

Great Books Discussion Questions
Snow Falling on Cedars

1. Why does Hatsue write in her breakup letter to Ishmael (page 353-4) “I don’t love you Ishmael. I can think of no more honest way to say it. From the very beginning, when we were little children, it seemed to me something was wrong. Whenever we were together I knew it. I felt it inside of me. I loved you and I didn’t love you at the very same moment, and I felt troubled and confused. Now, everything is obvious to me and I feel I have to tell you the truth.” Do you think that the war, their cultural differences, and the different ways in which they were raised contributed to Hatsue’s feelings? If so, how did each one contribute?
2. On Page 31, Ishmael mentions that he read *Moby Dick* and found it entertaining, but that he didn’t like the character of Ahab. He also mentions that he found it interesting that the narrator of the book was named Ishmael.

There are a number of parallels between *Snow Falling on Cedars* and *Moby Dick*. Their main narrators are both named Ishmael. Both novels deal with life at sea. Ahab is missing a leg; Ishmael is missing an arm. Both Ishmael and Ahab are Biblical characters who are outcasts (Ishmael is rejected by Abraham in favor of Isaac; Ahab is the King of Israel who worships Baal instead of Yahweh and is killed in battle for his punishment). Both Ishmael and Ahab retreat from life to pursue an ideal that is unrealized (Ahab the white whale, Ishmael Hatsue). Are these unintentional coincidences, or does Guterson play on these themes in the book? Please give reasons for your decision.

3. Both Mrs. Chambers (page 348) and Hatsue (page 446) advised Ishmael to find someone, get married and have children. Ishmael knew that he was empty inside and that he was looking to fill the emptiness. Would marriage fill the void left by Hatsue? Did Ishmael’s actions to save Kabuo fill that void? After the end of the trial, do you think Ishmael felt that he’d done the right thing?
4. The last paragraph in the book ends as follows: “Ishmael gave himself to the writing of it, and as he did so he understood this, too: that accident ruled every corner of the universe except the chambers of the human heart.” What does this sentence mean?
5. Hatsue studies Japanese culture with Mrs. Shigemura, who advises her (page 84) “White men had their fantasies of a passionate Japan—girls of burnished skin and willowy long

legs going barefoot in the wet heat of rice paddies—and this distorted their sex drives. They were dangerous egomaniacs and utterly convinced that Japanese women worshipped them for their pale skin and for their ambitious courage. Stay away from white men, said Mrs. Shigemura, and marry a boy of your own kind whose heart is strong and good.” Was Mrs. Shigemura’s advice helpful to Hatsue? Did this advice contribute to Hatsue’s doubts about Ishmael? Was Ishmael typical of other white men, as described by Mrs. Shigemura?

6. Nels Gudmundson, in his closing arguments, tells the jurors that he views things differently from them because he is an old man. He explains that he ponders matters of life and death on a daily basis. He then goes on to say (page 419) “You have only the decision you must make, each of you, alone. And will you contribute to the indifferent forces that ceaselessly conspire toward injustice? Or will you stand up against this endless tide and in the face of it be truly human? In God’s name, in the name of humanity, do your duty as jurors.” How does Nels’ argument refer back to the underlying prejudice against Kabuo and the rest of the Japanese-Americans on the island? Is the prejudice real? Does Kabuo feel that he can get a fair trial as a result of this prejudice?
7. Ishmael’s father is held in high regard by the Japanese community on the island, in part, due to his efforts to dispel the prejudice against the Japanese-Americans before they were taken to internment camps (see his editorial on pages 183-185). How is Ishmael affected by the legacy of his father? Does his impression of his father change during the course of the book? Ultimately, does Ishmael grow into the role of the editor of the newspaper, the way many of the members of the Japanese-American community hope he will?
8. Is this novel a parable about the loss of innocence and reconciling oneself to live in an imperfect world? Why or why not?
9. Is Ishmael redeemed at the end of the novel? Is he at peace (are redemption and peace one and the same)? Why or why not?