

Teachers' Notes for Across the Nightingale Floor Tales of the Otori Book 1

Lian Hearn

Teachers notes written by Associate Professor Robyn Ewing (B.Ed Hons, PhD).

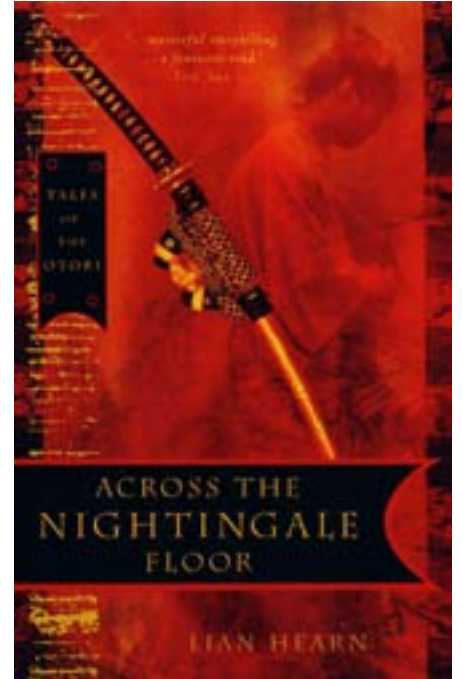
Introduction

This novel is at once powerful and gentle. Set in ancient Japan, it is the story of a journey and, at the same time, a story of many journeys: a search for identity and a search for meaning in a world that *is so beautiful and so cruel at the same time* (p.114).

About the Author

Lian Hearn's passion for and lifelong interest in Japan is evident in her writing of this the first book in a trilogy. She has painstakingly researched the details for *Across the Nightingale Floor* and, although it is fiction, the meticulous detail is one of the novel's many strengths.

In earlier years, Lian studied Modern Languages at Oxford University and worked as a film critic and arts editor in London. Although she now lives in Australia, her lifelong interest in Japan led to lengthy visits there and a desire to learn the Japanese language.



Before Reading the Text

The cover is distinctive:

- What does the cover convey? Why are oranges used as the major colours and what do they suggest?
- What does the foregrounding of the sword symbolise?
- *Across the Nightingale Floor* is an intriguing title—what associations does it have?

Although Hearn says this is *a work of the imagination* it would be useful to do some background reading about Japan. Different groups could research:

- the country Japan
- a brief history of Japan
- Japan's feudal system
- the clans
- the Samurai and their traditions.

The Hidden are mentioned early in the novel. It would be interesting to find out more about this religion. Legend has it that when the first Catholic Church was finally allowed to open in Japan in the late 19th century, ostensibly initially for western visitors, the Japanese government was astonished when many people, who had hidden their belief in this faith since the Jesuits had been expelled at the end of the 16th century, streamed to the church from isolated mountain areas. Because they had been without any writing and teaching for so long, their faith was a strange mixture of Catholicism, Buddhism, animism and Shintoism.

What does the opening poem suggest the story is about?

Major Themes

There are many 'quotable quotes' around the important themes in this novel. Construct a table listing those that are important for you and record relevant quotes for future reference and discussion. It will be important to return to them at the conclusion of the novel for further reflection.

For example:

Theme	Relevant Quote
Search for identity	<i>I did not know if this Takeo was real or just a construction created to serve the purposes of the Tribe and the Otori (p.153).</i>
Family heritage	<i>I was woven from two strands that could hardly be less alike, and both called to me, through blood, muscle and bone (p.82).</i>
Life and death	<i>There are better things to die for (p.13).</i>
Fate	<i>Even wealth or high birth could not protect you from fate (p.19)</i> <i>Well the fates decide our lives no matter what we think we are planning (p. 85).</i>
Gender equity	<i>(Kaede) had come to believe that all women should use every weapon they had to protect themselves in the battle that life seemed to be...(p.144).</i> <i>Why is it that women have to suffer this way? Why don't we have the freedom men have (p.104-4)?</i>
Change	<i>Times change and we must all change with them (p.172).</i>
Honour	<i>It is better to die than to live with shame(p.183).</i>

Getting into the Text

The novel opens very dramatically. *And so between the waterfall and the top of the mountain I lost my name, became someone new, and joined my destiny with the Otori (p.12).* These first twelve pages lend themselves to scripting and enactment or readers' theatre.

It would be useful to construct a family tree for Tomasu/Takeo that can be added to as the novel unfolds. The same could be done for Kaede.

Plot

- The plot is an intricate weaving of a number of different stories initially introduced separately. It may help to keep some kind of summary of the various backgrounds, histories and journeys of Takeo, Kaede, Lady Maruyama, Lord Otori, Kenji.
- Alternatively, the map on the first end cover could be enlarged and brief summaries could be made alongside important villages/places where events occur during the journey(s).
- Are any of these individual stories linked to particular themes or does each story embody each theme? How? The different stories could be linked to themes identified.

