

# **No-No Boy Study Guide**

**No-No Boy by John Okada**

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## Plot Summary

No-No Boy tells the story of Ichiro Yamada, a 25-year-old man whose parents came to the United States from Japan before his birth. Like many Japanese-Americans, Ichiro and his family were sent to a “relocation camp” far away from their home early in World War II. Although they had done nothing wrong, they were treated like criminals. After two years, Ichiro was offered the opportunity to join the American military. Some young Japanese-American men fought in the war, often to try to prove they were true Americans. Ichiro’s mother was an old-fashioned woman who felt 100% Japanese and tried to raise her sons to feel that way as well. Ichiro refused to join the army, and was sent to prison for two years. The book begins on the day he comes home to Seattle at the end of the war.

Ichiro is angry at the world. His mother is cold and stubborn, and she refuses to believe Japan lost the war. His father is weak and turns to alcohol to deal with his troubles. Ichiro’s brother wants to join the army to prove he is a real American, unlike his brother. Ichiro faces hatred, threats, and discrimination not only from white and black people but also from Japanese-Americans who view him as a traitor. He is confused and ashamed, feeling he has made a mistake that will destroy his life. He doesn’t know what he wants to do, but knows he can’t go back to his old life, pretending nothing has happened.

In this book, Ichiro’s friends represent the different choices young Japanese-American men could have made during this time in history. His friend Freddie went to prison as well, and since his release he just wants to have fun and not think about things. Ichiro’s friend Kenji, a veteran who lost his leg in the war, tries to help Ichiro despite his own very serious problems. Eventually, Kenji dies from complications due to his injury.

Kenji introduces Ichiro to Emi, a beautiful young woman who is married to a soldier who won’t come home. Ichiro develops feelings for her, but doesn’t think he will see her again after a couple of encounters. However, she seeks him out later in the book and tells him she is getting a divorce.

Much of the book centers around Ichiro’s troubled relationship with his parents. His mother can’t deal with reality and makes him feel he is wrong to want to be American in any way. She believes she will one day return to Japan, and sees America as a temporary place to live despite having been in America for many years. Ichiro’s father can’t deal with his wife and his drinking increases. Eventually, Ichiro’s mother commits suicide. Both Ichiro and his father have mixed feelings about her death.

Ichiro’s initial rage and despair begin to soften a bit as he meets some genuinely decent people, both Japanese-American and white, and as he learns to forgive both his mother and himself. Throughout the book, he is on a journey of self-discovery. He is trying to figure out how to go forward and live a happy, meaningful life despite the hatred and discrimination he encounters. Even the dramatic death of his friend Freddie does not turn Ichiro away from his desire to live in a peaceful world. The book ends on a hopeful

note, with Ichiro's basic kindness and good nature beginning to come to the surface once again.



# Preface

## Summary

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. In America, suddenly people of Japanese ancestry were treated differently. Several everyday people - a college professor, a drunk, a Jewish businessman, and a prostitute – react to Japanese-Americans in their own way. It no longer mattered whether a person recently emigrated from Japan or had been living in America for many years – all people whose families came from Japan were seen as the enemy.

First people who were actually Japanese citizens were sent back to Japan. Then Japanese-Americans from communities in Washington, Oregon, and California were sent to camps surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards.

In 1943, a Japanese-American serving in the American army was on a plane with a lieutenant from Nebraska. The Japanese-American soldier told the lieutenant how Japanese-Americans had been taken from their homes by the American government and sent to camps. At first the lieutenant didn't believe this, but after more conversation, he realized it was true. He said if this happened to him, he wouldn't be fighting for America. The Japanese-American soldier kept saying, "I got reasons." He had a friend who was put in prison because the friend's family had been sent to two different camps, and this friend refused to join the military unless his family was allowed to be together in one camp.

## Analysis

The preface of this book explains what was happening in America just before the story begins. It describes how the Japanese people, even those who were American citizens or who had lived in America for many years, were seen as the enemy by most Americans after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. The author describes how some ordinary Americans, from a college professor to a prostitute, reacted to Japanese people. In a matter-of-fact way, the author shows the situation from each person's point of view. He describes the Japanese in America as "animals of a different breed." Each of the characters has his or her own way of seeing the Japanese, and the author simply states this point of view as if it were a fact, for example describing the Japanese as "too ambitious" when writing about the Jewish businessman's way of seeing them.

The author, John Okada, keeps using the terms "Japanese-American," "American-Japanese," and "Japanese-Japanese" as a way of emphasizing all people with a Japanese background were lumped together by Americans. He tells the story of how camps were set up in places far away from the Japanese communities on the West Coast. The American government sent people to these places, which were called



“relocation camps” but which the author describes as really being concentration camps, or prisons.

One of the most powerful parts of the preface is the story of a Japanese-American soldier who tells a lieutenant from Nebraska about the camps. The lieutenant can't understand why someone would fight for America when the American government was treating his people so poorly. If this happened to his family, he would be angry and refuse to join, the lieutenant thinks. The Japanese-American, however, realizes the alternative would have been to be sent to prison, which is what happened to his friend who refused to “volunteer” for the army.

Through this series of stories, the author sets the stage for the novel by describing the hatred and discrimination experienced by Japanese-Americans during World War II.

## **Vocabulary**

despicable, stratagems, hinterlands, ominous



# Chapter 1

## Summary

Ichiro is a 25-year-old Japanese-American man who spent two years in an American relocation camp and two years in an American prison. He is now returning to his family's home in Seattle, Washington. He was sent to prison because he refused to go into the army. Now he feels out of place. He runs into a young man he used to know who calls him "no-no boy" because Ichiro wouldn't join the army. The former friend spits on Ichiro, who feels angry at himself, ashamed, and confused.

Ichiro's home is in an area of the city that is mostly Japanese. He thinks this area has changed a lot while he was gone, looking older and dirtier. He has an encounter with a group of black men (whom the author calls "Negroes") and they call him "Jap-boy" and taunt him, making Ichiro very angry.

Ichiro reaches his home, a small, crowded grocery store with rooms for the family behind it. Ichiro's father is glad to see him, but Ichiro is frustrated by his father's old-fashioned thinking and argues with him. His mother returns and doesn't welcome him immediately. She tells Ichiro he must go back to college, but Ichiro feels lost and doesn't know what he wants to do. His mother does not believe Japan has lost the war. Ichiro can't believe his mother thinks this is true. He argues with his mother, but she is convinced, despite having seen pictures of Japanese cities devastated by atomic bombs.

Ichiro remembers when he was young and he felt close to his mother because he felt he was a Japanese person. Then he began to feel "half Japanese" because of his experiences growing up in America. Ichiro felt he was not strong enough to overcome his sense of being Japanese and join the American military to fight the war, but now he feels he is neither Japanese nor American. He is frustrated and disgusted with both his mother and himself.

