

Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet

By Jamie Ford

About the book...

In the opening pages of Jamie Ford's stunning debut novel, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, Henry Lee comes upon a crowd gathered outside the Panama Hotel, once the gateway to Seattle's Japantown. It has been boarded up for decades, but now the new owner has made an incredible discovery: the belongings of Japanese families, left when they were rounded up and sent to internment camps during World War II. As Henry looks on, the owner opens a Japanese parasol.

This simple act takes old Henry Lee back to the 1940s, at the height of the war, when young Henry's world is a jumble of confusion and excitement, and to his father, who is obsessed with the war in China and having Henry grow up American. While "scholarshipping" at the exclusive Rainier Elementary, where the white kids ignore him, Henry meets Keiko Okabe, a young Japanese American student. Amid the chaos of blackouts, curfews, and FBI raids, Henry and Keiko forge a bond of friendship—and innocent love—that transcends the long-standing prejudices of their Old World ancestors. And

after Keiko and her family are swept up in the evacuations to the internment camps, she and Henry are left only with the hope that the war will end, and that their promise to each other will be kept.

Forty years later, Henry Lee is certain that the parasol belonged to Keiko. In the hotel's dark dusty basement he begins looking for signs of the Okabe family's belongings and for a long-lost object whose value he cannot begin to measure. Now a widower, Henry is still trying to find his voice—words that might explain the actions of his nationalistic father; words that might bridge the gap between him and his modern, Chinese American son; words that might help him confront the choices he made many years ago.

Set during one of the most conflicted and volatile times in American history, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* is an extraordinary story of commitment and enduring hope. In Henry and Keiko, Jamie Ford has created an unforgettable duo whose story teaches us of the power of forgiveness and the human heart.

About the author...

Jamie Ford is the great-grandson of Nevada mining pioneer Min Chung, who emigrated from Kaiping, China, to San Francisco in 1865, where he adopted the Western name "Ford," thus

confusing countless generations. Ford is an award-winning short-story writer, an alumnus of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, and a survivor of Orson Scott Card's Literary Boot Camp. Having grown up near Seattle's Chinatown, he now lives in Montana with his wife and children.

Reviews

Booklist

Ford vacillates between a front story dominated by nostalgia and a backstory dominated by fear. The front story struggles to support the weight of the backstory, and the complexity Ford brings to the latter is the strength of this debut novel, which considers a Chinese American man's relationship with a Japanese American woman in the 1940s and his son in the 1980s. Although Ford does not have anything especially novel to say about a familiar subject (the interplay between race and family), he writes earnestly and cares for his characters, who consistently defy stereotype. Ford posits great meaning in objects—a button reading "I am Chinese" and a jazz record, in particular—but the most striking moments come from the characters' readings of each other: "Henry couldn't picture bathing with his parents the way some Japanese families did. He couldn't picture himself doing a lot of things with his parents. . . . He felt his stomach turn a little. His heart raced when he

thought about Keiko, but his gut tightened just the same."

Library Journal

Fifth-grade scholarship students and best friends Henry and Keiko are the only Asians in their Seattle elementary school in 1942. Henry is Chinese, Keiko is Japanese, and Pearl Harbor has made all Asians—even those who are American born—targets for abuse. Because Henry's nationalistic father has a deep-seated hatred for Japan, Henry keeps his friendship with and eventual love for Keiko a secret. When Keiko's family is sent to an internment camp in Idaho, Henry vows to wait for her. Forty years later, Henry comes upon an old hotel where the belongings of dozens of displaced Japanese families have turned up in the basement, and his love for Keiko is reborn. In his first novel, award-winning short-story writer Ford expertly nails the sweet innocence of first love, the cruelty of racism, the blindness of patriotism, the astonishing unknowns between parents and their children, and the sadness and satisfaction at the end of a life well lived. The result is a vivid picture of a confusing and critical time in American history. Recommended for all fiction collections

BookPage Reviews

**(<http://www.bookpage.com>) Jessica Inman
writes from Tulsa, Oklahoma**

First novel is more sweet than bitter

In the opening scene of Jamie Ford's debut, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, 50-something Henry Lee watches as a crowd gathers around the Panama Hotel. The new owner of the long-abandoned building has discovered something in the basement: the belongings of 37 Japanese families, items left behind decades ago when their owners were rounded up for internment camps during World War II.

There's a delicious sense of mystery about this scene. What will we find in the dusty memorabilia? Will its secrets be beautiful or tragic—or both? Henry is curious too, and he begins to remember his preteen years during the war and a girl named Keiko. In flashbacks, Ford tells us their story.

