

**Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet (Jamie Ford):
Rant and Review**

I am not widely travelled, but it so happens that Seattle is one place I have been. I remember China Town well enough, but I was initially puzzled that I could not recall there being any Japanese area. Apparently Nihonmachi is still there, though an active Japanese American community doesn't live there anymore. You will now know why.

Let's hear it for Uncle Sam! The land of the brave, the home of the free! In 1942 at least 90% of the 127,000 Japanese-Americans were interned in camps - effectively concentration camps for whole families. Two-thirds of them were second or third generation Americans. So this is a story that should be told, a story that is perhaps little appreciated in the UK. In WW2 the popular view in the USA was that they were at war, not with another nation, but with another race. Typical newspaper reports read like this: *"A viper is nonetheless a viper wherever the egg is hatched.... So, a Japanese American born of Japanese parents, nurtured upon Japanese traditions, living in a transplanted Japanese atmosphere... notwithstanding his nominal brand of accidental citizenship almost inevitably and with the rarest exceptions grows up to be a Japanese, and not an American.... Thus, while it might cause injustice to a few to treat them all as potential enemies, I cannot escape the conclusion... that such treatment... should be accorded to each and all of them while we are at war with their race"*. By the same reasoning, of course, the ruling white, Christian Americans are also vipers - be it of English or other European brood.

But we must not let mere logic stand in the way of an opportunity for a spot of bigotry. Indeed, even the much revered Constitution of the United States was ignored in favour of this bigotry. The Constitution unequivocally guarantees that the writ of habeas corpus shall not be suspended, and that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law. But this is precisely what was denied under Executive Order 9066, the knee-jerk reaction of the American authorities in 1942 which implemented these internments. To be fair, the authorities in the USA have now recognised, and apologised for, this injustice.

So, the book. I'd describe it as a good holiday read, which is not entirely disparaging. It's an easy read. It slips down quickly in a day or two and makes little in the way of intellectual demand. Nothing wrong with that, unless you happen to want to be intellectually demanded. "Bitter-sweet" is exactly what it is. When was a love story anything else? A sweet-only love story is unthinkable, surely. Where would the story be? True, the sub-variant "inflexible patriarch forbids true love" does not score highly on the originality scale, but then there *are* only seven basic plots so originality would seem to be an impossible goal. It's a feel-good story, despite the subject matter (we enjoy a bit of squalor and deprivation). And the Chinese-Japanese thing is a nice device, permitting a perspective from the two sides of WW2 whilst retaining both sides as immigrants. Pleasant enough though the book is, the subject could perhaps do with a more heavyweight treatment.

I did find a curious additional Chapter on the internet, in which others may be interested (attached). I presume it was removed in the final edit.....

The Omitted Chapter

Somewhere within Henry's subconscious he knew that, however influential the benevolent association was in some quarters, it did not run the post office. Some instinct of self preservation kept this observation safely away from Henry's attention. Following this line of thought could only lead to a most unwelcome conclusion: further misery which would surely be best avoided.

Ethel herself did not have the luxury of such total denial. She had to manage her treachery by more circuitous mental arrangements. Ethel recalled following Henry to the Panama Hotel on that pivotal day, the day his father died. She had stood a little way from him, frightened to approach - frightened because she did not know exactly what Henry's father had told him. Slowly, hesitantly, she dared to interpret his downcast appearance simply as the look of loss, a picture of tragedy. She saw no trace of anger at her: not then, and not ever since. Henry's trusting character was Ethel's protection against exposure. He would never entertain the idea of Ethel's duplicity, not even after she was long dead.

It would not have happened, of course, without Henry's father being the prime instigator. But Ethel's interest had been tweaked long before Henry's father showed up at the post office. How could she not be intrigued by this earnest young man, so steadfast in writing to his true love? What Henry never knew was just how famous he and Keiko had become amongst the local Chinese girls of a similar age. The jungle drums of marriageable girls beat with martial efficiency. The cultural conflict provided added frisson. Opinions were divided. Some wished the couple well. But many of the Chinese girls were against fraternisation with a Japanese girl. If one woman scorned is dangerous enough, to scorn the whole race is to court retribution. And in some ways Ethel was just as traditional as Henry's father.

So it was that when Henry's father turned up at the post office, Ethel was fertile ground for his suggestion. To help derail Henry's ill-advised liaison was surely her patriotic duty. That the stronger half of her motivation was more personal she acknowledged initially only at an instinctive level. It was easy for Ethel to intercept the letters between Henry and Keiko - in both directions. She let a few through, but with decreasing frequency, to make it seem like a natural slow diminishing of interest. And what was she to do with those she did not let through? Why, read them, of course. What else? Guiltily, but with forbidden glee, she pored over them, dissecting every word. Ethel became more and more impressed with Henry's possession of that most desirable of male characteristics in female eyes: dependability. She determined that she would have him.

Long scheming was not needed. Events would follow as if on autopilot. Standing at the post office counter, her hand reached down to the counter draw and pulled out the "Return to Sender" stamp. She tapped the stamp down on the ink pad contemplatively as she tried to remember where one could buy starfire lilies.

The Dickensian tradition would have Ethel tormented by her conscience through the long years of her marriage. But, no. Ethel's view was that she had saved Henry from an inappropriate relationship. The outcome was entirely for the best. True, as she lay mortally ill for all those years she would have liked to confess all to Henry, in line with the Chinese tradition to tie up loose ends before one's own end. But she knew that it would only cause him unnecessary pain and so did not do so. In this, if nothing else, she was in the right.