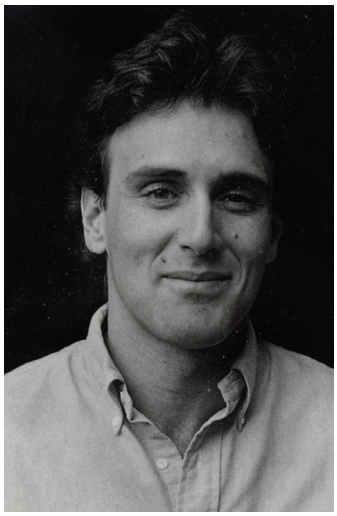
Author: David Guterson

Guterson was born and reared in Seattle, Washington; his father, Murray Bernard Guterson, is an criminal law attorney. As a child, Guterson heard about his father's cases and often sat in on his trials; he explained to Elizabeth Sherwin: "In the late 1960s when I was growing up I wanted to be a crusader like [my father] but I didn't want to wear a suit and commute. When I went to college I took a creative writing class and decided in a week to be a writer." Guterson attended the University of Washington, where he earned both a B.A. and an M.A. After graduating from college, Guterson became a high school English teacher in Bainbridge Island, Washington. He and his wife, Robin Ann Radwick, whom he married in 1979, have homeschooled all four of their children. Guterson has also served as a contributing editor to *Harper's* magazine.

Name: David Guterson
Born: May 4, 1956
Education: B.A. (1978) and M.A. (1982) University of Washington.
Address:
Georges Borchardt, Inc.
136 East 57th St
New York, NY 10020



Career:
High School English Teacher 1984-94, and Contributing Editor for *Harper's.*

Awards:
PEN/Faulkner Award, Folger Shakespeare Award, Barnes & Noble Discovery Award, and Pacific Northwest Sellers Award. All were awarded in 1995 for *Snow Falling on Cedars.*

Writings:
The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind (short stories) 1989
Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense (nonfiction) 1992
Snow Falling on Cedars (novel) 1994

Media Adaptations:
The novel, *Snow Falling on Cedars,* was adapted for a 1999 film of the same name, written by Ronald Bass and directed by Scott Hicks.

Major Works:
Guterson's collection *The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind* (1989) contains ten short stories that demonstrate the penchant for illuminating the beauty and mystery of both the natural world and human nature that informs the author's later work. Many of the stories are told from the perspective of a distressed narrator who examines his life from a mid-point, viewing both his past and his imagined future; then the connections between these times are revealed. Philip Graham observed: "In a sense, Guterson's stories are mystery stories of a high literary order, who dunits of fate and human frailty." The story "Opening Day" is narrated by a man who reflects on the human condition during a day of duck hunting with his son and his father, and in "Day of the Moonwalk," a man contemplates his family's unrealized dreams of happiness and success after moving to a new home in a

Author: David Guterson (2)

Seattle neighborhood. In *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense* (1992) Guterson offers evidence to support the decision of parents to educate their children at home rather than sending them to school; he cites examples from his own family's experience with homeschooling and uses statistics gathered from other sources to illustrate that it can be a beneficial and workable alternative form of education. Guterson's acclaimed novel, *Snow Falling on Cedars,* is set in the Puget Sound island of San Piedro in 1954 and centers on the murder trial of Kabuo Miyomoto, accused of killing fisherman Carl Heine. Miyomoto and his family were sent in 1942 to Manzanar, one of the relocation camps in which many Japanese Americans were interned during World War II because—though they had lived in America for generations—the American government determined they represented a threat to national security due to their race. Perhaps surprisingly, upon his release Miyomoto joined the United States Army and fought in Italy. After the war he returned to San Piedro to find that the strawberry farm his family had been buying from the Heine family had been sold during the Miyomotos's absence. Miyomoto's obsession with the farm provides the apparent motive for his alleged murder of Heine. Although the action of the novel focuses on the investigation and testimony presented at the trial, Guterson's omniscient viewpoint allows for numerous flashbacks among several of the characters, including a subplot involving an adolescent romance between Ishmael Chambers, a war veteran who operates the local newspaper, and Hatsue, Miyomoto's wife. Miyomoto's drive to reclaim the farm, and the guilt he feels for having killed Germans in Italy, is contrasted throughout with Chambers's vague desire to rekindle his romance with Hatsue.

Critical Reception:

Overall, critics have found Guterson's works engaging, thoughtful, and emotionally powerful, and have applauded his treatment of such broad, complex, and controversial themes as racism, honesty versus dishonesty, and the human condition. In reviews of *Snow Falling on Cedars,* critics praised Guterson's subtle treatment of racial prejudice and have characterized the novel as a study of community, hypocrisy, and the debilitating effects of guilt and obsession. Although some commentators maintained that the novel lacks an intriguing protagonist and suffers from an overabundance of detail, most lauded Guterson's prose, arguing that he invigorates his story with a dramatic and suspenseful pace and evokes a clear sense of the island's physical environment and the mood and way of life of its inhabitants. Philip Graham echoed the sentiments of many other critics when he declared that in both his short story collection and his novel "Guterson displays a fine eye for the mysteries of the human soul, creating dramatic moments that are often layered with social and historical complexities and framed by the stark beauty and terror of the natural world."

Sidelights:

Although he has also authored a volume of short stories and a work of nonfiction, Guterson is best known for his novel, *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1994), which was awarded the Pen/Faulkner Prize for Fiction. Critics have lauded Guterson's ability to create richly detailed settings, his evocative use of language, and his well-drawn, believable characters. Guterson has remarked: "I write because something inner and unconscious forces me to. That is the first compulsion. The second is one of ethical and moral duty. I feel responsible to tell stories that inspire readers to consider more deeply who they are."

Author: David Guterson (3)

Further Readings:

Periodicals:

Criticism

Graham, Philip. "In the Country of David Guterson." *The Chicago Tribune—Books* (30 June 1996).
Largely positive assessment of *The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind.*

Iyer, Pico. "Snowbound: On a Remote Island, a Vivid Tale of Clashing Cultures." *Time* 144, No. 13 (26 September 1994).
Highly laudatory review of *Snow Falling on Cedars.*

Review of *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense,* by David Guterson. *Kirkus Reviews* (1 July 1992).
A positive review of *Family Matters,* which the reviewer calls it "[a] literate primer for anyone who wants to know more about alternatives to the schools."

