

Reading Together

Study Guide and Discussion Leader Questions for *Snow Falling on Cedars* By David Guterson

Obviously, when reading a novel, the first thing you notice is the title. That's a good thing because titles so often give keys to the motifs and symbols within the book. This is certainly the case with *Snow Falling on Cedars*, where three—possibly four—of the words are significant. Be sure to ponder “snow,” “falling,” and “cedars,” and if you want to, take a look at “on,” too. To start the ball rolling, “snow”: the dominant white presence, white-washing, disguising, and cold are ideas that come to mind, but there are many more, particularly when you remember that snow is an element of nature. Snow is personified (p. 5) by the author, so it's perfectly fine for readers to do the same.

A Diverse Group of Characters

Unlike many of the other Reading Together selections, *Snow Falling on Cedars* is, more than anything else, a study of a diverse group of characters and how who each individually affects the other residents of San Piedro. What the characters do, of course, is important, but Guterson predicates these actions with in-depth looks at each distinct personality. An interesting exercise is to turn each character into an animal and to see if the animals would tend to interact in the same ways as the characters. Another is to try to think of five adjectives to describe each character.

Structure

Chapters 1 – 12, 17 – 22, and 25 – 30, the preponderance of the chapters, begin in the courthouse. Why did Guterson structure the novel this way, and why don't all the chapters begin there?

Two quotes precede the novel, one by Dante and the other by Harvey Oxenhorn. In what ways do they relate to the novel?

Guterson has given readers two maps of the area. Certainly, not all novels do. Why do you suppose they were included here?

Discussion Possibilities

If your group is reading the novel in several sections, you can discuss the questions that follow as you reach that section. If you are simply discussing the finished novel, you can pick and choose questions that seem pertinent to your discussion. If you are using this guide in place of a reading group while reading the novel on your own, please don't read the questions for the chapter until you've read the chapter, so as not to spoil anything for yourself.

Questions

Chapter 1

1. The first sentence shows Kabuo sitting with “rigid grace,” almost an oxymoron. How would one sit that way, and what does that tell us about Kabuo?
2. What do the descriptions of the courtroom and the jurors add to our knowledge?
3. In addition to the snow, mentioned above, the rain and the roads are also personified. What significance does this lend to the island and to nature?
4. The island’s history and description are important. Why? What do you learn from this?
5. Hatsue and Ishmael are introduced. There is obviously a conflict there. Be on the lookout for this to develop.
6. Think about Ishmael from the Bible and from *Moby Dick*. Be watching for ways in which these men are similar to Ishmael Chambers.

Chapter 2

1. The prosecutor notes that the sheriff’s response gives him “the authority of a conscientious man, for which there was ultimately no substitute” (10). What does this mean, and do you agree?
2. Notice that you could draw a picture of Art Moran. What do we learn about him?
3. The same goes for Carl Heine. What do we learn about him?
4. The first clues of the mystery, fog and head injury, are introduced. They will be important, so watch for additional information.

Chapter 3

1. Nels Gudmundsson is introduced as Kabuo’s attorney. What does his description tell you about him?
2. Notice the information about the battery. Why might that be important?

Chapter 4

1. What does it say about Ishmael that he called three people to confirm Carl’s death?
2. Ishmael’s history is given. What do we learn about this character?
3. Arthur’s father is important. Why? Other important literary characters are also never seen, such as the father in *Glass Menagerie* and the dead man in Yossarian’s tent in *Catch-22*. Can you think of other characters who are important but not physically present?
4. What does being “morosely meticulous” (35) mean?
5. Why would war make “scrupulosity” difficult for Ishmael?
6. “[Ishmael] wanted to like everyone. He just couldn’t find a way to do it” (36). What does this say about him? Note what his mother says about his being like his father.
7. The dock scene could be easily illustrated. What do you learn from the detail?
8. What is the image of a gill netter? Why does this become the image of a “good man”?
9. Notice the first racist comment (43). This is another important theme. Continue to watch for its importance to the novel.

Chapter 5

1. The time is established as 1954. What do you think of life being like at this time period?
2. Horace Whaley is described. How do his feelings about the Japanese factor into Moran’s thinking?

Chapter 6

1. Were you surprised that Carl built his own house? What does its description and placement add to our knowledge of Carl?
2. Art plans to stay on the porch and thinks about how to tell Susan Marie about Carl's death. Why did he end up entering the house to make the call? What do you think of his method of delivering the news? Does it seem in character? Why or why not?

