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# *Hiroshima*

by

**John Hersey**

**1946 & 1985**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Rachel Wolff

<http://monkeynote.stores.yahoo.net/>

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

This book takes place almost exclusively in the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Hiroshima was built on a delta, with several rivers running through the heart of the city. During World War II, where the book begins, Hiroshima was a major industrial and military center that had thus.....

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Miss Toshiko Sasaki** - Miss Sasaki is a personnel clerk at the East Asia Tin Works factory. She is in her early twenties and lives with her parents and young sibling at the time of the blast. Her left leg is severely injured when bookshelves fall on her from the impact of the bomb, and she

**Dr. Masakazu Fujii** - Dr. Fujii is a middle-aged physician who is comfortable financially since he owns his own private hospital. Being fairly self-absorbed, he enjoys fine whiskey, relaxation, and the company of foreigners. He is not completely unsympathetic to those around.....

**Mrs. Hatsuyo Nakamura** - Mrs. Nakamura is a tailor's widow with three young children, whose husband has died in the war. She struggles to make ends meet both before and after the.....

**Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge** - Father Kleinsorge is a thirty-eight year-old German missionary priest with the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). He loves the Japanese people and is committed to his work in Hiroshima but feels uncomfortable with the xenophobia of war-time Japan. He incurs only .....

**Dr. Terufumi Sasaki** - Dr. Sasaki is an idealistic, young surgeon working at the Hiroshima Red Cross Hospital. (No relation to Ms. Sasaki, above). He is the only uninjured doctor from the bomb, and in the chaotic aftermath, he treats thousands of victims from all over the city for.....

**Rev. Kiyoshi Tanimoto** - Rev. Tanimoto is a hard-working and thoughtful pastor. He is largely unhurt by the blast, and spends the first several days after the attack compassionately caring for the wounded and destitute of the city. He studied theology in Atlanta and corresponded with.....

#### Minor Characters

**The Dead and Dying Masses** - Final estimates say that 100,000 died in the atomic bomb blast in Hiroshima. Many died instantly but thousands and thousands suffered for several hours to a few days before succumbing to extreme radiation and/or graphic wounds. Hersey depicts these.....

**Mr. Fukai** - Mr. Fukai is secretary of the Catholic diocese. After he sees the fires resulting from the bomb, he refuses to escape with Father Kleinsorge and the others. Father Kleinsorge is.....  
Additional characters are outlined in the complete study guide.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - All six main characters together represent the protagonist of the book, as they struggle to survive after the atomic bomb is dropped on their city. All six are devastated to varying degrees by damage done to their bodies, family members killed, property destroyed, and shock.....

**Antagonist** - The antagonist is the atomic bomb itself, which causes so much destruction, pain, and loss for the main characters as well as the entire city of Hiroshima. Although it is.....

**Climax** - The climax of the book is reached a few days after the bomb has hit, when the main characters are still in crisis as to whether they will live or die. Yet as the book is a factual account of a.....

**Outcome** - There are six outcomes to the book, one for each of the main characters. Some are tragic; others are inspirational. All point to the enormous impact that the atomic bomb exposure had on their family lives, careers, and outlook on life. Rev. Tanimoto slips into a mundane existence, Dr. Fujii dies from gas poisoning and his family is split over his estate, Miss Sasaki becomes an.....

## **SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)**

The book begins with descriptions of what each of the six main characters was doing the morning that the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, up to the moment of the blast and immediately after. Miss Toshiko Sasaki, a personnel clerk at the East Asia Tin Works factory, had sat down to rest from her office work and turned to chat with her co-worker. The impact of the blast caused the bookcases behind her to fall and crush her leg, and she lost consciousness. Dr. Masakazu Fujii, a middle-aged physician, was relaxing on the river-side porch of his clinic. The bomb's blast threw him into the river, and the remains of his clinic followed him. He was trapped by two long pieces of wood across his chest, but his head was above water.