His brother Taro comes home. Taro, who is almost finished with high school, is eager to join the army when he graduates. Taro despises Ichiro's choice to go to prison, and Ichiro feels they are strangers to each other.

Ichiro and his parents go to visit family friends, including a family whose son Bob was killed in the war. Ichiro thinks of the choices young men like him made – some who went into the army like Bob, and others who refused for a wide variety of reasons. Many of these young men were sent to prison. Ichiro believes ultimately he did not go into the army because he was too weak to oppose his mother.

When Ichiro returns home, his father is drunk, which surprises Ichiro. His father is very disturbed because he gets letters from relatives and friends in Japan begging for help,



and he can't send them money because Ichiro's mother doesn't believe the letters are real. Ichiro's father tells him he is sorry Ichiro went to prison for the family.

## Analysis

In this chapter, the author shows readers the challenges faced by Ichiro, the young Japanese- American man who is the focus of the book, by describing both what happens to him and his thoughts. Ichiro made the decision to go to prison rather than fight in the army during World War II, mostly because his mother strongly believes the family is Japanese, not American, and it would have been dishonorable for her son to fight for America. The book begins with Ichiro's return to his home city of Seattle, where he is treated with contempt by everyone from an old friend to his own brother.

The author describes Ichiro's emotions in great detail. Ichiro is angry and bitter with himself and with his parents, particularly his mother, with whom Ichiro has a complicated relationship. She doesn't show him any affection, although she says she is proud of him for having refused to enter the army. At the time, Ichiro felt he would be betraying his mother if he went into the army. Ichiro has a hard time readjusting to things his parents think of as normal, such as the entire family sharing one bedroom or their idea he should just go back to college as if the war hadn't happened.

By telling the story of Ichiro's family visiting other Japanese families, the author explains the mind-set of most of the older members of the Japanese community. They see their time in America as temporary, and think they will eventually return to Japan. Ichiro's mother and some of the other older people truly don't believe Japan lost the war, and they stick to this belief even in the face of very strong evidence. Ichiro's visit to the home of his family friends, the Kumasakas, shows how he wishes his family would settle into life in America and be reasonable about the consequences of the war. But his father, out of loyalty to Ichiro's mother, pretends to go along with the idea that Japan has not lost the war. This makes his father so miserable he drinks to forget his pain.

The author describes how Ichiro no longer believes he fits in anywhere – he is neither Japanese nor American, and he can't figure out how to make peace with himself. His younger brother has solved the conflict by rejecting his Japanese heritage, acting and thinking like a mainstream American, but it is not so simple for Ichiro.

The author tells the individual stories of several young Japanese-American men, each one representing a group of men who, based on their own concerns, decided to either fight in the war or to go to prison. Ichiro now blames himself for his weakness and believes he made the wrong decision.

## Vocabulary

enlightenment, gouge, beseech, vehemently, wrought, gingerly, leering, seethed, preciously, hysterics, sear, timorousness, permeated, unobtrusive, fanatical, studiously, intervening, intricate, flourishes, momentous, tribute, incredulously, intangible, gallant,





boundless, inverted, cherish, deferment, swabbed, waver, ceremonious, matriculating, fanatic, loathing, uncompromising, perilous, sojourns, zealously, turbulence, zoology, wretchedly, convictions, liquidate, banzai, saboteurs, Shinto, sundry



## Chapter 2

### Summary

Ichiro wakes up the next morning feeling just as bad as when he was in prison, feeling as though he has created his own prison through his poor decisions. His father tries to help him to feel better. His mother talks about the friend's son who died in the war, saying the mother of the young man was to blame "because she did not conduct herself as a Japanese." She tells Ichiro if he were to join the army, she would consider herself to be dead. Ichiro becomes so angry with her he grabs her, and when his father tries to stop him, he hits his father and knocks him into the wall. He apologizes and his father forgives him.

Ichiro goes to visit his friend Freddie, who was released from prison about a month earlier. Freddie tries to pretend things are alright, but finally admits he is miserable, too. He is having an affair with a married woman in his apartment building, which is the only thing he feels good about. Former friends have treated Freddie badly because he chose prison over the army.

### Analysis

In this chapter, the author shows Ichiro's anger and misery as well as his sense of being totally disconnected from his parents. He pities his father, who is only trying to be kind, but Ichiro is irritable and unpleasant to him. Ichiro is so angry at his mother's stubbornness and unwillingness to face reality he actually hates her. When he loses control of his anger and grabs her, he is trying to tell her both he and she are crazy. Ichiro feels that his mother has driven him crazy, and he feels bad he is hurting his father.

Ichiro's visit with Freddie is one more disappointment. Ichiro realizes Freddie is just as lost and unhappy as he is. The author tells the story through dialogue between the two men, which shows their friendship and eventually their ability to talk openly with each other. Freddie, like Ichiro, made the choice to reject modern American values by refusing to go into the military, but he has also rejected traditional Japanese values by giving up ambition and seeking pleasure at the expense of moral guidelines.

### Vocabulary

magnitude, intervening, anguished, denounce, asunder, nonchalance, insuppressible



# Chapter 3

## Summary

Ichiro leaves Freddie's and walks, thinking about his own future as an American, hoping he will be able to be accepted and happy. Then he begins to feel this will never happen, because he is so troubled. He remembers how happy he was when he was a student, loving his life at that time. Ichiro goes to visit a former professor of his at the university, Professor Brown. The conversation is a bit awkward, and when he leaves, Ichiro realizes he has changed so much he can't return to the university.

Ichiro runs into an old friend, Kenji, and they begin to talk. Kenji walks stiffly with a cane. He offers Ichiro a ride in his new car, and eventually Ichiro learns Kenji lost his leg in the war. Kenji tells Ichiro he has not only had his leg amputated, but has had to have additional surgeries, and may face losing more of his leg or even dying from infection. Ichiro decides despite the pain his friend has endured, he would trade places with Kenji, who can still feel the pride of being an American.

When Ichiro returns home, the family is in turmoil because his brother Taro has turned 18 and told his parents that he will quit school and join the army. Ichiro thinks he would have made the same choice if he were in Taro's shoes. Taro is angry and confused about what Ichiro has done and this drives his decision, making both of his parents desperately unhappy.

## Analysis

The author exposes Ichiro's thoughts in this chapter, as Ichiro tries to figure out whether he has permanently damaged his chances of becoming a happy, successful American. Part of him is hopeful, but another part feels only despair. The author paints a vivid picture of Ichiro's memories of the joy of being a student at the university. He uses the slide rule (a device that looked something like a ruler and was used for calculations) as a symbol for modern life and being certain of things. Ichiro believes he should have focused on how happy he was as a student, and then he would have gone to fight in the war to preserve that way of life. Like many young Japanese-Americans at the time, Ichiro loved America and being American, but was shocked by the hatred and racism separating him from other Americans when the war started.

