So Far from the Bamboo Grove Study Guide

So Far from the Bamboo Grove by Yoko Kawashima Watkins

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Eleven-year-old Yoko and her family are stationed in North Korea during World War II while Yoko's father works as a Japanese government official in nearby Manchuria.

They live in a bamboo grove in Nanam until the Russian and Korean Communists invade their country and escalate their war against Japan. Because Yoko's father protects Japanese interests, the family knows they are in particular danger and must flee the country as soon as possible. So Far from the Bamboo Grove tells the story of their escape. Yoko, her mother, and her sister Ko learn of the urgency of their escape one night as Corporal Matsumura comes to their house and instructs them to leave immediately. Frightened and heartsick at having to leave Yoko's father at work in Manchuria and her brother Hideyo at work in an ammunitions factory, the three women embark on their journey alone. They travel by train and on foot. They hide by day and they walk by night. They withstand gunfire, disease, poverty, and near starvation.

Finally, they arrive in Seoul, travel by train to Pusan, and board a ship to Japan. Once in Japan, however, Yoko's mother dies from exhaustion and defeat, and Yoko and her sister Ko must learn to survive on their own. Their strength and determination leads them to success. Japan loses the war, but Yoko emerges victorious. Watkins's gripping tale of courage and strength recounts the plight of refugees through the story of Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo, many of whom withstood similar harrowing ordeals and struggled to survive during years of political unrest.

About the Author

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

Plot Summary

As the end of the Second World War develops for Japan, a Japanese family that lives in northern Korea becomes embroiled in their deadly struggles with Korean Communists, Korean rape gangs and the harsh approaching winter. Yoko Kawashima is the youngest child and narrator of the story. At only eleven years of age, she must accompany Mother and her older sister, Ko, as they move southward toward Seoul, the port town of Pusan, and eventually back to Japan. Rushed out of their home, they must flee without waiting for Hideyo, the eldest child, and Father, who works in Manchuria.

Mother and the two sisters first attempt escape on a medical train. Korean Communists stop and search the train for Japanese people, whom they shoot on sight. A nurse and medic help the family to avoid detection. Later on, planes bomb the train and disable it, forcing the family to walk the rest of the way to Seoul.

Three Korean Communists nearly kill the family, but a freak bomb from an airplane kills the soldiers. The family survives the bomb by hitting the dirt quickly, although Yoko sustains injuries to her ear and chest. In Seoul, a doctor tends to her infected injuries. The family cannot stay in Seoul for long, because Korean rape gangs roam about looking for Japanese girls. Mother shaves Ko's and Yoko's heads to disguise them as boys.

Arriving in Japan and relative safety, the family tries to contact Mother's parents, but they have perished from the bombing and nothing remains of their town, Aomori. Stressed to her limits, Mother dies in the Kyoto train station. Ko and Yoko must fend for themselves.

The two sisters continue their schoolwork that Mother had arranged for them. They find shelter in a warehouse through Mrs. Masuda, a kindly woman, and struggle to survive the upcoming winter. Meanwhile, Hiyedo nearly dies, as he makes his escape from Korea and is saved by the Kim family. The Kim family cares for Hiyedo and nurses him to health. In the springtime, he continues his journey back to Japan.

Yoko and Ko deal with their fellow students, and Yoko wins an essay contest that is published in the Kyoto paper. A friend of the family, Corporal Matsumura, notices Yoko's name and makes contact. He becomes the two sisters' primary benefactor, thus ensuring their survival. Hideyo reunites with his sisters, and the story ends with Yoko feeling safe and secure with her family. Father returns to Japan from a Siberian prison camp six years later.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Near midnight on July 29, 1945, an eleven-year-old Japanese girl named Yoko who lives in Nanan, a northern village of Korea, must evacuate her house along with her sixteen-year-old sister, Ko, and their mother. The mother ties strings to the sisters' wrists in order that they do not lose each other in the night. The son, Hideo, and Father work away from Nanan. The mother and sisters must leave without them.

The author flashes back. The Japanese family lives in Korea because the father works for the government in Manchuria. World War II has progressed to where police barge into the house and demand metal for the war effort. They take everything, including the mother's wire-rimed glasses and wedding ring. Yoko becomes upset and bites one of the policemen. The policeman kicks her unconscious, breaking some of her ribs in the process.

When home, the father directs the family to dig a shelter in a bamboo grove and prepare emergency bundles to be kept near the door. Yoko must help dig ditches around her school, where she studies calligraphy, classic Japanese dancing and tea ceremonies. One day in April, Yoko's teacher, Mr. Enomoto, announces that Tokyo has been bombed and most of its inhabitants killed. This brings immense sadness to Yoko's family and village.

Yoko is chosen as one of the students to entertain wounded soldiers from a nearby hospital. The sight of the soldiers frightens Yoko, but she performs regardless, with prompting from her older sister. One very badly wounded soldier cannot attend the dance. Major Ryu asks that Yoko and Ko visit the soldier to try and cheer him up.

Yoko and Ko visit Corporal Matsumura, who is bandaged head to toe. The Corporal takes to Yoko, and later visits her house. He tells her that she gave him the will to recover from his wounds. Corporal Matsumura becomes a friend to the family and visits often.

Hideyo decides to join Yokaren, the student army, and fight for his country. This upsets his mother to the point that the two stop talking to each other. Ko confronts Hideyo and tells him he is throwing his life away. The war is lost if old men, the wounded and students must carry on the fighting. Hideyo yells back at her, but also shouts that he will take care of the situation. When the family receives the results from his written exam, everyone is overjoyed to see that he failed the test. Ko recognizes that her brother purposefully failed the test. Hideyo must now work in a factory rather than going to a near certain death in war.

Corporal Matsumura tells the family that they must leave immediately. The Russians have landed nearby. The family prepares to leave, and Yoko gives the corporal a

calligraphy note that reads, *Good Luck in War*. Corporal Matsumura kisses her forehead and wishes her luck too. The family departs to catch a train to Seoul, leaving the men behind by necessity.

Chapter 1 Analysis

War affects families in various ways. Hideyo's urge to join the military is a common reaction, while Ko's objections to her brothers choice is also common. A main theme begins when Hideyo purposefully fails the military entrance exam in order to stay close with his family. Events happen too quickly for Mother, Ko and Yoko to wait for Hideyo, and the family becomes torn apart. The story follows both lines from this point, and intersects at the end.

Corporal Matsumura becomes an important friend to the family, and Yoko foreshadows his importance. "Then Ko, Mother, and Mr. Fukui wished the Corporal a speedy recovery and we left, to my great relief. How could I know this man was to be important in my life?" (pp. 13-24.) Just how this happens is not revealed until near the end of the story.

The tone and pacing for the story is set in the first chapter. The plot moves along quickly, with refugees fleeing an advancing threat. The tone keeps to the relatively simple observations of an eleven-year-old. The world has started to shock Yoko's sensibilities, from the soldiers taking all the metal out of the house to the wounded soldiers, some with no arms or legs. Yoko has the natural shyness of a child and a charming heart, yet a fierceness that can get her into trouble, such as when the soldier stomps on her while she bites him.

Mother's, Ko's and Hideyo's characters start their development straight off. Mother always thinks of her family first and does what she can to keep it together. Ko has a kindness and sweetness about her. Hideyo can be hotheaded, but he does listen to others. As with the plot, character development moves swiftly along.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

As Yoko and her family make their ways to the train station, they hear the sound of marching feet and hide among wild irises. Yoko becomes sick and throws up, nearly revealing their hiding place. The soldiers march on by.

