



## The Palest Ink

*Kay Bratt*

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A sheltered son from an intellectual family in Shanghai, Benfu spends 1966 anticipating a promising violinist career and an arranged marriage. On the other side of town lives Pony Boy, a member of a lower-class family—but Benfu’s best friend all the same. Their futures look different but guaranteed...until they’re faced with a perilous opportunity to leave a mark on history.

At the announcement of China’s Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao’s Red Guard members begin their assault, leaving innocent victims in their wake as they surge across the country. With political turmoil at their door, both Benfu and Pony Boy must face heart-wrenching decisions regarding family, friendship, courage, and loyalty to their country during one of the most chaotic periods in history.

The prequel to the beloved Tales of the Scavenger’s Daughters series, *The Palest Ink* depicts Benfu’s coming-of-age during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution.

## **The Palest Ink Details**

Date : Published October 27th 2015 by Lake Union Publishing

ISBN :

Author : Kay Bratt

Format : Kindle Edition 418 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Cultural, China

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## From Reader Review The Palest Ink for online ebook

### Mary says

???????? (translation)--

"The weakest ink is better than the strongest memory." - Chinese proverb

I have all of Kay Bratt's books downloaded on my Kindle. I will admit that I was initially seduced by the beautiful covers. I had little knowledge of the stories waiting to be told beyond such beauty. I chose to begin with the prequel, *The Palest Ink*. I'm not sure if beginning with this book will give too much of the story away but I'm glad I chose to start here because I now have a better understanding of the times, hardships, and daily struggles of the Chinese people that endured the ten year Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao, and Mao Thought. I'm ashamed to say that I knew very little about the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution initiated by Mao in 1966, until his death in 1976. During this time, Mao and the Red Guard sought to remove counter revolutionary elements of Chinese society by driving out imperialism. Mao claimed to stand for the poor peasants and farmers. Mao Thought turned class against class. Family members turned on loved ones. Religious and traditional cultural icons were destroyed. Ancient Chinese books, temples, and relics were burned. Families were separated and sent to communes for re-education. Schools and universities were closed and students turned on their once-respected educators and professors. Innocent people were accused of the smallest crimes, denounced as enemies, and shamed or executed in front of crowds. Chairman Mao Zedong is believed to be responsible for an estimated 40 to 70 million deaths through forced labor, starvation, and executions. Staggering!

"...people are giving each other up. Wives are going against husbands, children against parents, you wouldn't believe how many relatives are renouncing each other, claiming to cut all ties in order to not be touched by the blemishes their family members have against them. Pointing fingers and calling each other reactionaries."  
-- Wren, *The Palest Ink*

Kay Bratt has written a powerful story that may not be true but is easily imagined. Bratt did base some details on actual stories and photographs she had heard and seen. Unlike her main characters, Benfu and Pony Boy, Bratt succeeds in telling a powerful story of struggle, survival, loyalty, and heartbreak loss. She creates characters that are likable and easy to root for. Benfu represents the wealthy, respectable family. He tries desperately to adhere to family tradition, even when he disagrees with ancient customs he finds outdated. Pony Boy graciously stands for honor, placing family and love before his own needs. Pony Boy comes from a poor, but honorable family. I believe Bratt creates class distinction here to convey the message that during Mao Thought, wealthy or poor, no one was safe from suspicious accusation. Benfu and Pony Boy are young boys standing on the edge of adulthood when the story begins. Together, the boys attempt to shed light on the wrongs they witness during Mao's reign by secretly publishing a newsletter. By the last chapter, it is painfully clear that difficult life lessons have turned Pony Boy and Benfu into respectable grown men, comrades forever. While their tale of friendship is not always happy or easy to tell, it's one I absolutely fell in love with. Easily one of the best books I've read all year. That said, if you're looking for a happily ever after this is not the book for you. But, if you're seeking a great story, I highly advise picking this one up. Poignant. As for myself, I'm going to devour the rest of this book series, starting with *The Scavenger's Daughter*.

\*Thanks extended to NetGalley and Lake Union Publishing for sharing this wonderful egalley with me in exchange for review.

## **Tammy says**

I LOVED this book! This book is the prequel to the Scavenger's Daughter series and gives readers more insight into how the main character, Benfu, and how he became the man he is in the rest of the series. One does not need to have read the previous books to read this book as it does not give away any spoilers for the rest of the series.

