

The Incarnations Study Guide

The Incarnations by Susan Barker

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Plot Summary

The Incarnations is a gentle-fantasy novel by Susan Barker in which an unknown letter writer attempts to get Beijing taxi driver Wang Jun to recall his past lives, and realize he himself has been reincarnated. When the novel begins and Wang starts receiving letters, he believes he is being stalked. The letters claim the writer, an unknown woman, knows much about him. The police do not find the letters threatening or reflective of a stalker, so Wang is forced to rely on himself to figure out who the writer is. He is very protective of his life, especially his wife, Yida, and their daughter, Echo.

Wang, the son of a degenerate high-ranking party official, has strained relations with his father long after his mother's death while Wang was in college; and has strained relations with his stepmother, Lin Hong. It is because of this that Wang is all the more protective of his own family, meaning he is very concerned when the letters begin arriving. Each letter not only reveals the writer has been watching and following Wang, but knows many things about him.

Especially troubling to Wang is when the letters begin to explain that he has been reincarnated six times, with his present incarnation as Wang being the sixth. Wang does not believe any of this, and is thrown off even more when the letters begin describing his past lives, including that of a Red Guard teenage girl, a traitorous concubine, a gay young boy during a Mongolian siege, a 13-year old-female prostitute, and a captive taken by pirates. In each account, the souls of Wang and the writer lead to the other's downfall due to fate's circumstances beyond their control. In the present, the writer hopes that she and Wang will defy fate and finally be together.

Wang comes to suspect the letter writer as being a man named Zeng, with whom Wang had an illicit homosexual affair while both were in a psychiatric hospital. Wang urges Zeng to stay away from him, while Zeng's jealous and underage lover texts pictures of Wang and Zeng to Yida. This leads to the dissolution of Wang's marriage. Zeng denies any involvement with the letters. When they keep coming, Wang beats up Zeng and threatens more harm if Zeng persists. Still, the letters continue.

The letter writer reveals herself to be Shuxiang, the presumed-dead mother of Wang. Shuxiang writes again to Wang, revealing who she is and all that she knows. She even appears to Wang, but Wang does not consider her to be the letter writer. Instead, he blames Zeng once more. He goes to pick up Zeng in his taxicab, then crashes off a bridge to kill both himself and Zeng. At Wang's wake, Shuxiang introduces herself to Echo, and explains that Echo, too, is reincarnated. She then gives Echo a pack of letters which she tells Echo will make sense when she is older. Echo then sneaks over to a friend's house bearing those letters, and the letters written to her father, and begins to read them.



Chapters 1 – 6

Summary

Chapter 1, The First Letter – An unidentified unknown woman always records her dreams in journals. Her dreams range from the rise of Communism in China to the invasion of the Mongols. She also spends her days watching Wang, who drives a green and yellow Citroen taxi and lives at the Maizidian housing complex. She watches Wang Jun as he assists an elderly recycler named Old Pang, and then returns to work. The woman then asks Wang to bring her to Purple Bamboo Park, half-an-hour away. She reflects on Wang in his latest incarnation, realizes he must be wondering who he is, and what will become of Wang's marriage when she reappears in his life as his soulmate.

Chapter 2, Wang Jun – It is just prior to the 2008 Olympics. Wang, because of his job driving across the city, is able to see the city change as buildings rise and fall. Wang overhears often private and important parts of the lives of his passengers, who dismiss Wang as no one important. Passengers also often leave things behind, such as gloves, scarves, makeup, maps, guidebooks, documents, and so on. Wang only ever stole one thing left behind in his cab – a brand new kite he used to fly with his daughter, Echo. Wang wonders what the good of being moral is when no one else is moral.

Wang calls his wife, Yida, a pretty masseuse, to see how she is, for Wang dislikes her line of work. When Wang discovers a letter from the unknown woman, admitting to following him, he believes he is being stalked. The police say there is no clear evidence of this. Wang shows the letter to fellow driver Baldy Zhang, who finds it amusing. At home, Wang has sex with Yida, thinking of a line from the letter which says Yida only satisfies his need for flesh, and nothing else. Wang believes the writer is wrong, for he loves Yida.

Chapter 3, The Second Letter – The unknown woman calls herself the biographer of the past lives she and Wang have shared. She explains Wang was once a Jurchen, and once a Red Guard among other things. She explains she is writing this letter from Baldy Zhang's cab, and that she knows Wang lives in Building 16 at his complex. The unknown woman explains she has always found Wang attractive, for it is his soul she seeks and not his body. The unknown woman explains Wang is in his sixth incarnation, and that it is her duty to remind of his past, for his present knowledge means he is only one-sixth alive.

Chapter 4, Estrangements – In the morning, Yida is ill, so Wang begins preparing chicken soup for her. Wang considers the mysterious letter writer while he cooks, feeling as if his privacy has been violated. Yida requests Wang get Echo outside for a while. Wang agrees and brings Echo to the park. Wang invites his father and stepmother, Lin Hong, to the park as well. Wang's father, Hu, a wealthy government official, takes every chance to remind Wang of what a failure he is, for despite every opportunity, Wang has only become a taxi driver.



Hu, who has suffered a stroke, is now reliant on others for help. Because of this, Wang does his best to have some kind of a relationship with his father. He reflects on how his father attempted but failed to bring him into his own lifestyle of young prostitutes, drinking, clubs, and good-old-boys networks in business and politics. He also remembers how he and Lin Hong almost slept together, but have never spoken of it since.

At the park, Echo plays with a boy from school, and one of her boots goes missing. Monday morning, Wang finds the boot on his taxicab along with a new letter.

Chapter 5, The Third Letter – The unknown woman tells Wang that history is coming for him. She explains that she encounters other incarnations across Beijing all the time, such as the Empress Dowager Cixi as a Wangjing Station ticket attendant. Many of their kind, she explains, either go to their graves unknowing or are committed to insane asylums if they do know and cannot handle it. The unknown woman reveals she has devoted her existence in the present time to finding Wang once more, and is glad to have found him. The unknown woman reveals she and Wang are among those fated to live more than once, while most others simply die. The unknown woman urges Wang to let history in.

Chapter 6, Night Coming – It is the year 632 AD, in the Tang Dynasty.

Section I – Wang is a peasant boy named Bitter Root, whose mother has turned to the dark arts for want of money after her husband is killed by bandits. Bitter Root is 13 and so-named to trick demons into not eating him. He wanders the forest, hunting and gathering, and is often followed by his older, simple-minded sister, Brother Coming, so named to encourage the birth of a son. One day, Bitter Root sleeps with Brother Coming. They continue to sleep together. Brother Root becomes pregnant. Bitter Root's mother severs and embalms his genitals. Now a eunuch to be called Wu, Bitter Root is to be a gift to the Emperor Chang'an.

Section II – The unknown woman is born to Brother Coming. She is called many things, including She-Brat. She-Brat is told she is the product of incest and rape, and her grandmother cannot wait to be rid of her. At the age of 13, She-Brat is arranged in marriage with Young Master Huang of the Huang family in Goatherd Valley.

Section III – The Huang family is very wealthy, and She-Brat is amazed by the size of their home. She is welcomed by Master Huang and his wife. A maidservant named Duckweed shows She-Brat to her rooms where She-Brat is bathed. The next day, She-Brat is married to Young Master Huang, a cockerel. Later, Duckweed explains that She-Brat has been the spirit bride in a spirit wedding with the cockerel standing in for the many-years-dead Young Master Huang. She-Brat forces a confession from Duckweed about what comes next. She-Brat is to be ritually killed and buried with her husband. She-Brat then beats up Duckweed, steals her clothes, and escapes with the cockerel.

Section IV – She-Brat has no idea where she is headed, but arrives near the Tiltingsky Mountains by the Turnabout River. She-Brat, unable to deal with the pecking of the



cockerel, eats him for dinner. She-Brat encounters a caravan of merchants headed to Chang'an, and falls in with Merchant Fang. Fang forces She-Brat to sleep with him in exchange for passage. By the time She-Brat arrives in Chang'an, she is pregnant. The baby is born dead.

Section V – She-Brat is stunned by the size and scope of the city of Chang'an. There, she decides to find her father, Eunuch Wu. She is beaten at the Imperial Palace and sent away, for she does not have permission to approach.

Section VI – That night, She-Brat cannot find a safe place to stay. At last, she comes upon a candy apple seller to whom she says she will do anything for work.

Section VII – She-Brat is taken to work as a house of prostitution under Madame Plum Blossom, called Hummingbird Inn. There, she is given the name Night Coming because she has fire in her belly. Madame Plum Blossom trains She-Brat using the stable boy, instructing She-Brat on all the different ways of sexual relations. After three lessons, the stable boy begins to fall in love with She-Brat. Madame Plum Blossom warns She-Brat against falling in love.

Section VIII – She-Brat begins her work as a whore, working alongside Moonglow and Heavenly Lotus Flower, two other young prostitutes. As She-Brat comes into her own, she becomes a very popular whore and sleeps with hundreds of men. As she does, she begins to spread word of her search for her father.

