A Dictionary of Mutual Understanding – Reading Group Questions

• 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?

• Amaterasu has a strong feeling of her duty as a mother. Is there a better way that she and Kenzo could have handled the situation with Yuko and Sato? If your parents or other family members tried to stop you seeing someone, do you think it would backfire?

• 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?

• In one of his conversations with Yuko, Shige says, ‘Sometimes I fear there is a fine line between liberating a country and invading it.’ What do you think of this in the light of British involvement in countries such as Afghanistan?

• Can you appreciate why Ama initially turned Hideo away when he turned up at her doorstep? How did it make you feel about her? Do you think she was right to be sceptical? Later she says she feels unworthy to be Hideo’s grandson. Is this feeling justified?

• 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?

• ‘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 Ama’s version of events? Is she a reliable narrator? Do we all edit our own histories depending on our audience? How well do other people every really know us? Ama 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?

• Before the war, Ama says, 'All pain passes eventually,' but then her family suffers a terrible tragedy. Does pain pass? How do we find meaning in life after such monumental loss? Shige’s mother says after the bomb, she will, 'Carry on, endure, live.' Is it possible to find happiness again?

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

- Kenzo appears to embrace his new life in America. Does this reaction seem credible to you? Why do you think he would be so enthusiastic to adapt to this new culture and language? 'America is the world,' he says, and he calls the country a meritocracy. Do you agree?

- 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?

- Ama asks if Hideo and Yuko died so that the war could end? Does the end justify the means in war? Can you think of other examples of highly controversial military interventions? 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?

- Do we also have a certain historical amnesia when we look back to Nagasaki and Hiroshima? Were you surprised by the censorship that followed the bombings? What could be modern examples of military censorship?

- Do you view the atomic bombings as war crimes? Should America officially apologise? What effect would this have on the way Japan addresses its own actions during the Second World War?

- After the bomb is dropped, Ama passes a badly injured girl but 'to her shame' does not stop to help her. What do you think you would have done in this situation? Why do you think people suffer from survivors' guilt?

- What do you think the title of the book means?

- What role does faith play in the book?

- Ama is full of regrets. Do you think regrets diminish or grow as we age? Do we become more or less forgiving as we become older? Does the past sit more kindly with us as we near the end of our lives? What can we do as individuals to die in peace?