Mrs. Hatsuyo Nakamura, a tailor's widow with three young children, was watching her next-door neighbor tear his house down to make way for a fire escape route. When the atomic flash hit, she was thrown and covered by debris. After freeing herself, she dug out her children who were unhurt. Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge, a thirty-eight year-old missionary priest, was reading in his underwear in his room. When he saw the flash, he panicked, and somehow ended up in the vegetable garden, pacing aimlessly and bleeding from small cuts. Dr. Terufumi Sasaki was an idealistic, young surgeon working at the Hiroshima Red Cross Hospital. He was bringing a blood specimen to the laboratory as the bomb flashed. Because he had moved one step beyond the window and had bent down at impact, he was unhurt. In the chaotic aftermath, he began to treat the wounded as the only uninjured doctor at the hospital. Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto was a hard-working and thoughtful pastor who was helping his friend move furniture out of the city that morning. The bomb hit when he and his friend arrived at their destination. Pieces of the collapsed house fell on him, but he was largely unhurt.

In the second chapter, each character moves from the initial impression that the damage of the bomb is localized to the realization that the entire city has been affected. Rev. Tanimoto immediately rushed toward the center of town, panicked with thoughts of his wife, baby, and parishioners. Everywhere, people were trapped under buildings that were on fire but no one stopped to help, as they were overwhelmed by the magnitude of need. Finding his wife and baby safe, he spent the rest of the day assisting the wounded in Asano Park. Near the end of the day, Mr. Tanimoto encountered a neighbor woman who would not let go of her dead infant, hoping that her husband would find them and be able to see the little girl once more. Mrs. Nakamura fled with her children to Asano Park, the designated evacuation area for her community. Though they had no visible injuries, they soon became nauseated and vomited the entire day. Father Kleinsorge was surprised that in his room, some seemingly sturdy things were blown out of place and crushed, but vulnerable things such as a.....

## **THEMES**

### **Major Themes**

**Theme of Survival** - One major theme of this book is survival, both of individuals and of the community. The book describes how people react in crises and what this shows of their moral character. How each person chooses to rebuild their lives and also how the city of Hiroshima rebuilds itself after the disaster reveals the priorities of each person and the city as a whole. Part of the theme of survival is the portrayal of the human spirit and the will to keep on living even in the face of so much death and destruction. Survival is also demonstrated in how life slowly returns to normalcy for most, even after.....

**Theme of the Effect of War on Civilians** - Written one year after the first atomic bombs were dropped on civilians (or any human beings, for that matter), the effect of total war on regular populations is a major theme of the book. Total war means no one is left untouched. This is.....

Additional themes are detailed in the complete study guide.

## **MOOD**

The mood of the book is very shocking and troubling. It is a literal and uncensored account of the impact of the first atomic bomb to be dropped on human beings. The graphic details of human suffering and the physical effects of radiation and burns are deeply disturbing to the reader. Despite the.....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

The author, John Hersey, was born in China in 1914 and spent the next 9 years there until his family returned to America. He worked as a journalist for several years after studying at Yale and Cambridge. During World War II, Hersey served as a *Time* magazine correspondent and later as a senior editor for *Life*. He was famous for his ability to discuss on an individual level the tragedies of war. He won the Pulitzer Prize for *Bell for Adano*, a novel portraying the Allied Forces' occupation of Italy. His non-fictional writings on the war include *Men on Batman* (1942) and *Into the Valley* (1943), both about battles in the Pacific arena. "Hiroshima," a factual account of atomic bomb survivors based on interviews, was published in.....

## **HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

The book starts on August 6, 1945, the day the first atomic bomb was dropped on human beings, and ends in 1985, with updates on the lives of the six survivors chronicled in the book. When the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and a few days later on Nagasaki, Japan had been at war with the United States for three and a half years. It was by then a losing fight for Japan, as resources and soldiers had been severely depleted and the civilian population was living on meager rations. The atomic bomb attacks were a.....

