

Something Like an Autobiography Study Guide

Something Like an Autobiography by Akira Kurosawa

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Plot Summary

"Akira Kurosawa, Something Like an Autobiography" is the life story of the renowned Japanese filmmaker. Among the movie elite, he is considered one of the best. His movie, "The Seven Samurai" ranks with the likes of "Citizen Kaine" and "Casablanca." The western American movie, "The Magnificent Seven" is based on the "Seven Samurai"; imitation signifying the sincerest form of complement. His movie "Rashomon" won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film.

Akira Kurosawa subtitles his story with the line: "something like an autobiography." No doubt this references the rather unstructured style in which he writes his story. The beginning of his story is written in snatches of memories and episodes that at times do not seem cohesive. However, the story does eventually provide continuity as it connects lessons learned in his early life to his adulthood when he enters the tough world of filmmaking. Being the protected baby of a large family did not naturally prepare him for conflict and confrontation. His father and older brother both sensed that he needed toughening up for whatever may lay ahead. In their own ways, they each provided ways in which he was able to strengthen both mind and body.

Through trial and error and through hope and tragedy, Akira Kurosawa works his way unintentionally toward a successful career as a filmmaker. Beginning as a child, his interest in film was piqued by his father who took his family to the movies on a frequent basis. His father viewed movies as not only entertaining but educational as well. His father was a true visionary for he laid the foundation for his youngest son who was destined to become a world-class filmmaker.

Marrying his love of movies with his passion for literature and storytelling, becoming a filmmaker was a natural for Akira. As a child, not only did his passion for movies begin but his love of literature was born. He would walk to school so he could save his tram money to buy books. He would visit the village storytellers and become mesmerized by their imaginative tales. From childhood onward, Akira never lost his love for telling stories, evidenced by the 27 films he ultimately wrote and directed.

Fortunately, his somewhat argumentative and volatile nature was tempered when he met "the best teacher he ever had" in master filmmaker Yamamoto who became his mentor and lifelong friend. Yamamoto taught Akira every technical aspect of filmmaking as well as the importance of treating those who worked for him with respect and dignity. Yamamoto proved to Akira that the filmmaker is able to produce the best results when everyone on his team does his best. Yamamoto would not address anyone, even a seemingly insignificant extra, without giving him the respect of calling him by name.

The patience and tenacity he learned from Yamamoto helped Akira through the tough times. For example, Akira's career as a director was taking off in the midst of World War II. Akira had to tangle with Japanese censors who looked at the films they reviewed through over-zealous and xenophobic lenses. Some of Akira's scripts did not get approval and many of his scenes were cut due to their "American-British" slant or due to

perceived obscenity. But Akira persevered through this time. His movie "The Seven Samurai" became one of the classic movies of all time. He enjoyed a long and much-heralded career in a field that he only grew to love more with each movie he made.



Sections 1 through 4

Sections 1 through 4 Summary and Analysis

Babyhood

Akira Kurosawa recalls flashes of memories from his baby years. He remembers rocking in a wooden wash tub until it tilted over and scared him and left him wailing for his mother. In another recollection, he sees a white dog being sliced in half by a train. He remembers the insides of the animal looking just like sushi which he could not eat for years. His parents sent a parade of white dogs in front of him about which he loudly protested. The white dog that was killed must have been the family's pet. He wonders why the family did not opt for a black dog to be the family's new pet since there was such a tragic accident with the white dog.

Akira remembers going to the movies often with his family. Although his father did not encourage him to become a filmmaker, his father steadfastly insisted that seeing movies was good entertainment as well as being educational. His father passed on his love of sports to Akira who loved sports his entire life.

Morimura Gakuen

As a young filmmaker, Akira sees the movie of a competitor, Inagaki Hiroshi. The movie, "Forgotten Children," is about retarded children—modernity calls them "intellectually challenged." The movie shows one young boy who is isolated from the rest of the children and who appears not to follow the instructor of the class; rather, he seems in a world of his own. Akira becomes ill and walks out of the movie.

The movie forced him to recall his years at Morimura Gakuen, the primary school he attended, where he was considered retarded. He recalls the terrible memories there of being isolated from the other children and ridiculed by them when the instructor pointed out that everyone would understand the lesson except Akira. He recalls fainting at gym—when the instructor shouted "Attention," Akira would hold his breath and hyperventilate. Akira's experience at Morimura Gakuen left Akira with the life-long conviction that children should not be judged on their abilities by age alone. Rather, it should be recognized that children develop at varying ages and no child should not be labeled as "retarded" just because they are not functioning at the level experts have determined a child of his age should be.

Crybaby

In his second or third year of primary school, Akira transfers to Kuroda Primary School where his older brother attends. Kuroda is a traditional Japanese school that has not been westernized. He recalls his brother mocking him on their morning walks to school. On one occasion, when Akira is afraid to learn how to swim, his brother rows him to the middle of the river where he dumps the frightened Akira in. Akira struggles in the water



but eventually swims to safety. Akira later realizes that his brother was trying to toughen him up to face the bullies at school and to deal with adversity.

Akira faces further isolation and ridicule at his new school where the children call him a crybaby. They chant a song about "Mr. Gumdrop" taunting Akira that his tears are the size of gumdrops. Akira's favorite instructor, Mr. Tachikawa, is a positive force in young Akira's life. Mr. Tachikawa teaches art and allows his class to create artwork without the usual constrictions. When the class makes fun of Akira's wild piece of art, Mr. Tachikawa admonishes them and praises Akira's creativity. He gives Akira the highest mark possible for his art. Amazingly, Akira begins to not only catch up with his academics, he becomes a class leader and is eventually named Class President. Another student who is a worse "crybaby" than Akira is, Uekusa Keinosuke, becomes a life-long friend of Akira. When Akira becomes a filmmaker, he learns that Uekusa has become a screenwriter.

Whirlwind

Two tragic incidents strikes the family. Akira's brother who attends the same school, repeatedly scores highest on city-wide testing of school children. However, when he takes the exam for entry into middle school, he fails the test. The entire Kurosawa family is mortified except for the brother who failed. Perhaps he wanted to fail since he had become more engrossed with foreign literature than with general school curriculum. The brother winds up at a quasi-military school where his behavior generates repeated confrontations with his father.

