *My American Wife!* Over time however, Akiko finds herself inspired by the families showcased on the show and she begins to yearn for the kind of life these women have.

Akiko is subservient as the novel begins, but she slowly begins to show her own independence streak. Akiko begins to stand up to her husband in small ways, finding her own voice and her own desires separate from his. In the end, Akiko leaves her abusive husband and goes to America to find the life she has seen on Jane's episodes of *My American Wife!*



## Joichi 'John' Ueno

Joichi 'John' Ueno is an ad executive who represents BEEF-EX, the beef industry organization for whom Ueno's agency produces My American Wife! Upon Ueno's first visit to America to supervise the show, Jane gives him the nickname of John in order to throw him off balance. Instead, John embraces the name. John is a huge fan of everything American, especially big bossomed Texas women.

Ueno is a heavy drinker who often finds frustration in Jane's actions in relation to My American Wife! Ueno believes that Jane does not understand the focus of the show and she is repeatedly producing shows that do not promote the consumption of beef. For this reason, Ueno often travels to America to oversee the show's production. Ueno also treats his wife with disdain, often beating her for perceived offenses such as her inability to get pregnant because she does not eat properly. In the end, Ueno is demoted in his job and loses his wife, although he more than likely does not understand why.

## Sloan Rankin

Sloan Rankin is a musician who has his own jazz band and also provides soundtrack music for the movie industry. Jane is given Sloan's name from a friend and they begin talking to one another over the phone. This leads to faxes and long, late night conversations. Eventually Sloan comes to one of the motels where Jane is staying with the My American Wife! crew. Sloan and Jane become lovers but Sloan implies to Jane that it is only casual and he has no intention of making a commitment to her. When Jane becomes pregnant, she does not give Sloan a chance to express his desire to share in the pregnancy with her. However, Jane and Sloan continuously find their way back to each other through the struggle of the pregnancy and the subsequent loss.

## Suzuki

Suzuki is the sound man assigned to film episodes of My American Wife! with Jane. Suzuki is from Japan and he finds treasures in American culture that some Americans might take for granted. Some of Suzuki's favorite things are pornography and Walmart. As Suzuki works with Jane on the show and meets the families being filmed, he begins to change, coming to understand some of the realities of life and the struggle that women sometimes suffer in everyday life.

## Oh

Oh is the cameraman assigned to film episodes of My American Wife! with Jane. Oh is a quiet and unassuming man who watches more than he participates in what is going on around him. Jane believes that Oh is unobservant and that his inability to look Sloan in the eye on the few occasions when they meet will keep him from knowing about Jane's relationship with Sloan. However, Oh is more observant than Jane knows. In fact,





Oh and Suzuki are both very aware of the relationship between Jane and Sloan and are instrumental in helping her reunite with Sloan at the end of the novel.

## Bunny Dunn

Bunny Dunn is an ex-stripper who married a much older man. Bunny sees herself as all body and no brains, making her depend on her figure to get the things she wants. However, when Jane points out to Bunny that something is physically wrong with her daughter Rose, Bunny immediately turns to Jane to help her daughter. In fact, Bunny shows the cameraman the changes to Rose's body that have been caused by estrogen poisoning. Bunny then shows the footage to her husband in order to force his son, Gale, to stop using illegal hormones in the family feedlot.

## Suzie Flowers

Suzie Flowers is the first housewife showcased on My American Wife! under Jane's supervision. During the filming of Suzie's episode, her husband tells her that he has been having an affair with a cocktail waitress. Suzie is heartbroken and Jane feels as though she is responsible for this disaster. Suzie continually calls Jane throughout the novel but Jane avoids her in fear that she wants to see and complain about the visual and audio affects the director added to her episode. However in the end, Jane learns that Suzie credits Jane and the show for saving her marriage and not ruining it.

## Lara and Dyann

Lara and Dyann are vegetarian lesbians that Jane showcases on an episode of My American Wife! Jane is aware that this couple are vegetarians before she begins filming and so she keeps the finished episode as long as possible to give the Japanese network no choice but to show the episode. In the end, this episode receives high ratings from the Japanese audience but Jane is forced to clear future ideas by Ueno before she can film them. Lara and Dyann also deeply affect Akiko and motivate her to move to America.

## Miss Helen

Miss Helen is a black woman in the south that Jane wants to showcase on My American Wife! Jane visits Miss Helen during one of Ueno's many surprise visits. During their interview, Miss Helen and her husband, Purcell, admit that he once had side effects from eating chicken parts loaded with DES. This is the first time Jane has heard of DES and it leads her to investigate it further, exposing some of the illegal actions of the meat industry in America. This interview also exposes the fact that beef is too expensive for the poorer people of America. However, Ueno has no sympathy and demands that the episode feature a different housewife who is able to provide a beef dish.



