

The Goodman Theatre – *Silk* – Student Guide: Web Version

**The Goodman Theatre**  
Student Subscription Series  
2004-2005 Season

**Student Guide**

***Silk***

by Alessandro Baricco  
*translated from Italian by Guido Waldman*

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# EXPLORING THE PRODUCTION

## About the Director

### Mary Zimmerman

Mary Alice Zimmerman was born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska, the daughter of two University of Nebraska professors. She moved to Chicago to pursue her education, and has received her Bachelor of Science, Master of Arts, and Ph.D. all from Northwestern University. In 2003, she received an honorary doctor of letters from her hometown University of Nebraska in Lincoln.

Mary has become a prolific adaptor and director of new works with a very unique artistic process. Of her process, she has said: “Sometimes when I start my plays I don’t know if they will be one act or two—and four weeks later they’re onstage. I have to explain to theatres that there won’t be a script until we are late in tech week. It blows their minds.” (www.broadway.com)

In 1998, Mary was awarded the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship, often called the “genius grant,” for her artistic effort. Her many other awards include over 20 Joseph Jefferson awards and the 2002 Tony for Best Director for her ground-breaking *Metamorphoses*. She is a member of the Lookingglass Theatre Company, an affiliate artist of Seattle Rep Theatre, a professor of performance studies at Northwestern, and an artistic associate at the Goodman.

Her other adaptation credits include *The Notebooks of Leonardo DaVinci*, *The Odyssey*, *The Secret in the Wings*, and *Arabian Nights*. She was director and co-librettist of the new opera *Galileo Galilei* with Phillip Glass. She has also directed *Measure for Measure*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Pericles*.

## About the Author

### Alessandro Baricco

Alessandro Baricco was born in Turin, Italy in 1958, the place that he also calls home today. He was a student of music and philosophy before becoming a writer, beginning his career in advertising and as an opera critic for national newspapers in Italy. He wrote several essays on music and successful scripts for Italian television before publishing his first novel in 1991. That work, titled *Castelli di Rabbia*, won him the Prix Medicis, a French high literary honor, as well as the Selezione Campiello prize in his native Italy. His 1993 work, *Ocean Sea*, won the Viareggio and Palazzo del Bosco prizes, both Italian honors.

Baricco’s most famous work by far is *Silk*, published in 1997. This piece has been translated into twenty-seven languages and read in almost every country around the world. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Baricco said: “I remember that when I went to Thailand for its publication they told me that, before *Silk*, only one other Italian book had been translated into Thai: *Pinnocchio*.” (www.newyorker.com)

In 1994, Baricco founded Scuola Holden, a private university devoted to creative writing in his hometown of Turin.

# Adaptation

*working from  
the page to  
get to the  
stage...*

**a·dapt** (a-däpt'): to make suitable to or fit for a specific use or situation.

## MARY ZIMMERMAN ON CREATING THEATRE

People sometimes ask me why I work this way, why not just write a script ahead of time. I can only answer that my imagination doesn't work that way; text is not separate from image for me. There are lots of other reasons as well, I think: fear of dramaturgy, fear of calculation. I have a really strong faith and belief in the unconscious. Working this way doesn't allow for much strategy. You pretty much have to let go, to get the hell out of the way of what is happening through you, almost in spite of you. You can't self-censor, you can't second-guess. There just is no time for that.

The pressure is so intense it just cracks you open and you go with your secret, strange ideas, because you are desperate and don't have time to think up any polite ones. In our work together, we have felt the palpable presence of something much larger than ourselves. It takes over, you just try and get out of the way. It arrives in the room. Everyone feels it.

*Interview with Berkeley Rep Theatre*  
[www.berkeleyrep.org](http://www.berkeleyrep.org)

.....  
**Things to Remember as you Adapt...**

- Use what you have as everything you need (what???) A chair can be a horse, a door, a castle, a tree - and so can a person.
- Think outside the box - you don't have to tell the story like you would if you were making a movie - things don't have to be realistic! How many creative ways can you use yourself and the things in your classroom to *represent* a forest?
- Have fun! Don't take yourself or the story too seriously. Let yourself play, create, and explore the text and the way you're putting it on its feet.

**THINK ABOUT IT...**

In creating *Silk*, Mary Zimmerman worked directly from the text of the novel in rehearsal everyday, using her creative intuition and experience in adapting pieces of literature not originally intended for the stage, along with the input of her talented group of actors and designers to create what you see in performance. What kind of challenges does this method of working present to the actors? To the designers? What about the rest of the theatre staff - people in marketing and press? How does the idea of working on a play this way - making the play up as you go along - make you feel?

# Adaptation

## Your Turn!

### **ACTIVITY: Adapting a text for the Stage**

***This activity can be done either as a full class, or in two or three small groups. A couple of ground rules - you can only use what you can find in the classroom or performance space, and this entire process should take no more than one class period.***

Sit in a circle and read the text aloud to each other, one person taking the first paragraph, the next person taking the next paragraph, and so on.

Next, choose a director. Even though this is an extremely collaborative process, the director is ultimately responsible for making the decisions about what will be included in the piece. Remember that not all of the really wonderful ideas you have will be able to fit in this one short performance!

Now, go back through the story and make lists of sounds you might here during this story (what does the forest sound like? The inn? The nobleman's house with his three daughters?) and different objects (props) you might encounter that are important.

Divide the story up into three scenes, making sure you include the things you think are most important in telling this story. Think in terms of the beginning, middle, and end when picking your scenes. Work from the lists of sounds and props you made. How can you include these things? Remember that the way you tell the story is completely up to you. Be creative! Tell the story in the most interesting way you can. It's more important to communicate the *feeling* or the *message* of the story than the literal events in the order they happen.

Working as a group, construct your three scenes. Use people to create sets and props, to play the characters, to provide sound effects, as costume pieces, etc. Make sure you can transition easily from one scene to the next. Use what you find around you and don't censor yourself - there is no such thing as a wrong answer when creating this piece.

Perform your world-premiere play! If you divided your class into groups, perform for one another and then discuss the differences in the way each group told the story.

*This process was adapted from a master class by Mary Zimmerman in Spring of 2004.*

### **SOURCE TEXT: Bearskin - by the Brothers Grimm**

A soldier, having deserted his regiment in the thick of battle, took refuge in the woods. However, the foes of war were soon replaced by the enemies cold, thirst, and hunger. With nowhere to turn for help, he was about to surrender to the powers of despair, when, without warning an awful spirit appeared before him. He offered the poor soldier great wealth, if he would but serve this uncanny master for seven years. Seeing no other escape from his misery, the soldier agreed.