Akira's sixteen-year-old sister is Akira's favorite sibling. She is protective of him and loves to play games with him. Sadly, she becomes ill and dies. Recalling her death brings tears to Akira's eyes even so many years later.



Sections 5 through 8

Sections 5 through 8 Summary and Analysis

Kendo

Kendo is taught at the Kuroda Primary School in fifth grade. Akira shows potential skill and begs his father to arrange for private lessons for him at Ochiai, a renowned kendo school. His father agrees but insists that he follow a rigorous schedule. He takes his kendo lessons before school. It takes Akira an hour and half to walk there each morning. After that, he has to walk to his shrine, walk home for breakfast and walk to school. After school he takes calligraphy lessons and then before going home for the day, walks with Uekusa for additional lessons at Mr. Tachikawa's house. He maintains this schedule for several years.

Even though she is gentle and quiet, Akira sees his mother as the stronger and more practical of his parents. His father, though appearing strict and disciplined, is the more sentimental of the two. During the war years, when the parents are temporarily separated from their children, Akira recalls how his father lingered to watch his children walk away while his mother scurried back to continue her work.

A new art teacher is assigned to the school. Unlike Mr. Tachikawa, the new teacher does not appreciate Akira's idea of creativity. He holds up Akira's work in front of the class and harshly criticizes it. Akira is resolved to work so hard that the teacher would not find it possible to criticize him again.

Calligraphy

Akira's father greatly admires calligraphy. Instead of paintings, he displays scrolls of calligraphy in their home—which often depict famous Japanese poetry or wise sayings. Akira's calligraphy lessons are a disappointment to him. He feels the instructor is inferior in his knowledge. The instructor, however, is strict and makes those in his class write their symbols over and over again until they are perfect. After a year or so of these classes, Akira, with the help of his brother, convinces his father to allow him to quit the lessons.

Murasaki and Shonagon

In later years, Uekusa reminds Akira that as children he had named them "Murasaki Shikibu" and "Sei Shonagon" which were names of brave soldiers of Japanese literature. The boys learned of these warriors in their studies with Mr. Tachikawa who introduced the boys to many figures in Japanese literature. Akira draws from the bravery of these heroes when he is accosted one evening by a gang of older kids. Akira employs the skills he learned in kendo class and ultimately scares the hooligans off. Unfortunately, he loses his kendo outfit in the scuffle. Later in one of his movies, a



kendo outfit like the one Akira lost in the fight makes a symbolic appearance as a character's new direction in life.

Uekusa mostly remembers girls that he had crushes on while Akira remembers the skirmishes with ruffians. In one conflict, Akira is surprised when the timid Uekusa rushes alone up a hillside at the enemy gang. He is soon hit with a rock and collapses. The ruffians run off not from fear of Uekusa but rather their fear that they might have killed him. As a sixteen-year old, Uekusa waits on a mountain one night for a girl to whom he had written a love letter. Instead of the object of his affection rendezvousing with him, the girl's father shows up with the love letter demanding an explanation. Although Uekusa tries to defend his love for the girl, he never sees her again after that night.

The Fragrance of Meiji, the Sounds of Taisho

At the dawning of the Taisho age in Japan in 1912, remnants of the preceding Meiji era lingered. As a child, Akira sang songs from each era which he considered in later years a good continuity model for film. The sounds of Akira's childhood still are vivid. From the canon marking noon-time each day to the bells and clangs of the various vendors, the lost sounds still resonate. Although some memories generated by the recalling of these sounds are melancholy, Akira feels sorry for modern day children who are bereft of these experiences.



Sections 9 through 16

Sections 9 through 16 Summary and Analysis

Storytellers

Akira's childhood is full of memories of movie-watching with his family. He vividly recalls the masculinity of William S. Hart westerns. He remembers a movie about the lead sled dog dying after valiantly leading his team through the snow. He could not stop crying for the dog—even as an adult the movie stirs strong emotion. In addition to the movies, Akira loves when his father takes him to the villages to hear the master storytellers weave their intriguing tales.

The Goblin's Nose

Just when Akira is confident of his fierce kendo skills, he joins a new school where he is taken down a few notches—his "long, smug goblin's nose" is forever cut down to size. He fails an entrance exam to the next level due to his poor achievement in math and science. He loves literature and the arts, an early signal where his future lies.

The Gleam of Fireflies

Akira graduates from the fifth grade. At the ceremony the girls sob as they sing "The Gleam of Fireflies." Akira is valedictorian for the boys and is given a speech to read by the teacher he hates. Akira is uncomfortable with the speech as it lauds the great work and dedication of this teacher. His brother writes another speech for him one which harshly criticizes the education system and the teachers. Akira has both speeches with him and in the end reads the teacher's version. He did not want to dishonor his father who was in the audience but felt like a fraud and a coward afterwards.

Keika Middle School

A school friend recalls Akira as having "zero" physical strength. Akira takes exception to that assessment. He was very strong in martial arts, especially kendo sword fighting. However, it is true that he could not do even one chin-up. Although he receives a zero in his physical fitness class, Akira triumphs in high bar jumping. To the amazement of his instructor and the other students, he is the last boy standing in the high bar competition, having bettered everyone else.

A Long Red Brick Wall

Akira recalls a terrifying incident when riding a tram to school. The tram is so crowded that people ride hanging onto the outside of the car. Akira just lets go, staying aboard only because he is pinned in by two university students. He begins to slip but one of the students hangs on to him until the next stop. He is embarrassed and runs off—never fully understanding himself why he let go. From that point on, he walks to school. He



uses his tram money to buy books—which have become his latest passion. The walk takes him by a long red brick wall. As he walks along the wall, he read his books.

September 1, 1923

The Great Kanto Earthquake hits on September 1, 1923. Akira is in the village with a friend when it strikes. They run home to find their homes all but destroyed. Akira fears his whole family is dead and of course is relieved when he sees all his family members emerge from the rubble unscathed.

