

A READING GUIDE TO

Joy

By Anne L. Watson



Shepard & Piper

About the Book

Mirai San Julian is a young woman with a rich and fascinating life. She restores historic carousels, working from a studio in a former roller skating rink. She has never had trouble attracting men. Though black, she spent her first years in the Basque community of Nevada, the adopted child of a single mother. And in later childhood, she was raised by her Aunt Joy in a Catholic Worker house in California.

Yet the richness of that life now seems to be turning against her. She finds herself overwhelmed by a carousel project that's out of control. She learns that the man who dumped her only months before is already married and—from Mirai's point of view—to the worst possible person. She discovers that her adoptive mother's death long ago may not have been an accident. And she suspects that Joy, the only person she trusts completely, may know more about that death than she's willing to reveal.

Shaken by these tremors, all Mirai needs is a real-life earthquake to either send her sprawling or force her to find a more solid footing. And in the Oakland of 1989, she won't have long to wait.



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About the Author

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Anne is glad to interact with reader's groups by email, phone, video chat, or in person for local groups. You can find her online at www.annelwatson.com or write her at Anne@annelwatson.com.



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THE USED BOOKSTORE ON FOURTEENTH STREET had been there as long as I could remember. It smelled of yellowed paper, old leather, and dust. Browsing the shelves, I always—faintly—heard rain, even in dry weather. The sound would stop like a broken cassette tape if I listened harder, or if I looked out the door to the dry street. As I turned back to the stacks, it would start again. Isolating, soothing, almost hypnotic.

Patrons often stayed for hours, standing in the aisles like mannequins—the owner tolerated readers, but he didn't bother to make them comfortable. Like the books, they tended to have torn jackets and heavy general wear. Also like the stock, some of the customers were rare collectibles—classic California eccentrics. It was a great place to strike up a conversation with someone interesting. It was where Aunt Joy found Charlene.

I'd guess most people who lived in Oakland in 1989 were wary of strangers. Not Joy.

She and I had lived there for twenty-five years, ever since I started school. Long enough for her to have learned city ways—the friendly smile and the quick retreat. But Joy had no use for such behavior. We were from Nevada, a little ranching place called Paradise Meadow. Instead of learning to act like a Californian, Joy turned Oakland into a small town so it would fit her. She talked to anybody, anywhere. She gave people her phone number, invited them to dinner, made strangers into friends. Sometimes it drove me nuts.

The spring day she told me about Charlene was one of those times. We were walking around Lake Merritt, as we often did in the

afternoon—supposedly for exercise, but really for people-watching and talking.

“How did you meet her?” I asked.

“Oh, we got talking.” Joy was offhand. That figured. When it came to answering questions, she was the world’s worst.

“Wasn’t it you who taught me not to talk to strangers?”

“Oh, for pity’s sake, Mirai—that’s for children. Children don’t get to vote or drink wine, either. Or drive.” Not that Joy did any of those things.

“One of these days,” I told her sourly, “you are going to fall into a conversation with Jack the Ripper.”

She ignored the small matter that Jack had been dead for over a century. “What would he be doing in a *bookstore*?” she asked.

“Is that where you met Charlene?”

“Oh, yes. I was shopping for cookbooks at Holmes. She was, too.”

She seemed to expect that to reassure me. As if a bookstore were the only place she picked people up! She talked to the meter reader, to dog walkers, to people in line at the bank or the bus stop. After so many years as the director of a Catholic Worker house, Joy didn’t think anyone was a stranger. Most of her “guests”—the house term for her nonpaying residents—were people she’d found that way. Her volunteers, too.

I’d argued about this with her before, and had no intention of doing it again at any length. In self-defense I shut up, and we walked on silently for a couple of minutes. Then she came to her real point.

“She has a big house a few blocks from St. Martha’s,” she said. “And she’s looking for a roommate. I got her card in case you want to talk to her.”

“Why in the world would I want to move in with someone you just met in a bookstore?”

“Maybe because you’re tired of sleeping on the floor of your studio? You’re not moving back in with Will, are you?”

Will—my lover. Nonlover. Unlover. Whatever the word would be. Ever since things had fallen apart, I’d been too downhearted to look for a real home. But I couldn’t go on like that forever, as Joy was patiently pointing out. With a sigh, I took the card and put it in my pocket.

Joggers, nannies, and dogs circled on the sidewalk, and waterfowl swam around and around the lake. It reminded me of a carousel, and that reminded me I needed to get to work arranging my trip to Idaho to restore a historic one. This carousel was a prize job for me and my restoration crew—it had come from the workshop of the legendary Charles Looff. But I had to order materials, pack for the trip, set up testing I had a long to-do list, all of it important. What a time to face moving. I sighed again.

“You know you can come back to St. Martha House any time,” Joy said.

I didn’t say, *Anything but that*. I thought it, though, and she probably knew I did. I shook my head and didn’t meet her eyes.

We stood silently and watched the lake for a while. Sun pennies danced across the water like skipping stones. A rowing club passed in their board-thin boat. Their wake shattered the reflection of a Victorian mansion on the shore.