Section IX – Eunuch Talent comes to see She-Brat. Talent reveals Wu is now head of the Department of Housekeeping of the Imperial Palace, is known as Eunuch Loyal One, and is a trusted confidante of Emperor Taizong. Talent agrees to tell Wu of She-Brat if She-Brat will sleep with him. She agrees, but is horrified to discover that eunuchs make love by physically abusing girls. Madame Plum Blossom tends to She-Brat's injuries.

Section X – Months go by, but Wu does not come. Saddened, She-Brat turns to drinking and depression. At last, Wu comes and She-Brat rushes out to meet him. Wu acknowledges She-Brat as his daughter, but says he can never love her like a daughter since he has imperial duties. He offers her one-thousand tael, a lifelong fortune, if she remains silent about being his daughter. He explains the story of Bitter Root and Brother Coming is bad for his reputation, and that he will only do that which serves the Emperor. Enraged, She-Brat grabs Wu's genitals, kept in a silver case on his belt, and throws them into a nearby well. Wu frantically tries to retrieve his case, only to slip and fall, dying in the well.

Section XI – She-Brat is charged with manslaughter and is forced to join a Daoist nunnery on Flowery Mountain, where she lives until the age of 45.



Analysis

When Susan Barker's novel *The Incarnations* begins, Wang is an unassuming taxi driver who is deeply committed to his wife and daughter given his own difficult relations with his father, stepmother, and dead biological mother. The letters Wang begins receiving – understandably disconcerting regardless as to the circumstances – deeply trouble Wang all the more because he believes the writer is stalking him, and thus may be stalking his family. Wang dislikes the idea that anyone is stalking him, or his wife and daughter, and so attempts to go to the police. The police find the letters strange but nonthreatening. Wang, therefore, has no one to rely on except himself – and the letter writer's promises to reveal the past.

Wang is primarily concerned with escaping from the stalking letter writer, while the writer is more concerned with bringing up the past. The past, she reveals, cannot be escaped. Without context, this is a menacing statement, but with the context of reincarnation, makes sense. Wang does not have the benefit of his yet, so the writer's approach is certainly disturbing. Nevertheless, the writer's contention that the past cannot be escaped becomes a predominant theme that will be found consistently through the course of the novel. The past cannot be escaped because a human life is made up of past events, actions, words, deeds, and situations; and the past cannot be escaped because Wang and the letter writer are both incarnations.

The letter writer herself notes that fate can both be cruel, and can mete out severe punishments for sins committed in each life. These become dual themes that work together with one another with each journey into the past. This is certainly the case of the first reincarnation account that the unknown woman relates to Wang, in which Wang has sex with his sister, bringing about the birth of the letter writer. Conceived in sin, the soul of father and daughter are fated to one another, and fated to reincarnation without ever truly coming to rest. Sins lead to severe punishments; and the fate of reincarnation is cruel, even from the start. Refusing to accept his own daughter for fear of his own reputation, She-Brat brings about the death of Wu by sending his jewel-encased genitals down a well.

While it is clear the idea of soul mates reflects on true love – and the idea that true love may defy all else becomes a running theme in the novel to which the letter writer aspires – it does not mean that there will be happy endings through reincarnations. This is made abundantly clear in the present. Instead of being together, the letter writer is forced to hint at the past to Wang, who in turn is terrified by the idea that he may have a stalker. The letter writer clearly can only reveal bits and pieces to Wang, or Wang will never believe her accounting of his past lives, or of the idea of reincarnation. Wang, however, is completely disturbed by the letters, and will not even give them the time of day. The reader is reminded of the fact that fate can be cruel.



Discussion Question 1

Why does the unknown woman choose to write letters to Wang rather than to speak to him in person, or reveal everything in one long letter? What is Wang's response to the first letters? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the unknown woman dwell so long on the idea of history? Why does she urge Wang to let history in, especially when it comes to the idea that the past cannot be escaped?

Discussion Question 3

How does Wang react to the idea that he, and others like the letter writer, are doomed to live more than once? What does Wang make of the entire situation? Why?

Vocabulary

eddied, laobaixing, perfunctory, incarnation, guffaw, procreate, mutilate, broach, compensated, beguilingly, pique, mimicry, vigorous, pulchritude, maladroit, palanquin, libidinous



Chapters 7 – 13

Summary

Chapter 7, Year of the Rat – It is New Year's Eve. Wang considers the story of She-Brat, and imagines it must be plagiarized. At home, Yida cleans out the apartment in the superstitious custom of cleansing the house of last year's dust. After fireworks, Wang and his family go to bed, but he cannot fall asleep.

Chapter 8, The Wedding Photo – Wang contemplates a photo of his father and mother on their wedding day, May 3, 1975. He remembers what he can about his biological mother, Shuxiang, including that she was very good at reading people, that she did not like people, was agoraphobic, smoked a lot of cigarettes, and drank all the time. He remembers his father being intimidating, a rising star in the Department of Agriculture, and disliked any emotion shared between mother and son. Over time, Wang remembers, Shuxiang's agoraphobia faded, and she did not care that her husband was having an affair with Lin Hong. Wang recalls how her mother eventually lost her mind, and he went on to care for her until she died of pneumonia contracted while swimming in the winter while Wang was away at boarding school.

Chapter 9, The Alley – It is now spring in Beijing. Preparations for the summer Olympics are now in earnest. There are many more Westerners around now, and the city is busier than ever. Wang shops for groceries on a list provided by Yida, and runs into Zeng Yan, who looks ill and works as a barber. Wang gets his hair cut, then heads out, knowing he will be back.

Chapter 10, Mindsickness – Wang remembers becoming depressed in college, leading to his father having to come to handle the situation. Wang recalls how angry his father was, and how his father quickly had him committed to a psychiatric clinic. He remembers it was there that he met Zeng, who had come to the city with dreams of pop stardom, only to end up a male prostitute and committed after burning down a shed in an alley while imagining an ex-boyfriend to be in it.

Chapter 11, The Watcher – Yida is now working nights at Dragonfly Massage, which upsets Wang because he knows what kind of men visit massage parlors after dark. Wang thinks about Zeng because Zeng is an important part of his past. When Wang tucks Echo in that night, she asks him to leave the light on because the Watcher scares her. This panics Wang. Echo says the Watcher is a ghost and that Wang used to be mad. Wang believes this must be Lin Hong telling such things to Echo.

Chapter 12 – The Fourth Letter – The unknown woman writes her first letter to Wang in ten days. She wonders if he remembers what it is like to die, to have his soul leave his body. The unknown woman explains their souls have never met in the Otherworld, but only on Earth as punishment for their sins against each other in which they bring about the other's downfall.



Chapter 13, Arise Slaves, Arise! – It is the year 1213 AD, in the Jin Dynasty. Wang and the unknown woman are currently two starving Jurchen boys fighting over a turnip in the city that has been stricken with famine and under siege by the Mongols. Wang calls himself Tiger, while the unknown woman calls herself Turnip. Tiger wins the fight but shares the turnip. They decide to work together to hunt down and eat a cat while others begin to cannibalize dead people. Tiger and Turnip become sexually active as time passes.

Finally one morning, the Mongols break through the city gates and begin to plunder and loot the city. Tiger and Turnip are put into slavery along with many other Jurchens to in order to civilize Mongol lands with their crafts, trades, and skills. Progress is slowed by the Gobi desert sands, heat, and not enough water. A massive sandstorm suddenly comes on. Tiger contends this is their chance to escape while the Mongols and everyone else hunker down. They run until the storm dies down. They are free, but now lost among the Singing Dunes. At last, they come to the Lake of the Crescent Moon where they drink water and eat bird eggs. While Tiger wants to journey on, Turnip wishes to remain at the lake. As Tiger attempts to leave, Turnip strangles him. Turnip then heads off into the desert to die.

Analysis

The letter writer's contention that the past cannot be escaped is once again explored through her next letters. Yet another one of Wang's past lives are recounted, where he is a young boy attempting to survive a Mongol siege. He and the writer, also a young boy, becomes thieves and lovers and as they attempt to avoid starvation, and later as they attempt to avoid being killed or ending up in slavery at the hands of the Mongols. Fate is indeed cruel based on the past sins of both souls, in which fate metes out cruel punishments. Only in the midst of terror do Tiger and Turnip find one another, but it is too late for them. Tiger ends up being strangled by Turnip, while Turnip then wanders out into the desert to die.

The past lives of Wang are not the only forms of history that catch up to him. His own personal history begin to unravel dramatically in this chapter. The death of his mother is explored in greater detail, while his poor relations with his father are expanded. These continue to lay the foundations for Wang's understandable and strident desire to protect his wife and daughter. The details of Wang's mother's death should be noted by the reader, for her symptoms of insanity and agoraphobia are strikingly similar to that of the letter writer: someone who does not wish to be seen (yet), and someone whom Wang believes might even be mentally dangerous.

Wang's own past – including what seems to be a nervous breakdown leading him to being committed – cannot be escaped. The letter writer's warning that the past cannot be escaped is illustrated in detail when Wang encounters Zeng again for the first time in years. Zeng is not doing well, but despite his ill-health, still seems to have some sort of a pull over Wang. As the reader will learn shortly, Wang and Zeng had a homosexual affair while Wang and Zeng were both psychiatric patients. It is a part of Wang's past he



had hoped to put behind him, and would not have to deal with again. However, the past has come back to haunt Wang in the form of Zeng.

