

A Reader's Guide



Wild Ginger

by Anchee Min

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About *Wild Ginger*

"Once again, Min reminds us of the freedoms we take for granted." — *San Francisco Chronicle*

"Anchee Min has become the voice and conscience of children raised under the red flag of Mao." — *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"Compelling, beautiful writing." — *Baltimore Sun*

With *Wild Ginger*, Anchee Min has created a "poetic . . . captivating, and tragic" (*Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*) love story set against the horrors of Maoism. Returning to the devastating experience of the Cultural Revolution that defined her youth, as she has done in her previous books, Min opens the fictional door to "a world that is at once terrible and compelling" (*Kirkus Reviews*). *Wild Ginger* is only in elementary school when she is singled out by the Red Guards for her "foreign-colored eyes." Her classmate Maple is also a target of persecution. The novel chronicles these two girls' maturing in Shanghai in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Chairman Mao ruled absolutely and his followers took up arms in his name. *Wild Ginger* grows up to become a model Maoist, but her romantic love for a man soon places her in an untenable position — and ultimately in one of mortal danger.

"Potent . . . chilling . . . [and written] with restraint and clarity" (*Los Angeles Times*), *Wild Ginger* offers "a vivid picture of young people in the grip of ideology [and serves as] a reminder that the passion of youth . . . can be channeled into tragic courses" (*San Jose Mercury News*).

About the Anchee Min

Anchee Min was born in Shanghai in 1957. Like her character Wild Ginger, she ardently followed the tenets of Maoism to save her spirit and joined the Red Guards to avoid being attacked. At seventeen she was sent to a labor collective, where a talent scout for Madame Mao's Shanghai Film Studio recruited her to work as a propaganda-movie actress. She came to the United States in 1984. Min's critically acclaimed novel *Becoming Madame Mao* was a national bestseller. Her 1994 memoir, *Red Azalea*, was named a New York Times Notable Book and was an international bestseller, with rights sold in more than twenty countries. Both books were successful reading group titles.

Questions for Discussion

We hope that the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Wild Ginger* for every reader.

1. This novel is an example of first-person narration, in which events are seen through the eyes and words of Maple; however, the title character and emotional center of the book is Wild Ginger. How does it change, hinder, or enhance your understanding of Wild Ginger to see her through someone else's eyes? Does Maple's point of view change throughout the novel? What other function(s) does Maple serve in the story? Do you think that a book written from Wild Ginger's point of view could have been as effective?
2. Maple is portrayed as a follower, and as is expected in her society, she usually does whatever she is asked and avoids making decisions on her own. What are some examples of times when Maple takes control of a situation? What do those moments reveal about her character and her outlook on life?
3. When Maple questions herself, wondering why she was unable to turn in Wild Ginger to save Evergreen, she asks, "With whom was I in love?" How would you answer this question? What kind of love is portrayed in this story? How is love differentiated from desire?
4. Propaganda can be used to brainwash populations into obedience and submission. What are some examples from the novel of strategies that Maoists use in their propagandizing? Can you think of an analogy to this propaganda in your life? Do you know of any other successful propagandists in history?
5. In Chapter 4, Maple lauds Evergreen's desire as "ambitious," and he replies, "I suppose that's what devotion and loyalty are all about" (39). Do you agree with this statement? What does it say about Evergreen's ideals and motivations? Do Evergreen's opinions about loyalty and devotion change throughout the novel?
6. Wild Ginger's sanity is questioned repeatedly. Do you believe that Wild Ginger is mad? If so, do you believe she is driven insane by her surroundings and experiences, or is the cause something inside her?
7. Although her young characters hold positions of power and leadership in their community, Min repeatedly emphasizes their youth and inexperience. How is youth portrayed, and how

is youth corrupted in this novel? What does it mean, with regard to the reliability of the narrative, to have readers see the story through the eyes of a child or young adult? Do you think the representation of a child's level of emotion and devotion is realistic? By reminding her audience of the age of her characters, does Min strengthen or undermine the tragic ending?

