
This is author Jamie Ford’s debut novel, developed from his short story about the ‘I Am Chinese’ button that his father and many Chinese children wore after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.¹ It’s a charming story moving between 1986 and 1942, providing an historical landscape which enables the reader to follow events that influenced the central character Henry Lee. Though it is a work of fiction, the author has used real events and places to give a sense of authenticity to the story.

The novel opens on 56-year-old Henry as he joins ‘a crowd of curious onlookers’ (1) gathering outside the Panama Hotel in 1986. This is his second visit to the originally Japanese designed and owned landmark building ‘that has been boarded up since 1950’ (4). As Henry stands in the crowd, the new hotel owner announces that ‘the belongings of 37 Japanese families’ (5) have been found in the hotel’s basement; opening the umbrella she is carrying to emphasise the drama for the television cameras. Henry sees it is a ‘Japanese parasol, made from bamboo, bright red and white – with orange koi painted on it, carp that looked like giant goldfish’ (5). For further emphasis, the owner holds up various items that have been gathering dust in the dim basement ever since their owners were interned.

It’s the parasol that triggers Henry’s deeply suppressed memories and takes him back to 1942 and ‘the war years’ (1) when he was a 12-year-old schoolboy straddling two cultures and finding the first love now described by the older Henry as ‘the love of his life’ (1).

The more Henry thought about the shabby old knick-knacks, the forgotten treasures, the more he wondered if his own broken heart might be found in there, hidden among the unclaimed possessions of another time. Boarded up in the basement of a condemned hotel. Lost, but never forgotten. (6)

In the intervening 40 plus years Henry has experienced a happy marriage to ‘dear Ethel’ (2), who has been dead for six months now. Henry retired to care for his sick wife, but since her passing has a lot of time on his hands and feels lonely; perhaps these belongings hold answers about the mystery of what happened to the Okabe family, especially their daughter Keiko.

There are some amusing moments, such as when the young Henry is ordered to ‘speak only your American’ (11) by his father, although his parents only speak their native Chinese. Also expected to wear an ‘I Am Chinese’ (11) button on leaving the house each day, the confused young Henry considers ‘the contrast … absurd. This makes no sense … My father’s pride has finally got the better of him’ (11). However, it occasionally has benefits when, for instance, his mother queries how he affords the ‘starfire lily’ he buys her each week. His rapid answer, ‘Everything was on sale today-special offer’ (14), confuses her, but she appreciates his ‘good bargaining skills’ (15) as she pockets the cash.

¹ Interview with Jamie Ford, author of *The Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* posted on YouTube. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvfUXAVv5Y&feature=related

Sent to Seattle’s all-white Rainier Elementary, with a racist culture prevailing among not only the students but also some of the teachers, Henry faces daily taunts and an occasional beating from the school bullies. He maintains a stoic exterior in spite of his inner dread. Correspondingly, each day he’s heckled as he walks in the opposite direction to Chinese children going to the Chinese school only three blocks from his parents’ apartment. Feeling ‘like a salmon swimming upstream’, he’s grateful his old classmates don’t join in the chorus of ‘white devil’ (12).

The day Keiko Okabe appears in the canteen at Rainer and she and Henry are thrown together performing duties in payment for their scholarships, a friendship begins. Both are at the all-white school because their parents believe it will cement their American status. Henry has never had any Japanese associations. His father would definitely not approve a friendship with Keiko.

Henry’s extremely traditional Chinese Nationalist father is well respected by the Chinatown community. He raises funds in support of the Kuomintang. He hates the Japanese more for bombing Shanghai and sacking Nanjing than bombing Pearl Harbor.

Introduced to jazz music through his friendship with black saxophonist, Sheldon, Henry has another little secret to keep from his father. Jazz is the new counter-culture just emerging onto the Seattle club scene. Definitely not something Henry’s parents would consider suitable. When Sheldon lands a gig with Oscar Holden at Seattle’s Black Elk Club, Henry decides to go. Keiko joins him there. It’s their first date. Holden acknowledges them, dedicating Alley Cats ‘for my two new friends’ (66). It becomes Henry and Keiko’s abiding connection. The evening is interrupted by an FBI raid to round up all Japanese patrons, and the children witness first-hand the enactment of Roosevelt’s Executive Orders, realising their own vulnerability, but escaping thanks to Henry’s I Am Chinese button.

In 1942 all Japanese living in America, regardless of their citizenship status, were relocated to internment camps under the Executive Orders signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, purportedly for their own safety but more in response to mounting fear and suspicion of their loyalty to America. Many of the interned Japanese men were expected to prove their loyalty by signing up to fight on America’s behalf. 2

Back to 1986 as 56-year-old Henry rues his fraught relationship with his son, recognising aspects of his childhood struggles with his own father. Marty is frustrated by the lack of communication between them; he also feels he knows little about his father’s life. Both Henry and Marty acknowledge Ethel’s role in mediating between them.

The usually cautious Henry makes a sudden decision to explore the belongings in the Panama Hotel basement. The new owner gives permission, but the task proves daunting. Henry’s decision to ask Marty to help is the turning point in their difficult relationship as they learn to listen and to share things about themselves. It’s a turning point in their difficult relationship bringing a brighter promise for their future.

Although I felt the young Henry seems too emotionally mature for his age, I nevertheless enjoyed his emerging sense of self and independence as he pursues friendship with Keiko, sneaking out to see her, even helping her family as they face internment.


In some ways Sheldon acts the older brother, lessening the young boy’s loneliness. Mrs Beatty of the Rainier canteen unexpectedly proves an ally who also adds to Henry’s growing independence.

This novel would be a good discussion starter for book groups or the classroom as the author touches on many issues and events without offering moral judgments, leaving it open to readers to exercise their own sense of justice.

Bud’s Jazz Records and the Panama Hotel are real places, and the belongings of thirty-seven Japanese families continue to be stored in the basement of the hotel. Oscar Holden was one of the founding fathers of the North West American jazz scene (365-366).

In today’s Seattle the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience offers tours of Seattle’s International District, including one titled Bitter and Sweet Tour in honour of Jamie Ford’s novel, which held a place in the New York Times Top 20 Bestsellers for more than twelve months.

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