

# Southfield Public Library

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## *Hiroshima by John Hersey*

*Discussion questions used at SPL -- November 2010*

1. Was this a hard book for you to read due to the content? How did it affect you?
2. How would you describe Hersey's tone of voice in telling the stories of the six survivors?
3. Did that seem to work for you? Would you have preferred a different style?
4. We learned the stories of six people, **Toshinki Sasaki**, who worked in the personnel office, **Dr. Masakazu Fujii**, who had his own hospital, **Hatsuyo Nakamura**, the tailor's widow and mother of three, **Father Wilhelm Kleinshorge**, a Jesuit missionary, **Dr. Terufumi Sasaki**, a young doctor and the **Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto**.
5. Who seemed to deal with the tragedy the best for you? Who had the hardest time? What did they have in common? How were they different?
6. Why do you think they survived when others in the same situation did not?
7. In the first days after the bomb was dropped, what astonished you the most?
8. Hersey seemed to credit much of the actions – waiting patiently, not too much rioting, helping others - of the people on their culture – from what we've read and what you know, how would you describe the Japanese people?
9. How did the role of family structure play out in the people we read about?
10. How were the children affected? Did they understand the situation?
11. Do you think their reactions would be the same today?
12. What did you think of the reaction people had when their emperor came on the radio?
13. How do you think Americans would have reacted?
14. Can we compare this bombing in any way to Pearl Harbor? (1178 injured, 2400 killed) To 9/11? (2700 dead, 215 injured, 460 emergency responders killed or injured)
15. Hersey's wrote about how "a surprising number of the people of Hiroshima remained more or less indifferent about the ethics of the bomb." Why do you think that was? Should they have been angrier about it? What do you think the rest of the world thought about it as an ethical issue?

16. The last part of the book, *The Aftermath*, was added almost 40 years later. How did knowing the fates of our six people change your perception on the bombing? Does it make the book better?
17. Were you surprised that Father K became a Japanese citizen? Were you surprised that these people were able to lead relatively normal lives after the immense changes they went through?
18. What did you think of Rev. **Tanimoto** going on *This is Your Life*? Was that a good thing? What do you think his feelings were on meeting the pilot who dropped the bomb? What do you think the pilot was thinking?
19. What do you think Hersey's purpose was in writing this book? Did he interject his own feelings in this book?
20. Do you think dropping the bombs was justifiable? Do you think if the Japanese had had the same capabilities, they would have dropped it on America or someone else?
21. Do you think there should be some things that are off limits in a war? Do you think the world could agree on those things?
22. There were some moments that stood for me . . . the man who met his wife and they went their separate ways, Mr. Fukai who was rescued but went back into the burning city, how Fr. K no longer cared about blood. Could you understand why they did the things they did?

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## *General discussion questions*

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author's writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author's use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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## *Hiroshima*

*Some background information taken from The Avalon Project*

[www.valon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/mp10.asp](http://www.valon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/mp10.asp)

## The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

### Total Casualties

There has been great difficulty in estimating the total casualties in the Japanese cities as a result of the atomic bombing. The extensive destruction of civil installations (hospitals, fire and police department, and government agencies) the state of utter confusion immediately following the explosion, as well as the uncertainty regarding the actual population before the bombing, contribute to the difficulty of making estimates of casualties. The Japanese periodic censuses are not complete. Finally, the great fires that raged in each city totally consumed many bodies.

The number of total casualties has been estimated at various times since the bombings with wide discrepancies. The Manhattan Engineer District's best available figures are:

TABLE A: Estimates of Casualties

	Hiroshima	Nagasaki
Pre-raid population	255,000	195,000
Dead	66,000	39,000
Injured	69,000	25,000
<b>Total Casualties</b>	<b>135,000</b>	<b>64,000</b>

The relation of total casualties to distance from X, the center of damage and point directly under the air-burst explosion of the bomb, is of great importance in evaluating the casualty-producing effect of the bombs. This relationship for the total population of Nagasaki is shown in the table below, based on the first-obtained casualty figures of the District:

TABLE B: Relation of Total Casualties to Distance from X

Distance from X, feet	Killed	Injured	Missing	Total Casualties	Killed per square mile
0 - 1,640	7,505	960	1,127	9,592	24,700
1,640 - 3,300	3,688	1,478	1,799	6,965	4,040
3,300 - 4,900	8,678	17,137	3,597	29,412	5,710
4,900 - 6,550	221	11,958	28	12,207	125

6,550 - 9,850	112	9,460	17	9,589	20
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No figure for total pre-raid population at these different distances were available. Such figures would be necessary in order to compute per cent mortality. A calculation made by the British Mission to Japan and based on a preliminary analysis of the study of the Joint Medical-Atomic Bomb Investigating Commission gives the following calculated values for per cent mortality at increasing distances from X:

TABLE C: Percent Mortality at Various Distances

<b>Distance from X, in feet</b>	<b>Percent Mortality</b>
0 - 1000	93.0%
1000 - 2000	92.0
2000 - 3000	86.0
3000 - 4000	69.0
4000 - 5000	49.0
5000 - 6000	31.5
6000 - 7000	12.5
7000 - 8000	1.3
8000 - 9000	0.5
9000 - 10,000	0.0

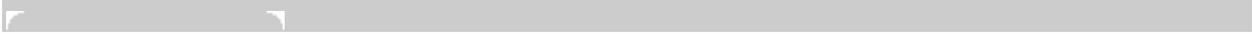
It seems almost certain from the various reports that the greatest total number of deaths were those occurring immediately after the bombing. The causes of many of the deaths can only be surmised, and of course many persons near the center of explosion suffered fatal injuries from more than one of the bomb effects. The proper order of importance for possible causes of death is: burns, mechanical injury, and gamma radiation. Early estimates by the Japanese are shown in D below:

TABLE D: Cause of Immediate Deaths

<b>Hiroshima</b>	
<b>Cause of Death</b>	<b>Percent of Total</b>
Burns	60%
Falling debris	30
Other	10

<b>Nagasaki</b>	
<b>Cause of Death</b>	<b>Percent of Total</b>
Burns	95%
Falling debris	9

Flying glass	7
Other	7



# Before...After





<http://www.nucleardarkness.org/hiroshima/>

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## About the author....

The author, John Hersey, was born in China in 1914 and spent the next 9 years there until his family returned to America. He worked as a journalist for several years after studying at Yale and Cambridge. During World War II, Hersey served as a *Time* magazine correspondent and later as a senior editor for *Life*. He was famous for his ability to discuss on an individual level the tragedies of war. He won the Pulitzer Prize for *A Bell for Adano*, a novel portraying the Allied Forces' occupation of Italy. His non-fictional writings on the war include *Men on Batman* (1942) and *Into the Valley* (1943), both about battles in the Pacific arena. "Hiroshima," a factual account of atomic bomb survivors based on interviews, was published in 1946. His next major project after "Hiroshima" was a historical novel, *The Wall*, about the Nazi destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. The novel was critically acclaimed and is considered the first American-written novel dealing with the Holocaust.

His account of six survivors in Hiroshima was first published as an article in *The New Yorker* magazine in August of 1946, one year after the bomb was dropped and World War II ended. *The New Yorker* devoted that entire issue to "Hiroshima," preempting any other articles or cartoons. The issue met with a tremendous response in the United States and sold out within hours. Numerous newspapers and magazines commented on Hersey's article, and the full text was read on the radio in the U.S. and abroad. The Book of the Month Club even sent a free copy in book form to all its members. "Hiroshima" was published as a book later that same year.

A new edition was compiled forty years later, when Hersey returned to Japan to chronicle what had happened to the six main characters in that time. Hersey wrote his findings in a new final chapter, "The Aftermath," and this edition was published in 1985. "Hiroshima" remains in print and is considered a classic of World War II storytelling.

## HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The book starts on August 6, 1945, the day the first atomic bomb was dropped on human beings, and ends in 1985, with updates on the lives of the six survivors chronicled in the book. When the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and a few days later on Nagasaki, Japan had been at war with the United States for three and a half years. It was by then a losing fight for Japan, as resources and soldiers had been severely depleted and the civilian population was living on meager rations. The atomic bomb attacks were a final devastation to Japan's war effort, and it surrendered unconditionally only nine days after Hiroshima's destruction, on August 15, 1945.

For its part, the United States meant to use the atomic bomb as an extreme measure that would force Japan to give up its losing war. In World War II, Japan had waged a "total war," in which civilians were as dedicated and indoctrinated to the national cause as were soldiers. Everyone

had been taught that it was honorable to die for the Emperor, and families and communities were prepared to commit suicide rather than be taken as prisoners if the American forces were to invade. Faced with such stubborn resistance and wide-spread brainwashing, the U.S. leadership feared massive casualties on both sides if they were forced to wage a land war in Japan. To this day, the American government states this reason for its use of the atomic bomb on civilian populations.

After Japan surrendered, the U.S. set up an occupational government to purge military leaders and rebuild the country. For these first few post-war years, Americans were fascinated by their former enemies and very focused on how they could transform and revitalize Japan. It was in this environment that John Hersey's "Hiroshima" debuted. The U.S. public was eager for the information in this factual account of atomic bomb survivors.