The terms of the pact were quickly stated: For seven years the soldier was to wear only a bearskin robe, both day and night. Neither comb nor shears were to touch his hair and beard. He was not to wash, nor cut his nails, nor blow his nose. In return, the spirit would provide him with food, drink, and an endless supply of money.

The soldier, who by his very nature was not especially fond of cleanliness, entered into the agreement. He took lodgings in a village inn, and discovered soon enough that his great wealth was ample compensation for his strange looks and ill smell.

A nobleman frequented this inn. Impressed by Bearskin's lavish and generous expenditures, he presented him with a proposal. "I have three beautiful daughters," he said. "If the terms are right, you may choose any one of them for a bride."

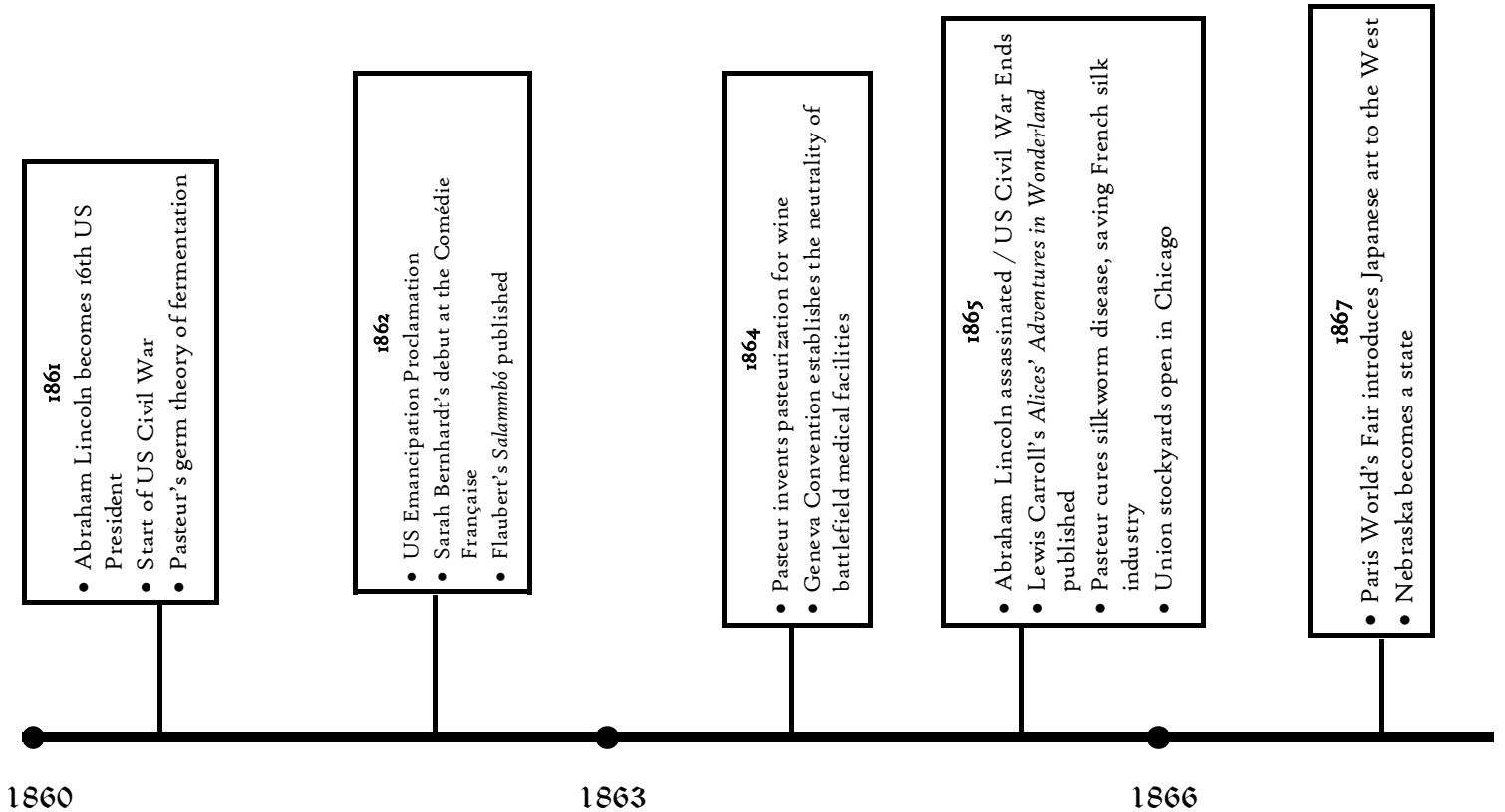
Bearskin named a sum that was acceptable to the nobleman, and the two set forth to the palace to make the selection. The two older daughters made no attempt to hide their repugnance of the strange suitor, but the youngest unhesitatingly accepted her father's will. Bearskin formalized the betrothal by removing a ring from his own finger and twisting it into two pieces. One piece he gave to his future bride; the other he kept. Saying that soon he would return, he departed.

The seven years were nearly finished, so a short time later Bearskin did indeed come back for his bride. Now freshly bathed, neatly shorn, elegantly dressed, and riding in a luxurious carriage, he was a suitor worthy of a princess. Identifying himself with his half of the twisted ring, he claimed his bride.

