

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

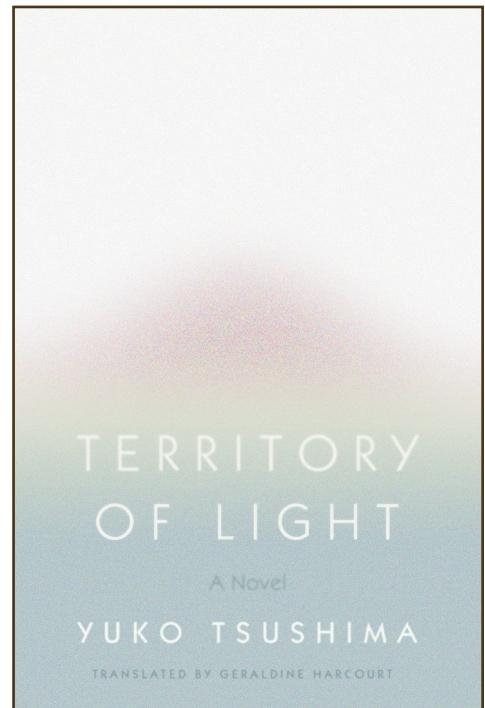
# Reading Group Gold

## *Territory of Light*

*A Novel*

by Yuko Tsushima

Translated from the Japanese by  
Geraldine Harcourt



ISBN: 978-0-374-27321-7 / 192 pages

It is spring. A young woman, left by her husband, starts a new life in a Tokyo apartment. *Territory of Light* follows her over the course of a year as she struggles to bring up her two-year-old daughter alone. Her new home is filled with light streaming through the windows, so bright she has to squint, but she finds herself plummeting deeper into darkness, becoming unstable, untethered. As the months come and go and the seasons turn, she must confront what she has lost and what she will become.

At once tender and lacerating, luminous and unsettling, Yuko Tsushima's *Territory of Light* is a novel of abandonment, desire, and transformation. It was originally published in twelve parts in the Japanese literary monthly *Gunzō*, between 1978 and 1979, each chapter marking the months in real time. It won the inaugural Noma Literary Prize. We hope the following questions will enhance your reading group's experience of this beautiful novel.

### QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Territory of Light* is twelve linked stories told from the point of view of one narrator, the newly single mother of a young daughter. What kind of person is the narrator? As a wife, a daughter, a mother? How does she interact with her neighbors and with the parents and teachers at her daughter's day care? How is she brave? How is she weak? What are her fears and desires?

# Reading Group Gold

2. The book begins, “The apartment had windows on all sides,” immediately introducing the ideas of territory (apartment) and light (windows). What are the other territories the narrator explores in her first year apart from her husband? What are other types of light? Is there a “territory of dark” in the book? How do descriptions of spaces, interior and exterior, and various sources of light give insight into the narrator’s state of mind?
3. How does the narrator balance her own needs with those of her daughter? When is she at her best as a mother and when is she at her worst? How would you describe her daughter? What signs are there that the little girl is affected by her parents’ separation? How does she communicate her feelings?
4. The narrator’s dreams and memories intertwine with the mundane realities of her life. In the first dream she describes, she is “sitting in a silver, star-shaped receptacle” that is spinning faster and faster. An old classmate from middle school asks her, “Why are you such a loser?” Toward the end of the book, she dreams she is on an outing with classmates from elementary school. She tries to change her clothes and finds herself partially undressed. What do these dreams and others have in common? What do they reveal about her as she grapples with her new status? How are they tied to previous days’ events? What might some of the images symbolize?
5. What kind of man is Fujino? Is he held to different societal standards as a parent and spouse than his wife? How does he treat his daughter? Does the narrator relate anything about him that makes him sympathetic?
6. “Sunday in the Trees,” set less than six months after the narrator’s separation from her husband, shows her at a low point. What are the events of this afternoon in the park? What is the narrator’s mood as she looks up into the zelkova elms and, later, sees an acquaintance asleep on a bench? Why does she lose her temper with her daughter? What are various images of light and shadow?
7. In “The Sound of a Voice,” the narrator realizes she isn’t afraid of intruders breaking in to her apartment, because it is on the fourth floor. She reflects, “Instead, living at that height meant it was a long way down.” What are other references to height and falling in “The Sound of a Voice”? Are they grim or reassuring? Why are the phone calls from the stripper and the professor part of this chapter?
8. Who is Sugiyama? Who is Kawachi? What are the narrator’s feelings for them? What role does each of them play in helping her navigate separation and divorce? In general, how do men respond to her sexuality?
9. The narrator frequently describes herself as worried, angry, and overtired. She leads an isolated life and is awkward with other women. As a single mother, she has been relegated to the shadows of society. Given this, why is the book titled *Territory of Light*? What are the moments of contentment and connection that brighten the narrator’s life?

