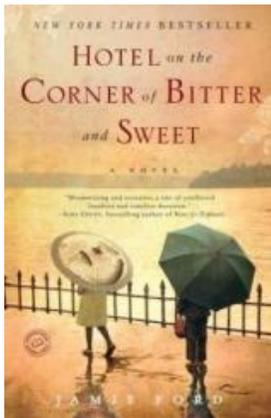


# Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet



By Jamie Ford

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## About the book:

In the opening pages of Jamie Ford’s stunning debut novel, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, Henry Lee comes upon a crowd gathered outside the Panama Hotel, once the gateway to Seattle’s Japantown. It has been boarded up for decades, but now the new owner has made an incredible discovery: the belongings of Japanese families, left when they were rounded up and sent to internment camps during World War II. As Henry looks on, the owner opens a Japanese parasol.

This simple act takes old Henry Lee back to the 1940s, at the height of the war, when young Henry’s world is a jumble of confusion and excitement, and to his father, who is obsessed with the war in China and having Henry grow up American. While “scholarshipping” at the exclusive Rainier Elementary, where the white kids ignore him, Henry meets Keiko Okabe, a young Japanese American student. Amid the chaos of blackouts, curfews, and FBI raids, Henry and Keiko forge a bond of friendship—and innocent love—that transcends the long-standing prejudices of their Old World ancestors. And after Keiko and her family are swept up in the evacuations to the internment camps, she and Henry are left only with the hope that the war will end, and that their promise to each other will be kept.

Forty years later, Henry Lee is certain that the parasol belonged to Keiko. In the hotel’s dark dusty basement he begins looking for signs of the Okabe family’s belongings and for a long-lost object whose value he cannot begin to measure. Now a widower, Henry is still trying to find his voice—words that might explain the actions of his nationalistic father; words that might bridge the gap between him and his modern, Chinese American son; words that might help him confront the choices he made many years ago.

Set during one of the most conflicted and volatile times in American history, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* is an extraordinary story of commitment and enduring hope. In Henry and Keiko, Jamie Ford has created an unforgettable duo whose story teaches us of the power of forgiveness and the human heart.

## Discussion Guide:

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?

# Interview with Jamie Ford

February, 2009 | Taken from Goodreads.com



Debut author [Jamie Ford](#) knows how to sell, sell, sell. Despite a very successful career in advertising (he's won over 400 Addy Awards), Ford was determined to extend his writing skills—first in the short story medium and now with his first novel, [Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet](#). Jumping back and forth between the 1940s and 1980s, the book tells the story of Henry, a Chinese-American living in Seattle, and his love for Keiko, a Japanese-American student who is sent with her family to an internment camp during World War II. Ford chatted with Goodreads about cultural identity, why he is drawn to love stories, and how he can write just about anything on a deadline.

*Goodreads:* What inspired the story, and how much, if any of it, was inspired by family history?

*Jamie Ford:* The inspiration was a button my father wore as a Chinese-American teenager growing up in Seattle during WWII. The button read, "I Am Chinese," and a lot of Chinese kids wore them to separate themselves from their Japanese neighbors. It was an icon of the time and just haunted me. And the rest, as they say, is history.

*GR:* Henry and Keiko come from two different cultures, and yet are united in a way by the hostility of a third culture, the United States, during the turmoil of World War II. Do you think it has gotten any easier for love to transcend culture since the 1940s?

*JF:* Without a doubt—I remember what an oddity my own parents were. My dad was Chinese and my mom was Betty Crocker white—an unusual pairing in the '60s. Most people assumed that my mother was Chinese, partly because of my last name, but mainly because that was the norm—this war-bride model of a white guy bringing home an Asian wife. Growing up, the only two Asian men that I knew of with Caucasian wives were Bruce Lee and my dad. Now ethnicity, at least in Seattle, is almost an afterthought. I remember waiting tables in college and noting the lovely diversity of couples that came in for dinner. Geography and proximity still play a natural factor, but I do think love is somewhat color-blind these days. (Though culture, lifestyle, and religion can be just as divisive at times.)

*GR:* What are some of your favorite literary love stories?

*JF:* I think my brain must be hard-wired for love stories. [Sense and Sensibility](#) is a personal favorite. And I love [Shakespeare](#), though I tend to prefer comedy over tragedy, favoring [Much Ado About Nothing](#) over [Romeo and Juliet](#). Not a big fan of [Wuthering Heights](#), though, oddly enough. When I think of modern literary love stories, I almost draw a blank—which is rather tragic in itself. Are we writing fewer love stories these days? Paging [Doctor Zhivago](#)...

*GR:* You expanded a short story into a full-length book. Did you have a long-standing ambition to write

a novel?

