



## The Book of Dead Birds

By Gayle Brandeis  
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### Introduction

Ava Sing Lo has been accidentally killing her mother's birds since she was a little girl. Now, having just graduated from college, Ava leaves for California's Salton Sea where she volunteers to help environmental activists save thousands of birds poisoned by agricultural run-off.

Helen, Ava's mother, has been haunted by her past for decades. As a young girl in Korea, Helen was drawn into prostitution on a segregated American Army base. After several brutal years, a young white American soldier married her and brought her to California. When she gave birth to a black baby, her new husband quickly abandoned her and she was left to fend for herself and her daughter in a foreign country.

*The Book of Dead Birds* eloquently captures a young woman's struggle to come to terms with her mother's terrible past while she searches for her own place in the world. This moving mother-daughter story of migration, survival, and reconciliation resonate across cultures and through generations.

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the author's choice to use Keats and Mitchell for the epigraph. How are these passages significant to the novel?
2. Ava recollects the seesaw incident with her mother Helen at Balboa Park. Why was Helen so determined to do this? What did she want to show Ava? Do you think Ava finally sees what her mother intended her to see?
3. Ava is at a crucial point of her life, on the cusp of adulthood. Must she leave her house and her mother to redefine herself. Why?
4. "I unwrap a Crunch bar, let my teeth pass through the deep brown chocolate, the pale crisped rice inside. Such an easy balance between those two flavors; such an uneasy balance in my own life -- chocolate and rice, battling it out, creating something different, something neither flavor can really claim." Is her skin color her main struggle, or is there more?
5. Discuss the parallel between the birds and women. Is there a social parallel -- the treatment of women by men, culture and society? How does Helen's past as a prostitute fit into this? What is the significance of the dead women Ava finds?
6. Music plays a crucial role in the novel -- Ava finds solace in beating her drum, even if she plays it incorrectly; Helen sings to Ava; and even Ava Sing Lo's name is tied to the theme of music. How does music help reconcile Ava and her mother?
7. The natural world plays a big part in *The Book of Dead Birds*. Were you surprised by the harsh landscapes of Korea and southern California, and is there beauty, after all, in these places?
8. Discuss the title *The Book of Dead Birds*, and how the novel itself -- not just Helen's scrapbook, is a "book of dead birds." Why does Helen keep this scrapbook? What does it mean to her? What does it say about her and about her relationship to her daughter? Is there redemption for the birds and the women at the end of the novel?

### About the Author

Gayle Brandeis is also the author of *Fruitflesh: Seeds of Inspiration for Women Who Write* (HarperSanFrancisco) and a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Salon, HipMama, among other places online and off. *The Book of Dead Birds* is her first novel.