Chapter 7

1. What does the introduction of the Japanese community imply about their life on San Pedro?
2. Why do you suppose the strawberry princess was always Japanese?
3. Did the Japanese internment make sense?
4. "There was a war on and that changed everything" (79). What are your reactions to this statement?
5. What do you learn about Hatsue as an adult? What is the significance of her lessons with Mrs. Shigemura?
6. Why and how does Hatsue develop a secret life?
7. Look for symbolism in the meeting of Hatsue and Ishmael. This may become more apparent later.
8. What does a "deliberately controlled hysteria" (93) look like? Feel like?

Chapter 8

1. "Geoduck" is pronounced "gooey-duck." It is a very phallic-looking clam. Is this symbolic or just happenstance of place?
2. How does the early play together of races and socio-economic classes and then later separation reflect reality today?
3. How does the Timmons-Crowe border war (102) reflect life on the island?
4. In what ways do the "summer people" affect the life on the island?
5. Is Ishmael's assuredness of Hatsue's feelings natural for a 14 year old? Is his voyeurism symbolic?
6. What might the hollow cedar symbolize?
7. Note Ishmael's repeated use of "sort of" (111). What does this say about him?
8. When they discuss their parents' reactions to their romance, Ishmael says that her parents would find it more wrong than his. Would this still be true today? Why or why not?

Chapter 9

1. Etta Heine is introduced. What do we learn about her?
2. Etta seems to appreciate the resourcefulness of the Miyamotas from afar. What causes her reaction when Zenichi comes to ask about the land (117)?
3. Contrast Carl, Sr., and Etta (120). What do their contrasting views about the internment suggest about their relationship?
4. Notice that Etta refers to them as "her" seven acres (127). What would cause this?

Chapter 10

1. Why aren't "illegal" and "wrong" the same thing?
2. Ole Jurgensen keeps claiming he knew nothing of the Miyamota land. Do you think he really believes that?
3. Is the fact that Carl does not like fishing a surprise? If you stop and think about it, Etta sold the farm out from under Carl as well as from under Kabuo. Do you think she thought about this?
4. Do you think that Ole would have sold to Kabuo if he had come first?
5. Carl knew about Kabuo's desire for the seven acres. Did he forget or not care? What do his personality and actions to this point suggest?

Chapter 11

1. A great deal about Kabuo is detailed in this chapter. In what ways does who he is hurt him? Help him?
2. Is Nels a good choice to represent Kabuo? Why or why not?
3. Look at the lovely imagery Guterson uses to describe Kabuo's nature daydreams. What does this tell you of Kabuo?
4. How do Kabuo's thoughts of Hatsue add to your impression of her?
5. Compare Kabuo's love of Hatsue with Ishmael's.
6. How does Kabuo's samurai heritage seem to influence him?
7. How can a sword "give life, not take it" (168)?

Chapter 12

1. Compare Ishmael and Hatsue's relationship with Kabuo and Hatsue's relationship?

Chapter 13

1. What would it be like to be a Japanese American hearing of the bombing of Pearl Harbor?
2. What does Arthur's editorial add to our knowledge of his character?
3. Hatsue quickly assures Ishmael that the war won't hurt their relationship. Does this seem in character? Why or why not?
4. Arthur tells Ishmael, "Not every fact is just a fact. . . [a] balancing act. . . that's what journalism is about" (188). Do you agree? How could news ever be accurate in that case?
5. What does Guterson establish with the description of all the articles going into the paper and the islanders' reactions to them?

Chapter 14

1. How are the FBI search and arrest of Hisao portrayed?
2. What are Fujiko's beliefs and how do they affect Hatsue?
3. Hatsue becomes a much more complex character in this chapter. In what ways?
4. Notice Ishmael's and Hatsue's changes of outlook from the previous chapter. What causes this reversal?
5. In what ways is Ishmael's and Hatsue's last meeting in the tree all out of balance?
6. When Hatsue last sees Ishmael, his arm is outstretched toward her. Why is this significant?

Chapter 15

1. Compare internment proceedings with what you know of the German treatment of the Jews and others.
2. What does Fujiko's handling of Ishmael's letter and Hatsue's response establish about each of them?

Chapter 16

1. How does Ishmael's war experience change him?
2. How is it affected by the letter from Hatsue?

Chapter 17

1. Guterson's description of the snow and of the islanders' reactions to it is charming. What are its significances?
2. Do you think that Carl and Kabuo would consider themselves enemies? Why or why not?

Chapter 18

1. Which of Moran's reasons for wanting to search Kabuo's boat is most convincing?
2. Why does Guterson include the listing of the fishermen's superstitions?
3. While Moran is searching Kabuo's boat, does he stick to just looking for the murder weapon, as Fielding required?