In Ichiro's encounter with his former professor, the author shifts from the dialogue between them to telling about Ichiro's thoughts. Okada describes Ichiro's feeling that he and the professor hadn't really connected, and Ichiro's conclusion the professor had remained the same but he, Ichiro, had changed so much they couldn't truly communicate.

Ichiro's meeting with Kenji, the wounded war veteran, shows another aspect of the theme of choices in life. Despite Kenji's description of all the horrible things he has had



to endure, Ichiro finally decides Kenji is more fortunate than he: “A leg more or less wasn’t important when compared with himself, Ichiro, who was strong and perfect but only an empty shell. He would have given both legs to change places with Kenji.” The author also shows even the young man who made the choice to serve in the war feels a sense of isolation and despair, much as Ichiro does.

In the final scene, the author briefly shifts the point of view from Ichiro to his brother Taro, explaining how Ichiro’s choices affected his brother’s feelings and decisions. Ichiro realizes his mother, strong as she is, is hurt by his brother’s actions, which make her feel as though she has failed as a Japanese mother.

## Vocabulary

irretrievably, redemption, rupture, buttresses, Gothic, seclusion, evacuation, interrogating, ushered, inconsequential, forfeited, unassuming, gingerly, braggart, exhilaration, conceivably, pensioner, succession, amply, wry, advantageous



# Chapter 4

## Summary

Ichiro and Kenji go to a gambling club in Chinatown. Kenji wins some money, and they go to a private club, the Oriental Club, to drink. Kenji tries to help Ichiro to feel better about himself. A Japanese man named Bull insults Ichiro. Ichiro's brother Taro comes into the club and insists Ichiro come out onto the street with him. Two young men follow them and try to beat Ichiro up, and it is evident Taro set him up for this. Kenji comes out and stops the men from hurting Ichiro.

Kenji takes Ichiro out into the countryside, to the home of a female friend named Emi. Her husband Ralph is in the army and chose to serve a second tour without coming home because he was ashamed by the actions of his older brother, who was something of a troublemaker in the relocation camp where he was sent. To Ichiro's surprise, Kenji urges him to sleep with Emi, and he finally shares Emi's bed. The next morning, Emi talks to Ichiro and seems to understand the emotional pain he is experiencing. She encourages him not to stay stuck in self-pity, but to believe he can move forward and make things right somehow. At the end of the chapter, Kenji asks Ichiro to go with him to the veterans' hospital in Portland.

## Analysis

In this chapter, Kenji's friendship with Ichiro deepens. Kenji doesn't judge and tries to help Ichiro keep from sinking into despair. The scene at the private club intensifies the sense Ichiro finds nothing but hatred and contempt from other people. He is once again ridiculed for being a "no-no boy." Even his brother turns against him. Ichiro strives to understand why people feel and act as they do. The author continues to describe Ichiro's thoughts and his struggle to understand what has happened to his life.

In the scene at Emi's house, Okada tells the story simply, without much explanation at first. The reader, like Ichiro, doesn't understand what is happening, what Kenji's relationship with Emi is like, or why he wants Ichiro to sleep with her. The story unfolds to the reader along with Ichiro, who intuits Kenji cares for Emi but is not able to satisfy her physically because of his injury. Just as Ichiro decides to take off his clothes and get into bed naked with Emi, he also is willing to be open with her about his struggles in life. Emi seems to understand deeply and she tries to help him understand how, in loving America, he can open himself up to the possibility that he will be forgiven and be able to take his place in this country.

## Vocabulary

nimble, miserliness, forlorn, mahogany, swarthy, boisterous, ostentatiously, athwart, retribution, uncovered, ineptitude, quizzically, placidly, mollify, composure, antagonizing



# Chapter 5

## Summary

Ichiro comes home and tells his mother he will be going to Portland with Kenji, which makes her furious. Ichiro thinks about how his mother has tried to be a good mother to him in the only way she knows how. Ichiro talks to his father, and thinks about what life was like for him as a young man. His father reads a letter from his wife's sister in Japan to Ichiro's mother. Despite the personal details of the letter, describing the family's postwar desperation, Ichiro's mother chooses to believe it is a fake. However, it disturbs her greatly, and she goes to her room and won't talk.

Ichiro begins to think about moving to Portland to get a fresh start. He thinks about all his parents' troubles, and thinks his father should have been a woman because of his weakness. His father, who had tried to get Ichiro's mother to face the reality of what happened to Japan in the war, gives up and tries to soothe her with lies. He tells Ichiro the war was harder for his mother to endure than for Ichiro himself, which makes Ichiro very angry.

## Analysis

In this chapter, Ichiro goes back and forth between his desire to really understand his parents and be sympathetic to them as human beings, and his anger at them for the way they think. He sees his mother as rigid, stubborn, and unwilling to open her mind, while he sees his father as weak and ineffectual. Because Ichiro thinks in terms of traditional roles of men and women, he sees weakness as feminine and therefore believes his father should have been a woman.

The author uses Ichiro's thoughts about his mother's and father's lives when they were younger as a way to give the reader a picture of what life was like for Japanese people who came to America during this time in history. Through the letter from Ichiro's aunt, Okada also gives readers a snapshot of life in postwar Japan.

As Ichiro tries to reach out to his parents in this chapter by empathizing with what they have gone through, they push him away – his mother through her stubborn denial of reality, and his father through his drinking and inability to insist that Ichiro's mother deal with the real world. This feeds into Ichiro's desire to move away and his belief if he stays at home, he will not be able to get on with his life.

## Vocabulary

industriously, askance, perused, ironically, grimaced, skeptically, pout



# Chapter 6

## Summary

Kenji goes to his family home and has a good conversation with his father, who raised six children after his wife died. His father worries because he gave his permission for Kenji to join the army, he is to blame for Kenji losing his leg in the war, but Kenji sets his mind at ease. Kenji's father remembers hearing about a neighbor's son, a soldier, who became very angry because his family was sent to a relocation camp and also because the Japanese-American soldiers were hidden when President Roosevelt came to visit the troops. Kenji's father also remembers a sociologist who visited the relocation camp and told the older Japanese they did not understand their children's lives at all. Kenji's father is grateful for the good relationship he and Kenji enjoy.

Kenji's father makes a family dinner, and Kenji's sisters and brothers and their children come to visit. Kenji leaves early because he doesn't want them to make a fuss over him since he is going to the hospital the next day. He goes to the private club where he and Ichiro drank the other day, but leaves when the management refuses to allow two black people to enter. He is deeply troubled by all the prejudice in the world, thinking those who are discriminated against should unite rather than turn on each other.

Kenji picks up Ichiro, whose mother is behaving very oddly, and the two drive to Portland. On the way, they are stopped for speeding by a prejudiced cop who tries to get them to give him a bribe. Kenji tells Ichiro he has a bad feeling about going into the hospital, implying he believes he may die. He asks Ichiro to take his car home.