The family makes it to the train station, which is crowded with the sick and wounded. After having some difficulty with the stationmaster, they board a crowded boxcar near a woman with a baby and another pregnant woman. While riding the train, the woman's baby dies, as do several of the other passengers. The pregnant woman gives birth.

While stopped to take on coal and water, Korean Communists search the train for Japanese. A medic and nurse disguise the family as very sick people and tell the Korean Communists that Mother has small pox. The soldiers quickly leave the boxcar. Farther along, planes fly by and bomb the train, disabling it. The family must walk the rest of the way to Seoul.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The advancing Russian troops are not nearly the threat that the Korean Communists become. They seek out Japanese people and kill them on sight out of resentment for being under Japanese rule for so long. Another major theme starts developing when the medic and nurse help out the family, and in effect save their lives. The family shows kindness to others and receives kindness from others, while carnage happens all around. Planes bomb the train even though this is against the law, although war often violates all rules of behavior. Atrocities to war are like hail to thunderstorms. Atrocities do not happen all the time, but enough to be generally predictable.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The family follows the train tracks toward Seoul. Ko scouts ahead and helps Yoko to cross a frightening trestle over a river. One day a group of three Korean Communist soldiers come upon the family, and things look grim until a plane drops a bomb and kills all three soldiers. The family survives, because they hit the ground faster than the soldiers. Yoko has an injured ear and chest. They take the soldiers' uniforms and wear them in order to travel undetected in daylight.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The family begins to show resolve and innovation. The bomb that kills the soldiers also provides the family with uniforms that they use as camouflage, not for hiding in the woods but for walking along the railroad tracks. Yoko's smallness is a problem though. The family is lucky that nobody looks too closely to see that only one member, Ko, makes a convincing soldier. Still, luck is on their side, starting with the bomb that kills the soldiers. Only Yoko is injured, and not critically.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

At the factory where Hideyo works, the Korean Communists make a raid to kill all the Japanese youth who work there. Hideyo successfully hides and escapes with three friends, Makoto, Shinzo and Shoichi. The four young Japanese friends return to their village and find their houses ransacked by the Korean Communists. Hideyo takes food and supplies, including his family's savings book. The four friends change out of their Japanese school uniforms into Korean clothing. They follow the railroad tracks south, toward Seoul, and along the way, they discover that Japan has lost the war.

The four friends encounter two Russian soldiers and pass themselves off as Korean Communist members. The soldiers tell the boys where to find a small river and that the Communist Army Headquarters in Tanch'on is hiring laborers. Hideyo and his friends discover that the labor involves the disposal of Japanese corpses into Tanch'on Bay, but they do the work anyway. Hideyo leaves his friends and continues on his way to Seoul, while his friends seek out their relatives.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Hideyo witnesses the cruelty of the Korean Communists and is outraged. However, he keeps his head about him and uses his mastery of the Korean language to mask his and his friend's nationality from the Russians. To the Russian eye, the Japanese must look the same as the Koreans. The work of corpse disposal is a hideous result of war, yet a necessary part of the boys' escape. Survival often requires doing distasteful things.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Ko discovers a farmer's field and negotiates for corn and tomatoes, even though the farmer hates Japanese. She convinces him with her flawless Korean. Mother is disappointed that Ko has become a liar and a robber, and Ko replies that she does what she must. Yoko's chest and ear wounds continue to hurt.

The family makes it to Seoul, where they are interrogated, being as they wear Korean Communist uniforms. They learn that the war is over and hear about the atomic bombs that had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Doctor Takeda attends to Yoko's wounds. He removes a piece of shrapnel from her ear and dresses her chest wound, then gives Mother medicine to apply at regular intervals to treat the infections. The family stays at the train station and waits for Hideyo. Ko scrounges for food in garbage cans, while Mother shaves their heads and binds Ko's breasts so they appear to be boys, and thus avoid rape. Ko teaches Yoko how to scrounge for food.

The family takes a train south to the port town of Pusan after waiting as long as they could for Hideyo. Seoul had become too dangerous due to the number of rapes going on, perpetrated by Koreans who hate the Japanese. Before leaving, the family carves messages for Hideyo in the station posts. More rapes happen in Pusan, but the disguises work for the family, and they now wait for a ship to Japan.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Ko uses her head to obtain food for the family, even if it means lying to the farmer. The finer points of ethics mean nothing when it comes to survival, which is Ko's stance. It might be noble to speak truthfully, but in this situation nobility can also be deadly.

Seoul becomes a two-edged sword for the family. The doctor takes care of Yoko's wounds, but the Koreans have started raping Japanese girls. Using more disguises to make them look male, the family again employs its resourcefulness for survival. However, a quick exit from Korea must be the next move. The only safe haven for the family is Japan.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

As Hideyo makes his way to Seoul, he fights starvation by eating mushrooms and tries his best to stay warm in the cold fall air. A squad of Korean Communist soldiers causes him to lose the railroad tracks, but he comes back upon them. He sees a group of Japanese people walking along the tracks, and the Korean Communists gun them down. Hideyo decides that paralleling the tracks through the forest is the only safe way to continue on.

The weather becomes colder, and Hideyo nears starvation and freezing to death. While caught in a blizzard, he loses consciousness, as he tries to make it to an occupied farmhouse.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Like the rest of the family, Hideyo is a survivor. He uses whatever resources are at hand for sustenance and keeps moving. He also recognizes danger when he sees it, although the gunning down of a mass of people might have shocked him even farther. The Korean Communists are ruthless. His strength of will keeps him going through the blizzard to the farmhouse, although the natural urge while freezing to death is to sleep.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The family arrives in Japan, where they expect to be cared for by Yoko's grandparents. They report to the refuge camp, and the next day Mother tries to contact her parents in Aomori by mail. The mail is returned as undeliverable. They stay for weeks waiting for Hideyo to arrive, but then leave for Aomori by train. Mother decides that Ko and Yoko should stay in Kyoto and attend school, so the family gets off the train at the Kyoto station. Mother arranges for the school and continues on to Aomori. Yoko notices that Mother takes a big wrapping cloth with her to the restroom, which seems a strange thing to do.

On a streetcar that takes them to the Sagano Girl's School, Mother points out landmarks for Yoko. Kyoto is still in good shape, because the city was not bombed during the war. The school accepts Yoko, and Mother leaves to take Ko to her university. Mother tells Yoko to take streetcar number three to get back to the train station.

Yoko helps with a cleaning assignment and meets the janitor, a middle aged man with a stutter. He lets her take discarded papers and pencils. When she returns to the Kyoto train station, Yoko tells Mother about her first day in school. The other students had laughed at Yoko, and she says that the girls have a lot to learn. Mother leaves for Aomori.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Even in wartime, a certain amount of humanity can survive. Kyoto was not bombed due to its lack of strategic targets, and very possibly because of its beauty. Contrasting with this is the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two horrifying uses of the atomic bomb. Debates still surface at times on whether the bombings were necessary to end the war with Japan, but the fact remains that two cities were entirely wiped off the map with only two bombs. The other fact remains that some parts of Japan were not bombed at all.

The strong character of Mother keeps Ko and Yoko on a path to civilization. She insists that they continue with their studies. Yoko has grown up rapidly during the flight from Korea. She recognizes the other students as the spoiled children of affluent families that did not taste the terror and carnage of war. She recognizes herself as an honorable survivor who deserves better treatment, but must accept the reality that some people are uncompassionate jerks.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The next class day, the janitor talks with Yoko and enjoys her slow way, which helps him speak fluently. He starts saving anything that she might be able to use in her studies. The other students draw an insulting picture of Yoko and post it on a bulletin board. This causes Yoko to vow not to attend school any longer, but being unable to tell Ko, she decides to keep on going to class.

