

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

The Waiting Years by Fumiko Enchi

- In the beginning of the story (p.15) the author recounts an incident when a snake crawls under the mosquito net where Tomo and Shirakawa are sleeping. Tomo takes the snake and throws it into the garden. Shirakawa asks her why she did this because he would have killed it. What is the significance of this scene?
- When Shirakawa tells Tomo that he wants her to find a girl for the household, why is he reluctant to call her a concubine?
- Did Tomo have any alternative to procuring Suga for Shirakawa?
- Why do you think Tomo picked Suga as the girl to become part of her household?
- How would you describe the relationship between Shirakawa and Suga?
- Do you think it was necessary for Tomo to marry off Ruriko? Do you think she was overreacting to the relationship between Ruriko and Takao?
- Why did Enchi choose to set this story in the Meiji Period (1868-1912)?
- Does Shirakawa genuinely care for any of the female characters? Does he display any humanity?
- Why does Tomo suggest to Iwamoto that he marry Yumi?
- After Shirakawa meets Hanashima, he wishes to seek solace from Tomo. (p. 78). Why do you think he feels this way?
- How would you describe Tomo's relationship with her daughter, Etsuko? Tomo says that she is afraid of spoiling her. Why do you think she feels this way?
- Why is Suga envious of Yumi's impending marriage to Iwamoto? (p.119)
- Why does Mr. Konno call Suga Mrs. Shirakawa (p.133)? What was his motive in developing a relationship with her?
- Why is Tomo more disgusted by Miya's behavior than by Yukitomo's?
- Why do you think Yukitomo wanted Miya to die "as a woman of disrepute."? (p.169)
- Describe Michimasa's character. Do you think there is any symbolic element in his portrayal?
- What is the role of nature in this novel? (Orchard of Unripe Damsons, p. 130; black butterflies chasing Ruriko, p. 164)
- What is the significance of Tomo's last act before she is taken ill? She goes to visit Kayo and her illegitimate baby by her grandchild, Kazuya.
- What are the waiting years and who is waiting? (In one internet source a critic said that Onnazaka (the Japanese title) does not mean waiting years but it's a made up word constructed from the characters for "woman" and "hill" or "slope".)
- What did you think of the book's ending? Do you think that the family would actually carry out Tomo's request to be dumped at sea?



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