**Teacher's notes**

**Snow Falling on Cedars**

by David Guterson

**SUMMARY**

From time to time a book is published that is instantly recognised as a classic. First published in 1994, *Snow Falling on Cedars* was such a book, reaching the top of bestseller lists in both America and Britain.

The novel is set in the year 1954, on San Piedro, a lonely (fictional) island off the north-west coast of America. Kabuo Miyamoto, a fisherman of Japanese origin, is accused of murdering Carl Heine, another fisherman, while the two men were out at sea. Throughout the story, we follow Kabuo’s trial, as the prosecutor seeks to prove that Kabuo boarded Carl’s boat during the night and murdered him, dropping his body overboard. In a series of flashbacks we learn the story of Kabuo’s life and that of his beautiful wife, Hatsue. It becomes evident as the trial progresses that there is powerful racial prejudice operating against Kabuo. But it also becomes evident that the Japanese fisherman may have had a motive for murdering Carl. Then Ishmael Chambers, a bitter San Piedro journalist who was Hatsue’s childhood sweetheart, finds that he has the power to save Kabuo. But Ishmael still loves Hatsue and hopes to win her.

**BACKGROUND AND THEMES**

In 1941, in the middle of the Second World War, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour, a naval base on the American island state of Hawaii, in the Pacific Ocean. This unprovoked act of aggression shocked and enraged America and brought it into the Second World War. As a result of this attack on US territory, Americans felt far more hatred towards the Japanese than they did towards other nationalities on the opposing side, for example, the Germans.

The Japanese attack had dire consequences for the hundreds of thousands of Japanese who had immigrated to the United States (particularly in the early years of the twentieth century). Even before Pearl Harbour, there was a general hostility toward the Japanese immigrants, almost certainly because of large differences in culture and appearance. Following the attack on Pearl Harbour, hostility turned to paranoia, and Japanese Americans were accused of spying for Japan and compelled to sell their land. About 110,000 Japanese Americans were placed in prison camps for the remainder of the war.

*Snow Falling upon Cedars* takes place in 1954, only nine years after the end of the Second World War. The war is still fresh in everyone’s memories and wounds have not healed. An underlying hostility towards Japanese Americans remains. It is against this background of prejudice that the trial of Kabuo Miyamoto takes place. The prejudice is rarely voiced. Only one witness, Etta Heine, Carl Heine’s mother actually expresses it in court, (and ironically she is of German origin!) but the reader senses its unspoken presence throughout the book.

The effect of the Second World War resonates strongly in the three main protagonists, Kabuo, Ishmael Chambers (the journalist) and Carl Heine (the murdered man). The three men were all at school together before the war and were friendly to each other. Then they fought in the war and emerged from it as different, very damaged men, with a basic goodness but lacking in trust after the terrible things they had seen and experienced. The author shows us clearly, and without sentimentality how these three good men have been deadened.

Unlike many novelists writing today, David Guterson believes that an important function of literature is to pose moral questions for the reader to consider. In *Snow Falling on Cedars*, there are two moral issues at stake. The larger issue involves the whole community and it is this...
discussed above: the easy willingness to condemn someone because they are different. The second moral issue is a personal one involving Ishmael Chambers, the local journalist who is in love with Hatsue, Kabuo Miyamoto's wife. Ishamel, who lost an arm during the war, is a bitter and unfulfilled man. Towards the end of the story, he accidentally finds proof that Kabuo did not murder Carl Heine. But because he still fantasises about winning Hatsue, he is tempted to keep silent, hoping that if Kabuo is found guilty of murder, then he, Ishmael, will have a chance of winning Kabuo.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK
Photocopy page v of the Introduction. Blank out the last sentence of each paragraph and put dotted lines in instead. Now make enough photocopies of the page so that students can work in pairs. Ask them to read the page and write a last sentence for each paragraph. Ask students to read out their sentences and the class discusses which one they think is best for each paragraph. Then students read page v in the book and read the actual sentences.

ACTIVITIES WHILE READING THE BOOK
Chapters 1–5
Put students in pairs. Ask them to answer these questions
(a) Why do the police believe that Kabuo Miyamoto killed Carl Heine?
(b) Why is it possible or probable that Carl Heine may not have been murdered?
(c) Is there enough evidence so far, to prove that Kabuo murdered Carl Heine? If not, what other kind of evidence is needed?

Chapters 6–9
Put students in groups of three. One student plays Hatsue, one plays her sister and one plays her mother. Ask students to imagine that they are in the prison camp in California after Hatsue has written to Ishamel ending their relationship. Ask students to discuss life in the camp and their hopes and fears for the future.

Chapters 10–14
Put students in groups of three. One student plays Hatsue, one plays her sister and one plays her mother. Ask students to imagine that they are in the prison camp in California after Hatsue has written to Ishamel ending their relationship. Ask students to discuss life in the camp and their hopes and fears for the future.

