

**Tuesday, February 23, 2010. Gail Tsukiyama, Author "Women of the Silk."**

MS. KELLY: It's my honor to introduce our next speaker. Thanks to Wanda and her group, it's been an exceptional couple of days, so I hope all of you have felt the same way. When we got here, many of us were on an empty tank, so I hope after these couple of days that you feel as complete as I do with all the various ways we have engaged in creativity and been filled up with many genres, so it seems appropriate that we have this session in which we engage in the creative world of language.

And so today with us we have Gail Tsukiyama. We are so glad to have you, poet and author. I don't know about you, but I have read *Women of the Silk*, and it is an extraordinary piece of literature. I would encourage you to read it.

I didn't even ask Gail this, but just by reading it, I would imagine a great deal of research went into the study of the women of that period; it was so clear by reading that. I look forward to the sequel.

Gail is a best-selling author of five novels, including *Women of the Silk*, and *The Samurai's Garden*, as well as the recipient of the Academy of American Poets Award and the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award. She was born in San Francisco, California, to a Chinese mother from Hong Kong and a Japanese father from Hawaii.

She attended San Francisco State University, where she received both her Bachelor of Arts degree and Master of Arts degree in English with an emphasis in creative writing. I understand she did spend quite a bit of time with poetry, as well, so Bruce, you were sort of correct in the use of language. We're not going to let Bruce live that down.

Interestingly, Gail once mentioned that she likes to examine the social groups of those who live apart from mainstream society.

So Gail, I am going to wonder what you think of us after spending a couple of days with us. How did we stack up? Would we be fodder for your next novel, perhaps, this social group apart from mainstream society these couple of days?

On behalf of NAPSG, we welcome Gail and look forward to the thoughts and the words that you're going to share with us and continue to enrich us this afternoon. Please welcome Gail.

MS. TSUKIYAMA: I'm supposed to be here to enrich you today? I'm not. I heard you got free books from the book person. I came here today thinking I had to talk about some big academic thing, and Bruce and I talked on the phone and he said, "No, talk about your writing."

And I thought, thank God. To be in a room -- I actually am so honored to be in a room with all the administrators and principals of schools. You have the hardest job. You know, you have the job of making those decisions, and all I have to do is decide if I kill my characters or I don't kill my characters. You can't do that.

I have been incredibly fortunate. Several of the books that I have written are used in a lot of schools around the United States, and so I constantly get e-mails from educators or English teachers who say, "I'm about to retire and I have taught *The Samurai's Garden* for the last six years. Can we do a Skype thing with you?"

I didn't even know what Skype was. So it turns out that I had I think the H1N1 flu last year, so I said, "I'm really sick right now. You don't want to see me on Skype."

So here I'm talking to you today and I have a little eye problem. Whenever I'm with educators, somehow something happens. And they e-mailed me all their questions that had to do with *The Samurai's Garden*. And the English teacher said, "I'm so sorry. I hope there's not too many e-mails coming towards you."

Well, there were a lot. There were three different English classes, all writing. As I started to read the questions, I realized that so many of them overlapped that I would just write one long letter back to the entire school, and she could read it. Within the letter, I answered all the questions, which is what I had done.

Over the years, I have been fortunate enough to have that opportunity to also go talk within schools. And that's why I admire you all even more, because there's nothing more frightening than talking to an assembly of junior high or high school students. I look out there and I'm terrified because I don't know how to capture their attention. It's easy to talk about being a writer and the writing process. It's much more difficult to do that with a younger generation who are so technically acutely good at all that, and all I'm doing is talking to them face-to-face and telling them that I love writing and trying to get them to love writing. So I have actually toned that over the years and am able to do that.

So this should be easy; right? This is the other spectrum: The bosses of the kids. That was terrifying until I came last night and saw you in the cave, and now I feel totally relaxed. I can talk about everything.

I thought that I would open by reading you a letter of one of these kids whose school I went to down in southern California, Palos Verdes. They all had to read *The Samurai's Garden*, which is my second book, which is about a man who goes to Japan to recuperate from an illness for one year, and it's what he learns and what he gains from that one year in Japan.

For some reason, teachers teach this book and I think it's because it's a coming-of-age story. It's a learning-about-life story. It's about illness. It's about family. It's about everything I think a young person goes through as they're growing up.

I got a letter back from this young boy, and he sent it actually on a piece of construction paper. It was orange. He gave me one quarter and he wrote with a Sharpie, "Dear Ms. Tsukiyama. I really liked reading your book *The Samurai's Garden*. I actually read the whole book." This is the part. I love this guy. "It was much better than this other book they made us read called *Jane Eyre*. Thank you very much." And he spelled it E-I-R-D. I don't think he got past the title on that book.