Pate, Nancy. "Murder Unveils an Island's Secrets." *The Chicago Tribune* (12 January 1995).
Favorable assessment of *Snow Falling on Cedars,* in which Pate asserts "Guterson's prose is controlled and graceful, almost detached. But the accretion of small details gives his story weight."

Source Citation: "David Guterson." Contemporary Literary Criticism Select. Detroit: Gale, Literature Resource Center. Gale. Kalamazoo Public Library. 14 Sept. 2009

Reviews:

Publishers Weekly (1 Aug. 1994): p70
This poetic novel beautifully captures the painful legacy of war and a community's struggle to deal with that pain. Shortly after WW II, fisherman Carl Heine is found dead in the waters off San Pedro, an island of "damp souls" off the coast of Washington State. Accused of his murder is fellow fisherman Kabuo Miyomoto, a member one of the many families of Japanese descent on the island. All of the island's inhabitants are gripped by the murder trial, but none more so than Ishmael Chambers, a local reporter who lost his arm in the Pacific theater, and Hutsue Imada, Kabuo's wife and Ishmael's former lover. First-novelist Guterson, a contributing editor at Harper's and author of the short-story collection *The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind,* pays meticulous attention to the legal intricacies of Kabuo's trial. His greater purpose, however, and one that he achieves with skill and grace, is an investigation of racism, the nature of justice and the "same human frailty passed from generation to generation." This is a luxurious book, whose finely detailed evocation of its small-town setting effectively draws the reader to consider its larger issues. (Sept.)

Booklist (Aug. 1994): p2022
A 1954 murder trial in an island community off the coast of Washington state broadens into an exploration of war, race, and the mysteries of human motivation. The dead man, Carl Heine, his accused murderer, Kabuo Miyomoto, and the one-man staff of the local newspaper, Ishmael Chambers, were all scarred by their experiences in World War II but resumed normal-seeming lives upon their return to the fishing and strawberry-farming community of San Piedro in Puget Sound. While fishermen Heine and Miyomoto set about raising families, the newspaperman remainsalone and apart, alienated by the loss of an arm and a childhood love, who married Miyomoto. Chambers comes upon information that could alter the verdict of the trial if presented or change his own life if suppressed, creating a private trial as momentous as the public one, with the outcome as much in doubt. Guterson's first novel is compellingly suspenseful on each of its several levels.

The New York Times Book Review (Oct. 16, 1994)
In March 1942, just before the 800 Japanese residents of San Piedro Island in Puget Sound are herded off to a California internment camp, 18-year-old Hatsue Imada gives what seems a naive response to her mother's description of the deep racial bias that has surfaced in their small, isolated community in the wake of Pearl Harbor: "They don't all hate us," Hatsue says. "You're exaggerating, mother—you know you are. They're not so different from us, you know. Some hate, others don't. It isn't all of them." Hatsue should know; for four years she has been carrying on a clandestine romance with a boy named Ishmael Chambers, son of the local newspaper editor, the two of them meeting at odd moments in a huge old hollow cedar in the forest between their houses.

But neither the romance nor the friendship that they have shared since childhood will survive the bitter division brought about by the war.

Successive waves of "wayward souls and eccentrics"—Canadian Englishmen, Scots-Irish, Scandinavians, Germans and most recently Japanese, who came originally as migrant labor to pick berries on the extensive strawberry fields and stayed on, aspiring for their American-born children to own their own plots—have resulted in an ethnically if not economically diverse population on this "island of five thousand damp souls." Their isolation within the spectacularly beautiful but harsh environment has fostered the illusion of community, an illusion abruptly shattered by the advent of World War II.

Reviews: (continued)

It's now the first week in December 1954, and snow is falling outside the courtroom in the "rainy, wind-beaten sea village" of Amity Harbor, the island's only town, "downtrodden and mildewed," where Hatsue's husband, Kabuo Miyomoto, is on trial. He is charged with the first-degree murder of Carl Heine, a fellow fisherman, whose body was found early on the morning of Sept. 16, entangled in his own gill net. Now the sole proprietor of his late father's newspaper, Ishmael Chambers, maimed both physically and psychically fighting against the Japanese in the South Pacific, looks out at the storm, hoping it will "snow recklessly and bring to the island the impossible winter purity, so rare and precious, he remembered fondly from his youth." But the war has taken a terrible toll on the human spirit, and memories of that desperate conflict have exacerbated the racial intolerance subtly present even before the war. This is most clearly evidenced in the testimony of Carl's mother, Etta Heine, whose act in denying the Miyomoto family ownership of their all-but-paid-for seven acres of strawberry fields is revealed as the first link in a decade-long chain of events that has now apparently culminated in Carl's death at the hands of Kabuo.

Though the courtroom setting defines the present in *Snow Falling on Cedars,* David Guterson's finely wrought and flawlessly written first novel (he is the author of a book of short stories and a guide to home schooling), this meticulously drawn legal drama forms only the topmost layer of complex time strata, which Mr. Guterson proceeds to mine assiduously through an intricate series of flashbacks. Thus testimony slides ineluctably from merely verbal recollection into remembered incident into fully realized historical narrative—past events told from the numerous characters' points of view with all the detail and intensity of lives being lived before our very eyes. THE most immediate of these serial flashbacks recounts not only Sheriff Art Moran's investigation of the events surrounding Carl's death during the months preceding the trial, but also the personal histories of the people Moran has seen fit to interview and who are now being called as witnesses. Even minor characters—Ole Jurgensen, present owner of the disputed seven acres; Horace Whaley, the coroner; Carl's wife, Susan Marie; Army Sgt. Victor Maples, who testifies to Kabuo's expertise in kendo, the ancient military art of the samurai warrior—are dramatized well beyond their roles as participants in the trial.

