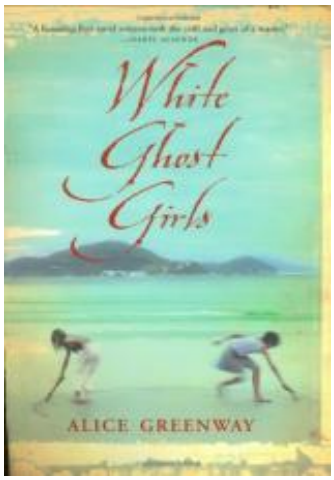
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White Ghost Girls

by Alice Greenway



About the Book

Summer 1967. The turmoil of the Maoist revolution is spilling over into Hong Kong and causing unrest as war rages in neighboring Vietnam. **White Ghost Girls** is the story of Frankie and Kate, two American sisters living in a foreign land in a chaotic time. With their war-photographer father off in Vietnam, Marianne, their beautiful but remote mother, keeps the family close by, frightened of losing her husband to a mistress or the addiction of war itself.

Although bound by a closeness of living overseas, the sisters could not be more different --- Frankie pulses with curiosity and risk, while Kate is all eyes and ears. Marianne spends her days painting watercolors of the lush surroundings, leaving the girls largely unsupervised, while their Chinese nanny, Ah Bing, does her best to look after them. One day in a village market, they decide to explore --- with tragic results.

Immersed in the heat and color of Hong Kong, a city shimmering between sea and sky, it is a world of fishermen, junks, and unexplained bodies floating up in the sea, of plotting rebels, temple gods, and ghosts.

In Alice Greenway's exquisite gem of a novel, two girls tumble into their teenage years against an extraordinary backdrop both sensuous and dangerous. This astonishing literary debut is a tale of sacrifice and solidarity that gleams with the kind of intense, complicated love that only exists between sisters.

Discussion Guide

1. In what ways does the narrator see herself and her sister as "castaways" and "secret sisters, shipwrecked sisters, and Vietcong sisters" (p. 4)?

2. How are Kate and Frankie different, physically and temperamentally? How do these differences influence their relationships with their parents? "Frankie is faster, bigger, stronger. But she's also more needy. She needs my

participation, my surrender in order to assert herself" (p. 5).

3. "Hong Kong would be safer than Saigon; an old-fashioned British enclave, he called it. That was before the trouble started this summer" (p.12). What is ironic about their parents' efforts to keep the girls safe from the horrors of Vietnam? Why are Kate and Frankie obsessed with war games and following the events in Vietnam?

4. What is the picture of the war in Vietnam as it emerges in the book? What about America's role, and their father's?

5. How is Marianne, the mother, portrayed? Are there multiple facets in her daughters' perceptions of her? How does her art reflect her efforts to keep order and civility in her family's life? Churchgoing and tea parties? "I feel my mother wrap herself in it, the charm and comforts of the colonial era" (p. 29). What is her relationship with her husband? Does it change by the end of the book?

6. The father, too, is a complex person. Is he a good father? What are his strengths? His limitations, from Kate's point of view? Is Kate fair in her evaluations of him? Do you as a reader empathize with him as the book goes on? Explain his deep attraction to Vietnam. "It's hard for him to remember us sometimes. He loves Vietnam so much" (p. 49).

7. What is the role of Ah Bing? As Amah is she an alternative mother figure for them? What kinds of worlds does she open? What are her memories of Mao and the Cultural Revolution? "Ah Bing knows we're no longer safe. From Mao. From dead bodies. From ourselves. We're changing too fast. We can't be trusted" (p. 18). How well does Ah Bing know the girls?

8. "The Chinese believe dragons lie curled asleep under these hills. . . . The great beasts must be appeased, offerings made, to avoid disease, bankruptcy or sudden, unexplained death" (p. 5). Death pervades the story from the beginning. Consider the shark threat in the harbor that turns out to be a body. "We're caught, rapt, unable to look away. It's as if we expect the body to roll over in the sea and speak, tell us her story" (p. 8). What is "the sudden change in everything" (p. 11) after they see the remains of the woman in the water? What are the deeper implications for their mother?

9. How does Ah Bing's temple on Lantau Island compare to the English church, St. John's? What does the whole temple world mean to Ah Bing? How is Kate particularly influenced by what she sees there? At one point she prays to the goddess of mercy: "Can you help me, Kuan Yin? Can you protect me from dead bodies floating up in the sea; from the Viet Cong hiding in the hills; from my body changing; from the lychees I carried, from Frankie?" (p. 133).

10. Describe the events on Lantau after Frankie induces Kate to run ahead of Ah Bing toward the temple. Kate says, "It's because I'm good at this. That's why they don't see me, run out and stop me. I've been in training. Hiding out. Playing Viet Cong with Frankie. . . . Camouflage, secrets, deceit, they're second nature. It's because I'm gwaimui, white ghost girl. I can make myself invisible, hide behind my white skin" (p. 62). How has the whole story so far been funneled into this one catastrophe? How is Kate's loyalty to Frankie instrumental in her actions?