8. Wild Ginger proclaims that she strives to give up her human desires and dedicate herself fully to Mao. Is she being selfless or selfish? Is she offering her life to a cause or searching for personal recognition and acceptance?

9. What do we learn about the conditions in Maoist China from Min's novel? What parts and themes of this story seem to be universal, to transcend the setting and situation of the book?

10. The book concludes with Maple saying, "I tasted her in my mouth." Do you think Maple and Evergreen will ever be able to escape the overwhelming shadow of Wild Ginger? Why or why not? Is Wild Ginger's lingering influence symbolic of the effects of the Cultural Revolution on modern China?

11. Discuss the theme of fear in the novel. Is Wild Ginger's fearlessness a virtue? Or is it the recklessness that leads to her downfall? How does fearlessness undermine Maoist control? How does it enhance Maoist power?

12. The dialogue in this book is very formal and mature. How does the lack of colloquialisms change your impression of the characters? Is their youth masked by the maturity of their language?

13. Mao's quotations make up a large part of the novel, by both shaping individual interactions and driving the overall plot. What does this say about the overwhelming influence Mao had on the lives of his people? Is this level of devotion comprehensible to today's western reader?

14. To what extent is this novel a psychological study of the effects of the Cultural Revolution on the minds of China's youth? Is Wild Ginger representative of a larger population? Is Maple?

For Further Reading

[Becoming Madame Mao](#) by Anchee Min

[Empress Orchid](#) by Anchee Min

Timeline of Modern Chinese History

1893

Mao Tse-tung is born.

1911

The Ch'ing Dynasty, which has held power since 1644, ends; the period of instability that follows, characterized by feuding warlords, lasts until 1927.

August 1912

The National People's Party, or Kuomintang, is founded.

1913

Jiang Ching, the future Madame Mao, is born.

1914

World War I begins; Japan seizes German holdings in Shantung Province.

1915

The Peking government recognizes Japan's authority over the Shantung territory, southern Manchuria, and eastern Inner Mongolia; Germany and Britain also lay claim to Chinese territory.

1917

China declares war on Germany.

1918

Peking signs a secret deal with Japan accepting Japan's claim to Shantung.

May 4, 1919

In response, massive student demonstrations against the Peking government take place.

July 1, 1921

The Chinese Communist Party founded, with Mao as one of its key members.

1925

Chiang Kai-shek becomes leader of the National People's Party.

1927

The Communist Party seizes control of the southeastern province of Kiangsi; Nationalist forces surround the province and institute a blockade; an estimated one million people die of starvation and disease.

October 1934

The Long March of 86,000 Communists from Kiangsi propels Mao Tse-tung to power.

July 1937

Japan invades China; Mao Tse-tung uses World War II and nationalistic fervor to further communism in China.

1938

Jiang Ching marries Mao Tse-tung.

August 1945

World War II ends.

October 1, 1949

China's Independence Day. The People's Republic of China is established, and Mao Tse-tung is elected chairman.

February 1950

China signs the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union.

1953

China initiates its first Five-Year Plan, the Transition to Socialism.

1958–1960

The Great Leap Forward is marked by propaganda championing human willpower as the means to industrialization and economic growth.

1966–1976

The Cultural Revolution, led by Mao and the Red Guard, causes great suffering and unrest; the Gang of Four comprising Jiang Ching, Mao's wife; Chang Ch'un-ch'iao, a Shanghai Propaganda Department official; Yao Wen-yüan, a literary critic; and Wang Hung-wen, a Shanghai security guard — rises to power.

1971

Lin Piao, the leader of the People's Liberation Army and Mao's official successor, plots Mao's assassination, is exposed, and dies.

1976

Mao Tse-tung dies; Hua Kuo-feng succeeds him; Cho En-lai, premier of the People's Republic, dies.

1978

Teng Hsiao-p'ing, as head of the People's Republic, begins economic modernization.

1980

The members of the Gang of Four are tried in court and sentenced to prison.

1991

Jiang Ching dies.