



And what is the measure of self inside grief? Jordan Okumura's novel *Gaijin* is a body song. By weaving stories of loss and myth, Okumura brings an identity to life, half real, half imagined. I was mesmerized from start to finish.

—LIDIA YUKNAVITCH, author of *Small Backs of Children*

TEACHING GUIDE

GAIJIN

by Jordan Okumura

978-1-937865665 / 136 pages / \$15.95

Recommended Classes:

- Creative Writing
- Hybrid Writing
- Creative Nonfiction & Memoir
- Trauma Studies
- Feminist Literature
- Experimental Fiction
- Experimental Writing

Keywords:

Fiction / Experimental Fiction / Trauma / Hybrid /
Memoir / Autobiography / Sexual Assault / Heritage
Japanese Heritage / Portuguese Heritage / War /
Identity Studies / Mythology / Japanese Internment /
Loss / Death / Grief

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the narrator work through / live with / process the grief from various traumas? Does there seem to be an ultimate resolution possible? Does it matter if there is?
2. What is the difference in sound, tone, and language when the narrator resides in a memory space versus in a traveling space? What do you sense about the different emotional perspectives within these spaces?
3. How does breath seem to operate in the book? Both as gesture and action, but also in terms of the rhythm and pacing of the language and sentence structure.
4. How do you understand time in this book? Does time seem to be chronological or cyclical and how does this affect the reading of the overall narrative?
5. What is the relationship between the narrator and her body in the text? How does the human body relate with the body of the text itself? What tensions do you see surrounding the concept of the body?

6. *Gaijin* speaks to memory, inherited trauma, physical and emotional fractures, race and gender. These are all topics that are present in today's social and cultural climate. In what ways does this book present ways to heal for its readers? In what ways does this book ask more questions? What is the importance for sharing narratives like this?
7. *Gaijin* employs white space and line breaks. How does this contribute to the reader's understanding of the narrative and the overall pacing of the text?
8. How do language and imagery evoke various emotional responses? What are some examples?
9. How do family histories impact the narrator and her sense of self and her body?
10. What does the narrator's struggle with language and her ultimate use of it communicate to you about the ontological core of the book?
11. *Gaijin* is classified as fiction though it draws from autobiographical elements. Does the categorization of genre here (fiction vs nonfiction) matter to you as a reader? What is the relationship between trauma and genre? How does the genre classification influence the reading of the text?
12. How do you understand the title of the book and its relationship to the text?

Possible Assignments:

- The narrative in *Gaijin* has been described as a plowing "forward in reconciling two disparate sources of grief in order to heal them..." In *Gaijin*, the author rubs different emotional moments together - juxtaposing moments of beauty with moments of pain and loss. Write a piece where you address two different, seemingly opposing emotional experiences. How do they begin to inform each other? How do they change and reveal each other in different ways then if they were standalone pieces?
- Though not apparent to the reader, much of *Gaijin* was written from research and photographs. Create an ekphrastic work from a photograph of your own, without including or addressing the photograph in the piece. Tell the story behind the negative / Create the story that the negative does not tell.
- The narrator in *Gaijin* is constantly reopening old wounds, as she searches for "the animal that came after the animal that I am." The author explores, what she calls, *writing within an inch or your life*. Find a moment that is painful to look at directly, that is hard to look in the eye, and then write towards the center of it and write it as if no one will ever read it. What does this open up for you? How does the process itself reveal something about the story beneath the story you are trying to tell?