Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet by Jamie Ford

If you have any questions now or during the summer, please contact Mr. Winderbaum at 808-896-2020 bwinderbaum@parkerschoolhawaii.org

Seventh grade students entering the eighth grade have been given a paperback edition of the novel Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet by Jamie Ford. If you did not receive a copy, you may get one from:
Tina Doherty, Middle School Head. Email: tdoherty@parkerschoolhawaii.org

- Actively read this book and bring your work to the first day of class.

The term “Active Reading” refers to a method of highlighting or underlining passages and details in the text and annotating (making notes) in the margins or at the end of chapters. Simply underlining is NOT active reading! Directions for taking proper active reading notes follow.

Read actively; mark your book:
As you read the novel highlight useful information and make notes in the margins concerning the two major characters, Henry and Keiko. You might choose to highlight information about Henry in one color (orange or pink perhaps) and Keiko in another color (yellow or green perhaps). The following questions are suggested by the author to better understand the novel. You do not need to provide written answers the questions; they are placed here to guide your active reading annotations.

1. Father-son relationships are a crucial theme in the novel. Think about some of these relationships and how they are shaped by culture and time. For example, how is the relationship between Henry and his father different from that between Henry and Marty? What accounts for the differences?

2. Why doesn't Henry's father want him to speak Cantonese at home? How does this square with his desire to send Henry back to China for school? Isn't he sending his son a mixed message?

3. If you were Henry, would you be able to forgive your father? Does Henry's father deserve forgiveness?

4. From the beginning of the novel, Henry wears the "I am Chinese" button given to him by his father. What is the significance of this button and its message, and how has Henry's understanding of that message changed by the end of the novel?

5. Why does Henry provide an inaccurate translation when he serves as the go-between in the business negotiations between his father and Mr. Preston? Is he wrong to betray his father's trust in this way?

6. The US has been called a nation of immigrants. In what ways do the families of Keiko and Henry illustrate different aspects of the American immigrant experience?

7. What is the bond between Henry and Sheldon, and how is it strengthened by jazz music?

8. If a novel could have a soundtrack, this one would be jazz. What is it about this indigenous form of
American music that makes it an especially appropriate choice?

9. Henry's mother comes from a culture in which wives are subservient to their husbands. Given this background, do you think she could have done more to help Henry in his struggles against his father? Is her loyalty to her husband a betrayal of her son?

10. Compare Marty's relationship with Samantha to Henry's relationship with Keiko. What other examples can you find in the novel of love that is forbidden or that crosses boundaries of one kind or another?

11. What struggles did your own ancestors have as immigrants to America, and to what extent did they incorporate aspects of their cultural heritage into their new identities as Americans?

12. Does Henry give up on Keiko too easily? What else could he have done to find her?

13. What about Keiko? Why didn't she make more of an effort to see Henry once she was released from the camp?

14. Do you think Ethel might have known what was happening with Henry's letters?

15. The novel ends with Henry and Keiko meeting again after more than forty years. Jump ahead a year and imagine what has happened to them in that time. Is there any evidence in the novel for this outcome?

16. What sacrifices do the characters in the novel make in pursuit of their dreams for themselves and for others? Do you think any characters sacrifice too much, or for the wrong reasons? Consider the sacrifices Mr. Okabe makes, for example, and those of Mr. Lee. Both fathers are acting for the sake of their children, yet the results are quite different. Why?

17. Was the US government right or wrong to "relocate" Japanese-Americans and other citizens and residents who had emigrated from countries the US was fighting in WWII? Was some kind of action necessary following Pearl Harbor? Could the government have done more to safeguard civil rights while protecting national security?

18. Should the men and women of Japanese ancestry rounded up by the US during the war have protested more actively against the loss of their property and liberty? Remember that most were eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the US. What would you have done in their place?

19. Should the men and women of Japanese ancestry rounded up by the US during the war have protested more actively against the loss of their property and liberty? Remember that most were eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the US. What’s to prevent something like this from every happening again?
References


Active Reading: What? Why? How?

An informational guide for middle and upper school students at Parker School

What is Active Reading?
The term “Active Reading” refers to a method of highlighting or underlining passages and details in the text and annotating (making notes) in the margins.

What is the Value or Purpose of Active Reading?
Active Reading is useful in several ways:

1. Engagement with the text. When you are reading actively, you don’t just let the story “wash over you.” You pay attention to details, descriptions, and techniques used by the author. This offers the potential for a deeper understanding of the text.

2. Creation of a resource for discussion. You will be discussing the assigned text in class. If you have marked up your text well, you should be able to more readily find places in the text being discussed so that you can review them or share them aloud to examine the author’s words more closely.