Darkness and Humanity

The night of the earthquake, all power is lost and the neighborhoods are lit by candlelight. The next night the candles are all spent and the communities are plunged into total darkness. Aftershocks keep everyone on edge. Akira privately fears that it is the end of the world. Terrifying everyone are the constant explosions from the armory located behind the red brick wall. The wall keeps the fires from spreading but their flames set off ammunition stored at the armory. The darkness and chaos provides an excuse for some Japanese men to hunt down and beat Koreans who live in the community. Akira is astonished by how fear drives people to lose their humanity.

A Horrifying Excursion

Akira's older brother forces him to accompany him on an excursion to explore the burned out areas of the city. Akira can hardly bear to look at the ruins and tries to turn back several times but his brother makes him stay. He cannot count the dead bodies—the many charred bodies piled high in the streets or floating aimlessly down the river, babies still attached to their mothers' backs. Although it was a horrifying experience, Akira understands later that it was better to face the realities of the tragedy. He realizes it had been just as difficult for his brother to view the carnage. It is another example of his brother trying to toughen him up and that their excursion had been a journey to conquer fear.



Sections 17 through 24

Sections 17 through 24 Summary and Analysis

Honor and Revere

The Keika Middle School where Akira is now attending burns down in the earthquake fires and moves to temporary facilities. Akira develops excellent relationships with a new teacher. Mr. Iwamatsu has a very liberated view toward testing and helps the children during their exams, sometimes writing the solutions on the board. Akira who struggles with math, receives a 100 percent grade on a math exam proctored by Mr. Iwamatsu. Akira feels fortunate that he had the support of some special teachers while in school and later the guidance of some great filmmakers when he embarked on his career.

My Rebellious Phase

Akira becomes a prankster. Some of his pranks are harmless but some involve gun powder and explosions. During his time at Keika Middle School, Akira experiences a terrible relationship with the military instructor. Military instruction is mandatory in the fifth grade. Akira does not have a military mind which the instructor senses immediately. The instructor humiliates Akira at every opportunity. To really put Akira on the spot, he makes him a platoon leader. Akira fails to give the correct marching orders and his platoon marches straight into a wall. Akira becomes the only graduate of Keika to finish with a failed grade in military instruction.

A Distant Village

Akira does not relate to the concept of belonging geocentrically to a region. He feels he is a child of the planet earth, not some small village tucked away in Japan. Akira had visited his father's place of birth, Toyokawa Village, only a handful of times in his life. On one visit, the village elders are honored that his father sent him and repeatedly toast him. With each new toast, Akira is urged to drink a glass of sake—a strong liquor which he had never tasted before. He becomes so drunk that he wobbles outside and collapses in the rice paddy. He encounters other strange village residents. One old man tells him it does not matter that he lives in a hovel—what matters is that he is alive.

The Family Tree

Akira's father sends him to Toyokawa Village to spend the summer with relatives. He instructs the relatives that Akira needs strengthening and to work him hard. Akira has become a daring young man and slides down waterfalls and jumps into whirlpools to impress the other youngsters. He is most impressed when a relative shows him a book containing his family tree. He becomes a stronger boy when he reads about the brave warriors who are his ancestors.

My Aunt Togashi



One of Akira's favorite relatives is his Aunt Togashi. She is always kind to him and pays him with yen and adoration when he escorts her on family visits. Taking the advice of a doctor who told her to eat tree roots, Akira feels she died prematurely just before her ninetieth birthday.

The Sapling

Although Akira had been a protected "sapling" throughout his childhood, once he graduates he is thrown into the real world. He has a modest success with his artwork and ponders if whether art will become his life's career.

The Labyrinth

The Great Depression hits Asia in 1929. Akira feels reluctant to keep asking his parents to support his art career. He begins reading scores of books and seeing dozens, then hundreds of movies. Akira joins the Proletarian Artists' League to enhance his artistic abilities. Akira's brother advances in the business and becomes an actor (silent-film narrator). When the Artists' League disbands, Akira feels at a loss—what will he do with all he has learned?

Military Service

Akira is drafted in 1930 at the age of 20. When he appears for his physical, he is considered too weak and is not called again until years later. By that time, he is a director and the US air raids have all but destroyed Tokyo. The war is almost over. At this call-up, an air-raid siren sounds, causing everyone to scurry away, including Akira who never once again eludes military service.



Sections 25 through 32

Sections 25 through 32 Summary and Analysis

A Coward and A Weakling

It is not long after he joins the Artists' League that Akira realizes it is a front for a Communist organization. Akira remains silent and reluctantly goes along with some of their operations—he is arrested once and spends a night in jail. He somewhat enjoys the excitement and intrigue of being part of an illegal organization, but he does not want to disgrace his father by being sent to prison. Akira never becomes a Communist himself although he does become the assistant editor of the League's newspaper. Being an operative for the League does not provide a lucrative income and Akira spends many days with nothing to eat. After a severe illness, Akira loses contact with the organization and seeks out his brother who is working as a silent film narrator for a local cinema in Tokyo.

An Alleyway in the Floating World

Akira finds his brother in a crowded tenement. He allows Akira to stay with him for a month until he finds a room of his own nearby. Once again, Akira loses himself in movies, going as often as possible. Talkies come into being and Akira's brother's job is soon fazed out. Akira also spends time listening to the storytellers and taking in shows spotlighting puppets and clowns. Rape and crime are rampant in the tenement. A neighbor asks Akira to rescue a girl from her step-mother. The woman has tied the girl up and beaten her. The woman leaves her apartment so Akira sneaks in and unties the girl. However, the girl is not pleased with her freedom, in fact she is angry at Akira. She has him tie her up again because if her step-mother finds her untied, she will receive an even worse beating.

A Story I Don't Want to Tell

A tragedy that saddens Akira the rest of his life is the death of his brother Akira Heigo. The talkies take over the movie industry and the narrators lose their jobs. Heigo leads a strike protest but it fails. Akira's mother has a premonition that all is not well with Heigo. Akira has dinner with him three days before he commits suicide. Akira and his father claim the body. Akira feels enormous guilt because he ignored his mother's feelings that Heigo was in danger. Akira is forever haunted by that guilt.