# EXPLORING THE CONTEXT

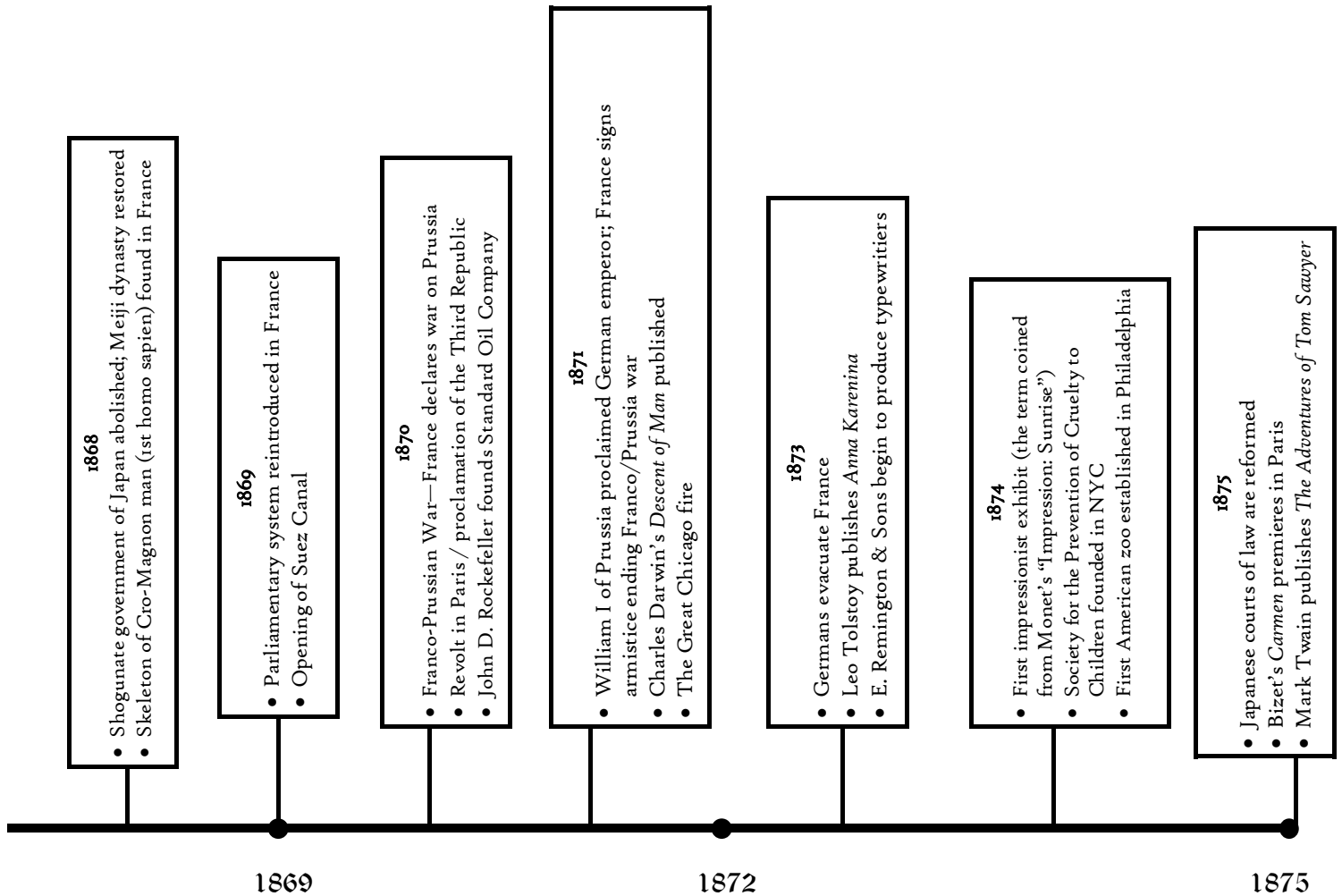


# International



**ACTIVITY:** *Hervé Joncour's Timeline*  
With the text of *Silk* as your guide, use the space under the timeline above to create a timeline of the major events that happen to Hervé during the story. Try to be as specific as you can!

# Timeline



**ACTIVITY:** YOUR Timeline

Think of the major events that have happened in your life so far. On a separate sheet of paper, construct a timeline for your journey. Make it as detailed as you want—adding pictures of yourself and your friends and family at different points in your life would be a great touch.

# JAPAN

## A COUNTRY OF RITES AND RITUALS

Americans have long been fascinated by the customs and views of Eastern culture. Here are just a few of the differences between Americans and the Japanese.



In the United States, people bathe to clean their bodies; in Japan, the bath is more about cleansing the soul.

There are several steps to taking a bath in Japan, and several rules as well.

- Wash your body completely in hot water *before* you get into the tub. Most public baths (yes, *public* baths) have a separate area designated for washing, shampooing hair, etc—usually with soap and other products provided for you. Remember *no suds in the tub!* So be sure to rinse completely.
- Next, get into the tub. The water will seem extremely warm to most Westerners—it may take some time to get used to.
- Don't let your towel (smaller than average US bath towels) dip into the tub water—good etiquette will keep the towel on your head while you soak. Remember that this kind of bathing is about revitalizing and relaxing.
- When it's time to get out, wash your body with soap once again in the washing area.
- Take another dip in the hot communal tub—just for a quick soak this time.
- Cleanse yourself once more with a hot shower—remember that this is a *ritual* and each of these steps in an important part of that practice.

In America	In Japan
Thinking of absolutes: right/wrong, black/white	Thinking of harmony: nothing is either one thing or the other
Individuality is most important	Belonging to a group is most important
Greeting with a handshake	Greeting with a bow
No running in the halls	Running, jumping, and playing catch between classes
Custodial staff cleans school bathrooms	Students clean school bathrooms
Emphasis on effort	Emphasis on perfection
Uncomfortable with silence	Uncomfortable with talking too much

### ACTIVITY: Recognizing your Rituals

In Japan, each day is full of rituals. These practices involve eating, sleeping, and interacting socially with others. Choose a day to examine your personal rituals. What things do you do about the same way every day? Some things to look at: getting ready for school, first thing when you get home, before you go to bed. Make a list and share your findings with your class.

### OTHER JAPANESE RITUALS AND CUSTOMS:

- **The Tea Ceremony (Sado)** : this is a ritualistic way of preparing and drinking tea. It is a complicated process, with many exacting steps, all of which have to be meticulously learned and performed.
- **Shoes and Slippers**: there are many rules of etiquette surrounding footwear in Japan. Before you enter someone's home, you should remove your shoes and change into slippers, provided at the door. If you need to use the bathroom while in their home, make sure to change into the special washroom slippers before entering and back into your house slippers afterwards.

Of course, these are just a few of the many customs in Japan. For more: [www.japan-guide.com](http://www.japan-guide.com)

### THINK ABOUT IT ...

The Japanese place a great deal of emphasis on ritual, but they place an even greater one on the family. Think about your family and its rituals. Do you sit down to have dinner together every night? Does everyone attend church or synagogue together? What about holidays and other special events - do you have any yearly traditions that are special to you? Make a list of all your family's traditions and rituals and discuss with your class.

# Vive la France!

a country rich in  
history and  
culture

Americans and the French are famous for their social clashes - but many times it's just a case of cultural differences and misunderstanding! Here are some of the cultural differences between the two countries.