In a sense, the rediscovery of Zeng from the past is its own form of reincarnation, so to speak. Uncovering the past – wanted or unwanted – is like living a part of one’s life over again. The reader can clearly tell that Wang is both appalled by and attraction to, and repelled by the presence of Zeng. Between the past being unable to be escaped, and this idea of a pseudo-reincarnation of who Wang was during his time at the psychiatric hospital – fate is a cruel thing. Wang has encountered a part of his past that he did not wish to remember, and must now deal with the consequences of it.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Wang consider that the story of She-Brat must be plagiarized? Why does he react so negatively to the latest letters he has received?

Discussion Question 2

How are the unknown letter writer and Wang reincarnated in the Jin Dynasty? How do their lives play out? Why?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways does Wang’s own past come back to haunt him in this section of the novel? Why does the past trouble Wang so much, especially with respect to the present?

Vocabulary

plagiarism, superstition, agoraphobia, recluse, opalescence, tolerance, quotas, indecipherable, stricken, famine, delirious



Chapters 14 – 18

Summary

Chapter 14, The Birthday Gift – Wang goes back to visit Zeng after 31 days. The two sleep together. Wang asks Zeng about the letters, Zeng denies any knowledge of them. As Wang returns to his apartment, he feels very guilty. Yida and Echo have been waiting with a birthday celebration surprise for him. After gifts and food, Wang is called by Lin Hong, who reveals Wang's father wants to see him. Wang reluctantly goes to see his father. His father gives him a hardback edition of *The Book of Odes*, which belonged to Wang's mother. Wang thanks his father, but cannot understand the gift or its meaning. He wonders if his father is getting sentimental in his old age.

Chapter 15, Sleeping Pills – Wang recalls the summer at the psychiatric clinic where he spent much time with Zeng. Wang remembers telling Zeng about Shuxiang telling him to ignore the lessons learned in school, as they are lessons designed to make Chinese students into sheep. Wang recalls how Zeng wanted to open a bar and live together, but that Wang resisted Zeng's sexual advances but ultimately gave in, blaming the conditions of the hospital for his sexual affair with Zeng. Wang recalls finally freezing Zeng out after the other patients began to condemn him for crimes against the state by having homosexual relations, to which Zeng called Wang a self-castrated eunuch, worried about what other people would think. Wang also remembers being released from the hospital and being told to avoid men like Zeng.

Chapter 16, The Torch – In the present, Wang reads over the letters he has received. Wang imagines that Zeng must have written the letters. That night, he believes he sees Zeng outside. On television, London protesters attempt to wrestle away the Olympic torch from the bearers, calling on China to free Tibet. A sandstorm sweeps across Beijing as Wang confronts Zeng. Zeng again denies knowledge of the letters or being outside of Wang's house. Wang tells Zeng to leave him alone or he will report Zeng to the police.

Chapter 17, The Fifth Letter – The unknown woman tells Wang that Yida is a reincarnate as well, formerly a flea though in her present life, still a parasite. Yida, the unknown woman explains, is full of cruelty and hate. Yida is quickening Wang's demise, it is argued. The unknown woman explains she is continuing to write Wang's biographies, but that the third has been the most difficult.

Chapter 18, Sixteen Concubines – It is 1542 AD, in the Ming Dynasty.

Section I – Wang is a 14-year-old girl named Concubine Bamboo. She is taken to the Forbidden City and the Imperial Palace.

Section II – It is at the Imperial Palace's gardens where the letter writer appears as Elder Sister Concubine Swallow. Many in the harem commit suicide, Swallow explains,



and blames it on brain fever. Bamboo has heard rumors that suicides come about because the Emperor does cruel things to girls with scalpels. Swallow dismisses this because to spend even one night with the Emperor is worth any suffering, she explains. She tells Bamboo to endure the pain.

Section III – In the baths, all the concubines speak of current events, believing the famines the kingdom faces are punishments from the gods for disapproval of Emperor Jiajing.

Section IV – Swallow has borne the Emperor three princesses and has her own chamber in the Palace of All Sunshine. Bamboo comes to see Swallow, asking her to implore the Emperor to spare her because she is too young to die. Swallow reveals her own scarred body, evidence of the Emperor's scalpels. Swallow promises to do what she can.

Section V – At lunch with the Emperor, Swallow suggests demoting Bamboo from concubine to maidservant because Bamboo is unworthy. That night, Swallow is called to the Leopard Room.

Section VI – Swallow arrives in the Leopard Room to find Bamboo naked on the Emperor's bed. The Emperor tells Bamboo that Swallow only wants her demoted because she is no longer attractive like Bamboo. The Emperor then proceeds to take Bamboo's virginity, afterwards whispering lines from The Book of Odes to her about how all evil comes from women. The Emperor tells Bamboo that Swallow's cheeks are too pale, so Bamboo uses her virginal blood to smear across Swallow's face. The Emperor then gives Bamboo a scalpel for more color to be drawn.

Section VII – Concubine Jasmine tends to Swallow, who is bandaged and confined to bed. Swallow finds Jasmine sexually enticing, but Jasmine explains she is not so inclined.

Section VIII – Eventually, Swallow is deemed well enough to return to the Palace of All Sunshine. Most of the other concubines are thrilled to have her back, and they welcome her. They reveal that, while having sex with Tranquility, Heavenly Orchid, Joyous Abundance, and Bamboo at the same time, the Emperor became convinced they were laughing at him, and ordered them all to commit suicide. Bamboo, it is revealed to Swallow, failed, and now is in the infirmary. Swallow wants to finish the job, but the others tell her not to, instead blaming the cruelty of the Emperor. It is also revealed that the Emperor is now drinking the menstrual blood of young girls to prolong his youth, with many bleeding to death as their blood is extracted. The other concubines are plotting to kill Emperor Jiajing as a result of his barbarity. Swallow joins up.

Section IX – Bamboo apologizes to Swallow for what she has done, and goes without food and clothing in the cold spring nights to prove her remorse. Swallow brings Bamboo inside to save her life, and the two make love and declare their love for one another.



Section X – Jasmine reveals to the other 15 conspiring concubines that she has secured an evening with the Emperor for all concubines at once after performing oral sex on him at lunch. The 16 plot to use the chance to carry out the murder, but are overheard by Bamboo. The others believe Bamboo to be a spy and want her killed. Jasmine intervenes, saying they will not have the blood of Bamboo on their hands, but will instead lock her up in a tea chest until after the assassination.

Section XI – The 16 concubines are locked in the Leopard Room with Emperor Jiajing. They entice him to lay on his bed with his eyes closed, then commit to tying him up and putting a noose around his neck. They begin to choke him, but Jiajing will not die. They realize they have tied the noose wrong, but by then, the Imperial Guards have broken into the room. They beat the girls horribly, leaving them barely alive. Bamboo has betrayed them.

Section XII – Swallow and the other concubines are executed before an audience of officials, nobles, and other elites. Bamboo is not troubled by the executions at all, for she is now Empress Bamboo.

Analysis

As the reader now learns in detail, Wang did indeed have a homosexual affair with Zeng. While Wang fights the attraction to Zeng, Zeng does his best to lure Wang back into a relationship of sorts. The past cannot be escaped, Barker continues to argue – and the past is manifested in the physical presence of Zeng. To Wang, it can only make sense that Zeng is the letter writer: no one else besides Zeng would know so much about him, his family, or would want to come between him and Yida. Wang directly confronts Zeng about the letters, but Zeng denies all knowledge of them. Wang is so adamant about Zeng leaving him alone that he threatens to report Zeng to the police if Zeng does not desist. Wang's family is no longer in danger so much as Wang's life with them. If Yida becomes aware of the affair, it would destroy the marriage.

No matter what Wang does, however, he cannot escape the past. What has happened has happened. The past can either be made peace with, or it can consume the present. Wang has attempted to make peace with the past and to let it go, but he believes Zeng is the reason why the past cannot be left in the past. Wang confuses the past of his own life with the past lives of himself in the letters that are being written by the unknown woman. Wang still believes they are one in the same – Zeng and the writer of the letters – and so Wang believes dealing with Zeng will deal with the past. But the past of the letters is not the past with Zeng.

Wang's own most recently revealed incarnation is that of a young concubine who sells out her fellow concubines to curry favor with the sadistic Emperor Jiajing. Fate can indeed be cruel, as Barker continues to argue. Wang and the letter writer have found themselves as concubines to a psychotic ruler, and because of their circumstances, turn against one another. Because Wang and the writer have been so cruel to one another in



past lives, they are again reincarnated in the 1540s in perilous times and a dangerous situation. Fate metes out severe punishments once more, here.

