

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Breakaway

Grades 4 - 8

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1. Novel Summary

Eighteen-year-old Kwok-ken Wong faces many problems in 1932 Vancouver. He is a good soccer player, but anti-Chinese racism prevents him from joining the all-star team. He comes from a farm family that faces bleak prospects due to the Depression and the weather. Kwok's father hails from a tradition of farmers in Vancouver, but the entire industry is failing.

When Kwok fails to win a soccer scholarship to university, his mother takes extreme measures to raise his tuition. At the same time, Kwok's father calls him a fool for studying, because white employers don't hire Chinese. Chinatown has a trophy-winning soccer team, but Kwok's father moved his family away from the community and won't let him get involved there. Kwok and his father are always arguing. What path will Kwok take into his future?

Although Kwok is a Canadian-born Chinese, his life reflects the immigrant world of his parents. As such, the reader will find these themes of immigration in the story:

- Disappointment in homeland
- Not fitting in
- The importance of family
- Living in two worlds
- Trying to succeed
- Facing racism
- Different cultural practices

2. Author's Note

I wrote this book in honour of Vancouver's Chinese Soccer Team. I learned about this team in the 1970s, long after its winning days. I was impressed with the courage and sportsmanship of all the team members. I met Frank Wong, one of the team's members, when he was living in senior's housing. I believe the team played a key role in improving community morale during difficult times.

I was also curious about the Depression because the aunt who raised me had lived through those tough times. Consequently, I am very careful about saving and spending money. My aunt also had friends who farmed in Richmond, and I recall going to visit the farm as a child. The thing I most remember was this: the clouds of bugs in the air were so thick I was afraid to breathe.

This was my second time writing about soccer in fiction. In my first book, *Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter*, one of the stories involved this sport in the 1980s.

3. Background

- In the 1930's, Vancouver's Chinatown is the largest in Canada.
- Vancouver's Chinese population begins dropping because a 1923 federal law stops Chinese immigration into Canada.
- The law reflects powerful anti-Chinese racism existing in Canada at the time.
- Vancouver's Chinese Soccer Team did exist, and the team won many trophies. One player, Quene Yip, is honoured at the B.C. Sports Hall of Fame.
- In British Columbia, the Chinese work in many industries, including farming, mining, logging and fish-canning. As well, Vancouver's Chinatown generates a thriving internal economy.

4. The Craft of Writing

4.1 Setting

- 4.1.1 What three words would you choose to describe Kwok's family accurately? Give examples to support your choices.

4.1.2 How does the setting (Vancouver in the Depression 1930s) increase the drama around the novel's themes as listed below? Use Chapter 4 from *Saltwater City* to help you.

- (a) Knowing yourself
- (b) Take charge of your life
- (c) Individual and community

4.1.3 How do the story's scenes reinforce the novel's themes? Story scenes include a farm at the river's edge, a river, playing field, and the cafes and restaurants of Chinatown.

4.2 Character

4.2.1 What motivations drive Kwok's character? Why did Kwok finally play for the Chinese Soccer Team? How did playing in that game change Kwok?

4.2.2. When does Kwok feel good about himself? When does he feel bad? How are these feelings addressed at the end of the novel?

4.2.3. What is the function of Head Cook's character in this novel?

4.3 Conflict

4.3.1. What makes Kwok so angry? In the story, Kwok has no friends at school. Let's say you are his one friend. However, you are leaving town to study in Montreal. Write him a letter in which you try to help him become less angry. Are all of Kwok's problems caused by anti-Chinese racism?

4.4 Themes

4.4.1. How does the title of the novel reflect the themes of the novel?

5. Discussion Questions

5.1. The women in Kwok's family lead tough lives. What are the forces that cause this? How do the two women strive to improve things?

5.2. What is the similarity between what is happening at Kwok's family farm and what is happening in Vancouver's Chinese community at that time?

- 5.3. How does Kwok feel about being 'Canadian' and 'Chinese'? How are things different for Chinese teenagers in Canada today?
- 5.4. How does this novel treat sports teams, the role of individual players, and the communities that teams come from?
- 5.5. Some people say, "Like father, like son." What does this mean? Does this hold true for Kwok and his father?

Questions re: Immigration

- 5.6. Disappointment in homeland: How does Kwok's view of Canada differ from his father's view of Canada?
- 5.7. Not fitting in: In what ways are the problems facing Ying different from those facing Kwok?
- 5.8. The importance of family: How do Kwok's parents view the future of their children?
- 5.9. Living in two worlds: Kwok is a farmer, a soccer player, and a student. How are each of these roles part of both mainstream Canada and the Chinese community?
- 5.10. Trying to succeed. Show how each of the following persons had a different view of what 'success' meant:
 - a. Kwok
 - b. Kwok's father
 - c. Head Cook
- 5.11. Facing racism. In the early part of the novel, Kwok encounters several incidents of anti-Chinese racism. Why is it hard for him to fight back?
- 5.12. Different cultural practices. Ying is put into an 'arranged marriage,' one where the parents choose the spouse. Who benefits the most in Ying's marriage?

6. Activities

- 6.1. Research the models of automobiles available in 1932 that Phil Scott and Everett Drysdale may have driven. How are these cars different from today's automobiles?
- 6.2. Design a new soccer jersey for the Chinese Soccer Team that would make team members feel strong.

- 6.3. You are the sports reporter for Vancouver's major newspaper. After the Northwest Trophy match, you corner Kwok and interview him. What questions do you ask to get a good interview? Write the newspaper article, using quotes from your interview with Kwok.
- 6.4. You are Ying. Write a letter to your female cousin describing the situation with Dickson and your decision on him.
- 6.5. You are a newspaper reporter. The editor assigns you to write a feature article about Drysdale's golf course. Include quotes from Drysdale, Kwok's father and the mayor of the city.

7. Further Reading

Yee Paul, *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1988, revised 2006). Chapter 4 covers the Depression years.