Unlike many recent purveyors of courtroom calisthenics, Mr. Guterson does not stop there. Taking us back nearly a dozen years in both historical and personal time, he depicts the Allied invasion of the South Pacific island of Betio through the eyes of the 19-year-old Ishmael, as, lying gravely wounded on the beach, he sees the rest of his company wiped out, so that like his namesake he alone survives to tell the tale. Almost simultaneously, we accompany Hatsue and her family on their harrowing journey southward to California, and we share their deprivation and humiliation in the notorious internment camp of Manzanar, as well as the irony of Kabuo's turnabout military service fighting Germans in the European theater. Tunneling back even further, we witness Ishamel and Hatsue's secret meetings inside the hollow cedar, the development of their forbidden romance and its subsequent demise, adding emotional depth to their estrangement in the present.

As the exhaustive list of acknowledgments demonstrates, Mr. Guterson has done his homework on everything from autopsies to Zen Buddhism, taking on the enormous risk of crossing boundaries not just of time, but of sex and culture as well. The result is a densely packed, multifaceted work that sometimes hovers on the verge of digressiveness, but in Mr. Guterson's skilled hands never succumbs to the fragmentation that might well have marred such an ambitious undertaking. In fact, so compelling is the narrative that we almost lose sight of the central issue, which is, as the defense attorney Nels Gudmundsson reminds us in his summation, whether Kabuo Miyomoto is on trial for murder—even worse, will be found guilty—simply because he is Japanese.

Simply is not the right word. In a parallel to the case against Kabuo, the reader must sift back through the weight of the whole novel to determine not only whether Kabuo's accusation and trial are in fact racially motivated, but

Reviews: (continued)

where the responsibility lies if this is in fact the case. Along with the clear manifestations of racism, there is enough evidence of people struggling with their own consciences, speaking out against prejudice, among them Ishmael's parents and Carl Heine's father, to support Hatsue's perception that "it isn't all of them" that hate. The answer, finally, is equivocal at best. Is Kabuo's refusal to reveal his whereabouts on the fateful night a response to the prejudice he feels will condemn him out of hand, or a self-fulfilling prophecy that is in itself a form of racism? The key, Mr. Guterson seems to say, lies in the possibility of individual action. As Nels Gudmundsson instructs the jury: "Your task as you deliberate together on these proceedings is to insure that you do nothing to yield to a universe in which things go awry by happenstance. Let fate, coincidence and accident conspire; human beings must act on reason."

In a heart-stopping demonstration of this, fate, coincidence and accident do conspire to supply a crucial bit of last-minute evidence, requiring one of the actors in this drama to choose whether to act on reason and compassion, or, by giving in to hatred and anger, let accident rule every corner of the universe. Thus the mystery plays itself out, along with the storm, leaving the human heart to shake free, as the hardiest cedars shake free of snow, of the chill of hatred and war—if it only will.

Library Journal 1994
Japanese American Kabuo Miyomoto is arrested in 1954 for the murder of a fellow fisherman, Carl Heine. Miyomoto's trial, which provides a focal point to the novel, stirs memories of past relationships and events in the minds and hearts of the San Piedro Islanders. Through these memories, Guterson illuminates the grief of loss, the sting of prejudice triggered by World War II, and the imperatives of conscience. With mesmerizing clarity he conveys the voices of Kabuo's wife, Hatsue, and Ishmael Chambers, Hatsue's first love who, having suffered the loss of her love and the ravages of war, ages into a cynical journalist now covering Kabuo's trial. The novel poetically evokes the beauty of the land while revealing the harshness of war, the nuances of our legal system, and the injustice done to those interned in U.S. relocation camps. Highly recommended for all fiction collections.

Kirkus Reviews 1994
Old passions, prejudices, and grudges surface in a Washington State island town when a Japanese man stands trial for the murder of a fisherman in the 1950s. Guterson (*The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind,* 1989, etc.) has written a thoughtful, poetic first novel, a cleverly constructed courtroom drama with detailed, compelling characters. Many years earlier, Kabuo Miyamoto's family had made all but the last payment on seven acres of land they were in the process of buying from the Heine family. Then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and Kabuo's family was interned. Etta Heine, Carl's mother, called off the deal. Kabuo served in the war, returned, and wanted his land back. After changing hands a few times, the land ended up with Carl Heine. When Carl, a fisherman, is found drowned in his own net, all the circumstantial evidence, with the land dispute as a possible motive, points to Kabuo as the murderer. Meanwhile, Hatsue Miyamoto, Kabuo's wife, is the undying passion of Ishmael Chambers, the publisher and editor of the town newspaper. Ishmael, who returned from the war minus an arm, can't shake his obsession for Hatsue any more than he can ignore the ghost pains in his nonexistent arm. As a thick snowstorm whirls outside the courtroom, the story is unburied. The same incidents are recounted a number of times, with each telling revealing new facts. In the end, justice and morality are proven to be intimately woven with beauty—the kind of awe and wonder that children feel for the world. But Guterson communicates these truths through detail, not philosophical argument: Readers will come away with a surprising store of knowledge regarding gill-netting boats and other specifics of life in the Pacific Northwest. Packed with lovely moments and as compact as haiku—at the same time, a page-turner full of twists.

Criticism

Critical Essay on *Snow Falling on Cedars*

In many ways, Ishmael Chambers, the World War II veteran and small-town reporter in David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars* is similar to his literary namesake in Herman Melville's classic *Moby Dick.* In fact, the two characters have enough in common to warrant a comparison in an effort to understand Ishmael Chambers better. Fundamentally, however, there are significant differences in the two characters' ways of understanding the world. If Ishmael Chambers had been more like Ishmael at this deeper level, he could have saved himself years of anger, resentment, and cynicism. It is likely that he would have married, had a family, and enjoyed the years he wasted on bitterness.

Comparing Ishmael and Ishmael Chambers is important because it shows the reader how Ishmael Chambers' life could have been different. If he had been more like Ishmael, he would have seen himself not as a victim of the world but as a part of it.

