Note for teachers

PLEASE NOTE: This document contains spoilers!
If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on Curio.ca with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.

Literacy strategy

If you are using this book backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words they find and research their meaning.

Book Description

Forgiveness is the true story of author Mark Sakamoto’s grandparents. His maternal grandfather Ralph MacLean was a Canadian soldier, captured by the Japanese in Hong Kong. He spent years living under brutal conditions in a prisoner of war camp. His paternal grandmother Mitsue Sakamoto was one of thousands of Japanese-Canadians interned by the Canadian government during WWII. At the end of the war, after forgiving his captors and returning home, Ralph settles into his domestic life and fathers Diane Maclean who meets Mitsue’s son and falls in love.

The last third of Forgiveness recounts Mark’s childhood and adolescence in Medicine Hat as he and his younger brother Daniel witness their parents’ divorce and attempt to rebuild their individual lives. Mark’s mother, however, is consumed by alcoholism and extreme poverty, and eventually dies. This leads Mark to his own struggle to forgive and let go of resentment.

Watch Mark Sakamoto discuss his book: www.curio.ca/canadareads
Structure

Mark informs readers about the memoir’s ending right from the beginning. During a visit to his paternal grandmother’s house after her husband’s demise, Mark mentions his mother’s death.

From here, the story splits in two as Mark narrates his family history. One strand follows the experiences of Ralph MacLean as a soldier captured by Japanese army while the other accompanies Mitsue Sakamoto during her internment years in Canada.

The final five chapters are about Mark’s life and the coming together of these two sides of his family.

Characters

Mark Sakamoto. The memoir’s narrator. It is through Mark that all of the characters and stories coalesce. From this unique vantage point, Mark is able to tell the stories of Japanese-Canadians at home and the soldiers abroad during WWII.

Jade. Mark’s wife. She shakes Mark out of his stupor following his mother’s death and encourages to finish his studies in law. She and Mark are the parents of Miya Mitsue.

Mitsue Margaret Sakamoto. Mark’s paternal grandmother. She was a Sunday school teacher in Vancouver and seamstress before the events of Pearl Harbour. It is during that period that she met Hideo Sakamoto, her husband. She endures hard labour and the loss of her mother-in-law during her internment in Alberta and relocates to Medicine Hat after the war ends.

Hideo Sakamoto. Mark’s paternal grandfather and Mitsue Sakamoto’s husband. He worked in a paper mill when they first met. Mitsue noticed “he was a nice-looking man with an easy, honest smile” (p. 51).

Stanley Gene Sakamoto. Mark’s father and Diane Sakamoto’s ex-husband. He has a playful spirit.

Daniel Sakamoto. Mark’s younger brother.

Diane Sakamoto (née MacLean). Mark’s mother and Stanley Sakamoto’s ex-wife. After her divorce, she spirals into alcoholism and enters a tumultuous relationship with Stephen. Her children feel they have been neglected and, although Mark cares for his mother throughout this period and accompanies her on her deathbed, he only learns to forgive her at the end of the memoir.

Stephen. Mark’s mother’s abusive partner. He works at a pizza shop and has violent outbursts against Diane.

Ralph MacLean. Mark’s maternal grandfather, who suffered terribly as a POW in Japan during WWII.

Stanley MacLean. Ralph’s violent, hardened father. Mark’s great grandfather.

Deighton. Ralph’s friend in the POW camp who succumbs to Diphtheria.
The Ending

*Forgiveness* ends with Mark discovering the meaning of his memoir’s title. After the birth of his daughter, Miya Mitsue, Mark returns home to Medicine Hat with his mother’s cremated remains. He stays at his father’s house before heading to Central Park where he pours out his mother’s ashes and, satisfied with his newfound life as a father, finally moves on.

