

# THE MEMORY POLICE

a novel by **YOKO OGAWA**

with supplementary texts by **James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde, & Donte Collins**



## DESCRIPTION

On an unnamed island, objects are disappearing. Most of the inhabitants are oblivious, while those few imbued with the power to recall the lost objects live in fear of the draconian Memory Police, who are committed to ensuring that what has disappeared remains forgotten. When a young woman who is struggling to maintain her career as a novelist discovers that her editor is in danger from the Memory Police, she concocts a plan to hide him beneath her floorboards, clinging to her writing as the last way to preserve the past. *The Memory Police* is a surreal, provocative fable about the power of memory and the trauma of loss.

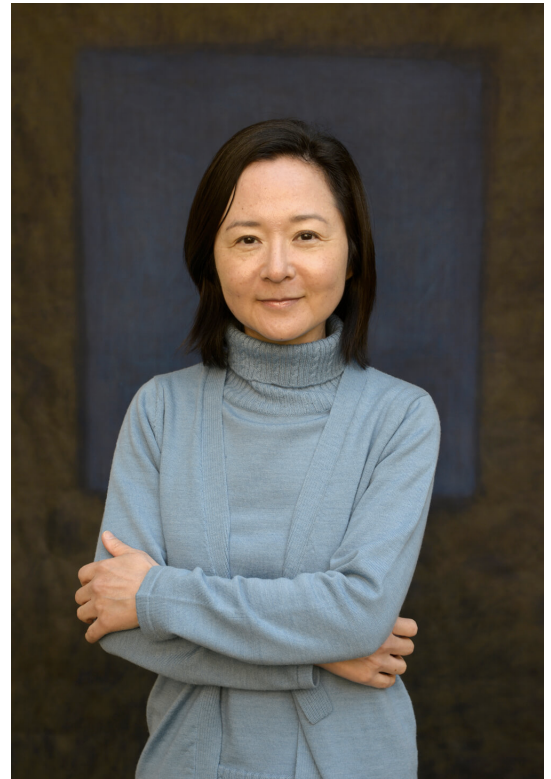
## DID YOU KNOW?

*The Memory Police* was a finalist for the 2019 National Book Award in Translation, and it is currently shortlisted for the 2020 Man Booker International Prize.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yoko Ogawa was born in Okayama, Japan in 1962. She attended Waseda University in Tokyo and began publishing her writing in 1988. She is the winner of numerous fiction prizes in Japan and worldwide, including the Akutagawa Prize, the Tanizaki Prize, the Shirley Jackson Award, and the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize. She lives in Hyogo with her husband and their son.

In an interview with Dr. Hayao Kawai, Ogawa explained why she feels compelled to write: "Stories are necessary for us to be able to come to terms with our fears and sorrows... finding something in nothing, which is essentially what telling a story is, is the only way to understand the existence of death. Only by having a story are people able to connect the body and soul, the outer and inner worlds, the conscious and unconscious, into one."



## ABOUT THE BOOK

In writing *The Memory Police*, Ogawa drew inspiration from her lifelong love of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which she has read many times over since she was a child. Anne Frank, a Dutch and German Jewish girl, was born in 1929. Together with her sister, her parents, and four others, Anne spent over two years hiding from the Nazis in "The Secret Annex," a cramped apartment concealed behind a bookcase in a building along the canals in Amsterdam. In March 1944, Anne wrote in her diary, "The brightest spot of all is that at least I can write down my thoughts and

feelings; otherwise I would be absolutely stifled." In August of that year, the inhabitants of the annex were captured by the SS. Anne died of typhus in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in February 1945, just two months before liberation. She was fifteen years old.

Many elements of Anne Frank's life in hiding are incorporated into *The Memory Police*. "Anne's heart and mind were so rich," commented Ogawa in a conversation with Motoko Rich. "Her diary proved that people can grow even in such a confined situation. And writing could give people freedom... I wanted to digest Anne's experience in my own way and then recompose it into my work."

## NEW IN TRANSLATION

Ogawa wrote *The Memory Police* in 1994, but it was only in 2014 that Stephen Snyder began work on the English translation. It was released in 2019, quickly earning international acclaim.