First, it is important to establish that there are enough substantial similarities between the two characters to justify a meaningful comparison. The first signal to the reader is the name itself. Ishmael is an unusual name, and most American readers immediately think of what is perhaps the most famous opening sentence in American literature: "Call me Ishmael." Briefly, the character of Ishmael in *Moby Dick* is a man who heads for the seas in search of adventure. Along the way, he befriends a cannibal, meets the crazed Captain Ahab (whose sole purpose in life is to kill the whale that took his leg), and survives a disastrous boat wreck. *Moby Dick* is such a cornerstone of American literature and the narrator's name is so memorable, Guterson (an English teacher) was certainly aware that readers would make a connection. Guterson's inclusion of a passage referring to *Moby Dick's* Ishmael further assures the reader that the allusion is intentional. Melville's use of the name is a biblical allusion. The name means "God hears," which refers to both characters' eventual triumphs over seemingly insurmountable odds. Ishmael was the only survivor of Captain Ahab's ship that was lost at sea during Ahab's final pursuit of the whale. Ishmael Chambers fought in the South Pacific during World War II, seeing the rest of his group killed. Although he survived, he came close enough to death that he lost his left arm.

Beyond sharing a name and the meaning associated with it, these two characters have other similarities. They are both participants in a passionate pursuit that is not their own. Ishmael finds himself aboard Captain Ahab's ship, and Ahab is single-minded in his pursuit of the whale. Ishmael Chambers fights in World War II, a conflict so passionately pursued by world leaders that it ended with unparalleled atomic devastation. In both cases, the stakes are life and death. They are both then reporters (Ishmael Chambers being formally occupied as one), the only witnesses to the events around them.

Both men are essentially alone in the world. Ishmael Chambers has no wife, no co-workers, and no close friends. He is able to talk to his mother, but is guarded even with her. Ishmael is unencumbered enough to set off for adventure, and his only friend is made on the trip—the cannibal Queequeg. While Ishmael and Queequeg are friends, they are too dissimilar to bond at a deep level, and they do not have a history together. Just as Ishmael comes to see the very frightening and strange Queequeg as not so different that they cannot be friends, Ishmael Chambers sees Hatsue as more like him than unlike him. That she is Japanese and he is American is of little consequence to him because he prefers to focus on the person behind the ethnicity.

For all of these similarities, however, they differ dramatically in the ways in which they see the world and themselves in it. Ishmael seeks adventure, which indicates his impulse to be part of the world and to experience

Criticism: (continued)

what the world has to offer him. He expects to venture into the unknown and be changed by it. In Moby Dick, he explains that he sees himself as an eagle that dives down, grasps what is needed, and returns to the sky. He sees himself as part of the pattern of the world and, therefore, as someone who is connected to the universe. Ishmael Chambers, on the other hand, would have been content never to have left the island of San Piedro. His plans after graduation are not to enlist for service, and the only reason he considers leaving San Piedro is to take Hatsue with him to a place where they can be together. The things that matter to him are in the small community of San Piedro. His adventure (the war) is a decision made for him and forced upon him, not an effort on his part to find adventure. When he returns, his bitterness is heightened by the changes that have taken place in his absence. Hatsue has married and had children, and he feels that everyone stares at him because of his rolled-up sleeve where his left arm once was. Although he never says so, it is clear that he would have been happier if he could have returned to a San Piedro in which nothing had changed since he left it.

Another fundamental difference between the two characters is that Ishmael is open to what the world offers, but Ishmael Chambers keeps himself closed off from the world. Ishmael is willing to see the world in new ways and to learn how other people and cultures think about life. Ishmael Chambers, on the other hand, is unable even to understand the deep cultural divide that keeps Hatsue distant from him. He imagines that the force of their love alone is sufficient to keep them together because he does not open himself up to learning about the culture of the woman he loves. When he goes to war, he is already bitter and cynical, so he avoids learning anything from his experiences or the other men.

Comparing Ishmael and Ishmael Chambers is important because it shows the reader how Ishmael Chambers' life could have been different. If he had been more like Ishmael, he would have seen himself not as a victim of the world but as a part of it. He would have understood that there are highs and lows in life, and that it was sometimes up to him to determine which direction he would take. Rather than stewing in cynicism and hate, he would have had the opportunity to see himself as a man with the power to climb back up to the sky, like the eagle. Instead, his perspective made him feel trapped and powerless. And if he had shared Ishmael's quality of being open to the world, he would have taken the initiative to understand Hatsue's situation better. While it is unlikely that this would have enabled them to stay together, it would have shown him why they were fated to part. His heart would have been broken, but the break may have been mutual and an act of love for each other's best interests. Instead, he perceived the break-up as an act of violence committed against him by Hatsue, and he could not forgive her. Because he felt wronged by it, he was paralyzed by it. The hate that Ishmael Chambers felt after the war, both because of the break-up and because of the loss of his arm, incapacitated him for almost ten years. He wasted a decade of his youth in resentment rather than enjoying being back home from the war and pursuing a life for himself.

The irony of Ishmael Chambers' unnecessarily wasted years is that he was given an opportunity to change his course when he returned from the war. After the war, he attended a university, where he began taking literature classes. He took a course in American literature and read *Moby Dick.* He was even struck by the fact that he and the narrator shared the same name. The reader is told in chapter four:

The next fall Ishmael took up American literature. Melville, Hawthorne, Twain. He was prepared, in his cynicism, to find *Moby Dick* unreadable—five hundred pages about chasing a whale?—but, as it turned out, it was entertaining. He read the whole thing in ten sittings in his booth at Day's and began pondering the whale's nature at an early juncture. The narrator, he found upon reading the first sentence, bore his own name—Ishmael. Ishmael was all right, but Ahab he could not respect and this ultimately undermined the book for him.

