

Reason and chance



“ There are things in this universe that we cannot control, and then there are the things we can...let fate, coincidence, and accident conspire; human beings must act on reason” (Guterson 418). Reason, especially in the eyes and hands of human beings, is a very fickle thing in David Guterson’s novel *Snow Falling on Cedars*. It is applied and interpreted in different ways by different people, and often, it is incorrectly done so. Etta Heine believes it is pure reason that causes her to ignore the agreement between her dead husband and Zenhichi Miyamoto and instead sell her land to Ole Jurgensen; however, it is only undiluted prejudice. Despite this, there are also those on San Pedro Island who do understand reason in both concept and practice. Nels Gudmundsson is an examples of one of these people, as is Kabuo Miyamoto. On the island of San Pedro, reason and the lack there of collide constantly, leaving indelible stains on all of the islanders. It is the colliding of reason and irrationalism that controls the lives of all of the islanders and that brings them all to where they are when Kabuo Miyamoto is tried for murder.

In *Snow Falling on Cedars*, Nels Gudmundsson is one of the few characters to represent reason. Though he is in his late seventies with declining health, his intelligence remains highly astute. There is no attorney that could do better by Kabuo Miyamoto, for no attorney could be as willing and capable as Nels to look past skin color and eye slant and the general blind belief of the island that Kabuo is guilty, because of these physical characteristics. Nels’ treatment of his client is that of the utmost humanity and respect, without the vicious pervasion of prejudice so prevalent among most of San Pedro Island. In courtroom recesses, he steps away and encourages the deputy Abel Martinson to do the same so that Kabuo and his wife Hatsue may speak

in private, unseparated by a pane of glass. When they first meet, Nels brings Kabuo two chocolate bars without acknowledging his charity, something he knew Kabuo would find humiliating. In the same visit, Nels also shows Kabuo his complete indifference to skin color over a friendly game of chess by having no preference for the white or black chess pieces. When Nels determines, not decides, that Kabuo is not telling him the whole, honest truth about the events of the night of Carl Heine's death, he pushes him for the truth without disrespecting him, or for the purpose everyone else has of proving him guilty just because of the color of his skin. He truly wants to do his job to the best of his ability, to help vindicate Kabuo and return him to his family. Nels is able to treat his client with the fairness, equality and open-mindedness so many of the islanders are incapable of because he understands reason. He listens to Kabuo and looks at the facts, and in the courtroom he implores both the jurors and the audience to do the same, and to resist the subtle appeals the prosecutor Alvin Hooks makes to their racism.

Nels is the champion of reason, but his client Kabuo is its steady, quiet proponent. Kabuo withholds the truth for as long as he does, from the sheriff and from Nels, because he has every reason to believe that the truth would be just as, if not more, detrimental to his legal standing. As he tells Nels, "This island [is] full of strong feelings...people who do [not] often speak their minds but hate on the inside all the same...they hate anyone who looks like the soldiers they fought" (391). Kabuo is absolutely accurate in this statement. It is the truth, unaffected by Kabuo's resentment for it. Kabuo knows that he, like all of the other islanders of Japanese descent, is not

trusted by the citizens of San Pedro or by the United States government. He knows that he has been wronged by the family of Carl Heine, the man who was his good friend when they were boys. He knows that they are friends no longer because the men Carl calls enemies during the second World War have similar faces to Kabuo, while the men Kabuo fights in Europe resemble Carl. Kabuo is angry and resentful and haunted when he returns from the war, but not to the point where he decompensates. He retains his ability to rationalize, his understanding and respect of reason, and this is what allows him to help Carl on the night of his death, as morality can best follow reason. Kabuo could have surrendered to pettiness and bitterness, but he never even considers such because he sees Carl stranded in the water with a fully depleted battery, in need of help. He does not push Carl to sell him the seven acres owed to his family because he knows such pressure would only be counterproductive. The presumption among many of the islanders is that Kabuo kills Carl because he wants the land Carl has just recently purchased from Ole Jurgensen, seven acres of which are the ones that were essentially stolen from the Miyamoto family. Kabuo, however, recognizes that “ the world [is] one world, and the notion that a man might kill another over some small patch of it [does] not make sense” (321). Kabuo only helps Carl, reaches an agreement about the land, shakes Carl’s hand, and returns to his own boat and leaves. He does nothing unreasonable.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Carl Heine’s mother, Etta. Etta is bitterly, unrelentingly racist, and subsequently incapable of treating Kabuo Miyamoto in the manner reason (as well as basic human decency) demands. She takes advantage of her husband’s death and Carl’s being away at war to

sell their farm to Ole Jurgensen, including the seven acres Zenhichi Miyamoto makes all but the last two payments on. These last two payments, due in 1942, are missed only because San Peidro's entire Japanese population is sent to internment camps far off, where completion of the payments is simply not possible. When Kabuo confronts her about the land owed to him, the land she wastes no time in selling to Ole Jurgensen without regard for the contract between her husband and Kabuo's father, Etta says "[she has not] done anything a bank would [not] do. [She has not] done anything wrong" (138), a belief to which Kabuo responds "[she has not] done anything illegal...wrong is a different matter" (138). Kabuo is right; Etta does not decide and act according to a sense of right and wrong, she acts according to "a thin veneer of cheap" (301) reason. Her attempt at justification is that there is little economic sense in selling the seven acres to Zenhichi Miyamoto so that when his eldest son Kabuo reaches the age of twenty he may be a landowner. While she does truly care about money, in both this particular instance and in general, it is not, as she asserts, her main concern and source of opposition against the sale. Her reason for such is as abominably simple as racism. Without any evidence to support this, and actually only evidence to the contrary, Etta is distrustful of Zenhichi. As her husband Carl Senior points out, he and his family are hard workers, quiet and neat, but Etta hears none of it because she has already decided, rather than determined, what kind of people the Miyamotos are, just by the color of their skin. Etta employs racism and hate in her assessments, but because of her complete lack of reason, she is unwilling and incapable of recognizing herself as a deplorable, irrational woman.

San Pedro Island is a place full of unspoken hate. No one ever says anything about the discrepancy between the treatment of the white and Japanese citizens, but everyone knows it exists, and most encourage and enable it. They call this reasonable, as the “ Japs” cannot be trusted. Most islanders think it perfectly logical to quarantine all Japanese persons living in America because they look like the enemy, and therefore they might actually be. Just as there is no reason behind the internment camps, there is no reason behind the murder trial of Kabuo Miyamoto. He is there because of racism and the complete absence of rationale that allows for it. Years before Carl Heine even dies, Etta Heine builds the foundation for the accusation of Kabuo by stealing the land owed to him, and she never repents in any way, or even realizes that she should. Luckily for Kabuo, Nels Gudmundsson is a man of reason, a man willing to look at the facts before developing theories rather than developing theories before examining all of the facts, and this is what makes him the best defense attorney for Kabuo. Reason, in the end, triumphs over irrationality.