



### Orchards

Written by Holly Thompson  
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*Orchards* is an exquisitely written novel in verse that lends a personal, insightful look into the thoughts of thirteen-year old Kana Goldberg, a half-Japanese and half-Jewish American teenager. As the novel opens, readers immediately sense Kana’s angst at being sent to her mother’s family in Japan for the summer to work in the family’s mikan orange groves. Kana feels she is being “exiled to my maternal grandmother, Baachan, to the ancestors at the altar and to Uncle, Aunt and cousins I haven’t seen in three years—not since our last trip back to Japan for Jiichan’s funeral” (p.9). In the first few pages, we discover that Kana’s friend, Ruth,

has committed suicide and her parents decide Japan is the best place for her to deal with her friend’s death. The traumatic incident shocked the community, prompting talk and gossip about the clique of eighth grade girls that form Kana’s circle of friends.

The author creates a sense of being inside Kana’s head throughout this difficult time in her life— we are able to hear her thoughts as she copes with trying to understand Ruth’s death and feel her painful guilt at the impact of the clique’s actions. Kana “talks to” Ruth and reflects back on the actions, words, and events leading up to Ruth’s suicide as her way of working through her grief and guilt. Throughout the early chapters of the novel, the reader senses the heavy presence of Ruth in Kana’s mind. Feelings of blame, anger, and frustration resonate in her thoughts. However, as she assimilates into the responsibilities of working in the mikan groves, becoming part of what she calls the “farm rhythm” (p. 29) and with the love and support of her Japanese family, Kana works through the pain of not being able to prevent Ruth’s suicide and the constant questioning and wondering “*should I have?*”

Kana’s Japanese family presence is strong, especially that of her strict, but loving grandmother. The interactions between Kana and Baachan, along with her developing friendships with her cousins, help us understand her Japanese self and her Jewish American self. Flashbacks weave the story of her parents’ struggle with her grandparents’ acceptance of an interracial marriage. The novel is infused with snippets of Japanese language and customs. Kana must catch up to her family’s speaking fast and constant Japanese, not the half-English, half-Japanese ‘Japlish’ that she is used to with her parents and younger sister. Upon arrival she must light incense at the altar in the family home to pay respects to Jiichan; she adheres to the order of bathing in the shared family tub, with the elder males always going first. We get a glimpse into obon rituals that honor those that have died. Kana learns to accept and appreciate these customs as a way of life and as a

means to eventually help her move on. The novel is further enhanced by the simple artwork that captures artifacts of Japanese culture. A picture of a mikan orange frames each chapter's title. Simple woodblock-like prints portray different aspects of Japanese culture, such as chopsticks, bento boxes, terraced mikan fields, Mount Fuji, paper lanterns, and origami.

The impact of bullying, cruelty, and harsh words that cut deep are deftly woven into an eloquent novel that captures the essence of a teen surviving and coping with many forms of grief, loss, anger, hope, fear, blame, love, and regret. The verse lends itself to a quick, but powerful read; the novel is packed with events that keep readers turning the pages. *Orchards* is a novel that one wants to return to again after the last word. The contemporary issues that conflate teen relationships have universal significance for all teenagers, regardless of race or ethnicity. *Orchards* received the APALA 2012 Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature and is a YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults selection.

Holly Thompson lives in Japan although she is originally from the New England region of the U.S. She states, "My books often reflect the crossing of cultures amid my family, among my students, and within the communities in which I find myself immersed" (<http://www.hatbooks.com/>). Holly teaches creative writing at Yokohama City University, and her fiction is often set in Japan and Asia. She is able to speak to universal human experiences as well as unique cultural practices of this area of the world as seen in *Orchards*.

*Orchards* pairs well with another of Holly Thompson's works, an edited volume called *Tomo: Friendship through Fiction—An Anthology of Japan Teen Stories*. *Tomo* is a compilation of 36 tales gathered as contributions to the relief effort for victims of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. They feature stories of Japanese and half-Japanese teenagers growing up, woven into tales of mystery, love, friendship, ghosts, science fiction and history, both in contemporary and historical times. Together, these books invite conversation with teen readers on issues that surround their lives as they engage in the process of growing up.

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