

Questions for Discussion

A Thousand Years of Good Prayers

Extra:

What does Auntie Wang mean when she suggests to Granny Lin that "there is always a road when you get into the mountains" (3)? Describe the "road" Granny Lin pursues; is her choice a good one?

Consider the bond between Granny Lin and Kang; how are they both "Extras"?

Granny Lin cherishes her time with Kang as her "brief love story" (22). What does she mean by this? Granny Lin also believes that "to love someone is to want to please him, even when one is not able to" (19). How does this hold true in her friendship with Kang? Think of your own definition of love; how would you describe what it means to truly love someone?

Why does Granny Lin think the truth is futile? Discuss her reaction to Old Tang's death, and to Kang's disappearance. Why doesn't Granny defend herself? How do other characters in *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* view the possibility for achieving truth and justice?

After A Life:

Why does Jian's birth turn the Su's relationship cold, even in a way that the challenge of Beibei's condition did not? Consider the history of their marriage; why were Mr. and Mrs. Su able to share misfortune, but not happiness?

Imagine the questions that Mr. Su has never gathered the courage to ask Mrs. Su. What might he want to ask her, in his deepest heart? Why does he decide, instead, that "things unsaid had better remain so" (40)?

Discuss the theme of shame in "After a Life," and the many forms it takes in both the Su and the Fong families. Does anyone overcome the weight of shame? Who deals with it best? Who hides it and remains a prisoner? Consider the same theme in stories throughout the collection; what roles do honor and dishonor play?

Immortality:

Describe the identity of the narrator of "Immortality"? What atmosphere does this collective voice create?

Assess the complex attitude of the people toward the Great Papas, the Dictator, and the Impersonator. How are these cultural figures—heroes and villains both—at once "larger than the universe" (53) and yet also vulnerable to time? Do they achieve immortality in the hearts and minds of the people?

Yiyun Li presents the history of China through aphorism, mythology and storytelling. What does one gain from such a literary portrayal that isn't necessarily communicated through history books?

The Princess of Nebraska:

"The Princess of Nebraska" is set in the heartland of America, during a small street parade. Discuss the juxtaposition of Yang, Sasha and Boshen's life in China with their new experience in America. How do they each react in their new environment?

Sasha believes that "moving on" (69) is an American concept that suits her well. Do you agree that Americans have a unique ability to start fresh and forget the past? Consider your own experience; do you see this optimism reflected in other cultures, or would you agree that it is an American outlook? Later, Sasha says Americans are "born to be themselves, naive and contented with their naivety." Describe the insights behind this appraisal; do you agree or disagree? What does this story reveal about the Chinese and American psyche, and how does this resonate throughout the entire book?

At the end of "The Princess of Nebraska", what do you think Sasha decides to do about the baby?

Love in the Marketplace:

Describe the movie *Casablanca*; why does Sansan love the film so dearly? In what ways does the movie encompass "all she wants to teach the students about life?" (95)

Discuss Sansan's sacrifice; did she act virtuously or foolishly? What lies beneath her fierce attachment to the notion of her own "nobleness" (102)? Later, why is Sansan so tenderly affected by the beggar in the marketplace, and his "promise"?

Son:

How are the children of this generation in China, now adults, breaking away from the traditions of, and duties to, their parents? Think about Sansan, in *Love in the Marketplace*, Han in *Son*, and even Mr. Shi's daughter in *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*.

What moves Han to reveal the long kept secret of his sexuality to his mother? Were you surprised by her reaction? Is Han's mother as "traditional" as he believes?

The Arrangement:

Why does Roulan's mother refuse a divorce? What is the "arrangement" that she has worked out with Uncle Bing and Roulan's father?

What is a stone woman? What do you think of Roulan's advances? Does she know what she's asking for?

Uncle Bing says he's "one of those fools who puts a magic leaf in front of his eyes and then stops seeing mountains and seas." What does this mean? Have you ever fallen victim to a similar preoccupation?

Death Is Not A Bad Joke If Told The Right Way:

What does Mrs. Pang mean when she says "Nobody knows who he will become tomorrow?" (152) What does this sentiment reveal about life in China?

Discuss the importance of Mr. Du's orchids. Why is Du happy when they go out of fashion? What do the orchids mean to him?

Would Mrs. Pang have been proud of Mr. Pang at the end of his life, as the girl believes?

Persimmons:

What is a hero? As the villagers say in "Persimmons," "If you've made a point, you are a hero. If you've failed to make a point, you are nothing" (181). Do you agree?

Describe the view of life and death that the villagers hold. Is existence controlled by fate? God? Man? Consider, also, their attitude toward the possibility for justice.

A Thousand Years of Good Prayers:

Describe the emotional barriers to communication in "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" does language allow both Mr. Bing and his daughter to open up? How does the ability to communicate in a new language "make you a new person" (199)?

Yiyun Li sets many of her stories in her homeland of China. What is the spirit of the people? What mood pervades the workers' lives? How would you describe the way characters, such as Granny Lin, Mr. and Mrs. Su, Sansan, and Mr. Du respond to adversity?