

Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet

by **Jamie Ford**

About the Book

When artifacts from Japanese families sent to internment camps during World War II are uncovered in Seattle, Henry Lee embarks on a quest that leads to memories of growing up Chinese in a city rife with anti-Japanese sentiment.

Praise for the Book

"Sentimental, heartfelt...the exploration of Henry's changing relationship with his family and with Keiko will keep most readers turning pages...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."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"A tender and satisfying novel set in a time and a place lost forever, **Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet** gives us a glimpse of the damage that is caused by war--not the sweeping damage of the battlefield, but the cold, cruel damage to the hearts and humanity of individual people. Especially relevant in today's world, this is a beautifully written book that will make you think. And, more importantly, it will make you *feel*."

—**Garth Stein**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*

"Jamie Ford's first novel explores the age-old conflicts between father and son, the beauty and sadness of what happened to Japanese Americans in the Seattle area during World War II, and the depths and longing of deep-heart love. An impressive, bitter, and sweet debut."

—**Lisa See**, bestselling author of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*

Courtesy of Random House

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.

Courtesy of Random House

Author Interview

Random House Reader’s Circle: Where did the idea for *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* come from?

Jamie Ford: It really started with the “I am Chinese” button, which my father mentioned wearing as a kid. There was a bit of an identity crisis in the International District in the wake of Pearl Harbor. Many Chinese families feared for their safety, especially as the FBI was rounding up prominent members of the Japanese community. It piqued my curiosity and really led me to research the whole period.

From there I wrote a sliver of a short story, really nothing more than a vignette, and I submitted it to the now-defunct *Picolata Review*, where it was ultimately accepted. A few weeks later I was accepted to an intensive, immersive, week-long literary boot camp run by science fiction and fantasy writer Orson Scott Card, where we literally read and wrote fifteen to seventeen hours a day. It was while attending that camp in Virginia that Scott inspired me to write what he termed “a noble romantic tragedy.” That story was called “The Button,” about a Chinese boy (Henry) that tried to prevent his best friend (Keiko) from being taken away. I workshopped the story, changed the title to “I Am Chinese” and sent it off to *Glimmer Train*, where it became a finalist in their 2006 Short-Story Award for New Writers. That story became a chapter in the book.

RHRC: You’re part Chinese. Tell us about your Chinese family. And the name Ford, where does it come from?

JF: Actually, I didn’t even know the whole story until last year. I finally tracked it all down. It turns out my great-grandfather, a man named Min Chung, immigrated to America and later adopted the name William Ford—supposedly from the famous outdoorsman, not the father of Henry Ford. My grandfather, oddly enough, switched back to Chung as a screen name, going by George Chung and appearing as an extra in movies during the ’50s. He went on to be a consultant for the ’70s TV series *Kung Fu*. His son, my father, was 100 percent Chinese and fluent. Unfortunately, I don’t speak Chinese—I had four years of German and that doesn’t get me

very far at family reunions.

In general, I had a very American childhood, though when you're half Chinese, you never fully fit in. You don't feel white and you don't feel Chinese—you're half, or *hapa*, as they say in Hawaii. Census forms don't have a box to check for half.

RHRC: How did you come to learn about the Panama Hotel?

JF: That came about as I was researching a different story—one dealing with the Wa Mei Massacre, which was a mass shooting in the mid- '80s at a backroom casino in Chinatown, where my grandfather once worked. I was paging through some old news articles and there was an unrelated mention of the Panama Hotel about the owner finding the belongings of all these Japanese families. When I wrote *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, I dug further into that story and eventually contacted the hotel owner and flew out to Seattle. It was amazing and humbling to see what still remains to this day in that dank, dusty basement.

RHRC: Do you personally know anyone who was affected by the Japanese Internment?

JF: I do, but I didn't know it at the time. I lived in Ashland, Oregon, until I was twelve, and one of my best friend's fathers had been uprooted as a child and sent to a camp in Arkansas. I never knew that until I was doing my research and saw that he'd written a book of poetry about his camp experiences (five actually). His name is Lawson Inada—he's now Oregon's Poet Laureate, by the way. We were able to reconnect and he was kind enough to read an early version of my manuscript.

RHRC: Do you see any parallels between the Japanese Internment and, say, the desire by some to lock our borders, or round up Muslims because they might be a threat?

JF: Only vague similarities. The empire of Japan had been cornered, and lashed out by attacking Pearl Harbor, Singapore, the Philippines, etcetera—it was an unexpected, vicious attack, but it was an all- out declaration of war between nations with very obvious borders. It's very different than having cells of foreign- sponsored terrorists within our country or operating overseas. And now, for the most part, we're a much more integrated society. Rounding up 120,000 Japanese Americans didn't slow down the ambitions of the empire of Japan, and I don't think rounding up Muslim Americans will stop the machinations of evilminded people along the Afghan/Pakistani border. Let's hope that we learned our lesson sixty- five years ago.

RHRC: What about people like conservative columnist Michelle Malkin who have spoken out in favor of the Japanese Internment, even writing a book about it— saying it was a just endeavor?

