# The Housekeeper and the Professor by Yoko Ogawa

## Synopsis

He is a brilliant math Professor with a peculiar problem—ever since a traumatic head injury, he has lived with only eighty minutes of short-term memory.

She is an astute young Housekeeper—with a ten-year-old son—who is hired to care for the Professor.
And every morning, as the Professor and the Housekeeper are introduced to each other anew, a strange and beautiful relationship blossoms between them. Though he cannot hold memories for long (his brain is like a tape that begins to erase itself every eighty minutes), the Professor's mind is still alive with elegant equations from the past. And the numbers, in all of their articulate order, reveal a sheltering and poetic world to both the Housekeeper and her young son.

The Professor is capable of discovering connections between the simplest of quantities—like the Housekeeper's shoe size—and the universe at large, drawing their lives ever closer and more profoundly together, even as his memory slips away.

## Discussion questions

1. The characters in The Housekeeper and the Professor are nameless (“Root” is only a nickname). What does it mean when an author chooses not to name the people in her book?
2. The Houskeeper’s father abandoned her mother before she was born; and then the Housekeeper herself suffered the same fate when pregnant with Root. In a book where all of the families are broken (including the Professor’s), what do you think Ogawa is saying about how families are composed? Do we all, in fact, have a fundamental desire to be a part of a family?
3. Did your opinion of the Professor change when you realized the nature of his relationship with his sister-in-law? Did you detect any romantic tension between the Professor and the Housekeeper, or was their relationship chaste? Perhaps Ogawa was intending ambiguity in that regard
4. The sum of all numbers between one and ten is not difficult to figure out, but the Professor insists that Root find the answer in a particular way. Ultimately Root and the Housekeeper come to the answer together. Is there a thematic importance to their method of solving the problem? Generally, how does Ogawa use math to illustrate a whole worldview?
5. How does Ogawa depict the culture of contemporary Japan in The Housekeeper and the Professor? In what ways does is it seem different from western culture? For example, consider the Housekeeper’s pregnancy and her attitude toward single motherhood; or perhaps look at the simple details of the story, like Root’s birthday cake. In what ways are the cultures similar, different?
6. Ogawa chooses to write about actual math problems, rather than to write about math in the abstract. In a sense, she invites the reader to learn math along with the characters. Why do you think she wrote the book this way? Perhaps to heighten your sympathy for the characters?
 *Discussion questions from https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780312427801/thehousekeeperandtheprofessor*