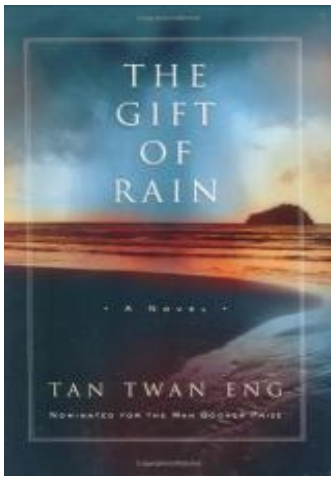
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The Gift of Rain

by Tan Twan Eng



About the Book

Written in lush, evocative prose, **The Gift of Rain** spans decades as it takes readers from the final days of the Chinese emperors to the dying era of the British Empire, and through the mystical temples, bustling cities, and forbidding rain forests of Malaya.

In 1939, sixteen-year-old Philip Hutton --- the half-Chinese youngest child of the head of one of Penang?s great trading families --- feels alienated from both the British and Chinese communities. He discovers a sense of belonging in his unexpected friendship with Hayato Endo, a Japanese diplomat who rents an island from his father. Philip proudly shows his new friend around his adored island of Penang, and in return Endo teaches him about Japanese language and culture and trains him in the art and discipline of aikido.

But such knowledge comes at a terrible price. As World War II rages in Europe, the Japanese savagely invade Malaya, and Philip realizes that his mentor and sensei --- to whom he owes absolute loyalty --- is a Japanese spy. Young Philip has been an unwitting traitor, and he is forced into collaborating with the Japanese to safeguard his family. He turns into the ultimate outsider, trusted by none and hated by many.

Tormented by his part in the events, Philip risks everything by working in secret to save as many people as he can from the brutality of the invaders. **The Gift of Rain** is shot through with universal themes, a novel about agonizingly divided loyalties and unbearable loss. But it is also about human courage and --- ultimately --- about the nature of enduring loyalty.

Discussion Guide

1. What is the picture of pre-war Malaya? Is it idealized? Philip recalls ?magical days, just before the threads that bound the world together became unraveled? (p. 44). Is it part of the magic the balance and harmony of Chinese, Indians, and

Malays? Philip also describes it as ?this untamed land where anything could happen? (p. 87). For the British colonials it is a comfortable world, but at what cost? (Do you know people who still live abroad in the ease of expat conditions? Hong Kong, perhaps, or Latin America?)

2. At various times in his life Philip is grounded by feeling connected to a tradition. What are these various traditions?

3. In his early life, how is Philip raised? ?[B]ecause of my mixed parentage I was never completely accepted by either the Chinese or the English of Penang, each race believing itself to be superior? (p. 28). For instance, as he enters the Cross party, ?[t]here were the usual speculative glances?*here comes the half-caste*, I thought wryly? (p. 136). How does he protect himself against ?the insults and whispered comments? (p. 28)?

4. ?Fifty years I had waited to tell my tale, as long as the time Endo-san?s letter took to reach Michiko? (p. 23). Tales within tales form a structure in the novel. What is the function of the Wen Zu episode? (p. 106 ff.). Is it a way to reveal the estranged grandfather?s character (?this strange tale had made him human?) and important aspects of Chinese history (p. 124)?

5. How does the novel propel the reader like a thriller? How does the fortune teller at the Snake Temple in Penang serve as a clue and lynchpin in the story? What are roles of Uncle Lim, and how does Philip piece them together? Who is Martin Edgecumbe in the cloak and dagger operation? Do you agree with Philip?s assessment of Kon as ?idealistic? as opposed to himself? What is the ?high pressure game? Philip enters into with Towkay Yeap? How does it increase his isolation? ?That is the price of playing both sides. Eventually all sides mistrust you? (p. 333).

6. Would you say that the whole book is a quest of Philip?s to integrate his memories? ?Memories --- they are all the aged have. The young have hopes and dreams, while the old hold the remains of them in their hands and wonder what has happened to their lives?If one steps out of time, what does one have? Why, the past of course, gradually being worn away by the years as a pebble halted on a riverbed is eroded by the passage of water? (p. 11). Is this an inevitable process? Tan Twan Eng has chosen as his opening epigraph a passage from *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, by Jean-Dominique Bauby, ?I am fading away. Slowly but surely. Like the sailor who watches his home shore gradually disappear, I watch my past recede. My old life still burns within me, but more and more of it is reduced to the ashes of memory? (p. IX). How is this theme interwoven throughout the book?

