Samurai of Gold Hill Short Guide

Samurai of Gold Hill by Yoshiko Uchida

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Samurai of Gold Hill recounts the adventures of Koichi, the son of a samurai warrior, who leaves Japan at the end of a civil war and joins other Japanese immigrants in building a colony in California. Much of the novel's fascination stems from its authentic portrait of feudal Japan and its depiction of the conflict between this culture and that of the American frontiersmen during the gold rush era. Samurai of Gold Hill is based on real historical events, and Uchida's careful research provides a solid base of information about the experiences of Asian immigrants in the 1800s. But the novel is primarily a story of extraordinary adventure—from the farms, shops, and cities of Japan to the constant dangers of life in nineteenthcentury frontier California—that will captivate its readers.

About the Author

Yoshiko Uchida was born on November 24, 1921, in Alameda, California, and grew up in Berkeley. Her father, Dwight Takashi Uchida, was a businessman who worked in San Francisco; he and his wife, Iku, enjoyed entertaining and often played host to young Japanese visiting the area. Yoshiko was a creative child who liked to draw and, by age ten, had begun writing short stories. She often traveled during the summers, and visited Japan when she was about twelve years old.

In 1942 Uchida graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, with a bachelor's degree in English, philosophy, and history. She received her diploma through the mail in a cardboard roll because she and others of Japanes e ancestry who lived on America's West Coast were taken from their homes and sent to inland camps after war with Japan broke out. Uchida was evacuated first to the Tanforan Race Track, and from Tanforan to the Topaz, Utah, internment camp. Most Japanese-Americans lost their homes and businesses; much of what they could not carry, they had to sell or give away. They experienced humiliation and were deeply marked by their miserable internment. Although she found useful work teaching second grade at Topaz, Uchida says that her memories of the time center on the awful living conditions—snakes and scorpions infested the camp—and the abiding sense of unjust treatment.

In 1943 Uchida left Topaz for Northampton, Massachusetts, where she studied at Smith College on a fellowship. She received a master's degree in education from Smith the following year and taught at Frankford Friends' School in Philadelphia from 1944 to 1945. She was a secretary for the Institute of Pacific Relations from 1946 to 1947, and it was during this period that she decided that she wanted to write. While working as a secretary for the United Student Christian Council in New York, she published her first and second books—The Dancing Kettle and Other Japanese Folk Tales and New Friends for Susan. The latter, published in 1951, differs from most of Uchida's later books in that it does not specifically address Japanese or Japanese-American topics.

Uchida spent 1952 in Japan on a Ford Foundation Foreign Study and Research Fellowship, researching materials for her second collection of folktales, The Magic Listening Cap. She remained in Japan until 1954, all the while writing articles for the Nippon Times of Tokyo. During the years 1955 to 1964 she served as the West Coast correspondent for Craft Horizons of New York, and wrote a column, "Letters from San Francisco," for the magazine. From 1957 to 1962 she also worked as a secretary for the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory at Berkeley.

Published in 1971, Journey to Topaz was named an American Library Association (ALA) Notable Book for 1972, and Samurai of Gold Hill received the Commonwealth Club of California Medal for best juvenile book by a California author that same year. In 1981 Uchida received the Distinguished Service Award from the University of Oregon for her work in helping Americans better understand Japan and the heritage of Americans of Japanese descent. Her book for younger children, A Jar of Dreams (1981), received the 1982 Commonwealth Club of California Medal for best juvenile book. The Best Bad

Thing (1983), the first sequel to A Jar of Dreams, was named an ALA Notable Book for 1983.

In 1985 Uchida was given the Young Authors' Hall of Fame Award by the San Mateo and San Francisco Reading Associations.

Uchida speaks Japanese and French as well as English, and has been active in improving understanding between American ethnic groups. One of her books for adults, Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family (1982), is an important resource for those interested in learning about the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Setting

Samurai of Gold Hill begins in the Year of the Serpent, 1869, in Wakamatsu, a town in northern Japan's BandaiAzuma mountains. The castle of Lord Matsudaira.has been gutted by fire but still looms over Wakamatsu. Many samurai warriors have perished in the battle to defend Wakamatsu, and Lord Matsudaira himself has been imprisoned. Entrusted with a secret mission on behalf of Lord Matsudaira, Koichi's father—Matsuzaka, Gentai (the surname goes first in Japanes e names)—gathers together the companions he will need for a great adventure. Koichi, trained to be a samurai and to obey his leader without asking any questions, journeys with his father to the bustling port city of Yokohama; he is filled with curiosity about his father's mission but waits until his father chooses to reveal the secret plan.

