

**Teaching Suggestions for *The Color of the Sky is the Shape of the Heart* by Chesil,
translated by Takoma Nieda**

Before reading the book, ask the students one or more of the questions below:

1. Have you ever experienced or seen cruelty at our school or in other schools? What did this look like? Was it abusive physically or verbally? What did you do as the victim, the bystander, or the cruel one yourself? Was the cruelty ongoing or just one incident? Looking back on this, how should you have reacted or how would you react today? Can such cruelty be prevented by school personnel or other adults, or is it just part of being human?
2. One aspect of education is educating students for citizenship and global leadership. What injustices exist within our school and student community? How can students, not yet adults, deal with such injustices? Can we attempt to mitigate them or is that an impossible task? Should we just acknowledge that they exist and then let adults, teachers, and administrators take care of individual incidents as best they can? There is no single correct answer. Explain your approach.
3. Is it okay for a student or students who want to promote justice to demonstrate their leadership by intentionally destroying school property and then handing out printed copies of a rationale for their actions? How should student leaders go about advocating for change in schools, if not by a dramatic and disruptive demonstration? Share at least one approach.

During the reading, ask the students one or more of the questions below:

1. The first chapter of the book takes place in a Korean school in Japan. What details and scenes in this chapter match your experience of school in the United States? Make a list of situations, comments and aspects of this foreign school routine that correspond to your experience of school here. You should note at least ten items, if not more.
2. Ginny, Jinhee is her Korean birth name, is Zainichi or ethnic Korean born in Japan, who does not fit in with Koreans peers nor with the Japanese population. As you read in this fictional narrative based on Chesil's childhood as a third generation Zainichi, are her experiences of bullying and verbal or physical discrimination similar to any experiences of peer bullying of ESL or newcomer students you have observed or experienced yourself.
3. Do persons of color who are racially the same, have issues of being seen as darker or lighter in skin tone and then judged lesser or greater because of this by their same race peers? Is this infighting justified? You need not write your answers to these questions but

think about them as you read this book set in a Korean-speaking school located in Japan that experiences Korean infighting.

4. What songs and music does Ginny listen to? Select at least two and listen to them online; download the lyrics. Explain how these connect to Ginny's life experience.

5. Ginny grows increasingly focused on the portraits at her school of Kim Il Song, and Kim Jong Il, two Great Leaders of Korea. Even though a part of the school, these two inanimate objects actually have no real-life interaction with her. Chesil is using them as symbols of the injustices that Ginny wants to topple. Based on the text, what exactly are the injustices which outrage Ginny? How do the letters interspersed throughout the book support Ginny's outrage?

6. Ginny in spite of herself does make two peer friends and could make more. Detail how her ability to write about her feelings and to interpret words and metaphors in print and/or music helps her make social connections.

7. How does Ginny deal with the violence she experiences and the bullying in this narrative? Provide three specific examples of how she navigates these experiences. Do you agree with her approach? What might she have done differently?

8. The title of this work alludes to a trip and scenery that Ginny takes with Stephanie as part of her Oregon experience. What does Ginny see at the Vista house? How does Ginny describe the sky she sees? What does the metaphoric description of the title say about life? Do you agree with this viewpoint?

9. What decision does Ginny make at the end of the narrative? In what way does her answer to Stephanie's question: "The sky is about to fall. What do you do?" metaphorically map how Ginny has evolved throughout the plot.

After reading: Take action projects:

1. Insert yourself into Ginny's story as her friend. What would you advise her to do about her manifesto and toppling the Kim portraits? How would you help her deal with the ongoing bullying about her Zainichi status? How would you counsel her about leaving school and taking extensive time to escape her issues? Should she have confided in her parents or was it best she reached out to others? Generate a chapter or a dialogue in which you are a peer helping her as an American exchange student.

2. Make a playlist for Ginny of music you find helps you through crises similar to what Ginny experienced. Explain for least five songs how the lyrics or music helps you navigate a crisis.

3. As an ESL student, person of color or other minority to what extent have you experienced similar and surprising infighting and verbal abuse/insults from your peers. Share how you would suggest coping or navigating such insults.

4. Some readers would argue this is a remarkable story about the Japanese and Koreans, but even in translation it is not relevant for readers with other cultural backgrounds or American born students at all. How would you respond to this argument? Write a review of this book for independent reading by an American teen who does not have a Japanese or Korean background.

4. Using the cover art image and your own research, develop a graphic novel version of one of the chapters in the book. Then explain how the graphic novel realizes the prose text in graphics and accentuates the author's themes. Alternatively, use the chapter titles to develop a found poem with your reactions to the titles merging your high school experience with Ginny's.

Author: Dr. Rose Reissman, Teacher Educator

February 2025