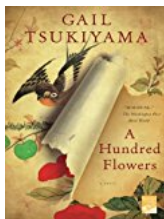


## Hundred Flowers (Tsukiyama)

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### **A Hundred Flowers**

*Gail Tsukiyama, 2012*

*St. Martin's Press*

*320 pp.*

*ISBN-13: 9781250022547*

### **Summary**

A powerful new novel about an ordinary family facing extraordinary times at the start of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

China, 1957. Chairman Mao has declared a new openness in society: "Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend." Many intellectuals fear it is only a trick, and Kai Ying's husband, Sheng, a teacher, has promised not to jeopardize their safety or that of their young son, Tao. But one July morning, just before his sixth birthday, Tao watches helplessly as Sheng is dragged away for writing a letter criticizing the Communist Party and sent to a labor camp for "reeducation."

A year later, still missing his father desperately, Tao climbs to the top of the hundred-year-old kapok tree in front of their home, wanting to see the mountain peaks in the distance. But Tao slips and tumbles thirty feet to the courtyard below, badly breaking his leg.

As Kai Ying struggles to hold her small family together in the face of this shattering reminder of her husband's absence, other members of the household must face their own guilty secrets and strive to find peace in a world where the old sense of order is falling. Once again, Tsukiyama brings us a powerfully moving story of ordinary people facing extraordinary circumstances with grace and courage. (*From the publisher.*)

**Author Bio**

- Birth—N/A
- Where—San Francisco, California, USA
- Education—B.A., M.A., San Francisco State University
- Awards—Academy of American Poets Award;  
PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award
- Currently—El Cerrito, California

Readers know Gail Tsukiyama through her best-selling novel *The Samurai's Garden* (1994). Her other works include *Women of the Silk* (1991), *Night of Many Dreams* (1998), *The Language of Threads* (1999), *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms* (2007), *Dreaming Water* (2002), and *A Hundred Flowers* (2012).

Born to a Chinese mother and a Japanese father, she grew up in San Francisco and now lives in El Cerrito, California. She earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in English with a concentration in Creative Writing at San Francisco State University. With an understanding of her heritage, Tsukiyama explores the sights, sounds and feelings of China and Japan in her novels.

She was one of nine fiction authors to appear during the first Library of Congress National Book Festival in 2001. (*From the publisher.*)

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**Book Reviews**

I was following this family almost as though it were my own and stayed all the way to the end of their story.

***NPR, All Things Considered***

Tsukiyama adopts the contemporary template of multiple perspective narration to explore the relationships of a close family in a closed society. Though complex human beings fail to emerge from the facade of stock voices, the tenderness the author shows for her characters creates a sympathetic portrait of intellectuals trying to live honestly in the shadow of oppression.

***Publishers Weekly***

Best-selling author Gail Tsukiyama, recipient of PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award, takes us back to those times not by painting a panorama but in her thoughtful and forthright way by showing the consequences for one family.

***Library Journal***

Tsukiyama's close attention to detail and descriptive language paint a vivid picture of the daily life of Kai Ying and her family. Tsukiyama gently envelops the reader into the quiet sadness that permeates the entire household while weaving in the multiple

hardships the family faces under communism. Strength of community; support and love of family, both natural and adopted; and the ability to heal and overcome loss are major themes within the moving novel.

### **Booklist**

A young boy and his family struggle to adjust after the imprisonment of his father, an outspoken intellectual, in this dour slice-of-life novel about Maoist China from Tsukiyama.... 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.

### **Kirkus Reviews**

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#### Discussion Questions

1. Wei and Sheng have different philosophies of life as evidenced by their statements on page 17. Wei says to "look for the quiet within the storm" while Shen states to walk "straight into the storm." As the plot unfolds do you feel that these early declarations are true to each man's character?

2. On page 83 Kai Yeng remembers Sheng telling her that worrying about the worst things that could happen in life takes the same amount of energy as hoping for the best. Do you agree? What examples of hope do you find in the book? Do you feel that Sheng had hope? Kai Yeng?

3. Why is the character of Suyin necessary to the plot? What different roles does she play for the other members of the household?

4. Do you agree with Wei's observation (page 239) that China "could easily have caught up with the rest of the world if she weren't always being dragged backward"?

5. In the end the Kapok tree heals itself. Do you feel that the relationship between Wei and Sheng was healed? Are they truly "more alike than either of us knew" (page 281)? How might this also be true for others in the book? Explain.

6. The Kapok tree is almost a character unto itself in this book. Explain its significance to one or more characters.

7. What role do you think Tian plays in the book? If Tian was not on the train, do you think Wei would have been successful? After Tian leaves Wei and the story, speculate what happens to Tian. Do you think he gets involved with the Lee family afterwards?

8. At first Tao seems to resent having Suyin living with his family. What happens that changes his feelings to her? Compare this to Tao's forgiveness of his school friend Little Shan.

9. Compare and contrast the marriages in the book.

10. Although this concentrates on a difficult time period in Chinese history, how do each of the characters embody a sense of hope for the future?

11. What do you think will happen with Sheng? Why?

12. Was grandfather Wei wrong to write to "The Party" when he knew it might endanger the family?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

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