



## Thousand Pieces of Gold

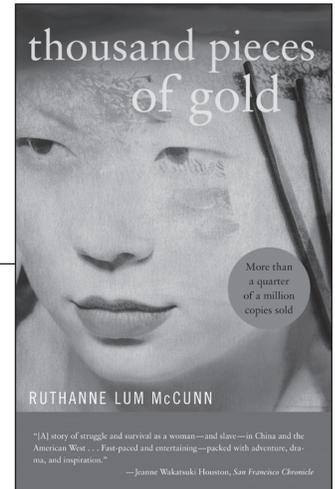
A Biographical Novel

by Ruthanne Lum McCunn

Beacon Press | Trade Paperback | 978-0-8070-8326-0 | 216 pp | \$15.00/\$17.00 Can.

Also Available in e-Book and Audio editions

Reading Level: 7th Grade



“A story of struggle and survival as a woman—and slave—in China and the American West. . . . Fast-paced and entertaining—packed with adventure, drama, and inspiration.” —Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“From Shanghai to San Francisco, Lalu Nathoy’s courageous journey is an important contribution to the history of pioneer women.” —*Ms. Magazine*

### about the author

**RUTHANNE LUM MCCUNN** traces her earliest inspiration to her Chinese great-grandmother who was sold into slavery. Her biracial and multicultural sensibilities are reflected in her books about Chinese on both sides of the Pacific, including *Wooden Fish Songs*; *Sole Survivor: A Story of Record Endurance at Sea*; *Chinese American Portraits: Personal Histories, 1828–1988*; *The Moon Pearl*; *God of Luck*; and, most recently, *Chinese Yankee: A True Story from the Civil War*. Her award-winning work has been translated into 13 languages, published in 22 countries, and adapted for stage and screen. A former teacher, she currently resides in San Francisco and lectures extensively at universities, schools, and community organizations.

### about the book

*Thousand Pieces of Gold* opens in mid-1800 northern China with Lalu Nathoy on the cusp of adolescence, her family—subsistence farmers in a region beset by poverty and violence—on the verge of a downward spiral that ends in a bandit raid in which she is sold for two bags of seed. Sold again to a Shanghai madam, Lalu is shipped to America and auctioned for \$2,500 to a Chinese saloonkeeper in a racially divided Idaho mining camp, where she is renamed Polly. Steadfast in her determination to live free, Polly eventually succeeds with the help of Charlie Bemis, whom she later marries, and together, they homestead on the River of No Return.

Firmly grounded on historical documents, oral histories, and period photographs, *Thousand Pieces of Gold* is an important contribution to the literature of pioneer life in the West. Its remarkable heroine and vivid storytelling appeals to a wide range of students.

### note to the teacher

In *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, Ruthanne Lum McCunn tells the extraordinary, true story of a Chinese pioneer’s experiences as a slave and free woman in the American West. This guide offers instructors the opportunity to engage students in thoughtful

discussions and activities examining important concepts such as the meaning of the American dream, involuntary vs. voluntary immigration, acculturation vs. assimilation, race, gender, ethnicity, discrimination, and civil rights in the historical milieu of the late 19th- and early 20th-century American west, and includes information on the book's support of Common Core State Standards.

### pre-reading activity

Students can brainstorm what they know about 19th century China and the American West. Capture this brainstorming on butcher paper. Then, after the students have finished the book, review the record of their initial brainstorming session together, circling the facts that have been confirmed and striking out what has been discredited. Discuss sources for knowledge and how to determine credibility.

*Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading: Information Text: Key Ideas & Details RI. 9-12.1; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 9-12.1; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 9-12.4; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 9-12.7.*

