

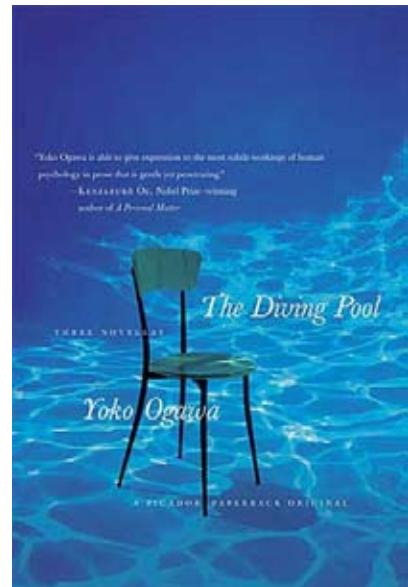


Reading Group Gold

The Diving Pool A Novel by Yoko Ogawa

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Diving Pool* 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 Diving Pool*.



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About the Book

The Diving Pool is a haunting trio of novellas about love, motherhood, fertility, obsession, and how even the most innocent gestures may contain a hairline crack of cruel intent. Whether describing a pregnancy, a swimming pool, or even a simple plate of macaroni and cheese, nothing in an Ogawa story is quite what it seems.

This collection introduces American readers to a most unusual voice in Japanese literature. Ogawa's stories, written in beautiful, spare prose, gracefully move from the naturalistic to the surreal, sometimes within the same paragraph; the characters are normal people in familiar situations, and yet their behavior is elusive and strange; and the narrators of each story, all women, harbor secret inner lives. The stories are almost like mysteries, in which the reader gathers clues about where the line between reality and imagination is drawn. Ogawa does not always offer a clear answer, but there is tremendous pleasure to be had in trying to figure it out.

Praise for *The Diving Pool*

“A Russian doll of a read . . . A story that cooks like a mother.” —Stephen King, *Entertainment Weekly*

“An intoxicating journey filled with missing souls and vengeful spirits.” —*The Washington Post*

“An entertainingly readable novel of ideas . . . Berlinski’s narrative is brilliantly plotted and builds to a shattering but entirely credible conclusion.” —*Los Angeles Times*



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“A sad and powerful tale . . . Inspired and courageous.” —*San Francisco Chronicle*

“An impeccably structured novel portraying two strikingly different milieus . . . Bravura storytelling.” —*The Seattle Times*

“Airtight and intensely gripping . . . His treatment of both religious missionary and anthropological field-work is subtle and insightful. Impeccable research and a juicy, intricate plot play off in this perfectly executed debut.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Gripping and entertaining . . . A quirky, often brilliant debut, bounced along by limitless energy.” —*The New York Review of Books*

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. Food is not always a source of nourishment in *The Diving Pool* – often it plays a more malevolent role. In “Pregnancy Diaries”, the diarist imagines she is killing her sister’s embryo by feeding her grapefruit jam with chromosome-altering pesticides; in “Diving Pool,” the narrator knowingly feeds a rotten cream puff to a little girl and sends her to the hospital. To what effect is Ogawa using food to heighten the menace of her stories. And what does it say about the characters that their chosen method of aggression is to poison? Does “Dormitory” have a different take on food?
2. The narrator of “*The Diving Pool*” has a cruel streak. Why does she place Rie in the jar and then take pleasure in listening to her cry? Is she simply evil, or is the act in some way connected to her feelings for Jun? Did you feel more or less sympathy for the narrator at that moment, and how did your sympathies shift throughout the story?
3. Ogawa’s female protagonists each live relatively isolated lives, and they are also quite secretive. Is Ogawa lamenting the impossibility of one person to ever really understand another, or is isolation a problem particular to just these narrators?
4. The pregnant sister sees a therapist, Dr. Nikaido; but her sister does not seem entirely sane either. Are they both a little out of their minds, or is Ogawa just distorting the point of view to make them seem that way? Is pregnancy itself, with all of its physical and psychological effects, a form of temporary insanity? Did you think that M Clinic resembled an insane asylum?



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5. “Pregnancy Diaries” is a dark story, but also darkly comic. Is it okay to express ambivalence about pregnancy?
6. The narrator in “Diving Pool” has a crush on her foster brother, and it seems to completely consume her. Is this what it’s like to be a teenager, when emotions are at such a high pitch, and every gesture of affection or discontent seems to move us to extremes? What is Ogawa saying about life as a teenager in this story? Do those feelings necessarily go away in adulthood?
7. Why does the narrator of “Dormitory” throw so much energy into helping her cousin? Does she perhaps have a romantic attachment to him. Is she simply lonely? Or does she see her cousin as a surrogate child? Is Ogawa hinting that the narrator is infertile?
8. The man who runs the dormitory is a triple amputee, who nonetheless can open doors, prepare a pot of tea, hold down a job, and have a life. How would you manage under similar circumstances?
9. Why does Ogawa withhold the story of how the dormitory manager lost his limbs? Did you assume he was born that way? Does it matter? Is it somehow symbolic, is he and his whole world in fact disintegrating? Why?
10. Where has the young woman’s cousin gone? Has he in fact disappeared, or is he simply absent, getting on with his life, forgetting about her? Is there a gulf between what the characters in Ogawa’s stories feel and the world outside of themselves? Perhaps all of her narrator’s are unreliable. What clues does she give you to determine the difference between what they imagine and what is real?
11. Discuss the final image of “Dormitory”, the discovery that the narrator makes deep inside the air duct. It seems to be dripping down blood, but we discover it is something else. What do you think is the meaning of this image in the story?
12. Are there any assumptions you can make about contemporary Japan from these stories, is Ogawa commenting on society and culture in her native country (e.g. what people eat, how they receive pre-natal care, college dormitory life)? Or do the novellas seem to take place in a culturally opaque landscape, and deal strictly with more elemental, basic aspects of living and existence?
13. One might say that Ogawa writes about normal life – going to the doctor, having a crush, finding a place to live – but with tiny, imaginative distortions. What is so particular and strange about how she approaches these seemingly familiar activities? Is she distorting them, or just showing us what they really are like?
14. Do you think everyone has the potential for cruelty? Is it true that if you can think a cruel thought, that you are not far really that from acting upon it? Does Ogawa succeed in making you empathize with cruel people, and is it even fair to characterize them as cruel?
15. Women take center stage in these three novellas, their psyches on naked display. Is this a book that men could relate to as well, or does it speak particularly to a female reader only?