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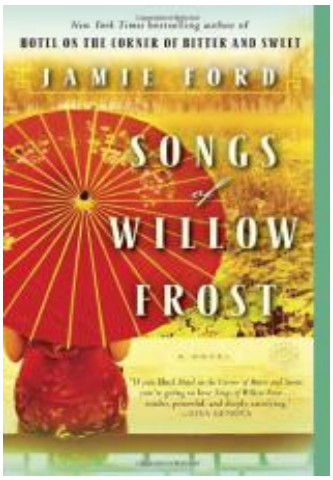
Songs of Willow Frost

by Jamie Ford



About the Book

From Jamie Ford, the *New York Times* bestselling author of the beloved HOTEL ON THE CORNER OF BITTER AND SWEET, comes a much-anticipated second novel. Set against the backdrop of Depression-era Seattle, SONGS OF WILLOW FROST is a powerful tale of two souls --- a boy with dreams for his future and a woman escaping her haunted past --- both seeking love, hope and forgiveness.

Twelve-year-old William Eng, a Chinese American boy, has lived at Seattle?s Sacred Heart Orphanage ever since his mother?s listless body was carried away from their small apartment five years ago. On his birthday --- or rather, the day the nuns designate as his birthday --- William and the other orphans are taken to the historical Moore Theatre, where William glimpses an actress on the silver screen who goes by the name of Willow Frost. Struck by her features, William is convinced that the movie star is his mother, Liu Song.

Determined to find Willow and prove that his mother is still alive, William escapes from Sacred Heart with his friend Charlotte. The pair navigate the streets of Seattle, where they must not only survive but confront the mysteries of William?s past and his connection to the exotic film star. The story of Willow Frost, however, is far more complicated than the Hollywood fantasy William sees onscreen.

Shifting between the Great Depression and the 1920s, SONGS OF WILLOW FROST takes readers on an emotional journey of discovery. Jamie Ford?s sweeping novel will resonate with anyone who has ever longed for the comforts of family and a place to call home.

Discussion Guide

1. William?s life at Sacred Heart is, he feels, a hard one. Do you agree? In the long run, do the caregivers at Sacred Heart do more to help or harm their young wards?

2. The orphans at Sacred Heart share a collective ?birthday,? one for boys and one for girls. What would it be like to celebrate such an event? Would it feel less special without a focus on the individual, or even more joyful to share it with a community?

3. On May 4, 1931, the first bookmobile hit the streets of Seattle, where it did indeed visit the historical Sacred Heart Orphanage (as well as Boeing Field). Why do you think there was such a need to bring the library to its patrons, rather than allowing those patrons to visit the library as they chose?

4. What qualities does Liu Song share with her mother? How are their lives similar or different?

5. Does Liu Song?s mother represent strength, weakness, or a little of both? Do you think she knew she was a second wife?

6. Why doesn?t Liu Song study Cantonese Opera instead of pursuing a career on film and stage?

7. What do you think happened to Mr. Butterfield after the loss of his music store? Personally and professionally, how would he react to receive Liu Song?s newfound fame as Willow?

8. Imagine that you are Liu Song and pregnant under her circumstances. What would you do? Who might you tell? And would you keep the baby?

9. The novel explores the subject of abandonment, whether by willful desertion or by circumstance. What forms does such abandonment take among contemporary families?

10. In the time period the novel is set in, economic and social classes were clearly defined and while change was desired by some, it was feared by others. Do you think we live in a more just and fair era today, or are we in fact worse off?

11. The social worker, Mrs. Peterson, represents an outside authority at a time when mothers had fewer rights to their children than fathers. When did that begin to change and why?

12. During the early years of the silent film era, studios and production companies could be found in most states. So why had much of the film industry congregated in Hollywood a decade later?

13. What factors contributed to the eventual demise of the grand movie palaces of the 1920s and 1930s?

14. Willow always knew where her son was, so why didn?t she come back sooner, especially as she gained success?

15. Why does Willow die in all of her films?

16. How do you think Charlotte?s death impacted Sister Briganti?

17. In the end Willow comes back for William. What do you think happened to them after the novel?s conclusion? What happened to her career?

18. Overall, do you think the story is one of hope and promise or suffering and sacrifice?

Author Bio

Jamie Ford is the great-grandson of Nevada mining pioneer Min Chung, who emigrated from Hoiping, China to San Francisco in 1865, where he adopted the western name Ford, thus confusing countless generations. His debut novel, HOTEL ON THE CORNER OF BITTER AND SWEET, spent two years on the *New York Times* bestseller list and went on to win the 2010 Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature. His work has been translated into 35 languages. Having grown up in Seattle, he now lives in Montana with his wife and a one-eyed pug.

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