Chapters 15–19
1 Put students in pairs. Give them the following question.
   Before students make the conversation between Ishmael and his mother, check that they understand what ‘the things that really matter are’ (See Student’s Activities, Chapters 18 & 19, question 2 and answer key.)
   In chapter 19 we read that Ismael is unable to tell his mother about ‘the things that really matter’. Imagine that Ishmael does tell his mother about these things. Make the conversation.
   2 Put students in pairs. They discuss the following question.
      Whose evidence against Kabuo is the worst do you think? Give reasons for your opinion.

Chapters 20–25
Put students in pairs. They discuss these questions. Then have a whole class discussion on the subject.
‘The heart of any other, because it had a will, would remain forever mysterious . . . Ismael . . . understood . . . that accident ruled every corner of the universe except the chambers of the human heart.’
‘What is ‘will’ in a human being?’
Why does the author end the book with these sentences? How are these sentences connected with Ishmael and the choices he and the jury are faced with? What effect do these words and this last chapter have on you?

Glossary
It will be useful if your students know these new words. They are practised in the ‘Before You Read’sections at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cabin</td>
<td>(n) a small room on a ship</td>
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<td>cedar</td>
<td>(n) a large tree with leaves shaped like needles</td>
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<td>coroner</td>
<td>(n) someone whose job is to discover the cause of someone’s death</td>
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<tr>
<td>counsel</td>
<td>(n) a type of lawyer who represents you in court</td>
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<tr>
<td>deceased</td>
<td>(the) deceased</td>
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<tr>
<td>counsel</td>
<td>(n) someone whose job is to discover the cause of someone’s death</td>
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<td>folder</td>
<td>(n) a container for keeping loose papers, made of folded card</td>
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<tr>
<td>gull</td>
<td>(n) a large black and white sea bird</td>
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<tr>
<td>mast</td>
<td>(n) a tall pole on which the sails of a ship are hung</td>
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<td>prosecute</td>
<td>(v) to officially say that someone is guilty of a crime and must be tried in court</td>
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<tr>
<td>salmon</td>
<td>(n) a large fish with pink flesh that lives in the sea</td>
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<td>saw</td>
<td>(n) a tool that has a flat blade with a row of V-shaped metal pieces, used for cutting wood</td>
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<tr>
<td>sheriff</td>
<td>(n) an elected law officer in a county of the USA</td>
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<tr>
<td>skull</td>
<td>(n) the bone of a person’s or animal’s head</td>
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<td>strawberry</td>
<td>(n) a soft red juicy fruit</td>
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Activities before reading the book

Look carefully at the chapter titles on the Contents page. From these titles write four or five sentences about what you think the story could be about. Then read pages vi and vii of the Introduction. What were you right about? What were you wrong about? Write a few sentences about this.

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTERS 1–5

Chapters 1, 2 & 3

1 Explain the part that these people play in these chapters.
   Kabuo Miyamoto    Carl Heine    Ishmael Chambers
   Hatsue Miyamoto   Art Moran      Abel Martinson
   Nels Gudmundsson

2 Answer these questions.
   (a) What is San Piedro? Write a brief description of it.
   (b) How do you think Ishmael Chambers feels about Hatsue Miyamoto? Why do you think this?
   (c) What is strange about Carl Heine’s boat when the country sheriff and his deputy first investigate it?
   (d) Why is Kabuo on trial?
   (e) What is Nels Gudmundsson suggesting when he asks questions about the batteries?
   (f) What do the two policemen notice about Carl Heine’s head when they pull his body in? Why is this important, do you think?

3 Write down five different words that describe the book and/or your feelings about it. Then explain why you wrote each of these words.

Chapters 4 & 5

1 Explain why these words are important in Ishmael’s life.
   the war   arm   trust   San Piedro Review

2 What important things does the coroner Horace Whaley discover when he examines Carl Heine’s body? In what way is Whaley responsible for Kabuo’s trial for murder, do you think?

3 Imagine that Ishmael Chambers tells Art Moran about his conversation with Susan Marie Heine. What do you think he might say?

CHAPTERS 6–9

Chapters 6 & 7

1 Try and complete these sentences from the book without looking at the book. Then find the sentences in the book. How different are your sentences?
   (a) ... in America there was fear of death; here life

   was separate from Being. A Japanese, on the other hand, must see that ... 
   (b) But this had not been true. There was no farm, ...
   (c) They’d been married at the camp in the Californian desert where ...
   (d) He had to go to the war, he told her. It was necessary ...
   (e) Although they had been secret friends since they began school, they ...

2 Explain why Chapter 7 is called ‘The Beach and the Woods’.

3 Answer these questions.
   (a) Does it seem as if Hatsue and Kabuo had happy childhoods? Give reasons for your opinion.
   (b) Would you like to live on an island like San Pedro? Say why/why not.

