

## Reading Group Guide

### *Japanland* by Karin Muller

1. A major theme in *Japanland* is personal freedom, or lack thereof, in Japanese society. How do Karin's personal values conflict with accepted Japanese values?
2. Discuss how Karin is set up for a troubled relationship with Yukiko even before she arrives in the Tanaka household. What does Karin do to cope with her perceived lack of *iki*, or the Japanese equivalent of "good breeding?" Could or should she have done anything differently, and would it have changed the outcome?
3. Genji Tanaka's reasons for volunteering to be Karin's sensei and take her in as a houseguest are never explicitly stated. Judging from what you know about Genji's character and Japanese society, what might have been his reasons?
4. Karin makes repeated reference to Japan's shame culture. How does shame work as a driving force in daily life? Why is Karin "immune to public ridicule and humiliation," as she says on page 192? Is there an equivalent of Japanese shame that can be found in Western culture?
5. Discuss some of the rituals and practices that provide the Japanese with an opportunity to escape the pressures of daily life. How are these pressure valves ingrained in Japanese culture?
6. Is forgetting stress the same thing as finding peace?
7. Despite the widespread belief that certain ancient Japanese practices have not changed much over the years, Karin finds evidence to the contrary: first in Roberto, the South American-born heir to an esteemed sword-polishing practice; and later in observing video-game-playing acolytes in the monastery. Why call attention to these anachronisms?
8. What does Karin's failed attempt to "lose" her umbrella prove about Japanese society and Karin's evolving attitude toward it?
9. Discuss the following passage, from which the title of the book was drawn: "I'm just beginning to get a glimpse past the mask Japan wears in public to its more private side. It's almost like an alternate reality—a kind of Japanland—that's right there in front of you, but you can't see it unless you know how to look." What does knowing "how to look" entail?
10. When Karin learns of the elusive Yamabushi society, she declares that she likes people with secret lives. Could she qualify as someone with a secret life in Japan?
11. At times it seemed easy to forget that Karin was in Japan as a film documentarist as well as a spiritual journeywoman. Did her role as a photographer affect her spiritual quest?
12. The Japanese countryside and its inhabitants pose a stark contrast to the manicured suburbs of Fujisawa and impeccably mannered housewives like Yukiko. Discuss the difference between what is socially acceptable in rural Japan vs. what is expected in urban Japanese society. Is there an analogous situation in Western culture?
13. Discuss Karin's position on the subject of geishas—their place in society, and their unique power. How does she react to being made over as a geisha?
14. How does Karin, in her capacity as an author, show compassion toward Yukiko long after leaving his house?

15. How does Karin's definition of courage change over time, especially with Roberto the sword-polisher, Adam the street performer, and Yukiko?
16. For Karin, the search for *wa* definitely involves physical challenge, from her intense judo training, to walking over hot coals with the Yamabushi, to a 700-mile pilgrimage that ultimately lands her in the hospital. Where does her search climax? Discuss the meaning of the two key words spoken to her by the old judo master on page 304.