When Mother returns from Aomori, she tells Ko and Yoko that her parents are dead and that nothing is left from the bombings. Mother dies later that day. Mrs. Masuda helps the family to bring Mother to the crematorium, thirty minutes before Ko returns from the University. Ko and Yoko pick up Mother's ashes the next morning and use a mess kit as an urn. A Buddhist monk refuses to say a prayer for Mother, which causes Yoko to vow not to ever step foot in a Buddhist temple.

Mrs. Masuda allows Ko and Yoko to stay in an unheated warehouse room. They clean up the place and build a small shrine for Mother.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Mother's death is a serious blow to Ko's and Yoko's spirits, yet they have no choice but to keep on surviving. Pausing for grief is not an option. The two still have their survivalist legs and move on to what lies ahead. The incident with the monk does immense harm to Yoko's young sense of spirituality, causing her to swear off Buddhism completely. The monk likely has no idea of what he just did. He is having a bad day, probably. To Ko and Yoko, every day has been bad since leaving the bamboo grove. They have no room for sympathy.

Mrs. Masuda is kindness personified. She does not go out of her way to help Ko and Yoko, or at least she claims not to. This could be another part of Japanese culture, where providing assistance must be done in a way that does not oblige the receivers of the assistance. Ko and Yoko are thankful, but the do not need to feel like beggars.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Ko and Yoko talk about their departed mother. They naturally feel grief stricken, yet they puzzle over how Mother had told Yoko to hang on to the wrapping cloth, as if the cloth were somehow valuable. Unable to solve the puzzle, they sleep in the warehouse room.

The next morning Yoko discovers that paper is between the layers of fabric that make up the wrapping cloth. Ko investigates and finds a zippered pocket with money in it, thirty-six thousand yen, which is the equivalent of one hundred 1945 dollars.

After Ko and Yoko wash and find a fruit crate that will work as a table, Mr. and Mrs. Masuda talk with the sisters. Mrs. Masuda offers old kitchen pots for the girls' use, and Mr. Masuda asks if the room is working out for them. Ko goes to a grocery store to purchase food and supplies. She buys a razor blade to rip apart the military uniforms and makes winter coats out of them.

As the year rolls into December, the girls at Yoko's school start calling her Rag Doll and Trash Picker, which upsets Yoko. She tries not to react to their taunts. Her only friend is the janitor, Mr. Naido, who picks up bottles and cans that he sells. He agrees to sell any cans that Yoko brings in and give her the money. Meanwhile, Yoko's shoes start falling apart.

From a newspaper that she picks up for fuel, Ko reads that the Japanese government is giving out futon mattresses for refugees. Ko and Yoko take their refugee certificates, along with Mother's, and pick up three futons from the city hall. The futons make sleeping in the unheated warehouse more tolerable. Ko and Yoko begin to make dolls and beanbags for selling at the port and door-to-door. When Yoko goes to a popular shrine to sell her wares, she discovers that Ko shines shoes to make extra money.

Yoko takes the money she has been saving for a new pair of shoes and instead spends it on a New Year's Eve feast. She wants to treat Ko to a good meal, since it is not only New Year's Eve, but also the eve of both of their birthdays. In Japan, everyone has the same birthday, regardless of the actual day of birth. Ko tells Yoko that she should not have spent her shoe money on the New Year's Eve feast, and Yoko's generosity to her sister brings tears to Ko's eyes.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Little by little, Ko and Yoko improve the quality of their lives. The discovery of Mother's money cache gives them emergency funds, and they are wise to parcel it out for only the absolute necessities, which at this point consist of school tuition. Besides money, Yoko makes a friend in Mr. Naido. With all the taunting of her classmates, Yoko needs

someone who is on her side. Mr. Naido knows what the other students do to her, where the teachers are not aware of the misbehavior.

Emotion in the story reaches a pinnacle at the end of the chapter. The simplicity of the prose disarms the reader's aversion to feel emotion, and the parallel elegant dignity of the tea ceremony enhances Ko's reaction to Yoko's New Year's Eve and birthday gift of green tea. The chapter ending carries with it a poetic strength and impact of remarkable power, producing an image like a fine painting. Two Japanese girls sit at a fruit crate table dressed as refugees. The older girl drinks reverently from a wooden bowl using both hands as tears run down her cheek. The younger girl watches on with a pleased but subdued expression. In the background is an innocuous shrine to a mess kit.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

After the ten-day school vacation for New Year's, Yoko discovers that a newspaper is holding an essay contest, with the top prize of ten thousand yen. She enters the contest and wins the top prize, but the subject of her essay is critical about the way the other school children treat her, and this does not please the students or teachers.

A week later the principle calls Yoko into his office. He has a letter from Corporal Matsumura, who now lives in Kyoto. Corporal Matsumura recognized Yoko's name when it appeared in the paper with the winning essay, and he wants to make contact. Yoko tells Ko about the letter, which contains a reply postcard, and mails the card with contact information. Two days later, the Corporal appears at Yoko's school. They ride together in the streetcar to the warehouse.

Corporal Matsumura tells of his war experience and marriage. He pays homage to Mother's urn and gives a watch to Yoko as a present for her brother, when he returns. He promises that if he and his wife have a female baby, they will name her Yoko.

Chapter 10 Analysis

When Yoko enters the essay contest, she uses her talent for writing to further her and Ko's survival. Circumstances can take away a person's belongings and transform the person into a refugee, but talent is impossible to take, other than through death. Yoko naturally writes about what she knows, which is a basic principle of writing, and her subject matter inevitably repulses the school and students. Yoko has the upper hand though, because her studies are faultless, and she has done nothing wrong besides telling the truth. If the school or students were to object, people would likely think that they protest too much, an indication of guilt. Alternatively, polite Japanese society might consider protesting a contest winner as highly dishonorable. In either case, Yoko wins the contest and relief from the students' taunts. Her luck takes a turn for the better in more ways than she knows at this point.

The essay in the newspaper gives Corporal Matsumura a clue as to where Yoko is. He follows up on his hunch and reunites with Yoko and Ko, which is a richer gift than winning the essay contest. Corporal Matsumura considers Ko, and especially Yoko, part of his family. The two sisters find a reliable and affluent benefactor in Corporal Matsumura, thus ensuring their survival.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

The Kim family, Mr. and Mrs. Kim and their two teenaged sons, Hee Cho and Hee Wang, discover Hideyo, when he approaches and passes out from the cold against their farmhouse door. Mr. Kim decides that he will take Hideyo on as his nephew. Mrs. Kim nurses Hideyo back to health. As soon as he can, Hideyo helps the family with the daily farm tasks and the children's education. When spring comes, Hideyo decides to leave for Japan.

While crossing a guarded river, the Communists open fire on him. He dives to avoid the gunfire and crosses unharmed. The next day he asks directions to Seoul, about forty miles away. He arrives in Seoul and searches for his family, but gives up after discovering that the Kawashima name is not on the refugee list. He takes a train to Pusan and a boat to Japan. At Maizuru he finds his name on a bulletin board, along with his sisters' address.

Corporal Matsumura employs Ko as a kimono seamstress and sends packages of food. He offers to be the contact point for a radio announcement that requests information on Hideyo and their father, Yoshio. Yoko finishes the school term with straight A's. As Yoko prepares a special meal to celebrate her good grades, Hideyo runs to her.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The Kim family saves Hideyo's life and nurtures him back to strength. The Kim family helps Hideyo in a similar manner that the nurse and medic enabled Mother, Ko and Yoko to survive the Korean Communists who were looking for Japanese on the medical train. In both situations, an amount of deception is required. Mr. Kim claims Hideyo as a nephew, while the nurse and medic tell the soldiers that Mother has a contagious illness.

