

THE PEARL OF TIGER BAY

By Gabrielle Wang

The Pearl of Tiger Bay takes its protagonist to a small, moribund, coastal township that is left to wallow in the memory of its past glories. The town is personified in the form of an enigmatic recluse whose proprietorship of the local hotel not only recalls past prosperity but also holds promise for a future of renewed vigor and opportunity.

Synopsis

Annie Starr and her family move to Tiger Bay, the home of an old ancestor. She soon strikes up a friendship with Jin, son of the local café proprietor. He tells her about the town's locally famous recluse, Madame Olenka. Annie's curiosity is piqued, especially when a message from the elderly lady is delivered to her, beckoning Annie to visit her in the Pearl, Madame Olenka's now closed and dilapidated but once thriving and grand cliff-top hotel. It is a special privilege as the old lady has not spoken to anyone in thirty years. It seems a local councilor has designs on the old place and is trying to convince the authorities that Madame Olenka should be settled into an old person's home. The Pearl must be made viable again. The old lady, a former actor, seeks Annie's help in forming a children's theatre school to raise money for the refurbishment of the hotel, to prevent its demolition. She succeeds but not only is the hotel and Madame Olenka's place in it saved but old demons of the past, which have been haunting her and which led to the demise of the hotel and the old lady's reclusiveness, are exorcised.

Characterisation

The novel requires some suspension of disbelief; the circumstances of Madame Olenka's existence, her trust in an unfamiliar girl, the caricature depiction of Councilor Crookshank, the stereotypical Chinese grandmother of Jin, the puny local mayor, and the exotic impresario friend of Madame Olenka. Accepting this mix of credible players and stock characters, the novel presents an interesting insight into community and the diversity, place and motives of the different people within that community. It is through the eyes of an outsider – Annie – that an observation and understanding of the Pearl Bay characters – indeed, Pearl Bay itself – is formed.

Annie reminds Madame Olenka of her daughter Beatrice who tragically died many years before. She also sees in Annie a reflection of herself as an outsider moving into a small closed community who will have to find her own place among its people.

Discussion Points

- The title of the novel is ambiguous. What two features of Tiger Bay could it be referring to? Why is the word 'pearl' so appropriate? - consider the appearance and culture of a pearl.
- Some folk in the novel are 'stock characters'. What is a stock character? Who in the novel is a stock character? What purpose do they serve in a story?
- Could the action of the novel occur without the catalyst of Annie? Why is the device of an 'outsider' so important to the story?
- Madame Olenka personifies the town of Tiger Bay. The novel initially relates a little history of the fictitious place (p14-8). How does she represent the town? How does the existence of the Pearl Hotel mirror the life of Madame Olenka?
- Without using much description, the author paints a clear picture of the place through dialogue between characters, observation by characters and through brief phrases in the narrative. As in the case of Annie, what would you see on arrival at Tiger Bay?
- What are Councilor Crookshank's intentions? How is his son useful in his plans?
- Eldora, Madame Olenka's pet magpie, is unreal in its behaviour but necessary to the plot. Why?
- How does the novel offer insight into the assimilation of foreigners into a community?