This book is set during the Cultural Revolution in China, when China was in turmoil during Mao's rule of China. When people lived in fear and uncertainty. Kay incorporated China's rich history into the book, making one really feel how the people felt who were living through this time of unrest. We feel the emotions that the characters feel, we feel their fear, their heartache and sense of loss.

I loved how this book answered questions as to why Benfu became the type of person he is in the series. He and his friend, Pony Boy, best friends from different backgrounds find that common thread that bonds them together. Benfu's family is wealthy, he is growing up with privilege and expectation set by parents, ones he must honor. He knows his parents love him, but outward display of affection are not the norm for his family. Pony Boy's family, on the other hand, is poor but what they don't have with money, they make up in love. Their home is filled with love, respect and affection. Benfu sees the differences and yearns for that relationship with his parents that Pony Boy has with his.

I could go on and on about this book as I loved it. I love Benfu and his amazing spirit and his big heart. I loved reading about him as a teen and young adult as I have felt so connected to his character in this series. Please read this book...and the Scavenger's Daughters series.

Note: I was given an advanced copy of this book in exchange for a fair review.

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## **Dorie says**

I received an ARC of this book from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

I haven't read about this time period in China for a while and it was good to revisit Mao's Cultural Revolution. This book is actually a prequel to a series of books that Ms. Bratt has written about the people of China. She spent quite a few years living in China which has resulted in this wonderfully character driven account of the people's struggle with the changes in China.

The main characters, Benfu and Pony Boy are from different social levels. Benfu's parents are both well educated and are teachers at the University while Pony Boy's father is a mail man. We meet these characters as young teenagers and the story progresses until they are young men.

Benfu's parents continue to believe that their family will be safe even as there was news of persecution of the upper class and all intellectuals who were deemed enemies of the People's Republic. People were being beaten and jailed for as little as speaking negatively about Mao. They were warned to leave the area but they instead decided to send Benfu to the countryside under an alias in an attempt to prevent him from punishment due to their status. In reality Benfu suffered unbelievable torture, humiliation and near starvation in the hands of those in charge of the commune.

Pony Boy and Zu Wren carried out the idea that Benfu first had of a newsletter that they printed to bring the real news to the people of their area. In the end the decision by both of them to take the newsletter to the city to reach more people resulted in tragedy.

Ms. Bratt's book is extensively researched and every detail from the politics, to the clothes the people wore and even the food is well described. The Red Guard, the children's faction of Mao's followers were brainwashed to believe that what Mao was doing would be good for the common people, that they would have jobs and enough food to eat. In reality, many millions died of starvation, even those who worked on the communes producing food didn't have enough to eat as the food was sent to feed the ever increasing Red Army

I enjoyed this book and will look into reading the series of books that Ms. Bratt has written which continue the stories of the people we meet in this book. Highly recommended for book clubs

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### **Andrea says**

Maybe a 3 1/2. I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. Not quite sure how to rate this. I have a masters in international affairs and studied China so was quite familiar with the time period [and campaigns] covered. In the beginning I thought, this could be a great story--the evolution of the Cultural Revolution set against the struggle of two young men to come into their own--new China versus old China. Customs versus love. Family versus politics and so on.

There was a lot of information but I found some of the stories shortchanged. The afterword explains Bratt's love for China and this comes across quite clearly.

Some of the descriptions and language are quite beautiful. Other times I found it almost too simplistic.

Note: I was very much caught up in Benfu's story and struggles as well as that of Pony Boy and Zu Wren. And, the contrasts between the two men's families and situations was quite well done. SO, it may be that I later think this worthy of a four. However, I am not upgrading because I was disappointed it was not more compelling.

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### **Susan says**

I enjoyed this story of two Shanghai teenagers caught up in the throes of the Cultural Revolution. Much has been written about this time, but Kay Bratt holds her own as a masterful storyteller. What caught my attention was the friendship between the two main characters, Benfu and Pony Boy. The first came from a refined Shanghai family that thought it would be immune to the increasing chaos in post-1949 China. Pony Boy, on the other hand, was from a working class background, but the two boys were best friends. That wasn't so unusual in 1966 China. Pony Boy came from the right background back then, while Benfu's family was on the wrong side of history. Even so, Ms. Bratt shows that not even one's family background could protect people in China back then. Everyone was fair game. I thought Kay Bratt did a fabulous job recreating 1966 Shanghai and the chaotic atmosphere of China at that time.