I have had the luxury of having all these opportunities of being in schools, and the two groups that I always try to speak to, if they ask, are librarians and teachers, because I think that in so many ways, my career would not have gotten off the ground if it weren't for these two groups, librarians and teachers, who somehow embraced my early books and began teaching them in school.

I started out as a poet. I actually started out as a filmmaker. I wanted to make films, and I watched films from fifth grade on. I remember, when everybody was asleep, I would be watching old movies on television, and I thought, that's what I want to do. So I had gone to San Francisco State thinking I'm going to make movies and I going to tell my stories that way.

Well, I took a film course. It was so boring. It was so technical that I thought, this isn't at all like watching Paul Newman and Robert Redford on the screen. Where is the story?

So I took another course, which was a script-writing course, and I thought, this is closer, but what they're doing is limiting me. There's no narrative involved. It's all scenes.

So I moved over from the film department at San Francisco State to the writing department, and the first class I took was something similar to what I'm doing with you today. A writer came every week to talk about

being a writer. The first person who had come was a woman poet named Kathleen Frazier, and I fell madly in love with poetry. (I'm doing my poetry story for Bruce.) And what I realized is that I'm always a poet, because it gave me language. It taught me how to use language, and it taught me how to use language sparingly, that you could say a lot in a small space as opposed to the opposite, in many books that I read. So I did my undergrad and my graduate work all emphasizing poetry, and I didn't begin writing fiction until I had graduated and begun teaching.

But I brought today the very first poem, the very first work, I ever had published, and it was in the literary magazine called *The Rock Bottom Magazine*, and I figured there was no place to go but up. What I did realize, though, thanks to Bruce, because I knew he was kind of leaning toward the poetry thing, I went back and I looked at my master's thesis, which was a book of poetry, and I wanted to get one poem out of that book to read to you, and I figured the best would be to get the one that was published first.

But as I was looking at my thesis, I hadn't realized that the majority of poems that I had written were about my heritage. As you heard, I was born in San Francisco. I have lived and grown up all my life in the San Francisco Bay Area. I'm half-Chinese, half-Japanese. I grew up in the Chinese culture. So I grew up hearing Chinese Cantonese. I know everything, in terms of culturally, the yes and no's of how to get through the Chinese culture. I knew nothing about my Japanese side.

But going back and rereading through my thesis, I realized that a lot of what I had written about was being Asian, and I hadn't realized that. I kind of tucked my thesis away and never looked at it again. But in looking for a poem, you'll see how I'm writing about the Asian culture. I brought a poem called *Moon Festival*. And do you know Moon Festival? It's every year. Supposedly the moon is the roundest. In the Chinese culture, we celebrate that with eating moon cakes, and families gather together and all that. So this is Moon Festival.

*On moon festival, my relatives gather for dinner.  
We eat duck stuffed with barley and nuts.  
For dessert, moon cake made of lard, an egg yolk in the middle,  
Full like the moon.  
My grandmother watches me.  
In English and Chinese, she says, "You'd be beautiful  
If you'd stand up straight."  
And for the rest of the evening, I'm ugly.*

Thank God she didn't read English.

But you see the gift of writing? The angst of growing up went into these poems and went into the stories, and I hadn't realized it, actually. Now, as an older adult looking back, I realize how much of it went into the poetry, how there were little ways of taking what I heard and what bothered me that went into the poems.

Afterwards, I spent many years writing short stories. I somehow thought if there were more words on the page, I would be paid more money, so I started writing short stories. I also thought that in the process of writing, now that I had written so many years of poems, I wanted to write short stories, which is to me, today, the most difficult genre of writing. You have to say a lot in a small space, differently from a poem.

So I just wrote. I never published. I never tried to publish. The only short story I have had published was translated from English into Italian. I wrote no short stories about culture. The one short story that was published in Italy was about an Elvis impersonator. And none of my characters were Asian. They didn't even have last names. They were all Joes and Marys and Hanks and Bettys. And so you can see how I was going through the stage, as a person and as a writer.

Finally, in my 20s I thought, I need a larger canvas to tell a bigger story. I wanted to write a novel. I wanted to see if I could do a beginning, middle, and end. But I didn't know what to write about. I knew certain things from the very beginning. I didn't want to write about myself, and I was not going to write about my family. So that cancelled out a lot, because unfortunately -- you read all these memoirs now published by young people -- I never had a life of abuse. I never ran with scissors. I never had the gift of having all this angst in my background, so I couldn't do that, either.

