THE EMPEROR OF ANY PLACE

About the Book

It's always been just Evan and his father, Clifford, living a contented life together in Toronto. When Clifford dies suddenly, a devastated Evan preoccupies himself with reading a mysterious book his father left behind, which tells the gripping tale of Isamu, a Japanese soldier on a Pacific island with only ghosts for company until an American plane crashes. Then Evan's abrasive military grandfather, Griff—a man Clifford labeled a murderer — arrives and jolts Evan into anger and fear. Evan's suspicions about his grandfather grow when Griff appears as a dangerous figure in Isamu's story. Solving the dark mystery of what happened on that island will change Evan's future, but will it be for better or for worse?



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COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the Reading Literature standards for Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the Speaking & Listening standards for Comprehension and Collaboration and for Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used as writing prompts for independent work.



Discussion Questions

- 1. Describe Evan as a character, including his life before his father died. How does he cope with his grief and anger? How does he change in the course of the story? Speculate on what you think his future will be like.
- 2. Evan's father, Clifford, appears in two flashbacks, but otherwise his character as an adult is revealed through Evan, neighbors, and friends. Discuss Clifford and what he means to those people, especially Evan.
- 3. Evan describes the boat in a bottle as a "ship that wasn't going anywhere" and adds fondly, "Just like my dad" (page 12). Later he calls it "making a toy out of what had been an instrument of war" (page 282). What do these ships reveal about Clifford? Discuss why Clifford sent one to Griff, why Griff sent it back, and why Evan buries it with his father's ashes.
- 4. Griff and Clifford had a complicated relationship, especially when Clifford was younger. Talk about their views of each other and why they parted ways, taking into account Griff's revelation near the end about his marriage.
- 5. Isamu also comments on his father, who was harsh to him, and grandfather, who taught him about stories. Analyze his relationship with those two men and the effect it had on his sense of himself. Compare the relationships to those of Evan, Clifford, and Griff.
- 6. In the prologue to Isamu's book, Derwood calls it "a remarkable love story," referring to Isamu and Hisako (page 28). Discuss whether or not you agree and why. Find places where Isamu speaks to Hisako directly and talk about what it shows about their relationship. What is Hisako like? How does writing to her help Isamu?
- 7. When Isamu first encounters the ghost children, he thinks they will protect him from the other ghosts. Discuss who the ghost children are, what they do, and how they affect Isamu, Derwood, Griff, and Evan. How do they give Isamu hope? When Evan experiences being a ghost child on the island, what does he see?
- 8. The *jikininki* are much more frightening than the ghost children. What do they want? How do they try to get it? Describe some of the scenes in which Isamu deals with and talks with the *jikininki*. Discuss whether or not you think they are evil, citing evidence in the text.
- 9. Near the end of the book, Evan sees Griff as wearing a mask, which he also calls armor, that is slowly flaking off. Analyze the meaning of this metaphor and whether you find it effective. How does it tie in with the *bunraku* puppet show Isamu seems to see?
- 10. After he starts to burn the bodies that wash up on the island, Isamu says, "And so I set myself up as the island's undertaker" (page 61). Why does he do it? What role do the dog tags he saves play later? Discuss what these actions show about him. How does the trap for *Tengu* relate to the burials?
- 11. Isamu first sees *Tengu*—"a monstrous thing, larger than a demon bear" (page 136)—when it attacks Derwood. He believes Derwood has brought it somehow. Describe *Tengu* and its role in the story for Isamu, Derwood, and Griff. Discuss it as a real creature and as a metaphor. Why does Isamu eventually think *Tengu* is his "master" (page 231)?
- 12. Just before Derwood leaves the island, Isamu thinks, "I have ceased really to think of the war as them and us," (page 204). Talk about Isamu and Derwood's relationship and how it changes between their first encounter and

this scene. How do they communicate? How do they work together? Compare and contrast their personalities and backgrounds.

- 13. Evan feels like he has washed up on a desert island "where he is surrounded by dead people . . . and one person who *should* be dead" (page 110). Griff describes himself as having landed on a "hostile island" (page 143). Discuss the importance of islands literally and figuratively throughout the novel.
- 14. Why does Griff object to having Isamu's book published, at least while he's alive? Describe his reaction to the graphic novel project and contrast it with Evan's point of view. Do you think Isamu's story would make a good graphic novel? Why or why not?
- 15. Griff says about veterans, "Nobody really wants to know about them or the dirty business they're honor-bound to carry out" (page 288). Evan later sees a look on Griff's face that shows "a lifetime of people who didn't get him didn't understand" (page 309). Discuss these quotes and what they say about Griff, his views on life, and his relationship to the world.
- 16. Even near the end of the book, Evan can't figure out his grandfather. "The man is the most infuriating thing he has ever come across" (page 288). Describe the evolution of their relationship from the time before Griff arrives until the end of the story. How are Griff and Evan similar? How are they different? Speculate on what their future relationship might be like.
- 17. Analyze why the author uses a third-person narrative to tell Evan's story and first-person narratives for the book by Isamu and, to a lesser extent, Derwood. Discuss whether you think the structure and voices are effective, and why or why not, pointing to specific examples in the text.
- 18. The book's epigraph is an excerpt from Dylan Thomas's poem "A Process in the Weather of the Heart." What is the emotional impact of these lines, and how does it set a tone for the novel? Draw connections between the quote and elements of the story. Consider reading the entire poem and discussing it in the context of *The Emperor of Any Place*.
- 19. Discuss the novel's title, *The Emperor of Any Place*, and that of Isamu's book, *Kokoro-Jima, The Heart-Shaped Island*. Why do Evan and his father give their address as 123 Any Place? What is the significance of the word *emperor*, and when is it used in the story? Talk about why Isamu might have chosen the subtitle he used.

About the Author



Tim Wynne-Jones is the author of many critically acclaimed young adult novels, including *Blink & Caution* and *The Uninvited*. His books have won the *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Award, the Governor General's Literary Award, the Canadian Library Association Book of the Year Award, the Arthur Ellis Award, and the Edgar Award. In 2011, he was named an Officer of the Order of Canada for his services to literature. He lives in Ontario with his wife in a house he designed himself.

This guide was prepared by Kathleen Odean. Kathleen was a school librarian for more than fifteen years and now presents workshops on new books for young people, including one that focuses on Common Core nonfiction. She served as chairperson of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and is the author of several guides to children's books, including *Great Books for Girls, Great Books for Boys,* and *Great Books About Things Kids Love.*