In America	In France
Greeting friends with a hug	Greeting friends with a kiss on each cheek
Bar crawls and keg parties	One or two drinks, slowly sipped
Hands in your lap at the table	Hands always kept above the table
Nudity is taboo	Nudity is no big deal
Income taxes paid by everyone	Taxes paid by only about 52% due to a minimum income requirement
Americans want to be loved	The French want to be independent
You are judged by what you do	You are judged by what you are
Americans like what is simple	The French like what is complex

## Café Culture

“The café is a way of life,” says Catherine Mathivat, joint-director of one of the most famous ones on the left bank of Paris. Not just a place to grab a cup of coffee on the way to work each morning, the French café has been the meeting place of friends, revolutionaries, philosophers, famous authors, tourists, and compulsive people-watchers for centuries. It is a traditional part of life in France - an integral part of Parisian culture and ritual.

Most Parisian cafés serve more than just coffee and espresso drinks. Almost all of them have a full bar, many feature lunch and/or dinner, and all of them provide an inspirational environment for activities from reading your favorite French poetry to writing postcards to your family back home.

Famous artists who called French cafés their second home include Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

source: CNN.com

## Faire La Bise

In France, as mentioned above, the custom when greeting friends is kissing on the cheek, but even this custom has its variations across regions. The “traditional” method involved one kiss on each cheek, starting with the left. However, in some regions like Provence, there are three kisses, and in others parts of Southern France, the norm is four! The French call this “la bise.”

### ACTIVITY: Watch and Learn...

Choose a local coffee house in your neighborhood or near your school. With a notebook in hand, take an afternoon and people watch. What kind of interactions happen in Chicago coffee houses? How does this compare with the description of the French cafés? Are people mostly alone or do they come in groups? What are they doing - reading, writing, working on a computer? Keep a log of what you see, and jot down notes on anyone particularly interesting you encounter. Tell your class about what you see.

# Making Silk

*If you held it in your hands, it was like grasping nothing.*

*- Silk*

## ***A Brief History of Silk...***

The beginning of silk production (called *sericulture*) dates back to 2640 B.C. in ancient China. Legend has it that Si Ling-chi, the wife of the famous Yellow Emperor, not only invented the loom on which silk fabric is made, but also developed the process of “reeling” the cocoons into silk thread and encouraged the cultivation of mulberry trees, the main home and source of food for the silkworm.

The Chinese guarded the secret of silk-making with their lives for around 3000 years, the penalty for selling silkworms to foreigners being death until the sixth century A.D. It wasn't until visitors to China began smuggling the silkworm eggs out of the country that the West was able to produce its own silk. The first Europeans to do this were two former missionaries to China, sent by Byzantine Emperor Justinian, who were able to smuggle eggs to Constantinople in a hollow staff.

Although the manufacturing of European silk boomed, especially after the emergence of French looms and Louis XIV's trend-setting, silk-wearing minister, Asian countries still lay claim to the title of largest silk exporters. Over the past 30 years, China and Japan have together manufactured more than 50% of the world's supply. Despite the advent of man-made silk alternatives, this luxurious fabric is still in great demand in its purest, natural form.

sources: [www.silk-road.com](http://www.silk-road.com), [www.bartleby.com](http://www.bartleby.com)'s *Columbia Encyclopedia*

## **The Silkworm of Commerce - *Bombyx mori***

Although many different species can be used in the cultivation of silk, the *Bombyx mori* is the preferred species - so much so, that thousands of years of cultivating them has eliminated the insects from the wild, and the adults no longer fly. Rearing silkworms is a complex process that depends on knowledge of the species' lifecycle, outlined here:

- Larvae hatch from tiny, almost microscopic eggs and immediately begin feeding on mulberry leaves. In this stage for about a month, they will end up at 10,000 times their original body weight.
- During this initial growth, the larvae must be protected from loud noises, drafts, and strong smells - even the odor of sweat.
- Next, a mature larva attaches to a mulberry twig and begins spinning its cocoon in a constant, slow, circular motion - this process takes three to four days, with the larva never taking a break.
- Only enough cocoons to continue the species and provide the next generation of silkworms are allowed to hatch - about a week later. The moths hatch, mate, and the female begins laying eggs almost immediately and, after this exertion, dies around 24 hours later.

Sources: [www.silk-road.com](http://www.silk-road.com); *Columbia Encyclopedia*

## *How to Make Silk*

1. Sort silkworm cocoons according to color and texture
2. Boil the cocoons to kill the silkworm before it starts to hatch
3. Steam cocoons to soften the natural glue holding them together
4. Unwind the cocoons (very carefully) into filament
5. Twist strands of filament (between 4 and 18) together to make an even thread—this is called “raw” silk
6. Throw the raw silk—prepare it for the loom by twisting and doubling it to its desired thickness—singles, tram, or organzine
7. Boil the silk in soapsuds to remove any remaining gum
8. Dye the silk (either now, or once it has been woven into fabric)

source: *Columbia Encyclopedia*

# RETRACING THE JOURNEY: TRAVELING THE SILK ROAD

## *The Silk Road*

The term "Silk Road" refers to a network of trade routes which snaked around and through Europe and Asia beginning as early the first millennium B.C. and ending around the middle of the second millennium A.D. Much like Columbus and other explorers vying to discover the "New World" first, the travelers of the Silk Road were always looking for a faster, more efficient way to reach China and Japan and all the treasures they would find there. In addition to opening opportunities for trade, technology also spread from Asia to Europe along the Silk Road—things like gunpowder, the magnetic compass, the printing press, mathematics, and, of course, silk—were all innovations and the original "imports."

### **ACTIVITY:**

#### ***Tracing Hervé's Journey***

Open the novel to page 25 and re-read the paragraph detailing Joncour's first journey from France to Japan. Using other maps as reference (on the internet, in a world atlas, etc.), see if you can trace the route on a modern map of Eurasia on this page. Think about the *means of transportation* Hervé uses. How would you feel about taking such a long journey that way? Would you take a different route based on what you find about the geographical features of these two continents?

### ***Silk Road Explorers***

John of Plano Carpini 1245-1247

Marco Polo 1272 - 1295

Anthony Jenkinson 1557 - 1560

Adam Olearius 1635 - 1639

**Hint:** to find good pictures of Silk Road routes, go to:  
<http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/maps/maps.html>

### **ACTIVITY: Comparing Journeys**

Legendary explorers like Marco Polo took many different routes in their journeys along the Silk Road. Pick one of the explorers listed on this page and find out which route he took to get to treasures of the East. Compare your findings with your classmates'. How do the different routes compare to each other? How do they compare to the quest of Hervé Joncour?