Negative and Positive

Akira ponders how his life would have worked out had his brother had lived. His brother was talented and could have made it in the movies. After Akira begins working as an assistant director on a movie, an actor who knew Heigo comments that Akira looks just like his brother. The only difference is that Akira has a positive, happy look while Heigo always looked dark and sad. After another older brother dies, Akira at 26 decides it is



time to settle on a career. He has lost confidence in his art and decides to abandon that dream. He applies at the P.C.L. Studio and several months later gets word that he passed the first hiring phase. Later, at the studio he will meet the best teacher of his life—the film director Yamamoto Kajiro.

A Mountain Pass

After several more testing sessions, Akira receives a job offer as assistant director and accepts. He is not thrilled with his first assignment but his second assignment lands him a position working under Yamamoto Kajiro. After just a brief association with this man, Akira finally is certain he has found where he belongs.

P.C.L.

P.C.L. stands for Photo Chemical Laboratory. It was originally established as a research institute for sound films. It is a studio full of fresh, young talent who collectively make fresh, new films despite the fact that a world war is brewing. Of the new crop of assistant directors, Akira is the only one without a university degree. Since the assistant directors are considered to be the future of the company, they are required to learn everything about movie making from the ground up. They learn editing and screenwriting and even play extra roles in films.

A Long Story: Part 1

Akira recollects the death many years later of film director Yamamoto, Akira's mentor and favorite teacher. When Akira visits the dying Yamamoto, the old man first asks Akira about his new assistant director. Akira references this incident to underscore how the wise filmmaker viewed the role of the assistant director in Japanese filmmaking. It takes Akira six long years to rise from third assistant director to chief assistant director under Yamamoto. Yamamoto requires his assistant directors to know everything about the film being made and drives them hard. Akira and the other assistant directors often go without sleep for days to insure that the film is on schedule. Akira stresses how much he learned under Yamamoto and that he would not have enjoyed the success he did were it not for Yamamoto's influence. Yamamoto was a patient teacher, sometimes allowing mistakes to make it to the final film just so that his assistants could see and understand the errors they made.

A Long Story: Part 2

As chief assistant director under Yamamoto, Akira begins writing screenplays. Reviewing them with Yamamoto he learns that the art of screenwriting is very different from other forms of writing. Yamamoto has Akira edit films which is where life is breathed into the film. At first, Akira is considered a terror in the editing room. He cuts and splices to the horror of the senior film editor. However, it is a valuable learning experience for Akira. That same senior film editor many years later becomes Akira's chief editor. Akira begins coaching actors and learns from Yamamoto that a director gets the best results from actors by treating them with the utmost respect. Yamamoto would

always address even the most insignificant extra by his name. Akira also learns the delicate art of sound dubbing from the master.



Sections 33 through 40

Sections 33 through 40 Summary and Analysis

Congenital Defects

Throughout his career, Akira found it next to impossible to control his temper. Even at 70, when he writes this book, Akira has trouble controlling his anger. He is also stubborn and obstinate. When the Army orders Akira to cut a scene in a movie, he refuses. The Army major is just a stubborn. It is finally resolved when the Major drinks Akira under the table. After drinking sake all night at the major's house, Akira finally agrees to cut the scene.

Good People

Another favorite director that Akira works for only a few times is Naruse Mikio. Akira admires his method of building a scene on a series of short shots. Akira also greatly admires the works of directors Fushimizu Shu and Takizawa Eisuke. Fushimizu Shu, a promising young director whose specialty was musicals, dies at a young age and in Akira's view his death strips the world of wonderful musicals. Takizawa is a genius at setting the atmosphere of a scene. Akira is grateful for what he learned from these men.

A Bitter War

After working on the film, "Horses," Akira devotes his time to screenwriting and drinking. He writes "A German at Daruma Temple" and suggests that he direct the film himself. The government will not allow the film to be made under the current censorship standards established during the Pacific War. The censors reject other screenplays written by Akira and cut more scenes from movies he is working on. The censors are over the top and obsessed. Their over-scrupulous and puritanical mind-set causes a perfectly innocent scene to be cut because it contained the phrase, "The factory gate waited for the student workers. . . ." Akira learns later that the censor took "gate" to be synonymous with a woman's vagina. The censors are very difficult to please during the tense time. Akira runs into his old schoolmate Uekusa who is now a screenwriter.

My Mountain

Akira talks his studio into buying the rights to a new book entitled, "Sugata Sanshiro" which is a story involving martial arts. Several studios are fighting over the rights but the author's wife had heard of Akira and insists that he gets the rights to direct the movie. Akira quickly writes the screenplay and runs it by his mentor, Yamamoto, who approves it. At 32 years of age, Akira is on his way to directing his first feature.

Ready, Start!



"Sugata Sanshiro" begins shooting on location at Yokohama in 1942. Initially Akira is very tense but soon begins to build confidence. There is a controversy about a character who jumps in a pond at night. Akira makes the day shot look like night but staff members tell him that the sounds of lotus blossoms opening can be heard and lotuses only open during the day. Akira is not concerned. He does his best and the movie goes well. The final critics.

Sugata Sanshiro

Akira is very upbeat during the filming of his first feature. Everything goes rather smoothly until he decides to shoot the final fight scene at a windy locale, abandoning the wind machines which would fail to bring the necessary excitement to the film's climax. Akira picks out a notoriously windy spot—the Sengokuhara plain in the Hakone Mountains. The shoot is allotted only three days. Unfortunately during the first two days, the area has no wind. On the third day, the winds—gale force in fact—return and the scene is successfully shot. Akira has to appear before the censorship board which he dreads. He has several allies on the board—two master filmmakers—who wind up supporting the movie although the censors feel it had portions that were too "American." The film is released to critical acclaim.

