Description: Late in 1938, Stephen Chan, a young Chinese man diagnosed with tuberculosis, travels to his grandfather's beach house in Tarumi, a small Japanese town, where he hopes the ocean air will aid in his recuperation....

The Samurai's Garden

by

Gail Tsukiyama

(New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1994)

Author:

Gail Tsukiyama was born in San Francisco to a Japanese father and a Chinese mother. Although she is primarily known for her novels, Tsukiyama's writing career began with poetry. While she attended San Francisco State University where she earned both a B.A. and an M.A. in English, Tsukiyama focused almost exclusively on poetry, winning the Academy of American Poets' Award. Since finishing her schooling, Tsukiyama has lectured part-time in creative writing and has written four novels. *Women of the Silk*, her first novel, was published in 1991; it tells the story of Pei, a young Chinese girl who is sold to work in the silk trade. *The Samurai's Garden*, Tsukiyama's second novel, was published in 1994; Tsukiyama followed her second novel with *Night of Many Dreams*, the story of two Chinese sisters, Joan and Emma, who grow up in a family with business interests in Japan. Most recently, in 1999 Tsukiyama published *The Language of the Threads*, a sequel to *Women of the Silk*.

Each of Tsukiyama's novels focuses on Asian cultures, a feature of her writing that can be explained by her heritage. More significantly, perhaps, her novels frequently address the interaction between different Asian cultures as well as the influence of Western culture on Asia. *The Samurai's Garden*, for instance, focuses on Stephen, a young Chinese man who is raised in a family that emphasizes the importance of the West; for this reason, he is exposed to Christianity and given a Christian name. When he travels to Japan, all three cultures meet with fascinating results. It is no accident that Tsukiyama's novels focus on the intersection of these three different cultures. Coming from a mixed Japanese and Chinese background and growing up in the United States, Japanese, Chinese, and American cultures all form Tsukiyama's background. In an interview with Elisabeth Sherwin, Tsukiyama claims that "Writing chose me. It came out of the need to learn about my heritage."

Tsukiyama also frequently takes up the issue of women's rights, particularly as they relate to Asian cultures. Both *Women of the Silk* and *The Language of the Threads*, for instance, address the issue of women who work in the silk trade.

The Samurai's Garden is somewhat of an exception here, as it focuses primarily on Matsu and Stephen; however, Sachi represents a strong female presence similar to the main characters in Tsukiyama's other novels.

Summary:

Late in 1938, Stephen Chan, a young Chinese man diagnosed with tuberculosis, travels to his grandfather's beach house in Tarumi, a small Japanese town, where he hopes the ocean air will aid in his recuperation. The first person to greet him in Tarumi is Matsu, an old Japanese man whose family has tended the beach house for decades. Although Stephen remembers Matsu as a quiet and even unfriendly man, the two quickly become close friends. When Matsu asks Stephen to accompany him to Yamaguchi, a small town in the nearby mountains, Stephen is quick to accept the offer. Stephen is unprepared, though, for what awaits him in Yamaguchi. As the two men approach, Stephen realizes that the village is a sanctuary for lepers. Even more shocking, though, is Sachi, Matsu's close friend whose hands and face have been destroyed by leprosy. Although Stephen is unsure at first how to react to Sachi, he soon learns to overlook the physical scarring to see the beautiful woman beneath.

After returning to Tarumi, Stephen meets and falls in love with a young Japanese woman named Keiko. Keiko is shy at first, but she soon comes to return Stephen's feelings. Despite their love for each other, though, there is an insurmountable wall between the two. During the year Stephen spends in Tarumi, the Japanese army marches across China, destroying lives and cities in the beginnings of World War II. While Stephen sees the absurdity of the war and the hatred between Japan and China, not everyone in Tarumi is so enlightened. Keiko's father in particular dislikes Stephen because he is Chinese; inevitably, this racial tension places a heavy strain on Stephen's relationship with Keiko.

