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Author

Gail Tsukiyama



BIO

Gail Tsukiyama is the bestselling author of five previous novels, including *WOMEN OF THE SILK* and *THE SAMURAI'S GARDEN*, as well as a recipient of the Academy of American Poets Award and the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award. She divides her time between El Cerrito and Napa Valley, California.

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ARTICLE

Gail Tsukiyama was born in San Francisco, her mother a Chinese immigrant, her father Japanese. This multicultural upbringing is reflected in the deeply personal stories about Chinese women which she has been writing since her first novel, *WOMEN OF THE SILK*, was published in 1991. An unexpected bestseller, it launched her successful writing life, winning her a prestigious Academy of American Poets award. She also writes short stories, many of which have been translated into various languages throughout the world.

Tsukiyama considers herself an examiner of what she calls the lives of "early Chinese feminists," as embodied by the silk workers in her first novel. She has also tackled the topics of the differences between Chinese and Japanese culture (*THE SAMURAI'S GARDEN*) and the daily struggles of young women growing up in World War II Hong Kong (*NIGHT OF MANY DREAMS*). Her latest novel, *THE LANGUAGE OF THREADS*, is about to be published --- it is a sequel of sorts, following the story of Pei, the young girl sold into the silk trade by her poor parents in *WOMEN OF THE SILK*.

In this story, Pei moves to Hong Kong, where she must begin anew her life alone. World War II looms on the horizon and provides an explosive backdrop for the emotional story. Writing about these women has had special meaning for the author, who

[NIGHT OF MANY DREAMS](#)

explains, "It has given me a greater sense of who I am, just in realizing what these Chinese women silk workers went through in order to make a life for themselves."

A serious researcher, Tsukiyama spent most of her writing time looking into the silk society which survived in China for one hundred years, between 1830 and 1930. "[The first book] grew out of library research and my desire to write about Chinese society. I became intrigued by a brief reference to these women silk workers in the autobiography of writer Han Suyin. The few lines described a community of unmarried women who earned their own livings...I knew instantly I wanted to write about these early Chinese feminists."

In fact, not only is she preserving a special aspect of her ancestral heritage through mining this subject in her work, but she has also found that "it has given me a greater sense of who I am..." At the age of thirty, she realized that she needed to learn so much more to keep from losing her own heritage and thus started this fruitful investigation into China's female past. "At 30, I began to regret not having learned to write and speak Cantonese --- language being so important to understanding a culture. Something inside of me wanted to go back and learn what it meant to be Chinese and Japanese." Not only has Tsukiyama been able to do that for herself, she has also done it for her very grateful audience.

--- Jana Siciliano

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INTERVIEW

September 7, 2007

Gail Tsukiyama is the award-winning and bestselling author of [WOMEN OF THE SILK](#), [THE SAMURAI'S GARDEN](#), [THE LANGUAGE OF THREADS](#), [DREAMING WATER](#) and the newly-released [THE STREET OF A THOUSAND BLOSSOMS](#). In this interview with Bookreporter.com's Alexis Burling, Tsukiyama delves into the relationships and the developments of her main characters, and explains how her curiosity to explore her Japanese heritage prompted her to write this book. She also describes how she was able to blend historical fact with the emotional plot, addresses the parallels between the post-World War II mindset and today's political climate, and shares what she hopes her readers will take away from this novel.

Bookreporter.com: What inspired you to write THE STREET OF A THOUSAND BLOSSOMS?

Gail Tsukiyama: It came mainly from my desire to learn more about the Japanese culture. I've also always been fascinated by

social groups who live and work outside the mainstream. So the world of sumo wrestling within the Japanese culture had been an ongoing interest, something I've always wanted to write about. It covered such enticing material and I've always had so many questions I wanted answered: What was the process of becoming sumotori? How were they selected? What was their training like? Those were the seeds that began the story, which soon grew into an exploration of culture, family, the inhumanity of war and the perseverance of the human spirit.

BRC: Your novel spans three decades of Japanese history. What type of research did you do when writing the story? How did you decide what to include and what to leave out?