The Most Beautiful

Akira's next film is "The Most Beautiful" which is a blend of staged and real-life action. Akira is demanding of the young girls who play the main roles. He disallows any make-up, makes them take on real jobs in a factory, requires them to run laps and play volleyball and, worst of all, makes them march through the streets as a fife and drum band. His goal is to remove any artificiality from the women to enable him to portray them as real, simple girls. He is successful and "The Most Beautiful" remains one of Akira's favorite films. Most of the girls retire from acting after the movie which he attributes to his demanding schedule and requirements. Some time later, Akira marries one of the actresses, Yaguchi Yoko.

Sugata Sanshiro, Part II

Although Akira does not want to make a sequel, due to the success of Sugata Sanshiro, the studio insists. His heart is not in it and it ultimately is not a very successful movie. A funny incident occurs on a snowy mountaintop during the shooting of the film. The villain is dressed in strange clothing, a long curling wig and heavy garish make-up. He is waiting atop a snowy peak when skiers see him and freak out. They come skiing down the mountain at break-neck speed to get away from the strange being.



Sections 41 through 48

Sections 41 through 48 Summary and Analysis

Marriage

At the age of 35, Akira marries Yaguchi Yoko. At first he does not think she is right for him—she is stubborn and confrontational like he is. However, a friend encourages the match—she is exactly what he needs. They marry amidst the sound of air raids and the confusion of the war torn country. His parents are isolated and cannot attend the wedding. Yoko is disappointed to learn that Akira makes less than she did as an actress. Akira has no choice but to start writing more screenplays.

The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail

The war is coming home to roost. For their safety, Akira and his wife are forced to move several times. One of their homes is destroyed from the fires and bombings. Times are tough—even food is scarce. Akira visits his father, which turns out to be the last time he sees him. Akira has a child a short while later that his father never meets. Akira is working on a new movie "The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail" which is based on a Kabuki play. When the film is nearing completion, the war ends and Japan surrenders. American troops occupy Japan, some US soldiers visit the set and take photos with the actors and crew. One day an elite group of commanders comes to observe Akira's shoot. Only years later does Akira learn that famed American director John Ford was among those observers. One bright spot that comes with Japan's loss of the war, is that the censors are disbanded in favor of democratic creativity. Although Akira has to deal with American censors, they are more open and liberal and much more respectful.

The Japanese

On August 15, 1945, Akira is called to the studio to listen to the radio address of the emperor. He encourages the Japanese people to put down their swords and accept defeat. Akira feels guilty since he had never fought against Japanese imperialism. He therefore approaches democracy without zealotry but rather with humility. After the war, Akira is driven to learn more about Japanese culture and art. He feels he has been starved of the classic beauty of Japanese art for far too long and craves its peacefulness.

No Regrets for Our Youth

Akira's first movie after the war is "No Regrets for Our Youth" which is a morale-rallying tale aimed at Japan's youth. There is much upheaval during the making of the film due to union strikes and labor disagreements. The American censors approve the movie and heartily endorse it. Although it sets the stage for the recovery of Japan's spirit, it is just the beginning. His next film addresses continuing social adjustments.



One Wonderful Sunday

The top stars leave Akira's studio, the Toho, and form a new studio based on the star system. A fierce competition takes place between the two studios. Akira's studio plans a crowded production schedule. Akira is to write several of the screenplays and direct one called "One Wonderful Sunday." Akira and his old schoolmate Uekusa write the screenplay. Akira directs the last scene to elicit interaction from the actual audience. This innovative technique gets no response in Japan but receives a wildly enthusiastic response in Paris. One evening an old man watches the movie and sobs as he reads the credits. It is Akira's former teacher, Mr. Tachikawa. He becomes emotional when he sees that two of his favorite students made the film. Akira and Uekusa invite their old teacher out to dinner where everyone winds up in tears.

A Neighborhood with an Open Sump

Next, Akira and Uekusa collaborate on "Drunken Angel," which is about the yakuza gangsters who emerge after the war. The backdrop of the film is an unsightly drainage pond where garbage is discarded—thus the title of the film. The head gangster is based on a real-life yakuza gangster whom Uekusa has gotten to know. They struggle in defining the antagonist but finally model him after an alcoholic doctor they meet who operates without a license and tends to the low life of the black market area. Conflicts arise between the two writers when the more liberal Uekusa feels that the gangsters should be portrayed in a more sympathetic manner than what Akira is comfortable with. Despite their differences, Akira and Uekusa successfully finish the screenplay and remain friends.

Drunken Angel

A young actor Mifune Toshiro applies for a position at Akira's studio. He selects anger as the emotion he will display in his audition. However, he is so overly violent in his audition that he is turned down by the board. However, Akira intercedes and along with the help of Yamamoto, Toshiro is hired. Akira finds him a fascinating and talented actor with unlimited creativity and energy. He casts him as the gangster in "Drunken Angel." The film is well received and Toshiro is so dynamic that he literally steals the show. Akira's father dies during the filming of "Drunken Angel." Akira is so distraught that he goes on a drinking binge winding up in a market where "The Cuckoo's Waltz", a cheerful song, is blasting. The upbeat tune makes Akira even more depressed. He adapts the use of this technique in his film. When the main character is distraught over loss of power, Akira uses "The Cuckoo Waltz" to draw the dramatic contrast.

On the Banks of the River Sai

After hosting a memorial service for his father, Akira returns to the studio to face a third union strike which last 195 days. Akira sees both sides—management and labor—as acting like stubborn children. Studio personnel camp out on the grounds. They string barbed wire and set up lighting to ward off invasions by striking employees. The studio sets up large wind machines where they can insert cayenne red pepper in case the

strikers try to rush the studio. The strike is an emotional roller coaster for Akira and everyone involved. He feels that management is not handling the situation well and just making more enemies. The strike ends under pressure from the studio backed by the police. Akira is so disenchanted with the outcome that he leaves the studio vowing never to return.



Sections 49 through Epilogue

Sections 49 through Epilogue Summary and Analysis

The Quiet Duel

Along with Yamamoto and several other directors, Akira forms a new studio called the Film Art Association. The first film Akira makes at his new filmmaking home is "The Quiet Duel." He uses the dynamic actor, Mifune Toshiro, in the lead. Filming the climax, Akira and the cameraman are literally moved to tears by the wonderful acting of Mifune and the lead actress.