Hideyo must use courage and determination to escape Korea as well. His story nearly parallels Yoko's, except he blends in better with native Koreans and does not need to worry about Korean rape gangs. From the kindness of others, and by using courage and endurance, Hideyo successfully reaches Japan and reunites with Ko and Yoko. This scene brings the emotion to a final pinnacle, the plot climax.

A short anticlimax follows, but leaves the fate of Father unknown. However, the Notes from the Publisher clear this up. "Yoko's father returned from a prison camp in Siberia six years later" (p. 183.) The reader may assume that Hideyo takes on the role of Father for the next six years, finds work, moves the family into a modest and heated house, and rejoices with the rest when Father returns. The family suffers the loss of Mother but gains a depth of love that most families never attain, and Yoko grows far beyond her

years. The worst of humanity comes out in wartime, but so does the best. The same can be said about natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or any extremely stressful condition.

Characters

Yoko

Yoko is the eleven-year-old Japanese girl, who narrates the story. She does not understand much of why the war is going on, but she does understand that the Korean Communists want to kill her, her sister and her mother. She also understands that her brother and father are in grave danger as the Second World War comes to an end with a Japanese defeat.

Yoko's character changes from a whining eleven-year-old to a strong and resolved young woman, as she escapes Korea with her family. Her character also develops a depth of compassion not ordinarily found in girls of her age. Terror and suffering accelerate her into a wisdom that few adults attain in peacetime. She recognizes that the other students at the Sagano Girls' School have much to learn about life, while she befriends Mr. Naido, a man whom society usually ignores due to his stuttering.

Japanese customs require a show of respect for people, but in Yoko's case, her respect is genuine and from the bottom of her soul, not something that is done because the rules of etiquette expect it. She learns to accept Ko's bossiness as necessary for their survival and makes sure that on New Year's Eve, Ko has green tea to drink. This simple show of affection and respect brings tears to Ko's eyes. He is usually the strong one.

Ko

Ko is Yoko's sixteen-year-old sister, and her unofficial guardian after Mother dies. Yoko thinks that Ko is selfish until, while crossing a railroad trestle over a raging river, Ko carries her little sister to ensure that she does not fall between the railroad ties and into the water.

Resilient and bold, Ko scouts ahead for danger or opportunity, while the family walks toward Seoul. She displays survival skills by conning corn and tomatoes from a farmer and by scrounging in the garbage for whatever food she can find. Her skills extend to being able to sew a kimono with colored thread and not make it show, a talent that brings in business from Colonel Matsumura, a strong friend of the family.

The two sisters grow very close together while living in the Kyoto warehouse. They know that survival depends upon tight cooperation, and even after finding money in Mother's wrapping cloth, Ko shines shoes for a few yen every day after her studies at the University. She becomes a stronger and highly honorable person during the flight from Korea and her stay in the warehouse. Nothing is beneath Ko when it comes to survival, save prostitution. Although poverty stricken, she maintains the family honor.

Mother

Mother is the head of the family as it flees the mortal dangers in Korea. Her greatest strength is endurance, as she tries to keep Yoko and Ko safe however she can until they reach Japan. Mother is clever in the ways of the world. She makes Ko and Yoko look like boys to avoid the rape gangs, and hides money in her wrapping cloth. Mother can be intimidating too, as when she threatens an aggressive man with the family's short sword.

Education for Yoko and Ko is Mother's top priority once they reach Japan and start to settle into Kyoto. Unfortunately, Mother's body gives out shortly after she returns from her parents' residence, where she discovers that both are dead and nothing remains from the bombings. Nevertheless, Ko keeps up with the education priority after Mother dies. Mother leaves an admirable legacy for her daughters.

Hideyo

Hideyo is Yoko's brother and the eldest sibling. He escapes the dangers of Korea by posing as a native Korean. A snowstorm nearly kills him, but he manages to find a farmhouse. The Kim family takes care of him through the winter and into spring, when he decides to leave for Japan. Crossing over into South Korea and relative safety involves a dramatic river crossing while Korean Communist soldiers fire upon Hideyo, and he must dive under the water to avoid the bullets. He eventually makes it back to Japan and reunites with his sisters.

Corporal Matsumura

Corporal Masumara is a good friend of the Kawashima family. He first meets Yoko while wounded and in despair. He refuses to eat due to his extensive injuries. Yoko visits the corporal in the hospital, dressed in a fine kimono for performing classic Japanese dance. Corporal Masumara becomes enchanted with Yoko and decides that he must fight for his life.

The Corporal recovers from his wounds and rejoins the war. Afterwards, he discovers Yoko's name in the Kyoto newspaper for winning an essay contest. He writes the school to regain contact with Yoko and her family, which works. He then becomes a benefactor for Yoko and Ko.

Mr. Kim

Mr. Kim is the farmer who takes in Hideyo. Mr. Kim invents a story that Hideyo is his nephew and treats Hideyo as if family throughout the winter. He asks Hideyo to stay, when he decides to leave for Japan.

Mrs. Masuda

Mrs. Masuda helps Ko and Yoko while in Kyoto. She arranges for the cremation of Mother in a way that does not cost too much money. Later on, she offers the warehouse room and gives them old pots and pans for cooking.

Mr. Naido

Mr. Naido is the man whom Yoko befriends at the Sagano Girl's School. He scrounges for school supplies and gives them to Yoko. He also accepts bottles and cans from her to sell, then gives her the money. Yoko has a profoundly positive influence on Mr. Naido, because she talks slowly with him. This way, Mr. Naido can talk slowly too and avoid the speech blockage of stuttering.

Korean Communists

The Korean Communists are the primary antagonists in the story. They kill Japanese people on sight, and thus must be avoided. A freak bombing as the family sets off for Seoul kills three Korean Communists who are about to murder the family. Korean Communists almost discover the family in the medical train, but the quick thinking of a medic and nurse turns them away. Hideyo also must deal with the Korean Communists, but he successfully passes himself as native Korean. When he crosses the river, he must dive to avoid the rifle fire from the Korean Communists.

South Korean Men

The South Korean men are also mostly antagonists. The family must deal with aggressive men in the station while waiting for a boat to Japan, and also when the men celebrate a holiday by raping refugee Japanese women and girls.

Sagano Girls' School Students

The students at the Sagano Girls' School constantly taunt Yoko, because she is poor. The other students come from affluent families and are spoiled. Yoko takes the abuse in stride most of the time, and she finds that because the other students throw away perfectly good school supplies, she can obtain her supplies from the trash. The students call her Rag Doll and Trash Picker.

Objects/Places

Nanam

Nanam is Yoko's hometown in the northwestern part of Korea. She was born there and knows nothing about Japan, other than her studies in school, before fleeing the Korean Communists.

Railroad Tracks

The railroad tracks are important pathways for the family as it makes its way south. Hideyo also uses the tracks as guidance on his journey. The Korean Communists murder Japanese people who are unlucky enough to be spotted on the tracks.

Seoul

Seoul is the capital of South Korea and a common destination for the Japanese people running away from the Korean Communists.

Pusan

Pusan is a southern port town in Korea and a destination for refugees who want to return to Japan.

Maizuru

Maizuru is a port town on the main part of Japan. Refugees returning to Japan first land at Maizuru.

Kyoto

Kyoto is a beautiful inland city in Japan that was spared from bombing during the war. Ko and Yoko live there, and Hideyo returns to Kyoto and reunites with his sisters.

