

# THE GARDEN OF EMPRESS CASSIA

By Gabrielle Wang

**The Garden of Empress Cassia** is a deceptively simple little tale but one with a depth of insight into issues of ethnicity, identity, community, schoolyard society and individual expression. A melding of reality and fantasy enables the novel to carry the main character, and the readers, through the potential trials of being an Australian of Asian origin.

## Synopsis

Protagonist Mimi Lu suffers schoolyard taunts about her Chinese heritage. She is Australian born, wants to be known as Australian but is seen as Chinese. She is fond of art and drawing, however her herbalist father frowns upon such frivolous activity; he urges her to work hard to achieve A's for her schoolwork. Her new teacher quietly encourages her talent and gives her a box of *Empress Cassia* pastels, along with a warning to never let others use them. Mimi proceeds to chalk pictures upon the footpath outside her parents' shop front home. The magical pastels never wear out and the drawings are always the same – beautiful, sprawling, exotic Chinese gardens with embellishments of sage verse. Mimi's gardens become widely known and admired. A Chinese elder tells Mimi of the story behind Empress Cassia and the rare privilege of being granted the pastels and the gift to recreate the inspirational and healing garden of Empress Cassia. Through the gardens, joy and healing is miraculously brought to wounded locals. And Mimi's life is transformed as old prejudices are vanquished forever.

## Characterisation

A community is made up of a diversity of characters. Mimi's street is no different and all the various minor characters of inner-city Rumble Street do make up the fabric of Mimi's little world. Their roles in the story are central to the plot and themes of the novel: bitter old spinster, Mrs Sternhop; Mr Holes, a shabby young homeless man; Mr Honeybun, the amputee war veteran; Mrs Jacobs, the elderly widow searching for her lost wedding ring – all are characters with their own sad histories and missions. And there is Gemma, Annie's nasty antagonist and leader of the 'cool group' at school, a girl whose own sadness and ignorance affects her behaviour and clouds her perceptions of others. Against these folk, Dr and Mrs Lu represent traditional Chinese culture. Mimi seeks her place somewhere in between.

## Discussion Points

- The author is a third-generation Chinese Australian. This is her first book, written after her first visit to China on which she studied painting. To what extent might the novel reflect the author's own experience of growing up?
- What factors lead Mimi to rebel against her parents and spurn her Chinese heritage? (Chapter 1) Why is she rebelling against it all?
- Stories of magic and parallel worlds require a portal through which characters can move between the two worlds. What is the portal that allows access into the magical garden of Empress Cassia?
- In considering her mixed heritage, Mimi self-effacingly refers to herself as a 'banana' (p.11). What does she mean by this expression?
- None of Mimi's family entered the garden (p68-9). Yet people like bitter Mrs Sternhop got to experience its beauty and magical effects. What commonly characterised the people who entered the garden? Why were they admitted?
- The novel draws on the Chinese tradition of sage philosophy, of sprigs of wisdom to inspire and guide one through life. What has Mimi learned from the experience of the garden of Empress Cassia?