3. Creation of a resource for writing. At Parker School, we normally write essays or book reports on all of the texts we read. These essays require evidence in the form of quotations from the text. If you have marked your book well during Active Reading, you should be able to find quotations you can use as evidence more readily. When you are being introduced to writing about literature in the sixth and seventh grade, it might be unclear at first what types of quotations will make good evidence for a paper. However, as you become more comfortable writing literary analysis essays, finding good evidence becomes more natural.

Can I read actively if I’m using an eBook?
Yes! Both iBooks purchased from the iTunes store and Kindle eBooks have highlighting and note-taking functions. In fact, many have hypertext functionality which allows you to look up unfamiliar words immediately while reading. Also, notes taken in an eBook are grouped together on one page and are easily searchable.
How do I read actively?
There are several steps to Active Reading.

1. You may begin reading actively on your initial read of the book, or you may read the book or assigned chapter first for pleasure and then again, actively. There are several benefits to reading the material twice:
   a. Some students feel that active reading is less enjoyable than reading for pleasure. Reading the text twice allows you to read it first for pleasure.
   b. Reading the text twice helps you to notice things more. If you already know what’s coming, when you go back and actively reread a section of the book, you will be amazed at the details that jump out. The author’s techniques for creating the story become more readily apparent.
   c. You get to know the material very well. This makes you more adept at discussing and writing about it.

2. Highlight or underline significant sentences, quotations, details or passages. You may wonder what “significant” means. Here are some guidelines of things to look for:
   a. Characters’ physical descriptions
   b. Plot developments, especially where something changes or where you can sense that an important change will result from a character’s actions
   c. Symbolism: Does an object seem to have greater importance beyond its use or existence? Does it appear to represent an idea?
   d. Foreshadow: Does it seem like the author might be dropping a hint about something to come?
   e. Character development: Is a character changing in some way? Are character relationships with one another changing?
   f. Allusion: are there references to widely known texts such as the Bible, Greek mythology or the works of Shakespeare? If something in the story sounds like a Greek myth you read in fifth grade, you can bet it’s deliberate.
   g. Theme: What are the ideas behind the story? What is the lesson the author wants the reader to take away?
   h. Motifs: Is an idea such as a metaphor repeated throughout the text? Have you noticed certain wording used again and again? Mark it; you can bet it was deliberate.
   i. Vocabulary: Be sure to note unfamiliar words and look them up. It will aid your understanding of the text and help you to enlarge your vocabulary.

3. Annotate. Take notes in the margin:
   a. **Engage with the text.** Write questions that you would like to ask in class. If you’re not sure if something is a literary device, write “symbol?” or “metaphor?”
   b. **Briefly summarize** what you’ve underlined so that when you are flipping through the book, you can quickly find the passage you are looking for. For instance, if you are trying to find the description of a character named Joe, “Joe descript.” in the margin will lead you right to it. You can also summarize character feelings and
c. actions such as: “the uncle is always angry” or “helps others” or “Doesn’t speak up for himself.” (Full sentences are not required in Active Reading annotations.)

d. Note quotations that reveal aspects of a character or his/her attitudes and how the character either changes or does not change over time.

e. Direct yourself to other pages that relate to something you’ve read. For instance, if you think you’ve noticed a motif or recurrent language, write the numbers of other pages where that language or idea appears.

Will my Active Reading be checked and graded?

1. Expect your Active Reading to be checked on the day the assignment is due. For summer assignments, this will be the first day of school. If you enrolled right before the beginning of school, the teacher will likely offer you an extension. You will not be expected to read an entire book in a single night.

2. Each teacher has his or her own way of grading active reading. If you are new to the school or have never been taught Active Reading, the teaching will certainly take the circumstances into consideration before issuing a grade for the assignment. It may be assessed on the basis of effort. If you appear to have made a concerted effort to do the Active Reading, then you should do just fine for your first assignment, even if you made mistakes or were unsure if you were doing it correctly. If you made no effort to do the Active Reading, you will receive a zero. Please note: You may have read the text and have a lot to say about it in class, but if you did not do the actual highlighting and annotations in your book, you will not receive credit for it.
Example of active reading for Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet.

The Panama Hotel
(1986)

Focus on theme!

Focus on how characters change over time.

Old Henry Lee stood transfixed by all the commotion at the Panama Hotel. What had started as a crowd of curious onlookers eyeballing a television news crew had now swollen into a polite mob of shoppers, tourists, and a few punk-looking street kids, all wondering what the big deal was. In the middle of the crowd stood Henry, shopping bags hanging at his side. He felt as if he were waking from a long forgotten dream. A dream he’d once had as a little boy.