Eventually Koichi learns that his father plans to establish a colony in California to serve as Lord Matsudaira's home in exile after his release from prison. Koichi, his father, and the others sail to San Francisco and from there take another ship upriver to Sacramento. The land seems dry compared to Japan, which is in its rainy season; Koichi feels like he has "come from a land of soft gray mist to a land of eternal harsh sun." The travelers ride wagons to Placerville, a boisterous frontier town where they face the hostility of many of the white settlers. From Placerville, they ride to Gold Hill, the site of their future colony.

Some of the immigrants' neighbors, both Native Americans and white farmers, are friendly and helpful, but others—especially the gold prospectors—are suspicious of the Japanese's efforts to establish a new home.

California's climate differs from that of Japan, and it, too, often seems hostile toward their crops and farm.

Social Sensitivity

The sad ending is likely to disappoint some readers, but its truthfulness enhances the credibility of Uchida's account of the Gold Hill colony. In the unflinching ending, the legal authorities refuse to help the colonists, and the hostility of racism overcomes the best intentions of the Japanese and their farmer neighbors. That racism can overcome good work and good intentions is not an uplifting message, and will likely disturb some readers. Yet anger is a valid emotional response to cruel racial prejudice. In the classroom in particular, the book's ending can be useful for generating discussion about how racism sometimes overwhelms more honorable points of view, and about how a tragic conclusion may be more memorable and meaningful than a happy one.

Although Uchida is generally evenhanded in her portrait of racism, she presents the Japanese more sympathetically than she does One-eye and other anti-Japanese racists. By depicting the silly myths the Japanese have about "barbarians," Uchida shows the foolishness of racist views. The fact that the colonists have superstitions about their white neighbors enhances the development of Uchida's themes, and reminds readers that racism is not restricted to one ethnic group. The loneliness and frustration of being a stranger in a strange land become broad statements of universal truth in Samurai of Gold Hill.

Literary Qualities

Samurai of Gold Hill is based on the history of a real Japanese settlement, the Wakamatsu Colony. Its site was made a California Historical Landmark in 1969, one hundred years after its founding. The Japanese civil war, the village of Wakamatsu, Lord Matsudaira, Herr Schnell, and the servant Okei are all genuine historical figures. Out of the historical facts, Uchida has tried to depict what life would have been like for the Japanese colonists. Her Japanese characters cling to their customs, finding in them a sense of community that helps them fend off the hostility of their new land. Although Toyoko becomes more independent in her new home, she does not stray beyond historically believable limits; she remains subject to the wishes of the men.

Although Toyoko and Koichi function as realistic and complex characters in the novel, they also serve as symbols of a new Japanese generation. Toyoko, considered a "half barbarian" even in her own country, must learn to strike a balance between Japanese and American female roles. Koichi, likewise, no longer has a clearly defined Japanese identity; he has little use for his samurai training in the remote hills of California.

Unseated in Japan and unwelcome in America, both children find themselves growing up as Japanese-Americans.

Koichi comes of age at a time when his culture is also undergoing a radical change.

Gold Hill, an actual gold-rush town settled by the Japanese colonists, represents the fantasy of a prosperous and shining future in a new land. The name takes on ironic significance by the end of the novel, however, when the Japanese lose their long, upward struggle against racial prejudice and are forced to give up their "golden" dream.

Uchida uses symbolism in her characterization of One-eye, the prospector whose bigotry tarnishes the Japanese's hopes for a Gold Hill colony. As his name suggests, One-eye has limited vision, both literally and figuratively.

His narrow perspective blinds him to the needs of others; he sees only his needs and is unable to envision Gold Hill as an integrated, harmonious community.

Themes and Characters

The principal theme of Samurai of Gold Hill is that of "strangers in a strange land." This theme emphasizes the problems people have when they feel that they are different from those around them, as well as the excitement people experience when they explore a new and different world. The other themes—racial discrimination, cowardice, and sexism—give the main theme its focus and help to clarify the relationships between the novel's characters.