The only two students of Asian descent at their school, Chinese-American Henry and Japanese-American Keiko quickly strike up a friendship. But soon it becomes clear that their friendship is much deeper than schoolyard camaraderie. Their feelings for each other are simple, but their love story is complicated: by war, and by Henry's father's ill regard for the Japanese.

When Keiko's family is sent to an internment camp, time and tragedy separate her from Henry.

Ford aims to portray the Japanese-American internment with solid historicity, choosing to focus on how the events affected the course of real people's lives. And he succeeds. The book's historical elements are sturdy, but they're very gently threaded into the novel. It's mostly just a good story, one about families and first loves and identity and loyalty.

Ford, of Chinese descent, is the kind of down-to-earth writer you'd like to have a cup of coffee with. His full-length fiction debut might make you fall in love with Seattle—or at least start digging up your own city's wartime history and possible jazz roots. It will make you want to call your oldest relatives and ask how they met their spouses. More than anything, though, it will make you linger on the final pages, sure that even the bitterest memories and the most painful regret can yield something sweet.

Kirkus Reviews

Sentimental, heartfelt novel portrays two children separated during the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. In 1940s Seattle, ethnicities do not mix. Whites, blacks, Chinese and Japanese live in separate

neighborhoods, and their children attend different schools. When Henry Lee's staunchly nationalistic father pins an "I am Chinese" button to his 12-year-old son's shirt and enrolls him in an all-white prep school, Henry finds himself friendless and at the mercy of schoolyard bullies. His salvation arrives in the form of Keiko, a Japanese girl with whom Henry forms an instant—and forbidden—bond. The occasionally sappy prose tends to overtly express subtleties that readers would be happier to glean for themselves, but the tender relationship between the two young people is moving. The older Henry, a recent widower living in 1980s Seattle, reflects in a series of flashbacks on his burgeoning romance with Keiko and its abrupt ending when her family was evacuated. A chance discovery of items left behind by Japanese-Americans during the evacuation inspires Henry to share his and Keiko's story with his own son, in hopes of preventing the dysfunctional parent-child relationship he experienced with his own father. The major problem here is that Henry's voice always sounds like that of a grown man, never quite like that of a child; the boy of the flashbacks is jarringly precocious and not entirely credible. Still, the exploration of Henry's changing relationship with his family and with Keiko will keep most readers turning pages while waiting for the story arc to come full circle, despite the overly flowery portrait of

young love, cruel fate and unbreakable bonds. A timely debut that not only reminds readers of a shameful episode in American history, but cautions us to examine the present and take heed we don't repeat those injustices.

Publishers Weekly

Ford's strained debut concerns Henry Lee, a Chinese-American in Seattle who, in 1986, has just lost his wife to cancer. After Henry hears that the belongings of Japanese immigrants interned during WWII have been found in the basement of the Panama Hotel, the narrative shuttles between 1986 and the 1940s in a predictable story that chronicles the losses of old age and the bewilderment of youth. Henry recalls the difficulties of life in America during WWII, when he and his Japanese-American school friend, Keiko, wandered through wartime Seattle. Keiko and her family are later interned in a camp, and Henry, horrified by America's anti-Japanese hysteria, is further conflicted because of his Chinese father's anti-Japanese sentiment. Henry's adult life in 1986 is rather mechanically rendered, and Ford clumsily contrasts Henry's difficulty in communicating with his college-age son, Marty, with Henry's own alienation from his father, who was determined to Americanize him. The wartime persecution of Japanese immigrants is

presented well, but the flatness of the narrative and Ford's reliance on numerous cultural clichés make for a disappointing read.

Discussion questions

(<http://www.jamieford.com/reading-guide/>)

- 1. Father-son relationships are a crucial theme in the novel. Talk about some of these relationships and how they are shaped by culture and time. For example, how is the relationship between Henry and his father different from that between Henry and Marty? What accounts for the differences?**
- 2. Why doesn't Henry's father want him to speak Cantonese at home? How does this square with his desire to send Henry back to China for school? Isn't he sending his son a mixed message?**
- 3. If you were Henry, would you be able to forgive your father? Does Henry's father deserve forgiveness?**
- 4. From the beginning of the novel, Henry wears the "I am Chinese" button given to him by his father. What is the significance of this button and its message, and how has Henry's understanding of that message changed by the end of the novel?**

5. Why does Henry provide an inaccurate translation when he serves as the go-between in the business negotiations between his father and Mr. Preston? Is he wrong to betray his father's trust in this way?

6. The US has been called a nation of immigrants. In what ways do the families of Keiko and Henry illustrate different aspects of the American immigrant experience?

