



Hotel on the corner of bitter and sweet

By Jamie Ford

First published in 2011

Genre and Subject

Japanese Americans -- Evacuation and relocation, 1942-1945 -- Fiction

Fathers and sons -- Fiction

Widowers -- Fiction

Seattle (Wash.) -- Fiction

Synopsis

The New York Times bestselling novel about a chance discovery in boarded up old hotel that brings back long forgotten memories and rekindles a forbidden love, swept aside during the chaos and heartbreak of World War II and internment of Japanese families in the wake of Pearl Harbor.

In 1986, Henry Lee joins a crowd outside the Panama Hotel, once the gateway to Seattle's Japantown. It has been boarded up for decades, but now the new owner has discovered the belongings of Japanese families who were sent to internment camps during World War II. As the owner unfurls a Japanese parasol, Henry, a Chinese American, remembers a young Japanese American girl from his childhood in the 1940s - Keiko Okabe, with whom he forged a bond of friendship and innocent love that transcended the prejudices of their Old-World ancestors. After Keiko and her family were evacuated to the internment camps, she and Henry could only hope that their promises to each other would be kept.

Now, forty years later, Henry explores the hotel's basement for the Okabe family's belongings and for a long-lost object whose value he cannot even begin to measure. His search will take him on a journey to revisit the sacrifices he has made - for family, for love, for country.

Author Biography

Jamie Ford is the great-grandson of Nevada mining pioneer Min Chung, who emigrated from Kaiping, China, to San Francisco in 1865, where he adopted the Western name 'Ford,' thus confusing countless generations. Ford is an award-winning short-story writer, an alumnus of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, and a survivor of Orson Scott Card's Literary Boot Camp. Having grown up near Seattle's Chinatown, he now lives in Montana with his wife and children.

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Discussion Starters

1. 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. For example, how is the relationship between Henry and his father different from that between Henry and Marty? What accounts for the differences?
2. 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? Isn't he sending his son a mixed message?
3. If you were Henry, would you be able to forgive your father? Does Henry's father deserve forgiveness?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. If a novel could have a soundtrack, this one would be jazz. What is it about this indigenous form of American music that makes it an especially appropriate choice?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. Does Henry give up on Keiko too easily? What else could he have done to find her?
11. What about Keiko? Why didn't she make more of an effort to see Henry once she was released from the camp?
12. Do you think Ethel might have known what was happening with Henry's letters?
13. 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?
14. What sacrifices do the characters in the novel make in pursuit of their dreams for themselves and for others? Do you think any characters sacrifice too much, or for the wrong reasons? Consider the sacrifices Mr. Okabe makes, for example, and those of Mr. Lee. Both fathers are acting for the sake of their children, yet the results are quite different. Why?
15. 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?

Author biography from—<https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/book/Jamie-Ford-Hotel-on-the-Corner-of-Bitter-and-Sweet-9781743310878>

Discussion questions from—<https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/hotel-on-the-corner-of-bitter-and-sweet/guide>