

*Gabrielle Wang*



*Little  
Paradise*

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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# Little Paradise

Gabrielle Wang is an author and illustrator born in Melbourne of Chinese heritage. Her great grandfather came to Victoria during the Gold Rush. Gabrielle has lived in both China and Taiwan where she studied the Chinese language and painting. Her stories are a blend of Chinese and Western culture with a touch of fantasy.

*The Garden of Empress Cassia* won the 2002 Aurealis Award, was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and was a Notable Book in the CBC Book of the Year Awards. *The Pearl of Tiger Bay* was shortlisted for the 2004 Aurealis Award, and *The Lion Drummer* was a Notable Book in the 2009 CBC Awards. Gabrielle's novel *A Ghost in My Suitcase* was shortlisted for the 2009 Aurealis Award – Best Children's Novel.

Gabrielle lives in Melbourne with her partner, Steve, and their two children, Lei Lei and Ren.

For more info visit: [www.gabriellewang.com](http://www.gabriellewang.com)

In memory of my father, David N H Wang, 1920–1978

*'You can't change your name!' Mama shouted. 'Your name is Lei An. It has been carefully chosen so that everything is in harmony.'*

*'I know, Mama,' the girl replied. 'But this name feels right. It belongs to me.'*

*Mama's face distorted in pain. She turned away towards the window. 'Changing your name will change your whole destiny,' she said, her voice sad and distant.*

*The girl stepped up to her mother, touching her shoulder.*

*Mama sighed. 'You have always been good, Lei An.'*

*'It will be all right, Mama. I'm still Lei An inside. I'll just be Mirabel at school, that's all. Please, I haven't wanted anything as much as I've wanted this.'*

*Mama reached out to stroke her daughter's long dark hair. She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, dropped her hand to her side.*

*'If you must do this thing, we have no choice but to consult the soothsayer.'*

Tradition is a throbbing vein that runs deep within our souls. It links our lives, runs through families and generations. And, like the course of a river, it cannot be diverted without consequence.

# *Prologue*

NORTH MELBOURNE

1940

## **Bones of the Soothsayer**

Mirabel blew into her gloved hands. A flash of movement caught her eye and she paused, turning her head towards the rusted rubbish bins across the street. There! A white cat fixed her with arched green eyes, and a filament of disquiet stirred deep within.

Mama, small and neat in hat, coat and gloves, saw it too and stamped her foot. 'Get away, you horrible thing!' she said, and the cat leapt through the iron railings in front of one of the bluestone houses that lined the street. Once safe, it stretched its back and looked at them.

Mama pulled at Mirabel's arm. 'Now remember, be respectful,' she said in a low voice. 'Listen to the soothsayer's words well, for these Daoist wizards know much that is hidden from the minds of ordinary men.'

'Yes, Mama,' Mirabel replied, turning around to look for the cat. But it had gone.



Mama hesitated outside Number Eight, then knocked on the door.

Except for a small *bagua* mirror over the entrance to ward off evil spirits, the cottage looked too ordinary to be the house of a wizard, Mirabel thought. Yet, as the door opened, her heart beat a little faster in anticipation.

The soothsayer stooped slightly. His hair was pure black, comb marks clean as furrows in a field of rich earth. He had a high brow and bright eyes that held a gentle intensity. He greeted them with a nod.

As they entered the house, Mirabel smelled incense. Shafts of light from the window behind her fell onto an altar lit by two squat candles. Flames like yellow tongues licked the scented air.

'*Qing zuo*, please, take a seat,' the soothsayer said in Mandarin. He gestured at a green sofa by the wall, then entered a kitchen hidden behind a heavy blue-and-white cotton curtain.

Mirabel heard the trickle of tea being poured and the sweet fragrance mingled with the smell of incense.

The soothsayer returned and handed a small cup to Mama.

While the adults spoke in quiet voices, Mirabel looked around. The room was heated by a fire and contained a wooden table, two hard-backed chairs, and a single bed with a dark-brown *mian bei* or doona folded on one end. On the wall hung a long scroll with a brush painting of an ugly old man leaning on an iron crutch. He had a dirty face and scraggly beard. It was Li Tie Guai, one of the Eight Immortals Mirabel's mother had often told her about. This particular immortal helped the poor, sick and needy with herbal

medicine from his magic gourd. Beside the scroll was a shelf with all kinds of Chinese painting equipment – a bamboo canister of brushes, carved inkstones, and rolls of white paper. On the very top shelf, as if standing guard over the room, sat a Chinese griffin: half lion, half dog, with a horn like a unicorn and fire all over its body. It was carved from white jade.

Mirabel was about to reach up and touch the griffin when she realised the adults had gone silent and were looking at her.

'*Guo lai*, come over here,' the soothsayer commanded. He handed Mirabel two lit incense sticks and showed her how to bow in front of the altar. Then he walked towards the bed, beckoning for her to follow.

Mirabel watched as he dragged out a battered tin trunk. He unhooked the latch and lifted the lid.

She gasped and fell a step backwards. What she saw was so repulsive she put her hand over her mouth and nose. The chest was full of dried-up old bones and tortoise shells.

The soothsayer's dark eyes glinted amusement, but his face remained serious. 'These are oracle bones,' he said, lifting one out. It was flat, shaped like a large leaf with the texture of chalk. 'This is the shoulder blade of an ox. Come child, choose the one that speaks to you.'

'The one that speaks to me?' Mirabel frowned. She glanced at her mother but received a stern nod as if to say, 'Go ahead, do as he says.'

'*Na yi ge*. Take one,' the soothsayer said forcefully.

Behind her the fire hissed and crackled.

