

**Gail Tsukiyama**

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Updated: Oct. 25, 2013

Born: San Francisco, California, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Novelist

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## PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born in San Francisco, CA. **Education:** San Francisco State University, B.A. and M.A. **Addresses:** Home: El Cerrito, CA. **E-mail:** gtsukiyama@literati.net; gatsuki@aol.com.

## CAREER:

Writer, editor, and teacher. San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, part-time lecturer in creative writing; *San Francisco Chronicle*, San Francisco, freelance book reviewer; *WaterBridge Review*, book review editor. Kiriyaama Book Prize judge, 1997-99.

## AWARDS:

Academy of American Poets Award; chosen by Library of Congress to participate in first National Book Festival, Washington, DC, 2001.

## WORKS:

**WRITINGS:****NOVELS**

*Women of the Silk*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1991.

*The Samurai's Garden*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1995.

*Night of Many Dreams*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1998.

*The Language of Threads*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1999.

*Dreaming Water*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2002.

*The Street of a Thousand Blossoms*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2007.

*A Hundred Flowers*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2012.

## Sidelights

Gail Tsukiyama is a writer, editor, and teacher known for her subtle, moving writing that shows insight into even the most complicated human relationships. The daughter of a Chinese mother from Hong Kong and a Japanese father from Hawaii, Tsukiyama often explores her multicultural heritage in her work, placing her subjects against a backdrop of Chinese and Japanese history and culture.

Tsukiyama's first novel, *Women of the Silk*, draws a picture of Chinese culture as it existed in the early twentieth century. It is the story of Pei, the younger daughter of a poor fish-farming couple, who is sent to work in a silk factory when her family can no longer afford to support her. At the factory Pei soon encounters a sisterhood of workers, an all-female workforce forming a subculture within Chinese society. Although her life is restricted in many ways--she has to work twelve hours each day, for instance--Pei nonetheless adjusts to the limitations and finds independence, friendship, and fulfillment.

Reviewers praised *Women of the Silk* for its impressive detail and its realistic portrait of a young woman coming of age. A *Publishers Weekly* critic stated that Tsukiyama "weaves a picture of rural China," opening "a window onto an aspect of China few outsiders ever see." Likewise Bob Allen, writing in the *Washington Post Book World*, admired Tsukiyama's "wit, grace and keen insight" and declared that her characters presage modern feminists--"strong, self-reliant women who manage to thrive, prosper and lead rich inner lives ... within a stultifying social order that seems in all ways stacked against them." And Fran Handman, a *New York Times Book Review* contributor, commended Tsukiyama's thorough historical research, describing *Women of the Silk* as "straightforward and fast moving, its prose succinct and delicate."

Tsukiyama's second book, *The Samurai's Garden*, was equally well received. An exploration of the author's Japanese heritage, the book is roughly based on Tsukiyama's uncle's experiences in Hong Kong and Japan. Although Tsukiyama admitted to *Printed Matter* contributor Elisabeth Sherwin that, because she was unfamiliar with Japanese culture and customs, her second book was more difficult to write than her first--"I began *Women of the Silk* with culture but no story," she said. "Here I had a story but no culture"--this historical fiction about a young painter's spiritual coming of age was praised by *Booklist* reviewer Donna Seaman as "an extraordinarily graceful and moving novel." Stephen is a twenty-year-old from Hong Kong who is suffering from tuberculosis and is sent to his family's beach house in Japan to recover. There he meets Matsu, described by Seaman as "a samurai of the soul," who nurses Stephen to health of both body and spirit. Set during the Japanese invasion of China in the late 1930s, *The Samurai's Garden* celebrates, in writing that a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called "crystalline and delicate," the rise of goodness and beauty above political and moral strife.

The spiritual value of the family bond is at the center of *Night of Many Dreams*, Tsukiyama's third novel, which follows four women after their escape from the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. Sisters Joan and Emma Lew are the young protagonists of the novel; they, along with their mother and aunt, return from exile in Macao to a prosperous postwar Hong Kong. The reader witnesses the young girls as they travel through adolescence and young adulthood. A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* wrote: "Although at times her spare prose and use of past-tense flashbacks flatten emotional resonance, she compensates with subtle background details." *Booklist* reviewer GraceAnne A. DeCandido praised Tsukiyama's ability to "[evoke] how scent and aroma can jog the memory and clutch at the heart." Shirley N. Quan, a reviewer in *Library Journal*, also commented on the author's sensory writing that "because Tsukiyama writes with great sensory detail, allowing her reader to touch, taste, and feel the world she creates, the work does remain a satisfying read."

Tsukiyama's fourth novel, *The Language of Threads*, is a sequel to *Women of the Silk*, revisiting Pei, now twenty-eight years old and living in Hong Kong after having escaped the silk industry and having fled the Japanese invasion of her village. *Booklist* contributor Grace Fill criticized the latter book, commenting that "Tsukiyama's simple writing style, though pleasant, does not adequately convey the magnitude of the difficulties Pei encounters," but a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer praised the novel as a

"quiet but powerful effort" written in "spare, evocative prose," and Quan in *Library Journal* called Tsukiyama's writing "richly descriptive and filled with historical detail."