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS**

### **CHAPTER ONE: A NOISELESS FLASH**

#### **Summary**

The book begins with descriptions of what each of the six main characters was doing the morning that the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, up to the moment of the blast and immediately after. Miss Toshiko Sasaki, a personnel clerk at the East Asia Tin Works factory, had awakened that morning of August 6, 1945, at three a.m., to catch up on housework and cooking duties for her family. She worked until seven, then left her home in the suburb of Koi for her factory in a part of town called Kannonmachi. She arrived at work, planned a former employee's funeral for later that morning, then settled at her desk. When the bomb flashed, Miss Sasaki had sat down to rest from her office work and turned to chat with her co-worker. The impact of the blast caused the bookcases behind her to fall and crush her leg. The floor above fell through on her as well, and she lost consciousness.

Dr. Masakazu Fujii, a middle-aged physician, rose much earlier than usual that morning, which resulted in his life being spared. As a wealthy and pleasure-loving doctor with his own private clinic, he usually slept in until nine or nine-thirty, but he awoke at six to see a friend to the station. He returned by seven and, stripping to his underwear, relaxed on the riverside porch of his clinic to read the newspaper. The bomb's blast threw him into the river, and the remains of his clinic followed him. He was trapped by two long pieces of wood across his chest, but his head was above water.

Mrs. Hatsuyo Nakamura, a tailor's widow with three young children, had spent a hectic night shuttling her family back and forth to evacuation spots because of air raid false alarms. Exhausted, the children were still resting when the bomb fell. Mrs. Nakamura, however, was awakened at seven by another air raid siren. The all-clear signal sounded at eight o'clock and the relieved Mrs. Nakamura began studying her next-door neighbor

tear his house down to make way for a wider fire escape route. She was annoyed with the noise but sympathized with the man having to sacrifice his home to prepare for the American attack that everyone was expecting soon. As she watched her neighbor work, the atomic flash hit and she was thrown and covered by debris. After freeing herself, she began digging out her youngest daughter who was crying for help.

Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge, a thirty-eight year-old missionary priest, was suffering from painful diarrhea that morning. He had been generally undernourished in wartime Japan, and felt weary from the xenophobia he suffered as a German. He conducted mass at six thirty that day with only a few in attendance, and sat at breakfast with the other priests until they heard the all clear at eight o'clock. Father Kleinsorge looked to see a single weather plane flying overhead, as was customary, and felt relieved. He retired to his room and started reading in his underwear. When he saw the flash, he thought a bomb had fallen directly on him and he panicked. Somehow, he ended up in the vegetable garden, pacing aimlessly and bleeding from small cuts.

Dr. Terufumi Sasaki was an idealistic, young surgeon working at the Hiroshima Red Cross Hospital. He lived with his mother two hours from the city and was treating the sick in that small town without a permit. The previous night, he had had a nightmare about being arrested for illegally treating patients, and it haunted him as he began his work at the hospital that morning. He arrived at the hospital at seven forty-five, and drew blood to be tested. He was bringing the blood specimen to the laboratory as the bomb flashed. Because he had moved one step beyond the window and had bent down at impact, he was unhurt. In the chaotic aftermath, he began to treat the wounded as the only uninjured doctor at the hospital. Soon, thousands of victims from all over the city would descend on him, demanding help.

Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto was a hard-working and thoughtful pastor who was focused on sparing his church's belongings from the massive B-29 raid that everyone feared was imminent. A friend had helped him move the heavier items, and in return, he was to assist his friend in hauling a daughter's dresser that morning. Mr. Tanimoto had studied theology in Atlanta and had corresponded with American friends until the war broke out. This aroused police suspicion, so to compensate he had volunteered to plan air-raid defenses as head of his neighborhood association. He was thus overworked and tired that morning. The bomb hit when he and his friend arrived at their destination. Pieces of the collapsed house fell on him, but he was largely unhurt. He assumed a bomb had fallen directly on the house.