Early in 1939, the village of Yamaguchi catches fire. Stephen and Matsu spend several weeks helping the people of Yamaguchi to rebuild their houses. The time spent working there allows Stephen's relationship with Sachi to develop further. As the two become closer, Sachi tells Stephen the story of her life. Sachi's life is one of pain and hardship. Before her illness, she was engaged to Kenjo, Matsu's best friend. The leprosy, though, disgraces Sachi; her culture demands that she kill herself to avoid disgracing her family. Although she rejects this demand, Sachi feels compelled to leave Tamuri forever. For her to return would be further to disgrace herself and her family. Only because of Matsu's help is she able to survive.

After a full year in Tamuri, Stephen leaves. Many of his questions remain unanswered. Although he loves Keiko, he knows that the conflict created by the war will keep them apart. The futures of Sachi and Matsu are unclear. Stephen recognizes that the two rely on each other, love each other, and need each other; he also knows that both are old, and he worries about what will happen when one of them dies. In the course of his journey, though, Stephen has learned much about life, and as the novel closes, he sits on the train, beginning his journey home, and starts to write what he has learned.

Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

Tsukiyama presents the novel as Stephen's journal. What effect does this have?

The Samurai's Garden takes the form of a journal written by a young man. By choosing to present the novel in this way, Tsukiyama rejects more traditional ways of telling stories. She does not allow herself the privilege of commenting on the actions of characters, nor does she as an author write as though she knows more about Stephen's mental processes than he himself does. Instead, everything is filtered through Stephen's mind; what we read are his thoughts, his perceptions, and his particular way of understanding the world around him. Tsukiyama achieves two main effects by writing the novel in this style. The most obvious effect is that we as readers accept Stephen's judgments even when they are incorrect. We experience this throughout the novel; for example, when Stephen first meets Matsu, he describes him as an old man who prefers to be alone and resents anyone who intrudes on his little world in Tarumi. As we learn in the rest of the novel, this is not a fair representation of Matsu, but because we see Matsu through Stephen's eyes, we tend to accept Stephen's judgments.

The second effect of Tsukiyama's choice to write the novel as Stephen's journal is somewhat more complicated. The purpose of any journal is to look back at events and record them, interpreting them in order to keep a record of growth and experience. The fact that Stephen keeps a journal indicates that he is aware that he is on a journey, both in the literal sense that he has traveled from China to Japan and in the figurative sense of a spiritual or emotional journey. Because he is so aware of being on a journey, he tends to interpret events as part of a process of growth and healing. When Stephen learns of Hiro's death, for instance, the memory of his leper friend causes Stephen to speculate about what death is and what it means. He writes in his journal "I tried to comprehend what it meant to die, to move on to an eternal sleep and never wake up again" (p. 165). What follows in the journal is an extended passage about what death means. While Stephen's thoughts are certainly natural -- anyone learning of the death of a friend naturally questions what death means -- the way in which he records his thoughts are not. Stephen's thoughts are *remembered* thoughts; in the process of writing down what he felt, Stephen interprets his thoughts, consciously recognizing that all of what he experiences is part of a journey towards an awareness of who he himself really is.

Why does Tsukiyama set the novel at the beginning of World War II?

The Samurai's Garden occurs during the years 1938 and 1939 when Japan was considered to be a significant military power. There seem to be two primary reasons why Tsukiyama chooses this particular year for her novel.

One of Tsukiyama's purposes in setting the novel during these years is to highlight the differences between the Chinese and the Japanese cultures. Perhaps the main conflict in the novel is Stephen's attempt to reconcile his own Chinese nationality with the Japanese culture in which he finds close friends in Matsu, Sachi, and Keiko. However, Tsukiyama's novel is directed to an English speaking audience, an audience that may not fully appreciate the vast difference between the Chinese and Japanese cultures. Too often, perhaps, the audience reading Tsukiyama's work tends to group all people from the countries near and around China under the category of "Asian," a grouping that *The Samurai's Garden* tries to contradict.. By setting the novel in 1938 and 1939 when Japan was invading and attempting to conquer China, Tsukiyama can use political events to parallel Stephen's personal journey into the differences between the two cultures.

