

# The Gardens of Kyoto: A Novel

by Kate Walbert

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## About the Book

I had a cousin, Randall, killed on Iwo Jima. Have I told you?

So begins Kate Walbert's beautiful and heartbreaking novel about a young woman, Ellen, coming of age in the long shadow of World War II. Forty years later she relates the events of this period, beginning with the death of her favorite cousin, Randall, with whom she shared Easter Sundays, childhood secrets, and, perhaps, the first taste of love. When he dies on Iwo Jima, she turns to the legacy he left her: his diary and a book called **The Gardens of Kyoto**. Each one subtly influences her perception of her place in the world, the nature of her memories.

Moving back and forth through time and place, Kate Walbert recreates a world touched by the shadows of war and a society in which women fit their desires into prescribed roles. Unfolding in lyrical, seductive prose, **The Gardens of Kyoto** becomes a mesmerizing exploration of the interplay of love and loss.

## Discussion Guide

1. The stark simplicity of the novel's opening lines, "I had a cousin, Randall, killed on Iwo Jima. Have I told you?" belie the intensity of the narrator's feelings for Randall which only slowly come into focus as the novel unfolds. How do the secrets the two shared and the wrenching loss she experiences after the tragic death of her first love shadow Ellen's life and all her relationships? Why does Ellen keep repeating "I didn't know him too well"? How is that statement true -- or untrue? The chaste friendship between the cousins depicted in the novel's early pages contrasts sharply with Ellen's later memory? fantasy? of their lovemaking: "I feel his tongue, warm, and want to pull my hand away but I do not want to at all...He has reached my neck, my face -- his leg to my leg... Soon he will tug me in an easy way to the cold, dirt floor, push my good Easter dress above my hips..." Are we to believe that this scene actually took place? What did you conclude was the true nature of their relationship? Are we ever sure?

**2. The Gardens of Kyoto** is both the title of Kate Walbert's novel and the title of a book about Japan's historic gardens of Kyoto that was Randall's prized possession. Talk about the author's use of the book-within-a-book device? Discuss the irony of Randall's infatuation with Japanese culture and his death in World War II in a mop-up operation on Iwo Jima after the fighting had ceased. In what other ways does the author make use of irony in narrating her story?

**3.** In the New York Times Book Review, Alida Becker wrote: "Walbert's novel is, in a way, an homage to the most famous of Kyoto's gardens, Ryoan-ji, a deceptively simple arrangement of 15 rocks set on raked sand, only 14 of which are visible at a time. One rock is always 'hidden,' but which one it is depends on the viewer's perspective." How does the novel's shifting perspective change the reader's perceptions of characters and events?

**4.** After Randall dies, in an effort to offer her great-uncle Sterling some piece of his son to console him in his grief, Ellen shares Randall's discovery of the slaves' secret hiding place inside the sprawling farmhouse that was once a stop on the Underground Railroad. But when Sterling discloses his own big secret -- that Ruby, not her sister Jeannette, was Randall's biological mother--Ellen doesn't know whether she should reveal that Randall had known. When finally, several months later, she blurts it out, she wields the truth as a weapon intended to hurt. Later she is consumed by remorse. Do you regard her leaving Randall's diary on his father's bed a betrayal of her dead first love -- or do you think Randall would have viewed her impulsive gesture in the same way she does: "as if I were bringing Randall back to Sterling, leading Randall in and asking him, as a favor to me, to just sit for a moment in his father's room"?

**5.** One of the major themes probed by Kate Walbert in **The Gardens of Kyoto** is the emotional devastation wrought by war -- on the men who go off to fight and on those at home who love them. Discuss this theme as it plays out in the lives of Randall's father, Ellen, Ellen's sister Rita and her husband, Roger, and, six years later, Henry Rock, the handsome young lieutenant Ellen meets and instantly falls in love with just before he leaves for battle in the Korean War, who returns home with his body whole but his mind shattered, and who fathers Ellen's daughter just before he succumbs to madness.

**6.** "They pretended to be fine, but if you looked you'd see that they were not fine at all. We weren't supposed to look. We were supposed to welcome them home, pretending, as they pretended," Ellen writes, trying to explain why it took her so long to realize how deeply and irrevocably damaged Henry was. Contrast the pep-rally cheerleading role those on the home front were encouraged to play with their returning servicemen after World War II and the Korean War with the way America greeted -- or failed to greet -- those who served in Vietnam. There has been a general perception that the pep-rally approach was both morally good and healthy for those returning home, while the anti-Vietnam War sentiments that spilled over onto the fighting men have been thought to have deeply pained and emotionally scarred our Vietnam veterans. Does this novel make you reconsider that perception? Is the pretense really better than a harsher, yet perhaps more honest judgment? How do you think society should welcome its warriors back to peacetime living? Is it possible to honor the truth of their experience yet still ease the transition and help them to forget the horrors they have endured?