What I ended up doing was thinking to myself, what about heritage? What brought me to California, to El Cerrito, California? Somehow the past brought me here. My roots; right?

So I went to the library and got everything I could find on China, and then I thought, oh, yeah, there's all these thousands of years of history. So I just thought, all right, what I have to start doing is book-ending. And from that day on, I have always done this as an author now, to book-end what I wanted to write about.

The problem was, at that time I didn't know what I wanted to write about. I just wanted to write about the Chinese culture. I had grown up in it. I wanted to know more about it, having grown up in America. I was fortunate that as a young child, I spent a lot of time going back and forth to Hong Kong, because my grandmother still lived there at the time. They had since immigrated to California and all lived in the East Bay. So I didn't have anybody to go back to anymore.

So I began reading. I went to the library, and this is right before the Internet became so available. And I read every book and I thought, I'm not going to write about the dynasties. That was off the list. What I wanted to do was write about 1900 and forward, something I felt more comfortable with, a time period I somehow maybe could grasp, and wishing that something would come to me, like that muse that suddenly comes to your head.

I started reading. I was at a used bookstore, and I looked into the shelf and I saw six volumes of autobiography by an author named Han Suyin. This is how life comes strangely full circle. The reason why I knew her name was because I saw one of her movies back when I was going to be a filmmaker. It was called Love Is A Many-Splendored Thing, and had William Holden and Jennifer Jones in it. I thought, I know that name. So I took down the first autobiography and began reading. And it was wonderful, because it was not only about her life growing up as a Eurasian missionary's daughter in China, but it had everything you can imagine about the culture, the Chinese culture. Things that I never heard and never knew growing up, even with my grandmother and my aunts and my own mother here.

So I bought all six volumes, and I just started reading. In the second volume, called *The Birdless Summer*, she had two lines about these Chinese women silk workers who, from the time they're seven or eight years old, worked do the silk work and send money back home. I thought, I never heard of them. They survived for 100 years. What's their story? And so it became the seed of what would become my first novel, *Women of the Silk*.

I knew nothing about women silk workers. I knew nothing about the area. But fortunately, it was in the southern part of China, so I can understand Cantonese, even though I don't speak well. So I had that going for me. And they actually were part of the culture from the late 1800s to 1937, when the Japanese invaded. So I had that going for me. All the things fit my book ends. So I started to read up on them, only to find there's nothing written on them. They were like a subculture that had nothing on them.

For one, the Chinese government didn't want them in any way to be seen, because they were independent, they were women, they didn't have their feet bound. They were everything that was against the Chinese culture. They didn't get married. They went to the hairdressing ceremony. They were married to the silk work. So all these things were fascinating but were against the Chinese traditions, and so nothing was recorded, not by the Chinese and of course not by the English.

I tried everything. I looked everywhere. I finally found the name of a woman who'd gotten her Ph.D. in Chinese woman studies at Cal and left a message there at the office and I thought, oh, please let her call back. And she didn't. Weeks later when I thought, this is the wrong thing to write, she called, and she said, "I was away. I was on sabbatical. I was actually researching another thing that I'm writing."

And I explained to her that I wanted to write a book, a fictional book about the Chinese women silk workers. And she said, "Oh, I know all about them."

And I thought, thank God. She said, "If you could find this one book of essays published by a group of women anthropologists who went back to Asia, all over Asia, in the 1920s, you will find one essay that talks all about these Chinese women silk workers, their day-to-day life, how they lived, how they worked within the silk sisterhood, all of it, but I don't know if it's in print anymore. As I recall, it was published quite a while ago."

Well, it was before the Internet, so I jumped in the car and I went to the main Berkeley library, and I looked into the computer. I'm thinking, it's there, right? Published in 1948. And I think, it's there. I look on the shelves and I can't find it. And I'm thinking, I just don't know how to use the library. I'm looking and looking. Finally I go to the librarian and say, "I'm looking for this book. It's in the computer. It's not on the shelf."

So she looks high and low and she can't find it either. So I'm thinking, it wasn't just me. And 45 minutes later she came up from the basement and she said, "This book is on its way out. Nobody is checking it out. So we were actually going to get rid of it. But if you want it, here. Check it out."

So from that one essay came all the background that would become *Women of the Silk*. It was a first novel. I didn't know what I was doing. I had a fictional story based on the real world, so I thought it was easy because, oh, this is giving me my outline. This is easy. I'll just stick my characters in there.