Yet again, Barker continues to push the thematic argument that reincarnation does not mean there will be happy endings. This comes by way of the other two related themes: fate can be cruel, and fate metes out severe punishments. It is apparent that in the 1540s, as well as 2008, reincarnation is not a happy thing for Wang or for the letter writer. Wang is convinced the letter writer is other than who she is; he does not accept reincarnation, and his antagonism toward Zeng is mounting toward violent. Meanwhile, the letter writer continues to desperately grab Wang's attention and to convince him of the truth of the past.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Wang continue to believe that Zeng is the writer of the letters? Do you believe that Zeng is the writer of the letters? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Bamboo betray Swallow and the other concubines? How is this in keeping with the theme that reincarnation does not always mean happy endings?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Wang and the letter writer continue to be born in situations in which they are more opposed to one another than for one another? How does the letter writer consider this idea while writing in the present? Why?

Vocabulary

depravity, systematically, mystified, mawkishness, physiognomist, inauspicious, immolated, solipsism, remorse, pallorous, incredulously, vociferously, regicidal, pandemonium



Chapters 19 – 24

Summary

Chapter 19, Retaliation – Wang considers going to the Public Security Bureau, but then decides he must solve his problems on his own. Wang is convinced he has read the story of Jianjing before in school because he remembers so much of it, and now considers the letter writer to be nothing more than a plagiarist. Wang burns the letters outside of Zeng's home while Zeng watches. Wang tells Zeng that if Zeng sends even one more letter, he will burn down Zeng's shop, and his life.

Chapter 20, Yida – Wang remembers returning home from the hospital to find his father out on business, and his stepmother at home to greet him, saying his homosexual liaison at the hospital is disgusting and that Wang can repeat his last year of college next year. Wang remembers saying he would not go back to college, going on to take his own apartment while fantasizing about Zeng, and deciding to become a taxi driver while walking through the city and seeing all the sights and sounds. Wang remembers first meeting Ma Yida as a girl who hailed his taxi after being fired from her job, and how they quickly hit it off. He also recalls how his father was glad to learn he was to be married to woman, even though he took the opportunity to make fun of Wang for driving a taxi, and to hit on Yida.

Chapter 21, The Sixth Letter – An earthquake shakes Beijing, awakening the unknown woman's superstitions, causing her to wonder if the gods are angry. The unknown woman also questions just how well Wang knows Yida. She goes on to reveal she has made an investigation into Yida by going to Dragonfly Massage and requesting time with Yida. While in session with Yida, she reveals, she offered Yida money to strip naked, which Yida accepted and began to exhibit herself in pornographic fashion. The unknown woman tells Wang his wife will betray him for money, and that his marriage is a sham.

Chapter 22, Sirens – Wang returns to his apartment to find it in disarray. Yida is smoking a cigarette and enraged. She shows him a photo on her cellphone of himself and Zeng. Wang denies a sexual affair, but Yida does not believe it. Wang then says Zeng came onto him, but that he pushed Zeng away. Yida still does not believe it, and reveals she has also read the letters. Wang denies he has written them. Yida throws them out the window. He begins shaking Yida as she demands he leave. He then kisses her, determined to show Yida who he really is.

Chapter 23, Ah Qin and the Sea – It is the year 1836 in the Qing Dynasty.

Section 1 – The letter writer is now a 10-year-old boy named Ah Qin who flees a group of whites from whom he has stolen, having kicked one of them in the shin. They are stopped by another white man with a limp named Tom who preaches Christianity. It is Wang in his fourth incarnation.



Section II – The preacher brings Qin to a British factory, saying this is how honest money is made. Tom is not only a preacher of Christianity, but a businessman and a writer. Tom seeks to learn more about Qin's people, the Tanka. He points out his wife and children in a photograph, then gives Qin some coins for the information Qin shares about the Tanka.

Section III – Qin is at home where his mother repairs fishing nets, while his sisters clean and mend clothing for sailors. When Qin's mother learns about how he has earned money, she spansks him, saying whites are their enemies.

Section IV – The Tanka people live in boats outside the walled city of Canton, for the Tanka are forbidden by law to build homes on the land. This does not bother Qin, because he does not feel trapped the way he does on land.

Section V – Qin recalls how his father's ducks, for which he made a living, all died of illness, leading his father to despair, take to opium, and later drown.

Section VI – Although Qin has gotten in trouble for talking to Tom, Qin intends to return to the British factory. Qin hears from the god of the sea that his destiny is to be at sea, though he will one day again see Tom.

Section VII – Qin goes to work as a fisherboy for five years for Fisherman Po. Qin falls for and marries a girl named Ah Moun, and the two take their own boat house. It is at this time that the Chinese Emperor sends his fleet against the British to fight against the opium trade, but the British navy smashes apart the Chinese boats. Ah Moun later gives birth to a deformed baby who dies shortly after birth. Ah Moun disappears from the boat and does not come back.

Section VIII – While out fishing, Po and Qin are boarded by pirates. The catch is stolen, the ship is torched, and Qin is beaten up. Instead of killing Qin, they take him aboard the pirate ship.

Section IX – Sixty pirates live on the ship, Scourge of the Celestial Seas, and are led by Chief Yang. The ship is primarily maintained and serviced by kidnapped fisherboys, impressed as slaves. Yang gets by based on the reputation of his grandfather, a now-dead and infamous pirate. A year passes. Qin works hard and receives little food. He contemplates suicide.

Section X – Tom is among the captives the pirates take one day, and force aboard the ship. Tom explains to Yang that they were caught in a bad storm, and need help returning to port. Tom offers to pay for the passage. Yang knows that to bring Tom and the others to pirates could be beneficial.

Section XI – Tom and his traveling companion and businessman, Jack, are forced to stay in cages outside in the cold of the night. Qin sneaks over to Tom to reveal himself. Qin explains that Tom saved his life once, and now the favor will be repaid.



Section XII – For defiant behavior, and in order to save Tom, Jack is killed. Tom continues to offer any amount of money in exchange for his freedom, but is denied.

Section XIII – Tom is taken to Hermit Crab Cove. That night, he manages to secure a gun, and kills Qin for having killed Jack, saying he must now bear the news of Jack's death to Jack's wife and children.

Chapter 24, Bruises – Back in the present, as Wang heads back to the taxi station after work, he goes past a crowd that has gathered around the scene of a 707 bus accident in which a boy has been hit. Wang tells Baldy Zhang about the situation with Yida, but denies cheating on her. Back at the apartment, Yida refuses to let Wang return. Echo is devastated by this. Wang promises her things will get better soon.

Analysis

That history comes for everyone – that the past cannot be escaped – continues to be a resounding theme in this section of the novel. Wang attempts to outdo the past – both his own, personal past, and (what he believes to be the plagiarized) past of the letters. Wang is continually haunted by the specter that is Zeng, believing he is continuing to write the letters. Wang's past fully arrives in his life when photos of Wang and Zeng together are sent to Yida, and when Yida actually reads the letters that Wang has received. Yida does not know whether Wang himself wrote the letters or not, but between them and the photographs, the situation is clear to her: she must leave Wang.

Wang's life is now in complete and total disarray. Everything he had been seeking to avoid he must now deal with – including the dissolution of his marriage and the destruction of his family. Wang holds Zeng wholly accountable for what has happened, so he makes his most violent threat yet against Zeng. Fate can indeed be cruel, Susan Barker argues, whether it is fate across time or fate in the present time. Despite the threats and destruction of Wang's marriage, the letters continue to come. This further enrages Wang, and begins to cause him to lose his grip on reality.

In the past itself, the souls of Wang and the unknown woman inhabit the bodies of different people of different races in a very difficult period of Chinese history. The closest thing to love between Wang and the unknown writer is when both seek to save the other's lives at different points. However, in Wang's desire to escape as Tom, he does not hesitate to kill the writer, believing her to have been his enemy rather than his true friend. Tom does not even know who Qin actually is, just as Wang does not actually know who the unknown letter writer is. Fate is indeed very cruel, and metes out severe punishments.

Drawing on sins from past lives, it is only clear that punishments in the present will be cruel – with Tom being a different race in a violent time and Wang simply have no idea about anything in his own difficult circumstances. Interestingly enough, Wang and the letter writer appear to be growing more distant than closer together as the centuries pass. This in turn serves as an ill-omen in the present time. If Wang and the letter writer



cannot recognize one another in one of their more recent incarnations, how will they ever again expect to recognize one another in the present?

Discussion Question 1

What finally becomes of Wang's marriage? How does this happen? How does Wang respond to the situation – especially toward Zeng? Why?

Discussion Question 2

The incarnation of the letter writer as Qin, and the incarnation of Wang as Tom, proves to be one of the most unhappy times in which their souls meet. Why is this so? What do you believe explains these circumstances?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Yida so quick to disbelieve Wang because of the letters? Do you believe Wang himself bears any fault for this situation as it has turned out? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

fantasizing, nostalgically, inoculation, barbarian, calamity



Chapters 25 – 30

Summary

Chapter 25, Liars – Wang stays with Baldy Zhang for the time being. Zhang is very messy and has an extensive porn collection. Wang goes to visit his father and Lin Hong. She reveals his father is getting worse and will soon need full-time care. Lin Hong is going to go into business for herself, she explains, doing something creative such as interior design. She is also willing to help Wang in the divorce he believes to be coming with Yida. Wang says he will not ever force his daughter away from Yida, but agrees with Lin Hong's suggestion that Echo may choose herself where she lives. Lin Hong goes on to explain that Wang's own mother did not originally die, but was sent to a psychiatric hospital for a year or so before escaping and then dying a week later. Lin Hong explains this was done to protect Wang from how mad his mother had become. Wang demands to see his mother's death certificate. It lists her name, age, etc., as well as the place and cause of her death – a town called Langxiang, where she died of hypothermia. Wang tells Lin Hong she is dead to him and to Echo now. Wang then confronts his father, but Lin Hong orders him out, threatening to call the police.

