



Gail Tsukiyama's *The Samurai's Garden* recommended by Stephen Cushman

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month, Stephen Cushman—poet, critic, author and professor at the University of Virginia—recommends *The Samurai's Garden* by Gail Tsukiyama.

One of the best books I've had the pleasure of reading this summer was Gail Tsukiyama's *The Samurai's Garden*. Published in 1994, this two-hundred page novel is the second book by a young woman, now living in San Francisco, who identifies herself as the daughter of a Chinese mother and a Japanese father. Although *The Samurai's Garden* isn't obviously autobiographical, the author's mixed parentage informs her marvelous book with quiet authority.

Set against the historical background of the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, Tsukiyama's novel focuses on a year in the life of Stephen, a young man who has been studying at the university in Canton when he falls ill with tuberculosis. One of four children, all of whom have been given Western names by a practical father, who believes those names will help them in the business world, Stephen returns to his home in Hong Kong to convalesce under the watchful eyes of his mother, his sister, and an older family servant. Meanwhile, Stephen's father lives in Kobe, Japan, where he runs his business, although he remains married to Stephen's mother.

On the second page of the novel, which Tsukiyama builds around Stephen's diary entries from September 1937 to October 1938, Stephen's father instructs his wife to send their convalescing son to stay with him in Japan, where the climate is healthier than it is in Hong

Kong. Once in Japan, Stephen secures his father's permission to travel to his family's beach house in the small village of Tarumi. At the train station in Tarumi, Stephen is met by Matsu, a sixty-year-old man and caretaker of the beach house, where he has lived for the last thirty years.

In setting the scene this far, I've said nothing one doesn't learn in the first five or six pages. The remainder of the novel explores how Stephen—a sensitive, young, educated, artistic Chinese man—discovers and grows into the world of Matsu, an older, uneducated Japanese man, who says little and sees much. The development of their deep friendship takes place against the difficult background of war between their two countries, a war that soon puts Stephen in a hard position in the small Japanese village.

During his year in Tarumi, Stephen has many powerful experiences, meets some extraordinary people, and learns some large truths, not only about himself but also about his family and the incomparable Matsu, whose gift for building beautiful gardens gives the novel its title. It's not telling too much to add that while he is falling for a local village girl named Keiko, Stephen also meets Sachi, a once beautiful woman of Matsu's age and acquaintance, now living in the mountains above the village, from which she has exiled herself for a very particular reason.

But delicate plot and unforgettable characterizations cast only part of the spell of *The Samurai's Garden*. The other component is Tsukiyama's mastery of tone and language. Elegant, graceful, lyrical, understated, restrained, her writing delivers more emotional resonance in its muted spareness than one finds in many a slickly written novel twice the length of this small gem.

Virginia Festival of the Book

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