## Analysis

This is the first chapter that follows another character, Kenji, instead of Ichiro. By describing the warmth and honesty between Kenji and his father and siblings, the author gives us a stark contrast with the unpleasant and distant relationships in Ichiro's home. Even though Kenji must deal with the possibility that he will die, he is more content than Ichiro because of the love and connection he feels at home. Okada's description of Kenji's family life is very realistic and makes the reader smile with recognition. Kenji's father's memories reinforce the theme of the difficulty the generations of Japanese have in understanding each other, yet the relationship between Kenji and his father shows it is possible to bridge that generation gap with honest communication.

The author also follows Kenji's thoughts in this chapter, using his concerns to explain Okada's views of prejudice and discrimination. Okada provides a series of scenarios in which people of different races or ethnic groups are treated badly, and he shows Kenji's sadness that those who experience hatred are divided against each other instead of showing compassion for each other.



In the encounter with the bigoted and crooked traffic cop, Kenji shows quick thinking by switching places with Ichiro as the driver. Kenji fights back by taking the speeding ticket, believing he will be dead before it comes due. Thus, in a way, he gains victory over the person who is treating him badly.

## Vocabulary

wincing, acceding, pervaded, anguish, decry, cessation, painstakingly, meager, Nisei, decadent, abided, ravenously, deviltry, oratory, plagued, flaunts, haughty, deduced, inevitably, foliage, cordiality, enmity





# Chapter 7

## Summary

In Portland, Ichiro begins to look for a job. He goes to apply for a position as a hotel porter, but doesn't feel he can fill out the application honestly, and leaves. He goes to an engineering firm where he meets the owner, Mr. Carrick, a non-Japanese man with a great deal of sympathy for what Japanese-Americans went through during the war years. He offers Ichiro a job, but Ichiro begins to realize he needs to go home to Seattle and settle his problems there, so he refuses. Mr. Carrick's kindness makes him realize some Americans are good people who don't blame Japanese-Americans for the war.

Ichiro goes to a restaurant where he encounters a young Japanese waiter who shows off about being a veteran, which makes Ichiro very angry. Ichiro goes to the hospital to say goodbye to Kenji, who is not doing well. Kenji agrees with Ichiro's plan to return to Seattle, and suggests Ichiro should marry a non-Japanese woman, so eventually the races will blend and this will end the conflict among people. Kenji says he will write to Emi's husband and tell him she cares for Ichiro, in hope of making the husband so jealous he will return to his wife. Ichiro drives to Emi's house, and realizes by her reactions how much she cares for Kenji.

## Analysis

In this chapter, readers see how difficult it is for Ichiro to rejoin the community after prison and the war. The character of Mr. Carrick symbolizes those Americans who were not evil or prejudiced, and who didn't agree with the treatment of Japanese-Americans during the war. Ichiro first sees the existence of men like Mr. Carrick as a sign of hope about America, but later he is convinced people like this are all too rare. Ichiro is tempted to take the job offered to him, but realizes that would be running away. He also later refuses a job from a Japanese friend of Emi's because he feels remaining solely within the Japanese-American community would be another form of running away.

During Ichiro's encounter with the waiter who was a veteran, he thinks about how tight-knit the Japanese-American community is, and how he could find automatic acceptance from some Japanese-Americans, but this feels false to him. This theme continues as Kenji describes his belief that Japanese-Americans are clustering together and creating a community in which they are cut off from the larger American society, just as they were in the relocation camps.

The people Ichiro cares about are important in this chapter. He grieves because he knows Kenji will die soon, and he and Kenji have become close. He is hurt because Emi is disappointed when Ichiro shows up instead of Kenji, and he knows he could come to love her. With Emi and Kenji, as well as Mr. Carrick, Ichiro has found something good



and positive, but for various reasons he believes none of them will be in his life in the future.

## Vocabulary

marquee, methodically, incredulity



## Chapter 8

### Summary

Ichiro's father is so desperate for a drink he goes out to the liquor store without a coat on a cold night. He falls and hurts himself on the way home, but is only worried about the liquor bottles he carries. Ichiro's mother has been acting very strangely, and her husband has not been able to get her to eat or to act sensibly since Ichiro left. For example, she waited until it was pouring rain to go hang laundry on the clothesline. . He thinks about how good things were when he and Ichiro's mother first met, and how they were so attracted to each other they made love, impulsively, before they were married. He believes they brought bad luck on themselves by doing this. Ichiro's father tries to reach out to his wife, who is packing suitcases and running the bath water, but eventually he gives up and gets so drunk he passes out.

Ichiro drives back to his home, but does not want to go in. He decides to go to Kenji's father's house. There he learns Kenji died that afternoon. He talks for a while with Kenji's father, to whom he returns Kenji's car. Kenji's father drives him home. When Ichiro goes inside the house, he finds his mother has killed herself in the bathtub. He finally finds his father passed out on the floor, and when Kenji tries to tell him about his mother's death, his father is too drunk to understand.

### Analysis

In the beginning of the chapter, the author follows Ichiro's father and reveals his pain by telling the reader his thoughts, which make him so miserable he can only find comfort by getting drunk. The author's description of Ichiro's father's thoughts and memories help the reader see his point of view. It is interesting he is referred to only as "Ichiro's father," because that is the reason for his importance in this story.

Ichiro's life swings wildly from good to bad in this chapter. The kindness shown to him by Kenji, Emi, and Mr. Carrick help him to feel less alone, but then he has to deal with the horror of finding his mother dead in the bathtub and his father too drunk to function. The author describes the "disgust and irritation" Ichiro feels about his mother's death, but as he thinks about his mother's life, Ichiro is able to have some sense of tenderness and understanding. Ichiro has to function as the sensible adult in the house, calling the undertaker, because of his father's weakness.

### Vocabulary

wretchedly, torrent, spasmodic, spewing, rivulets, unintelligible, coroner



# Chapter 9

## Summary

Ichiro's mother's funeral is held at a Buddhist church. His father seems strangely cheerful, enjoying the attention he is getting, which disturbs Ichiro. During the funeral, when people speak of Ichiro's mother's life, it doesn't seem to him as though they are speaking about the mother he knew. After the funeral, everyone is supposed to go to a restaurant to eat together, but Ichiro can't stand it anymore. When Ichiro sees his friend Freddie start to drive away, he jumps into Freddie's car. Freddie is scared at first, because some guys are after him for using a knife on a young man who tormented him.

Freddie is still drifting aimlessly, not working or trying to make a future for himself. Surprisingly, the husband of the neighbor woman he is having an affair with has taken a liking to Freddie, and even loans Freddie his car. Ichiro begins to realize even though Freddie seems to enjoy life, he has no depth and his life has no real meaning. Ichiro asks him about jobs, and Freddie says some young men have gotten jobs through a neighborhood Christian Center. Freddie drops Ichiro at home. Ichiro has mixed feelings about his mother, remembering how she destroyed his records and record player when he was a child, because she felt he was becoming too American.