7. What is the bond between Henry and Sheldon, and how is it strengthened by jazz music?

8. If a novel could have a soundtrack, this one would be jazz. What is it about this indigenous form of American music that makes it an especially appropriate choice?

9. Henry's mother comes from a culture in which wives are subservient to their husbands. Given this background, do you think she could have done more to help Henry in his struggles against his father? Is her loyalty to her husband a betrayal of her son?

10. Compare Marty's relationship with Samantha to Henry's relationship with Keiko. What other examples can you find in the novel of love that is forbidden or that crosses boundaries of one kind or another?

11. What struggles did your own ancestors have as immigrants to America, and to what extent did they incorporate aspects of their cultural heritage into their new identities as Americans?

12. Does Henry give up on Keiko too easily? What else could he have done to find her?

13. What about Keiko? Why didn't she make more of an effort to see Henry once she was released from the camp?

14. Do you think Ethel might have known what was happening with Henry's letters?

15. The novel ends with Henry and Keiko meeting again after more than forty years. Jump ahead a year and imagine what has happened to them in that time. Is there any evidence in the novel for this outcome?

16. What sacrifices do the characters in the novel make in pursuit of their dreams for themselves and for others? Do you think any characters sacrifice too much, or for the wrong reasons? Consider the sacrifices Mr. Okabe makes, for example, and those of Mr. Lee. Both fathers are acting for the sake of their children, yet the results are quite different. Why?

17. Was the US government right or wrong to

"relocate" Japanese-Americans and other citizens and residents who had emigrated from countries the US was fighting in WWII? Was some kind of action necessary following Pearl Harbor? Could the government have done more to safeguard civil rights while protecting national security?

18. Should the men and women of Japanese ancestry rounded up by the US during the war have protested more actively against the loss of their property and liberty? Remember that most were eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the US. What would you have done in their place?

19. Should the men and women of Japanese ancestry rounded up by the US during the war have protested more actively against the loss of their property and liberty? Remember that most were eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the US. What would you have done in their place? What's to prevent something like this from every happening again?

Readalikes

***Tallgrass* by Sandra Dallas**
Her life turned upside-down when a Japanese internment camp is opened in their small

Colorado town, Rennie witnesses the way her community places suspicion on the newcomers when a young girl is murdered, an event that prompts Rennie's own perspective change and the discovery of dangerous secrets. By the author of *New Mercies*.

***Disappearing Moon Café* by Sky Lee**

Sometimes funny, sometimes scandalous, always compelling, this extraordinary first novel chronicles the women of the Wong family from frontier railroad camps to modern-day Vancouver. As past sins and inborn strengths are passed on from mother to daughter to granddaughter, each generation confronts, in its own way, the same problems – isolation, racism, and the clash of cultures. Moving effortlessly between past and present, between North America and China, Sky Lee weaves fiction and historical fact into a memorable and moving picture of a people's struggle for identity.

***American Knees* by Shawn Wong**

Coping with the usual challenges of love and relationships, divorced Chinese-American Raymond Ding and Japanese-Irish Aurora Crane are further challenged by age-old family traditions and the expectations of their own generation

***The Climate of the Country* by Marnie Mueller**

The author, the first Caucasian born in the Tule Lake Japanese American Segregation Camp in northern California during World War II, has based this moving study of divided loyalties and racial prejudice on her own parents' experiences. Denton Jordan is a conscientious objector who becomes an administrator at the camp. Married to a Jewish wife who resents her husband's pacifism, Jordan must reconcile his pacifist beliefs with the responsibility he feels while dealing with the Japanese Americans' equally strong divided loyalties as prisoners in their own country. With martial law established and loyalty oaths ordered, conflict escalates into violence with the internees, and Jordan must confront significant challenges to his idealism in the complex situation of the camp. The novel features a strong sense of history and the particulars of the internment experience of Japanese Americans during the war.

***Heart Mountain* by Gretel Ehrlich**

The left-at-home residents and ranchers of Luster, Wyoming, and the Japanese-American inmates of nearby Heart Mountain Relocation Camp contend with colliding political and personal circumstances

***When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka**
Otsuka tells the story of a Japanese American family's internment during World War II. In 1942 an unnamed young boy and girl, along

with their mother, are forced to leave their Berkeley, California, home for a primitive Utah desert compound while the fate of their father, detained in New Mexico, is uncertain. After the war, the family is reunited and tries to reassemble their lives. This is a restrained and careful reconstruction of a time and a place based on evident historical research and the author's own grandparents' experiences.