### classroom discussion

- Why is the tale of Guo Ju, the father who sacrifices his child in order to save his own mother from starvation, especially frightening to Lalu? (p. 11) How does her mother explain the story? Explain Lalu's reaction to the story.
- Identify the ways in which Lalu's parents demonstrate their love for her. Which are unique to the Chinese culture? Which are universal?
- In the opening chapter of *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, A Cai, Lalu's younger brother, attends school, and Lalu does not. Discuss the different social and cultural expectations for boys and girls in rural China in the mid-1800s. What were the social and cultural expectations for boys and girls in rural America during that same period?
- Lalu's father not only takes the bag of seed Chen gives him for Lalu but asks for a second. Discuss whether this means that Lalu's father sold her. Lalu's mother regrets having removed Lalu's feet from their bindings and tells her, "Now you're neither snake nor dragon. You are a woman, yet you work like a man, a laborer. Who will marry you?" (p. 22) The hurdy gurdy girl who laces Lalu into a corset tells her, "Small pretty. Good for catch husband." (p. 80) Why is marriage so all-important to Lalu's family and the hurdy gurdy girl? Does Lalu agree? Track how her feelings about marriage change through the book. What spurs the change(s)?
- What role do Lalu's determination and courage play in surviving abduction and enslavement? Compare and contrast the mistreatment she experiences in China to the mistreatment she experiences in America.
- The magistrate-turned-bandit Ding tells Lalu, "We have no choice except to follow the paths Heaven has allotted us." (p. 49) The Shanghai madam counsels her not to waste her strength on fighting the impossible. Debate whether the madam, like Ding, is telling Lalu to accept her fate. How does Lalu/Polly view this advice? Identify what Lalu/Polly accepts and what she fights throughout her life.
- Explain what Ding means by "Water once spilled cannot be gathered again." (p. 49) How might "water" be a metaphor for Lalu's past life?
- Discuss what the Madam in Shanghai means by "Look at that bamboo. It's strong, but it bends in the wind, just as you must do." (p. 59) Debate whether Lalu learns to "bend in the wind." Cite specific scenes from the book to support your thoughts.
- When Jim encourages Lalu by telling her he was indentured for six years, he implies her servitude is the same as his. Given what Lalu has experienced and been told in the San Francisco auction room, however, how would you characterize her bondage?
- Discuss how gender and race are viewed in the mining camp. Who are the people of power? How is this reflected in the camp's layout and buildings? To what extent do the local saloons serve as community centers? Where are Lalu/Polly, the hurdy gurdy girl, Jim, Hong King, and Charlie situated in the camp's hierarchy of power?
- Jim tells Polly, "Your family means everything to you. But you're dead to them," (p. 88) How does Lalu miss her family? Polly argues that she's not heard from them because her letters might have been lost or her parents are dead or have become landless refugees. Why do you think Jim

is so insistent that Lalu accept that she is dead to them? Use details from the book to support your reasoning.

- Jim speaks English fluently. He dresses and works as a Westerner. Though fully acculturated, he was not and never could be assimilated. Why? Would that still be the case today?
- After Polly learns slavery is against the law in America, she excuses everybody's silence except Charlie's. In your opinion, was anyone's silence justified? Discuss whether their silence made them complicit in her enslavement. Why did the Black man speak out?
- Jim, although a good marksman, doesn't carry a gun in Warrens. The hurdy gurdy girl, who advised Polly to arm herself, does. How do you think the people in Warrens would react if Polly had shot Hong King? What would happen to her? Support your response with evidence from the novel.
- Charlie wins Polly from Hong King at poker. She is furious because she doesn't want to belong to any man. Then she learns that due to legal and social restrictions directed at Chinese, she needs a "China herder" to fulfill her plans to operate her own business. Examine her discussion with Charlie and identify what makes Polly finally feel free.
- Describe the escalating anti-Chinese sentiment nationally, in Idaho, and in Warrens that finally convinces Polly to marry Charlie. Identify the three specific documents Polly must have to protect her.
- Although Charlie and Polly marry to prevent her deportation, the two are clearly devoted to each other. Describe the many ways in which Polly and Charlie demonstrate their love for each other throughout the book.
- By the 1890 Fourth of July celebrations, Polly appears very much a part of Warrens. Does she belong? Or is she an outsider? List the ways in which each is true. Debate whether she is appropriately or overly cautious in refusing to have children with Charlie.
- Identify the major themes of the book. Trace how the themes are developed from the beginning to the end of the book.
- *Thousand Pieces of Gold* is a true story. Debate whether the book should be classified as a biography or historical fiction. Prior to the debate, students should read the author's essay "Reclaiming Polly Bemis: China's Daughter, Idaho's Legendary Pioneer" in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 24 no. 1 (2003), published by the University of Nebraska Press. An alternate activity could be a discussion of the novel's epigraph: Voltaire's "There is no history, only fictions of varying degrees of plausibility."

*Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading: Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 9-12.1 RL. 9-12.2, RL. 9-10.3; Craft & Structure RL 9-12.4, RL. 9-10.6; Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 9-10.9; Reading: Informational Text: Key Ideas & Details RI. 9-12.1, RI. 10-12.2; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 9-12.1, SL. 9-12.3; Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 9-12.4, SL. 9-12.6; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 9-12.1; Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 9-10.5.*

### class activities

- The words "Gold Mountains" embodied the hopes of Chinese immigrants to America in the nineteenth century, their "American Dream." Write a paper that answers the questions: To what extent did Lalu/Polly achieve the "American Dream"? How might her story inspire young immigrants today?

*Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 9-12.1; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 9-12.1, L. 9-12.2*

- Consider the prejudices against the Chinese in 19th century America, then write a paper that explains how Polly is different from the majority of Chinese in Warrens. Include a discussion of the key people in shaping the life she leads. Cite textual evidence to support your thoughts.

*Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 9-12.2; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 9-12.1, L. 9-12.2.*

- Polly Bemis is a part of the Ann Frank Human Rights Memorial in Boise, Idaho. The mission of the Wassmuth Center for Human Rights is to "promote respect for human dignity and diversity through education and to foster individual responsibility to work for justice and peace." (<http://>

wassmuthcenter.org). Write an opinion paper that discusses how Polly Bemis' story "promotes respect for human dignity." Cite scenes and quotes from the book to support your thoughts.

**Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 9-12.1; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 9-12.1, L. 9-12.2.**

- Early in *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, the Nathoy family's former hired hand, Chen, takes Lalu away from her family forever in exchange for two bags of seed. Consider the following questions: How does Lalu's "price" change over the course of the book? How does being the sole daughter of a poor family and having unbound feet affect her value? How does her worth as a pawn in the sex-trafficking industry in China compare to her social currency as Polly, the only Chinese woman in all of Warrens, Idaho? By the time Charlie Bemis "wins" Polly in a gambling bet from her owner Hong King, how does she understand her self-worth? Write a paper that discusses how these successive transactions contribute to Polly's sense of self and her feelings about her true identity.

**Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes 9-12.3; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 9-12.1, L. 9-12.2.**

- In the midst of saving her husband, Charlie, from a house fire, Polly rescues their wedding certificate, her Certificate of Residence, and their claim for their ranch from the flames. Ask your students to consider the significance of this gesture. What do these documents represent to Polly and Charlie? What does the risk she takes in securing them suggest about her sense of security in Idaho? Encourage students to make lists of what they would choose to take with them in a sudden emergency, and to share their lists in small groups. What do these lists reveal about what is important and cherished in their lives, and how do they compare to Polly Bemis's most valuable possessions?

**Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 9-12.1, SL. 9-12.2; Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 9-12.4.**

- Students should be acquainted with the enslavement of captured Africans and African-Americans born into slavery in 19th Century America, and the Underground Railroad. Working in small groups, ask students to compare the experiences of Lalu Nathoy/Polly Bemis to the experiences of enslaved Africans and African-Americans born into slavery. Who is Lalu/Polly's Harriet Tubman? Using examples from *Thousand Pieces of Gold* as evidence, have students identify facts that confirm Lalu/Polly's status as a de facto slave. These small groups can then open up into a larger class dialogue about human trafficking and the definition of enslavement. Encourage them to explore the following websites:

- <https://www.dosomething.org/facts/11-facts-about-human-trafficking>
- <http://www.traffickingresourcecenter.org/states?gclid=CPLU09vClcgCFdgKgQodD9QCeQ>

**Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 9-12.1, SL. 9-12.2; Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 9-12.4, SL. 9-12.5, SL. 9-12.6; Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 9-12.8, W. 9-12.9.**

- The gender inequalities that Lalu/Polly experienced are not as severe today in either the Peoples Republic of China or the United States of America. Research when and how changes were effected. In small groups, brainstorm the gender inequalities that remain, either in the United States or abroad, similarities between different countries, and how they might be changed. What is the United Nations doing to help? (<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2015/9/civil-society-organizations-and-un-women-strategize-on-joint-work-to-achieve-the-sdgs>). Have each group develop a power point presentation called "Gender Issues: Then and Now." Use supporting images from the Internet.

**Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Production & Distribution of Writing W. 9-12.6; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 9-12.8; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 9-12.5.**

- Polly observed that anti-Chinese violence had lessened because "troublemakers had turned their fury against a group of white people called Mormons." (p. 116) Ask students to identify groups, past and present, which have experienced discrimination nationally, regionally, and in their community, perhaps their school. Identify laws that have codified discrimination in the past and been struck down, and those that still exist. Discuss the challenges of overcoming institutionalized prejudice even after a law is changed. Organize a student debate about whether racial discrimination has, in fact, lessened since the nineteenth century or has it merely shifted from one group to another.

*Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 9-12.1, SL. 9-12.3; Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 9-12.4; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 9-12.1.*

### ● vocabulary/use of language

Students should be asked to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them taking clues from context. Such words may include: *brothel* (p. 37), *wanton* (p. 39), *garish* (p. 53), *cormorant* (p. 58), *contagion* (p. 61), *bagnio* (p. 68), *procuress* (p. 68), *lethargy* (p. 70), *queue* (p. 74), *assent* (p. 78), *herbalist* (p. 115), *muckers* (p. 121), *imperceptibly* (p. 125), and *prospectors* (p. 150). Have students use a dictionary to check their definitions.

*Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 9-12.4.*

### ● beyond the book

#### **VOLUNTARY AND INVOLUNTARY MIGRATION**

The United States is a nation of immigrants. Discuss with students the causes of voluntary and involuntary migration from overseas and within national borders, in the past and today. Identify what affects a group's ability to acculturate and/or assimilate.

*Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 9-12.1; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 9-12.1.*

#### **CITIZENSHIP AND EXCLUSION**

Citizenship offers membership in community. Yet the 1790 Naturalization Law restricted naturalization to "free white persons." Nor did the Fourteenth Amendment and the Naturalization Act of 1870, which extended naturalization to "aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent," apply to Asians. The 1868 Burlingame Treaty did recognize "free migration and emigration" of Chinese to the United States as well as the rights of Chinese in the country to "enjoy the same privileges, immunities, and exemptions in respect to travel or residence, as may there be enjoyed as the citizens of the most favored nation." But it withheld the privilege of naturalization since the U.S. solely wanted Chinese men, and only for as long as their labor was needed to build the transcontinental railroad and develop the West.

To discourage Chinese men from settling, the California State Legislature passed an act in 1870 denying Chinese women the right of entry unless they could prove to the Commissioner of Immigration that they were "of correct habits and good character." Then state law forbade intermarriage and many local governments passed discriminatory labor laws. Other states followed suit.

Large numbers of Chinese men stayed anyway. Others came. And when a postwar economic depression struck in the 1870s causing severe unemployment, White workers blamed Chinese. Political parties used Chinese as scapegoats for low wages and societal ills. With the press fanning the flames, anti-Chinese rhetoric exploded into violence and "Chinese must go" became national policy.

In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act suspending the immigration of Chinese laborers—initially for 10 years—then, through extensions, for the next 50. The Exclusion Act also specifically prohibited naturalized citizenship for Chinese. Not until China and the United States became allies in World War II was Exclusion repealed. Even then, the 1943 Magnuson Act only allowed 105 Chinese immigrants each year (compared to 65,700 for England). BUT Chinese, at last, could become naturalized citizens.

The Chinese were the first group of people to be targeted by the U.S. government for exclusion but not the last. Divide students into small groups and ask them to use books in the library and sites on the Internet to identify and research other groups that were subsequently targeted. Examine the factors that led up to each group's exclusion. Together, discuss how these same factors affect immigration policy today.

*Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 9-12.8; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 9-12.4; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 9-12.1.*

**ETHNIC ENCLAVES**

New immigrants often congregate into enclaves. Ask students to use the Internet to learn about the origins and functions of diverse ethnic enclaves such as Chinatowns, Little Italy, Little Saigon, The French Quarter, Little Odessa, Germantown, Little Manila. . . . Then have a class debate about whether these enclaves perpetuate prejudices or celebrate diversity.

*Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 9-12.8; Speaking & Listening: Conventions of Standard English SL. 9-12.1; Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 9-12.4. Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 9-12.1.*

**CUSTOMS AND STANDARDS OF BEAUTY**

Foot binding crippled a woman's feet. Tightly-laced corsets affected a woman's health, especially her ability to breathe. Yet these practices were commonplace to achieve nineteenth century standards of beauty. Students may want to consider beauty practices that are culturally acceptable in American society today but might be seen as potentially harmful or dangerous—self-tanning, piercing, body art, extreme dieting, high heels, liposuction, and plastic surgery are just a few examples. Many of these practices affect men as well as women. Ask students to discuss what gives rise to social standards of beauty and how these beauty ideals are perpetuated.

*Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 9-12.1; Language: Conventions of Standard English L. 9-12.1.*

● **other works of interest**

**BOOKS (Non-fiction)**

*The Chinese American Family Album* by Dorothy Hoobler and Thomas Hoobler

*Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present* compiled and edited by Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang and Him Mark Lai

*Chinese Americans Struggle for Equality* by Franklin Ng

*Journey to Gold Mountain: the Chinese in Nineteenth Century America* by Rebecca Steffof and Ronald Takaki

*The Making of Asian America* by Erika Lee

**FILMS AND TELEVISION**

*Thousand Pieces of Gold*

*Becoming American: The Chinese Experience*

*Chinatown: A Portrait of a World-Renowned Neighborhood*

● **about the guide writers**

**JULIE COOPER** is a writer and editor from Bainbridge Island, Washington. A graduate of Harvard University, Oxford University, and the University of Washington, Julie has taught creative writing at the University of Washington, and she currently writes and edits educational materials and reading group guides for several major publishers.

**PAT SCALES** is a retired middle and high school librarian from Greenville, SC. She is a freelance writer and free speech advocate.



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