

READING GROUP GUIDE

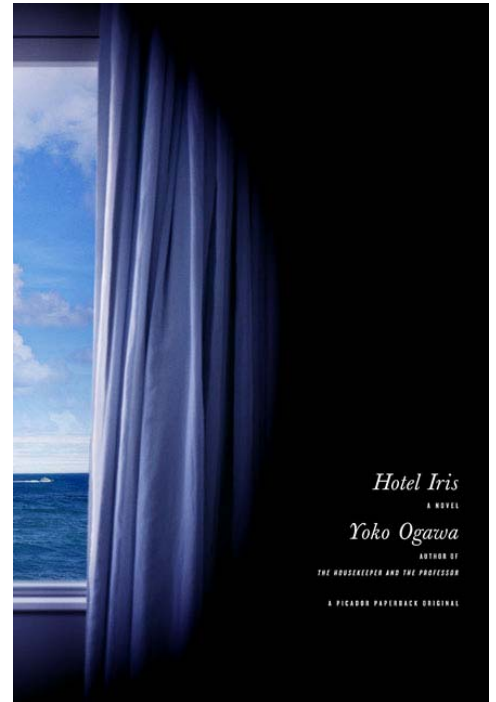
Hotel Iris

A Novel

by Yoko Ogawa

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Hotel Iris* 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 *Hotel Iris*.

About the Book

Set in a seaside town in Japan, *Hotel Iris* is the story of a brief but intense relationship over one summer between a reclusive sixty-year-old man and a shy teenaged girl named Mari. He is a translator of Russian texts into Japanese; a man with a short temper, but a deep sense of melancholy. Living in isolation on an island off the coast, he comes to shore to replenish supplies, and to solicit the local prostitutes – his sexual tastes turn out to be more than a little perverse. Although Mari is seemingly his opposite, she finds herself strangely at ease in the translator’s world, and in one carefully constructed scene after another, Ogawa explores the

complex emotional terrain of their relationship. Dark, subversive, but often rich with surprising insights about love and desire, *Hotel Iris* 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. Mari first encounters the translator when he is expelled from the hotel. What exactly fires her attraction, why do you think she is initially drawn to him, even before seeing what he looks like?
2. Why does Mari's mother so carefully groom her? Is she like a fixture in the hotel that must be polished? Or is the hotel is her domain, and Mari her subject? Why does she assert such strict control over her daughter?
3. Discuss the translator's impassioned letters to Mari. Does he assume a different role in the letters than when they are physically together? Do you agree that letters bear more emotional weight than email? Are they inherently more romantic?
4. The idea of translation – of words and ideas borne into another language -- is woven throughout the novel. What does *Hotel Iris* have to say about how love is expressed? Is intimacy like a language artfully translated by another person? A secret language between two people?
5. Why is the translator unnamed? Does it lend a shade of mystery to his character, does it signal that he is in some way symbolic? Why is Mari the only character with a name?
6. The translator is working on a book in which the heroine has an affair and is brutally punished for it. Is this a personal fantasy of his? Does Mari act it out for him intentionally? Do you believe that books offer a way for people to engage safely with their more adventurous desires?
7. Can the characters in *Hotel Iris* be divided into dominant and submissive personalities? Where does Mari's mother fall? The housekeeper? The translator's nephew?
8. It is commonly assumed that an affair between a young woman and a much older man is driven partly by the woman's desire for a paternal relationship. Do you think that such is the case in *Hotel Iris*? If so, how does Ogawa subvert this stereotype?

9. How would Mari's relationship with the translator's nephew be different if he could speak? Is he merely a pawn in their relationship? Discuss the ways in which his character is important to the story.
10. Is the relationship between Mari and the translator's only physical, or do they relate to one another on intellectual and emotional levels as well? They have both suffered tragic, violent loss of a loved one – do you think the parallel currents of their pain converge? How do their personal histories make the relationship possible? Do they truly relate to one another?
11. How much power does Mari have over her circumstances? Although she is submissive to the translator, she does find the will to defy her mother. Does she have some control over the translator as well? Consider how the translator responds when she does not show up to meet him at the flower clock.
12. In *Hotel Iris*, pain and shame are gateways to pleasure. Do you believe that pain can be perceived simply as a powerful sensation in the service of intimacy? The sexual tastes of the characters may be unusual, but what does Ogawa do in order to help the reader understand their origins?
13. Is *Hotel Iris* ultimately a love story?

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