A Salmon's Old Stories

Akira returns to his old studio Toho several years later. He is dismayed by the decline of Japanese filmmaking which he attributes to the loss of so many great future directors during the strike. American film is surviving the popularity of TV by instituting innovative techniques to lure the audience. Unfortunately, Japanese filmmakers are instead copying TV shows.

Stray Dog

Akira makes "The Stray Dog" at Toho Studios. He feels satisfied that he captured the atmosphere of post-war Japan. The shoot goes remarkably well as only a few problems are encountered—a fierce typhoon and one uncooperative ingenue.

Scandal

Akira makes the movie "Scandal" in 1950 based on the abuses the new "freedom of speech" laws were causing that were instituted after the war. Celebrities have no control over lies written about them in the press. The film is not effective and has no positive influence on the writing of libelous articles. One problem with the movie is that he allows a supporting character to emerge as the star. Only later does he realize that he had based this character on a real individual he had met one night in a bar long before. The man was distraught over his daughter's terminal disease. Akira realizes that he did not write the character, rather the memory of that man wrote the character.

Rashomon

In his film, "Rashomon," Akira attempts to recapture the fascination he felt as a child for the silent movie. Although he uses dialog, it is limited and subordinate to the visual effects of the film which mimic the profound use of dark and light in the silent film era. "Rashomon" takes place in the 11th century and is a tale that illustrates how man's ego is his downfall. The film is shot on location in rugged mountain and forest areas. The innovative techniques applied in "Rashomon" are later praised at the International



Venice Film Festival. "Rashomon" receives the Grand Prix from the Venice Film Festival and the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film.

Epilogue

Akira is disappointed the first time "Rashomon" is shown on TV. The studio head takes full credit for the film, not even mentioning Akira. Akira confesses that he probably left the worst parts of his nature out of his autobiography. He too suffers from the curse of egoism highlighted in "Rashomon." A work, he concludes, often says more about the creator than the work.



Characters

Akira Kurosawa

"Akira Kurosawa, Something Like an Autobiography" is the life story of the famous Japanese filmmaker. His movie, "The Seven Samurai" is considered one of the best movies ever made. It is ranked with "Citizen Kaine" and "Casablanca." The movie is a much-heralded masterpiece among the international film community. In fact, the popular American movie, "The Magnificent Seven" is based on the "Seven Samurai," in tribute to the master filmmaker.

Akira Kurosawa subtitles his autobiography with the disclaimer that his work is "something like an autobiography." As the reader begins to get into the tome, he can readily understand why Akira added this caveat. The account begins with Akira's childhood which is told in what are often disjointed flashes. Some of these recollections are just that and do not add much dimension to the overall story of the man. Other memories tell how this rather shy, weak young man, who was the baby of his family, learned discipline and tenacity, characteristics certainly necessary for a future film director.

With master filmmaker Yamamoto as his mentor, Akira learns every aspect of filmmaking. Yamamoto drives Akira to accept only perfection. He also teaches him the importance of treating everyone on the cast and crew with the utmost respect, even the extras. Akira goes on to become one of Japan's foremost film writers and directors. With his film, "Rashomon," Akira is accepted into the international film community. He wins the Venice Film Festival's Grand Prix award for "Rashomon" as well as the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. Akira goes on to make twenty-seven feature films. He attributes his success to several outstanding teachers he had in school; to his father and brother, and, to his mentor Yamamoto.

Yamamoto Kajiro

Akira considers film director Yamamoto Kajiro his mentor in filmmaking and "the best teacher of his entire life." Akira meets Yamamoto when he is hired as a young assistant director with a production company called P.C.L. Akira is ready to quit after his first film assignment but is scheduled on his second venture to join Yamamoto's group. Immediately, Akira is drawn to the master filmmaker. Akira finds Yamamoto not only one of the most knowledgeable people on movie making but also one of the wisest, gentlest and patient people he has ever met.

Yamamoto is respectful and kind to his staff but that does not mean he does not work them hard. He requires all his assistant directors to learn every part of filmmaking, including the most menial of clean-up jobs. Yamamoto views the flock of assistant directors that came his way as the future of film and he wants to ensure that they know



what they are doing when they take the reins. Akira learns much from his mentor—he writes screenplays, edited film, dubbed in sound, and coached actors under his mentorship.

The most important thing Akira learns from Yamamoto, however, had nothing to do with technique. Rather, it is the importance of being disciplined and working as hard and long as necessary and being kind and respectful to everyone. Yamamoto would never address anyone without knowing his name. If he needed to speak to an extra, he would only address that person when he could call them by name. He knew that he would get more out of the people working for him, and thus make a better movie, if he just took the time to be kind.

Akira Heigo

Akira Heigo is Kurosawa's protective, older brother to whom he is always very close. Akira remains haunted throughout his life by Heigo's suicide at just 27 years of age.

Akira's Father

Akira is first introduced to movies and sports by his father, two passions that stay with Akira throughout his life.

Akira's Mother

Although Akira's mother seems passive and submissive to her husband, Akira views her as his more practical, less emotional parent.

Uekusa Keinosuke

Uekusa Keinosuke is a student at Kuroda Primary School along with fellow "crybaby" Akira Kurosawa. They become life-long friends and collaborators.

Mr. Tachikawa

Mr. Tachikawa is Akira Kurosawa's favorite primary school teacher. He encourages creativity in his students.

Aunt Togashi

When Akira visits his father's village of birth, he spends time with his Aunt Togashi, one of his favorite relatives. She pays the young Akira yen to escort her on family visits.



Yaguchi Yoko

Yaguchi Yoko is a young actress that Akira meets when making the movie "The Most Beautiful." Later, she becomes his wife.

Mifune Toshiro

When fledgling actor Mifune Toshiro is turned down for a position with his studio, Akira insists that he be hired. Mifune goes on to star in many of Akira's movies.



Objects/Places

Akita Prefecture

Akita Prefecture is the region where Akira's father is born. It is the locale of a memorial service held for Akira's grandfather when Akira is one-year old.

