



Bitter Creek: An Epic Poem

by Teow Lim Goh

Discussion Questions

1. Some events in history are hard to learn about or discuss. Some people think we should leave troubling events in the past, believing that focusing on past problems only serves to bring those disagreements into the present. Others think we need to learn about the difficult aspects of history so that we can also learn from them. Which approach do you prefer? Why?
2. Poets tend to use words very carefully and deliberately. In “Number One” (page 10), the coal mine is referred to as both “Mine Number One” and “Mine. Number One.” In “Town Hall” (p. 12), the mine owners are said to be living “in their gilt.” The miners end by saying, “Let’s go for broke.” How do these words help shape the way you read the story?
3. In Part III of “China Mary” (p.41), China Mary says, “Lady, this town / is not what any of us had imagined for ourselves / if you had asked us thirty years ago.” Has your life gone as you planned? Do you feel you can still work toward dreams you have not achieved?
4. The poems paint a vivid picture of the loneliness and pain of the Chinese immigrant lives. “Letter Home” (p. 15) includes the lines “I think about those years I spent shoveling snow and blasting rock. I kept praying a shard won’t shatter in my heart.” In “Letter Home” (p. 81), the letter writer says, “I never/ saw them grow up./ I want to go home.” What sacrifices are you willing to make as you look at the needs of your family or the dreams you have?
5. Teow Lim Goh says that seven of the poems are composed entirely from found text. Were you already familiar with this type of poetry? Do you think it is effective in creating the mood and message of the poetry in the book?



Torrey House Press
WILD WORDS. WILD PLACES.

6. Teow Lim Goh criticizes Craig Storti's history book *The Incident at Bitter Creek* as problematic because it characterizes the massacre as "having little to do with race prejudice or immigration policy" and frames the massacre as one part of the labor issues during the industrial era. Teow Lim Goh sees racial prejudice. Which explanation makes the most sense to you? Do you think Teow Lim Goh and Craig Storti can both be correct?
7. Teow Lim Goh said she wanted to consider multiple perspectives when writing this book. Do you think she has been fair to the various perspectives of different groups of people? Did she help you to understand why different people acted as they did?
8. The question at the heart of the book is: What brings people to commit atrocious acts? What are your thoughts on that question?
9. Do you see similarities and differences with the ethnic prejudices and immigration issues we face today? Did this book cause you to look differently at any of those issues?



Activity Ideas

1. Visit Rock Springs, WY, to learn more on site.
 - a. There is a [permanent exhibit](#) in the Historical Museum and [memorial at the site](#) of the former Chinese settlement area.
2. Watch *Massacre at Hells Canyon*, a twenty-seven-minute documentary about the massacre of Chinese miners in Oregon.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zx6Lzw6LoL0>
3. Prejudice against Asian Americans continued and helped lead to the internment of Japanese Americans in camps during World War II. Visit one of the memorials sharing this history:

[Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial](#) (Washington State)

[Manzanar War Relocation Center](#) (California)

[Heart Mountain Relocation Center](#) (Wyoming)

[Fort Missoula Alien Detention Center](#) (Montana)

[Minidoka National Historic Site](#) (Idaho)

[Topaz Japanese American Internment Camp](#) (Utah)