GT: It's always difficult to know up front how much information you need, because so much of the writing process is discovering as you write. I was originally going to begin the book after the war, when Hiroshi just enters the sumo stable, but then I began to ask myself the same questions a reader might ask: Did he always want to be a sumotori? Was he always a strong boy? Who determines that you're sumotori material? In order to answer the questions linearly, I pushed the story back a decade. That, of course, led me through the war in Japan and its devastating outcome. And because all the families in the book lived in Tokyo, I concentrated on the firebombing, which was also horrific, though we Westerners know more about the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As the story progresses according to time and place, I began to instinctively know what to include and what to exclude to keep the storyline moving forward. The hardest part is keeping the story in the forefront and the research materials in the background.

BRC: When describing Hiroshi's grandparents, you write: "It was a marriage that hadn't faltered in forty years, despite the heartache of losing Misako and the raising of their grandsons. They had lived two separate lifetimes together, nurtured two families, and even with the hardships of war and rationing, she never felt their family strength waver." Why do you think they were able to cultivate such a solid connection, despite losing their daughter, his blindness, the war? What can be learned from their attitude on life?

GT: I believe the strength of Fumiko and Yoshio's marriage has a lot to do with the time period they live in, and in the Japanese culture itself. They also genuinely love and like each other and are lucky to find strength in each other during their times of misfortune. I don't think they ever had the notion that they wouldn't always be together through thick and thin. Theirs is a true love story, in which their loyalty, humor and devotion seems to be such an anomaly in today's world. It's something we can all learn from.

BRC: What is the significance of the watchtower, in your

eyes? Is there further significance in its fall?

GT: It was Yoshio's way of helping the boys rise above their childhood misfortune. The fall represented the subsequent end of their childhood.

BRC: Many of the young characters are orphaned in the book. Haru and Aki's mother is killed during the firestorm. Sadao's parents were burned as well. Hiroshi and Kenji lost their parents in a boat accident. I can't possibly imagine what that fear must feel like at such a young age. How did you manage to get inside their heads in order to make that fear palpable for readers?

GT: Much of it has to do with the process of character development, tapping into my own psyche, asking myself the questions: How does this affect them? What do they do in order to survive? How do they react to the people and events around them? How and what makes them keep living? I've always held the belief that if I could make readers understand a character's motive and establish an emotional connection, they would follow that character no matter where he/she led them.

BRC: Following the end of the war, Fumiko says, "The number of lives lost abroad and at home was staggering. And in the end, what was it all for?" How poignant. And how true. Couldn't this same sentiment also be voiced today? Do you think humans will ever learn?

GT: Bless you! It was so important to me to show the utter futility of war. What's occurring today was very much on my mind when I wrote the firebombing scenes, the senseless loss of lives, the dislocation of families and loved ones, and the aftermath of destruction that often hurts those who are innocent the most. It's sad to think that we, as a humanity, still haven't learned that war is not always a means to an end.

BRC: "Up until now, Haru had thought her life in Nara was extraordinary, but as the beating of her heart calmed and the sharp pull in her lungs subsided, she realized that gaining one thing meant losing another. Wasn't that the way it always was? It was that simple: her mother's life for that of Aki and her; her life in Nara for that of marrying Hiroshi." Do you think Haru was content with the way her life turned out? Why or why not?

GT: In many ways, I saw Haru as the most complicated character to write because she was so balanced outwardly. It's always hard to be the good girl because the people around you tend not to see you. Emotionally and culturally, she would always outwardly accept the way her life turned out, even if inwardly she felt otherwise. But I do believe Haru was content in the end, having found her place in raising Takara and returning to teach in Tokyo.

I also think she came to see Hiroshi's respect, trust and even love for her.

BRC: "When he was a boy, Hiroshi always believed he would track down the man who had left him and Kenji orphans. As a man, he knew the past was best forgotten. What had it to do with his life now?" Why do you think Hiroshi felt this way in the end? Do you think you would feel the same if you were in his shoes?

GT: I believe time and age changed his views, that living through the war and struggling to become a sumotori gave him more perspective and distance. I do think I would come to the same conclusions if I were standing in front of a defeated, old man, and keeping in mind that it was an accident and not deliberate makes a world of difference. The fact that the captain ran away from the accident and didn't take responsibility is something he'll have to live with for the rest of his life.