7. How do Michiko?s arrival and Endo-san?s Nagamitsu sword serve as aides-mémoire? ??Can you recall the last time you saw Endo-san using it?? She asked. I looked away. ?Too well, I whispered, trying to block the sudden rush of memories, as though the sword itself had cut a gash in the dyke I had built? (p. 15). What is traumatic for Philip in seeing the sword again? Endo-san at one point had re-assured Philip that one day he would emerge from all the chaos and horror of war. ?But to get there you will have to travel across the landscape of memories, across the continent of time? (p. 331). In this book are memory and storytelling both harrowing and liberating? How?

8. We are told that Buddhism, when introduced from India, was changed by the Chinese to include Confucian ethics, Taoist beliefs, ancestor worship and a multitude of gods. Do you see vestiges of these adaptations in the novel? How does Tan Twan Eng weave in the Zen emphasis on the virtues of mental concentration and physical self-discipline?

9. One recurrent concept in the book and a source of Philip?s philosophical dilemma is the Buddhist Wheel of Becoming (p. 51). Can you explain that idea? How is it related to destiny and the elusive idea of free will? How does the Snake

Temple link the Japanese Endo-san and the Chinese grandfather? What do you think about Endo-san?s insistence that he and Philip have known each other in earlier lives?

10. What do you deduce about the British in Asia? They are censorious about Japanese incursions. Philip himself says about punitive Japanese soldiers, ?How could we ever understand these savage, cultured, brutal, yet refined people?? (p. 392). Yet Endo-san says the British are a people ?that saw fit to turn a nation of healthy Chinese into opium addicts just so it could force the Chinese government to trade with it? (p. 41). And what is Philip?s opinion of the wholesale evacuation of the British from Malaya, apart from his own family? What does another Brit, Edgecumbe, hope to achieve?

11. What are the mixed feelings about the potential invasion of Japan into Malaya? How do the attitudes of the Chinese differ from those of Indians and Malayans? And British? (See p. 133). Where does Philip fall on this spectrum?

12. What is the irony of Grandfather Khoo?s having a house in Penang next door to the Malayan base of Sun Yat Sen?s Chinese Nationalist Party? What is the Khoo family history?

13. ?I had often wondered why Endo-san had decided to make me his pupil. Had it all been merely an accident that he leased our island and then made himself such a large part of my life?? (p. 153) What do you think? Was it by accident or design, perhaps sinister, on Endo-san?s part?

14. How does Philip explain his continuing love for Endo-san after he can no longer deny his friend?s treachery? (See p. 268). When Philip gradually begins to have uncertainties about his teacher and other Japanese (such as Kanazawa-san down in Kampung Pangkor, p. 85-87), why does he continue to do Endo-san?s bidding? Is it credible that he never asked Endo-san what his business was in the early years? Are the red flags up when Endo-san shoots photos sequentially from Penang Hill ?as though he had marked out a grid on the ground? (p. 58)? What is the Fortune Teller?s reaction to Endo-san? Even with all the treachery, Tanaka-san says to Philip, ?I think in the end it?s your love for him which will save him? (p. 145) Does this turn out to be true? How?

15. ?Next to a parent, a teacher is the most powerful person in one?s life?and Endo-san had been more than my parent, much more than my teacher? (pp. 168-9). Apart from Endo-san and Philip?s, what are other teacher-student relationships in the novel?

16. What are some examples of crossing lines, defying taboos in search of love? Is there any suggestion that Endo-san?s and Philip?s relationship is taboo? (See pp.186-7). Some of the swordplay imagery is highly suggestive. Do you think the sexual implications are purely metaphorical? (See pp. 305-308)

17. Can you explain the paradox behind Ueshiba?s concept of martial arts? How can mortal conflict be based on love? (see p. 141) Aikijutsu is called ?the art of harmonizing? (p. 140). Tanaka-san balked when ordered to teach army recruits in Japan. ?To teach aikijutsu in order to be able to kill and murder. Aikijutsu, the very concept of which is based on love and harmony!? (p. 145) To carry the paradox further, why is the highest level of jujitsu, according to Endo-san, never to fight at all?