11. The whole spirit world of Chinese traditions is a rich one. Can you recall specific details? Think of lighting joss sticks, fortune-telling, tending ancestor tablets so "they won't become hungry ghosts" (p. 7). Think of the mother carrying her baby in a special red scarf on her back . . . and the drugged moths considered to be spirits. Other examples?

12. Why does Kate have such trouble talking to someone about Lantau and the lychees? Even Frankie doesn't want to

hear. "I think my mother doesn't want to know about me if I'm bad. It's why she doesn't look" (p. 74). How do the lychees continue to define Kate for herself in the book? Who, finally, is the one person she is able to tell? And why?

13. As Kate tries to understand her family and her world, is she a reliable narrator? She tries to delve into her mother by looking at her paintings: "My mother's paintings are nostalgic, suggestive. They conjure a mythical past, an alternative present, one my father would be happy to indulge in if it wasn't for the war. A world she'd like us, her children, to believe in too" (p. 80). How is the idealized China related to the idealized old English colony? "Not this other China gone mad, slamming its doors to the West, cutting off pigtails, sending bodies down the river" (p. 81). Kate sees a further connection between Marianne's ethereal paintings and her mothering. What is it?

14. How does Kate roll Vietcong and Red Guard war games into her assessment of her own family dynamics? Give examples (see pp. 91?92).

15. One of the big differences between Kate and Frankie is their attitude toward sex. Discuss this difference. What are Ah Bing's ideas on the subject? Why is Frankie drawn to seek sexual thrills with someone like Humphries? Is it merely part of her reckless personality? Is some other need propelling her? How well does Kate understand her sister's behavior?

16. Since the father is a photographer, is it odd that there are almost no photographs of his daughters? Why not? What does one of the few photographs, taken by their mother, reveal about the two, dressed in cotton sashed dresses? "It's a testament to my mother's strength of will that she gets us to church in this heat. The power of her sudden need to rein us in, dress us, render us up for God's inspection" (p. 20).

17. On his rare trips home the father's bedtime stories as he lies on his back on the floor are of Mao, Ho Chi Minh and General Giap, Genghis Khan and Marco Polo. Is this his effort to share his world of journalism? His trying to teach the girls to take their world seriously? What is the contrast with his Saigon Duck stories later in the book? "Saigon Duck's a magic duck, enchanted. A feathered Shaharazad spinning stories to postpone the day her head will be chopped off" (p. 45). Does Kate inherit this gift for storytelling?

18. What does the deaf boy mean to Kate? He has a name, Fish Tze, but she always calls him "the deaf boy." Why, do you suppose? How does their relationship change in the book?

19. Is it the nature of a teenage girl to swing wildly as she judges her parents? "Maybe it's unfair the way I remember it. Maybe I'm too hard on my father. Maybe my memory exaggerates. Maybe he knew everything. He just couldn't help us. Like we couldn't help him. He hides in temples, behind his camera lenses, like I hide in the dark from Frankie, don't answer questions, pretend to be asleep" (p. 99). Is it necessary on some level for children to protect parents to keep some coherence in their idea of family? To create a myth of safety?

20. Greenway creates menace from the beginning of the book. Midway, in a flash forward, we know some disaster is to befall Frankie. Is there a growing inevitability about Frankie's pell-mell behavior? Her mother says, "She's too wild, too unruly" (p. 105). Ah Bing, of course, agrees. "Why does she have to be so demanding, so selfish, so present?"(p. 107). Could anyone have done anything different to protect Frankie?

21. How is the defection of the deaf boy's artist father a revelation to Kate? How does she draw an analogy with her own family? "I thought you had to take care of everyone. I didn't know you could choose" (p. 120). Is Kate's deduction on

target?

22. How does Kate and Frankie's relationship change when their father is home? What is a defining moment when he tries to take Kate's picture? How is this event one more in a series of disillusionments in Kate's story? What are other times of loss of innocence for Kate? She started by saying this was to be Frankie's story. Is it? Is it rather both their stories? "I want to tell Frankie to stop. It's not worth impressing this boy. . . . You don't need George or Humphries or Pym. Can't you see, we'll survive on our own. We've got the clothes under Ah Bing's bed. We've got our shacks of flotsam and jetsam. We're secret sisters. We don't need a father. We don't need to tell anyone anything. . . . I can't stop her from what she wants" (p.139). Do you think Frankie feels as much a sister as Kate does?

23. How do you explain the last chapter, which stands as an epilogue written many years later? Is it Kate's epilogue only? "After all these years, this is all I want: a wooden stool, a bowl of rice, an army canteen, a secret comrade, the whooping cry of wild gibbons" (p. 168).

Author Bio

Alice Greenway lived the itinerant life of a foreign correspondent's child. She grew up in Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Jerusalem, as well as in the United States. She now lives in Edinburgh with her family. This is her first novel.

Critical Praise

"An auspicious debut sensitively and impressionistically evokes adolescent turmoil."

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