

# Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016

Massachusetts Center for the Book

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Level III Honors Award

To the wonderful author of *Weedflower*, Cynthia Kadohata,

The floorboards creaked slightly as the carpet parted beneath my sneakers. My eyes scanned the shelves of the library cart. I stopped before a book titled *Weedflower*. What a strange name, I thought at the time; why not rose? Why not water lily? Why not something extravagantly beautiful? Why Weedflower? Picking up the book, expecting the story of a high school social outcast who lives the classic rags to riches story, I checked it out.

Contrary to my previous assumptions, *Weedflower* is a book about a young Japanese-American girl living through World War II. It indeed was a story of an outcast; except she was never quite to the "rags" nor did she ever achieve "riches". She simply became accepting. Weedflower from the beginning and Weedflower till the end, all that really changed was the light she saw herself and her world in.

I thought about it for some time, and it rose a nostalgic feeling in me; an emotion that I couldn't really pinpoint. Over a quarter of the book was about waiting for the inevitable doom of being taken from their home and precious flower farm. Like being glued to a chair that's in a room, being constantly filled with water. Then Bam! The day came. A day that almost seemed to be a dream; the kind that you would wake up from and only remember being frightened. Was she ever able to wake up from that dream? Has she ever stepped out of the camp even though her body has? The cliffhanger brought on these rhetorical questions.

Flip the pages of my own life story. On July, 22, 2008, at the age of seven, I took my first step on American soil. With absolutely no knowledge of the language other than the "head, shoulders, knees and toes" song, my father and I journeyed from a country on the opposite side of the globe to join my dear mother.

I expected so much out of this country. I expected so *much* yet I didn't know exactly what I was expecting; all I thought about was reuniting with my mother who left China when I was an infant. The excitement was slapped right in the face with reality when I realized on the second day that I could hardly talk to anyone. No one really talked to me; no one tried to get close, and I sympathize with Sumiko for that. I knew how it felt to be lonely. I know how it is when "everyone was looking at you" and when, "nobody was looking at you". I know the feeling when, "you didn't care about anything at all", and when "you were *just* about to cry over every little thing". I really went through some of the exact same situations Sumiko did.

I even remember in my first year of life in America, a neighbor's daughter was having a birthday party, and to my pleasant surprise I was invited. This was my first time! I was thrilled, putting on a nice dress and taking my favorite stuffed *Mashimaro* as a present, I rushed over, a smile from ear to ear pasted across my face. Just like Sumiko did. Knocking on the door, the girl's mother opened and kindly invited me in.

Not even a minute into walking in the house, the "birthday girl" spotted me. Of course, I knew how to say happy birthday; it was one of the first terms I learnt. My mouth opened to greet her when she cut me off. Right in front of me, in a clearly audible voice, she complained, "why did you invite her?!". At first I was dumbstruck, then I realized that *she* didn't invite me at all, her *mother* did. I went home after that, dejected, with the stuffed rabbit still in my hand. And I cried. Just like Sumiko did.

These small connections, like little stepping stones, really help me walk in the shoes of Sumiko. I saw her troubles; I saw her joy; I saw her pain. However, what this book really changed about me was the way I see myself. I'm a strong-willed person; the one friend that you have who seems like nothing can really discourage their self-confidence; the one that says "I'm comfortable in my own shoes". I am that friend. However, at the same time, I am also a liar. Spewing lies, non-stop, to my parents, to my friends, to all that I love and care about, without batting a lash – it's already became a natural response. I was such a truthful child but the sudden smack of reality that hit me since 7<sup>th</sup> grade changed me. I'm no longer the happy, girly, bubble of a person I used to be, because I lie to myself. I am that friend, but I am a liar.

They don't see it, but I *do* care about my appearance. I *do* care about what other people think; I *do* care about the way I act. I lie so much, that sometimes I forget that I'm living that lie I trapped myself in.

But this book, this work of art suddenly made something snap. "Weedflower", why "Weedflower"? Its' so simple yet beautiful. The small beautiful things in life, like making friends and escaping "ultimate boredom". This is what makes humans so unique. Reading this story made me question, "Who am I lying for?". If I didn't want to live it, I don't have to; if I didn't want to pretend, I don't have to; such a simple resolution that took me so grueling long to come to. If I wanted to be cautious why pretend? If Sumiko could act the way she wanted in a camp that holds her hostage, why couldn't I stop pretending to be stronger than I really am in the "Land of the Free"? This is what this book revealed to me.

Being centerpiece of a wedding  
Is not what defines a successful life  
Be the quiet little life of a weed flower  
Thriving in the middle of a barren land  
It's *your* life  
You get only one of them  
Live it your way

Thank you for teaching me that.

Sincerely,

*Yanrui (Rena)*

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