



# The Lost Ryū

Emi Watanabe Cohen

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**Format:** Paperback

**Recommended for:** 8–12 years

**Themes:** Friendship, identity, family, World War II

**Applicable to learning areas:** English language, literacy and literature, visual literacy

## Summary

Kohei Fujiwara has never seen a giant dragon in real life. The big ryū all disappeared from Japan after World War II, and twenty years later, they've become the stuff of legend. Their smaller cousins, who can fit in your palm, are all that remain. And Kohei *loves* his ryū, Yuharu, but he has a memory of the big ryū. He knows that's impossible. In his mind, he can see his grandpa – Ojiisan – gazing up at the big ryū with what looks like total and absolute wonder. When Kohei was little, he dreamed he'd go on a grand quest to bring the big ryū back, to get Ojiisan to smile again.

But now, Ojiisan is really, really sick. And Kohei is running out of time.

Kohei needs to find the big ryū *now*, before it's too late. With the help of Isolde, his new half-Jewish, half-Japanese neighbour, and Isolde's Yiddish-speaking dragon, Cheshire, he thinks he can do it. Maybe.

From debut author Emi Watanabe Cohen comes a story of magic, a mysterious family legacy and the lengths to which we'll go to protect the people we love.

'An extraordinary book filled with dragons big and small.' Carole Wilkinson, multi-award-winning author of *Dragonkeeper*.

## About the Author

Emi Watanabe Cohen wrote her first novel when she was 12 years old – the most complete draft she can find clocks in at 234,780 words. That's over 1000 pages! Thankfully, her editing skills have improved since then. Her more recent work involves Jewish and/or Japanese folklore, complicated families and a dash of improbable magic. She is a graduate of Brandeis University, where she studied Creative Writing. *The Lost Ryū* is her debut novel.

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## Suggestions for Classroom Discussion and Application

### Before Reading and Visual Literacy

- Before reading *The Lost Ryū*, look closely at the book's cover and guess in what country you think the story will be set. What elements helped you guess and what was it about these elements specifically? What genre will the story be: fantasy, science fiction, mystery, historical fiction? What on the cover suggested that genre to you? Does the cover make you want to open the story and start reading? If so, explain why. If not, explain why not?

### Research

- Choose one of the following topics to research:
  - Life in Japan during World War II
  - The role of the Kenpeitai and the Tokkō
  - Reasons for the Japanese surrender in World War II
  - The rebuilding of Japan post-war.
- Present your research to the rest of the class to build a better understanding of the time and place *The Lost Ryū* is set.

### Characters

- Chapters 1 and 2 tell us a lot about Kohei's household. For instance, we find Ojiisan, Kohei's grandfather, is often unhappy and angry with the world, that Kohei's mother is prone to pretending things are fine when they are not, that Kohei is kind and wishes to help his Ojiisan, and that Yuharu, the ryū, is fiercely loyal to Kohei.

Divide a blank page into four columns, heading each with a character – Ojiisan, Kohei's mother, Kohei and Yuharu – and make a list of adjectives that define each of them. When making your list, try to point to the thing that each said or did in the chapters that illustrated the adjectives you chose.

- Consider this extract from the text and answer the question below:

*Arahata Denjirō's voice was mittens on a cold day. A lullaby. Soft and slow and sure. 'Yamenaide, Kohei-kun. Don't quit. There are always good things you can do.'* (Page 10)

What sort of man do you think Kohei's father was? How do the words – *mittens, lullaby, soft, slow* and *sure* – help you picture his father? What do the words, '*Don't quit. There are always good things you can do.*' tell you about him?

### Chapter 3 Comprehension

- Why is Kohei so interested in meeting Isolde's dragon, Cheshire?
- Why is he so disappointed after meeting Cheshire?
- Why does Kohei react badly when Isolde asks him if he is all right?
- How would you describe Isolde's first impressions of Kohei after his visit to her room?
- What is the significance of Yuharu's comment to Kohei, 'Languages don't die unless people who speak them are killed'? (Page 32)

### Theme

- Consider this extract from the text and answer the question below:

*He was in one of the older wings, one that had survived the worst of the shells ... Funny, Kohei thought in a detached sort of way, how the buildings that were spared total destruction during the war ended up looking the shabbiest when the rebuilding was done. Things that seemed okay were never looked at too closely. (Page 52)*

How does this description of the hospital wing relate to Kohei's confusion and frustration with his own family and life?

## Genre

- What subgenres of fantasy are there? For example, high fantasy, urban fantasy, magic realism, comic fantasy, historical fantasy, dark fantasy, fairytales, supernatural fantasy. In pairs or small groups, choose one subgenre to investigate further, considering its archetypes and prominent authors and their works.
- After completing the previous exercise, talk as a class about what subgenre (or subgenres) of fantasy *The Lost Ryū* could be classified as. What expectations might you have about the book if you consider it as part of this subgenre/s? How has the author fulfilled or subverted your expectations?

## Empathy

- Tell the story from either the perspective of Kohei's mother or grandfather. In the telling, explain how you felt about Kohei before his trip to the ocean floor and after.

## Monomyth

- The Monomyth is a literary theory that states that a huge percentage of stories from around the world fit one simple pattern: a hero ventures from a normal world to a supernatural region where they encounter fabulous forces, have a decisive victory and return to their world with new powers or wealth. The films in the Stars Wars series, for instance, fit this pattern. Do you think *The Lost Ryū* fits the monomyth pattern? Give examples from the story to illustrate your answer.

## A Word from the Author



'When I was a kid, I was really into dragons. Not so much stories *about* dragons – more the concept of them as a classifiable species. I was entranced by the idea that human cultures all across the world had independently dreamed up their own versions of these creatures, from firebrakes and wyverns to ryū and lóng. Dragons are recognisably dragons the way chihuahuas and greyhounds are recognisably dogs. And, like dogs, dragons are a part of humanity's cultural history that transcends geography.

'That said, as a dragon-loving eight-year-old, I sometimes felt that anthologies of "dragon myths from around the world" were missing something. Dragons always seemed so very *human* ... so why were there no stories of Eastern and Western dragons living in multicultural families like mine? Surely if they truly existed, they'd want to share their lives and their cultures the same way humans do. I wondered why no one had ever conceptualised a type of dragon that was a little bit Eastern and a little bit Western, just like me.

'Those vague imaginings of "biracial dragons" were the beginnings of *The Lost Ryū*. The idea sat in the back of my mind for almost twelve years, and I hope in finally writing this story, I've made my eight-year-old-self proud.'

– **Emi Watanabe Cohen**