## SELECTION PROCESS:

A committee of students, faculty, and staff met this spring to discuss the all-school read. We considered over fifty nominated works of fiction, centering on the theme of **perseverance**. Committee members expressed enthusiasm about exploring a global perspective, considering a work in translation, and choosing an Asian or Asian-American author, an urge only deepened by concerns of prejudice erupting around the coronavirus. Given our campus climate this year, several students also mentioned that they hoped to find a text that addressed anti-Semitism. Ogawa's novel received the most votes, not only because it met these criteria, but because it drew readers in right away and seemed highly relatable to the attendant feelings of the pandemic.

As the national reckoning with police brutality has deepened this summer, Ogawa's allegory remains relevant, as it centers on policing and the fungible morality of law enforcement, as well as how ordinary people respond to injustice. However, we recognize that this connection is an abstract one, and we feel called to engage clearly and directly with racial justice as a community in this moment. We have assembled a short list of paratexts to generate meaningful dialogue between the allegorical elements of the novel and current issues of racism in America.

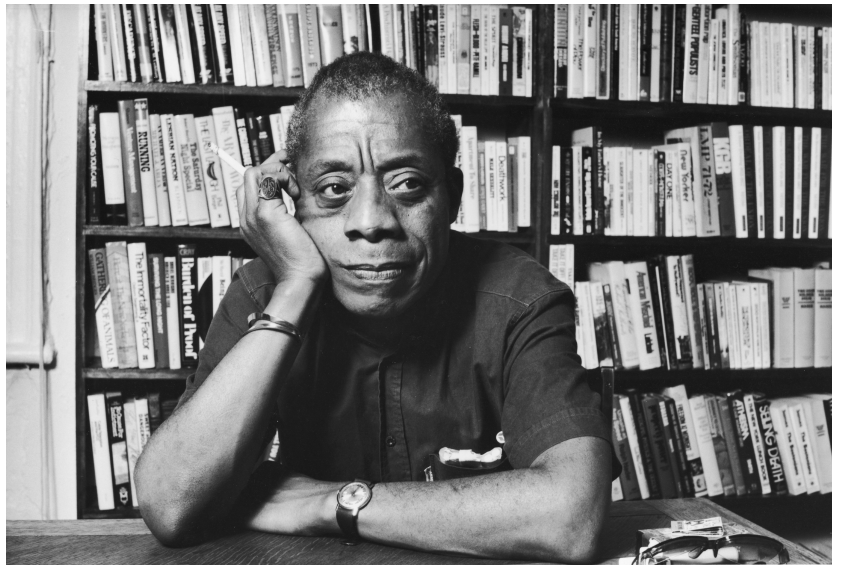
## WHAT IS A PARATEXT?

A paratext is a supplementary reading that frames the main text and offers new avenues for its interpretation.

## PARATEXTS:

*The Memory Police* draws out contradictions in the morality versus the legality of its fictional police force, inviting a parallel examination of the long history of resistance to racist policing in Black literature.

Start by reading **James Baldwin's essay "A Report from Occupied Territory,"** published in *The Nation* in 1966. (Warning: the essay contains racial slurs.) Baldwin (at right) was an American novelist, essayist, activist, and public intellectual who lived from 1924 to 1987.



Then consider the following three poems on policing written by Black Americans over the past seventy-five years:

- **Langston Hughes, "Who But the Lord?"** (1947)
- **Audre Lorde, "Power"** (1978) (Warning: contains profanity and refers to sexual violence)
- **Donte Collins, "what the dead know by heart"** (2016)

You will find further discussion questions on these texts at the end of this reading packet.



## WHAT IS ALLEGORY?

Allegory is the figurative treatment of an unmentioned subject under the guise of another that is similar to it in some way.

The parables in the Bible, Aesop's fables, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Moby Dick*, and even *Animal Farm* may all be considered allegorical.

In English, the word *allegory* dates to the late 14th century and comes from the 12th century Old French *allegorie*, which in turn derives from the Latin *allegoria*, and before that, the Greek, meaning "figurative language, description of one thing under the image of another"; literally "a speaking about something else," from *allos* "another, different" + *agoreuein* "speak openly, speak in the assembly."

The word 寓話, or *guwa*, signifies an allegory or fable in Japanese.\*

### UP FOR DISCUSSION:

If allegory is a way of speaking that uses one thing to represent another, what issues might Ogawa be addressing indirectly?

Did you notice any puns while reading? Were they related to allegorical elements of the book?

What aspects of the anxiety, isolation, fear, loss, and perseverance of these characters feel familiar or speak to our current moment?