## RETELLING THE JOURNEY: WRITING ABOUT TRAVEL

People travel for as many reasons as there are place to go - business, adventure, family visits - and yet no matter the reason for the journey, so many people have been compelled to write about their experiences. Writing about travel has evolved into a whole genre of non-fiction - it has its own section in many bookstore, and each year an anthology of the best American travel writing is released. And some works have had a profound influence on a culture, a time, or a place. (see the excerpt from *On the Road* on this page, a book which inspired a whole generation)

Websites about becoming a travel writer for fun and profit are all over the internet, as are class listings to learn the ins and outs of this particular type of literature. This writing includes guidebooks for people visiting new places, but hardly stops there. Much of the writing involves chronicling the personal experience of taking a trip to the exotic - or not so exotic - locale featured in the piece and can often talk more about the people met and seen along the way than any sites or attractions.

The writing can take many different forms. From diary entries either kept private or later published, to writing with the intent to publish - by telling a story more than just recounting details - to the advent of the modern-day internet travel blog, where people recount their adventures on-line for the general consumption.

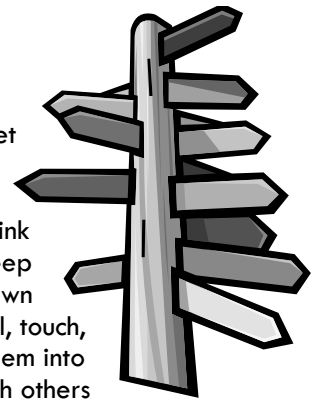
### **ACTIVITY: Your Travel Memoir**

Think about the farthest place you've traveled away from home. It could be to a foreign country, another state in the US, or simply to the other side of town.

Remember as many details as you can about your journey - your mode of transportation, how long it took to get there, what kind of things you saw, who you met along the way, who you took the trip with - as much as you can remember. Now take all these bits and pieces, and create your own piece of travel writing. It can be in the form of a journal, a short story, a poem, a song - anything you want! Gather all the pieces from your class together and "publish" your own travel writing anthology - make copies of the pieces, staple them together, give your book a cover, and give each member of your class one to keep!

### **ACTIVITY: Your Daily Journey**

What kind of journey do you take to get to school every day? To get home? Is it the same every day, or do you like to vary your route? Take a day and think of your daily commute as a *journey*. Keep a small notebook with you and write down any and everything you see, hear, smell, touch, even taste. Take your notes and turn them into a short story and share your journey with others in your class.



# EXPLORING THE TEXT



# VOCABULARY

*There is no less eloquence in the voice, in the eyes and in the air of a speaker than in his choice of words.*  
 ~ François de la Rochefoucauld (French classical author)

**ACTIVITIES: *Building your Vocabulary***

- Find each of the following words in the play—note the page number where you find each one.
- Write down what **you** think the word means on a separate sheet of paper—if you don't already know the word, use the context clues in the sentence you find it in to take a guess.
- Next, look the word up in the dictionary and write its definition below your definition. Make sure you keep track of the words that you defined correctly on your own!
- Try to find a way to use each word in a sentence in conversation—*maybe practice in class with a partner!*

adhering	inauguration
affected	indefectible
austerely	indifferent
betokened	intonation
brazier	licit
breach	limpid
clandestine	pervaded
conceded	propitious
consulate	quiescence
craven	rectified
dapper	retinue
descry	scrupulously
divulged	scrutinized
elusive	solemnity
epidemic	steppe
fomented	unassailable
ideogram	unqualified
imperial	vouchsafe

# Cast of Characters

*Though many characters populate the world of *Silk* in the forms of villagers and fellow travelers, only six are considered primary characters.*

## In France

**Hervé Joncour**  
*“Bought & sold silkworms for a living”*

**Hélène Joncour**  
*“His wife”*

**Baldabiou**  
*“The man who changed Hervé’s life”*

**Madame Blanche**  
*“She’s rich. And she’s Japanese.”*

## In Japan

**Hara Kei**  
*“The most elusive man in Japan”*

**The Woman in Japan**  
*“Her eyes did not have an Oriental slant”*

### ACTIVITY:

#### *Casting Call*

After reading the text of the novel, whom would you cast in these six roles? Make a cast list using well-known actors you think would be best suited to the roles.

### ACTIVITY: *Character Descriptions*

When someone writes a play, he or she will often give short descriptions of the characters at the front of the script or in the stage directions when the character first appears onstage. These can be as simple as stating the character’s age, or can provide a brief outline of important traits, ticks, or even a specific look. Here’s an example from Eugene O’Neill’s *A Moon for the Misbegotten*:

**JOSIE** is twenty-eight. She is so oversize for a woman that she is almost a freak - five feet eleven in her stockings and weighs around a hundred and eighty. Her sloping shoulders are broad, her chest deep with large, firm breasts, her waist wide but slender... But there is no mannish quality about her. She is all woman.

Next to the character names below, write the character description that you would put at the beginning of a script if you were writing a play based on this novel. Be specific, but keep it short

Hervé Joncour \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Hélène, his wife \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Baldabiou \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Hara Kai \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Madame Blanche \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The Woman in Japan \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### THINK ABOUT IT...

In *Silk*, the author - like most fiction writers - uses narration to tell a good chunk of the story. How do you think this stage adaptation will handle that part of the story? Would you include a Narrator character? What qualities would this person have? Would it be a male or female role?

Here are some plays that use a “narrator” character - you can use them as reference when thinking about this question:

**Our Town** - the character of the Stage Manager orchestrates the events in the play

**Into the Woods** - called simply “The Narrator”

**Vienez Carre** - Tennessee Williams uses an older version of the main character to drive the play’s action

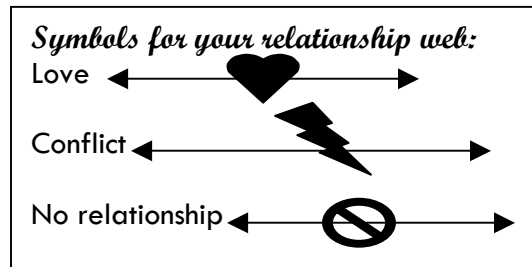
**How I Learned to Drive** - the main character, Li’l Bit, is both a participant in the scenes and an outside voice commenting on them

# Relating Characters

## Determining Relationships Among Characters

### ACTIVITY: *Find the Love (and the Conflict)*

From the list of characters below, and on a separate piece of paper, construct a “relationship web” showing what kind of relationship each character has with the others. Start with the basics—is there primarily love or conflict between the two people? With that decision as your base, choose three relationships to analyze in more detail. Write at least one paragraph on each relationship, then discuss your interpretation of these relationships with your class. How do people see the same relationship differently?



**Characters:** Hervé Joncour, Hélène Joncour, Baldabiou, Madame Blanche, Hara Kei, The Woman in Japan, The Mayor, The Dutch Smuggler, The Boy, Verdun (café owner), Silk mill workers, Hara Kei's villagers

# Quoting Characters

What does what we say tell others about who we are?

