

Hiroshima

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John Hersey's *Hiroshima* is a riveting tale of unthinkable catastrophe and how a group of people reacted to it, as well as an example of first-class journalism. In addition, *Hiroshima* offers testament to the capacity for individual transformation, and, in its final chapter, a commentary on human folly. Deftly weaving these elements together, Hersey's *Hiroshima* is a model of literary journalism.

Hersey understands that mere recitation of facts – at least a hundred thousand dead, rampant radiation sickness, sixty two thousand of ninety thousand buildings destroyed, and so on – fail to convey the awful magnitude of the event. Instead, he focuses on six *hibakusha* (“explosion-affected persons”), tracing the trajectory of their lives before and after the bomb detonated, ending with a post-script chronicling how each was affected by the blast. Presenting short, pithy biographical sketches of his characters, Hersey moves in round-robin fashion to describe harrowing experiences and individual acts of selflessness, and by the mid-point of the book we know them well. This device makes people like Reverend Tanimoto and Hatsuyo Nakamura real to readers, and Hersey's technique of following each personal story in its turn has the added attraction of creating narrative tension. Those who wonder what's happened to Father Kleinsorge while they've been reading about Dr. Fujii are obliged to keep wondering until Hersey picks up that strand of his narrative again – and, of course, to keep reading.

Although the narrative structure of *Hiroshima* might be described as “literary,” Hersey's scrupulous attention to detail and journalistic obsession with accuracy are everywhere in evidence. At countless junctures in the book, Hersey uses parenthesis to explain, clarify, and amend, providing pertinent, illuminating information in terms anyone can understand. (This is especially useful in clearing up mysteries related to Hiroshima, such as the nature of “shadows” cast on buildings after the explosion, or in furnishing correct information in direct contradiction to popular misconceptions.)

We learn why the geographical outlay and military significance of Hiroshima made it exceptionally vulnerable to attack; that the lack of adequate medical attention after the explosion was due less to callous doctors (as Rev. Tanimoto first thought), than to the fact that most were killed or wounded by the bomb; why plant life in Hiroshima suddenly became eerily

verdant a month later, and what the three stages of radiation sickness are. We learn something of the history and culture of Japan, and its attitudes toward the United States, helping us to understand why certain *hibakusha* reacted to the bomb as they did. Throughout, Hersey's prose is elegant, understated and deceptively simple ("Dr. Sasaki lost all sense of profession and stopped working as a skillful surgeon and a sympathetic man; he became an automaton, mechanically wiping, daubing, winding, wiping, daubing, winding.")

Along with the notion that life is frequently an inexplicable, arbitrary thing – one recalls Dr. Sasaki's decision to take a streetcar to the hospital the morning of the bombing, rather than his usual train, unwittingly sparing himself certain annihilation – *Hiroshima* centers on two major themes. One is the ability of people to rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of unimaginable tragedy, transforming their lives for the better and making a positive mark on the world. This theme is prominently featured in Chapter Five ("The Aftermath"), Hersey's update of what happened to his six subjects forty years after *Hiroshima* was published. Each of the six has prospered or otherwise undergone genuine transformation in response to their experience. These changes are most obvious in Father Kleinsorge (ne Takakura), Toshinki Sasaki (who overcame her initial bitterness to become a nun), and Hatsuyo Nakamura ("Green pine trees, cranes and turtles... You must tell a story of your hard times / And laugh twice").

On one level readers might infer the same of Kiyoshi Tanimoto, whose story, tellingly, begins and ends the book. At the beginning and through most of *Hiroshima*, Tanimoto is portrayed in near heroic terms. When Hersey revisits the Protestant minister forty years later, however, Tanimoto is depicted as decent and sincere, but also as naïve, something of a publicity seeker, and, finally, as abdicating the moral high-ground of his peace crusade in favor of mindless consumerism. ("He lived in a snug house with a radio and two television sets, a washing machine, an electric oven, and a refrigerator, and he had a compact Mazda automobile manufactured" – and here Hersey's irony is palpable – "in Hiroshima.")

With Tanimoto's story, Hersey underscores a second, darker theme – that even those most powerfully effected by the bomb, to say nothing of governmental authorities, failed to learn the lessons of Hiroshima. Lest anyone miss the point, Hersey brackets the revised biographies in Chapter Five with italicized news briefs detailing the ongoing nuclear arms race. Hersey's parting words about Tanimoto – the last in the book – are aimed less at the good Reverend than the foolish societies that surround him. "He ate too much. ... He was slowing down a bit. His memory, like the world's,

was getting spotty.” Were another edition of *Hiroshima* published today, it’s unlikely the author would strike his final sentence.