

Discussion Questions for *No Quiet Water* by Shirley Miller Kamada

I am delighted to share in a discussion of my historical novel, *No Quiet Water*. I believe no story is complete until it meets its readers, and I look forward to hearing from you if you have suggestions for additional questions or a unique perspective. Contact me on my website: shirleymillerkamada.com.

1. When venturing into a novel, we are asked to suspend disbelief. We might consider whether the narrator is reliable or unreliable. The answer to that question will frame our understanding of the story. Acknowledging that *No Quiet Water* is narrated by a young boy and a border collie, how did you navigate that decision? At what point did you grant belief?

2. *No Quiet Water* aligns itself with an ancient story form, kishōtenketsu, which originated in China and is now widely known by the name given it in Japan. This classic literary structure is uncommon in the United States, where readers are familiar with the Hero's Journey and the Three Act Structure, both characterized by urgency and obstruction and, at the end, triumph. Such stories fulfill expectations for readers and theatergoers, and, I might add, video gamers.

Kishōtenketsu progresses differently. In its simplest form:

First, place and time are established—the setting.

Second, introduction of the primary character(s) whose purpose, possibly quite ordinary, is revealed. They are at their place of work, performing an errand, preparing a meal.

Third, a twist occurs, a complication, a mysterious, maybe magical, event, even an unexplained departure from the earlier setting and an encounter with a new character. The reader asks, “How does this connect?” Inferring the story's trajectory engages curiosity and propels further reading.

The story's elements are presented as pieces of a puzzle, until finally—and this is the appeal—

Fourth, all elements are reconciled. The meaning is understood at the story's end.

How did this uncommon structure affect your reading of the novel?

3. What character were you drawn to over others and why? Was there a character you disliked? Please share your reasons.

4. What characters would you like to know more about?

5. Reviewers have described this book as “emotive.” Which scenes did you find moving? How did that affect your experience of the story?

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6. Describe the relationship between Fumio and his little sister Kimiko. In what ways does he demonstrate his feelings toward her? Please comment further on the dynamics of Fumio's family. How was Grandfather Miyota, having passed away, honored in the story?

7. Readers will find examples of inner strength and resilience in the Miyotas' lives, seeking and creating beauty, music, art, and purposeful order. Please give an example and describe the emotion it inspired in you.

8. Were you acquainted with the art of taiko drumming before reading this book? How is taiko drumming used to create tension or generate emotion in the book? How are the drums a metaphor?

9. Food is an integral part of the story. Scenes reflect foods from the Miyotas' cultural heritage as well as foods typical to Bainbridge Island, Washington. As the settings and situation change, the reader sees adaptation. What did you find significant about the passages featuring food and beverages?

10. A phrase frequently repeated when referring to the apparent acceptance of internment by Japanese Americans is, "Shikata ga nai," variously interpreted as, "Nothing can be done about it," or "It is what it is." Please share your view of this perspective. Did you feel this notion sustained or inhibited the characters in *No Quiet Water*?

11. References to "waiting," are threaded throughout *No Quiet Water* and finally, "Fumio remembers his father's words: 'We do what we can with what we have. We work, we watch, and if we must, we wait.'" What do you think was Fumio's emotion as he recalled these words? Please share, what were your feelings as you read them?

12. If you could ask the author one question about the book, what would it be?

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For the facilitator:

Thank you for your interest! Your support is so much appreciated. These notes might be helpful.

Language is constantly changing.

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When writing *No Quiet Water*, the most straightforward adjustment was that although the words were once hyphenated, currently “Japanese American” is written as two separate words. From that point on, we encounter conflicting opinions.

When creating dialogue, a challenge for the author of historical fiction is maintaining an awareness of slurs, labels, and misguided attempts at humor targeting ethnicity, habitual ways of speaking which might not have been unusual in the story’s era but that we now know to be patently unacceptable. To tell a story realistically, sensitivity is required. The author chooses carefully, word by word, how best to communicate the intent of the character speaking.

Concerning Executive Order 9066 (nine-zero-six-six) and the internment of Japanese Americans, intense discussion has focused on terminology: “Assembly Center,” “Camp,” “Relocation Center.” These terms are euphemistic, misleading, and wrong, having been used to blur, or hide, the fact that newborn babies, the elderly, the ill—hardworking Americans were forcibly removed from their homes and held against their will, without charges, without a trial, without legal defense to establish their innocence. Were they “campers”? Or prisoners?

With progress in establishing and making the facts known, more accurate terms are coming into use. Still at issue: Even after decades of study, the Exclusion Centers are, most often, labeled Camps. Perhaps the irony is telling, but only if one understands it to be irony.

A seldom understood condition of the internment is that incarcerated—individuals and families—imprisoned so tightly together were more different than alike. Each person was as unique as you would find yourself to be if, for instance, you were suddenly isolated en masse with every person who shares your first name. Those consigned to internment camps had little commonality.

The statement at this site, [Do Words Matter? | Densho Encyclopedia](#), succinctly provides a complete explanation: “Densho's policy is to avoid using these and other overtly euphemistic terms for the most part, except when quoting from historic documents or in proper nouns.”

While I fully support this statement, readers of an historical novel would be jarred from the story if confronted by usage not associated with the era. Believing my choice of vocabulary will better withstand the passage of time if terms are moderate, I have referred to those isolated in the camps as “the population,” or “inhabitants.” Sometimes “neighbors,” although that term, too, is ironic.

I encourage those participating in the discussion of *No Quiet Water* to consider which terminology is most fitting to your purpose.

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Further information:

This link brings you to the first page of an article written by Roger Daniels, a leading authority on the topic: [Words Do Matter: A Note on Inappropriate Terminology and the Incarceration of the Japanese Americans – Part 1 of 5 – Discover Nikkei](#)

A taiko performance by the highly regarded touring ensemble, Kodo, can be viewed here: [\(80\) KodoHeartbeat - YouTube](#)

[The Japanese Art of Acceptance: Shikata ga nai | Psychology Today](#)

Concerning “Shikata ga nai,” Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu, Ed.D., shares his understanding of the phrase as supported by cultural values, writing, “No one always wins in life. . . . The key is accepting what can't be changed and focusing energy on what can be changed.”

Kishōtenketsu—Examples of novels, short stories, films and poems written in this form:

Station Eleven, a novel by Emily St. John Mandel

The Hole, a novel by Hye-Young Pyun, translated by Sora Kim-Russell

The film “Spirited Away” (and most other Studio Ghibli films)

Many manga and anime series

“The Lottery,” a short story by Shirley Jackson

The Selected Poems of Wang Wei, translated by David Hinton

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