

Reading Group Guide
Discussion Questions

1. How do you think Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “strange and beautiful flower” speaks to Hana and Kei?
2. Talk about the title of the novel. Does its meaning change for you, as a reader, over the course of the book?
3. Lillie’s story is set against historical events. How does her very personal journey influence your understanding of those events? Does it influence how you see the significant events in your own world and your relationship to them? And, if so, how exactly?
4. How does Lillie’s relationship with her parents affect her own role as a parent? Are there any echoes that stand out for you in the book?
5. Do you consider Hana an unreliable narrator? Why or why not?
6. Darkness plays a literal and metaphorical role in the novel. Discuss how it has impacted the characters, their life choices, and their relationships to one another.
7. In the camps, Lillie objects to being “repatriated” to Japan: “Whatever world Donald had thought she belonged to when she married him, he was wrong. She was American. The preacher’s daughter. California was her home.” How do her feelings about her identity change?
8. Hana is labeled the “good” twin while Kei is “bad.” Do you see this shift over the course of the novel? Why or why not? Is being the “good” daughter a blessing?
9. The novel is written from many different perspectives: first person for Hana, third person for Lillie, and first, second, and first-person plural (“we”) for Kei. Why do you think the author made this choice? What effect do these shifts have on you, the reader?
10. Names, and their meaning, play a large role in the book. Discuss what it means to give someone a name—is it simply a word, a label, or does it have a larger impact?

Q & A with Rahna Reiko Rizzuto

What drew you to this story?

In my first two books, I found myself exploring how memories shape us, and also the role of secrets and silences, and how we can inherit trauma, even when that trauma is unspoken. These themes are very central to *Shadow Child* as well. I was interested in telling the story of Hiroshima. I was interested in exploring sisterhood, and thinking about how we create our own identities against the pull of others and against a world that wants to tell us who we are.

I was also haunted by a terrible moment of violence that happened to a friend of mine, and the way that moments like that can reverberate and mark even those on the periphery.

You were born and raised in Hawaii. How does that inform the book?

When I was growing up, Hawaii was a world apart from “the mainland” as we called it. We didn’t have TV reception until I was fifteen; and, when we did, they aired shows two weeks late (the time it took to ship the tapes to the islands). There was a certain rhythm to life there, a certain connection to the land and ocean, and a connection, too, to community. It was also a multicultural place, rooted in generosity and the concept of ‘ohana. Hawaii infuses you; you can recognize someone else from Hawaii anywhere else in the world. And, in that way, I think Hawaii has made me who I am and is in every book I write.

Did the novel take unexpected turns as you were writing it, or did you know from the beginning where you were headed?

This novel twisted and turned and stood on its head for almost two decades. I knew how it began, who the twins were, and the outline of their story and Lillie’s. But it was two books when I started. The twins’ story was half done, and I went to Hiroshima to research Lillie’s story. As I said in my acknowledgements, the shape and tone of the story kept changing, even the genre (on advice of an editor, I tried my hand briefly at making this a thriller). As for the characters, I would say they didn’t change so much as reveal themselves, and express themselves in ways that I didn’t expect but were true to who they were. So every time I discovered something new about them, it was like, “Aha! There you are!”

What was your research process like?

All of my books have been very exhaustively researched. I use historical documents—facts, if you will—but I also interview people, who have wildly different recollections and experiences, sometimes of the same event. I am interested in little details about life: favorite clothes, particular smells, funny anecdotes. I am also interested in what is forgotten. For example, in researching the actual tsunami that inspired the one in my book, I found people who remembered the scientists on the bridge, and others who swore there were no scientists there. I found a written documentation of the scientists, so I put them in my novel. But facts and truth can be very different things, and that comes out starkly, especially when you are dealing with traumatic memories as I often am.

Lillie’s story is inspired, in part, by stories from your own family. How did the decision to treat this subject in fiction, rather than reportage, change your understanding of or relationship to that history?

My family members lived through the Japanese-American incarceration, fought in the war, worked for the American Occupation, and witnessed the devastation of the Hiroshima bomb. But those stories were largely lost to silence. In my writing, I am trying to fill those silences, and understand the experiences that shaped us—that shaped me, even though they were

unspoken. Fiction allowed me to feel the effects and consequences of history, rather than just compiling and understanding the missing facts.

What are you working on next?

I have a draft of a young-adult fantasy novel, which is currently marinating in a drawer, and a couple of story ideas in the “suspenseful literary fiction” genre. I’m going to let them battle it out and see which one wants to come next.