

## Fremont Great Books Book Club

### Discussion Questions for “The Honjin Murders” by Seishi Yokomizo

November 15, 2025

1. Edgar Allen Poe is often credited with inventing the detective story with his 1841 classic, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” E.M. Wrong observed that detective stories following the “Rue Morgue’s” formula involve a “detective’s Boswell,” whose “narrative of an eye-witness attains a dramatic quality more easily than does an impersonal record. The clues can...be described not as they really are, but as they appear to a man of average, or generally less than average, intelligence.” How does the anonymous narrator and Dr. F-- fit or not fit the idea of a “detective’s Boswell?”
2. Many bracket the Golden Age of mystery fiction by the British soft-boiled mysteries and American hard-boiled detective stories written between the World Wars. These stories have several common elements including: a closed setting (i.e. a country house), a clue-puzzle format (both detective and reader are provided same set of facts and gaps), and fair play (not introducing new characters, unexpected revelations, supernatural elements, etc.). How does “The Honjin Murders” pay homage to and play within or outside of the Golden Age mystery structure?
3. Some critics believe the popularity and structure of Golden Age mystery stories mirrors the upheaval and uncertainty caused by the one-two punch of World War I and the Great Depression, but with satisfying and logical resolutions unlike the stark reality of the 1920s and 1930s for so many. What is your opinion?
4. “The Honjin Murders” is a locked room murder mystery, or “impossible” crime; there does not appear to be a way for those responsible for the crime to enter the room, commit the crime, and leave without detection. The narrator goes so far as to name a few of their favorite authors & stories in this specific sub-genre on p. 2. What is your opinion of this particular locked room mystery? Did you feel that Yokomizo followed the “fair play” rule when unraveling the solution to the murders?
5. *Honkaku*, or orthodox, Japanese mysteries “are carefully constructed three-dimensional puzzle mysteries inspired by the Golden Age of Western detective fiction.” *Honkaku* stories appeal to the intellect, feature diagrams and lists of characters, and follow the fair play rules of many Golden Age mystery writers. Yokomizo is considered a master of *Honkaku*. *Honkaku* aren’t supposed to focus on social commentary; does “The Honjin Murders” strictly fit the definition?
6. In his “Introduction to Crime and Detection” from 1926, E.M Wrong argued: “[T]here is the question of morality. Perhaps art in general should have no moral purpose, but the art of the detective story has one and must have; it seeks to justify the law and to bring retribution on the guilty. The criminal must be unmasked, the detective represents good and must triumph.” What did the three-fingered man represent in this continuum? Does Kondaichi represent good and Kenzo evil?
7. E.M. Wrong stated: “What we want in our detective fiction is not a semblance of real life, where murder is infrequent and petty larceny common, but deep mystery and conflicting clues.” Do you think that is what appeals to a reader of “The Honjin Murders?” Kosuke Kindaichi, the young amateur detective, is introduced as someone who pays little attention to his appearance, but has a vast intellect and ability to ferret out details the average person cannot. Does Kindaichi satisfy Wrong’s statement?

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8. The narrator is an unnamed mystery writer who evacuated to rural Okayama to avoid World War II bombing raids by the US. The narrator decides to learn more about the Ichiyonagi Family, or Honjin, Murders while in the area. What is the significance of using a frame narrator who book ends the tale of the Honjin Murders with descriptions of the now-decaying, but once-thriving, Ichiyonagi estate? Is Yokomizo making any qualitative statements about feudal Japanese society vs. the less restricted modern society of the late 1930s? How did providing post-WWII details about each family member affect the resolution?

**SOURCES AND LINKS**

[INTRODUCTION to Crime and Detection \(1926\) by E. M. Wrong](#)

[The Murders in the Rue Morgue by Edgar Allen Poe](#)

[How World War I Gave Rise to the Traditional Mystery](#)

[Tangled Yarn Blog post about "The Honjin Murders"](#)

[EBCO Article about Golden Age Mysteries & Detective Fiction](#)

[The Honkaku and Shin Honkaku Mysteries of Seishi Yokomizo](#)