Criticism: (continued)

Apparently, Ishmael Chambers could not be taught a better way by his literary namesake but had to learn his lessons by taking a painful and wasteful road for ten years. He met Ishmael in the pages of *Moby Dick*, and he liked him, but he was too distracted by what he found distasteful to see that an invaluable lesson lurked in the pages. The reader can perhaps find comfort in knowing that Ishmael Chambers did eventually find a better way to live by making peace with his past and taking responsibility for his future. Very often, this is the purpose of great literature, and if Ishmael Chambers missed it in reading *Moby Dick*, maybe modern readers will not miss it by reading *Snow Falling on Cedars.*

Source Citation: Bussey, Jennifer. "Critical Essay on *'Snow Falling on Cedars'*." *Novels for Students.* Ed. Elizabeth Thomason. Vol. 13.

Sometimes, Even Good People Must Coexist With Evil

David Guterson's haunting first novel *[Snow Falling on Cedars]* works on at least two levels. It gives us a puzzle to solve—a whodunit complete with courtroom maneuvering and surprising turns of evidence—and at the same time it offers us a mystery, something altogether richer and deeper.

In 1954, off the island of San Piedro in Puget Sound, salmon fisherman Carl Heine is found drowned and entangled in his boat's gill net. It seems to be an accident. Soon, however, darker suspicions bubble to the surface, and a fisherman of Japanese descent, Kabuo Miyomoto, is put on trial for murder.

Heine, the coroner discovers, has a fractured skull; before drowning, he hit his head on something, or was hit. Evidence confirms that Miyomoto boarded Heine's boat on the foggy night when he died—a rare occurrence among these solitary and self-reliant men. Yet Miyomoto's initial statements to investigators failed to mention such a visit. Besides, Miyomoto had a motive for foul play. When San Piedro's Japanese population was interned in 1942, his parents had nearly paid off their mortgage on a seven-acre strawberry farm bought from Heine's parents. Heine's mother, Etta, promptly sold the land to another farmer. Stoic in the face of legalized injustice, Miyomoto and his wife, Hatsue, waited patiently to repurchase the farm when its owner grew old, but instead Heine bought it just before his death.

This is the puzzle: We are led to believe that Miyomoto, who fought with the legendary 442nd Regimental Combat Team in Europe, is an honorable man, although his stern bearing revives anti-Japanese prejudices that nine postwar years have only lightly buried. We are led to believe that distrust of whites—his family and Hatsue's were shipped to the Manzanar camp in California's Owens Valley—and guilt over the German soldiers he has killed make him accept his arrest as fate.

But if Miyomoto is innocent, why does a net of circumstantial evidence bind him as tightly as any struggling fish?

Ishmael Chambers covers the trial for San Piedro's newspaper, which he inherited from his father. A former Marine who lost an arm fighting the Japanese at Tarawa, Chambers was Hatsue's high school sweetheart; before her crowning as Strawberry Festival Princess in 1941, they secretly met and necked in a hollow cedar tree. From Manzanar, however, Hatsue wrote denying that she loved him, and in the Pacific he felt his love turn into hate.

By now, love and hate alike have faded. "You went numb, Ishmael," his mother tells him. "And you've stayed numb all these years."

Criticism: (continued)

Just as Miyomoto is obsessed with getting back the exact acreage that his family lost, so Chambers sleepwalks through life in the vague hope of reclaiming Hatsue. The contrast between these two obsessions—one conscious and potentially fruitful, the other unconscious and debilitating—is Guterson's main device for leading us into the mystery.

Which is: How can people in a small, tightly knit community be neighbors for generations, even love one another, yet be torn apart by racism?

During the three-day trial, an epochal snowstorm intensifies San Piedro's isolation. Island people, Chambers' father once told him, can't afford to make enemies.

"No one trod easily upon the emotions of another.... This was excellent and poor at the same time—excellent because most people took care, poor because it meant an inbreeding of the spirit, too much held in, regret and silent brooding ... fear of opening up." The ordeal of the storm, coupled with the shock of Heine's death, forces them to confront the past and cracks the ice of their reserve.

Guterson (whose previous work includes a story collection, *The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind*) convinces us that he knows or has researched everything essential here—details of fishing, farming and lawyering; of Coast Guard and coroner's procedures; of Japanese American culture.

With a stately pace and an old-fashioned omniscient voice, he describes the beauty of the Puget Sound islands, the bloody chaos of Tarawa, the desolation of Manzanar and the inner life of every major character.

What he finds there is usually nobility. The only semi-villains are Etta Heine, a couple of FBI men and the anonymous callers who curse Chambers' father for his editorials defending the island's Japanese residents after Pearl Harbor.

Everyone else—Hatsue, Heine's widow, the judge, the sheriff, the aged defense attorney, tough and silent Heine himself—is human and often admirable.

How can so many good people coexist with a major historical evil? The mystery remains even after the puzzle is satisfyingly solved.

Source Citation: Harris, Michael. "Sometimes, Even Good People Must Coexist With Evil." *Los Angeles Times.* E4. Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism Select.

Document Type: Critical essay

David Guterson's well-written first novel is at various moments a courtroom drama, an interracial love story and a war chronicle. Guterson melds these components into a novel that explores how individuals and communities abuse, retreat from or use their histories as motivating forces.

David Guterson's well-written first novel is at various moments a courtroom drama, an interracial love story and a war chronicle.

Criticism: (continued)

Set in 1954 on the fictional island of San Piedro near the San Juan Islands in Washington, *Snow Falling on Cedars* focuses on the trial of Kabuo Miyomoto, a Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) charged with the murder of a fellow fisherman and childhood friend, Carl Heine.

The novel unfolds to reveal complex relationships among the book's main characters: Kabuo; his wife, Hatsue; Carl Heine; and Ishmael Chambers, the local newspaper owner who is covering the trial.

Before the war, Miyomoto's father purchased land from Heine's father, and young Kabuo and Carl were friends. Hatsue and Ishmael were also childhood friends and adolescent sweethearts. The war, however, forever alters these relationships.

Hatsue and Kabuo are interned in Manzanar, where they fall in love and marry. Heine and Chambers see battle in the Pacific, and Kabuo joins the heroic 442nd all-Japanese American combat team to fight in Europe.