### ACTIVITY: *Say what?*

Look at the following quotes - not taken from the play - and decide which of the characters you think would say or feel the way the quote suggests. Choose three quotes you feel strongly about and, on a separate piece of paper, write one or two paragraphs detailing why you think that character would agree with the quote. Compare your answers with the rest of the class. How similar were everyone's choices? Debate and defend your choices during the discussion.

### *Quotes*

Life on the planet is born of woman. - Adrienne Rich

The world is round and the place which may seem like the end may also be the beginning. - Ivy Baker Priest

We must learn our limits. We are all something, but none of us are everything. - Blaise Pascal

People living deeply have no fear of death. - Anais Nin

I love my past. I love my present. I'm not ashamed of what I've had, and I'm not sad because I have it no longer. - Colette

You must do the things you think you cannot do. - Eleanor Roosevelt

Meeting you was fate, becoming your friend was a choice, but falling in love with you I had no control over. - Anonymous

Life is a quest and love a quarrel. - Edna St. Vincent Millay

I accept chaos. I am not sure whether it accepts me. - Bob Dylan

We create our fate every day we live. - Henry Miller

You often meet your fate on the road you take to avoid it. - French proverb

### **THINK ABOUT IT...**

Which of the quotes on this page might be ones that you would connect to yourself? Put a star next to each thought you feel matches your personality and then think about why you associated with certain ones. What does this tell you about yourself? How does it make you feel about characters in *Silk* who think and feel the same way you do?

# SPEAKING IN COLOR

*Mere color, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form,  
can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways.*

*- Oscar Wilde*

In *Silk*, Baricco pays special attention to colors that appear in the world of his book. Each color, whether we realize it or not, evokes a different emotion, and adds to the richness of our experience. But what do colors mean, and what are they really saying?

## ACTIVITY: Color Quiz

Think about the colors that you associate with the following things. Work quickly through the list and **follow your first instinct**. Compare your answers to your classmates' responses.

HAPPY: \_\_\_\_\_

PURE: \_\_\_\_\_

GOOD LUCK: \_\_\_\_\_

GOOD-TASTING: \_\_\_\_\_

DIGNITY: \_\_\_\_\_

POWER: \_\_\_\_\_

DEPENDABLE: \_\_\_\_\_

BAD LUCK: \_\_\_\_\_

SEXINESS: \_\_\_\_\_

MOURNING: \_\_\_\_\_

FAVORITE COLOR: \_\_\_\_\_

LEAST FAVORITE: \_\_\_\_\_

Now think about *why* you chose the colors you chose, and how you feel when your colors either match or oppose the “average” response. Discuss this in class. How strongly do you feel about the colors you chose? Why?

## ACTIVITY: Tracking Colors

Go through the text of *Silk* and mark every time color is mentioned. Then, look at the list of color meanings below and decide if you think the author is using the “traditional” color meaning, or going against it. How do you feel about the meanings given to colors on this page? Do you agree with them? Why or why not?

RED: energy, war, danger, strength, power, passion, love, excitement  
LIGHT RED: joy, sexuality, sensitivity  
PINK: romance, love, simple & uncomplicated emotions  
DARK RED: vigor, willpower, rage, anger, courage, longing, malice  
BROWN: stability, earth, roots, giving of life, wealth, security  
ORANGE: joy, sunshine, enthusiasm, creativity, attraction, success  
DARK ORANGE: deceit, distrust  
RED-ORANGE: desire, sexual passion, pleasure, domination  
GOLD: prestige, wisdom, wealth  
YELLOW: happiness, energy, dishonesty, cowardice, betrayal, caution  
DULL YELLOW: decay, sickness, jealousy  
LIGHT YELLOW: intellect, freshness, joy  
GREEN: nature, growth, freshness, fertility, optimism, good luck, envy  
DARK GREEN: ambition, greed, jealousy  
YELLOW-GREEN: sickness, cowardice  
AQUA: emotional healing  
OLIVE GREEN: peace  
BLUE: trust, loyalty, faith, confidence, intelligence, heaven, safety  
LIGHT BLUE: Health, healing, tranquility, understanding  
DARK BLUE: knowledge, power, integrity  
PURPLE: royalty, power, luxury, wealth, wisdom, creativity, mystery, courage  
LIGHT PURPLE: romance, nostalgia  
DARK PURPLE: gloom  
WHITE: purity, goodness, innocence, virginity, crispness, tidiness, sterility  
BLACK: power, elegance, formality, death, evil, corruption, emptiness



# *Letters of Love*

*...Until in the end I shall kiss you on the heart, because I want you,  
 I shall bite the skin that throbs on your heart, because I want you,  
 and with your heart between my lips you will be mine, truly, with  
 my mouth in your heart you will be mine, forever, if you do not  
 believe me open your eyes, my master and beloved, and look at me,  
 it is I. Who will ever be able to erase this moment that is happening?  
 and this body of mine no longer with any silk, your hands touching it,  
 your eyes looking at it...*

-SILK

**THINK ABOUT IT...**

The love letter included in the text of *Silk* is intense - and it's supposed to be. All love letters are! Each word is carefully chosen to produce a specific effect - to paint a very detailed picture. The letter found in *Silk* sensuously explores a romantic relationship, but not all love letters spring from these types of feelings. A love letter can be written to a friend, a parent, a hero - anyone that you want to express strong feelings toward - anyone that you love in any way. What's important in a love letter is your choice of words.

**ACTIVITY: In Other Words**

Look at the excerpt from the letter found in *Silk*. Then "translate" the text into plain language. Example: "my master and beloved" translates to something like "my boyfriend." See which version you like better. Which one is more interesting?

**ACTIVITY: This is Dedicated to the One I Love...**

Now it's your turn to write a love letter of your own. But, there are some rules! This particular love letter should be to someone with whom you are *not involved romantically*. This could be a parent, a guardian, an aunt, uncle, or grandfather. You can write to your best friend, your favorite elementary school teacher - anyone that you have a strong emotional connection with and, preferably, that you don't always take the time to tell. Use the space here for a first draft, then you can revise your letter by yourself or with the help of a trusted friend or classmate. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, re-write your refined letter. You can either send your letter to the person, or hold on to it yourself, as a reminder of how you feel.

*Love has many definitions...*

- strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties
- the object of attachment, devotion, or admiration
- unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another
- attraction based on sexual desire : affection and tenderness felt by lovers

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Having trouble getting started? Here are some suggestions: Remind the person of a wonderful day you spent together, tell him or her about a time he/she was really there for you when you needed it, even in a seemingly small way, or tell him/her about a life lesson that you learned from being together...