Chapters 8 & 9

1 Put these events in the right order.
   (a) Kabuo Miyamoto accuses Etta Heine of stealing his family’s land. __
   (b) Zenhichi Miyamoto offers Carl senior $120 dollars to complete his payments on the land. __
   (c) Carl Heine buys back his family land from Ole Jurgensen. __
   (d) Carl senior agrees to sell his land to Zenhichi Miyamoto for a cash deposit and $250 twice a year for the next eight years. __
   (e) Kabuo Miyamoto asks Ole Jurgensen if he can buy the Heine land. __
   (f) Etta Heine sells her land to Ole Jurgensen. __

2 Explain why Etta Heine and Ole Jurgensen are good witnesses for the prosecution.

3 What are your feelings towards Etta Heine? Why do you feel like this? Write what you would like to say to her.

CHAPTERS 10–14

Chapters 10, 11 & 12

1 Which of these things were the result of Pearl Harbour? Explain why.
   (a) The defence of San Piedro was organised. __
   (b) People cancelled orders for the San Piedro review. __
   (c) Hatsue’s father kept explosives in his house. __
   (d) Hatsue’s father was arrested. __
   (e) Hatsue told Ishmael she would not marry him. __
   (f) The Japanese had to leave the island. __
2. Imagine that Kabuo and Ishmael meet and talk. They describe to each other the effect of the war on them. Make the conversation.

**Chapters 13 & 14**

1. Answer these questions.
   - a) Why does Hatsue’s mother feel that the journey to the prison camp is ‘like going down into hell’?
   - b) Why does Katsue’s sister show Ismael’s letter to her mother?
   - c) Why do you think Katsue finds Kabuo more attractive than Ishmael?
   - d) Why does Ishmael hate Hatsue?

2. Something really terrible happens to Ishmael that he still dreams about ten years later. What is it? Do you think it is possible to recover psychologically from this kind of thing? Say why/why not.

**CHAPTERS 15–19**

**Chapters 15, 16 & 17**

1. Imagine you are a member of the jury. Make notes on
   - a) the evidence showing that Kabuo killed Carl Heine.
   - b) the evidence showing that Kabuo did not kill Carl Heine.
   - c) your opinion so far.

2. Which characters in these chapters do you think show prejudice against Japanese Americans?

**Chapters 18 & 19**

1. Read these sentences. The events described in some of these sentences cause events described in others. Connect the sentences, writing ‘Cause’ and result ‘beside them.

   Example: (m) cause (n) result. Some events have more than one result. Some results become causes of other events.
   - a) A wave of water went through Ship Channel Bank.
   - b) Ishmael decides to write the article that Hatsue wants him to write.
   - c) Hatsue asks Ishmael to say that the trial is unfair in his newspaper.
   - d) Ishmael finds out that the S.S. West Corona crossed the Ship Channel Bank on the night Carl Heine died.
   - e) Ishamael wants Hatsue.
   - f) The lights go out in the Island County Courthouse.
   - g) Carl Heine falls out of his boat.
   - h) Ismael decides not to say anything about the shipping lane records for the night of September 15th.
   - i) Hisao Imado’s car breaks down.
   - j) The S.S. West Corona crosses the Ship Channel Bank.
   - k) Ishmael gives Hatsue a lift.
   - l) Ishamel goes to the lighthouse to look at the records there.
   - m) There is a bad snowstorm.
   - n) Nobody knows that the S.S. West Corona crossed the Ship Channel Bank on the night Carl Heine died.
   - o) Philip Milholland is moved to Cape Flattery on 16th September.

2. ‘He could not bring himself to talk about the things that really mattered, so she could not help him.’
   - a) Who is ‘he’ in this sentence. Who is she? What is the situation?
   - b) What are ‘the things that really mattered’?

3. What decisions does Ishmael come to at the end of chapter 18? Can you understand and sympathise with him? Explain how you feel about his decision.

**CHAPTERS 20–25**

**Chapters 20, 21 & 22**

1. Work in pairs. Act/write the conversation between Kabuo and Hatsue when Kabuo returns from fishing on the morning of 16th September, after he has helped Carl at sea.

2. Answer these questions.
   - a) How does Alvin Hooks succeed in making Hatsue and Kabuo look bad?
   - b) How do you think the jury feels about Kabuo at the end of the Chapter 21? Give reasons for your opinion.

3. Work in pairs. Decide what the important points are in Nel Gumundsson’s final words to the court. Gudmundsson.

**Chapters 23, 24 & 25**

1. What things help Ishmael come to the decision to tell Judge Fielding about Philip Milholland’s notes?

2. Answer these questions.
   - a) How do ‘cut pieces of string’ on the mast help prove Kabuo’s innocence?
   - b) What part does the lamp play in Carl’s death?

3. This story is as much about Ishmael Chambers as it is about Kabuo Miyamoto. Do you agree with this statement? Explain why/why not.

**Activities after reading the book**

An important theme in *Snow Falling upon Cedars* is the effect of war on people.” Discuss this statement.