

# THE SNOW KIMONO

MARK HENSHAW

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## Praise for *The Snow Kimono*

'When I finished *The Snow Kimono*, I...turned straight back to page one and began again. That never happens to me.' *Saturday Paper*

'The writing is beautiful: pellucid and wonderfully visual, painting memorable landscape cameos.' *Adelaide Advertiser*

'Henshaw marshals densely wrought material with a masterly semblance of ease... With agile intelligence, with boldness in what he has imagined and tight control over how it is developed, Henshaw has announced triumphantly that he is no longer a ghost on the Australian literary scene, but one of its most substantial talents.' *Australian*

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## About Mark Henshaw

Mark Henshaw has lived in France, Germany, Yugoslavia and the USA. He currently lives in Canberra. His first novel, *Out of the Line of Fire* (1988), won the FAW Barbara Ramsden Award and the NBC New Writers Award. It was one of the biggest selling Australian literary novels of the decade, and is being republished as a Text Classic. For many years Henshaw was a curator at the National Gallery of Australia. He has co-written two crime novels.

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## A reader's introduction to *The Snow Kimono*

Mysteries hidden behind other mysteries; stories nestled inside other stories; identities masked in other identities—carefully constructed and beautifully told, *The Snow Kimono* is an enigma as intricate and as difficult to solve as the Japanese puzzles beloved by one of the novel's characters. The reader detours down sidetracks, crosses thresholds, and peers into abysses alongside the characters, although their memories and perceptions can never be fully relied upon.

First, we meet Inspector Jovert, recently contacted by a woman who says she is his daughter. He is looking back at his past, including his work as an interrogator for the French forces in Algiers in the 1950s, while listening to

the stories of a man who has deliberately sought him out. Tadashi Omura is a lawyer and academic, and the adoptive father of his beloved daughter, Fumiko. And, at the heart of it all, there is Katsuo Ikeda. Brilliant and narcissistic, Katsuo is a writer of fiction, including a 'semi-autobiographical' novel called *The Chameleon*. Through Katsuo's story we encounter other lives, particularly those of his two loves, Mariko and Sachiko. But, as becomes increasingly clear, not everyone is who they appear to be.

This, then, is a novel about truth and the possibility—the impossibility—of finding it. It is about how we know each other—and ourselves. It is about how we tell and understand stories and history. It is about love, power and transformation. And it is about morality. Morality in the present, future and past. How do I act? What course will I choose? What should I have done?

'The future changes everything' (93), Tadashi Omura has realised. Similarly, in reading this novel, the secrets that are revealed to us change our previous understanding of events and alter the meaning we ascribe to them. *The Snow Kimono* rewards re-reading, thought and discussion.

## Questions for discussion

1. Discuss morality in the novel. For example, talk about the moral dilemmas the characters face, whether they have made the right choices or what they should have done. Is Katsuo the most immoral of the characters? Is Jovert more moral? And does the novel itself pass moral judgment?
2. Discuss Katsuo's character, aside from his morality. What kind of man has Mark Henshaw made him? And how can we know him? What of Jovert's character?
3. What are the similarities and differences between Katsuo and Jovert? Are they 'two parts of an uncompleted whole' (362)? Which other characters in the book have similar bonds, or have parallels drawn between them? What do these parallels suggest?
4. Katsuo has written a novel called *The Chameleon*, but he is not the only person who assumes different colours. Many characters pretend to be someone other than

who they are (Omura pretends to be Fumiko's father; Natsumi pretends to be a governess; Jovert has two identities in Algiers; Sachiko's parents are not really her parents; and, most obviously, Katsuo pretends to be Omura). What is the novel saying about identity?

5. Katsuo tells Tadashi: 'if you want power over people, you have to get inside them, find out what they are afraid of' (84–5). Is Katsuo right? How do characters get inside each other in the novel? Are they truly able to do so?

6. Omura asks for Jovert's opinion on what he should have done when he heard the axe falling when he was visiting Sachiko's grave with Fumiko. He tells Jovert: 'if you want to see your life, you have to see it through the eyes of another' (47–8). Why? Is he seeking judgement? What other parts of the story does he want Jovert's perspective on? Why does he want Jovert's perspective in particular? And if 'Omura' is Katsuo, who is asking for Jovert's perspective, and is he asking for Jovert's thoughts on Omura or on Katsuo? Was their meeting 'preordained' so that the 'unfolding' could begin (369)?

7. 'You don't exist. Except as a function of me' (145), Katsuo says to Tadashi. Discuss whether or how this is true.

8. Why is the book named after the kimono that Sachiko wears when she meets Katsuo and when she dies during childbirth in the snow? Is the snow kimono the central symbol of the book? If so, does that mean Sachiko's story is the central story?

9. Another important symbol is the jigsaw puzzle. What are puzzles an analogy for? Think about Omura's comments that puzzles in the 'ancient tradition' are 'calculated to deceive...to make the solution of the puzzle as difficult, as challenging, as possible. In our tradition, how a puzzle is made, and how it is solved, reveals some greater truth about the world' (43). What greater truth does this novel reveal about the world? Is the book itself 'calculated to deceive'? Omura's father likes *himitsu-e* puzzles, which 'have an infinite number of solutions, or solutions which are mutually contradictory' (44). Is this true of the novel too? And what of the difference between the Eastern and Western jigsaw puzzles, and the different interpretations Omura and his father have of them (46)?

10. Discuss some of the other symbols in the novel (a few suggestions—birds; snow and ice; gaps, abysses and ravines; the Spirit of Liberty statue that Jovert can see from his apartment window).

11. 'There are times in your life when something happens after which you're never the same' (3). Are there key moments in our lives like this? What is the novel saying about transformation? Talk about the times characters cross over from one state into another.

12. How do the two epigraphs capture the main themes of the novel? Or do they indicate only some of the novel's concerns? Or are they misdirecting the reader altogether?

13. Are we as readers supposed to try to sort out the novel's fact from its fiction?

14. Many characters can't remember what happened between particular moments: for example, Jovert when Omura first comes into his apartment (10). Why does Henshaw have the characters experience these gaps in their memory? Later, Jovert thinks that 'to see his inability to recall what Omura had said the night before—after he had turned to walk back down the path—as a gap, a void, was the wrong way to see things. What he should do was not to search for what had dropped out of his memory, but to look more closely at what had come so insistently to inhabit it' (29). Is this a clue to how to read the novel?

15. How does Jovert's role in the Algerian war sit with the rest of the novel? And, related to this, what of the story of his wife and son?

16. Jovert wants to 'atone' (391). Does Katsuo?

17. Did you guess the twist of Omura's identity? How? If not, did you feel tricked? How did you feel about it? When you look back, is it credible that the storyteller identified as Omura talking to Jovert is actually Katsuo? Are there clues that the Omura whom Jovert meets is actually Katsuo? What red herrings have been put in to mislead the reader?