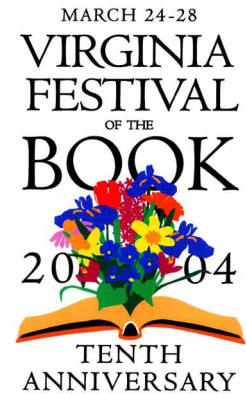


## *Waiting* by Ha Jin recommended by Sarah Kennedy

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month, Sarah Kennedy—assistant professor at Mary Baldwin College and author of the recent poetry collections *Double Exposure* and *Flow Blue*—recommends *Waiting* by Ha Jin. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



Since leaving his native China in 1985 to attend Brandeis University, Ha Jin has won three Pushcart Prizes, a Best American Short Story Award, and the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. He has justly gained a reputation for his fine and intelligent explorations of the tensions between traditional Chinese culture and "modern," educated characters who chafe at restrictions on their lives. Since its publication in 1999, Ha Jin's novel *Waiting*, which was a National Book Award finalist, has gained the author a wide following. *Waiting* centers on Dr. Lin Kong, who is caught between his romantic attachment to Manna Wu, a nurse, and his duty to Shuyu, his long-time wife in an arranged marriage. Shuyu, still living in rural Goose Village, is illiterate; her feet have been bound; she has always looked, to her husband, "old." He is ashamed of her; after all, he thinks, "This is the new China; who would look up to a young woman with bound feet?"

Most of the book involves the eighteen-year wait that Dr. Kong and Manna Wu must endure until he can divorce Shuyu without her consent, and while this drawn-out romance might seem too un-dramatic a subject for a novel, the attendance to personality for which Ha Jin is known drives the plot on. Couple this with his attention to the complexities and contradictions of post-Mao China and you have a novel rich with irony and ambiguity. Yes, the lovers find themselves together at last, but to reveal more about the marriage they finally gain would be to give

away an ending as surprising and rewarding as the conclusion of a mystery.

Ha Jin's prose is clear and accessible, seamlessly blending political and personal elements. Lin, thinking about his divorce, has to confess that "if a villager asked him about Shuyu, he would admit she was a perfect wife," that he might have lived happily with her, "just as many couples who had gotten married without knowing each other beforehand became perfect husbands and wives later on." But Lin has "a career in the city." So when Shuyu offers to share his bed during one of his trips back to the village, hoping to become pregnant with the son she believes he wants, Lin rejects her "feudal idea." She leaves, her "shoulders drooping," and Lin realizes that Shuyu "must have been lonely when he was away." It occurs to him, for the first time, that "she had her own ideas and feelings," though he rationalizes away his discomfort by concluding that she is merely a "simple-hearted woman."

Shuyu is not, of course, just simple-hearted. Few of Ha Jin's characters are, and the imperfect resolutions they fashion of their difficult lives make this novel, like all of Ha Jin's fiction, deeply satisfying, if emotionally complicated reading. This writer refuses to take an easy way out: you won't necessarily be happy at the end of *Waiting*, but you will be glad you didn't put off reading it any longer.