

Reader's Guide | White Elephant

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Discussion Topics

1. The novel switches mainly between Sakiko and Hiroko's perspective. How are their voices distinct? How does the reader's perception of one sister alter as a result of the voice of the other? Discuss the juxtaposition.
2. Mako Idemitsu began her career as a video artist. Do you see this reflected in her writing style?
3. Like Sakiko, Hiroko, Eiko, and Fusako, the author is the daughter of a well-known businessman. Discuss the line between memoir and fiction.

Chapter by Chapter

Chapter 1

4. Sakiko describes Mii-chan's family's relative lack of wealth and greater sense of closeness with envy. To what extent do you think these two factors are related? How do you think money has affected the Morimotos' dynamic?
5. Sakiko introduces her more confident alter ego "Yuko". Do you think separating herself into these two distinct characters helps Sakiko step out of her shell, or do you think this reinforces her perception of her natural self as something "not-Yuko"?
6. During Sakiko's marriage ceremony, Paul's friends cheer and Sakiko thinks "Yet again, the smell of white people as conquerors." To what extent do you think the power dynamics between Paul and Sakiko are due to race?
7. Sadako's backstory is relayed to the reader by way of Hiroko who is describing their mother's life to Sakiko. She concludes "That is why I will never do anything so foolish as to have a baby." What is the effect of this framing? Why does Hiroko reject all things womanly?
8. In this chapter we learn that "Fusako, the third girl, was born [when] the National Mobilization Act had just been passed. The whole nation was excited by war; boys were needed as soldiers." How does WWII affect the Morimotos?

Chapter 2

9. Paul exclaims to Sakiko "I know Japanese people care what other people think. They worry about face. But I'm telling you something extremely important. Instead of worrying what other people will think, you should be listening to me!" Is Paul and Sakiko's relationship abusive?
10. The phrase "unfortunately it's a girl," is used to describe Sakiko's birth. To what extent does this foreshadow Sakiko's self-image? How does the novel illustrate the social constructionist theory of gender and Simone de Beauvoir's view that "One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman."
11. "When I'm with Hideto...sometimes it's so painful I feel like I'm going crazy. Of course I love him. So much I would give my life for him. Yet there are times when I hate him so much I wish he would just go away... It's as if something connected to the very root of my being is disturbed. As if I'm being negated." Discuss the novel's depiction of motherhood.

Chapter 3

12. Hiroko is described as "...frankly jealous of the Madonna-like artist whom men fall all over. She had neither their sociability nor their maternal ability to sense what men need without being asked and lavish it on them accordingly." How is this viewpoint at odds with her proclaimed independence?
13. "...when she saw the face of the child with clearly half-Caucasian features sitting in a stroller, Hiroko thought, *Poor little thing. That child will have a life of suffering, trapped between two races and two cultures*". At what points in the novel do characters encounter cultural divide?
14. "Japanese society was dominated by 'what people will say' and the conflict between giri and ninjo, duty and human feelings. Japanese people were ruled by their emotions. That's why they started a war they knew they were going to lose." Discuss this conflict between emotion and duty.
15. Discuss Paul and Hiroko's relationship. What is the role of infidelity in the novel?

Chapter 4

16. After being overlooked by hospital staff after Hiroko's car accident Sakiko muses to herself "Was her indignation a sign of oversensitivity? Or was she angry at herself for not being able to handle that woman? Or was it her roots in the privileged class that made discrimination so hard for her to accept?" Which do you think is true?

Chapter 5

17. Hiroko describes their father as “always issuing a command in the morning and reversing it at night, but no one knows the thought process in between...Nothing makes any sense, so there’s nothing to do but hold him in fear.” Discuss Morimasa’s methods of maintaining power.

Chapter 6

18. Hiroko has a strong distaste for Sakiko’s dirty life in San Francisco and the sickly sweetness of motherhood. Later Hiroko’s life in New York turns to squalor and she seems to abandon her convictions (Ch.6). Discuss this evolution.
19. Who is Charlie? How does Charlie’s casual savant status complicate Hiroko’s worldview?
20. Morimoto says “Hiroko isn’t like women and children who whimper and cry. She’s a very intelligent child”. Discuss the connection between emotion, weakness, and femininity. How does this relate to Charlie’s exclamation that “Crying is joy, man!”

Chapter 7

21. Charlie explains that a White Elephant is “a costly encumbrance” like a novelty gift given at a white elephant party during the holidays. Discuss the significance of the novel’s title.
22. “In the English department [Hiroko] studied the English language and was struck by its logic and clarity of expression. All things Japanese became increasingly repugnant to her.” Why do you think Hiroko hates all things Japanese?

Chapter 8

23. “[Hideto] and Paul made a great big snowman, with red apples for eyes. Sakiko, used to seeing charcoal for eyes, found the red-eyed snowman rather disconcerting, but for Hideto, red eyes for snowmen would now be the norm. People grew up in different environments and so they came to follow different customs and have different ways of thinking.” Where else do we see cultural anxieties like this expressed?

Chapter 9

24. After learning about Paul and Hiroko’s relationship Sakiko wants to leave Paul but is initially paralyzed, afraid she won’t be able to make it on her own. How does dependency constrict Hiroko and Sakiko?
25. Discuss Sakiko’s confrontation with her family.