

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### THE SECOND SINO-JAPANESE WAR

(July 1937–September 1945) was a major war fought between the Republic of China and the Empire of Japan before and during World War II. Although the two countries had fought intermittently since 1931, full-scale war started in earnest in 1937, the result of a decades-long Japanese imperialist policy aiming to dominate China politically and militarily, and secure its vast raw material reserves and other resources. The rising tide of Chinese nationalism and notions of self-determination simultaneously provoked confrontation. In July 1937 the Japanese Imperial Army, claiming to have been antagonised by Chinese soldiers, took the Marco Polo Bridge, a crucial access point to Beijing, and – using the already-conquered Manchuria as a base – launched a full-scale, and famously brutal, invasion. Within five months, Japan controlled all of China's major cities and communication systems and had one million Chinese under their control. For the next four years they held their position but made little further progress, and after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 they found themselves embroiled in the greater conflict of World War II. By the time of Japan's defeat in 1945 the war had cost China an estimated four million lives, and created around 60 million refugees. The official Japanese death toll was only about 200,000, but this is believed to be extremely low when considering the length of the conflict. The combined Chinese forces claimed to have killed 1.77 million Japanese soldiers during the eight-year war.

### IDEAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

*The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* by Yukio Mishima

*Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami

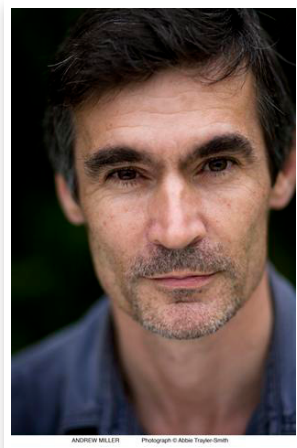
*An Artist of the Floating World* by Kazuo Ishiguro

*The Sun*, film by Aleksandr Sokurov

*Empire of the Sun*, film by Steven Spielberg

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Miller was born in Bristol in 1960 and grew up in the West Country. He has lived in Spain, Japan, Ireland and France, and currently lives in Somerset. His first novel, *Ingenious Pain*, was published in 1997 and won the James Tait Black Memorial Award for Fiction, the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Grinzane Cavour prize in Italy. He has followed it with *Casanova*, *Oxygen*, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Whitbread Novel of the Year Award in 2001, and *The Optimists*.



### ALSO BY ANDREW MILLER

*Ingenious Pain*

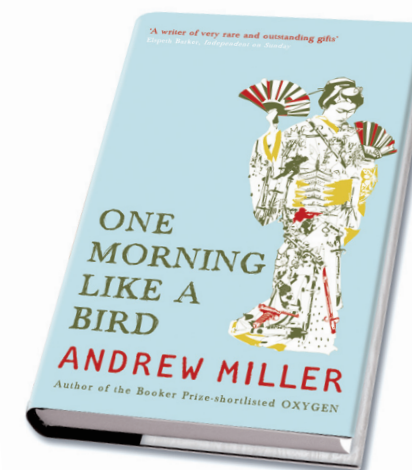
*Casanova*

*Oxygen*

*The Optimists*



## READING GROUP GUIDE



## ONE MORNING LIKE A BIRD

Andrew Miller

Tokyo, 1940. As Japan's war with China escalates, Yuji Takano, a young man so far spared fighting by ill-health, clings to his calm, cultured life – the company of friends and family, evenings of French conversation at the home of the trader, Monsieur Feneon, the days of writing and contemplation enabled by an allowance from his father.

But the world begins to close in on Yuji. His father, having lost his professorship over a comment about the Emperor, is forced to scrap his allowance and, with the nation heading towards conflict with the Allies, conscription threatens. Then there is Monsieur Feneon's nineteen-year-old daughter, Alissa, and an evening that will change everything. The time has come for Yuji to grow up and, amid the chaos and destruction that surrounds him, have the courage to choose what's right.

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### THE GREAT KANTŌ EARTHQUAKE OF 1923

struck the Kantō plain on the Japanese main island of Honshū at 11:58am on 1 September 1923 and was later estimated to have had a magnitude between 7.9 and 8.4 on the Richter scale. It devastated Tokyo and the port city of Yokohama and caused widespread damage throughout the Kantō region, largely as a result of cooking fires that got out of control, fanned by the high winds from a nearby typhoon. Casualty estimates range from about 100,000 to 142,000 deaths. The single greatest loss of life occurred when approximately 38,000 people packed into an open space at the Army Parade Ground in downtown Tokyo were incinerated. Following the devastation, some in the government considered the possibility of moving the capital elsewhere and alternative sites were discussed. A reconstruction plan of Tokyo included modern networks of roads, trains, and public services but the outbreak of World War II and subsequent destruction severely limited resources and delayed regeneration.