Chapter 26, Train Station – Wang and Echo go get a bite to eat. Echo looks sad and tired. Wang knows he looks worse. At work the next afternoon, Wang is stunned to find Zeng along his route at the train station. Wang cannot imagine how Zeng knows where he would be. Zeng explains he has been away for two days for his mother's funeral. Wang blames Zeng for the photos and for breaking up his marriage, but Zeng denies this. Zeng says that Wang's marriage was over before it began, that Wang is a homosexual in denial. Wang then attacks Zeng, punching him repeatedly and drawing blood. Passersby offer to call the police, but Zeng refuses, saying Wang is his friend and does not mean it. Wang leaves Zeng behind, leaving the station.

Chapter 27, The Fire – That night, a unknown woman appears at Zhang's door when Wang answers a knock. It is his mother, Shuxiang. She tells Wang to go see Yida and Echo before it is too late. She says "that man" is worse than Wang thought. Wang considers that he has just seen his mother's ghost. Wang rushes out and learns Yida and Echo are in the hospital, their apartment having caught on fire apparently from an electrical fault. Wang explains he knows who started the fire, and that it was not an accident. When Wang goes to pick up Zeng to talk to him in his cab, Zeng's underage boyfriend, Wu Fei, threatens to send more photos to Yida if Zeng is hurt. As Wang drives away, he believes he should have run over Wu Fei for sending the photos.

Chapter 28, The Anti-Capitalist School for Revolutionary Girls – It is 1966 in the People's Republic of China.

Section I – The unknown woman is now Yi Moon, and attends a class taught by Teacher Zhao about the evils suffered under the Nationalist regime. Zhao interviews a farmer named Po who suffered under the Nationalists. After school, Red Star, Long March,



Patriotic Hua, and their friends confront Yi Moon for not crying during Po's story. The girls pour pig's blood all over Yi Moon, accusing her of being a Rightist sympathizer.

Wang, in his current incarnation as Zhang Liya, leader of the Beijing No. 104 Middle School for Girls's detachment of the Communist Youth League, stops the scuffle. Because Liya's father is a high-ranking party official, the other girls go on their way. At home, Yi's mother tends to her soiled clothing. Yi skips school the next day. Yi and her mother have been very sad since her father was rounded up in a Rightist purge to fill a quota, so things are always tense when Yi's classmates pick on her.

When Liya visits that evening, both Yi and her mother are surprised. Liya urges Yi to return to school before things get worse for her. Liya brings Yi out for noodles, explaining they cannot be friends at school. That weekend, with her parents away, Liya invites Yi over to her house. The two girls bathe together, then Liya pulls out some old possessions belonging to her biological mother from the Nationalist era, including a dress and a love song from Hong Kong. Yi then teaches Liya to masturbate. Outside school, Liya and Yi spend as much time as possible together without arousing suspicion. They speak of rumors of a coming political storm.

Section II – On Monday at school, posters and banners have been placed everywhere calling for an education revolution, in which Headteacher Yang must be brought down, along with the existing school curriculum. Yi and the other girls all learn that all the teachers have been suspended from work. The students set to work creating posters and slogans denouncing their teachers. The girls all cut their hair short, led by Little Miao, a boyish girl. In July, the teachers are put on trial before their students, including Zhao. The students hurl false charges and accusations at Zhao for three hours, declaring her to be a Rightist, a Capitalist, and so on. The teachers are all called Ox Freaks and Snake Monsters and forced to parade around the school track. The students continue to shout lies against the teachers. Yi has no choice but to go along. Liya cautions Yi to always be careful, and reveals she has personally been protecting Yi and Yi's mother against threats.

The Smash the Four Olds Movement begins, in which the Red Guards take to destroying the Old Culture, the Old Society, the Old Education, and the Old Ways of Thinking. This occurs across the city and throughout the country. Teens take to the streets to lead the way, dragging out anticommunist suspects, and destroying anything that hints at times past, such as landscape paintings, vases, novels, and so on. At school, students begin to study Chairman Mao's Little Red Book in earnest. Many of the teachers commit suicide to escape their brutal punishments, such as Zhao.

It is not long before the hordes turn on Zhang Liya, for her father has been expelled from the party. Yi, caught up in events, outs Liya for having secret Nationalist possessions. The teen girls storm Liya's house to arrest her. In the winter, Yi apologizes to Liya for betraying her. Liya is in horrible condition, bruised and cut all over. Liya reveals her father has died, and now she wishes to commit suicide but does not have the strength or ability with broken fingers. Liya believes she deserves to die for the



cruelties she has done to others earlier in the Smash Movement. Yi agrees to slash Liya's wrists. Liya dies not long after. Yi then attempts suicide as well.

Chapter 29, Rebirth – Yi does not die. She is taken to a hospital, recovers, returns to school, and is then sent to Repair the Earth in the country to Three Ox Village near Langxiang, where local peasants are indoctrinated and Yi and other girls are forced to work in the fields. Yi begins sleeping with local Secretary Lin to encourage him to return her to Beijing under the traded name, Li Shuxiang.

Now 24, Shuxiang works a tea cart at a government building where she meets the man who will become Wang's father. They marry, and Shuxiang gives birth to Wang. While breastfeeding Wang one day, Shuxiang considers that Wang may be someone else behind his eyes. Some months later, Shuxiang realizes Liya is behind Wang's eyes. Years pass. Shuxiang does not remember her first breakdown, only the aftermath of it. It is then that Shuxiang does not recognize the woman staring back at her in the mirror. She, too, is someone else she realizes. When she escapes the hospital, she pretends to be dead to be free of Wang's father. She begins to remember who she is in her dreams, and begins to write these down. She then realizes who Wang is – her soulmate – and returns to Beijing once more to find Wang. She now speaks to Wang, asking if he is ready to see her again.

Chapter 30, The Wake – Lin Hong hosts a funeral wake for Wang, and is in a very good mood because of it. It is believed that Wang was driving at 140 kilometers per hour when his taxi crashed, but his death has been hushed up by Wang's father. Lin Hong is glad no one has taken the family of the dead passenger, Zeng, seriously, because Zeng was a male prostitute. Yida and Echo are heartbroken by all that has happened. Yida tells Wang's taxicab friends he was not a good man.

A gray-haired woman arrives. The old woman tells Echo she knew her father, and that she has been watching Echo very closely. The woman explains Echo has had many past lives, but in the present life, is her grandchild. She hands Echo a packet of letters, saying Echo will understand them when she is older. Echo goes and grabs the letters written to her father that have been left behind as well, then runs to her friend Xiu Xing's apartment to begin reading them.

Analysis

As the novel comes to a conclusion, Susan Barker's contention that the past cannot be avoided is once again made apparent. The letter writer turns out to be Wang's own mother, and her attempts to get back in touch with her son lead to disaster. Shuxiang is indeed the past not only for Wang in his present life, but is also the past for Wang in his previous lives. Shuxiang is his soulmate, but given difficult situations – including the current situation – the two cannot be together. Fate is indeed cruel, and the punishments fate has granted the souls of Wang and Shuxiang for their sins (beginning with Wang's incestuous relationship with his sister centuries before) cannot be overturned.



Although the past cannot be escaped, it is not the past lives of Wang that Wang is trying to escape, but his former life in the psychiatric hospital with Zhen that he seeks to escape. While Shuxiang believes fate can be defied, and true love can defy all odds, Wang is in a completely different world both mentally and emotionally. Wang has no real thoughts about soulmates, but has only thoughts about the destruction of his family. It is tragedy to Wang, and it is a tragedy caused by Zeng. Wang has finally had enough, and kills himself in order to kill Zeng.

When Shuxiang comes to Wang at Zhang's apartment, Wang still is not convinced of anything. He considers his mother to be a ghost. Tragically, Wang continues to persist in his belief that Zeng is the letter writer and the destroyer of his family. All evidence suggests this, with Wang not even seriously entertaining the idea that reincarnation may indeed be possible, and that the body of his mother may house his soulmate. Although Shuxiang has strived to outwit fate by letting Wang know the truth one step at a time, fate is not to be outdone. Fate cannot be changed. As a result, reincarnation does not mean there will be happy endings – or that there will be a chance to finally bring about a happy ending. However, that Shuxiang is now speaking to Echo means that there may indeed be better opportunities to convince Wang in whatever his future incarnation may be, for Echo could be a valuable ally.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Wang continue to persist in the belief that Zeng is the letter writer? What does this ultimately result in happening?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you believe Wang kills himself along with Zen? How does this affect Wang's family, and Shuxiang in particular? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe Shuxiang gives Echo the letters? Why is Echo so determined to read them?