Well, I have this 150-page rule. I write 150 pages, then I stop, and I go back and read it as if I were a reader reading it. And I thought to myself, this is so boring. It didn't know what it wanted to be. It didn't know if it wanted to be fiction or nonfiction. I didn't know how to put one in the forefront and put all the facts in the backseat, which is how you write historically, how you write when you have a lot of research involved. You don't want to overburden the reader with too much stuff, too much factual information. You want to move the character through the history.

I didn't know that, so I looked back thinking, what did I do wrong? When I started reading, I realized, I have the entire book in the first person. It's all from the point of view of this little girl. She's seven, eight years old. She can't possibly see and understand everything that's happening. So I thought, that's what's wrong. I have it in the wrong person. It should be the third person.

So I put it in the third person and, oh, it's better. And then I'm reading it and I'm thinking, still, she can't see. But what if I divide each chapter into three different voices, and they all come from a different woman who's within this sisterhood? Then I can tell alternative stories.

And it began to work. And that's when writers say the book wrote itself. A book doesn't write itself. We know that. But what happens is, when you find the right structure, when you find the right voice, something happens and you know the direction you're going. And I think that's when you feel the book is writing itself, even though it isn't. And that's what happened with *Women of the Silk*, my first book.

I'm going to give you a medley of greatest hits. I'm going to talk to you about the angst of each book, because each book, like each child, is totally different.

I have this once-a-year gathering with a bunch of writing buddies, and these are writers who have done very well, bigger names than I will ever have. We talk about the process of writing, and we talk about how each

book gets harder, and how it's harder for us as writers. I have now written six books about the Asian culture in one way or another. If I decide to write about a group of educators in a cave, say -- and I expect some dirt, ladies and gentlemen -- I don't know if I would be drawing the same kind of reader, because I think they would look at me and they would say, "Well, when are you going to write about Asia again?"

So it's like we tie ourselves up and you never thought, as a writer, that you would be tied down, but we are tied down, and it's unfortunate, because I'm an American more than I am an Asian in a lot of ways, but for some reason, I'm tied into writing about Asian culture, not that that in any way disappoints me. I love learning more about who I am and the culture in general. And the more I write about different cultures, the more I realize we're all alike. Humanity is all one, and that's the thing.

But if I were going to write about all of you, I could just imagine what my editor would say. "Don't." You know, that's the way in the writing world. It goes in all different directions, but it's this. You have to write from your heart. You have to write what you're passionate about.

Writing a book is like getting married. You're spending years with this. And all during the process, you want a divorce, and you can't, because you have gone this far. You're not going to get rid of the book. You know, you have to keep this in mind when you're working.

My second book, I thought, now I have written about my Chinese side. What about my Japanese side? I didn't grow up with any Japanese culture. I didn't know anything. You probably know as much as I do. Sushi. You know? I like the noodles. That kind of thing. And I thought, what a pleasure it would be if I could write the story that had to do with the Japanese side of my culture and learn something about it.

About six months had gone by. When you're a writer, what the houses look for is, does a writer have a second book? We're always being tested. Isn't it terrible? But it's the second book, because everybody has one book in them. All of you have a book in you. Whether you write it down is one thing, but you know you have that story that you could tell, given a chance.

So I thought, huh-oh, I'm in trouble here, because they didn't know that *Women of the Silk* was going to sell any books, you know. They must have printed two copies in hard cover. They said to me, "We like your writing. We think you can write. We don't know if this particular book is going to sell that much, but we would love to publish it."

And it was fine with me. The best day of my life was when I saw that first book come to me in hard cover. I thought, I can't believe it. I have a book. And fortunately for me, somehow it was a story that people wanted to read, especially on the West Coast. And it sold very well here. I think it's because we have a lot of Asians. We're very acclimated to the Asian culture. For some reason it started here. And they sold the book as an Asian-American author writing about Chinese women feminists. So I looked at that and I thought, huh? I just wanted to be a writer, you know?

So my second book turned out to be very different and it was a conscious choice for me to make my protagonist in the second book not a woman, but a male protagonist. So sitting there, I'm thinking, I don't know what to write about. But then I remembered the story. When you grow up in any old culture -- for me, I grew up in what Maxine Hong Kingston said is actually talk-stories, hearing talk-stories all the time. If you really think about it, third-world writers were not published 25 years ago. If you tried to teach third-world writers you had one: Maxine Hong Kingston, and you taught *The Woman Warrior*, which is the one book I read in high school. It wasn't until 25 years ago that you're getting any books so rich in culture that now you're reading *The Kite Flyer* and you're reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed Earth* and reading my books, and it really is a tragedy to think that 30 years ago none of these stories were ever told.