At the start of the novel, Koichi already finds himself alienated, even though he is in his own town. His side in the civil war has lost, and his country now belongs to the enemies of his father and Lord Matsudaira. Too young to fight and die honorably as has his brother, Koichi finds himself surrounded by uncertainties; the samurai code of honor does not prepare him for defeat, and his life— which had seemed well planned, with the certainty that he would become a samurai warrior like his brother and father—is adrift, its future unpredictable. Thus, at the beginning of Samurai of Gold Hill, Koichi and the other followers of Lord Matsudaira are already strangers in a strange land— they are alienated from their own country. Their decision to leave for California to create a colony-in-exile seems a logical and natural development.

In California, Koichi and his companions find themselves the objects of intense curiosity and sometimes intense dislike. Some Californians, such as the farmers Thomas and Kate Whitlow, offer them help and friendship.

Other Californians are openly hostile, picking fights with the Japanese immigrants and trying to make life on Gold Hill difficult for them. Much of the immigrants' life in California is a struggle for acceptance, and the racist hostility of some of their neighbors—along with the inhospitable weather—eventually overwhelms the colony.

Sexism is an ever-present factor in the lives of Koichi and the other followers of Matsudaira. In the opening chapters, the social differences between men and women loom large. Men make the important decisions; women merely obey the commands of the men. Even Koichi's beloved grandmother is not allowed to make important decisions about the life of her family. During the voyage to California, the alienation of the Japanese women finds its focus in Toyoko Schnell. She bears a double burden, for not only is she a woman in an almost totally male-oriented society, but she is only one-half Japanese.

Toyoko's father is J. Henry Schnell, a German, and Toyoko "looked neither Japanese nor Prussian, but was a strange mixture of the two. The people in Wakamatsu had said she would never find a proper husband because she was half barbarian." In addition, Toyoko is only eight years old and has no playmates. Koichi, twelve years old at the start of the novel and well on his way to becoming a samurai warrior, is the nearest person to her in age, and he would much prefer to have a boy for a companion. In this, Koichi has no choice; he and Toyoko, the youngest of the colonists, are given joint tasks.

Toyoko wins Koichi's respect with her efforts to preserve the silkworms, and she slowly develops self-respect by proving that she can be a productive member of the colony even though no one expects her to be very helpful. Toyoko's is an individual battle for respect; the colonists' views toward women in general change little.

The Japanese are always struggling to understand their new world. The climate is different from that of their homeland, so they need to abandon some of their customary ways of farming and learn new ones, such as how to irrigate their land with only one stream as a source of water. In their attempt to cope with an alien society, the Japanese come to know and appreciate the local Native American community. Like the Japanese, the Native Americans live lives rich in rituals, and their closeness to the land echoes the Japanes e farmers' closeness to their old land at Wakamatsu.

The racists in Samurai of Gold Hill tend to be cowardly people. The worst is "One-eye," a nasty bully who hates the Japanese colonists primarily because they are different from white Californians. He picks a fight with Rintaro, Lord Matsudaira's chief carpenter, and loses, further embittering him toward the Japanese. The problems caused by racism are present throughout the novel. The Japanese themselves regard white people as barbarians, and they claim that white people wear heels in their shoes because they have cloven hooves instead of feet. Even Toyoko, who should know better, fears that a diet of milk and beef will cause her to lose her toes and to develop hooves.

When they reach Placerville, the Japanese find themselves to be every bit as much the subject of foolish fears as Herr Schnell and Toyoko were in Japan.

When they try to find wagons to take them to Gold Hill, they find that most people refuse to help them. One-eye's treachery and cruelty represent the blind hatred of all those who are hostile to the colonists simply because they are Japanese. When One-eye finally succeeds in destroying the Gold Hill colony by cutting off the water supply, he finishes the work of many other racists.

Most of the colonists find work on local farms owned by people such as the Whitlows, who are concerned more with the value of the Japanese's work than with their race, while some—such as the Schnell family—return to Japan.