Tsukiyama's other purpose in setting the novel in the late 1930's is to create difficulties in Stephen's ways of thinking. When the novel closes, Japan is still a significant military power. Stephen certainly has no idea that within five years, the United States would drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, thus effectively ending Japan's military capabilities. When Stephen leaves Japan at the end of the novel, China has been subjugated by the Japanese armies, and there seems to be no clear end to the conflict. Over and over, Stephen looks at his Japanese friends and wonders how his friendship will be affected by the political strife between Japan and China. His conclusion is that they will not be affected, that his love for Matsu, Sachi, and Keiko will continue despite the fact that his own country has been conquered by Japan. However, because of the time of the novel's setting and the fact that Stephen cannot know that his own country will survive the impending war, this is a hard decision. By setting the novel in 1938 and 1939, Tsukiyama is able to complicate Stephen's decision; his choice to maintain personal relationships with his Japanese friends is made from the position of one whose home has been destroyed by the Japanese, not from the perspective of a member of a country whose armies have been victorious in conquering the people whom he chooses to befriend.

What is the significance of the novel's timeframe?

The Samurai's Garden occurs over the course of a single year. It begins with the autumn of the year 1938, moves through winter, spring, and summer, and finally concludes in the autumn of 1939. Tsukiyama makes sure that readers recognize this changing timeframe in several ways; she uses the seasons as the chapter divisions for the book, she includes the date at the beginning of each year, and she frequently describes the weather conditions in and around Tarumi. Clearly, then, the changing seasons hold a great deal of importance for the novel.

In his final journal entry for the autumn of 1939, Stephen sums up the importance of the changing seasons. He writes that "Even if you walk the same road a hundred times, you'll find something different each time" (p. 210). With this statement Stephen recognizes that he is in fact walking the same road again. The autumn of 1938 found him embarking on a journey to a new place where he was unsure what to expect; the autumn of 1939 finds him once again setting out on a journey into the unexpected. The year, with its change from one season to the next, forms a continuous cycle; it is the road that Stephen walks over and

over. In the time period between 1938 and 1939, Stephen has learned that the difficulties created by international politics can be overcome through his relationships with individuals such as Matsu, Sachi, and Keiko; what he also learns is that learning itself is a process that will continue for as long as he walks the road from year to year. Although uncertain what he may face in the upcoming year, Stephen is sure of one thing -- that he will find something different but of no less value.

How does Tsukiyama comment on the mixing of different cultures in *The Samurai's Garden*?

Throughout *The Samurai's Garden*, it seems that different cultures simply are unable to join together. In Stephen's daily life, there numerous instances in which different groups of people are isolated from each other for what seem to be illogical and irrational reasons. The lepers of Yamaguchi, for instance, can not be a part of life in their own home villages and are forced to isolate themselves in the mountains even though their disease is rarely contagious. On a larger level, Stephen's experience in Tarumi reflects the larger political divisions between China and Japan. Because he is Chinese, Stephen frequently feels how different he is from those around him; when he and his father travel to Tokyo, both feel a certain animosity expressed towards themselves. The division between the Chinese people and the Japanese is even more clearly seen in Stephen's relationship with Keiko. Because her brother is killed in China, she must break off her relationship with Stephen. The political conflict between Japan and China has worked its way down even into Stephen's most intimate relationships.

Tsukiyama, though, is not entirely without hope that different cultures can meet peacefully. Throughout the novel, those individuals who live in isolation are frequently able to mediate between two different cultures. Matsu, for instance, lives in isolation throughout his life. In his youth, he was the quiet gardener who was known by very few people. In his adult life, he lives by himself in the beach house. Yet Matsu is able to connect with others who are isolated. He is the connection between the lepers in Yamaguchi and the village of Tarumi; similarly, he reaches out to Stephen, demonstrating that relationships between individuals need not always mirror relationships between political states. Stephen too acts as a mediator between individuals. For instance, he is instrumental in bringing Matsu and Sachi closer together over the course of his year in Tarumi. Although Stephen is ultimately unable to overcome the barrier between himself and Keiko, the final lesson that the war "is another life [that] will never have anything to do with [his relationship with Matsu]" (p. 211) demonstrates that he and Matsu both have learned that individuals working together can overcome the differences between their cultures.

What is the effect of the absence of parental figures in Stephen's life?

