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READER'S GUIDE
WAITING
HA JIN

NATIONAL BESTSELLER



Waiting

"A suspenseful and bracingly tough-minded love story." —*The New Yorker*

HA JIN

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BOOK

A NOVEL

HA JIN

Ha Jin first considered abandoning his native Chinese language to write exclusively in English on the day of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, four years after he arrived in America. He has been grappling with his “ultimate betrayal” ever since.

“This linguistic betrayal is the ultimate step the migrant writer dares to take,” he wrote in his 2008 book, *The Writer as Migrant*, “after this, any other act of estrangement amounts to a trifle.”

The choice has led him to a celebrated literary career – he is one of only three writers whose native language isn’t English to win the National Book Award — and it also set him on a “solitary path.”

“I will never be a Chinese writer,” he once told an interviewer. “This is a fact of myself, that I can accept myself as a kind of failure.”

Ha Jin’s career has been marked by sacrifices determined by language. Jin Xuefei became “Ha Jin” with his first published poem in America – an act of accommodation in an adopted country that could not say his name. “‘X’ words like ‘xue’ are impossible for Americans to pronounce,” he has explained.

Jin was born in the northern city of Jinzhou, China in 1956. His father was an Army officer, as was his mother, who was later persecuted under Mao Zedong because her family owned a small parcel of land.

Jin was 10 when the Cultural Revolution started—a time when schools were either closed or crippled by restrictions—and 14 when he lied about his age to join the People’s Liberation Army. His limited schooling left him nearly illiterate. In his first year, he served as an artilleryman along the Soviet border when the threat of war seemed imminent—an experience that shaped his first story collection, “Ocean of Words.” After his second year, when he was transferred to a telegraphy post, he began studying at night from the banned schoolbooks his parents sent him. At age 19, he left the Army to work for a railroad company. There, he listened to a radio station broadcast of an English-language study program before



dawn. “It was very simple,” he has said. “They would teach you to speak English by saying things like ‘This is a table. Is that a chair? Long live Chairman Mao!’”

Colleges were reopened in 1977 and he was admitted to Heilongjiang University in Harbin where he was assigned to study English, the last of his five choices. At Shandong University, where Jin received a master’s degree in American Literature, he met his wife, Lisha. From her parents—both Army doctors—he heard the story that would inspire *Waiting*: a doctor at their hospital had waited 18 years to get a divorce so that he could marry a nurse.

Jin and Lisha were married in 1982. Three years later he left China and his family to get a Ph.D. at Brandeis University in Boston. He wrote his dissertation on the Chinese influence on modernist poets, including Pound and Eliot, with a job as a professor in China in mind. But in 1989, Jin watched the Tiananmen Square massacre unfold on television and—after months “in a daze”—decided he would never return to his home.

CHINA

“We were taught that the People’s Army’s first principle was to serve the people, to protect the people, and now the whole thing was reversed,” he has said. The “national madness” he saw exemplified in the massacre later became central to his novel, *The Crazyed*.

Jin’s wife and his 6-year-old son, Wen, were allowed to join him in America and the family survived by working sometimes 80 hours a week. By 1990, Jin had decided to stop taking low-paying odd jobs—as a night watchman at a chemical factory, a busboy at an Italian restaurant, a hospital custodian—so that he could finish his degree and begin a writing career. He published “Between Silences,” his first book of poems. Two years later, he started auditing creative writing classes at Boston University and, in 1993, he got an academic post at Emory University.

By the end of the decade, Jin had published five more volumes: the short story collections “Ocean of Words” (1996) and “Under the Red Flag” (1997), a book of poetry, and two novels, *In the Pond* and *Waiting*, with which he began to make a living as a writer. “I finally felt like I could breathe,” he has said. He currently teaches at Boston University and lives in a wooded area outside Boston that reminds him, in climate and vegetation, of northeast China.

In his subsequent novels, *The Crazyed* (2002), *War Trash* (2004), and *A Free Life* (2007), Jin gradually transitioned from writing books about China—which had become “unfamiliar and distant” because of his absence—to writing books about the immigrant experience in America. *War Trash* is set in POW camps in Korea because “it is a transitional place, a step towards the United States,” he has said. His most recent novel, *A Free Life*, is set in Boston, New York, and Georgia. At the end of that novel, Jin attaches a volume of poetry “written” by the main character, a Chinese immigrant. It is called “Another Country.” “You must go to a country without borders,” it begins, “where you can build your home out of gallons of words.”

Lin Kong and Mannu Wu’s decades-long struggle to make a life together in *Waiting* is set against the backdrop of a period of political strife in China. The churning of the Cultural Revolution takes place on the margins of their story, but signs of it reappear in descriptions of events, characters and places and its influence shapes the ways characters interact.

Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966 with the support of his wife and her associates, known as the Gang of Four. For years, moderates in the Communist Party led by Chinese president Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping had enacted gradual but successful economic and social reforms. In response, Chairman Mao sought to engender a radical class struggle to eliminate the privileged class of “liberal bourgeoisie”—intellectuals and professionals—and solidify his own power. The result was a decade of violence and chaos that left thousands dead and millions exiled. It also had long-term destabilizing effects on the Chinese economy and created a generation of citizens who were deprived of an adequate education.

