

## Discussion Suggestions for



### **The Far Side of the Moon**

(For use in conjunction with the book's *Notes*)

#### **Author's and Reader's Goals**

My goal in choosing the subject of this book was to tell a story about Okei, a real person whose grave on a hill near Placerville, California is still visited by travelers from Japan who leave flowers and mementos and have their pictures taken next to her headstone.

Among my goals for readers: To comprehend facts in context, to understand the struggles of the Japanese refugees, the Native Americans, and the resident California locals, and to appreciate some of their virtues.

To enjoy the humor and drama of the story; to enjoy a story whose characters are worth remembering.

To better understand some special immigrants, particularly Asian immigrants, a group that has not been much appreciated in American curriculum materials. I hope that showing affirmative interaction of Japanese refugees with Native Americans and Caucasian Americans might demonstrate that we are better as human beings and as citizens as we embrace diversity.

The questions and project suggestions that follow are intended to provide probing or stimulation, not tedium. The discussions may reveal some "teachable moments." Of course, teachers will use them only as the suggestions appear to be appropriate to the reading, interest, and competence levels of individuals that comprise the group.

## LESSON/ DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

The story's meanings will be enhanced if the students fully comprehend the time and place in which the action occurs. But that's perhaps a tall order. If you get the impression that your young readers find the subject or the story dull, please do move on to something else. The last thing I want for Kei and Julius is that they bore their readers!

### **Chapter One**

1. Kei speaks of the canal water as "lower every day." By what methods and out of what materials might canals have been constructed in the 1870s? Are any such waterways in existence today?
2. "seventh-month" What is it? Why say it that way? Why do Americans and Europeans identify the months as "January," or "February"? Do other cultures use different terms?
3. "Chinese men work the great water hoses...." Discuss the method called "placer mining."
4. "In dreams I run wildly...." Consider the structure and "discipline" of Japanese poems. Write a brief poem based on a syllables-per-line formula (such as a haiku).
5. Kei says she can't pronounce the new name of the town (Placerville). Discuss the various problems one might have in trying to speak in a foreign language..
6. Speculate as to why Schnell's little girls have Western rather than Japanese names.

### **Chapter Two**

1. "Mr. Schnell says it's good business" to know many languages. Discuss.

### **INTERNET/ ENCYCLOPEDIA RESEARCH**

Japanese bath  
samurai

### **Chapter Three**

1. "Coal-oil lamps." What is coal-oil? Is it easy to find a coal-oil or similar lamp today?
2. What do we call the form of punishment that Julius's pa actually used on Julius?

### **Chapter Four**

1. Calculate what "birthday" (number of years) the nation was celebrating on the Fourth of July.

### **Chapter Five**

1. The farmers are worried about the problem of water shortage. How has that problem been solved or not solved in North America? Discuss.
2. Kei complains that Julius's singing is "not a nice Japanese sound." (Find and listen to recordings of Japanese folk music and poetry recitations, especially "old" music and *shigin*.) How do cultures differ in what is pleasing to the ear, to the taste?
3. Yoto-to-wi says she "cannot ever be friend with American." On what evidence might she believe this to be true?

### **Chapter Six**

1. Discuss the attitude Julius's pa has about Native Americans.
2. What do you suppose had brought the "hard-looking fellows" to the Placerville area?
3. Why might Julius and Billy be impersonating Generals Lee and Grant instead of Eisenhower, Schwartzkopf, or Franks?
4. "...grasshopper, which the Diggers...eat...." Is this a fact?

### **Chapter Seven**

1. How do mosquitoes irritate and damage their victims?
2. Research/discuss social class structure in pre-Meiji Japan.
3. "Who would buy such fine garments..." Discover the cost of silk kimonos in today's Japan.
4. "I must give her my wooden comb *because* it is my favorite." Discuss Kei's motivation and the reason(s) for her choice.
5. Research/discuss the probable diet, food acquisition, food preparation, and food storage practices of Yoto-to-wi and her family.

### **Chapter Eight**

1. What might cause the apparent near vegetarianism of the Japanese diet that Julius sees?
2. "...a lot of black pepper boiled up in water..."  
What other interesting remedies are advertised to combat fevers and excess weight and bad breath?
3. Research/discuss Maidu conceptions of physical beauty.
4. Julius always "just never noticed (Yoto-to-wi's) human look before...." Discuss, considering the effects of stereotyping.

### **Chapter Nine**

1. “Mistress will not wear one of the beautiful silk kimonos...”  
Speculate as to why not.
2. Research/discuss the 12-year cycle of animal symbols by which the Japanese identified one’s most likely character traits.

### **Chapter Ten**

1. Research/discuss the possible curative powers of plants.
2. Discuss Julius’s estimation of Yoto-to-wi’s medicine.
3. “...bit by a bee.” What kind of mark does a bee bite make on human skin? (trick question)
4. Frenchy called Schnell “Dutchman.” Could Schnell have been Dutch?  
Or was “Dutchman” used as a kind of familiar slang?
5. Speculate as to why Schnell decided not to call the sheriff.