### JEAN NICOLAS ARTHUR RIMBAUD

(20 October 1854–10 November 1891) was a French poet, born in Charleville. A precocious child, he produced his best works whilst still in his late teens – Victor Hugo described him at the time as ‘an infant Shakespeare’ – and gave up creative writing altogether before he reached 21, although he remained a prolific letter-writer. By 1875 Rimbaud had decided on a steady, working life, which took him all over Europe as well as to Java, Cyprus and Abyssinia, where his commercial dealings notably included coffee and weapons. Here he had affairs with several Ethiopian women, despite an early – and tempestuous – homosexual relationship with the eminent Symbolist poet Paul Verlain back in France. In February 1891, Rimbaud developed what he initially thought was arthritis in his right knee, but which later transpired to be cancer. He died in Marseille nine months later, a month after his 37th birthday.

## FOR DISCUSSION

Yuji is obsessed with refined Western culture and yet revels in the day-to-day traditions of Tokyo – its bathhouses, sushi restaurants and festivals. What might this tell us about Yuji? Is there a discrepancy between his intellectual and sensual impulses? Does one prove more genuine than the other?

How does Andrew Miller build tension in the novel?

An *Observer* review for Miller’s novel *Oxygen* suggests that he has a preoccupation with ‘emotional vacuums’. Might the various members of the Takano family also be described as living in a vacuum or void? If so, how does this manifest itself, and what are its causes? How do they find expression for their emotions as the novel progresses?

Why do you think Miller chose the title ‘One Morning Like a Bird’?

In the privacy of his own thoughts, Yuji refers to Feneon’s house as ‘*my house of life*’ (p.54). What does he mean by this, and how might the phrase assume an alternative significance by the end of the novel?

Would you describe *One Morning Like a Bird* as an atmospheric novel? What techniques does Andrew Miller employ to make Tokyo come alive on the page?

‘Is this how a life goes wrong? How ambition is cut off and talent thwarted, so the fishmonger can be paid?’ (p.5). What does this novel have to say about artistic zeal versus everyday expediency? Does Yuji’s attitude towards the two change as the novel progresses and, if so, why? How do his actions reflect this?

Yuji hopes that Arthur Rimbaud’s letter will offer him advice on ‘how to live as a poet’ (p.59). When he finally receives the letter (p.304), how does it compare to his expectations? Why do you think Andrew Miller chose Rimbaud as the object of Yuji’s adulation?

How, if at all, does Andrew Miller’s nationality affect your reading of the novel?

Yuji reflects that the Feneon’s house ‘is a little fortress sealed off by red-brick walls’ (p.54) whereas ‘the Japanese live among what is fragile and evanescent’ (p.109). Does architecture represent the people that it accommodates? What is its significance in the context of the impending war?

Is Yuji a likeable young man? Do you sympathise with his situation? How does he change as the novel progresses? Does it matter whether you ‘like’ him by the end?

Yuji is privately critical of Alissa’s ‘questionable blood’ (p.116) and Feneon reflects that ‘Yuji is Japanese. He is a yellow man. A native. The daughter of a European gentleman might have such a person as a friend ... but more than that?’ (p.275). How seriously should we take these musings? Are all attempts at multiculturalism in the book a sham?

Grandfather was extolled in his youth for his displays of physical strength; Mrs Miyazaki is ‘one of the old-style wives, content to kneel at the kitchen door waiting to be told when to bring the sake in’ (p.157). To what extent have ideas of masculinity and femininity changed for Yuji and his contemporaries?

What techniques does Miller use to unravel the past and foreshadow the future in *One Morning Like a Bird*? Do you find it an effective and affecting way of constructing a story? How else might he have gone about it?

Is it significant that the novel ends with Yuji’s words “‘I’m from Tokyo”” (p.369) on the morning of his departure from the city? If so, why? What does this novel have to say about travel and cultural identity? Could Yuji be described as patriotic?