The characters return to San Piedro after the war and try to resume their lives. Kabuo discovers, however, that during the war, Heine's mother, motivated in part by racial prejudice, sold the Miyomotos' land to another farmer. Haunted by this injustice, Kabuo seeks to regain his family's land, creating a strain between him and Carl.

Chambers finds it difficult to readjust to life in San Piedro, in part due to the loss of an arm in the war. He takes over his father's newspaper but finds little meaning in his work. His reintegration is compounded by his lingering love for Hatsue.

The novel is well-researched and, for the most part, emotionally realistic. Guterson has a good eye for telling details and writes vividly about the verdant landscape of San Piedro, the profound distress of combat and the solitariness of fishermen at work.

But because the novel mixes genres, it moves at an uneven pace. Not surprisingly, the courtroom scenes move briskly and suspensefully. Other scenes, especially those focusing on Chambers' existential search for meaning, are more ponderous.

Most of the book is written from the various perspectives of the characters, a tricky and difficult narrative technique that Guterson generally employs with success. But in places it means uneven character development, with some characters more convincingly drawn than others.

The novel's main flaw is the underdevelopment of Kabuo, ostensibly the story's main character. Guterson balances between exploding ethnic stereotypes and reinforcing them.

Kabuo is portrayed as stoic, strong and angry. Although he reveals emotional vulnerability in brief moments, his character could have benefited from more shading.

There are minor points in the novel that seem slightly inconsistent with Japanese American history. It seems unlikely, for example, that so many Issei (first-generation Japanese immigrants) would speak English as fluently as they do in the novel. The disintegration of family life in the Manzanar internment camp occurs a bit too quickly. Important distinctions between the Nisei-dominated Japanese American Citizens League and Issei organizations are not made.

Criticism: (continued)

Overall, though, this is an intriguing novel that explores the burdens of history and how random circumstances combined with ethnic stereotypes contribute to resulting troubles and tragedies.

Source Citation: Yogi, Stan. "A Friendship Shattered by War." *San Francisco Chronicle.* 2. Rpt. in Novels for Students. Ed. Elizabeth Thomason. Vol. 13.

Amid the Cedars, Serenity and Success

David Guterson has been away from home for only two hours, but when he walks into the kitchen of his shingle-style bungalow, telephone messages line the door frame.

An editor from *People* magazine has called. A television producer wants an interview before the German publicity tour for Mr. Guterson's first novel, *Snow Falling on Cedars.* A bookstore clamors for a reading, if Mr. Guterson can fit it in between tours of France, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

Mr. Guterson, 39, smiles slightly and shakes his head. "It wasn't like this when I was teaching high school English," he says. "This book is a full-time job."

This book is, in fact, a literary sensation. The winner of the 1995 Faulkner Award for Fiction, one of the highest honors in American letters, *Snow Falling on Cedars* has surprised even its publishers by also becoming a national best-seller, registering the kind of paperback sales usually associated with John Grisham and Danielle Steele.

The novel, an atmospheric tale about the murder trial of a Japanese-American fisherman on an isolated cedar-covered island in Puget Sound, sold 70,000 hard-cover copies after Harcourt Brace published it in late 1994. Sales were buoyed by favorable reviews, but the book soon stopped being just a favorite of critics and crossed over into mainstream success. The Vintage Books paperback, released in October, has gone through 22 printings in as many weeks, with about 850,000 copies in print, and seems lodged on the bestseller list.

Next came the ultimate seal of late 20th-century literary success: Universal Pictures optioned the book and asked Ron Bass, the Academy Award-winning co-writer of *Rain Man,* to bring it to the screen. Mr. Guterson stands to make more than $1 million from the movie alone.

So far, he has spent practically nothing of his book riches. His success enabled him to quit teaching after 10 years at Bainbridge High School and write full time, but he still lives simply, either out of long habit or philosophical preference. He wears the kind of flannel shirts made famous by Seattle's grunge rockers, and for warmth sometimes layers on three of them. He still drives a battered 1967 International Travelall.

The house he and his wife, Robin, 41, rent on the less fashionable west side of Bainbridge Island, 35 minutes by ferry from Seattle, has a perpetually wet cellar and a first floor cluttered with toys, basketballs, musical instruments and books belonging to their four children.

Until recently, their three sons were schooled at home, largely by Mrs. Guterson, a speech therapist, and the kitchen table was the center of their school room. "We fell into home schooling by accident," Mr. Guterson says. "When Taylor, the oldest, turned 5, we didn't think he was ready for kindergarten, so we kept him home. And then a year later we decided we liked it."

Criticism: (continued)

Mr. Guterson wrote a book about the family's experience, *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense* (Harcourt Brace, 1992), arguing that home schooling was not just for "religious fundamentalists or granolaheads." "Parents are natural teachers," he says.

Last fall, two of the boys, Taylor, now 14, and Henry, 10, switched to public schools, with their parents' full support. "Taylor wanted to see how he measured up to everyone else, and Henry realized that this would be his last year in elementary school," Mr. Guterson says.

Travis, a cheerful 12-year-old, had tried public school the year before, and this year has opted to stay home, along with his sister, Angelica, 3.

Upstairs, in his snug study, Mr. Guterson shows off a new desk chair, its pristine upholstery untouched by children, and a second phone line he installed for a fax machine. Those are the only indulgences he has allowed himself, though he and his wife plan someday to build a house on the island. They have scouted building sites, but were startled by the asking prices ("They wanted $350,000 just for the land," he complains).

Mr. Guterson faces the world with the serenity found in highly aerobicized athletes or saintly kindergarten teachers. Not even the recent sniping by some East Coast critics—that his is a Northwest novel that owes more to its scenic locale than to its plot—seems to bother him.

"Of course it's a Northwest novel—that's all I know," said Mr. Guterson, who has bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Washington and has spent all but one year of his life near Seattle.

In the 12 years the Gutersons have lived here, Bainbridge has become a mecca for lawyers and executives who commute to Seattle. Mr. Guterson has considered moving to a less-crowded island, but Bainbridge exerts a powerful hold.

