READERS GUIDE

This guide is designed to help readers explore the key themes, historical context, and literary techniques in ***Songs for Ghosts***. The guide is structured to follow the novel's plot progression, offering discussion points and activities that encourage deeper engagement without revealing key spoilers too soon.

Unlike a typical book club guide the discussion prompts and questions are designed around specific passages and themes in the book, with suggested activities to complement your reading journey,

BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

- Based on the title ***Songs for Ghosts***, what do you expect from the novel?
- How do the cover and blurb suggest the book's themes?
- What makes a good ghost story? Do they always have to be frightening?

BACKGROUND READING: THE INFLUENCE OF *MADAMA BUTTERFLY*

Before reading ***Songs for Ghosts***, it is useful to understand the influence of ***Madama Butterfly***, an opera composed by **Giacomo Puccini** in 1904. The opera tells the story of Cio-Cio-San (Madama Butterfly), a young Japanese woman who falls in love with an American naval officer, Pinkerton. She believes in his promises of love and waits faithfully for his return, only to discover that he has married an American woman. In despair, she gives up their child to be raised by him and his American wife and then takes her own life.

READ: CHAPTERS 1-5

DISCUSS:

- The diarist feels a strange compulsion to play the biwa, an instrument her grandmother taught her. Adam, in the present, struggles with the cello. How does music function as more than just a skill or hobby in the novel?
- The diarist writes that the biwa players tell stories of the past. How can music be a way of preserving history and memory?
- In the present, Adam is feeling disconnected from his father and stepmother. How do family expectations affect both him and the diarist?

ACTIVITY:

Listen to a short biwa performance of *Heike Monogatari*. Then choose a piece of music that connects you to your own past or culture. Explain why it is meaningful and how it might tell a story.

TWO STORIES, TWO MAIN CHARACTERS

Adam - the main protagonist in the present timeline

The diarist - the unknown author of the historic diary entries Adam finds

How does the parallel narratives structure affect your reading experience?

READ: CHAPTERS 21-23

DISCUSS:

Adam struggles with his biracial identity, feeling disconnected from his Japanese heritage yet not fully accepted in his American home. His journey to Nagasaki helps him understand himself in a new way.

- In what ways does Adam feel torn between his two cultures?
- How does language (or lack of fluency) affect Adam's sense of belonging?
- How does the book explore the idea that understanding the past helps shape personal identity?

ACTIVITY:

Write a short poem or letter from Adam to his mother, reflecting on his identity struggles and what he wishes he could have asked her.

READ: CHAPTER 29

DISCUSS:

Ghosts in ***Songs for Ghosts*** are not just supernatural figures - they represent unresolved histories, forgotten stories, and emotional burdens.

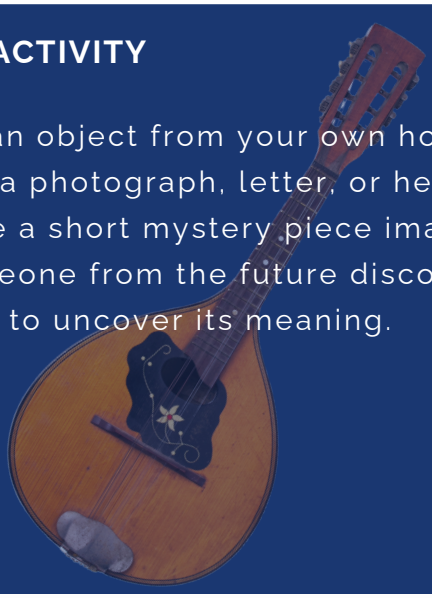
- What does the diarist's ghost want, and why does she grow more dangerous?
- How does the novel compare Western and Japanese beliefs about ghosts and the afterlife?
- In what ways can telling a story bring peace to both the living and the dead?

ACTIVITY:

Research a historical figure whose story or achievement was overshadowed or forgotten. Then, write your own short diary entry inspired by their story and create a short monologue from their perspective, giving voice to their untold story.

BONUS ACTIVITY

Choose an object from your own home (such as a photograph, letter, or heirloom) and write a short mystery piece imagining that someone from the future discovers it and tries to uncover its meaning.



MADAMA BUTTERFLY AND OTHER STORIES

- How does Adam relate to Haru's story in his own personal circumstances?
- How do Adam's discoveries about his mother, her relationship with his father, and her history reflect the origin story of Madama Butterfly?

ACTIVITY:

Research the history of Madama Butterfly and its cultural reception. Then, in small groups, rewrite a short scene from the opera from Kiku's perspective, giving her more agency.

TURN THE PAGE, STRIKE A CHORD.
THERE ARE RESTLESS GHOSTS TO BE APPEASED...

READ: CHAPTER 31

DISCUSS:

- Jo becomes an important person in Adam's journey. How does their friendship (and potential romance) contrast with Adam's relationship with Evan?
- How does discovering his family's history change Adam's understanding of himself?
- How does the novel use mystery elements to reveal the past gradually?

ACTIVITY:

Find Nagasaki on a map and mark locations significant to both Adam and the diarist.

Research one real historical event that affected Nagasaki during the diarist's lifetime. How might it have shaped her story?

READ: HARU'S LETTER (PAGE 417)

DISCUSS:

- Haru joins the US Army to avoid being sent to an internment camp during WWII. What does this reveal about the treatment of Japanese Americans during the war?
- Haru fears the possibility of facing his half-brother in battle. How does war force people into painful moral dilemmas?
- Do you think it is important to express feelings, even when the person may never receive them? How does this letter help Haru find closure?

READ: CHAPTER 37

DISCUSS:

- When Adam finally learns the diarist's name, what changes? Why is remembering someone by name important?
- By the end of the novel, how has Adam changed?
- What does Adam's final decision say about his identity: has he found a new sense of belonging?
- How does the novel explore the idea that family is not just who we are born to, but also who we find along the way?

ACTIVITY: ALTERNATIVE ENDINGS

Write a diary entry from Adam, five years later - where is he now? Has he returned to Japan?

Imagine the diarist had written one more entry before her story ended. What might she have said?

WHAT DID YOU THINK?

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