

Kira-Kira, by Cynthia Kadohata  
(Atheneum: 2004, 2005 Newbery winner)



“My sister, Lynn, taught me my first word *kira-kira*....*Kira*-“glittering” in Japanese... I loved that word! When I grew *kira-kira* to describe everything I liked: the beautiful blue kittens, butterflies, colored Kleenex. My mother said we the word; you could not call a Kleenex *kira-kira*. She was dismayed over how un-Japanese we were and vowed to send us to Japan one day. I didn’t care where she sent me, so long a Lynn came along.”

*kira* means older, I used sky, puppies, were misusing

Katie Takeshima’s family has just moved from Iowa to Georgia, both of her parents have to work long hours to have a chance at fulfilling their dream of owning their own home, and her sister Lynn is very ill. Simply and beautifully written, this book traces the lives of a tightly knit extended family, living in the midst of a gentler but real racial prejudice of the deep south, through the eyes of a pre-teen girl with responsibilities WAY beyond what she should be shouldered with.

This is a beautiful book for studying the art of characterization... Katie’s mother and father, her baby brother and older sister, her Auntie and Uncle, and her new friend, even the wealthy owner of the company her father works for, all become unique and special individuals by the time you reach the last page.

And most importantly, Kira-Kira is a quiet study in the value of living ethically. The book jacket reads: “My uncle was exactly one inch taller than my father. But his stomach was soft. We knew this because we hit him in it once the year before, and he yelped in pain and threatened to spank us. We got sent to bed without supper because my parents said hitting someone was the worst thing you could do. Stealing was second, and lying was third. Before I was twelve, I would have committed all three of these crimes.”

Just as in “Shiloh”, by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (1992 Newbery winner), you feel the need to debate the rights and wrongs of value systems in extreme situations that seem to scream “UNFAIR”, even though you know what they are doing is going against all they believe.

This book feels like a quick read, but I didn’t want to read it quickly. There is a strong feeling of impending sadness from the very beginning, so I was surprised at how strongly I did feel all the way through, even knowing what was probably coming. Kira-Kira would be a beautiful read aloud book for 4<sup>th</sup> grade and up, an excellent small group or literature circle selection, and a Saturday afternoon treat for your own personal reading pleasure!

You definitely want to check out this author’s website: <http://www.kira-kira.us/> It gives student-friendly author information, offers a discussion guide, and even provides the first chapter for you to read until you can get the book.

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