Key Themes

**INSTITUTIONAL RACISM**

Racism towards Japanese-Canadians erupted after Pearl Harbour. In December 1941, that hostility becomes part of government policy. Measure are taken to strip Japanese fishermen like Mitsue’s father of their livelihood and force Japanese-Canadian families into exile away from the coast. Years after being banished to hard labour in Alberta, Mitsue’s father receives a letter from the Department of the Secretary of State, informing him that he’ll be compensated for the sale of the family’s property with a mere $25.65. Mark reflects on these decisions towards the end of the memoir when, after advancing in his political career, he finds himself in the very war room in which Prime Minister King pronounced the fate of Japanese-Canadians.

**ISOLATION**

In *Forgiveness*, Ralph avoids solitude because it makes it too easy to think about his time in captivity. Mitsue, meanwhile, experiences isolation in the form of segregation when she and fellow Japanese-Canadians from Vancouver, are rounded up and dispersed—losing the sense of community they’d shared. In Mitsue’s case, her family was relegated to poverty, diseases, and the whims of the crop season, forcing her, Hideo and their two children, Ron and Glory, to relocate to the slightly more promising environment of Medicine Hat. Through isolation, Mark’s family was forced into economic dependence from which they barely escape.

**FORGIVENESS**

Mark’s treatise on forgiveness appears in the memoir’s last chapter: “Forgiveness is moving on. It is a daily act that looks forward. Forgiveness smiles... Forgiveness is not a transaction. It is not an exchange. Forgiveness has nothing to do with the past” (p. 237). It is perhaps fitting that Mark’s epiphany coincides with the narrative’s closing moments as the story neatly concludes what began with loss in the prologue. Forgiveness, it seems, has the power to bring stories to an end.

Contextual Information

- *Forgiveness* was a #1 national bestseller when it was first published.
- It is Mark Sakamoto’s debut as a writer.
- The book was originally published in 2014.
- It was shortlisted for the 2015 OLA Forest of Reading Awards – Evergreen Award and the 2015 Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-fiction.
Mark Sakamoto on how writing requires digging (CBC Books: Magic 8 questionnaire): [www.cbc.ca/1.4489367](http://www.cbc.ca/1.4489367)

How Mark Sakamoto’s grandparents’ stories of survival shaped him (The Next Chapter Interview): [www.cbc.ca/1.4536642](http://www.cbc.ca/1.4536642)


**Critical Thinking Questions**

Students may need to do some research to help them create and organize an answer.

1. Look at the title of the book. What could the story be about?

2. Reflect on the meaning of forgiveness. What does it mean for you to forgive?

3. How easy or difficult is it for you to ask for forgiveness? How easy or difficult is it for you to give forgiveness to someone else?

4. *Forgiveness* is a memoir. Consider what you may have learned about different types of narrators. What are the positives and negatives when an individual narrates their own story? Can we always trust the narrator?
5. What is institutional racism? What does racism look like, sound like and feel like in the communities we live in today?

6. Think about the world that we live in today. Think about your own communities. Who are the people who are isolated? What can we as a society to help individuals who are experiencing isolation? What can you do?

7. How important is it to read stories where Canada is used as a setting?

Activities

1. Students can create a KWL (i.e. Know, Want to Know, Will Look/Learn) chart on the subject of World War II, paying particular attention to the role of Japanese and Canadians in World War II and the impact of World War II on Japanese-Canadian citizens in Canada.

2. Students can watch video clips about World War II, particularly World War II veterans. Video clips can be found on websites such as CBC.ca and Curio.ca. They can organize their ideas and learning about what they are seeing according to a Think-Pair-Share.

3. Students can interview a grandparent or a senior citizen that they may know in their community. Teachers should be prepared to offer students suggestions for potential subjects or alternatives should students experience difficulty in connecting with a person. One alternative that teachers could consider is having students who are experiencing difficulty connecting with a grandparent or a senior citizen partner with a classmate who has been able to secure an interview subject.

4. Students can create a T-Chart outlining positive and negative impressions of the content in the backgrounder, as well as any questions the backgrounder inspires them to ask.