

WHITE MULBERRY

A Novel

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LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

READING GUIDE

1. The novel begins with Miyoung in a white mulberry tree, and she continues to remember the tree throughout her time living in Japan. What is the significance of the mul-berry tree for Miyoung? What does it symbolize in the novel as a whole? What is the meaning of the color white in the novel?
2. White Mulberry is an immigration story set in Japan in the 1930s and '40s. How is one's identity formed and changed by the experience of living outside one's ancestral home-land? Is Miyoung's experience different from immigrants in other parts of the world? If you're an immigrant, how is your experience similar or different from Miyoung's?
3. Miyoung learns to keep others at arm's length to protect herself from the pain of separation and loss. How does her fear of losing people she loves play out in her relation-ship with Ko-chan? How would you characterize her love for her son? Does it change, and if so, how?
4. Hojoon's love for Miyoung is deep and heartfelt. Why does Miyoung love Hojoon? If Miyoung hadn't been pregnant, do you think she would have married him? What would you have done in Miyoung's situation?
5. The relationship between Miyoung and her sister Bohbeh is very close. How does Bohbeh's advice influence Miyoung over the years? Why doesn't Miyoung tell Bohbeh about Hojoon initially? Why doesn't Miyoung talk to Bohbeh about Haramoto's abusive behavior? If you have a sister, do you hold things back from her? If so, why?
6. Ko-chan is only six years old when he leaves Japan with his mother. If you had to describe Ko-chan, how would you characterize his personality, conflicts, and goals? How does his relationship with his mother evolve throughout the novel?
7. Even to this day, many Koreans who live in Japan assume Japanese names and live as Japanese. What does the novel show about the discrimination against Koreans in Japan? What do you think of Miyoung's decision to pass as Japanese? Would you have made the same choice?
8. Motherhood is an important theme in the novel. Miyoung's mother, Hojoon's mother, and Miyoung her-self represent very different kinds of mothers. How are they different, and how are they the same? Does this depend on cultural factors? Are their sacrifices different from what is expected from mothers in other parts of the world?
9. Christianity plays a large role in Miyoung's life. Why is she attracted to Christianity? Does it seem plausible she would embrace it even against her mother's wishes? How were Westerners considered vis-à-vis the Japanese at this time?
10. Miyoung is faced with an impossible decision when she is ordered to serve in the Japanese Imperial Army. What do you think of her choice to escape? How about her decision to lie to her mother-in-law and son? What do you think Miyoung learns about herself at the end of the novel?
11. The novel takes place during a tumultuous time in Asian history. The Japanese occupation of Korea displaced Koreans, broke up families, and forced great economic and political change on Korea. How do world events affect Miyoung's choices? Do you think she will return home to the northern part of Korea before the country is divided after World War II? Does this story change any assumptions you have of North Korea now?

12. Strangers are a recurring motif in the novel—beginning with the man in uniform who appears at Miyoung’s farm and ending with Mr. Choi, the investigator who tries to bring Ko-chan back to his grandmother. What do these strangers portend? Have strangers appeared in your life at unexpected times?
13. In the beginning, Miyoung is a spirited child who identifies herself with the fiery dragon that represents her birth year on the Chinese zodiac. Later, she grapples with loneliness and isolation as a result of having to hide her Korean identity and her son to survive in Japan. What else does she suffer as a result of this duality? What does she gain?
14. Miyoung’s nursing and midwife career set her apart from other mothers during her time. To what extent have women’s roles changed since then? How have they remained the same? Does Miyoung use her nursing career as a form of personal resistance? If so, how? Against what?
15. Is this novel a work of tragedy, irony, or something else? Is it tragic that Miyoung takes her son away from the only home he’s ever known, just like she was removed from her own? Is it ironic because the nursing credentials she worked so hard to obtain create the risk that she will be sent to war to support Japan, the occupier of her own country? Or is this a story of family, survival, or hope? Why?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Rosa Kwon Easton was born in Seoul, Korea, and grew up with her extended family in Los Angeles. Easton holds a bachelor's degree in government from Smith College, a master's in international and public affairs from Columbia University, and a JD from Boston College Law School. She is a lawyer and an elected trustee of the Palos Verdes Library District. She is an Anaphora Writing Residency Fellow, and her work has been published in CRAFT Literary, StoryCenter.org, *Writer's Digest*, and elsewhere. She has two adult children and lives with her husband and Maltipoo in sunny Southern California. For more information, visit www.rosakwoneaston.com.