

READER'S GUIDE



Odori by Darcy Tamayose

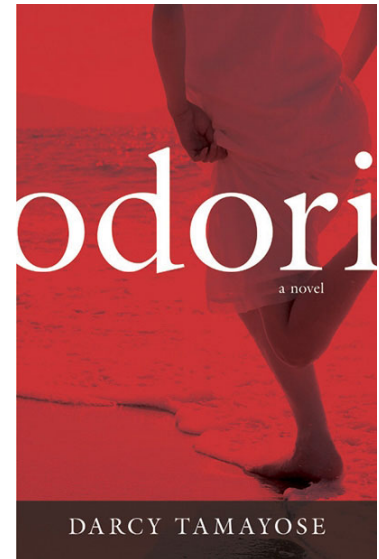
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INTRODUCING *Odori*

Plunged into a coma by a car accident that kills her husband, Mai Yoshimoto-Lanier finds herself in a world between heaven and earth, where her great-grandmother, a *kataribe* (storyteller) from Okinawa, tells her the story of her family. Stretching across five generations and delving into the annals of myth, the one constant throughout is a connection to the earth and its elements, the rhythms of life expressed through carving, farming, healing, painting, and odori dances.

Odori follows Mai's family through World-War-Two-devastated Okinawa, where Mai's mother and twin sister are forced to hide for months in crowded caves to escape invading Japanese and American soldiers, to the prairies of Rainmaker Hills, Alberta, where a new generation forges a connection to a different sort of landscape.

Lyrical and moving, *Odori* is the story of a family defined by an underlying sadness and a supreme beauty, whose lifeblood is embedded as much in the prairie soil as in the sands of the Okinawan shores. It is the story of the downfall of the glorious and peaceful Ryukyuan Kingdom that became Okinawa, and its survival in the spirits of its displaced people.



IMPORTANT THEMES

Natural Rhythm

In *Odori*, life and land are intertwined; beyond pathetic fallacy, the characters' souls are embedded in the soil. For instance, Eddie has a "soul touched by the harvest," that "[blends] into the earth like gold." Zenzo treads a delicate balance, variously damning and thanking the Tree God, and taking out his anger on the trees whose spirits he later releases by carving them into objects of beauty. In many ways, the physical devastation of Okinawa's people is as mourned as the devastation of its land. From the Americans "breaking up the coral reefs so that they might get their landing troops to shore," to the Japanese cutting down ancient trees to make way for military transports, the land suffers along with the people. As "the ancestors weep," "the islands [ache] with foreboding." In Alberta, too, the land reflects the people, as the fields are denied rain until Emiko reveals her secrets to Mai.

Coming-of-Age

Emiko and Miyako are forced into adulthood by trauma. Emiko describes war as, "a state where the gods force a child to grow old," while Miyako describes it as, "a place where the spirit makes the supreme sacrifice." The suffering is so great that, at least for a time, Emiko loses her connection to the odori. The novel presents childhood as a time of clarity; during childhood, odori, knowledge, and healing are at Emiko and Miyako's fingertips. Yet the girls' violent introduction to the adult world sullies their unfettered connection to knowledge and spirituality. What comes naturally in childhood proves difficult to recover amid the complications of adult life.

A Beautiful Mind

As she witnesses devastating events, Emiko thinks of odori. Says Emiko, "It's important to keep beauty in the mind." However, as the war goes on, she is increasingly unable to remove herself from the terror of her existence,

unable to “hold on to the beauty.” Zenzo reacts similarly, becoming obsessed with more and more intricate carvings and mapmaking, as he plans the trips he wants to take after the war. Zenzo transmutes his anger into “temporary bouts of insanity and forced optimism,” renovating a house that will soon be destroyed by bombs. The uselessness of creating art in wartime is a tragic irony that amplifies the characters’ pain.

