



THE HEN WHO DREAMED SHE COULD FLY
BY SUN-MI HWANG

The Reading Guide

Reading Group Questions

Sprout dares to question her station in life by venturing beyond the restrictive confines of the farmyard. What are these confines, and to what extent could Sprout be considered an antihero?

The weasel keeps most of the animals in fear and, in turn, submission – even those who live in the barn. Do you think that, overall, the animals are better or worse off living on the farm? How do theirs and Sprout's day-to-day lives differ?

"Sprout was the best name in the world. A sprout grew into a leaf and embraced the wind and the sun before falling and rotting and turning into mulch for bringing fragrant flowers into bloom. Sprout wanted to do something with her life, just like the sprouts on the acacia tree. That was why she'd named herself after them. Nobody called her Sprout, and she knew her life wasn't like a sprout's, but still the name made her feel good."

How do names affect who we are? And how others see us? Consider some of the other characters' names in the novel, such as Straggler.

Sun-mi Hwang's novel has been described as a modern fable. But what is a fable and how does this story conform to your understanding of the genre?

Sprout is amazed to discover that the weasel is female – and a mother. Many readers also make the assumption that she is male. Why is this?

At the end of the novel both Sprout and Greentop are accepted or, at least, respected, by their peers. But to what extent do they desire acceptance up until this point? For example, is acceptance even something that Sprout cares for?

Consider the relevance of the novel's title. Perhaps start by considering both the literal and metaphorical meanings of the word 'flight'.

Does it matter to Sprout that Greentop is a duckling? Why does it matter to the other animals? How is the issue of adoption portrayed in the novel?

The weasel describes Sprout as 'the luckiest hen alive' – an observation that Sprout, after a moment's reflection, agrees with. Can you isolate these lucky moments? Also, consider the extent to which Sprout survives due to her guile and will power, compared to that of her good fortune.

Sprout is able to let Greentop join his brace due to her maternal love for him. But what other types of love are explored in the novel?



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About the Book

A wonderful, 2-million-copy bestselling modern fable from Korea that is winning hearts around the world, for all lovers of *The Little Prince* and *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull*...

This is the story of a plucky hen named Sprout, a hen who yearns to raise a chick of her own but whose eggs are collected daily by the farmer's wife. Determined to follow her dream, and glimpsing another future through the barn doors where the animals roam free, she comes up with a plan to escape into the wild – and to hatch an egg of her own. Yet once out of her cage, she finds herself shunned by everyone in the barnyard except another outsider like herself, a mallard duck called Straggler. His lifesaving friendship enables Sprout to achieve one of her dreams: she hatches an egg she discovers in a briar patch, at first unaware that her offspring is not a chick, but a duckling. Sprout is also unaware that Straggler is the duckling's father, and when a weasel threatens to kill the newly hatched duckling, named Greentop, he sacrifices himself to save both their lives. Together Sprout and her duckling head out into the world, becoming wanderers in the wild, before Straggler's brace arrives and Sprout realises she must let Greentop find his own way in the world.

An anthem for freedom, individuality and self-determination, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* is a novel of universal resonance, which, with its array of animal characters – the hen, the duck, the rooster, the dog, the weasel – calls to mind such classics as *Animal Farm* and *Charlotte's Web*.

Praise for the Book

"An adroit allegory about life... in the vein of classics like *Charlotte's Web* and *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*... A subtle morality tale that will appeal to readers of all ages."

Kirkus Reviews

"A very special little book. I absolutely loved it, and I find myself still thinking about Sprout. She embodies all the best characteristics of deep-hearted mother-love: loyalty, sacrifice, and courage."

Lisa See, author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Snow Flower* and *the Secret Fan*, *Peony in Love*, and *Shanghai Girls*



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"Recalling *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, this slim but powerful tale will resonate with readers of all ages, who can take it at face value or delve deeper into its meditations on living courageously and facing mortality."

Booklist

"Everything wonderful about the world is contained in this small gem of a novel, which brims with dream-fulfilling adventures and the longing that underlies love."

Kyung-sook Shin, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Please Look After Mom*

"Sometimes the simplest character, expressed in the sparest prose, embarks upon life's most heroic journey. Meet Sprout, a plucky hen whose modest dream to hatch a single egg will take her down a path that leads to her true place in the natural world. Heart, determination, and empathy are the only skills Sprout needs to navigate this perilous passage in Sun-mi Hwang's lovely *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, a novel uniquely poised at the nexus of fable, philosophy, children's literature, and nature writing."