JF: First of all, I really set out to write a people story— a love story and a family story. It ended up as a bit more than that, but any kind of oblique political thing was not my intention. However, after I'd written *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, someone pointed out the Malkin book and I guess my answer to that is this: Ronald Reagan, the most beloved conservative in recent memory, was the one who signed legislation apologizing for the Internment and authorizing \$1.6

billion in reparations to be paid to those who lost their homes and livelihoods in the camps. Case closed.

RHRC: You delve a little into the Seattle jazz scene of the '40s. How did that come about?

JF: I've always had a fascination with the paved-over history of Chinatown and Nihonmachi. My grandparents were always having these anniversary dinners at the China Gate restaurant—this funky old place that was originally a Chinese theater and after that a jazz club where greats like Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington played. As a kid, I was always fascinated by that. It's sad because now the International District is ripe with decay, but in its heyday—from Prohibition until the Internment—it was the place to go for a wild time on a Saturday night. You could find booze, gambling, and jazz. I find it sad that these great places, like the Black Elks Club where Ray Charles had his first paid gig, have basically vanished.

Also, growing up in Seattle my grandfather would always take me to his favorite seafood restaurant, which was in Rainier Beach between a soul-food restaurant and a Hispanic grocer. I was always fascinated with how Seattle's ethnic communities ended up right on top of one another. Turns out it was because of the zoning laws in the '30s and '40s. It was illegal (though how well enforced, I don't know) to sell land to certain minorities outside of certain zones.

RHRC: The novel is told in a split-narrative: past and present. What made you decide to go that route?

JF: I wanted to give the book a more redemptive ending. That's a literary way of saying, "And everyone lived happily ever after."

The short story wrapped up on a fairly tragic note. And even if I continued the story in the '40s, there really wasn't a way to give it an ending that felt satisfying. I mean, after the war was over, it didn't suddenly get better for Japanese American families. Their lives had been completely turned upside down—sort of like people who survive a hurricane. Sure the wind stops blowing and the floodwaters recede, but what do you have left except rubble, and does that provide happiness, or just relief? It took decades for most of these families to recover. It just seemed natural to have that redemptive ending come years later as well.

Also, I think that most people can relate to seeing their first love again, at a class reunion or just by chance, and there's this wave of nostalgia and melancholy—it's very poignant and universal, I think. Plus, as a writer, it was interesting to explore Henry's character as an adult. As the saying goes, everyone has two chances at a parent/child relationship, once as a child and once as a parent. To me, that was a rich dynamic worth exploring.

RHRC: You've written a compelling and touching novel, which also sheds light on an important time in American history. Which of those elements came most naturally to you?

JF: I'd have to say that the "love story/family drama" came most naturally. If I were to list my all-time favorite movies, they tend to be complicated people stories, a bit sentimental, and

devoid of car chases and epic gun battles— it’s just what I relate to and what I like writing about.

The historical aspects are a close second, though. I love cultural history and am always pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoy the research process. I feel like an archaeologist, dusting off the past and presenting it to the reader. And of course, it adds context to my characters, giving them a rich world to splash around in. I find the whole process incredibly motivating as a writer.

Plus, deep down, I think most of us like entertainment that is somewhat enlightening. My grandmother used to watch *Jeopardy!* because it was “educational.” Do game shows really boost your IQ? Probably not, but they can be strangely satisfying to a lot of people.

RHRC: What is your writing process?

JF: It seems as though some authors meticulously outline everything, while others just write extemporaneously—working without a net. I tend to do a little bit of both. I do start with a few notes that are probably the least amount of words on a page that could possibly be mistaken for an outline— really nothing more than a beginning and an ending, with maybe a few scene ideas in the middle. But that ending is all- important for me. And by ending, I mean a real, unambiguous, nonmetaphorical ending. I look at storytelling as either banking or spending emotional currency with the reader. Good or bad, happy or sad, the ending is where those emotional debts are paid—if that makes sense? Plus, if I have a clear ending in mind, then the more nails I lay in the path of my characters, the more motivated I am as a writer to help them overcome them.

And of course along the way I’ll take a lot of spontaneous twists, turns, and unexpected detours.

Process- wise, I try to get the entire story nailed in one draft—one chapter or one scene at a time. I’ll start my day by cleaning up what I wrote the previous day and just keep going from there, occasionally backing up a chapter and starting over. I try not to slather words on the page with the intent to clean the whole thing up later. If I do, my stories tend to suffer a “death of a thousand cuts.”

RHRC: Is Henry you?

JF: I think readers sometimes feel that there is some sort of linkage between protagonists and their creators. The truth is, there’s a little bit of me in Henry—a small bit. Growing up in Oregon, I was the only Chinese kid in my grade school and my best friend was the only Japanese kid. That’s probably where the Henry/Keiko dynamic came from. But we weren’t outcasts—I think one year we were the class president and vice president. See what a difference thirty years can make!

RHRC: Do you have a favorite character in the book?

JF: Honestly, I tend to fall in love with the characters that I'm writing at the moment. I'm working on a new book so I'm sort of emotionally vested in these other characters right now. But in the world of *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, I really love Sheldon–Mrs. Beatty, too. I love them so much that I've written short stories starring each of them. I just wasn't ready to say goodbye, I guess.

Courtesy of Random House

Discussion Questions

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? What's to prevent something like this from ever happening again?

Courtesy of Random House