A World Apart

The family lives on islands — in Okinawa, surrounded by the sea, and in Rainmaker Hills, surrounded by the prairie. This physical isolation reflects an emotional isolation among certain characters, particularly Emiko, who is torn between two

landscapes and cultures. “I see the ocean,” says Emiko, looking out on the prairie, while in Okinawa, as a child, “the dusty path reminded [her] of the distant prairies; her home, where old roads guided grey trucks over hills and coulees, where cows and horses wandered the land littered with hay bales.” Two generations try to bridge the gap between the two worlds, as Emiko of the East China Sea marries Mutts, a “true farmer,” and Mai and Eddie are “daughter of the sea and son of the land.”

Spirituality and Myth

Emiko’s story is placed in the context of myth, as a continuation of the story of Yosio, high priestess of the Ryukyuan Kingdom during the Sho Dynasty, with whom Emiko and Miyako are mystically associated following “the incident on the beach.” The relating of actual events combined with myth offers Mai a connection to the history of the island and its culture, which is presented as continuous with the history of her family. Constants like myth and nature ground the family amid upheaval and struggle, and preserve the spirit of the Ryukyuan Kingdom.

Hands-on

The book often describes characters in terms of their hands, noting how hands show the ravages of work and age. For example, Mutts “felt the coarse skin of Eddie’s palms upon the first handshake and took to him immediately.” During her coma, Mai sketches Chiru’s hands, prompting Chiru to ask, “These are my hands? ... So old?” Finally, Emiko’s hands change when she moves back to Alberta: “Soon Emiko’s hands grew callused, often chapped in the winter months — so dry the skin would split near the fingertips and sometimes bleed.” Emiko’s hands play a crucial role in the beginning of her romance with Mutts. Mutts takes Emiko’s damaged hands, “once the delicate instruments of an odori dancer,” and “[touches] every finger,” while Emiko, “embarrassed by the condition of her hands ... closed them into fists and withdrew them from Mutts’ attentions.” But Mutts collects Emiko’s hands a second time, telling her, “Don’t ever be ashamed of your hands.”

Q&A WITH DARCY TAMAYOSE

1. How much is the book informed by your personal experiences and the history of your family?

The Okinawan culture is threaded into my family’s day-to-day life — food, dance, music, language. My mom was sent from Canada to Okinawa when she was two years old to obtain an Okinawan education and upbringing. During the Battle of Okinawa, she lived in one of the hillside caves. She has told many stories about life on the island. My father’s sister, Teruko, was also sent away as a young girl and eventually became a student nurse in one of the frontline hospital caves, where she died. The odori dance was something everyone in my family did at one point or other. My mother taught it, my grandfather played the



ABOUT DARCY

Darcy Tamayose has been a writer for *Lethbridge Living Magazine* for the past ten years. She is also a graphic designer for Adair Advertising and Global Television. She has attended the Alberta College of Art and the University of Lethbridge, as well as the Humber School for Writers. In 1992 she wrote and illustrated an art exhibit, *Riding Back and the Sacred Circle*, which travelled through the Alberta school system. Her book for young adults, *Katie Be Quiet*, will be published in the spring of 2008. She lives in Lethbridge with her husband and daughter.

sanshin at Okinawan celebrations, and there was always a cultural mix of food on the table growing up. So yes, this book is very much influenced by my own personal experiences and the history of my family.

The main character, Mai, has a profound reverence for the action and the sound of pencil to paper, whether in the form of a drawing or writing a word — she sees beauty in a simple brush stroke and considers the written word as art. My background as an artist influenced the formation of this character a great deal.

I enjoy the process of stretching imagination and building worlds with words. So, although this book is influenced by experience, writing it gave me the freedom to use my imagination to create the characters and enhance the landscapes in which they interact.

2. How did you approach your depiction of the war? Did you feel pressured to display a balanced view?

Portraying the Battle of Okinawa in this book was very difficult for me. The approach formed after many rough drafts. I'd had a mostly idyllic view of Okinawa. I took a trip to Okinawa years ago with my mother and it only scratched the surface of perception, even after that trip the island was still mythical in my mind. While in the midst of researching the history of the Ryukyu Islands (which is the group of islands that Okinawa is a part of), I had to first accept and understand the bloodiness of the Battle of Okinawa, the brutality of hand-to-hand combat, the number of civilian deaths in such a short period of time (approximately 1500 per day over an 80-day period), and the destruction of a culture nurtured over centuries. It was a painful realization to me that Okinawa's history was so full of sorrow. The myth shattered. But once I was past that, the war section began to take shape. I tried to contrast and balance the beauty of art, the beauty of simplicity, with the stark terror of war — tried to keep it balanced in a creative sense.