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## **Melissa says**

I received an advanced review copy from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

Set in the late 1960s, \*The Palest Ink\* is a prequel to the Tales of the Scavenger's Daughters series also by Kay Bratt. In this novel, Bratt explores the beginnings of Mao Zedong's rule over China, the fervor of the young people in their near worship of the man and the effect of Mao's harsh and catastrophic policies on two families in Shanghai. Benfu is a wealthy son of academics, and his best friend, Pony Boy, is from a working class family. They have been friends as long as they can remember despite Benfu's mother's disapproval (she would prefer a better class of friend for her son). As Mao escalates restrictions against the privileged class, Benfu and his family are forced to make tough decisions while Pony Boy's family is fighting for survival after Pony Boy's father is stricken by a sudden illness. Both Benfu and Pony Boy have to grow up quickly and decide whose side they are on and how far they are willing to go to defy Mao.

I loved the characters and the story. I sometimes felt that the author spent a ton of time leading up to something major happening, only to skip right past it, and then summing up the activity in a paragraph or two. I would still recommend the book to new readers of the series or those interested in a prequel to the series they've already completed.

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## **Joan says**

I was given this book to preview and from the very first page was caught up in the story. The book reminded me of books written by James Michener in that there was a lot of very informative history but was written in such a way that it was exciting. Kay Bratt truly knows how to tell a story! I learned a lot from this book about the history of China, what the people had gone through, and as I said, the book held my interest for word one. If you have not read the series: "The Scavenger's Daughters", I urge you to read this book first and then the four book series. I could not put any of them down. These are not books that leave you hanging or quit abruptly, but there is that hint there is more to come in the next book. Hopefully, there is another coming after the forth book of the "The Scavenger's Daughters" series. I am so looking forward to it.

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## **Loni says**

### **Another book to show the horrors of Mao**

It amazes me that a man as evil as Chairman Mao is so revered by the people of China. His picture still adorns the money, yet he destroyed so much of value in the Chinese culture. This book of two friends shows just how difficult it was living under his regime. Families turned on each other, neighbors couldn't be trusted. It was an evil time. And it comes out in this book

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## **Rebekka Steg says**

While I understand that the author spent some time in China herself, I did not get the feeling that she fully knew/understood this time in Chinese history. I've read several books by Chinese authors covering the same time period, and they had a very different feeling to them.

The *Palest Ink* wasn't bad, and there's a good chance I would've enjoyed it more had I read the other books in the series (*The Palest Ink* is technically a prequel, but was written after the others).

I did enjoy getting to know the characters, but felt like Bratt skipped over several of the events very lightly - events that could have given the novel more weight and gravitas.

\*I received an advanced readers copy from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review\*

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## **Jon says**

This book highlights China's Cultural Revolution and its many ramifications in a way that is poignant and heart-rending. The externalities of Mao's policies, the paranoia of the urban bourgeoisie, the desperation and brutality of the communes, the gripping terror inspired by the Red Guards, and the sheer pointlessness of it all is on full display in this captivating novel.

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## **Lorraine says**

*The Palest Ink*, considered historical fiction, was an interesting book, and I am sure that the author did a lot of research to make it historically accurate. Since I have read many books by Chinese-American and Chinese authors about this period in Chinese history, I was quite familiar with the Cultural Revolution, Mao Tse-Tung, and the devastation it caused to millions of people. Had it been my first introduction to this period of history, I may have been more impressed. However, Kay Bratt's writing style was strained—or too one-dimensional. It wasn't until three fourths of the book through that I was at ease in following the story. Most of the time, I simply wanted to get on with it, and nervously hoped it would flow more naturally and captivate me more than it did. I was never able to fully immerse myself into the book as I love to do.

The plot of the story surrounds the families of two boys, good friends, but from opposite socioeconomic standings. Benfu is from a rather wealthy family whose parents are academics. Pony Boy is from a lower class family. His father is a mail man and his mother works various jobs just to supplement the family income. They are not starving, but they have a difficult time just getting by. Pony boy's family is loving and caring and they show their love to each other. Benfu's family show little emotion and care only about Benfu's academic achievement.

The title comes from the proverb "the palest ink is better than the best memory." As explained by Pony boy's girlfriend Zu Wren, "It means that people's memories change over time, but if there's a written account, then it will be more accurately remembered." This discussion took place as the three of them were planning to publish an underground newspaper to educate the public about the harm that Mao was doing to the country. It was a very risky thing and dangerous for three teenagers to attempt.