Emi comes to Ichiro's house to see him. They go out dancing, and Ichiro feels better. When he returns, his father is sending parcels to Japan – the ones his mother objected to sending, because she refused to believe Japan had lost the war and that their relatives needed help. Ichiro's father doesn't blame him for leaving after the funeral, and says Ichiro can take his time deciding what to do. Ichiro says he will look for work tomorrow.

## Analysis

Despite his anger at his mother, Ichiro is somewhat taken aback by his father's cheerfulness during her funeral. This chapter is told from Ichiro's point of view, and ultimately he feels okay about his father finding relief at his mother's death, admitting he feels some relief as well. Ichiro has very mixed feelings. He understands, in a way, his mother wanted to keep him Japanese and not let him become an American, but she hurt him by depriving him of the things he enjoyed when he was growing up.

Ichiro is trying to understand what is important to him in life, and he realizes he just wants some happiness, and that it will take time before he can find it. He starts to understand Freddie is fooling himself and not living an authentic life by seeking easy pleasure and being lazy. Even though Ichiro's father offers to support him for a while, Ichiro decides he will seek work. Although he knows the road ahead will be tough, Ichiro seems to be finding a glimpse of hope and self-respect.



## Vocabulary

sauntered, lavish, unintelligible, fervent, insuppressible, elated, countenance, resonance, orators, excruciating, mortuary, albatross, affably, contemplatively



# Chapter 10

## Summary

The next day Ichiro takes the bus to the Christian Rehabilitation Center to seek a job. He passes massive amounts of donated items and sees a workshop in which people seem happy to be repairing similar items. A young man named Mr. Morrison interviews Ichiro. Another Japanese-American man, Gary, is working at the Center as a painter, and Mr. Morrison tells Ichiro he doesn't really know how to help either of them, because both Ichiro and Gary are bright young men who would have no trouble finding a job anywhere under other circumstances. He offers Ichiro a job helping Gary. Ichiro goes to talk to Gary, who tells him his life has actually improved because of being in prison. Gary is an artist who did more talking than painting before the war, and upon release from prison he became passionate about his work as an artist. Gary tells the story of how he left his previous workplace not because of the insults he had to endure, but because a black man working there decided to defend him, thereby putting himself in danger from the other workers. Ichiro likes Gary, but nonetheless decides not to work at the Center.

Ichiro gives a lot of thought to what Gary said about prejudice. Ichiro remembers a buddy from the relocation camp who tried to convince Ichiro to go to church with him. The first time Ichiro went, it was clear they weren't welcome because they were Japanese. When his friend found a church that welcomed Japanese, Ichiro went with him and discovered the congregation didn't want a black man to join them. Ichiro begins to realize he is only one of millions of people who have been mistreated because of prejudice. He begins to forgive himself and to focus on the positive a bit more.

## Analysis

In this chapter, Ichiro encounters more people who mean well, and he is able to see other people without as much bitterness as he had before. Mr. Morrison, who is willing to give Ichiro a job, seems to be a sincere man who doesn't know how to straighten out the mess the war has created for bright young Japanese-Americans.

Gary is an important character in the book, because he has been able to take the painful experience of being in prison and turn it into motivation for pursuing his artistic work. He is at peace, and his lack of despair gives Ichiro hope he, too, may find peace one day. Okada shows Gary's thoughts about his situation through dialogue rather than the internal monologues he creates for other characters in the book. Because Gary speaks about his thoughts out loud, he is able to influence Ichiro, who considers how random the divisions between people really are, and therefore how ridiculous it is for people to hate each other over small differences. In his memories about attending church when he was in the relocation camp, Ichiro's basic good character is shown



because he is as disgusted by discrimination against a black man as he is by the discrimination he himself endured.

## **Vocabulary**

burly, eaves, ambled, dilapidated, impertinent, lingered, placidness, inexhaustible



# Chapter 11 - Afterward

## Summary

Freddie calls Ichiro on the phone and insists they go out together. Ichiro's father gives him some money, which makes him feel a bit guilty, but they talk together and decide Ichiro will help his father in the store until he gets a job or goes back to school. Freddie is agitated and energetic, and first tries to arrange for prostitutes for the two of them. When that fails, he insists they play pool. He argues with the owner of the poolroom and breaks a pool cue over the table.

Then Freddie pressures Ichiro, who by now wants to get away from him, into going to the Club Oriental, which is where both of them were insulted and threatened previously. Ichiro reluctantly agrees to go for a drink. When they get there, a large man named Bull starts a fight with Freddie, dragging him outside. Ichiro tries to help his friend and to stop the fight, but finally has to hit Bull hard to try to stop him. Freddie escapes into his car and speeds away, crashing into a wall. The accident kills Freddie. Ichiro is still outside with Bull, and he speaks pleasantly to him despite the circumstances. Bull is mean and angry at first, but finally begins to sob and beg like a little child. Ichiro shows him kindness, and walks away thinking of all the good people he has met, feeling more hope for the future and for America than he has had since prison.

## Afterword

This book contains an afterword written by Frank Chin, an Asian-American writer who talks about how important this book was to him. The afterword tells the story of John Okada, the author of *No-No Boy*, from a fresh and surprisingly honest perspective. Frank Chin talks about John Okada as a pioneer because he was really the first Asian-American to write of his community's experiences. Chin says, "A white American writer would feel edgy if all the books ever written in America were by blacks, browns, reds, yellows, and all whites had ever published were cookbooks full of recipes for apple pie and fried chicken" (p. 253). This afterword is tart and almost shocking in some parts, and it is worth reading.

## Analysis

Okada uses a dramatic ending to show the changes in Ichiro. When Ichiro is with Freddie, he tries to help Freddie to slow down and act with common sense. Ichiro is acting as a good friend to Freddie, much as Kenji acted with Ichiro before Kenji's death. He doesn't judge Freddie, but tries to help him to see the consequences of his actions. Ultimately failing to save Freddie, Ichiro reaches out with kindness to the bully (named, not too coincidentally, "Bull") who hurt him and his friend. His tenderness toward the brute brings out the pain and sadness most bullies have hidden inside. The book ends on a hopeful note, as Ichiro reflects on his encounters with caring people. The author





connects Ichiro's transformation to the renewed hope that America, too, will find a positive way to move into the future.

## Vocabulary

garishly, celerity, perceptibly, menacingly, jostled, brandishing, proprietor, haggard, jealousy, roving, vigilantly, protestations, sputum, erratically, agape, sporadically, beseeching, insinuation



# Characters

## Ichiro Yamada

Ichiro, a 25-year-old Japanese-American man, is the main character in this novel. He has spent two years in a relocation camp and two more years in prison for refusing to join the army, and at the beginning of the book he is returning to his family's home. Through much of the book, Ichiro is very angry and very confused about life. He is infuriated with his mother and has pity and contempt for his father. Most of all, he is ashamed of himself for having chosen not to be a "real American" and join the army, because in his mind he would have been rejecting everything his mother taught him if he were to do so.