## Objects/Places

### Faxes from Jane

Jane communicates with the producers in Japan through faxes. Akiko finds one of these faxes after he leaves it in a suit pocket. Akiko uses the found fax to begin her own correspondence with Jane.

### Feedlot Footage

Jane takes footage the My American Wife! crew shot at the Dunn feedlot to create a small documentary. The footage is eventually sold in entirety and in pieces to media outlets all over the world after Gale Dunn admits to the illegal use of DES.

### Dyann's Articles

Dyann sends Jane many articles she wrote about the beef industry when she was pregnant and researching the best diets for herself, Lara, and their unborn children. Jane uses these articles to focus her research into the practices of the American meat industry.

### Pillow Book

Shonagon, a writer in 900 Japan, wrote a book she called the Pillow Book. Jane was a student of Shonagon in Japan during her marriage. Akiko is also a fan of Shonagon and has created her own Pillow Book.

### Bobby Joe Creely CD

Akiko falls in love with the music from the episode of My American Wife! that features Grace and Vern from Louisiana. Akiko immediately goes out to buy a Bobby Joe Creely CD.

### Coca-Cola Roast

Coca-Cola roast is the first recipe showcased on My American Wife!, cooked by Suzie Flowers.



## **Beef Fudge**

Beef fudge is one of the recipes shown on My American Wife! Beef fudge is a mixture of hamburger, chocolate, and sugar.

## **Train**

Akiko rides the train to and from Louisiana to visit one of the families showcased on My American Wife!

## **Kudzu**

Kudzu is a plant native to Japan that was planted in the southern part of America at a time when soil erosion was becoming a severe problem. The plant is now considered a nuisance in the south. Suzuki teaches Vern in Louisiana how to make starch of kudzu.

## **DES**

DES, or diethylstilbestrol, is a hormone that was discovered to promote quick growth in cows. This drug was also given to pregnant women to prevent miscarriage. However, the drug was soon shown to cause deformities in an infant's sexual organs and to cause feminization in men that were exposed to the hormone.

## **My American Wife!**

My American Wife! is a reality show showcasing American housewives cooking beef dishes in order to promote the consumption of beef in Japan.

## **BEEF-EX**

BEEF-EX, Beef Export and Trade Syndicate, is the beef industry organization that sponsors My American Wife!



# Themes

## Antibiotic and Hormone Use in the American Meat Industry

A huge theme of this novel deals with the use of antibiotics and hormones in meat that will be consumed. Jane knows very little about the meat industry in America when she first takes a job as the producer of a reality show to promote the consumption of beef in Japan. However, as she begins to work on the show, Jane sees firsthand the effects of using these drugs in meat.

Jane wants to direct the show, but the Japanese producers send a new director every couple of weeks to work on the show. However, when one of these directors has an allergic reaction to antibiotics used in the pork chops he is eating, Jane is given her chance. Jane talks to the doctor about this man's reaction, but it does not really sink in until Jane meets yet another person who has had an adverse reaction to the drugs used routinely in the meat industry.

Jane speaks with Purcell, the husband of a potential housewife for *My American Wife!* Purcell tells Jane how he used to eat chicken parts sold cheap from a local slaughterhouse but then he began to grow breasts and his voice began to change. This story is told with humor but it leads Jane to research DES, which is a hormone once used in cows to promote quick growth. This drug was shown to cause the symptoms that Purcell experienced. It was also discovered to cause deformities to female infants born to women using the drug to prevent miscarriage. Jane eventually comes to believe her own mother took DES during pregnancy, causing Jane's deformed uterus and fertility problems.

The use of antibiotics and hormones in the meat industry is a long practice in America and is seen as harmless to consumers. However, Jane's investigation refutes this, causing her viewers to second guess their meal choices.

## Fighting for What is Right

Jane wants to be a documentary storyteller. Jane wants to make a difference in the world. For this reason, Jane often goes against what her bosses in Japan to promote what she wants. Jane is unhappy from her first day on the job with her boss's desire to promote what appears to be only white housewives with perfect children and a supportive husband. Since this is far from reality, Jane tries to promote many different types of housewives, including minorities, poor housewives, and lesbian housewives. This causes Jane trouble with her bosses, but she believes she is promoting what is right and honest about America.



Jane is a strong and determined woman who wants to help people. Jane wants women in Japan to know the truth about beef and to know that life is not only what they know in Japan but a world full of diversity. To this end, Jane goes against her bosses multiple times to promote the diversity of America on My American Wife! Jane's programs tend to be the highest rated of the reality show, but this does not stop her bosses, particularly John Ueno, from threatening to fire her. In the end, Jane is fired but the show does not last long either. Jane fought for what was right and in the end, she got recognition for that fight.