Warehouse

The warehouse is where Ko and Yoko live in Kyoto. Their room is small and unheated, yet they make do with the Spartan lodging.

Sagano Girls' School

The Sagano Girls' School is where Yoko studies in Kyoto. She attains straight A's through her school term.

Mother's Wrapping Cloth

Mother's wrapping cloth is where Mother hides money. Yoko discovers the money after pondering about why Mother told her to hang on to it just before Mother died.

Yoko's Shoes

Yoko's shoes are in sad shape. She saves money to buy new shoes, but never gets around to it. The shoe with a floppy sole becomes a symbol of her poverty, her determination and her pride. She might not want new shoes very much, as they would contrast with her clothing and spirit.

Setting

Watkins begins her story in North Korea, moves into Seoul, South Korea, then into Pusan, a port city of Japan, and finally into Kyoto. These areas have been ravaged by war, and Watkins takes us behind the scenes and introduces us to the filthiest trains, the filthiest stations, and the filthiest people on both sides of the war. Her vivid descriptions of the devastation, the blood, and the stench allude to the ugliness of war. We picture the wreckage, and we feel the fear Yoko experiences when trying to navigate through such horrors without getting killed.

If we study the myths and traditions of Japan, we learn that the Japanese have a deep respect for the environment and the natural features of the land. Watkins describes how Yoko and her family use the Asian landscape to provide relief and protection. They bathe in the ponds and rivers, they hide in the brush, and they find food growing in the fields to sustain them.

Watkins uses the setting of her novel to highlight the contrast between war and peace, love and hate, evil and goodness.

During war, everything of beauty is destroyed, and the land that protects and provides for them crumbles, but eventually renews itself.

Social Sensitivity

The memories of her escape were so painful that it took Watkins thirty-one years before she could begin to write her story.

Her story is riveting and her message poignant, and anyone who reads about Watkins's experiences understands how deeply they must have molded her values and changed her outlook on life. Today Watkins lectures to children and young adults throughout the country and in other parts of the world as well. The stories she tells teach all of us important lessons about the sanctity of life, the value of love and kindness, and the necessity of world peace.

Both So Far from the Bamboo Grove and its sequel My Brother, My Sister, and I stress the importance of strength and perseverance in the face of tragedy. In this first book Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo brave hellish conditions and they survive amazing odds. Not only do they face gunfire and bombs and threats from hostile soldiers, but they face poverty and prejudice. These are problems many children struggle with today. Young people today who read Watkins's novel get the message that hardship breeds strength and fortitude. Yoko and Ko do what it takes to survive. They dress like boys to avoid being raped and they eat from garbage cans to avoid starvation. Forced into dire circumstances, these two girls learn how to be resourceful and how to take care of each other's needs. Ko sets an admirable example and Yoko follows suit. When the girls move into the warehouse in Kyoto, they have no coats to keep them warm, no money to buy food, and not even a bed to sleep on.

But Ko can sew. She cuts the uniforms they stole from the dead soldiers into small strips, and she uses them to make a coat for Yoko.

Yoko can shine shoes, and she uses the money she makes to buy a special dinner and green tea for Ko.

Watkins lived the most difficult years of her life without parents, but with an older sister who not only shared her determination to survive but who showed her unconditional love. Watkins's book teaches important lessons about love between siblings and about the importance of working together. Yoko and Ko leaned on each other and supported each other; they braved the world together and conquered it. The two sisters had lived a comfortable life in the bamboo grove in Nanam, and they never imagined they would spend years of their life fighting for life's most basic needs. Ko acts generously and selflessly and Yoko learns from her example. By the end of the book she has learned the importance of sharing, she has learned not to take comfort for granted, and she has learned that with strength and determination, she can survive. She has also learned the power of love. Strong familial bonds are typical in Japanese society, and the bond Yoko and Ko share becomes virtually unbreakable during their hardship. At the end of the novel, Hideyo finds them in Kyoto, and we know that the bonds among the three of them will only strengthen as they navigate through life together.

Yoko's experience as a refugee tested her strength and endurance, and she passed the test. By contemplating this test, we understand that through hardship we learn values. Many of these values Mrs. Kawashima taught her daughters while she was running with them; she certainly helped them recognize the value of love and family ties, but she helped them also recognize the value of education. It was not easy for Yoko to go to school in Kyoto; she was ridiculed by her schoolmates, called "rag doll" for coming to school in tattered clothes and a blanket for a coat, and called "trash picker" for having to search for food in garbage cans. But this made Yoko more determined than ever to succeed. Ko worked hard so that Yoko could go to school, and we know that her education and determination paid off. Readers will marvel at Yoko's courage and at the strength it must have taken for her to rise above the humiliation she felt, both in Korea and in Kyoto, and become the proud and successful woman she is today.

Literary Qualities

So Far from the Bamboo Grove pits good against evil, war against peace, strength against weakness, and creation against destruction. Unintentionally perhaps, Watkins uses the symbolism of the bamboo to emphasize the contrast. Before Yoko and her family are forced to flee their home, they live peacefully and comfortably in a bamboo grove, so it seems relevant to relate the role that bamboo plays in Japanese symbolism, an evergreen plant that symbolizes constancy. It is also a hearty plant and it lives an exceedingly long time, so it symbolizes longevity. Because the bamboo has strong roots and it always grows upright, it appears to show strength of character. It perseveres, even during hard times: the roots of the bamboo thrive, even in ice and snow, and they sprout multiple stems, which further indicate its strength and vitality.

Long ago, the Japanese took note of the bamboo's long life and perpetual foliage, and they labeled it not only a symbol of strength but a symbol of friendship as well.

Like friendship, it remains steadfast and true. Watkins may not have intentionally incorporated the symbolism of bamboo into her novel, but in analyzing the themes, it appears that Yoko and Ko embody the same qualities the Japanese attribute to their sacred plant. They too remain strong and they too persevere, even during hard times. And their love for each other remains steadfast and true. Furthermore, their peaceful life in the bamboo grove contrasts greatly with the violence they experience traveling through the war-ravaged areas of Korea.

Watkins draws parallels to compare the devastation of the land to the devastation of people's lives, and to compare the persecution she suffered as an escapee in Korea to the persecution she suffered as a destitute student in Kyoto. She seems to be alluding to the wreckage in her heart when she describes the wreckage caused by bombs and guns and when she describes the destructive comments made by Yoko's insensitive classmates. The death of Mrs. Kawashima is highly symbolic. Did the wreckage in her heart not also stem from the loss of her childhood world? Did Yoko not experience the death of innocence and the death of her old life? It is significant that the first task the sisters face after their mother's death is disposing of their mother's body. They manage to get a ride to a crematorium and pay for the cremation and urn for the ashes. They watch as the men in charge place their mother in the furnace.

According to Japanese tradition, Yoko and Ko are given the opportunity to light the fire, and Ko bravely lights it. Watkins then describes how the girls walk away from the furnace, down the hill in the twilight, and watch the smoke rise slowly and spread into the sky. This death and cremation seems symbolic of what Yoko and Ko and all the other Japanese refugees faced at the end of World War II. Their old life reduced to ashes, they had to move forward, painfully, and rebuild a new life in a new land, leaving everything they knew and loved behind.

Themes

Family Solidarity

The Kawashima family must pull together for mutual survival. Mother starts out as the strong unifying force, and later in the story, Ko takes over Mother's role after her death. At the same time, Yoko grows up quickly and becomes Ko's ally and friend, not just a whining little sister.