Well, I grew up in a generation where my mother and my grandmother didn't want stories told, didn't want certain stories written down. I'm a good friend of Jeannie Houston and I said, "Why didn't your mother write about Manzanar?"

She said, "Nobody in that generation even wanted to talk about it. We would lose face."

We grew up in a culture where Asians are extremely fearful of losing face, so perhaps there wouldn't have been a lot of Asian stories beyond 30 years ago, because it wasn't until my generation that we began to write the stories of our mothers and our grandmothers. And then the world started to shift in terms of those kind of voices being heard.

So to go back, I heard a lot of talk-stories growing up. I heard stories about uncles and cousins and when so-and-so drank the gallbladder and the snake that gave him virility, things like that. All the good stuff.

And then I heard about an uncle, my mother's favorite brother. She loved this brother because he wanted to be a painter. In the Asian culture, you know, another thing you're fearful of doing is going into the arts. It doesn't make a lot of money. You know, the Asian cultures drive their children -- you educators know that -- to get a good education, to go out into the world to be a doctor, a lawyer, engineer, make a lot of money. Right? So if you want to be a painter and you want to be a writer, it's a little bit harder.

My uncle wanted to be a painter, to go to Paris. But he got sick, and when he was about 20, they sent him to my great-grandfather's beach house. And my uncle, my mother's brother, was in Hong Kong, but my mother's family always had a lot of business with Japan. So my great-grandfather had a beach house outside of Kobe. So they sent him there to recuperate because at the time we thought it was TB.

So he went to the beach village on the off-season, and nobody was there, and so I thought to myself, I wonder what happened to him there? Did he meet anybody? Did he fall in love? What would it have been like to be somebody who had to step out of his own culture at an age where you want to date and you want to be with your friends and you're going to college and you suddenly have to be in Japan where you don't really know the language and you don't know anybody there, and it's exceedingly quiet? I think I'm going to write a story about that.

So the second book is called *The Samurai's Garden*, and it takes place during one year in this young man's life. I originally thought it was going to be a story about this young man, Stephen, and then I thought, well, somebody had to take care of this beach house. It will be a manservant. And his name will be Matsu. And something happened.

As I was telling the story, I became intrigued with Matsu's story, not Stephen's story. Stephen became the lens in which I told Matsu's story and his great love for this Japanese woman. I learned everything I could possibly want to learn about being Japanese. The cultures are so different, the Chinese and the Japanese. I once was on a plane going somewhere, and I was reading one of those in-flight magazines, and they were equating the Asian cultures to the European cultures. They said the Japanese were much like the British, stiff upper lip, very reserved, don't say what they really feel, but they do let you know.

The Chinese? Italians. Much more in your face. Much family, food, vociferous. You go to Chinese restaurants, you hear them. In Japanese restaurants, everything is much more ceremonial.

So you can imagine for me, being an American kid growing up in the Chinese culture, suddenly trying to figure out what it meant to be Japanese was hard, and a very different writing experience.

But in *Women of the Silk*, I had the culture but I didn't have the story. With *The Samurai's Garden*, I had the story -- it was this young man who goes and recuperates -- but I didn't have the culture.

The Japanese formalities are so different. By how low they bow is how much respect they give to somebody. So everything meant something. And it taught me how to write, because in the Japanese culture, everything is shown, not said. And it's everything a writing teacher had ever told me. "Show. Don't tell. Don't just tell. Show." You know, you hear it, and you get into it. But boy, when I wrote about the Japanese culture, everything was showing. The look on his face, the expression on his face, would tell more to this young man than him ever saying anything. He could never say "I love you" to the woman, because he would never say "I love you" out loud. So how can I show that? So it became this book in which I learned to be a writer. And it was such a quiet book and it was a time when I thought that you had to actually finish a book by deadline. Now I realize you don't have to.

I was teaching at the time, and it was July, and I had 150 pages written of *The Samurai's Garden*. A usual manuscript sent in is anywhere from 300 to 350 pages printed, out from the printer. And I thought, I have got to write half a book and I have a month and a half. I began teaching again early September.

So I rented a house in Lake Tahoe, up in the hills. I sat every day from 9:00 a.m. to the time of cocktail hour. Cocktail hour got earlier and earlier each day. 12:30? Ah, martini time. And I did finish it in a month and a half, and I realized that it was the perfect situation for that particular book, because he felt trapped. He felt trapped at a place he didn't want to be until he got to know these other characters. And I felt trapped in a place I didn't want to be, because it was summer, I wanted to go travel, go to the restaurants, and I kind of morphed into that.