While both of Stephen's parents are alive, neither of the two seems to take an active part in his life. Stephen notes early in his journal that his father seems distant to him. He writes that "It seems the apartment he keeps in Japan is more his home than our family house in Hong Kong" (p. 4). The distance between Stephen and his father is even more evident when his father comes to visit him in Tarumi; the two often face awkward silences and are generally unable to find

anything in common. While Stephen's mother seems at first to be more interested in his life, there are hints that she too keeps her distance from her son. While she is concerned about his illness, for instance, it is the servant Ching -- not Stephen's mother -- who arranges for his trip to Tarumi and accompanies him on his journey.

The absence of strong parental figures in Stephen's life is essential to the lessons that he learns. Initially it accounts for his responses to both Matsu and Sachi; he reacts to them much as he might react to his parents. When he first arrives in Tarumi, Stephen thinks to himself that "he [Matsu] must be annoyed at my disturbing his tranquil world" (p. 9). Clearly, Stephen has no basis for making this judgment, yet his response is much like the one that we later see in his attitudes towards his own father. Stephen's relationship with Sachi begins in similar fashion. He worries when he first visits Sachi, telling her "I hope we're not disturbing you" (p. 27). Stephen reacts to both Matsu and Sachi, then, as he might to his own parents -- he respects them but fears that his presence disturbs them. As the novel progresses, though, Matsu and Sachi become true parental figures for Stephen. When Sachi tells him that he has become the child that she and Matsu lost, Stephen willingly and gladly accepts this role. Paradoxically, then, the absence of Stephen's birth parents both sets the initial tone for his relationships with Matsu and Sachi allows for them to become real parental figures for him. The parent-child relationship that develops between Stephen, Matsu, and Sachi is essential to Tsukiyama's purpose in the novel. Stephen's "adoption" by Matsu and Sachi reflects Tsukiyama's vision of different cultures mixing, for Stephen gives up the natural ties to his Chinese birth parents in favor of two Japanese "parents."

What is the significance of the novel's title?

The samurai, the ancient Japanese warrior class, were fierce warriors who remained loyal to their masters at all costs. While this class of warrior no longer exists, the memory of the samurai is present in the minds of the characters of Tsukiyama's novel. At first, the combination of the world of the samurai and that of the gardener seems strange; the valiant warriors seem to have little in common with the humble gardener. It is Sachi who first offers a clue as to the connection between the two. She looks at Matsu's garden and explains to Stephen that "Matsu once told me the bridge [in the garden] represented the samurai's difficult path from this world to the afterlife. When you reach the top of the bridge you can see your way to paradise" (p. 58). Sachi's words indicate that even the samurai needed a vision of hope, an afterlife to strive for.

Both Matsu and Sachi take on characteristics of the samurai, becoming warriors in their own ways. Matsu quietly carries on through the years remaining loyal to his friend Sachi (as well as to the rest of the lepers in Yamaguchi). Similarly Sachi demonstrates extreme courage in choosing to live with her leprosy; she realizes that Matsu is correct when he tells her that "it takes greater courage to live" (p. 139). For both of these modern samurai, gardens become a place of healing. After his friend Kenzo commits suicide, for instance, Matsu turns to his garden; Stephen recognizes that it is here that Matsu must turn for refuge and for strength. The garden represents a similar thing for Sachi, although her garden of stones is quite a different thing than Matsu's garden. She uses the stone

landscape as an expression of herself, finding beauty in stones that by themselves appear less than beautiful. In the arrangement of the stones, Sachi learns that beauty is found in odd places. She begins the process of accepting herself as a beautiful person despite the scars caused by leprosy. For her, as for Matsu, the garden offers a place of refuge, a place where she gains a vision of life as it should be -- in harmony with all other life forms. The samurai's garden of the title, then, refers to both Matsu's and Sachi's gardens. Both Matsu and Sachi are samurai of sorts, acting with great courage and bravery, and each turns to the garden as his or her place of refuge.

Why is art so important to Stephen?