"Let's take a walk," he suggests at one point, hoisting Angelica, a delicate blonde, on one hip. He crosses his yard, where rhododendrons stand as tall as the house and wild blackberry bushes already obscure the stump of a tree that crashed into the roof last year. Then he cuts through a neighbor's yard, crosses a road and points to Puget Sound, 50 feet down a steep slope. "You're never very far away from the water here," he said.

Just up the road lies Fairy Dell, a stand of old cedars very much like the grove in the book where, inside a hollow tree, Ishmael Chambers and Hatsue Imada carry on an adolescent romance abruptly ended by the internment of Japanese-Americans. "In spring, great shafts of sun would split the canopy of trees," Mr. Guterson wrote of this grove, "but now, in February, the woods felt black and the trees looked sodden and smelled pungently of rot."

Mr. Guterson's fictitious San Piedro Island drifts at some distance from Bainbridge—on a real map of Puget Sound it would lie in the San Juan Islands, 90 miles north of here—but it is populated by some authentic Bainbridge characters.

Arthur Chambers, Ishmael's father and the editor of the island's weekly newspaper, who bravely editorializes against the Japanese-American internment, was based on Walt Woodward, who, with his wife, Millie, for years ran *The Bainbridge Review* and was among the few editors in America to take a stand against internment; Mr. Woodward still writes a column for the paper. And the doddering lawyer who defends Hatsue's husband,

Criticism: (continued)

Kabuo Miyamoto, when he is accused of murdering a Caucasian fisherman is loosely based on Mr. Guterson's father, Murray, a well-known Seattle criminal defense lawyer.

The literary model for the book, however, was more remote—Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird,* the 1960 novel Mr. Guterson regularly assigned to his high school English classes. "It always got a strong response, because students have a strong need for heroes of a particular type, someone who represents a set of values," he says. Atticus Finch, the small-town lawyer, "embodies those values, and kids encounter him with a sense of relief."

Snow Falling on Cedars, like *To Kill a Mockingbird,* centers around a trial, but once Mr. Guterson started writing, he says, it became clear that it would be hard to concoct an Atticus Finch for the 1990's. Ishmael Chambers, who succeeds his father as editor of the island newspaper, comes closest by offering up a key piece of evidence as the trial ends. "Atticus is certain of what he believes, and that kind of certainty hardly exists today," Mr. Guterson says. His own characters, on the other hand, "do the right thing, but it takes them a while," he adds.

And if a Southern novel like Harper Lee's is shaped by history, by slavery and generations of segregation, Mr. Guterson believes that Northwest novels are shaped by the landscape. "The cycle of decay is so overwhelmingly present here," Mr. Guterson says. "Everything human disappears in this landscape."

A variation on the Northwest landscape—the apple orchards of the Columbia River basin—will be the centerpiece of Mr. Guterson's next novel. The new book will be "looser and more picaresque than Snow," Mr. Guterson says, adding, "If *Snow* was about justice, then this one is about work, and the connection between love and work."

About a hundred pages into the new book, Mr. Guterson says he has reached an impasse "over a matter of character development" and has, for now, stopped writing. "I sweat words out one at a time."

It took him five years to write *Snow Falling on Cedars,* in part because of the extensive research he did on salmon fishing, strawberry farming and the internment. To describe the anti-Japanese hysteria that prevailed in the 1940's, he steeped himself in about 600 pages of oral histories compiled by elderly internees for the local Japanese-American Community Association.

For the new book, he has immersed himself in the nuances of apple cultivation, learning to pick apples ("There's no wasted motion when you know what you're doing"), reading pamphlets on apple maggots and other pests and interviewing the Mexican migrants who account for most of the orchards' work force.

Readers seem to like Mr. Guterson's old-fashioned attention to such details, his ability to find big truths in mundane places, his insistence on authenticity and his way of supplying every character with a complete history. "*Snow* isn't an especially modern book," he says. "I don't read many modern novels. So how could I write one?"

Source Citation: Mathews, Linda. "Amid the Cedars, Serenity and Success." *The New York Times.* Cl. C4. Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism Select.

Discussion Questions:

1. *Snow Falling on Cedars* opens in the middle of Kabuo Miyamoto's trial. It will be pages before we learn the crime of which he has been accused or the nature of the evidence against him. What effect does the author create by withholding this information and introducing it in the form of flashbacks? Where else in the narrative are critical revelations postponed? How is this novel's past related to its fictional present?

2. The trial functions both as this novel's narrative frame and as its governing metaphor. As we follow it, we are compelled to ask larger questions about the nature of truth, guilt, and responsibility. How does the author interweave these two functions? Which characters are aware that what is at stake is more than one man's guilt?

3. When the trial begins, San Piedro is in the midst of a snowstorm, which continues throughout its course. What role does snow play—both literally and metaphorically—in the book? Pay particular attention to the way in which snow blurs, freezes, isolates, and immobilizes, even as it holds out the promise of an "impossible winter purity" [p. 8]. How does nature shape this novel?

4. Guterson divides his island setting into four zones: the town of Amity Harbor; the sea; the strawberry fields; and the cedar forest. What actions take place in these different zones? Which characters are associated with them? How does the author establish a different mood for each setting?

5. In his first description of Carl Heine [pp. 14-16], Guterson imparts a fair amount of what is seemingly background information: We learn about his mother's sale of the family strawberry farm; about Carl's naval service in World War II; and about his reticence. We learn that Carl is considered "a good man." How do these facts become crucial later on, as mechanisms of plot, as revelations of the dead man's character, and as clues to San Piedro's collective mores? Where else does the author impart critical information in a casual manner, often "camouflaging" it amid material that will turn out to have no further significance? What does this method suggest about the novel's sense of the meaningful—about the value it assigns to things that might be considered random or irrelevant?

6. When Carl's body is dredged from the water, the sheriff has to remind himself that what he is seeing is a human being. While performing the autopsy, however, Horace Whaley forces himself to think of Carl as "the deceased...a bag of guts, a sack of parts" [p. 54]. Where else in *Snow Falling on Cedars* are people depersonalized—detached from their identities—either deliberately or inadvertently? What role does depersonalization play within the novel's larger scheme?