Omori District of Tokyo

The Omori District of Tokyo is the childhood home of Akira Kurosawa.

Morimura Gakuen

Morimura Gakuen is the primary school that Akira Kurosawa attends in Tokyo. He is considered "retarded" by the staff.

The Edogawa River District

The Edogawa River District is an area that is greatly damaged by the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923.

Toyokawa Village

Akira's father sends his son to his village of birth—Toyokawa Village—during a summer break. Akira's father sends instructions to work his rather weak son hard in order to build up his strength.

Tokyo Tenement

Akira lives in a run-down Tokyo tenement near his older brother, Heigo, for several years. His parents have no idea of the horrid conditions in which he was living. Heigo commits suicide in the tenement after losing his job.

Gotenba

Gotenba is a town at the base of Mount Fuji where Akira shoots several of his films, including "The Seven Samurai."



Yokohama

Yokohama is the locale of the first movie Akira directs. The movie is entitled, "Sugata Sanshiro."

Windy Mountains and Snowy Hilltops

Akira prefers to shoot his films on location. He opts for real wind versus that produced by machines and real rather than artificially produced snow.

Toho Studio

Toho Studio is where Akira meets Yokohama and learns the most about filmmaking. Although he leaves Toho at times, he returns and makes most of his movies there.



Themes

Tenacity

It is obvious with the birth of Akira Kurosawa that he is different—special—but different. He does not cry immediately at birth but his hands are tightly pressed against one another. When his hands are finally pulled apart, bruises are apparent on the tiny hands. Akira begins life the way he wants—silently but with strength. This characteristic never leaves him and serves him well in later years as he pursues a career in the turbulent world of filmmaking.

Due to his non-conformist attitude, Akira has some less than congenial relationships with some of his teachers. One teacher takes every opportunity to humiliate and degrade him. After the instructor harshly criticizes a simple drawing by Akira, he vows to work so hard from that point on that the teacher will never again have the opportunity to criticize him. That criticism strengthens Akira's resolve—a lesson he is able to draw from in future confrontations and conflicts.

He learns a great lesson from his older brother who forces Akira to accompany him to the villages burned out by the fires raging after the devastating Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. The two observe countless charred corpses piled in mounds or bloated and drifting down the river. Akira tries to run from the horror but his brother makes him stay. Only later does Akira realize that his brother was just as disturbed as he but knew that to become strong one had to conquer one's fears, even those worse than a nightmare.

Discipline

As a very young student, Akira keeps a schedule that most adults would find impossible to endure. He leaves home hours before sunrise every morning and walks well over an hour to his kendo lessons (martial art swordsmanship). After that he pays respect at his shrine, has breakfast at home, then begins his day as a student. After school he walks to his calligraphy classes. Akira keeps this hectic schedule for two years. However, his wise father knows that this agenda will help to transform the generally undisciplined youngster. From these early lessons, he begins to learn the necessity of organization and understand the value of effective use of time.

During a summer school break, his father sends him to the village of his birth which is lacking in the amenities of Tokyo. He and another child are given only a pickle and rice to eat each day as they are sent off to the rice fields to work. If they want more to eat, they are forced to catch fish with a rudimentary device consisting of a board to trap the fish and a net to capture it. Akira at first finds it difficult to even lift the device. However, he enjoys eating the fish, so he persists and through self-discipline learns to catch the fish.



He realizes that these difficult lessons learned as a child are essential for the success he realizes in later life as a filmmaker. As assistant director under his mentor and idol, Yamamoto, he is to accept only perfection and will go without sleep for days making sure a film was on schedule. Akira learns through film editing under Yamamoto how crucial it is to acquire the discipline to look at one's own work in an objective manner.

The Art of Film making

Successful filmmaking is impossible unless its underpinnings are moored in love. Love is what Akira Kurosawa has for film years before he has any thoughts that he can make a living at it. There is never a question about Akira's artistic and creative bent. As a young boy, his art work strays from the strict limitations of his instructors. While some teachers holds his art work up for ridicule, one teacher lauds him for his creativity and thus perhaps sets him off on the path that leads him to filmmaking.

Unintentionally, his father has a great influence on Akira's ultimate choice of careers. As far back as he can remember, he and his family always go to the movies. As a child, he sees the great silent films made in Japan and from around the world. He marvels at the shining stars in the superior films that come from the United States. Along with movie-watching, one constant in Akira's life is love for literature and storytelling. In Tokyo, children can visit village "storytellers" and his father often takes him to listen to their exciting tales. Reading as many books as he can becomes a lasting passion in Akira's life. The marrying of his artistic creativity with his love of storytelling ultimately leads to the natural progression in becoming part of the filmmaking industry.

Fortunately, when Akira becomes an assistant director he quickly comes under the tutelage of Yamamoto whom he considers his mentor and a master filmmaker. What Akira does not already come by naturally and through early experiences, Yamamoto is there to fill in the gaps. He patiently teaches Akira everything about making films from the menial tasks to the responsibility of taking over the helm. Akira cannot say enough in gratitude to his friend and mentor. He attributes his success to him.



Style

Perspective

Akira Kurosawa writes the story of his life, of course, with unique authority. The beginning of the story is rather jumpy and inconsistent which could be attributed to the fact that he is writing from memory. He does not make references to journals or diaries or testimonials and therefore the reader must assume he is depending upon his own recollections. He sometimes references other people's accounts of incidents. However, he often does not agree with their versions. It can be assumed that either he or the other person does not remember accurately—or perhaps both. However, as the story passes through early childhood, the account takes on a more cohesive sense and begins to have fewer inconclusive episodes.

It is easy to discern his artistic bent and rather non-conformist style. Some of the sketchy episodes he relates do not have a pay-off or conclusion which is indicative of that style. However, he is very thorough in one area—the art of filmmaking. In these descriptions, Akira writes appropriately as a master of the art. He describes in detail the learning process he experiences under his mentor Yamamoto. He learns every aspect of filmmaking under his tutelage and no one is in a better situation to accurately convey the techniques of Japanese filmmaking than Akira. He makes 27 feature films. His movie "Rashomon" wins both the Venice Festival Grand Prix award and the Academy Award for Best Foreign film of 1950.