BRC: Part of what makes reading THE STREET OF A THOUSAND BLOSSOMS so enjoyable is the insertion of time as a factor in each of the characters' relationships. Two obvious examples are Hiroshi and Kenji's relationships with their wives. Both start out blissful, then hit a stagnation point, then move on to a fuller, deeper understanding of each other. What are your thoughts on this ebb and flow? How is this different from, say, the way some people approach relationships and marriage today?

GT: A story's narrative demands ebb and flow when so much time is covered. There has to be change in order to create movement in a story. And then again, the time period and the culture had a lot to do with their staying power. Today, the world is much more fast paced, and hitting a stagnation point might mean the end of a relationship.

BRC: Death looms large throughout the book, leaving no character untouched. How do you think each character changed after the death of a loved one? And as you wrote, did you know these deaths were necessary to take your characters in new directions?

GT: When my niece was young, she read one of my early novels and said very succinctly, "I know how to write a book, first something good happens, then something bad happens, then something good happens at the end." In her simplified way, she realized conflict was needed to keep a story going. Each character has to change or mature after the death of a loved one, and then pick a path that takes them in new direction, which also keeps the plot moving. They all have to find ways to cope. I don't always know what's going to happen until I've reached the point in which it does happen.

BRC: What do you make of Aki's actions in the end?

GT: Aki was fragile from the time she was a little girl. After the war, she's always haunted by the past. Then again after childbirth, everything becomes magnified when her bout with postpartum depression sets her on a path from which she never really recovers. It couldn't help but ultimately catch up with her.

BRC: When Hiroshi and Kenji were growing up, their grandfather had always told them: "Every day of your lives, you must always be sure of what you're fighting for." What are your thoughts on this advice?

GT: I think it's a mantra we should all live by.

BRC: In the last few chapters, Hiroshi looks back on his life and attempts to make sense of what happened to him and how it shaped who he is as a person. Why did you choose to include this section, and what does his change in perspective say about his character? His feelings for his family and his country?

GT: Hiroshi's change in perspective gives him a very human quality, one that wasn't so evident when he was younger and his one big goal was to be sumotori. It's only when he gains age and wisdom that he's able to see how much his career has cost him.

BRC: You were born in San Francisco to a Chinese mother and a Japanese father. In what ways did your childhood and your family's background lend itself to writing this novel?

GT: My mother was from Hong Kong and my father was from Hawaii, so my cultural influence growing up was primarily Chinese. My mother's father also had an import/export business out of Japan, so the connections were always there. Having grown up in the Chinese culture, it seemed a natural progression to want to learn more about my Japanese heritage as I continued to write. I've always felt a mixture of both. The subject of this novel was something I've been thinking about for a while, but I wasn't quite sure how to execute it. And while there aren't any sumotori or Noh mask makers in my family, the sense of cultural tradition and how the world is viewed remains very similar.

BRC: What is the significance of the quotes you chose to accompany the title pages of Parts One, Two and Three?

GT: I started my writing career as a poet, so poetry has always been very important to me. The three Japanese poets quoted state beautifully, in so few lines, the core of what I wanted to write about in each section. I felt it would give the reader a wonderful introduction to each.

BRC: You include a variety of Japanese words throughout the

story, weaving them seamlessly into the text. Why did you choose to use this technique?

GT: One of the gifts of being a writer is living many other lives. To write about another country and not include some of its language seems to lessen the impact of the story and the characters. I always hope to finish writing a book having learned something, and I hope that's the same way readers feel when they finish reading the book --- that they've come away having gained something beyond the story, whether it's knowledge about the culture, the people, or the language.

BRC: What would you like your readers to take away from their experience with THE STREET OF A THOUSAND BLOSSOMS?

GT: Much of what I've said above, that readers finish the story having gained something about the culture or humanity in general. The more I write about other countries, the more I see how much we're alike.

BRC: Do you have family who witnessed World War II firsthand?