Hideyo's remarkable survival and recovery, as he tries to unite with his family illustrates just how strong the Kawashima family solidarity is. This solidarity comes from the mutual threat of the Korean Communists, but more needs to be in place, such as mutual respect and love, the foundations of a healthy family. The Japanese customs of showing respect for one another help, yet without sincerely felt fondness for one another, the family unit could disintegrate from the pressures of war and being refugees.

Courage and Endurance

Surviving in wartime and poverty takes grit. Mother lives until she is certain that her daughters will have a fighting chance at survival, then dies. She might have been running on sheer determination up until reaching Kyoto and discovering that her parents died in the war. Ko and Yoko do whatever they can to survive after Mother's death, and they hang onto their educations despite their mean living conditions.

Ko has the courage of youth, a boldness that comes from the typical notion in youth of being indestructible. Yoko has her youthful innocence as a source of courage, or rather faith, and endures as a matter of having no other choice. She becomes aware of what it takes during her Kyoto school days when the other students taunt her. A deep respect for Ko develops to where Yoko spends her shoe money on a special meal that includes green tea for her sister.

The Kindness of Strangers

The kindness of strangers helps the family to escape discovery by the Korean Communists and move through Korea to the southern coast. The family also shows kindness to the women in the medical boxcar. Hideyo survives the winter due to the kindness of a Korean family, and he tries to return the favor before he leaves for Japan. Ko and Yoko survive in Kyoto due to the kindness of Mrs. Masudo, and Yoko shows kindness to Mr. Naido. Mr. Naido returns the kindness by helping Yoko to obtain school supplies and a little money.

In times of traumatic experiences, people tend to help each other out. This is one of the more lovely traits in human societies, perhaps a rebellion against the ravages of nature and humankind's inhumanity to humans. People can treat each other horribly, as when

the Korean Communists murder the Japanese on sight, or when two entire cities are wiped out with only two bombs. Certainly historical arguments can be made as to why these events happened, but that reinforces the fact that people can treat each other with terrible cruelty. Conversely, people can treat each other with kindness, even if strangers. As shown in the story, the kindness leads to friendships, as when Corporal Masumara becomes a valued friend to the family.

Poverty and Pride

Ko shines shoes for extra money but does not tell Yoko about it. When Yoko discovers the truth, she never mentions the situation. Both sisters are protecting each other's pride in the face of crushing poverty. Ko never lets taunting comments phase her in the University, and Yoko follows suit. They are poor, but they are also very good at their studies.

The affluent students follow a typical human response. When a person is down, try to make life more miserable by taking away any shred of pride left. As Yoko comments, these people have a lot to learn about life. Her family was once like the students' families, affluent and perhaps capable of doing the same things. But after experiencing terror, pain, hopelessness, thirst, hunger and the stench of death, Ko and Yoko are actually superior to the other students. They only read about life, while Ko and Yoko live it. Eventually Ko and Yoko will be on top again, and it is a certainty that they will be stronger and more compassionate than most other people, especially those who have never been challenged in a similar way.

Sibling Love

The love that develops between Ko and Yoko is a thing of marvelous beauty. As the story starts out, sibling bickering happens between the two sisters. This is typical between the youngest and next oldest child, and often carries on into adulthood. The psychology of the rivalry is fairly simple. The next older child has it good until the youngest shows up and takes away the attention of the parents. Also, older children are often tasked with taking care of the youngest. Resentment naturally develops on both sides.

When siblings like this work together for some common purpose, the resentments can fade. With Ko and Yoko, the common purpose of survival is so fundamental among the needs of humans that the resulting love becomes one of the strongest known, rivaled only by the love between mother and child.

Yoko's love for Hideyo is different. He is the oldest and has some of the fatherly authority in the family, and although she tells his story with a similar passion as her own, the love is not nearly as close. It cannot be, for brother and sister experienced their traumas away from each other. It is a special experience to travel through hell together.

Themes/Characters

So Far from the Bamboo Grove is a story about strength, perseverance, and personal victory. At the start of the novel, Yoko, her sister Ko, and her brother Hideyo live with their mother in Nanam, North Korea, during a time of political upheaval when hostilities are raging between the Koreans and the Japanese. It is 1945, and word has just reached Korea that Japan is losing the war.

Tokyo has been bombed, Russian communist troops have invaded North Korea, and angry Koreans have vowed revenge against the Japanese for years of political oppression. The Japanese people living in Korea must flee for their lives, and as the family of a Japanese government official, Yoko and her mother and sister are among the first to flee. Devastated and frightened, the three of them embark on a harrowing journey. In describing that journey Watkins tells a poignant tale of endurance and survival.

During this time in history, anger and hatred toward Japan led the Korean communists to commit horrible human rights violations against the Japanese people. Japan had ruled Korea for thirty-five years, and as soon as Japan lost the war, Korean communists forced the Japanese out of the country.

They raped them and killed them. They dropped bombs from airplanes and ravaged them in the fields as they tried to escape. Japanese refugees had a long and dangerous journey before they reached Seoul, South Korea and then Japan. Thousands were killed or died of starvation or disease. But thousands more reached the port cities of Japan each day and faced the task of re-establishing their identity and building new lives in a country that had been devastated by Allied bombs. Yoko and her sister are fortunate; they survive.

Watkins lived this nightmarish adventure as the young Yoko, and the experience molded her life view forever.

So Far from the Bamboo Grove is classified an autobiographical novel, and Watkins reveals her thoughts as she describes her journey across the war-ravaged land. We understand Yoko's plight and we ache for her. At eleven years of age she has seen more death and destruction than most people see in their lives. Trapped in a hostile country and surrounded by enemies, Yoko has to remain strong and fight to survive.

She learns about love and strength and values in the process. Watkins concentrates primarily on her escape with her mother and her sister Ko, but then she flashes to the escape of her brother Hideyo. Hideyo makes his escape after the women, traveling by himself to Seoul in a nightmarish adventure of his own. Hideyo shared his personal horrors with his sister years later, shortly before he died, and Watkins incorporates them into her book to further illustrate the devastating effects of war.

Watkins reveals little about Hideyo's character but she lets us know that he was loyal to both his family and to his people. He planned to join the armed forces, but failed the written exam—Ko says on purpose. But he left shortly thereafter to work in an ammunitions factory where he could serve his people in a less dangerous way. While Hideyo is away at the factory, Yoko, Ko and their mother get word that they must flee Korea immediately. The Russians have landed, and because Yoko's father works for Japanese interests, their family is in imminent danger. With not a minute to spare, Yoko, Ko, and their mother have no alternative but to leave without Mr. Kawashima and Hideyo. They write Hideyo a note telling him to meet them at the train station in Seoul. Then they slip out into the night, the three of them tied together with a rope.

It seems fitting that the three women begin their venture at night because the minute they leave the bamboo grove in Nanam they enter a dark, dangerous world.

Once Japan came close to defeat, life became increasingly tough in Nanam, and Yoko lived in constant fear of bombings and air raids. But never once did she imagine what lay beyond the bamboo grove; and she soon witnesses horrors far beyond her wildest dreams. It is not surprising that Watkins could not write about her escape for more than thirty years. We can imagine how she must have been haunted by the sights and sounds that characterized her world as a refugee.

The moans of injured people, dead bodies tossed from trains, the stench of tired and battered soldiers, and the warmth of blood-soaked clothing sticking to her skin— these were the sights and sounds of Yoko's world. Her experience in many ways typified the experience of thousands of other Japanese women forced out of Korea. Leaving the home in the bamboo grove must have been painful, knowing that they had to leave Hideyo, Mr. Kawashima, and their entire life behind them. Yoko had no understanding of how difficult it would be to make it safely out of the country and back to Japan. Watkins conveys the sense of fear she and all the refugees felt embarking on this journey. She makes clear the overwhelming sense of loss the refugees felt facing an unknown future and leaving their life and their loved ones behind them.