# Reading Group Gold

10. Is there a turning point in the story—a moment or series of events when the narrator becomes more independent, optimistic, or confident about living on her own?
11. The four elements of nature—earth, air, fire, and water—are all present, in dreams, memories, and daily life in Tokyo. How and when does each appear? What might they signify?
12. Each chapter title refers to an episode in the life of the narrator and her daughter. For example, “The Water’s Edge” is about the flood in their apartment building. Do the titles match your expectations of what happens in each story? Are they simply poetic or deliberately ironic?
13. “The Earth’s Surface” begins with the idea of escape. The narrator tells us, “I stayed on the train. It was a Sunday afternoon. My daughter was not at my side.” Why is the narrator on the train? Where does she end up? What does this story say about being human in a crowded and complicated world? What does it say about being a mother? How is her freedom from a bad marriage different from Fujino’s?
14. The book begins and ends with descriptions of two apartments. What are the characteristics of these spaces and what do they reveal about the narrator? What does she find appealing about each of them? How are they different from each other and what might these differences signify about the narrator’s new life and her future?
15. In spite of her best intentions to create a light-filled, orderly life for herself and her daughter, anger and violence are an almost daily presence in the narrator’s life. She struggles to restrain herself, but often responds to neighbors, teachers, her husband, and even her little daughter with sharp words, shoves, and slaps. Painful or violent death is also present in many of her stories. She turns down an apartment because it has been the scene of two suicides. She tells of a boy falling from a window. In “Flames,” she comments on the number of funerals in her neighborhood. Her boss dies of cancer. Finally, there is a chemical factory explosion, with several casualties. The description of the explosion—a loud boom, a shock, a red glow—could be the description of a nuclear blast. How does the narrator react to the explosion and its aftermath? What is her response to the other deaths? How does she feel about losing her temper and how does she try to control it? How might she be representative of the Japanese cultural psyche in the decades following World War II?
16. What is the meaning of “Corpuscles of Light,” the title of the last story? One definition of *corpuscle* is “a minute particle regarded as the basic constituent of matter or light.” What are the particles of light—the moments of love, magic, or joy—that have marked this significant period in a woman’s life? How are the narrator’s experiences representative of universal challenges faced by women?

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

# Reading Group Gold

## PRAISE FOR *TERRITORY OF LIGHT*

“Fragmented, and rich in dreams and memories, the book is suffused with images of light and water . . . Geraldine Harcourt’s translation subtly conveys the narrator’s precarious grip on reality . . . Spiky, atmospheric and intimate, filled with moments of strangeness that linger in the mind like an after-image on the retina, *Territory of Light* is not a comforting read, but it will touch women across frontiers.” —Lee Langley, *The Spectator* (London)

“[*Territory of Light*’s] twelve linked tales of the city are fine-grained to the point of mundanity—finding an apartment, discovering a leak, visiting a park—but in Tsushima’s hands they achieve a deceptive, luminous clarity . . . In this short, powerful novel lurk the joy and guilt of single parents everywhere.” —Peter Beech, *The Guardian*

“Reflects, like a crystal, scattered moments in the life of an unnamed mother . . . Bracing, often breathtaking.” —John Self, *The Irish Times*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND TRANSLATOR

Yuko Tsushima was born in Tokyo in 1947, the daughter of the novelist Osamu Dazai, who took his own life when she was one year old. Her prolific literary career began with her first collection of short stories, *Shaniku-sai (Carnival)*, which she published at the age of twenty-four. She won many awards, including the Izumi Kyoka Prize for Literature (1977), the Kawabata Prize (1983), and the Tanizaki Prize (1998). She died in 2016.

Geraldine Harcourt was awarded the 1990 Wheatland Translation Prize. She is currently working on three books of Yuko Tsushima’s fiction. She lives in Kamakura, Japan.

Guide written by Patricia Daneman