Then all at once, the reflection of yellow flames seemed to dance across the floor, and a vision of strangeness arose before her. As the light touched the tin trunk, the bones and tortoise

shells seemed to come alive. One was in the shape of a swan, another was a prince with a cape and a sword. And there was a shell that looked like a stallion with a griffin riding on its back.

As Mirabel watched the scene unfold before her, she studied each bone, seeing – no, it was more like feeling with her eyes – their shape and texture. She no longer felt the hard concrete floor under her knees.

Then she noticed a small bone in the corner of the trunk. It reminded Mirabel of the white cat she had seen in the alleyway outside: the same shy exterior, and yet also strength and a hidden courage. She could hear it speaking to her just as the soothsayer had said – not in words, but like gold threads that reached out and spun themselves around her thoughts.

Mirabel gently pushed the other bones aside and lifted the cat bone out.

*'Hao, hao, hao,'* the soothsayer said. The spell was broken.

The room returned, and Mirabel suddenly felt the grating pain in her knees. She struggled to her feet.

This time the soothsayer's eyes sparkled. He hooked a pair of rimless glasses over his ears and, taking the bone from Mirabel, told her to sit down at the table and wait.

She watched as he began to carve two round holes into the surface of the bone. Every now and again, he held it up to the window and blew away the fine white powder. Then he continued with his carving, scraping, digging and chiselling.

Finally, he seemed satisfied. He laid the bone on the table and crossed to the fireplace. With a rag he drew out a thin metal rod, red hot from the fire, and, lifting the cat bone, carefully inserted the rod into each of the holes.

Mirabel heard a faint snapping sound and when she

looked closely, she saw a maze of tiny fractures had appeared, radiating from each hole.

The soothsayer held the oracle bone with both hands and went strangely still. The fire hissed, the light from the coals glowed then faded. He turned the bone, studying the fine lines. Then more stillness. Another angle.

Mirabel rose and sat beside Mama on the couch, not daring to speak. At times a shadow of a frown crossed the soothsayer's face. At other times the corners of his lips twitched or he raised his eyebrows, wrinkling his brow.

The fire burned low as shades of dusk crept into the room.

At last the soothsayer picked up a metal probe and began carving onto the surface of the oracle bone with tiny scratching sounds.

The waiting was too much for Mama, who stood up, then sat down again, clasping her hands on her lap.

At last he held the oracle bone out to Mirabel. '*Hao le*, it is done.'

Mama, unable to contain herself, took the bone from him. She stepped to the window to read the inscription aloud.

*'Dressing the dead  
Treasure not wed  
Lost on the sea  
To fortune you'll flee.'*

Mama looked up, puzzled.

The soothsayer took the bone and pressed it into Mirabel's hands. 'Wherever you go, no matter how far from home, be sure to take it with you,' he said with soft urgency.

'Yes, sir. Will . . . everything be all right?'

The soothsayer made no reply but ushered them to the door.

Out in the gloom of the alleyway where the hooded streetlamps flickered, Mirabel walked in silence across the cobblestones. But her mother's words echoed inside her head: *Changing your name will change your whole destiny.*

## *Part One*

### PEOPLE HIDE THEIR LOVE

Who says

That it's by my desire:

This separation, this living so far from you?

My robe still smells of the lavender you gave,

My hand still holds the letter that you sent.

Round my waist I wear a double sash:

I dream that it binds us both with a same-heart knot.

Did you not know that people hide their love,

Like a flower that seems too precious to be picked?

Emperor Wu Di (156–87 BC)



# *Rose and the Painting Book*

MELBOURNE

1943

Mr Cochran glared down at Mirabel, his face red with anger as he snatched her precious painting book off her desk. She had been designing cousin Margo's twenty-first birthday dress and hadn't noticed the ominous silence that had gathered.

Mirabel watched, frozen, as her painting book disappeared inside his black teaching gown. He dismissed the class with an imperious wave, then strode towards the door. Her cheeks flamed. How could she have been so stupid? He had threatened to burn it the next time he caught her drawing in class. And she had no doubt he would carry out that threat.

Mirabel trudged across the parched oval, lunch bag in hand, and sat down on a seat in the shade of the library. She felt like being alone. As she closed her eyes, an image of Mr Cochran, wild-eyed, ripping out pages one by one and holding them over a fire, flashed through her mind.

An excited squeal made her look towards the Great Divide, the tall cyclone fence that separated the boys from the girls. A girl was leaning against the fence, passing a note through it. She was the new girl from her history class.



Talking to the boys was *strictly* against school rules. But here was this girl, flirting with Dave Farrell – Football Captain, Prefect and all-round most wanted boy in school.

Mirabel watched as Dave read the note, then grinned. She shook her head. Incredible! She had always been too shy to talk to boys. Sometimes she would see a boy looking at her, a look that lingered a fraction too long, probing eyes accompanied by a flicker of a smile that would cause her heart to flutter. Then she'd have to turn away, face burning. What would she say to him? But this new girl seemed to do it all so easily.

A teacher rounded the corner and the girl casually pushed off from the fence, sneaking an over-the-shoulder smile at Dave before stepping away.

She came across the yard towards Mirabel and paused, cocking her head to one side.

'Hey, aren't you in my history class?'

Mirabel squinted into the sunlight, shading her face with her hand. The girl had honey-blond hair tied back in a ponytail and cat-like green eyes. She was beautiful.

'That teacher seems to have it in for you. Mind if I sit down?' Without waiting for a reply, the girl flopped down beside Mirabel. 'I'm Rose, by the way.'

'I'm Mirabel. Nice to meet you.'

'What do you paint in that book of yours, if you don't mind me asking?'

'Dresses, mainly. I was in the middle of designing a dress for my cousin's twenty-first.'

'Wow!' Rose's eyes widened. 'I would love to be able to draw.'

'Everyone can draw,' Mirabel said. 'It's just that school knocks it out of you so you end up thinking you can't.'