

Garden of Evening Mists

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A Reading Group Guide

Author's Commentary

“Shakkei” - the Art of Borrowed Scenery - is one of the main principles in Japanese gardening. When designing a garden, the gardener will make use of the neighbour's trees, or the mountains in the distance; he will even borrow from the clouds, the wind and the mists. The gardener incorporates these elements and views into the garden, making them integral to his creation. He must do it so skillfully, so seamlessly, that visitors to the garden are never aware of it.

Can shakkei be a metaphor for creative writing? There are similarities between the Art of Borrowed Scenery and the techniques of fiction. Using the elements of time, setting, and atmosphere, a writer creates a space for the reader to flesh out these characters in his own mind. In the process the reader lends something of his own “scenery” to these characters, making them feel more real to him, more alive.

Yugiri, the Garden of Evening Mists, is also a character in my novel. The garden interacts with Yun Ling and Aritomo. It borrows from their emotions and their responses. Yun Ling and Aritomo – and all who step into Yugiri – react to the garden in their individual ways. Yugiri, Yun Ling and Aritomo are mirrors, reflecting and borrowing from one another. So what is real, and what is only a reflection of a reflection of a reflection?

“Every aspect of gardening is a form of deception,” Yun Ling remarks to Aritomo. Writing a novel is similar to designing and creating a Japanese garden: both arts require artifice and lies. Every single object in a garden is carefully selected and placed to create the optimal effect; the same with words and sentences in a work of fiction. For a novel – and a garden – to succeed, the lie has to convince, to beguile. Like the gardener, the writer must create a believable world. Yun Ling realises this when she leads a group of visitors through Aritomo's garden: “The turns in the track disoriented not only our sense of direction, but also our memories, and within minutes I could almost imagine that we had forgotten the world from which we had just come.”

But are we ever aware that shakkei is part of our daily existence? “A garden borrows from the earth, the sky, and everything around it, but you borrow from time,” Yun Ling tells Aritomo. “Your memories are a form of shakkei too. You bring them in to make your life here feel less empty.”

We borrow not only from our own memories, but also from the memories of the people around us. And it isn't only memories that create the shakkei of our lives, but everything we see and hear and experience, everyone we meet and talk to and who talks to us. We borrow from the music we listen to, from the books we read. We borrow from the past and the present. We borrow from the future, those far mountains we will one day reach. We borrow all these into our lives, and they form the ever-changing landscape in which we travel, day after day.

Discussion Questions

1. The author introduces Yun Ling as she is entering retirement, and slowly reveals the key experiences that have shaped her life. What was your initial impression of the main character and how did it change as the novel progressed?
2. As a research clerk in the war crimes tribunal directly after the war, Yun Ling is intimately involved in the national process of punishment and healing after the horrors of the Japanese invasion. Yet, she is hardly healed, and she has her own motives for this work. Can the Japanese crimes be forgiven?
3. The author tells us on the first page that Aritomo “did not apologize for what his countrymen had done to my sister and me.” Does he attempt to make amends in other ways?
4. Violence is a frequent presence in Yun Ling’s life, from the labor camp to the CT invasion to the destruction of her memory. How does she cope with the trauma of these events? Is she successful?
5. Not just violence, but sexual violence is a factor in the novel. How did you grapple with Yun Hong’s experience as one of the “comfort women” in the camp and the shame she felt as a result?
6. Intertwined with the traumatic episodes, art – including literature, painting, and, of course, garden design – appears constantly in the book. Consider some key examples (i.e., Yun Hong’s painting, the supposed Golden Lily hoard, Yugiri itself) and discuss their importance to the novel.
7. As the author delves deeper into Yun Ling’s memory, the narrative continuously slips from present to past with little warning. How does this structure work to create meaning within the novel?
8. When Yung Ling finally returns to Yugiri and Frederik mentions Aritomo’s death, she says, “There are days when I think he’s still out there, wandering in the mountains, like one of the Eight Immortals of the Toaist legend, a sage making his way home.” Discuss the impact of Aritomo’s disappearance in the novel, and how he continues to be present.
9. Aritomo’s final artistic work is not a garden but a horimono, a tattoo covering much of Yun Ling’s battered body. What is the significance of this act to their relationship and to the novel?
10. There is a constant struggle between memory and forgetting in the novel. How does the experience of the camp change Yun Ling’s relationship to memory?

11. Frederik and Yun Ling have a brief encounter when she first arrives at Majuba estate, and he makes it clear that he has strong feelings for her throughout the book. Why do you think Yun Ling chooses Aritomo over Frederik?

12. Tatsuji is a peripheral character, but he is important not only for the revelatory information he brings. What does Tatsuji's narrative of his relationship with Teruzen and experience as a kamikaze pilot add to the novel?

