

# Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

## Waiting by Ha Jin

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- Why did Manna Wu wait for Lin Kong so long?
  - Is this realistic? Self-delusion on her part?
- How would you describe Lin Kong?
  - Is he a weak man? Is he a good man?
  - Was he uncaring or oblivious to his ex? At his first attempt at a divorce Shuyu wanted “to make a son” — didn't he realize she didn't want a divorce?
- Why does he seem incapable of love?
  - Kong's mother never had her own name — not a good role model for marriage. (p. 93)
  - His marriage had been arranged... not a marriage of love.
- Did he need love? Was he asexual?
  - “He needed no woman? (p. 80)
  - At the end his conscience speaks to him about whether he ever loved Manna.
  - “What was better than a place where you could sit down comfortably, read a book, have a good meal and an unbroken sleep.” (p. 303)
  - No apparent need for warmth, feeling, touching, sexual contact, etc.
- Was Lin ever truly in love with Manna?
  - His endeavor to fix her up with other men.
  - His apparent lack of enthusiasm for the divorce
- Which characters do you sympathize most with?
- Was Shuyu simple-minded or was she just basically good?
  - Offered him her meager savings (p. 92)
- Was Bensheng a good guy or a bad one?
  - How do Bensheng and Gen Yang compare to Lin Kong?
  - Do any other characters in the novel seem to have good and bad sides to their personalities?
- Do any of the men in this book ever marry for love?
  - Comrade Wei rejected Manna because of her handwriting (needed a secretary)
  - Lin initially married Shuyu to have someone take care of his ailing parents.
- How do the Chinese social mores affect Manna and Lin's relationship?
- Which restrictions depicted in China during this period seem the most onerous to you?
  - Couldn't walk together outside of the compound
  - Couldn't use modern autos during the forced march
  - Books banned
  - No card playing
- Would Lin have asked for a divorce on his own?
- What does he stand to lose in divorcing Shuyu?
- What are some of the unexpected benefits of the divorce?
  - Getting to know Hua



**Skokie Public Library**

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- New relationship with Shuyu
- Why didn't Manna read *Leaves of Grass*?
  - Why did the author choose this title which celebrates democracy and self?
- Are friends always false in this book?
  - Geng Yang
  - Haiyan
- Do you think that it is realistic that Gen Yang was so successful in later life?
  - Is Ha Jin saying that people with no conscience can thrive?
- The novelist has said that men and women were equal in Maoist China (p. 37). Do you find this to be the case in this novel?
- Are the peasants in the novel represented differently than those who are more educated and ambitious?
- The author points out how arbitrary some of the rules are. For example, The seventeen year rule — no one could remember why it was instituted. Can you think of any of our traditions that are similar?
- What does the future hold for Hua?
- Did you enjoy the descriptive passages of the novel?
- Did Manna find happiness in her marriage? Just what has Manna gotten out of this?
- There are many types of "Waiting" in the novel. What are the characters waiting for at the end?
  - Manna is waiting, only now, she awaits death
  - Shuyu is waiting, hopefully as ever, for her husband to return
  - Lin is waiting: for love, liberation, or perhaps an inner revolution that, Ha Jin implies, is the only real basis for cultural enlightenment.
- Jin admits that he intended the novel to be a universal story of a man's inability to love and appreciate what he has when he has it. Did he succeed in doing this with the novel?