GT: My mother and her family were in the thick of it as the Japanese were making their way through China to Hong Kong. Her family eventually moved to Macau during the Japanese occupation and spent most of the war there. My father was born and raised on Oahu, and I remember him telling us that he climbed a tree as a boy and watched the bombing of Pearl Harbor from there.

BRC: Do you prefer to read a specific genre of books? Might you have a few favorite books to recommend to your readers?

GT: I read everything. And while I don't read any specific genre, I do lean toward writers whose writing and language inspires my own work. I still go back and read Jane Austen and the classics. I'll also read anything by Alice McDermott, David Malouf, Alice Munro and Ian McEwen. Some wonderful books that have left a lasting impression on me lately are: FAMILY MATTERS by Rohinton Mistry, THE HUNGRY TIDE by Amitov Ghosh and THE LIZARD CAGE by Karen Connelly. I'm also reading a charming book right now, THE SECRET OF LOST THINGS by Sheridan Hay.

BRC: What are you working on now, and when might readers expect to see it?

GT: I'd begun what I thought was a short story, but it seems to be growing into something longer. I'll just say that I'm back tapping into my Chinese roots, so we'll see how deep they go. It feels too early to talk about it, other than I can see some of my ongoing themes of family and isolation developing. And when

might readers expect to see it? I'll have to get through this book tour first!

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PAST INTERVIEW

1999

TBR Senior Writer Jana Siciliano and Dana Schwartz are loyal fans of Gail Tsukiyama's engaging fiction so it was easy for them to come up with questions for the author about her book, THE LANGUAGE OF THREADS. In this book, Tsukiyama revisits her beloved Pei from WOMEN OF THE SILK. Find out what happens to Pei, Tsukiyama's inspirations, her favorite writers, the feedback from her Asian audience, what book has most of a chance to become a movie, and much more in this interview.

TBR: Your new book LANGUAGE OF THREADS, takes off where your 1991 WOMEN OF THE SILK left off. What made you return to the characters from your older book, namely the main character Pei?

GT: Originally, I thought WOMEN OF THE SILK would cover Pei's entire life story. But as I began to research all the information of the silk sisterhood, I realized that the book could logically end when Pei leaves the silk village of Yung Kee for Hong Kong. The book felt complete in that it ended one phase of her life. Yet, I always felt I might return and complete Pei's story another time, but it had to be a moment in time when I felt I could do justice to WOMEN OF THE SILK and the character of Pei. After writing my second and third novels, I just knew it was time to come full circle and complete the rest of Pei's story.

TBR: In LANGUAGE OF THREADS there is a distinct and heartwarming relationship between Mrs. Finch, Pei and Ji Shen. What draws these three women together? Do you also have a special circle of family and friends who are important to you?

GT: Beyond just the basic necessities of everyday survival in Japanese occupied Hong Kong during World War II, there's a strong emotional tie which develops between all three characters as a family unit. In a way, the strength of their bond comes from the fact that they are all orphans who come together to provide for each other. I think we all have a special circle of either family or friends that provide that kind of support for us. I've been very fortunate to have both a close-knit family, as well as long time friends whom I can trust and depend upon.

TBR: WOMEN OF THE SILK deals with women working in the silk factories of China. What drew you to write about these silk factories?

GT: When I first realized I wanted to write a novel, I began by researching China. I'm of both Chinese and Japanese ancestry, though I was brought up in the Chinese culture. So it felt like a natural desire to write about my heritage in some way. As I was reading one volume of an autobiography by Han Suyin, I was amazed to learn of these young women silk workers who were able to survive economically without family or husbands. There had been so little written about these early Chinese feminists that I knew instantly it was their story I wanted to tell.

TBR: The silk sisterhood that Pei joins in WOMEN OF THE SILK is supposed to be a workers union, but is more like a religious order complete with a vow of chastity. Why do you think some of the women in the silk factories were encouraged to take the vow of chastity? Do you think it ended up being for the factory's benefit or the women's?

GT: The vow of chastity had to do with Chinese superstitions, concerning the soaking the cocoons. It was "wet work" and thought to interrupt with a woman's fertility. That's why young girls were enlisted to do the soaking, only to eventually stay on when they grew older. Economically it benefited the factories and silk industry --- at the same time --- these girls were able to make their own money, help support their families, and had a much freer life than many of the young girls forced into an arranged marriage.

