

**A GRAYWOLF PRESS READING GROUP GUIDE**

**PICKING BONES FROM ASH**

*A Novel by*

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## The Bone Room

There was a mysterious room behind the main altar of the Buddhist temple where I stayed when I visited Japan with my mother. Visitors to the temple went in and out of the room speaking in hushed tones, and it took me several years to summon up the courage take a peek. Before that, the adults always steered me away from the room in the subtle, discouraging way that grown-ups have when they want to prevent you from doing something, but don't want to tell you why. I was probably around twelve when I got my first look. Alone, I snuck into the temple's main room, then slid past the immense, theater-like altar with its gold chandelier and brocade tapestries and the large Buddha seated at the very back surveying his offerings of melon and peaches. Just off to the right was a nondescript door, so artfully hidden behind the altar one might miss it altogether. Beyond this door was the strange room.


The space inside was dark and I left the light off, afraid I'd get caught. I could see that the room was narrow, and that it followed the width of the temple's back wall from left to right. To the left were dozens of pinwheels, children's toys, and bottles of Yakult yogurt milk. The rest of the walls were covered with boxes, plaques, and Japanese Buddhist statuary. Serious, adult stuff. But what was with the toys? I struggled to understand what these playful, brightly colored things were doing in a place that was otherwise so somber. In the years that followed, I asked for an explanation, but no one ever gave me one. It would be up to persistence and adulthood for me to find the answer.



My parents—and my American grandmother—were very committed to my Japanese education. Every summer my mother and I boarded the plane in San Francisco, bidding farewell to my American father, who could not speak Japanese. Once on the plane my mother refused to communicate with me in English. In those days there was no fax, no internet, and no Skype. International phone calls were expensive and reserved for emergencies. I had to rely on blue aerogramme letters to learn what was happening with my father and my parakeet, Cheerful. Once on the ground in Japan, I felt isolated, transported to another world whose rules became increasingly complex as I grew older and more was expected of me.

We nearly always began our visits to Japan at the temple because my mother's aunt, who ran the complex, welcomed us. My grandparents had been deeply upset by my mother's marriage to a foreigner and we visited them only briefly and always with trepidation. At the temple in the north, tucked into a hillside and surrounded by rice paddies, I would shake off my jet lag and struggle to re-attune my ear to the Japanese language, and try to mold my body to the shape and space of Japanese life: sit on knees and not Indian style, squat over the toilet, leave shoes at the door, wear one set of slippers in wood hallways and another in the toilet, wear no slippers on *tatami*, sit and sleep on the floor, bathe in extremely hot water, watch everything but save the questions for later, do not gesture too broadly. Accept that people will stare.

If I was often confused and homesick on those trips, I was also increasingly bewitched. At the festivals I wore a *yukata* (summer kimono) and admired fireflies and fireworks against the dark night sky. Streets were lit with paper lanterns and young men sang twangy folk tunes. The occasional wedding featured a bride dressed in bright red instead of white. Bamboo forests rattled and beckoned in the rain and cicadas sang me to sleep. Northern California is dry and gold in the summer; in Japan, the vegetation was lush and ripe. At home we were always on the verge of a water shortage; in Japan, we bathed in hot springs morning and evening to rid ourselves of sweat. In time, my mother reported that I was speaking in Japanese in my sleep. When we'd return to California, I would long for Japanese breakfasts with fish and seaweed and rice. By the time I was an adult, Japan had taken a permanent hold of my psyche.



Now I know that the mysterious room was the bone room. The boxes were filled with ash and bone, as the Japanese don't cremate human remains at as high a temperature as we do in the West; the bone is intentionally left behind. Sometimes grieving families don't have enough money for a burial plot. Sometimes, as was the case with my grandmother's remains a few years ago, the ground is too cold and frozen and the burial can't take place immediately after the funeral. In the meantime, the bones need a place to go. The toys were offerings to the spirits of dead children and aborted fetuses. Children, in general, haven't amassed enough karma to automatically begin the journey toward reincarnation; they need the help of a bodhisattva (an enlightened and compassionate being) to help them get started. The toys and clothes and candy were offerings, desperate gestures, bribes: the saddest and most personal acts of people deeply immersed in grief.

The bone room, that tragic yet clinical space, gets at the heart of what Buddhism is and does in Japan, which is to oversee all aspects of the afterlife. We like to think of Buddhism in the West as being a kind of philosophy, and of course, it can be. But in practice, Buddhism in Japan gives followers a window into the afterlife and very clear guidance at the moment of death and thereafter. A temple is not really a child's plaything, and knowing this, my mother's aunt and my mother had tried hard to make my early visits to Japan as devoid of any reference to Buddhism as possible. We focused on festivals, castles, animated television shows, food, and travel. The philosophy, and the grieving of dead relatives and friends, were all in the future.