Ichiro wonders if there is a place for him in American society, and if he will ever find happiness. He always struggles for understanding, and at times, he is able to understand his parents and the other people who hurt him. The kindness of others means a great deal to Ichiro. For much of the book, he is in despair and turmoil, but he finally begins to have a sense of hope.

## Ichiro's Mother

This woman is referred to as "Ichiro's mother" or "the mother" most of the time. She and her husband run a small grocery store and live in a few rooms behind the store. She shows no affection to or for her sons. When Ichiro returns home after being away for two years, she completes an unimportant task before coming to greet him. She sees herself as totally Japanese, not American at all, although she came to the United States as a young woman. Like many Japanese of her generation, she sees America as a temporary place to make money, with the goal of returning home to Japan.

Ichiro's mother refuses to believe Japan has lost the war. She has nothing but contempt for the young Japanese-Americans who served in the American military, and considers it the fault of their mothers, who were somehow not Japanese enough to prevent this. Even when she sees photographs of the cities in Japan that were hit with atomic bombs, she will not believe Japan has been defeated. She is strong, but very brittle, in the sense that she cannot change and move with the times. When she receives a letter from her sister in Japan with personal details only the sister would know, her mind snaps and she starts behaving in a very odd fashion. Finally, she cannot tolerate the conflict between the world she has built in her mind and the real world, and she kills herself.

## Ichiro's Father

Also referred to as "Ichiro's father" or "the father" rather than by name, this man works with his wife to run a small grocery store. He is described by Ichiro as being weak, and



indeed whenever a family member becomes upset, he tries to calm them down at any cost. He knows his wife is wrong about Japan not being defeated, but he doesn't press the issue. He is truly upset that he cannot send help to relatives who are suffering in postwar Japan, but he is not willing to go against his wife's wishes. He handles his emotional pain by drinking more and more, until the craving for alcohol takes over his life.

Ichiro's father shows love and concern for his son, and does not take offense when Ichiro becomes angry with him. Even when Ichiro lashes out and hits him, he forgives his son. When Ichiro's mother dies, it is as if a weight was lifted from Ichiro's father's shoulders. He can finally live freely and make his own decisions, and it seems as though he no longer needs the alcohol.

## Kenji

Kenji is a young Japanese-American man about the same age as Ichiro. He chose to serve in the military, and he lost a leg in the fighting. What's worse, he continues to have problems with infections in the leg, and he has to have several surgeries to make the stump of his leg even shorter in order to remove the infection. Kenji has people's respect, and his military pension pays for a new car and his expenses, but he is haunted by the idea that he will have to have more surgeries and has a good chance of dying from his war injuries.

Kenji does have a large, loving family. His mother died early, and his father raised the family with love and good communication. Kenji and his father have open, honest, respectful conversations that are very different from the conversations Ichiro has with his parents.

Kenji befriends Ichiro and does not judge him. He even switches places with Ichiro, who is driving when they are pulled over for speeding. Kenji cares deeply for Emi, but tries to get Ichiro to hook up with her because Kenji is not physically able to make love to her. Kenji knows in advance he is going to die, and he travels to the hospital with Ichiro and is able to talk bravely about his death, which comes later that day.

## Freddie

Freddie is a friend of Ichiro's who was in the relocation camp with him. Freddie has a sense of humor and charm, but he lacks inner strength and a sense of direction. He made the decision to refuse military service and to go to prison like Ichiro, but upon his release, he drifts aimlessly and starts an affair with a neighbor woman whom he calls "a fat pig." Ichiro eventually realizes Freddie is a person whose good qualities are all on the surface.

Freddie becomes restless and takes foolish risks. He picks fights and, toward the end of the book, chooses to take Ichiro into a club where he knows he is not welcome. A bully



fighters with him, and Freddie gets into a car and takes off so fast he crashes into a wall and is killed.

## Emi

Emi is a beautiful young woman whose husband, Ralph, served one tour in the military and then chose to serve another tour without ever coming back to see her. She lives in a house in the country, where Kenji and Ichiro visit her. She loves Kenji and cares for Ichiro as well. She is able to speak very frankly and openly to Ichiro, and to understand some of his feelings. Although Ichiro doesn't think he will see her again, she seeks him out after his mother's death and tells him she is getting divorced from Ralph.

## Gary

Although Gary appears only briefly in the book, he is an important character. Ichiro talks to Gary, an artist who spent time in prison, when Ichiro is looking for a job at the place where Gary works. Gary has used his time in prison to make positive changes in his life, and has come out with a sense of focus he did not have before. He shows Ichiro it is possible to find inner peace despite the circumstances of one's life.



# Objects/Places

## The Grocery Store

Ichiro's father and mother own a small grocery store, and they live in a few rooms in the back.

## Seattle

Most of the story takes place in Ichiro's hometown of Seattle, Washington, in a neighborhood largely Japanese-American.

## Slide Rule

A slide rule is an instrument used for mathematic calculations. In this book, it is a symbol of an American education, and of Ichiro's love for his prewar life as a college student studying engineering.

## Portland

Kenji and Ichiro drive to Portland, Oregon, where Kenji dies in a veteran's hospital. Ichiro thinks about moving to Portland, but decides he needs to resolve his issues at home.

## Kenji's Car

Kenji is able to afford a new car because of the government pension he receives for his war service and injuries. He trusts Ichiro to drive the car back to Kenji's father when Kenji knows he is dying.

## Freddie's Car

Freddie does not own a car, but uses one that is loaned to him by the husband of the woman with whom he is having an affair. He drives recklessly and eventually dies in a crash while driving this car.

## Club Oriental

This is a private drinking club where Ichiro and Freddie are threatened and bullied by other men because of their refusal to serve in the army. It is where the final fight of the book takes place, leading to Freddie's death.

## **Emi's House**

Kenji takes Ichiro to Emi's house, which is out in the country.

## **The Kumasakas' House**

This is the home of a family that is friendly with Ichiro's family. It is significant because it is a nice home. Many of the older Japanese people refused to buy nice homes because they believed their time in America was temporary and they would return to Japan soon.

## **Relocation Camps**

Ichiro and several other characters have memories of being in relocation camps, which were places surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards, where Japanese-Americans were imprisoned for no legitimate reason during World War II.



# Themes

## Identity

A major theme of the book is the struggle of first-generation Japanese-Americans to figure out who they are. Their parents, who came over from Japan, often spoke very little English and believed they would return to Japan one day. Many of them did not want their children to identify themselves as American. This issue became very clearly highlighted during World War II, when young men in the relocation camps were offered the choice of joining the American military to fight against Japan, or going to prison.