The old Seattle landmark was a place he’d visited twice in his lifetime. First when he was only twelve years old, way back in 1942, “the war years” he liked to call them. Even then the old bachelor hotel had stood as a gateway between Seattle’s Chinatown and Nihonmachi, Japantown. Two outposts of an old-world conflict—where Chinese and Japanese immigrants rarely spoke to one another, while their American-born children often played kick the can in the streets together. The hotel had always been a perfect landmark. A perfect meeting place—where he’d once met the love of his life.

The second time was today. It was 1986, what, forty-plus years later? He’d stopped counting the years as they slipped into memory. After all, he’d spent a lifetime between these bookended visits. A marriage.

The birth of an ungrateful son. Cancer, and a burial. He missed his wife, Ethel. She’d been gone six months now. But he didn’t miss her as much as you’d think, as bad as that might sound. It was more like quiet relief really. Her health had been bad—no, worse than bad. The cancer in her bones had been downright crippling, to both of us, he thought.

For the last seven years Henry had fed her, bathed her, helped her to
the bathroom when she needed to go, and back again when she was all through. He took care of her night and day, 24/7 as they say these days. Marty, his son thought his mother should have been put in a home, but Henry would have none of it. "Not in my lifetime," Henry said, resisting. Not just because he was Chinese (though that was part of his resistance). The Confucian ideal of filial piety—respect and reverence for one's parents—was a cultural relic not easily discarded by Henry's generation. He'd been raised to care for loved ones, personally, and to put someone in a home was unacceptable. What his son, Marty, never fully understood was that deep down there was an Ethel-shaped hole in Henry's life, and without her, all he felt was the draft of loneliness, cold and sharp, the years slipping away like blood from a wound that never heals. Lost and lonely!

Now she was gone for good. She needed to be buried, Henry thought, the traditional Chinese way, with food offerings, longevity blankets, and prayer ceremonies lasting several days—despite Marty's fit about cremating her. He was so modern. He'd been seeing a counselor and dealing with his mother's death through an online support group, whatever that was. Going online sounded like talking to no one, which Henry had some firsthand experience in—in real life. It was lonely. Almost as lonely as Lake View Cemetery, where he'd buried Ethel. She now had a gorgeous view of Lake Washington, and was interred with Seattle's other Chinese notables, like Bruce Lee and his own son, Brandon. But in the end, each of them occupied a solitary grave. Alone forever. It didn't matter who your neighbors were. They didn't talk back.

When night fell, and it did, Henry chatted with his wife, asking her how her day was. She never replied, of course. "I'm not crazy or anything," Henry would say to no one, "just open-minded. You never know who's listening." Then he'd busy himself pruning his Chinese palm or evergreen—houseplants whose brown leaves confessed his months of neglect. But now he had time once again. Time to care for something that would grow stronger for a change.

Occasionally, though, he'd wonder about statistics. Not the cancer mortality rates that had caught up with dear Ethel. Instead he thought about himself, and his time measured on some life insurance actuarial table. He was only fifty-six—a young man by his own standards. But he'd read in *Newsweek* about the inevitable decline in the health of a surviving spouse his age. Maybe the clock was ticking? He wasn't sure, because as soon as Ethel passed, time began to crawl, clock or no clock.

He'd agreed to an early retirement deal at Boeing Field and now had all the time in the world, and no one to share the hours with. No one with whom to walk down to the Mon Hei bakery for *yuet beng*, carrot mooncakes, on cool autumn evenings. Lonely.

Instead here he was, alone in a crowd of strangers. A man between lifetimes, standing at the foot of the Panama Hotel once again. Following the cracked steps of white marble that made the hotel look more like an Art Deco halfway house. The establishment, like Henry, seemed caught between worlds. Still, Henry felt nervous and excited, just like he had been as a boy, whenever he walked by. He'd heard a rumor in the marketplace and wandered over from the video store on South Jackson. At first he thought there was some kind of accident because of the growing size of the crowd. But he didn't hear or see anything, no sirens wailing, no flashing lights. Just people drifting toward the hotel, like the tide going out, pulling at their feet, propelling them forward, one step at a time.

As Henry walked over, he saw a news crew arrive and followed them inside. The crowd parted as camera-shy onlookers politely stepped away, clearing a path. Henry followed right behind, shuffling his feet so as not to step on anyone, or in turn be stepped upon, feeling the crowd press back in behind him. At the top of the steps, just inside the lobby, the hotel's new owner announced, "We've found something in the basement."

Found what? A body perhaps? Or a drug lab of some kind? No, there'd be police officers taping off the area if the hotel were a crime scene.

Before the new owner, the hotel had been boarded up since 1950, and in those years, Chinatown had become a ghetto gateway for thugs—gangs from Hong Kong and Macau. The city blocks south of King Street had a charming trashiness by day; the litter and slug trails on the sidewalk were