## Travel to Japan

When I started writing *Picking Bones from Ash*, I had a fairly simple premise: what if a girl was haunted by a ghost and readers thought they knew who the ghost was, but turned out to be wrong? And what if the key to understanding what the ghost wanted hinged on understanding another culture?

I knew that most of my characters would be women, but they would be modeled on the Japanese women I knew, and not the flimsy, suffering-but-beautiful stock characters I'd run into in so many historical novels written by Western authors. I would not write armchair-travel fiction. I thought about the lives of women in my family. My grandmother, who was born into an aristocratic family only to see its wealth and reputation vastly diminished during the early twentieth century and after the war. Despite this, she instilled a firm sense of aesthetics in her children. My mother, who was brave enough to leave her country and her parents to enthusiastically seek out a new life in the US. My aunt, who staunchly ran the temple, seeing it through some very financially troubling times, until she finally persuaded her brother's illegitimate son to cut ties with his mother and take over. And I thought about the marriages I'd observed since childhood and the quiet way in which men and women formed alliances and relationships—even when not married to each other.

As I thought about all these women, I began to think about the folk tales and children's tales my mother had read to me and those animated television shows I'd been allowed to watch in Japan as a child. It occurred to me that unlike Disney cartoons, Japanese fairy tales often feature preternaturally powerful women who are not in search of a man. Growing

up, my favorite story had been about the Moon Princess, found inside a fat stalk of bamboo and raised by a poor bamboo cutter and his wife. The princess is wooed by princes from the far corners of Japan and by the emperor himself, but spurns them all, eventually breaking the hearts of her would-be suitors and her adoptive parents (who promptly die) when she returns to the kingdom of the moon. No Disney fairy tale ended this way.

What was more, most of these Japanese stories developed in surprising and unexpected ways. Nature was often a powerful character, adding a quality of chaos to the universe. Evil characters were slippery, and sometimes become forces of goodness and wisdom. Structure, I realized as an adult, did not need to adhere to strict and symmetrical rules to be beautiful. My own characters thus came to life, with all the challenges, pleasures, and difficulties that come from being a girl who truly believes that the most important thing in life is, like the Moon Princess, to be talented and special.

Finally, I wanted to begin to share with readers some of what I believe makes Japan so unique, tantalizing, and rich. For a few years, I wrote for the blog *Japundit*, whose mission, according to its founder, was to show the world all that was Japanese and yet was not “tea and temples.” I’ve been going to Japan for a long time—over thirty years. In my efforts to learn “how to behave correctly,” I’ve listened to what people say and find funny and like to eat and do in their spare time. The tea and the temples are of course bulwarks of Japanese culture and are fascinating, as are the objects of current Western obsessions: love hotels, *Akihabara*, and other marginal cultural establishments. But there is much, much more to Japan—there has to be, with a culture that is over a thousand years old—and in *Picking Bones from Ash*, I wanted to try to unfold some of that mystery for curious readers.



## Questions and Topics for Discussion

- 1) At the beginning of the book, Satomi says: “My mother always told me there is only one way a woman can be truly safe in this world. And that is to be fiercely, inarguably, and masterfully talented.” Is Satomi safe in the end? At what cost? And what about the other female characters, particularly Akiko and Rumi? What does it mean for a woman to be safe?
- 2) Satomi seeks out Western music in Paris, Timothy yearns for spiritual enlightenment through Buddhism, and François reinvents himself in San Francisco. Discuss the ways in which these and other characters—and perhaps you yourself—find freedom through other cultures, and comfort in what is native.
- 3) On page 246, Satomi tells Rumi, “Here we are. A girl without a mother and a girl with too much of a mother. Which, I wonder, would most people rather be? One inherits history. The other is free to create it herself.” Do you think it is better to inherit history or to create a history for yourself?
- 4) François teaches Rumi the importance of seeing beauty out of context. How does this skill help her later on? How does it relate to the Buddhist notion of seeing through illusion?
- 5) Why do you think the ghost of Akiko revealed itself to Rumi and not to Satomi?
- 6) Masayoshi says: “When parents and children can accept each other—no matter what that means—their relationships with everyone else will change” (page 272). How do you feel about this statement?
- 7) How did Mockett’s use of interlocking stories and voices affect your reading experience?

8) Mockett has said: "I felt it was important that any supernatural elements in my novel would be grounded in psychological truths, because that's the 'reality' of true supernatural experiences." How does the supernatural function within her story? Does it add atmosphere? Did it detract from the story?

9) On page 224, Akira says: "The world of the living can be like that of the dead. It is tragic when we lose ourselves in grief." What do you think about this statement? Is it something that you or someone close to you has experienced?

10) At the end of the novel, Akiko says to Satomi: "You look like a loved person. It always shows on people's faces. The ones who discover love when they are much older always look startled." Do you agree?