



American Woman

By Susan Choi
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Introduction

In *American Woman*, Susan Choi assembles a fictionalized recasting of the notorious 1974 Patty Hearst kidnapping by the Symbionese Liberation Army. On this historical framework, Choi drapes a tale pulsing with immediacy, as we follow the aftermath of a violent shootout and life on the run.

Jenny Shimada, young Japanese-American woman, hides out in upstate New York, on the lam after bombing draft offices in California. Robert Frazer, a former acquaintance in the countercultural movement, finds Jenny and persuades her to aid three younger radical fugitives whom Frazer has smuggled across the country. One in particular, Pauline, the granddaughter of a wealthy newspaper magnate in San Francisco, shocked the nation by denouncing her family and espousing the views of her captors. Despite her initial misgivings, Jenny agrees to move into a secluded rural farmhouse with the fugitives, acting as a buffer between the cadre and the outside world, taking care of their needs

while they write a book to fund, and further the aims of, the revolution.

The complex negotiations and various frictions between the foursome eventually culminate in botched robbery attempt that sends Jenny and Pauline careening on a hallucinatory road trip back to California. A meditation on individual belief and the zeitgeist, a droll send-up of the self-anointed morally superior, and a flawless character study, *American Woman* explores a turbulent era in which the last flickering embers of liberal radicalism and youthful idealism smoldered.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you characterize Robert Frazer?
2. Is Pauline's status within the group secure? Does Jenny ever become accepted?
3. Are commonly held notions regarding the glamour and romance of life on the run -- coded telephone calls, wiping off fingerprints, disguises, rerouted letters, safe houses, etc -- still intact? How does this account differ from most other fiction, or even cinematographic depictions?
4. In what ways does she surprise her captors? Do you think her conversion to the radical cause was genuine or the result of Stockholm syndrome type brainwashing? In the end, is Pauline any less of an enigma?
5. How does Jenny react to Juan's praise and goading about her "non-white-skin privilege?" Why do most people she encounters inquire into her country of origin, and how does she respond?
6. What is the significance of Jenny's relationship with her father? How do his internment and their five-year sojourn in Japan lead to her participation in the radical movement?
7. Does "living in the times," as Jenny did, preclude the ability to discern your own convictions? Is it possible to distinguish one's own beliefs from the rush of the national mood today?
8. In Part 4, a journalist covering Pauline's case thinks of Jenny and Pauline as "the two girls who thought they could make history, while all the while it had made them." What does she mean? Do you agree?
9. Given the attempts by the counterculture movement to reshape society, what conclusions does *American Woman* draw regarding America's pervading class and ethnic rigidity? Do you think the movement was successful? How does wealth inure Pauline and Dolly from the vagaries of life?
10. Who does the "American Woman" of the title refer to? Given the fact that the female protagonists of *American Woman* are fugitives from the law, do you find the title ironic? How is each woman estranged from society, and in what ways does this novel reassess what it means to be an *American Woman*?

About the Author

Susan Choi was born in Indiana and grew up in Texas. Her first novel, *The Foreign Student*, won the Asian-American Literary Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the Discover Great New Writers Award at Barnes & Noble. With David Remnick, she edited an anthology of fiction entitled *Wonderful Town: New York Stories from the New Yorker*. In 2004 Susan Choi was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.