## Fighting for One's Independence

Akiko Ueno is a typical Japanese housewife. Akiko is subservient to her husband, living her life according to what he wants and what he tells her to do. In fact, Akiko married her husband simply because her boss pushed her into it, making it clear that marriage is the best a woman like Akiko can hope for. Akiko is unhappy in the marriage however. Akiko loses a great deal of weight in the early years of her marriage because it is the only thing she can control. This causes Akiko to be unable to become pregnant, making her husband even angrier with her.

Akiko finds herself in a situation she cannot control. However, little by little, Akiko begins to fight for her own independence. Akiko begins small, first starting her own Pillow Book even though her husband told her the only things she should write about is pregnancy. Akiko then begins to listen to American music and then plots to become pregnant before leaving her husband. In the end, Akiko walks away from her husband and begins a new life in America. Akiko finds her own voice, her independence, and this allowed her to find happiness like the women she admired on My American Wife!

# Style

## Point of View

The novel uses two different types of point of view. In the sections of the novel that are narrated by Jane, the point of view is the first person. Jane tells her story as though looking back on the year from a future date. Jane's view is almost like a diary or her own version of a Pillow Book. However, in the sections in which Akiko is the narrator, the point of view is the third person. A reader might argue that Jane is narrating Akiko's story but many of the things that take place in Akiko's story are things that happened before Jane met her.

The point of view of this novel is a highly personal point of view that allows the reader to create an intimate relationship with the main character, Jane. As the novel progresses, the reader gets to know Jane well and to understand her thoughts and motives. This intimate relationship between character and reader makes the reader deeply concerned with what happens to Jane as the plot develops. At the same time, the reader gets to know Akiko through a more remote point of view. However, this point of view manages to be nearly as intimate as the first person point of view as the reader watches Akiko blossom from a shy and subservient woman to a strong and independent one.

## Setting

The novel has two settings. The first is America, which is a setting that includes not only Jane's home in New York but the many locations at which Jane and her crew film the reality show, *My American Wife!* This setting takes the reader from the urban area where Jane has her apartment to rural parts of the south and southwest, as well as the churches and clubs that her housewives attend. The other setting of this novel is Japan. Akiko lives in an unnamed city in Japan that is several hours outside Tokyo. This setting is mostly centered on Akiko's apartment and the small world she inhabits as the wife of John Ueno.

The first setting of the novel reveals some of the more diverse areas of America while attempting to showcase the diverse people who live in these areas. Jane goes from the somewhat racist town in rural Louisiana to the religious fervor of the southeastern states, finally ending up in the heart of the cattle industry in the Midwest. Jane's desire to show a highly diverse section of America takes her to the many different states of America. At the same time, Akiko shows the reader the tiny world of the Japanese housewife as she spends her days cooking for and serving a husband she does not love. This setting explores the world which Jane's shows are meant to reach, which is a world that Akiko is quick to abandon for the independence of America.



## Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is simple English. Due to the connection of the plot with both the cattle industry and Japan, there is quite a bit of technical language and foreign words that the reader might not understand. When Jane begins to research the cattle industry more closely, she learns about hormones such as DES that are used to promote growth in cows in the feedlots. This section of the novel introduces quite a few technical words to the reader but they are presented in a simple format that should not cause the reader too much difficulty. At the same time, the two main characters both speak fluent Japanese. Therefore, there tends to be a large number of words and phrases in the Japanese language. These words are often explained in the text, however, helping the reader to keep track of what is being said.

The language of this novel tends to be a little more formal than an average bestseller that might be available on the market today. However, the language is authentic to the plot, allowing the reader to believe that the characters in this book do speak Japanese and that they are knowledgeable in the industries they both work in and are researching. The author is careful to be sure that she explains in an easy way what the foreign phrases or technical phrases mean. She does it in such a way that the flow of the narrative is not disrupted. This helps the reader keep on track with the plot and not lose their way in the use of the language. For these reasons, the language of this novel works well with the plot.

## Structure

The novel is divided into twelve chapters and includes both a prologue and an epilogue. The novel is structured in such a way that each chapter covers a month of one year in which the main character worked on the reality show *My American Wife!* for Japanese viewers. Each chapter has its own title and each chapter begins with a quote from the *Pillow Book* by Japanese writer Shonagon. Each of these quotes not only pertains to the events about to unfold in the chapter it introduces, but by using Shonagon, the writer promotes her theme of strong, Japanese women.