**7.** In a related and shocking scene, Ellen's sister Rita strips down to her brassiere at the family Thanksgiving table to offer visible proof of the brutality of her newly violent ex-soldier husband, Roger. But, Ellen points out, "we were not used to this kind of display, this bare truth." A few months later, when the family learns that Rita has fallen down the basement stairs, cracking her skull on the concrete floor, Roger asks to speak to each of them. When it was my turn, Ellen writes, "he told me that Rita had always believed I would go far, and that he hoped I wouldn't disappoint her. I thanked him. Thank you, I said, as if I weren't on the telephone to my sister's killer, as if what Rita had said about me to him, the

compliment, was far more important than my sister's life." Talk about the ways in which people avoid facing harsh and hurtful truths -- in the novel and in life.

8. "You have to understand: In those days to be unwed and pregnant was the end of your life," Ellen explains, as she describes the panic her friend Daphne experiences after fleeing the nasty backroom abortion her married lover and Bryn Mawr advisor has arranged for her. In **The Gardens of Kyoto** three of the characters -- Ruby, Daphne, and Ellen -- find themselves confronting the terror of pregnancy out of wedlock. Contrast the different circumstances that influence them in facing up to their problem -- and the different solution that each one chooses. Do you think they would have made other choices if the same options that women have today were available then? Why or why not? Ellen says she lost her courage when Henry died, but how likely do you think it ever was that she would have chosen to raise her daughter alone, even with the fiction of being a widowed, rather than unwed, mother?

9. "Iago says, I am not what I am, and for this he is called deceitful, a villain. Odd, isn't it? I have always found him to be the most truthful of Shakespeare's creations." What causes Ellen to offer her spirited defense of Iago's deceptiveness? Do you agree or disagree with her insistence that "We are none of us who we are"?

10. When Ellen decides to place herself and her unborn baby in the hands of the nuns and Mother Superior at a convent near the small-town hometown of Henry's hero squad mate, Tilsie promises to visit her, but Ellen knows that he will never return. What does she mean by her explanation: "I was too close to the lie of his own life, and he was too close to the lie of mine"?

11. Recalling the one essential rule that Randall insisted you must follow to master the art of dramatic presentation -- speaking to an audience of one, a solitary listener whom you picture as you confide -- Ellen tells her daughter: "You have been mine since the day you were born." Randall's own, Ellen tells the reader, was a famous poet, whose name Ellen has forgotten, a man no older than a boy who fought and died in the First World War. That changes in the concluding pages of the novel, when Ellen recalls their goodbye at the train station, already portrayed in the novel's opening pages. "I'm switching allegiances," Randall tells her. "You're it. My new audience. To hell with dead poets." Why do you think the author elects to renarrate the goodbye scene, this time with more and different details? What is the significance of Randall's switch of allegiance? Do you agree with the Salon.com website review that states: "Walbert knows that the goodbye to Randall means something different when retold 200 pages later, when the reader understands what happened to Ellen after he left. Some stories, Walbert seems to say, need to be told many times to be understood"?

12. "In Ellen's life, as in our own, people rarely turn out to be anything like what their loved ones imagine them to be," writes Francine Prose in her Elle review of **The Gardens of Kyoto**. "Rarely predictable, the narrative delivers a series of shocks that are all the more disturbing in an overall atmosphere as hushed as a Japanese garden. This lovely, original novel does a skillful job of examining the gauzy web of fictions we spin to protect ourselves and our loved ones from the barbed truths of the past." How do Prose's comments add to your understanding and appreciation of the novel?

13. In an interview given by the author on the subject of her novel, Kate Walbert said: "I have always been interested in the women who came of age in the late '40s and '50s and believe that they were affected by the Second World War and the Korean War in subtle and devastating ways. It was naturally to the women that men turned on their arrival home to make everything sane again; and yet nothing was as it had once been. They went along, building their families and their husbands' careers through the '50s and early '60s before the notion of a woman's happiness solely as a caregiver came

into stark question. This generation is my mother's generation, one that, I believe, is unlike any other in what was asked of them." How does this insight into Kate Walbert's thinking enhance your understanding of her novel and the

## Author Bio

Kate Walbert is the author of *HIS FAVORITES*, and five previous books of fiction: *THE SUNKEN CATHEDRAL*; *A SHORT HISTORY OF WOMEN*, a *New York Times Book Review* 10 best books of the year and finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize; *OUR KIND*, a National Book Award finalist; *THE GARDENS OF KYOTO*; and the story collection *WHERE SHE WENT*. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The Best American Short Stories* and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*.

## Critical Praise

"Kate Walbert's fine, delicate prose captures voices that we don't hear much anymore....*The Gardens of Kyoto* is a ghost story, a mystery, a love story."

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