Corporal Matsumura, a friend from the Japanese army who warns Yoko and her family to flee Nanam, has ensured that Yoko and her family be allowed to board a medical train for Seoul. As they are crammed in the women's compartment with the injured, they see people sucking urine from toilets to quench their thirst, they see a dead baby tossed from the train, and they see the women and children suffering from pain and near starvation. The next day the Korean Communist Army invades their compartment looking for Yoko and her family and other political fugitives. The medic and the nurse throw Yoko roughly on the floor and they smear Ko and her mother with blood so they look like the other injured passengers. Their persecutors leave, but that night the Koreans attack the train. Yoko, Ko, and their mother generously leave their precious provisions of food and water for an injured woman who just gave birth, and they jump out of their compartment.

The medical train is disabled forty-five miles from Seoul, and Yoko, Ko, and their mother have no choice but to continue their journey on foot. To remain safe, they travel by

night, in darkness, and they sleep by day, hidden in wild rushes. In vivid detail Watkins describes the treacherous journey that lies ahead of them, and she makes us painfully aware of the horrifying plight of all Japanese refugees trying to escape. She outlines the dangers for girls, particularly, relating an especially frightening experience for sixteen-year-old Ko. When Korean soldiers appear out of nowhere and find the women en route to Seoul, they threaten to rape Ko, and the only thing that saves her is a bomb that drops from an airplane killing the soldiers. The incident leaves them shaken and terrified. Yoko sustains a piece of metal in her chest and another one in her ear.

After Ko's narrow escape with the soldiers, Yoko's mother shaves the girls' heads and orders them to don the smelly uniforms of the dead soldiers to protect themselves.

Life changes drastically for Yoko during her journey. At the age of eleven she must learn to live with constant pain and fear, and she learns lessons about survival that most of us never learn. Yoko is a strong child, but her sister Ko appears to be stronger, perhaps because at the time of their flight, Ko is sixteen years old and Yoko is still a young child. She is used to being pampered. Before the communists invaded North Korea, Yoko lived a comfortable life in the bamboo grove, and for a while, she whines and complains at her unfortunate change of circumstances. She soon learns that she must remain strong. Ko is the model of strength, and she often speaks harshly to Yoko and Yoko resents it. But she also protects Yoko, carrying her on her back when she gets tired and sharing food with her when she is hungry. Watkins briefly describes the tensions that rage between Yoko and Ko, but she also describes the deep love they share.

When the three finally reach the station at Seoul, Yoko and her family join the other escapees waiting for trains to Pusan, the port city where they will board a ship for Japan. The war is over, and thousands of other Japanese refugees are feeling the same pain Yoko is feeling, and they are facing the same challenges. Yoko discovers that her chest wound is infected and she is deaf in one ear where the piece of metal punctured her eardrum. She is treated by the doctors, and must remain there two weeks in a hospital tent. They live at the station for over a month. Hideyo never arrives, and they must finally board a freight train to Pusan without him. Watkins goes on to describe their fears and concerns on the train and at the station in Pusan. Rape is a constant worry; many of the Koreans are drunk—celebrating their independence from Japan—and they are after the women. So the women have to do whatever they can to protect themselves. They have to bind their breasts and stand to urinate like boys. Male refugees had equally horrendous experiences, and these are recounted via Hideyo, who has a harrowing escape. Men and women both must dig through garbage for food. The nearly die from hunger and thirst and exhaustion, and they are sick with fear.

Watkins recounts the suffering she endured and the pain she felt at leaving her old life behind and not knowing if she would ever again see Hideyo or her father. But at the same time she lets us know that she was never without hope. Battered and broken, she boards the ship for Japan with Ko and her mother and they feel an incredible sense of relief. After months of suffering, they will finally reach their beloved homeland and be reunited with their loved ones.

Yoko had imagined that Japan as a beautiful country full of cheerful people who would welcome them and make them feel safe. But when she arrives she finds her homeland devastated by bombs and reduced to rubble. Watkins's vivid descriptions of the wreckage conveys the message that war devastates both the land and the people. Not only do Yoko and her family find the Japanese cities demolished, but they discover that their grandparents have been killed. Mrs. Kawashima had left her children in Kyoto to attend school while she went to find her parents and discovered the loss. Battered and grief-stricken, she returns to Kyoto but dies shortly thereafter.

Yoko and Ko are then left alone in a strange city to fend for themselves.

They say that tragedy brings people together, and Watkins stresses the bond that develops between Yoko and Ko. With no money, no assets, and no place to live, they face new trials every day, and they face a desperate struggle simply to survive. But they do manage to survive and to pull their lives together. They find shelter above a clog warehouse, curl together to keep warm, and they manage to continue with their schooling and find food to eat, often by digging through garbage cans like they did on their journey. Ko takes on the role of protector, but during their time in Kyoto, Yoko matures and learns to become selfreliant. Watkins describes several instances when she becomes aware of her sister's selflessness. A particularly touching incident occurs near the end of the book when Yoko discovers her sister shining shoes to make money to pay for Yoko's food. At this point she wants nothing more than to show her sister her appreciation. She scrapes together what money she has and she buys food for a New Year's feast. As a special treat, she buys tea and a "cheaply made" teapot. Then for the first time, she prepares a meal herself. When Ko returns home to the warehouse, Yoko welcomes her warmly and serves her the feast. When at the end of the meal Yoko bows to Ko and pours her a cup of green tea, Ko is overwhelmed. We understand that the simple act of pouring tea, in Japanese culture, is a sincere gesture of respect.

Watkins succeeds in writing a gripping novel of tragedy and survival, and she chronicles both the horrors of war and Yoko's growth into a loving and respectful young woman. "I competed with life and death when young, and I won," Watkins says later in life. She won in many more ways. Not only did she survive her experi ence as a refugee but she also learned the true value of love and respect. She learned not to take life or life's comforts for granted, and she emerged from her experience with a profound sense of pride and a true understanding of the significance of sisterly and familial bonds.

Style

Points of View

Yoko tells the story primarily from her point of view, except when narrating Hideyo's parallel story. She then becomes the omniscient narrator, although limited in scope. She does not tell the story of her father in very much detail, possibly because he does not speak of his experiences after returning home six years later. Another possibility is that the father's experience is out of the overall story context.

Yoko is only eleven years old through most of the story, and her point of view is limited to what an eleven-year-old can comprehend during wartime. The author adds detail to keep the story meaningful, but not so much that the reader feels an adult voice does the narration. An amount of adult soul-searching does come through the narrative, as if the author tries to dispel extreme bitterness and resentment through the purging that can result from writing down a traumatic life story. This is especially noticeable when Yoko deals with the girls' school students.

"The streetcar passed with a roar, leaving sparkles between the rails. A girl yelled from a broken window, 'Rag Doll!' I bit my lip, feeling anger I could not control and wanting to smack that girl, whoever she was. I stamped the ties and pretended I was stamping on her" (p. 152.)

Setting

The home setting in Korea starts out comfortable and quickly turns into a terrifying place. If Japanese soldiers are not taking all metallic items in the house, then the Korean Communists are killing every Japanese person in sight. From here the settings continue to be terrifying and horrible as the family makes its way southward. Once in Japan, the settings become more benign, although still dangerous in their austerity.

Yoko's Kyoto school contrasts sharply with her home in the unheated warehouse. The warehouse is barely fit for habitation, but Ko and Yoko manage to turn the place into something resembling a home. Meanwhile, the school contains only spoiled children from affluent families and dim teachers with one exception, Mr. Naido. The furnace room setting becomes the only socially positive place in the school due to his friendship.