Finally, I was very disturbed about the author's error in her account by the character Widow Chou of foot binding. She said she was thirteen and her sister was twelve when they had their feet bound. It would have been impossible to begin foot binding at that age because a girl's foot would have already grown too big, and there would be no way she would be able to endure the pain at that age; the process involved actually breaking the foot whenever it grew too large. It was usually between the ages of four and six that this ritual took place, and was far worse than the author describes. Ideally, the best foot was considered three inches long. Five inches or longer was pretty much unacceptable for good marriage prospects.

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### **Erika says**

took a little while to get into this but, once I did, it captured my attention fully. It was a beautiful and interesting story set in a period I did not know too much about.

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### **Jeni H says**

I received an advance copy of this book through Netgalley for review purposes. I was drawn to this title for the subject matter--Cultural Revolution-era China--and was not disappointed. The author's style, presentation of characters, development of the plot, and firm handle on the historical context are all impeccable. I found it difficult to put this one down. This book is a prequel to a series that I've been meaning to read, but I think I will be glad I read this one first. It provides so much background for the characters and their different ways of handling the insanity of the era puts each one on a trajectory that I am interested in seeing develop over the course of the series.

The story revolves around two primary characters, childhood friends Benfu and Pony Boy, who come from opposite sides of the tracks. I was immediately skeptical, since this would not be typical of the time or place, but Bratt convinced me through the details of their relationship, their dialogue, and their tender understanding and acceptance of one another's differences. As the country descends into the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, the two are just coming into young adulthood and finding their own voices in the ever-maddening world that is closing in on them. They taste the bitterness of their differences, the helplessness of wanting to change the world, and the agony of first love. There are a few love stories interwoven throughout

this story, but at its core is the story of their unshakable, enduring friendship. This is one thing that makes the novel stand out; all too often things revolve around romantic love. And, for these two young men, they do find their worlds turned upside-down by love, but it is their relationship with each other that serves as the binding and driving force here.

Bratt does a wonderful job of presenting Mao-era China through the common people's eyes, and she captures the fear and bewilderment that so many citizens were forced to live with. Rules and alliances were constantly shifting, and safety was a moving target. The Palest Ink portrays families trying to protect themselves and survive in the best way they know how. This drive to survive brings out the most fundamental aspects of human nature: greed, bloodlust, cruelty, fear, rage, but also kindness, generosity, and, yes, love. As the boys gradually grow aware of their circumstances, the lives that have been set out for them, and the limited number of choices they truly have in the world, you can feel the pressure tighten on them. The details of their lives are laid out plainly, and it is clear that Bratt has done her research on all Chinese social levels during this time period. It's striking how, as these details are unfolded for the audience, Benfu in particular really seems to begin to notice the significance of them. I have little in common with any of the characters, main or otherwise, but they all touched me and I felt truly connected to them. This is not an easy thing for an author to achieve, and I applaud Bratt's skill in doing so.

If you enjoy books about China, politics, history, or lasting friendship, this book is for you. I am an extremely picky reader, but I loved this one and am delighted to have discovered a talented new author. I'm definitely looking forward to reading the rest of the series.

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### **Rochelle says**

I received an uncorrected digital proof of this book via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. My thanks to the author, Kay Bratt, Lake Union Publishing, and NetGalley. Publication date: October 27, 2015

"The palest ink is better than the best memory." What should have been a compelling read--the effects of Mao's Cultural Revolution on the lives of two young male friends, their families, and Chinese society as a whole--suffers from ineffective character development and an overreliance on details. While it is evident that the author is extremely knowledgeable about China and its history, she fails to imbue her main characters with the energy and spirit that would draw her readers into their story. The author's language also fosters a sense of "form over substance", e.g. "the delicious dumplings now holding residence in all of the bellies." A waste of reading time? Definitely not, but much more vibrant depictions of the personal and societal horrors of the Mao's Cultural Revolution are readily available to readers. It seems that the author is a favorite among book clubs, but this reader found The Palest Ink to be a less than gripping read.

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### **Kelli Estes says**

Beautiful story that gives readers a look inside China's cultural revolution, and all it's heartbreak, terror, and betrayal told through the eyes of two boys who become men while learning about loyalty, honor, and love.

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