7. What material evidence does the prosecution produce in arguing Kabuo's guilt? Did these bits of information immediately provoke the investigators' suspicions, or only reinforce their preexisting misgivings about Carl's death? Why might they have been so quick to attribute Carl's death to foul play? How does the entire notion of a murder trial—in which facts are interpreted differently by opposing attorneys—fit into this book's thematic structure?

8. Ishmael suffers from feelings of ambivalence about his home and a cold-blooded detachment from his neighbors. Are we meant to attribute these to the loss of his arm or to other events in his past? How is Ishmael's sense of estrangement mirrored in Hatsue, who as a teenager rebels against her mother's values and at one point declares, "I don't want to be Japanese" [p. 201]? To what extent do Kabuo and Carl suffer from similar feelings? How does this condition of transcendental homelessness serve both to unite and to isolate the novel's characters?

Guide from ReadingGroupGuide.com (2)

9. What significance do you ascribe to Ishmael's name? What does Guterson's protagonist have in common with the narrator of *Moby-Dick,* another story of the sea?

10. What role has the *San Piedro Review* played in the life and times of its community? How has Ishmael's stewardship of the paper differed from his father's? In what ways does he resemble his father—of whom his widow says, "He loved humankind dearly and with all his heart, but he disliked most human beings" [p. 36]? What actions of Ishmael's may be said to parallel the older man's?

11. Ishmael's experience in World War II has cost him an arm. In that same war Horace Whaley, the county coroner, lost his sense of effectiveness, when so many of the men he was supposed to care for died. How has the war affected other characters in this book, both those who served and those who stayed home?

12. Guterson tells us that "on San Piedro the silent-toiling, autonomous gill-netter became the collective image of the good man" [p. 38]. Thus, Carl's death comes to signify the death of the island's ideal citizen: he represents a delayed casualty of the war in which so many other fine young men were killed. Yet how productive does the ideal of silent individualism turn out to be? To what extent is Carl a casualty of his self-sufficiency? What other characters in this novel adhere to a code of solitude?

13. Kabuo and Hatsue also possess—and are at times driven by—certain values. As a young girl, Hatsue is taught the importance of cultivating stillness and composure in order "to seek union with the Greater Life" [p. 83]. Kabuo's father imparts to him the martial codes of his ancestors. How do these values determine their behavior, and particularly their responses to internment, war, and imprisonment? How do they clash with the values of the Anglo community, even as they sometimes resemble them?

14. Racism is a persistent theme in this novel. It is responsible for the internment of Kabuo, Hatsue, and their families, for Kabuo's loss of his land, and perhaps for his indictment for murder. In what ways do the book's Japanese characters respond to the hostility of their white neighbors? How does bigotry manifest itself in the thoughts and behavior of characters like Etta Heine—whose racism is keenly ironic in view of her German origins—Art Moran, and Ishmael himself? Are we meant to see these characters as typical of their place and time?

15. Although almost all the novel's white characters are guilty of racism, only one of them—Etta Heine—emerges unsympathetically. How do her values and motives differ from those of other San Piedrans? How is her hostility to the Japanese related to her distaste for farming? To what extent are Guterson's characters defined by their feelings for their natural environment?

16. Ishmael's adolescent romance with Hatsue has been the defining fact of his life, its loss even more wounding than the loss of his arm. Yet when Hatsue first remembers Ishmael, it is only as a "boy" [p. 86] and her recollection of their first kiss is immediately supplanted by the memory of her wedding night with Kabuo. How else does Guterson contrast Hatsue's feelings for these two men? (Note that Hatsue's feelings for both Ishmael and her husband become clear in the course of making love.) What does the disparity between Hatsue's memories and Ishmael's suggest about the nature of love? Where else in this novel do different characters perceive the same events in radically different ways—and with what consequences?

17. In choosing Kabuo, Hatsue acknowledges "the truth of her private nature" [p. 89]. That choice implies a paradox. For, if Kabuo is a fellow nisei, he is also rooted in the American earth of San Piedro's strawberry fields. How is this doubleness—between Japanese and American—expressed elsewhere in *Snow Falling on Cedars*?

18. Ishmael's attraction to Hatsue is closely connected to a yearning for transcendence, as indicated by their early conversation about the ocean. Ishmael says, "It goes forever," while Hatsue insists, "It ends somewhere" [p. 97]. Typically, it is Ishmael who wishes to dissolve boundaries, Hatsue who keeps reasserting them, as when she gently withholds the embrace that Ishmael so desperately wants. What limits might Ishmael wish to transcend, even as a boy? Does he ever manage to do so? Does *Snow Falling on Cedars* hold the promise of transcendence for its characters or at best offer them a reconciliation with their limits?

19. One way that Guterson interweaves his novel's multiple narrative strands is through the use of parallelism: Ishmael spies on Hatsue; so does Kabuo. The two men are similarly haunted by memories of the war. Both Kabuo and Carl Heine turn out to be dissatisfied fishermen who yearn to return to farming. Where else in this novel does the author employ this method, and to what effect?

20. What is the significance of the novel's last sentence: "Accident ruled every corner of the universe except the chambers of the human heart"?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Fiction:

Walter Abish, *How German Is It;* Aharon Appelfeld, *Badenheim 1939;*
Günter Grass, *Dog Years;* Ursula Hegi, *Stones From the River;* James Jones, *From Here to Eternity, The Thin Red Line;* Ivan Klíma, *Judge on Trial;* Joy Kogawa, *Obasan;* Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird;* Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick;* Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead;* Shirley Nelson, *The Last Year of the War;* Howard Norman, *The Bird Artist;* E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News.*

Nonfiction:

John Armor and Peter Wright, *Manzanar;* Timothy Egan, *The Good Rain;* Hazel Heckman, *Island in the Sound;* Lauren Kessler, *Stubborn Twig: Three Generations in the Life of a Japanese-American Family;* Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore;* Studs Terkel, *The Good War;* Joe Upton, *Alaska Blues.*

Also by David Guterson, available from Vintage Contemporaries:

The Country Ahead of Us, The Country Behind