The Korean countryside, railroads and stations are the settings that the family must endure on their hazardous journey to Seoul and Pusan. Death and rape are always around them, but when they find a place on a ship to Japan, the dangers start to lessen. Even in the beautiful and untouched city of Kyoto, danger lurks, but it is nothing that Ko and Yoko cannot handle.

Language and Meaning

The language of the book is simple, as if an extended haiku. Meaning runs deep, as a simple statement carries powerful emotional impacts. Descriptions are minimal and always meaningful, so what seems sparse is actually carefully composed to accomplish the most with the fewest words. The author alludes to her training in classic Japanese poetry and how she had to compose her sentences carefully while writing her award-winning essay. This discipline extends to her English composition, and makes the work a long piece of poetry rather than a short novel. The reader might imagine the story done as a play with classic Japanese music in the background, and possibly a chorus.

The simplicity of the language not only works to tell the story in a powerful manner, but also reads as if a child is the narrator, not a married adult woman. Yoko's simple expressions of respect for her family and friends, and her basic feelings toward her enemies are appropriate to an eleven-year-old girl. As an adult, the author likely has more complex emotions that require extensive exposition.

Structure

The novel has two plots, Yoko's story and Hideyo's. Yoko's plotline follows along chronologically, while Hideyo's plotline consists of flashbacks. This is appropriate, due to Yoko not knowing what becomes of Hideyo while she lives her story. However, the transitions are not smoothly done, resulting in an angular structure that resembles two converging dashed lines. This minor weakness does not take away from the story's emotional impact, and trying to smoothen out the plotlines could result in less emotion. Sometimes angularity and dashed plotlines work. This story resembles a Japanese calligraphy character.

Action moves along very quickly. The plot covers many miles and months with long strides through brief scenes. The death of Mother is a major climax, while the ultimate climax is the reunion of Hideyo with Yoko. The story abruptly stops here, which some readers may find disturbing. Where does the family live next? What happens to Father? In the Western traditions of literature, anticlimax follows climax, where loose ends are usually tied up or trimmed away. This story does not follow those traditions. An abrupt ending could be perfectly acceptable in Japanese literature.

Adaptations

My Brother, My Sister and I (Simon and Schuster, 1994) is the highly praised sequel to So Far from the Bamboo Grove. In this work, Watkins continues her story of Yoko, Ko, and Hideyo as they build a new life in Kyoto. Year of Impossible Goodbyes, by Sook Choi (Econo-clad Books, 1999) also recounts a young girl's harrowing escape from Korea and details the horrifying experiences she had along the way.

One reviewer compared So Far from the Bamboo Grove to two notable holocaust survival stories. Aranka Siegal's Upon the Head of the Goat (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982) describes the suffering and bewilderment of a young Jewish child living in Hungary during its German occupation during World War II, and Ester Hautzig's The Endless Steppe (Harper Trophy, 1989) describes the experience of a young Siberian girl taken prisoner by the Russians and moved to a forced labor camp where she and her mother and grandmother must struggle to stay together and survive.

Topics for Discussion

1. Ko said that Hideyo purposely failed the written test to join the armed forces.

Do you think she was right? Why or why not?

2. Name several ways in which Yoko shows her gratitude to Ko.

3. What do you suppose drove Yoko to make friends with the stuttering man?

4. Why is Yoko so determined to do well in school?

5. How do Yoko and her family feel when they first arrive in Japan?

6. Often seeing so much violence and death desensitizes people. Do you think Yoko and Ko became desensitized? Why or why not?

7. Consider the plight of the Koreans who suffered for years under Japanese rule.

Does Watkins make any attempt to portray Koreans as sympathetic?

Essay Topics

Research the last days of the war with Japan during the Second World War. What were the political questions? What were the strategic problems? What might have been done differently?

The story is based on the author's experience, yet contains elements of fiction. Describe how the author uses dialog, exposition, character development, plot, description and theme to create a story that is both true and entertaining.

What symbolic functions do various objects in the story serve, such as Mother's wrapping cloth, Yoko's flopping shoe, Mr. Naido's speech impediment, and the fruit crate table serve?

The scene where Ko and Yoko ask the Buddhist monk to pray for Mother has a strong affect on Yoko's spirituality. How might this impact her attitudes as an adult?

What did Yoko do to inspire Corporal Matsumura? Why did this have such a strong impact upon him?

Research Japanese culture. Why does The Way of Tea have so much importance? Why is classic Japanese dance and music held in high esteem? Why is calligraphy considered a high art form?

When Yoko enters the essay contest, she wants to win the one-thousand-yen prize. What other motivations does she have?

Characterize the author's writing style with the understanding that English is her second language. How might the Japanese language and written forms influence her English writing style?

Imagine that the story is being turned into a screenplay. How should Father's return six years later be handled?

Jean Fritz writes in the Foreword, "When this book was accepted for publication, a writer friend told Yoko that now she would be competing with other writers. Yoko said, No, she would not compete with anyone for anything. 'I competed with life and death when young,' she said. 'And I won"' (no page number, second to last paragraph.) What does Yoko mean by this? How does the story support her meaning?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Gain some background to the Japanese-Korean relations during World War II. Do you think that Watkins realistically portrayed this situation in Korea or do you believe her account was biased?

2. Describe the different escape routes from Korea to Japan and outline some of the hardships the refugees may have faced along each route.

3. Discuss the Treaty of Portsmouth and outline its ramifications for families like Yoko's.

4. Discuss the ways the Japanese controlled the Koreans and treated them as second-class citizens in their own country.

Find instances from Watkins's book to support this.

5. Advance an argument for why the Japanese took control of Korea.

6. Describe some of the human rights violations Yoko witnessed on the escape route to Japan.

7. How did Hideyo's experience as a refugee differ from Yoko's? How was it different for men and for women?

8. Describe what Hideyo might have witnessed at the 38th parallel.

9. Choose another survival story from the related titles below. Compare and contrast Yoko's experience with the experience of one of the characters in these books.

Further Study

Bulletin of the Center for Children Books (June 1986): 199. A brief review of So Far from the Bamboo Grove.

Contemporary Authors, vol. 153. Detroit: Gale, 2000.

Fujita Sato, Gayle K. "Watkins, Yoko Kawashima." In Oxford Companion to Women's Writing. Edited by Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin.

Oxford University Press, 1995. This biographical entry on Watkins briefly describes the harrowing experiences she wrote about in So Far From the Bamboo Grove and it praises her success in reaching children and young adults with her messages about life, values, and world peace.

Sherman, Louise L. School Library Journal (September 1986): 147. A review of So Far from the Bamboo Grove.

Something about the Author, vol. 93. Detroit: Gale, 1997.

Twitchell, Ethel R. Horn Book (July-August 1986): 453. A review of So Far from the Bamboo Grove.

Ward, Nel. Voice Youth Advocates (AugustOctober 1986): 152. A review of So Far from the Bamboo Grove.

"Yoko Kawashima Watkins: So Far from the Bamboo Grove." In Literature and Its Times: Profiles of 300 Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events That Influenced Them, Vol. 4: World War II to the Affluent Fifties (1940's-1950's). Edited by Joyce Moss and George Wilson. Detroit: Gale Research, 1997. In addition to providing biographical information on Watkins and a synopsis of the plot, this essay includes a thorough overview of the historical events that took place at the time the novel was written, and a list of seven suggested readings that may help students understand the hostile relationship between Korea and Japan that Watkins speaks of in her novels.

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