A central part of the Cultural Revolution was the formation of groups called the Red Guards, high school and university students whom Mao encouraged to criticize intellectuals, school administrators, moderate government officials and other authority figures seen as his enemies. He advised the students and proletarian masses to “smash the four olds”: old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. They responded by destroying anything associated with foreign or traditional cultures, including temples, works of art, and books, and persecuting (often until death from abuse or suicide) anyone who made or studied such cultural artifacts. Schools were closed from 1966 until 1969 and, through the early 1970s, cultural production was limited to propaganda and praise of Chairman Mao, who was elevated to a god-like status.

In 1967, Red Guard factions began to fight among each other and to attack the military, which was called in to quell the violence. Fatal clashes continued for two years, when the Red Guards were dismantled and Chairman Mao began a program to “purify class ranks.” He split up families of the urban elite and sent them to the countryside to learn from the peasants or perform hard labor.



Children of peasants and workers were allowed to attend reopened schools, where they learned to honor the accomplishments of peasants and Chairman Mao. This elevation of the peasantry and Mao's effort to close the economic gap between the city and the country is clear at times in Jin's depiction of the division between the peasants in Goose Village and the people in bustling Muji City in *Waiting*. Asked to move to the city, Lin's daughter writes to her father that she wants to stay in the country "as a socialist peasant of the new type."

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, with Mao's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four. Five years later, Deng Xiaoping regained moderate leadership of the Communist Party and instituted a series of economic reforms aimed at countering the effects of the revolution.

Jin describes politics as "only a context" in *Waiting*. "The focus is on the person, the inner life... how the emotional life is affected by time and also by environment." He has also said that because his characters' lives are often affected by politics, he "cannot avoid politics in telling the stories."

Jin leaves markers of the waxing and waning revolution in the book: the hospital staff is divided between supporters of different revolutionary factions who share stories of fighting in the cities a year after the revolution's start; Haiyan is saved

from persecution during the strife even though her grandfather was a "well-known capitalist" because he had once donated money for the Communist government to buy a fighter jet; workers meet to study a decree that revolutionary rebels fight "with words instead of force" after the violent clashes in the cities. In the last half of the novel, a statue of a Russian soldier in Victory Park is being repaired from the damage inflicted by Red Guards years before – they had chopped off his helmet and parts of his submachine gun. Despite workers' efforts to scrape away the graffiti, the words that the Guards scrawled there—"Down with Russian Chauvinism!" are still legible.



QUESTIONS

1. Why does Manna wait for Lin to divorce his wife? What are the circumstances that either make her willing to wait or force her to wait?
2. Near the end of the novel, Lin doubts that he loves Manna or ever loved her, but he is certain she always loved him. Do you think either of them feels love for the other? What proof is there of their love or lack of love?
3. Lin has a revelation when he intuits that his marriage to Manna “might not be what he wanted,” and he is frightened by the thought that “all those years he had waited for something wrong.” What does Lin want in a marriage and how does it relate to what he wants for his life? What do Manna and Shuyu want in a marriage? What are the pressures—from neighbors, the military, the Party, family—that define what a marriage should be? Is Ha Jin critical of these pressures and his characters’ reactions to them?
4. Who or what is the voice Lin begins to hear near the end of the novel? What role does it play in teaching Lin about himself?
5. Lin is described, by himself or others, as benign, large-hearted, and as a miser, a loner and a sissy. What truth is there in those descriptions? How would you describe him?
6. How are reputations and rumors important in the novel? How do they shape Lin and Manna’s lives and their actions?
7. In what ways does Shuyu represent an “old” China in her manners, beliefs and appearance? What does a “new” China look like and who do you think is a “model” of the new? What is the significance of Shuyu looking healthy, happy and younger at the novel’s end?
8. Lin’s brother Ren asks him, “How can you say a divorce is just your own affair?” How is Lin’s quest for a divorce both a public and a private matter? Does the eventual divorce impact many people or just a few? In general, how much do public pressures impact private acts in the novel?
9. Why is the historical backdrop—of the Cultural Revolution, China’s shifting relationships with Russia and the United States, and the rise of wealth—important in the novel? How do major national or world events reflect, counter or impact what happens in small private lives?
10. Geng Yang tells Lin that “character is fate.” Is that true of Geng Yang’s own role in the book? What does it mean that such a brutal man becomes so successful? How does his character change the dynamics of Lin and Manna’s relationship and, even, the dynamics of the book? Why do you think Ha Jin created such a character?
11. Does Manna’s relationship with Lin change her? How do you know? Why do you think she develops a “heart condition”?
12. By the end of the book, Lin has gotten tangled in a new promise of waiting. How did it happen? What does it say about his character and the character of his daughter and first wife?
13. At times, both Lin and Manna refer to themselves as “useless.” Why is “use” such a central trait in Communist China and in the world of the book? What does use have to do with relationships and love in the novel?



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