Tone

The tone of the autobiography of filmmaker Akira Kurosawa provides the account with a gentle touch, even when times of tragedy are being described. There was a generous measure of tragedy in Akira's life and although he mentions it because it was part of his life, he does not dwell on the negative experiences or episodes. True to the storyteller he is, he is merely relating what happened.

Akira's delivery is not unemotional. Rather, he openly relates his feelings during the sad and tragic moments but then, as he most obviously did in his life, he moves on. In fact, he used many of the unhappy and trying times of his life as springboards to happier times. He was told by several people that he had a happy face and a positive attitude. He closely resembled his brother (who committed suicide) he was told with one difference: darkness was always on his brother's face while his was lit with sunshine. His positive outlook on life most becomes obvious in his writing of this book.

The non-conformist Akira began a career in art prior to going into film. He was encouraged in his art as a young boy when a teacher lauded him for his creativity. His positive and liberal attitude toward life's events and other people underscores a

tolerance and non-judgmental bearing that he adapted to his work in film. He is a living example of how one can exchange adversity for an opportunity to learn and grow.

Structure

The autobiography of Akira Kurosawa is structured in basically a chronological, straight-forward manner with minimum use of flashbacks or flash forwards. The account of Akira's childhood is slightly sketchy since Akira apparently depends upon his memory for most of the episodes. There is no reference to any logs or diaries that were kept about his early life. There is a sparsity of comments from others included in those early recollections.

The book is separated basically by episodes and there are 53 such sections in all. There are not numbered or named chapters per se. However, the episodic structure is laid out in generally brief, titled sections. Especially in the earlier sections about his youth, there is some lack of cohesion from one episode to the next which is understandable and probably due to sketchy memories. The book ends in an Epilogue in which Akira references the aftermath of his award winning film, "Rashomon." There is an appendix which Akira titled, "Some Random Notes on Filmmaking." This section had been prepared by Akira as a help to young people considering a film career. The book ends with an extensive index.



Quotes

"However, my oldest sister, now deceased, used to say, 'You were a strange baby.' Apparently I emerged from my mother's womb without uttering a sound, but with my hands firmly clasped together. When at last they were able to pry my hands apart, I had bruises on both palms." (3)

"In the early Taisho era, 1912-1926, when I started school, the word 'teacher' was synonymous with 'scary person.' The fact that at such a time I encountered such free and innovative education with such creative impulse behind it—that I encountered a teacher like Mr. Tachikawa at such a time—I cherish among the rarest of blessings." (13)

"Perhaps it is the power of memory that gives rise to the power of imagination." (30)

"When someone is told over and over again that he's no good at something, he loses more and more confidence and eventually does become poor at it. Conversely, if he's told he's good at something, his confidence builds and he actually becomes better at it. While a person is born with strengths and weaknesses as part of his heredity, they can be greatly altered by later influences." (40)

"Ordinarily, children are supposed to spend their childhood like saplings sheltered in a greenhouse. Even if on occasion some wind or rain of the real world slips in through the cracks, a child is not supposed to be weatherbeaten in earnest by the sleet and snow." (70)

". . .human nature wants to place value on things in direct proportion to the amount of labor that went into making them. In film editing, this natural inclination is the most dangerous of all attitudes. The art of the cinema has been called an art of time, but time used to no purpose cannot be called anything but wasted time." (105)

"Preparing for this second shot, the actress playing the daughter asked me, 'Mr. Kurosawa, do I just pray for my father's victory?' I replied, 'yes that's right, but while you're at it, you might as well pray for the success of this picture.'" (124)

"The Japanese have rare talents. In the midst of the war it was the encouragement of the militarist national policies that led us to a fuller appreciation of traditions and arts, but this political sponsorship is not necessary. I think Japan can be proud at any time of having a very special aesthetic world of its own. This recognition led me also to a better understanding of myself—and greater self-confidence." (148)

"It has been twenty-five years since we had shared a meal with Mr. Tachikawa. We were saddened to see that he had become very small, and his teeth were so weak he couldn't chew the sukiyaki beef very well. But when I started to get up to order something softer for him, he stopped me. It was enough of a feast for him, he said, just to be able to see our faces. We obeyed, moved by his emotion, and sat down again. As



he gazed into our faces, he made little mumbling sounds of approval and nodded his head. And as I gazed back at him, my old teacher's facial features became indistinct, and soon my blurred eyes couldn't see him very well." (155)

"From by many experiences of writing screenplays, however, I have learned something: If I hold fast in the face of this blankness and despair, adopting the tactic of Bodhidharma, the founder of the Zen sect, who glared at the wall that stood in his way until his legs became useless, a path will open up." (157)

"Management never recognized that movies are made by a co-operative work force that is created by a union of individual human talents. They never recognized how much effort was required to bring about that union. So they were able to destroy with total equanimity everything we had worked to build. We became like the children in Buddhist limbo who have preceded their parents in death: On the banks of the River Sai they pile up stones to form little towers. But every time a tower is completed, a mean devil comes and knocks it down." (166)

"Maupassant instructed aspiring writers to extend their vision into realms where no one else could see, and to keep it up until the hitherto invisible became visible to everyone." (172)



Topics for Discussion

How did filmmaker Yamamoto treat those who worked for him? How did he treat the extras on the set?

What circumstances led to the suicide of Akira Kurosawa's older brother, Heigo?

Why did the Japanese war-time censors cut the scene from a movie that contained this line, "The factory gate waited for the student workers?"

When the Americans occupied Japan after World War II ended, what Hollywood director came to Akira's set anonymously to observe Akira's work? When did Akira find out?

What was Yamamoto most concerned with when Akira visits him on his deathbed? What did this illustrate about the master filmmaker?

To what did Akira attribute the decline of Japanese filmmaking? In his view, why was American film becoming ever more successful?

What was the subject of Akira's movie, "Scandal?" Did the movie have the impact that Akira had hoped for?

How was Akira's film, "Rashomon" received by the critics? What awards did it win?