



# A DICTIONARY OF *Mutual Understanding*



## READING GUIDE

*A Dictionary of Mutual Understanding* raises many questions about being a parent, forgiveness and guilt and the way in which war is conducted. Here are some questions you may wish to consider and discuss.

'Pikadon has left its mark, not just in broken limbs and burnt flesh, but hidden in bones and muscles and fibres and young minds.' How much did you know about *pikadon* before reading the book? What impact do you think it had on a whole generation of Japanese people and their culture and outlook?

What did you think when the character of Hideo was introduced at the beginning of the book? Did you believe he was who he claimed to be? Did your opinion change throughout the course of the book? Is this man Hideo Watanabe?

In one of Sato's letters, he says, 'Natsu warned me against giving him a label. "What good was it being Hideo Watanabe?", she asked. But I had wanted to give him a sense of self, of history, a line of ancestors from which to draw. His face can tell nothing other than that day of August 9, 1945. I wanted to give him more than one day. Was that cruel of me?' What do you think of this? Was it better for Hideo to have an 'identity' and a 'history', even if it wasn't, in fact, his own? What would you have done?

'I explained how Kenzo and I could not stay in the city and live with our loss. We needed to go somewhere so alien and so different that all our energy would be taken up by the strangeness of our new lives.' What events from the past have had repercussions in your own life?

Did your opinion of what Amaterasu had done change, once you realised what her previous involvement with Sato had been? Why do you think Amaterasu would never tell her daughter why she was so set against Sato?

'I convinced myself an edited version of my past was necessary for a bearable life... I changed details... depending on my mood or audience.' How much do you trust Amaterasu's version of events? Is she a reliable narrator? Amaterasu says, 'Some stories are best taken to the grave.' Do you agree?

Memory is portrayed as unreliable and not necessarily to be trusted in the novel. How much do you trust your own memory when it comes to major events in your life – and how might the telling of these events differ when recalled by another person?

How did the chapter headings help your understanding of the characters and the cultural conditions they were bound by? Did any of the definitions remind you of similar attitudes in the West?

'You live with loneliness and it becomes a kind of company.' Amaterasu's isolation reflects a growing problem in our ageing population. How do we tackle the social exclusion of our elderly?

Sato says that personal goals must match national ambitions. Do you agree? When it comes to war, do you think personal sacrifice is justified if it is for the greater good of a nation? Do we owe our country a 'blood debt'? How big a part does national loyalty play in today's politics?

Given what you know about Sato's past, do you feel any sympathy for him? Ama describes him as a moral coward. Do you agree?

How do you think wartime conditions in Japan differed or were similar to those experienced in your country during the Second World War? Amaterasu questions if Hideo and Yuko died so that the war could end. Does the end justify the means in war? How has the legacy of Nagasaki and Hiroshima affected your view of nuclear weapons? Do you see them as necessary to keep the world safe or should we get rid of them? Can you imagine a world free of nuclear weapons?

A new generation of people who were not even born when the bombs were dropped are now taking on the responsibility of passing on the stories of the survivors, the hibakusha. How important is it to remember the past?

What do you think the title of the book means?