*JF:* I love short fiction. I love to read it and I love to write it, but the market for short fiction is almost theoretical these days. So writing novels seemed like the only way to really have a sustainable career as a fiction writer. Once I'd written the short piece, "I Am Chinese," with the characters of Henry and Keiko, I knew they had a larger story to tell. Or as one editor put it, "the moral territory was novel length."

*GR:* Please describe your research process: Seattle and the Panama Hotel, cultural attitudes during WWII, or the history of the internment camps.

*JF:* I try to immerse myself in the time period, not just the actual events in the book but the geography, diction, and naming conventions of the time. Usually, I'll start with maps—old period pieces. I find them in antiques stores or on eBay. For [Hotel](#) I used a map of Seattle, circa 1939, as well as old hand-drawn maps of Japantown. Then I'll find any and all nonfiction resources—books, newspapers, letters, old photos and such. For [Hotel](#), I spent a lot of time at the Wing Luke Asian Museum, both in person and online. And of course I went to the Panama Hotel in Seattle and spent time in the basement, reverently going through the belongings of Japanese families that still reside there. I also flew out to Seattle and met with famed activist and historian, Doug Chin, who lent a few charismatic insights and helped validate my research.

*GR:* Are you a jazz lover? How did you decide to incorporate elements from the Seattle jazz scene? Who are some of your favorite musicians from that era?

*JF:* I think I like the idea of jazz more than jazz itself. By that, I mean, jazz in its heyday was louder and had a more gregarious performance aspect to it. Its context in popular culture was larger than life. But over time, the large bands became ensembles. Ensembles became trios. And trios gave way to solo performers so that jazz in many cities is a tinkling echo of what it once was. In my mind, a piano bar is to jazz what a gecko is to the dinosaurs—a descendant, rather than a modern re-creation. Of the early jazz era, I'm probably partial to Billie Holiday, who I swear has come back to us in the form of Erykah Badu. (She's amazing!)

*GR:* Advertising and novel writing are pretty far afield. Do you feel that your professional background in advertising helped hone your writing skills?

*JF:* [laughing] Well, it helped tremendously in one area—deadlines. I'm such a creature of deadlines. I remember going to a writing workshop where we wrote and critiqued on-site, all week long. The instructor asked for a few volunteers to go first, leaving the rest of the group to have an extra day or two to write. Two of us volunteered, myself and another woman. It turned out that both of us worked in advertising. We were the two least afraid of deadlines—the two most accustomed to writing under pressure.

Aside from that, I suppose there's something to be said for just writing—commercials, ad campaigns, brochures, corporate communications, that kind of thing. Getting paid to play with words. It helps in a way, but it's really just an adjunct to writing fiction. It's sort of like asking a chef if his experience washing dishes was in any way helpful. And in some strange way, it is.

*GR:* What are you working on next?

*JF:* I'm busy working on the next book, which is another historical Asian-themed novel—tentatively titled, *Whispers of a Thunder God*. The book is set predominately in Japan and Seattle. It's a love story, but also a tale of a man struggling with the concept of faith.

*GR:* Describe a typical day spent writing. Do you have any unusual writing habits?

*JF:* As far as writing habits, I tend to over-research, to the point where I'm almost frantic about writing, fearing that I'm going to forget something or leave something out. And once I begin I have a hard time stopping, so I'll try to slow down and stay on an even pace, usually 1,500 words per day, or at least a completed scene. The next day, I review and edit the previous day's work, then keep plugging away, without any days off (if I can help it).

*GR:* What authors, books, or ideas have influenced your writing style?

*JF:* Ah, what a lovely question—especially the "idea" part, which has influenced my writing more than any single author or book.

And that idea is this: I don't allow myself to become a "performance writer"—that is, someone who is basically writing for the strict enjoyment of other writers. If someone likes my fiction more for the quality of my prose rather than the quality of my storytelling, I'm doing something wrong. I try to avoid that literary density—where authors indulge themselves in a sideshow of linguistic jujitsu—decorating the page with words. I don't permit myself to say, "Bob's rapacity knew no satiety," when I meant to say, "Bob was hungry."

*GR:* What are you reading now? What are some of your favorite books and authors?

*JF:* I'm re-reading [Watchmen](#) by [Alan Moore](#) and [Dave Gibbons](#). I'm a voracious consumer of graphic novels, and wanted to see if it held up after all these years—no surprise—it does.

Also, I recently read [The Art of Racing in the Rain](#) by [Garth Stein](#) and absolutely loved it. You don't even have to be a dog enthusiast to enjoy it, but if you are, it's even more powerful.

As far as favorite authors—I'm generally in awe of [Sherman Alexie](#). Even his simple, most modest stories have an air of importance about them. And the lyrical quality of his writing never distracts from the lovely or tragic events taking place.

