

A Penguin Readers Guide



Under Heaven

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“Because paths can and do fork, in ways no man or woman can ever truly grasp, for that is the way the world has been made.”

Ghostly voices howling on a desolate shore. An assassination attempt shrouded in betrayal and deceit. A staggering gift that brings with it deadly consequences. A vast empire teetering on the edge of civil war.

Under Heaven is the latest novel from Guy Gavriel Kay—the international award-winning author of *Tigana*, *Sailing to Sarantium*, and *Ysabel*—a truly epic story of adventure, intrigue, and romance that offers a fascinating interpretation of eighth-century China.

The great country of Kitai is enjoying a period of uneasy peace with its neighbours, a tenuous accord that is threatened by forces both within its borders and without. As these political and military forces quietly plot against each other, one man finds himself thrust into a dangerous world where honour and deadly intrigue turn on a sword's edge.

Shen Tai is observing a period of solitude in mourning for his father, a well-respected Kitan general, by the desolate shore of a distant lake. Tai has undertaken a monumental task: burying the bleached bones of thousands of fallen soldiers left behind following the devastating battles there. The course of Tai's life is forever changed by a savage attempt to kill him and an extravagant gift of 250 magnificent Sardinian horses, an astounding number of the longed-for Heavenly Horses. So large a number, in fact, that it can alter the balance of power at court.

This gift brings with it not only great influence but great responsibility and even greater danger, as Tai comes to the realization that he must leave behind his secluded life and return to the imperial city of Xinan. It is there that he will be drawn into an intricate web of court intrigue, family rivalry, and lost love, and where he will ultimately learn the true cost of destiny.

Tai is met on the road by Wei Song, a cool but deadly Kanlin Warrior, whom he hires to guard him, and by Sima Zian, a legendary lover of wine and women, and one of the most celebrated poets of his generation. When they near the glittering capital, welcomed and attacked in equal measure, Tai's sister, Li-Mei, finds herself on a very different but no less dangerous journey of her own. And in the imperial city, Tai's former lover, the courtesan Spring Rain, struggles to deal with her own changed life and to covertly protect him from the murderous power plays unfolding at the court of the Emperor.

At the end of their journeys, Tai and the others will learn how the paths of life can branch and converge in surprising and complex ways. ■

Q • Describe the genesis of *Under Heaven*. Were there any particular books or films that inspired or influenced the novel?

Under Heaven actually began as a Silk Road book. I was going to take a character from outside my slightly altered version of China and bring him there along those legendary routes to the East. But the more I read about the Tang Dynasty of the eighth century the more I found myself fascinated, and ultimately shifting, to a story grounded in that time and place. I read a huge number of books and articles, but the greatest inspiration actually came from the wonderful poetry of that era—Du Fu, Li Bai (the original Banished Immortal!), and others became integral to how I understood that world. ■

Q • What is your creative process in crafting an historical analogue like Kitai? Did you do extensive research into the history and literature of the Tang Dynasty in preparation? What do you feel are some of the most important differences between the fictional Kitai and the actual eighth-century China?

I usually read and correspond and sometimes travel for about a year to a year and a half before starting to write. The research is the ground upon which I build. I always feel an author needs to know *far* more than should actually get into the book—or you risk the dreaded “information dump,” where you are just showing off that you’ve done a bit of background reading. It needs to become, if at all possible, seamless and internalized. I shift from the real history to a slightly skewed one for many reasons. One is to avoid pretending I know what actual people thought and felt and said. Another is to allow me to sharpen the focus on the themes I want to explore. The ability to change events or chronology slightly adds to this and also increases suspense, even for those who *do* know the periods I’m working with. A third reason is to allow me to give full value to the actual beliefs of people at a given time. There are unquiet ghosts in the opening scenes of *Under Heaven* because the culture I am basing the story on absolutely believed in this. Using elements of the fantastic this way actually lets me (and the reader) get a little closer to a distant time and place. ■

- Q • When writing a novel of this size and scope, do you prefer to start with a detailed plot, or do you establish your characters first and then let the story grow organically? Were there any moments in writing the book when you were surprised by your own characters' actions?

I tend to go period, themes, characters, plot. That isn't a fixed rule, but it is a general pattern. I don't do outlines, so each novel is an adventure and an exploration for me. As such, I am often surprised by elements that come into the books. I'm not especially mystical about the writing process (steady work day after day will do more than inspiration will), but I do recognize how much of what happens in a creative work involves subconscious elements. ■

- Q • How does the challenge of choreographing a scene of high-court intrigue differ from that of an action-packed fight scene? Which do you find more rewarding as an author?

Interesting question. At times they are actually very similar. A duel of words with nuance rippling under the surface can be as intense as one with swords, and sometimes as deadly. I do have a strong preference for writing my action scenes in such a way that they are *also* moving character development forward. Sometimes through violent or dangerous encounters a writer can simultaneously push the reader's understanding of the figures in the book. We do reveal ourselves sometimes in moments of physical crisis. I tend to try to do more than one thing with a given scene. ■

- Q • You've enjoyed great critical and commercial success both here in Canada and internationally. Where do you see yourself in the CanLit landscape? Do you feel that your work has a Canadian sensibility even though it doesn't focus on more conventional themes of small-town life in the Maritimes or the Prairies?

