



Hotel on the corner of bitter and sweet

By Jamie Ford.

First published 2009

Genre & subject

Family saga

Japanese Americans

World War II

Love stories

Synopsis

1986 , The Panama Hotel. The old Seattle landmark has been boarded up for decades, but now the new owner has made a startling discovery in the basement: personal belongings stored away by Japanese families sent to interment camps during World War II. Among the fascinated crowd gathering outside the hotel stands Henry Lee who, as the owner unfurls a distinctive parasol, is flooded by memories of his childhood. He wonders if by some miracle, in amongst the boxes of the dusty treasures, lies a link to the Okabe family, and the girl he lost his heart to so many years ago.

Author biography

Jamie Ford was born on July 9 1968, in Eureka California. His father, a Seattle native, is of Chinese ancestry, while Ford's mother is of European descent.

His Western last name "Ford" comes from his great grandfather, Min Chung (1850-1922), who immigrated to Nevada in 1865 and later changed his name to William Ford. Ford's great grandmother Loy Lee Ford was the first Chinese woman to own property in Nevada.

Ford earned a degree in Design from the Art Institute of Seattle and also attended Seattle's School of Visual Concepts.

Discussion starters

- Father-son relationships are a crucial theme in the novel. Talk about some of these relationships and how they are shaped by culture and time.
- Why doesn't Henry's father want him to speak Cantonese at home? How does this square with his desire to send Henry back to China for school?
- If you were Henry, would you be able to forgive your father? Does Henry's father deserve forgiveness?
- From the beginning of the novel, Henry wears the "I am Chinese" button given to him by his father. What is the significance of this button and its message, and how has Henry's understanding of that message changed by the end of the novel?

- Why does Henry provide an inaccurate translation when he serves as the go-between in the business negotiations between his father and Mr. Preston? Is he wrong to betray his father's trust in this way?
- The US has been called a nation of immigrants. In what ways do the families of Keiko and Henry illustrate different aspects of the American immigrant experience?
- What is the bond between Henry and Sheldon, and how is it strengthened by jazz music?
- Henry's mother comes from a culture in which wives are subservient to their husbands. Given this background, do you think she could have done more to help Henry in his struggles against his father? Is her loyalty to her husband a betrayal of her son?
- Compare Marty's relationship with Samantha to Henry's relationship with Keiko. What other examples can you find in the novel of love that is forbidden or that crosses boundaries of one kind or another?
- Does Henry give up on Keiko too easily? What else could he have done to find her?
- What about Keiko? Why didn't she make more of an effort to see Henry once she was released from the camp?
- Do you think Ethel might have known what was happening with Henry's letters?
- The novel ends with Henry and Keiko meeting again after more than forty years. Jump ahead a year and imagine what has happened to them in that time. Is there any evidence in the novel for this outcome?
- Was the US government right or wrong to "relocate" Japanese-Americans and other citizens and residents who had emigrated from countries the US was fighting in WWII? Was some kind of action necessary following Pearl Harbor? Could the government have done more to safeguard civil rights while protecting national security?
- Should the men and women of Japanese ancestry rounded up by the US during the war have protested more actively against the loss of their property and liberty? Remember that most were eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the US. What would you have done in their place? What's to prevent something like this from ever happening again?

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