Characterisation

Characters are carefully drawn in this text. Look for descriptions of major characters and record these. Note how the physical descriptions are closely related to the personal qualities or attributes of the person. Compare, for example, the descriptions of Lord Otori (eg p.16,18) and Lady Maruyama (p.20-21), Shizuka (p.102-3,144-5) compared with Lord Iida (p7) or Lord Otori's two uncles (p.127). Choose a character to profile and document their qualities as demonstrated by their actions.

Some of the characters are also linked to qualities exemplified by animals or birds. Lord Otori, for example, is symbolised by the *great, grey* heron. See for example p.88, 124,179. What qualities do both Lord Otori and the heron share? Is the comparison a meaningful one?

Lady Maruyama is contrasted with other women. What makes her stand apart? See, for example, pp.104-6.

Kaede thinks a great deal about the plight of women and her own destiny. *She was a pawn on the board of the great game the warlords were playing* (p.144). How does Kaede overturn this game? Is it luck or was she destined to play this part? Does the author provide any suggestion that this will happen? How?

Much is made of appearance and people not being what they seem. Which characters are authentic? What is the message here for the reader?

Symbols

Hearn uses symbols very powerfully in the story. Consider:

- The sword is an important symbol in this novel. What does it symbolise in ancient Japan? What does it symbolise for the reader? Why does Takeo leave Jato with Makoto at the end of the story?
- How do the symbols relate to the themes of the novel? The characters? For example, the heron is frequently associated with Lord Otori. Why?
- Takeo's acute hearing is crucial to his developing skills and to the task that has been set for him. Is this an important symbol?
- Many chapters begin with a comment about the passing of the seasons or the weather. For example, when Lord Otori introduces Takeo to his loyal servant and tells him Takeo is to become his adopted son, Ichiro finds this hard to accept. *There was a sudden gust of wind, the shutters creaked and with the sound the world became unreal for me again...* (p.36). Investigate other examples when a change in the seasons or the weather symbolise new beginnings or a new dimension to the plot.
- In a similar way, settings often symbolise a significant moment. For Takeo, a blood red sun has taken on the bloodshed on the plain where the Otori clan suffered its worst defeat to Iida (p.27-8).

The Language of the Text

The novel is rich in description. Investigate the different language devices chosen by Hearn to create intricate pictures for the reader. For example:

Imagine you are Takeo entering a city for the first time. Hearn concentrates on the sounds of the city Hagi in depicting its busyness to a country boy (p.32). Similarly she concentrates on the visual when describing Lord Otori's upstairs room (p.38).

Many comparisons are effectively drawn using metaphor and simile. It may be useful to record references for those considered most powerful. For example:

The waning moon and a single star lay close together in the sky, so low that they looked as if they were eavesdropping on the sleeping town. The air was knife-cold (p.91).

Personification is also used to great effect. For example:

The maples had put on their brocade robes (p.93).

The house sang to me and I fell in love with it (p.39).

Style

The novel alternates between first and third person. Why do you think Hearn has constructed the text using different voices in this way?

Going Beyond the novel

The ending is very open ended, given that this is the first novel in a trilogy. Is any foreshadowing provided as a hint of what might happen next?

Make a list of the qualities of the Hidden. Contrast them with those attributed to the Tribe. Can these attributes co-exist in one person?

Questions for discussion

- Return to the poem about the deer that opens the novel and the title. What meanings do these now hold for the reader?
- What does Takeo's initial speechlessness allow?
- *I believe the test of government is the contentment of the people* (p.174). This is an important statement. How many current leaders do you think could say that the people they govern are content?
- *Power brings its own legitimacy* (p.175). Do you agree with this statement? It could form the basis for a debate.
- *Men are stronger and not held back by feelings of tenderness or mercy* (p.105-6) Do you agree that this is a feature of males? Do you agree that emotion is a weakness? What conclusions, if any, can you draw about gender difference from the novel?
- *How was it possible for the world to be so beautiful and so cruel at the same time* (p.114)? What are the cruelties faced by the major characters in the novel? Do you agree the world is these both simultaneously? Why?
- Takeo holds himself responsible for Lord Otori's death? Do you agree?
- Re-read the last two paragraphs of the novel (p.339-340). Do you think our purpose as humans is to live on earth as best we can *between the darkness and the light* (p.340)?

Related reading

The Tale of the Mandarin Duck Katherine Patterson

Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom Katherine Patterson

The Whale Child Gillian Rubenstein

The Lord of the Rings J.R.R. Tolkien