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## MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



# Jamie Ford's Love and Other Consolation Prizes

Jamie Ford has done it again. With his new book, *Love and Other Consolation Prizes*, he's written yet another powerful novel. In his previous two books, *New York Times* bestsellers *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* and *Songs of Willow Frost*, he deftly wrote of heartbreak, love, and family from an Asian-American male perspective set in Seattle amid backdrops of notable historical times, including the depression era and the Japanese-American internment during World War II.

In the new book, scheduled for release on September 12, Ford weaves an epic story about a 12-year-old biracial orphan boy who travels from China aboard a ship full of children being trafficked at the turn of the century. While many of the kids end up in prostitution and servitude, Ernest Young is raffled off at the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle. The winning ticket goes to a benevolent madam in a high-end brothel in Seattle's Tenderloin district that actually treated women who worked there with compassion. Ernest becomes a house servant and soon falls in love with two girls his age — one Asian, one white — and they essentially grow up together.

*Love and Other Consolation Prizes* alternates young Ernest's narrative in 1909 with an older Ernest in 1962 who has a wife and two grown daughters. Ford rather cleverly juxtaposes the 1909 expo with the 1962 Century 21 Exposition, also known as the Seattle World's Fair, that led to the construction of the now-famous Space Needle and Alweg monorail. Both stories unravel the mystery of Ernest and his fate without revealing until the end if Ernest actually picks one of his childhood crushes.

When I talked with Jamie Ford in 2013, he'd told me he was conducting research for a book set during the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, which always fascinated him. Ford said while people are familiar with the 1962 World's Fair, the 1909 one had strange "ethnographic displays" that were "basically human zoos" in which indigenous people were put on display.

"I thought that was just so bizarre it was worth exploring," Ford said. "I kept tripping upon a mention of a boy being raffled off on September 15, 1909, which was Washington Children's Day. I wanted to find out what happened to this kid." Ford never solved the mystery, so he created a character named Ernest Young who became "a blank canvas" to construct a 1909 story during the height of Seattle's red-light district and curiously during the women's suffrage movement in Seattle, also featured in the book.

In addition to the futuristic aspects of the Space Needle, the 1962 Seattle World's Fair also had its own oddities that surprised Ford during his research. He said the Century 21 Expo had an adults-only corner Ford described as a miniature Las Vegas "where space-age topless models were painted green, blue, or violet." Besides a "bizarre adults-only puppet show," Ford discovered a section of the fair that allowed people to rent cameras to photograph barely dressed showgirls through dressing-room windows. Amid the colorful backdrops, the reader also gains insight into Seattle's Asian-American history.

Ford said he harbors hope that someone who reads *Love and Other Consolation Prizes* will know something about the identity of the real orphan boy who was raffled off in 1909. He has reason to hope. In *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, there's a frontispiece with a photo of an unidentified Japanese girl that originally came from the National Archives. At a reading in Louisville, Kentucky, a woman came up to Ford and said, "This is my auntie." She put Ford in touch with the now grown woman who lives near Sacramento. "Whenever I do events in that area, she comes out and signs books with me and it's wonderful." Ford admits that the identity of the 1909 boy, however, is an even bigger mystery.

While preparing for the tour for *Love and Other Consolation Prizes*, Ford is also trying to keep his growing excitement in check for the film adaptation of his debut novel. He's written a second draft of the screenplay for *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* and has been spending more time in Los Angeles working with the director and an executive producer whose name "most people would recognize," but it's all "still secret."

"I did talk to one of the producers [recently], who is a wonderful man based in New York," said Ford. "He said it gently and nicely, but said you've got to stop saying this is a long shot — we're shooting this film." Ford also mentioned that he was told to block out dates for next year and that it's "looking pretty good right now." I couldn't be happier for him. There's certainly a dearth of love stories involving Asian-American men and women in film. I think one centering on the Japanese-American internment is not only timely, but also needed.

In the meantime, Ford fans have a chance to get their hearts broken by and put back together again in a most satisfying way while learning something new about Pacific Northwest history in *Love and Other Consolation Prizes*.

To learn more, visit <[www.jamieford.com](http://www.jamieford.com)>.

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