

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom

by
Feng Jicai

Book Information

Feng Jicai, Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom
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Hua Xiayu, an innocent victim of Communist China's Cultural Revolution in the 1960's, faces humiliation, beatings, and finally a sentence of hard labor after being falsely accused of spreading anti-revolutionary ideas.

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Community Life, Politics; Countries/Regions, China; History, Nuclear Weapons

Main Characters

Cui Dajiao the driver for the porcelain factory

Hua Xiayu an artist who is sent to work in a rural porcelain factory and is believed to be a counter-revolutionary

Jet a black dog who becomes Hua's only friend

Luo Changgui a potter at the porcelain factory under whom Hua works

Luo Jiaju a member of the Luo family who orders Hua's punishment

Luo Junjun the young woman whom Hua loves and marries

Qin Laowu the leader of Hua's work group at the rock quarry

Vocabulary

dossier a file that contains detailed reports about an individual

flabbergasted amazed or astounded

maelstrom a storm or a situation that seems to be spinning out of control

stigma a sign of disgrace

surreptitiously done in a secretive manner

Synopsis

The title of this book, *Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom*, comes from a statement made in 1956 by Chairman Mao, leader of the Chinese Communist Party. In this comment, he was inviting open discussion and criticism of Communism. Shortly after, however, the Communists brutally oppressed those who had voiced opinions opposing their ideals. The book reveals the story of a man who suffers years of hardship because of speaking a few words of doubt about Party politics.

The prologue opens with the author of the book traveling at night on a sleeper car of a train in China. He is alone in his compartment and is enjoying his privacy. Soon, though, the author is disappointed when the train makes a stop at a station and a dirty and ragged man enters the compartment. The man is carrying a large cardboard box and acts suspiciously in trying to hide it and its contents from the author. He speaks softly into the box and covers it with a blanket. Driven by curiosity, the author asks the man about the contents of the box. The man recognizes the author as a well-known writer and begins to tell his story.

The man, Hua Xiayu, begins his story in the early 1960's when he had just graduated from the Beijing Academy of Fine Arts. He was acknowledged to be the best artist of his class and was expecting to receive a prestigious appointment and begin a promising career. Instead, to his astonishment, he is assigned to a rural porcelain factory. When he arrives at the factory, though, he finds that he loves the beauty and potential of the unfinished pottery waiting to be covered with beautiful colors and glazes. Hua quickly notices that everyone in the factory is cold and unfriendly to him and then realizes that they believe him to be a counter-revolutionary. He suffers from anxiety and depression as a result.

A black dog named Jet appears outside his room one day and, while he is at first afraid of the dog, they eventually forge a deep friendship. Later, Hua is introduced to a girl, Luo Junjun, a local art teacher who takes an interest in his work. They fall in love, but rumors of his political opposition reach Luo

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Junjun, and she has doubts about him. He assures her that he has not been opposing the system. She accepts his assurances and they marry.

The political mood of the country becomes increasingly intolerant, and workers at the factory begin to put up posters accusing Hua of being a Rightist. He continues to deny the allegations to Junjun, but tensions rise until the Red Guard brings both Hua and Junjun to the courtyard of the factory for an interrogation. Hoping to protect Junjun from punishment, he falsely admits to being guilty and claims to have lied to Junjun. She is furious and leaves him. Hua is kept at the factory and is punished daily. Eventually he is sent to do hard labor at a rock quarry until he is reformed. Hua believes the driver of the truck taking him there has run over and killed his dog, Jet, and this thought torments him. While at the quarry, Hua learns that his wife has had an abortion and wants a divorce. This news plunges him further into despair.

Hua discovers the genius of local artists during his wanderings in his free hours, and he becomes inspired to further his own work. In order to earn his way back to porcelain factory where he can test his new ideas, he works diligently at the quarry. He is then thought to be reformed and is allowed to return to the factory and resume his plate painting. He finds that Junjun does not love him, so he agrees to the divorce she had requested earlier.

Hua visits a former employee of the factory and is told that his dog is still alive. The driver of the truck had run over Jet's leg, but had not killed him. He searches for the dog for a long time and eventually finds him.

