

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Snow Falling on Cedars

By David Guterson

Introduction

In David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*, Ishmael has never forgiven Hatsue for breaking his heart as a teenager. Now that her husband Kabuo is being tried for murder years later, does revenge or justice prevail? David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars* analyzes the effects of the Japanese-American internment during World War II, racism, human motivation, and redemption in a story that's a combination murder mystery, courtroom drama, and tragic love story.

(*cliffsnotes.com*)

About the Author

David Guterson was born in Seattle in 1956. His father, Murray Guterson, is a distinguished criminal defense lawyer: "One of the things I heard [from him] early on was to find something you love to do--before you think about money or anything else. The other thing was to do something that you feel has a positive impact on the world."

Guterson received his M.A. from the University of Washington, where he studied under the writer Charles Johnson. It was there that he developed his ideas about the moral function of literature: "Fiction writers shouldn't dictate to people what their morality should be," he said in a recent interview. "Yet not enough writers are presenting moral questions for reflection, which I think is a very important obligation."

After moving to Bainbridge Island in Puget Sound, Guterson taught English at the local high school and began writing journalism for *Sports Illustrated* and *Harper's* magazine, where he is now a contributing editor. His books include a collection of short stories, *The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind*, *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense*, and *Snow Falling on Cedars*, which won the 1995 PEN/Faulkner Award.

(*readinggroupguides.com*)

Reviews

"Haunting.... A whodunit complete with courtroom maneuvering and surprising turns of evidence and at the same time a mystery, something altogether richer and deeper. " — *Los Angeles Times*

"Compelling ... heartstopping. finely wrought, flawlessly written. " —*The New York Times Book Review*

" ... A beautifully assured and full-bodied novel [that] becomes a tender examination of fairness and forgiveness ..." —Pico Iyer, *Time*

(*randomhouse.com and readinggroupchoices.com*)

Movie Adaptation

Nine years after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, a small town in the Pacific Northwest still struggles with the troubling legacy of U.S. policies against Asian-Americans. In December 1950, just off the shores of San Piedro Island in Washington, a Japanese-American man named Kazuo Miyamoto (Rick Yune) stands accused of murder after his close friend Carl Heine (Eric Thal) is found drowned in icy waters. As the trial gets under way, with Alvin Hooks (James Rebhorn) prosecuting Kazuo and Nels Gudmundsson (Max Von Sydow) defending him, reporter Ishmael Chambers (Ethan Hawke) covers the proceedings for the local newspaper. It's difficult for Ishmael to view the trial objectively, as his first love was a Japanese-American girl named Hatsue (Youki Kudoh), who later married Kazuo. Now, Ishmael has discovered that, when the Japanese-American residents of San Piedro Island were sent to internment camps during World War II, Carl's mother used their incarceration to scuttle a land purchase by Kazuo's family. This could suggest a motive for murder, but Ishmael is reluctant to step forward with the story. *Snow Falling on Cedars* was based on the best-selling novel by David Guterson, adapted for the screen by Ron Bass and writer/director Scott Hicks. - Mark Deming, *All Movie Guide*

(*moviefone.com*)

YOUR KIRKWOOD PUBLIC LIBRARY

314-821-5770 kirkwoodpubliclibrary.org

Movie Reviews

Prettily photographed yet morbidly gloomy. –Jamie Bernard - *New York Daily News*

It's second to none in its ability to specify a world and immerse us in it. –Jay Carr - *Boston Globe*

The actors are valiant, but not bulletproof against the screenplay's almost obsessive romanticism. –Jeff Millar -*Houston Chronicle*

Exceedingly blurred rendering of a simply told, artful novel. –Lisa Schwarzbaum – *Entertainment Weekly*

(*rottentomatoes.com*)

Further Reading

To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee

House Made of Dawn by N. Scott Momaday

Obasan by Joy Kogawa

No-No Boy by John Okada

BOOK CLUB TO GO!

Snow Falling on Cedars

By David Guterson

Possible Discussion Questions

1. As we follow the trial, we are compelled to ask larger questions about the nature of truth, guilt, and responsibility. Which characters are aware that there is more at stake than one man's guilt?
2. What role does snow play--both literally and metaphorically--in the book? How does nature shape this novel?
3. There are places in the book where people are depersonalized; detached from their identities. What effect does depersonalization have upon our society?
4. Hatsue, as a teenager, rebels against her mother's values and at one point declares, "I don't want to be Japanese." How "normal" is her estrangement?
5. Compared to the *San Pedro Review*, what role does a newspaper play in the life and times of your community?
6. If you know someone affected by war, how does their experience compare to the ways in which the book's characters were affected?
7. How do Kabuo's and Hatsue's values determine their behavior, particularly their responses to internment, war, and imprisonment? How do their values clash with those of the Anglo community, even as they sometimes resemble them?
8. Racism is a persistent theme in this novel. In what ways do the book's Japanese characters respond to the hostility of their white neighbors?
9. 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 the others?
10. What does the disparity between Hatsue's memories and Ishmael's suggest about the nature of love?

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

(readinggroupchoices.com)