

Life, Writing, and Peace: Reading Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*.

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Life, Writing, and Peace: Reading Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*

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Abstract

Unlike her former award-winning and critically acclaimed works, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* has received little attention. This is an unthinkable phenomenon for a writer who has been hailed as one of the most widely taught authors living in the United States. One of the main reasons is that critics and reviewers do not know how to cope with this complicated, heterogeneous, and "weird" text that defies easy categorization. Nor do they know how to respond to the ways the author urges her readers to squarely face collective American traumas and symptoms through writing (especially the Vietnam War). This paper attempts to approach this intriguing text from the perspective of life writing. Part I points out the undue neglect of this book, refutes some serious misunderstandings, and offers "life writing" as a critical approach. Part II places this book in the context of Kingston's career and life trajectory in order to show that "peace" has always been her major concern. Part III argues that, whereas the 1991 Berkeley-Oakland fire destroyed the manuscript of her "Fourth Book of Peace" along with her house, this "baptism of fire" and its accompanying sense of devastation generated a special empathy, enabling her to better understand those who suffer, especially Vietnam War veterans. Part IV deals with both the subjects of writing trauma and trauma narrative and indicates how Kingston combines her writing expertise with the Buddhist mindfulness expounded by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh to lead the Veterans Writing Workshop. Finally, Part V stresses how Kingston and her writing community, by combining life, writing, and peace, tell their own stories and create new lives both personally and collectively.

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