Tsukiyama continues to explore the theme of family relationships in her fifth book, *Dreaming Water*. The story details two days in the life of Cate and Hana, a mother and daughter learning to cope with loss--both of a husband and father and of Hana herself, who is suffering from a fatal genetic disorder that causes her body to age at twice the normal rate. Added to the cast is Cate's childhood best friend, Laura, and Laura's two daughters, the three of whom help Cate and Hana face an uncertain future and who in return are taught valuable life lessons. Of the book, a *Publishers Weekly* contributor commented that "the pacing is stilted," but the same reviewer allowed that Tsukiyama "uses the sense of touch to stunning effect." And Kristine Huntley, writing in *Booklist*, praised the book as "beautifully written," concluding: "Tsukiyama's novel cannot fail to move readers."

An epic family saga covering three decades, *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms* focuses on Hiroshi and Kenji, orphaned brothers who live with their grandparents in Tokyo. The action begins on the cusp of world war in 1939 and follows the family through the horrors of wartime shortages, the firebombing of Tokyo, the humiliation of surrender, and the rebuilding of a shattered country. After the war, Hiroshi embarks on a successful career as a sumo wrestler; Kenji, who is shy and artistic, is drawn to the stark beauty of Noh theater and becomes an artisan who makes masks for Noh performances. Despite their success in their chosen fields, the brothers face emotional setbacks: Hiroshi cannot avert his wife's descent into depression; Kenji cannot acknowledge his homosexuality to the woman who loves him.

Many critics welcomed *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms* as an eloquent and moving family story. *Bookreporter.com* contributor Alexis Burling called the novel a "gorgeously rendered" story; Seaman, writing in *Booklist*, hailed it as "popular fiction at its most intelligent, appealing, and rewarding." Yet *New York Times Book Review* contributor Louisa Thomas found the book's epic ambitions at odds with its "reassuringly small-scale style of a folk tale, characterized by short anecdotes and a heavy dose of morals." For Thomas, the fact that all of the characters are essentially good people, who suffer what happens to them without apparent volition or conflict, detracts from the book's power. "Where there are only innocents and accidents," the critic concluded, "redemption comes easily." *USA Today* reviewer Susan Kelly made a similar point, observing that the characters are "somewhat diminished by the fact that they are all essentially noble, while all the evil lies without." Quan, on the other hand, praised the novel in a *Library Journal* review, commenting that Tsukiyama "deftly illustrates the meaning of resilience" and is "adept at capturing sensory detail."

Tsukiyama's seventh novel, *A Hundred Flowers*, is set in China in 1958. The title of the book is taken from a 1957 quote by Chairman Mao. The horrors of life in communist China play out through the experiences of Kai Ying. The protagonist's husband, Sheng, has been accused of writing a letter that is critical of communism. He is quickly arrested and placed in a labor camp on the other side of the country. Without her husband, Kai Ying must find a way to support herself, her son, and her father-in-law. Then Kai Ying's son is injured and a terrible family secret is revealed.

A *Kirkus Reviews* critic was somewhat ambivalent to *A Hundred Flowers*, stating that "for all the delicacy of the prose, the novel substitutes moral clichés against abuse and authoritarianism for emotional energy. The result reads like a faded black-and-white photo, charming but indistinct." Proffering a similar assessment in *Publishers Weekly*, a reviewer remarked: "Though complex human beings fail to emerge from the facade of stock voices," Tsukiyama "creates a sympathetic portrait." Furthermore, as Eve Gaus put it in her *Booklist* critique, "Tsukiyama gently envelops the reader into the quiet sadness that permeates the entire household."

FURTHER READINGS:

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

## PERIODICALS

*Booklist*, March 1, 1995, Donna Seaman, review of *The Samurai's Garden*, p. 1180; February 15, 1998, GraceAnne A. DeCandido, review of *Night of Many Dreams*, pp. 984-985; July, 1999, Grace Fill, review of *The Samurai's Garden*, p. 1926; May 1, 2002, Kristine Huntley, review of *Dreaming Water*, p. 1511; July 1, 2007, Donna Seaman, review of *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms*, p. 8; July 1, 2012, Eve Gaus, review of *A Hundred Flowers*, p. 35.

*Globe and Mail* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), October 27, 2007, Michelle Berry, review of *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms*, p. D2.

*Kirkus Reviews*, July 15, 2007, review of *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms*; August 1, 2012, review of *A Hundred Flowers*.

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*Printed Matter*, March 29, 1998, Elisabeth Sherwin, "Gail Tsukiyama Writes to Explore Her Dual Heritage."

*Publishers Weekly*, August 16, 1991, review of *Women of the Silk*, p. 47; January 30, 1995, review of *The Samurai's Garden*, p. 85; March 23, 1998, review of *Night of Many Dreams*, p. 80; August 30, 1999, review of *The Language of Threads*, p. 48; April 8, 2002, review of *Dreaming Water*, p. 204; June 11, 2007, review of *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms*, p. 35; June 18, 2012, review of *A Hundred Flowers*, p. 33.

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*Bookreporter.com*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (June 12, 2008), profile of Tsukiyama; Alexis Burling, interview with Tsukiyama and review of *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms*; (June 12, 2008), Jana Siciliano and Dana Schwartz, interview with Tsukiyama.

*Curled Up with a Good Book*, <http://www.curledup.com/> (June 12, 2008), Luan Gaines, review of *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms*.

*Literati*, <http://literati.net/> (May 21, 2013), author profile.

*Water Bridge Review*, <http://www.waterbridgereview.org/> (June 12, 2008), interview with Tsukiyama.\*

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