

## Readers' Guide

# *Unfinished Message*

Toshio Mori

### Timeline

The following timeline will help you put events from *Unfinished Message* in context.

- 1910 Toshio Mori is born in Oakland, California, and Oakland's Japantown is thriving along West Oakland's Market Street.
- 1913 The California legislature passes the Alien Land Act, which prevented Japanese from owning land in California.
- 1924 Congress bans Japanese immigration.
- 1941 Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.
- 1942 Caxton Printers, Ltd., postpones publication of Mori's first book, *Yokohama, California*. Mori is removed to Topaz, Utah, as part of the Central Utah Relocation Project.
- 1945 The United States drops the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.
- 1945 President Truman declares VJ (Victory in Japan) Day. Japantown in Oakland begins to shrink while the Japantowns of San Francisco and San Jose expand and thrive.
- 1947 Toshio Mori marries Hisayo Yoshiwara.
- 1949 Caxton Printers publishes *Yokohama, California*.
- 1978 Isthmus Press publishes Mori's first novel, *Woman from Hiroshima*.
- 1979 The University of California publishes Mori's *The Chauvinist and Other Stories*. Baseball player Kenichi Zenimura becomes the first Japanese American elected to the Fresno Athletic Hall of Fame, showing increased acceptance of Japanese Americans.
- 1980 Toshio Mori dies in San Leandro, California.

### Questions to Discuss

1. What do you consider to be Toshio Mori's definition of the American Dream?

2. Throughout the collection of stories, how do Japanese families cope with their changing lives in America? Are there any noticeable differences in how Issei and Nissei attempt to meet these challenges?
3. In the short story “Toshio Mori,” Teruo is confused and afraid. Of what particularly is he afraid? Why is it that he refuses coffee and companionship with those who offer? Why is it that seeking out companionship is seen as a weakness?
4. In the short story “Slant-Eyed Americans,” Tom hides in his work. Do you think in our contemporary world we still hide in our work?
5. In “The Brothers Murata,” do you think Mama is a courageous figure? What characteristics about Mama inspire silence in the dining hall?
6. In “The Brothers Murata,” Hiro is always urging Frank to be an American. Why is this so hard for Frank?
7. How does Frank’s understanding of duty and loyalty differ from that of his brother Hiro? In your opinion, which brother has a better sense of duty, and why?

### **Suggested Reading**

Inada, Lawson Fusao, ed. *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2000.

Iwata, Masakazu. *Planted in Good Soil: A History of the Issei in United States Agriculture*. American University Studies, Series 9, History, vol. 57. New York: P. Lang, 1990.

Masumoto, David Mas. *Country Voices: The Oral History of a Japanese American Family Farm*. Del Ray, CA: Inaka Countryside Publications, 1987.

—. *Woman from Hiroshima*. San Francisco: Isthmus Press, 1978.

—. *The Chauvanist and Other Stories*. Introduction by Hisaye Yamamoto. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979.

—. *Yokohama, California*. Introduction by William Saroyan. Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1949. Reprint. Introduction by Lawson Fusao Inada. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985.