So every writing experience is so different because of that. My third book, *Night of Many Dreams*, was about two generations of Chinese women in Hong Kong. The closest book I have ever written about family without writing about family. And it was when I had gone back to visit my grandmother a lot and saw how they lived, and she was a very upper-class Chinese woman who had mahjong and ate lunches every day. And during those lunches they tried to broker daughters and sons. They're like the Jewish faith. So I wrote about that.

And my fourth book, which took the longest time, like this one, what I wanted to write about, I couldn't -- I didn't know. And then it dawned on me, my first book, *Women of the Silk*, I thought was going to be a fat saga, and I somehow thought in the back of my mind that if I wrote this big Michener-esque saga, that they would make it into a miniseries. It took so long to find any information on the sisterhood itself that when she leaves the sisterhood and goes to Hong Kong at the end of the first book, I thought, the book can end here. One part of her life ends, so I ended it.

But I never felt that I finished the story. It became my fourth book, *The Language of Threads*. These Chinese women were amazing. They organized themselves and unionized themselves from the time they were silk workers and they brought that same system over to Hong Kong later. When they left during the Japanese invasion, they all went to Hong Kong and other parts of China, but in Hong Kong, they started up another way of living and they became domestic servants.

And my aunt, later on, told me after the book was written, "Oh, yeah, we had one of those domestic servants that came from the silk world." I thought, now you tell me?

And so they continued on their lifestyle, only in Hong Kong, with different adventures. And so I finished her story, the main character, in *The Language of Threads*, my fourth book.

So then something odd happened and I thought, I'm done with Asia. I felt like Picasso had finished his blue period. I can move on now, and I can write about America. I can write about California. And so in my fifth book, I thought, I'm not going to write about being Asian. I'm not going to be writing about Asia. I'm going to write about whatever comes to me.

I'm a closet doctor. I would have made my grandmother really happy, had I become a doctor. Instead, I practiced in the books. There are diseases, okay? The two things I find winding through many or all of the books are illness and some kind of subculture; the social group that stands aside, whether they be silk working girls, whether it's leprosy in *The Samurai's Garden*, or if it's a mother and daughter who's battling an aging illness, which became the seed for my fifth book, *Dreaming Water*. I wanted to write a very grounded California book, so it's set in California. I didn't want to use Asians, so I said, "I'll just start."

I write without an outline. I write very much like I wrote poetry. A line comes to me, a character comes to me, a voice comes to me. In that particular book, it was the mother's voice, and I thought, it will be a mother and daughter. One of them will have an illness.

I was taking care of my mother at the time. She had had a heart attack, and I realized how the shoe was on the other foot. I had never been in that situation where the daughter becomes the grownup in some ways, and I wanted to translate that into a book. But I didn't want to make it a downer book. I wanted to talk about life and how you live your life within these constraints. And because I felt physically older, just in this turn-around, I wanted to write about aging disease, and I'm sure you have heard of progeria. It's when the little kids grow old quickly, so by the time they're seven, they may look like little old people already. So I was sitting there and I thought, I wonder if there's like an older version of this disease?

So by then the Internet is here, and I'm on the Internet and I'm looking aging disease, progeria. Then I stumble on Werner's syndrome, and "Yes." I know, it's silly. I'm reading about leprosy and I'm going, "Oh, cool, their nose falls off. That will be a good scene."

With Werner's syndrome they don't start aging progressively quickly until they're about 21. So it did everything I wanted to. It allowed me to talk about her life up until then. She had some physical deformities that you can see that are part of the disease, but she can live a normal life up until then. So I thought, I'm going to start writing, and that's what it's going to be about.

The more I researched -- and research has been a huge part of every single book I have written, because of the medical, because of the subculture and the concept I'm writing about, because they somehow all cover World War II, even when I try for that not to happen, it happens. And in this book in particular, *Dreaming Water*, I thought, I'm writing about California. I'm out of World War II.

Then I researched Werner's syndrome and find that a large percentage of Werner's syndrome patients come from the Japanese culture. For some reason they have the genetic defect in which it always spreads. And I thought, see? You try to run away from something, and it takes you right back. So I said, okay, she's half-Japanese and she's half-Italian, because I like Italian food. The mother's Italian and the father is Japanese, and it's set in the 1990s.

And then I'm thinking, well, wait. If it's the 1990s, the father would have to have grown up during a war. He would have had to be interned. He grew up in Pasadena. They were interned there. So the war does come through him in that way. But you know, whenever that happens, it just gives me more to write about. It actually defines who the character is. If you're touched by war, you look at life differently than if you weren't touch by war. So that goes into how you build the character.