At this point in the story, Hua tells the author that the cardboard box he brought on the train contains his dog. He also tells the author that after only a few weeks back at the factory, Luo Jiaju, an important man at the factory who bore a grudge against him, had him taken from painting plates to working in the kiln. He claims that it was not really such a loss as he has learned much about the mysteries of glazing and firing. He realizes that while many people in his

life have intended him harm, he has actually benefited from much of their evil intentions. He then goes on to explain that a month earlier, a chance meeting with a girlfriend from the Academy revealed the source of the rumors that led to his downfall. He had unthinkingly expressed a few words of concern to her about the prevailing political climate. She had been sincerely concerned that his ideas might hinder him, so she had reported him. He does not hold any bitterness toward her though.

The train comes to a stop, and Hua prepares to get off the train. Before he does, the author peeks into the box to get a look at the Hua's faithful companion, Jet.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Hua finally tells the Scarlet Defenders that what is written on the posters is true. He says he has lied to them and to Junjun. Hua explains that while he knew this was not true he said it in order to spare Junjun any more punishment. What do you think would have happened to Hua and Junjun if Hua had not admitted these things?

No doubt Hua and Junjun would have been beaten and abused until Hua admitted his involvement with the counter revolutionaries. They may have beaten them to death if necessary. The Scarlet Defenders were not only punishing Hua but sending a message to the citizens of their town that any traitorous acts would be dealt with severely. They could not afford to be lenient with Hua and Junjun.

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Literary Analysis

The antagonist of a story is the character who creates conflict for the main character. Who is the antagonist of this story? What motivates him or her?

It may appear that Cui Dajiao is the antagonist since he is responsible for carrying out Hua's punishments. However, Luo Jiaju is actually the person who causes Hua the most trouble because he investigated Hua's dossier and orders the punishments that Hua receives. Luo Jiaju appears to have been motivated by jealousy. Hua is a very talented artist, and Junjun is in love with him. Both of these things seem to torment Luo Jiaju and cause him to treat Hua so harshly.

Inferential Comprehension

When Hua is late returning from his first trip into the countryside around the rock quarry, Qin Laowu voices his concern. Qin Laowu is concerned that Hua has tried to escape; he is more concerned that Hua might have committed suicide. What can you infer from this?

One could infer that suicide is considered a worse crime than escaping. It may have brought dishonor to those who had been given the responsibility of preventing the suicide of someone under their supervision.

Constructing Meaning

Before Luo Changgui dies, Hua asks him what makes his pottery seem so "alive." In response Luo Changgui tells Hua "vitality is in the hands" and he should never make his pottery completely smooth. He also says that the fingerprints of the artist that remain on the finished pottery are the "pottery's eyes." Hua is not quite sure what this means. Explain what you think Luo Changgui means by this.

This can be explained in various ways, but essentially it seems that Luo Changgui is implying it is the imperfections that gave the pottery character. The "eyes" of the pottery are the marks that an artist leaves on a piece that will reveal a little bit about who the artist is and how he or she sees the world.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Hua is persecuted for merely voicing his thoughts about the government. This may seem to a young reader in the United States to be unfathomable since freedom of speech is protected by the Bill of Rights. Have the students research the rights of citizens in Communist countries. Have them report on what they learned from their research and write a paper about how they think their own lives would be different if they lived in a Communist country.

Recognizing Cause and Effect China's Communist government and the actions of Chairman Mao have put a serious strain on the relationship between China and other countries, particularly the United States. Many people feel the United States should have no relationship with China because of the way the government has treated its citizens. Others believe the United States should give the government credit for trying to improve and a better relationship would benefit the economy and the citizens of the United States. Have the students research or invite a history teacher to discuss the history of the United States's relationship with China. Since this relationship is an important issue to the United States economy, have the students learn as much as they can about the issue through newspaper and magazine articles and have them debate whether the United States should have trade relations with China.

Recognizing Details Hua becomes fascinated by the personality and individuality of the art produced by the peasant artists. Give the students clay and instruct each to create a specific common object such as a cup or bowl. Then ask students to explain, in writing, how their art work reflects their personality.

Responding to Literature As the bond between Jet and Hua deepens, Jet becomes like a child to Hua. Hua takes him everywhere he goes. He speaks to Jet as he would a person. Hua even feels unsure whether he could go on living if Jet

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were to die. Ask the students if they have ever had such a strong bond to a pet. Ask them to share how they felt (or feel) about their pet. Students could even write a poem or short paper in honor of their pet or draw a picture of their pet.