Yes, during the beginnings of research I felt pressure to maintain a balanced view of the war. I naturally sympathized with the plight of civilians and their homeland. The portrait I tried to depict of war in this story is universal in that "war happens," it has always happened in the course of world history. The story describes many victims in the Battle of Okinawa — the American and Japanese soldiers, the civilians, art and culture, and an island whose geography has played an important role in its suffering. The beauty of the landscape, its simplicity, and its spirit fell victim to war just as significantly as did human casualties.

3. What is the root of the family's "underlying sadness"? Are they in mourning for the Ryukyuan Kingdom, or is the sadness more personal?

There is an underlying sadness in the family roots and in the island roots. In the story, this underlying sadness is passed on to the islanders as a trait would be in a family line. But that is not to say that it is a negative thing. In *Odori*, there is some semblance of beauty in sorrow, longing, suffering, and even in underlying sadness.

In addition, each character has a different mourning at different times in their lives. Mai longs for earth and Eddie while in her coma. Emiko longs for Miyako. Later in their lives, Zenzo and Chiru long for something beyond earth.

4. All of the characters are focused on details, be they tactile, visual, or olfactory. Is this more a reflection of your usual writing style, or a reflection of the way the characters experience the world?

When I was writing *Odori*, the five senses were always in my mind, probably because the subject of art and culture is a large part of the story. I had a tattered sticky note on the bottom corner of my computer monitor — hear, see, touch, taste, smell, and then at the bottom of the list "use intuition." I wanted to go beyond the five senses if I could.

5. Who is the book's narrator? Is Basan merely a construction of Mai's imagination, or are there mystical forces at play?

The book's narrator is the ghostly storyteller that Mai dreams about while she is in the coma. But there is overlap of dream into reality in several places — the most physical overlap is with the “soybean painting of Basan” that comes about in Mai's coma state. The painting appears on the wall of the house at the end of the book when the spirit of Basan filters away through the window. There are old Ryukyuan beliefs in gods and goddesses, *yuta*, high priestesses, *noro* — all believed to have some supernatural powers or perhaps simply finely tuned senses. Since there was a form of mystical belief system in Okinawa's history, it seemed natural to integrate it into the story. In some instances, I simply blurred the lines of dream and reality.

6. In Okinawa, Emiko yearns for the prairies. In Alberta, she sees the fields as an ocean. Where does she belong?

Throughout the book, Emiko feels physical displacement between the geography of ocean and prairie. After the war, she needs to deal with the spiritual displacement she experiences within and the loss of her passion for odori (a metaphor for her life). Once she comes to terms with the ghosts of her past, she discovers the belonging is internal.

7. What do you hope that people will take away from this book?

I hope the reader will feel as if they had travelled to another world — become interested in flawed characters that stay with them for a while, and read scenes that they can see. I hope they wonder what the *ashitibichi* soup tastes like, what the colour of the East China Sea looks like, and how it feels to have the nighttime greys at their ankles.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the root of the family's underlying sadness?
2. Kana's wife, Setsuko, is not given a voice in the novel. Do you feel she should have had an opportunity to tell her side of the story?
3. Darcy Tamayose based her depiction of the war on actual recollections. How did you react to these descriptions?
4. There is a sense of isolation created amid the family's island homes and boxed-up secrets. By the end of the novel, do any of the characters find a sense of completion?
5. Emiko and Miyako come of age during wartime. Is there a connection between the violence of war and the emotional and physical upheaval of puberty?
6. How is knowledge passed on? In a culture routinely devastated by invasion, what is the importance of myth?
7. What do the characters' obsessions with little details say about them?
8. What is the significance of the book's descriptions of hands? What do calluses symbolize?
9. In the book, what defines culture?
10. How does Basan's story help Mai through the healing process? What is redemptive about the experience?