

2011 AATF BOOK CLUB *L'INGRATITUDE* BY YING CHEN

Novelist and poet Ying Chen was born in Shanghai but came to McGill University to study creative writing in the late 1980s. Her short novel *L'ingratitude* (Montreal: Babel, 1995) reveals a style that is at once accessible and poetic. The novel deals with a 25-year-old Chinese woman who has been living under her mother's strict discipline her entire life. The story is a retrospective of the unnamed narrator's life as she awaits the arrival of Seigneur Nilou, the one who shepherds souls to the afterlife in her community's belief system. Simply put, the narrator is dead.

The opening scene occurs at her funeral, but the main thrust of the novel involves the events leading up to her planned suicide. The key word is "planned:" the narrator dies, but not how she—or the reader—expects.

L'ingratitude is interesting at several levels. It provides insight into a very conservative, non-Western culture, particularly as it relates to the role of women. Although the novel takes place in late twentieth-century China, one sees cultural expectations similar to those that were common to pre-twentieth-century Western literature (Madame de Lafayette or Flaubert). The Chen novel can open discussions of mores of earlier centuries. Chen goes into some detail as to the reasoning behind the mother's conservative stance while earlier writers often take these social norms as a given, needing no explanation.

The mother-daughter dynamics, even if set in a foreign culture, create a certain resonance for anyone trying to establish an identity separate from her (or his) parents, such as high school and college students. The novel opens the possibility for students to discuss or write about their own family relations, as well as their views of their community.

Finally, the novel provides an introduction to split timelines. Although most of the narrative covers the last few months of the narrator's life, it does alternate occasionally with the narrator's post mortem "present" as she vainly awaits Seigneur Nilou's arrival. The timeline of the novel is not confusing, but cues regarding the time setting of a specific chapter are sometimes less obvious than those in many English-language stories. The novel provides a good introduction to contemporary French narrative cues without forcing students out of their comfort zones.

Since the novel deals with the issues

of suicide and (to a considerably lesser degree) sexuality, high school teachers may wish to consider the appropriateness for their particular school. That said, *L'ingratitude* is no more problematic than works like *The Great Gatsby*, *The Scarlet Letter*, or *Brave New World*, which they may be reading in English class.

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