One of Stephen's mechanisms for dealing with the confusion of the world around him is through art. Initially, art represents a point of conflict between Stephen and his father; his father sees art as "a time consuming hobby" (p. 6). Stephen's art, though, cannot be dismissed so easily, for it is a part of the way that he makes sense of the world. When Stephen arrives in Tarumi, one of the first things that he paints is Matsu's garden. He notes that "The more time I spend here, the easier it is to see there's something very seductive about what Matsu has created . . . There's a quiet beauty here I can only hope to capture on canvas" (p. 31). As Stephen begins to paint, the garden changes from being a confining place to being a thing of beauty. The process of painting, then, changes the way that Stephen sees the garden.

The Samurai's Garden is all about the ways that people perceive their surroundings. Each of the three main characters -- Matsu, Sachi, and Stephen -- has his or her own way of expressing the need to order the world around them. Through the act of gardening, Matsu and Sachi aid in the process of creating the external world. At one point, Stephen even compares the gardening to art; he writes that it is in the garden that Matsu "becomes the artist; adding and mixing colors" (p. 73). As they work to shape the plants and stones in their gardens, though, they themselves are changed. Sachi tells Stephen how Matsu's gardening helped her to see that "life is not just from within, it extends all around you whether you wish it to or not" (p. 43). Painting is Stephen's garden. As he paints that which surrounds him, he imposes order upon it. At the same time, though, the life of the landscapes that he paints acts on him, forcing him to change the way that he sees the world. The process of painting opens Stephen to the possibilities of change, making him able to learn from both Sachi and Matsu.

What does Stephen learn from the lepers in Yamaguchi?

When Matsu first asks Stephen to accompany him to Yamaguchi, the Village of the Lepers, Stephen is unsure how to react. In China, lepers had been treated badly; Stephen remembers how they "had always been feared and shunned . . . forced to live on the streets, left to beg or eat rats, while they simply rotted away" (p. 24). The first person in Yamaguchi who Stephen meets is Sachi, and while he is initially hesitant to open up to her, he quickly realizes that she is a person of beauty, both inner and outer. Over the year in Tamuri, Sachi becomes one of Stephen's closest friends as he learns to see past the physical scarring left by the leprosy.

While Stephen soon becomes friends with Sachi, he has little contact with the other lepers in the village until the April morning when he and Matsu walk to Yamaguchi only to find the village in flames. Although Matsu tells Stephen to return to Tarumi immediately, Stephen ignores this warning and stands with the lepers to fight the blaze. After the fire is finally put out, Stephen remains in Yamaguchi for several weeks, helping the villagers rebuild their houses. In the process, he comes to know many of the people of Yamaguchi, and just as with Sachi, Stephen quickly becomes friends with many of them. When the burned houses are finally restored after nearly two months of hard work, the village throws a huge celebration. Stephen, who less than a year earlier had nervously made his way through the streets of Yamaguchi unsure of how to respond to the lepers, declares that "The celebration was one of the best nights of my life" (p. 159). Clearly, Stephen has learned a great deal from the lepers.

When he walked with Matsu to Yamaguchi and saw the lepers for the very first time, he thought to himself that "It looked as if they were all wearing monstrous masks that I kept waiting for them to remove" (p. 25). What Stephen has learned through his relationship with Sachi and through the experience of fighting the fire that threatens to destroy Yamaguchi is that the lepers do, in fact, wear masks; he realizes that beneath the physical appearances lie real people who are no different from himself.

Further Reading:

James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. (1916)
The young artist Stephen Dedalus embarks on a spiritual and artistic journey in his hometown of London. Stylistically, *Portrait of the Artist* is quite different from *The Samurai's Garden*, yet in many ways, Joyce's classic novel addresses many of the same themes taken up by Gail Tsukiyama.

Shusaku Endo, *Deep River*. (1993)
In *Deep River*, Shusaku Endo presents a number of "cases," profiles of Japanese men and women who search for spirituality in a modern world. Through their journeys, Western Christianity, Japanese Buddhism, and Indian Hinduism collide, resulting in a startling yet beautiful vision of religious and social harmony.

Gail Tsukiyama, *Women of the Silk*. (1991)
Nine year old PEI is sold to the silk industry when her parents run into financial trouble. There she is taken care of by Auntie Yee, a woman who runs a girl's house for the young girls who belong to the silk industry. Through Pei's life, Tsukiyama explores the social and political changes that took place in China between the World Wars.