TBR: Your books are rich in historical detail. Do you do your own research or do you have a team to help you?

GT: I've always done all my own research. It's part of the process for me, in terms of helping me to define a time and place in its truest sense. At this point, the research always feels so much a part of the story I can't imagine someone else doing it for me.

TBR: What inspires you to write? Do you ever take experiences and/or people from your life and incorporate them into your novels?

GT: Reading good books and telling a good story about characters you can identify with is a strong source of writing inspiration for me. I try not to write about anyone from my real life, though I'll admit characteristics and gestures from people I see or know in my life define many of my characters. Just enough to round out each character and give them a specific sense of personality that's distinctive to each of us.

TBR: What sort of response do you get from Asian readers since you write so often of the pain inherent in the history

and culture of both China and Japan?

GT: I've been very touched by the response I've received from Asian readers. Being of both Chinese and Japanese heritage, I've explored my history and culture from both sides in my books as a way for me to see more clearly. From the older Asian generation, there has been a sense of understanding. They have been touched by the experiences I write about and have appreciated the sensitivity in which the characters handle the situations they are in. From the younger Asian generation comes an involvement with the characters and story at a pivotal time in history, which will hopefully allow them to understand more of their history and the strengths and weaknesses of their culture.

TBR: Do you see any of your novels becoming films? If so, which one would you most like to see on the big screen? Who would star in it?

GT: The most immediate interest has been for THE SAMURAI'S GARDEN, which I think would be very poetic and inspiring in depicting the two cultures at a difficult time in history. It would also be nice to see WOMEN OF THE SILK and THE LANGUAGE OF THREADS as one film depicting Pei's life in the sisterhood and beyond. It would certainly be a nice dream, as well as a good showcase for more Asian actors.

TBR: Do you feel like you belong to a community of writers? If so, who makes up your writing community?

GT: Living in the San Francisco Bay Area is a wonderful place to be a writer. There are so many wonderful independent bookstores and bookstores in general who are very supportive of their Bay Area authors. I've also been with a writer's group for almost twelve years and they are certainly essential to my writing life. Many events around the community also work to bring together such Bay Area writers as Dorothy Allison, Tobias Wolff, Lynn Freed, Jim Houston, and Frances Mayes, to name just a few.

TBR: When did you realize you wanted to become a writer? What made you choose the form of the novel?

GT: I actually was a film major in college, only to realize it wasn't film making that I loved, but telling a story. I'd always written as a teenager, so I guess my first inklings came at that time. When I realized writing was closer to what I wanted to do, I transferred to the writing department where I received my BA and MA in English with emphasis in Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.

TBR: Are there other areas of writing you'd like to try your hand at? Short stories? Screenplay writing?

GT: My emphasis in Creative Writing had been in the genre of

poetry. My Master's Thesis was a book of poetry. It wasn't until I graduated that I began writing short stories in earnest and naturally progressed to the novel form. I did take a film writing class in which we worked on an original screenplay. I suppose that if I was asked to write the screenplay for one of my novels I might consider trying it again.

TBR: Would you ever consider writing a memoir?

GT: I'm afraid my life is too tame to lend itself to a memoir.

TBR: What authors and books have inspired you throughout your life?

GT: I love everyone from Jane Austen and Shakespeare to Annie Proulx, Louis De Bernieres, and Barbara Kingsolver. Well --- written books are such an inspiration to me as a writer and fortunately there are an endless array of fine writers out there now.

TBR: Do you have another project in the works? Can you give us a sneak preview?

GT: I'm just beginning a new novel, but it's so new that I'm unsure where it's heading at this time. I can say that it most likely won't be set in Asia.

TBR: What are you reading now?

GT: A wonderful novel by Elizabeth McCracken called, THE GIANT'S HOUSE.

TBR: What are your thoughts on the impending millennium?

GT: I hope that we as a people can learn from our past mistakes and keep peace around the world. I also hope it brings a new century of wonderful writing.

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