

Songs of Willow Frost: A Novel

By Jamie Ford

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

From Jamie Ford, author of the beloved *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, comes a much-anticipated second novel. Set against the backdrop of Depression-era Seattle, *Songs of Willow Frost* is a powerful tale of two souls—a boy with dreams for his future and a woman escaping her haunted past—both seeking love, hope, and forgiveness.

Look for special features inside. Join the Random House Reader's Circle for author chats and more.

Twelve-year-old William Eng, a Chinese American boy, has lived at Seattle's Sacred Heart Orphanage ever since his mother's listless body was carried away from their small apartment five years ago. On his birthday—or rather, the day the nuns designate as his birthday—William and the other orphans are taken to the historical Moore Theatre, where William glimpses an actress on the silver screen who goes by the name of Willow Frost. Struck by her features, William is convinced that the movie star is his mother, Liu Song.

Determined to find Willow and prove that his mother is still alive, William escapes from Sacred Heart with his friend Charlotte. The pair navigate the streets of Seattle, where they must not only survive but confront the mysteries of William's past and his connection to the exotic film star. The story of Willow Frost, however, is far more complicated than the Hollywood fantasy William sees onscreen.

Shifting between the Great Depression and the 1920s, *Songs of Willow Frost* takes readers on an emotional journey of discovery. Jamie Ford's sweeping novel will resonate with anyone who has ever longed for the comforts of family and a place to call home.

Praise for *Songs of Willow Frost*

“If you liked *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, you’re going to love *Songs of Willow Frost*. . . . tender, powerful, and deeply satisfying.”—Lisa Genova

“[A] poignant tale of lost and found love.”—***Tampa Bay Times***

“Arresting . . . [with] the kind of ending readers always hope for, but seldom get.”—***The Dallas Morning News***

“[An] achingly tender story . . . a tale of nuance and emotion.”—***The Providence Journal***

“Ford crafts [a] beautiful, tender tale of love transcending the sins people perpetrate on one another and shows how the strength of our primal relationships is the best part of our human nature.”—***Great Falls Tribune***

“Remarkable . . . likely to appeal to readers who enjoy the multi-generational novels of Amy Tan.”—***Bookreporter***

“Jamie Ford is a first-rate novelist, and with *Songs of Willow Frost* he takes a great leap forward and demonstrates the uncanny ability to move me to tears.”—**Pat Conroy**

“With vivid detail, Jamie Ford brings to life Seattle’s Chinatown during the Depression and chronicles the high price those desperate times exacted from an orphaned boy and the woman he believes is his mother. *Songs of Willow Frost* is about innocence and the loss of it, about longing, about the power of remembered love.”—**Nancy Horan, author of *Loving Frank***

“Ford’s boundless compassion for the human spirit, in all its strengths and weaknesses, makes him one of our most unique and compelling storytellers.”—**Helen Simonson, author of *Major Pettigrew’s Last Stand***

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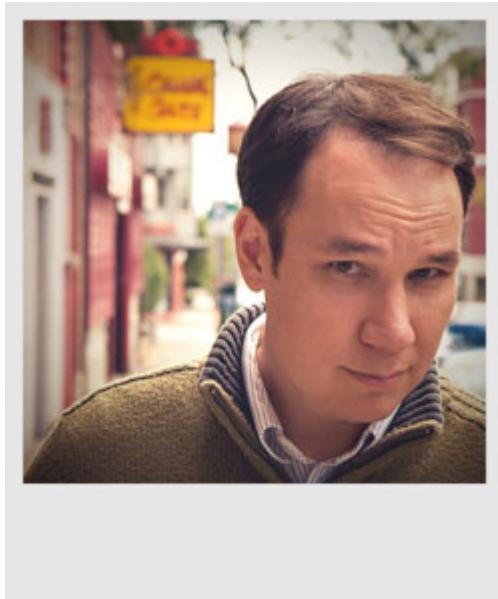
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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

A Talk with Jamie Ford, Author of *Songs of Willow Frost*



Your debut *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* sold over 1.3 million copies, was on the New York Times bestseller list for over two years, won the Asian Pacific American Award for Literature, and was even transformed into a popular stage play. Why do you think it resonated so deeply with readers across the country? Are there any particularly memorable or surprising reactions that you'd like to share?