When that book came out, the e-mails came, "When are you writing about Asia again?" I have always loved sumo. I know it's an odd thing to love, but I always was curious about how they got so big. Were they always big? Don't you ever ask yourself these questions? Do they eat to get that big, or are they born already hefty?

So I thought, that's kind of what I want to write about. I actually had put it on a back burner because I didn't think it would be a big seller. But I had a lot of women readers, a lot of book clubs, and because they're mainly a lot of women, I get e-mails all the time, I knew they were reading the books. If I write about a sumo, I might

lose my women readers. And then I thought, oh, who cares? You know, my cast as a writer is to make the book so interesting that anybody would want to read this, and maybe get a few guys along the way; right?

So I thought, I'm going to write about this boy who, as he grows up, loves sumo. I learned things along the way. Now, you just don't become a sumo. You don't just say, "I'm big enough. I want to become a sumo."

They actually have it for physical education in school, which was something I didn't know, something that was great news. So you have a coach who watches all the boys and if somebody is exceptional, like my character is, he calls the sumo stables and he says to the coach, "I think I have a boy here who has a lot of talent. You should come and look during PE time."

And that's how they're recruited, as young as 15, let's say. So I thought I'd start this book, my latest book, *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms*, with him being recruited and going into a sumo stable. And then I would talk about him being a sumo.

Well, what happened was, I started to ask myself questions that I thought readers would ask. Well, wait a second. Was he always a big boy? How do I show this? What family life did he have? Did his family want him to be sumo?

The problem with being a writer is this. If you do it that way, everything's back story, and I'd have to flashback all the time. I'd have to have him telling somebody. So I thought, okay, let me set it back more in time, the time he was younger, the time he's ten or eleven, where his first thoughts of being sumo really kind of come together.

When I set it back in time, it meant 1939. I didn't set it forward to the modern-day sumo in one respect. I didn't want to write about modern day sumo culture. It's very difficult. From the 1960s forward, it became more yakuza-involved. It had a lot more to do with betting and gambling, so I wanted to stay away from that aspect of the sumo world, so I stopped it in the 1960s, which meant that if he were going to be a sumo -- you have to go backwards in time -- if he's going to be a little boy, it's 1939.

So then, I thought, sumo became easy. What became difficult was how can I write in a voice of being a Japanese character in Japan during World War II? And who raises this boy? And then I thought, I don't want him to be alone. He should have a brother. So he has a brother. But who raises them? I'll make them orphans, so I don't have to worry about their parents. So then I thought, somebody has to raise them. Their grandparents. And what I'll do is, I'll get the entire generation, different generation, of the Japanese there. The boys will represent modern Japan; the grandparents will represent traditional Japan.

So you see how it doesn't come where you just sit down to write? It comes after lots of thinking, and that's why I don't have Facebook, and I don't have Twitter, I don't tweet, because I don't have enough time. I mean, I find it really hard to find quiet time just to think about orphans and grandparents.

And I thought, by part 2, the grandparents will die; right? Or they'll retire, and I don't need to worry about them as characters. Well, what happened was, they became such beloved characters to me, that they're all through the entire book. And they play a huge presence in the lives of these two boys, and the book, in the end, did not become a book about sumo. It became a book about family, it became a book about a culture, and it became a book about war, all the things that actually helped me during our time now with what's going on in terms of war.

Do you want me to read a tiny little bit, or just Q and A? I thought I'd read from the beginning of *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms*. There are two brothers. One is Hiroshi, who will go on to become the sumo, and his younger brother is Kenji, who's going to be an artist. I have to throw in that artist whenever I can, to help all those little Asian kids who want to be artists.

The grandparents raised them. Their grandmother likes to tell stories, talk-stories. One story she loves to tell is how the parents died saving Hiroshi. There's a very little scene where she tells this story, and I'm just going to read you that story. It's very short, but it kind of gives you a taste. It also gives you a taste of how it's not about sumo in the end.