\*Many thanks to Yuka Masamura '21 and Hatsuki Yahiro '21 for providing these valuable insights into the Japanese language.

### WALTER BENJAMIN (1928)

"An appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory."

### MAUREEN QUILLIGAN (1979)

"The *other* named by the *allos* in the word *allegory* is the possibility of an otherness inherent in the very words on the page; allegory therefore names the fact that language can signify many things at once."

### DANA MEDORO (2003)

"An allegorical tale... unfolds and connects meaning across the horizontal surface of the text's words... allegory and its puns suggest a sacred dimension of language."

Puns are important to allegory because they show on a micro level what allegory exposes at a macro level: the possibility of multiple, simultaneous meanings in language. Reading in translation, we do not see all of the puns Ogawa makes in Japanese, but Stephen Snyder preserves some and draws out others in his English translation. Consider the play on several meanings of the word *character*:

- a fictional person in a story
- the moral qualities of a person
- the *moji* used in written Japanese

In Japanese, キャラクタ, one of the many words for *character*, likewise implies the first two meanings, though not the third.\*



**QUOTES TO CONSIDER:**

"There are more gaps in the island than there used to be. When I was a child, the whole place seemed.... a lot fuller, a lot more real. But as things got thinner, more full of holes, our hearts got thinner, too, diluted somehow. I suppose that kept things in balance. And even when that balance begins to collapse, something remains. Which is why you shouldn't worry... those Memory Police are only after people who aren't able to forget" (54).

At some point I realized that I could no longer recall the sound of my own voice, and the thought dumbfounded me. How could I have so easily forgotten something I'd heard for so many years?... But in a world turned upside down, things I thought were mine and mine alone can be taken away much more easily than I would have imagined. If my body were cut up in pieces and those pieces mixed with those of other bodies, and then if someone told me, "Find your left eye," I suppose it would be difficult to do so (163).

"A heart has no shape, no limits. That's why you can put almost any kind of thing in it, why it can hold so much... My memories don't feel as though they've been pulled up by the root. Even if they fade, something remains. Like tiny seeds that might germinate again if the rain falls. And even if a memory disappears completely, the heart retains something. A slight tremor or pain, some bit of joy, a tear" (181-2).

"I remember hearing a saying long ago: Men who start by burning books end by burning other men," I said (184).

"You have to stop worrying about things like that. The disappearances are beyond our control. They have nothing to do with us. We're all going to die anyway, someday, so what's the difference? We simply have to leave things to fate" (185).

I remembered. The pages of the book had opened and fluttered through the air just the way birds had once spread their wings and flown off to distant places. But this memory, too, was soon erased by the flames, leaving behind nothing but the burning night (187).

"You're the same person now that you were when you wrote novels. The only thing that's changed is that the books have been burned. But even if paper itself disappears, words will remain. ... We haven't lost the stories" (191).

**UP FOR DISCUSSION:**

The title of the novel in Japanese is 密やかな結晶, or *Hisoyaka na kessho*, which roughly translates to "secret crystallization" or "dense crystals." Can you imagine why that would make a good title for this book?

**UP FOR DISCUSSION:**

The cover of the 1994 first edition (at left) utilized bird and flower imagery. What is the significance of these natural objects? How does their disappearance in the book differ from the manmade things?

## WHAT THE CRITICS SAID...

Although *The Memory Police* was first released in Japan in 1994, the novel is particularly resonant now, at a time of rising authoritarianism across the globe. Throughout the book, citizens live under police surveillance. Novels are burned. People are detained and interrogated without explanation. Neighbors are taken away in the middle of the night.

All the while, the citizens, cowed by fear, do nothing to stop the disappearances. 'Regardless of what had happened, it was almost certainly an unfortunate event,' the narrator explains, 'and, moreover, simply talking about it could put you in danger.'

**Motoko Rich**  
*The New York Times*  
August 2019

### UP FOR DISCUSSION:

What kinds of experiences do the characters undergo at the hands of the memory police that you recognize in historical or current events?

Why do you think Ogawa makes the narrator a novelist and her mother an artist? Why is art such a threat to the memory police? And why do novels and sculptures become places to conceal lost objects, waiting until we are ready to crack them open and reveal the memories inside?

### UP FOR DISCUSSION:

The narrator is estranged from many ordinary objects she encounters because they have "disappeared."

Which moments of estrangement can you recall from the book?

Have you felt estranged from any objects, places, people, or viewpoints this year that once felt familiar or precious to you?