Vocabulary

burden, physiotherapist, delusions, resurgence, incarcerated, placated, vigilant, unrepentant, vivacity, celebratory, lewdness



Characters

Wang

Wang Jun is a taxicab driver in Beijing, the husband of Yida, father of Echo, and the soulmate of the unknown woman (Shuxiang). Wang has had a difficult time since the death of his mother, Shuxiang, and has had a difficult relationship with his implacable father, Wang Hu, and his selfish stepmother, Lin Hong. Wang is all the more loving and protective of his own wife and daughter because of this.

When Wang begins to receive mysterious letters alluding to the fact that he is a reincarnated spirit, Wang believes he is being stalked by Zeng. While in a psychiatric hospital for a nervous breakdown during college, Wang had a homosexual affair with Zeng. Wang now believes Zeng is responsible for the letters, and threatens Zeng to leave him alone. Still, the letters keep coming. Zeng's lover sends compromising pictures of Wang and Zeng to Wang's wife, causing the dissolution of Wang's marriage.

When Shuxiang appears at Wang's door, he suspects her of being a ghost and so does not consider that she could have written the letters. Instead, Wang, beside himself, commits suicide to kill Zeng by driving off a bridge in revenge for the way his life has ended up. It becomes only the latest in a long line of Wang's incarnations, including an incestuous peasant-turned-eunuch, a concubine, a Mongol invasion survivor, an English businessman, and a teenage Communist girl.

The unknown woman/letter writer/Shuxiang

The unknown woman, later revealed to be Shuxiang, is the mother of Wang who has faked her own death in order to get away from her now ex-husband, Wang Hu. Shuxiang knows she is reincarnated, and knows Wang has also been reincarnated. In her past lives, Shuxiang has been the daughter of Wang's incestuous relationship, a concubine, a young boy who survives a Mongolian invasion, a peasant fisherman, and a teenage Communist revolutionary girl. She knows that her soul and Wang's soul are meant to be together forever, but their past sins compel fate to rebirth them into difficult and often dangerous circumstances.

In the present, Shuxiang does her best to convince Wang of the truth of his past and his own life, wanting him to recognize her soul and to defy the will of fate. No matter what Shuxiang does, however, Wang cannot be convinced, such is the tragedy of fate. As the novel ends, Shuxiang visits Echo to deliver more letters so that Echo may herself soon come to realize she is reincarnated as well.



Yida

Yida is the wife of Wang and the mother of Echo. A masseuse, Yida often goes beyond the normal boundaries of her practice to make extra money, such as having sexual relations with the men she massages. When Yida discovers that Wang has been with another man, she files for divorce and dissolves her marriage to Wang.

Echo

Echo is the eight year old daughter of Wang and Yida. Echo is perceptive and kind, and loves her father dearly. She is devastated when she learns her parents are to be divorced, and she is traumatized when her father dies.

As the novel ends, Echo meets her biological grandmother, Shuxiang, who delivers a packet of letters regarding reincarnation to her. Echo is herself a reincarnated soul, Shuxiang contends, and this will make sense as she gets older.

Zeng

Zeng Yan is a barber and the former homosexual lover of Wang while both were younger men. Having come to the city with dreams of pop stardom, Zeng turned to prostitution and was later committed to the same psychiatric hospital at which Wang found himself. There, Zeng enticed Wang into a homosexual relationship, which Wang later rejected. In the present, Zeng has an underage lover named Wu Fei, and attempts to seduce Wang once more. Wang mistakenly blames Zeng for the letters Wang receives, and when the letters continue to come, Wang becomes violent with Zeng. Ultimately, Wang drives his taxi off a bridge in order to kill both himself, and Zeng.

Wang Hu

Wang Hu is the father of Wang Jun, the former husband of Shuxiang, and the current husband of Lin Hong. Wang Hu was formerly a powerful and wealthy member of the Communist party and a secretary in agriculture. He was a hard-drinking, promiscuous, cruel, and implacable perfectionist who considers his son to be an absolute failure. Ill-health has forced Wang Hu into a submissive and passive role in life, however, leading to Wang Jun's attempt to reestablish a relationship of some kind with Wang Hu.

Lin Hong

Lin Hong is the stepmother of Wang Jun, and the current wife of Wang Hu. Lin Hong is selfish and narcissistic, but does her best to retain a superficially cordial relationship with Wang Jun. Lin Hong is not at all bothered by Wang Jun's death, and is more concerned about the family name, reputation, and wealth than by the actual death.



Baldy Zhang

Baldy Zhang is a friend of Wang's and a fellow taxicab driver. Baldy Zhang is so-named for his balding head. Zhang is friendly and takes Wang in when Wang is thrown out by Yida, but Wang is repulsed by Zhang's living conditions. Zhang is a slob, and the only orderly thing about him is his extensive pornography collection.

We Fei

Wu Fei is the underage male lover of Zeng. Wu Fei is intensely jealous of Wang and Zeng whenever they are together. In response to Wang's accusations, Wu Fei sends compromising photos of Wang and Zeng by text message to Yida to break up their marriage.

Fate

Fate is treated like a person in the novel, assuming almost human proportions in the way in which Shuxiang references it. She speaks about how fate doles out cruel punishments for past sins as though fate is a conscious judge of word and deed. She also speaks about how fate must be outwitted and defied as though it was a living, breathing, and intellectual being with limited rational capacities. By the end of the novel, Shuxiang realizes that fate has won the present battle, but resolves to continue on fighting against fate in the future by reaching out to Echo.



Symbols and Symbolism

Taxi

A green and yellow Citroen taxi is driven by Wang for a living and reflects his reincarnated state and fate. Just as numerous people inhabit Wang's cab on a daily basis, so too does Wang's soul inhabit numerous lives over the course of centuries. When Wang mistakenly blames Zeng for ruining his marriage and writing him the letters, Wang kills Zeng by crashing his taxi through a bridge, killing himself in the process.

First letter

The first letter Wang receives is a letter of vague introduction in which the unknown woman writing the letters briefly introduces herself. The letter reveals the writer has been watching Wang, and knows everything from where he lives to what his work is like. The letter wonders how Wang's life will be when the writer reappears in it. Wang is unnerved by the letter, and does not know what it implies. He worries it may mean he is being stalked.

Second letter

The second letter Wang receives involves a quick review of past lives, the idea of soulmates, and the idea that Wang is only living one-sixth of his life because he is unaware of the previous five. The letter demonstrates a greater awareness of Wang's life, his comings and goings, and denotes that it is the writer's duty to remind Wang of his previous lives. By this letter, Wang believes he is being stalked. He worries for the safety of his wife and daughter.

Third letter

The third letter Wang receives speaks broadly of history, and speaks of history in an almost threatening way. The letter writer explains that history is coming, and that history cannot be escaped. Wang does not entertain the idea of reincarnation, however, but does entertain the idea that someone from his past wants to hurt him.

Fourth letter

The fourth letter Wang receives speaks generally of fate, death, and souls. The writer wonders if Wang remembers what it is like to die, or to have his soul leave his body. The woman who writes the letters reveals that their souls have never met in the Otherworld, but only on Earth. This is due to punishment for their sins against one another in their previous lives.



Fifth letter

The fifth letter Wang receives is a tirade against Yida. Yida is bad, the writer explains as she compares Yida to a parasite. The writer explains that Yida is indeed a parasite, for in a previous life, she was a flea. This letter only serves to make Wang angry and causes him to double-down in defense of his wife.

Sixth letter

The sixth letter Wang receives is an indictment of Yida's wrongful behavior with evidence to support the assertion. Yida strips for money for the letter writer, arranging herself in sexually provocative and pornographic poses, meaning she has done such things – and more – before. The letter wounds Wang, but does not compel him to want to leave Yida.

The final letter

The final letter Wang receives is written by Shuxiang in which she reveals herself, reincarnation, and how she faked her own death. The letter is intended to finally bring about a uniting with Wang, but the letter backfires. Wang believes Zeng is torturing him with invented fantasies about one of the bleakest moments of his life – the death of his mother – and so Wang commits suicide in his quest to kill Zeng in revenge.

Photograph of Wang and Zeng

The photograph of Wang and Zeng symbolizes the end of his marriage to Yida. A photograph of Wang and Zeng sitting together, leaning against one another in a compromising way, is sent to Yida by Wu Fei. This is done as a threat against Wang, as a response for Wang's threats against Zeng, and to demonstrate the Wu Fei has the power of blackmail. Yida is horrified by the photograph, compelling her to seek divorce.

Packet of letters

A packet of letters written to Echo by Shuxiang is given to Echo by Shuxiang at Wang's funeral and represents the continuation of the theme of cycles in life continuing forever. The letters speak about reincarnation and similar things which Shuxiang tells Echo she will only really understand as she gets older. Echo leaves her father's funeral wake early in order to read not only these letters, but the letters written to her father that her mother did not throw out. The novel ends with Echo beginning the letters.



Settings

632 AD

632 AD is the year in which the souls of Wang and Shuxiang first appear on Earth. Shuxiang is born as the product of an incestuous relationship between Wang and his sister in a time when the vast majority of Chinese are peasants, and power is cradled in the hands of the ruling elite and the military. It is a dark and violent time in which superstitions and ghastly practices hold sway, such as Wang's mother being a witch and Shuxiang being prepared for a bridal sacrifice to marry a dead man.

