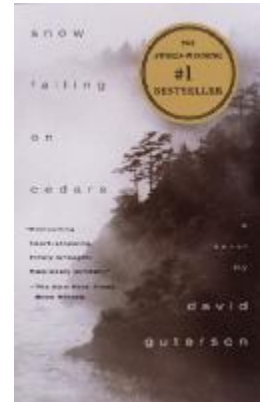


# Snow Falling on Cedars

By David Guterson

## About the Book....

San Pedro Island, north of Puget Sound, is a place so isolated that no one who lives there can afford to make enemies. But in 1954 a local fisherman is found suspiciously drowned, and a Japanese American named Kabuo Miyamoto is charged with his murder. In the course of the ensuing trial, it becomes clear that what is at stake is more than a man's guilt. For on San Pedro, memory grows as thickly as cedar trees and the fields of ripe strawberries-- memories of a charmed love affair between a white boy and the Japanese girl who grew up to become Kabuo's wife; memories of land desired, paid for, and lost. Above all, San Pedro is haunted by the memory of what happened to its Japanese residents during World War II, when an entire community was sent into exile while its neighbors watched. Gripping, tragic, and densely atmospheric, **Snow Falling on Cedars** is a masterpiece of suspense-- one that leaves us shaken and changed.



## About the Author...

David Guterson is the author of *Snow Falling on Cedars* and *East of the Mountains*, and of the story collection *The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind*. A Guggenheim Fellow and PEN/Faulkner Award winner, he lives in Washington State.



## 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. When the trial begins, San Pedro is in the midst of a snowstorm, which continues throughout its course. What role does snow play--both literally and

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- 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?
3. 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?
  4. 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?
  5. 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?
  6. 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?
  7. 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?
  8. 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?
  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 other San Piedrans? How is her hostility to the

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Japanese related to her distaste for farming? To what extent are Guterson's characters defined by their feelings for their natural environment?

10. 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?
11. 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?
12. What is the significance of the novel's last sentence: "Accident ruled every corner of the universe except the chambers of the human heart"?