Ichiro wrestles with this issue throughout the book. He loves America and the opportunities it provides, but his mother believes any hint of an American identity shows disloyalty and disgrace to the family. Different characters within the book handle the issue of cultural identity in different ways. Ichiro's brother Taro is humiliated by Ichiro's choice to go to prison and rejects the Japanese part of his identity completely.

## Prejudice and Hatred

Asian-Americans were discriminated against and treated poorly even before Pearl Harbor, but after war broke out, many Americans saw them as the enemy. Even Japanese-Americans who were American citizens and had no ties to Japan were rounded up and imprisoned in relocation camps. In this book, Ichiro is treated with contempt by many people, including other Japanese-Americans who disagreed with his decision to refuse military service.

The author describes the thoughts of the characters, and many of these thoughts involve an attempt to understand prejudice and hatred, and to figure out how to deal with it. Ichiro's first encounter when he gets off the bus for home is with a Japanese-American man who calls him a "rotten bastard" and spits on him. Then he walks past a

group of black men who call him "Jap-boy," and Ichiro calls them names in his head, while at the same time he realizes they are all targets of discrimination.

Much of the hatred in this book involves those who are close to Ichiro. Ichiro is so angry at his mother's refusal to deal with reality at times he hates her, and he hates his father for his weakness. Ichiro's brother Taro hates Ichiro for choosing to go to prison. Ichiro's mother despises those parents whose children fought for the United States in the war.

The prejudice directed at Japanese-Americans from outside their community is strongly depicted. The experience of being in relocation camps, which the author considers to be concentration camps, influences Ichiro, Freddie, and many others. When Kenji and Ichiro are stopped by a police officer, the cop asks, "You Japs can read, can't you?" Ichiro also remembers going to a church with a friend. As they left, a man leaned out of



his car and said, “One Jap is one too many. I told them: Two Japs today, maybe ten next Sunday. Don’t come back.”

Despite everything he endures, at the end of the book, Ichiro turns away from hatred by showing compassion to “the brute” Bull, the man who hurt him and his friend Freddie. Ichiro is able to see past Bull’s angry behavior and to reach the hurt soul within.

## Choices

Ichiro’s choice to go to prison rather than join the army is a life-changing decision. At the time, he felt he had no choice, because it would kill his mother if he chose the American way rather than the Japanese way. During his time in prison, Ichiro began to see things differently, and he thought refusing to fight in the war would ruin his life forever, because he could never be accepted as an American.

Several of the characters in the book represent different choices available to young Japanese-American men during and after World War II. Ichiro’s friend Kenji chose to fight and earned the respect of other Americans, but he lost his leg and ultimately his life because of that choice. Freddie went to prison like Ichiro, but he chose to ignore traditional values when he was released and this created a restlessness and discontent that ultimately led to his death. Taro, Ichiro’s brother, chooses to reject his parents and his brother and join the military even after the end of the war.

Ichiro faces many choices during his journey. He has to choose what to do with his life – whether to take a job or return to college, or to drift as his friend Freddie does. Ichiro thinks about living and working in Portland, away from his family, but decides he needs to come home and confront the problems that torment him. Ichiro investigates a job at the Christian Rehabilitation Center, but decides it is not for him. Ultimately, Ichiro chooses to seek happiness and to treat others well.

## Hope

At the beginning of this novel, Ichiro feels very little hope that he can find happiness and contentment in his life. At times, he believes he will be able to overcome the shame of having made a poor decision by going to prison, but at other times, he thinks he will never be able to overcome his past.

Ichiro begins to hope through his experiences with people who show him kindness. His father, despite his weakness, loves his son and tries to make things better for him. Kenji, the wounded war veteran, becomes a true friend who supports Ichiro and does not judge him. Emi speaks to Ichiro honestly and wants the best for him. Ichiro is offered a job by Mr. Carrick in Portland, a white man who truly apologizes for the poor treatment given to Japanese-Americans. He is also offered a job by Mr. Moore at the Christian Rehabilitation Center, who recognizes Ichiro’s abilities. A stranger buys drinks for Ichiro and Emi, just to be kind. Emi tries to help Ichiro find a job and clearly shows that she cares about him. Gary, a young artist who went to prison for refusing to join the military,





has found peace and contentment by rediscovering his life's purpose. Ichiro feels hopeful because Gary has walked the same path as he, and has come through without bitterness.

Ichiro's sense of hope is also supported by the stories of others. Gary tells him about a black co-worker who risked his own safety to defend Gary from other people. Kenji tells Ichiro about the good relationship Kenji and his father enjoy.

In the end, Ichiro sees "a glimmer of hope...It was there, someplace. He couldn't see it to put it into words, but the feeling was pretty strong." Ichiro hopes he will find happiness and peace, and be able to be proud to be an American.



# Style

## Point of View

This novel is written in the third person, but the author describes the thoughts of several of the characters in such detail that the reader is able to see the situation from a variety of characters' points of view. Most of the book follows the main character, Ichiro, using both exposition and dialogue. In the early chapters, the author sometimes reveals the thoughts of Ichiro's mother and father. By using this technique, Okada is able to show us very different points of view, such as that of Ichiro and that of his mother, who often see the world in two completely different ways.

In Chapter 6, the narrative follows Kenji, without Ichiro's presence. The author describes Kenji's visit to his father's home, showing the reader not only Kenji's thoughts, but also those of his father. In this manner, Okada is able to present an intimate picture of a very different family than Ichiro's, even though both families include parents from Japan and children born in America.

Okada's focus on Ichiro creates a sense of familiarity and connection between the reader and the primary character of the book. By offering other points of view as well, Okada helps readers to connect with characters they might otherwise not understand or care about. The technique of switching the point of view reinforces the book's theme of overcoming hatred through tolerance and understanding.

## Setting

Most of the book is set in the Japanese community in the city of Seattle, where the book's author was born. The time period is just after World War II. Ichiro's family lives in a neighborhood that has become even dirtier and more rundown during the war. The family home is a few rooms crowded behind an equally crowded small grocery store. The setting reinforces the difference in what each generation thinks is appropriate. Ichiro is disgusted because there is only one bedroom in his family's apartment, where all the family members sleep. The author explains many Japanese families lived in terrible conditions because they saw their time in America as temporary, and were saving all their money for their return to Japan. Okada contrasts Ichiro's family's home with that of the Kumasakas, family friends who decided America was truly their home and consequently bought a comfortable, well-furnished house.

The time period of this novel is especially critical, because the war between America and Japan created unthinkable conflict between Japanese-Americans and other Americans, and within the Japanese-American community itself. Some Japanese-Americans fought in the American military, while others refused to do so. Many Japanese-American families were removed from their homes to relocation camps during



the war. After the war, during the time covered by this book, Japanese-Americans struggled to regain the respect and trust of their fellow citizens.