1213 AD

1213 AD is the year in which the souls of Wang and Shuxiang appear as two young boys in a city besieged by the Mongols. The boys, Tiger and Turnip, become lovers and co-scavengers, scraping by to survive in a city that is being starved out. Impressed into slavery by the Mongols, Turnip and Tiger manage to escape into the desert, but Turnip kills Tiger for wanting to continue on beyond the oasis they find refuge in. Turnip then wanders out into the desert to die.

1542 AD

1542 AD is the year in which the souls of Wang and Shuxiang appear as two concubines in the court of Emperor Jiajing, with Wang appearing as the young Bamboo and Shuxiang as the twenty-something Swallow. The concubines of Jiajing's court have no rights beyond those given to them by Jiajing, and Jiajing – a psychotic ruler – not only has sex with his concubines, but uses a scalpel to carve them up. Bamboo and some of the other prostitutes decide to kill Jiajing to save the lives of other girls, but hoping to curry favor with Jiajing, Bamboo betrays them all.

1836 AD

1836 AD is the year in which the souls of Wang and Shuxiang appear as members of different classes and different races in a volatile period of Chinese history. Wang appears as Tom, an English businessman and preacher, while Shuxiang appears as a peasant fisherman. The opium trade leads to war between the English and the Chinese, during which time Shuxiang is impressed as a slave by pirates and is then killed by Tom for the murder of a fellow Englishman.



1966 AD

1966 AD is the year in which the souls of Wang and Shuxiang appear as two teenage girls in the midst of the Communist cultural revolution. Wang and Shuxiang become lovers as the Communists purge the country of those they do not deem to be radical enough. When things become especially violent, Shuxiang turns on Wang, and outs him to the other girls. He is arrested, beaten, and commits suicide, only to be reborn decades later as Wang.



Themes and Motifs

The past cannot be escaped

The past cannot be escaped, argues Susan Barker in her novel *The Incarnations*. One's history always catches up to one in the present in the novel. There are two kinds of such history: one's past lives, and one's personal past. Both matter tremendously in the novel.

The unknown woman who is writing the letters to Wang tells him that history is coming for him. In other words, history cannot be avoided. By this, the unknown woman means Wang's past lives –his various incarnations as a concubine, an Englishman in nineteenth century China, a peasant son of a witch, and so on. Wang is highly skeptical of the concept of reincarnation, believing instead that his own past is catching up to him. However, Wang is wrong.

The woman wishes to remind Wang of these various pasts for two primary reasons. First, she contends that she and Wang are soulmates. As such, they must be united in the present as they have failed to truly unite in their past lives. The letter writer is haunted by the fact that they have been unable to unite then, and hopes that in the present, they will be able to defy fate and unite. Secondly, the woman contends that Wang is only one-sixth alive because he does not know about his previous five incarnations. As such, he is not really living because he does not have the full knowledge of his past.

Wang's own past proves to be problematic for Wang. A homosexual liaison during his time spent in a psychiatric hospital causes Wang much distress, and his desire to suppress the event and hide it away is destroyed when Zeng reappears in the present. Wang's attempts to keep Zeng away do not work, for Wang mistakenly believes Zeng to be the letter writer. Zeng's underage lover exposes the affair between Wang and Zeng to Wang's wife. As such, Wang's past is not escaped, and his marriage is destroyed.

Fate can be cruel

Fate can be cruel, argues Susan Barker in her novel *The Incarnations*. Often, fate is considered to be something almost beautiful, allowing everything to work out alright in the end. However, this is not always the case, and certainly never the case in Barker's novel.

Each time Wang and Shuxiang are reborn, they are reborn in difficult circumstances. Even the summoning of Shuxiang's soul to begin with comes not as a matter of love, but incestuous rape. As father and daughter, Wang and Shuxiang still cannot unite – and Shuxiang helps bring about Wang's death. There is no happy ending here, or elsewhere.



Indeed, in each of Shuxiang and Wang's successive incarnations, fate is cruel. They are born in bad circumstances or bleak situations. Consider their rebirth as two boys who find each other only to be torn apart by Mongol invasion. Or consider their rebirth as two teenage girls in the midst of China's cultural revolution, as well as the rebirth of both souls as an English businessman and a Chinese fisherman during a violent period of history. In each situation, Shuxiang and Wang brought about the other's downfall.

In the present, fate still remains cruel. Shuxiang's attempts to outdo fate by writing Wang revealing letters ultimately backfires. Instead of bringing Wang closer to her, fate has set things up so that Wang believes he is being harassed and stalked by a former homosexual lover. Instead of uniting in love, Shuxiang must unhappily stand by as Wang commits suicide in order to kill Zeng. Fate is indeed cruel, as Shuxiang must now again search all over to find Wang once again.

Fate metes out severe punishments

Fate metes out severe punishments, argues Susan Barker in her novel *The Incarnations*. When fate metes out such severe punishments, it is due to the sins that souls have committed in their past lives. In other words, their current lives can be made difficult as punishments for living poorly in their past lives.

Indeed, the very soulmate-existence of the souls of Wang and Shuxiang are founded in sin. Wang's raping of his mentally-slow sister causes Shuxiang to be born – a soul born by way of incest and of sin. Because of this, it is possible that their souls are doomed from the very start never to unite. In a sense, their soulmate relationship is conceived in a beginning sin.

Each time Wang and Shuxiang are reborn, the punishments they receive are far more severe or tragic than their previous lives. Following their original dwelling on Earth in which Shuxiang's soul is first brought to Earth, Shuxiang and Wang are returned as two young boys who find one another only in the midst of a Mongol siege – and kill each other over a disagreement about where they should go once they escape the Mongols. For this murder, they are reborn as two concubines, with Wang betraying Shuxiang, leading to her death.

For this betrayal, Wang and Shuxiang are reborn as an Englishman and Chinese resident, respectively, during a period of great violence between the two people and in which Wang shoots and kills Shuxiang. Their souls are reborn as two teen girls during China's cultural revolution – but their romantic relationship is not strong enough to handle the trauma of the revolution. Shuxiang betrays Wang, who is killed and reborn as Wang in his present incarnation. Shuxiang, still in her same incarnation, fails to get Wang to see the truth – and Wang kills himself instead.



True love does not defy all odds

True love does not defy all odds, argues Susan Barker in her novel *The Incarnations*. As Barker explains through Shuxiang repeatedly, fate is cruel and can mete out severe punishments for sins. Shuxiang herself knows this, having lived it for centuries. But she hopes that eventually – particularly in the present time – she and Wang will be able to defy fate.

Fate, however, cannot be defied no matter the circumstance. As the daughter of Wang's incestuous relationship with his sister early in the novel, Wang refuses to acknowledge Shuxiang in order to protect his own reputation. Fate has put Wang in a position of power, and Wang refuses to compromise this. Rather than recognizing his daughter, Wang only recognizes himself. In the time of the Mongols, Wang and Shuxiang are reborn as two young boys who find love with one another, but are driven apart by fate toward murder by the Mongol invasion.

As their lives pass, fate time and time again puts Wang and Shuxiang in positions antagonistic toward one another. As concubines, Wang wishes to curry the Emperor's favor while Shuxiang wishes to kill him. As a result, the Emperor is saved and Shuxiang is killed. In nineteenth-century China, Wang and Shuxiang are born on different sides into different races during a bloody war, which in turn leads to Wang shooting and killing Shuxiang, mistaking Shuxiang for a bloodthirsty pirate. In revolutionary China in the 1960s, Wang is sold out by Shuxiang in the name of Communism, for Shuxiang is swept up in the revolutionary fervor sweeping the country.

In the present, Wang's own precarious situation – a miserable father and stepmother, a treasured but tense relationship with his wife and daughter, and his own past homosexual liaison with Zeng – threaten Shuxiang's hope that love will finally defy all odds, including fate. However, this is not to be. Shuxiang's attempts to reveal the truth to Wang result in Wang blaming Zeng, Zeng's lover outing Wang, and Wang committing suicide in order to kill Zeng. In the end, love does not defy anything, and Shuxiang must once again wait for Wang's rebirth.

Reincarnation does not mean there will be happy endings

Reincarnation does not mean there will be happy endings, argues Susan Barker in her novel *The Incarnations*. Many believe, as Shuxiang once did, that the ability to live over and over again is a good thing. Each life is full of new chances and new opportunities. But this is not the case, especially in the novel.

In the novel, reincarnation never leads to happy endings. Each incarnation of Wang and Shuxiang is beset with violence, betrayal, and tragedy – sometimes in combination with one another. This is because fate metes out severe punishments in present lives for past lives; and because fate itself can be cruel. Indeed, the very bringing of Shuxiang



into the world at first comes by way of the incestuous affair Wang has with his own sister.

Each time Wang and Shuxiang are reborn, any chance for happiness is stripped away. In the time of the Mongols, the Mongolian invasion destroys the city in which Wang and Shuxiang live, and ultimately drives them apart when they escape the Mongols. In the time of Emperor Jiajing, Wang and Shuxiang become lovers as concubines, but Wang sells Shuxiang out when Shuxiang is poised to kill the Emperor. In the time of pirates and the English, Wang and Shuxiang are on opposite sides and belong to different races – and ultimately Wang kills Shuxiang, denying any chance of happiness there. The same is true of the cultural revolution in China of the 1960s, in which Wang and Shuxiang, teen girls, are caught up in the revolution – and Shuxiang betrays Wang.

