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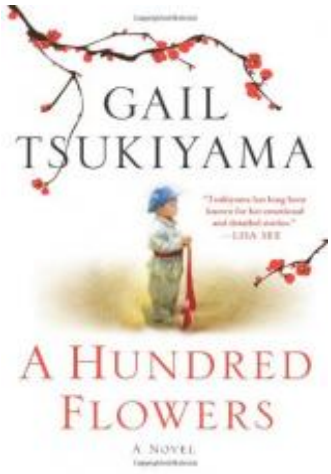
A Hundred Flowers

by Gail Tsukiyama



About the Book

A powerful new novel about an ordinary family facing extraordinary times at the start of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

China, 1957. Chairman Mao has declared a new openness in society: ?Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend.? Many intellectuals fear it is only a trick, and Kai Ying?s husband, Sheng, a teacher, has promised not to jeopardize their safety or that of their young son, Tao. But one July morning, just before his sixth birthday, Tao watches helplessly as Sheng is dragged away for writing a letter criticizing the Communist Party and sent to a labor camp for ?reeducation.?

A year later, still missing his father desperately, Tao climbs to the top of the hundred-year-old kapok tree in front of their home, wanting to see the mountain peaks in the distance. But Tao slips and tumbles 30 feet to the courtyard below, badly breaking his leg.

As Kai Ying struggles to hold her small family together in the face of this shattering reminder of her husband?s absence, other members of the household must face their own guilty secrets and strive to find peace in a world where the old sense of order is falling. Once again, Tsukiyama brings us a powerfully moving story of ordinary people facing extraordinary circumstances with grace and courage.

Discussion Guide

1.Wei and Sheng have different philosophies of life as evidenced by their statements on page 17. Wei says to "look for the quiet within the storm" while Shen states to walk "straight into the storm." As the plot unfolds do you feel that these early declarations are true to each man's character?

2.On page 83 Kai Yeng remembers Sheng telling her that worrying about the worst things that could happen in life takes the same amount of energy as hoping for the best. Do you agree? What examples of hope do you find in the book? Do you feel that Sheng had hope? Kai Yeng?

3.Why is the character of Suyin necessary to the plot? What different roles does she play for the other members of the household?

4.Do you agree with Wei's observation (page 239) that China "could easily have caught up with the rest of the world if she weren't always being dragged backward"?

5.In the end the Kapok tree heals itself. Do you feel that the relationship between Wei and Sheng was healed? Are they truly "more alike than either of us knew" (page 281)? How might this also be true for others in the book? Explain.

6.The Kapok tree is almost a character unto itself in this book. Explain its significance to one or more characters.

7.What role do you think Tian plays in the book? If Tian was not on the train, do you think Wei would have been successful? After Tian leaves Wei and the story, speculate what happens to Tian. Do you think he gets involved with the Lee family afterwards?

8.At first Tao seems to resent having Suyin living with his family. What happens that changes his feelings to her? Compare this to Tao's forgiveness of his school friend Little Shan.

9.Compare and contrast the marriages in the book.

10. Although this concentrates on a difficult time period in Chinese history, how do each of the characters embody a sense of hope for the future?

11. What do you think will happen with Sheng? Why?

12. Was grandfather Wei wrong to write to "The Party" when he knew it might endanger the family?

Author Bio

Gail Tsukiyama was born in San Francisco, California, to a Chinese mother from Hong Kong and a Japanese father from Hawaii. She attended San Francisco State University where she earned her Bachelor of Arts Degree and a Master of Arts Degree in English. She is the bestselling author of such novels as WOMEN OF THE SILK, THE SAMURAI'S GARDEN and A HUNDRED FLOWERS, and has received the Academy of American Poets Award and the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award. She divides her time between El Cerrito and Napa Valley, California.

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