18. How is Michiko-san a living emblem of the war in Japan? What are her old ties to Endo-san ---their fathers and conflict of love, family and country? (See pp. 78-9)

19. Talk about the odd triangle of Endo-san, Philip and Michiko-san. How has Endo-san engineered that the gap in the triangle would be closed? How is their story resolved at the end? Do the lines from *King Lear* that Philip quoted to Isabel about Peter continue to shed light on the complexities of these characters? ?Love?s not love/When it is mingled with regards that stand/Aloof from th?entire point? (p. 270)

20. What does the title mean? What is the origin of the phrase? How does Philip finally understand it himself? (See pp. 50, 129, and 431)

21. Talk about the ideas of destiny in the novel. Are these concepts still arguable at the end, or are they resolved?

22. How does Endo-san?s teaching enable Philip belatedly to recognize and return love for both his father and grandfather? Does aikido help him reconcile opposites including the racial division in himself?

23. How are Philip?s and Endo-san?s fates similar as they bear double-edged swords both rebelling against and protecting their fathers? What are other stories about the love and anguish of fathers? Grandfather? Uncle Lim?

24. At one point Philip falls into what he feels is enlightenment or satori when his worlds come together in a blinding flash (pp. 218-19). Are there other moments of Philip?s going into a state of deep zazen?

25. Explain the concept of ?face? in Asia. How is it ?a labyrinthian process of transaction and relationship?? (p. 135) How does Philip?s questioning of Hiroshi about Nanking cause the Japanese consul to lose face? What are the later consequences? With regard to ?face,? what are the English Noel?s determinations about his family and business, despite the war?

26. What is the fate of Fujihara? What is it he wanted that might have linked him to others? fates? How did you respond to Philip?s decision about Fujihara?s end? Admirable? Understandable?

27. It is hard to leave the novel without looking again at some of the extraordinary images. Do you have favorites? Consider these for their clear observing, beauty, and thematic resonance. When Endo-san describes the famous torii, the great gate, of Miyajima, he says, ?Each morning the sun comes to rest on it and it burns red and gold, as though the gods had just forged it in their furnace and placed it in the sea to cool. ? Philip recalls, ?The unadorned lines and subtle curves of the massive gate looked to me like a Japanese ideogram, as though a word of piety had been transformed into a physical structure, an expression of prayer made real? (p. 47). In another seaside scene, ?[h]undreds of translucent crabs scuttled away at the vibrations of our footsteps, parting before us like a curtain of glass beads? (p. 75). One ominous, startling image captures Philip?s reaction to his grandfather?s tale of the fortune teller years ago. ?I held my breath and a feeling of unreality came over me as the memory of the day I had spent with Endo-san at the temple uncoiled itself inside me? (p. 124). Whether it is sight, sound, touch, sound or taste, Tan Twan Eng conjures images that crystallize experience and memory for the reader.

28. Part of Philip?s exploration of the past is to explain --- and understand himself --- his own behavior in the war. Do you see the book as primarily an apology or self-justification? Is Philip honest in his view of his own actions? Is he always skewered by the paradox of having done both good and harm in the war? Do the concepts of aikido help him to live with the paradox? A young journalist says, ?The problem, Mr. Hutton, is that in your case there are just too many facts. All of them conflicting. And Philip responds, ?Therein lies the truth you seek? (p. 172).

29. What do we know of Philip?s life after the war? Are there consolations for his losses? Is it relevant that Noel had asked him, ?Among the creations of our modern world, what do you think will still exist and have historical and aesthetic value five hundred years from now?? (p. 162). Do you think of both the restored buildings and the antique keris?

30. Are there lingering mysteries for you in the novel? For instance, what did Endo-san write in the fifty-year-old letter to Michiko? Other questions? After an eerie, inexplicably silent boat ride across to the island, Endo-san says, ?Accept that there are things in this world we can never explain and life will be understandable. That is the irony of life. It is also the beauty of it? (p. 422).

Author Bio

Tan Twan Eng was born in Penang and lived in various places in Malaysia as a child. His first novel, THE GIFT OF RAIN, was longlisted for the Booker Prize and has been translated into Italian, Spanish, Greek, Romanian, Czech and Serbian. He is also the author of the novels THE GARDEN OF EVENING MISTS and THE HOUSE OF DOORS, the latter of which was longlisted for the Booker Prize.

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