# MOTHER TONGUE

know what you're saying and why you're saying it

## A Brief Pronunciation Guide for *SILK*

Hervé Joncour: AIR-vey ZJON - coor  
Flaubert: flow - BEAR  
Hélène: EL- en  
Lavilledieu: lah - vill - DYOO **meaning "Village of God"**  
Baldabiau: BALL - da - b'YOU  
pébrine: peh - BREEN  
Hara Kei: HAH - ra - KAI  
Madame Blanche: mah - DAHM buh - LAHNCH  
billet-doux: BEE-yay DOO **meaning a love letter or note**  
hélas: eh - LAHS **meaning alas, unfortunately**

*Barely had he passed the last houses in the village when a man ran up to overtake and stop him. He said something to him in an excited, peremptory tone of voice...*

*Hervé Joncour did not speak Japanese and was unable to understand the man. What he did grasp was that Hara Kei wanted to see him. - *Silk**

## Basic Japanese

Good morning *Ohayou* o-HI-yo  
Hello *Konnichiwa* koh - NEE - chee - wah  
Good bye *Sayonara* sigh - o - NAH - rah  
How are you ? *O genki desu ka* oh GEHN - ki deh - SOO - kah  
I am fine *Genki desu* **GEHN - ki DEH - soo**  
Yes *Hai* hi  
Thank you *Arigatou* ahr - ee - **GAH - toh**  
Please *Onegai shimasu* oh - nee - **GUY shee - MAH - soo**

*Silk* deals with two conflicting cultures with two very different languages - both of which are very different from English.

## Crash Course in French

**Hello** *Bonjour* **bohn - ZHOOR**  
**Thank you** *Merci* **mehr - SEE**  
**Please** *S'il-vous-plait* **seel voo play**  
**Yes** *Oui* **wee**  
**Goodbye** *Au revoir* **oh reh-VROIR**  
**How are you doing?** *Comment allez-vous?* **KOH - mon TAH - lay VOO?**  
**Where is the bathroom please?** *Où sont les toilettes, s'il-vous-plait?* **oo SAHN lay TWAH - lett, seel voo play?**

### ACTIVITY: Speaking the Language

Look at the simple French and Japanese words and phrases on this page. Practice speaking and listening to them. With a partner, have a short "conversation" with one of you speaking in Japanese and the other in French. Then switch. How does speaking two different languages make you feel about the conversation?

### THINK ABOUT IT...

However odd it may be, there is often a tendency to speak louder and more slowly to people who don't speak your language, thinking that this will somehow help them to understand. Why do you think this is? Has this ever happened to you? How did/would it make you feel? Have you ever done this to someone else? Discuss this phenomenon in class.

### ACTIVITY: Listening to Silence

Go through the text of *Silk* and highlight each time the author mentions the presence of silence in a scene. What is the purpose of the silence? What is Baricco trying to "say" with it?

In a small group, choose one of these scenes with silence to perform for the class. How do you communicate the events and feelings of the scene without using words or sounds? Discuss each group's work in class.

# RESPONDING TO THE PLAY

## *Study Guide Questions*

1. Why do people adapt literature for theatre and film? What are the advantages and disadvantages of telling a story as a play versus as a book?
2. Why do people travel? Why did explorers and traders risk their lives and stay away from their families for such long periods of time to travel the Silk Road?
3. Why would the Chinese people work so hard to keep the process of silk making secret?
4. Why do people write so much on the topic of travel?
5. Why are rites and rituals important? Which of your own rituals is most important to you?
6. Why do you think people from different countries often have misconceptions about each other's countries and cultures?
7. Why do some playwrights put character descriptions at the beginning of the script? How is this different from describing a character in a novel or short story?
8. Why do you think color has so much impact on people? Which colors have the most impact on you and your daily life?
9. Why do people write love letters? What's the most important thing to remember when composing a love letter?
10. TRUE or FALSE: It doesn't matter if you write a response letter to one of the artists involved with *Silk* - no one reads them anyway.  
(*hint: the answer does **not** start with a T*)



# *Text Questions*

## **Chapter 1**

- What had Hervé Joncour's father pictured for him as a brilliant career?
- What did Hervé Joncour end up choosing as a career?
- In what year does the story begin?
- How old is Hervé Joncour at the beginning of the story?
- What does Hervé Joncour buy and sell?

## **Chapter 2**

- Where does Hervé Joncour live?
- What is the name of the town?
- What is Hervé's wife name?
- How many children do Hervé and his wife have?

## **Chapter 3**

- Why does Hervé travel to Syria and Egypt?
- Which month of the year would Hervé set out each year?
- When would Hervé return to Lavilledieu?
- What would Hervé do for the rest of the year?

## **Chapter 4**

- Who was Jean Berbeck?
- How did Hervé feel about achieving true wealth?
- If men either participate in or observe their life, what type of man is Hervé?

## **Chapter 5**

- What was the name of the silkworm epidemic?

## **Chapter 6**

- Who is Baldabiou?
- What did he bring to the mayor's office?
- What did Baldabiou build by the river?
- What did he bring to the mayor's office the second time?
- What kind of town did Lavilledieu become?

## **Chapter 7**

- How old was Hervé when Baldabiou met him?
- Who is Hervé's father?
- How did Baldabiou change Hervé's life?
- Where does Hervé go on his first trip?
- How did he travel to this country?
- What did he see on the evening of the third day?

## **Chapter 8**

- What is the "Verdun"?
- Where is Baldabiou suggesting that Hervé go to buy silkworms?

## **Chapter 9**

- How did Japan operate for 200 years?
- What happened to people who emigrated?
- What did Commodore Matthew C. Perry do?
- What had the Japanese never seen?

## **Chapter 10**

- What legend kept resurfacing about Japan?
- What did it feel like to hold a veil woven out of Japanese silk thread?
- Why are the people at the bar concerned about sending Hervé to Japan?
- What was concerned a criminal offence by the Japanese?
- What are the gentlemen of Lavilledieu willing to do in Japan that they would never do in France?

## **Chapter 11**

- Where is Japan according to Baldabiou?
- What interesting detail are we given about Héléne?

## **Chapter 12**

- How many countries does Hervé Joncour travel through before reaching Japan?
- What are the different modes of transportation that he uses?
- Who does Hervé Joncour buy the eggs from?
- Who wants to see Hervé Joncour as he is about to leave Japan?