In the present, Shuxiang hopes that enough time has passed, and that she has enough understanding of history and fate to be able to outdo both. However, Shuxiang underestimates fate and where Wang is in his own life – ranging from his homosexual affair to the tenuousness of his marriage to the strained relationship with his own father and stepmother. No matter what Shuxiang does to try to reveal the truth to Wang, and to bring about happiness, it backfires. Wang assumes incorrectly that Zeng is the letter writer – and kills himself in order to kill Zeng, thus denying Shuxiang and Wang any chance of happiness together. Likewise, that Wang and Shuxiang are mother and son would also make any kind of happiness in romance impossible.



Styles

Point of View

Susan Barker tells her novel *The Incarnations* in the first and third-person narrative modes, alternating between an unnamed third-person narrator, and Shuxiang's narration. Shuxiang's narration takes the form of letters and accounts of her previous lives as they have involved Wang, and so it is only natural that Shuxiang write about her own personal experiences in the first person. Sections of the novel in which Wang is present, but Shuxiang is not, are told in the third-person narrative mode, allowing the reader to trace his events from a distant and objective standpoint, as though the reader, too, were watching Wang's life the way Shuxiang is. As a result, there is consistency between the reincarnation-conscious accounts of Shuxiang, and the daily life and struggles of Wang as he endeavors to discover the identity of the writer of the letters.

Language and Meaning

Susan Barker tells her novel *The Incarnations* in language that is pointed and educated, as well as incorporating moments of poetic description. This is done for at least two different reasons. First, much of the novel is told by Shuxiang as she watches Wang and writes through letters and historical accounts. Her language is blunt because she has points she needs to make clearly and effectively to Wang in order to make him realize who he is, and that he has been reincarnated. Consider, for example, page 37 in Chapter 5 where Shuxiang explains succinctly and ominously, "History is coming for you. Do you hear it, coming up behind you in the dark?" Second, given all of the lives that Shuxiang has lived, and all of the education in various forms she has received in addition to the beauty and tragedy she has experienced, it is only natural that these things be reflected in the language that she uses. Consider on page 117 of Chapter 12 where Shuxiang says, "Our souls have never met in the Otherworld. We suffer for our prolific sins against each other separately, and our paths never cross. After incarnation is when we meet... Fate has us brawling... Fate condemns us to bring about the other's downfall. To blaze like fiery meteors as we crash into each other's stratosphere, then incinerate to heat and dust." The language used by the unknown third-person narrator retains this style, seemingly for the sake of continuity between first and third-person sections.

Structure

Susan Barker divides her novel *The Incarnations* into 30 numbered chapters that weave back and forth between the past and the present. Many of the chapters appear either as letters or as historical accounts accompanying the letters, written and narrated by Shuxiang. Most of these chapters venture into the past. In addition to being numbered, each chapter is titled, with the title reflecting the contents of that chapter. For example,



Chapter 8, The Wedding Photo, deals with a wedding photo of Wang's parents and the history of their marriage, while Chapter 18, Sixteen Concubines, deals with the time Wang and Shuxiang were both female concubines in the court of Jiajing. The historical account chapters themselves are divided up into smaller subsections given Roman numerals, as the chapters themselves are very long.



Quotes

Taxi-driver Wang Jun.... The latest in your chain of incarnations, like the others, selected by the accident of rebirth, the lottery of fate.

-- Unknown woman (Chapter 1)

Importance: Here, the unknown woman considers in her mind Wang's current situation in life, reborn as a taxi driver. It is the fate of people to be reborn randomly after death, a fate out of their hands. In the novel, reincarnation is the reality of what comes after death. Each time they are reborn, Wang and the unknown woman must find one another again.

I am your soulmate, your old friend, and I have come back to his city of sixteen million in search of you. I put your poor wife, Driver Wang... What will become of her when I reappear in your life? What will become of her then?

-- Unknown woman (Chapter 1)

Importance: The unknown woman considers the fact that she and Wang are soulmates, finding each other when they are reborn across centuries. It has taken the unknown woman quite a while to find Wang, who is a married taxi driver. The unknown woman wonders how Wang's wife will handle the situation when the unknown woman reenters Wang's life.

To scatter beams of light on the darkness of your unknown past is my duty. For to have lived six times, but to know only your latest incarnation, is to know only one-sixth of who you are. To be only one-sixth alive.

-- Unknown woman (Chapter 3)

Importance: The unknown woman reveals that each time Wang is reincarnated, it is her job to remind Wang of who he is, what his past has been, and that he and her are soulmates. The unknown woman explains that for Wang to be present only of his current life is to be one-sixth alive, because so much of his past – who he is – is unknown to him at present. By reminding Wang of who he is, the unknown woman fills in not only missing pieces of his life, but missing pieces of his soul.

History is coming for you. Do you hear it, coming up behind you in the dark?"

-- Unknown woman (Chapter 5)

Importance: The unknown woman explains to Wang that he cannot escape history. Although he may not remember it now, she will be undertaking the task of reminding him. This will help him to realize who he is and who she is, and that they are indeed soulmates.

Our souls have never met in the Otherworld. We suffer for our prolific sins against each other separately, and our paths never cross. After incarnation is when we meet... Fate has us brawling... Fate condemns us to bring about the other's downfall. To blaze like



fiery meteors as we crash into each other's stratosphere, then incinerate to heat and dust.

-- Unknown woman (Chapter 12)

Importance: In her fourth letter to Wang, the unknown woman reveals that their uniting as soulmates has been marred by fate. Fate always brings them into the world in bad circumstances. These circumstances put one soul against the other. Because of this, one brings about the other's downfall on Earth, meaning their souls cannot truly unite.

The time has come to deliver this letter. For in your sixth and current incarnation, Driver Wang, we must rebel against fate. So read on. Fate must be outwitted. It must no longer stand in our way.

-- Unknown woman (Chapter 12)

Importance: As the unknown woman explains their conundrum – of their souls being incarnated into beings destined to bring about the other's downfall – the unknown woman vows to change things. She explains to Wang they must stand up to fate, and find a way to outdo it or outwit it. They must do this so that their souls may truly be united.

As your biographer, I resurrect our past incarnations... Deep, scalpel-carved wounds, stitched up hundreds of years ago, have been reopened with much darkness and agonizing pain. But I am willing to endure. For this torturous journey through the suffocating dark is the only way to get to the light.

-- Unknown woman (Chapter 17)

Importance: As the unknown woman writes letters and biographies to Wang, she admits to having a hard time resurrecting the past. This is because the past is full of many bad, sad, and even violent memories that are like old wounds which must be opened to be remembered. The unknown woman can only hope that this will lead to reuniting with Wang, and so she is willing to endure the pain of delving into the past to help Wang remember.

Things will get better soon. I promise.

-- Wang (Chapter 24)

Importance: When Yida finds the letters that have been written to Wang, she believes Wang is cheating on her. She throws him out of the apartment, which devastates Echo. Echo is not happy without her father around. Wang does his best to reassure her, letting her know that everything will be alright soon –but that for now, things will be difficult. This also reflects on Wang's own situation with the letters and their writer in general. He himself hopes that everything will be better soon.

There were incidents like this throughout your babyhood, when I was overcome by the conviction that Liya, or some other imposter, was stalking me through your eyes.

-- Shuxiang (Chapter 29)



Importance: Here, Shuxiang recounts discovering her son, Wang, was someone else while breastfeeding him, and have many such similar reoccurrences. It is then that she realizes that the soul in Wang is the same soul she has known before. However, this changes over time as Wang's own personality takes over the body, leading Shuxiang's considerations to the backburner for the time being.

For years my life was centered around the dreams and their documentation.
-- Shuxiang (Chapter 29)

Importance: As the years pass, Shuxiang begins to learn the truth about herself and Wang through her dreams. She records these dreams in her journals in order to remember her former lives and all the events in them. She does this as well to make sense of them, and begins to realize that she herself has lived multiple times before, always with Wang in her life, somewhere. This leads to the idea that she and Wang are soulmates.

The day I returned to Beijing was the day I began the first letter to you. It was winter then, and now it is summer and this letter will be the last. Whether you are enlightened or not, the time has come to move into the here and now.
-- Shuxiang (Chapter 29)

Importance: Convinced of who she is and who Wang is, Shuxiang returns to Beijing. There, she looks up Wang and begins writing him letters. She explains she has come back to see Wang, and wants to know if he is ready to see her.

News of the tragedy had spread about Maizidian.
-- Narrator (Chapter 30)

Importance: Instead of having the effect of causing Wang to realize who he and Shuxiang are, Shuxiang's letters lead him to commit suicide in order to kill Zeng at the same time. Wang believes Zeng is continuing to write the letters, so he crashes his cab to kill himself and Zeng due to all of the trouble that has been caused. Without Wang, Shuxiang now gives letters to Echo, who is also a reincarnate.