## Language and Meaning

What makes this book exceptional is the unique and creative use of language. Okada shows us the world in which these characters live, and how they think, through his use of clear and powerful language. For example, he describes Ichiro's mother cleaning a vegetable stand near the grocery store: "There was a power in the wiry, brown arms, a hard, blind, indisputable force which coursed through veins of tough bamboo." Okada often uses long sentences, especially as he describes people's thoughts, which have a definite rhythm and something of a poetic sound:

In the book's dialogue, the author captures the difference between the first-generation Japanese parents, whose English is limited, and their children, who speak like any American. Each character has a distinctive way of thinking and speaking, and this helps the reader to know more about the person. Okada slips from describing things objectively into telling the story from a particular character's point of view: "The mother uttered a single, muffled cry which was the forgotten spark in a dark and vicious canyon and, the spark having escaped, there was only darkness, but a darkness which was now darker still, and the meaning of her life became a little bit meaningless."

The language in the book is straightforward, with characters swearing at times or talking openly about sexual matters. Some of the author's language is tied to the time in which he was writing (the 1950s), for example calling African Americans "Negroes." He also uses language some might find offensive when characters are thinking about or talking to people of other racial backgrounds, but this is realistic in terms of the time in which the book is set.

John Okada uses a wide vocabulary and very vivid words. Every word counts,

and he has obviously thought about the impact of his words. For example, he usually describes Ichiro's parents by calling them "Ichiro's mother," "the mother," "Ichiro's father," or "the father," rather than by name. This reinforces the importance of how Ichiro sees the world in this story. When Okada describes prejudice and hatred, his words are very moving. He keeps the stories in the book simple, but they are powerful. For example, in the preface, he tells the story of a white American soldier who can't believe Japanese-Americans are being imprisoned in America, setting the stage for the rest of the book.

## Structure

The novel consists of 11 chapters, which vary in length from a few pages to almost 30 pages. There is an introduction written in 1976 by Lawson Fusao Inada, who describes how important this book is and how it was very nearly overlooked. John Okada writes a brief preface, which helps the reader understand the time period in which the book is



set. The book also includes a fascinating afterword written by Frank Chin, who talks about how incredibly important *No-No Boy* was because it is a great book written by an Asian-American novelist at a time when there were no other Asian-American novelists.

The main plot of the book is the story of Ichiro Yamada as he tries to make a life for himself after World War II. The stories of each of his parents and his friend Kenji spin off a bit from the main plot, and occasionally the author will insert another short story in the narrative to make a point, but all of the subplots are brought together because they relate directly to the themes of the book.



## Quotes

Thus they communicated, the old speaking Japanese with an occasional badly mispronounced word or two of English; and the young, with the exception of a simple word or phrase of Japanese which came fairly effortlessly to the lips, resorting almost constantly to the tongue the parents avoided. (Chapter 1)

He looked at his mother and swallowed with difficulty the bitterness that threatened to destroy the last fragment of understanding for the woman who was his mother and still a stranger because, in truth, he could not know what it was to be a Japanese who breathed the air of America and yet had never lifted a foot from the land that was Japan. (Chapter 1)

I am not your son and I am not Japanese and I am not American. (Chapter 1)

The prison which he had carved out of his own stupidity granted no paroles or pardons. It was a prison of forever. (Chapter 2)

And, as his heart mercifully stacked the blocks of hope into the pattern of an America which would someday hold an unquestioned place for him, his mind said no, it is not to be, and the castle tumbled and was swallowed up by the darkness of his soul, for time might cloud the memories of others but the trouble was inside of him and time would not soften that. (Chapter 3)

...when one is born in America and learning to love it more and every day without thinking it, it is not an easy thing to discover suddenly that being American is a terribly incomplete thing if one's face is not white and one's parents are Japanese of the country Japan which attacked America. (Chapter 3)

It was seeing without meeting, talking without hearing, smiling without feeling

I was born not soon enough or not late enough and for that I have been punished. (Chapter 4)

This is a big country with a big heart. There's room here for all kinds of people. (Chapter 4)

I'll go,' said Ichiro to the man who was neither husband nor father nor Japanese nor American but a diluted mixed of all... (Chapter 5)

If he was to find his way back to that point of wholeness and belonging, he must do so in the place where he had begun to lose it. (Chapter 7)

It was a mistake to leave Japan and to come to America and to have two sons and it was a mistake to think that you could keep us completely Japanese in a country such as America. (Chapter 8)



On the surface, there was wit and understanding and even a rough sort of charm, but one made a mistake in probing underneath...It was like being on a pair of water skis, skimming over the top as long as one traveled at a reasonable speed, but, the moment he slowed down or stopped, it was to sink into the nothingness that offered no real support. (Chapter 9)

'Sure,' said Ichiro, as he looked deep into his friend's eyes to detect the fear and loneliness and bitterness that ought to have been there and saw only the placidness reflected in the soft, gentle smile. (Chapter 10)

It wasn't his fault. Neither was it the fault of his mother, who was now dead because of a conviction which was only a dream that blew up in her face. (Chapter 10)

One had only to look about to see all the hatred in the world. Where was all the goodness that people talked about, the goodness of which there was never quite enough to offset the hatred? (Chapter 10)

He walked along, thinking, searching, thinking and probing, and, in the darkness of the alley of the community that was a tiny bit of America, he chased that faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continued to take shape in mind and in heart. (Chapter 11)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

In this book, there are very definite differences between older people who were born in Japan and came to America, and their children. What are these differences? How do the two generations see the world differently?

## Topic 2

How are the experiences of Japanese-Americans similar to or different from the experiences of any other immigrant group, such as people from Mexico who have come to America in the last few years? How does the time period described in this book affect the experiences of Japanese-Americans?

## Topic 3

How do Ichiro's feelings change and grow during the course of the book? What are his primary emotions when he first comes back to his home community, and how does he feel at the end of the book?

## Topic 4

Why does Ichiro feel such great anger towards his mother? Does he have any other feelings for her? How do his feelings about his mother differ from the way he feels about his father?

## Topic 5

Why does Ichiro's mother commit suicide? What are her beliefs about the world, and how do those beliefs create problems for her? Why does she think that if Ichiro were to join the American army, it would destroy her?

## Topic 6

What is Ichiro's relationship with Kenji? How does Kenji handle things differently than Ichiro does? Why do you think Kenji behaves the way he does?



## Topic 7

What does Ichiro mean when he thinks about Freddie near the end of the book and says he (Ichiro) feels “sadly cheated”? How does Freddie handle having spent time in prison, and how is this different from the way Ichiro and Gary react?

## Topic 8

Give some examples from the book about times when people who have been the victims of hatred and discrimination act in a mean way towards others. Why do you think this happens? What characters in the book believe that this is wrong?