

Two Sparrowhawks in a Lonely Sky

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SCIS: 5457764

ISBN: 9781761180224

RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Secondary

SYNOPSIS

Two Sparrowhawks in a Lonely Sky centres on 13-year-old Fu and his younger sister Pei, who live with their mother in a small rural community in southern China that is already enduring famine conditions when it is collectivised as part of Mao's 'Great Leap Forward' campaign in the late 1950s. After tragedy strikes, Fu and Pei, with nothing to guide them but a photograph, some letters and a menu that they cannot read, set out on a perilous journey across countries and oceans to find their father, who left for Australia almost a decade ago.

Told through the lens of two children, this is both a heart-stopping adventure of survival, and an honest and compassionate look at one of the historical causes of the Chinese diaspora into Australia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Lim is an award-winning Australian writer, illustrator and editor and the author of over twenty books, including *Tiger Daughter* (a CBCA Book of the Year: Older Readers and Victorian Premier's Literary Award-winner), *The Astrologer's Daughter* (a Kirkus Best Book and CBCA Notable Book) and the bestselling *Mercy*. Her work has been shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, NSW Premier's Literary Awards, Queensland Literary Awards, Margaret and Colin Roderick Literary Award and Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Awards, shortlisted multiple times for the Aurealis Awards and Davitt Awards, and longlisted for the Gold Inky Award and the David Gemmell Legend Award. Her novels have been translated into German, French, Turkish, Portuguese, Polish and Russian. She is a co-founder of the Voices from the Intersection initiative to support emerging young adult and children's authors and illustrators who are First Nations, People of Colour, LGBTIQ+ and/or living with disability, and co-editor of *Meet Me at the Intersection*, a groundbreaking anthology of YA #OwnVoice memoir, poetry and fiction.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, spend a lesson to research and discuss Australia's White Australia Policy to find out:
 - Which ethnic groups the Policy was aimed at keeping out of Australia.
 - The link between Australia's Gold Rush and the Policy.
 - The link between Federation in 1901 and the Policy.
 - Ways the Policy effectively limited immigration, ie. the dictation test.
 - When and why was the Policy ended?
- Keeping in mind what you have learnt about the White Australia Policy, what do you think Bob Chen means when he writes, 'I well understand the existing policy, and that his case must be made to fit within an exceedingly narrow

- opening for admission under it'? Why do you think Rebecca Lim decided to include Bob Chen's letter before the story begins?
- Fu and Pei live in a southern Chinese village where another government policy—this time a Chinese Communist policy—is destroying lives. Find out the name of the policy and why and how it was implemented. What events in the novel reflect key points in the policy's roll-out?
 - 'It seems that Australia and China are more alike than your Ba realised before he left' (p 55). What do you think Yun means here?
 - How does the Chinese proverb at the beginning of Part 1, 'Ice in springtime is thin: but human compassion is thinner', reflect what will happen to Yun, Fu and Pei in their village?
 - The final section of the story features the proverb 'Repay Good, with Good'. Why do you think the author chose it for this section?
 - 'Always stay together. With all your different strengths—Fu, protect your sister; Pei, protect your brother.' (p 94) What are the different strengths that Fu and Pei possess? Find examples in the story where they each display their strengths.
 - Compare and contrast the characters of Yun, Cadre Ling and Sister Zeng. What challenges does each face and how do they attempt to overcome these challenges?
 - 'People, boats and buildings come in all different shapes and sizes! She could see the same realisation in her brother's equally rapt expression. Every day brought new vistas to their eyes and new ideas to their understanding of the world. It was bigger, and stranger, than anything they could have imagined back home on Long Jing Cun.' (p 170) Make a list of events or encounters in the story that bring new vistas and ideas to Fu and Pei's understanding.
 - '... Are they a polite people, the ghost people?' Pei asked with interest. 'Only on the surface,' Sister Zeng answered grimly. (p 151) Would you agree with Sister Zeng's comment based on what happens to Fu and Pei when they first arrive in Hong Kong and go in search of the Wing On Life building?
 - Do the Chinese living in Hong Kong treat the 'ghosts' the same way as they treat those who look and sound similar to them but come from mainland China? Why do you think they welcome the 'ghosts' and not the asylum seekers?
 - "“These people should be stopped,” a woman in a floral cheong sam said sourly to another dressed all in black, glaring down at Pei. “Coming here and expecting us to take care of them! There’s entirely too many of them in the country.”” (p 191) Are today's attitudes to asylum seekers much changed from those of the Hong Kong people in autumn 1958?
 - 'Ma told me once, before she died, that we are merely gears and levers, parts of a machine. I never understood that before, but now I think I do. The machine . . . it holds you tight so that you can't get away, or it pushes you out . . . it doesn't really matter who you are. Or where you are, I think. We were pushed out, Fu and I. Just like you were pushed out.' (p 269) Many characters in the book are made to feel they do not belong to the community in which they live. Apart from Fu and Pei there's the very young Bob Chen ostracised in Long Jing Cun because he is half Chinese and half European, Fu and Pei's mother Yun struggling to be accepted because she is not from the south, Cadre Ling fighting to be seen as an equal among the men in her unit, and Miss Ewa escaping Nazi-occupied Poland to settle in Shanghai, and moving on to Sydney a few years later. In a whole class discussion, consider:
 - How important is it to feel like you belong to a community?
 - Why do some people get pushed out of the 'machine'?
 - How can we make people new to our school, state or country feel like they belong?
 - At the end of the novel Pei asks her father, 'Was it worth it?' How do you think Yun would have answered that question? Do you think Ru did the right thing leaving his wife and children to come to Australia? Do you think Fu and Pei will settle in Australia easily? What sort of challenges do you think they might yet face?
 - Develop a multimodal synopsis of the book in the form of a PowerPoint (or similar) that you will present live. You will need to source images and music to illustrate key plot points in the book, retelling the story verbally as you move through the presentation.

AUTHOR OF NOTES

CAROLYN WALSH