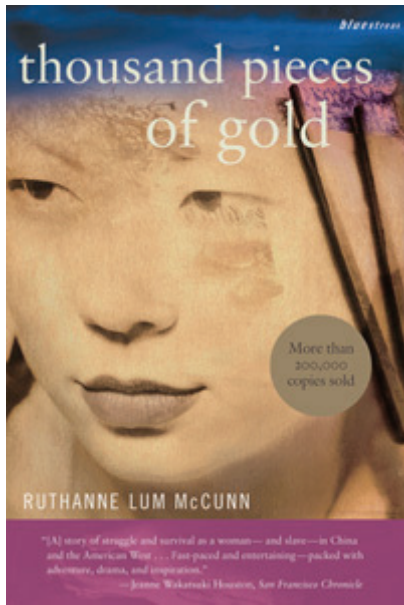




Beacon Press Readers' Guide

Thousand Pieces of Gold Ruthanne Lum McCunn

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INTRODUCTION

Thousand Pieces of Gold tells the extraordinary story of Lalu Nathoy, later known as Polly Bemis. Her father calls his thirteen-year-old daughter his "thousand pieces of gold," but when famine strikes northern China in 1871, he is forced to sell her. Lalu is first sold to a brothel and then to a slave merchant bound for America, before being auctioned to a saloonkeeper, and finally offered as a prize in a poker game. A few fictitious characters have been added and certain events transposed for the sake of the narrative, but the essential story of Polly's life remains accurate. A biographical novel, *Thousand Pieces of Gold* is about the life of a remarkable woman and her struggle for respect and dignity in the early American West. It's a moving and inspirational read.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RuthAnne Lum McCunn, a Eurasian of Chinese and Scottish descent, has published seven books on the experiences of Chinese people in America. Among these highly acclaimed works are *Sole Survivor: A Story of Record Endurance at Sea*; *Chinese American Portraits: Personal Histories 1828-1988* and her most recent, *Wooden Fish Songs*. Her award-winning books have been translated into eight languages. A former teacher, she currently resides in San Francisco and lectures extensively at universities and community organizations.

IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In Chapter 8, Ding says to Lalu, "Don't you understand, you cannot escape your fate?"(p.77). How does this book embody the debate on predestination vs. determining one's own future?

2. Discuss the various meanings behind the title, "Thousand Pieces of Gold." Do you think it is an appropriate title for this book?
3. Do you think the author presents a realistic portrait of race relations in a small, yet polarized American community? How about the role of women in a largely male community? Discuss how you think it feels to be a minority in a similar situation.
4. "For the Gold Mountains they had described was not the America she would know. This: the dingy basement room, the blank faces of women and girls stripped of hope, the splintered boards beneath her feet, the auction block. This was her America." (p.102). This small passage touches upon the idea of the 'American Dream' and how reality is often very different than immigrants imagined it to be. Do you think immigrants still experience these same feelings in America today? Describe your own personal experiences.
5. During the course of the book did you ever think Lalu fit into the role of a 'China doll'? If so, when does her status start to change and what events contribute to her eventual liberation?
6. Charlie speaks of the limitations Lalu will have as a Chinese person living in 19th century America. Besides her decision to not have children, in what other ways does Lalu show that she is aware of these limitations?
7. To what degree does Lalu loosen her ties with her Chinese background? Mention some examples from the book.
8. Does Jim's concern for Lalu match the brief relationship she had with the bandit Ding? How do the two relationships differ?
9. Lalu is told by Charlie that a Chinese person in America cannot own land. Considering Lalu's love of farming and land, does she ever accept this concept? Give examples of her defiance and perseverance.
10. Is Charlie's and Lalu's relationship similar in some ways to the one Lalu formed with her father when she worked in the fields of northern China?
11. "And when you became of age, your mistress would have found you a good husband, and you would have been free again. Now you are neither snake nor dragon. You are a woman, yet you work like a man, a laborer. Who will marry you?" (p.356). Discuss the daily discrimination Lalu faced in China and how it differed from the discrimination she faced in America.

PRAISE FOR *THOUSAND PIECES OF GOLD*

"[A] story of struggle and survival as a woman-and slave- in China and the American West...Fast-paced and entertaining-packed with adventure, drama, and inspiration."

—Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"RuthAnne Lum McCunn has woven an enthralling work of fiction from the true-life story of Lalu Nathoy."

—Elena Brunet, *Los Angeles Times*

"A valuable book that gives Chinese Americans another true heroine."

—Maxine Hong Kingston

"Lalu is a living, vital person from page one until her death...[She] emerges as a person of dignity, intelligence, devotion, even humor. Author McCunn has given me a friend I'll never forget."

—Anne Alexander, *Peninsula Times Tribune*

"From Shanghai to San Francisco, Lalu Nathoy's courageous journey is an important contribution to the history of pioneer women."

—*Ms. Magazine*