*"That night after dinner as Hiroshi sat bent over his schoolwork, his grandmother came into the dining room and sat on the tatami mat across from him, pouring each of them a cup of green tea. It was his grandparents, Yoshio and Fumiko Wada, who kept the spirit of his parents alive, long after three-year-old Hiroshi and his 18-month-old brother Kenji were orphaned. His obaachan often stopped whatever she was doing, washing clothes or preparing his grandfather's favorite sticky rice, to tell Hiroshi stories of his parents and how they had saved his life. 'You are a child of good fortune,' his obaachan whispered, so that the gods wouldn't hear her and return to take him away, too. 'They loved you and your little brother more than life.' She always sighed as if the ache of their deaths could be expelled.*

*"When she began to speak, he looked up from his books, drank down his tea, and listened to his grandmother's story. 'Your mother and father were so happy to get away to Kyoto for their first overnight trip since you were born,' she began, her voice clear but calm in the small dining room. 'And still, they wanted to take you with them. You were just three years old. Kenji was 18 months, and I insisted that he stay with your grandfather and me. It was the last evening of the Lantern Festival at Miyazu Bay. They wanted to show you the red lanterns glimmering on the dark water like fireflies, where the spirit ships welcomed ancestors back to the human world. It was a warm and still summer night, and your mother wore her red-flowered summer kimono. Who could have known that the spirits would take your mother and father back into their world with them?' His obaachan swallowed. Her pause was like a sorrow she could never voice. 'Everyone felt festive in the calm, unusually dark night. The water gleamed the color of black pearl. Some men with a fishing boat offered to take spectators out into the bay to float among the lanterns. What possesses people to do what they do? Your mother and father stepped onto that boat, with you squirming in your father's arms. Too late they realized that the men steering the boat were drunk, that they'd been drinking sake all afternoon and should never have taken people out on that dark night. They went out too far, away from the shore, away from the lighted lanterns, away from all that was safe. In the blindness of that night, the boat struck rocks. The wood snapped and cracked. The boat ripped apart like shoji beneath their feet, separating your parents onto opposite halves of the deck. The boat sank in minutes -- just enough time for your quick-thinking father to place you in an empty fish barrel. You floated on the waves, crying after him, while he dived into the dark waters in search of your mother, who had never been a strong swimmer. Just beyond them, a wall of floating lanterns blocked the view of what was happening; your screams were lost in the revelry. When the other boats came to the rescue, all eight passengers were found drowned that night in Miyazu Bay, all except you, Hiroshi, floating in your fish barrel, and the young captain of the boat. They told us that water had just begun to seep into the barrel.'*

*"What happened to the captain?" Hiroshi asked. He pushed his books aside and looked down at his grandmother's thin, blue-veined hands that never seemed to stop moving.*

*"His body was never found," his obaachan answered. She sat for a moment in silence; Hiroshi felt bitterness cut through the air between them. 'I prayed the spirits of the dead had taken him that night, forgetting to leave his body behind.'*

*"At the end of his grandmother's story, Hiroshi stood and stretched. He took a deep breath, and went to study the black-and-white photograph of his parents, Kazuo and Misako, that sat on the tokonoma, the recessed shelf in his grandparents' living room. Misako had been their only daughter. He saw himself in his father's tall, heavysset build, his dark, almost brooding features, while Kenji was a daily reminder of his delicate mother with her liquid, faraway gaze. He wondered whether his parents might have lived if he hadn't been with them that night. Those precious moments given to him might have saved their lives. The thought stabbed at the side of*

*his brain until his head ached. Which was worse, he asked himself -- having them taken from him, or not remembering them at all, like Kenji? The answer tilted one way, then the other, never finding balance.*

*"Where are they now?" Hiroshi sometimes wondered, though he never said the words aloud. Were they watching from the heavens? Did they know when he and Kenji were bad? When he was a little boy, it all seemed too large and confusing. What he remembered felt less and less tangible.*

*"As Hiroshi grew older, his own memories of that night blurred with the distance of a dream. He began to hear slight discrepancies in each version of his obaachan's story. He never asked how she could know so much. He never questioned any of the differences -- the change in time, the shade of darkness in the night, the color of his mother's kimono or his father's shoes. He liked the way she reinvented his parents, brought them back to life. Bits and pieces of their existence returned to him, his father's arms holding him tightly, his mother's lovely, smiling eyes upon his face, the darkness of that night, the red lights, the slapping of water all around him as he floated light and ethereal. His obaachan always began the story with a great burst of energy, her voice rising and falling like waves, lapping slowly to shore almost in a whisper as she came to the end. He sat back transfixed, wanting only to hear it again, while his younger brother, Kenji, covered his ears or left the room, preferring to be as far away as possible. But his obaachan, tired and spent, always needed to lie down afterward."*

Are there questions? I will answer questions at the signing.

MR. GALBRAITH: We thank you, Gail.

Gail will have books for sale and will sign them, and we can do Q and A there. They turned the heater on to make it a little warmer, but you kept us really warm. This was wonderful. Thank you.

Last night's dinner was a total hoot with Gail. You just received a very low bow. Thank you and good afternoon.