## **Chapter 13**

- What is Hara Kei wearing?
- Who is lying beside him?
- What is she compared to?
- What languages does Hara Kei speak?

## **Chapter 14**

- What happens, that "though nothing in itself, seemed quite momentous?"
- What is striking about the young girl's eyes?
- What are Hervé and Hara Kei drinking?

## **Chapter 15**

- What does the young girl reach out and grab?

## **Chapter 16**

- What has Hervé Joncour been talking about all this time?
- What type of eggs is Hervé actually carrying?
- Why is Hara Kei laughing?
- What is the last thing that Joncour sees as he leaves Hara Kei?

## **Chapter 17**

- How does Hervé Joncour describe the end of the world to Baldabiou?
- What gift does Hervé bring back to Héléne?
- Why doesn't Héléne ever wear it?

## **Chapter 18**

- What do the eggs attach to?
- What does Baldabiou decide to build?
- What is strange about his request to the Spanish architect?
- What does Joncour decide to build?

# *Text Questions*

## **Chapter 18 (con't)**

- What makes Joncour happy?
- What is a “vision of peace” for Joncour?

## **Chapter 19**

- What does Joncour wait two days for in Shirakawa?
- What does Joncour find at the end of the path?
- What is the woman wearing?
- What does Joncour drop beside the orange dress?

## **Chapter 20**

- How many days does Hervé Joncour stay with Hara Kei?
- What two rituals are performed daily?
- Who is the white man who comes to the village?

## **Chapter 21**

- Why do local people watch the birds fly?
- What reigns around Hara Kei, always?

## **Chapter 22**

- What does Joncour see in front of Hara Kei’s house?
- What does Hara Kei’s house seem flooded in?
- What kind of stage does Joncour encounter?

## **Chapter 23**

- What is unusual about this bath ritual?
- What is placed in his palm?

## **Chapter 24**

- What do the silkworms in Joncour’s bag represent?
- What does Hélène say to Joncour upon his return?

## **Chapter 25**

- What does Joncour do on the forty-second day?
- What is peculiar about the way Baldabiou plays billiard?
- When will Baldabiou leave town?
- What does Joncour need?
- Who does Baldabiou suggest he go find?

## **Chapter 26**

- What does Hervé tell his wife?
- What is strange about the room where Hervé Joncour is kept waiting?

## **Chapter 27**

- What color is Madame Blanche’s kimono?
- What does she wear on her fingers?
- What does Joncour notice about Madame Blanche’s skin?
- What does “blanche” mean?
- What does the note say?

## **Chapter 28**

- What would people be wearing after having visited Madame Blanche?

## **Chapter 29**

- What does Hélène hope will happen on the Riviera?
- What does Hervé hear himself murmuring?
- What is strange about this, if anything?

## **Chapter 30**

- What news comes from Japan?
- What question does it raise for the people of Lavilledieu?
- What does Hervé Joncour say?

## **Chapter 31**

- What does Hervé find when he arrives to Japan?

## **Chapter 32**

- What does Hervé finally see on the horizon?

## **Chapter 33**

- Whom does Hervé find in front of the empty aviary?
- What does Hara Kei say to Hervé about the woman?

## **Chapter 34**

- How do Hervé and the woman in Japan communicate throughout the entire evening?
- Who does Hervé find when he gets home?

## **Chapter 35**

- What happens in this scene?

## **Chapter 36**

- What is Hervé desperately looking for in Hara Kei’s deserted house?

## **Chapter 37**

- What does Hervé Joncour do?

## **Chapter 38**

- Why does Joncour remain in the carriage?

## **Chapter 39**

- Whose house does Joncour buy?
- What is he searching for there?
- What do Joncour and Baldabiou talk about?
- What is Joncour working on?
- Why does Joncour want to build an aviary?

## **Chapter 40**

- What happens at the birthday party?
- What is Joncour’s reaction?

## **Chapter 41**

- What is Joncour’s reaction to everything Baldabiou is telling him?
- What does he decide to do?

## **Chapter 42**

- Who is the one person that Baldabiou cannot lie to?
- What does Hélène find the strength to say on the last evening?
- How is her voice described?

# *Text Questions*

## **Chapter 43**

- How many journeys to Japan had Hervé been on in 1864?
- What does Joncour find when he arrives to Japan?

## **Chapter 44**

- Who appears amidst the ruins?
- What does he give to Hervé Joncour?
- Where does Hervé Joncour end up following the little boy to?

## **Chapter 45**

- What does Joncour see from the top of the hill?

## **Chapter 46**

- How is Hara Kei's interaction with Hervé different from before?
- What is Hara Kei's reaction to Joncour's gold?

## **Chapter 47**

- What is dangling from the cages?

## **Chapter 48**

- What does Joncour see hanging from the tree?
- What is a "billet-doux"?
- What is Hara Kei suggesting?
- What does Hara Kei do to Joncour?
- What are Hara Kei's parting words?

## **Chapter 50**

- What happened to the grubs?

## **Chapter 51**

- What is left unsaid in this chapter?
- Why does Héléne tell herself not to run away?

## **Chapter 52**

- What is Hervé's idea?
- What is built out of wood and metal?
- What are people saying about Joncour?

## **Chapter 53**

- What does Hervé finally tell Baldabiou?

## **Chapter 54**

- What happens in Japan in 1866?
- What happens in 1869?
- What happens in 1884?

## **Chapter 55**

- Where does the letter come from?
- What language is it written in?

## **Chapter 56**

- What happens on the morning of the fifth day?

## **Chapter 57**

- What is different about the Russian pianist?

## **Chapter 58**

- What is Madame Blanche wearing?
- What does Madame Blanche make Hervé promise?

## **Chapter 59**

- What is the letter about?
- How does the letter end?
- What does Madame Blanche give Hervé, once she is done reading the letter?

## **Chapter 60**

- Why does Hervé go down to the lake and stare?

## **Chapter 61**

- What happens on 16 June 1871?
- Where does Baldabiou say he will be going?
- What is the odd thing that Héléne does?
- What is the name of Michel Lariot's third daughter?

## **Chapter 62**

- What is the weather like the day that Héléne dies?
- What single word is carved on Héléne's grave?

## **Chapter 63**

- What does Hervé find on his wife's grave?

## **Chapter 64**

- Where is Madame Blanche now living?
- What is Madame Blanche wearing?
- Who wrote the letter?
- What does Madame Blanche say about Héléne's voice?
- Who had said the same thing previously?

## **Chapter 65**

- What single pleasure does Hervé Joncour start allowing himself?
- What is the last visual image of the novel?