Chapter 19

1. Whose testimony is most damaging to Kabuo's case? Why?

Chapter 20

1. Guterson gives a very full portrait of Susan Marie. What characteristics do you see in her? Why is she so important to the novel?
2. Compare Etta and Susan Marie.
3. Compare Carl's war exposure with Ishmael's and Kabuo's.
4. Compare the three couples, Hatsue and Kabuo, Carl and Susan Marie, and Carl, Sr., and Etta.

Chapter 21

1. What further understanding does Guterson give us of Nels Gudmundsson?

Chapter 22 (a really important chapter)

1. Is there significance to the power going out? What is it?
2. As you travel with Ishmael around the snowy island, what more do you learn of island society? Of Ishmael?
3. This chapter is packed with symbolism, including Ishmael's phantom pain and the Packard Clipper. Look and see what you can find and what these symbols might mean in connection to the characters.
4. Compare Hisao with twenty years ago with Hisao now.
5. "'I know you think it's caused you trouble,' Ishmael said. 'But don't you think the snow is beautiful? Isn't it beautiful coming down?'"
6. Is unfairness a part of things (325) for all the characters?
7. Hatsue lists people she finds acting unfairly. Why does she think that? Do you agree with her assessment?
8. What is your reaction to Ishmael's thoughts of the change in his situation with Hatsue?

Chapter 23

1. "The room smelled of salt water and snow and of the past—it was full of the scent of lost days (331). This sentence is worth spending some time thinking about. What are the lost days? What is their scent? How is it significant that salt water and snow have entered the courtroom?
2. When Hatsue and Ishmael meet on the beach, how have they changed, how stayed the same?
3. So, what happened in the Ship Channel and what do you think Ishmael will do with this knowledge?

Chapter 24

1. Compare Etta Heine, Fujiko Imada, and Helen Chambers. Also consider the mother/child relationship of each.
2. What all factors in to Ishmael's thoughts of keeping the information from Mulholland secret?
3. What more do we learn of Ishmael's character?

Chapter 25

1. What is the symbolism of the snow on the spectators' coats?
2. What more do we learn of Hatsue? Of Kabuo?

Chapter 26

1. Does Hatsue's testimony help or hurt Kabuo's case? In what ways?
2. How does Gillander's testimony affect the case?

Chapter 27

1. What might the weather refer to on page 387?
2. What do we learn about Kabuo from conversations with Nels about Carl?
3. What do we learn from his reflections of the night of Carl's death?
4. Besides being an important plot device, what could fog symbolize?

Chapter 28

1. With reference solely to the last paragraph of the chapter, how do you see Kabuo?
2. How does his awareness of the snowfall tie in with its symbolism?

Chapter 29

1. Compare the two attorneys' closing arguments.
2. Why are the judge's instructions important to the novel?
3. Again, note the reference to the storm and its symbolism.

Chapter 30

1. What is the symbolism of the power going back on?
2. When Ishmael thinks about Hatsue, he thinks "to feel her hair in his **hands**" (424). What does this tell you about Ishmael's ruminations?
3. Notice the references to Ishmael's father, including Hatsue's calling the paper "your father's newspaper" (426). Why is Arthur important at this juncture?
4. How do both Nels and Hatsue's references affect Ishmael?
5. How does the description of the storm's aftermath (427-428) fit with the symbolism you've uncovered so far?
6. How do prejudices affect the jurors' discussions?

Chapter 31

1. What more do you learn of Arthur? Why do you suppose he's being referenced so frequently this late in the novel?
2. What is the significance of the final section of Hatsue's letter?
3. What truths does Ishmael realize about his mother?
4. What is the significance of Ishmael's thoughts in the tree?

Chapter 32

1. How does Hatsue's and Ishmael's final conversation on the porch help to conclude their story?
2. Is the final explanation of the accident satisfying to you as a reader? Why or why not?
3. Is Ishmael's last thought true?
4. Note Ishmael's last name. How does this tie in with the last line of the novel?

Wrapping Up

1. What is the central conflict of the novel? What are other conflicts?
2. What themes did you uncover?
3. As another little character exercise, list all the characters on a continuum from "best" to "worst," by whatever standards you choose. Not only will you discover more about the characters, you may discover something about what you find to be important.
4. Usually, in order to become a classic, a novel has to deal with universal truths in a profound way. Do you think *Snow Falling on Cedars* has the makings of a classic?
5. If you have also read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, what comparisons can you make between the two novels?