At its core, *Hotel* is a love story—or actually a love-lost-and-then-found story, which I think everyone can relate to on some level. There's a reason why people try to lose 20 pounds before class reunions. There are just some people in our lives whom we love, and lose, and unfailingly long for. They orbit our hearts like Halley's Comet, crossing into our universe only once, or if we're lucky, twice in a lifetime.

Hotel also deals with race relations during an oft-forgotten period in US history. As a researcher and storyteller, I like turning over rocks and looking at the squishy things underneath. I think others do too.

As far as memorable reactions, here are three that immediately come to mind:

- 1) Being invited to the Minidoka Reunion (Minidoka was an internment camp outside Twin Falls, Idaho), where former internees had a karaoke night where they sang *Don't Fence Me In*.
- 2) Going to Norway and speaking to high school students who were assigned the book, which was surreal.
- 3) A sansei (third generation Japanese American) woman sharing that she had read the book to her mother, a former internee, while she'd been in hospice, and that the book was the first time they'd talked about "camp."

Hotel has been described as “a wartime-era Chinese-Japanese variation on Romeo and Juliet” (Seattle Times). In what ways is *Songs of Willow Frost* a different kind of love story, and why did you want to turn to this narrative next?

If I were to create a perfume, it would come in a cracked bottle and be called Abandonment. That's how *Songs of Willow Frost* opens. It's another love story—and while there are boy-meets-girl aspects to the tale, the real love story is about a mother and her son, and about how two people can be so close, yet so far away from each other, and ultimately so misunderstood. I don't think we ever really understand our parents until they're gone—at least that's been my experience. William experiences that loss, and it affects him profoundly. But then he has something many of us don't get—the opportunity to find his mother again, to see her through new eyes.

Willow breaks into the movie industry at a studio in Tacoma, WA. What was Washington's role in early American film? Does it still bear the footprint of that era?

Before the film industry coalesced in Southern California, there were viable studios in unusual places, like Minnesota, Idaho, and even Tacoma, WA., where H.C. Weaver Productions has long been forgotten.

Early in the research process I called the Washington Film Office, and they told me the first film shot in Washington State was *Tugboat Annie* (1933). I'd read about movie crews on Mt. Rainier around 1924, so I knew the film office information was off. I kept digging and found press clippings which led to the H.C. Weaver production stage, which at the time was the third-largest freestanding film space in America (the larger two were in Hollywood).

H.C. Weaver produced three films, *Hearts and Fists* (1926), *Eyes of the Totem* (1927), and *The Heart of the Yukon* (1927). These silent films were tied up in distribution and unfortunately released when talkies were overtaking their silent predecessors. The studio closed its doors as the roaring 20s stopped roaring. The building was converted into an enormous dance hall, which burned to the ground in 1932. The films have all been lost, though the Tacoma Public Library has a wonderful collection of production shots by Gaston Lance, the studio's art director.

You have said that Liu Song/Willow is also an amalgamation of your own mother and Chinese grandmother. Are there particular real-life experiences that work their way into your story, and what was it like to write with them in mind?

I come from a family of big families. Both of my Chinese grandparents had more siblings than you could count on one hand, yet my father was an only child. The reason for that is because my Chinese grandmother had a backroom “procedure” that left her unable to bear more children.

And yet my grandmother was fierce. She was an alpha-female at a time where it was perhaps culturally and socially unacceptable, but in America, as a U.S. citizen, she could become something different. That said, as a Chinese woman, she was still minority within a minority, and unable to receive proper medical care.

My mom on the other hand was Caucasian. But she was dirt-poor—so poor that when she became pregnant with my oldest sister, she could only dream of giving birth in an actual hospital. That dream went unfulfilled, as her husband at the time gambled away the money she'd saved for the delivery. But, like my grandmother, she picked herself up after every setback, after every sacrifice.

There are elements of both of them in Willow—in the kinds of challenges she faces, and the determination with which she faces them, and survives.

What do you hope readers take away from *Songs of Willow Frost*?

I hope they're equally entertained and enlightened. I hope they value their time spent with Willow and William. And I hope they see growth in me as a writer. Is that too much to hope for? I mean, before the Beatles wrote *Abbey Road* they were singing, "She loves you, yeah-yeah-yeah."

We all have to start somewhere.

Users Review

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