The novel has two main plots. The first plot follows the work of Jane Takagi-Little as she begins and continues to work on the reality show *My American Wife!* This plot includes Jane's personal life as well as her professional, showcasing the things in Jane's life that have been impacted by the meat industry in America. The other plot showcases Akiko Ueno, a young housewife in Japan who is a viewer of the same reality show that Jane produces. This plot shows how the reality show impacts Akiko's life and encourages her to change it. Both plots come to a satisfactory end at the climax of the novel.



## Quotes

"Meat is the message" (Chapter 1, The Sprouting Month, pg. 7.)

"I imagine Shonagon, the master thief, hiding in her nook of history, watching me slip in and out of darkened rooms and steal from people's lives" (Chapter 3, The Ever-Growing Month, pg. 33.)

"Now, in the third year of their marriage, he was stony with rage" Chapter 3, The Ever-Growing Month, pg. 47.)

"I had a lover in the Year of Meats" (Chapter 4, The Deutzia Month, pg. 51.)

"The modern Japanese housewife finds the human interaction necessary to purchase meat distasteful" (Chapter 5, The Rice-Sprouting Month, pg. 87.)

"You see, Christina Bukowsky was beautiful. Not beautiful in any ordinary, earthbound, Midwestern sense of the word, but transgressively so" (Chapter 6, The Water Month, pg. 137.)

"In racially homogeneous Japan, we were a radical couple" (Chapter 7, The Poem-Composing Month, pg. 152.)

"Maybe America had radicalized him, but it was Suzuki who convinced me that it would be fine to put lesbians on the show" (Chapter 8, The Leaf Month, pg. 173.)

"So here we go. I will probe its stinking heart and rub Ueno's nose in its offal. No more fudge. I am thinking slaughterhouses for the next show" (Chapter 9, The Long Month, pg. 202.)

"Life is bloody, she thought, wiping her mouth. I don't mind, because it can't be helped" (Chapter 10, The Gods-Absent Month, pg. 251.)

"Coming at us like this—in waves, massed and unbreachable—knowledge becomes symbolic of our disempowerment—becomes bad knowledge—so we deny it, riding its crest until it subsides from consciousness" (Chapter 12, The End of the Year, pg. 334.)

"So here it is. My Year of Meats. Not so easy. But done" (Epilogue, January, pg. 361.)





## Topics for Discussion

Who is Jane Takagi-Little? What is significant about her name? Who are her biological parents? Why does Jane need a job? Why does she agree to produce a Japanese reality show? What is this show about? How does Jane change the format of the show over the course of the plot? Why? What is the outcome of this for Jane? For the show?

Who is Akiko Ueno? Why does Akiko throw up all her meals? Is this physical or mental? What impact does this have on Akiko's body? Why? Does her husband have sympathy for this condition? Why or why not? Is Akiko happy in her marriage? How does the reader know this? What does Akiko plot to do at the end of the novel? Why does Akiko reach out to Jane? Why does Akiko run away?

Who is Sloan? What role does he play in Jane's life? How does Jane feel about Sloan? How did they meet? Who does Sloan pretend to be each time he meets Jane at a hotel on the road? Why? Why is Jane worried about the reaction of her bosses to Sloan meeting her at the hotels? Why does Sloan tell Jane he wears double protection when they are together? Why does Sloan request that they not use protection? What is the result of this experiment?

What is DES? What does it do? What are its side effects? In how many ways has it personally touched Jane's life? Why does Jane blame DES for these things? Is it true? Is DES a real hormone? Was it really banned by the USDA? Do feedlots still use DES? What reason might they wish to continue to use a drug that has been banned in the United States? Is this harmful? What if all industries ignored the law in this regard?

Who is Shonagon? Why does the author use quotes from Shonagon to introduce each of her chapters? How do these quotes relate to the chapter they introduce? What does Shonagon say about women? What does Jane take from Shonagon? What does Akiko take from Shonagon? Why do you suppose the writer chose the name Akiko for one of her characters? How is this name related to Shonagon?

Discuss Jane's mother. Why does Jane's mother appear unkind to her daughter? Does Jane's mother dislike living in America? Why has she not returned to Japan? What does Jane's mother tell Jane about her own conception? What did Jane's mother use to help her conceive and carry Jane to term? Does Jane believe this worked? Why or why not?

Why does Akiko focus on Lara and Dyann during their episode? What does Dyann say that Akiko reacts to? Why does Akiko want to live near Lara and Dyann while she waits for her baby to be born? Is Akiko a lesbian? Is Akiko an unhappy woman? Does Akiko hope to find happiness in America? Or does she simply want her baby to be born in America? Why did Akiko not want to have a baby girl in Japan?