## Notes

This first chapter introduces the six main characters of the book. Hersey carefully details their precise locations and actions at the time the bomb flashed. This paints a vivid picture for the reader, and emphasizes Hersey's point that it was the small, unconscious actions that spared each from death or more serious injury. The reader thus shares the characters' feelings of mystery that they survived while 100,000 others perished.

In this chapter, Hersey impresses upon the reader how quickly everything changed when the atomic bomb hit. Unlike a conventional air raid, there was no warning and no time to take cover. In one instant, an entire city switched from common, every-day tasks to a panicked struggle for survival. Neither the characters' lives nor their surroundings would be normal for a very long time.

Although the entire work is factual, Hersey emphasizes certain points of his interviewee's stories for story-telling effect. For instance, it is ironic that Miss Sasaki had spent time planning a funeral at work that morning. The funeral, scheduled for ten a.m., would not only never take place but would be utterly forgotten in the flood of deaths from the bomb that was about to be dropped. Another irony Hersey notes is that while the dropping of the bomb over Hiroshima signified a technological breakthrough into the "atomic age," Miss Suzuki was actually crushed and wounded by books, fairly primitive objects compared to this brand new weapon. A third irony is that a number of the characters remembers feeling relief at the all-clear signal that sounded at eight

o'clock that morning. Just fifteen minutes later, a completely unfamiliar type of bomb was dropped on them. Hersey is showing the reader just how unexpected and undetectable the nuclear attack was for the citizens of Hiroshima.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE FIRE

### Summary

In the second chapter, each character moves from the initial impression that the damage of the bomb is localized to the realization that the entire city has been affected. This is difficult to comprehend, since they heard neither explosive sounds nor a large group of airplanes overhead. Instead, they saw a single, blinding flash and felt a powerful force that ripped houses apart, made people fly several feet, and instantly destroyed the downtown of Hiroshima. In their early assumption that they had experienced a single, small bombing, each character focused on the people around them to varying degrees. Soon, however, overwhelmed by the widespread destruction and suffering, they concentrated on the survival of themselves and their immediate family and companions.

Rev. Tanimoto believed a bomb had hit the house he was standing next to, and was thus puzzled to see blood dripping from the faces of soldiers who had been in a nearby cave. He ran up a hill from which he could see the whole city of Hiroshima, and was shocked that as far as he could see, the city was awash in thick smoke. Panicked with thoughts of his wife, baby, and parishioners, he rushed toward the center of town. On his way, he encountered crowds fleeing in the opposite direction, most badly burned and.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Miss Toshiko Sasaki** - The book introduces Miss Sasaki as a personnel clerk at the East Asia Tin Works factory. She is in her early twenties and lives with her parents and young siblings at the time of the blast. She is a hard worker, and engaged to be married. When the atomic bomb falls on her city, her left leg is severely injured from bookshelves that fall on her from the impact of the bomb, and she is left crippled. She has a strong spirit, however, and overcomes her hardships to become a Catholic nun who is very active in helping orphaned children.

Hersey's account of Miss Sasaki's life is perhaps the most inspirational of all the main characters. Her choices after surviving the A-bomb demonstrate that the disaster strengthened her instead of.....

**Dr. Masakazu Fujii** - Dr. Fujii is a middle-aged physician who is comfortable financially even in the last days of Japan's losing war, since he owns his own private hospital clinic. Hersey describes him as being rather self-absorbed, enjoying fine whiskey, relaxation, and the company of foreigners. He is not completely unsympathetic to those around him, but throughout the book is fairly focused on himself. His hospital is completely destroyed in the blast and he is moderately injured, but he soon.....

**Mrs. Hatsuyo Nakamura** - Mrs. Nakamura is a tailor's widow with three young children, whose husband has died in the war. She struggles to make ends meet both before and after the atomic attack by using her husband's sewing machine to get tailoring work. She suffers mild radiation sickness for most of her life, which makes it very difficult for her to support her children, but four decades after the bomb was dropped, she is an active citizen whose children have grown and found happiness. In telling.....

**Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge** - Father Kleinsorge is a thirty-eight year-old German missionary priest with the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). Immediately after the bomb hits, he focuses on helping the wounded and over the years develops an even greater dedication to the Japanese, which leads him to.....

**Dr. Terufumi Sasaki** - Dr. Sasaki is an idealistic, young surgeon working at the Hiroshima Red Cross Hospital. He is the only uninjured doctor from the bomb, and in the chaotic aftermath, he treats thousands of victims from

all over the city for three days straight with no sleep. After 5 years of continuing to treat bomb victims at the Red Cross Hospital, he escapes from the memories of the attack by.....

**Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto** - Rev. Tanimoto is a hard-working and thoughtful pastor. He is largely unhurt by the atomic bomb attack, and spends the first several days afterward compassionately caring for the wounded and destitute of the city. He studied theology in Atlanta and.....

## **PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS**

The book is a non-fictional compilation of six separate interviews, written in narrative form. The structure is a chronological narrative that follows the characters' lives, from the morning the bomb fell to forty years later. Hersey jumps from one character to the next and then back again, in each chapter, to nurture the reader's interest in each sub-plot.

This first chapter introduces the six main characters of the book. Hersey carefully details their precise locations and actions at the time the bomb flashed. This paints a vivid picture for the reader, and emphasizes Hersey's point that it was the small, unconscious actions that spared each from death or more serious injury. In this chapter, Hersey impresses upon the reader how quickly everything changed when the atomic bomb hits. In one instant, the entire city switches from common, every-day tasks to a panicked struggle for survival. Although the entire work is factual, Hersey emphasizes certain points of his.....

## **THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS**

**Theme of Survival** - One major theme of the book is survival, both of individuals and of communities.

The book describes how people react in crises and what this shows of their moral character. How each person chooses to rebuild their lives and also how the city of Hiroshima rebuilds itself after the disaster reveals the priorities of each person and the city as a whole. Dr. Fujii, for example, pours his life into pleasure-seeking activities for himself. He prospers financially and avoids health problems from the radiation; in this sense he "survives" well, but sacrifices closeness with his family and misses the opportunity for a fulfilled life of service. Mrs. Nakamura struggles greatly for the basic needs of survival, working odd jobs to feed her children while suffering A-bomb ailments. Yet after four decades, she has raised three.....

## **POINT OF VIEW**

The point of view of the book is that of an objective observer. The author interviews each main character, and in a journalistic fashion, knits their stories together without adding his own biases or moral judgments. This allows the reader to hear their stories as if from their own mouths, and.....

## **JAPANESE CULTURE AND LANGUAGE**

Japanese cultural factors play a strong part in both the plot and character development of this book. The Japanese attitude toward the dead is very significant in this disaster which kills 100,000. In the third chapter, for example, we see how the Red Cross Hospital staff carefully preserves ashes of each deceased even while there are thousands of living wounded who still require treatment. Proper treatment of the dead, both in respect to the deceased person and to their family, is a moral obligation which often supercedes care for the living. Therefore, the staff is careful to label each corpse and to package some of their ashes for relatives to pick up later.

This attitude toward the dead also influences how the living from Hiroshima are.....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS – ESSAY TOPICS – BOOK REPORT IDEAS**

### **Study Questions**

1. What aspects of the book make it clearly a non-fictional account under the genre of investigative reporting?
2. The book is marked by realism and the experiences and feelings of individuals. Discuss.
3. Discuss the significance of the “Aftermath” chapter in relation to.....

### **Essay Topics**

1. Discuss the fear of attack that the citizens of Hiroshima were feeling before the bomb was dropped. Contrast this to the actual power of the atom bomb and discuss whether.....

### **Selected Answers**

1. The book is based on interviews of six survivors, with no moral conclusions drawn.
2. The survivors’ stories are allowed to speak for themselves. The book is not a call to action but an objective reporting of the facts. The author is unemotional even in his

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