Bereft of memories, words and associations, the inhabitants know that their hearts are growing 'thinner.' The soul – personhood, selfhood – is hollowed out.

Ogawa has a further challenge. Her novelist cannot recall the disappeared things, and this obstacle gives her language, already reserved, a faintness – an almost translucent feeling. How thin the writing sometimes seems, even as it remains sure and fluid. As losses accumulate and we internalize the workings of this world, the novelist's understated prose accrues a polyphonic power.

**Madeleine Thien**  
*The Guardian*  
August 2019

## JIA TOLENTINO

*The New Yorker*

November 2019



In the novel, the psychological toll of forgetting is rendered in physical reality: when objects disappear from memory, they disappear from real life... There are components to forgetting: the thing disappears, and then the memory of that thing disappears, and then the memory of forgetting that thing disappears, too.

Throughout *The Memory Police*, [the narrator] works on a novel-in-progress about a typist whose voice is vanishing. She's processing reality through a metaphorical device, re-creating the mechanism of the book that she herself is embedded in.

One of the most affecting aspects of *The Memory Police* is the lack of misery in the narrative. At first, this feels comforting, moving – an assurance that life is worth living even in the most reduced circumstances.... But then it begins to seem possible that despair itself has been forgotten – that the islanders can't agonize over the end that's coming because the idea of endings has also disappeared.

The fantastical is necessary to access the fullness of reality... Statelessness and slavery and fascism may be complex, but, if we fail to fully see them, this is at least partly because we have chosen to look away....

I often feel dulled by an endless accumulation of information, an onslaught of reality that precludes reality's absorption. It can feel impossible to grasp the extent of the sufferings of others; we can consequently go blind to the ways in which individuals have mitigated and can mitigate this pain.... Ogawa make[s] us look.

### UP FOR DISCUSSION:

What does it mean for the characters to become accustomed to things disappearing? Is it a form of strength to persevere, to adapt, and to feel gratitude for what is left, as the narrator and the old man try to do?

Or is it a weakness, as the mother, R, and those who cannot forget claim, since something irrecoverable about the world – and the self – is lost when an object or a person is taken away?



## UP FOR DISCUSSION: PARATEXTS

How do these writers interrogate policing, and how can we relate their ideas to Ogawa?

### JAMES BALDWIN, "A REPORT FROM OCCUPIED TERRITORY"

Baldwin writes that "Harlem is policed like occupied territory" and "the police are the hired enemies of the population." Why does Baldwin choose these words? What is their rhetorical significance? How do police treat citizens, and how do the citizens respond?

Baldwin argues that "pious calls to 'respect the law,' always to be heard from prominent citizens each time the ghetto explodes, are so obscene. The law is meant to be my servant and not my master, still less my torturer and my murderer. To respect the law, in the context in which the American Negro finds himself, is simply to surrender his self-respect." How does this relate to the memory police and their treatment of the islanders?

Baldwin says of the salesman beaten by police that "His tone is simply the tone of one who has miraculously survived – he might have died; as it is, he is merely half blind." How does this match the way ordinary citizens adjust to loss and cruelty in Ogawa?

In *The Memory Police*, the citizens who are targeted are the ones who remember that which the police want them to forget. What connection might exist between state-sanctioned violence against minority groups (such as Jewish people or Black Americans) and those in the novel who refuse to forget their history?

### LANGSTON HUGHES, "WHO BUT THE LORD?"

The speaker of the poem appeals to the Lord to save him, but laments that "the Lord was not quick" and "God don't protect a man." Do you see a connection to Donte Collin's poem in the line, "today i did not die and there is no god or law to thank"?

### AUDRE LORDE, "POWER"

What are the images of power, violence, race, and gender that stay with you from Lorde's poem? How do they remind you of current events? Of *The Memory Police*? What is Lorde's challenge to ordinary people and how they can use their power?

### DONTE COLLINS, "WHAT THE DEAD KNOW BY HEART"

Like Ogawa, Collins incorporates the imagery of birds into their poem: "how many bullets, like a flock of blue jays, will come carry my black to its final bed." How does flight operate as an image of freedom and of destruction in the poem and the novel?

Collins inserts odd line breaks in the midst of their sentences, in a poetic technique called *enjambment*. Why do you think they break up the words of their poem like this?

Watch Collins read the poem [here](#). What effect does their reading have on you?