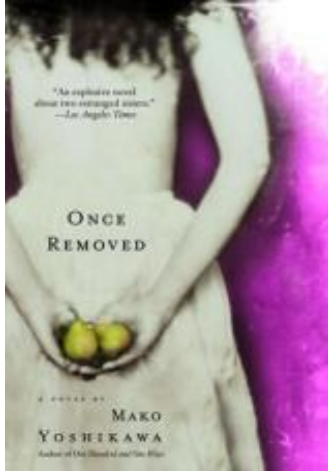


Once Removed

by Mako Yoshikawa



About the Book

The Washington Post praised Mako Yoshikawa's extraordinary first novel, **One Hundred and One Ways**, as "strikingly assured." The Orlando Sentinel called it "an impressive accomplishment." In **Once Removed**, Yoshikawa continues in the tradition of Alice Walker and Amy Tan with a powerful story of two women from different cultures who form a deep friendship that, though severely tested, can never be broken.

It has been many long years since Claudia last saw her Japanese-American stepsister. Once upon a time, Claudia's Jewish father fell in love with Rei's Japanese mother and abandoned his family to be with her. Though Claudia resented this new family her father so readily embraced, from the moment she and Rei met, the two girls formed a bond not even their parents understood. Their long-standing joke is that they are mirror reflections of each other--though in truth they are striking opposites. Claudia is blond and large-boned; Rei is dark-haired and thin, with distinct Asian features.

Now in their early thirties, Claudia and Rei have found a way back into each other's troubled life. As impulsively affectionate as ever, Rei has come to Boston to recuperate from a potentially life-threatening illness, while the typically cautious Claudia has found herself replicating the behavior of her step-mother by falling in love with a married man. As they come together, the two women realize they must strike a balance between the friendship they long to recover and the secrets they have learned to keep. And they discover that despite the distance that has grown between them, their bond is as strong as ever--and could help them repair the other wounded relationships in their lives.

Lyrical, evocative, and richly imagined, **Once Removed** is an exceptional tale of two families, two cultures, and the connection between two women that survives the betrayals of those around them. Taking us from the exotic Japan of the 1940s and '50s, to the verdant English countryside, to the urban streets of Boston, Mako Yoshikawa is a gifted storyteller who has firmly established her place in contemporary fiction.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel begins and ends with images of Claudia and Vikrum. In what way does their relationship form an appropriate backdrop for the novel's other narratives?
2. What is the effect of the shifting points of view? Do these various perspectives mirror or conflict with one another?
3. Rei's storytelling ability enchanted Claudia. How would you characterize her stories? Do they share any common threads? What is the significance of language in her capacity to remember, and to preserve her mother's memories?
4. Rosie and Hana appear to have many distinctions, especially in terms of career (mathematician versus artist) and cultural outlook. What drew Henry to each of them? What kept him from remaining committed to them?
5. Mako Yoshikawa includes vivid scenes of going through customs. How do the seemingly mundane items mentioned in these passages, the radish and the dragonfly in particular, garner their tremendous emotional significance? What metaphors can be drawn from the process of crossing these borderlines?
6. What determines the alliances within your own family? Which relative is your most trusted confidant, and how was that bond formed?
7. In what way do the novel's characters embody various time periods, from the final chapters of World War II to the social awakenings of the 1970s and the dilemmas of contemporary life?
8. What shapes Rei's perception of her father? How do his absence and Henry's presence impact her attitudes toward love and family?
9. Toward the end of chapter eleven, Yoshikawa asks, "So was it the fact that happiness lay in choosing love over a more glamorous match --- that love, which might just be life's ultimate goal, was captured by Hana only because she could see that the handsome, glamorous Emperor-in-waiting offered less than the banker with the oddly mismatched face?" Though the author then underscores the rhetorical nature of this question, she has made an important observation about the quandaries imposed by social pressure. What empowers so many of the novel's characters to make bold sacrifices for love?
10. Why did Claudia reject Hana's warmth for so long? What determines whether stepfamilies will experience such tensions?
11. Why wasn't Henry able to have more compassion for Hana when he discovered her medical file? How does he define honesty and integrity?
12. In what way does Rei's illness lead to emotional healing for her family? Can Hana accept that the melanoma's onset was beyond anyone's control?

13. How would you have responded to Vikrum's ring? Is Claudia's decision a liberating one, or does it trap her in a generational cycle?

14. What transformations occur as a result of Claudia's reunion with Rei? What do you predict for their future as a family?

Author Bio

Mako Yoshikawa has studied at Columbia and Oxford, and has been a fellow at the Bunting Institute, Harvard University. A doctoral candidate in English literature at the University of Michigan, she lives in New York City. She is the great-granddaughter of a geisha.

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