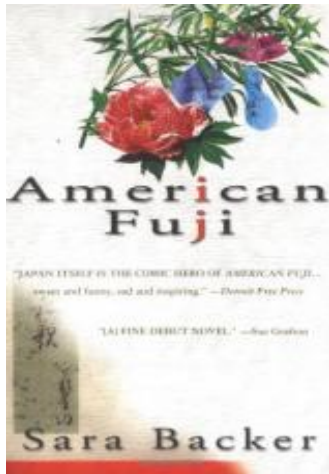


# American Fuji: A Novel

by Sara Backer

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## About the Book

Gaby Stanton, an American professor living in Japan, has lost her job teaching English at Shizuyama University. (No one will tell her exactly why.) Alex Thorn, an American psychologist, is mourning his son, a Shizuyama exchange student killed in an accident. (No one will tell him exactly how.) Alex has come to this utterly foreign place to find the truth, and now Gaby—newly employed at a Japanese "fantasy funeral" company—is his guide. Gaby, at least, can speak the language, though as she explains to Alex, the key to mastering Japanese is understanding what's not being said. And in this dazzling, unusual novel, the unsaid truths about everything from work and love to illness and death cast a deafening silence—and tower in the background like Mount Fuji itself.

## Discussion Guide

1. In what ways does Gaby Stanton typify an American living abroad? How does her perspective on Japanese culture compare to Alexander Thorn's? How do their attitudes change as their relationship develops?
2. How do Gaby and Alex's social positions—single American adults—affect them differently in Japan? How do their professional lives affect how they are perceived and how they behave? Does gender play a role? How?
3. In what ways does Gaby's "shameful illness" (p. 247) impact her relationships with others? With herself? How is her relationship to her body a reflection of the culture she lives in? Discuss.
4. Early in the narrative, Gaby says to Lester: "How many people are happy, no matter where they are? Overall, my life is better in Japan than it was in America. Isn't that good enough?" (p. 30). Is this sentiment sincere? Does her perspective on happiness change over the course of the story?
5. How do obligation and affection overlap in Gaby's relationship with Alexander Thorn? With Mr. Eguchi? With

Lester? In what ways are her expectations challenged by this duality?

6. In what ways is Alexander Thorn's life altered by his quest for answers about his son's death? How is Mr. Aoshima's appearance on Mount Fuji meaningful?

7. "America's not my home," Gaby tells Mr. Eguchi (p. 337). Japan is not her home either, she goes on to admit. What factors contribute to her emerging comfort in the role of exile? Alex ends the book by looking "to the east, facing home." How has the idea of home changed for him as a result of his time in Japan?

8. How has Gaby's relationship to her home been challenged by the loss of her prestigious university job? By her relationship with Alex? By her illness? How does her behavior in her apartment reflect these changes?

9. Are Rie's deformed foot, Aoshima's new heart, and Endo's suicide attempts significant? How? In what ways are they emblematic of Gaby's admonition to "Expect the unexpected?" What is Gaby's reaction to unexpected events in her own life?

10. Musical toilets, English-as-Beatles-lyrics, moon funerals: to what extent do these absurd-seeming aspects of Japanese culture reflect the prejudices of the narrator herself? Is Gaby Stanton a reliable interpreter of Japanese manners and mores? Why or why not?

## Author Bio

Sara Backer was the first American and the first woman to serve as visiting professor of English at Japan's Shizuoka University. An early draft of *AMERICAN FUJI* was named a finalist in the James Jones First Novel Competition, and a play she wrote as a Djerassi artist in residence was chosen for performance at the Edward Albee Theatre Conference in June 2000. A published poet and short-story writer, Backer lives in San Luis Obispo, California.

## Critical Praise

"Sharp, quirky details?an appealing read."

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