The colonists are attractive because of their courage and pluck. Koichi, in particular, matures into a thoughtful and courageous young man. Well into his teens at the novel's end, he becomes more open-minded than he would have been had he stayed in Japan. He comes to appreciate Toyoko's strength of character and to admire the Japanese farmers, all of whom would be beneath his social station in Japan. However, history must disappoint those readers who hope for the success of the colonists. Bad weather and hostile miners doomed the colony, and the ending is therefore a sad one, with some of the characters—such as the Schnell family—returning to Japan, and with others scattering across northern California in search of work.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Koichi wish to go off to battle, probably to die, as his brother has?

2. Why does Koichi refrain from asking his father about the secret plan?

3. What is the most significant adjustment the Japanese colonists make when they come to California?

4. Why do the Native Americans help the colonists?

5. In the seventh chapter, "The Silent Cellar," Koichi gives Toyoko an order, and Uchida notes: "Toyoko nodded obediently. Just as her mother did whatever her father asked, she knew that it was her place to listen to Koichi.

He was older, and besides that he was a boy. That put him at least two notches above her in their small world, and she knew it." How do Toyoko's views about gender roles change during the novel?

Why do they change? How liberated is she at the novel's end? Do you think she will get along well when she is back in Japan?

6. Do Koichi's views toward women in general change during the novel, or is the change only in his view of Toyoko, alone?

7. Why do Lord Matsudaira's followers want to establish a colony in California, rather than somewhere else? Why do they choose to go into exile at all?

8. How do the colonists deal with the differences between the climates of Wakamatsu and Gold Hill? Do they do the right things to make their farm a success?

9. Why does Koichi's father, a proud samurai warrior, agree to run a farming colony?

10. Why are the Japanese children not allowed to go to school in California?

11. Why do some of the non-Japanese people harbor racial myths about the Japanese? Are any of these myths still prevalent today? Why do some of the Japanese characters believe that white people are "barbarians"?

12. Are the themes of Samurai of Gold Hill unified and clear at the novel's end?

Does the ending provide a satisfying conclusion to the adventures of the Japanese immigrants?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The towns and cities mentioned in Samurai of Gold Hill are all real places.

Research one of these Japanese or California towns or cities and explain what it was like from 1869 to 1873, the approximate years during which the novel takes place.

2. What were farms around Placerville like during the time of the novel?

3. How accurate are Uchida's depictions of the Japanese customs of the 1860s? What were the lives of Japanese women like at this time?

4. The Japanese civil war that opens Samurai of Gold Hill actually happened.

Why was it fought? What happened to the winners? What happened to the losers?

5. What were the duties and responsibilities of samurai warriors?

6. How were samurai warriors trained?

What training would Koichi have received by the time he was twelve years old?

7. What special laws did California have regarding Asian immigrants during the second half of the nineteenth century? Why did such laws exist? How long did they last? Does the United States still have such laws?

8. What happened to the real-life settlers of the Wakamatsu Colony? What happened to Lord Matsudaira? Were there any other efforts by Japanese immigrants to establish colonies in America?

9. Trace the development of the theme of racism in Samurai of Gold Hill Are all the racist views alike? Are all the people who harbor racist views alike?

10. Yoshiko Uchida has written extensively about Japanese experiences in the United States. Read Journey to Topaz, Journey Home, or Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family and compare the views of the Japanese-American experience found in the book you choose with those in Samurai of Gold Hill. What seem to be Uchida's overall views about life for Japanese-Americans? Is she inconsistent in some of her views? Why might this be?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. Something about the Author. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale Research, 1971. Article on Uchida summarizes her life and work.

Sutherland, Zena, and May Hill Arbuthnot. Children and Books. 7th ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1986.

Contains a brief evaluation of Uchida's books, focusing on those for younger children.

Uchida, Yoshiko. Toshiko Uchida." New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books/Macmillan, 1986. An autobiographical pamphlet that provides an account of Uchida's life and includes some of her views about her own work.

Related Titles

Most of Uchida's writings deal with Japan or Japanese-Americans. Her autobiographical novel Journey to Topaz tells about a family uprooted from its Berkeley, California, home during World War II and sent to a detention camp. The novel's sequel. Journey Home, depicts the aftermath of the family's exile to Topaz. Both are wellwritten books that vividly depict life in the 1940s.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996