

## Memory Police questions and connections:

Ogawa wrote *The Memory Police* in 1994, but it was only in 2014 that Stephen Snyder began work on the English translation. It was released in 2019, quickly earning international acclaim.

- What is the significance of the story within the story?
- The title of the novel in Japanese is Hisoyaka na kessho, which roughly translates to “secret crystallization” or “dense crystals.” Which title holds more meaning for you?
- Why does art, such as novels and sculptures, become places to conceal lost objects?
- What are the implications for the characters to become accustomed to things disappearing?

In writing *The Memory Police*, Ogawa drew inspiration from her lifelong love of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which she has read many times over since she was a child. Many elements of Anne Frank’s life in hiding are incorporated into *The Memory Police*. “Anne’s heart and mind were so rich,” commented Ogawa in a conversation with Motoko Rich. “Her diary proved that people can grow even in such a confined situation. And writing could give people freedom... I wanted to digest Anne’s experience in my own way and then recompose it into my work.”

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### *The Memory Police* as **allegory**:

As the national reckoning with police brutality has deepened, Ogawa's allegory remains relevant, as it centers on policing and the morality of law enforcement, as well as how ordinary people respond to injustice.

“An appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory.”  
Walter Benjamin (1928)

“An allegorical tale... unfolds and connects meaning across the horizontal surface of the text’s words... allegory and its puns suggest a sacred dimension of language.”

Dana Medoro (2003)

Puns are important to allegory because they show on a micro level what allegory exposes at a macro level: the possibility of multiple, simultaneous meanings in language.

Reading in translation, we do not see all of the puns Ogawa makes in Japanese, but Stephen Snyder preserves some and draws out others in his English translation. Consider the play on several meanings of the word **character**:

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- \* a fictional person in a story
- \* the moral qualities of a person
- \* the moji used in written Japanese

In Japanese, キャラクタ, one of the many words for character, likewise implies the first two meanings, though not the third.

If allegory is a way of speaking that uses one thing to represent another, what issues might Ogawa be addressing indirectly?

Did you notice any puns while reading? Were they related to allegorical elements of the book?

What aspects of the anxiety, isolation, fear, loss, and perseverance of these characters feel familiar or speak to our current moment?

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### **Centrality of art/creation to *The Memory Police***

Why do you think Ogawa makes the narrator a novelist and her mother an artist? Why is art such a threat to the memory police? And why do novels and sculptures become places to conceal lost objects, waiting until we are ready to crack them open and reveal the memories inside?

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## Memory, Loss, Trauma, and Reconciliation

Although *The Memory Police* was first released in Japan in 1994, the novel is particularly resonant now, at a time of rising authoritarianism across the globe. Throughout the book, citizens live under police surveillance. Novels are burned. People are detained and interrogated without explanation. Neighbors are taken away in the middle of the night.

All the while, the citizens, cowed by fear, do nothing to stop the disappearances. 'Regardless of what had happened, it was almost certainly an unfortunate event,' the narrator explains, 'and, moreover, simply talking about it could put you in danger.'

Motoko Rich

The New York Times

August 2019

What does it mean for the characters to become accustomed to things disappearing? Is it a form of strength to persevere, to adapt, and to feel gratitude for what is left, as the narrator and the old man try to do?

Or is it a weakness, as the mother, R, and those who cannot forget claim, since something irrecoverable about the world – and the self – is lost when an object or a person is taken away?

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## Policing

In James Baldwin's "A Report From Occupied Territory", he writes that "Harlem is policed like occupied territory". He argues that "pious calls to 'respect the law,' always to be heard from prominent citizens each time the ghetto explodes, are so obscene. The law is meant to be my servant and not my master, still less my torturer and my murderer. To respect the law, in the context in which the American Negro finds himself, is simply to surrender his self-respect."

How does this relate to the memory police and their treatment of the islanders?

Baldwin says of the salesman beaten by police that “His tone is simply the tone of one who has miraculously survived – he might have died; as it is, he is merely half blind.” How does this match the way ordinary citizens adjust to loss and cruelty in *Ogawa*?

In *The Memory Police*, the citizens who are targeted are the ones who remember that which the police want them to forget. What connection might exist between state-sanctioned violence against minority groups (such as Jewish people or Black Americans) and those in the novel who refuse to forget their history?

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