Adam Johnson, author of the Pulitzer Prize winner and *New York Times* bestseller *The Orphan Master's Son*

"*The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* breaks down the boundaries between the animal and the human and takes us on the intensely personal journey of a lonely hen whose simple, fierce desires guide her to surprising places. This entertaining and plaintive tale is South Korea's *Charlotte's Web* for youth and adults alike."

Krys Lee, author of *Drifting House*

"A simply told but absorbing fable."

Publishers Weekly

About the Author

SUN-MI HWANG is a beloved writer in South Korea, where she has won many awards and published more than forty books enjoyed by adults and children alike. Born in 1963, she was unable to attend middle school due to poverty, but thanks to a teacher who gave her the key to a classroom, she was able to go to the school and read books whenever she wanted. She enrolled in high school by taking a certificate examination, and she graduated from the creative writing departments at Seoul Institute of the Arts and Gwangju University, and from the graduate school of Chung-Ang University. She lives in Seoul, South Korea.



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An Interview with Sun-mi Hwang

Where did your inspiration for this novel come from?

I got the idea to write a story about a hen while I was watching TV, and the inspiration for the duck came from a comic book. These two sources of inspiration were surprising, as they were so different.

Why did you choose a hen for your main character?

The hen is hardly the coolest or most beautiful of characters to choose for a heroine, as hens are neither brave nor good fighters. In picking a hen I deliberately opted for a puny, run-of-the-mill creature – a creature that is so often overlooked and ignored – as I wanted my protagonist to be an ordinary person who readers could relate to, and realize that they could be a hero in their own lives.

Do you see anything of yourself in Sprout?

Of course there is! It's natural for a writer to put something of themselves into any character in his or her work. Sprout is all about following one's passions and dreams and about taking a chance to discover a new life for yourself. I'd have to say the novel is based on the story of my father and my adolescence. I prefer to write about strong characters like Sprout – this is very typical of my books.

Names are important to the characters in the book – do you think that names help shape who we are?

Yes, they are. I had to consider and reconsider the name of each character very seriously. The names given to them are not just names but are an integral part of the plot, as each character signifies a specific type of person, which I wanted readers to spot.

Your novel has been described as a modern fable. Do you think that fables can be a more powerful way of sharing ideas?

Fables can portray humanity and life very powerfully and deeply. I do like writing about people in my novels, but I feel much freer when writing a fable. The fable is an attractive option for writers as it's not only a very charming genre but is one that can really engage readers, as the very positive responses from so many suggest.

What would you like readers to take away from this novel?

I don't really think it is necessary for a writer to interfere in a reader's response to a work, but I would be honoured if my book prompts someone to take a look at themselves. We have all had a dream at one time or another that has given us a zest for living, a purpose in life. If anyone who is suffering or living a hum-drum life could be reminded of their childhood dream when reading this book, it would be a success.



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This novel has been hugely popular around the world, with foreign language editions coming out in over twenty countries – what do you think makes the story so universal?

Actually, this is something that I've wondered about myself. I think perhaps it's due to a desire we all have to connect with and understand others. But I also think readers can relate to and identify with the animals in the story, particularly as the novel is really about such universal human themes as motherhood, loyalty, sacrifice and so on. In addition, I think my focus on the importance of every life, and of every human being, is reflected in this work too, which resonates with readers.

Could you tell us a little bit about how – and why – you began to write books, and your experiences writing this novel in particular?

I've wanted to read and write stories ever since I was thirteen when I came across a children's novel for the first time. Since then I've never considered any other job because the urge to write was so strong. I can't imagine not writing. It's how I live, it's who I am, and how I express myself. As far as the writing of this novel in concerned, however, it was really my father who was the inspiration – the character of Sprout is based on him. Sadly he died just after I finished writing the novel.

Where do you write, and what is your writing routine – i.e. do you write every day, or in bursts when the inspiration takes you?

I usually write whenever I need to. I do not have a special place or time to write, but I do have to be somewhere quiet. My inspiration comes from daily life, and from the everyday lives I see around me, so these are very important. I would love to travel to other countries for extra stimulation, but things have fallen through so far.

You have written a number of books since *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*. Do you have plans for further books?

I have a lot of stories in my head, and I am never sure which one I should pull out first. I'd love to tell the story of a writer who is in a vegetative state, and I am so excited about it that it keeps me awake at night, but I am still figuring out how I should start it.

