

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR BENEATH THE WIDE SILK SKY

1. *BENEATH THE WIDE SILK SKY* gives readers an intimate fictional account of the experiences of Japanese Americans during the period before their mass incarceration. How can fiction add to our understanding of historical periods? Does fiction have any advantages over nonfiction?
2. The protagonist, Sam Sakamoto, is sixteen years old. In what ways does her age affect the reader's experience of the events of the book? And in what ways does Sam "come of age"?
3. Sam's dream of becoming a photographer—and recording her experiences—is threatened when the government confiscates all cameras from the Japanese American community. What role does documentation have in the pursuit of justice in the book? In our day?
4. When Pearl Harbor is bombed, Mr. McClatchy immediately lashes out against the Sakamotos, but his prejudice has deeper roots. Pearl Harbor is simply a catalyst for his long-simmering resentments. In your opinion, what are the true sources of his bigotry? And are there modern-day conflicts in which we see these same layers?
5. Sam's interracial crush on Beau is considered scandalous by her community, Kiki's relationship quickly ends, and Charlie feels he has to keep his relationship secret. In what way are their interracial relationships similar? In what ways are they different?
6. In the author's note, we learn that 93% of Americans supported the incarceration of Japanese immigrants, and that over half of Americans supported the incarceration of Japanese American citizens. Is Linley Island's population representative of these numbers? What characters would have voted for the Japanese to be incarcerated? What characters would have voted against incarceration?
7. At one point in the novel, Sam asks Ruth, "Why are you different from the others?" Ruth answers, "I shouldn't be different [. . .] I mean, I grew up with these kids. We've gone to school together all these years. Had the same teachers. Roamed the same forests and beaches." What is it that makes some people more likely to hurt and fear those who are different from themselves? And what are some antidotes to these tendencies?
8. Sam's father came to America as a teen, but decades later, he isn't allowed to become a citizen or own land. And even Sam and Kiki at times seem to have different beliefs about what makes an American. What, in your opinion, makes an American, and how do the characters in *BENEATH THE WIDE SILK SKY* fit into your definitions?
9. While Mr. Sakamoto thinks it's important to cooperate with the government's orders, Mr. Tanaka believes in speaking out as he firmly believes that the United States will do what is right and live up to its own professed values. In what ways are each of the men right? And what is the relationship between patriotism and protest?
10. The title is also the last line of the book. What is the significance of the "wide silk sky" in the novel?
11. Throughout the book, Sam wishes she could "muster the courage" to speak out. What things get in the way of this goal? And in what ways does she succeed?
12. The author ends *BENEATH THE WIDE SILK SKY* when the family is just about to be incarcerated. Why do you think the author chose to end the novel at this point? What questions does this choice ask of its modern readers?