Yukio Mishima, *Runaway Horses*. (1969)
In this second book of Mishima's tetralogy, Isao, a young Japanese man, returns to the ancient tradition of the samurai. He forms a band of warriors, carries out the assassination of a high level Japanese businessman, and ends his life by committing seppuku -- the ritual suicide of the samurai. Mishima, like Tsukiyama, uses his novel to examine the tense political situation in Asia during the 1930's.

January, 2002

This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Devon Fisher, who holds an MA in English from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and is currently a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Samurai's Garden (Tsukiyama) - Discussion Questions

Discussion Questions

1. The title of the novel obviously alludes to Matsu's garden, but to whom else could the title refer as a "Samurai"? Why?

2. The garden acts as a center or core of the novel. All three central characters (Stephen, Matsu, and Sachi) find some sense of comfort in tending the garden. What are some of the metaphors for the garden and how are they worked out in the novel?

3. Loneliness, solitude, and isolation are all themes that permeate the novel throughout. How do the three central characters' approaches to these feelings vary, resemble each other, and evolve?

4. It appears as though Stephen and Sachi are somehow juxtaposed. How is this connection represented and developed?

5. How is the politically turbulent time at which *The Samurai's Garden* takes place approached in the novel? Is it a strongly political novel or does the world of Tamuri somehow defy and avoid the political turmoil of the era?

6. How is Stephen and Keiko's relationship represented? Examine it in relation to the courtships of the past—Kenzo and Sachi, as well as Matsu and Sachi.

7. As the novel progresses, Stephen stops longing to return to his home and in fact dreads having to leave Tamuri. What provokes this change of heart? Also, how does this sentiment affect the ending of the novel?
(*Questions issued by publisher.*)

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Discussion Questions

The Samurai's Garden

by Gail Tsukiyama

1. One of Gail Tsukiyama's talents is her ability to reveal a whole world and a culture though subtle details. This novel opens with a very graphic scene, in which Pei's mother gives birth to yet another daughter. How does this one scene introduce the dynamics in Pei's family-and thus a Chinese family-to its audience? What details are important and what larger issues do they signify?

2. The theme of the Chinese family remains in the foreground of the novel throughout. Once Pei arrives at the girls' house how does her own experience in her family compare to the other girls' experiences? Mei-li's family, for example?

3. Once Pei arrives at the girls' house she is struck by the fact that all the girls there look the same-same hairstyle, same clothes. How does this homogeneity affect Pei? For example, examine the scene where Pei looks at herself in the mirror for the first time after being dressed like the others.

4. What are the dynamics between the girls at the silk house? For example, how does Moi affect the girls? How do they regard Chen-Li?

5. On page 90, Lin's mother is described as having lost her "voice" after her husband's death. What implications does this statement have? How does it relate, for example, to Pei's later statement that her own family remained "silent"-meaning they never responded to Pei's letter, nor did they ever come to visit her.

6. Compare the hairdressing ceremony with the wedding ceremony of Lin's brother. How are they similar or different, and what do they symbolize?

7. What drives Pei to participate in the hairdressing ceremony and join "the sisterhood?"

8. What does the ending scene, with Pei leaving for a "new life" in Hong Kong, suggest? How does it affect the way you view the novel and Pei's progress?

The Samurai's Garden
by Gail Tsukiyama

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Gail Tsukiyama was born in San Francisco, California to a Chinese mother from Hong Kong and a Japanese father from Hawaii. She attended San Francisco State University where she received both her Bachelor of Arts Degree and a Master of Arts Degree in English with the emphasis in Creative Writing. Most of her college work was focused on poetry, and she was the recipient of the Academy of American Poets Award. A resident of the San Francisco Bay Area, she has been apart-time lecturer in Creative Writing at San Francisco State University, as well as a freelance book reviewer for the San Francisco Chronicle.

During 1997 to 1999, she sat as a judge for the Kiriyama Book Prize and is currently Book Review Editor for the online magazine The WaterBridge Review. In September of 2001, she was one of fifty authors chosen by the Library of Congress to participate in the first National Book Festival in Washington D.C. and has been guest speaker at the Hong Kong International Literary Festival and the Sydney Writers' Festival.

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Gail Tsukiyama

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Gail Tsukiyama

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