

Teachers' Notes written by Kevin Steinberger

HANNAH'S WINTER

By Kierin Meehan

Hannah's Winter opens up a window to Japanese culture through an Australian girl's extended holiday with a host family in an old traditional quarter of a coastal town. Also traditional is the stimulus and structure for the story that follows: the chance discovery of a cryptic poem sends the young protagonists off on a tortuous, eventful quest over the Japanese landscape.

Synopsis

Liana Forrester, a gardening writer, takes her 12yo daughter Hannah with her on a research trip to Japan. She leaves Hannah with some old friends, the Maekawa family, while she goes on an extended tour of the country. Mr Maekawa is the proprietor of a stationery shop. Not long after Hannah's arrival, he receives a box of old knick knacks from an elderly friend. Among them is an old cryptic poem seeking help for an 'ocean boy'. All are intrigued. Hannah, the Maekawa's 12yo daughter Miki and Hiro, the 13yo grandson of the next door flower shop proprietor, determine to pursue the mystery. They enlist the aid of adult Aunt Yukiyo, proprietor of the neighbouring donut shop, a spinster who has never gotten over a failed, long past romance. In their various excursions out into the neighbourhood - into temples, the market, ancient rural shrines, an ancient castle, to a mountain - they progressively decipher the poem as they recognize its clues among the people and places of their travels. Not only do they solve the mystery of the 'ocean boy' but their quest also fortuitously brings happy resolution to the sad histories of Yukiyo and Hiro.

Characterisation

The author, a teacher of Japanese and former resident of Japan, shares her love of the Japanese culture with this novel. It is through her characters that she achieves this. As an observer of the Maekawa household and a fellow traveler on their excursions, the reader gains considerable insight into domestic life in Japan and traditional culture. The elderly folk - Granny Maekawa and Grandpa Honda - represent a connection with the past, its knowledge and traditions. Aunt Yukiyo and KimiShimi represent a younger, Westernised Japan. The children embrace modern living but are curious about the past. Hannah's unfamiliarity with much of her Japanese experience illustrates the persistent uniqueness of national cultures in spite of the growing concept and practice of the global world community.

Discussion Points

- The reader is like Hannah - an Australian learning about Japanese culture. Chapter 12 is about Hannah's experience of a Japanese school. How does it compare with being a student in an Australian school?
- Home life is quite different too. One example is the wearing of shoes at home (p42-4). What are the traditions of wearing shoes?
- *'Old Japan is still there, but it's hard to find.'* says Miki's mother to Hannah (p.38). What makes the town different from Tokyo? What does 'old Japan' look like?
- What is the bean-throwing festival?
- The character of the historic samurai doctor Yoshi Kato enables the author to reveal Japan's history of isolation from the West. What does the reader learn about how trade did occur in that time? (p185-6)
- Japanese words are interspersed throughout the text, usually accompanied by their English meaning, eg; p121. Make a glossary of Japanese vocabulary.
- The book is a 'quest novel'. What are the basic elements of a quest story?
- Although the quest is serious in nature, the author manages to inject some humour into the novel through the relationship between Hannah and her mother. What is her mother's manner like? (Chapters 1, 2) How is it revealed in the text?