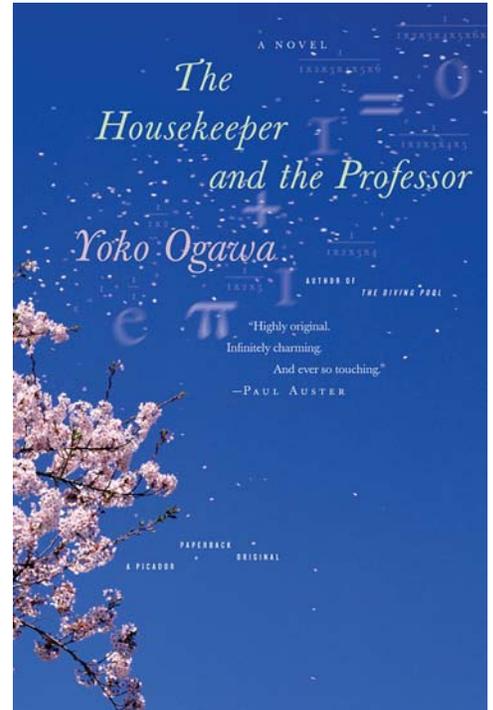


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Housekeeper and the Professor A Novel

by *Yoko Ogawa*

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Housekeeper and the Professor* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Housekeeper and the Professor*.

About the Book

In *The Housekeeper and the Professor*, Yoko Ogawa tells an intimate story about family, the nature of memory, and the poetry of mathematics. It is also, in a sense, a story about the simple experience of getting to know someone, but with a twist: the person forgets everything in eighty minutes. How do you form a relationship with a person who cannot remember? In this uplifting and often poignant novel, Ogawa seems to ask whether our immediate experiences are more important than our memories, since memories inevitably fade, and the eponymous Professor's condition of limited short-term memory allows the author to explore this question with great

creativity. At the same time, Ogawa invites the reader into the world of mathematics, using complex equations as a metaphor for the themes running throughout her book. *The Housekeeper and the Professor* is a rich, multilayered novel that offers much to discuss.

About the Author

Yoko Ogawa's fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *A Public Space*, and *Zoetrope*. Since 1988 she has published more than twenty works of fiction and nonfiction, and has won every major Japanese literary award.

Discussion Questions

1. The characters in *The Housekeeper and the Professor* are nameless (“Root” is only a nickname). What does it mean when an author chooses not to name the people in her book? How does that change your relationship to them as a reader? Are names that important?
2. Imagine you are writer, developing a character with only eighty minutes of short-term memory. How would you manage the very specific terms of that character (e.g. his job, his friendships, how he takes care of himself)? Discuss some of the creative ways in which Yoko Ogawa imagines her memory-impaired Professor, from the notes pinned to his suit to the sadness he feels every morning.
3. As Root and the Housekeeper grow and move forward in their lives, the Professor stays in one place (in fact he is deteriorating, moving backwards). And yet, the bond among the three of them grows strong. How is it possible for this seemingly one-sided relationship to thrive? What does Ogawa seem to be saying about memory and the very foundations of our profoundest relationships?
4. The Professor tells the Housekeeper: “Math has proven the existence of God because it is absolute and without contradiction; but the devil must exist as well, because we cannot prove it.” Does this paradox apply to anything else, beside math? Perhaps memory? Love?
5. The Housekeeper’s father abandoned her mother before she was born; and then the Housekeeper herself suffered the same fate when pregnant with Root. In a book where all of the families are broken (including the Professor’s), what do you think Ogawa is saying about how families are composed? Do we all, in fact, have a fundamental desire to be a part of a family? Does it matter whom it’s made of?
6. Did your opinion of the Professor change when you realized the nature of his relationship with his sister-in-law? Did you detect any romantic tension between the Professor and the Housekeeper, or was their relationship chaste? Perhaps Ogawa was intending ambiguity in that regard?

7. The sum of all numbers between one and ten is not difficult to figure out, but the Professor insists that Root find the answer in a particular way. Ultimately Root and the Housekeeper come to the answer together. Is there a thematic importance to their method of solving the problem? Generally, how does Ogawa use math to illustrate a whole worldview?
8. Baseball is a game full of statistics, and therefore numbers. Discuss the very different ways in which Root and the Professor love the game.
9. How does Ogawa depict the culture of contemporary Japan in *The Housekeeper and the Professor*? In what ways does it seem different from western culture? For example, consider the Housekeeper's pregnancy and her attitude toward single motherhood; or perhaps look at the simple details of the story, like Root's birthday cake. In what ways are the cultures similar, different?
10. Ogawa chooses to write about actual math problems, rather than to write about math in the abstract. In a sense, she invites the reader to learn math along with the characters. Why do you think she wrote the book this way? Perhaps to heighten your sympathy for the characters?
11. Do numbers bear any significance on the structure of this book? Consider the fact that the book has eleven chapters. Are all things quantifiable, and all numbers fraught with poetic possibility?

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