I'm not personally inclined towards slotting artists. We are a categorizing species, I know, and we like to know where to put things in our minds (or on our bookshelves), but I think that often gets in the way of assessing the actual work. In some ways, I suppose one of the most Canadian aspects of my writing is my being open to the wider

world and to a long view of history, not assuming that my world is the one that matters. But the truth is, or so it seems to me, that Canadians are astonishingly diverse, and it may be a mistake to try to reduce us, or our artists, to a handful of themes, motifs, symbols. Having said that, I grew up in Winnipeg, and so I always say the harsh eternal winter in my first trilogy isn't actually based on Norse myths; it is hyper-realistic writing about my own childhood! ■

Q • In most bookstores, your work is usually shelved in the fantasy section. What are your thoughts on being labelled a fantasy author, and do you foresee a time when the new Guy Gavriel Kay novel is just that and not the new fantasy novel by Guy Gavriel Kay?

This links back to the previous question, doesn't it, as to categories? I have been really generously treated and received within the fantasy genre, with awards and thoughtful responses from academics teaching the books and critics discussing them. At the same time, especially here in Canada, the mainstream media have been good to me for a long time now (writing that sentence makes me feel old!). I have always taken the view, even as a reader long before I wrote my first novels, that worrying about where and how to slot a book can undermine the more important question, which should be, Is it good? I absolutely believe that the borders between genre and mainstream are being blurred today. Fantasy writers are being seen to be doing strong and important work, and writers tagged as mainstream, in Canada and elsewhere, are seeing the strength and potential in exploring elements of science fiction, the fantastic, even horror. I'm actually quite optimistic about this trend. This edition of *Under Heaven*—with a new cover, with these questions, and with a readers' guide—reflects a sense that the readership for the novel (and for my others) can transcend genre and categories. Penguin Canada and some of my other publishers worldwide have been committed to that, and I'm deeply appreciative. ■

Q • I'm sure that you get this question from your fans all the time, but what are you working on now, and what can we expect in the future from Guy Gavriel Kay?

I confess I fall on the “don't ask, don't tell” side of the author spectrum. Some writers like to tease and lure their readership with bits of

information about books in progress. I prefer to incubate a novel in silence as much as possible. That's part of letting the inner life of the story take shape. The more I talk about it, the more it seems as if the book will *harden* along whatever lines I'm talking about, and I don't want that to happen. I am always working, whether reading, corresponding with scholars, making notes, or actually sitting down to write. I prefer to eventually come forward, blinking in the bright lights, with as near to a finished book as I can, rather than announce what I think it'll be too far in advance. ■

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Under Heaven* is an epic novel with a plot that spans several cultures, covers thousands of kilometres, and features a large cast of characters from many social stations. What literary techniques does Guy Gavriel Kay use to not only bring this world to life but to balance so many elements? What are the challenges for a writer when he uses many different character viewpoints?
2. The author developed the world of Kitai to serve as a fictional analogue to persons and events from the Tang Dynasty of eighth-century China. Why might an author prefer this sort of shift? How do you think the story would differ had it been set in historical China using real people as major characters instead of in Kitai?
3. Following his father's death, Shen Tai sets aside his studies to observe a two-year mourning period at Kuala Nor, due to a legally enforced filial obligation. Likewise, his sister, Li-Mei, has no choice but to accept their older brother Liu's plan to have her sent "beyond all borders" as a diplomatic bride. Liu defends this as a major step in increasing their family's honour. The Beloved Companion, Wen Jian, helps make her cousin first minister. Discuss the ways in which family bonds can mean both strength and sacrifice in the novel.
4. Tai speaks of the way in which women are adept at "pursuing ... subtleties," prompting Spring Rain to reply that "women have no choice but to be this way if we want any kind of influence, or simply a little control of our own lives" (p. 118). To what extent do characters such as Spring Rain, Li-Mei, Wen Jian, and Wei Song pursue and display these subtleties? How accurate does this feel as a way for women to assert themselves in a historically

based novel? What literary devices does Kay use to draw attention to the “voice” and circumstances of women in Kitai?

5. Throughout the novel, there are encounters with elements that we might consider fantastic, but which were central beliefs in eighth-century China, such as the ghosts of Kuala Nor, a possible fox-spirit, and the shamans of the northern steppes. Discuss the role of the supernatural in the novel, and what effect belief in the supernatural has on the characters and their actions.
6. Life in Kitai is regulated by strictly observed systems of cultural etiquette and political or military hierarchy. What place does free will have in such a society, and how do characters like Tai, Sima Zian, or Spring Rain adhere to this or else circumvent these constraints to achieve some freedom?
7. Tai says, “The world can bring us gifts, or poison in a jewelled cup” (p. 368). These gifts can be as dramatic as a herd of peerless horses, or as small as a fresh lychee or a song sung for a particular listener, but each may bring with it implications and consequences. Discuss this quote and the repercussions of both giving and accepting gifts.
8. The main political crisis in the novel arises because two ambitious men are fighting for power in a time when the Emperor has grown indifferent to the duties of government. Does this seem to be an often-repeated pattern in history, where personal ambition and rivalry lead to great destruction? Can this be an example of how Kay’s imaginary Kitai offers insight into events in our own world? Are there other motifs in the novel that do this as well?
9. Sima Zian is a fascinating character in that his lifestyle reflects that of a modern-day rock star, and at the same time he is revered by many as a master poet and wise counsellor. When Tai and his brother confront each other at court, it takes the form of a duel of improvised verse. Discuss the place of poetry in Kitan society and its effect on the characters in the novel.