

# DURHAM COUNTY LIBRARY

## Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

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*Plum Wine*

by

Angela Davis-Gardner

(New York: The Dial Press, 2006)

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### **Author:**

Angela Davis-Gardner is the author of the internationally acclaimed novels *Felice*, *Forms of Shelter*, and *Plum Wine*, which was inspired by the time she spent teaching at Tsuda College in Tokyo, Japan. An Alumni Distinguished Professor at North Carolina State University, Angela has won nearly thirty awards for writing and teaching. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she is at work on her net novel. [From the book jacket]

### **Summary:**

Bottles of homemade plum wine link two worlds, two eras, and two lives through the eyes of Barbara Jefferson, a young American teaching at a Tokyo university. When her surrogate mother, Michi, dies, Barbara inherits an extraordinary gift: a *tansu* chest filled with bottles of homemade plum wine wrapped in sheets of rice paper covered in elegant calligraphy—one bottle for each of the last twenty years of Michi’s life.

Why did Michi leave her memoirs to Barbara, who cannot read Japanese? Seeking a translator, Barbara turns to an enigmatic pottery artist named Seiji, who will offer her a companionship as tender as it is forbidden. Bust as the two lovers unravel the mysteries of Michi’s life, a story that draws them through the aftermath of World War II and the hidden world of the *hibakusha*, Hiroshima survivors, Barbara begins to suspect that Seiji may be hiding the truth about Michi’s past—and a heartbreaking secret of his own. [From the book jacket]

### **Questions:**

1. Discuss the storytelling approach used in *Plum Wine*. Does it change the reading experience to watch history unfold from the translation of buried papers? Is this narrative approach effective?
2. Discuss the significance of a fox to the Japanese. What is so appealing about the stories about the Fox-Woman? Can Barbara be considered a fox? If so, in what ways?
3. “It was strange, she thought, how the placement of objects affected them. It was true for people too.” (page 12) Sentiments of alienation engulf Barbara throughout the novel. What makes her feel so different?

4. How does learning about Michi-San, Seji, and Rie's Hiroshima experiences affect Barbara? Do their stories further distinguish her or do they make her feel more connected?
5. Memories from the bombing haunt Seiji and Michi. Describe some of these haunting images. How do these terrible recollections fit into the larger scope of the book?
6. Barbara is deeply affected by the revelation that Michi, Seiji, and her student Rie are survivors of the atomic bombing. It is even harder for her to understand the devastating psychological effects wrought by war. How do her feelings change after she runs into American officers on a train ride and when she learns of Rie's side job?
7. Tradition and heritage are major themes throughout this novel. How are they treated differently by Japanese and American characters? Does the cultural distinction prohibit Barbara from participating in Japanese traditions?
8. "Hibakusha have become almost a pariah caste in Japan."(p. 99) Why are Hiroshima survivors, "hibakusha," tainted? Do you think Seji is correct by saying hibakusha never love?
9. Michi-san's fondness for plum trees leads her to name her daughter Ume, which means *plum*. What does the plum tree symbolize?
10. Why did Michi leave Barbara her papers? Explain what it means to have "an inheritance of absence." (p. 179)
11. How does Rie explain that one's true valor rises above class? Does this idea of valor above class transcend all cultures? Is this a modern idea or can it be traced throughout history?
12. *Plum Wine* portrays the bonds people form under the cruelest of circumstances. Discuss the connections between the characters, their traumas in both past and present, and the wars that they survived.
13. Barbara realizes that Seiji is leaving out parts of Michi's writing in his translation. What secret does Barbara uncover? In what ways are Seiji's actions the result of his cultural perspective? In what ways do they transcend cultural concerns?
14. Barbara comes to Japan on a personal journey in search of the essence of her mother. Did she accomplish her goal? Why or why not?
15. We often read about wartime experiences from a male point of view. Based on *Plum Wine*, how is wartime experience different for a female? As a reader, does this change the way you think about the events and repercussions of World War II?

16. Discuss the issues relating to motherhood in the novel. Describe Barbara's relationship with her mother and Michi's with Ume—and Michi and Barbara's mother-daughter relationship with each other. Why do you think Michi and Barbara formed this type of bond?

[From Random House, Inc.]

**Further Reading:**

*The Island of Bicycle Dancers*. Jiro Adachi. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004.

*Invisible Lives*. Anjali Bamerjee. New York: Downtown Press, 2006.

*Summer's End*. Lyn Cote. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2003.

*That Summer in Paris*. Abha Dawesar. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2006.

*Bollywood Nights*. Shobhaa De. New York: New American Library, 2007.