I glanced up to the mansion’s ornate rear deck, half-expecting to see ladies in long bustled dresses, going to the lakeshore with picnic baskets. That was the problem with working in restoration: It was the thin end of a wedge. First the charming, imaginary past, children on a carousel in twenties dresses, Victorian picnics. Once the door was open, the real past sneaked in.

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THE REAL PAST, with all its questions: Christmas shopping with Joy. Mid-sixties, it must have been—I was eight or nine. Joy in her soft wool coat, with gloves and hat for downtown San Francisco. A salesclerk wrapped a purchase for Joy and counted change.

“What a cute little girl,” she said, beaming at me. “Is she your maid’s daughter?”

At that age, I lived in a fantasy world where I was Joy’s real niece. This was the first time it had occurred to me that any stranger could tell I wasn’t.

Joy drew me close. She beamed at the woman like St. Francis on a good day.

"Please allow me to introduce my niece, Mirai San Julian," she said. "And what's *your* name?"

The clerk flapped her jaw silently and quickly found another customer to wait on. Joy knelt to study my face. I tried to swallow my tears, but I couldn't.

"Everyone knows I'm adopted," I said. "Everyone knows I don't belong."

"*Adopted* means *chosen*, Mirai," Joy said, pulling a Kleenex from her purse and giving it to me. Her hand was pale against my small brown hand. How could I have imagined anyone would think I was hers?

"*You* didn't choose me," I sobbed. "*Mama* did." Joy ignored the shoppers swirling around us.

"Mirai, listen to me." Her voice was low and private, but intense. "I *did* choose you. I loved Zuzene best of anyone, and she chose you. And now she's gone to heaven. And I'm choosing you again every single day, Mirai. I'm choosing you right now."

And she hugged me closely, kneeling in the crowd. "Peace on earth, goodwill to men," trumpeted the Muzak while a dozen people glared because we were in their way.

I drew a deep breath with a sob left in it and relaxed against her. I knew that whatever Joy said was true. She never lied, not about the smallest thing. Sometimes that even made me mad, but that day it was all I had to hang onto. Joy said she chose me, and Joy never lied.

"I choose you, too, Joy," I mumbled. I was almost certain she heard me.

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THAT WAS MY EARLIEST clear memory. To me, the years in Nevada were as imaginary as a Victorian picnic. And I was starting to wonder why.

Lake Merritt's "Necklace of Lights" shone their answer to the dusk. It was time to go home.

Questions for Discussion

1. Mirai's love of carousels began when she rode them as a child. Today, carousels are less common, and many children never have the chance to develop similar feelings. Do you have strong memories of carousels from your own childhood?
2. As a child, Mirai struggled with the problems of being adopted. In her case, even strangers felt qualified to comment, because she was of a different race than Joy. What are your thoughts about interracial adoption? Given the real-world difficulties, is it a desirable arrangement?
3. One of Mirai's problems is that Will and Barbara are both colleagues of hers. What are the advantages and disadvantages of working with close friends or finding love among coworkers? In a world where most people spend most of their time at work, is it possible or even desirable to avoid such connections? Do working people today have any better choices?
4. Are the complaints of the St. Martha neighbors in any way justified? What would be the alternative to providing such halfway houses? How can a halfway house make itself a good neighbor?
5. A number of characters in the story suffer from psychological problems. Zuzene is one example, the residents of St. Martha's are another. How do these examples differ? Do you agree with Mirai that greater self-sufficiency will benefit the St. Martha residents?
6. Some of the characters in Paradise Valley have "old country" attitudes about society and relationships. How different are the common attitudes in contemporary culture?

7. It comes out that Estebe and his former friend, Danel Arauco, may have lured a man into the desert and killed him. We also know Estebe coaxed Zuzene into the desert by sending a note supposedly from her mother. Do you believe his story to the priest about Zuzene's death being an accident? If not, do you think he might have returned to Spain to avoid the risk of prosecution?
8. Garaze does not tell Mirai all she knows about Mirai's parents and grandparents. Do you think she was justified in holding back? What would you have done?
9. Issues of loyalty come up many times in the story. How do these issues play out in the relationships of Mirai with Joy, Will, Barry, Alex, and Barbara? Of Barbara with Will? Of Estebe with his daughters? Of Garaze with Rosa? What might the story's events have taught Mirai about the meaning and limits of loyalty?
10. How does the earthquake "shake up" the lives and relationships of the main characters in the story? What do you think might have happened to each of them if the earthquake had not intervened? Do some characters actually gain from its effects? Why would this be so?

A Note from Anne

Ever since I was a child, I've loved carousels. I grew up in New Orleans and have happy memories of the beautiful one at Pontchartrain Beach. As an adult, I worked professionally in architectural and art preservation. Carousel restoration, it turns out, involves many of the same problems and challenges.

The characters in *Joy* are concerned with restoration—but not just of carousels, though that's most obvious. They work also for restoration of truth, of memories, of relationships. And finally, of their city and of their way of life after a major disaster.

In some respects, a novel is an autobiography that has been through a blender. I based this novel on stories from friends who grew up as first-generation Americans; on the Oakland and San Francisco I knew in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s; and on my interest in the Catholic Worker movement—among many other things.

Author Online!

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