### **Chapter Eleven**

1. “...the unlucky direction.” Research/discuss the ideas of the Chinese system of *feng shui*, influential in Japan then—as it still is in Japan and in the Western world. See  
<<http://www.traditionalfengshui.com>>
2. Research/discuss the Japanese concept of the “rabbit in the moon.”  
On the Web, see an interpretation of the Buddhist legend:  
<[http://www.karmel.at/ics/others/j\\_14.html](http://www.karmel.at/ics/others/j_14.html)>
3. If there is a store nearby that sells Japanese food, etc., perhaps someone could find mochi and bring some to class to taste!
4. Japanese honor their ancestors. Are there other cultures that honor their ancestors? Is it a typical American practice or tradition?  
Discuss.

### **Chapter Twelve**

1. “...treat the rear end...with terps....” How do we today consider such behavior?
2. Penicillin is a mold. How likely is it that “...mud from the goat pen” is a curative for pimples?

### **Chapter Thirteen**

1. ” After frying the poor creature’s body parts...” Why is Kei so upset about a chicken?
2. “...not at all a typical Japanese design.” What might a typical Japanese design for yukata material have looked like?
3. The flute’s tone “...seems a sad sound.” Discuss how and why music may affect one’s moods.

### **Chapter Fourteen**

1. According to Julius. Yoto-to-wi has been “learning civilization.” Comment.
2. “To thine own self be true,” as Julius’s pa sees it may not be quite the same as Shakespeare’s character advised. (See Polonius’s advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*.)
3. “...most folks don’t really know the Maidu at all.” Does Julius’s observation represent some sort of change in his attitude about “Indians”?
4. Discuss Julius’s choice of costume.

### **Chapter Fifteen**

1. Kei and the Maidu family bowed to each other. How did (and do) Japanese people in Japan bow?
2. Matsunosuke explains poetic meaning. Why do you agree/disagree with his interpretation?

### **Chapter Sixteen**

1. Julius observes that as he learns a foreign word, he understands the English equivalent better. If it’s true, how does this happen?
2. Matsunosuke remarks that Kei is “a tiger.” How has she displayed such characteristics so far?

### **Chapter Seventeen**

1. Kei wonders how Yoto-to-wi “copes with the cold....” How might the Maidu have borne cold weather?
2. Search the life-cycle of the silk worm, the processes by which the cocoon produces silken thread, and the environment the worms need to survive.
3. Until very recent years, Japanese workers and their employers are said to have displayed a great deal of mutual loyalty. When Schnell said farewell to the colony, the members “all felt bad for him.” Why does Kei say they felt bad for *him*, not for themselves.

### **Chapter Eighteen**

1. Why is it a surprise that the Schnells leave without Kei? (Is it a surprise?)
2. Play jon-ken-pone, but go easy on the shoulder-pounding! Better yet, use a pencil and paper or toothpicks to keep score.

### **Chapter Nineteen**

1. “...rice was buttered and sweetened.” What was Kei’s usual diet and how did it differ from the daily fare of the Veerkamps?
2. Discuss Mistress’s alarm about Kei’s fever.

### **Chapter Twenty**

Discuss the relationship of Kei and Matsunosuke.

### **Chapter Twenty-one**

1. Kei is believed to have suffered from malaria. How might a doctor today prescribe for Kei's symptoms?
2. Consider what truths, if any, that the story may have led you to realize.

### **Other Resources**

One or more students could read Yoshiko Uchida's *The Samurai of Gold Hill* (a young adult novel based on the same historical circumstances as *The Far Side of the Moon*) and compare the two stories for the class.

### **Visit these Websites:**

<<http://www.Japansociety.org>>

<<http://www.jacl.org>> Japanese-American Citizen's League

<<http://www.asianamericanbooks.com>> Asian-American Curriculum Project

<[http://www.mtdemocrat.com/display/inn\\_2000\\_columnists/Richard%20Hughey/X804\\_H.TXT](http://www.mtdemocrat.com/display/inn_2000_columnists/Richard%20Hughey/X804_H.TXT)> (Newspaper column of historical interest)

<<http://www.geocities.com/sengokudaimyo/Miscellany/Names.html>>  
On Japanese names

### **INTERNET/ ENCYCLOPEDIA RESEARCH**

bamboo culture  
Japanese diet  
"Digger" Indians  
Maidu Indians  
placer mining  
Hiroshige  
Hangtown  
Lord Matsudaira  
malaria  
tea culture

### **POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES:**

Bring a Japanese-style dish to sample.

Dine at a Japanese restaurant and report on the dishes available.

## LESSON/ DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

If a Japanese market is located nearby, the class or individuals might visit.

Before the students finish the book, encourage them to select some form of demonstration to show something they have thought seriously about or learned to do or learned to appreciate from the story.

Confer with each about the subject of each demonstration. Establish criteria by which each project can be assessed by the group or/and by the teacher.

Examples of successfully executed projects:

- Make a diorama demonstrating the setting of the story or showing a part of the book that particularly interested the student.
- Illustrate/paint/draw incidents from the story.
- Assume the person of one of the secondary characters and write a journal entry about selected story events.
- Search current newspapers for items that appear to report “prejudice” or “racial/ethnic profiling.” Report to the group how the items might relate to incidents and attitudes expressed in the book.
- Write a Japanese-style poem about a particularly compelling memory of the book.
- Review changes in attitude that Julius displayed.

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