13. Aritomo teaches Yun Ling that "every aspect" of the garden "is a form of deception." How does this aesthetic of deception and mystery become apparent in other aspects of the novel?

14. Why does Yun Ling, after all her searching and striving, choose not to use the possible clues from her horimono to try and locate her camp? Is this a hopeful novel?

Praise for *Garden of Evening Mists*

“This novel uses fine art as its major theme and, in the process, becomes a work of fine art itself.”—*The Washington Post*

“[A] sumptuous . . . thoughtful . . . heartbreaking tale How to excise trauma . . . how to inscribe it on the present without tainting the world itself: these are the grand issues of this novel. With each one of its sentences, *The Garden of Evening Mists* poses a beautiful answer to these questions.” —John Freeman, *Boston Globe*

“This story of a Japanese garden created in honour of a Japanese victim-of-war is sternly paced to match its subject. One of us likened its beauty to those of slowly clashing icebergs. The gardener is one of the most memorable characters in all the 30,000 pages we read this year.” —Man Booker Prize Judging Panel, *The Telegraph*

“[A] strong quiet novel [of] eloquent mystery.”—Dominique Browning, *New York Times Book Review*

“Tan writes with breath-catching poise and grace. . . . *The Garden of Evening Mists* also offers action-packed, end-of-empire storytelling. . . . His fictional garden cultivates formal harmony –but also undermines it. It unmask[s] sophisticated artistry as a partner of pain and lies. This duality invests the novel with a climate of doubt; a mood – as with Aritomo’s creation – of ‘tension and possibility.’ Its beauty never comes to rest.”—*The Independent* (UK)

“*The Garden of Evening Mists*, Tan Twan Eng's second novel, continues Eng's exploration, begun in *The Gift of Rain*, of the mystery that is memory, how remembrance never proceeds in anything like a straight line, and how its gaps are as crucial as silence is to music. . . . Beautifully written. . . . Eng is quite simply one of the best novelists writing today.”—Frank Wilson, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“As intricately designed as a Japanese garden, this deceptively quiet novel resonates with the power to inspire a variety of passionate emotions. . . . A haunting novel certain to stay with the reader long after the book is closed.”—*Booklist*

“The unexpected relationship between a war-scarred woman and an exiled gardener leads to a journey through remorse to a kind of peace. After a notable debut, Eng (*The Gift of Rain*) returns to the landscape of his origins with a poetic, compassionate, sorrowful novel set in the aftermath of World War II in Malaya. . . . Grace and empathy infuse this melancholy landscape of complex loyalties enfolded by brutal history, creating a novel of peculiar, mysterious, tragic beauty.”—*Kirkus Reviews*, STARRED REVIEW

“Tan Twan Eng’s superb *The Garden of Evening Mists* is. . . a gripping read. A new favorite.” —Nick Harkaway, *The Daily Beast*

“Like his debut, *The Gift of Rain*, Tan’s second novel is exquisite...Tan triumphs again, entwining the redemptive power of storytelling with the elusive search for truth, all the while juxtaposing Japan’s inhumane war history with glorious moments of Japanese art and philosophy. All readers in search of spectacular writing will not be disappointed.”—*Library Journal*, STARRED REVIEW

“A complex and powerful narrative...[a] sophisticated and satisfying novel.”—*The Sunday Times* (UK)

"The descriptions of nature in this heartfelt novel are so powerful, so sensitively handled that a palpable feeling of having seen the garden and the surrounding mist-shrouded hills is engendered...an outstanding prose writer."—Ed Voves, *California Literary Review*

“Once again, Eng transports the reader to a world that few people know about and reveals the complicated humanity of its inhabitants.”—*BookPage*

“Tan's second novel is exquisite. . . [He] manages to intertwine the redemptive power of storytelling with the elusive search for truth, all the while juxtaposing Japan's inhumane war history with glorious moments of Japanese art and philosophy. His is a challenging balancing act, and yet he never falters, intimately revealing his stories with power and grace.”—Terry Hong, *Bookslut.com*

“*The Garden of Evening Mists* is an unusually ambitious novel, and its focus on Japanese art forms elevates it beyond the horrors of war... [an] elegant story of two unusual people dealing with war and the past and, more importantly, finding solace in art, creativity, and abiding values.”—Mary Whipple, *Seeing the World Through Books*

About the Author

Tan Twan Eng was born in Penang in 1972, but grew up in several places across Malaysia. He earned a law degree at the University of London and later practiced as an intellectual property lawyer. He developed a love of Aikido at a young age, and the principles of this martial arts discipline have seeped into all aspects of his life. He has a first-dan ranking in the practice, and is a strong advocate for the conservation of heritage buildings.

Eng’s first novel, *The Gift of Rain*, was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2007 and has been widely translated.

Eng divides his time between Cape Town and Kuala Lumpur. His second novel, *The Garden of Evening Mist*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2012.