

## The Poetry of History: The Novels of Gail Tsukiyama

“We all persevere in the same way,” says Gail Tsukiyama, recipient of the Academy of American Poets Award and the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award. Drawing on her background as the daughter of a Chinese mother and a Hawaii-born Japanese father, Tsukiyama’s six novels have ranged from the silk factories of early 20<sup>th</sup> century China to the sumo stables of World War II Japan to a college town in contemporary California. Her upcoming novel, *A Hundred Flowers*, tackles China during the Cultural Revolution. Her oeuvre has been inspired by a “sense of curiosity... about a person or subculture or time and place,” as well as the themes of “family, courage and perseverance.”

*Women of the Silk*, her debut novel, follows young Pei as she is sold by her destitute rural family to a silk mill, where she forges strong bonds with her fellow workers, particularly Lin. As a gesture of her independence, Pei partakes in the hairdressing ceremony that marks her commitment to an unmarried life and a place in the “sisters’ house.” The peace that Pei discovers in sisterhood is contrasted by the upheavals rocking 1920s and 30s China. Tsukiyama offers a glimpse into an unfamiliar subculture, and claims a place for women’s experiences in the story of China’s modernization. One reviewer states, “If Charles Dickens had lived in early 20th-century China, he would have been Gail Tsukiyama.”

USA Today praises Gail Tsukiyama’s sixth novel, *The Street of A Thousand Blossoms* as “a fascinating, intricate portrait of Japanese customs and rituals that floods the senses.” The novel follows brothers Hiroshi and Kenji as they negotiate the changing world of Japan over three decades—from its days as an empire through the darker days of war and finally to post-war reconstruction. Kenji is slight, artistic, soft-spoken, and longs to be a Noh mask-maker, while robust Hiroshi trains to become a champion sumo wrestler. Orphaned by the drowning death of their parents, the boys are raised by their grandparents, Yoshio and Fumiko. Ritual offers the characters solace and stability in a chaotic world. As Japan changes, “as the ghosts of the past were put to rest as new generations moved forward in the world,” the rituals of the two brothers’ professions maintain a link to the Japan of yore and offer the characters a sense of control amid the tumult.

Tsukiyama has commented, “Poetry gave me the foundation of language.” Indeed, from the very first line of *The Street of A Thousand Blossoms*, poetry greets the reader: “A white light seeped through the shoji windows and into the room, along with the morning chill.” The novel’s structure of small vignettes that culminate in a broader epic reflects the pacing of Noh, Kenji’s passion. The first time Kenji watches a Noh performance, he notes, “Each step was like a dance. Each gesture meant something, and each word was recited like poetry.” Likewise, *Women of the Silk* has been praised by *Publishers Weekly* for its “simple, elegant and fluid prose” and called “succinct and delicate” by the *New York Times Book Review*.

However, the lovely language does not exempt the characters—nor the reader—from

destruction and pain. Fire plays a pivotal role in both novels. In *Women of the Silk*, Pei loses her best friend in a fire at the silk factory: “Pei watched the flames and could feel the burning emptiness moving through her even before Chen Ling came walking toward them, her face dark and grave.” In *The Street of A Thousand Blossoms*, Tsukiyama describes the horror of the bombing of Japan through the experiences of two sisters, Haru and Aki, who lose their mother. Aki recalls, “The world was dark smoke around her when she suddenly turned at her mother’s scream to see her back engulfed in bright flames like some strangely beautiful bird.” Fire is destruction, but also, like the mythical phoenix, offers an opportunity for renewal.

Ultimately, both novels are connected by the theme of resilience—of the heart, of a nation, and of a culture. “There’s a story behind everything,” Tanaka, the sumo master advises Hiroshi at the beginning of his career. “To be noble, my mother said, was to account for the life you lived, to always account for your mistakes, and to have dignity and worth.” Through her enduring characters—models of dignity and worth—Gail Tsukiyama offers readers the triumph of the human spirit, and demonstrates that “no matter how different we are as a greater humanity, how different we might live externally, we are ultimately alike internally.”

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